

**HELP FOR WRITERS:**  
**AVOIDING COMMON MISTAKES IN GRAMMAR, SPELLING, WORD**  
**USAGE, AND MORE**

**(with BatB-inspired examples)**

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We're all in favor of being as creative as possible, but there are some rules you just shouldn't break.

**IT MIGHT LOOK RIGHT. IT MIGHT EVEN SOUND RIGHT, BUT...**

Spellcheck is a great tool to use when writing, but always remember that it is far from foolproof, and it's not a substitute for proofreading! You might type a word that is spelled correctly, but it is misused in context.

For example: As the sun rose, Vincent knew he should return Below, yet he was headless of the possible consequences.

Headless is spelled correctly. Spellcheck alone wouldn't catch it. Now Vincent will always have the starring role in the Samhain tunnel production of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

**Those pesky homonyms:**

**Homophones:** Words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently, e.g.:

l/eye, plane/plain, fair/fare, carrot/caret, to/two/too, pare/pair/pear, etc.

**Homographs:** Words that are spelled the same but pronounced differently, e.g.:

lead – a metal

lead – be at the head of the line

tear – rip

tear – drop of liquid when crying

bass – a low deep voice

bass – a fish

**Their** is the possessive form of they. **They're** is the contraction of they are. **There** is a location.

The people who live Below with their families and friends know they're lucky to have a home there.

**You're** is the contraction of you are. **Your** is the possessive form of you.

"Catherine, you're working late. Is there a problem with your new case?" Vincent asked.

**It's** is the contraction of it is. **Its** is a possessive pronoun. Like his, hers, and ours, its does not need an apostrophe.

"It's time Mouse took that creature back to its home," Father said, pointing at Arthur.

**Who's** is the contraction of who is. **Whose** is the possessive form of who.

"Who's serving on the Council this month?" asked William. "Whose turn is it?"

**Two** is a number. **Too** means also. **To** is a preposition.

"I have two new cases," Catherine told Vincent. "I have to be in court tomorrow, too."

### **Other often misspelled words:**

**Breathe** is a verb. **Breath** is a noun.

"Breathe," Vincent urged, his breath catching as Catherine coughed and slowly opened her eyes.

**Alot** is never correct when written as a single word. 'A lot' is the opposite of 'a little'. Keep in mind you never see the word 'alittle.' This is also true for **alright**. 'All right' is the opposite of 'all wrong' and you never see the word 'alwrong'.

**Lose** is what happens when you don't win or when you misplace or no longer possess something. **Loose** is the opposite of tight.

Catherine hadn't tried to lose weight, but her new suit felt much too loose.

Kipper counted the Winterfest candles he still needed to deliver, and he knew he was about to lose his bet with Samantha.

**Choose** (the 'oo' sounds like 'ooo') is present tense. **Chose** (the 'o' sounds like 'oh') is past tense.

"Catherine, when I was asked to choose between pleasing Father and pleasing you, I chose you," Vincent said.

**Past** indicates something that happened at an earlier time. **Passed** indicates movement; it is the past tense of the word pass.

Catherine smiled and waved as she passed the sentry at the tunnel entrance. The days of needing someone to act as her guide Below were in the past.

**Advice** (the 'c' sounds like 's') is a noun. Advice can be given, taken, offered, ignored, etc.

**Advise** (the 's' sounds like 'z') is a verb.

Father felt he must advise Vincent to stay away from Catherine. He knew his son would be much happier if he followed that advice.

**Discreet** means private, reserved. **Discrete** means entirely separate.

Vincent had learned to be discreet about his time spent Above. His precious moments with Catherine and his life Below were discrete entities.

**Affect** is usually the word to use if you need a verb. **Effect** is usually the word to use when you need a noun.

“How did this trial affect your work?” Vincent asked. “Did it have an effect on your relationship with Joe?”

**Accept** means to take or receive. **Except** can be a verb that means to exclude. **Except** can also be a preposition that means ‘with the exception of’.

The tunnel community had learned to accept all of Mouse’s quirks, except the young man’s habit of creating inventions that often had disastrous consequences.

