

Frequently Confused Words

advice, advise

Advice is an “opinion about what should be done.” Example: She gives good **advice**.

Advise means “to recommend.” Example: Please **advise** me on which college to attend.

Note: “please be advised” and “please advise” are considered old-fashioned, stilted and unnecessary. Passing on knowledge and asking for instruction are not the same as giving or requesting advice.

affect, effect

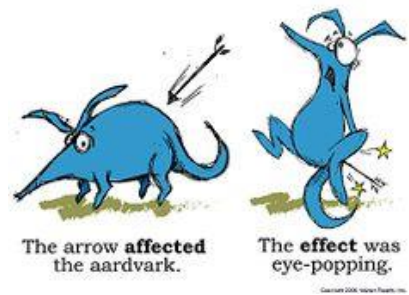
Most commonly, **affect** is used as a verb that means “to influence” and **effect** as a noun that means “a result.”

Examples: Do not let the loss **affect** you. The loss did not have an **effect** on me.

Remember: If something **affects** you, it has an **effect** on you.

However, sometimes **affect** can be a noun to mean someone’s mood, and **effect** is used as verb meaning “to bring about.”

Examples: He has a flat **affect**. We want to **effect** change on campus.



assure, insure, ensure

To put someone’s mind at rest, you **assure** that person *of* something.

Right: “I **assure** you that we will handle this problem.”

Wrong: “We want to **assure** the best possible outcome.”

You **insure** something to be prepared in case something bad happens. You take steps to **ensure** that something will (or won’t) happen:

Examples: “I **insure** my house against water and fire damage.” “I carry snacks in the car to **ensure** that I will have snacks if I get stuck in traffic.”

Remember: You **insure** to protect. You **ensure** to make sure.

aw, awe

Aw is what you say about something cute. **Awe** is reverential respect.

Example: “**Aw**, that’s adorable. I’m in **awe** of how clever you are.”

ball, bawl

A **ball** is a round object. To **bawl** means to sob furiously.

Example: “I **bawled** my eyes out when the **ball** hit me in the knee.”

complement, compliment

Complement means “to make complete.” Example: This hat will **complement** my new outfit.

A **compliment** is something said in praise. Example: Thanks for the **compliment** on my dress.

Remember: “I” like compliments. “Complement” comes from “complete.”

different from, different than

Preferred style is **different from**. If you consider “is different” (be verb plus adjective) equals “differs” (verb), then *from* is natural – as in this differs from that, it is different from that.

fewer, less

Fewer refers to items you can count individually. Use **less** to refer to a quality or quantity that is not counted individually. The only way something has “less calories” is if all the calories are operating at decreased capacity.

Example: She baked **fewer** pies than I did.

Example: The plate has **less** pie on it now that I ate a piece.

homophones

Often when we type, we spell things phonetically or use a homophone (sound-alike word) rather than the correct work. Be careful with words like “threw/through” and “know/no.”

it's, its

It's is the short form of “it is.” Example: **It's** (it is) in the dog house.

Its is a pronoun that shows ownership or possession. Example: The dog has **its** (belonging to it) own house.

Remember: the apostrophe shows that a letter – “i” – has been omitted. **It's** is always it is.

Nauseated, nauseous

Nauseated means your stomach is upset. Something **nauseous** causes nausea in other people.

Example: I am **nauseated** from standing next to a **nauseous** odor.

principal, principle

A **principal** is the head of a school. A **principle** is an important fact or law.

Examples: The **principal** spoke to us today. The **principle** of democracy is important to us.

Remember: your principal is your PAL.

site, sight, cite

Site means “location.” **Sight** means “something seen.” **Cite** means to quote or reference something.

Examples: They are shooting the movie on a great **site**. What a **sight** her face was! You will need to **cite** an example of how that works.

stationary, stationery

Stationary means to be “standing still.” **Stationery** means “writing materials.”

Examples: Please remain **stationary**. They went to the store to buy some **stationery**.

Remember: “e” is in “letter” and in “stationery”; “a” is in “stand” and “stationary.”

suppose, supposed, supposedly

Suppose means “to guess or assume.” **Supposed** can mean “alleged,” or as a verb can mean “should.” There is no such word as “supposably,” – it's “**supposedly**.”

Example: I **suppose** you think I'm gorgeous.

