

# 10 Most Frequent (And Very Intelligent) Mistakes



based on editorial mark-ups  
of *my* work

**By Mike Finley**

# #10

## standard confusions

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### *Its, it's*

If it's modifying something, drop its apostrophe.

### *They're, their, there*

More of a typo than an error, but readers subtract points anyway.

# #9

## false parallelism

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Right: "lovely ladies of dubious virtue,  
kind gentlemen of low repute"

Wrong (but interesting): "I hate, in no  
particular order, housework, being  
cold, when people talk during a movie,  
to have to sing at parties, the way  
you are looking at me right now, and  
France."

# #8

\$/%#\*@ words

## **comprise**

It is always active, and means "include." Do not bend it into being passive with "is comprised of," because that makes no sense.

Right: *The zoo comprises four animal buildings.*

Wrong: *The zoo is comprised of four animal buildings.*

*affect, effect*

*flaunt, flout*

*wrack, rack, wreck, wreak*

*rung, rang, wrung, wrong*

*flounder, founder*

*credulous* (receiver), *credible* (sender)

# #7

## *fewer* and *less*

*Less* refers to a portion of a single whole. *There is less milk than there was last night.*

*Fewer* refers to number. *There are fewer gremlins in the patio than there were last night.*

# #6

## Serial Commas

My preference: commas go after *each item in a series* except the last

*White, black, and red*

Some style guides prefer deleting the comma before *and*.

At least be consistent from page to page!

# #5

## Dangling participles

A participial phrase starting a sentence must modify the subject:

Wrong: *Going to the bathroom, an idea occurred to me.*

Right: *Going to the bathroom, I stumbled on a toy.*

# #4

*data, phenomena, criteria, bacteria*

They're always plural. In writing, use the correct verb form. (In speech, you're on your own.)

# #3

*all right, alright*  
*all ready, already*

(*alright*'s not really a word)

## #2

*hopefully*

Why not just say, *I hope*?

Likewise, be on the lookout for  
doubt-creating phrases like:

*frankly, honestly, to tell the truth, mark my words*

# #1

## *Which* and *that*

*that* never follows a comma;  
*which* always must follow a comma

# Incidentally

Split infinitives are fine.

*To boldly go where no man has gone before* is really the only way you can say it.

*NOTA BENE!* The anti-split infinitive movement originated with scholars who believed English should imitate Latin - which has only one-word infinitives and thus cannot be split.

# Nitpicker's Ball

*purposely, purposefully*

*a while, awhile*

*-ible, -able*

*They have more money than I.*

*everyone = singular*

*farther* (distance), *further* (degree)

*more important > more importantly*

# Vive le indifference

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*catsup, ketchup*  
*tenets, tenants*  
*as to, so far as*

And don't trust your spellchecker

*Order the lo mein top go.*

(My spellchecker flags *mein*,  
but not *top*.)