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## COMMON SPELLING AND GRAMMAR MISTAKES

DON'T LET THESE MISTAKES SINK YOUR COMMUNICATION EFFORTS

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## Common spelling and grammar mistakes that can sink your communication efforts

Imagine walking into a room with a big piece of spinach stuck in your teeth. EMBARRASSING! When you write and make stupid grammar and spelling mistakes it's as obvious to others as that big gob of spinach between your teeth.

Most of us write on a daily basis. Some of our written communication is informal. Those text messages or tweets with their character limitations call for shorthand. But other written communication carries more impact and when you make blatant mistakes it can sabotage your effort. Even Facebook posts should be grammatically correct. Who knows who will be checking out what you have to say. Plus getting in the habit of writing correctly will help you when you have to write that important report for the boss or the new client.

When you write something more formal than a tweet or text, use your spell checker but don't rely on it totally. The spell checker will highlight those misspelled words (diferent instead of different) but it will miss other mistakes. And those mistakes can you make you look careless at a minimum or really, really dumb.

Many of us already know the rules of spelling and grammar but when we're under deadline pressure or writing quickly these mistakes can sneak into our work.

## Quick Sand Words

There are a number of words that are tricky. I call them "Quick Sand" words because they can sink what you're trying to do and there's no way to dig yourself out. Many of these mistakes center around incorrectly using contractions.

### ITS / IT'S

- **Its:** the possessive. I put the coffee back into **its** container.
- **It's:** the contraction for it is. **It's** my job to scrub the floor—ugh.

Usually people write its when they mean it's.

### THERE / THEIR / THEY'RE

- **There:** Use it for placing something or someone or a direction. My computer is over **there**. I was there earlier today. Go over there.
- **Their:** Use it for possession. I had borrowed **their** keys. Where are their books?
- **They're:** Is the contraction for they are. **They're** (Joan and Henry are) going to the diner.

### YOUR / YOU'RE

- **Your:** possessive—**your** book is on the table
- **You're:** contraction for you are. **You're** the only person who can do this.



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## WHO'S / WHOSE

- **Who's:** contraction for who is. **Who's** the person who's going to win?
- **Whose:** possessive—belongs to someone. **Whose** book is this?

## TO / TOO

- **Too:** means also or excessive. When you write a sentence if you can substitute the word also you have used too correctly. I want to go there **too**. The other use for too is excessive. I ate **too** much cake.
  - **To:** it's a preposition used to express motion or direction. They came **to** our house after dinner. It also can express a limit in time. I work from nine **to** five. Finally it's used in the infinitive of verbs. I have **to** read this book.
- And of course, there's the number **two** but that's misused less frequently.

## OUR / ARE

- **Our:** possessive. **Our** house is down the street.
- **Are:** verb. We **are** going to the movies.

## THEN / THAN

- **Then:** Then has a connection to time either at the same time (My sister was living at home **then**.) or immediately or soon after (The children stopped playing when the car drove past but **then** started again.) It can also be used to order the timing of an event. We went to school, **then** we went to the drugstore. It can also be used for order of place. We put the knife on the inside, **then** we place the spoon on the outside.
- **Than:** Is used in comparison. He is older **than** John. Other uses for than. It is much different than I thought. I'd rather drink tea **than** coffee in the morning.

## Proofread your work

After you've finished writing, proofread your work. I use a multi-step process:

1. The first thing I do is walk away from what I've written. I always give myself a break. When I come back I am able to look at my work with a fresh set of eyes.
2. Use your spell and grammar checker. That's your first pass at what you're doing. Correct the errors but be careful. Sometimes we click on the first word that comes up in the spell check list and it's not always the correct **word**. The last sentence is an example of spell check not working. Of course the sentence should have read: Sometimes we click on the first word that comes up in the spell check list and it's not always the correct **word**. As you just saw, the problem comes when Spell Check doesn't help because the incorrect spelling is also a word.
3. I read what I've written silently.
4. I read it aloud.
5. I read it backwards. Yes, that's right. I look at what I have written back-to-front. This helps because you don't get absorbed into the content of what you've written but are looking at each individual word.
6. When possible I have someone else read what I've written. They can help you to determine whether what you're saying is clear and easy to understand.



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## A few more tips:

- Avoid sentence fragments. Each sentence should have a grammatically correct complete thought. The easiest way to make sure your sentences are complete is to make sure they include a verb. (Sometimes nouns are understood. Run, for example, is a complete sentence. Down the street is not. ) Spell and grammar checks usually will pick up sentence fragments.
- Use small words instead of big words. People think using multi-syllabic words (like multi-syllabic) make them sound smart. It's not necessarily so. Example: Use instead of utilize.
- Always proof headlines, subheads and subject lines. They are too often overlooked.
- Now for some writing tips:
- Ronn Levine, a writer I admire, suggests this exercise: "Write something and then go back and replace any wearied or clichéd phrases with more original and specific ones. The idea is to play off your clichés; tweak a word or two so that it becomes specific to what you are trying to convey. Instead of the cat is out of the bag, perhaps the cat has left the bag in the dust. Instead of "secure your seat at the table," maybe you could say "pull up a chair and get comfortable."
- Building good writing skills are an important part of any portfolio, and they can be developed with practice.

Here's to your continued success in all your communication efforts!