

# CHAPTER 13: WORKING WITH WORDS: WHICH WORD IS RIGHT?

## ***Communication Essentials for College* by Jen Booth, Emily Cramer & Amanda Quibell**

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interactive activities and ancillary resources.

# 13.1 - COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS

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## Learning Objectives

- Identify commonly confused words.
- Use strategies to avoid commonly confused words.

Just as a mason uses bricks to build sturdy homes, writers use words to build successful documents. Consider the construction of a building. Builders need to use tough, reliable materials to build a solid and structurally sound skyscraper. From the foundation to the roof and every floor in between, every part is necessary. Writers need to use strong, meaningful words from the first sentence to the last and in every sentence in between.

You already know many words that you use everyday as part of your writing and speaking vocabulary . You probably also know that certain words fit better in certain situations. Letters, e-mails, and even quickly jotted grocery lists require the proper selection of vocabulary. Imagine you are writing a grocery list to purchase the ingredients for a recipe but accidentally write down cilantro when the recipe calls for parsley. Even though cilantro and parsley look remarkably alike, each produces a very different effect in food. This seemingly small error could radically alter the flavor of your dish!

Having a solid everyday vocabulary will help you while writing, but learning new words and avoiding common word errors will make a real impression on your readers. Experienced writers know that deliberate, careful word selection and usage can lead to more polished, more meaningful work. This chapter covers word choice and vocabulary-building strategies that will improve your writing.

## Commonly Confused Words

Some words in English cause trouble for speakers and writers because these words share a similar pronunciation, meaning, or spelling with another word. These words are called commonly confused words. For example, read aloud the following sentences containing the commonly confused words *new* and *knew*:

I liked her *new* sweater.

I *knew* she would wear that sweater today.

These words may sound alike when spoken, but they carry entirely different usages and meanings. *New* is an adjective that describes the sweater, and *knew* is the past tense of the verb *to know*. To read more about adjectives, verbs, and other parts of speech see Chapter 11 “Writing Basics: What Makes a Good Sentence?”.

## Recognizing Commonly Confused Words

*New* and *knew* are just two of the words that can be confusing because of their similarities. Familiarize yourself with the following list of commonly confused words. Recognizing these words in your own writing and in other pieces of writing can help you choose the correct word.

### Commonly Confused Words

A, An, And

- A (article). Used before a word that begins with a consonant.  
**a** key, **a** mouse, **a** screen

- *An* (article). Used before a word that begins with a vowel.  
**an** airplane, **an** ocean, **an** igloo
- *And* (conjunction). Connects two or more words together.  
peanut butter **and** jelly, pen **and** pencil, jump **and** shout

#### Accept, Except

- *Accept* (verb). Means to take or agree to something offered.  
They **accepted** our proposal for the conference.
- *Except* (conjunction). Means only or but.  
We could fly there **except** the tickets cost too much.

#### Affect, Effect

- *Affect* (verb). Means to create a change.  
Hurricane winds **affect** the amount of rainfall.
- *Effect* (noun). Means an outcome or result.  
The heavy rains will have an **effect** on the crop growth.

#### Are, Our

- *Are* (verb). A conjugated form of the verb *to be*.  
My cousins **are** all tall and blonde.
- *Our* (pronoun). Indicates possession, usually follows the pronoun *we*.  
We will bring **our** cameras to take pictures.

#### By, Buy

- *By* (preposition). Means next to.  
My glasses are **by** the bed.
- *Buy* (verb). Means to purchase.  
I will **buy** new glasses after the doctor's appointment.

#### Its, It's

- *Its* (pronoun). A form of *it* that shows possession.  
The butterfly flapped **its** wings.
- *It's* (contraction). Joins the words *it* and *is*.  
**It's** the most beautiful butterfly I have ever seen.

#### Know, No

- *Know* (verb). Means to understand or possess knowledge.  
I **know** the male peacock sports the brilliant feathers.
- *No*. Used to make a negative.  
I have **no** time to visit the zoo this weekend.

#### Loose, Lose

- *Loose* (adjective). Describes something that is not tight or is detached.  
Without a belt, her pants are **loose** on her waist.
- *Lose* (verb). Means to forget, to give up, or to fail to earn something.  
She will **lose** even more weight after finishing the marathon training.

#### Of, Have

- *Of* (preposition). Means *from* or *about*.  
I studied maps **of** the city to know where to rent a new apartment.
- *Have* (verb). Means to possess something.  
I **have** many friends to help me move.
- *Have* (linking verb). Used to connect verbs.  
I should **have** helped her with that heavy box.

#### Quite, Quiet, Quit

- *Quite* (adverb). Means *really* or *truly*.  
My work will require **quite** a lot of concentration.
- *Quiet* (adjective). Means not loud.  
I need a **quiet** room to complete the assignments.
- *Quit* (verb). Means to stop or to end.  
I will **quit** when I am hungry for dinner.

#### Right, Write

- *Right* (adjective). Means proper or correct.  
When bowling, she practices the **right** form.
- *Right* (adjective). Also means the opposite of left.  
The ball curved to the **right** and hit the last pin.
- *Write* (verb). Means to communicate on paper.

After the team members bowl, I will **write** down their scores.

#### Set, Sit

- *Set* (verb). Means to put an item down. She **set** the mug on the saucer.
- *Set* (noun). Means a group of similar objects.  
All the mugs and saucers belonged in a **set**.
- *Sit* (verb). Means to lower oneself down on a chair or another place.  
I'll **sit** on the sofa while she brews the tea.

#### Suppose, Supposed

- *Suppose* (verb). Means to think or to consider.  
I **suppose** I will bake the bread, because no one else has the recipe.
- *Suppose* (verb). Means to suggest.  
**Suppose** we all split the cost of the dinner.
- *Supposed* (verb). The past tense form of the verb suppose, meaning required or allowed.  
She was **supposed** to create the menu.

#### Than, Then

- *Than* (conjunction). Used to connect two or more items when comparing.  
Registered nurses require less schooling **than** doctors.
- *Then* (adverb). Means next or at a specific time.  
Doctors first complete medical school and **then** obtain a residency.

#### Their, They're, There

- *Their* (pronoun). A form of *they* that shows possession.  
The dog walker feeds **their** dogs everyday at two o'clock.
- *They're* (contraction). Joins the words *they* and *are*.  
**They're** the sweetest dogs in the neighborhood.
- *There* (adverb). Indicates a particular place.  
The dogs' bowls are over **there**, next to the pantry.
- *There* (pronoun). Indicates the presence of something.  
**There** are more treats if the dogs behave.

#### To, Two, Too

- *To* (preposition). Indicates movement.  
Let's go **to** the circus.
- *To*. A word that completes an infinitive verb.  
**to** play, **to** ride, **to** watch.
- *Two*. The number after one. It describes how many.  
**Two** clowns squirted the elephants with water.
- *Too* (adverb). Means *also* or *very*.  
The tents were **too** loud, and we left.

#### Use, Used

- *Use* (verb). Means to apply for some purpose.  
We **use** a weed whacker to trim the hedges.
- *Used*. The past tense form of the verb *to use*  
He **used** the lawnmower last night before it rained.
- *Used to*. Indicates something done in the past but not in the present  
He **used to** hire a team to landscape, but now he landscapes alone.

#### Who's, Whose

- *Who's* (contraction). Joins the words *who* and either *is* or *has*.  
**Who's** the new student? **Who's** met him?
- *Whose* (pronoun). A form of *who* that shows possession.  
**Whose** schedule allows them to take the new student on a campus tour?

#### Your, You're

- *Your* (pronoun). A form of *you* that shows possession.  
**Your** book bag is unzipped.
- *You're* (contraction). Joins the words *you* and *are*.  
**You're** the girl with the unzipped book bag.

The English language contains so many words; no one can say for certain how many words exist. In fact, many words in English are borrowed from other languages. Many words have multiple meanings and forms, further expanding the immeasurable number of English words. Although the list of commonly confused words serves as a helpful

guide, even these words may have more meanings than shown here. When in doubt, consult an expert: the dictionary!

## Exercise 1

### Exercise 1 (Text Version)

Complete the following sentences by selecting the correct word.

1. My little cousin turns (to, too, two) years old tomorrow.
2. The next-door neighbor's dog is (quite, quiet, quit) loud. He barks constantly throughout the night.
3. (Your, You're) mother called this morning to talk about the party.
4. I would rather eat a slice of chocolate cake (than, then) eat a chocolate muffin.
5. Before the meeting, he drank a cup of coffee and (than, then) brushed his teeth.
6. Do you have any (loose, lose) change to pay the parking meter?
7. Father must (have, of) left his briefcase at the office.
8. Before playing ice hockey, I was (suppose, supposed) to read the contract, but I only skimmed it and signed my name quickly, which may
9. (affect, effect) my understanding of the rules.
10. Tonight she will (set, sit) down and (right, write) a cover letter to accompany her résumé and job application.
11. It must be fall, because the leaves (are, our) changing, and (it's, its) getting darker earlier.

