

Twelve Frequent Errors in English Expression

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References are to AU-1 (*Air University Style and Author Guide* [April 2005])

So why does this matter? When you write something, you are trying to communicate. When your product is marred by errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, you (inadvertently) communicate an attitude of negligence and of inattention to detail. AU-1 is an excellent guide. See the Index (pp. 183-196.)

1. Using an apostrophe to make plurals (e.g., “the Smith’s” rather than “the Smiths.”) See 3.2.1.
2. Placing periods and commas outside quotation marks or placing colons or semi-colons inside quotation marks. (Placement of question marks and exclamation points depends upon usage.) See 3.2.14.
3. Misunderstanding the semicolon, principally by using it before conjunctive adverbs (such as *however*) or using it incorrectly after salutations. See 3.2.15.
4. Using commas incorrectly: “John went to the store, he bought a loaf of bread.” Use a period (3.2.11), a semicolon (3.2.15), or a conjunction preceded by a comma (3.2.5 and 3.2.16) instead of only a comma (= “comma splice”) here.
5. Dividing words somewhere—rather than at the syllable. (Correlatively: Do not hyphenate such compounds as “highly regarded catcher.” See 3.2.8 and 4.2.52.)
6. Very common error: Failing to use the past perfect tense (e.g., saying, “If George *would* have been here, everything *would* have been all right” instead of the correct version: “If George **had been** here, everything would have been all right.”).
7. Misunderstanding ellipsis marks. (See 3.2.7.)
8. Using dangling modifiers--e.g., “Running up the hill, my lungs began to burn.” Your lungs can run? See 3.1.4. Coincidentally, use dashes properly. See 3.2.6.
9. Misunderstanding the logic of an outline. If you divide anything, it must have at least TWO parts—even in “bullet” constructions.
10. Misspellings. Watch out for homonyms (*principal* and *principle*, *affect* and *effect* [by the way, the noun *effect* can become a verb as in “to effect a change”], *it’s* and *its*). Very common errors are misspellings of these: *all right*, *supersede*, *privilege*, *irresistible*, *canceled* (preferable to the English version *cancelled* [because we won the Revolutionary War]), *siege*, *seize*, *accommodate*, *benefited*, *quizzes*, *liquefy*, and *fiery*.
11. Setting off display or block material with quotation marks. (See 5.4.)
12. Last: Using the word *quote* when you mean *quotation*, or using the word *impacted* (which is a serious dental malady) when you mean *affected* or *influenced*; or saying, “Hopefully, it will rain” when, in fact, rain can’t be hopeful—you hope it will rain; or, unless you work in a restaurant, saying you’re “waiting on” someone when you mean “waiting for.” How about: “Harry only borrowed a dollar”? Ever walk by a house that had a sign that said, “The Jones”? Who do you suppose THE JONES is? So: “Harry borrowed only a dollar” and “The Joneses” or “the Joneses’ house.”