



## Basic grammar review

"Grammar and composition errors at any time are unacceptable. You are a newspaper. You hire journalism majors. They should be able to spell and construct a proper sentence and paragraph."

— Ruth Lang of Lake Zurich, Ill.

By [Neil Holdway](#)

Let's start with one of the most commonly misused sets of homonyms.

### **affect vs. effect**

These two come up over and over again.

**The basic rule:** "Affect" is the verb and "effect" is the noun. A is the verb, E is the noun. A verb, E noun. Say it with me now.

*I hope this has a positive effect on our writing.*

*I hope this will positively affect the way we look to readers.*

**One little thing to complicate matters:** Fortunately it's rare, but "effect" can be a verb meaning bring about or cause.

*Colin Powell will travel to Israel in an effort to effect a compromise.*

*He hopes the meeting will effect change in the Middle East.*

Here are simple words Daily Herald editors are seeing confused too frequently. Hopefully it's because of brain cramps and not a lack of knowledge.

### **its/it's**

"Its" is the possessive form of "it."

"It's" is a contraction for "it is."

Apply the "it is" test to make sure you're right. If it doesn't make sense when you substitute whichever version you typed with "it is," then you go without the apostrophe.

*The turtle was turned on its/it's back.*

The turtle was turned on it is back? Nope. So ...

*The turtle was turned on its back.*

### **their/they're/there**

"their" is the possessive form of "they."

"they're" is a contraction for "they are."

"there" means "in that place."

### **to/two/too**

Do I have to explain?

### **your/you're**

It's so easy to mistype "your," the possessive form of "you," for "you're," the contraction for "you are."

### **who's/whose**

"who's" is a contraction for "who is" or "who has."

"whose" is the possessive form of "who."

### **lose/loose**

"lose" is the verb.

"loose" is an adjective (which is not related to "lose")

### **choose/chose**

"choose" is the present tense.

"chose" is the past tense.

### **Extra credit: What's the difference between a dilemma and a quandary?**

A "quandary" is a perplexing situation or position.

A "dilemma" is a perplexing situation in which one must choose between unpleasant alternatives.

So, having to choose between a chocolate cake and chocolate ice cream is not a dilemma (unless you hate chocolate or you're allergic to it); it's a mere quandary.

Having to choose between paying \$2,000 to fix your car or suddenly shell out payments for a new car probably is a dilemma.

### **More commonly misused words ...**

#### **between/among**

"among" refers to more than two things

*The profits are to be evenly divided among the three partners.*

"between" refers to two things

*The territory is divided evenly between the two sales representatives.*

When noting a range, you should write "between x and x," not "between x to x."

Wrong: *The car show takes place between 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.*

Wrong: *The car show takes place between 8 a.m.-10 p.m.*

Right: *The car show takes place between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m.*

Wrong: *Police say between 12 to 15 dogs are in the house.*

Right: *Police say between 12 and 15 dogs are in the house.*

Also right: *Police say 12 to 15 dogs are in the house.*

Also, it's "*between you and me*," not "*between you and I*."

## **flier/flyer**

- "Flier" is the version we almost always should be using, be it one who flies or a piece of paper people hand out.
- "Flyers" is only a proper noun, such as for the Schaumburg baseball team and some trains and buses.

## **principal/principle**

- A "principal" is the person in charge of a school, or a leader or key player in anything.
- Or it's the base amount of money owed.
- Or it's an adjective meaning first in rank or importance.
- "Principle" most often means a fundamental truth, a rule of conduct, or scientific law.

Right: *Principal Joe Schmoe said the school would be closed for two days.*

Right: *The auditor's order was the principal motivation of the investigation.*

Right: *His theory fit the principles of nature.*

Right: *Looking accurate to readers is the principle behind these notes.*

P.S.: Goofed-up phrases: Here are a couple of idioms I've seen written incorrectly.

*If worst comes to worst, she said, the district may consider legal action to get McHenry County to change its decision.*

It's "*worse comes to worst.*"

*"By in large, most of our larger technology initiatives have been the result of a referendums," said Waller, the school board president.*

It's "*by and large,*" and this is minor enough to go ahead and change the quote.

## **Here are a bunch of homonyms that give us trouble.**

peddle/pedal/petal

- "peddle" relates to selling
- "pedal" relates to riding a bike
- "petal" is part of a flower

## **compliment/complement**

- A compliment is praise. "Complimentary" is the spelling for something given for free.
- A complement completes something, or "complement" is a verb meaning to complete something: A dish of ice cream complements the meal. Also, when you say "the full

complement," this is the spelling.