### **MASTERING THE FOLLOWING IS A BIT TRICKIER, BUT WELL WORTH THE EFFORT.**

The words **less**, **few**, and **fewer** are opposites of ‘more’, but they are not interchangeable.

**Less** is used to describe things that cannot be counted or empirically measured. **Few** and **fewer** are used for things that can be specifically counted or measured.

Vincent has less romantic experience than Catherine.

To Catherine’s surprise, Joe had left only a few file folders on her desk.

Father has fewer books than the New York Public Library.

**Lie** means to recline or to be situated. **Lay** means to put or place an object. (Of course, lay has yet another meaning in fanfic, depending on the story’s rating.)

“Lie on your bed, Vincent,” Catherine said. “I’ll lay a soft blanket over you.”

However – while Vincent can lie on his bed when he’s ill, it’s also possible that he’ll try to get up, faint, and fall to the floor unconscious, in which case Catherine will have to get help to place – or lay – him on the bed. (Stop snickering! This is a serious grammar lesson!)

And just to make things more confusing, know that there is crossover in the past tense and past participle tense of the verbs.

For **lie**: Vincent lies on the bed. He is lying quietly. Yesterday he lay there. He has often lain there for hours at a time.

For **lay**: Catherine will lay the blanket over him. She gently lays the blanket over him. Yesterday she laid the blanket over him. She has laid the blanket over him many times in the past.

**That** and **which** are not interchangeable. Here’s a rule that’s easy to remember. After a comma, which indicates a pause, use ‘which’.

The small chamber, which appeared to be unused, was now home to a raccoon that bore a striking resemblance to Arthur.

**Between** should only be used in relationship to two objects, entities, points in time, etc. If there are more than two, use other words such as among, amid, within, and so on.

Samantha made sure she returned Father's book to the proper place on the shelf, placing it safely between well-worn copies of *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*.

When you are determining whether to use **who** or **that**, keep these simple guidelines in mind:

**Who** is always used to refer to people.

Vincent is the man who can lift heavy objects.

**That** is always used when you are talking about an object.

Here is the key that fits Vincent's new door.

**That** can also be used when you are talking about a group, class, or type of person.

The crew that cleaned up the big rockslide is having lunch now.

### **HERE ARE EXAMPLES OF ADDITIONAL WORDS THAT ARE OFTEN MISUSED:**

*Please note: They are used correctly in the sample sentences below.*

Catherine knew Father was a man of **principle**, but she often wondered about his **principal** reasons for discouraging her relationship with Vincent.

It didn't **faze** Mouse when Arthur ran off through the tunnels in search of adventure. He understood that it was just a **phase** his pet was going through.

Father repeatedly advised Vincent to be **chaste**, especially when being **chased** by Catherine.

Catherine **inferred** that Father wasn't telling the truth, but when she confronted him about it, he demanded to know what she was **implying**.

When Catherine decided to improve her cooking skills, she asked William if she could **borrow** one of his favorite cookbooks. He was happy to **lend** it to her and to offer some helpful advice.

### **IS IT 'IF I WAS' OR 'IF I WERE'?**

Use **were** if the state of being you are describing is in no way the current reality. This is true whenever a hypothetical situation is expressed (when the word "if" appears).

If Catherine were to just pack up and move Below, Father might throw a fit.

Use **were** for wishful thinking.

Pascal wishes he were just a little bit taller.

These phrases are never correct: I wish I was, I wish it was, he wishes he was, she wishes she was.

## **PUNCTUATION IS NOT OPTIONAL!**

Sentences begin with a capital letter and end with the appropriate form of punctuation. Unless you are ee cummings reincarnated, that rule is not open to interpretation!

The **apostrophe** is used for showing ownership (singular or plural). It is also used to create a contraction. It is not used to make nouns plural.

The books are on the table. Each book's cover has been removed. All the books' covers are in a pile on the lower shelf. The books don't look as appealing without their beautiful covers.

