They is Plural

Tips on Punctuation,

Grammar,

and Word Usage

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PREFACE

This handbook does not attempt to deal with *everything* about grammar and punctuation. It focuses instead on the few style problems most people in college and beyond still have.
I know what those problems are because I have been teaching college-level writing for over 40 years, and I have encountered and commented on the same style errors on paper after paper. This handbook is a collection of those problems and my suggestions for correcting them. I hope you find it useful, even enjoyable.

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Here is that paragraph again—this time with appropriate punctuation:

Punctuation helps readers the way traffic signs and signals help drivers: it helps readers find their way with ease. If you don't give your readers the right signals, they become lost, frustrated and resentful; they also quit reading. When punctuation is doing its job, readers don't even notice it consciously, but they respond to it with unconscious gratitude as they easily comprehend what you are telling them.

People somehow know most of the rules of punctuation. There are a few useful rules, though, that many have failed to grasp.

COMMAS

1. Use a comma after an introductory element, especially if it is more than a few words long.

Okay: Tonight let's go cow tipping.
Better: Tonight, let's go cow tipping.
Okay: Even though you've grown up in this city and think you know all there is to know about it you can still be surprised by it.
Better: Even though you've grown up in this city and think you know all there is to know about it, you can still be surprised by it.
Confusing: When he returned home was not what it used to be.
Clear: When he returned, home was not what it used to be.
Confusing: The day before I didn't work.
Clear: The day before, I didn't work.

NOTE: Once you understand the importance of this rule and are able to distinguish between when this comma is essential and when it isn't, go ahead and relax the rule if you prefer your writing to have fewer commas. For example, only two of those four sample sentences ("When he returned home…." and "The day before….") *must* have a comma to help readers grasp it on first reading. HOW ABOUT THIS ONE: After dark fireflies come out in large numbers.

2. Use a comma to separate independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet). (A clause is "independent" if it can stand alone as a sentence.)

Okay: He thinks he's smart and popular but I think he's a fool.
Better: He thinks he's smart and popular, but I think he's a fool.
Okay: It's your turn to do the dishes so get started.
Better: It's your turn to do the dishes, so get started.
Confusing: I know why it happened and how to deal with it is clear.
Clear: I know why it happened, and how to deal with it is clear.
Confusing: I wanted to hit the ball and Mary wanted to catch it.
Clear: I wanted to hit the ball, and Mary wanted to catch it.

NOTE: Confusion is most likely to occur in such sentences when the writer changes subjects from the first clause to the second.

NOTE: Once you understand the importance of this rule and are able to distinguish between when this comma is essential and when it isn't, go ahead and relax the rule if you prefer your writing to have fewer commas.
HOW ABOUT THIS ONE: Mike is bringing Melanie and Mary is bringing Matt.

3. Use commas around a word or clause that is included in a sentence for clarification, transition, or emphasis but isn't essential to the idea. (Some of these also are referred to as "parenthetical expressions" or "nonrestrictive modifiers.")

Confusing: The person who dented my fender whoever he or she is is going to regret it.
Clear: The person who dented my fender, whoever he or she is, is going to regret it.
Confusing: The person who wrote this article who is supposed to be an authority on the subject doesn't know beans about it.
Clear: The person who wrote this article, who is supposed to be an authority on the subject, doesn't know beans about it.
Okay: It's time for lunch. I think I'll skip it though.
Better: It's time for lunch. I think I'll skip it, though.
Okay: Honestly I can't take any more of your blabbering.
Better: Honestly, I can't take any more of your blabbering.

NOTE: Once you understand the importance of this rule and are able to distinguish between when this comma is essential and when it isn't, relax it if you wish.

SPECIAL SITUATION: If you give the name of a person or pet in a sentence, enclose the name in commas if you have only one of that kind of person or pet, and don't enclose the name in commas if you have more than one of that kind.

Example: My dad, Walter, is the best fisherman I know. (You have only one dad.)
Example: My sister**,** Alice, hates me. (You have only one sister, and her name is Alice.)
Example: My sister Alice hates me. (You have more than one sister; this one is Alice.)
Example: My dog Smiley follows me everywhere. (You have more than one dog.)

4. Use commas to separate two or more adjectives that modify the same subject.

Example: I have a blue, 26-inch road bike.
Example: The rutted, curvy, narrow back roads are my favorite places to drive fast.
Example: I bought an early 20th century, mahogany, claw-foot table.

NOTE: Once you understand the importance of this rule and are able to distinguish between when this comma is essential and when it isn't, relax it if you wish.

5. Use commas to indicate "direct address."

Incorrect: Dad I need your help with this.
Correct: Dad, I need your help with this.
Incorrect: Come here Sally.
Correct: Come here, Sally.
Incorrect: Hey Walter, what's up?
Correct: Hey, Walter. What's Up?

UNNECESSARY COMMAS

1. Don't use a comma just because you pause or take a breath. People pause at different places in a sentence for different reasons—sometimes for emphasis, sometimes to orient themselves.

No comma needed: It seems to me, that the world would be a better place without people.
Better: It seems to me that the world would be a better place without people.
No comma needed: I thought about it for a long time, before making my decision.
Better: I thought about it for a long time before making my decision.

2. Don't use a comma before a conjunction that *does not* separate two independent clauses.

No comma needed: Tomorrow will be cloudy, but still hot.
Better: Tomorrow will be cloudy but still hot.
No comma needed: I was neither right, nor wrong.
B*etter*: I was neither right nor wrong.

3. Don't, except in rare circumstances, use a comma before "because."

No comma needed: There are lots of ways to get there, because it's centrally located.
Better: There are lots of ways to get there because it's centrally located.

4. Don't use a comma *and* parentheses; use one or the other.

Confusing punctuation: I think he's good looking, (even if he is my brother).
Clear: I think he's good looking, even if he is my brother.
Clear: I think he's good looking (even if he is my brother).

NOTE: Parentheses clutter a sentence; if commas will do the job, use them instead of parentheses.

5. Don't use a comma to separate an adjective from another adjective that it modifies.

No comma needed: I bought an early, 20th Century table.
Correct: I bought an early 20th Century table. ("Early" modifies "20th C." not "table.")
No comma needed: She bought three, pink pencils.
Correct: She bought three pink pencils. ("Three" modifies "pink pencils" not just "pencils.")
Comma needed: I built a tall, sturdy fence. ("tall" and "sturdy" both modify "fence.")

SEMICOLONS

1. Use semicolons to separate independent clauses that are not already separated by a conjunction.

Incorrect: Don't be nervous, I only want to talk.
Correct: Don't be nervous; I only want to talk.
Incorrect: Wet roads are especially dangerous, they cause lots of accidents.
Correct: Wet roads are especially dangerous; they cause lots of accidents.
Incorrect: It's my turn, I defer to you though.
Correct: It's my turn; I defer to you, though.

2. Use semicolons to separate elements in a series if at least one of those elements contains a comma. (Otherwise just use commas.)

Incorrect: I have a dog, two cats, including the one I adopted today, three parakeets and a lovebird, and two horses.
Correct: I have a dog; two cats, including the one I adopted today; three parakeets; and two horses.
*Correct***:** I have a dog, two cats, three parakeets, and two horses.

COLONS

1. Use a colon to indicate that you're going to give an explanation or a list, usually to answer the anticipated question "What?" or "How?"

Example: If you want to go camping with us, bring the following: hot dogs, mustard, and Darlene.
Example: I have two favorite ways to exercise: weightlifting and swimming.

2. *Do not* use a colon after a verb or a preposition.

