

Diction and Idiom Errors: A List of Common Errors in English Usage

The errors on this list are, obviously, organized alphabetically. Errors that involve confusion of two or more words or expressions are generally alphabetized according to whichever word comes first alphabetically; “emigrate vs. immigrate,” for example, is listed under emigrate. (Others are listed by the word or expression that is commonly misused, such as “like vs. as,” which is listed under like.) Articles (a, an, the) and the word to in infinitives are disregarded for purposes of alphabetization. Some words or expressions fall under a larger category; “to set vs. to sit,” for example, is listed under the heading “count nouns vs. mass nouns.”

Items marked with an asterisk are errors that students whose English is influenced by Chinese should pay special attention to.

about vs. around

Some grammar fascists insist that *around* should not be used to mean “about” or “approximately”:

~~“around five hundred people”~~

~~“around six o’clock”~~

“about five hundred people”

“at *about* six o’clock”

absolute adjectives

Some adjectives, including superlative adjectives like *last* and *best*, along with other adjectives like *full*, *pregnant*, *perfect*, the word *absolute* itself, and *unique* (which literally means “one of a kind”), technically should not be modified by intensifiers like *very* and *extremely* or qualifiers like *somewhat* and *a little* because they indicate qualities of an absolute degree. A woman is either pregnant or not pregnant, for example; she can’t be “a little pregnant.”

~~“the very best performance”~~

“the *best* performance”

~~“a very perfect performance”~~

“a *perfect* performance”

~~“a rather perfect performance”~~

“an *excellent* performance”

In practice, however, this rule is often disregarded. It may make sense to describe a woman as “very pregnant,” for example, if you mean that her pregnancy is advanced and her stomach is quite large. (*Unique*, in particular, is often modified by an intensifier. Many people think of *uniqueness* as a quality that can have different degrees; one person, for example, can be “more unique” than another person.)

absorbed in

When you use *absorb* to mean “engross,” use it with the preposition *in*:

~~“too absorbed by his book to notice”~~

“too absorbed *in* his book to notice”

accept vs. except

Except can be used as a verb, but only to mean “to exclude.”

~~“refused to except defeat”~~

“refused to *accept* defeat”

“People are dishonest, cruel, and selfish... present company *excepted*, of course.”

adapt vs. adopt

To adapt means “to make or become suited (often by alteration)”; *to adopt* means “to take up for use” or “to accept and put into effect.”

“freshmen *adapting* to a new environment”

“*adapted* it for use as a weapon”

“*adopted* a new strategy”

“the speaker *adopted* a tone of urgency”

“*adopted* the panel’s recommendations”

“*adapted* the recommendations to fit the new situation”

adhere with

adhere to

“If you do not *adhere to* the rules, you will be excommunicated from the Hannah Montana Fan Club.”

advance vs. advanced

Some people are under the impression that the past participle *advanced* is the only adjective form of the verb *advance*. In fact, *advance* itself can be an adjective when it refers to something ahead of time:

“*advanced* age”

“*advanced* technology”

“*advance* notice”

“*advance* party sent to secure the area”

*affect vs. effect*¹

In their most common usages, *affect* is a verb meaning “to influence” or “to have an impact on,” while *effect* is a noun meaning “result, consequence, outcome”:

“*affect* the outcome”

“*affected* by the weather”

“the war’s *effects*”

“the *effect* of the decision”

However, *effect* can also be a verb when it is used to mean *to bring about* or *to put into effect*:

“to *effect* a change” = “to bring about a change” (not “to influence a change”)

“*effect* a solution to the problem”

¹ *Affect* has other uses as well, but they aren’t likely to appear on the SAT: one can *affect* a British accent or *affect* a limp, for example, and in psychology, an *affect* (pronounced “A fect,” not “uh FECT”) is the subjective aspect of an emotion.

afflict vs. inflict

To *afflict* means to distress severely; trouble. To *inflict* means to give or cause (damage, pain, etc.). Although they are similar in meaning, *afflict* focuses on the pain or suffering itself, while *inflict* focuses on the active cause of the pain or suffering. Generally speaking, if the word *cause* can be used as a substitute, you should use *inflict*, not *afflict*.

- ~~“inflicted with various ailments”~~
- “afflicted with various ailments²”
- ~~“a region inflicted with drought”~~
- “a region afflicted with drought”
- ~~“suffering afflicted by the drought”~~
- “suffering inflicted (caused) by the drought”
- ~~“attack that afflicted heavy losses on the enemy”~~
- “attack that inflicted (caused) heavy losses on the enemy”
- ~~“losses inflicted (caused) by the enemy”~~

aggravate

Although *aggravate* (along with other forms such as *aggravating* and *aggravation*) has long been commonly used to mean “to annoy or irritate,” some grammar fascists insist that its only proper usage is “to make worse; to exacerbate”:

- ~~“aggravated by her constant nagging”~~
- “annoyed/irritated by her constant nagging”
- ~~“bully aggravated his injury while beating up the little kid”~~

agree (up)on, agree to, agree [infinitive], agree with

agree (up)on = [of two or more parties] “to have the same opinion about (something)” or “to reach an agreement regarding (something)”

- “two sides agreed on a course of action”

agree to = accept

- “agree to your demands”

agree [infinitive]

- “agree to accept responsibility”
- “agree to do my homework regularly”

agree with = to have the same opinion as; concur

- ~~“agree to your views on the matter”~~
- “agree with your views on the matter”

allude/allusion/allusive vs. elude/elusive vs. illusion

An *allusion* is “a reference to something, often an indirect reference,” and to *allude* thus means “to make a reference.” To *elude* means “to escape.” An *illusion* is “something that causes a false perception or belief” (or the false perception or belief itself).

- ~~“novel makes frequent illusions to the Bible”~~
- “novel makes frequent allusions to the Bible”
- ~~“police could not capture the elusive fugitive”~~
- “optical illusion that made the image appear to change”

² Although *afflict(ed) with* seems to be the preferred idiom, *afflicted by* is also quite common.

“has no illusions about his chances of success”

alot and alright

Just in case your teachers have failed to get the message to you, these forms are considered nonstandard. Use “a lot” and “all right.”

altogether vs. all together

Altogether means either “completely” or “in total”; *all together* means “all in a group”:

- ~~“altogether in one place for the first time in years”~~
- “all together in one place for the first time in years”
- ~~“an altogether different situation” (= “a completely different situation”)~~

~~“a need of”~~

~~“in need for”~~

~~“a need for”~~

- “a child with a need for attention”

~~“in need of”~~

- “a patient in need of immediate aid”

appraise vs. apprise

To *appraise* means “to evaluate or estimate”:

- “an appraisal of the value of the house”
- “quickly appraised the situation”

To *apprise* means “to inform, to tell”:

- “apprised him of the situation”

argue against vs. argue with

argue with [a person]

- ~~“argued with the plan”~~
- “argued with him about the plan”

argue against [an opinion, approach, tactic, etc.]

- ~~“argued against him about the plan”~~
- “argued against the plan”

as...than...

- ~~“gasoline as expensive than liquid gold”~~

as...as...

