

Administrative Professionals Network
2018 Conference
Case Western Reserve University

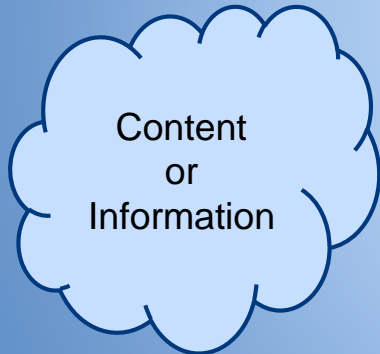
Business and Professional Writing

Rob Rowan, Presenter

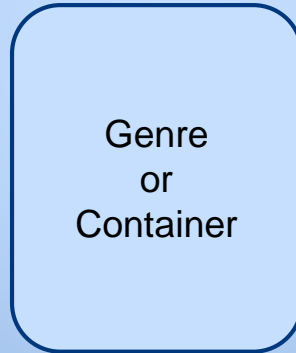
May 7, 2018

How communication works

These are the three main ingredients.
Each ingredient can be simple or very complex.



Or knowledge, ideas, facts,
body, feelings, material,
images, sounds...



Or documents, papers,
texts, instruments,
forms, writings...



Or readers, viewers,
listeners, recipients,
users, fans, followers...

Section A:

Three Goals of Workplace Writing

These are not our only goals, but they are some of the most important ones. They address our needs and the needs of the reader (our audience).

A. Be Understood

B. Keep the Reader's Trust

C. Help the Reader Get Things Done

Exercise 1: Audiences

Write a list of all of the different workplace audiences (types of readers) you communicate with on at least an occasional basis.

Categorize or group them as you see fit. We will use this list again later today.

Goal 1: Be Understood

This is our primary goal. It is always in play.

- Grammar and punctuation errors happen to everyone, including seasoned professionals. Eliminating these types of errors completely from your writing is possible but very labor-intensive; making sure they don't get in the way of being understood is a more practical goal.
- Re-read what you've written. What makes sense in our head doesn't always make sense on the page. It's not reasonable to expect perfection in your first draft—even experienced, expert writers produce multiple drafts and revisions of their documents.
- Jargon, slang, acronyms, text-speak, idioms, cryptic abbreviations, and specialist language can all get in the way of being understood. We sometimes act as gatekeepers for our in-group without realizing it, but some of our readers are on the outside. [Your jargon? Exercise 2]

Exercise 2: Jargon

Write a list of the abbreviations, acronyms, jargon, or other specialized language you use regularly in emails.

Review your list of reader types and think about who's likely to not know (or maybe not remember) some of this specialized language. Share some of the problem combos with us.

Goal 1: Be Understood (cont'd)

This is our primary goal. It is always in play.

- Watch out for vague pronouns or unclear references, e.g. “I want it to go well.” Do we know what “it” is? When was the last time you explicitly named the original subject? Have you mentioned other subjects in between then and now that could be (mis)interpreted as “it”?
- Consider simplifying your complex sentences. We’ve all been trained to think that complex sentences are smart sentences, but good writing uses a mix of complex and simple sentences.
- Think about whether your sentences or phrasing could be interpreted more than one way.
“Let’s have grandma for dinner”; “You can’t water this plant too much”
- Spelling and grammar checkers are helpful, but they’re not always right.

Goal 2: Keep the Reader's Trust

By default, our readers will usually trust us as reliable sources of information. It's up to us to maintain that trust.

- Avoid commonly misused or mixed-up words (see the list in your packet).
- Verify important facts and data. Dates and times are especially common sources of errors (but not the only ones).
- Triple-check the spelling of people's names. People are very attached to their own names. Spelling someone's name wrong can be harmless, but it can also make the person feel insulted, demeaned, or simply not valued.

Goal 3: Help the Reader Get Things Done

Every workplace is a complex system (sometimes called an activity system) of people trying to get things done.

Our work supports the work of others.
The work of others supports our work.

Most of our work is information-related, which has to be transmitted through communication (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Exercise 3: Getting Things Done

Our workplaces are complex systems of people trying to get things done.

What are your readers trying to get done?

How does your writing support those efforts?

(Bonus question) How does the writing of others help you get things done?

Goal 3: Help the Reader Get Things Done (cont'd)

- Think about your document from the reader's point of view. What will the reader do with the document and its information?
 - o Decision-making tool
 - o Background information
 - o Action/response trigger
 - o Data collection tool
 - o A combination of the above, or something else
- Write your own follow-up questions to the document, and then answer them (minus the questions) in the document.
- The challenge: our readers may not know how to explain what they're trying to accomplish. This is why it's so beneficial for us to understand our workplace as an interconnected system of people trying to get things done.

