

COMMONLY MISUSED AND PROBLEM WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

After. Following

After is the more precise word if a time sequence is involved: ‘We went home after the meal.’

Allow

Use *allows* instead of *allows to*: ‘this system allows to measure the position of positrons...’ should be ‘this system *allows one to* measure the position of positrons...’ or ‘this system *allows the position of positrons to be measured*’;

Alternate. Alternative

The first means every other one in a series; the second, one of two possibilities.

Among. Between

When more than two things or persons are involved, *among* is usually called for: The money was divided among the four players. When, however, more than two are involved but each is considered individually, *between* is preferred: An agreement was reached between the heirs.

Amount. Number

Use *amount* when you refer to a mass or aggregate; use *number* when countable units are involved: ‘The number of people in our laboratory is 5000’.

And/or

A device, or shortcut, that damages a sentence and often leads to confusion or ambiguity. First of all, would an honour system successfully cut down on the amount of stealing and/or cheating? First of all, would an honour system reduce the incidence of stealing or cheating or both?

Anticipate

Use *expect* in the sense of simple expectation. My brother *expected* the upturn in the market. My brother *anticipated* the upturn in the market. The second sentence should be understood as meaning that he acted in advance of the expected upturn in the market by buying stock.

Anybody

In the sense of ‘any person’ not to be written as two words. *Any body* means ‘any corpse’, or ‘any human form’, or ‘any group’. The rule holds equally for *everybody*, *nobody*, and *somebody*.

Anyone

In the sense of ‘anybody’, written as one word. *Any one* means ‘any single person’ or ‘any single thing’.

As to whether

Whether is sufficient.

As yet

Yet nearly always is as good, if not better. ‘No agreement has been reached as yet’. ‘No agreement has yet been reached’. The chief exception is at the beginning of a sentence, where *yet* means something different: ‘Yet (*or* despite everything) he has not succeeded’. ‘As yet (*or* so far) he has not succeeded’.

Being

Not appropriate after *regard*. . . *as*: ‘He is regarded as being the best dancer in the club’; ‘He is regarded as the best dancer in the club’.

Beside. Besides

Beside: (prep.) close to, by, near (to); on a level with; compared with; wide of (beside the point).

Besides: (adv. and prep.) in addition (to); moreover; otherwise, else (than).

But

Unnecessary after *doubt* and *help*.

‘I have no doubt but that . . .’ ‘I have no doubt that . . .’

‘He could not help but see that . . .’ ‘He could not help seeing that . . .’

Can

Means ‘am (is, are) able’. Not to be used as a substitute for *may*.

Case

Often unnecessary. ‘In many cases the rooms were poorly ventilated’. ‘Many of the rooms were poorly ventilated’.

Compare

To *compare to* is to point out or imply resemblance between objects regarded as essentially of a different order; to *compare with* is mainly to point out differences between objects regarded as essentially of the same order.

‘Shall I *compare* thee *to* a summer’s day?’

‘Congress may be *compared with* the British Parliament’.

Complementary. Complimentary

A complement fills up or completes something: complementary information; a compliment is an expression of esteem, respect, praise: complimentary tickets (given free as a courtesy or favour).

Comprise

Literally ‘embrace’: A zoo *comprises* mammals, reptiles, and birds. But animals do not comprise a zoo—they *constitute* a zoo.

Consist of

To be made up or composed of; to have as its constituent substance or elements.

An ordinary fence, *consisting of* a ditch and a bank

Constitute

To make up, form, compose; to be the elements or material of which the thing spoken of consists.

Reading, writing and arithmetic do not of themselves constitute an education.

The rocks which constitute the crest of the mountain

Contrast

You *compare* two or more items in terms of similarity; you *contrast* differences.

Data

Like *strata*, *phenomena*, and *media*, *data* is a plural and is best used with a plural verb. The word, however, is slowly gaining acceptance as a singular.

‘The data is misleading’. ‘These data are misleading’.

Different from

One thing differs from another, hence, *different from*. *Different to* is criticized by some people, but is considered acceptable.

Divided into

Not to be misused for *composed of*. An apple, halved, is divided into sections, but an apple is composed of seeds, flesh, and skin.

Due to

Loosely used for *through*, *because of*, or *owing to*, in adverbial phrases. In correct use *due to* is an adjective synonymous with *attributable to*:

‘The accident was due to bad weather’; ‘losses due to preventable fires’.

‘He lost the first game due to carelessness’. ‘He lost the first game *because of* carelessness’.

Effect

As a noun, means ‘result’; as a verb, means ‘to bring about’, ‘to accomplish’ (not to be confused with *affect*, which means ‘to influence’).

Etc.

Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list already given almost in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation. At the end of a list introduced by *such as*, *for example* or any similar expression, etc. is incorrect. Name all the items.

Fact

Use this word only of matter capable of direct verification, not of matters of judgement.

Farther. Further

Farther serves best as a distance word, *further* as a time or quantity word. You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*.

Fix

Colloquial in America for *arrange*, *prepare*, *mend*. The preferred meaning of the word is ‘to make firm’, ‘to place definitely’.

Forgo. Forego

Forgo means to do without. *Forego* means to go before.

Fortuitous

Limited to what happens by chance. Not to be used for *fortunate* or *lucky*.

Fraction

Because *a fraction* can be large or small, it must be qualified: ‘a large fraction of the animals survived’.

Get

The colloquial *have got* for *have* should not be used in writing: ‘He has not got any sense’. ‘He *has* no sense’.