### Check Your Answers: <sup>1</sup>

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## Strategies to Avoid Commonly Confused Words

When writing, you need to choose the correct word according to its spelling and meaning in the context. Not only does selecting the correct word improve your vocabulary and your writing, but it also makes a good impression on your readers. It



also helps reduce confusion and improve clarity. The following strategies can help you avoid misusing confusing words.

1. **Use a dictionary.** Keep a dictionary at your desk while you write. Look up words when you are uncertain of their meanings or spellings. Many dictionaries are also available online, and the Internet's easy access will not slow you down. Check out your cell phone or smartphone to see if a dictionary app is available.
2. **Keep a list of words you commonly confuse.** Be aware of the words that often confuse you. When you notice a pattern of confusing words, keep a list nearby, and consult the list as you write. Check the list again before you submit an assignment to your instructor.
3. **Study the list of commonly confused words.** You may not yet know which words confuse you, but before you sit down to write, study the words on the list. Prepare your mind for working with words by reviewing the commonly confused words identified in this chapter.

## Tip

Figure 1 – Commonly Misused Word on a Public Sign



Commonly confused words appear in many locations, not just at work or at school. Be on the lookout for misused words wherever you find yourself throughout the day. Make a mental note of the error and remember its correction for your own pieces of writing.

## Writing at Work

All employers value effective communication. From an application to an interview to the first month on the job, employers pay attention to your vocabulary. You do not need a large vocabulary to succeed, but you do need to be able to express yourself clearly and avoid commonly misused words.

When giving an important presentation on the effect of inflation on profit margins, you must know the difference between *effect* and *affect* and choose the correct word. When writing an e-mail to confirm deliveries, you must know if the shipment will arrive in *to* days, *too* days, or *two* days. Confusion may arise if you choose the wrong word.

Consistently using the proper words will improve your communication and make a positive impression on your boss and colleagues.

## Exercise 2

The following paragraph contains eleven errors. Find each misused word and correct it by adding the proper word.

The original United States Declaration of Independence sets in a case at the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom as part of the National Archives in Washington, DC. Since 1952, over one million visitors each year of passed through the Rotunda too snap a photograph to capture they're experience. Although signs state, "No Flash Photography," forgetful tourists leave the flash on, an a bright light flickers for just a millisecond. This millisecond of light may not seem like enough to effect the precious document, but supposed how much light could be generated when all those milliseconds are added up. According to the National Archives administrators, its enough to significantly damage the historic document. So, now, the signs display quit a different message: "No Photography." Visitors continue to travel to see the Declaration that began are country, but know longer can personal pictures serve as

mementos. The administrators' compromise, they say, is a visit to the gift shop for a preprinted photograph.

**Collaboration**

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

## Key Takeaways

- In order to write accurately, it is important for writers to be aware of commonly confused words.
- Although commonly confused words may look alike or sound alike, their meanings are very different.
- Consulting the dictionary is one way to make sure you are using the correct word in your writing. You may also keep a list of commonly confused words nearby when you write or study the chart in this book.
- Choosing the proper words leaves a positive impression on your readers.

## Writing Application

Review the latest assignment you completed for school or for work. Does it contain any commonly confused words? Circle each example and use the circled words to begin your own checklist of commonly confused words. Continue to add to your checklist each time you complete an assignment and find a misused word.

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## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter (text & images) is adapted from “4.1 Commonly Confused Words (<https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/writingsuccess/chapter/4-1-commonly-confused-words/>)” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

## Notes

- |    |          |                     |               |
|----|----------|---------------------|---------------|
| 1. | 1. two   | 5. then             | 9. sit, write |
|    | 2. quite | 6. loose            | 10. are, it's |
|    | 3. Your  | 7. have             |               |
|    | 4. than  | 8. supposed, affect |               |

## 13.2 - SPELLING

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### Learning Objectives

- Identify common spelling rules.
- Identify commonly misused homonyms.
- Identify commonly misspelled words.

One essential aspect of good writing is accurate spelling. With computer spell checkers, spelling may seem simple, but these programs fail to catch every error. Spell checkers identify some errors, but writers still have to consider the flagged words and suggested replacements. Writers are still responsible for the errors that remain.

For example, if the spell checker highlights a word that is misspelled and gives you a list of alternative words, you may choose a word that you never intended even though it is spelled correctly. This can change the meaning of your sentence. It can also confuse readers, making them lose interest. Computer spell checkers are useful editing tools, but they can never replace human knowledge of spelling rules, homonyms, and commonly misspelled words.

### Common Spelling Rules

The best way to master new words is to understand the key spelling rules. Keep in mind, however, that some spelling rules carry exceptions. A spell checker may catch these exceptions, but knowing them yourself will prepare you to spell accurately on the first try. You may want to try memorizing each rule and its exception like you would memorize a rhyme or lyrics to a song.

Write *i* before *e* except after *c*, or when pronounced *ay* like “neighbour” or “weigh.”

- achieve, niece, alien
- receive, deceive

When words end in a consonant plus *y*, drop the *y* and add an *i* before adding another ending.

- happy + er = happier
- cry + ed = cried

When words end in a vowel plus *y*, keep the *y* and add the ending.

- delay + ed = delayed

Memorize the following exceptions to this rule: *day, lay, say, pay* = *daily, laid, said, paid*

When adding an ending that begins with a vowel, such as *-able, -ence, -ing, or -ity*, drop the last *e* in a word.

- write + ing = writing
- pure + ity = purity

When adding an ending that begins with a consonant, such as *-less, -ment, or -ly*, keep the last *e* in a word.

- hope + less = hopeless
- advertise + ment = advertisement

For many words ending in a consonant and an *o*, add *-s* when using the plural form.

- photo + s = photos
- soprano + s = sopranos

Add *-es* to words that end in *s*, *ch*, *sh*, and *x*.

- church + es = churches
- fax + es = faxes

## Exercise 1

### Exercise 1 (Text Version)

Identify the nine misspelled words in the following paragraph.

Sherman J. Alexie Jr. was born in October 1966. He is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian and an American writer, poet, and filmmaker. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. This condition led doctors to predict that he would likly suffer long-term brain damage and possibly mental retardation. Although Alexie survived with no mental disabilitys, he did suffer other serious side effects from his condition that plagud him throughout his childhood. Amazingly, Alexie learned to read by the age of three, and by age five he had read novels such as John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. Raised on an Indian reservation, Alexie often felt aleinated from his peers due to his avid love for reading and also from the long-term effects of his illness, which often kept him from socializeing with his peers on the reservation. The reading skills he displaid at such a young age foreshadowed what he would later become. Today Alexie is a prolific and successful writer with several story anthologeis to his credit, notably The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven and The Toughest Indian in the World. Most of his fiction is about contemporary Native Americans who are influenced by pop culture and pow wows and everything in between. His work is sometimes funny but always thoughtful and full of richness and depth. Alexie also writes poetry, novels, and screenplays. His latest collection of storys is called War Dances, which came out in 2009.

**Check Your Answers:**<sup>1</sup>

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**Tip****Eight Tips to Improve Spelling Skills**

1. Read the words in your assignment carefully, and avoid skimming over the page. Focusing on your written assignment word by word will help you pay close attention to each word’s spelling. Skimming quickly, you may overlook misspelled words.
2. Use mnemonic devices to remember the correct spelling of words. Mnemonic devices, or memory techniques and learning aids, include inventive sayings or practices that help you remember. For example, the saying “It is important to be a beautiful person inside and out” may help you remember that beautiful begins with “be a.” The practice of pronouncing the word Wednesday Wed-nes-day may help you remember how to spell the word correctly.
3. Use a dictionary. Many professional writers rely on the dictionary—either in print or online. If you find it difficult to use a regular dictionary, ask your instructor to help you find a “poor speller’s dictionary.”
4. Use your computer’s spell checker. The spell checker will not solve all your spelling problems, but it is a useful tool. See the introduction to this section for cautions about spell checkers.
5. Keep a list of frequently misspelled words. You will often misspell the same words again and again, but do not let this discourage you. All writers struggle with the spellings of certain words; they become aware of their spelling weaknesses and work to improve. Be aware of which words you commonly misspell, and you can add them to a list to learn to spell them correctly.
6. Look over corrected papers for misspelled words. Add these words to your list and practice writing each word four to five times each. Writing teachers will especially notice which words you frequently misspell, and it will help you excel in your classes if they see your spelling improve.
7. Test yourself with flashcards. Sometimes the old-fashioned methods are best, and for spelling, this tried and true technique has worked for many students. You can work with a peer or alone.
8. Review the common spelling rules explained in this chapter. Take the necessary time to master the material; you may return to the rules in this chapter again and again, as needed.