Section B:

Workplace Writing Genres and Techniques

Our readers need information (data plus context).
They will use this information to get things done.

We can please our readers by gathering, organizing, and
presenting information in a way they can easily engage with.

Our readers may expect the info to appear in a customary or
standard genre, such as a business letter or memo.

What's a Genre?

A genre is any instance of communication.

Some genres are standardized, like a business card.

Some genres are freeform, like a conversation or notes.

Many workplace genres look the way they do by convention and expectation (soft rules) rather than hard rules.

All genres have attributes that can be researched and understood, and then adjusted to suit our needs. This reduces the importance of memorizing tons of rules.

Genres are containers for info

We pack info into many different containers

- Books, magazines, newspapers, TV, film
- Songs, poems, and stories
- Photographs, drawings, and animation
- Internet sites and social media
- Forms, reports, spreadsheets, and other workplace genres

What's a Genre? (cont'd)

Different genres have different expectations, such as formality level, quality of writing, complexity of content, internal organization, acceptable fonts and typefaces, use of images, or materials the document itself is made of.

Why does this matter?

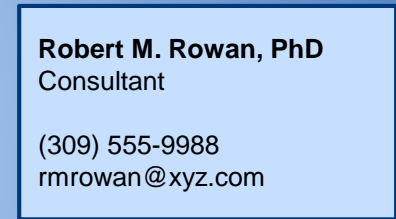
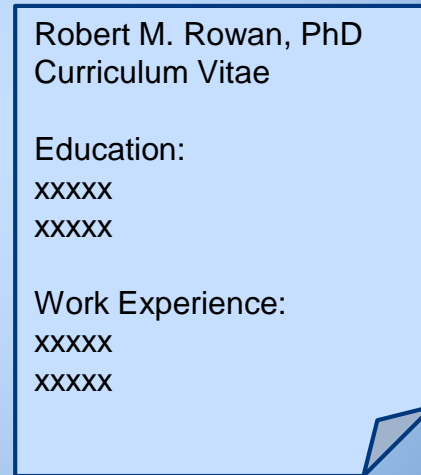
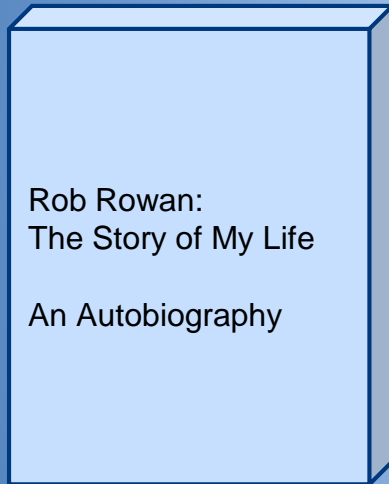
Once we understand why a genre works the way it does, we can use it more effectively and bend its rules (when needed) to achieve our communication goals.

Suitability

Genres contain different volumes or types of content.

Sample content: Rob Rowan

What does the reader want (generally) from each of these genres?



If I have a lot to say, I might not be able to put it all in the genre I've chosen.
Even if it does fit, it might not be the best way of delivering that information to the reader.

Common Workplace Genres

Emails

Business cards

Spreadsheets

Resumes

Business letters

Memos

Time sheets

Progress reports

Instructions

Documentation

Purchase orders

Invoices

Proposals

Evaluations

Brochures

Accounting ledgers

Surveys

Presentations

Web pages

...and many more

Genre and Writing Research

- Grammar and Style Books
- The OWL at Purdue (owl.english.purdue.edu)
- Case Western's Editorial Style Guide
(<https://case.edu/umc/communications/editorial-writing/editorial-style-guide>)
- Web search (adjust your terms for different results)
 - Business letter
 - Business letter formats
 - Business letter tips
 - Cover letter
 - How to write a business letter

Genres in 2018

Even though it's the Digital Age, we still print things—a lot.

Assume that the reader may need to print the document.

Format most documents to fit on an 8.5 x 11-inch page and to look good in black and white.

Light colors and tiny text can be hard to read, so they usually don't work well in print.

Email Attributes

- Recipient email address(es)
- Email date (happens automatically)
- Sender email (happens automatically)
- Subject line and its importance
- Body (Like a letter; not like a letter)
- Formality level (no text-speak)
- Signature block?
- Attaching files

Email

Dear Faculty and Graduate TAs,

The English department has changed its process for assigning teaching schedules to Graduate Teaching Assistants. Starting January 5, 2015, the new process will be a rolling system that alphabetically divides TAs into four groups, with each group getting preference for teaching times once every two years. We are making these changes based on feedback from administrative staff and graduate students worried about the fairness of the system and balancing teaching with coursework.

