

THE
LITTLE GOLD
GRAMMAR
BOOK



MASTERING THE
RULES THAT UNLOCK
THE POWER OF
WRITING

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Chapter 3

Word Gremlins

Diction, sometimes called word usage, is about word choice. A writer often must choose between two similar words or expressions. The good news is that a small amount of concentrated study can greatly improve anyone's grasp of diction. The bad news is that most diction errors will not be picked up by a spell checker or grammar checker. Rather, they lurk in material until discovered and culled.

Idioms, here called grammatical idioms, are words and expressions that have become accepted due to the passage of time. They are right simply because "they're right." Even native speakers have trouble relying entirely on what sounds right. Fortunately, the compiled list of 200 common grammatical idioms will provide a welcome reference for preview and review.

Diction Showdown

Affect, Effect

Affect is a verb meaning “to influence.” *Effect* is a noun meaning “result.” *Effect* is also a verb meaning “to bring about.”

The change in company policy will not affect our pay.

The long-term effect of space travel is not yet known.

A good mentor seeks to effect positive change.

Afterward, Afterwards

These words are interchangeable; *afterward* is more commonly used in America while *afterwards* is more commonly used in Britain. A given document should show consistent treatment.

Allot, Alot, A lot

Allot is a verb meaning “to distribute” or “to apportion.”

Alot is not a word in the English language, but a common misspelling. *A lot* means “many.”

To become proficient at yoga one must allot twenty minutes a day to practice.

Having a lot of free time is always a luxury.

All ready, Already

All ready means “entirely ready” or “prepared”; *already* means “before or previously,” but may also mean “now or soon.”

Contingency plans ensure we are all ready in case the unexpected happens. (entirely ready or prepared)

We've already tried the newest brand. (before or previously)

Is it lunchtime already? (now or so soon)

All together, Altogether

All together means “in one group.” *Altogether* has two meanings. It can mean “completely,” “wholly,” or “entirely.” It can also mean “in total.”

Those going camping must be all together before they can board the bus.

The recommendation is altogether wrong.

There are six rooms altogether.

Note: The phrase “putting it all together” (4 words) is correct. It means “putting it all in one place.” The phrase “putting it altogether” (3 words) is incorrect because it would effectively mean, “putting it completely” or “putting it in total.”

Among, Amongst

These words are interchangeable: *among* is American English while *amongst* is British English. A given document should show consistent treatment.

Anymore, Any more

These words are not interchangeable. *Anymore* means “from this point forward”; *any more* refers to an unspecified additional amount.

I'm not going to dwell on this mishap anymore.

Are there any more tickets left?

Anyone, Any one

These words are not interchangeable. *Anyone* means “any person” whereas *any one* means “any single person, item, or thing.”

Anyone can take the exam.

Any one of these green vegetables is good for you.

Anytime, Any time

These words are not necessarily interchangeable. *Anytime* is best thought of as an adverb which refers to as “an unspecified period of time.” *Any time* is an adjective-noun combination which means “an amount of time.” Also, *any time* is always written as two words when it is preceded by the preposition “at”; in that case, its meaning is the same as its single word counterpart.

Call me anytime and we’ll do lunch.

This weekend, I won’t have any time to tweet (twitter).

At any time of the day, you can hear traffic if your window is open.

Anyway, Any way

These words are not interchangeable. *Anyway* means “nevertheless, no matter what the situation is” or “in any case, no matter what.” *Any way* means “any method or means.”

Keep the printer. I wasn’t using it anyway.

Is there any way of salvaging this umbrella?

Note: The word “anyways,” previously considered nonstandard, is now considered an acceptable variant of “anyway,” according to *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*.

Apart, A part

These words are not interchangeable. *Apart* means “in separate pieces”; *a part* means “a single piece or component.”

Overhaul the machine by first taking it apart.

Every childhood memory is a part of our collective memory.

Awhile, A while

These words are not interchangeable. *Awhile* is an adverb meaning “for a short time”; *a while* is a noun phrase meaning “some time” and is usually preceded by “for.”

