



Most Common Language Errors • Capitalization

1. Family Relationships

Capitalize family relationships only when used as proper nouns:

- I tell my Aunt Betty everything.
- I saw Mom and Uncle Tony at the store.

Do NOT capitalize nouns:

(usually preceded by the word “my”)

- I saw my dad and my uncle on the boat.

2. Titles

Capitalize titles if the title appears before a name or are part of a name:

- President Carter
- Senator Carl Levin

Do NOT capitalize titles that are not part of a name, or used after a name:

- The senator’s new office is in the corner of the building.
- Judy Jones is currently the vice president of the company.

3. “Calendar Words”

Capitalize: days of the week, months, and holidays:

- Monday
- September
- Memorial Day

Do NOT capitalize:

- spring
- summer

4. Subjects

Capitalize specific school courses:

- Sociology 201
- English 101

Do NOT capitalize general areas of study:

- His major was psychology.
- I studied algebra and history last night.

5. Geography

Capitalize regions that have a name:

- The Gulf Coast
- The Midwest
- The Middle East

Do NOT capitalize points on the compass:

- north
- east
- southeast Indiana
- western edge of Harrison County

6. Proper Nouns

Capitalize: the names of particular structures, special events, monuments, vehicles and so on:

- The Titanic
- The World Series
- The Eiffel Tower

7. Movements

Capitalize philosophic, literary, and artistic movements:

- Naturalism
- Romanticism
- Neoclassicism

8. Cultural Words

Capitalize races, ethnic groups, nationalities, and languages:

- African American
- Latino
- English

9. Medical terms & Diseases

Capitalize only medical terms with a proper noun in the name or acronym:

- Reye’s syndrome
- ADHD

Do NOT capitalize any other medical words:

- polio
- mumps



Most Common Language Errors • Spelling

The “25 Most Commonly Misspelled Words” is a list that has circulated among American businesses for decades:

1. accommodate
2. acknowledgment
3. argument
4. commitment
5. consensus
6. deductible
7. dependent
8. embarrass
9. existence
10. foreword
11. harass
12. inadvertent
13. indispensable
14. judgment
15. liaison
16. license
17. occasion
18. occurrence
19. perseverance
20. privilege
21. prerogative
22. proceed
23. separate
24. supersede
25. withhold

Source: [The Business Writing Center](#)



Most Common Language Errors • Punctuation

- The apostrophe.** The apostrophe is used to form contractions and to indicate possession. The apostrophe is *not* used to form plurals, unless you are making a plural noun ending in “s” possessive.
 - It’s time to go.
 - Mary’s car is blue.
 - My sons’ books are in the closet.
- The comma splice.** When the comma is used to separate independent clauses, there must be a conjunction connecting them.
 - The car costs \$10,000. I am going to buy it.
 - The car costs \$10,000, and I am going to buy it.
- The comma after introductory elements.** Use a comma after an introduction or when providing a background to a certain sentence. An introductory element can be a sentence or a single word.
 - Before going to the school, Joe stopped at my house.
 - However, the festival was cancelled today due to rainy weather.
- The semicolon.** A semicolon should be used to separate two independent clauses (or complete sentences) that are closely related in meaning.
 - Richard likes cake; Susan likes salad.
- The quotation mark.** A quotation mark is used to quote speech, sentences or words. They should not be used to add emphasis to a word or sentence. If you want to add emphasis to a word, use the boldface type and not the quotation marks. Other punctuation should go inside the quotation marks, even if it is not part of the quotation itself.
 - “When will you be here?” he asked.
 - Wrong: “This gift is “free”!
 - Uncle John said, “My car is blue.”
- The exclamation mark.** The exclamation mark should be limited to one exclamation point, regardless of how excited you might be when writing that sentence.
 - This is amazing!



