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”
- “adopted 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
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 ailments”
“a region afflicted 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 (upon), agree to, agree [infinitive], agree with
agree (upon) = [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 allusions to the Bible”
“novel makes frequent illusions to the Bible”
“police could not capture the elusive fugitive”
“optical illusion that made the image appear to change”

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”

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2 Although afflicted with seems to be the preferred idiom, afflicted by is also quite common.
“attend to a problem”
“attend to your studies”

attribute on/attribution on
attribute to/attributable 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 biased against the poor”
“a biased 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 prejudiced 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 alone”
“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. complimentary(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 commensurate in math: it describes two acute angles that together form a right angle.
“his skills complemented 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"

**Contrast 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.*

**Counsel vs. Council**

A *counsel* is made up of people who make decisions about the actions or policies of the group they represent. *Council* 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":

"five rices"

"five grains of rice"

"five pounds of rice"

"two waters"

"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*

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

"the amount of rice"

"the number of rice"

"the number of waters" vs. "the amount of water"

"much things to see" vs. "many things to see"

"not many homework(s)" vs. "not much homework"

"less children" vs. "fewer children"

"fewer sadness(es)" vs. "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" vs. "a lot of stuff"

**Crutch vs. Crux**

*Crutch:* 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.

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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.
**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 or him.”
“I didn’t see either you nor him.”
“I saw neither 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 *empathy*, and it means “strong; forceful; characterized by emphasis”:

“made an emphatic gesture as he spoke”

“emphasize”

**emphasis on**

*Emphasize* is a transitive verb and thus does not need a preposition to take an object. The preposition 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 everyday”

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) founded**

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 find* 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, naïve—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:

**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”

“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 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 *implied* that we were at fault.”

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

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

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

**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”

**behind**

*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** 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 indefecive 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”
“had an interest in 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”
“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 of 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 criterion”
“according to these criteria”
“according to this criterion”
“many strange phenomena”
“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:

“lend me fifty dollars” is risky
“lend me fifty dollars” is universally accepted
“lend 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...
awkward and redundant expression.

combined into “the only one of its kind,” which is an

unique. (Specifically, if you describe something as

both expressions that are used to describe something

Because

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”)

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
“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, theirselves 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 youself), 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”
“torturous 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 whose* dog pooped on my lawn”

(= “*the man who his* 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)