

Ten Common Grammar Mistakes and How to Prevent Them

1. When to use *its* and *it's* (also *whose/who's*, *your/you're*)

What you need to know here is whether you are showing possession or using a contraction.

If showing possession, use *its*, *whose*, or *your*.

If you want a contraction, use the version with an apostrophe because it designates missing letters—*it's* for *it is*, *who's* for *who is*, *you're* for *you are*.

2. When to capitalize *mother*, *father*, *mom*, *dad*, *aunt*, *uncle*, etc.

What you need to know here is whether *mother* or *father* is used as a name or a title or role.

If used as a name, capitalize *Mother*. As a test, change *mother* to an actual name. If the sentence still makes sense, capitalize the *Mother*.

Mother is at the grocery store.

Agnes is at the grocery store.

Lowercase *mother* if the word is used as a role. Note: in this instance, *mother* is typically preceded by a pronoun.

My mother is at the grocery store.

My Agnes is at the grocery store. (doesn't make sense)

3. Eliminate 99% of qualifying words: *very*, *really*, *pretty*, *little*, etc.

We are so accustomed to using these words that we reach for them habitually. Yet, they add little to the understanding of the sentence. How much is *very* anyway?

I defer to author Mark Twain who said the following about *very*:

"Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it, and the writing will be just as it should be."

4. Avoid the overuse of the word *would*.

Would is used to refer to habitual past behavior, but we can develop a bad habit of using it where the simple past tense makes the sentence much stronger.

She would wake up and drink coffee in the morning.

She woke up and drank coffee in the morning.

5. Use only one space after a period.

I read a blog post titled, "Nothing says over forty like two spaces after a period." Times have changed from the days we used typewriters, and now, only one space is needed between sentences.

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6. **Interchanging *anxious* and *eager*.**

The true definition of *anxious* is: *characterized by extreme uneasiness of mind or brooding fear about some contingency*. The definition of *eager* is: *marked by enthusiastic or impatient desire or interest*. The two words are not interchangeable.

I felt anxious about my upcoming doctor's visit.

I felt eager to go to the zoo.

I felt anxious to go to the zoo.

(Incorrect, unless you fear the tiger is going to eat you.)

7. **Eliminate state of being verbs (*is, am, are, was, were*) wherever possible** and replace with verbs that show action.

She was going to the bank.

She walked/drove/skipped to the bank. (better)

8. **Commas and periods *always* go inside quotation marks** regardless of the context of the sentence. Exclamation marks and question marks may go inside or outside depending on the context of the sentence.

I want the doughnut advertised for "ten cents."

Did Jim say, "I have enough money"?

Jim asked, "Do I have enough money?"

9. **To make numbers plural, add only an *s*. To make numbers possessive, add an *'s*.**

We grew up in the 1950s.

Room 330's garbage can is overflowing.

10. **Use commas wisely.**

The *Chicago Manual of Style* says, "Effective use of the comma involves good judgment, with ease of reading the end in view."

Use a comma before a conjunction connecting two independent clauses.

She went to the café, and she ate a sandwich.

For clarity, use a comma before a conjunction in a list. This is often called the *serial* or *Oxford* comma.

His shirt is yellow, orange, and blue.

She took a picture of her parents, John F. Kennedy, and Lady Byrd Johnson.

(The photo taken was of four people—her mother, father, John F. Kennedy, and Lady Byrd Johnson. Without the serial comma, it looks like the parents are John F. Kennedy, and Lady Byrd Johnson.)