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NOW

TOP STUDENT WRITING MISTAKES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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By Lance Ensign

The importance of effective, quality writing—in academics as well as professional and all other areas of life—cannot be stressed enough. No matter how intelligent you are, if the quality of your writing and grammar is poor then this will act as a hindrance to you in reaching your goals.

Many times in your life, the first or primary (sometimes *only*) opportunity you'll have to make an impression on someone is through your writing.

For example, a college admissions essay or statement of intent will probably be the first and only opportunity those reading it will have to gain knowledge of you, and everything they think and learn about you, as well as the overall impression of you they will walk away with, depends on you.

The good news is, this means you have total control! The impression you make is entirely in *your* hands.

Similarly, you may be in college and thus are well aware of how large some classes can be. In many of these classes you're just one of hundreds of students—just another face blended in with the crowd. What this means is that, when you hand in that essay or research paper or other writing task you were assigned, you have an opportunity to either stand out or blend in with the others.

Again, the good news is that it's up to you! *You* have total control over the impression your teacher will walk away with after reading your work.

The same is true of everything else you will ever write for others. You might be writing in order to win a scholarship, a grant, or some other type of financial aid. You could be writing a personal statement as part of a job application process.

Regardless of your situation or your goals, it is crucial to recognize the key role your writing ability will play in influencing others and attaining those goals, and it is critical to remember that in any such situation, the ultimate power (and thus responsibility) for the impression your writing leaves with others depends on you.

No matter how good or how poor you think your writing is, there are plenty of ways to objectively improve it. One of the easiest, most obvious and most effective ways to do so is to learn about some of the most common errors student writers make, and how to avoid and correct them.

So here I'll briefly discuss some of the mistakes students make that are among the most common.

First, one of the biggest mistakes students make in their writing is to use too many words where fewer would suffice. This is usually driven by the mistaken idea that longer sentences and larger paragraphs will look more impressive to the instructor, but the reverse is normally true.

Teachers are as human as you. They tend to like things spelled out as clearly and plainly as possible. The more words you use in your sentences and your paragraphs, the harder it is to sift through all that content to discover your point.

Bigger words, longer sentences, longer paragraphs, longer papers. That's the no-no.

Shorter words, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, shorter papers (as long as they still meet length and word count requirements). Yes-Yes! That's what your teachers like to see. That's what the people considering you for admission into their university want to read, and the same holds true for the people deciding whether you merit that scholarship, grant or employment position in their organization.

I don't mean write like you're in third grade, just don't use more words than you need to.

Examples:

1. “The ball” is the same as “the round circular-shaped ball.” Everyone knows what a ball looks like. The added words *round* and *circular-shaped* are fluff.
2. “Now” is the same as “at the present moment in time.” If you can communicate the same idea in fewer words, do it.
3. “I think that...” is the same as “Truthfully, I honestly think that...” Unless you state otherwise, your reader should be able to assume that you're being truthful when you tell them what you think.
4. “Remember...” is the same as “It should be remembered that...”

I'm sure you get the idea. Remember that the urge to pad your writing with excess words, sentences and phrases is natural but should be avoided. Look at every sentence and every paragraph you write and think, “Okay, what isn't needed here?” Ask yourself if there's anything cluttering or obscuring your point. If there is, remove it. This makes it easier on your readers and will improve their impression of your writing and you.

Next, let's look at one of the most common causes of student writing errors—the humble comma.

Students tend to use more commas than they need, and they tend to place them in locations where it makes understanding more difficult, not less. As in all other aspects of writing, commas should enhance understanding, not hinder it.

An intuitive and natural way to write (I sometimes do this) is to “think” your sentences or read them out loud. I find that in most places where you naturally pause in reading or speaking, it's more likely that a comma will work well. However, this is obviously not a hard and fast rule, it's just a trick you can use to help you proofread. It may help you spot unnecessary commas and places where commas are needed.

With that in mind, there are definitely situations where you should use commas, and situations where you should avoid them.

Examples:

1. Don't use commas to separate the subject from the verb in a sentence. Don't write, “The dog, chased the ball.” The meaning of the sentence is clear without the comma (The dog chased the ball).