### **capital/capitol**

- The capital is the official government seat of a state or nation.
- The capitol is the building where the U.S. Congress or a state legislature meets.

### **premier/premiere**

- "premier" means first in rank or importance, or is a name for a head of state: It's the premier festival in the suburbs. In 1996, he became premier of Prince Edward Island.
- "premiere" means debut, as in world premiere, season premiere, etc.

### **peak/peek/pique**

- "peak" is the top of a mountain, and it often is used to refer to the highest point of anything: Shaquille O'Neal is at the peak of his career.
- A "peek" is a quick look.
- "pique" is what you use when you say "It piqued my interest."

### **medal/meddle/metal/mettle**

- "medal" is the award someone wears around the neck or hangs on a uniform.
- To "meddle" is to interfere.
- "Metal" is the hard, sometimes shiny stuff.
- When you want to "test one's mettle," this is the spelling you use.

### **tack/tact/tactics**

- When you want to say something like "*Bensenville is taking a different tack in stopping O'Hare's expansion*," that's the spelling you use.
- It's not "tact," which refers to the skill in dealing with people or difficult situations.

- "Tactics," preferred in the plural, refers to a set of methods or actions to achieve a goal.

## **whet/wet**

- When something "whets your appetite," that's the spelling.

And finally, from a reader's letter: *"In the article on the Watergate scandal, the writer says a poll 'seems to bare that out.'" (We meant to use "bear.")*

## **P.S.: Another commonly misused word:**

\* renown vs. renowned

-- renown is the noun. It means great fame or reputation; celebrity. It comes from an Old French word, *renommer*, meaning, to name again or often, make famous. You use it like this:

The Art Institute of Chicago's exhibit "To Inspire and Instruct, Art From the Collection of the Chicago Public Schools" highlights more than 22 representative portable murals and easel paintings by artists of both local and national renown.

-- renowned is the adjective. It means having renown. You use it like this:

The Streamwood Park District is inviting residents to tour the Anderson Japanese Garden in Rockford, the renowned creation of architect Hoichi Kurisu.

**Now the commonly misused words get trickier — but our grammatically astute readers will catch them.**

## **compose/comprise/constitute**

Have to look these up all the time? So do I. But the AP Stylebook has an entry on it.

- You'd say the larger thing is composed of smaller things, like the United States is composed of 50 states.
- You'd say the larger thing comprises the smaller things. The United States comprises 50 states.
- The smaller things constitute the larger thing. Fifty states constitute the United States.

### **lie/lay**

- You lie down. An object lies on a surface. You are lying down.
- You lay the object on the surface.
- But lay also is the past tense of lie, so you'd say, "Then I lay down and fell asleep."
- Where did you put it? "I laid it on the table."

### **a while/awhile**

- "a while" two words is a noun, typically an object of a preposition. I'll lie down for a while. I ran into him a while back.
- "awhile" is the adverb form. You may have to wait awhile.

### **persuade/convince**

- You convince someone to think a certain way, typically to overcome doubts.
- You persuade someone to actually do something.

Wrong: The board convinced him to approve the measure. [It's "persuade" here.]

Right: The board convinced him that the measure was appropriate.

### **farther/further**

- "farther" refers to actual distance. The new library will be two blocks farther from the village hall.
- "further" means "to a greater extent." Let's discuss the library further Monday.



**fewer/less**

Use "fewer" with plural nouns, "less" with singular nouns.

- Fewer people attended the meeting this week. [Not "less.]
- Organizers put forth even less effort than last year.

But in matters of time, distance and money, "less than" is preferred, and sometimes "less than" is acceptable before quantities: less than 10 years ago, less than six miles away, less than \$1 million, less than 20 pounds.

**bring/take**

- "bring" indicates motion from far to near: Bring your flowers over. The party got loud because the teens brought their best CDs.
- "take" indicates motion from near to far: Take these flowers home with you. The father decided to take his son to the Flyers game.

**P.S.: Confused words that should have made earlier lists ...****pour/pore**

- When one pores over documents, that's the spelling.
- When one pours a drink, that's the spelling.
- When steam opens one's pores, as in the face, that's the spelling.