Let’s wait awhile.

I’m going to be gone for a while.

Note: It is not correct to write, “Let’s wait for awhile.”

As, Because, Since

These three words, when used as a conjunction meaning “for the reason that,” are all interchangeable.

As everyone knows how to swim, let’s go snorkeling.

Because all the youngsters had fishing rods, they went fishing.

Since we have firewood, we’ll make a bonfire.

Assure, Ensure, Insure

Assure is to inform positively. *Insure* is to arrange for financial payment in the case of loss. Both *ensure* and *insure* are now largely interchangeable in the sense of “to make certain.” *Ensure*, however, implies a kind of virtual guarantee. *Insure* implies the taking of precautionary or preventative measures.

Don't worry. I assure you I'll be there by 8 a.m.

When shipping valuable antiques, a sender must insure any piece for its market value in the event it's damaged or lost.

Hard work is the best way to ensure success regardless of the endeavor.

Every large jewelry shop maintains an on-site safe to insure that inventory is secure during closing hours. (taking of precautionary measures)

Because of, Due to, Owing to

These word pairings are interchangeable and mean “as a result of.”

The climate is warming because of fossil fuel emissions.

Fossil fuel emissions are increasing due to industrialization.

Owing to global warming, the weather is less predictable.

Better, Best

Better is used when comparing two things. *Best* is used when comparing three or more things.

Comparing Dan with Joe, Joe is the better cyclist.

Tina is the best student in the class.

Between, Among

Use *between* to discuss two things. Use *among* to discuss three or more things.

The jackpot was divided between two winners.

Five plaintiffs were among the recipients of a cash settlement.

Cannot, Can not

These words are interchangeable with “cannot” being by far the most popular written expression in both American and British English.

Choose, Choosing, Chose, Chosen

Choose is present tense of the verb (rhymes with “blues”). *Choosing* is the present participle (rhymes with “cruising”). *Chose* is the past tense (rhymes with “blows”). *Chosen* is the past participle.

My plan was to choose blue or green for my company logo.

I ended up choosing teal, which is a blend of both colors.

Actually, we first chose turquoise but, soon after, realized that the shade we had chosen was a bit too bright.

Note: There is no such word as “chosing.” This word is sometimes mistaken for, and incorrectly used in place of, the present participle “choosing.”

Complement, Compliment

Both complement or compliment can be used as nouns or verbs. As a verb, *complement* means “to fill in,” “to complete,” or “to add to and make better”; as a noun it means “something that completes” or “something that improves.” *Compliment* is used in two related ways. It is either “an expression of praise” (noun) or is used “to express praise” (verb).

A visit to the Greek islands is a perfect complement to any tour of bustling Athens. Visitors to the Greek island of Mykonos, for instance, are always struck by how the blue ocean complements the white, coastal buildings.

Throughout the awards ceremony, winners and runner-ups received compliments on a job well done. At closing, it was the attendees that complimented the organizers on a terrific event.

Complementary, Complimentary

Both words are used as adjectives. Like complement, *complementary* means “to make complete,” “to enhance,” or “to improve” (e.g., complementary plans). *Complimentary* means “to praise” (e.g., complimentary remarks) or “to receive or supply free of charge.”

Only one thing is certain in the world of haute couture: fashion parties brimming with complimentary Champagne and endless banter on how colorful characters and complementary personalities rose to the occasion.

Differs from, Differ with

Use *differ from* in discussing characteristics. Use *differ with* to convey the idea of disagreement.

American English differs from British English.

The clerk differs with her manager on his decision to hire an additional salesperson.

Different from, Different than

These two word pairings are interchangeable. However, whereas *different from* is used to compare two nouns or phrases, *different than* is commonly used when what follows is a clause.

Dolphins are different from porpoises.

My old neighborhood is different than it used to be.

Do to, Due to

Do to consists of the verb “do” followed by the preposition “to.” *Due to* is an adverbial phrase meaning “because of” or “owing to.” *Due to* is sometimes erroneously written as *do to*.