- “gasoline as expensive as liquid gold”

For negative comparisons using this pattern, see the entry for “not so...as...”

~~“at face value”~~

~~“for face value”~~

The idiom *face value* refers to the outward or initial appearance of something. It is used to indicate the acceptance of something without questioning or doubting it:

- “accepted his explanation at face value”
- “took his promises at face value”

attend vs. attend to

The verb *attend* is usually used to mean “to be present at, to participate in, to be enrolled in”:

- “attend a meeting”

To *attend to* something is “to deal with” or “to focus one’s attention on”:

- ~~“attend to a school”~~

“attend to a problem”
“attend to your studies”

~~attribute on/attribution on~~
attribute to/attribution to

“problems attributable to neglect”
“saying traditionally attributed to Socrates”

avail

“To no avail” means “without success”:
“tried to resuscitate her, to no avail”
“To avail oneself of [something]” means “to take advantage of”:
“availed herself of the opportunity to observe a veterinarian at work”

These are standard idioms for which no other formula is acceptable.

bare vs. bear

Bare means “to uncover, reveal,” while *bear* means “to endure” or “to carry”:
“bare one’s soul” (“reveal”)
“bare one’s pain to the audience”
“bear the pain of rejection” (“endure”)
“bear the cross of terrible guilt” (“carry”)
“bear the weight of the panda on my back”

because at the beginning of a sentence

The rule that you can’t begin a sentence with *because* is pounded into the heads of kids everywhere, and many of them never get the message that this rule is fallacious. Elementary school teachers teach this rule because they know that most young kids aren’t yet linguistically sophisticated enough to understand how to write such sentences correctly. As long as a *because* clause is followed by an independent clause that explains its outcome or consequences, it is perfectly acceptable:

~~“Because it had eaten five pounds of chocolate in ten minutes.”~~
“Because it had eaten five pounds of chocolate in ten minutes, the dog vomited forth a river of black goo.”

Although we use such fragments in conversation quite frequently (“Why?” “Because I told you so!”), they should be avoided in writing.

being as.../being that...

because, since, etc.

~~“Being as she doesn’t want your help, you should let her handle it herself.”~~
“Since she doesn’t want your help, you should let her handle it herself.”

belong*

Belong is not an adjective; it is an intransitive verb that cannot be used in the passive voice and is never used in the progressive tenses, so it should never be preceded by a *to be* verb:

~~“all your bases are belong to us”~~
“all your bases *belong* to us”

be sure and [verb]

~~“be sure and clean up after yourself”~~

be sure [infinitive]

“be sure to clean up after yourself”

between...or...

~~“a choice between death or imprisonment”~~

between...and...

“a choice between death *and* imprisonment”

between vs. among

for two: **between**

for three or more: **among**

“walk **between** the two statues”

“walk **among** the many statues”

bias vs. biased

Bias is both a noun and a verb; *biased* is a participle often used as an adjective:

“wording that **biases** the poll results”

“has a **bias** against the poor”

~~“test is **bias** against the poor”~~

~~“a **bias** and unfair test”~~

“test is **biased** against the poor”

“a **biased** and unfair test”

Note that this is also true of the adjective *prejudiced*:

~~“a **prejudice** jury”~~

“a **prejudiced** jury”

both...as well as...

~~“both teachers **as well as** students”~~

both...and...

“both teachers **and** students”

Using *as well as* with *both* is considered redundant, but using *and* with *both* is an idiomatically acceptable redundancy.

breath vs. breathe

When you need a noun, use *breath*; when you need a verb, use *breathe*. The adjective form *breathy* is derived from the noun.

bring vs. take

Bring is used to suggest movement toward the speaker (or, in some cases, the person being spoken to); *take* is used to suggest movement away from the speaker:

~~“**Bring** your textbook home tonight,’ the teacher said.”~~

“**Take** your textbook home tonight,’ the teacher said.”

~~“**Take** your book to school tomorrow,’ the teacher said.”~~

“**Bring** your textbook to school tomorrow,’ the teacher said.”

“Yes, I will **take** it to you right now.”

“Yes, I will **bring** it to you right now.”

“can’t help but [base verb]”
“can’t help [present participle]”
Although “can’t help but” is a common expression, it is technically considered a double negative.

“~~can’t help but wonder~~”
“can’t help *wondering*”

capable [infinitive]
“~~capable to solve~~ this problem”
capable of [present participle]
“capable *of solving* this problem”

cliché vs. clichéd
Cliché is a noun; if you want to use the word as an adjective, use *clichéd* (even though *cliché* isn’t a verb, *clichéd* is the correct adjective form).
“love song with ~~cliché~~ lyrics”
“love song with *clichéd* lyrics”

~~commensurate to~~
commensurate with
The word *commensurate*, which means “proportionate,” is used with the preposition *with*.
“punishment **commensurate with** the crime”

~~commentary of~~
commentary on
In sentences such as the example below, the proper preposition to use with *commentary* is *of*:
“lyrics that contain insightful **commentary on** society”

compare vs. contrast
Some people are under the impression that *comparison* involves only similarities and that the word *contrast* must be used to refer to differences. In fact, one meaning of *compare* is “to note the similarities *and* differences between two things.” Thus, the expression “compare and contrast” is technically redundant; teachers use it in order to emphasize that they want you to discuss both similarities and differences.

compare to vs. compare with
For comparisons that involve both similarities and differences, use *compare with*; to stress a specific similarity or difference between two things in some respect, use *compare to*. This rule means that in general, figurative comparisons should be made with *compare to*.

“**compared** the copy **with** the original to determine whether they were really indistinguishable”
“**compare** his interpretation **with** mine”
“**compared** the president **to** a rock”
“nothing **compares to** you” (= “nothing is as good as you”)
“a poor speller **compared to** you”
“a poor speller **in comparison to** you”

complement(ary) vs. compliment(ary)
The verb *complement* means “to complete; to fill out by supplying what something else lacks.” Remember this by relating it to the use of the term *complementary* in math: it describes two acute angles that together form a right angle.

“his skills ~~complimented~~ her creativity”
“his skills **complemented** her creativity”
One meaning of *complimentary* is “free of charge”:
“**complimentary** beverages on the flight”

~~comply to~~
“~~comply to~~ your request”
comply with
“comply **with** your request”

compose vs. comprise
The verb *compose* means “to make up; constitute.” *Comprise* is often used as a synonym for this sense of *compose*, but its actual meaning is “to include.” You can avoid confusing the two by not using *comprise* as an adjective or in the passive voice:
“a series ~~comprised of~~ seven volumes”
“a series **composed of** seven volumes”
“This series **comprises** seven volumes.”

concerned with vs. concerned about
to be concerned with = “to deal with/to focus on” or “to occupy”
“this essay is **concerned with** the problem of overpopulation”
“**concerned with** writing my doctoral thesis”
to be concerned about = *to be worried about*
“this essay is ~~concerned about~~ the problem of overpopulation”
“the *author* of this essay is **concerned about** the problem of overpopulation”

confide in vs. confide [something] to
“confide in you”
“confide my problems **to** you”

conscience vs. conscious
Your *conscience* is your sense of morality, the “voice in your head” that tells you that you shouldn’t, for example, throw rotten eggs at your English tutor’s car. The adjective form of *conscience* is *conscientious*, which means “showing great care and thoroughness.” *Conscious* is an adjective meaning “awake” or “aware.”