If you have any questions, please contact the assistant department head, Dr. John Locke.

All the best,

Elizabeth Hamilton

Business Letter Attributes

- Sender's mailing address
- Letter date
- Recipient's mailing address
- Greeting or salutation
- Body
- Formality level
- Signature block
- End notations

Business Letter

March 6, 2009

Angela Property
220 Corporation Way
Somewhereville, VA 22590

Dear Ms. Property:

I hope that you are doing well. My name is Lydia Lease, and I am an attorney at Sell Your House, Inc. I am writing in regards to a parcel of land located at 225 Parcel St., Richmond, VA. My client, Mrs. Tabitha Land, is running into some difficulties in selling her property that is apparently still under lease by your organization.

This parcel of land (100 ft by 300 ft) is located at the back of my client's property. According to the city records, the lease was initiated in September, 2001, and never terminated. After calling your lease office, it appears that you no longer make use of this property. In order for my client to be able to sell her property, the lease must be cleared. This parcel of land is still under your organization's name. I have attached the documents describing the lease and ask that you clear your name from this property as soon as possible.

My client is wishing to put her property on the market by April, 2009. In order to do so, this parcel of land must be cleared from your organization's hold. I have enclosed the city's documents concerning the ownership of this land as well as termination documents for your use. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (123) 456-7890. I look forward to working with you to resolve this matter.

Sincerely,

Annotations: A vertical double-headed arrow on the right side indicates a 2" margin. A horizontal arrow points to the date line with the label "1 line". Horizontal arrows point to the address and salutation lines, each labeled "1 line". A horizontal arrow points to the first paragraph with the label "1 line". A horizontal arrow points to the second paragraph with the label "1 line". A horizontal arrow points to the closing line with the label "1 line". A horizontal arrow points to the signature line with the label "4 lines". A vertical arrow on the left side indicates "Justify Left". A horizontal arrow on the right side indicates a 1" margin.

Memo Attributes

- Header (To, From, Date, Subject)
- Body
- Formality level

Memo

TO: Kelly Anderson, Marketing Executive

FROM: Jonathon Fitzgerald, Market Research Assistant

DATE: June 14, 2007

SUBJECT: Fall Clothes Line Promotion

Market research and analysis show that the proposed advertising media for the new fall lines need to be reprioritized and changed. Findings from focus groups and surveys have made it apparent that we need to update our advertising efforts to align them with the styles and trends of young adults today. No longer are young adults interested in sitcoms as they watch reality television shows. Also, it has become increasingly important to use the internet as a tool to communicate with our target audience to show our dominance in the clothing industry.

Internet Advertising

XYZ Company needs to focus advertising on internet sites that appeal to young people. According to surveys, 72% of

Organizing

Help the reader understand how to read your document and how to find the specific information they need.

- First, frontload your doc by briefly describing its information and how it's organized. An introductory paragraph is a great place to do this.
- Index or Table of Contents
- Numbering
- Headers
- Paragraphs

Don't be stingy with headers and paragraphs. If your doc looks like a wall of text, it needs some breathing room!

Organizing (cont'd)

Organize your long or information-dense documents in a logical way.

- Instructions or procedures? Sequential.
- Event or other planning? Chronological.
- Decision-making? Priority or significance, with the most important (or relevant or timely) material first. Emphasize questions or decision points.
- Explanatory or background material? Categorize.

Make your organizational choices clear and obvious.
It's not a puzzle for the reader to solve.

Improving Your Writing

Making small, incremental improvements to your writing is good. Focus on a specific issue so you don't feel overwhelmed.

1. Pick 2 or 3 items you've written in the past (items you didn't proofread heavily).
2. Read the items carefully and make a list of the types of errors or problems you find.
3. Divide your list into categories (such as punctuation, spelling, grammar errors, word choices, confusing phrasing, ambiguous meaning, and so forth).
4. Select the problem category with the highest tally. Make that your focus for the next week.

Improving Your Writing (cont'd)

5. The next time you write, set aside time to review and revise the item. Pay extra attention to your problem category. Fix other errors as you see them too, of course. With practice, problems in this category will either decrease naturally or become easier to spot.
6. When you're satisfied with your progress, move to the next problem category on your list.
7. Occasionally pick a few new docs to analyze for an updated list of problem categories.

Business and Professional Writing

Rob Rowan, Presenter

Presentation topics:

- A. Goals of workplace writing
- B. Workplace writing genres and techniques

Section A: Three Goals of Workplace Writing

1. Be understood
2. Keep the reader's trust
3. Help the reader get things done

These goals focus on the needs of the reader. It's important to have a clear picture of who your audiences (your readers) are—this includes who they are in relation to you and who they are in relation to your workplace. The three goals are cumulative: 1 helps with 2, and 1 & 2 help with 3.

