



ESL/EFL/TEFL Teaching Information

50 Common English Usage Problems

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Summary :

English is today's lingua franca; its evolution is driven by the current demands for information and the need for global communication. It has unarguably become an important academic and professional tool. It is recognized as the most important language through which the increasingly mobile international community interacts and learns. However, despite its worldwide use, English is still considered the most difficult European language to learn and read, primarily because its unique characteristics hinder non-native English speakers from obtaining a strong command of it. English is also unique in its uses of articles. When combined with the fact that English is an unphonetic language and possesses other small peculiarities, it is a daunting challenge to learn and master.

Below, we have compiled a list of common English usage problems that can cause confusion in both writing and speaking. We also provide corresponding examples to illustrate these problems and demonstrate proper usage. As you become more familiar with the contents of our booklet and master them, you may refer to individual items from time to time as needed. Remember, the only way to develop a good command of the English language is to master its rules and apply them accordingly in your everyday speech and writing.

1 The article a is used before consonant sounds, and the article an before vowel sounds. Words beginning with h, o, or u may have either a consonant sound or a vowel sound. a histology class (h-sound) a one-way path (w-sound) a uniform look (y-sound)

2 Accuse means "to blame" or "to bring a charge against." Allege means "to claim something that has not been proven." He was accused of treason, which he vehemently denied. It was alleged that he secretly cooperated with the Japanese during the war.

3 Advice is a noun meaning "an opinion." Advise is a verb meaning "to give an opinion to." I miss the pieces of advice that mother used to bombard me with. She has always advised me to remain strong and independent.

4 Aggravate means "to make worse." Avoid using this word as a synonym of "annoy." LESS ACCEPTABLE: She was severely aggravated by his rude behavior. PREFERRED: Delaying your visit to the doctor will only aggravate your ailment.

5 Ain't, originally a contraction of AM NOT, is not considered acceptable in standard English. Avoid using it in all writing and speaking. NONSTANDARD: I ain't going to the party tonight. CORRECT: I am not going to the party tonight.

6 Alright is nonstandard spelling. Always use the two-word form in your writing. NONSTANDARD: It is alright with the group that you take your share in advance. CORRECT: It is all right with the group that you take your share in advance.

7 Among and between are both prepositions. Among always implies three or more. Between is generally used with just two things. John was certainly among the most talented students in his class. John always comes between Frank and myself.

8 Use amount with quantities that cannot be counted. Use number with things that can be counted. a small amount of lotion, a large amount of profit a number of books, a number of delegates

9 Anxious means "worried," "uneasy," or "fearful." Do not use it as a substitute for "eager." We are always eager to meet new friends. AMBIGUOUS: We are always anxious to meet new friends. CLEAR: We are always anxious about meeting new friends.

10 Do not use the conjunction "as" to mean "because" or "since." LESS ACCEPTABLE: As she was terribly sick, she was not able to join the competition. PREFERRED: Because she was terribly sick, she was not able to join the competition.

11 Do not use at after "where." Simply eliminate it. NONSTANDARD: Do the visitors know where the train station is at? CORRECT: Do the visitors know where the train station is?

12 Avoid using at with about. Simply eliminate at or about. LESS ACCEPTABLE: The delegates arrived at about noon. PREFERRED: The delegates arrived at noon.

13 Beat means "to overcome (an opponent)." Win means "to achieve victory in." Do not use win in place of beat. NONSTANDARD: The Tigers won against the Yankees in the final game. CORRECT: The Tigers beat the Yankees in the final game.

14 Avoid using the expressions being as and being that. Use "since" or "because" instead. NONSTANDARD: Being that it was raining outside, we cancelled our activity for the day. CORRECT: Because it was raining outside, we cancelled our activity for the day.

15 Bunch means "a number of things of the same kind." Avoid using this word to mean "group." PREFERRED: A group of professionals formed their own labor union. They brought a bunch of fruits with them.

16 Burst is the standard present, past, and past participle of the verb burst. Bust and busted are nonstandard forms. NONSTANDARD: Marco will bust if he takes one more bite! CORRECT: Marco will burst if he takes one more bite!

17 Do not use but what. Instead, use that. NONSTANDARD: I do not doubt but what I will succeed. CORRECT: I do not doubt that I will succeed.

18 Avoid clipped or shortened words, such as gym, phone, and photo in formal writing. INFORMAL: I kept a photo of you and your family all these years. FORMAL: I kept a photograph of you and your family all these years.

19 Continual means "occurring again and again in succession." Continuous means "occurring without interruption." His continual tardiness caused his dismissal from his post. His continuous absence from his post caused his dismissal.

20 Done is the past participle of the verb do. It should always follow a helping verb. NONSTANDARD: Mr. Jones' children always done well in school. CORRECT: Mr. Jones' children have always done well in school.

21 Due to means "caused by" and should be used only when the words caused by can logically be substituted. NONSTANDARD: The meeting was postponed due to the gloomy weather. CORRECT: The postponement of the meeting was due to the gloomy weather.

