

Most Common English Writing Errors



WORDVICE

2016 Annual Report

Wordvice Annual Report

"It's much more helpful than I expected. The editor eliminated all the Chinglish and responded to me quickly. You can learn a lot if you compare the draft before and after the edits. It gets harder to improve English when you reach a certain level because it's no longer basic grammar problems but native writing style issues. That's when it's better to have professionals guide you through."

-- Chen Hsi Lee

Dear Loyal Customers,

12,000,000 words and over 9,000 clients means that 2016 was a year of improved quality and growth, and we have you to thank!

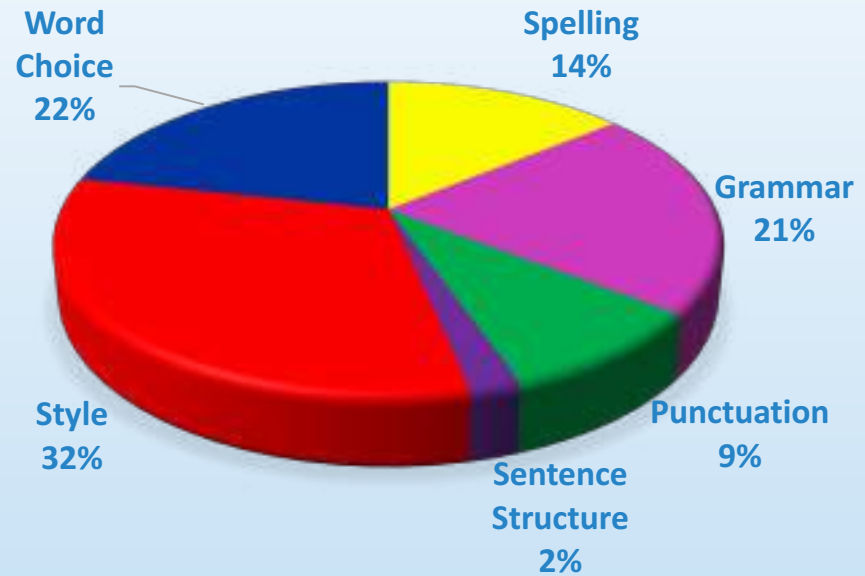
For our 2016 annual report, we thought we'd sum up **our greatest achievements, your improved writings!** We examined sample papers to identify frequent spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style errors. And **after analyzing several million words** written by you, our clients, **we have compiled a series of useful facts and tips!**

Our report will show you the most common errors found in your works and, better yet, how best to avoid those mistakes! We hope this report will help you have a more successful 2017 writing year!

Sincerely,

Wordvice

Errors by Type



What do these percentages mean?

- Style: 3.8 errors/page
- Vocabulary Enhancement: 2.6 errors/ page
- Grammar: 2.59 errors / page

On average, we found:

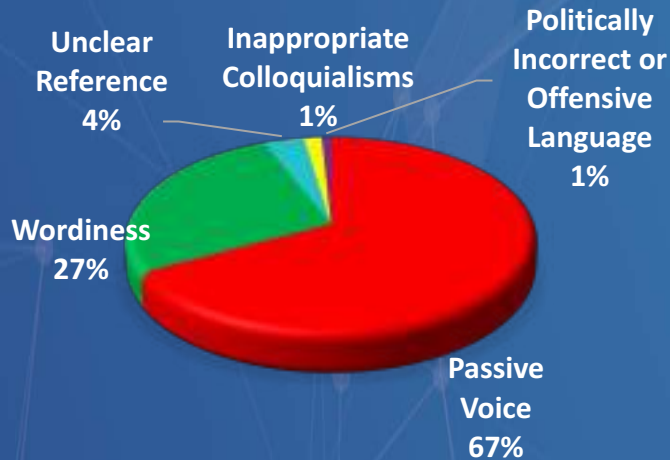
- Contextual Spelling: 1.69 errors/page
- Punctuation: 1.1 errors/page
- Sentence Structure: 0.25 errors/page

"The precise revisions and comments were very informative and helpful. Additionally, the revisions focused on natural sentence flow and editing to ensure appropriate word usage for the given context."

