

# V. Words and Expressions Commonly Misused

(Some of the forms here listed, as *like I did*, are downright bad English; others, as the split infinitive, have their defenders, but are in such general disfavor that it is at least inadvisable to use them; still others, as *case, factor, feature, interesting, one of the most*, are good in their place, but are constantly obtruding themselves into places where they have no right to be. If the writer will make it his purpose from the beginning to express accurately his own individual thought, and will refuse to be satisfied with a ready-made formula that saves him the trouble of doing so, this last set of expressions will cause him little trouble. But if he finds that in a moment of inadvertence he has used one of them, his proper course will probably be not to patch up the sentence by substituting one word or set of words for another, but to recast it completely, as illustrated in a number of examples below and in others under Rules [12](#) and [13](#).)

**All right.** Idiomatic in familiar speech as a detached phrase in the sense, “Agreed,” or “Go ahead.” In other uses better avoided. Always written as two words.

**As good or better than.** Expressions of this type should be corrected by rearranging the sentence.

My opinion is as good or better than his.

My opinion is as good as his, or better (if not better).

**As to whether.** *Whether* is sufficient; see under [Rule 13](#).

**Bid.** Takes the infinitive without *to*. The past tense in the sense, “ordered,” is *bade*.

**But.** Unnecessary after *doubt* and *help*.

I have no doubt but that

He could not help see but that

I have no doubt that

He could not help seeing that

The too frequent use of *but* as a conjunction leads to the fault discussed under [Rule 14](#). A loose sentence formed with *but* can always be converted into a periodic sentence formed with *although*, as illustrated under [Rule 4](#).

Particularly awkward is the following of one *but* by another, making a contrast to a contrast or a reservation to a reservation. This is easily corrected by re-arrangement.

America had vast resources, but she seemed almost wholly unprepared for war. But within a year she had created an army of four million men.

America seemed almost wholly unprepared for war, but she had vast resources. Within a year she had created an army of four million men.

**Can.** Means *am (is, are) able*. Not to be used as a substitute for *may*.

**Case.** The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* begins its definition of this word: “instance of a thing's occurring; usual state of affairs.” In these two senses, the word is usually unnecessary.

In many cases, the rooms were poorly ventilated.

It has rarely been the case that any mistake has been made.

Many of the rooms were poorly ventilated.

Few mistakes have been made.

See Wood, *Suggestions to Authors*, pp. 68–71, and Quiller-Couch, *The Art of Writing*, pp. 103–106.

**Certainly.** Used indiscriminately by some writers, much as others use *very*, to intensify any and every statement. A mannerism of this kind, bad in speech, is even worse in writing.

**Character.** Often simply redundant, used from a mere habit of wordiness.

Acts of a hostile character

Hostile acts

**Claim, vb.** With object-noun, means *lay claim to*. May be used with a dependent clause if this sense is clearly involved: “He claimed that he was the sole surviving heir.” (But even here, “claimed to be” would be better.) Not to be used as a substitute for *declare*, *maintain*, or *charge*.

**Clever.** This word has been greatly overused; it is best restricted to ingenuity displayed in small matters.

**Compare.** To *compare to* is to point out or imply resemblances, between objects regarded as essentially of different order; to *compare with* is mainly to point out differences, between objects regarded as essentially of the same order. Thus life has been compared to a pilgrimage, to a drama, to a battle; Congress may be compared with the British Parliament. Paris has been compared to ancient Athens; it may be compared with modern London.

**Consider.** Not followed by *as* when it means “believe to be.” “I consider him thoroughly competent.” Compare, “The lecturer considered Cromwell first as soldier and second as administrator,” where “considered” means “examined” or “discussed.”

**Data.** A plural, like *phenomena* and *strata*.

These data were tabulated.

**Dependable.** A needless substitute for *reliable*, *trustworthy*.

**Different than.** Not permissible. Substitute *different from*, *other than*, or *unlike*.

**Divided into.** Not to be misused for *composed of*. The line is sometimes difficult to draw; doubtless plays are divided into acts, but poems are composed of stanzas.

**Don't.** Contraction of *do not*. The contraction of *does not* is *doesn't*.

**Due to.** Incorrectly used for *through*, *because of*, or *owing to*, in adverbial phrases: “He lost the first game, due to carelessness.” In correct use related as predicate or as modifier to a particular noun: “This invention is due to Edison;” “losses due to preventable fires.”

