Common Mistakes

Tips that help improve quality

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1. APOSTROPHES

Apostrophes are primarily used in three different ways.

Apostrophes showing possession

With a singular noun or most personal names, add an apostrophe plus the letter *s*:

1. *We met at Ben's party.*
2. *The dog's tail wagged rapidly.*
3. *Yesterday's weather was dreadful.*

With personal names that end in -*s*, add an apostrophe plus s when you would naturally pronounce an extra *s* if you said the word out loud:

1. *He joined Charles's army in 1642.*
2. *Dickens's novels provide a wonderful insight into Victorian England.*

With a plural noun that already ends in -*s*, add an apostrophe after the *s*:

1. *The mansion was converted into a girls' school.*
2. *The work is due to start in two weeks' time.*

With a plural noun that doesn't end in –*s*, add an apostrophe plus *s*:

1. *The children's father came round to see me.*
2. *He employs 14 people at his men's clothing store.*

There are two cases where you don't need an apostrophe to show meaning:

- **possessive pronouns,** including *his, hers, ours, yours, theirs* (meaning *belonging to him, her, us, you* or *them*)
- **possessive determiners**, including *his, hers, its, our, your, their* (meaning

belonging to or associated with him, her, it, us, you or *them*)

Apostrophes showing omission

An apostrophe can be used to show that letters or numbers have been omitted.

- *I'm*—short for *I am*
- *she'd*—short for *she had* or *she would*
- *didn't*—short for *did not*

It also shows that numbers have been omitted, especially in dates:

1. *The Berlin Wall came down in the autumn of '89*.

It's or its?

Its (without an apostrophe) means *belonging to it:*

1. *The dog wagged its tail.*

It's (with an apostrophe) means *it is* or *it has*:

1. *It's been a long day.*

2. COLLOCATIONS

A collocation is a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance.

There are six types of collocations:

- adjective + noun
- noun + noun

- verb + noun
- adverb + adjective
- verb + prepositional phrase
- verb + adverb

An example of a collocation is the expression *strong tea*. While the same meaning could be conveyed by the roughly equivalent *powerful tea*, this expression is considered incorrect by English speakers.

Conversely, the corresponding expression for computer, *powerful computers* is preferred over *strong computers*. Phraseological collocations should not be confused with idioms, where meaning is derived. Instead, collocations are mostly compositional.

An internet search is a simple method for determining whether or not the combination you're using is correct.

3. COLONS VS. SEMICOLONS

Semicolons separate usually separate two main clauses that are closely related but that could stand on their own as sentences. Only join components of equal importance with a semicolon:

1. *Harry didn't much feel like leaving the house; it was blustery and raining outside.*

The purpose of a **colon** is to introduce or define something. Only use a colon to join a main clause with a noun. You can use a colon to join things of equal or unequal importance.

1. *Joan had asked me to pick up two items at the mall for her: a sweater and an umbrella.*

4. COMMAS AND CLAUSES

A **comma** marks a slight break between different parts of a sentence. Used properly, commas make the meaning of sentences clear by grouping and separating words, phrases and clauses. Used incorrectly, they can introduce errors or render a sentence incomprehensible.

NOTE: UK English is moving towards sparser comma usage, while failure to implement clausal commas in US English is considered incorrect. The items outlined below are considered correct in both variants.

Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*.

1. *The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.*
2. *The student explained her question, yet the instructor still didn't seem to understand.*
3. *Yesterday was her brother's birthday, so she took him out to dinner.*

Here are the main cases when you need to use a comma:

Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases and words preceding the main clause.

1. *While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.*
2. *Having finished the test, he left the room.*
3. *However, you may not be satisfied with the results.*

Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it, however:

1. *The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating* is incorrect.

Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases and words

that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

1. *That Tuesday, which happens to be my birthday, is the only day when I am available to meet.* (non-essential clause)
2. *This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, on the other hand, is rather bland.* (non-essential phrase)
3. *I appreciate your hard work. In this case, however, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.* (non-essential word)

5. CONFUSING WORDS

The following is a list of the most commonly confused words.