“obey the dictates of your **conscience**”
“a **conscientious** worker”
“felt **self-conscious** in front of a crowd”
“regained **consciousness**”

~~consistent to/inconsistent to~~
consistent **with/inconsistent with**

consist in vs. consist of

In discussing abstract things, *consist* can be used to mean “lie or reside”; in such cases it is used with the preposition *in*:

- “happiness **consists in** loving and being loved”
- “his weakness **consisted in** his overconfidence”

When it is used to mean “to be made up of,” it is used with the preposition *of*:

- “the Olympic team **consisted of** five guards, five forwards, and two centers”

contrasting with

unlike/in contrast with/in contrast to

“Contrasting with” is a clumsy way to introduce a statement of difference. Use one of these other expressions instead.

- “~~Contrasting with~~ her, I think farts are funny.”
- “**Unlike** her, I think farts are funny.”

“~~could of~~”/“~~should of~~”/“~~would of~~”

“**could have**”/“**should have**”/“**would have**”

The auxiliary verbs *could*, *should*, and *would* should never be followed by the preposition *of*. This is a corruption of the contracted forms *could've*, *should've*, and *would've*.

council vs. counsel

A *council* is made up of people who make decisions about the actions or policies of the group they represent. *Counsel* is a noun meaning “advice or guidance” or a verb meaning “to give advice or guidance,” and a *counselor* is a person who gives advice or guidance.

- “public meeting of the city **council**”
- “**counseled** me to change my plans”
- “marriage **counselor**”

count nouns vs. mass (non-count) nouns

Mass nouns have no plural form and can only be counted with the aid of a “measure word”³:

- “~~five rices~~”
- “five *grains* of rice”
- “five *pounds* of rice”
- “~~two waters~~”⁴
- “two *glasses* of water”
- “~~one sadness, two sadnesses~~”
- “a lot of **sadness** at the funeral”

Count nouns have a plural form and can be counted without the aid of a “measure word”:

- “seven **books**”
- “three **children**”
- “two **grievances**”

Certain nouns in English used to discuss quantity reflect the distinction between mass and count nouns, but they are often misused. Remember that

³ In fact, nouns cannot really be so neatly divided into separate categories, but for the SAT, the above information is all you need to know.

⁴ In a restaurant, you might ask for “two waters,” but that kind of usage is considered nonstandard.

amount, *much*, and *less* should not be used with count nouns; use *number*, *many*, and *fewer* instead:

- “~~the amount of books~~”
- “the **number** of books”
- “~~the number of water(s)~~”
- “the **amount** of water”
- “~~much things to see~~”
- “**many** things to see”
- “~~not many homework(s)~~”
- “not **much** homework”
- “~~less children~~”
- “**fewer** children”
- “~~fewer sadness(es)~~”
- “**less** sadness”

In addition, there are some mass nouns frequently used in everyday conversation that I often hear used as count nouns, such as *homework* (see above) and *stuff*:

- “~~three homeworks~~”
- “three **homework assignments**”
- “~~a lot of stuffs~~”
- “a lot of **stuff**”

crutch vs. crux

crux: central or essential point

- “~~the crutch of the problem~~”
- “the **crux** of the problem”

decide vs. decide on/upon

An unresolved issue is *decided*; the expression *decided on* should be used to introduce the ultimate outcome of the situation:

- “~~The general's orders decided on the matter.~~”
- “The general's orders **decided** the matter.”
- “The general **decided on** a direct assault.”
- “~~stopped while we decided on which route to take~~”
- “stopped while we **decided** which route to take”
- “We finally **decided on** the quicker route.”

different than vs. different from

In most cases, the expression *different than* is considered nonstandard, even though it is very commonly used in American English:

- “~~my plan was different than his plan~~”
- “my plan was **different from** his plan”
- “mine was **different from** his”
- “my plan **differed from** his”

From is a preposition and should be used before a noun or pronoun. This is the most common sentence pattern, so *different from* is usually correct. *Than* is a conjunction, so it should only be used before a clause (a subject with a verb), not before just a noun or pronoun:

- “his plan was **different than** I thought”
- “saw things **differently than** I did”
- “**different from** what I expected”

In the last example, the pronoun *what* is the object of the preposition *from*, so *from* is correct.

discreet vs. discrete

If you are careful in your judgment and don't draw attention to what you're doing, you are *discreet* (noun form: *discretion*); things that are separate or distinct from one another are *discrete* (noun form: *discreteness*):

"showed **discretion** in his decision not to tell others about the matter"

"FBI agents **discreetly** kept tabs on the suspect"

"**discrete** entities that should not be treated as if they were the same"

One way to remember the difference in both spelling and meaning between these two words is to note that the *e*'s in *discrete* are *separated* by the *t*.

"~~discriminate [something or someone]~~"

"**discriminate against** [something or someone]"

When used to suggest an unfair bias, *discriminate* should always be used with the preposition *against*:

~~"minorities were **discriminated**"~~

"minorities were **discriminated against**"

~~"they **discriminated** minorities"~~

"they **discriminated against** minorities"

Also, remember that *discrimination* doesn't necessarily suggest racism or prejudice; in general it simply suggests that one has refined tastes. A *discriminating reader*, for example, is simply someone who exercises careful judgment in deciding what to read.

disinterested vs. uninterested

Some grammar police insist that *disinterested* should be used to mean "unbiased or neutral" and should not be used as a synonym for *uninterested* ("not interested"). Although the history of the usage of these words is actually more complicated, you should remember this distinction for the SAT.

"a fair, **disinterested** judgment"

"**uninterested** students snoring and drooling"

downfall vs. downside/drawback

A *drawback* is simply a disadvantage or a *downside* to something. *Downfall* is a much more extreme word that refers to ruin or defeat (a person's fall from power, for example), as well as the thing that causes that ruin or defeat.

~~"a **downfall** of this plan"~~

"a **downside/disadvantage/drawback** of this plan"

"the tyrant's inevitable **downfall**"

"excessive pride, the hero's **downfall**"

due to

Some grammar fascists insist that a phrase beginning with "due to" should only be used as an adjective phrase at the end of a clause. Use it after a *to be* verb, as in the last example below:

~~"**Due to** the rain, the match was cancelled."~~

"**Because of** the rain, it was cancelled."

"The cancellation was **due to** the rain."

~~"**due to the fact that**"~~

because, since, etc.

Strictly speaking, the use of this expression is not necessarily considered an error, but it is generally better to use a more concise expression like *because* or *since*.

economic vs. economical

The word *economic* describes things having to do with the economy; something *economical* is inexpensive or efficient. Although *economic* can be used to describe someone who is thrifty (careful and wise in using resources), it's better to use *economical* in such situations.