Incorrect: If you want to go camping with us, bring: hot dogs, mustard, and Darlene.
Correct: If you want to go camping with us, bring hot dogs, mustard, and Darlene.
Incorrect: When I think of good things to drink, I think of: milk, spring water, and strawberry shakes.
Correct: When I think of good things to drink, I think of milk, spring water, and strawberry shakes.

DASHES

The dash is an informal alternative to commas, colons and parentheses for setting off non-essential information, for making sudden shifts, and for adding emphasis. It is often used as a crutch, though, by people who aren't certain of how to punctuate. Once you know how to use conventional punctuation, and you're in an informal writing situation, try the dash.

Set off non-essential information: The old station wagon—the one my parents passed down to me—still runs as if it's only a few years old.
Make a sudden shift: I thought and thought—then I fell asleep.
Add emphasis: If only he would listen—but he won't.

FRAGMENTS AND RUN-TOGETHERS

Fragments and run-togethers are punctuation problems. A fragment often occurs because the writer used a period when he or she should have used a comma or nothing; a run-together (sometimes referred to as a comma splice) occurs when the writer should have used a period or semicolon instead of a comma.

Fragments

Incorrect: I never spoke to her again. Even though she kept calling and leaving messages.
Correct: I never spoke to her again, even though she kept calling and leaving messages.
Incorrect: Some people irritate me. The worst being the know-it-alls.
Correct: Some people irritate me, the worst being the know-it-alls.
Correct: Some people irritate me; the worst are the know-it-alls.

NOTE: Fragments can be appropriate in *informal* writing, but they should be intentional rather than accidental, and there should be no possibility they will confuse the readers.
Example: I don't care what you say. Or what you think.

Run-togethers

Incorrect: I'm sick of love, aren't you?
Correct: I'm sick of love. Aren't you?
Incorrect: Don't be frightened, I'm here to help you.
Correct: Don't be frightened; I'm here to help you
Correct: Don't be frightened. I'm here to help you.

APOSTROPHES

1. **Use an apostrophe followed by an 's' to show singular possession and an 's' followed by an apostrophe to show plural possession.**
   Singular possession: My dog's fur is golden.
   Plural possession: All six of my dogs' fur is golden.
   Singular possession: My dad's car is white.
   Plural possession: My parents' car is white.

2. **Never use an apostrophe to show non-possessive plural.**
   Incorrect: He has more gun's than sense.
   Correct: He has more guns than sense.

3. **Use an apostrophe to show the contraction of two words.**
   Examples: It's snowing. They're all coming. I haven't done anything wrong.

   NOTE: Sometimes the *contraction* rule for the apostrophe and the *possession* rule for the apostrophe conflict. In those cases, the contraction rule overrides the possession rule.

   Contraction: It's not my fault.
   Possession: My dog doesn't respond when I call its name.
   Contraction: Who's coming to the party?
   Possession: Whose turn is it?

PUNCTUATING QUOTES AND DIALOGUE

1. **Periods and commas *always* go *inside* quotation marks, even if the quotation marks are used for emphasis rather than to quote.**
   Example: "Give me your driver's license," the policeman said.
   Example: I answered, "I don't have it with me."
   Example: He read me my "rights."

2. **Semi-colons and colons *always* go *outside* quotation marks.**
   *Example***:** I like John Lennon's song "Imagine"; it makes me think.
   Example: There is only one explanation for my brother saying I'm "a liar": he's joking.

3. **Question marks and exclamation marks sometimes go inside, sometimes outside quotation marks. They go *inside* when they are part of the question or expression that is being quoted; they go *outside* when they are not part of it.**
   Question mark as part of quote: I asked, "Why don't you want to go?"
   Question mark not part of quote: Why do you treat your mother as if she's a "servant"?
   Exclamation mark as part of quote: "I love this place!" she cried.
   Exclamation mark not part of quote: You are "intolerable"!

A NOTE ON THE USE OF EXCLAMATION MARKS: Use an exclamation mark only with something that is said with force. Do not use an exclamation mark to make what you're writing seem emphatic; it will only make it seem loud.

Examples of appropriate exclamation marks: Nuts! You make me sick! Get out of here!
Examples of <u>in</u>appropriate exclamation marks: I could sleep all morning! Boy, that party sure was fun!

<u>NOTE:</u> If you want your writing to be emphatic, use precise words, and place them when possible at the beginning or end of the sentence.
Not emphatic: This is a really fun party!
Emphatic: This party is delightful.
Not emphatic: As far as being good students, boys aren't as good as girls!
Emphatic: Girls are better students than boys.

GRAMMAR TIPS

MODIFIER CONFUSION

Sometimes when we write, we don't put all the words in the right places, and a word we intended to refer to one thing ends up referring to something else. So instead of writing sense, we've written nonsense.

Confusing: As a soldier, my rifle is always loaded. (This says the rifle is a soldier.)

<u>NOTE:</u> If the subject of the sentence is not identified in the opening phrase or clause, the first noun or pronoun in the main clause is perceived to be the subject. To correct the problem, identify the subject immediately in the main clause, or rewrite the opening phrase or clause to identify the subject.
Correct: As a soldier, I keep my rifle loaded.
Correct: Because I am a soldier, my rifle is always loaded.
Confusing: Floating 3,000 feet above the earth in a parachute, the cows looked like ants.
Correct: As I floated 3,000 feet above the earth in a parachute, the cows looked like ants.
Confusing: I lost my keys, but I found them coming out of the house.
Correct: I lost my keys, but I found them when I was coming out of the house.
Confusing: He bought a truck from a stranger with bald tires. (This says the stranger—not the truck—has the bald tires.)

<u>NOTE:</u> You may know what you mean, but if you don't put your words where they belong, your readers will have the wrong idea, or they'll be confused, or they'll laugh at you.
Correct: He bought a truck with bald tires from a stranger.
Confusing: He caught the fish in a pond that weighed four pounds.
Correct: He caught the fish that weighed four pounds in a pond.
Correct: He caught the four-pound fish in a pond.
Confusing: Jane only likes Michael. (This says Jane doesn't love him; she just likes him. If, however, the writer meant that Michael is the <u>only</u> person Jane likes, he/she should have written, "Jane likes only Michael.")

<u>NOTE:</u> Place the words "just," "only," "almost," "even," "merely," "nearly," "hardly," "scarcely," and "simply" in front of the word they modify.
Confusing: I only bought a car for two thousand dollars.
Correct: I bought a car for only two thousand dollars.
Confusing: I almost have no homework.
Correct: I have almost no homework.

PARALLELISM

One way to make your writing graceful as well as clear is to make the repeated elements in a sentence grammatically parallel. The repeated elements might be two or more clauses, two or more adjectives, two or more adverbs, two or more pronouns, or two or more phrases. (Notice the four parallel phrases in that sentence: "two or more" plus a noun.)

Not parallel: I was tired, frustrated, and wanting to eat.
Parallel: I was tired, frustrated, and hungry. (adjective, adjective, adjective)

Not parallel: In my freshman year, I improved my study skills, my thinking skills, and I became more sociable.
Parallel: In my freshman year, I improved my study skills, my thinking skills, and my social skills. (pronoun, pronoun, pronoun)
Alternative: In my freshman year, I improved my study skills and my thinking skills, and I became more sociable.

Not parallel: Since my accident, I drive more alertly and with caution.
Parallel: Since my accident, I drive more alertly and cautiously. (adverb, adverb)
Parallel: Since my accident, I am more alert and cautious when I drive. (adjective, adjective)

Not parallel: I like fishing as much as I like to hunt.
Parallel: I like fishing as much as I like hunting.
Parallel: I like fishing as much as hunting.
Parallel: I like to fish as much as I like to hunt.

