

Let us improve our English

Common mistakes we make

There/their/they're

These are homophones – words that sound the same but have different meanings; that is why we get confused.

The rules:

1. Use “there” to refer to a place that isn’t here – “over there”.
2. We also use “there” to state something – “There are no biscuits left.”
3. “Their” indicates possession – something belonging to them.
4. “They’re” is short for “they are”.

Wrong usage:

- Their going to be here soon
- We should contact they're agent
- Can we use there car?
- Their is an argument that says

Correct usage:

- They're going to be here soon
- We should contact their agent
- Can we use their car?
- There is an argument that says

Fewer/less

The mistake most people make is using “less” (for quantity) when they actually mean “fewer” (for numbers), rather than the other way round.

The rules:

1. “Fewer” refers to items you can count individually.
2. “Less” refers to a commodity, such as sand or water, which you can’t count individually.
3. Less time but fewer hours
4. Less stress but fewer worries

Wrong usage:

- *There are less packets now*
- *She has less toys as compared to him*
- *Ten items or less*

Correct usage:

- *There are fewer packets now*
- *She has fewer toys as compared to him*
- *Ten items or fewer*

Amount/number

These two work in the same way as “less” and “fewer”, referring respectively to commodities and individual items.

We say 14 to 15 people came.

People can be counted and are separate entities, so we should say 14 or 15 people came.

The rules:

1. “Amount” refers to a commodity, which can’t be counted (for instance water).
2. “Number” refers to individual things that can be counted (for example birds).

Wrong usage:

- A greater amount of people are eating more healthily

Correct usage:

- A greater number of people are eating more healthily
- The rain dumped a larger amount of water on the country than is average for the month

To/two/too

It's easy to see why people get this one wrong, but there's no reason why you should.

The rules:

1. "To" is used in the infinitive form of a verb – "to talk".
2. "To" is also used to mean "towards".
3. "Too" means "also" or "as well".
4. "Two" refers to the number 2.

Wrong usage:

- I'm to hot
- It's time two go
- I'm going too town
- He bought to cakes

Correct usage:

- I'm too hot
- It's time to go
- I'm going to town
- He bought two cakes

Me/Myself/I

All three refer to oneself and hence there is sometimes confusion about the suitability of the usage, particularly in a sentence in which another person is referred to.

The rules:

1. When referring to yourself and someone else, put their name first in the sentence.
2. Choose “me” or “I” by removing their name and seeing which sounds right.
3. You only use “myself” if you’ve already used “I”, making you the subject of the sentence.

Wrong usage:

- Me and John are off to the circus
- Myself and John are going into town
- Give it to John and I to look after

Correct usage:

- Anuj and I are off to the circus
- Anuj and I are going into town
- Give it to Anuj and me to look after
- I’ll deal with it myself
- I thought to myself

Then/than

Confusion between “then” and “than” probably arises because the two look and sound similar.

The rules:

1. “Than” is used in comparisons.
2. “Then” is used to indicate something following something else in time, as in step-by-step instructions, or planning a schedule (“we’ll go there first and then there”).

Wrong usage:

- *She was better at it then him*
- *It was more then enough*

Correct usage:

- *She was better at it than him*
- *It was more than enough*
- *We’ll go to the baker first, then the coffee shop*

“Could/would/should”

They are similar sounding but quite different in meaning.

The rules:

1. We use “could” when there is/ was a possibility.
2. We use “would” when we intend to.
3. We use “should” when we ought to.

Wrong usage:

- *You could do this for me?*
- *How would you did it?*
- *Should it be possible for you?*

Correct usage:

- *I could have done it better (I had the capability of doing better)*
- *I would do it better given another chance (intent for future)*
- *I should do it better (it is expected of me)*

Who/whom

Think of “he/she” or “him/her” when confused.

The rules:

1. “Who” refers to the subject of a sentence; “whom” refers to the object.
2. “Who” and “whom” work in the same way as “he” or “him”. You can work out which you should use by asking yourself the following:
“Who did this? He did” – so “who” is correct. “Whom should I invite? Invite him” – so “whom” is correct.