- Yong Rae C., Researcher, Science and Technology Policy Institute

*** One page is approximately 250 words
TOTAL: 12.03 errors/page**

1. Style



Definitions

- Passive voice: a grammar structure that uses “to be + past participle” to show a subject receiving the action caused by something else.
- Wordiness: extremely long sentences (more than 20-30 words) or unnecessarily long phrases that could be replaced by fewer words.
- Unclear reference: when the noun to which a pronoun or a determiner (e.g., “this” and “that”) refers is unclear. E.g. “Joe gave Mark his book.” “His” could be Joe’s or Mark’s.
- Politically incorrect or offensive language: Gender-specific words or “clinical” words regarding race, religion, gender and sexuality that could be offensive in some cultures.
- Inappropriate colloquialism: informal words or phrases that are not suitable for formal/ academic writing.

Most common style errors:

1. Passive voice

- While 29.5% of all research papers we examined overused the passive voice, a whopping **56.4% of admissions essays used too much passive voice!**
- Research writing often requires some passive voice structures to emphasize the results rather than the actions causing an outcome. Nonetheless, the passive voice is less engaging to read than active voice. For admissions essays, avoid passive constructions.
- To revise the passive voice**, identify the true subject and reorder your sentence to establish an active sentence that contains the classic “Subject + Verb + Object” order as shown in the example on the right.

2. Wordiness

- The major sources of wordiness in your papers were unnecessarily long phrases and nominalizations. We have prepared a special article on this. You can click [*here to read the article and other tips to help reduce wordiness!*](#)

3. Repetition (a subset of wordiness)

- Unless you are using a defined term, you should not repeat the same words or phrases within a few lines of each other. **Choose synonyms** or consider varying sentence structures like compound sentences. **Be careful, however, to use substitute words that fit the tone and context of your writing.** For example, we would not have chosen **X** “surrogate words” to replace “synonym” in the preceding sentence!

To learn more about how to reduce wordiness and improve your writing style, please visit our website at wordvice.com/blog!

Quick Tips

Passive voice:

X The speech **was given** by the mayor. → **✓** The mayor **gave** the speech.

X Noun2 + “be” + past participle of Verb + by + Noun1 → **✓** Noun1 + Verb + Noun2

Wordiness:

X in addition to → **✓** also

X take into consideration → **✓** consider

Repetition:

X I like **the house**. **The house** is on a hill. → **✓** I like **the house** on the hill.

2. Grammar

Most common grammar errors:

1. Article/ Determiner use (A/ An/ The/ This/ That, etc.)

- An overwhelming **62% of grammar mistakes** found in your writing relate to article use. This is understandable when your native language might not use words like “a,” “an,” and “the.” Article misuse often occurs when people are uncertain if a noun is countable or uncountable.
- **Countable nouns:** Nouns that can be counted (e.g. apples and ideas).
 - When talking about countable nouns generally, use the plural + NO article. If it is the first time mentioning a countable noun, use “a” or “an.” Afterward, use “the,” “this,” or “that.”
- **Uncountable nouns:** nouns that can’t be counted (e.g., research and water).
 - General discussions of uncountable nouns use NO articles. If it is the first time mentioning a specific uncountable noun, use NO articles. You can use “the,” “this,” or “that” afterward.
 - Careful! Some idiomatic expressions don’t use articles.

2. Prepositions

- Sadly, there’s no clear cut rule about when to use which preposition. Worse yet, some verbs use several prepositions, depending on context. When in doubt, do what native speakers do, check the dictionary!

3. Subject-verb agreement

- Double-check that your verbs match in number with your subject.

To learn more details about article use, prepositions and other common grammar problems, please visit our website at wordvice.com/blog!

Quick Tips

Countable nouns:

✗ The apple is delicious.
→ ✓ Apples are delicious.

✗ I read the new book.
The book was fascinating.
→ ✓ I read a new book.
The book was fascinating.

Uncountable nouns:

✗ The water is healthy for you.
→ ✓ Water is healthy for you.