## Tip

Remember to focus on spelling during the editing and revising step of the writing process. Start with the big ideas such as organizing your piece of writing and developing effective paragraphs, and then work your way down toward the smaller—but equally important—details like spelling and punctuation. To read more about the writing process and editing and revising, see Chapter 3 “The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?”.

## Homonyms

Homonyms are words that sound like one another but have different meanings.

### Commonly Misused Homonyms

Principle, Principal

- **Principle (noun).** A fundamental concept that is accepted as true.  
The **principle** of human equality is an important foundation for all nations.
- **Principal (noun).** The original amount of debt on which interest is calculated.  
The payment plan allows me to pay back only the **principal** amount, not any compounded interest.
- **Principal (noun).** A person who is the main authority of a school.  
The **principal** held a conference for both parents and teachers.

Where, Wear, Ware

- **Where (adverb).** The place in which something happens.  
**Where** is the restaurant?

- **Wear (verb).** To carry or have on the body.  
I will **wear** my hiking shoes when go on a climb tomorrow morning.
- **Ware (noun).** Articles of merchandise or manufacture (usually, *wares*).  
When I return from shopping, I will show you my **wares**.

## Lead, Led

- **Lead (noun).** A type of metal used in pipes and batteries.  
The **lead** pipes in my homes are old and need to be replaced.
- **Led (verb).** The past tense of the verb *lead*.  
After the garden, she **led** the patrons through the museum.

## Which, Witch

- **Which (pronoun).** Replaces one out of a group.  
**Which** apartment is yours?
- **Witch (noun).** A person who practices sorcery or who has supernatural powers.  
She thinks she is a **witch**, but she does not seem to have any powers.

## Peace, Piece

- **Peace (noun).** A state of tranquility or quiet.  
For once, there was **peace** between the argumentative brothers.
- **Piece (noun).** A part of a whole.  
I would like a large **piece** of cake, thank you.

## Passed, Past

- **Passed (verb).** To go away or move.  
He **passed** the slower cars on the road using the left lane.
- **Past (noun).** Having existed or taken place in a period before the present.  
The argument happened in the **past**, so there is no use in dwelling on it.

## Lessen, Lesson

- **Lessen (verb).** To reduce in number, size, or degree.  
My dentist gave me medicine to **lessen** the pain of my aching tooth.
- **Lesson (noun).** A reading or exercise to be studied by a student.  
Today's **lesson** was about mortgage interest rates.

## Patience, Patients

- **Patience (noun).** The capacity of being patient (waiting for a period of time or enduring pains and trials calmly).  
The novice teacher's **patience** with the unruly class was astounding.
- **Patients (plural noun).** Individuals under medical care.  
The **patients** were tired of eating the hospital food, and they could not wait for a home-cooked meal.

## Sees, Seas, Seize

- **Sees (verb).** To perceive with the eye.  
He **sees** a whale through his binoculars.
- **Seas (plural noun).** The plural of sea, a great body of salt water.  
The tidal fluctuation of the oceans and **seas** are influenced by the moon.
- **Seize (verb).** To possess or take by force.  
The king plans to **seize** all the peasants' land.

## Threw, Through

- **Threw (verb).** The past tense of *throw*.  
She **threw** the football with perfect form.
- **Through (preposition).** A word that indicates movement.  
She walked **through** the door and out of his life.

## Exercise 2

### Exercise 2 (Text Version)

Complete the following sentences by selecting the correct homonym.

1. Do you agree with the underlying \_\_\_\_\_ (principle, principal) that ensures copyrights are

protected in the digital age?

2. I like to \_\_\_\_\_ (where, wear, ware) unique clothing from thrift stores that do not have company logos on them.
3. Marjorie felt like she was being \_\_\_\_\_ (led, lead) on a wild goose chase, and she did not like it one bit.
4. Serina described \_\_\_\_\_ (witch, which) house was hers, but now that I am here, they all look the same.
5. Seeing his friend without a lunch, Miguel gave her a \_\_\_\_\_ (peace, piece) of his apple.
6. Do you think that it is healthy for mother to talk about the \_\_\_\_\_ (passed, past) all the time?
7. Eating healthier foods will \_\_\_\_\_ (lessen, lesson) the risk of heart disease.
8. I know it sounds cliché, but my father had the \_\_\_\_\_ (patients, patience) of a saint.
9. Daniela \_\_\_\_\_ (sees, seas, seize) possibilities in the bleakest situations, and that it is why she is successful.
10. Everyone goes \_\_\_\_\_ (through, threw) hardships in life regardless of who they are.

### Check Your Answers:<sup>2</sup>

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## Commonly Misspelled Words

Below is a list of commonly misspelled words. You probably use these words every day in either speaking or writing. Each word has a segment in bold type, which indicates the problem area of the word that is often spelled incorrectly. If you can, use this list as a guide before, during, and after you write.

### Tip

Use the following two tricks to help you master these troublesome words:

1. Copy each word a few times and underline the problem area.
2. Copy the words onto flash cards and have a friend test you.

**Table 1 – Commonly Misspelled Words**

- across
- dis**app**oint
- int**egr**ation
- particu**lar**
- sepa**rat**e
- a**ddr**ess
- disa**ppr**ove
- int**ellig**ent
- **per**form
- sim**ilar**
- ans**wer**
- doe**s**n't
- int**er**est
- **per**haps
- **sin**ce
- arg**um**ent
- eigh**th**
- int**er**fere
- perso**nn**el
- spe**ech**
- ath**lete**
- embarr**ass**
- jew**el**ry
- poss**ess**
- streng**th**
- begin**ning**
- enviro**n**ment
- judg**ment**
- poss**ible**
- suc**cess**
- behavio**r**
- exag**ger**ate
- knowledg**e**
- **pre**fer
- **sur**prise
- cal**endar**
- fam**iliar**
- maint**ain**
- prej**ud**ice
- **ta**ught
- care**er**
- finally
- math**em**atics
- priv**ilege**
- temper**at**ure
- consc**ie**nce
- gov**ern**ment
- me**ant**
- prob**ably**
- **thor**ough
- crow**ded**
- gram**mar**
- **ne**cessary
- **psy**chology
- thoug**ht**
- def**inite**
- heig**ht**
- **ner**vous
- **pur**sue
- tire**d**
- **de**scribe
- **il**legal
- **oc**cas**ion**
- refer**ence**
- un**til**
- desper**ate**
- im**medi**ately
- opin**ion**
- **rh**yth**m**
- weig**ht**
- diff**er**ent
- import**ant**
- optim**ist**
- ridic**ul**ous
- writ**ten**

## Exercise 3

### Exercise 3 (Text Version)

Find the ten commonly misspelled words in the following paragraph.

Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs that make up New York City. It is located on the eastern shore of Long Island directly across the East River from the island of Manhattan. Its beginings stretch

back to the sixteenth century when it was founded by the Dutch who originally called it “Breuckelen.” Immediately after the Dutch settled Brooklyn, it came under British rule. However, neither the Dutch nor the British were Brooklyn’s first inhabitants. When European settlers first arrived, Brooklyn was largely inhabited by the Lenapi, a collective name for several organized bands of Native American people who settled a large area of land that extended from upstate New York through the entire state of New Jersey. They are sometimes referred to as the Delaware Indians. Over time, the Lenapi succumbed to European diseases or conflicts between European settlers or other Native American enemies. Finally they were pushed out of Brooklyn completely by the British.

In 1776, Brooklyn was the site of the first important battle of the American Revolution known as the Battle of Brooklyn. The colonists lost this battle, which was led by George Washington, but over the next two years they would win the war, kicking the British out of the colonies once and for all.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Brooklyn grew to be a city in its own right. The completion of the Brooklyn Bridge was an occasion for celebration; transportation and commerce between Brooklyn and Manhattan now became much easier. Eventually, in 1898, Brooklyn lost its separate identity as an independent city and became one of five boroughs of New York City. However, in some people’s opinion, the integration into New York City should have never happened; they thought Brooklyn should have remained an independent city.

### **Check Your Answers:**<sup>3</sup>

**Activity Source:** Exercise 3 is adapted from “4.2 Spelling” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC- 4.0.

## **Writing at Work**

In today’s job market, writing e-mails has become a means by which many people find employment. E-mails to prospective employers require thoughtful word choice, accurate spelling, and perfect punctuation. Employers’ inboxes are inundated with countless e-mails daily. If even the

subject line of an e-mail contains a spelling error, it will likely be overlooked and someone else's e-mail will take priority.

The best thing to do after you proofread an e-mail to an employer and run the spell checker is to have an additional set of eyes go over it with you; one of your teachers may be able to read the e-mail and give you suggestions for improvement. Most colleges and universities have writing centers, which may also be able to assist you.

