

Top 25 Grammar and Language Mistakes

by *Daphne Gray-Grant*

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My mother was from the East Coast, and she had a bevy of funny expressions. A short person was “two jam-pots high.” No one was ever just big; he or she was “great big huge.” But my favorite expression was, “Wouldn’t that just rot your socks?” It expressed good-humored annoyance with something or someone (often me!).

One of the things that rots my socks is the misuse of the English language. I’m no grammar zealot and I’ve been known to make my own mistakes (usually the result of poor proofreading), but at least I care about words. While it’s true that corporate communicators need to aim at colloquial language—we don’t want to be so colloquial that we assault our readers’ eyes with errors. Here are 25 of the most common ones you should watch out for:

Spelling

1. Writing “then” when you mean “than.” The first is a description of time—“I wrote the sales letter and then I wrote the advertisement”—while the other is used when making a comparison—“I am more sick of this picky client than you are!”
2. Misspelling “bated breath.” If you write baited breath, everyone will suspect fishing is your favorite hobby. The word should be spelled bated, which comes from abated, meaning held.
3. Using “accidently” instead of “accidentally.” There are quite a few words with -ally suffixes (“incidentally”), and these should not be confused with words having -ly suffixes (“independently”). Accidently makes it into some dictionaries but it’s regarded as a variant. It’s wise to avoid variants if you can, because some people will become more concerned about your spelling than what you’re selling.
4. Writing that something has “peaked your interest.” We’re not talking mountain climbing here. The correct word is piqued.
5. Confusing “racked” with “wracked.” If you are racked with nerves, you are feeling as if you are being stretched on the torture device, the rack. You rack your brain when you try to write difficult stories. Wrack, on the other hand, has to do with ruinous accidents. With luck, this won’t apply to your writing, but it might just apply to the stock market, which has been wracked by recession.

Word usage

6. Confusing “into” with “in to.” The word into is a preposition (a linking word) that answers the question, where? “Donna walked into her office before noticing her CEO was sitting at her desk.” Note that the “where” needn’t always be a physical place—Donna could also “go into business” or “go into graduate school.” But, on those occasions where in and to just happen to end up beside each other, they must remain separate words. For example, “Peter walked in to see his supervisor.”

7. Misusing “literally.” If your boss said, “I literally felt like firing the entire department,” would you think she really meant that? No! She meant it metaphorically. Small comfort, I know, but help her retain at least a few well-trained staff by stopping her from ever using literally unless it’s the actual (literal) truth.

8. Confusing “edition” with “addition.” I know both words sound alike, but they mean totally different things. An edition is the form in which a text (usually a book) is printed, an issue of a newspaper or magazine or a version of something that’s a little different from the ordinary (for example, an experimental edition of a play). Addition, on the other hand, is what you do when you add up numbers ($1 + 1 = 2$), when there is an increase (“there was an addition to our taxes this year”) or when you expand your house (“the addition of the deck increased the value of our house significantly”).

9. Saying you made a 360-degree turn, when you changed direction. I’ve had many (otherwise bright) bosses say they made a 360-degree turn when they meant that they turned around completely. But think about it: If you turn around so that you’re facing in the opposite direction, you’ve actually made a 180-degree turn.

10. Being redundant. Repeat after me: PIN stands for personal identification number. Therefore, you cannot say PIN number without being redundant. Similarly, CD-ROM stands for “compact disc, read-only memory,” DVD stands for digital video disc or digital versatile disc and ATM stands for automated teller machine. Thus, don’t repeat the word disc or machine. Furthermore, never describe your “favorite pet peeve.” Stick with “pet peeve” alone. “Personal favorite” is another noxious phrase. Can you ever imagine an impersonal favorite?

11. Failing to understand the difference between “hone” and “home.” To hone is to sharpen. You can hone a point but you home in on a target. This is why they don’t call those birds “honing pigeons!”

12. Saying something is a “mute point” instead of “moot.” Moot means open to discussion or debatable. Mute means silent. Much as we all might appreciate more mute points, they’re not only ineffective, they’re also incorrect.

13. Using “centered around.” Think about that phrase for a second. How could anything be centered around something else? The correct phrase is “centered on.”

14. The inability to distinguish between “e.g.” and “i.e.” The abbreviation e.g. is Latin for “exempli gratia” meaning “for example”. The abbreviation i.e., on the other hand, stands for the Latin “id est” meaning “that is to say.” So, you might write, “We like vegetables—e.g., broccoli, green beans and cauliflower.” Or you might write, “We like all vegetables—i.e., we’re healthy eaters.”

15. Misusing the word “penultimate.” This word means second to last: November is the penultimate month of the year. It does not mean “super-ultimate” (e.g., “He’s the penultimate father” is incorrect).

16. Using “irregardless.” While irregardless does appear in some dictionaries, it’s always listed as “non-standard.” That’s because it’s meaningless. The “ir” cancels out the “regardless.” Stick with plain old regardless.

17. Confusing “flush it out” with “flesh it out.” To flesh out an idea is to give it substance. But if you’re trying to drive a criminal, an injustice or bad behavior out into the open, you want to flush it out.

Grammar

18. Using “could of,” “would of,” “should of.” These are all 100 percent wrong, born of our sloppy speaking styles—could’ve, would’ve, should’ve. What you want to write is could have, would have, should have. We all coulda, woulda, shoulda become better at grammar.

19. Using “me and somebody.” I tell my children that it’s common courtesy to put the other person first. Thus you should always say, “Fred and I went to the gym together,” or “Suzie and I saw that movie.”

20. Using “that” instead of “who” (and vice versa). If you’re writing about people, always use who. If a company president says, “employees that are affected by layoffs will be greatly missed,” no one is likely to believe him because he’s treating them as objects by using the word that.

21. Using “they” when referring to a business. “Starbucks said they would give everyone a free latte today.” Although this might sound right, the correct sentence is: “Starbucks said it would give everyone a free latte today.” And if that grates on your ears, then rewrite the sentence to avoid the problem: “Starbucks is offering everyone a free latte today.”

Style

22. Using “orient” and “orientate” in the same piece of text. Both words are correct, meaning to determine one’s position with reference to another point or to familiarize (someone) with new surroundings or circumstances. That said, the latter choice is British and widely considered “incorrect” in the U.S. Bottom line: If you spell theater (rather than theatre), you should also use orient.

23. Using “toward” and “towards” interchangeably. Both words are correct, but again, the latter is British and the former is American. Which you choose depends on your audience. And whatever you do, be consistent.

Apostrophes

24. Using “it’s” when you mean “its.” This is a mistake I see every day—whether on the Web or in print. The rule is so breathtakingly simple that everyone should learn it’s stands for it is. The possessive version, “The dog chewed on its bone,” somehow prompts people to throw in an errant apostrophe. Whenever I see it’s, I always reread the sentence to ensure the correct meaning is it is. And when I see its, I reread the sentence to ensure it doesn’t mean it is.

25. Using a random apostrophe. Is there a worse mistake than “The photo’s are for sale at 50 percent off”? Remember, apostrophes are used only in two cases: to signify a letter has been omitted (in “it’s” it represents the missing “i” from the word “is”) and to signify possession (“The dog’s dish of water was spilled by the anxious owner”).

Don’t use random apostrophes—or make any of these other mistakes—or you’ll be rotting your readers’ socks.

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