What can we do to save the mountain gorilla?

Roads are slippery due to heavy rain.

Each other, One another

Use *each other* when referring to two people; use *one another* when referring to more than two people.

Two weight lifters helped spot each other.

Olympic athletes compete against one another.

Everyday, Every day

These words are not interchangeable. *Everyday* is an adjective that means either “ordinary” or “unremarkable” (everyday chores) or happening each day (an everyday occurrence).

Everyday is an adverb meaning “each day” or “every single day.”

Although we’re fond of talking about the everyday person, it’s difficult to know what this really means.

Health practitioners say we should eat fresh fruit every day.

Everyplace, Every place

These words are not interchangeable. *Everyplace* has the same meaning as “everywhere.” *Every place* means in “each space” or “each spot.”

We looked everyplace for that DVD.

Every place was taken by the time she arrived.

Everyone, Every one

These words are not interchangeable. *Everyone* means “everybody in a group” whereas *every one* means “each person.”

Everyone knows who did it!

Every one of the runners who crossed the finish line was exhausted but jubilant.

Everything, Every thing

Everything means “all things.” *Every thing* means “each thing.” Note that the word *everything* is a much more common than its two-word counterpart.

Everything in this store is on sale.

To every thing there is a season

Every time, Everytime

Every time means “at any and all times.” It is always spelled as two separate words. Spelling it as one word is nonstandard and incorrect.

Every time we visit there’s always lots of food and drink.

Farther, Further

Use *farther* when referring to distance. Use *further* in all other situations, particularly when referring to extent or degree.

The town is one mile farther along the road.

We must pursue this idea further.

Fewer, Less

Fewer refers to things that can be counted, e.g., people, marbles, accidents. *Less* refers to things that cannot be counted, e.g., money, water, sand.

There are fewer students in class than before the midterm exam.

There is less water in the bucket due to evaporation.

If, Whether

Use *if* to express one possibility, especially conditional statements. Use *whether* to express two (or more) possibilities.

Success depends on whether one has desire and determination. (The implied “whether or not” creates two possibilities.)

The company claims that you will be successful if you listen to their tapes on motivation.

Note: In colloquial English, *if* and *whether* are now interchangeable. Either of the following sentences would be correct: “I’m not sure whether I’m going to the party.”/“I’m not sure if I’m going to the party.”

Instead of, Rather than

These word pairs are considered interchangeable.

Lisa ordered Rocky Road ice cream instead of Mint Chocolate.

The customer wanted a refund rather than an exchange.

Infer, Imply

Infer means “to draw a conclusion”; readers or listeners infer. *Imply* means “to hint” or to suggest”; speakers or writers imply.

I infer from your letter that conditions have improved.

Do you mean to imply that conditions have improved?

Into, In to

These words are not interchangeable. *Into* means “something inside something else”; the phrase *in to* means “something is passing from one place to another.”

The last I saw she was walking into the cafeteria.

He finally turned his assignment in to the teacher.

Note: Regarding the sentence above, unless the student were a magician, we could not write, “He finally turned his assignment into the teacher.”

Its, It’s

Its is a possessive pronoun. *It’s* is a contraction for “it is” or “it has.”

The world has lost its glory.

It’s time to start anew.

Lead, Led

The verb *lead* means “to guide, direct, command, or cause to follow.” *Lead* is the present tense of the verb while *led* forms the past tense (and past participle).

More than any other player, the captain is expected to lead his team during the playoffs. Last season, however, it was our goalie, not the captain, who actually led our team to victory.

It is a common mistake to write “lead,” when what is called for is “led.” This error likely arises given that the irregular verb “read” is spelled the same in the present tense and in the past tense. Ex. “I read the newspaper everyday, and yesterday, I read an amazing story about a ‘tree’ man whose arms and legs resembled bark.”

Lets, Let’s

Lets is a verb meaning “to allow or permit.” *Let’s* is a contraction for “let us.”

Technology lets us live more easily.

Let’s not forget those who fight for our liberties.