22 Replace the wordy expression due to the fact that with since and because. LESS ACCEPTABLE: Due to the fact

that we were late, we lost the game by default. PREFERRED: We lost the game by default because we were late.

23 Enthused is nonstandard. Replace it with enthusiastic. NONSTANDARD: The employees were all enthused about the new work arrangement. CORRECT: The employees were all enthusiastic about the new work arrangement.

24 Use fewer with things that can be counted. Use less with qualities and quantities that cannot be counted. Fewer books, fewer complaints Less trouble, less milk

25 Former refers to the first of two previously mentioned items. Latter refers to the second of the two. We bought some food and new toys for the orphanage. The former we gave to the orphanage employees; the latter we gave to the kids.

26 Whenever possible, replace the weak and overused words such as good, lovely, and nice with a more specific adjective. WEAK: good explanation, lovely weather, nice clothes BETTER: elaborate explanation, warm weather, fashionable clothes

27 Things are healthful; people are healthy. LESS ACCEPTABLE: Tofu is healthy food. PREFERRED: Tofu is healthful food.

28 In refers to position. Into suggests motion. Position: Each piece of accessory was placed in the cabinet. Motion: Please put all of your things into the drawer.

29 Judicial means "relating to the administration of justice." Judicious means "showing wisdom." The highest judicial body in the land is the Supreme Court. The judge's judicious decision earned for him much respect.

30 Do not use kind of and sort of to mean "rather" or "somewhat." NONSTANDARD: Anne was sort of disappointed with her colleague's performance. CORRECT: Anne was somewhat disappointed with her colleague's performance.

31 Learn means "to acquire knowledge." Teach means to impart knowledge to." I learned so much from my elementary English teacher. My elementary English teacher used to teach me so much.

32 Leave means "to allow to remain." Let means "to permit." NONSTANDARD: Leave me to do this on my own. CORRECT: Let me do this on my own.

33 Like is a preposition and should not be used in place of the conjunction as. NONSTANDARD: He is wise like a monkey is wise. CORRECT: He is wise as a monkey is wise.

34 In formal usage, the adjective mad means "insane." Used informally, mad means "angry." INFORMAL: Jenny was so mad that she threw the book at her brother. FORMAL: She was brought to the sanitarium because she was mad.

35 Maybe is an adverb meaning "perhaps." May be is a helping verb and a verb. ADVERB: Maybe we will make it to the meeting on time. VERB: She may be permitted to use the conference room.

36 Only should be placed in front of the word it logically modifies. We brought with us only the most important items. Only the employees were allowed access to the conference room.

37 Never use ought with have or had. Simply eliminate have or had. NONSTANDARD: The photocopy machine had ought to work now. CORRECT: The photocopy machine ought to work now.

38 Do not use the expression outside of to mean "besides" or "except." NONSTANDARD: Outside of Terry, there was no other eligible applicant. CORRECT: Except Terry, there was no other eligible applicant.

39 Poorly is used informally to mean "ill." Avoid this use in formal situations. INFORMAL: She missed her class because she was feeling poorly. FORMAL: She missed her class because she was feeling ill.

40 Precede means "to go before." Proceed means "to move or go forward." The board meeting preceded the election of officers. The board proceeded with the deliberation.

41 Raise usually takes a direct object. Rise never takes a direct object. Raise your complaints before the board. Rise to a new day.

42 Real means "authentic." The use of real to mean "very" or "really" should be avoided in formal writing. INFORMAL: This job is one real challenge. FORMAL: This job is very challenging.

43 Seen is a past participle and can be used as a verb only with a helping verb. NONSTANDARD: We seen this movie a couple of times already. CORRECT: We have seen this movie a couple of times already.

44 The meaning of shape is "spatial form." In formal writing, avoid using shape to mean "condition." INFORMAL: My parents are in good shape. FORMAL: My parents are in good condition.

45 So is a coordinating conjunction. It should be avoided when you mean "so that." LESS ACCEPTABLE: Can you please move over so the other passengers can sit down? PREFERRED: Can you please move over so that the other passengers can sit down?

46 Take and is a nonstandard expression. Eliminate it entirely. NONSTANDARD: Take and put these manuscripts in the filing cabinet. CORRECT: Put these manuscripts in the filing cabinet.

47 That refers to people or things; which refers only to things; who refers only to people. This is the resort that (or which) I have been telling you about. She is the teacher who (or that) received the Employee of the Year award.

48 Till and until are interchangeable. Be careful, however, of spelling. Till should not be spelled til or 'til; until always ends in one l. We played by the seashore until we were all tired.

49 Till and until are interchangeable. Be careful, however, of spelling. Till should not be spelled til or 'til; until always ends in one l. We played by the seashore until we were all tired.

50 Ways is plural. Do not use it after the article a. Use instead the singular form of way. NONSTANDARD: The chauffeur has a considerable ways to drive yet. CORRECT: The chauffeur has a considerable way to drive yet.

About Author

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