2. Avoid comma splices. You can use commas in the creation of compound sentences but you need to use an appropriate conjunction (such as *for*, *and* or *but*). “She likes cats, but she also likes dogs” is fine. However, “She likes cats, she also likes dogs” is not (the latter example would be okay with a semicolon, as in “She likes cats; she also likes dogs”).

3. DO use commas to separate words or phrases written in a series within the sentence. For example, “I like dogs, cats, and guinea pigs” or “That buffet last night gave me diarrhea, bloating, cramps, and gas.”

4. DO use commas to set off quotations within the sentence. For example:

George Washington once said, “These frog legs taste just like chicken!”

He didn't really say that (so far as I know...)

Anyway, rules governing comma usage can get quite complicated and subtle so it's no wonder that comma abuse and misuse constitutes one of the largest areas of student error. If in doubt, consult a print or online guide to help you.

The third and final common type of mistake students make that I'll discuss in this report is that of word choice.

This is a case not of choosing too many words or too few, but of choosing the wrong words for a given situation. In this case, there are usually several similar words from which one may select. Quite often the wrong choice is made, and thus these kinds of errors are also among the most commonly made by students.

In fact, many of these errors are so subtle and thus common that they also permeate much “professional” entertainment and news media—thus perpetuating and reinforcing the problem. Many of these mistakes can become quite ingrained and thus hard to correct no matter how many times they're pointed out. Students will continue to make them time and again because they haven't yet internalized the distinction between different uses of similar words (and it doesn't help that they keep seeing and hearing the incorrect usage in popular media).

The best way to learn to avoid these errors is to practice learning and using the correct forms, while actively searching for these types of errors when proofreading will help reinforce that learning and teach you to avoid making these errors again in the future.

Since these errors are legion, let's take a look at some examples:

1. “Whose” is a form of possessive while “who's” is a contraction. *Whose pen is that? Who's the man?*

2. “There” refers to location while “their” is a possessive. *There's a UFO in my backyard. Their sushi smells a little off.*

(Also, “They're” is a contraction. *They're coming to take me away.*)

3. “Where” refers to location while “were” is a past form of the verb “to be.” *Where did I leave that cattle prod? Were there any lesions in my frontal lobe?*

4. “Its” is possessive while “it's” is a contraction. *I can't find its bottom! It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood.*

5. “Accept” is a verb indicating consent while “except” denotes exception. *I accept the million dollars you keep offering me. Everyone knows what the hell is going on except for me.*

There are many, many other examples of words similar in appearance but with distinct usages. If in doubt consult a good print or online reference.

I've only covered some of the most obvious errors that students often make in their writing here. There are of course many others. In general these errors fall under the

categories of style and grammar, word usage, and punctuation.

Students tend to make the same errors in their writing repeatedly, and while instructors stoically try to find and point out these mistakes, it is only through practice that recognition will follow. You first have to learn where the error lies of course, but you then have to internalize the correct format and make its usage a habit.

One thing that can help you tremendously both in correcting errors and learning to avoid making them altogether is to use the information in this guide when proofreading your own writing. It won't help you catch every error but it will make it easier for you to focus and have an idea what kinds of errors you're looking for.

Practice makes perfect, but getting from here to there of course takes time, repetition and diligence. However, having a handy reference can make it easier for you. Even if you just use this guide as a means to avoid the most common mistakes discussed herein, you'll still no doubt be dramatically improving the quality, professionalism and clarity of your writing, and that translates directly into getting what you want.

Whether you're writing for a grade, admission to the college you desire, a scholarship, grant or new job, following just the simple tips in this report will improve your writing—and that translates into better grades, better schools, more scholarships and better jobs.

Remember: In many cases the only chance you have to impress and influence others is through the words that you write, so learn to avoid error and maximize clarity in order to make the best impression you can.

If you need help with tips or advice check out my website at LanceEnsign.com where I offer proofreading and other writing services, and for a more lengthy discussion on things you can do to make your writing the best it can be, check out my eBook [*Improve Your Writing Now: A Student's Guide to Writing an Effective Paper*](#) available for the Kindle on Amazon.