Wrong usage:

- Who shall I invite?
- Whom is responsible?
- He was the only person that wanted to come

Correct usage:

- Whom shall I invite?
- Who is responsible?
- He was the only person who wanted to come

Alphabet/Letter

There is sometimes confusion about the usage of these 2 words. For example, the word “Alphabet” is synonymously used for “Letter”.

1. Actually alphabet is a set of letters or symbols in a fixed order used for writing a language.
2. It originates from alpha and beta, first 2 letters of the Greek alphabet.
3. Most languages have an alphabet of their own.
4. The English alphabet has 26 letters (A-Z)
5. Hindi alphabet is called “Varnmala”.

Wrong usage:

- My name Seema has 5 alphabets.
- Which is the alphabet after D?
- K is the 11th alphabet.

Correct usage:

- My name Seema has 5 letters in it.
- Which is the letter after D?
- K is the 11th letter of the English alphabet

Sentence/Phrase

There is a huge difference between the written language and the spoken language.

The rules:

1. When we write we must take care to write sentences properly.
2. Sentence = a set of words expressing a statement, a question or an order, usually containing a subject and a verb.
3. In written English sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, a question mark or an exclamation mark.

Difference

A sentence makes complete sense and has a subject and a predicate. A phrase is a group of words usually without a verb and is a part of a sentence. It makes some sense but not complete sense.

Common mistake

In a presentation when we use bullet points to keep it short, we do not form complete sentences; but by mistake tend to put a full stop after each point.

Use of the articles a/an

We have learnt that “an” is used before words beginning with vowels (a,e,i,o,u) and “a” otherwise.

The rules:

1. “An” is also used before words beginning with vowel sound.
2. Similarly “a” is used before words beginning with a vowel letter without a vowel sound.
3. “A & an” are used only for countable nouns in the singular.

Wrong usage:

- A hour ago (hour has h silent and hence begins with a vowel sound, though not a vowel letter)
- An union (A is also used before words beginning with a vowel letter, not having a vowel sound.)

Correct usage:

- An hour ago
- An honest man
- A union
- A one rupee note

Usage of full stop, comma, semi colon and colon

1. Full stop is used to indicate completion of a sentence, as we all know. It is also used for indicating abbreviations and initials.
2. Comma is used for a brief pause in a sentence. It usually separates clauses.
3. Semi colon is used for a longer pause.
4. Colon is used before enumerating.

Examples –full stop & comma

1. I am hungry. Get me something to eat.

M.B.B.S

Mr. K.D. Kelkar

L.I.C

2. We need books, pens, pencils and erasers.

Examples –semi colon & colon

1. His nature is mild; his heart generous.
She is a hard working, sincere and well-behaved girl; and we all love her.
2. Children are generally divided into three categories: listeners, lookers and movers.

Affect/effect

It's an easy enough mistake to make given how similar these two words look and sound, but there's a simple explanation to help you remember the difference.

The rules:

1. Affect is a verb – “to affect” – meaning to influence or have an impact on something.
2. Effect is the noun – “a positive effect” – referring to the result of being affected by something.

Wrong usage:

- He waited for the medicine to have an affect
- They were directly effected by the flooding

Correct usage:

- He waited for the medicine to have an effect
- They were directly affected by the flooding

I.e. and e.g.

These two abbreviations are commonly confused, and many people use them interchangeably. However, their uses are very different.

The rules:

1. I.e. means “that is” or “in other words”. It comes from the Latin words “id est”.
2. E.g. means “for example”. It comes from the Latin words “exempli gratia”.
3. Only use “i.e.” and “e.g.” when writing informally. In formal documents, such as essays, it is better to write out the meanings (“for example” or “that is”).

Wrong usage:

- He liked many different authors, *i.e.* Chetan Bhagat, Sudha Murthy & Amish Tripathi
- He objects to the changes –*e.g.* he won’t be accepting them.