[Who are your audiences? Exercise 1]

1. Be Understood

This is our primary goal. It is always in play.

- Grammar and punctuation errors happen to everyone, including seasoned professionals. Eliminating these types of errors completely from your writing is possible but very labor-intensive; making sure they don't get in the way of being understood is a more practical goal.
- Re-read what you've written. What makes sense in our head doesn't always make sense on the page. It's not reasonable to expect perfection in your first draft—even experienced, expert writers produce multiple drafts and revisions of their documents.
- Jargon, slang, acronyms, text-speak, idioms, cryptic abbreviations, and specialist language can all get in the way of being understood. We sometimes act as gatekeepers for our in-group without realizing it, but some of our readers are on the outside. [Your jargon? Exercise 2]
- Watch out for vague pronouns or unclear references, e.g. "I want it to go well." Do we know what "it" is? When was the last time you explicitly named the original subject? Have you mentioned other subjects in between then and now that could be (mis)interpreted as "it"?
- Consider simplifying your complex sentences. We've all been trained to think that complex sentences are smart sentences, but good writing uses a mix of complex and simple sentences.
- Think about whether your sentences or phrasing could be interpreted more than one way.
"Let's have grandma for dinner"; "You can't water this plant too much"
- The spell checker and grammar checker can be helpful, but they're not always right.

2. Keep the Reader's Trust

By default, our readers will usually trust us as reliable sources of information. It's up to us to maintain that trust.

- Avoid commonly misused or mixed-up words (see the list at the end of this document).
- Verify important facts and data. Dates and times are especially common sources of errors (but not the only ones).
- Triple-check the spelling of people's names. People are very attached to their own names. Spelling someone's name wrong can be harmless, but it can also make the person feel insulted, demeaned, or simply not valued.

3. Help the Reader Get Things Done

Every workplace is a complex system of people trying to get things done. Our work supports the work of others; the work of others supports our work. Most of our work is information-related, which has to be transmitted through communication (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

[What are your readers trying to get done? Exercise 3]

- Think about your document from the reader's point of view. What will the reader do with the document and its information?
 - Decision-making tool
 - Background information
 - Action/response trigger
 - Data collection tool
 - A combination of the above, or something else
- Write your own follow-up questions to the document, and then answer them (minus the questions) in the document.

Section B: Workplace Writing Genres and Techniques

Our readers need information (which is more than just data). They will use this information to get things done. We can please our readers by providing the information they require, presented and organized in a way that they can easily engage with. Our readers may expect the info to appear in a customary or standard format (a genre), such as a business letter or resume or memo.

What's a genre?

Any instance of communication is a genre. It can be standardized, like a business card, or freeform, like notes in a meeting. Many genres that show up in the workplace look and behave the way they do by convention and expectation (soft rules) rather than because of hard rules. Different genres have different expectations, including (but not limited to) formality level, quality of writing, simplicity or complexity of content, internal organization, acceptable fonts and typefaces, use of images, or materials the document itself is made of.

The key benefit of thinking about genres and workplace writing is that all genres have attributes that can be researched and understood, and then adjusted to suit our needs. Memorizing huge piles of rules becomes much less important this way.

Digital vs. print documents

We still print things—a lot. For most documents, it's best to assume that the reader may want to print it out at some point. This means it's best to format documents for an 8.5 x 11-inch page and to look good in black and white. Light colors and tiny text usually don't work well in print.

A few workplace genres

Email

- Recipient email address(es)
- Email date (happens automatically)
- Sender email (happens automatically)
- Subject line and its importance
- Body (Like a letter; not like a letter)
- Formality level (no text-speak)
- Signature block?

Business letters

- Sender's mailing address
- Letter date
- Recipient's mailing address
- Greeting or salutation
- Body
- Formality level
- Signature block
- End notations

Memos

- Header (To, From, Date, Subject)
- Body
- Formality level

Organize your thoughts and your words

Use these tools to help the reader understand how to read your document and how to find the specific information they need without reading the whole document.

- First, frontload your doc by briefly describing its information and how it's organized
- Index or Table of Contents
- Headers
- Numbering
- Paragraphs

Organize your long or information-dense documents in a logical way.

- Instructions or procedures? Sequential.
- Event or other planning? Chronological.
- Decision-making? Priority or significance, with the most important (or relevant or timely) material first. Emphasize questions or decision points.
- Explanatory or background material? Categorize.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Write a list of all of the different workplace audiences (types of readers) you communicate with on at least an occasional basis. Categorize or group them as you see fit. We will use this list again later today.