Lie, Lay

In the present tense, *lie* means “to rest” and *lay* means “to put” or “to place.” Lie is an intransitive verb (a verb that does not require a direct object to complete its meaning), while lay is a transitive verb (a verb that requires a direct object to complete its meaning).

Lie

<i>Present</i>	<u>Lie</u> on the sofa.
<i>Past</i>	He <u>lay</u> down for an hour.
<i>Perfect Participle</i>	He <u>has lain</u> there for an hour.
<i>Present Participle</i>	It was nearly noon and he was still <u>lying</u> on the sofa.

Lay

<i>Present</i>	<u>Lay</u> the magazine on the table.
<i>Past</i>	She <u>laid</u> the magazine there yesterday.
<i>Perfect Participle</i>	She <u>has laid</u> the magazine there many times.
<i>Present Participle</i>	<u>Laying</u> the magazine on the table, she stood up and left the room.

Note: There is no such word as “layed.” This word is the mistaken misspelling of “laid.” Ex. “A professionally laid-out magazine article,” not “a professionally layed-out magazine article.”

Like, Such as

Such as is used for listing items in a series. *Like* should not be used for listing items in a series. However, *like* is okay to use when introducing a single item.

A beginning rugby player must master many different skills such as running and passing, blocking and tackling, drop kicking, and scrum control.

Dark fruits, like beets, have an especially good cleansing quality.

Loose, Lose, Loss

Loose is an adjective meaning “not firmly attached” or “not tightly drawn.” *Lose* is a verb meaning “to suffer a setback or deprivation.” *Loss* is a noun meaning “a failure to achieve.”

A loose screw will fall out if not tightened.

There is some truth to the idea that if you’re going to lose, you might as well lose big.

Loss of habitat is a greater threat to wildlife conservation than is poaching.

Maybe, May be

These words are not interchangeable. *Maybe* is an adverb meaning “perhaps.” *May be* is a verb phrase.

Maybe it’s time to try again.

It may be necessary to resort to extreme measures.

Might, May

Although *might* and *may* both express a degree of uncertainty, they have somewhat different meanings. *Might* expresses more uncertainty than does *may*. Also, only *might* is the correct choice when referring to past situations.

I might like to visit the Taj Mahal someday. (much uncertainty)

I may go sightseeing this weekend. (less uncertainty)

They might have left a message for us at the hotel. (past situation)

No one, Noone

No one means “no person.” It should be spelled as two separate words. The one-word spelling is nonstandard and incorrect.

No one can predict the future.

Number, Amount

Use *number* when speaking of things that can be counted. Use *amount* when speaking of things that cannot be counted.

The number of marbles in the bag is seven.

The amount of topsoil has eroded considerably.

Onto, On to

These words are not equivalent. *Onto* refers to “something placed on something else.” The phrase *on to* consists of the adverb “on” and the preposition “to.”

Ferry passengers could be seen holding onto the safety rail.

We passed the information on to our friends.

Note: We could not pass the information *onto* our friends unless the information was placed physically on top of them.

Passed, Past

Passed functions as a verb. *Past* functions as a noun, adjective, or preposition.

Yesterday, Cindy found out that she passed her much-feared anatomy exam.

The proactive mind does not dwell on events of the past.

Principal, Principle

Although *principal* can refer to the head administrator of a school or even an original amount of money on loan, it is usually used as an adjective meaning “main,” “primary,” or “most important.” *Principle* is used in one of two senses: to refer to a general scientific law or to describe a person’s fundamental belief system.

Lack of clearly defined goals is the principal cause of failure.

To be a physicist one must clearly understand the principles of mathematics.

A person of principle lives by a moral code.

Sometime, Some time

These words are not interchangeable. *Sometime* refers to “an unspecified, often longer period of time”; *some time* refers to “a specified, often shorter period of time.”

Let’s have lunch sometime.

We went fishing early in the morning, but it was some time before we landed our first trout.

Than, Then

Than is a conjunction used in making comparisons. *Then* is an adverb indicating time.