Not parallel: My favorite pastimes are reading, listening to music, and crossword puzzles.
Parallel: My favorite pastimes are reading, listening to music, and working crossword puzzles.

PASSIVE VOICE

In active voice, someone (or something) is doing something; in passive voice, something is being done <u>to</u> someone (or something). Also, passive voice uses some form of the weak "to be" verb (is, was, were).

Passive: He *was told* by his mother to study.
Active: His mother *told* him to study.

Both are clear, but the passive version requires two more words than the active version.

The most troublesome version of passive voice leaves the reader with an unanswered question because it doesn't identify the source of the action.

Passive: Jim *was left* without a ride. (Left by whom?)
Active: Jim's friends *left* him without a ride.
Passive: The children *were led* to expect a reward for their efforts. (Led by whom?)
Active: The parents *led* the children to expect a reward for their efforts.

Sometimes, though, passive voice is necessary or preferable.

Passive (but appropriate): The president was shot this morning by someone in the crowd.
Active: Someone in the crowd shot the president this morning.

<u>NOTE:</u> That the *president* was shot is more significant than that *someone shot* the president. Thus, the passive version is more appropriate.

Passive (but appropriate): The faces of the presidents at Mt. Rushmore are being spray-washed by a company from Germany.
Active: A company from Germany is spray-washing the faces of the presidents at Mt. Rushmore.

NOTE: That the faces are being washed is more significant than who's doing the washing. Thus, the passive version is preferable.

DELAY OF SUBJECT

Similar to passive voice, delay-of-subject creates confusion because it delays identifying the "actor" in the sentence. It is also wordy.

One version of delay-of-subject begins with the word "it" or "it's."
Wordy and a bit confusing: It's not my fault that the wreck happened.
Clear and not wordy: The wreck wasn't my fault.
NOTE: In the confusing version, we don't know what "it's" refers to until we read "wreck." In the clear version, we know immediately that "wreck" is the subject.

Confusing: It took me four hours a night for three weeks to solve the problem.
Clear: The problem took me four hours a night for three weeks to solve.
NOTE: This time, the confusing version delays our understanding for 15 words. In the clear version, we understand immediately that the subject is "problem."

Similar problems can occur when starting a sentence with "there is," "there are," "there were," or "there will."
W*ordy and a bit confusing*: There is a do-rag covering his bald spot.
Better but still wordy: A do-rag is covering his bald spot.
Better: A do-rag covers his bald spot.

WORDS FREQUENTLY MISUSED

A -- Use before words that start with a consonant *sound*, not just words that start with a consonant.
Example: I thought that cloud was a UFO (not *an* UFO).

An -- Use before words that start with a vowel *sound*, not just words that start with a vowel.
Example: Being admired by her is an honor (not *a* honor).

About -- usually unnecessary when expressing approximate amounts, lengths, distances, or time. Just use a number; your readers will realize that it's approximate. (This tip applies also to "almost," "nearly," "approximately," and similar words.)
Example: She called about a dozen times.
Better: She called a dozen times.
Example: We have about fifty miles to go.
Better: We have fifty miles to go.
Example: The lake is about 200 feet from the cabin.
Better: The lake is 200 feet from the cabin.

Accept -- a transitive verb meaning “to receive or agree with,” not to be confused with “except,” which means “to leave out, exclude, or omit.”
Incorrect: I except your proposal.
Correct: I accept your proposal.
(See also "except.")

Affect -- a verb meaning “to have an influence on,” not to be confused with “effect,” which is normally a noun meaning “a result.”
Incorrect: The president’s speech effected me negatively.
Correct: The president’s speech affected me negatively.

NOTE: Affect is used in psychology as a *noun* to refer to a feeling as opposed to an action or thought.
(See also “effect.”)

Alot -- should be *two* words: a lot. Sometimes confused with “allot,” which means “to parcel out, distribute, allocate.”

Alright – not a standard word; should be “all right.”

Always -- seldom accurate; hardly anything is ***always*** the case or ***always*** true.
Use words that express your meaning exactly.
Imprecise: My mother always told me she loved me. (This says the only thing the mother ever said to the daughter is “I love you,” and she said it over and over and over.)
Precise: At least once a day, my mother told me she loved me.
(See also "every" and "never.")

Anxious -- means fearful, or deeply worried. If you mean "eager," say eager.
Incorrect: I was anxious for my friend to arrive.
Correct: I was eager for my friend to arrive.
Correct: I was anxious about my grade in the course.

Anybody, anyone -- singular pronouns; therefore, they take singular verbs and pronouns.
Incorrect: Anybody who wants to fish has to bring their own equipment.
Correct: Anybody who wants to fish has to bring his or her own equipment.

NOTE: If "anybody" in the situation you're writing about refers only to males or only to females, then use the appropriate singular pronoun.
Example: Anyone in this office who makes the boss look bad will lose her job.

NOTE: If using the singular pronouns becomes awkward or uncomfortable, use a plural subject.
Example: All who want to fish have to bring their own equipment.
(See also "everybody" and "everyone.")

Apart/a part – “Apart” means to separate, as in “Take that bicycle apart.”
“A part” refers to a piece of something, as in “I need a part for my bicycle.”

Aspect – refers to the appearance or “look” of something such as a facial feature, a building, or a situation. Often misused to refer to things that aren’t visible.
Incorrect: One aspect of my feeling for you is anxiety.
Correct: One element of my feeling for you is anxiety.
Correct: One aspect of her face is the freckles across her nose.

As to -- archaic and awkward; try "about" or "regarding" instead.
Awkward: I am puzzled as to how this happened.
Clearer: I am puzzled about how this happened.

Awesome -- means "inspiring awe" (a mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired as by authority, genius, great beauty, or might).
Imprecise: This Big Mac is awesome.
Precise: The hurricane was awesome.
Precise: Jesus's miracles were awesome.
(See also "incredible.")

A while – a useless (and annoying) way to express how much time is needed for something to happen or be accomplished.
Useless: It's going to take me a while longer to finish this.
Precise: I'll have it finished in two hours.
Useless: I'll be there in a while.
Precise: I'll be there in 15 minutes or less.
(See also "some time.")

Because -- not needed in conjunction with "reason" and "why" because they all say the same thing.
Wordy: The reason why the pump failed is because a bearing burned out.
Precise: The pump failed because a bearing burned out.
Precise: The reason the pump failed is a burned out bearing.
(See also "due to," "reason," and "why.")

Began, begin, began to, begin to -- often unnecessary and mildly confusing. Also invites the question, Did he (or she/it/they) ever stop?
Confusing: He left work and began driving home. Later that night.... (Doesn't say he ever arrived home.)
Clear: He left work and drove home. Later that night....
(See also "decide" and "start.")

Being that, also **being as how** – awkward and non-standard; try "since" or "because" instead.
Awkward: Being that we've had so much rain, I haven't been able to plow yet.
Better: Because we've had so much rain, I haven't been able to plow yet.

Both -- not needed if you identify the two people or items.
Wordy: The two brothers both bought new bikes.
Precise: The two brothers bought new bikes.
Precise: Both brothers bought new bikes.

Certain -- often vague and, therefore, mildly confusing. (Be precise rather than vague.)
Example: Certain situations in this office need to be changed. (We have no way of knowing what situations this person is referring to.)
Vague: Certain people make me angry.
Precise: Arrogant people make me angry.