## Key Takeaways

- Accurate, error-free spelling enhances your credibility with the reader.
- Mastering the rules of spelling may help you become a better speller.
- Knowing the commonly misused homonyms may prevent spelling errors.
- Studying the list of commonly misspelled words in this chapter, or studying a list of your own, is one way to improve your spelling skills.

## Writing Application

What is your definition of a successful person? Is it based on a person's profession or is it based on his or her character? Perhaps success means a combination of both. In one paragraph, describe in detail what you think makes a person successful. When you are finished, proofread your work for spelling errors. Exchange papers with a partner and read each other's work. See if you catch any spelling errors that your partner missed.

## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is adapted from “4.2 Spelling (<https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/writingsuccess/chapter/4-2-spelling/>)” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

## Notes

1. Sherman J. Alexie Jr. was born in October 1966. He is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian and an American writer, poet, and filmmaker. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. This condition led doctors to predict that he would *likly* suffer long-term brain damage and possibly mental retardation. Although Alexie survived with no mental *disabilitys*, he did suffer other serious side effects from his condition that *plagud* him throughout his childhood. Amazingly, Alexie learned to read by the age of three, and by age five he had read novels such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Raised on an Indian reservation, Alexie often felt *aleinated* from his peers due to his avid love for reading and also from the long-term effects of his illness, which often kept him from *socializeing* with his peers on the reservation. The reading skills he *displaid* at such a young age foreshadowed what he would later become. Today Alexie is a prolific and successful writer with several story *anthologeis* to his credit, *notably* *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Most of his fiction is about contemporary Native Americans who are influenced by pop culture and pow wows and everything in between. His work is sometimes funny but always thoughtful and full of richness and depth. Alexie also writes poetry, novels, and screenplays. His latest collection of *storys* is called *War Dances*, which came out in 2009.
2.
 

1. principle	5. piece	9. seizes
2. wear	6. past	10. through
3. led	7. lessen	
4. which	8. patience	
3. Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs that make up New York City. It is located on the eastern shore of Long Island directly *accross* the East River from the island of Manhattan. Its *beginings* stretch back to the sixteenth century when it was founded by the Dutch who originally called it “Breuckelen.” *Immedietely* after the Dutch settled Brooklyn, it came under British rule. However, neither the Dutch nor the British were Brooklyn’s first inhabitants. When European settlers first arrived, Brooklyn was largely inhabited by the Lenapi, a collective name for several organized bands of Native American people who settled a large area of land that extended from upstate New York through the entire state of New Jersey. They are sometimes referred to as the Delaware Indians. Over time, the Lenapi succumbed to European diseases or conflicts between European settlers or other Native American enemies. *Finalley* they were pushed out of Brooklyn completely by the British. In 1776, Brooklyn was the site of the first *important* battle of the American Revolution known as the Battle of Brooklyn. The colonists lost this battle, which was led by George Washington, but over the next two years they would win the war, kicking the British out of the colonies once and for all. By the end of the nineteenth century, Brooklyn grew to be a city in its own right. The completion of the Brooklyn Bridge was an *ocasion* for celebration; transportation and commerce between Brooklyn and Manhattan now became



much easier. Eventually, in 1898, Brooklyn lost its *seperate* identity as an independent city and became one of five boroughs of New York City. However, in some people's *opiniem*, the *intagratiion* into New York City should have never happened; they *though* Brooklyn should have remained an independent city.

## 13.3 - WORD CHOICE

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### Learning Objectives

- Identify the reasons why using a dictionary and thesaurus is important when writing.
- Identify how to use proper connotations.
- Identify how to avoid using slang, clichés, and overly general words in your writing.

Effective writing involves making conscious choices with words. When you prepare to sit down to write your first draft, you likely have already completed some freewriting exercises, chosen your topic, developed your thesis statement, written an outline, and even selected your sources. When it is time to write your first draft, start to consider which words to use to best convey your ideas to the reader.

Some writers are picky about word choice as they start drafting. They may practice some specific strategies, such as using a dictionary and thesaurus, using words and phrases with proper connotations, and avoiding slang, clichés, and overly general words.

Once you understand these tricks of the trade, you can move ahead confidently in writing your assignment. Remember, the skill and accuracy of your word choice is a major factor in developing your writing style. Precise selection of your words will help you be more clearly understood—in both writing and speaking.

### Using a Dictionary and Thesaurus

Even professional writers need help with the meanings, spellings, pronunciations, and uses of particular words. In fact, they rely on dictionaries to help them write better. No one knows every word in the English language and their multiple uses and meanings, so all writers, from novices to professionals, can benefit from the use of dictionaries.

Most dictionaries provide the following information:

- **Spelling.** How the word and its different forms are spelled.
- **Pronunciation.** How to say the word.
- **Part of speech.** The function of the word.
- **Definition.** The meaning of the word.
- **Synonyms.** Words that have similar meanings.
- **Etymology.** The history of the word.

Look at the following sample dictionary entry and see which of the preceding information you can identify:

**myth**, mith, *n.* [Gr. *mythos*, a word, a fable, a legend.] A fable or legend embodying the convictions of a people as to their gods or other divine beings, their own beginnings and early history and the heroes connected with it, or the origin of the world; any invented story; something or someone having no existence in fact.—**myth • ic**, **myth • i • cal**

Like a dictionary, a thesaurus is another indispensable writing tool. A thesaurus gives you a list of synonyms, words that have the same (or very close to the same) meaning as another word. It also lists antonyms, words with the opposite meaning of the word. A thesaurus will help you when you are looking for the perfect word with just the right meaning to convey your ideas. It will also help you learn more words and use the ones you already know more correctly.

**precocious** *adj.* *She's such a precocious little girl!*: uncommonly smart, mature, advanced, smart, bright, brilliant, gifted, quick, clever, apt.

*Ant.* slow, backward, stupid.

## Using Proper Connotations

A denotation is the dictionary definition of a word. A connotation, on the other hand, is the emotional or cultural meaning attached to a word. The connotation of a word can be positive, negative, or neutral. Keep in mind the connotative meaning when choosing a word.

## Scrawny

- **Denotation:** Exceptionally thin and slight or meager in body or size.
- **Word used in a sentence:** Although he was a premature baby and a **scrawny** child, Martin has developed into a strong man.
- **Connotation:** (Negative) In this sentence the word *scrawny* may have a negative connotation in the readers' minds. They might find it to mean a weakness or a personal flaw; however, the word fits into the sentence appropriately.

## Skinny

- **Denotation:** Lacking sufficient flesh, very thin.
- **Word used in a sentence:** **Skinny** jeans have become very fashionable in the past couple of years.
- **Connotation:** (Positive) Based on cultural and personal impressions of what it means to be skinny, the reader may have positive connotations of the word *skinny*.

## Lean

- **Denotation:** Lacking or deficient in flesh; containing little or no fat.
- **Word used in a sentence:** My brother has a **lean** figure, whereas I have a more muscular build.
- **Connotation:** (Neutral) In this sentence, *lean* has a neutral connotation. It does not call to mind an overly skinny person like the word *scrawny*, nor does imply the positive cultural impressions of the word *skinny*. It is merely a neutral descriptive word.

Notice that all the words have a very similar denotation; however, the connotations of each word differ.

## Exercise 1

### Exercise 1 (Text Version)

In each of the following items, you will find words with similar denotations. Identify the words'

connotations as positive, negative, or neutral by writing the word in the appropriate box. Copy the chart onto your own piece of paper.

1. curious, nosy, interested
2. lazy, relaxed, slow
3. courageous, foolhardy, assured
4. new, newfangled, modern
5. mansion, shack, residence
6. spinster, unmarried woman, career woman
7. giggle, laugh, cackle
8. boring, routine, prosaic
9. noted, notorious, famous
10. assertive, confident, pushy

**Check Your Answers:**<sup>1</sup>

**Activity Source:** Exercise 1 is adapted from “13.3 – Word Choice” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC- 4.0.

## Avoiding Slang

Slang describes informal words that are considered nonstandard English. Slang often changes with passing fads and may be used by or familiar to only a specific group of people. Most people use slang when they speak and in personal correspondences, such as e-mails, text messages, and instant messages. Slang is appropriate between friends in an informal context but should be avoided in formal academic writing.

### Writing at Work

Frequent exposure to media and popular culture has desensitized many of us to slang. In certain situations, using slang at work may not be problematic, but keep in mind that words can have a powerful effect. Slang in professional e-mails or during meetings may convey the wrong message

or even mistakenly offend someone.

## Exercise 2

Edit the following paragraph by replacing the slang words and phrases with more formal language. Rewrite the paragraph on your own sheet of paper.