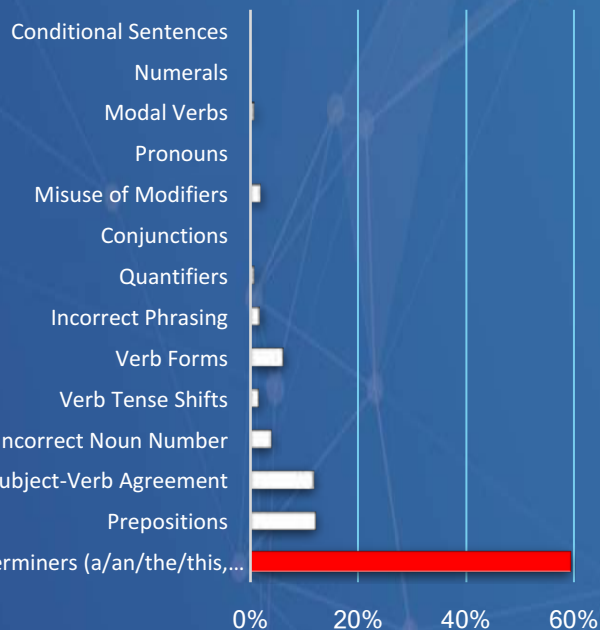
✗ I bought the water yesterday, and now I will put the water in the fridge.
→ ✓ I bought water yesterday, and now I will put the water in the fridge.

Idiomatic expressions:

✗ Let’s have a lunch. →
✓ Let’s have lunch.

Subject-verb agreement:

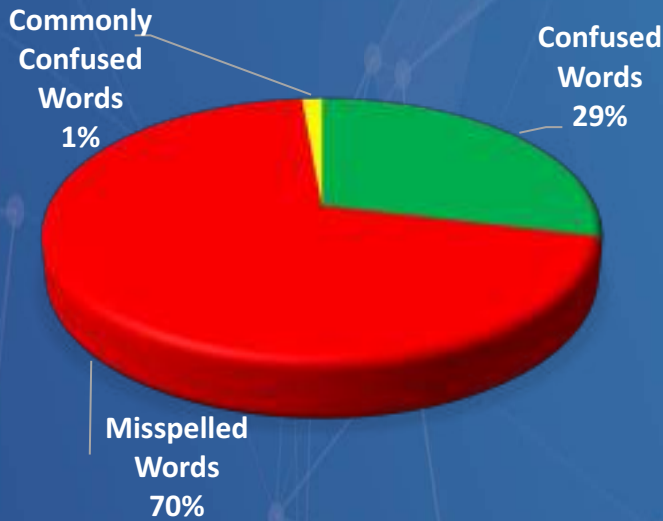
✗ Joe and his cat Snow lives by the lake. →
✓ Joe and his cat Snow live by the lake.



Certain Definitions

- Determiners (articles and other modifying words like “this,” “that,” “every,” etc.).
- Verb Tense Shift: starting a sentence in one verb tense and using another verb tense inconsistently, thus breaking the logical sequence of events.
- Incorrect phrasing: improper use of idiomatic expressions.
- Verb Form: the correct form (e.g., past participle, gerund, etc.) for a verb.

3. Spelling



Definitions

- Confused words: incorrect preposition based on context, wrong words in idiomatic expressions, confusion between similarly spelled words or homonyms.
- Misspelled words: words not following conventional spellings found in a standard English dictionary like Merriam-Webster's.
- Commonly confused words: based on a list of the top 250 most commonly confused words in the English language (e.g., then vs. than).

Most common spelling errors:

1. Spelling woes

- Some spelling errors resulted from typographical errors (mistakes made when typing) or incorrect vowels. Merriam-Webster is the unofficial American English dictionary. Please consult to confirm the spelling of a word (use the first spelling if there are multiple choices).
- **Hyphenating modifiers (a major source of spelling errors)**
 - When two or more words function as one idea to describe a noun, and those words directly precede the noun, use hyphens. If they follow the noun, do not hyphenate that descriptive phrase. ****Do not** hyphenate proper nouns.
 - You should use hyphens whenever a series of modifiers would make the sentence unclear.
 - Some fixed phrases always use hyphens, so double-check a dictionary.
 - "Very" and adverbs ending in -ly are never hyphenated in phrases.
 - Prefixes like "ex-," "mid-," and "re-," usually require hyphens.