"**economic** conditions"

~~"**economic** refrigerator"~~

"**economical** refrigerator"

"natives with an extremely **economical** lifestyle in which nothing is wasted"

~~either...nor.../neither...or.../either...and...~~

~~either...or.../neither...nor...~~

These pairs of correlative conjunctions are always used in these combinations only and cannot be mixed. In addition, *and* should not be used with *either* or *neither*.

~~"I didn't see **either you and him**."~~

~~"I didn't see **either you nor him**."~~

~~"I saw **neither you or him**."~~

"I didn't see **either you or him**."

"I saw **neither you nor him**."

Neither and *nor*, when used together, are *not* considered a double negative.

emigrate vs. immigrate

You emigrate *from* a place and immigrate *to* another place:

"**emigrate from** Poland"

"**immigrate to** the United States"

"Polish **emigrants**" = people leaving Poland

"Polish **immigrants**" = people from Poland who have immigrated to (for example) the United States

eminent vs. imminent vs. immanent

An *eminent* person is outstanding, prominent, well known, well respected—usually for great accomplishments and/or scholarly attainments.

"**eminent** physician"

"**eminent** professor"

"**eminent domain**" (a law term)

Something *imminent* is about to happen:

"**imminent** arrival of the guests"

"**imminent** danger"

You're not likely to see the other homophone *immanent* on the SAT, but be aware that it means "inherent; present within a particular domain." It often appears in religious contexts, for example, to denote the pervasive presence of God in the world (as opposed to being separate from and above the world).

"holiness **immanent** in nature"

empathetic vs. emphatic

Empathetic is similar to *sympathetic* and is used to describe someone who is so sensitive to someone else's feelings that he is able to feel and understand them himself, without the need for direct communication:

"**empathetic** social worker who somehow knew exactly how each person felt"

Emphatic is the adjective form of the noun *emphasis*, and it means "strong; forceful; characterized by emphasis":

"made an **emphatic** gesture as he spoke"

~~"emphasize on"~~

emphasis on

Emphasize is a transitive verb and thus does not need a preposition to take an object. The preposition *on* should only be used with the noun *emphasis*:

~~"program that **emphasizes on** practical skills"~~

"program that **emphasizes** practical skills"

"program with an **emphasis on** practical skills"

~~enthuse/enthused~~

excite/excited/enthusiastic

Grammar fascists insist that *enthuse* is not an acceptable word in Standard English.

~~"children **enthused** about the clown show"~~

"children **excited/enthusiastic** about the clown show"

every day vs. everyday

There are a number of expressions in English that can be written both as a single word and as separate words, each with a distinct usage or part of speech. The most problematic of these are "every day" and "everyday." *Everyday* should only be used as an adjective to describe ordinary things that are used or encountered frequently; for an adverbial description, write the words separately:

"**everyday** problems"

"**everyday** clothes"

"go to the office **every day**"

It might help to remember Bob Marley's song "Everyday People."

~~familiar to~~

~~"**familiar to** the artist's work"~~

familiar with

"**familiar with** the artist's work"

farther vs. further

Strictly speaking, *farther* is used to express physical distance, while *further* is used to express figurative or abstract distance. It is acceptable to use *further* in place of *farther* (this usage is very common in British English), but don't use *farther* to refer to figurative distance.

"**farther** down the road" (for a physical road only, not a metaphorical road)

"**further** down the road"

~~"**farther** along in my studies"~~

"**further** along in my studies"

"prevent **further** deterioration"

faze vs. phase

Faze means "to deter, daunt, upset, disturb"; *phase* means "stage in development or in a cycle" (as a noun) or "to introduce in stages" (as a verb).

"explosion didn't **faze** the courageous soldiers"

"just a **phase** she's going through"

"**phase in** these changes over a period of time"

(to) find vs. (to) found

These shouldn't cause much trouble; just don't be confused by the fact that the second one looks like the past tense and past participle of the first one:

"**found** the lost city of Atlantis" (past tense of *to find*)

"plan to **found** a city called Atlantis" (to *establish* such a city)

And remember that the past tense and past participle form of *to found* is *founded*:

"**founded** an organization" (established)

"well-**founded** beliefs" (beliefs with a logical *foundation*)

flaunt vs. flout

Flaunt means "to show off"; *flout* means "to scornfully disregard; to violate or break":

"**flaunted** his wealth by wearing fifty pounds of gold around his neck"

"**flouted** the rules as if he were above them"

genius vs. ingenious vs. ingenuous

Genius should only be used as a noun, not as an adjective:

~~"**genius** plan"~~

"certifiable **genius**"

Someone *ingenious* is clever, and something *ingenious* is characterized by cleverness or resourcefulness. The noun form of *ingenious* is *ingenuity*.

"**ingenious** architect"

"**ingenious** plan"

"a plan that shows great **ingenuity**"

Someone *ingenuous* is innocent, simple, candid, sincere, naive—sometimes to the point of lacking cunning or sophistication. The noun form of *ingenuous* is *ingenuousness*, and its antonym is *disingenuous*.

"**ingenuous** child who couldn't conceive of lying"

"seemed **ingenuous**, but was actually sly"

"the child's disarming **ingenuousness**"

"a **disingenuous** explanation that was meant to mislead people"

Make sure you spell these words correctly:

genius

ingenious: add an *o*

graduate from

~~"**graduate** high school"~~

"**graduate from** high school"

Really old-fashioned grammar fascists use *graduate* in the passive voice when the student is the subject

of the clause, but this usage is almost obsolete in contemporary American English:

“She **was graduated from** high school in June.”
“That school **graduated** 600 students this year.”

healthy vs. healthful

Although the distinction between these words is rarely observed in contemporary English, be aware of their traditional usages. *Healthy* is used to describe one’s state of health, while *healthful* is used to describe something that promotes health:

“**healthy** children”
“**healthy** teeth”
“**healthy** diet”
“**healthful** diet”

hoard vs. horde

The first one is a large collection or stockpile, often hidden; the second one is a large crowd:

“stole it from the dragon’s **hoard**”
“**horde** of etiquette-challenged barbarians”

hope vs. wish*

You *hope* that something will come true or that something is true when there is a real possibility; you *wish* that something were true when you know there is no such possibility. The verb *wish* is often used with other verbs in the subjunctive mood.

“~~I wish that he is all right.~~”
“I **hope** that he is all right.” (He might actually be o.k.; his condition is unknown.)
“I **wish** that he were all right.” (subjunctive mood: I know that he is *not* all right.)
“~~I wish that I will be able to go.~~”
“I **hope** that I will be able to go.” (There is a possibility that I will be able to go.)
“I **wish** that I were able to go.” (subjunctive mood: I know that am *not* able to go.)

if vs. whether

If is used in conditional, cause-and-effect situations (if...then...). To refer to two options or possibilities, use *whether*:

“not sure ~~if~~ **whether** she wanted to go”
“not sure **whether** she wanted to go”

imply vs. infer

These two words are often confused because they are, in a sense, opposite perspectives on the same process. *Imply* means “to suggest; to hint without stating directly,” and *infer* means “to deduce; to conclude by reasoning based on evidence.” In other words, *implying* is what a speaker or writer does in expressing an idea; *inferring* is what a listener or reader does based on the information he or she is given.