An **ellipsis** (...) consists of three dots/periods in a row. It isn't entirely wrong to add a fourth dot if the ellipsis ends a sentence; however, using three dots is the standard accepted way to do it.

Be very careful about overusing **exclamation marks** in your writing! Save them for when they're absolutely necessary in making a point! Remember, if your scene is highly emotionally charged, it's better to use vibrant words and phrases! This is an especially common error when writing dialogue! Also, don't use them in bunches!!! That's just totally incorrect!!!! So, don't ever do it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

And speaking of **dialogue**, here's a rule that every reader will be grateful you have followed:

"Don't forget," Catherine said, "when you're writing dialogue, you have to follow very clear rules of punctuation."

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "And don't you have to start a new paragraph every time a different speaker says something?"

"Naturally. Otherwise, it gets too confusing for the reader." She shook her head in exasperation.

He nodded emphatically. "I thought so."

If you want to use **parentheses** (and who doesn't?), punctuate the phrase or sentence within the parentheses as if it were standing alone; however, leave off the end punctuation except for question marks and exclamation points. Punctuate the main sentence just as you would if the parenthetical information was not there.

If you are adding information, such as an aside, put the entire sentence – including proper punctuation - within parentheses.

Catherine glared at Lisa (that cheap tramp!) and wondered what she could say to make the dancer understand the effects of her behavior. She thought of Vincent's concern for this woman (his tenderness, his compassion), and she wished she could understand the qualities he saw in her. (She knew no one else could understand it either.) Lisa had never made a completely kind or caring gesture in her entire life (unless it was for her own benefit).

Note: The sample paragraph is an exaggeration to show the various uses of parentheses. When actually writing a story, don't overuse them. If you find you're using parentheses too often, it probably means the rest of your narrative doesn't give sufficient, clearly expressed information.

### **TAKE ONE GERUND AND CALL ME IN THE NEXT CHAPTER**

The overuse and/or the inappropriate use of gerunds are bad habits many beginning (and some veteran) writers get trapped in all too easily. Often, it's simply a case of starting too many sentences with gerunds. It can become so noticeable and distracting that your readers will start looking for them – or worse, counting them! At other times, a gerund will describe actions that are physically impossible for one person to do simultaneously. Either way, it's one of those intrusive things that eventually will pull your readers right out of their enjoyment of your stories.

*Rising to his feet, snuffing out the candle on his desk, and reaching for his cloak, Vincent hurried from his chamber. Feeling Catherine's emotions calling to him urgently through their bond, he raced along the rocky corridor. Reaching the tunnel entrance, he slid open the secret door. Feeling the cold night air on his face, he ran into the park. Hearing Catherine's rapid footsteps as she ran to him, he hurried to her, gathering her to his chest. Looking down at her, he nestled his head against her hair, sighing and pressing his lips to the silky strands, while whispering her name.*

Think about ways you could eliminate nearly all those gerunds and have a far more effectively written paragraph.

### **ARE YOU DANGLING YOUR PARTICIPLES?**

When you dangle your participle, it means your participial phrase is hanging there in your sentence with no proper subject.

Wrong: **Sitting on the park bench, the street lights** all came on at once.

In this example, "sitting on the park bench" modifies the subject of the sentence "the street lights". As written, it sounds like the street lights are sitting on the park bench, which clearly is not happening.

Correct: **Sitting on the park bench, Catherine** saw the street lights come on all at once.

Now it's clear that Catherine is sitting on the park bench.

### **USEFUL REFERENCES FOR WRITERS**

The internet is full of wonderful references for writers, far too many to list here. Most have websites. To get started, you might want to look at some of the following:

The Chicago Book of Style

Writersdigest.com

Dictionary.com

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Thesaurus.com

Guide to Grammar and Style at [andromeda.rutgers.edu](http://andromeda.rutgers.edu)

The Writer's Toolbox/Gotham Writers Workshop at [writingclasses.com](http://writingclasses.com)

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/category/handbook/>

Please remember that it never hurts to ask for help. If you're uncertain, just speak up. Your readers will thank you; you'll learn something valuable for your efforts; and you'll be a better writer for having taken the time and effort.