

**STRAIGHTENING OUT SOME COMMON PROBLEMS  
WITH ENGLISH GRAMMAR**

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“I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English...it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.”

**Mark Twain**

### Words that often get mixed up...

- **affect** is a verb meaning “to influence.”

*The addition of chlorine affects the taste of water.*

- **effect** is usually a noun meaning “result.”

*The addition of chlorine has an effect on the taste of water.*

- **effect** sometimes can be a verb meaning “to bring about.”

*The addition of chlorine effects a chemical change in water.*

- **a lot...***We've done a lot of similar projects*

- **alot...is not a word.**

- **farther...**is used for physical distance. *New York is farther from Maine than Boston.*

- **further...**means “more” or “to a greater extent.” *We are not going to discuss this any further.*

- **its...**is a singular possessive pronoun. *A construction company usually leaves its major equipment on site.*

- **It's...**is a contraction meaning “it is.” *It's normal for a construction company to leave its major equipment on site.*

- **percent...**is used with a number. *About fifty percent of sales are lost by not listening to the needs of the client.*

- **percentage...**is used when there is no number. *A high percentage of sales could be won by listening more closely to the needs of the client.*

- **principal...**can be an **adjective** meaning “first in importance.” *The principal investigator from DEP did not want to approve the landfill closure.*
- **principal...**can be a **noun** meaning “the main person or thing.” *A principal of the firm will be attending the meeting.*
- **principle...**is a **noun** meaning “a fundamental truth or rule.” *The principles of bridge design have been developed over a long period of time.*
- **regardless / irregardless...***Regardless of what you may think, “irregardless,” like “ain’t,” is not standard English!*
- **than...**is a conjunction used in comparisons. *One firm was more qualified than the other.*
- **then...**is an adverb showing time. *Fred will survey the property, then we will begin cutting down trees.*
- **their...**is a plural possessive pronoun. *Construction companies usually leave their large equipment on the job site.*
- **there...**shows place and can also be used to begin a sentence. *There are a number of different plans over there on the conference table.*
- **they’re...**means “they are.” *They’re one of three firms competing for this assignment.*
- **to...**helps to form the infinitive form of a verb. *We hope to design and to build this project.*
- **too...**means “also.” *We hope to be part of the project team, too.*
- **two...**is the number 2.

- **your...**is a possessive pronoun. *Your firm was selected.*
- **you're...**means “you are.” *You’re one of the finalists for this project.*
- **Not only...but also.** If you use one you should use the other. *In marketing it is important not only to make the first contact, but also to follow up on a regular basis.*
- **The “rule” of not ending a sentence with a preposition.**

With regard to this rule, there is a story that Sir Winston Churchill was once accused by a Member of Parliament of ending a sentence with a preposition. Mr. Churchill was said to have replied: *“This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.”*

### Some Common Mistakes Using Commas

*Generally speaking, there are just too many commas used in sentences, where they are not needed. Don’t go “comma crazy.” No commas are needed in this sentence at all!*

One of the biggest mistakes is **omitting** the comma before the word “and” in a compound sentence.

*Fred designed the building, and John built it. **The comma is needed before the word “and” in a compound sentence.***

However, a comma is not needed in a sentence with a compound predicate.

*XYZ Construction designed and built the project. **No comma needed.***

Other common mistakes using commas:

*In 1958, the three Murphy brothers formed the Murphy Company. **Comma not needed after 1958.***

*Dear Mr. Jones: Use a colon( : ), not a comma in the salutation of a business letter.*

*Dear John, A comma is used in a personal letter.*

### **The Question about Using Commas in a Series of Words**

In a series of words or phrases, the comma may or may not be used before the word “and” at the end of the series. The important thing is to be consistent in doing it one way or the other.

*At XYZ Construction we handle site work, design, scheduling, supervision, construction and commissioning.*

### **Using Quotation Marks**

**Rule:** Periods and commas always go **inside** the quotation marks.

*The architect said, “The design should be completed before construction begins”. **Wrong.***

### **The Possessive with 'S or S'**

1. Decide if the word is singular or plural.

2. If the word is singular, just add 's.

*After a brief discussion they decided to use a local engineer's plans.*

3. If the word is plural ending in s, add apostrophe **after** the s'.

*The three architects' offices were all in the same part of town.*

4. If the word is plural **not** ending in s, add apostrophe **before** the 's.

*The men's champion at our golf club always gets a special parking place. The women's champion gets one, too.*

## Using Hyphens (-) in Compound Modifiers

A hyphen is used with compound modifiers **before** a noun.

*ABC construction is an employee-owned firm.*

*The architects gave a well-prepared presentation.*

*The team decided on a three-phase scope of work.*

Do **not** use hyphens when the compound modifier is used without a noun.

*ABC Construction is employee owned.*

*The presentation by the architects was well prepared.*

*The scope of work for the project will be three phase.*

## Using Active and Passive Voice

The Active Voice makes sentences shorter and stronger.

*The Marketing Department prepared the proposal.*

*ABC Architects designed the new building.*

Passive Voice is O.K., but it is used much too often.

*The proposal was prepared by the Marketing Department.*

*The new building was designed by ABC Architects.*

Sometimes, however, it makes more sense to use the Passive Voice.

*The design team for the project will be composed of ABC Architects, DEF Engineers, GHI Surveyors and JKL Contractors.*