2. Beware the homonym!

- Homonyms (that is, words that sound alike) and words with similar spelling are tremendously confusing, right? Your proofreading software might not catch these, which is why a second pair of eyes would be helpful!

To learn more details about the most commonly confused English words and other common spelling issues, please visit our website at wordvice.com/blog!

Quick Tips

Spelling:

Check Merriam-Webster (m-w.com) for official spellings. Use the first spelling if more than one is offered.

Hyphenation:

✗ The **10 years old** girl likes chocolate. →

✓ The **10-year-old** girl likes chocolate.

✗ The girl is **10-year-old**. →

✓ The girl is **10 years old**.

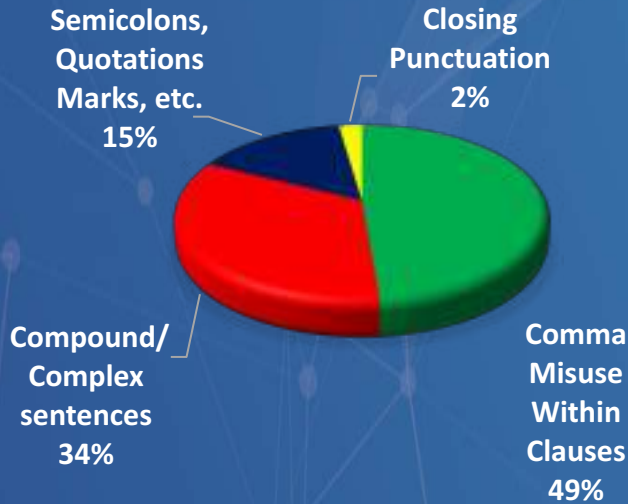
Hyphens for clarity:

A "tall window maker" and a "tall-window maker" have different meanings! In the first phrase "tall" describes the maker, not the window.

Homonyms:

Some of the most commonly confused pairs include: (1) than/then; (2) affect/effect; (3) lay/lie; and (4) they/their/they're.

4. Punctuation



Definitions

- Compound sentence: a sentence that has more than one subject or predicate.
- Complex sentence: a sentence with at least one subordinate clause.
- Subordinate clause: a clause that is dependent on the main clause/ sentence; it usually starts with a conjunction.
- Closing punctuation: the punctuation normally at the end of a sentence that is quoted or inserted into a parenthetical.

Most common punctuation errors:

1. Commas within clauses:

- Use commas to separate introductory phrases from the main sentence.
- Don't use commas before "than" in comparisons.
- Use commas around phrases that could be put in parentheses (i.e., information that could be taken out of the sentence and still have the sentence make sense). NOTE: You need two commas if you insert these descriptive phrases in the middle of a sentence. Sometimes, therefore, it might look like there is a comma before a conjunction when it wouldn't normally be there. Ex: I went to the store, **which was along the river**, and bought some cookies. [The core sentence is "I went to the store and bought some cookies."]
- Don't use commas to separate a month and year.

2. Compound sentences: Don't use commas to separate compound subjects or objects. Here's a quick test to help you.

- "A and B do C." For a compound sentence, you should be able to split the sentence to say "A does C" and "B does C" by distributing the subjects across the verb. If the resulting clauses make sense, don't use commas to separate A and B.
- "A does B and C." You can split the sentence to read "A does B" and "A does C" by distributing the subject across both verbs. These phrases make sense, so no comma is needed.
- "A does B, and C." First, split the sentence at the comma. "A does B." "C..." Wait, what does C do? The second "sentence" doesn't work, so delete the comma!
- "A does B, and C does D." Break the sentence at the comma. "A does B." "C does D." Both sentences make sense, so the comma was used correctly.

To learn more details about how use the comma and other common punctuation mistakes, please visit our website at wordvice.com/blog!