I felt like such an airhead when I got up to give my speech. As I walked toward the podium, I banged my knee on a chair. Man, I felt like such a klutz. On top of that, I kept saying “like” and “um,” and I could not stop fidgeting. I was so stressed out about being up there. I feel like I’ve been practicing this speech 24/7, and I still bombed. It was ten minutes of me going off about how we sometimes have to do things we don’t enjoy doing. Wow, did I ever prove my point. My speech was so bad I’m surprised that people didn’t boo. My teacher said not to sweat it, though. Everyone gets nervous his or her first time speaking in public, and she said, with time, I would become a whiz at this speech giving stuff. I wonder if I have the guts to do it again.

### Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

## Avoiding Clichés

Clichés are descriptive expressions that have lost their effectiveness because they are overused. Writing that uses clichés often suffers from a lack of originality and insight. Avoiding clichés in formal writing will help you write in original and fresh ways.

- **Clichéd:** Whenever my brother and I get into an argument, he always says something that makes my **blood boil**.
- **Plain:** Whenever my brother and I get into an argument, he always says something that makes me really angry.
- **Original:** Whenever my brother and I get into an argument, he always says something that

makes me want to go to the gym and punch the bag for a few hours.

## Tip

Think about all the cliché phrases that you hear in popular music or in everyday conversation. What would happen if these clichés were transformed into something unique?

## Exercise 3

On your own sheet of paper, revise the following sentences by replacing the clichés with fresh, original descriptions.

1. She is writing a memoir in which she will air her family's dirty laundry.
2. Fran had an ax to grind with Benny, and she planned to confront him that night at the party.
3. Mr. Muller was at his wit's end with the rowdy class of seventh graders.
4. The bottom line is that Greg was fired because he missed too many days of work.
5. Sometimes it is hard to make ends meet with just one paycheck.
6. My brain is fried from pulling an all-nighter.
7. Maria left the dishes in the sink all week to give Jeff a taste of his own medicine.
8. While they were at the carnival Janice exclaimed, "Time sure does fly when you are having fun!"
9. Jeremy became tongue-tied after the interviewer asked him where he saw himself in five years.
10. Jordan was dressed to the nines that night.

## Avoiding Overly General Words

Specific words and images make your writing more interesting to read. Whenever

possible, avoid overly general words in your writing; instead, try to replace general language with particular nouns, verbs, and modifiers that convey details and that bring your words to life. Add words that provide color, texture, sound, and even smell to your writing.

- **General:** My new puppy is cute.
- **Specific:** My new puppy is a ball of white fuzz with the biggest black eyes I have ever seen.
- **General:** My teacher told us that plagiarism is bad.
- **Specific:** My teacher, Ms. Atwater, created a presentation detailing exactly how plagiarism is illegal and unethical.

## Exercise 4

Revise the following sentences by replacing the overly general words with more precise and attractive language. Write the new sentences on your own sheet of paper.

1. Reilly got into her car and drove off.
2. I would like to travel to outer space because it would be amazing.
3. Jane came home after a bad day at the office.
4. I thought Milo's essay was fascinating.
5. The dog walked up the street.
6. The coal miners were tired after a long day.
7. The tropical fish are pretty.
8. I sweat a lot after running.
9. The goalie blocked the shot.
10. I enjoyed my Mexican meal.



## Key Takeaways

- Using a dictionary and thesaurus as you write will improve your writing by improving your word choice.
- Connotations of words may be positive, neutral, or negative.
- Slang, clichés, and overly general words should be avoided in academic writing.

## Writing Application

Review a piece of writing that you have completed for school. Circle any sentences with slang, clichés, or overly general words and rewrite them using stronger language.

## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is adapted from “4.3 Word Choice (<https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/writingsuccess/chapter/4-3-word-choice/>)” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

## Notes

1. Positive: interested Negative: nosy Neutral: curious
2. Positive: relaxed Negative: lazy Neutral: slow
3. Positive: courageous Negative: foolhardy Neutral: assured
4. Positive: modern Negative: newfangled Neutral: new
5. Positive: mansion Negative: shack Neutral: residence
6. Positive: career woman Negative: spinster Neutral: unmarried woman

7. Positive: giggle Negative: cackle Neutral: laugh      9. Positive: famous Negative: notorious Neutral: noted  
8. Positive: routine Negative: prosaic Neutral: boring      10. Positive: confident Negative: pushy Neutral: assertive

# 13.4 - USING CONTEXT CLUES

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## Learning Objectives

- Identify the different types of context clues.
- Practice using context clues while reading.

Context clues are bits of information within a text that will assist you in deciphering the meaning of unknown words. Since most of your knowledge of vocabulary comes from reading, it is important that you recognize context clues. By becoming more aware of particular words and phrases surrounding a difficult word, you can make logical guesses about its meaning. The following are the different types of context clues:

- Brief definition or restatement
- Synonyms and antonyms
- Examples

## Brief Definition or Restatement

Sometimes a text directly states the definition or a restatement of the unknown word. The brief definition or restatement is signaled by a word or a punctuation mark. Consider the following example:

If you visit Baffin Island, you will likely see many glaciers, or slow moving masses of ice.

In this sentence, the word *glaciers* is defined by the phrase that follows the signal word *or*, which is *slow moving masses of ice*.

In other instances, the text may restate the meaning of the word in a different way, by using punctuation as a signal. Look at the following example:

Marina was indignant—fuming mad—when she discovered her brother had left for the party without her.

Although *fuming mad* is not a formal definition of the word *indignant*, it does serve to define it. These two examples use signals—the word *or* and the punctuation dashes—to indicate the meaning of the unfamiliar word. Other signals to look for are the words *is*, *as*, *means*, *known as*, and *refers to*.

## Synonyms and Antonyms

Sometimes a text gives a synonym of the unknown word to signal the meaning of the unfamiliar word:

When you interpret an image, you actively question and examine what the image connotes and suggests.

In this sentence the word *suggests* is a synonym of the word *connotes*. The word *and* sometimes signals synonyms.

Likewise, the word *but* may signal a contrast, which can help you define a word by its antonym.

I abhor clothes shopping, but I adore grocery shopping.

The word *abhor* is contrasted with its opposite: *adore*. From this context, the reader can guess that *abhor* means to dislike greatly.

## Examples

Sometimes a text will give you an example of the word that sheds light on its meaning:

I knew Mark's ailurophobia was in full force because he began trembling and stuttering when he saw my cat, Ludwig, slink out from under the bed.

Although *ailurophobia* is an unknown word, the sentence gives an example of its effects. Based on this example, a reader could confidently surmise that the word means a fear of cats.

### Tip

Look for signal words like such as, for instance, and for example. These words signal that a word's meaning may be revealed through an example.

### Exercise 1

Identify the context clue that helps define the underlined words in each of the following sentences. Write the context clue on your own sheet of paper.

1. Lucinda is very adroit on the balance beam, but Constance is rather clumsy.
2. I saw the entomologist, a scientist who studies insects, cradle the giant dung beetle in her palm.
3. Lance's comments about politics were irrelevant and meaningless to the botanist's lecture on plant reproduction.
4. Before I left for my trip to the Czech Republic, I listened to my mother's sage advice and made a copy of my passport.
5. His rancor, or hatred, for socializing resulted in a life of loneliness and boredom.

6. Martin was mortified, way beyond embarrassment, when his friends teamed up to shove him into the pool.
7. The petulant four-year-old had a baby sister who was, on the contrary, not grouchy at all.
8. The philosophy teacher presented the students with several conundrums, or riddles, to solve.
9. Most Canadians are omnivores, people that eat both plants and animals.
10. Elena is effervescent, as excited as a cheerleader, for example, when she meets someone for the first time.

## Exercise 2

On your own sheet of paper, write the name of the context clue that helps to define the following words:

- precocious
- flabbergasted
- dexterity
- gloated
- agape

Imani was a precocious child to say the least. She produced brilliant watercolor paintings by the age of three. At first, her parents were flabbergasted—utterly blown away—by their daughter’s ability, but soon they got used to their little painter. Her preschool teacher said that Imani’s dexterity, or ease with which she used her hands, was something she had never before seen in such a young child. Little Imani never gloated or took pride in her paintings; she just smiled contentedly when she finished one and requested her parents give it to someone as a gift. Whenever people met Imani for the first time they often watched her paint with their mouths agape, but her parents always kept their mouths closed and simply smiled over their “little Monet.”

### Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

## Tip

In addition to context clues to help you figure out the meaning of a word, examine the following word parts: prefixes, roots, and suffixes.

## Writing at Work

Jargon is a type of shorthand communication often used in the workplace. It is the technical language of a special field. Imagine it is your first time working as a server in a restaurant and your manager tells you he is going to “eighty-six” the roasted chicken. If you do not realize that “eighty-six” means to remove an item from the menu, you could be confused.