There is controversy over whether the Petronas Towers in Malaysia is taller than the Sears Tower in Chicago.

Finish your work first, then give me a call.

That, Which

The words *which* and *that* mean essentially the same thing. But in context they are used differently. It is common practice to use *which* with nonrestrictive (nonessential) phrases and clauses and to use *that* with restrictive (essential) phrases and clauses. Nonrestrictive phrases are typically enclosed with commas, whereas restrictive phrases are never enclosed with commas. This treatment means that *which* appears in phrases set off by commas whereas *that* does not appear in phrases set off by commas.

The insect that has the shortest lifespan is the Mayfly.

The Mayfly, which lives less than 24 hours, has the shortest lifespan of any insect.

That, Which, Who

In general, *who* is used to refer to people, *which* is used to refer to things, and *that* can refer to either people or things. When referring to people, the choice between *that* and *who* should be based on what feels more natural.

Choose a person that can take charge.

The person who is most likely to succeed is often not an obvious choice.

Note: On occasion, *who* is used to refer to non-persons while *which* may refer to people.

I have a dog who is animated and has a great personality.

Which child won the award? (The pronoun *which* is used to refer to a person.)

There, Their, They're

There is an adverb; *their* is a possessive pronoun; *they're* is a contraction for “they are.”

There is a rugby game tonight.

Their new TV has incredibly clear definition.

They're a strange but happy couple.

Toward, Towards

These words are interchangeable: *toward* is American English while *towards* is British English. A given document should show consistent treatment.

Used to, Use to

These words are not interchangeable. *Used to* is the correct form for habitual action. However, when “did” precedes “used to” the correct form is *use to*.

I used to go to the movies all the time.

I didn't use to daydream.

Who, Whom

“Who” is the subjective form of the pronoun and “whom” is the objective form. The following is a good rule in deciding between *who* and *whom*: If “he, she, or they” can be substituted for a pronoun in context, the correct form is *who*. If “him, her, or them” can be substituted for a pronoun in context, the correct form is *whom*. Another very useful rule is that pronouns take their objective forms when they are the direct objects of prepositions.

Let’s reward the person who can find the best solution.

Test: “He” or “she” can find the best solution, so the subjective form of the pronoun—who—is correct.

The report was compiled by whom?

Test: This report was drafted by “him” or “her,” so the objective form of the pronoun—whom—is correct. Another way of confirming this is to note that “whom” functions as the direct object of the preposition “for,” so the objective form of the pronoun is correct.

Note: One particularly tricky situation occurs in the following: “She asked to speak to whoever was on duty.” At first glance, it looks as though “whomever” should be correct in so far as “who” appears to be the object of the preposition “to.” However, the whole clause “whoever was on duty” is functioning as the direct object of the preposition “to.” The key is to analyze the function of “whoever” within the applicable clause itself; in this case, “whoever” is functioning as the subject of the verb “is,” thereby taking the subjective form. We can test this by saying “*he* or *she* is in charge.”

Let’s analyze two more situations, both of which are correct.

- (1) “I will interview whomever I can find for the job.” The important thing is to analyze the role of “whomever” within the clause “whomever I can find” and test it as “I can find *him* or *her*.” This confirms that the objective form of the pronoun is correct. In this instance, the whole clause “whomever I can find” is modifying the word form “will interview.”
- (2) “I will give the position to whoever I think is right for the job.” Again, the critical thing is to analyze the role of “whoever” within the clause “whoever I think is right for the job.” Since we can say “I think he or she is right for the job,” this confirms that the subjective form of the pronoun is correct. In this instance, the whole clause “whoever I think is right for the job” is modifying the preposition “to.” Therefore, this example mirrors the previous example, “She asked to speak to whoever was on duty.”

Whose, Who’s

Whose is a possessive pronoun; *who’s* is a contraction for “who is.”

Whose set of keys did I find?

He is the player who’s most likely to make the NBA.

Your, You’re

Your is a possessive pronoun; *you’re* is a contraction for “you are.”

This is your book.

You’re becoming the person you want to be.