Color -- often redundant and, therefore, unnecessary.
Wordy: The sky is a gray color.
Precise: The sky is gray.
(See also "distance," "height," "shape," and "size.")

Completely – one of many words (usually adverbs such as “thoroughly” and “entirely”) that are used for emphasis but aren’t needed because they say something that is already implied. For example, “My house was completely destroyed” should just be “My house was destroyed” because “destroyed” includes the idea of “completely.”

Covered with -- seldom accurate; hardly anything is ever *covered* with something.
Find the verb that expresses your meaning exactly.
Imprecise: My car is covered with bird droppings.
Precise: My car is splattered with bird droppings.
(See also "filled with," "full of.")

Decide, decided, decide to, decided to -- often unnecessary and mildly confusing.
Also invites the question, Did he (or she/it/they) ever *do* it?
Imprecise: He decided to write his report first, then he checked his e-mail. (This doesn’t say he actually did write his report.)
Precise: He wrote his report, then he checked his e-mail.
(See also "began" and "start.")

Describe -- doesn't mean the same as "explain." To "describe" something is to provide sensory information: the stars are white, the air smells of sulfur, the music is loud, this beer is bitter, your hand is cold. To “explain” means to analyze.
Incorrect: Describe that concept.
Correct: Explain that concept.
Correct: Describe her outfit.

Distance -- often redundant and, therefore, unnecessary.
Wordy: The cabin is a distance of five miles from here.
Precise: The cabin is five miles from here.
(See also "color," "height," "shape," and "size.")

Done -- not an advisable synonym for "finished." Food is "done"; tasks, events and situations are "finished."

Down -- often not needed.
Wordy: I sat down and waited.
Precise: I sat and waited.
(See also "up.")

Dream(s) -- best used to refer to mental activity during sleep and not as a synonym for "hope," "plan," "goal," or "ideal," unless you can do so as effectively as Martin Luther King, Jr.
Imprecise: My dream is to be a Peace Corps volunteer.
Precise: My goal is to be a Peace Corps volunteer.

Due to -- not needed in conjunction with "reason" and "why" because they all say the same thing.
Wordy: The reason why the river is flooding is due to all the rain lately.
Precise: The flooding is due to all the rain lately.
Precise: The reason the river is flooding is all the rain lately.
(See also “because,” “reason,” and “why.”)

Each – a singular adjective; therefore it takes a singular verb.
Incorrect: Each of you have to take a turn.
Correct: Each of you has to take a turn.

Each and every – repetitious; one or the other is sufficient.
Wordy: Each and every one of you is responsible for this mess.
Precise: Every one of you is responsible for this mess.
Precise: Each of you is responsible for this mess.

Effect -- normally a noun meaning "a result." Not to be confused with "affect," a verb meaning "to have an influence on."
Incorrect: Your flirting doesn't effect me.
Correct: Your flirting doesn't affect me.
Correct: Your flirting has no effect on me.

NOTE: Effect sometimes is used as a *verb* to express bringing something into existence or producing an outcome.
(See also "affect.")

Else -- needed to complete comparisons involving "than anyone (or anybody)," as in "prettier than anyone," "smarter than anybody," "faster than anyone."
Incorrect: He is taller than anyone in town.
Correct: He is taller than anyone *else* in town.

NOTE: Without "else," that statement says he is taller than even himself since he also lives in the town.
(See also "more than" and "other.")

Elude/elusive – refer to evasion and escape. Sometimes confused with "illusion," but there is no such word as "illude" or "illusive," and "illusion" has nothing to do with escape or evasion.
(See "illusion.")

Emotional -- often used as if it refers only to sadness, but it refers to the entire range of emotion. Thus, to say someone is being "emotional" could mean he or she is delighted or depressed, confident or despondent.
Vague: He is emotional about his parents' divorce.
Precise: He is depressed about his parents' divorce.
Precise: He is happy about his parents' divorce.
(See also "upset.")

Empathy -- often confused with sympathy. To have empathy means to *imagine* what someone else is feeling. To have sympathy means to *know* what someone else is feeling. Thus, if you have had the same experience as someone else, you can sympathize. If you have had *similar* experience, you can only empathize.

Entitled -- means "given a claim or right to something." Not advisable as a synonym for "titled," which means "given a title."
Incorrect: My report is entitled "Global Warming."
Correct: My report is titled "Global Warming."

Ethical –often used incorrectly as if it is synonymous with "ethics." If something is "ethical," it is moral. Thus, to say something is "ethically wrong" is contradictory. If it's "ethical," it's right, not wrong.
Contradictory: This is an ethical problem.
Precise: This is a problem of ethics.
Precise: In this organization, we are expected to behave ethically.
(See also "factual." and "grammatical.")

Every -- use only when accurate; when you exaggerate, you risk losing credibility.
Exaggeration: Every time I trust people, they let me down.
Precise: Often when I trust people, they let me down.
(See also "always" and "never.")

Everybody, everyone -- as with "anybody" and "anyone," these are singular pronouns; therefore, they take singular verbs and pronouns.
Incorrect: Everybody has to fight their own battles.
Correct: Everybody has to fight his or her own battles.
Correct: People have to fight their own battles.
(See also "anybody, anyone.")

Except -- means "to leave out, exclude, omit." Not to be confused with "accept," which means "to receive."
Incorrect: I except your offer.
Correct: I accept your offer.
Correct: I like everyone except Donna.
(See also "accept.")

Fact/factual – "Factual" often is used incorrectly as if it is synonymous with "fact." If something is "factual," it is true. Thus to say something is a "factual error" is contradictory. If it's "factual," it's true (or correct).
Contradictory: Your report contains a factual error.
Precise: Your report contains an error in fact (or "in its facts").

Farther/further – "farther" refers to physical distance, while "further" refers to advancement along a nonphysical dimension.
Example: If you are planning to walk any farther than six blocks, wear comfortable shoes.
Example: Until we are further along in our research, we won't even speculate about the outcome.

Feel -- as in "I feel" -- not to be used as a substitute for actually describing what you feel.
Not descriptive: I feel the grass.
Descriptive: The grass is prickly. Or, The grass pricks my feet.
(See also "hear," "see," "smell," "taste.")

Feel -- not a synonym for think or believe. Use "feel," "felt," and "feeling" only to refer to emotion (or, of course, tactile sensation).
Imprecise: I feel they should stand up for their rights.
Precise: I think (or believe) they should stand up for their rights.

Feel like/felt like -- should be used only to make a physical or emotional comparison, not as a synonym for think or believe.
Imprecise: I felt like it was her fault.
Precise: I thought (or believed) it was her fault.
Precise: Her lips feel like warm silk.
Precise: Lifting that fat baby is like lifting a pig.

Fewer -- not to be confused with "less." "Fewer" is used to denote things that can be counted, while "less" refers to measurable things.
Incorrect: I have less than five days to finish the job.
Correct: I have fewer than five days to finish the job.
Correct: I weigh less than I did a year ago.
(See also "less.")

Filled with, full of -- not to be used casually; hardly ever is anything *filled with* or *full of* something. Find the verb that expresses your meaning exactly.
Imprecise: The pond is full of fish.
Precise: The pond has lots of fish.
(See also "covered with.")

Find oneself, found oneself -- overused and seldom accurate. Try to use this expression only when someone has been lost in some way.
Imprecise: He found himself in a strange bed.
Precise: He realized he was in a strange bed.

First -- often redundant and, therefore, unnecessary, as in "the first time I met him," or "when we were first introduced," or "when I first arrived," or "when I first found out." Avoid wordiness and mild confusion by saying "when I met him," "when we were introduced," "when I arrived," "when I found out."