“By asking me how many cows I eat every day, you’re **implying** that I’m fat.”
“If you ask me how many cows I eat every day, I can **infer** that you think I’m fat.”
“He didn’t directly accuse us, but his statements ~~inferred~~ **implied** that we were at fault.”

“He didn’t directly accuse us, but his statements **implied** that we were at fault.”

“He didn’t directly accuse us, but I can **infer** from his statements that he blames us.”

“From his refusal to speak, I ~~implied~~ **inferred** that he was angry.”

“From his refusal to speak, I **inferred** that he was angry.”

“His refusal to speak **implied** that he was angry.”

Make sure that you don’t confuse *infer* with *refer*, which has a completely different meaning.

in vs. into

To indicate movement from one place to another, use *into* instead of *in*:

“~~walked in the room~~” (= “walked *within* or *inside* the room”)
“walked **into** the room” (= “*entered* the room”)
“~~fell in the water~~”
“fell **into** the water”

in back of

In back of is a slang expression meaning “behind.” Use it only if you want to sound uneducated.

“~~in back of the house~~”
“**behind** the house”

incredible vs. incredulous

Incredible literally means “difficult to believe” (and by extension, “amazing”) and is used to describe something external, such as an accomplishment or a claim:

“**incredible** feats of strength”
“**incredible** story about the dog that ate his homework”

Incredulous means “skeptical, disbelieving” and should be used to describe a person’s attitude:

“~~incredulous~~ **incredible** feats of strength”
“**incredulous** audience, skeptical about his **incredible** claims”
“**incredulous** teacher laughed at the ridiculous excuse”

indecisive vs. indefinite vs. indeterminate

The word *indecisive* should only be used to suggest difficulty making up one’s mind; therefore, it should only be used to describe a person (or something else with a mind):

“**indecisive** leader continually vacillated between going forward with the project and canceling it”

Indefinite and *indeterminate* have similar usages and can both mean “vague; not precisely determined”:

“~~delayed for an indecisive period of time~~”
“delayed for an **indefinite** period of time”
“of an **indeterminate** age, appearing both young and old simultaneously”

Indeterminate can also mean “not known in advance”:

“complex project involving many **indeterminate costs**”

independent of

Although we do speak of, for example, one country’s independence *from* another, *independent* should be used with *of* when it means “not depending on”:

~~“independent from any outside help”~~

“**independent of** any outside help”

“made progress **independently of** her partners’ efforts”

infinitives vs. present participles

A common source of confusion for English speakers is the idiomatic distinction between infinitives and past participles. Some expressions arbitrarily require an infinitive; other expressions arbitrarily require a present participle (-*ing* verb form). In the latter case, present participles are often used with the preposition *of*.

~~“able of solving the problem”~~

“able **to solve** the problem”

~~“capable to solve the problem”~~

“capable **of solving** the problem”

Some expressions can be used with either form:

“continue **going** to that store”

“continue **to go** to that store”

Unfortunately, these expressions generally must be memorized individually.

~~“in regards to”~~

~~“in respect to”~~

“in **regard to**”/“with **regard to**”

“with **respect to**”

Although “in respect to” is a fairly common expression, some traditionalists prefer “with respect to” to mean “concerning.” “In regard to” and “with regard to” are also acceptable:

“reach a consensus **with respect to** this issue”

“reach a consensus **in regard to/with regard to** this issue”

~~insight on~~

~~“an anecdote that gave me **insight on** her daily emotional struggles”~~

insight into

“an anecdote that gave me **insight into** her daily emotional struggles”

“in **some aspects**” vs. “in **some respects**”

The proper idiom to use as a separate phrase is “in some respects”:

~~“in some **aspects**, it is a good plan”~~

“in some **respects**, a great performance”

“not well executed, in some **respects**”

The phrase “in some aspects” should only be used when followed by *of* and given a specific context:

“in some **aspects of** its execution”

“in some **aspects of** their development”

~~interest for~~

~~“had an **interest for** aviation”~~

interest in

“had an **interest in** aviation”

in time [infinitive] vs. **on time**

The expression *in time* is often followed by an infinitive:

“We were late, but we still arrived **in time to see** the beginning of the show.”

The expression *on time* refers to a time scheduled in advance and implies punctuality:

“We arrived at the theater **on time.**”

intransitive verbs vs. transitive verbs

There are a few pairs of common verbs that tend to give people a lot of trouble. In each of these pairs, one verb is *transitive*, meaning that it always takes an object after it (the subject does the action to something else), and one verb is *intransitive*, meaning that it cannot take an object after it (the subject does the action itself):

to lie = to rest or recline (intransitive)

“dog **lies** at the foot of the bed every night”

“a weakness that **lies** at the root of his failures”

“**lay** in bed last night, listening to the rain”⁵

“has **lain** around feeling sorry for himself all day”

to lay = to put [something] down (transitive)

“**laid** down their weapons”

“foundation **laid** by our forefathers”

What makes this pair especially confusing is that the past tense of *to lie* (when it means “to tell an untruth”) is *lay*.

to rise = to move upward (intransitive)

“sun **rises** very early”

to raise = to lift (transitive)

“**raise** your hand”

“**raise** the flag”

“concerns **raised** by the students”

to sit = to rest on one’s buttocks (intransitive)

“**sat** in the chair”

to set = to put [something] down (transitive)

“**set** my glasses on the bedside table”

“rules **set** forth by the officers”

~~irregardless~~

regardless

Even though *irregardless* is commonly used, even by educated people, it is considered a nonstandard word. (Since *-less* is a negative suffix, *ir-* is redundant.)

⁵ Many people incorrectly use *laid* as the past tense form and past participle of *to lie*. See my “Irregular Verbs” handout or my “Understanding Verbs” handout on transitive and intransitive verbs for the proper way to conjugate these verbs.

its vs. it's

The difference between *its* and *it's* is easy to remember if you keep in mind the rule that possessive pronouns never use apostrophes. Compare *its* with *his*, *hers*, *theirs*, etc.

~~"it's effect on the economy was obvious" =
"it is/it has effect on the economy was obvious"~~

"*its* effect on the economy was obvious"

It's is most often used to stand for "it is," but remember that it can also stand for "it has":

"it's affecting the economy dramatically"

(= "it is affecting the economy dramatically")

"it's affected the economy dramatically"

(= "it has affected the economy dramatically")

Occasionally, I've had students interpret *its* as a plural pronoun. There is no form of *it* that is plural; we use forms of the pronoun *they* (*them*, *their*, *theirs*), or in other situations *these* or *those*, to refer to any plural noun.

~~"the books were on the table"~~

= "*they* were on the table"

~~"its were on the table"~~

~~"kind of a [noun]" / "type of a [noun]" / "sort of a [noun]"~~

~~"a certain kind of a person"~~

kind of [noun]/type of [noun]/sort of [noun]

"a certain kind of person"

Remember that the use of *kind of* to mean *somewhat* is considered slang.