Correct usage:

- He liked many different authors, *e.g.* Chetan Bhagat, Sudha Murthy & Amish Tripathi
- He objects to the changes –*i.e.* he won’t be accepting them.

Invite/invitation

This mistake is now so common that it's almost accepted as an alternative, but if you really want to speak English properly, you should avoid it.

The rules:

1. "Invite" is a verb – "to invite". It refers to asking someone if they'd like to do something or go somewhere.
2. "Invitation" is a noun – "an invitation". It refers to the actual message asking someone if they'd like to do something or go somewhere.

Wrong usage:

- *I haven't responded to her invite yet.*
- *She sent me an invite.*

Correct usage:

- *I haven't responded to her invitation yet.*
- *She sent me an invitation.*
- *I'm going to invite her to join us.*

Its/it's

Apostrophes should be used to indicate possession, but there is one exception to this rule, and that is the word "it". Unsurprisingly, this exception gets lots of people confused.

The rules:

1. "It's" is only used when short for "it is".
2. "Its" indicates something belonging to something that isn't masculine or feminine (like "his" and "hers", but used when you're not talking about a person).
3. If it helps, remember that inanimate objects can't really possess something in the way a human can.

Wrong usage:

- Its snowing outside
- The sofa looks great with it's new cover

Correct usage:

- It's snowing outside
- The sofa looks great with its new cover

Your/you're

The rules:

“Your” indicates possession –something belonging to you.

“You’re” is short for “you are”.

Wrong usage:

- *Your beautiful*
- *Do you know when your coming over?*
- *Can I have one of you're biscuits?*

Correct usage:

- *You're beautiful*
- *Do you know when you're coming over?*
- *Can I have one of your biscuits?*

Vocabulary of a person tells us the extent or number of words that he/she knows. A person's vocabulary may be wide or limited. According to researchers, 500 repetitions are required before any word becomes part of a person's vocabulary.

Passive & Active Vocabulary

Vocabulary may be passive or active; meaning thereby that the words that we read and hear are a part of our passive or receptive vocabulary.

And the words that we speak and write are a part of our active or expressive vocabulary.

From receptive to expressive

Words first become a part of our receptive vocabulary and then we start using them ourselves.

Vocabulary Building

You must become actively receptive to new words.

You must be on a constant lookout, in your reading and listening, for any words that other people know and you do not.

Step 1

To encounter new words, you must read more. You don't have to read only heavy stuff. Recreational reading, like novels, magazines etc. also helps.

Step 2

Invest time in a dictionary. It has a wealth of information about the language. Check out the dictionary each time you encounter a new word. Repeat it in your mind 2-3 times so that it stays.

Synonyms

There are words that are “correct” to use in a situation but there are words that are more apt or appropriate; closer to what you really want to say.

Synonyms are therefore important for vocabulary development.

Step 3

This must become a way of life, a habit forever. The desire must be from within and the effort constant. Put new words with their meanings on “post it” slips for a few days or weeks, till you are comfortable with these new words.

Step 4

Express yourself with new words. Instead of always using the same adjectives, make a constant effort to replace them with synonyms.

Jargon

Areas of human learning are immensely wide.

Moreover, all areas have their own special words or jargon. Like true students, you must methodically attack new areas of learning and read about different subjects. Using jargon creates a good impression.

Step 5

Make lists of words related to certain fields of study. For example: practitioners and professionals, science, machinery, medical science, art architecture, law, automobiles, armed forces, astronomy etc.

Step 6

Make word lists about simple mundane things: media, filmmaking, airport/ railway station, governance/ parliament, cuisines, trade/ business, music, sports etc.

Classification

Using “classification” technique, you can take certain situations and write all the words that come to your mind. We hesitate to express ourselves because we fumble for suitable words.

Step 7

Think of varied situations and step by step list all the words that go with each; like planning a holiday abroad and making preparations right from requiring travel documents etc., or cookery & grocery list

Step 8

You can daily look up the dictionary for 4-5 new words –taking one alphabet a day.

Make sentences with each new word.