Future plans -- redundant; all plans are for the future.
Wordy: What are your future plans?
Precise: What are your plans?

Get, got, getting, gotten – a widely used and usually meaningless verb. Try to use it only to refer to the act of receiving, and use more accurate verbs elsewhere.
Example: After I get dressed, I'm going to get in my car, get some gas, get something to eat, get my date and get….
Imprecise: I'm going to get that report finished before I do anything else.
Precise: I'm going to finish that report before I do anything else.
Imprecise: I'm getting a new car.
Precise: I'm buying a new car.

Good -- adjective, not to be confused with the adverb "well."
Incorrect: My car rides good with these new shocks.
Correct: My car rides well with these new shocks.

NOTE: "Good" and "well" are overused and vague and should be replaced with words that are precise.
Better: My car rides smoothly (or smoother) with these new shocks.
Okay: I had a good time at Disney World.
Better: I had fun at Disney World.

Grab/grabbed -- an overused verb that has lost its effectiveness and, therefore, ought to be avoided.
Example: I grabbed my books and my keys, drove down Main and grabbed a left into McDonald's where I grabbed a Biggie Fries and Coke, then I grabbed a right back onto Main, grabbed a cd from the floor, and….

Grammatical -- "grammatical" means the grammar is correct. Thus, to say there are "grammatical errors" in a piece of writing is contradictory. Say "grammar errors" or "errors in grammar" instead of "grammatical errors." Don't say "grammatically correct," either; you'll be saying the same thing twice. Just say "grammatical." For example, "That sentence is grammatical."
Incorrect: "Class," said Miss Dimwittee, "I will tolerate no grammatical errors in this exercise."
Correct: Julie in the front row frowned and said, "Miss Dimwittee, you surely meant to say '*grammar* errors,' didn't you?"
(See also "ethical" and "factual.")

Great -- a widely used and nearly meaningless adjective. You'd best avoid it if you intend to express something accurately.
Imprecise: I had a great time at the party.
Precise: I danced and laughed at the party.

Hand -- often not needed, especially to indicate position or direction.
Wordy: Take the right-hand turn. Look in the left-hand drawer.
Precise: Take the right turn. Look in the left drawer.

Hard -- refers to something that is resistant to pressure or not easily penetrated. Not simply a synonym for "difficult." Thus, a rock is hard; so is a baseball bat or a punch in the jaw. A task, however, is difficult; so are many decisions and situations.

Hear, heard -- (as in "I hear" or "we heard") -- not to be used as a substitute for actually *describing* what was heard. Use a verb that lets your readers *hear* the sound you heard.
Not descriptive: I heard thunder all night.
Descriptive: Thunder rumbled all night.
(See also "feel," "see," "smell," "taste.")

Heart -- an organ that pumps blood. No longer an effective metaphor for love because it's been so overused. A person wanting to express bad love (broken heart) or good love (overflowing heart) should find a fresh way to express it that accurately describes what s/he is feeling.
(See also “soul.”)

Height -- often redundant and, therefore, unnecessary.
Wordy: The height of the ceiling is twelve feet.
Precise: The ceiling is twelve feet. (Or, the room has a twelve-foot ceiling.)
(See also "color" and "distance.")

Hopefully -- an adverb meaning "with hope"; not an accurate alternative for "I hope," "we hope," or "let's hope." Though the word is misused by practically everyone, it is still incorrect.
Incorrect: Hopefully, the sun will shine.
Correct: I hope the sun will shine.
Correct: The boy looked hopefully at his father.

Hung – past tense and past participle of "hang," except when referring to a form of execution, in which case "hanged" is the appropriate word.
Incorrect: He was hung by the neck.
Correct: He was hanged by the neck.

Idea -- as in "the idea of" -- often unnecessary and mildly confusing.
Imprecise: The idea of having to work overtime this weekend upsets me.
Precise: Having to work overtime this weekend upsets me.
(See also "thought.")

Illusion – refers to misperceiving reality; being deceived. It has nothing to do with escape or evasion.
(See “elude/elusive.”)

Incredible -- means "unbelievable," "implausible." Another word that is losing its strength by being used inappropriately.
Misused: This Big Mac is incredible.
Precise: His story about his near-death experience is incredible.
(See also "awesome.")

Inner feelings -- redundant and mildly confusing. All feelings/emotions are “inner.”
Wordy: She didn’t like to reveal her inner feelings.
Precise: She didn’t like to reveal her feelings.

In this day and age -- overused and wordy. Try "today" or "these days."

Irregardless -- no such word. "Regardless" has enough letters as it is.

Issue/issues – Avoid using to refer to problems or disputes.
Incorrect: My parents are having issues again.
Correct: My parents are fighting again.

It -- Try to avoid using "it" unless it refers back to something. Otherwise, you mildly confuse and distract your readers as they read on to find out what "it" refers to.
Confusing: It isn't my fault that the tire is flat.
Precise: The flat tire isn't my fault.

Its/it's -- The confusion is caused by conflicting rules: we show both contraction and possession with an apostrophe. In the few situations in which this conflict occurs, the contraction rule takes precedence over the possession rule. Thus "it's" is the contraction of "it is," while "its" is possessive.
Correct: It’s time to leave.
Correct: This is my cat; its name is Marilyn.
(See also "who's/whose" and "your/you're.)

Just -- an easy word to overuse.
Example: She just knew everything would be okay if she could just find the answer that just kept eluding her.

Keep -- means "to retain," not "to remain in a condition or situation."
Imprecise: I'm going to keep going.
Imprecise: I wish you'd keep quiet.
Precise: Keep the change.

Lay -- *present* tense of a transitive verb meaning "to place or put" something or someone.
(A transitive verb is one that refers to an object.)
Example: Lay the book on the table. (present tense)
Example: He laid the book on the table. (past tense)
Example: He will lay the book on the table. (future tense)
One reason for so many people’s confusion about "lay" is that it is also the *past* tense of the *in*transitive verb "lie," which means "to recline."
Example: I lay in bed ‘til noon yesterday.
Incorrect: I'm going to lay out in the sun.
Correct: I’m going to lie out in the sun.
Correct: I lay out for two hours yesterday, and I'm going to lie out for two hours today.
Correct: I have lain out here for two hours.
There's no need to be confused about "laid," though; just remember that it is the past tense of "to place or put" and is in no way a form of "to recline." And because it’s a transitive verb, it always is followed by an object (e.g., He laid the newspaper (object) on the floor.) Thus, if you say, “I laid in bed all morning,” you are implying that you laid something or someone in that bed.

NOTE: “lying” is the present participle of both “making a false statement” and “reclining.”

Less -- not to be confused with “fewer.” “Less” refers to measurable things, while “fewer” refers to things that can be counted.
Incorrect: I have less clothes than I used to have.
Correct: I have fewer clothes than I used to have.
Correct: I have less open space in my room than I used to have.
(See also "fewer.")

Liable -- means "legally obligated, responsible"; not to be confused with "likely" or "apt."
Incorrect: She's liable to fire me if I come in late once more.
Correct: She's likely to fire me if I come in late once more.
Correct: I’m liable for my children’s welfare.

Lie -- (See “lay.”)

Like -- best used to express similarity; otherwise use "as" or “the way,” or another appropriate word, or in some cases nothing at all.
Imprecise: This looks like fun. The days seem like they're getting longer. This isn't going like I expected it to.
Precise: This looks fun. The days seem longer. This isn't going the way I expected.
Correct: His eyes looked like red lights.