Quick Tips

Introductory Phrases:

X In the beginning I was hopeful. → **✓** In the beginning, I was hopeful.

Commas in "than" comparisons:

X I work **harder, than** Mike does. → **✓** I work **harder than** Mike does.

Setting aside information:

X I **unlike the other campers** was not afraid to cross the old rope bridge. → **✓** I, **unlike the other campers**, was not afraid to cross the old rope bridge.

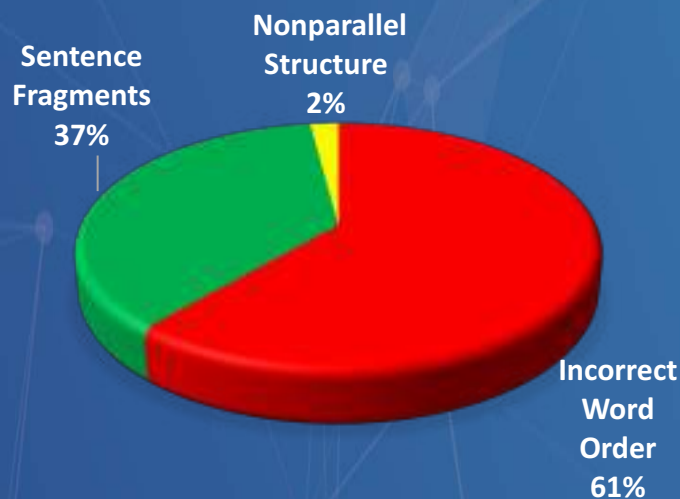
Month and year:

X **January, 2017** → **✓** **January 2017**

Compound Sentences:

X I like to read many books, **and** write fantastical tales. → **✓** I like to read may books **and** write fantastical tales.

5. Sentence Structure



Definitions

- Incorrect Word Order: incorrect preposition based on context, wrong words in idiomatic expressions, confusion between similarly spelled words or homonyms.
- Sentence Fragment: Incomplete sentences (i.e., missing a subject or predicate).
- Nonparallel Structure: when words, phrases, or clauses of equal weight are strung together but are not in similar grammatical form.

Most common sentence structure errors:

1. **Declarative sentence word order**
 - “Normal” sentences follow either of the following structures:
 - Subject + Auxiliary + Negation + Verb + Direct Object + to + Indirect Object.
 - Subject + Auxiliary + Negation + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object.
2. **Adjective order:**
 - To review adjective order, please check out our article at: <http://wordvice.com/how-to-order-adjectives-101/>.
3. **Adverb order:**

Adverbs can be placed:

 - Before the subject or a clause (usually short common adverbs, time words, and adverb phrases that describe the whole clause and not just the verb)
 - After “to be”
 - After the verb or direct object (most adverbs, especially “place” and “manner” words)
 - Between the subject and verb (usually frequency words)
 - Middle of Verb Phrase (usually frequency words). If an auxiliary or modal verb is present, frequency adverbs go after that modal/auxiliary. If there is a modal + auxiliary or multiple auxiliaries, the order is: Subject + modal + negation + frequency adverb + auxiliary + auxiliary + main verb.
4. **Sentence Fragments:**
 - Make sure each sentence has subject (either express or implied) and a verb. If a verb requires a direct object, make sure you include one!

To learn more about word order, parallelism and other sentence structure issues, please visit our website at wordvice.com/blog/!

Quick Tips

Normal sentence structure:

✓ I have not had to give him my reply.

✓ I have not yet written him my reply.

Adverb before subject:

✗ I went **yesterday** to the movies. → ✓ Yesterday, I went to the movies.

Adverb after “to be”:

✗ She **always is** late. → ✓ She is **always** late.

Adverb after verb or direct object:

✗ I did **hastily** my work. → ✓ I did my work **quickly**.

Adverb between subject and verb:

✗ I work long hours **always**. → ✓ I **always** work long hours.

Middle of verb phrase:

✗ We might not have **ever** been allowed to join the club. → ✓ We might not **ever** have been allowed to join the club.

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