

Common Mistakes

Below are common grammar, usage, and punctuation errors that should be avoided:

Affect vs. effect—“Affect” is a verb which means “to influence something.” “Effect” is a noun which refers to the result of something.

i.e. vs. e.g.—“i.e.” means “that is.” “e.g.” means “for example.”

It’s vs. its—“It’s” is short for “it is.” “Its” is the possessive of “it.”

Thus vs. therefore—“Thus” means “like this/that” or “in this/that manner.” “Therefore” means “because of the foregoing, this follows.”

Hopefully—“Hopefully” is an adverb that describes the manner of one who is hopeful. It is not a word that means “to hope.” (e.g. “Hopefully, I won’t make this error.” Is incorrect.)

Literally—“Literally” is often used, incorrectly, to indicate emphasis when what is really meant is “figuratively.”

Only—“Only” should be anchored to the word it is meant to apply to.

Unique—“Unique” means “one of a kind.” It is not a synonym for “unusual” and cannot be modified as in “somewhat unique” or “very unique.”

Comma/semicolon/colon—Use a comma to separate clauses and items on a list. Use a semicolon if the portion of the sentence set off by the punctuation could stand on its own as a sentence. Use a colon after a formal introductory statement to alert the reader to what follows (often a list or description).

Quotation marks with punctuation—Commas and periods go inside quotation marks; colons and semicolons go outside. Question marks go inside quotations if the quote is a question, outside otherwise. Single quotes are used for a quotation nested in a quote. (This is reversed for British styles).

Subject-verb agreement—The subject of a sentence has to agree with the verb. Singular nouns should be matched with singular verbs, plural nouns with plural verbs.

Misused apostrophes—Apostrophes indicate possession and form contractions. Never use apostrophes with possessive pronouns (“hers,” “theirs,” “yours,” “whose,” and “its”) or to form a plural.

Mixed tenses—Past, present, or future, tenses should remain consistent throughout your text.

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