Exercise 2: Write a list of the abbreviations and acronyms you use regularly in emails. Review your list of reader types and think about who’s likely to not know (or maybe not remember) some of these acronyms or abbreviations and share some of the problem combos with us.

Exercise 3: Our workplaces are complex systems of people trying to get things done. What are your readers trying to get done? How does your writing support those efforts?

Supplemental Material

File naming conventions

If you create a lot of documents, it's good to develop a standardized method for naming them so that the file name itself explains the document's contents and purpose. This helps when you're searching or sorting your documents, and also helps other people who might receive documents from you or who need to work with the documents you've made. Consistency is the most important thing here, or a file naming convention will quickly become less useful.

I usually use a pattern like this: Last name, course number (if it's for a specific course), underscore, brief description of the file in Title Case, dash, semester and year (if applicable).

Rowan398_CourseSyllabus-Fall17

Rowan_APNBusinessWritingPresentation1

Document versioning

If you update a document frequently (especially if you share those updates with others), it's helpful to show when it was last updated. Use a date, a decimal number, or some other method. Just be sure to change the version each time you make changes to the document!

In my class documents, I put "Last Updated ##/##/##" at or near the top. You can see an example of this in the "Commonly Misused Words and Phrases" document.

Outside resources

The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue: owl.english.purdue.edu

Some other schools are starting to offer this kind of publicly available information too, but Purdue's OWL is one of the best and most comprehensive.

A professional writing handbook of your choice. Try the library, our bookstore, or Amazon. Searching the web through Google or some other search engine. Be specific in your search strings for best results. Try different combinations until you find what you're looking for. Each of these samples below will yield overlapping but different results.

- Grammar guide
- Grammar handbook
- Writing handbook
- Workplace writing handbook
- Workplace communication for administrative professionals

Improving your writing

Improving your writing is not a magic-button event. It happens gradually over time. Don't feel like you have to quickly and radically alter your writing style in order to progress. Making small, incremental improvements to your writing is good. The best place to start is by analyzing your own writing and selecting a specific area to work on.

1. Pick 2 or 3 items you've written in the past (items you didn't proofread heavily).
2. Read the items carefully and make a list of the types of errors or problems you find.
3. Divide your list into categories (such as punctuation, spelling, grammar errors, word choices, confusing phrasing, ambiguous meaning, and so forth).
4. Select the problem category with the highest tally. Make that your focus for the next week.
5. The next time you write, set aside time to review and revise the item. Pay extra attention to your problem category. Fix other errors as you see them too, of course. With practice, problems in this category will either decrease naturally or become easier to spot.
6. When you're satisfied with your progress, move to the next problem category on your list.
7. Occasionally pick a few new docs to analyze for an updated list of problem categories.

Commonly Misused Words and Phrases

This list includes words and phrases that are often confused with each other or used improperly. Some definitions borrowed or paraphrased from Dictionary.com.

Problem Words

Accept/Except

Accept – to agree or consent to (He accepted her apology.); to take or receive something offered (She accepted the award graciously.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Except – with the exclusion of (Everyone is ready to go except Mary.)

Advice/Advise

Advice – a noun referring to an opinion or suggestion for action (She gave him some good advice.)

Advise – a verb meaning to give someone advice (She advised him not to stick his finger in there.)

Affect/Effect

Affect – to act upon something or cause something to change (The sad song affected him deeply.)

Effect – a result, whether physical, emotional, or perceptual (The sad song had the effect of making him melancholy.) Or (Her repeated complaints about poor working conditions had no effect.)

Aisle/Isle/I'll

Aisle – a walkway between shelves or chairs (He pushed his shopping cart down the aisle.)

Isle – another word for island (Ireland is sometimes called the Emerald Isle.)

I'll – a contraction of “I will” (I'll be home in an hour.)

Alright/All right

Alright – a non-standard variation of all right

All right – an adverb phrase meaning satisfactorily or indicating consent (Her studies are coming along all right.) Or (All right, I'll come with you to the play.); an adjective meaning safe or acceptable (Are you all right?) Or (The halibut is all right, but I prefer the lasagna.)

Alot/A lot

Alot – this is not a word

A lot – a large amount (We have a lot of work to do.)

Aloud/Allowed

Aloud – able to be heard (She practiced her speech aloud in front of the mirror.)

Allowed – permitted (We were allowed to take one suitcase on the flight.)

Altar/Alter

Altar – a table or platform where religious rites are conducted (He was sacrificed on the altar of Cthulhu.)

Alter – to change or modify (The Titanic did not alter its course when confronted with an iceberg.)

Angel/Angle

Angel – one of a class of spiritual or supernatural beings; a person who has qualities usually attributed to angels; a financial backer for a play or business venture [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Angle – the space within two intersecting lines which are not parallel; a point of view, either physical or philosophical; a motive, usually secret [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Apart/A part

Apart – separate or distinct from; to reduce something to smaller pieces (He took the bed apart before moving.)