~~"kind of cool"~~

known [infinitive] vs. known for

To be *known to do* something suggests that people are aware that you tend to do that thing occasionally; to be *known for* something means to be famous for a particular skill, product, or quality:

"**known to** make a mistake from time to time"

"region **known for** its natural beauty"

"musician **known for** his intense performances"

lack vs. lack of

Lack should only be followed by *of* when it is acting as a noun. As a verb or participle, it takes an object and thus does not need a preposition:

~~"his performance is **lack of** sophistication"~~

~~"his performance **lacks of** sophistication"~~

"his performance **lacks** sophistication"

"a performance **lacking** sophistication"

"a performance suffering from **a lack of** sophistication"

However, when followed by a noun referring to a quality considered in an abstract sense, it can sometimes be used with the preposition *in*:

"makes up in determination what he **lacks** in physical strength"

Latin plurals

A number of words derived from Latin that end in *-a* cause confusion for English speakers. Originally, such words were all plural forms, and their use as

singular words is essentially a corruption. However, in some cases this use is so common and widespread that it has become accepted. *Agenda*, though technically a plural word, is completely accepted as a singular noun whose plural form is *agendas*. *Data* (the plural form of *datum*) is also becoming accepted as a singular mass noun, as is *media* (the plural form of *medium*) when it refers to things like television, radio, and publications. However, some of these words must be treated as plural words in Standard English:

~~"according to **this criteria**"~~

"according to **these criteria**"

"according to **this criterion**"

~~"many strange **phenomenas**"~~

"many strange **phenomena**"

"an interesting **phenomenon**"

latter vs. last

Although *latter* is sometimes used to refer to the last of three or more things, it should technically only be used to refer to the second of two things. (Remember that its usage follows the pattern of comparative adjectives like *better* and *quicker*.)

~~"Of the gerbil, the hamster, and the rat, the **latter** has the worst taste in music."~~

"Of the gerbil, the hamster, and the rat, the **rat** has the worst taste in music."

"Between the hamster and the rat, the **latter** has the worst taste in music."

lend vs. loan

Although the use of *loan* as a verb when discussing money or material goods has been common in English for a long time, some authorities still insist that *loan* should only be used as a noun. In any case, *loan* should never be used as a verb to express figurative meanings:

"**loan** me fifty dollars" is risky

"**lend** me fifty dollars" is universally accepted

~~"**loan** him a hand"~~

"**lend** him a hand"

~~"her presence **loaned** me confidence"~~

"her presence **lent** me confidence"

liable vs. likely

Although *liable* is now very commonly used to mean "likely," there are still some traditionalists who want to restrict its usage to "responsible."

~~"**liable** to rain today"~~

~~"**liable** to get hurt if you keep doing that"~~

"**likely** to rain today"

"**likely** to get hurt if you keep doing that"

"You are **liable** for any damage you cause."

like vs. as/as if

Like is a preposition, so it cannot take a subject (and verb) after it:

like [clause]

~~"felt **like** I was flying"~~

~~"want to do it just **like** he does"~~

as [clause]

“felt *as if* I were flying”

“want to do it just *as* he does”

However, *like* can be used before a noun or pronoun that is not the subject of a clause:

“felt *like* an explosion”

“want to be just *like* him”

One simple rule to remember is that following *like* with a nominative pronoun (such as “he” above) is always wrong.

like vs. for example

Don’t use the word *like* to introduce an example at the beginning of a sentence:

“~~Like the time I went to Taroko Gorge, that was an incredible experience.~~”

These kinds of sentences contain **dangling modifiers**, because phrases beginning with *like* are descriptive phrases when they are used in this position in a sentence. The actual meaning of the above sentence would be to compare going to Taroko Gorge with going to some other place:

“*Like* the time I went to Taroko Gorge, the time I went to Yangming Mountain was an incredible experience.”

Instead of using *like* to introduce an example, use another expression, such as *for example*:

“**For example**, one incredible experience I had in Taiwan was going to Taroko Gorge.”

Sometimes *for example* sounds better when it’s used in the middle of the sentence, after the example itself has been named:

“The natural beauty of Taroko Gorge, **for example**, is comparable to that of the Grand Canyon.”

When using *for example*, be careful not to write a fragment:

“~~For example, going to Taroko Gorge.~~”

“~~The natural beauty of Taroko Gorge, for example.~~”

Like can be used in other places in a sentence to introduce an example, in the same way *such as* is used:

“I visited many beautiful natural areas in Taiwan, *like* Taroko Gorge and Yangming Mountain.”

“Beautiful natural areas, *like* Taroko Gorge and Yangming Mountain, abound in Taiwan.”

Like should only be used at the beginning of a sentence to make a comparison between the object of *like* and the subject of the next clause:

“*Like* her, I felt that the show wasn’t very funny.”

“*Like* the band’s previous album, its most recent album contains songs that break new musical ground.”

loath (to) vs. loathe

Loath is an adjective meaning “reluctant”; *loathe* is a verb meaning “to detest.”

“*loath* to take on such a huge project”

“*loathe* his trite, rambling speeches”

moral vs. morale

If you want a word having to do with right and wrong or with a story’s lesson, use *moral*; if you want to refer to the mental or emotional state of a person or group, use *morale*.

“the **moral** of the story”

“**moral** principles”

“soldiers suffered from low **morale**”

“camaraderie improved their **morale**”

more [noun]...than [noun]

This pattern is very commonly used with an adjective and a noun:

“**more** powerful **than** a hurricane”

However, many young writers seem to be unaware that it can also be used with two nouns or with two adjectives:

“**more** an *annoyance* **than** an *obstacle*”

“**more** a *blessing* **than** a *curse*”

“**more** *knowledgeable* **than** *intelligent*”

need not [verb] = “don’t need to [verb]”

This expression isn’t familiar to many younger English speakers, but it is an idiomatic expression that is perfectly acceptable. It is most often used in contracted form: “needn’t.”

“You **needn’t** worry about it; I’ve already taken care of it.”

(= “You **don’t need to** worry about it; I’ve already taken care of it.”)

“**need not** bother going to the store”

not as...as...

“It was ~~not as~~ difficult ~~as~~ I had predicted.”

not so...as...

In a comparison involving a negative modifier such as *no*, *not*, or *never*, the word *so*, instead of *as*, should be used before the first adjective or adverb. This pattern is an example of archaic usage that is no longer observed by most American English speakers, but the writers of the SAT may expect you to at least be able to recognize that it is an accepted idiom.

“It was **not so** difficult **as** I had predicted.”

“He **never** ran **so** quickly **as** when his life was in danger.”

*objective/external adjectives vs. subjective/internal adjectives**

English contains a number of pairs of complementary adjectives that cause a lot of confusion for non-native speakers. In each pair, one of the adjectives describes the objective, external thing that *causes* a certain reaction. Present participles, or “-ing verbs,” such as *boring*, are often used this way. The other adjective describes a person’s subjective, internal reaction. Past participles, such as *bored*, are often used this way.

“~~I am so boring!~~” (= “I cause other people to feel boredom.”)

Unless you intend to insult yourself, avoid using the expression above.

“The **bored** student fell asleep while listening to

the boring lecture.”