And someone pointed out this set, though it didn't even make my favorite grammar book's extensive list:

**weary/wary**

- "weary" means to be tired or tired of something. So one might write, "Jesse Ventura is weary of the media scrutiny," because he's tired of it.

- "wary" means cautious. So one might write, "Jesse Ventura has been wary of the media in recent months," meaning he's being careful around the media.

This is from a story Rukmini Callimachi wrote about a girl who won a national handwriting prize.

The emphasis on handwriting at Sacred Heart was stressed by the Benedictine sisters who founded the school in 1888.

"The sisters always believed that excellence is in the big picture as well as in the details," [Theresa] Johnson said. "There's a certain snobbery these days that says that people with big ideas don't have to worry about the little details. I find that deplorable. Even if you are an eminent scientist, people will wonder about the quality of your data if the quality of your grammar is not precise."

(Theresa Johnson is principal of the Sacred Heart School in Cullman, Ala., a school that since 1995 has produced three Grand National Champions, seven National Grade Level Champions and 15 State Level Champions in handwriting.)

And now, some of the more dreaded grammar lessons: who vs. whom, due to vs. because, and like vs. as. These excerpts are by Merrill Perlman, deputy editor of the New York Times News Service.

## **WHO,WHOM**

From The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage: "Who is the word when someone is the subject of a sentence, clause or phrase: The woman who rented the room left the window open. Who is there?"

"Whom is the word when someone is the object of a verb or preposition: The woman to whom the room was rented left the window open. Whom do you wish to see? ...

"Sometimes whoever or whomever will occur, confusingly, in a clause that is part of a larger

sentence. In that case, disregard the overall sentence, and choose the pronoun according to its function inside the clause: Give the book to whoever answers the door. (He or she answers.) Hand the package to whomever you see first. (You see her or him.)

Do not be distracted by a verb that occurs in a parenthetical phrase between the pronoun and its verb, in a construction like this: Pat L. Milori, who the police said was the mastermind, was arrested yesterday. Mentally remove the police said, and the need for who becomes clear.

But in this sentence, whom is correct: Pat L. Milori, whom the police described as the mastermind, was arrested today. (They described him or her.)"

## **DUE TO/BECAUSE OF**

A "due to" phrase needs to point to a noun, not to a long noun phrase or a verb.

## **REMINDERS/DRILLS**

Wrong: Due to the snow, school was canceled.

What was due to the snow? The answer must be a noun. The only available noun is school, and that obviously isn't the right answer. Make it Because of the snow, school was canceled or, if you must keep due to, make it The school's closing was due to snow.

Wrong: *The play closed due to a lack of interest.*

The "cause" is a lack of interest, a whole phrase. Make it The play closed because of lack of interest or owing to lack of interest.

Wrong: *Dr. Wendy Burger died on Saturday, March 24, 2001, at the age of 39 due to complications of breast cancer.*

Nope. What is due to? Her death, a noun. Not died, a verb.

## **LIKE/AS and LIKE/SUCH AS**

"Use like as a preposition to compare nouns and pronouns. It requires an object: Jim blocks like a pro.

"The conjunction *as* is the correct word to introduce clauses:

*Jim blocks the linebacker as he should.*" (Associated Press Stylebook)

As a preposition meaning "similar to," the word *like* "can introduce only a noun or a pronoun, not introduce a clause that has its own verb." ... [Wrong:] He is competitive, *like* his father was. Make it *as* his father was, or simply *like* his father. (The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage)

"If the *as* construction (although correct) sounds stiff or awkward, try the way instead: He is competitive, *the way* his father was." (The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage)

But what about *like* and *such as*?

Some sticks-in-the mud don't like to use *like* to introduce an example or a list like this one: The banquet included foods *like* Long Island duckling, leg of lamb, Maryland crab cakes, Iowa corn, Idaho potatoes and Maine blueberry cobbler. But nearly all usage authorities, including Webster's, accept it. So don't sweat it.

If you must, you can always alter *such as* slightly: The banquet included *such* local foods *as* Long Island duckling, leg of lamb, Maryland crab cakes, Iowa corn, Idaho potatoes and Maine blueberry cobbler.

**P.S.: Bonus question: Are a cardiac arrest and a heart attack the same?**

Bob Susnjara has the answer:

Speaking of errors, cardiac arrest and a heart attack are not the same. Heart attack involves heart muscle damage after inadequate blood supply. Cardiac arrest just involves complete failure of the heart to pump blood and usually happens in conjunction with another problem such as sudden respiratory failure.

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