

COMMON ENGLISH GRAMMAR ERRORS

AND HOW TO CORRECT THEM, ESPECIALLY FOR NONNATIVE SPEAKERS

Plural v. Singular with Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Countable nouns are things that can be counted and made into plurals (a hundred dollars, six miles, three children). *Uncountable* nouns are things that cannot easily be counted as individual units (money, wisdom, love, traveling) and usually have no plural form. For example:

*The box contained **many photo** of my family.*

“Photos” are real, countable objects, and in addition, “many” indicates an amount. Instead, write:

*The box contained **many photos** of my family.*

Some uncountable nouns function more like categories and do not have a plural version.

*We have ordered **new office equipments**.*

This sentence does not specify what kind of equipment; equipment functions more like a category. You can correct this problem in one of two ways:

*We have ordered **new office equipment**.* (no plural)

*We have ordered **new desks and chairs**.* (more specific, and therefore plural, nouns)

Incorrect or Missing Articles

The articles *a*, *an*, and *the* are the signal that a noun will follow. *A* and *an* are used in front of nonspecific, singular countable nouns (*a* film, *a* cat, *an* orange, *an* advertisement). *The* is used in front of specific singular and plural nouns (*the* film, *the* cats, *the* furniture, *the* future). For example:

*We ate **delicious dessert** after dinner.*

If dinner was followed by one specific dessert, you need an article:

*We ate **a delicious dessert** after dinner.*

If there was more than one dessert, then you need the plural form (also see previous section):

*We ate **several delicious desserts** after dinner.*

***Players** bowed to each other to show **the respect**.*

This sentence has two article problems. First, if “players” refers to a specific group, it needs an article. Second, respect, as an uncountable noun (in this case a concept), needs no article

***The players** bowed to each other to show **respect**.*

Prepositions

Preposition use does not always follow a clear logic. To master this trickster, memorize common expressions containing prepositions. Examples of common mistakes:

Mistake: ***On July**, we will go to the mountains.*

Correction: ***In July**, we will go to the mountains.*

Mistake: *James is **acquainted to** the president.*

Correction: *James is **acquainted with** the president.*

Repeated Subject

The subject of a sentence should not be repeated in pronoun form.

Repeated subject: *My English **teacher he** is very smart.*

Correct: *My English **teacher** is very smart.*

COMMON ENGLISH GRAMMAR ERRORS (cont'd)

Irregular Verb Usage

Regular verbs in English end in -ed in both the past tense and past participle (work – worked – has worked), while irregular verbs often change form (take/ took, has taken). Their usage is particularly tricky in the past tense. The best way to learn irregular verb forms is to memorize them.

Incorrect past tense: *John **cutted** fabric for the trousers.* (from present-tense “cut”)

Correct: *John **cut** fabric for the trousers.* (In this case, “cut” is past tense.)

Incorrect past tense: *They all **have went** to the Cannes film festival.*

Correct: *They all **have gone** to the Cannes film festival.*

Incorrect Order of Adjectives

In English, when two or more adjectives (modifiers) appear before a noun, they should follow a certain order. Here is the usual “priority” order of adjectives in a series:

1. **Article or other noun signal word** (a, an, the, most)
2. **Judgment** (wonderful, unfair, useful, ugly)
3. **Size** (large, tiny, little)
4. **Shape** (round, long, bell-shaped)
5. **Age** (old, teenaged, modern)
6. **Color** (green, yellow, black)
7. **Nationality** (Vietnamese, French, Russian)
8. **Material** (stone, wood, cotton)

Wrong adjective order: *I've just bought a **yellow new** Mini Cooper.*

Correct: *I've just bought a **new yellow** Mini Cooper.*

Wrong adjective order: *Is that your **silver Mexican favorite** necklace?*

Correct: *Is that your **favorite Mexican silver** necklace?*

Other Common Errors to Look Out For

Passive v. Active Voice: Who performs the action of the verb?

*The ball **was thrown** v. **She threw** the ball.)*

Verb Tense: Be consistent in your use of past, present, future, and complex tenses.

Subject/Verb Agreement: Is the subject singular or plural? Make sure the verb matches.

***They goes** should be **They go**.*

Bibliography and Further Information

In creating this handout, we consulted and/or modified information from the following sources.

Dartmouth College:

<<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/tutor/problems/esl.shtml#topten>>

The Purdue OWL: <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/678/01/>>

Also visit these links for helpful hints, examples, and exercises:

http://college.cengage.com/devenglish/fawcett/evergreen/7e/students/grammar_errors.html

<http://www.esldesk.com/common-errors-english>

http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/drills/index.shtml