Slang

These are very informal words or expressions that are more common in spoken language. Generally special groups have their own slang vocabulary. It consists of words and expressions which will not be found in the dictionary, and can be distortions of existing words or entirely invented terms.

Slang

It is used in informal situations. It is not appropriate in formal situations. You may use it while conversing but written formal English must conform to basic grammar rules.

Informal Situations where using slang is alright

While playing sports, at an informal restaurant or a party, while watching a sporting event, with close family members or friends, while shopping, studying or hanging out. On a date, at the movies, in email, in notes, on the telephone with friends etc.

Informal vs. Formal

Slang gives comfort in communication as little effort is required and also because you know you are not being judged.

You can be yourself.

However, transporting this feeling of ease to formal situations is not advisable.

Formal situations demand formal communication.

Informal writing

There has seen a dramatic decline in the writing abilities of the students due to Tweeting, Facebook, and texting. They do not capitalize words or use punctuation anymore. Take care.

Informal speaking

Learn to control the urge to speak casually when in formal situations. To be able to articulate well, one has to find apt words and for that vocabulary building is a prerequisite. (see lesson 5)

Shortened Forms

Short forms are quicker to use, both while speaking and writing. In formal situations take care to write the full form. Unfortunately, sometimes the full form is not known. Try to find out the full form and use at appropriate places. (Remember these are English Improving lessons.)

Some common short forms

Abs –for abdominal muscles
Gym –for gymnasium
Lab –for laboratory
Id –for identification
Intro –for introduction
Info –for information
Vibes –for vibrations

Some more...

Funda–for fundamental
Max –for maximum
'Coz –for because
Dunno–for do not know
Gonna–for going to
Ya/yeah for yes
Bro –for brother

Some phrases

Some expressions are very casual and must be restricted to only very casual situations. Your approach and intent may be “serious”, as in an interview, but if you articulate casually, you will be assessed differently.

To be avoided in formal situations

*Have a blast
Blow up money
Cool dude
Deck up
Eye candy
Chill out
Damn
Anyways
No worries*

Some more examples

*Twenty-four seven
Whatsup
Hang out
Hooked on to
In thing
Turn up / show up
Dish out
Just a sec
Drama queen*

Abbreviations

These are shortened versions of words or titles or names of groups, organizations etc. Most are accepted forms. Sometimes fewer letters of a word are used (St. for saint or Dr. for doctor), sometimes first letter of each word are used (ISRO for Indian Space & Research Organization).

When to use

It is alright to use abbreviations if they are widely used across nations/ cultures. Or you must be confident the listener or reader would know as you both belong to the same set-up, culturally or workwise.

When not to use

However, if the abbreviations are peculiar or restricted to a closed group (like a particular company, institution, city etc.), then you must use the full form. (We in Ahmedabad know what PDPU or CG Road stand for, outsiders may not know.)

Sorry

The word “sorry” is one that is used widely, but it has more than one meaning. When we’re apologizing for something, we say either “sorry for” or “sorry about”.

But you can also use the word to express a feeling of sympathy towards someone.

Examples of apology

- *I’m sorry about the mess.*
- *I’m sorry for ruining your day.*
- *I am sorry I came late and kept you waiting.*

Feelings of sympathy

- *He lost his job; I feel really sorry for him.*
- *Very sorry to hear your father passed away.*
- *I am so sorry, you really had a rough time.*

Loose/Lose

Loose means not firmly fixed where it should be OR it may mean, not tied together OR it can be used to mean free to move around. OR not fitting properly. Lose means to be unable to find something OR to have something taken away from you OR to face defeat OR to have to give up something.

Examples of usage of Loose

- The button is loose.
- She left her hair loose.
- The cows were let loose to graze.
- This kurta is a bit loose for me.

Examples of usage of Lose

- Be careful, don't lose the keys.
- She will lose her hair due to chemotherapy.
- If you lose this race you will not qualify for next round.
- You will lose your deposit if you cancel the order.