When you first start a job, no matter where it may be, you will encounter jargon that will likely be foreign to you. Perhaps after working the job for a short time, you too will feel comfortable enough to use it. When you are first hired, however, jargon can be baffling and make you feel like an outsider. If you cannot decipher the jargon based on the context, it is always a good policy to ask.

## Key Takeaways

- Context clues are words or phrases within a text that help clarify vocabulary that is unknown to you.
- There are several types of context clues including brief definition and restatement, synonyms and antonyms, and example.

## Writing Application

Write a paragraph describing your first job. In the paragraph, use five words previously unknown to you. These words could be jargon words or you may consult a dictionary or thesaurus to find a new word. Make sure to provide a specific context clue for understanding each word. Exchange papers with a classmate and try to decipher the meaning of the words in each other's paragraphs based on the context clues.

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## Attribution & References

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# 13.5 - PLAIN LANGUAGE

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## Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- identify active and passive voice, jargon, positive and negative tone, and unnecessary words in written and oral communications;
- rewrite a given message while following five principles of plain language: active voice, common words, positive tone, reader focus, and short (concise) words and sentences;
- proofread another student's work, or your own, with a focus on the five principles of plain language: active voice, common words, positive tone, reader focus, and short (concise) words and sentences.

## Crafting Your Message with Plain Language

No matter who you are communicating with, they will appreciate your ability to write using plain language. This is a key skill in any professional setting. Plain language writing—and speaking—will help you to get your message across clearly and concisely. This chapter will introduce you to the principles of plain language and allow you to practise them.

### Principle 1: Use Active Voice

Knowing when and how to use either active or passive voice will help you to create clear messages. Most contexts prefer the active voice, which is more direct than passive voice, which can be awkward, vague and wordy. Passive voice can be the best choice, in some situations; knowing the difference is important!

## Recognizing Active and Passive Voice

To use active voice, make the *noun that performs the action* the subject of the sentence and pair it directly with an action verb.

Read these two sentences:

Matt Damon left Harvard in the late 1980s to start his acting career.

Matt Damon’s acting career was started in the late 1980s when he left Harvard.

In the first sentence, **left** is an action verb that is paired with the subject, Matt Damon. If you ask, “Who or what left?” the answer is Matt Damon. Neither of the other two nouns in the sentence—Harvard and career—“left” anything.

Now look at the second sentence. The action verb is **started**. If you ask, “Who or what started something?” the answer, again, is Matt Damon. But in this sentence, the writer placed **career**—not **Matt Damon**—in the subject position. When the doer of the action is not the subject, the sentence is in passive voice. In passive voice constructions, the doer of the action usually follows the word *by* as the indirect object of a prepositional phrase, and the action verb is typically partnered with a version of the verb *to be*.

The following sentences are in passive voice. For each sentence, identify

- the noun in the subject position,
- the form of the verb *to be*,
- the action verb, and
- the doer of the action.

Example 1: The original screenplay for *Good Will Hunting* was written by Matt Damon for an English class when he was student at Harvard University.

### Quick Check 1



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-290>

### Quick Check 1 (Text version)

Match the following words or phrases (a. Matt Damon, b. written, c. was, d. Good Will Hunting), to the following parts:

1. The noun in the subject position
2. The form of the verb 'to be'
3. The action verb
4. The doer of the action

**Check your Answer:** <sup>1</sup>

**Activity source:** "Quick Check 1" is adapted from *Professional Communications: Canadian Edition*, CC BY 4.0.

Example 2: As an actor, Matt Damon is loved by millions of fans worldwide.

## Quick Check 2



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-291>

### Quick Check 2 (Text version)

Match the following words or phrases (a. loved, b. Matt Damon, c. is, d. fans), to the following parts:

1. The noun in the subject position
2. The form of the verb 'to be'
3. The action verb
4. The doer of the action

**Check your Answer:** <sup>2</sup>

**Activity source:** “Quick Check 2” is adapted from *Professional Communications: Canadian Edition*, CC BY 4.0.

## Check Your Understanding: Active or Passive

Decide whether each of the following sentences is active or passive.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-292>

### Check Your Understanding: Active or Passive (Text version)

1. An Oscar was given to Matt Damon and Ben Affleck for the *Good Will Hunting* script.
2. Matt Damon and Ben Affleck grew up together and are still colleagues and friends today.
3. Jason Bourne, a character from the novels of Robert Ludlum, was played several times by Matt Damon.
4. Besides acting in the Bourne movies, Matt Damon also played the title character in *Good Will Hunting*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

### Check your Answer:<sup>3</sup>

**Activity source:** “Check Your Understanding: Active or Passive” is adapted from *Professional Communications: Canadian Edition*, CC BY 4.0.

## Using Action Verbs to Make Sentences More Interesting

Two sentences can say the same thing but leave a different impression based on the choice of verb. Which of the following sentences gives you the most vivid mental picture?

1. A bald eagle was overhead and now is low in the sky near me.

2. A bald eagle soared overhead and then dove low, seemingly coming right at me.

Most of us would agree that sentence B paints a better picture.

Try to express yourself with action verbs instead of forms of the verb *to be*. Sometimes it is fine to use forms of the verb *to be*, such as *is* or *are*, but it is easy to overuse them (as in this sentence—twice). Overuse of these verbs will make your writing dull.

## Revising sentences to make them more interesting

Read each of the following sentences and note the use of the verb *to be*. Think of a way to reword the sentence to make it more interesting by using an action verb before checking the suggested revision.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-293>

### Revising sentences to make them more interesting (Text version)

A photo was snapped, the tiger was upset, and Elizabeth was on the ground. Check revision<sup>4</sup>

A giraffe's neck is long and thin, but it is as much as 500 pounds in weight. Check revision<sup>5</sup>

An elephant is able to drink 80 gallons of water and is likely to eat 1,000 pounds of vegetation in a day. Check revision<sup>6</sup>

**Activity source:** “Revising sentences to make them more interesting” is adapted from *Professional Communications: Canadian Edition*, CC BY 4.0.

### Note

A point of confusion that sometimes comes up when people discuss the passive voice is the use of expletive pronouns. A sentence with expletive pronouns often starts with “There is ...” or “There are

....” Many people mistakenly think that expletive pronoun sentences are a form of passive voice, but they are not.

To understand the difference, please read the “Avoid Expletive Pronouns” section under Principle 5.

## Using Action Verbs Alone to Avoid Passive Voice

Even though the passive voice might include an action verb, the action verb is not as strong as it could be, because of the sentence structure. The passive voice also causes unnecessary wordiness.

### Rewording sentences in active voice

Read the following sentences and think of a way to reword each using an action verb in active voice. Then look at the suggested revision for each case.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-294>

#### Rewording sentences in active voice (Text version)

Original: The zebras were fed by the zoo workers. (eight words) Check revision<sup>7</sup>

Original: Water was spewed in the air by the elephant. (nine words) Check revision<sup>8</sup>

Original: The home of the hippopotamus was cleaned up and made tidy by Hank the Hippo Man. (16 words) Check revision<sup>9</sup>

**Activity source:** “Rewording sentences in active voice” is adapted from *Professional Communications: Canadian Edition*, CC BY 4.0.

## Writing in the Active Voice

Writing in active voice is easy once you understand the difference between active and passive voice. Make sure you always define who or what did what. If you use forms of the verb to be with your action verb, consider the reason for your choice. If you are writing in progressive tense (“Carrie is walking to my house”) or perfect progressive tense (“Melissa will have been married for four years by then”), you will need to use helping verbs, even in active voice.

## Using Passive Voice

Sometimes passive voice is the best option. Consider the following acceptable uses of passive voice.

When you do not know who or what is responsible for the action:

Example: Our front-door lock was picked.

Rationale: If you do not know who picked the lock on your front door, you cannot say who did it. You could say a thief broke in, but that would be an assumption; you could, theoretically, find out that the lock was picked by a family member who had forgotten to take a key.

When you want to hide the person or thing responsible for the action, such as in a story:

Example: The basement was filled with a mysterious scraping sound.

Rationale: If you are writing a dramatic story, you might introduce a phenomenon without revealing the person or thing that caused it.

When the person or thing that performed the action is not important:

Example: The park was flooded all week.

Rationale: Although you would obviously know that the rainwater flooded the park, saying so would not be important.

When you do not want to place credit, responsibility, or blame:

Example: A mistake was made in the investigation that resulted in the wrong person being on trial.

Rationale: Even if you think you know who is responsible for a problem, you might not want to expose the person.

When you want to maintain the impression of objectivity:

Example: It was noted that only first-graders chose to eat the fruit.

Rationale: Research reports in certain academic disciplines attempt to remove the

researcher from the results, to avoid saying, for example, “I noted that only first graders...”

When you want to avoid using a gendered construction, and pluralizing is not an option:

Example: If the password is forgotten by the user, a security question will be asked.

Rationale: This construction avoids the need for the cumbersome “his or her” (as in “the user forgets his or her password”).