In the example above, *bored* describes the student’s subjective reaction; *boring* describes the external thing that causes this reaction. A person can also be *boring*, however, if he *causes* boredom in others:

“The **boring** English teacher put his students to sleep.”

Not all such pairs are participles; the adjectives *incredible* and *incredulous*, for example, fall into this category as well (see separate entry above).

Here are some other common examples of such adjective pairs:

excited/exciting
interested/interesting
tired/tiring

oblivious of/to

Although the expression *oblivious of* is probably preferred, *oblivious to* is also generally acceptable.

Any other preposition is unacceptable, however:

~~“oblivious toward the chaos around her”~~
“oblivious **of** the chaos around her”
“oblivious **to** the chaos around her”
“oblivious **of** the oncoming truck”
“oblivious **to** my overtures”

~~obsession for/preoccupation for~~
obsession with/preoccupation with
~~obsessed with/preoccupied with~~

~~off of~~

~~“fell off of the shelf”~~

off

“fell **off** the shelf”

Because *off* is a preposition, a second preposition is redundant.

~~“on account of”~~

~~“delayed on account of bad weather”~~

because of

“delayed **because of** bad weather”

“one of a kind” vs. “the only one of its kind”

“One of a kind” and “the only one of its kind” are both expressions that are used to describe something unique. (Specifically, if you describe something as “the only one of its kind,” you’re emphasizing that it has qualities that put it in a category of its own; it is unique in a fundamental way.) They should not be combined into “the only one of kind,” which is an awkward and redundant expression.

~~“This painting is the only one of a kind.”~~

“This painting is truly **one of a kind**.”

“This painting is a **one-of-a-kind** work of art.”

“This ancient work of art is **the only one of its kind**; scientists have been unable to determine how it was made and have found nothing else like it.”

~~opinion toward~~

~~“negative opinion toward him”~~

~~“strong opinion toward that issue”~~

opinion of, opinion about/on

In referring to one’s attitude toward people or their behavior, use *opinion of*:

“very low **opinion of** that sort of behavior”

“hopelessly biased **opinion of** him”

In referring to one’s views about an issue, use *opinion about* (or with key words like *issue* or *question*, *opinion on* is also acceptable):

“**opinion about** the judge’s decision”

“**opinion about** immigration”

“strong **opinions on** that issue”

ought to (ought [infinitive])

This expression is equivalent to *should* and should never be preceded by *had*:

~~“think we had ought to leave soon”~~

“think we **ought to** leave soon” (= “think we **should** leave soon”)

~~outlook of~~

~~“optimistic outlook of life”~~

outlook on

“optimistic **outlook on** life”

overcome by vs. overcome with

One is overcome *by* a fact, situation, force, etc.:

“**overcome by** exhaustion”

“**overcome by** the weight of his responsibility”

One is overcome *with* an emotion:

“**overcome with** joy at the beautiful sight”

“mourners **overcome with** grief”

palate vs. palette vs. pallet

All of these words have the same pronunciation [PAL uht], but they have very different meanings:

palate = taste (both sensory and intellectual)

“experienced wine drinker with a discriminating **palate**”

palette = range of available colors or elements

“artist’s **palette**”

“**palette** of emotions that the author draws on in her stories”

pallet = crude mattress; kind of platform

“monks sleeping on **pallets**”

peak vs. peek vs. pique

The first two should be easy to distinguish from each other; the last one tends to cause problems, because many students don’t know it. *Pique* means “to stimulate, arouse, excite” or “to annoy.” Thus, something that is stimulating or provocative is *piquant*. Think of the *picador* in a bullfight, the man who jabs the bull with a lance.

~~“an advertisement that peaked my interest”~~

“an advertisement that **piqued** my interest”

“**piqued** by his constant disobedience”

persecute vs. prosecute

To persecute means “to harass or mistreat people because of their beliefs, race, sexual orientation, etc.”:

~~“suffered prosecution at the hands of the~~

Nazis”

“*persecuted* by the Nazis”

“suffered *persecution* by those who fear and hate what they don’t understand”

To *prosecute* means “to take legal action against [a person or other entity]” or “to pursue [an activity] to its completion”:

“*prosecuted* the executives for tax evasion”

“*prosecuted* the war with great determination”

persist [infinitive]

persist in [present participle]

See the note on infinitives vs. present participles above for information on related errors.

“~~*persist to cause* trouble”~~

“*persist in causing* trouble”

populace vs. *populous*

Populace is a noun that means “population” or “the common people”; *populous* is an adjective that describes a place with a large population.

“tyrant intimidated the *populace*”

“*populous* region with a high birth rate”

“~~*prefer* [one thing] more than [another]”~~

“~~*prefer* [one thing] over [another]”~~

“~~*prefer* [one thing] to [another]”~~

Because the word *prefer* already implies a comparison, *more* is redundant.

“~~*prefer* Chinese food over Japanese food”~~

“~~*prefer* Chinese food more than Japanese food”~~

“*prefer* Chinese food to Japanese food”

“education is ~~*preferable over*~~ ignorance”

“education is *preferable to* ignorance”

principal vs. *principle*

We all know that the school *principal* is supposedly your pal. What causes confusion is the use of *principal* as an adjective meaning “main or most important” and its other noun uses that reflect its adjective meaning, including “a sum of money that draws interest” and “a leading performer.” A *principle* is a rule or law—remember this by noting that like the word *rule*, it ends in *-le*. Remember the idiom “in principle” also.

“his *principal* objection to the treaty”

“the *principal* reason for my decision”

“a loan with a *principal* of \$500”

“a *principle* of good leadership”

“a man of high *principles*”

“agree with him in *principle*”

provide for

“*provided* for the child’s needs”

“be sure to *provide* for any emergency that might occur”

provide [someone] with

“*provided* him with plenty of food”

provided that

This expression is used to mean “on the condition that”:

“Each student will receive a stipend every month, **provided that** he or she attends class regularly and maintains good grades.”

quiet vs. *quite*

The distinction between these words is simple, but many students fail to catch this error in their writing because spell checkers can’t tell that you mean to say *quiet* instead of *quite*.

“~~(the) reason...is/was because...~~”

“(the) reason is/was that...”

The word *because* essentially means “for the reason that,” so “the reason...is because” is redundant:

“~~The reason I went was because I wanted to see the opening band”~~

(= “the reason I went was for the reason that I wanted to see the opening band”)

“the reason I went was *that* I wanted to see the opening band”

“redneck” pronouns

~~hisself, ourself, themself, theirselves, theyselves~~

himself, ourselves, themselves

Ourself and *themself* are easy to recognize as wrong; since *them* and *our* are plural, they can’t be paired with the singular *self*. *Hisself* and *theirselves* are more logical mistakes, because we do say *myself* and *yourself* (not *meself* and *yoursel*), but they are also nonstandard.

redundant expressions

Colloquial English is replete with expressions that are logically redundant but are still commonly used. Many of them are considered nonstandard, so look out for them, especially in the “identifying sentence errors” section:

“~~actual fact~~”

“~~in close proximity to the building~~”

“*in proximity* to the building”

“~~end result~~”

“~~exact replica~~”

“~~sufficient enough~~ reason for his actions”

“*sufficient* reason for his actions”

“~~up until~~” (see separate entry)

You might, however, use some of them for the sake of clarification or emphasis. When discussing a chain of causes and effects, for example, you might properly refer to the ultimate effect of these events as their “end result.” In addition, there are some redundant expressions that are accepted as standard idioms, such as “patently obvious” and “safe haven.” Distinguishing between the acceptable redundancies and the unacceptable ones is tricky—there are probably some linguists who would argue, for example, that “close proximity” should fall into the former category. *Note that the writers of the SAT generally stay away from controversial linguistic territory, and they will probably only*

include such expressions on a test (as an underlined part of an ISE problem, for example) if they expect you to recognize them as errors.