Older/ Elder

These are used to compare the ages of people, buildings, monuments, things etc. Elder is less commonly used nowadays and is appropriate when comparing the age of people, especially if they are from the same family. We say “elder to” but “older than”.

Common errors

Five-days week ×
Five-day week ✓
He is 20 year old. ×
He is a 20-year-old man or 20 years old. ✓
Three hours journey ×
Three-hour journey or three hours' journey ✓

Common errors

In the train ×
On the train ✓
You can find her on her desk. ×
At her desk ✓
What's the time in your watch? ×
By your watch ✓

Break

This word has several meanings and when joined with some prepositions and other words like in, out, off, up, down etc. it gives a new expression. Inappropriate usage can alter the meaning completely.

Some examples

Break in = to enter without permission and usually not from the main entrance

Break out = spread of a disease or riots or other forms of unrest or violence

Break off = to go away from

Some more examples

Break up = snapping (end) of a relationship

Break down = be distressed emotionally and vent the loss or grief OR a vehicle or a machine or a system developing a fault that requires repairs

Now some idioms.....

acid test

- An absolute, demanding or ultimate challenge or measure of quality or capability – deriving from very old times – several hundreds of years ago – when nitric acid was used to determine the purity or presence of gold, especially when gold was currency before coinage. Gold does not dissolve in nitric acid, whereas less costly silver and base metals do. The use of nitric acid also featured strongly in alchemy, the ancient ‘science’ of (attempting) converting base metals into gold.

*open a can of
worms*

- *highly difficult situation presently unseen or kept under control or ignored OR*
- *provok edebate about OR*
- *expose a hitherto dormant, potentially highly difficult situation*

*best of both
worlds / best of
all worlds*

- *ideally (usually impossibly), satisfying or achieving two needs, aims, problems that are difficult or impossible to reconcile (and usually contradictory or mutually exclusive) - this expression represents an unlikely ideal outcome or compromise*

goody two shoes /
little miss
goody two shoes

- A person who behaves and performs extremely well and particularly beyond the normal expectation, perhaps smugly, as to prompt cynicism, criticism and more accurately a little jealousy from others

on cloud nine

- *extreme happiness or euphoria*
- *being in a state of extreme happiness, not necessarily but potentially due to drugs or alcohol*
- *cloud seven is another variation, but cloud nine tends to be the most popular*

hold the fort / holding the fort

- Take responsibility for managing a situation while under threat or in crisis, especially on a temporary or deputy basis, or while waiting for usual / additional help to arrive or return
- ‘hold the fort’ or ‘holding the fort’ is a metaphor based on the idea of soldiers defending (holding) a castle or fort against attack by enemy forces.

alma mater

- (my) university -from the Latin, meaning 'fostering mother'

*battle of
the bulge*

- diet/lose weight

devil's advocate

- a person who raises objections against a (typically) logical or reasonable proposition, usually to test a generally accepted argument, or simply to prompt debate

*blood is
thicker than
water*

- *family loyalties are greater than those between friends*

bohemian

- artistically unconventional (typically referring to lifestyle, people, atmosphere, etc.) -Bohemia and Bohemian originally referred to a historic region in the western Czech republic

*bolt from
the blue*

- *sudden shock or surprise -see 'thunderbolt'*

*the buck
stops here*

- *acceptance of ultimate responsibility*

*pass the
buck/passing
the buck*

- *delegate or avoid responsibility by passing a problem or blame to another person*

*let the cat out
of the bag*

carte-blanche

- *give away a secret*

- *full discretionary power, freedom or permission to do anything*

damp squib

- *failure or anti-climax -a squib is an old word for a firework, and a wet one would obviously fail to go off properly or at all*

*double
whammy*

- *two problems in one. Usually people misuse it when 2 consecutive good things are also referred to as double whammy*

sitting duck

- *easy target or something that is vulnerable or defenseless to attack*

*make ends
meet*

- *budget tightly*

hoi polloi

- *an ordinary mass of people*

*footloose
and
fancy free*

- *free of obligations or responsibilities/free and single,
unattached*

Thank you