The Most Common Punctuation and Grammar Mistakes

Who and Whom

Tip: Try replacing who/whom in the sentence with he/him or she/her. If the sentence should have he/she, then use who. If it should have him/her, use whom.

Which and That

Tip: If the sentence doesn’t need the clause that the word is connecting, you can usually use which. “My paper, which is two pages long, is finished.” “My paper that is two pages long is finished.” In the second sentence ‘that is two pages long’ describes the paper in a way that specifies and restricts which paper it is. The first simply describes the paper.

Lay and Lie

Tip: Lay is a verb that requires a direct subject and one or more objects. Its past tense is laid. Lie is a verb that does not need an object. Its past tense is lay. For example: You may “lay a pencil on the table” (pencil is the object), but you would not say that “The Pencil lay between the sheet and calculator” (no object). Instead, “The pencil lies between the sheet and the calculator.”

Continual and Continuous

Tip: Continual means that something is always occurring with lapses in time. “The music played continually throughout the night.” Continuous means that something continues without any stops or gaps. “Her continuous talking was distracting.”

Nor

Tip: Nor means ‘and not’. It is generally used either following ‘neither’ or to list a second negative verb. “He is neither here nor there.” “He won’t sleep nor eat.”

Whether and If

Tip: Whether is used when there are two or more alternatives. If is used when there are no alternatives. “I don’t know whether I will pass or not.” Versus: “If I don’t get an A on this paper I won’t pass the class.”

Fewer and Less
Tip: Few and fewer are for things you can count. “The library has fewer print books than online books.” Versus: “The library is less busy than it was yesterday.”

Farther and Further

Tip: Farther implies a measurable distance. Further is for distances that you can’t always measure. “I threw the ball ten feet farther than yesterday.” Versus: “The lack of books caused further concerns.”

Since and Because

Tip: Since refers to time while because refers to causation. “Since I quit going to the library, my grades have dropped.” Versus: “Because I stopped going to tutoring, my grades dropped.”

Affect and Effect

Tip: Affect is almost always a verb while effect is almost always a noun. This means that you can ‘affect’ something, but you cannot ‘effect’ it. However, you can cause an ‘effect’. “Lou’s lack of sleep affected his performance.” Versus: “Lack of sleep can cause an effect on your body.”

Common Punctuation Errors

Avoid unnecessary apostrophes! Apostrophes are only used to make things possessive and for contractions. “That is my wife’s car.” Shouldn’t, wouldn’t, can’t.

Avoid unnecessary quotation marks. Quotation marks should only be used when quoting someone else’s words. Do not use them for emphasis or around a common catch phrase.

Improper comma use. Commas are often used either too much or too little. Read a sentence aloud and consider using a comma when you come to a pause or break in your speech. However, review comma usage rules to ensure you do not use them inappropriately. And try not to use too many commas, even if the usage is correct. Sometimes it’s best just to use a period and break up a statement into multiple sentences. (Be mindful to use complete sentences).

Excess exclamations. Exclamation marks are rarely used in academic writing. Avoid using them to make a sentence more exciting.

It’s versus Its. It’s is a conjunction of ‘it is’. Its is possessive. You could say “It’s of great importance” but not “Its of great importance”. Similarly, you could say “Its leg was broken” but not “It’s leg was broken”.

Semi-colons vs Colons: Use a colon when you want to provide a list of items. If you want to separate two related but distinct thoughts, use a semi-colon. When using a semi-colon, you may want to consider using a period instead.