~~“right of passage”~~

“rite of passage”

This expression refers to something like a *ritual*, so *rite* is the correct word to use:

“common **rite of passage** for American teenagers”

substitute for

~~“no substitute for preparation”~~

~~“substituted onion rings in place of French fries”~~

“substituted onion rings **for** French fries”

superior to

~~more superior than~~

~~more superior to~~

“their team is **superior to** our team”

Because *superior* already implies a comparison, *more* is redundant.

~~suppose to~~

~~“was suppose to be home by 12”~~

supposed to

“was **supposed to** be home by 12”

This is a descriptive expression derived from the passive voice, so the past participle *supposed* is always the correct form when it is used to mean “permitted,” “required,” or “expected.”

surprised [infinitive] vs. surprised at vs. surprised by

Surprise can be used with infinitives:

“**surprised to discover** that he had left”

One can be *surprised by* many things:

“**surprised by** the attention she received”

“**surprised by** the sudden change in direction”

In addition, one can be surprised *at* a person (or a person’s behavior, attitude, etc.) that doesn’t match your expectations. Usually this connotes an attitude of disappointment.

“**surprised at** your disrespectful attitude”

“**surprised at** his sudden reluctance to help”

Note that in the two examples above, “surprised by” would also be acceptable, but it would not have the same connotation of disappointment; it would convey only the *fact* of the surprise.

than vs. then

These expressions are quite distinct, but because their spellings are so similar, it’s easy to confuse them—like *quiet* and *quite*. Remember that *than* is used in comparing, while *then* is used in referring to a sequence of events.

tortuous vs. torturous

Tortuous (without the second *r*) means “winding, tricky, crooked, convoluted”:

“**tortuous** roads caused the dog to become

carsick and vomit on my shoes”

“**tortuous** legal jargon”

“**tortuous** plot”

Torturous (from the verb *torture*) means “painful” or “slow and difficult, labored”:

“**torturous** feelings of guilt”

“**tortuous** English class”*

“the rusty old car’s **torturous** climb up the steep hill”

~~try and [verb]~~

~~“try and solve the problem”~~

try [infinitive]

“try **to** solve the problem”

~~up until~~

~~“up until I was sixteen...”~~

until

“**until** I was sixteen...”

A preposition is not needed before this subordinating conjunction.

~~use to~~

~~“use to go fishing there”~~

~~“use to the extreme heat”~~

used to

past habitual action:

“**used to go** fishing there”

“accustomed to”:

“**used to** the extreme heat”

By definition, this is always either a past tense or passive voice expression, so *use to* is never correct.

veracious vs. voracious

Veracious means “truthful”—it shares the root *ver* with words like *verify* and *verdict*. In everyday English, you’re more likely to come across *voracious*, which means “extremely hungry; ravenous or insatiable” in both a literal and a figurative sense:

“**veracious** claims supported by evidence”

“a **voracious** predator”

“a **voracious** reader”

wait on vs. wait for

wait on = “to serve”

“our server **waited on** us attentively”

wait for = “to await”

“~~waited on~~ the bus for an hour”

“**waited for** the bus for an hour”

wander vs. wonder

Although one’s thoughts might *wander*, to speculate about something is to *wonder*. *Wonder* is also a noun.

“**wandering** through the forest”

“**wondering** whether he should go”

“a profound sense of **wonder**”

* Thanks to Tracy Kao for this witty example.

when and where

Where is supposed to be used only in reference to places, and *when* is supposed to be used in reference only to words relating to time, but these pronouns are often misused. The expression “[something] is/was *when*” is commonly used, but some grammar police disapprove of the use of this expression.

~~“The candidate gave a speech *where* he criticized the incumbent governor.”~~

~~“He taught us a method *where* we could make our shots more accurate.”~~

~~“This is a case *when* caution is required.”~~

~~“My favorite part of *Main Street* is *when* Carol encounters the town pariah.”~~

Obviously, speeches and methods aren’t places, and a part of a novel and a case are not times, so you should find a different way to express these ideas. A good way to avoid these errors is to use the pronoun *which* instead, but you often need to use an appropriate preposition along with it, such as *in*, *at*, *on*, or *by*. This approach may also involve rewording the sentence slightly (see the underlined addition below).

“The candidate gave a speech *in which* he criticized the incumbent governor.”

“He taught us a method *by which* we could make our shots more accurate.”

“This is a case *in which* caution is required.”

“My favorite part of *Main Street* is the chapter *in which* Carol encounters the town pariah.”

See my handout on the use of *that*, *which*, *when*, and *where* in dependent clauses for further information and some exercises.

who vs. that/which

Grammar fascists insist that the pronoun *who* should be used to refer to any noun or pronoun indicating people; *that* or *which* should be used for any other noun or pronoun:

~~“student *that* got the highest score”~~

“student *who* got the highest score”

~~“pigeon *who* pooped on my car”~~

“pigeon *that* pooped on my car”

who’s vs. whose

Who’s is a contraction for “who is” or “who has.” It is never a possessive pronoun. Possessive pronouns in general never use apostrophes: see *his*, *hers*, *theirs*, *its* (see entry above), etc.

~~“*Whose* going on the trip?”~~

“*Who’s* going on the trip?”

Another source of confusion regarding these words is the false impression that the pronoun *whose* can only be used to refer to people. In fact, *whose* can be used to refer to any noun, because there is no other word in English that has the same function as *whose*; there is no equivalent possessive form of *that* or *which*.

~~“the man *who’s* dog pooped on my lawn”~~

(= “the man *who* his dog pooped on my lawn”)

“the man *whose* dog pooped on my lawn”

~~“the *dog that its* poop decorated my lawn”~~

“the *dog whose* poop decorated my lawn”

“the *poop whose* smell assaulted my nose”

“The dog *whose* poop decorated my lawn seemed to laugh at me as it trotted off.”

Additional Resources

This list is only intended to present some common errors that are likely to be tested on the SAT; it is very far from being a comprehensive list of idiom and diction errors (in fact, to put together such a list would be an impossible task). These sites contain more information about English usage that you may find useful:

Common Errors in English:

(<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/>)

Preposition Usage:

(<http://www.ingilizceci.net/GrammarMaryAns/Yeni%20Klas%F6r/gramch26.html>)

Idiomatic Uses of Prepositions:

(http://www.douglas.bc.ca/_shared/assets/Idiomatic_Uses_of_Prepositions49179.pdf)