Examples: The **supposed** genius flunked his managerial accounting test. You are **supposed** to pay attention.

than, then

Than means "in comparison with." Example: He is bigger **than** I am.

Then means "next." Example: After going home, he **then** started his assignment.

their, there, they're

Their is the possessive form of "they" that shows ownership. Example: **Their** flowers are gone.

There describes where something is. Example: Their flowers are **there** on the table.

They're is a short form of "they are." Example: **They're** going to buy flowers.

weather, whether

Weather means "conditions outdoors." Example: The **weather** is terrible.

Whether is an expression of choice between two options. Example: I do not know **whether** I will stay home or go to school.

Note: you do not need to say "or not" with whether. It is implied. Example: "I don't know whether to go."

who's, whose

Who's is a contraction for "who is." Example: "Who's coming with us?"

Whose means "belonging to whom." Example: "Whose book is this?"

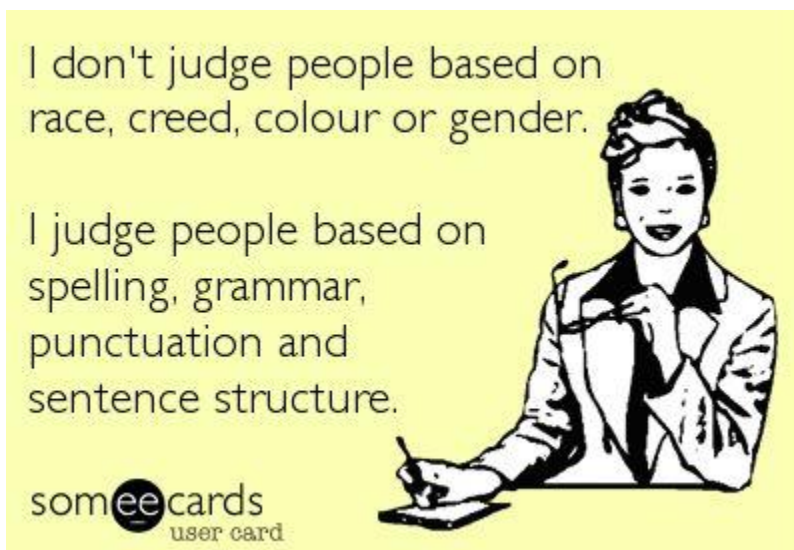
Remember: This is tricky. You note that apostrophes show possession, so it's easy to think that who's is possessive. Replace whichever form you use with "who is." If it sounds right, then use who's; if not, use whose. So, "Who is coming with us?" is right. "I don't know who is this is" is wrong.

your, you're

Your is a form of "you" that shows ownership. Example: **Your** car is new.

You're is a short form of "you are." Example: **You're** going to the store.

Remember: the apostrophe shows that a letter has been omitted. Replace the phrase with "you are" and see which one works.



Crash Course in Punctuation

Period [.]

1. **Use a period to show the end of a sentence.**

Gator football is a popular sport in Tallahassee.

2. **Use a period after certain abbreviations.**

It is 4 **p.m.** in Pittsburgh right now.

Note: AP style is to punctuate times without “:00” after the number: 4 p.m., not 4:00 p.m.

When you use the month and day, abbreviate longer months (Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec.), and use only the number, not “-nd” or “-st” or “-th” after the number: Sept. 1, not September 1st. It’s a good idea to include the day of the week too: Monday, April 8.

Question Mark [?] and Exclamation Mark [!]

1. **Use a question mark at the end of a sentence to show a direct question.**

How many Carnegie Mellon students does it take to screw in a light bulb?

2. **Use an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence to show surprise or excitement.**

We won the national championship!

Comma [,]

1. **Use a comma to show a pause in a sentence.**

Therefore, not everyone will be attending.