Literally -- means "really, actually, truly," yet people often use it as if it meant "figuratively," which means "not literally true." Thus, to say "This job is literally killing me" is to say that it is, in truth, taking your life. To avoid this confusion, avoid using the word "literally" for emphasis.

Little did I (we, she, he, they) know -- a worn out, useless expression. Avoid it.
Example: Little did I know what would happen later. (Of course not; we never know for certain what's going to happen.)

Look/Looks -- a verb best used to describe an activity of the eyes. Not an effective synonym for "appears" or "seems."
Imprecise: That looks fun.
Precise: That seems fun. Or, That appears fun. Or, That is fun. Or, That should be fun.
Also not an effective synonym for "expression."
Imprecise: She had a sad look.
Precise: She had a sad expression.
Precise: She appeared sad.

Looks -- not an effective synonym for "appearance."
Imprecise: I don't like his looks.
Precise: I don’t like his appearance.

Lose/loose, losing/loosing -- often confused in spelling. To "lose" something, of course, is to misplace it. Something that's "loose" is not restrained or contained.
Incorrect: We will not loose this game.
Correct: We will not lose this game.
Correct: Let that dog loose.

Mad -- means "insane." Try "angry," or "irate," or any of the many more appropriate words for expressing anger.

Made (one's) way -- a vague way to express movement from one place to another. Try "walked," "sauntered," "ran," "crawled," or whatever describes the movement exactly.
Imprecise: I made my way across the park.
Precise: I strolled across the park.

Maybe -- a useful word for expressing uncertainty. If you *are* certain, though, don't say "maybe"; you'll be signaling your readers that you can't be trusted to take a stand.
Imprecise: I think maybe I should reword this.
Precise: I should reword this.

Me (first) -- "Me" is an object, not a subject, and courtesy requires that it come last, not first.
Incorrect: Me and my mom went shopping.
Correct: My mom and I went shopping.
Incorrect: My mom took my sister and I shopping.
Correct: My mom took my sister and me (objects) shopping. (You wouldn't say, My mom took… *I* shopping.) (Would you?)

Media (mass media) -- a *plural* noun that includes radio, television, newspaper, movies, billboards, etc. Yet people often use it as if it's a singular noun that refers only to television. Newspaper is a medium; radio is a medium; television is a medium. All together they are media.
Incorrect: The media has too much graphic violence.
Correct: The media have too much graphic violence.
Correct: The medium of television has too much graphic violence.
Correct: Television has too much graphic violence.
Correct: The media have a powerful influence on people's attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Miracle/miraculous -- refers to something that is unexplainable by the laws of nature, usually supernatural, such as an act of God. Don't use it casually, or you'll diminish its effectiveness and your readers' faith in your ability to express your meaning accurately.
Inaccurate: My winning the lottery was a miracle.
Precise: My winning the lottery was inconceivable.
Precise: Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana.

More than (or "better than") -- needs "else" or "other" for the comparison to make sense.
Incorrect: She's smarter than anyone I know.
Correct: She's smarter than anyone else I know.
Incorrect: *The Big Lebowski* is funnier than any movie I've seen.
Correct: *The Big Lebowski* is funnier than any other movie I've seen.
(See also "else" and "other.")

Most importantly – incorrect. Should be "most important." "Importantly" is an adverb, but the expression calls for an adjective: "important."
Incorrect: Most importantly, I am grateful to my parents.
Correct: Most important, I am grateful to my parents.

Myself – not a substitute for "I" or "me." It is used correctly as the object of a verb or preposition (I bought myself a new suit); it is used for emphasis (I myself was not worried); and it is used to refer to one's normal condition (I am myself again).
Incorrect: The cop told my brother and myself to cross at the corner.
Correct: The cop told my brother and me to cross at the corner.
Incorrect: Myself and my friend got in trouble with a cop yesterday.
Correct: My friend and I got in trouble with a cop yesterday.

Needless to say -- a self-defeating expression. It actually says, "There's no need for me to say what 1'm about to say." To which a reader has every right to say, "So, don't say it. I don't want to hear anything that doesn't need to be said."

Never -- often used when it's not accurate, in which case it loses its effectiveness. Many people use it for emphasis, but an accurate word would be more emphatic.
Imprecise: I am never allowed to do what I want.
Precise: I am seldom allowed to do what I want.
(See also "always.")

Nice -- vague and overused. Use the adjective that exactly expresses your meaning.
Imprecise: They have a nice house.
Precise: They have a comfortable house (or a spacious house).

Nod, nodded -- refers to an action of the head intended to signal agreement or approval; thus, the word "head" and the words "yes" or "agreement" or "approval" aren't needed.
Wordy: When I asked if he broke the pitcher, he nodded his head yes.
Precise: When I asked if he broke the pitcher, he nodded.
(See also "shake.")

One of the (best) (worst) (most) -- seems to say something specific, but in fact it's indefinite. Be as exact as you can.
Imprecise: This is one of the best movies I've ever seen.
Precise: This is one of the five best movies I've seen.

NOTE: Every movie you've seen is "one of the best" movies you've seen.

Only -- needs to be placed next to the word it modifies if you want it to accurately express your meaning.
Confusing: I only have to buy one new tire.
Precise: I have to buy only one new tire.
Also don't let "only" interrupt a verb.
Interrupted: We *were* only *told* what to bring.
Better: We *were told* only what to bring.

Only to -- another worn out expression; avoid it if you want your writing to be fresh.
Imprecise: I dressed up only to find out this is casual day.
Precise: I dressed up, not realizing this is casual day.
Precise: I dressed up, then I found out this is casual day.

Other – needed to complete some comparisons in order for them to make sense.
Incorrect: He's smarter than any guy I know.
Correct: He's smarter than any other guy I know.

NOTE: Without "other," that statement says he is smarter even than himself, since he is one of the guys I know.
(See also "else" and "more than.")

Peculiar -- best used to refer to something that is characteristic of one group or person rather than to something that is odd or strange.
Imprecise: A peculiar (meaning "unusual") odor rose from the ditch.
Precise: An unusual odor rose from the ditch.
Precise: Large ears are peculiar to that family.

Person -- often an unnecessary word. If you refer to someone by name or with the pronoun "he" or "she," your readers realize you're talking about a person.
Wordy: Ed is a person who annoys anyone with whom he spends more than five minutes.
Precise: Ed annoys anyone with whom he spends more than five minutes.

Personally (in my opinion) (I think) (I believe) -- not needed when you are obviously expressing your own opinion. It also makes you sound cautious rather than assertive.
Wordy: Personally, I think we're going about this the wrong way.
Assertive and precise: We're going about this the wrong way.

Priority – means "first in importance." Thus, to say "first priority" or "top priority" is redundant.
Imprecise: My top priority is cutting down that tree.
Precise: My priority is cutting down that tree.

Quite -- as with most adverbs, it should be used only when you can't find an adjective that expresses your meaning exactly. If you have a precise adjective, adding an adverb such as "quite" diminishes its effectiveness.
Wordy: His behavior is quite appalling.
Precise: His behavior is appalling.
Wordy: I'm quite tired.
Precise: I'm exhausted.
(See also "really" and "very.")

Really -- an overused, ineffective, and usually unnecessary adverb. People use it to add emphasis, but a precise adjective is more emphatic, and adding "really" to the adjective only diminishes its effect.
Wordy: I'm really terrified.
Precise: I'm terrified.
Wordy: I'm really furious about this.
Precise: I'm furious about this.
(See also "quite" and "very.")