A part – one single item in a larger whole; a role in a play, performance, event, or gathering (She wanted to be a part of the group.)

Ask/Axe

Ask – to inquire about something (Let me ask you a question.)

Axe – a short, flared blade with a long handle, usually used for chopping (He cut down the tree with his axe.); to get rid of or eliminate someone or something, usually phrased as “to be axed” or “to be given the axe” (Last week I came to work late again, and my boss gave me the axe.)

Berth/Birth

Berth – a sleeping space on a plane, train or ship; a docking space for a ship at a harbor; to sleep in a berth; to dock in a berth

Birth – the beginning or origin of something or someone; a person’s lineage or heritage; to initiate; to bear a child or offspring

Bias/Biased

Bias – a prejudice, either for or against something (My bias against tomatoes prevents me from eating BLT sandwiches.)

Biased – to have a bias (I am biased against tomatoes.)

Brake/Break

Brake – to decelerate or stop; a device which aids in deceleration (He tried to brake when he saw the deer in the road.)

Break – to smash something violently (She threatened to break his nose and his heart.); to violate a law, rule, or promise; a resting period; to put an end to something, as in a sports record or a habit [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Breath/Breathe

Breath – a noun for the air taken in or exhaled while breathing (I stopped to catch my breath.)

Breathe – a verb for the action of inhaling or exhaling (I like to breathe.)

Bring/Take

Bring – to carry or convey something toward the speaker (When you come by tomorrow, be sure to bring your notes.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Take – to carry or convey something away from the speaker (Take your umbrella with you when you go out.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Capital/Capitol

Capital – a city or town that is the seat of government (Topeka is the capital of Kansas.); wealth (The corporation invested its surplus capital in research and development.); capital letters (ABC); most serious or punishable by death (Treason is a capital offense.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Capitol – a building occupied by a state legislature or the United States Congress

Cloth/Cloths/Clothes/Close

Cloth – a piece of fabric or material woven of wool, cotton, or some other fiber; a piece of fabric suited for a particular purpose, such as a tablecloth; the garments worn by a profession such as the clergy

Cloths – plural of cloth [not commonly used]

Clothes – garments for wearing

Close – to finalize something, as in a business deal; to shut or seal something; to come to an end; the act of closing [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Collage/College

Collage – a collection of items; a type of handicraft made with random images or objects

College – a school of higher learning (past high school), sometimes interchangeable with university

Complement/Compliment

Complement – to accompany or to make complete (A slice of gouda complements this turkey sandwich perfectly.)

Compliment – an expression of praise or admiration (She gave him a compliment for his hard work.)

Conscience/Conscious

Conscience – the mixture of ethical and moral principles which guide a person’s thoughts and behavior

Conscious – to be awake (She was conscious during her surgery.); to be aware of one’s own existence and thoughts; something which is deliberate or intentional (He made a conscious effort to eat less salt.)

Consul/Council/Counsel

Consul – a government official who looks after her country’s interests and citizens in another country

Council – a group of people who are elected or summoned to give advice, debate or enact laws, or carry out administrative functions

Counsel – advice or opinions on another person’s behavior or judgment; to give advice or opinions to someone; a legal advisor

Dairy/Diary

Dairy – a place where milk and cream are kept or harvested, and/or where cheese and butter are made; products made of milk or cream

Diary – a periodic record of someone’s thoughts or activities; the book in which such items are written

Decent/Descent

Decent – conforming to standards of good taste or morality, as in speech, behavior, or art; respectable (They came from a decent family.); acceptable or passable (Her job paid a decent wage.); kind or generous (It was very decent of her to let us stay the night.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Descent – a downward slope; the act of traveling downward, either physically or in quality over time; lineage or heritage

Desert/Dessert

Desert – a barren, arid region (The Israelites wandered the desert for many years.)

Dessert – something sweet for after dinner (Finish your beets and then you can have some dessert.)

Device/Devise

Device – a thing made for a particular purpose, whether mechanical, literary, or a plan or scheme [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Devise – to invent or create, either from scratch or based on existing ideas or principles (He devised a method to rid his lawn of gophers.)

Discrete/Discreet

Discrete – separate from; specific (We were given a discrete set of numbers to use in our algorithm.)

Discreet – modest, subtle, or done without calling undue attention (She tried to be discreet when telling her boss about a co-worker’s drinking problem.)

Do/Due

Do – verb of action (We have to do a lot of work before the end of the semester.)

Due – because of or owing to (We couldn’t go swimming due to the rain.)