2. **Use a comma with quotation marks to show what someone has said directly.**

“I can tell you how I did it,” she said, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

3. **Use commas for listing three or more items.**

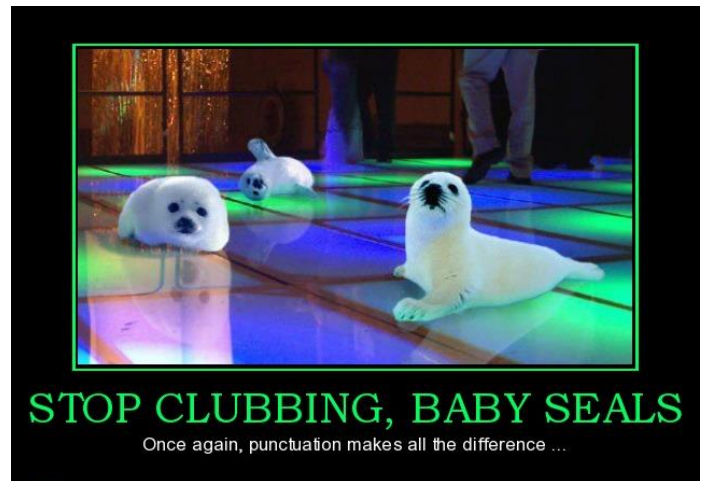
Thank you for your support of our faculty, staff and students.

Note: AP style is to punctuate serial commas as A, B and C, not A, B, and C.

Other styles differ. Chose one and be consistent.

4. **Use commas around relative clauses that add extra information to a sentence.**

Patricia, who is the vice president’s administrative assistant, is widely known for her patience and diplomacy.



Apostrophe [‘]

1. **Use an apostrophe to show ownership of something. For nouns in plural form, put the apostrophe at the end of the noun.**

Examples: These are the **professor’s** books. (books that belong to the professor)

These are the **professors’** books. (books that belong to professors)

2. **Add apostrophe plus s (’s) to form the possessive of singular words except when pronunciation would be difficult. Then, put an apostrophe at the end of the word (s’).**

the car of Ms. Jones = Ms. Jones’s car

the dial on a phone = a phone’s dial

a vacation of one week = a week’s vacation

Exceptions: Jesus’ teachings, Charles’ xylophones

3. **Use an apostrophe to show letters that have been left out of a word.**

Note: Do not use apostrophes to show plural – “Ham’s are on sale today” or “The Smith’s live here.” The Smith family = The Smiths. Their house is the Smiths’ house. But Mr.

Meyers and his family are the Meyerses, which sounds awkward. Best to go with the Meyers family.

Quotation Marks [“ ”]

1. **Use quotation marks to show what someone has said directly.**

Examples: Pee Wee Herman said, “If you love fruit salad so much, why don’t you marry it?”
“I thought I had mono once,” Garth said, “but it turns out I was just bored.”

Note: Be careful not to “overuse” quotation marks. They do not “add” emphasis. They only “distract” from readability.

Colon [:]

1. **Use a colon to introduce a list of things after a complete sentence.**

Correct – George Forman has four sons: George, George, George and George.

Incorrect – George Forman’s four sons are: George, George, George and George.

2. **Use a colon to introduce a long quotation.**

Barney has been known to sing this song: “I love you. You love me. We’re a happy family.”

Semicolon [;]

1. **Use a semicolon to join related sentences.**

Homecoming is one of my favorite events; I just love it when they crown the queen.

2. **Use a semicolon in lists that already have commas.**

Our children are Ryan, 25; John, 20; Melody, 13; and Merry Glynn, 11.

Dash [–]

1. **Use a dash before a phrase that summarizes the idea of a sentence.**
Fat, bald and boring – that is how I’d describe my old boyfriends at my class reunion.
2. **Use a dash before and after a phrase or list that adds extra information in the middle of a sentence.**
He will come back – I promise you this – but not until you refill the freezer with ice cream.

Hyphen [-]

1. **Use a hyphen to join two words that form one idea.**
Blue-eyed boy, fire-resistant toy

Note: do not hyphenate such phrases if they come AFTER the noun.
She is a long-legged girl. But... The girl is long legged.
I want an up-to-date report. This report is up to date.
The three-year-old house fell apart. The house is three years old.
2. **Use a hyphen to join prefixes to words.** A dash separates, a hyphen connects.
Examples: anti-American, non-contact sport

Note: typographically, a dash is called an “em dash” and is made up of two hyphens, two “en dashes,” just like the letter “m” looks like “n” plus “n.”

Parentheses and Brackets [] ()

1. **Use brackets when you need to include a phrase within them that uses parentheses.**
This situation happens mostly in scientific writing or references/citations. If you need them in regular prose, and things are that complicated, you probably need to rewrite your sentence.
2. **Use parentheses to enclose words or figures that clarify or are used as an aside.**
Examples: Please pay me five hundred dollars (\$500). She sat down (after realizing her dress was ripped) and lost her balance on the chair.