## Principle 2: Use Common Words Instead of Complex Words

Inappropriate word choices will get in the way of your message. For this reason, use language that is accurate and appropriate for the writing situation. Omit jargon (technical words and phrases common to a specific profession or discipline) and slang (invented words and phrases specific to a certain group of people), unless your audience and purpose call for such language. Avoid outdated words and phrases, such as “Dial the number.” Be straightforward in your writing rather than using euphemism (a gentler, but sometimes inaccurate, way of saying something). Be clear about the level of formality each piece of writing needs, and adhere to that level.

### Writing without Jargon or Slang

Jargon and slang both have their places. Using jargon is fine as long as you can safely assume your readers also know the jargon. For example, if you are a lawyer writing to others in the legal profession, using legal jargon is perfectly fine. On the other hand, if you are writing for people outside the legal profession, using legal jargon would most likely be confusing, and you should avoid it. Of course, lawyers must use legal jargon in papers they prepare for customers. However, those papers are designed to navigate within the legal system and may not be clear to readers outside of this demographic.

#### Examples:

Jargon: I need to hammer out this report by tomorrow.

Alternative: I need to type up this report by tomorrow.

Euphemism: My uncle is vertically challenged.

Alternative: My uncle is only five feet tall.



## Principle 3: Use a Positive Tone When Possible

Unless there is a specific reason not to, use positive language wherever you can. Positive language benefits your writing in two ways. First, it creates a positive tone, and your writing is more likely to be well-received. Second, it clarifies your meaning, as positive statements are more concise. Take a look at the following negatively worded sentences and then their positive counterparts, below.

### Examples:

Negative: Your car will not be ready for collection until Friday.

Positive: Your car will be ready for collection on Friday.

Negative: You did not complete the exam.

Positive: You will need to complete the exam.

Negative: Your holiday time is not approved until your manager clears it.

Positive: Your holiday time will be approved when your manager clears it.

Avoid using multiple negatives in one sentence, as this will make your sentence difficult to understand. When readers encounter more than one negative construct in a sentence, their brains have to do more cognitive work to decipher the meaning; multiple negatives can create convoluted sentences that bog the reader down.

### Examples:

Negative: A decision will not be made unless all board members agree.

Positive: A decision will be made when all board members agree.

Negative: The event cannot be scheduled without a venue.

Positive: The event can be scheduled when a venue has been booked.

## Principle 4: Write for Your Reader

When you write for your readers and speak to an audience, you have to consider who they are and what they need to know. When readers know that you are concerned with their needs, they are more likely to be open to your message, and will be more likely to:

- take the action you are asking them to and
- focus on important details.

Your message will mean more to your reader if they get the impression that it was written directly to them. When you sit down to write, either for a paper or a presentation, consider the audience analysis tool presented earlier in this module.

Then try to answer these questions in your writing with user-friendly language.

Speaking directly to the audience using you-oriented language helps to personalize the message and make it easier to understand. Using the second-person pronoun you tells your reader that the message is intended for them. You might be inclined to use he, she, or they instead, but those terms are not as direct or personal. Using the pronoun you makes the message feel relevant.

Consider the following sentences:

1. Employees arriving at the Sands Hotel for the team's day out should assemble in the lobby.
2. When you arrive at the Sands Hotel for the team's day out, please join us in the lobby.

Which one is more inviting? Most people will find the second sentence more friendly and inviting because it addresses the reader directly.

## Organize Your Document to Meet Your Readers' Needs

When you write, ask yourself, "Why would someone read this message?" Often, it is because the reader needs a question answered. What do they need to know to prepare for the upcoming meeting, for example, or what new company policies do they need to abide by? Think about the questions your readers will ask and then organize your document to answer them.

## Principle 5: Keep Words and Sentence Short (Conciseness)

It is easy to let your sentences become cluttered with words that do not add value to your message. Improve cluttered sentences by eliminating repetitive ideas, removing repeated words, and editing to eliminate unnecessary words.

### Eliminating Repetitive Ideas

Unless you are providing definitions on purpose, stating one idea twice in a single sentence is redundant. Read each example below and think about how you could revise the sentence to remove repetitive phrasing. Then look at the suggested revision.

Examples:

Original: Use a very heavy skillet made of cast iron to bake an extra-juicy meatloaf.

Revision: Use a cast-iron skillet to bake a juicy meatloaf.

Original: Joe thought to himself, I think I'll make caramelized grilled salmon tonight.

Revision: Joe thought, I think I'll make caramelized grilled salmon tonight.

## Removing Repeated Words

As a general rule, you should try not to repeat a word within a sentence. Sometimes you simply need to choose a different word. But often you can actually remove repeated words. Read this example and think about how you could revise the sentence to remove a repeated word that adds wordiness. Then check out the revision below the sentence.

**Example:**

Original: The student who won the cooking contest is a very talented and ambitious student.

Revision: The student who won the cooking contest is very talented and ambitious.

## Rewording to Eliminate Unnecessary Words

If a sentence has words that are not necessary to carry the meaning, those words are unneeded and can be removed. Read each example and think about how you could revise the sentence; then check out the suggested revisions.

**Examples:**

Original: Andy has the ability to make the most fabulous twice-baked potatoes.

Revision: Andy makes the most fabulous twice-baked potatoes.

Original: For his part in the cooking class group project, Malik was responsible for making the mustard reduction sauce.

Revision: Malik made the mustard reduction sauce for his cooking class group project.

## Avoid Expletive Pronouns (Most of the Time)

Many people create needlessly wordy sentences using expletive pronouns, which often take the form of "There is ..." or "There are ...."

Now, if you remember, pronouns (e.g., I, you, he, she, they, this, that, who, etc.) are words that we use to replace nouns (i.e., people, places, things), and there are many types of pronouns (e.g., personal, relative, demonstrative, etc.). However, expletive pronouns are different from other pronouns because unlike most pronouns, they do not stand for a person, thing, or place; they are called expletives because they have no

“value.” Sometimes you will see expletive pronouns at the beginning of a sentence, sometimes at the end. Look at the following expletive constructs:

**Examples:**

1. There are a lot of reading assignments in this class.
2. I can't believe how many reading assignments there are!

Note: These two examples are not necessarily bad examples of using expletive pronouns. We included them to help you first understand what expletive pronouns are so you can recognize them.

The main reason we should generally avoid writing with expletive pronouns is that they often cause us to use more words in the rest of the sentence than we have to. Also, the empty words at the beginning tend to shift the more important subject matter toward the end of the sentence. The above sentences are not that bad, but at least they are simple enough to help you understand what expletive pronouns are. Here are some more examples of expletive pronouns, along with better alternatives.

**Examples:**

Original: There are some people who love to cause trouble.

Revision: Some people love to cause trouble.

Original: There are some things that are just not worth waiting for.

Revision: Some things are just not worth waiting for.

Original: There is a person I know who can help you fix your computer.

Revision: I know a person who can help you fix your computer

While not all instances of expletive pronouns are bad, writing sentences with expletives seems to be habit forming. It can lead to trouble when you are explaining more complex ideas, because you end up having to use additional strings of phrases to explain what you want your reader to understand. Wordy sentences, such as those with expletive pronouns, can tax the reader's mind.

**Example:**

Original: There is a button you need to press that is red and says STOP.

Revision: You need to press the red STOP button. Or: Press the red STOP button.

Of course, most rules and guideline have exceptions, and expletive pronouns are no different. In many cases common expressions, particularly if they are short, are not worth revising—especially in live communications such as presentations, lectures, and speeches.

**Examples:**

There is no place I'd rather be.

There are good days, and there are bad days.

There is no way around this.

How many ways are there to solve this puzzle?

The above sentences use expletive pronouns but are fine because they are short and easy on the reader's mind. In fact, revising them would make for longer, more convoluted sentences!

So when you find yourself using expletives, always ask yourself if omitting and rewriting would give your reader a clearer, more direct, less wordy sentence. Can I communicate the same message using fewer words without taking away from the meaning I want to convey or the tone I want to create? Practise evaluating your own writing and playing with alternative ways to say the same thing.

### Note

Do not confuse expletive pronouns with passive voice (as also noted briefly in Principle 1: Use the Active Voice). Both expletive sentences and passive voice use forms of the verb to be, often result in wordiness, and sometimes obscure important information, but they are not the same thing grammatically. The following example should help to clear up any mix-up between the two.

Example:

The following sentence uses passive voice:

- A few people can be called upon to help you.

It is passive because the subject of the sentence (people) are not the doers of the verb called. The active agent who will be "calling" is missing. Are you to call upon these people, or will someone else call upon them?

But the following example uses an expletive pronoun and is not in passive voice, because it has an active agent (you) doing the "calling":

- There are a few people you can call upon to help you.

But even though passive voice and expletive constructs are not the same, it is possible—but rarely advisable—to write a sentence that uses both!