Most Common Language Errors • Grammar

- Who and Whom.** Who is a *subjective pronoun*, along with he, she, it, we and they. It is used when the pronoun acts as the subject of a clause. Whom is an *objective pronoun*, along with him, her, it, us and them. It is used when the pronoun acts as the object of a clause. It is not always easy to tell subjects from objects but to use a general rule: subjects start sentences, and objects end them.
 - Who brought the paper inside?
 - Who talked to you today?
 - To whom it may concern:
 - To whom did you talk today?
 - Whom does Sarah love?
- Lay and Lie.** Lay is a *transitive verb* that requires a direct subject and one or more objects. Present tense is “lay” and past tense is “laid.” Lie is an *intransitive verb*; it needs no object. Present tense is “lie” and past tense is “lay.”
 - I lay the pencil on the table.
 - Yesterday I laid the pencil on the table.
 - The Andes mountains lie between Chile and Argentina.
 - The man lay waiting for an ambulance.
- Nor vs. Or.** “Nor” expresses a negative condition. Use the “nor” form if your sentence expresses a negative and follows it with another negative condition. If the second negative is a noun, adjective, or adverb, you would use “or,” because the initial negative transfers to all conditions.
 - Neither the men nor the women were at home.
 - He won’t eat broccoli or asparagus.
- Fewer vs. Less.** Use “fewer” when discussing countable objects. Use “less” for intangible concepts.
 - He ate five fewer chocolates than the other person.
 - There are fewer than 20 employees attending the meeting.
 - I spent less than one hour finishing the report.
- Affect vs. Effect.** “Affect” is almost always a verb. It is used when you’re talking about the act of changing. “Effect” is almost always a noun. It is used when you’re talking about the change itself.
 - That movie affected me greatly.
 - That movie had a great effect on me.
- They’re vs. Their vs. There.** “They’re” is a contraction for “they are.” “Their” refers to something owned by a group. “There” refers to a place.
 - They’re going to love going there. I heard their food is the best!
- Your vs. You’re.** “Your” is used when you own something. “You’re” is the contraction for “you are.”
 - How’s your gymnastics class?
 - You’re fast when you are outside running.



Most Common Language Errors • Grammar (continued)

8. **Its vs. It's.** Use “its” as the possessive pronoun. Use “it’s” for the contraction for “it is.”
 - I took its bone.
 - It’s raining outside today.

9. **Me vs. I.** “Me” always functions as the object. “I” is always the subject. To decide usage, take the other person out of the sentence to see if it sounds right.
 - When you get done with that lab report, can you send it to Bill and me?
 - My co-worker and I went to lunch.

10. **A lot vs. Alot vs. Allot.** If you’re trying to say that someone has a vast number of things, you’d say they have “a lot” of things. “Alot” is not a word. If you’re trying to say you’ve set aside a certain amount of money to buy something, you’d say you “allotted” \$20 to spend on gas.

11. **Into vs. In to.** “Into” indicates movement. “In to” is used in a lot of situations because the individual words “to” and “in” are frequently used in other parts of a sentence.
 - Ginny walked into the office.
 - Can you call in to a meeting?

12. **A dangling modifier.** A dangling modifier is a modifier that has nothing to modify. Remember, modifiers describe a word or make its meaning more specific. A dangling modifier is an error caused by failing to use the word that the modifier is meant to be describing.
 - *Wrong:* Having read your letter, my cat will stay indoors until the ducklings fly off. (In this example, the missing word is *we*.)
 - *Correct:* Having read your letter, we will keep our cat indoors until the ducklings fly off. (In this example, the modifier *Having read your letter* is modifying *we* as it should.) Logically, the wrong example suggests the cat read the letter.

13. **Ending sentences with a preposition.** A preposition is a word which precedes a noun to show the noun’s relationship to another word in the sentence. Do not end a sentence with a preposition. In most cases, you can just transpose the preposition to the beginning of the clause.
 - *Wrong:* That is a situation I have not thought of.
 - *Correct:* That is a situation I have not considered.



Most Common Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is an expression in which the words are not used in their literal sense.

1. **Metaphor** - a term or phrase that suggests that one thing is something that it is literally not.
 - This bedroom is a prison.
 - He listened with a stone face.
 - He has a heart of gold.
 - Your love is an ocean.
2. **Simile** - a phrase that likens one thing to another (usually achieved by the use of the word *like* or *as*.)
 - She sings like an angel.
 - It is as clear as a bell.
3. **Personification** - a phrase that is used when non-human objects are given human traits.
 - Every morning my alarm clock springs to life.
 - It was a pity that the storm attacked the town with great rage.
 - Be careful when you talk around here; even the walls have ears.
 - Time has an annoying habit of creeping up on you.
4. **Hyperbole** - an exaggeration or extravagant statement used for effect.
 - I have a million problems.
 - We won a ton of cash.
 - I'll die if I don't finish this paper.
5. **Idiom** – commonly used expression whose meaning does not relate to the literal meaning of its words.
 - Be careful not to miss the boat.
 - This is the last straw.
 - You can't pull the wool over my eyes.
6. **Euphemism** - use of agreeable or inoffensive words to replace rude or offensive ones.
 - He kicked the bucket.
 - We are letting you go.
 - He has lost his marbles.
7. **Alliteration** - the repetition of an initial consonant sound.
 - She sees sheep sleeping.
 - Hannah's home has heat hopefully.
 - Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.



Most Common Figures of Speech (continued)

8. **Irony** - the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning.
 - I saw a fish drowning.
 - The water vendor died of thirst.
 - The teacher failed the test.

9. **Pun** - a play on words.
 - When it rains, it pours.
 - Without geometry, life is pointless.

10. **Oxymoron** - contradictory terms appear side by side.
 - Pretty ugly
 - Great Depression
 - Random order