**Folk.** A collective noun, equivalent to *people*. Use the singular form only.

**Effect.** As noun, means *result*; as verb, means *to bring about*, *accomplish* (not to be confused with *affect*, which means “to influence”).

As noun, often loosely used in perfunctory writing about fashions, music, painting, and other arts: “an Oriental effect;” “effects in pale green;” “very delicate effects;” “broad effects;” “subtle effects;” “a charming effect was produced by.” The writer who has a definite meaning to express will not take refuge in such vagueness.

**Etc.** Equivalent to *and the rest*, *and so forth*, and hence not to be used if one of these would be insufficient, that is, if the reader would be left in doubt as to any important particulars. Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list already given in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation.

At the end of a list introduced by *such as*, *for example*, or any similar expression, *etc.* is incorrect.

**Fact.** Use this word only of matters of a kind capable of direct verification, not of matters of judgment. That a particular event happened on a given date, that lead melts at a certain temperature, are facts. But such conclusions as that Napoleon was the greatest of modern generals, or that the climate of California is delightful, however incontestable they may be, are not properly facts.

On the formula *the fact that*, see under [Rule 13](#).

**Factor.** A hackneyed word; the expressions of which it forms part can usually be replaced by something more direct and idiomatic.

His superior training was the great factor in his winning the match.

He won the match by being better trained.

Heavy artillery has become an increasingly important factor in deciding battles.

Heavy artillery has played a constantly larger part in deciding battles.

**Feature.** Another hackneyed word; like *factor* it usually adds nothing to the sentence in which it occurs.

A feature of the entertainment especially worthy of mention was the singing of Miss A.

(Better use the same number of words to tell what Miss A. sang, or if the programme has already been given, to tell how she sang.)

As a verb, in the advertising sense of *offer as a special attraction*, to be avoided.

**Fix.** Colloquial in America for *arrange*, *prepare*, *mend*. In writing restrict it to its literary senses, *fasten*, *make firm or immovable*, etc.

**Get.** The colloquial *have got* for *have* should not be used in writing. The preferable form of the participle is *got*.

**He is a man who.** A common type of redundant expression; see [Rule 13](#).

He is a man who is very ambitious.

Spain is a country which I have always wanted to visit.

He is very ambitious.

I have always wanted to visit Spain.

**Help.** See under [But](#).

**However.** In the meaning *nevertheless*, not to come first in its sentence or clause.

The roads were almost impassable. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

The roads were almost impassable. At last, however, we succeeded in reaching camp.

When *however* comes first, it means *in whatever way* or *to whatever extent*.

However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best.

However discouraging the prospect, he never lost heart.

**Interesting.** Avoid this word as a perfunctory means of introduction. Instead of announcing that what you are about to tell is interesting, make it so.

An interesting story is told of

In connection with the anticipated visit of Mr. B. to America, it is interesting to recall that he

(Tell the story without preamble.)

Mr. B., who it is expected will soon visit America

**Kind of.** Not to be used as a substitute for *rather* (before adjectives and verbs), or except in familiar style, for *something like* (before nouns). Restrict it to its literal sense: “Amber is a kind of fossil resin;” “I dislike that kind of notoriety.” The same holds true of *sort of*.

**Less.** Should not be misused for *fewer*.

He had less men than in the previous campaign

He had fewer men than in the previous campaign

*Less* refers to quantity, *fewer* to number. “His troubles are less than mine” means “His troubles are not so great as mine.” “His troubles are fewer than mine” means “His troubles are not so numerous as mine.” It is, however, correct to say, “The signers of the petition were less than a hundred,” where the round number *a hundred* is something like a collective noun, and *less* is thought of as meaning a less quantity or amount.

**Like.** Not to be misused for *as*. *Like* governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is *as*.

We spent the evening like in the old days.

He thought like I did.

We spent the evening as in the old days.

He thought as I did (like me).

**Line, along these lines.** *Line* in the sense of *course of procedure, conduct, thought*, is allowable, but has been so much overworked, particularly in the phrase *along these lines*, that a writer who aims at freshness or originality had better discard it entirely.

Mr. B. also spoke along the same lines.

He is studying along the line of French literature.