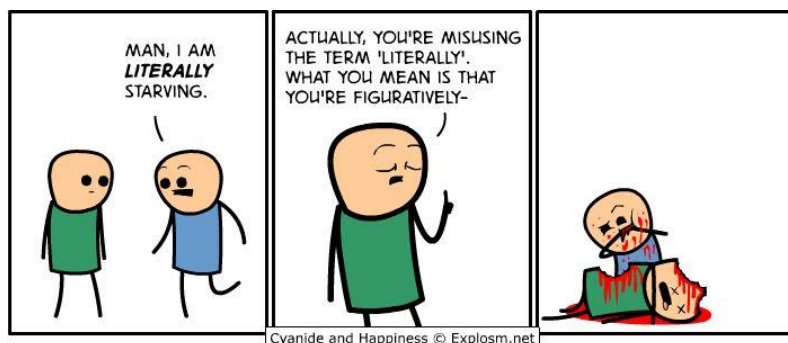
Note: AP style discourages using parentheses to reference an abbreviation immediately after the full name – for instance, American Bottle Club (ABC). Oddly, some writers use the abbreviation then never refer to the entity again in their article. Usually readers are smart enough to figure out what the abbreviation is after you’ve named the entity, but this issue is a style preference. If you like it, leave it in. If you don’t, leave it out.

Also, parentheses slow down a reader, so if you don’t need them, don’t use them. The second example could just as easily have used commas.

Words You ~~Almost Never~~ Rarely Need

1. “**In order** to complete the project, collect plenty of specimens.”
What’s lost if you leave out “in order”? Same for “in an effort to” and “is designed to.”
2. “They serve 20 **different** kinds of pancakes.”
Of course they’re different. “Kinds” means different.
3. “I **personally** have not had this experience.”
What does “personally” add? The contrast is implied: I haven’t but others have.
4. “She spoke to **both** the fathers and the mothers of her students.”
At first, it sounds like “both the fathers,” as in two fathers. It’s not necessary; “both” is implied with “and.”
5. **Intensifiers** define the degree of an adjective or another adverb and precede the adjective or adverb they modify: *very, so, somewhat, quite, rather*.
 - Instead of using an intensifier, strengthen the adjective or adverb: “speak aimlessly” becomes “jabber.”
 - If it’s cold, it’s cold. “Very” cold doesn’t make it seem any colder than just plain “cold” does. One newspaper editor suggests using “very” as you would “damn.”
 - “So” should not be used as an intensifier. If you use it to show cause and effect, you also need a “that” (explicit or implied) clause:
Right: The story was so depressing (that) I didn’t even want to finish reading it.
Wrong: Thank you so much.
6. “My favorite parts of **the** football games are the heat and **the** loud noises.”
Most of the time you can eliminate “the” in front of a plural noun – not always, but most of the time. Try it.
7. “**Per** our conversation, enclosed please find an application form.”
How about, “As we discussed, I am sending you the enclosed application form.”
8. That said, that having been said, with that having been said, at the end of the day.
At the end of the day, trendy is no substitute for clarity of thought – just so we’re on the same page and thinking outside our boxes and comfort zones.

9. Literally, extremely.
Literally means exactly, truly. It does not mean very. (See cartoon.)
Extremely means to an extreme extent and thus has a negative connotation. It does not mean very. For instance, it Susan is extremely cautious in traffic, she probably will end up causing a wreck rather than preventing one.



Fun Time with Pronunciation

Commonly mispronounced words:

- “Public speaking is not my **forte**.” – Although it’s not incorrect to pronounce this “FOR-tay,” the preferred pronunciation is “FORT.” “FOR-tay” is a musical dynamic meaning loud; “FORT” (still spelled with the silent “e”) means “strong suit.”
- “Her little son is **mischievous**.” – The correct pronunciation is “MIS-chi-vus,” not “mis-CHEE-vee-us.” Remember the word comes from mischief (MIS-chuff).
- Orange, lime and raspberry ice cream is “sherbet” not “sherbeRt.” Remember: it’s a sure bet. Sorbet (sor-bay) is another type of frozen deliciousness.