He is a man who

Redundant expression: ‘He is a man who is very ambitious’; ‘He is very ambitious’.

Hopefully

An adverb meaning ‘with hope’ not ‘I hope’ or ‘it is to be hoped’.

However

Avoid starting a sentence with *however* when the meaning is ‘nevertheless’. The word usually serves better when not in first position.

When *however* comes first, it means ‘in whatever way’ or ‘to whatever extent’.

‘However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best’.

Imply. Infer

Not interchangeable. Something implied is something suggested or indicated, though not expressed. Something inferred is something deduced from evidence at hand.

‘Farming implies early rising’. ‘Since he was a farmer, we inferred that he got up early’.

Importantly

Avoid by rephrasing. More importantly, he paid for the damages. What’s more, he paid for the damages.

In order to

Means *to*.

In regard to

Often wrongly written *in regards to*. But *as regards* is correct, and means the same thing.

In terms of

Padding. The job was unattractive in terms of salary. The salary made the job unattractive.

In view of the fact that

Say *because*.

Irregardless

There is no such word. Should be *regardless*. The error results from failure to see the negative in *-less* and from a desire to get it in as a prefix, suggested by such words as *irregular*, *irresponsible*.

Its. It’s

The first is the possessive of ‘it’. The second means ‘it is’.

Lay

A transitive verb. Do not misuse it for the intransitive verb *lie*. The hen *lays* an egg; the llama *lies* down. The playwright went home and *lay* down.

lay; laid; laid; laying

lie; lay; lain; lying

Less

Should not be misused for *fewer*. Ten items or less. Ten items or *fewer*. *Less* refers to quantity, *fewer* to number.

Like

Not to be used for the conjunction *as*. *Like* governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is *as*.

‘We spent the evening like in the old days’. ‘We spent the evening *as* in the old days’.

Meaningful

A bankrupt adjective. Choose another, or rephrase.

‘His was a meaningful contribution’. ‘His contribution was significant’.

Methodology

Means the *study of methods*. In most scientific papers, you should refer to a *method*.

Nor

Often used wrongly for *or* after negative expressions:

‘He cannot eat nor sleep’. ‘He cannot eat *or* sleep’. ‘He can *neither* eat *nor* sleep’.

Partially

Not always interchangeable with *partly*. Best used in the sense of ‘to a certain degree’, when speaking of a condition or state: ‘I’m partially resigned to it’.

People

A word with many meanings. The word *people* is best not used with words of number, in place of *persons*. Say ‘six persons, one person’.

Presently

Has two meanings: ‘in a short while’ and ‘currently’. Because of this ambiguity it is best restricted to the first meaning: ‘He’ll be here presently’ (‘soon’, or ‘in a short time’).

Principal. Principle

Principal is usually an adjective, meaning ‘most important’.

Principle is a noun meaning ‘a rule of conduct’.

Respective. Respectively

These words can often be omitted since they are redundant (‘works of fiction are listed under their respective authors’), but can be helpfully used to clarify the relationship between two or more groups: ‘She and I live in London and Birmingham respectively.’ makes it clear who lives where.

Shall. Will

We are old-fashioned and prefer *shall* for the first person in the future tense and *will* for the second and third.

Split infinitive

There is long precedent for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive it governs, but the construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.

Than

Any sentence with *than* (to express comparison) should be examined for completeness.

‘I’m probably closer to my mother than my father’. (Ambiguous.) ‘I’m probably closer to my mother *than to* my father’. ‘I’m probably closer to my mother *than my father is*’.

That. Which

That is the defining, or restrictive pronoun, *which* the non-defining, or non-restrictive.

‘The lawnmower that is broken is in the garage’. (Tells which one.)

‘The lawnmower, which is broken, is in the garage’. (Adds a fact about the only mower in question.)

They

Not to be used when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each*, *each one*, *everybody*, *every one*. Use the singular pronoun:

‘Each one of us knows they are fallible’. ‘Every one of us knows *he* is fallible’.

This. These

The antecedent of *this* or *these* should always be grammatically clear.

Antecedent in doubt: A thousand industries need such basic data on which to build progress. *This* is one purpose of the Bureau of Census.

Better: A thousand industries need such basic data on which to build progress. *Providing these data* is one purpose of the Bureau of Census

Transpire

Not to be used in the sense of ‘happen’, ‘come to pass’. It is correct, however, in the sense of ‘become known’, ‘come to light’.

Try

Takes the infinitive: ‘try *to* fix it’, not ‘try and fix it’.

Unique

Means ‘having no like or equal’. Hence there can be no degrees of uniqueness. Something is either unique or not unique. It cannot be very unique, most unique, or quite unique.

While

In general, use only with strict literalness, in the sense of ‘during the time that’. ‘Nero fiddled while Rome burned’.

Worth while

Strictly applicable only to actions: ‘Is it worth while to discuss it further?’

Worthwhile

A worthwhile journey.

Various. Varying

Various means ‘of differing kinds’, ‘diverse’: ‘There are various programs available’. Varying means ‘exhibiting or undergoing change’ (intransitive), e.g., ‘a constantly varying sky’, or making a partial change (transitive), e.g., ‘varying the temperature’.

Prepositions

The bugbear of non-native English speakers. Correct current usage is simply idiomatic and has to be learned or looked up. A useful list appears in Thomas L. Warren, *Words into Type*, Prentice Hall, 1999.