1. **To, Too, Two**

   To can serve as a preposition or part of an infinitive.

   1. *The writers went to the author's reading.* (preposition)
   2. *Choosing to write for a living could be considered insane.* (part of infinitive)

   Too is an adverb, which means it needs an adjective or another adverb to modify.

   1. *The writer spoke too quietly to be heard.*

   Two is a number.

2. **There, Their, They're**

   There is used either as an adverb indicating place or an expletive:

   1. *The writers who have been published are standing over there.* (adverb)
   2. *There is one thing every writer must remember before submitting a query to a*

magazine: Know the publication. (expletive)

Their is a possessive pronoun.
They're is the contraction of *they are*.

3. You're, Your

You're is the contraction of *you are*.
Your is a possessive pronoun.

4. It's, Its

It's is the contraction of *it is*.
Its is a possessive pronoun.

5. Accept, Except

Accept is a verb (*to take possession of*).
Except is most often a preposition, meaning *excluding*.

6. Affect, Effect:

Affect is a verb meaning *to influence*.
Effect is usually a noun meaning *result*, but can also be a verb (*to bring about*).

1. *Talented investigative writers can effect dramatic change in their communities.*

7. Than, Then:

Than is a conjunction used in a comparison.
Then is an adverb indicating time in the past.

8. Data

Data can be both plural and singular. The word was originally a plural in Latin but is now commonly treated as singular in English. Either is acceptable.

9. That, which

That introduces what is called an essential clause. Essential clauses add information that is vital to the point of the sentence.

1. *I do not trust products that claim to contain all natural ingredients because that can mean almost anything.*

Which introduces a nonessential clause, which adds supplementary information.

1. *The product claiming to consist of all natural ingredients, which appeared in the Sunday newspaper, is on sale.*

In **American English**, a nonrestrictive modifying phrase must be set off by commas and generally uses *which* as its pronoun.

1. *The dog, which bit the man, was brown.*

A restrictive modifying phrase is not set off by commas, and uses the pronoun *that*.

1. *The dog that bit the man was brown.*

Interchanging the two structures is grammatically incorrect in American English because they have different meanings.

British English, by contrast, does not require that sentences distinguish between the restrictive and nonrestrictive forms.

1. *The dog which bit the man was brown.*

In this sentence, it is ambiguous whether the phrase *which bit the man* is serving to identify a particular dog among several or just to provide background information about a dog whose identity is otherwise not in doubt. The reader must try to infer the distinction from context or from his own knowledge.

Please use the correct form depending on which English variant (US or UK) you are using.

10.   Who, whom

Who and *whom* are both pronouns. You use *who* when you are referring to the subject of a clause and *whom* when you are referring to the object of a clause.

HINT: Like *whom*, the pronoun him ends with *m*. When you're trying to decide whether to use *who* or *whom*, ask yourself if the answer to the question would be *he* (*who* is proper) or *him* (*whom* is proper).

6. SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

A singular subject involves a single item or person. A plural subject involves more than one item or person. The basic rule states that a singular subject takes a singular verb, while a plural subject takes a plural verb.

HINT: Verbs do not form their plurals by adding an s as nouns do. In order to determine which verb is singular and which one is plural, think of which verb you would use with he or she (singular) and which verb you would use with they (plural).

1. When we say, "He talks," *talks* is singular
2. When we say, "They talk," *talk* is plural

7. UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

Uncountable nouns are substances, concepts, etc. that we cannot divide into separate elements. We cannot count them. Uncountable nouns are treated as singular (e.g. use a singular verb) and generally don't use the indefinite article a/an. For example, we cannot say *an information* or *a music*.

1. *This news is very important.*
2. *Your luggage looks heavy.*

Please also familiarize yourself with Gengo's complementary **Punctuation & Grammar Rules** as well as any **customer style guides** when translating.