Reason -- not needed in conjunction with "'because" and "why" because they say the same thing.
Wordy: The reason why I did that is because I was angry.
Precise: The reason I did that was anger.
Precise: I did that because I was angry.
(See also "because," "why," and "due to.")

Remember -- as in "I remember" -- usually not needed when you are clearly referring to something you remember.
Wordy: I remember how nervous I was on our first date.
Precise: I was nervous on our first date.

Retrieve -- means to recover something that was taken from you or which you lost, not just something you want to take ahold of or possess.
Incorrect: I retrieved the broom from the closet.
Correct: I removed the broom from the closet.
Correct: The police retrieved my stolen bicycle.
Correct: I retrieved my fishing lure from the cattails.

Revert -- means to return (go back) to a former way of thinking, behaving, believing, etc.; therefore, to say "revert ***back***" is redundant.

Sat -- sometimes just an unnecessary word.
Examples: I sat and thought. I sat and read. I sat and watched TV.
In these examples, posture is not important, so why mention it?
Precise: I thought. I read. I watched TV.

Sat down -- see "Down."

Scared -- should be used as a verb, not an adjective.
Incorrect: I was so scared I nearly fainted.
Correct: I was so frightened (or afraid, or terrified) I nearly fainted.
Correct: He scared me so badly I nearly fainted.

See/saw -- (as in "I see" or "she saw") -- not to be used as a verb for actually describing what was seen. Use a verb that lets your readers see what you saw.
Not descriptive: I saw the bats chasing mosquitos.
Descriptive: The bats swerved and darted to catch mosquitos.
(See also "feel," "hear," "smell," "taste.")

Seeing as how -- an awkward, non-standard expression. Use "since" or "because" instead.
Imprecise: Seeing as how we're all finished, let's leave.
Precise: Since we're all finished, let's leave.

Seems -- often evasive and vague; don't say something *seems* to be true when in fact it *is* true. Such evasiveness causes readers to lose trust in your ability to communicate exactly.
Wordy: This seems awfully difficult.
Precise: This is difficult.

Sense of -- often just a wordy and inappropriate expression. Try to limit your use of the word "sense" to the actual senses, and avoid using it to refer to thoughts and emotions.
Wordy: His sense of pride kept him honest.
Precise: Pride kept him honest.
Correct: She sensed cold weather approaching.

Shake (or shook) one's head -- refers only to signaling denial, disagreement or disapproval, whereas "nodding" signals admission, agreement or approval. Thus, you don't need to say someone shook his or her head *no*.
Wordy: When I asked Tom if he broke the mower, he shook his head no.
Precise: When I asked Tom if he broke the mower, he shook his head.
(See also "nod.")

Shape -- If you're describing a shape, you don't need to *say* it's a shape.
Wordy: The balloon is an oval shape.
Precise: The balloon is oval.
(See also "color," "distance," "height," "size.")

Share, shared -- implies two or more people having or doing something together; thus, to say "shared together" is redundant.
Wordy: The brothers shared a room together.
Precise: The brothers shared a room.

Size -- If you're describing size, you don't need to say it's a size.
Wordy: The size of that building is enormous.
Precise: That building is enormous.

(See also "color," "distance," "height," “shape.”)

Smell -- as in "I smell" -- not to be used as a substitute for describing what was smelled.
Not descriptive: I smelled the sewer gas.
Descriptive: The sewer gas smelled sulfuric.
(See also "feel," "hear," "see," "taste.")

Smile -- a facial act or feature; thus, to say someone had a smile on his or her face is redundant.
Wordy: He had a smile on his lips.
Precise: He smiled.

So -- shouldn't be used as an adverb; it doesn't say anything specific.
Example: I'm so tired.
How tired is "so" tired? Use "so" only if you're willing to complete the idea that it begins: "I'm so tired I could sleep for twelve hours."
(See also "such.")

Somehow -- vague; shouldn't be used in place of something precise.
Example: Somehow I knew I was too late to help.
The word "somehow" in this sentence tells the readers nothing. Always make yourself clear to your readers; that's your job as the writer. In this case, explain *how* you knew you were too late.
Vague: Somehow I knew the test would be easy.
Precise: I knew the test would be easy because the material was basic.

Some time -- a useless (and annoying) way to express how much time is needed for something to happen or be accomplished.
Useless (and annoying): It’ll be some time before I can give you an answer.
Precise: It’ll be an hour before I can give you an answer.
(See also “a while.”)

Sort of – another vague and relatively useless expression.
Imprecise: I’m sort of angry.
Precise: I’m annoyed. I’m irked. I’m miffed. I’m angry.

Soul -- means so many different things that it is losing its effectiveness. Avoid it unless it is the word you absolutely need and you are sure your readers understand what you mean by it.
Imprecise: I feel it in my soul. I’m sick to my soul. I bared my soul. She’s my soul mate. He has a lot of soul.
Precise: I prayed to God to save my soul.
(See also “heart.”)

Stand up -- usually wordy and redundant; to stand is to put oneself in an upright posture.
Wordy: I stood up and stretched.
Precise: I stood and stretched.
(See also "down.")

Start, started, started to -- often unnecessary and mildly confusing. Also invites the question, Did he (or she/it/they) ever stop?
Imprecise: I went home and started studying.
Precise: I went home and studied.
(See also "began" and "decide.")

Such -- not effective as an adverb; it isn't specific.
Example: We had such a good time.
How good a time is "such" a good time? Use "such" only if you're willing to complete the idea: "We had such a good time that we're going to do it again."

Suppose -- misspelling of supposed, resulting in an improperly formed verb tense.
Incorrect: You're suppose to close the door.
Correct: You're supposed to close the door.
(See also “use.”)

Sympathy -- see "empathy."

Tall -- Often unnecessary when describing or identifying height.
Wordy: She is 5’ 6” tall.
Precise: She is 5’ 6”. Or, She is five-feet-six.
Wordy: The building is 47 stories tall.
Precise: The building has 47 stories.

Taste -- (the flavor of something) -- not to be used as a substitute for actually *describing* the taste.
Not descriptive: I don't like the taste of this peanut butter.
Descriptive: This peanut butter is bitter.
(See also "feel," "hear," "see," "smell.")

Terrible, terribly -- shares the same origin as "terror"; thus, it should be used to refer to situations that cause extreme fear.
Imprecise: This Big Mac is terrible.
Precise: That was a terrible storm.

Than -- To decide whether to use a subjective pronoun (I, he, she) or an objective one (me, him, her) after "than," express in your mind the words of the comparison that are implied rather than stated.
Example: She is still a better student than *I* (am) [not *me* (am)].
Example: This bothers her more than (it bothers) *me* [not (it bothers) *I*].
ALSO: “Than” is sometimes confused with "then." "Then" refers to time, while "than" is for comparison.
Examples: I went to school with her then. She is still a better student than I.

That -- often not needed.
Wordy: He told me that he wanted money.
Precise: He told me he wanted money.

That/which – Use "that" to introduce a clause that identifies what's being talked about.
Example: The bicycle that my sister bought last year is beyond repair.
The clause "that my sister bought last year" identifies the bicycle under consideration.
Use "which" to introduce a clause that adds additional useful information about the subject.
Example: My sister's bicycle, which is bent and twisted and lying in the driveway, is beyond repair.

That/who -- Use "who" when referring to humans and "that" when referring to things.
Incorrect: Anyone that helps me will be my friend for life.
Correct: Anyone who helps me will be my friend for life.
Correct: I try to avoid anything that is annoying.
Correct: I try to avoid anyone who is annoying.