Mr. B. also spoke, to the same effect.

He is studying French literature.

**Literal, literally.** Often incorrectly used in support of exaggeration or violent metaphor.

A literal flood of abuse.

Literally dead with fatigue

A flood of abuse.

Almost dead with fatigue (dead tired)

**Lose out.** Meant to be more emphatic than *lose*, but actually less so, because of its commonness. The same holds true of *try out, win out, sign up, register up*. With a number of verbs, *out* and *up* form idiomatic combinations: *find out, run out, turn out, cheer up, dry up, make up*, and others, each distinguishable in meaning from the simple verb. *Lose out* is not.

**Most.** Not to be used for *almost*.

Most everybody

Most all the time

Almost everybody

Almost all the time

**Nature.** Often simply redundant, used like [\*character\*](#).

Acts of a hostile nature

Hostile acts

Often vaguely used in such expressions as a “lover of nature;” “poems about nature.” Unless more specific statements follow, the reader cannot tell whether the poems have to do with natural scenery, rural life, the sunset, the untracked wilderness, or the habits of squirrels.

**Near by.** Adverbial phrase, not yet fully accepted as good English, though the analogy of *close by* and *hard by* seems to justify it. *Near*, or *near at hand*, is as good, if not better.

Not to be used as an adjective; use *neighboring*.

**Oftentimes, ofttimes.** Archaic forms, no longer in good use. The modern word is *often*.

**One hundred and one.** Retain the *and* in this and similar expressions, in accordance with the unvarying usage of English prose from Old English times.

**One of the most.** Avoid beginning essays or paragraphs with this formula, as, “One of the most interesting developments of modern science is, etc.,” “Switzerland is one of the most interesting countries of Europe.” There is nothing wrong in this; it is simply threadbare and forcible-feeble.

A common blunder is to use a singular verb in a relative clause following this or a similar expression, when the relative is the subject.

One of the ablest men that has attacked this problem.

One of the ablest men that have attacked this problem.

### Participle for verbal noun.

Do you mind me asking a question?

Do you mind my asking a question?

There was little prospect of the Senate accepting even this compromise.

There was little prospect of the Senate's accepting even this compromise.

In the left-hand column, *asking* and *accepting* are present participles; in the right-hand column, they are verbal nouns (gerunds). The construction shown in the left-hand column is occasionally found, and has its defenders. Yet it is easy to see that the second sentence has to do not with a prospect of the Senate, but with a prospect of accepting. In this example, at least, the construction is plainly illogical.

As the authors of *The King's English* point out, there are sentences apparently, but not really, of this type, in which the possessive is not called for.

I cannot imagine Lincoln refusing his assent to this measure.

In this sentence, what the writer cannot imagine is Lincoln himself, in the act of refusing his assent. Yet the meaning would be virtually the same, except for a slight loss of vividness, if he had written,

I cannot imagine Lincoln's refusing his assent to this measure.

By using the possessive, the writer will always be on the safe side.

In the examples above, the subject of the action is a single, unmodified term, immediately preceding the verbal noun, and the construction is as good as any that could be used. But in any sentence in which it is a mere clumsy substitute for something simpler, or in which the use of the possessive is awkward or impossible, should of course be recast.

In the event of a reconsideration of the whole matter's becoming necessary

If it should become necessary to reconsider the whole matter

There was great dissatisfaction with the decision of the arbitrators being favorable to the company.

There was great dissatisfaction that the arbitrators should have decided in favor of the company.

**People.** *The people* is a political term, not to be confused with *the public*. From the people comes political support or opposition; from the public comes artistic appreciation or commercial patronage.

**Phase.** Means a stage of transition or development: "the phases of the moon;" "the last phase." Not to be used for *aspect* or *topic*.

Another phase of the subject

Another point (another question)

**Possess.** Not to be used as a mere substitute for *have* or *own*.

He possessed great courage.

He had great courage (was very brave).

He was the fortunate possessor of

He owned

**Prove.** The past participle is *proved*.

**Respective, respectively.** These words may usually be omitted with advantage.

Works of fiction are listed under the names of their respective authors.

The one mile and two mile runs were won by Jones and Cummings respectively.

Works of fiction are listed under the names of their authors.

The one mile and two mile runs were won by Jones and by Cummings.