- There are a few people who can be called upon to help you.

The active agent doing the “calling” is, once again, missing; and the sentence starts with the expletive “There are.” What a convoluted sentence!

A better sentence that uses neither passive voice nor expletive pronouns would be:

- You can call upon a few people to help you.

Ah! Much better!

## Conclusion

In this chapter, you have recognized plain language as a way to get your message across clearly and concisely when writing and speaking. You have identified five principles of plain-language writing: use active voice, use common words instead of complex words, use a positive tone when possible, write for your reader, and keep words and sentences short. You should now be ready to get more practice using the questions in this chapter, or move on to the next topic.

## Further Readings

- *Five-step checklist to write better* (<http://centerforplainlanguage.org/5-steps-to-plain-language/>). Center for Plain Language.

## Key Takeaways and Check In

### Key Takeaways

- Write using the active voice to make sentences more interesting.
- Limit the use of jargon to situations where your audience recognizes it. Remove slang and euphemisms from professional writing.
- Use positive instead of negative tone.
- Examine the subject matter, audience, and purpose to determine the level of formality for your writing or presentation.
- State ideas only once within a single sentence.

## Final Check In Questions

Aim to achieve 100% on these final, check in questions. Good luck!



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/gccomm/?p=5249#h5p-295>

### Final Check In Questions (Text version)

1. “Best practices,” “centres of excellence,” “core competencies,” “mission critical,” “roll out,” and “performance management” are all examples of:
  - a. Jargon
  - b. Cliches
  - c. Sexism
  - d. Slang
  
2. The following statement lacks which principle of plain language? “Despite the fact that Mrs. Armadio will not be present at the commencement of her kitchen renovation project, as her legal representative, I am authorized to coordinate with the foreman of the construction crew about how the project will proceed.”
  - a. Organization
  - b. Common words
  - c. Active Voice
  - d. Positive tone
  - e. Conciseness
  
3. Which of the following is FALSE?
  - a. Jargon should be avoided at all times, because it is too occupation specific.
  - b. Clichés are communication obstacles because they are overused.
  - c. You can use slang to target specific audiences.
  - d. Doublespeak is not ethical.
  
4. Read the following statement: “It was determined by the committee that the report was

inconclusive.” Identify which of the five plain-language principles the writer has NOT followed.

- a. Common Words
  - b. Reader Focus
  - c. Active voice
  - d. Conciseness
  - e. Positive Tone
5. One of the pages on the University of Midland’s Human Resources website starts with the following paragraph: “The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) replaced the Tuition Remission and Reimbursement Program (TRR) effective November 1, 2004. This program was implemented with the Spring Semester 2005. TAP is an employee supplemental educational assistance program.” Is this an effective message? Why, or why not?
- a. Yes, it is effective, because it starts by making sure readers are not confused by the changes in the program.
  - b. No, it is not effective, because it contains information that is now irrelevant and defines the most important term last instead of first.
  - c. Yes, it is effective, because it contains precise information and identifies abbreviations (TAP, TRR) before using them.
  - d. No, it is not effective, because when the new program was implemented is irrelevant and the name of the old program communicated the benefit more accurately than the new name.
6. Each of the options above contains flawed details, and so none are 100 percent correct.
- a. Which of the following is NOT a good way to ensure that your document’s tone matches its intent?
  - b. Read it out loud, so you can hear how the words you have chosen reflect the tone of your messages.
  - c. Get several people to read your work and give you feedback on its tone.
  - d. Listen to or watch presentations that are known for having used tone effectively.
  - e. Publish or send the document and wait for feedback from your readers.\*

**Check your Answers:**<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

1. 1. d, 2. c, 3. b, 4. a
2. 1. b, 2. c, 3. a, 4. d
3. 1. Passive, 2. Active, 3. Passive, 4. Active.
4. Elizabeth innocently snapped the photo, and the lion let out a roar that sent Elizabeth scrambling backward until she tumbled down the hill.
5. A giraffe’s neck towers far above its body and often weighs as much as 500 pounds.
6. In one day, an elephant slurps down 80 gallons of water and munches away on 1,000 pounds of vegetation.
7. The zoo workers fed the zebras. (six words)

8. The elephant spewed water in the air. (seven words)
9. Hank the Hippo Man cleaned up and tidied the hippopotamus's home. (11 words)
10. 1. a, 2. e, 3. a, 4. c, 5. d, 6. e

# 13.6 - WORKING WITH WORDS: END-OF-CHAPTER EXERCISES

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## Learning Objectives

- Use the skills you have learned in the chapter.
- Work collaboratively with other students.

## Exercise 1

Proofread the paragraph and correct any commonly confused words and misspelled words.

Grunge, or the Seattle sound, is a type of rock music that became quiet popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It began in Seattle, Washington. Grunge musicians rejected the dramatic an expensive stage productions that were trendy at the time. There music was striped down with an emphasis on distorted electric guitars. Grunge musicians did not ware makeup or sport extravagant hairstyles like many of the day's rock musicians and bands. Many grunge musicians would by they're clothes from secondhand stores. The lyrics too grunge songs were also quit different compared two what was populer at the time. Grunge lyrics are charecterized by dark or socially conscience themes. Grunge music is still admired today buy music lovers of all ages.

## Exercise 2

### Exercise 2 (Text Version)

Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank line with the correct homonym or frequently misspelled word.

1. Kevin asked me a serious question and \_\_\_\_\_(then, than) interrupted me when I attempted to answer.
2. A hot compress will \_\_\_\_\_(lessen, lesson) the pain of muscle cramps.
3. Jason was not a graceful \_\_\_\_\_(looser, loser) because he knocked his chair over and stormed off the basketball court.
4. Please consider the \_\_\_\_\_(effects, affects) of not getting enough green vegetables in your diet.
5. \_\_\_\_\_(Except, Accept) for Ajay, we all had our tickets to the play.
6. I am \_\_\_\_\_(threw, through) with this magazine, so you can read it if you like.
7. I don't care \_\_\_\_\_(whose, who's) coming to the party and \_\_\_\_\_(whose, who's) not.
8. Crystal could \_\_\_\_\_(sea, see) the soaring hawk through her binoculars.
9. The \_\_\_\_\_(principal, principle) gave the students a very long lecture about peer pressure.
10. Dr. Frankl nearly lost his \_\_\_\_\_(patience, patients) with one of his \_\_\_\_\_(patience, patients).

### Check Your Answers:<sup>1</sup>

**Activity Source:** Exercise 2 is adapted from “13.5 – Working With Words: End-Of-Chapter Exercises” In *Writing for Success* by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, licensed under CC BY-NC- 4.0.

## Exercise 3

Rewrite the following personal essay by replacing the slang, clichés, and overly general language with stronger, more precise language.

My biggest regret happened in high school. I had always felt like a fish out of water, so when I started grade 9 I was determined to fit in with the cool people. Man, was that an uphill battle. I don't even know why I tried, but hindsight is 20/20 I guess. The first thing I did was change the way I dressed. I went from wearing clothes I was comfortable in to wearing stuff that was so not me. Then I started wearing a ton of makeup, and my brother was all like, "What happened to your face?" Not only did my looks change, my personality changed a lot too. I started to act all stuck up and bossy with my friends, and they didn't know how to respond to this person that used to be me. Luckily, this phase didn't last more than a couple of months. I decided it was more fun to be me than to try to be someone else. I guess you can't fit a square peg in a round hole after all.

## Exercise 4

### Exercise 4 (Text Version)

Write the correct synonym for each word.

1. lenient \_\_\_\_\_ (relaxed, callous)
2. abandon \_\_\_\_\_ (vacate, deceive)
3. berate \_\_\_\_\_ (criticize, encourage)
4. experienced \_\_\_\_\_ (callow, matured)
5. spiteful \_\_\_\_\_ (malevolent, mellow)
6. tame \_\_\_\_\_ (subdued, wild)
7. tasty \_\_\_\_\_ (savory, bland)
8. banal \_\_\_\_\_ (common, interesting)

9. contradict \_\_\_\_\_(deny, revolt)  
 10. vain \_\_\_\_\_(boastful, simple)

### Check Your Answers:<sup>2</sup>

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## Notes

- |    |                          |                          |                        |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | 1. then                  | 5. Except                | 9. principal           |
|    | 2. lessen                | 6. through               | 10. patience           |
|    | 3. looser                | 7. who's                 |                        |
|    | 4. effects               | 8. see                   |                        |
| 2. | 1. lenient - relaxed     | 5. spiteful - malevolent | 9. contradict - revolt |
|    | 2. abandon - vacate      | 6. tame - subdued        | 10. vain - boastful    |
|    | 3. berate - criticize    | 7. tasty - savory        |                        |
|    | 4. experienced - matured | 8. banal - common        |                        |