

## BASIC GRAMMER

### Their vs. There vs. They're

Commit this cardinal sin and you may never be forgiven (we kid, we kid). "Their" is possessive. "There" indicates place. "They're" is the contraction of "they are."

### Your vs. You're

When you get a text that confuses "you're" for "your," it takes a venti amount of willpower not to toss your phone across the room, doesn't it? Sing it from the top of your kid's swing set so the whole neighborhood can hear: "You're" is the contraction of "you are."

### Misusing Commas

"Let's eat Mom" versus "Let's eat, Mom" mean two very different things. (In the former case, Mom is for dinner. Odds are there are tastier things in the pantry.)

### Its vs. It's

Easy trick: If you were to say "it is" in the sentence, would the sentence still make sense? If the answer is yes, stick with "It's." If the answer is no (as in, "The wallet was returned to its owner."), then ditch the apostrophe.

### Em dash vs. En dash

There is a feather of a difference between an em dash and an en dash. An em dash ("—") is the longer of the two dashes, and it takes the place of commas, parentheses or colons. The en dash ("–") is used to represent a range of numbers (10–15), dates or time.

### Mrs. vs. Ms. vs. Miss

This small slip-up may cause big trouble when writing your Christmas cards. "Mrs." is to acknowledge a married woman and "miss" refers to an unmarried woman. "Ms." can be used interchangeably for both unmarried and married women. When in doubt, use "Ms."

### I vs. Me. vs. Myself

Me, myself and I are not interchangeable – even though they may refer to the same person. Bottom line, "me" is the person that the verb is being done to, "myself" is typically used in conjunction with I, and "I" is the person performing the action of the verb.

#### Except vs. Accept

Accept = receive. Except = exclude. Think of it this way: The restaurant accepts all credit cards except American Express.

#### Capitalizing Job Titles

Someone's professional title is capitalized when it comes before or immediately after his or her name (President of the United States, Barack Obama / Barack Obama, President of the United States). Do not capitalize the title if it comes after the name, as in: Barack Obama was first elected president of the United States in 2008.

#### Could've vs. Could of

"Could've" sounds a whole lot like "could of" when spoken out loud. However, "could've" is a contraction of "could have" and refers to something that's possible but didn't actually happen in the past. ("I could've been a rockstar.") The only time you'd ever use "could of" is if "of" is followed by another expression that begins with "of" ("She could, of course, come with us!")

#### Affect vs. Effect

Affect = a verb and means to influence. Effect = a noun and means results.

#### Overusing Ellipses

Ellipses are widely overused in casual texting conversations, but the punctuation should only be used when jumping from one topic to another.

#### Whose vs. Who's

Use the same trick you used for "its" versus "it's." If you were to say "who is" in the sentence, would the sentence still make sense? If the answer is yes, go with it. If the answer is no ("Whose jersey is this?"), spell it that way.

## Who vs. Whom

Try replacing "who" with "he" or "she" and "whom" with "him" or "her" – it's a quick trick to double check that you're using the right word.

## Ending a Sentence with a Preposition

Grammar snobs are softies with this rule today; however, it's best to steer clear when writing a formal letter. (Of, In, To, For etc.)

## Starting a Sentence with a Conjunction

Most writers have lightened up on doing this conversationally, but if sentences that start with conjunctions are sprinkled all over your debut novel, your New York Times book reviewer may have something to say about it. (But, why not.)

## Then vs. Than

Then = time. (Let's go to the grocery store first, then the bank.) Than = a comparison. (I am so much smarter than Bob.)

## Misusing a Colon

A colon is used to introduce a list after a full sentence ("We covered a lot this week: addition, subtraction and multiplication.") or to join two sentences, where the latter expands on the former. ("Life is like a box of chocolates: You never know what you're gonna get.") It's also used to express time, titles, that sorta thing.

## Pronoun Errors

Just make sure your singular pronouns (his and her) replace singular nouns (Todd and Sara) and plural pronouns (they) replace plural nouns (Todd and Sara and Sam).

## While vs. Though

While = a period of time. Though (or "although") = another way to say "however."

## Speaking in Passive Voice

The passive voice incorporates forms of the verb "to be" such as "was," "were" and "is." Grammar snobs usually try to avoid it because they think it weakens their writing. ("The bee stung the babysitter" sounds more to the point than "The

babysitter was stung by the bee.") Regardless, you'll hear it used frequently today.

### A while vs. Awhile

It may take a while for this grammar rule to stick. Both words refer to a period of time, but "a while" means a segment of time and "awhile" means a short time interval.

### Manipulating Parallel Structure

Sentences must be parallel to make sense. Consider this one: My grandma likes to cook, to bake and sewing. "Sewing" stands out because it's not parallel, but if you make it "to sew" like the others, it fits right in.

### Me vs. I

"I" is the subject pronoun ("I am cooking Thanksgiving dinner this year"). "Me" is the object pronoun ("She asked me to cook Thanksgiving dinner this year"). It gets confusing when you combine the two, so just take out the other person in your head, and it should be clearer: "Sara and I cooked Thanksgiving dinner together."

### To vs. Too

To = a preposition. ("We're going to the circus.") Too = an adverb that means "in addition to," so, "Michelle is going to join us at the circus too."

### Thinking Data is Plural

Contrary to popular belief, "data" is singular. Both uses are pretty standard, so you won't get dinged either way, but if you want to be all official about it, try using "results" or "information" if you're talking in bulk.

### Less vs. Fewer

Fewer = quantifiable subjects (puppies!). Less = subjects that aren't quantifiable (love!).

### None in Plural Form

This "rule" is actually a myth, but let's dispel it: If you're talking about a singular subject ("None of the food is contaminated"), that's "none" in a singular sense. "None of the boys were late to the picnic" is also fine. According to the Oxford dictionary, "None is descended from Old English nan meaning 'not one' and has

been used for around a thousand years with both a singular and a plural verb."

### Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier happens when you use a word or phrase to describe something that isn't specified ... and the sentence just ... ends. For example, "Having finished dinner, the dishwasher was turned on." (On what?!) Easy fix: "I finished dinner, and then I turned on the dishwasher."

### Assure vs. Insure vs. Ensure

Assure means to promise, insure means to protect against and ensure means to make certain. So: Please ensure that your house is insured or you may have bigger issues than common grammar mistakes. I assure you, it's worth your while.

### Between vs. Among

Use "between" when speaking about individual items, groups or people. "Among" is used when referring to a group of items or people.

### Double Negatives

Shakespeare could get away with a double negative ("You know my father hath no child but I, nor none is like to have..."), but not the 2016 man. "I don't want nothing" just makes you sound like a whiner.

### Have vs. Has

Most of the time, "have" is used with the I / you / we / they pronouns and plural nouns. "Has" is used with the he / she / it pronouns and singular nouns.

### Was vs. Were

Use "was" when something actually happened. ("I was at the mall today.") Use "were" in hypothetical situations. Beyonce got it right with "If I Were a Boy," and so can you.

### Describing an Entity as They

A business entity like Target or Starbucks should be referred to as "it" not "they," unless you're talking the employees.

Alot vs. A lot

Good ol' spell check usually catches this mistake: "Alot" isn't a word and "a lot" means a large amount.