Dual/Duel

Dual – having two parts, people, or aspects

Duel – an arranged combat or contest between two people; to take part in such a contest

Foreword/Forward

Foreword – an introductory section in a book, usually written by someone other than the book’s author

Forward – moving ahead; presumptuous; toward the future [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Forth/Fourth

Forth – onward or outward in space, time, or awareness

Fourth – the number four place in a series; ¼ of something [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Hear/Here

Hear – to perceive something by the ear (I can hear the dogs barking.); to learn something by being told (Did you hear the news?) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Here – in this place or point in time (We will set up the conference booth here.); toward this place or point in time (Come over here.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Hole/Whole

Hole – an opening or gap in something (He had a hole in his shoe.); a shabby or squalid place (Their apartment was a disgusting hole.); a flaw or fault (The opposing attorney quickly spotted the hole in Jim’s reasoning.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Whole – complete, intact, or in one piece (My antique mirror arrived whole.); the entire quantity of something (She ate the whole sandwich herself.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Instance/Instant/Instants

Instance – one case or occurrence of something (In one instance, she found him unconscious on the kitchen floor.); an example given for proof or illustration

Instant – a precise moment in time (We will use slow-motion photography to capture the instant of combustion.); occurring immediately (Many Americans prefer instant gratification.); food or beverages designed for quick preparation (I had some instant oatmeal for breakfast.)

Instants – plural of instant

Its/It’s

Its – third person possessive pronoun (That was its lair.)

It’s – contraction of “it is” or “it has” (It’s nice to see you again.)

Lay/Laid/Lie/Lye

Lay – a verb meaning to put something (or oneself) in a horizontal position or a position of rest (We should lay the baby down for a nap soon.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Laid – past tense of lay (We laid the baby down for a nap an hour ago.)

Lie – a verb meaning to be in a horizontal position or a position of rest (The books lie on the kitchen table.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Lye – a highly concentrated solution of potassium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide, used in making soap

Lose/Loose

Lose – to be deprived of something, fail at something, or get rid of something (You will lose the game if you don’t practice.) Or (He promised to lose weight.)

Loose – as an adjective: relaxed, not tight, or free from attachments (These pants are very loose.); as a verb: to release someone or something (The hounds of war have been loosed upon the world.)

Manner/Manners/Manor

Manner – a way of doing something; a person’s way of speaking to and treating others

Manners – a set of social customs or rules for polite behavior, as in table manners

Manor – an estate or plantation, usually including both the land and a large house or mansion

Marital/Martial

Marital – relating to marriage or people who are married

Martial – relating to war, the military, or people who are in the military; warlike

Moral/Morale

Moral – relating to a code of right vs. wrong conduct; capable of conforming to the rules of right conduct [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Morale – confidence or cheerfulness (or a lack thereof), especially under difficult conditions

New/Knew

New – of recent origin or production (These are my new shoes.); unfamiliar or strange (We visited several new countries on our vacation.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Knew – past tense of know

Past/Passed

Past – a previous point in time (Quit living in the past.); to move beyond something (We drove past the ice cream stand without stopping.)

Passed – past tense of pass (She barely passed her Chemistry final.)

Pique/Peak/Peek

Pique – to arouse interest (The mysterious clue piqued his curiosity.); to irritate (She was piqued at not being invited to the party.)

Peak – the top of a mountain or other pointy structure; the high mark of an event or period

Peek – a quick glance

Principal/Principle

Principal – highest in rank, importance, or significance (He was the principal character in the story.) Or (Our principal goal is to improve our writing skills.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Principle – an ethical or scientific code of performance (Her principles wouldn’t allow her to cheat.) or (Last semester we studied the principles of modern physics.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Quiet/Quite

Quiet – silent or not loud (Be quiet in the library.)

Quite – to a degree or somewhat (The strawberry cheesecake is quite tasty.)

Real/Really

Real – an adjective meaning sincere, factual, or authentic (The real Mona Lisa is on display in the Louvre.)

Really – an adverb meaning actually, genuinely, or truly (I’m really impressed by the Mona Lisa.)

Role/Roll

Role – a character or part in a film or play; a customary place or duty within a society

Roll – to move along by turning over and over; a list of names or members; something wound up in a circular or cylindrical form, such as a roll of tape [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Shone/Shown

Shone – past tense of shine [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Shown – past tense of show [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Since/Sense/Sence

Since – because of (Since we had no food, we were hungry.); an indication of the past (We hadn't eaten since yesterday.)

Sense – the five perceptual faculties (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing); a general impression (The blanket gave him a sense of security.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Sence – this is not a word

Stake/Steak

Stake – a post sharpened at one end for driving into the ground as a boundary marker or part of a fence; to possess, claim, or mark a share of something

Steak – a slice of meat, typically beef (less commonly, pork), which is served broiled or fried

Stationary/Stationery

Stationary – not moving, not changing (The guards remained stationary.)

