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Common Grammatical mistakes

GOOD, BETTER OR BEST

Adjectives describe nouns and provide further information.

A common error is to use the superlative form of an adjective when the comparative should be used. The rules are:

When describing a single noun, the singular form should be used. e.g. That is a good dog.

When describing two nouns, the comparative form should be used. e.g. This dog is the better of the two.

When describing three or more nouns, the superlative form should be used. e.g. This dog is the best of the lot.

The following table lists some adjectives in their three forms.

| Singular | Comparative | Superlative |
|----------|-------------|-------------|
| Good | Better | Best |
| Fast | Faster | Fastest |
| Slow | Slower | Slowest |
| Bad | Worse | Worst |
| Little | Less | Least |
| Few | Fewer | Fewest |
| Fit | Fitter | Fittest |
| Old | Older | Oldest |
| Short | Shorter | Shortest |
| Small | Smaller | Smallest |
| Fat | Fatter | Fattest |

Life becomes a little more complex when you cannot add -er or -est. Think about beautiful, irritable, intelligent, attractive, imaginative and so on. Quite apart from anything else, they would become very difficult to pronounce.

Instead we use more and most, giving:

Beautiful more beautiful most beautiful

The rule is that more and most cannot be used where -er and -est have been. Unfortunately, sentences like 'he was the more fitter of the two' are not uncommon.

LESS or FEWER

The rule is very straightforward, albeit ignored by every supermarket in the UK.

Use fewer before countable nouns
Use less before uncountable nouns

If the noun is a single unit and one that you can literally count, e.g. six men, four lorries, five chickens, then you must use fewer. The checkout sign really should read:

'Ten items or fewer' as items are, by definition, countable.

Use less before uncountable nouns, e.g. coffee, snow, tea, frost, sunshine.

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Fewer cars | less traffic |
| Fewer sugar lumps | less sugar |
| Fewer clients | less income |

Too Two To

Too: meaning as well or also. 'I want to go too.'

Two: meaning the numeric 2 or two of. 'there are two lorries in the car park.'

To: Turns a noun into a verb. e.g. 'an axe is needed to axe the wood.'

A or AN

The rule is use a in front of a word that begins with a consonant or sounds like a consonant.

A bike a car a boy a bird and so on.

Words like uniform, unicorn, and unique all start with a vowel but are pronounced with a long 'yoo' sound and should have an a in front of them.

A unique unicorn

Use an in front of a word that begins with a vowel or sounds like a vowel.

An idea an elephant an alternative an opposite view an umbrella

Using a or an before the letter h also causes confusion. The rule here is that you use a if you pronounce the letter, aspirate, in normal speech and an if you do not.

A horrible crash, a horizontal platform, a howitzer.

An hour ago an honest man an heir to the throne an honourable man

If it does not work, as in A. above, then it must be who.
If it does work, as in B above, then it must be whom

NUMBERS

The convention is to write the numbers one to ten in longhand and to use numerics thereafter.

The two cars covered a total of 240 miles during the race.

If you intend to use longhand for numbers greater than ten, then they should be hyphenated.

Forty-nine eighty-two thirty-eight

STARTING A SENTENCE WITH AND OR BUT

There is no foundation in the belief that you should not start a sentence with the conjunctions and or but. Doing so can be very effective in providing contrast.

SPLIT INFINITIVES

The infinitive is a form of the verb usually consisting of to followed by the stem of the verb.

e.g. to have
 to go
 to think
 to make

If you split the infinitive, you put a word between the to and the stem:

e.g. to definitely have
 to boldly go
 to clearly think
 to quickly make

Strict grammarians say that you should avoid the split infinitive unless to do so makes your meaning unclear.

The hailstones were of such a size that they failed completely to melt before hitting the ground.

Did they reach the ground completely frozen or incompletely melted?

INCOME or REVENUE

Again, the rule here is very simple and often ignored. Income refers to money being earned, by whatever means, and being available to a business or individual. Hence we have phrases like income-stream.

Revenue, on the other hand, refers to money raised through taxation and nothing else. Hence the Inland Revenue and the Revenue men.

A very small point, I know, but it drives accountants ape.

I or ME

The pronouns which give us most trouble are I and me. The rule here is to use I when you are the subject and me when you are the object of the sentence. The easiest, and fail-safe, way of sorting this out is to say to yourself: "If it was just me in this sentence would I say I or me?" e.g.

Please contact Mr Stevenson or me if there are any problems.
Mr Vickers and I will attend the meeting with you.
He came with John and me.

EACH

Each is followed by a singular verb: it means 'each one'.

'Each (one) of our shops is well supplied.'
Each (one) of the reports has been well received.

EITHER and NEITHER

Take care: you'll need a singular verb.

Either of the cars is available.
Neither of the secretaries has a key.

DIFFERENT FROM / TO

It is nearly always different from.

This car is different from ours.

The exception is: 'This looks different to me.'

COMPARE WITH / TO

Compare with means to make a comparison.

How would you compare this holiday with last year's?

Compare to means to liken.

The commentator compared Celtic Spring to Nijinsky.

To put this another way, try using:

Similar to
Different from
Compare with

WHICH or THAT

It's all to do with restrictive and non-restrictive clauses.

A restrictive clause is necessary; it is needed to identify what is being talked about.

A non-restrictive clause is not required for identification. It adds further, or non vital, information.

Which introduces a non-restrictive clause:

The rings of Saturn, which can be seen easily with a small telescope, are composed of billions of tiny particles of rock.

That can only introduce a restrictive clause:

The report that I left on my desk has disappeared.

When do you need commas?

You need commas with non-restrictive clauses:

The European powers, which were busily carving up Africa, paid no attention to boundaries between ethnic groups.

The European powers here are European powers in general.

You do not use commas with restrictive clauses:

The European powers that were busily carving up Africa paid no attention to boundaries between ethnic groups.

The European powers here are those involved in carving up Africa.

In summary:

If you can leave the clause out and the sentence still says exactly what you mean, then put commas around it and use which, otherwise use that.

Capital Letters

A summary of when you use capitals:

The word I

At the beginning of a sentence

For proper nouns e.g. London

At the beginning of reported speech. He said, "Please take the van".

For each important word in a title: Terms of Reference, Rules of Engagement.

For days of the week, months of the year, festivals but not seasons.

At the beginning of lines of verse.

For words indicating rank or profession when used with the person's name.

Managing Director Andy Back will make the presentation but the managing director presented the case.

Practice with a 'C' – if it is a noun

Practise with an 'S' – if it is a verb

The underlined word is the correct answer.

Football practice/practise is at 6.00 pm.

We are all being encouraged to practice/practise every week.

With practice/practise we will all become more skilful.

I need to go to the doctor's practice/practise to collect the prescription.

Practicing/practising daily will keep you skilful.

Half an hour's practice/practise is all it takes.

We practice/practise three times a week.

It is good office practice/practise to file every day.

He made an effort to practice/practise what he preached.

All the practice/practise in the world won't turn me into a concert pianist.

Trick: Substitute the words Advice or Advise to see if the sentence sounds correct.