Their, them, they -- grammatically can refer only to *plural* subjects.
Incorrect: A worker who wants to be promoted should know their job inside and out.
Correct: A worker who wants to be promoted should know his or her job inside and out.
Correct: Workers who want to be promoted should know their jobs inside and out.
(See also "anybody, anyone" and "everybody, everyone.")

Their/there/they're -- "Their" is possessive.
Example: Their food is tasty.
"There" refers to place.
Example: Put it there.
"They're" is the contraction of "they are."
Example: They're going to be late if they don't hurry.

Then – See “than.”

There is, there was -- not an adequate substitute for a verb that actually describes the subject.
Not descriptive: There is an old barn on the hill.
Descriptive: An old barn tilts on the hill.

Thing -- an overused and vague word. Use words that express your meaning exactly.
Imprecise: The thing is, we don't know what we're doing.
Precise: The problem is, we don't know what we're doing.
Imprecise: Get that thing out of here.
Precise: Get that stinking pig out of here.

Thought -- as in "the thought of "-- often not what is meant and, therefore, mildly confusing.
Imprecise: The thought of having to work overtime this weekend upsets me.
Precise: Having to work overtime this weekend upsets me.
(See also "idea.")

Thought to myself (herself) (himself) -- redundant; all thinking is done "to oneself."
Wordy: I thought to myself, This is too dangerous.
Precise: I thought, This is too dangerous.

Toward -- preferred over "towards" (in the USA). Also true for backward(s), foreward(s), upward(s), downward(s).

Tragedy, tragic -- commonly misused to refer to any unusually regrettable death or loss. The traditional definition of "tragic" relates to "tragic heroes" in Greek drama who brought about their own downfall because of a flaw in their character. Thus, a tragedy is a fall from prominence that is caused by a weakness in an otherwise strong person. Richard Nixon is a modern example.
Incorrect: Her accidental death is a tragedy.
Correct: Her accidental death is distressing.

Try and – a misuse of the expression "try to." The result is usually nonsense, though we don't hear it as such because we're so accustomed to the misuse.
Incorrect: I'm going to try and leave work early today.
Correct: I'm going to try to leave work early today.

Type of person -- as in "She's the type of person who" -- a wordy expression, and to some ears an offensive one. It's wordy because we know from the context that the subject is a person, so we don't need "of person." And we don't need "the type" because whether she's a type is not the issue. In addition, many of us object to "typing" people needlessly, preferring to recognize each person's uniqueness.
Wordy: Dexter is the type of person who succeeds at whatever he does.
Precise: Dexter succeeds at whatever he does.

Unique -- means distinctive, individual, one-of-a-kind. We are fond of saying that we are each unique, yet we often use the word "unique" in ways that suggest we don't believe it.
Examples: He's the most unique person I know. She's really unique.
There are no degrees of uniqueness. If you are inclined to say something such as "she's really unique," ask yourself what you mean. Perhaps you mean she's a nonconformist. Always seek the words that express your meaning exactly.

Up -- often an unnecessary word, as in "start up" or "listen up."
Wordy: Start up the car.
Precise: Start the car.
(See also "stand up.")

Upset -- a vague, ambiguous word because it is used sometimes to express anger, sometimes sadness, sometimes fear. If you want to be understood, use words that express your meaning exactly.
Imprecise: I was upset after she left me.
Precise: I was sad after she left me.

Use -- misspelling of "used," resulting in an improperly formed verb tense.
Incorrect: I use to walk a lot.
Correct: I used to walk a lot.
(See also “suppose.”)

Used to -- sometimes just unnecessary words because they repeat a concept that's expressed in other words.
Wordy: I used to walk a lot when I was a child.
Precise: I walked a lot when I was a child.
Wordy: I used to be lonely until I met you.
Precise: I was lonely until I met you.

Very – an overused and, therefore, useless adverb. You'll seldom need an adverb if you use adjectives that express your meaning exactly. When you do need an adverb, though, find a more precise one than "very."
Wordy: She's really a very pretty girl.
Precise: She's pretty. Or, She’s lovely. Or, She’s beautiful.
(See also “quite” and "really.")

Where -- refers to place, not situation.
Incorrect: We were in a situation where we didn't know what to do.
Correct: We were in a situation in which we didn't know what to do.
Better: We didn’t know what to do in that situation.

Whether or not -- "or not" is implied in "whether" and, therefore, usually not needed.
Wordy: I don't know whether or not to attend the game tonight.
Precise: I don't know whether to attend the game tonight.

Which/that -- see "that/which."

Who/that -- see "that/who."

Who/whom -- Use "who" to refer to a person who is the subject of a sentence.
Example: Tommy is the contestant who caught the biggest fish.
Use "whom" to refer to a person who is the object of a verb or preposition.
Examples: Whom are you expecting? To whom were you talking?

NOTE: One of the forgiving features of the English language is that it offers alternatives for many situations. In the case of "who" and "whom," for example, if you can't figure out which is correct, or if you're uncomfortable with "whom," find another way to say what you mean.
Example: The guy to whom I sold my car wrecked it a week later. Or, The guy who bought my car wrecked it a week later.

Who's/whose -- "Who's" is the contraction of "who is."
Example: Who's going with me?
"Whose" is possessive.
Example: Whose turn is it?
(See also "its/it's" and "your/you're.")

Why -- see "because" and "due to."

Words can't express -- an expression you should avoid, along with its variations: "I can't begin to explain" and "I can't tell you." Readers come to you for information; the last statement they want to hear from you is "Words can't express" or some other admission that you're too lazy to *try* to make yourself clear. The truth is that words are never equal to experience, but the right words used well can come close. The writer's job is to find those words.
Imprecise: Words can’t express how happy I was when I found my cat.
Precise: I was so happy when I found my cat that I didn’t put him down for an hour.

Would -- often indirect and wordy and, therefore, ineffective. Whenever possible, be direct; you'll use fewer words, and your meaning will be unmistakable.
Imprecise: We would appreciate it if you would let us know when it would be convenient for us to deliver your furniture.
Precise: When should we deliver your furniture?

Your/you're -- "Your" is possessive.
Example: Your clothes are dirty.
"You're" is the contraction of "you are."
Example: You're the reason I came here tonight.
(See also "its/it's" and "who's/whose.")

CLICHES

Clichés are worn-out expressions such as

- "I feel like hell"…
- "as cute as a button"…
- "slept like a log"…
- "raining cats and dogs"…
- "beating a dead horse."

All clichés were fresh similes and metaphors at one time, but they have been used so much that they are no longer effective. Thus, you should avoid them in your writing.

The above examples are "old" clichés, but newer ones are equally ineffective:

- "bottom line"
- "think outside the box"
- "raise the bar"
- "stay the course"
- "step up to the plate."

Good writing is fresh; it keeps the readers alert. Clichés lull them to sleep or allow their minds to wander from what you're saying. But the best reason for not using a cliché to describe or explain something is that it doesn't show the way *you* saw it; rather, it describes how the person who created that expression (before it was a cliché) saw it. Be yourself. Look, listen, feel, smell, taste, and imagine with an open mind, not one filled with other people's words and expressions.

Good advice: If you've heard it, avoid using it.

WORDINESS

Some people believe that if they use extra words when they write, their writing will be more impressive. But the opposite is true: the fewer word you use, the stronger the impression. The key, of course, is to use the *right* words.

Wordy: He's really a very generous kind of guy.
Precise: He's generous.

Readers who have to deal with unnecessary words become mentally weary and frustrated. Reading should be invigorating, not tiresome.