In some kinds of formal writing, as geometrical proofs, it may be necessary to use *respectively*, but it should not appear in writing on ordinary subjects.

**Shall, Will.** The future tense requires *shall* for the first person, *will* for the second and third. The formula to express the speaker's belief regarding his future action or state is *I shall*; *I will* expresses his determination or his consent.

**Should.** See under [Would](#).

**So.** Avoid, in writing, the use of *so* as an intensifier: “so good;” “so warm;” “so delightful.”

On the use of *so* to introduce clauses, see [Rule 4](#).

**Sort of.** See under [Kind of](#).

**Split Infinitive.** There is precedent from the fourteenth century downward for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive which it governs, but the construction is in disfavor and is avoided by nearly all careful writers.

To diligently inquire

To inquire diligently

**State.** Not to be used as a mere substitute for *say*, *remark*. Restrict it to the sense of *express fully or clearly*, as, “He refused to state his objections.”

**Student Body.** A needless and awkward expression meaning no more than the simple word *students*.

A member of the student body

Popular with the student body

The student body passed resolutions.

A student

Liked by the students

The students passed resolutions.

**System.** Frequently used without need.

Dayton has adopted the commission system of government.

The dormitory system

Dayton has adopted government by commission.

Dormitories

**Thanking You in Advance.** This sounds as if the writer meant, “It will not be worth my while to write to you again.” In making your request, write, “Will you please,” or “I shall be obliged,” and if anything further seems necessary write a letter of acknowledgment later.

**They.** A common inaccuracy is the use of the plural pronoun when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each, each one, everybody, every one, many a man*, which, though implying more than one person, requires the pronoun to be in the singular. Similar to this, but with even less justification, is the use of the plural pronoun with the antecedent *anybody, any one, somebody, some one*, the intention being either to avoid the awkward “he or she,” or to avoid committing oneself to either. Some bashful speakers even say, “A friend of mine told me that they, etc.”

Use *he* with all the above words, unless the antecedent is or must be feminine.

**Very.** Use this word sparingly. Where emphasis is necessary, use words strong in themselves.

**Viewpoint.** Write *point of view*, but do not misuse this, as many do, for *view* or *opinion*.

**While.** Avoid the indiscriminate use of this word for *and, but, and although*. Many writers use it frequently as a substitute for *and* or *but*, either from a mere desire to vary the connective, or from uncertainty which of the two connectives is the more appropriate. In this use it is best replaced by a semicolon.

The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor, while the rest of the building is devoted to manufacturing.

The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor; the rest of the building is devoted to manufacturing.

Its use as a virtual equivalent of *although* is allowable in sentences where this leads to no ambiguity or absurdity.

While I admire his energy, I wish it were employed in a better cause.

This is entirely correct, as shown by the paraphrase,

I admire his energy; at the same time I wish it were employed in a better cause.

Compare:

While the temperature reaches 90 or 95 degrees in the daytime, the nights are often chilly.

Although the temperature reaches 90 or 95 degrees in the daytime, the nights are often chilly.

The paraphrase,

The temperature reaches 90 or 95 degrees in the daytime; at the same time the nights are often chilly,

shows why the use of *while* is incorrect.

In general, the writer will do well to use *while* only with strict literalness, in the sense of *during the time that*.

**Whom.** Often incorrectly used for *who* before *he said* or similar expressions, when it is really the subject of a following verb.

His brother, whom he said would send him the money

The man whom he thought was his friend

His brother, who he said would send him the money

The man who (that) he thought was his friend (whom he thought his friend)

**Worth while.** Overworked as a term of vague approval and (with *not*) of disapproval. Strictly applicable only to actions: “Is it worth while to telegraph?”

His books are not worth while.

His books are not worth reading (are not worth one's while to read; do not repay reading; are worthless).

The use of *worth while* before a noun (“a worth while story”) is indefensible.

**Would.** A conditional statement in the first person requires *should*, not *would*.

I should not have succeeded without his help.

The equivalent of *shall* in indirect quotation after a verb in the past tense is *should*, not *would*.

He predicted that before long we should have a great surprise.

To express habitual or repeated action, the past tense, without *would*, is usually sufficient, and from its brevity, more emphatic.

Once a year he would visit the old mansion.

Once a year he visited the old mansion.

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