

TECHNICAL WRITING

Judicious use of common words and phrases

COMMONLY MISUSED TERMS AND PHRASES

- Absorb / Adsorb
- Accept / Except
- Accurate / Precise
- Affect / Effect
- Alot / Allot
- Alright / All right
- Alternate / Alternative
- Among / Between
- Amount of / Number of
- And / Or
- Area / Region / Section
- As / Like
- Aspect
- Assure / Ensure / Insure
- Between . . . and / From . . . to
- Bi / Semi
- Can / Could
- Cite / Site / Sight
- Coarse / Course
- Compared to / Compared with
- Complement / Compliment
- Compose / Constitute / Include
- Comprise
- Continual / Continuous
- Different than / Different from
- Due to the fact that / The reason is because
- e.g. / i.e. / et al.
- etc.
- Fact / Factor
- Farther / Further
- Few / Less
- Former / Latter
- Imply / Infer
- In terms of
- Irregardless
- It's / Its
- Lay / Lie
- Lead / Led
- May / Might
- One / You
- Per
- Percent / Percentage
- Perfect / Unique
- Perspective / Prospective
- Pretty / Quite / Rather / Very
- Principal / Principle
- Precede / Proceed / Subsequent
- Respective / Respectively
- That / Which
- Try and / Try to
- Will / Would

ACCURATE / PRECISE

- As your cleverest professors might be fond of saying:

"A measurement can be accurate without being precise; a measurement can be precise without being accurate."

We cannot claim that a particular event occurred "precisely 20,000 years ago" or that a particular ore reserve weighs "precisely 1 million tonnes"; by definition, such values are measured coarsely rather than exactly. In relation to the weather, we would properly refer to an accurate (true) forecast, but a precise (exact) temperature.

- "Accuracy" denotes how closely a measurement approaches its true value. An accurate measure, then, is one that conforms well to an implied or stated benchmark:

□ The accuracy of the test results was verified by running 50 of the samples a second time.

□ This particular scale is accurate to the nearest kilogram.

□ "Precise" means marked by a high degree of exactitude:

- One pint is precisely 568.245 milliliters.
- **In the simplest terms, accuracy is about conformity to truth or fact, while precision is about exactness.**

IT'S / ITS

- ❖ These two words probably represent the most common usage problem in papers, but the distinction between the words is painfully simple.
- ❖ "It's" always means "it is." "Its" never does. At first glance, there seems to be an inherent inconsistency, because we usually use apostrophes to indicate possession, but certain words, for instance "its," "hers," and "yours," automatically show possession and need no apostrophes. When you write "it's" be certain that you mean two words rather than one. Read it to yourself aloud if you have to, reading every "it's" as "it is."
- In war, a country must protect its borders.
- It is understood that part of the area's soil is of glacial origin.

BI / SEMI

- ❖ These two prefixes create some confusion, because they both mean "occurring twice during."
- ❖ By convention, a writer can correctly use "bimonthly" and "semimonthly" to mean either "twice a month" or "once every two months." To avoid confusion, I recommend that you follow these standard usage practices:
 - biweekly = once every two weeks;
 - bimonthly = once every two months;
 - semiweekly = twice a week;
 - semimonthly = twice a month;
 - semiannually = twice a year.
- If confusion still might result in context, avoid using the prefixes and simply write out the time-frame clearly ("every two weeks"; "twice per month").

COMPARED TO / COMPARED WITH

- ❖ Use "compared to" to point out similarities between things:
 - RAM can be compared to ROM in that both involve memory storage.
- ❖ Use "compared with" when noting both similarities and differences:
 - By way of Bernoulli's principle, the mechanics and function of a dragonfly's wings can be compared with those of a dolphin's fins.

COMPLEMENT / COMPLIMENT

- ❖ One could argue that most writers confuse these terms as an error of spelling rather than usage—all the more reason to distinguish between them carefully and avoid an embarrassing, sloppy habit.
- ❖ The distinction is simple: "complement" (note the "e" in the middle) means "something that completes"; "compliment" (note the "i" in the middle) means "to express praise" or "thanks to":
 - Jupiter Scientific Publishing Company recently published *The Bible According to Einstein: a Scientific Complement to the Holy Bible for the Third Millennium*.
 - The compliments provided in the "Acknowledgments" section of this manual are provided compliments of the author.
 - Spelling "complement" correctly is especially important in fields such as biochemistry, where "complement components" and "complement pathways" are cited frequently.

WILL / WOULD

- ❖ "Will" suggests strong probability or future likelihood. "Would" implies the same, but is typically used when the probability is more hypothetical.
 - Eventually these sediments will be deposited on a sea floor. ("Will" expresses strong probability and future likelihood.)
 - At still higher temperatures, the radiation would probably become stronger. ("Would" suggests hypothetical probability.)
- ❖ Be especially careful not to overuse "will" and "would," in particular when affirming facts. Some writers habitually compose sentences such as "A comparison of MWD logs and wire line logs would be difficult because they will operate in different environments." In a revised version of this sentence, the writer should eliminate "will" and "would," simply affirming the fact that she knows to be true: "A comparison of MWD logs and wire line logs is difficult because they operate in different environments."

PRECEDE / PROCEED / SUBSEQUENT

- ❖ Various forms of "precede" and "subsequent" are often confused with each other, but the two terms are opposites.
 - To "precede" is "to come before"; "subsequent" means "following in time":
 - Record albums preceded compact discs.
 - Decades can be devoted to the discovery and subsequent clinical development of a single drug.
- ❖ "Precede" is also sometimes confused with "proceed," which means to go forward:
 - When stuck on a particular exam question, proceed to the next question, then return to the difficult question if time allows.