Stationery – writing paper (I wrote you a letter on my new stationery.)

Then/Than

Then – indicates a time (I'll see you then.)

Than – used in comparisons (My pencil is sharper than yours.)

There/Their/They're

There – an indication of place in space or time; opposed to here (She went back there for vacation last year.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Their – possession by two or more people (We're going to their house on Saturday.)

They're – contraction of "they are"

Threw/Through

Threw – past tense of throw (He threw the ball to the catcher.)

Through – to pass in one end or side of an object (or group of objects) or place and out of the other end or side (The water flows through the hose.) Or (We hiked through the trees.); to reach the end of something (We will be through with the semester in May.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

To/Too/Two

To – a preposition expressing direction (We went to the kitchen.), limits (He grew to seven feet.), comparison or opposition (Our team beat theirs by eight to six.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Too – in addition; also; an excessive degree (I would like to come too.) Or (It's too hot today.)

Two – more than one and less than three

Upmost/Uppermost/Utmost

Upmost – this is not a word

Uppermost – at or near the top in location, rank, or power (The kite was stuck in the uppermost branches of the tree.)

Utmost – the highest degree; the farthest point away; the greatest effort (She did her utmost to win the contest.)

Use/Used

Use – to put into service for some purpose (We can use this axe to chop down the tree.); to expend or consume (Did you use all the money I gave you?) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Used – past tense of use; the phrase "used to" (not "use to") means to be accustomed to something or in the habit of doing something (I am used to having eggs for breakfast.), or to indicate something that was done habitually but isn't done any more (I used to eat eggs for breakfast, but now I don't.)

Weak/Week

Weak – not strong

Week – seven days in a row

Weather/Whether

Weather – atmospheric conditions outdoors; to withstand or endure something; to age in appearance

Whether – a conjunction used to introduce the first of two choices (It makes no difference whether we stay or go.) or a single choice where the second choice is understood (Do you know whether you'll come to the party?)

Were/We're/Where/Wear

Were – past tense plural of be (We were busy all day yesterday.); past tense singular subjunctive of be (If I were guilty of the crime, I wouldn't be here to defend myself.)

We're – a contraction of we are (We're nearly done.)

Where – in or at what place (Where does she work?); to what place (Where are we going?); in what position (Where do you stand on Issue A?); from what source (Where did you get this recipe?) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Wear – to have on the body, as in clothing or equipment; to diminish or deteriorate by some continued process (The sea will wear away at these rocks.) [See dictionary for a full list of definitions]

Who/Whom

Who – a pronoun indicating a question about a person or people (Who is hiding behind the curtains?), or a pronoun indicating the person or people (These are the folks who donated books to the library.)

Whom – objective form of who (With whom did you speak?) Or (He thought about his sister whom the judge had sentenced to death.)

Who's/Whose

Who's – a contraction of “who is” or “who has” (Who's coming to your party tomorrow?)

Whose – a possessive form of who (Whose book is this?)

Won't/Wont

Won't – a contraction of “will not” (I won't be coming with you tonight.)

Wont – custom, habit, or practice (It was her wont to jog two miles before breakfast.)

Your/You're/You'r/Your's

Your or yours – possession by the person being addressed (This is your salad.) Or (Is this salad yours?)

You're – contraction of “you are” (You're a college student.)

You'r – this is not a word

Your's – this is not a word

Problem Phrases and Other Items

All of a sudden, not all of the sudden or all the sudden

Bald-faced lie, not bold-faced lie

Based on, not based off or based off of

Beck and call, not beckon call

Case in point, not case and point

Currency (US): \$1,000 or 1,000 dollars, not \$1,000 dollars or 1,000\$

For all intents and purposes, not for all intensive purposes

Fount of wisdom (or knowledge), not font of wisdom

Hunger pangs, not hunger pains

Moot point, not mute point

Nip it in the bud, not nip it in the butt

Pique my curiosity, not peak my curiosity or peek my curiosity

Pore over, not pour over

Sleight of hand, not slight of hand

Toe the line, not tow the line

Tongue in cheek, not tongue and cheek

Try to go, try to run (meaning attempt to go, attempt to run, etc.), not try and go or try and run

Used to (meaning something that was once done but isn't done now), not use to

Whet your appetite, not wet your appetite

Would have or would've (could have, should have), not would of or could of or should of

Wouldn't have (couldn't have, shouldn't have), not wouldn't of or couldn't of or shouldn't of

Omitting "to be" in a verb phrase is a colloquial regional custom: "The dog wants walked" or "The dishes need washed." It is not considered standard English.