

Common Mechanics Issues

The following list reflects the most common grammar and punctuation questions I get in writing classes.

You and I

Many of us have heard we should never use the words *I* or *you* in our writing. This rule, unfortunately, overapplies the scientific preference for objective writing. Use the following, more appropriate rules instead:

Use *I* when you refer to yourself. It's especially appropriate in semiformal business letters and memos. It's indispensable in a status or progress report. Take credit for your work! →

CORRECT: I wrote the report for the CEO.

JUST PLAIN WEIRD: The report was written for the CEO by the author of this sentence.

Use *you* when you directly address your reader →

CORRECT: You should stack the boxes under the table.

TOO IMPERSONAL: The boxes should be stacked under the table.

Do not use *you* in the general sense as a substitute for *people*, *everyone*, or large groups of people. →

CONFUSING: You should always shave your legs before putting on fishnet stockings (has no significance for those who never wear fishnet stockings).

Amount vs. number

Many people use the word *amount* freely in their speech. We have different rules for using it in written English:

Use *number* when you refer to something that can be counted →

We talked to a large **number** of people for this report.

Use *amount* when you refer to something that cannot be counted (or usually isn't)→

I spilled a large **amount** of tar on the floor.

Less vs. fewer

People often use the word *less* instead of *few* in their speech. The rules for written English say

Use *fewer* when you refer to something that can be counted →

We **fewer** pencils than pens.

Use *less* when you refer to something that cannot be counted →

We have **less** asphalt than concrete.

Series commas

Many English teachers will tell you that the final comma in a series is optional; however, that rule is quickly becoming obsolete →

I ate apples, oranges and bananas for lunch.

Use the final series comma to avoid ambiguity →

WITHOUT THE COMMA: I leave my estate to Sylvester, Tweety and Yogi.
(Sylvester may get half while Tweety and Yogi have to split the other half.)

WITH THE COMMA: I leave my estate to Sylvester, Tweety, and Yogi.
(Tweety and Yogi should like this better.)

The naked *this* (thank you to Kristen Woolever for this term)

The word *this* can be a useful pronoun, but take care how you use it.

Use the word *this* with a noun or you may write something ambiguous →

AMBIGUOUS: John eats worms for breakfast and then cleans the plates.
This makes his mother ill. (Which part makes her ill?)

CLEAR: John eats worms for breakfast and then cleans the plates. This diet makes his mother ill.

Hyphens

The rules for using hyphens vary from style guide to style guide. Pick a consistent style and use it throughout the document. The following rule, however, does not vary.

Use hyphens only to connect words to words or numbers to words;

don't use them in place of bullets or to connect parts of a sentence →

INCORRECT: I need to buy the following at the store:

- peas
- pistachios
- pomegranates

INCORRECT: My sister giggles too much - her laughter makes me crazy.

CORRECT: My sister giggles too much—her laughter makes me crazy.

(Notice the double dash or em-dash.)

CORRECT: I have a twelve-year-old sister.

CORRECT: I need to buy the following at the store:

- peas
- pistachios
- pomegranates

Exception: you may use hyphens as bullets if you are writing a text-only scannable resume.

Source References and Other Names

The first time you use a person's name, use both first and last: Taylor Smith. Afterwards refer to that person by his or her last name: Smith. (Exceptions: if you know that person well, if that person is a juvenile, or if you are writing informally; you may use the first name.)

Quotations

Always include a quotation as part of a larger sentence. A quote should never stand alone:

CORRECT: Mary Forte says, "Don't forget to introduce all quotations!"

INCORRECT: "And if possible, to look like one!" That's the movie line that always comes into my head.

Compound Words and Other Spelling

Below you will find a list of words that people frequently confuse and consequently misspell. Except for "*definatly*", the spellchecker usually won't catch these:

Definitely vs. Defiantly (definAtely is not a word)

I *definitely* want to spell this word correctly; however, some spell checkers correct "definAtely" to *defiantly*.

Defiantly is how your cat lays on the couch even when you told it to get off. (Picture the smug look in its eyes.)

Everyday vs. Every day

Use *everyday* (it's an adjective) to modify a noun: I wore my *everyday* shoes (← noun) to school.

Use *every day* to indicate when something happens: I ride my bike to school *every day*.

Into vs. In to

I am going to turn this paper *into* my teacher. Then my backpack will be really, really heavy.

I am going to turn this paper *in to* my teacher. She will be happy to get it.

Posses vs. Possess

For *posses*, think Westerns: When Curly Bill escaped we rounded up some *posses* and hunted him down.

For *possess*, think ownership: I *possess* a large number of paperclips.

Supposed to, Used to, Accustomed to

Those are the correct spellings above. Notice the *ds* that you often can't hear in speech: I am *supposed to* remember to put the **d** at the end of those words, but I'm not *used to* it. So I'm *accustomed to* leaving it off. But now I will change my ways!

Issues Specific to Technical Writing

Any writer will find the following discussion useful, but technical writers especially need to know these rules.

Colons to introduce a list

You will find several variants of the rules for introducing a list depending on what style guide you use. **Always** use a sentence or phrase to introduce a list. Here is the simplest rule:

Use a colon at the end of a complete sentence →

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators

Use no punctuation for a portion of a sentence finished off by the list items →

At the meeting, we will discuss

- raises
- expenses
- vacations

List punctuation

You have several choices for punctuating a list. Choose a consistent style to use throughout a document.

Use periods at the end of each item →

Bring the following to class:

- pens.
- notebooks.
- calculators.

Use no periods at all →

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators

Use a period only at the end of the list →

Bring the following to class:

- pens
- notebooks
- calculators.