Some Common Pitfalls

1. Typos

To achieve perfect, typo-free articles, *National Geographic* editors proofread each article seven times. Did you proofread your paper more than once? Spell check isn’t enough.

“Public” and “pubic” are both words, but you don’t want them confused. To proof a paper follow these steps: read it out loud, read it backwards, then read it one line at a time. If you’re brave, have someone else read it.

2. Not following directions and formatting instructions

Make sure all letters are in the organizational template (margins, type face, point size).

3. Subject/verb agreement

Wrong: “The loyalty and pride you have shown **is** an inspiration to us all.”

Take out the phrase “you have shown.” What you have left is: “The loyalty and pride... (they) ARE...”

To check out if what you have is correct, remove the extraneous phrase and replace the subject with a pronoun. If you use “they,” then the verb is plural. If you use “it” or “s/he,” then the verb is singular.

Technically, “none” is supposed to be singular, since it stands for “not one.” So you end up with “none of us is going” and “none of them is correct,” which sound funny. Same with “any” (one) – you end up with “is any of you going” or “does any of you know,” which also sound funny. Go with the version you’re comfortable with.

4. Object form of pronouns.

Wrong: “That’s exactly what happened to John and **I**.”

“We had dinner with **she** and her husband on Sunday.”

Again, take out the “and” part. What you’re left with is “That’s exactly what happened to I” and “We had dinner with she.”

5. **Turning verbs into nouns.**

Wrong: “Unanimous agreement is crucial on this bill.”

“Prior approval is needed.”

This style makes the subject obscure. Who is supposed to be agreeing? Whose approval do you need to get? To get around this problem, think in clear terms about what you want to say. If the action you want is not the verb, then rewrite the sentence until it is.

It’s often best to use good ol’ subject-verb-object order: “We all need to agree on this bill.”

“Students need to have the auditor approve the purchase order.”

6. **Using passive vs. active voice**

In active voice, the subject is actually performing the action of the verb: “John hit the ball.”

In passive voice, however, the subject is acted upon: “The ball was hit by John.”

The main reason to avoid passive voice is that it detracts from readability. Since it’s not in logical order (subject-verb-object), it takes longer for the reader to figure out what you’re saying. Passive voice also can make the subject obscure: “The money was taken during fifth period.” Who took it? Sometimes we don’t know, and that’s the only way to write the sentence. But if the writer is purposely hiding something, you need to dig a little deeper and figure out what’s going on.

7. **Using “this” as a noun. Using “there are.”**

In the big scheme of things, breaking these rules is not always a big crime. At most, it makes your writing obscure and detracts from readability.

Not great: “Living in America is a great privilege, one that many people take for granted.

This is not a good thing.” Better would be: “This lack of appreciation is unfortunate.”

Not great: “**There are** many ways for an auditor to detect fraud.”

Better would be: “An auditor has many ways to detect fraud.” It’s fewer words, more concise.

8. **Run-on sentences**

If you read a sentence out loud and you have to stop your breath before it’s finished, the sentence is too long. A true run-on sentence, however, can be short. It contains more than one sentence within a sentence, typically with inadequate punctuation.

To diagnose a run-on sentence, isolate the subject and the verb, then look for a period. The cure for run on sentences is punctuation: often commas but always periods.

Not great: “He said he would give me the exam but I’m not sure he can since the semester is over and I need to be in St. Augustine for the weekend but we’re going to try because I really need to graduate.”

Better: “He said he would give me the exam. I’m not sure he can, since the semester is over and I need to be in St. Augustine for the weekend. We’re going to try, though, because I really need to graduate.”

9. **Wrong relative pronouns.**

“Who” refers to people, “that” refers to everything else. Wrong: “I have a donor **that** wants to give.” Correct: “I have a donor **who** wants to give.”

10. **Spacing between sentences.**

In high school and college, teachers asked us to put two spaces between sentences. In today’s business world, we use one space.

11. **Obscure, picky points.**

- On a ____ basis.
If you do something every day, no need to say you do it on a daily basis. You do it daily. Or weekly. Or monthly. Or case by case. Or individually. None of those needs “basis.”
- Use “the reason is that” instead of “the reason is because.” “Because” is implied in “reason.”
- You have only one alternative but you can have several options.
- Due means what is owed, or because of. Example: The total amount **due** is on the bill. The static is **due** to the lack of humidity.
Note: strictly speaking, it is incorrect to use “due to” to mean “because of.” You can say that the rain is due to the clouds forming, but you should not say, “Due to the clouds forming, it rained.” Remember that “due” is an adjective, not a conjunction.

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Think of a magnet. It draws whatever is closest to it. Same with modifiers. **Misplaced modifiers** are single words, phrases or clauses that do not point clearly to the word or words they modify. As a rule, related words usually should be kept together. Below are six tips for placing modifiers.

1. **Limiting modifiers (only, even, almost, nearly, just) should be placed in front of the words they modify.**

Wrong: You will only need to plant one seed package.

Better: You will need to plant only one seed package. (“Only” modifies “one,” not “need.”)

2. **Place modifying phrases and clauses so readers can see at a glance what they modify.**

Wrong: The robber was described as a tall man with a black moustache weighing 150 pounds.

Better: The robber was described as a six-foot-tall man weighing 150 pounds with a black moustache. (“150 pounds” describes the man, not the moustache.)

3. **Sentences should flow from subject to verb to object without lengthy detours along the way. When adverbs separate subject from verb, verb from object, or helping-verb from main-verb, the result can be awkward.**

Not great: John, after trying to reach the ball, decided to get a ladder.

Better: After trying to reach the ball, John decided to get a ladder. (Subject and verb are no longer separated.)

4. **Infinitives (= “to” + verb) usually should not be split unless necessary, especially in formal writing. That rule has been greatly relaxed, though. (Notice how “has been relaxed” was just split!)**

Not great: The patient should try to, if possible, avoid going up and down stairs.

Better: If possible, the patient should try to avoid going up and down stairs.

5. **Dangling modifiers are word groups (usually introductory) that may confuse some people if they fail to refer logically to any word in a sentence. Rewording a sentence may help clarify the meaning.**

Wrong: Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter happily pumped Joe’s hand. (The recruiter is not deciding to join the navy; Joe is.)

Better: The recruiter happily pumped Joe’s hand after learning that Joe had decided to join the navy.

Wrong: Though only 16, CMU accepted Martha's application. (CMU not 16, Martha is.)

Better: Though Martha was only 16, CMU accepted her application.

6. **Repair dangling modifiers by restructuring the sentence.**

Possibly unclear: When watching films, commercials are especially irritating.

- a. One option would be to change the subject so that it names the actor that the modifier implies: When watching films, I find commercials especially irritating.
- b. Another option would be to turn the modifier into a word group that includes the actor: When I am watching films, commercials are especially irritating.

Style Tips to Make Writing More Interesting

1. Combine sentences.
 - Take two sentences and make a compound sentence.
 - Insert adjectives or adverbs to combine sentences.
 - Use a prepositional phrase to combine sentences.
 - List items in a series to combine sentences.
2. Vary sentence beginnings and length.
 - Use a variety of parts of speech and grammatical forms to vary sentence beginnings.
 - Short sentences have three to six words. The average sentence has about eight to 15 words. Long sentences can have 20 words or more.
3. Eliminate weak verb-adverb combinations.

An adverb modifies verbs, adjective or other adverbs, answering *where*, *when*, *how* and *to what extent*. Eliminate adverbs by identifying which question the adverb answers.

 - *The teacher ~~looked menacingly~~ (menacingly answers how) glared at the ~~disruptive student~~ hooligan.*
 - *He foolishly ~~invested in bad~~ speculated in real estate.*
4. Avoid "to be" verbs.
 - Change the *be* verb to a strong verb:
Example: is afraid of = fears.
 - Eliminate the *be* verb by writing one or more showing sentence.
Example: Alligators **are** mean.
The alligator, angry at being disturbed, lurched forward and swallowed the decoy.
Unsatisfied, the grouchy gator swam circles around the boat and hissed at the hunters.
 - Combine sentences to eliminate the *be* verb.
Example: The inefficient time manager *is unfulfilled*. He heads to bed, disappointed, despite having finished his to do list.
The inefficient time manager **heads to bed, unfulfilled**, having checked everything off on his unprioritized to do list.
5. Use strong verbs. Example: "ate lunch quickly" = "devoured my lunch"
6. Pronouns and antecedents must be clear. Too many pronouns can cause confusion. It's better to repeat a name or noun than to write unclearly.