

THE “WRITING” IN GRANT WRITING COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AND HANDY ONLINE RESOURCES

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“This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.”

Thus did Winston Churchill poke fun at a picky editor who criticized his ending a sentence with a preposition.

We all chafe at the ministrations of overly zealous grammarians. But grammar and spelling rules exist to promote clarity of expression. And since grant writing is all about getting your ideas across, you should at least be familiar with the rules.

Plus, if you can’t distinguish between “its” and “it’s” or you confuse the spelling of “complement” with “compliment,” the reader may think you don’t care enough to get it right, or worse, that you don’t *know* enough to get it right – the opposite of the impression you hope to create.

Here are a few of our “favorite” errors in grammar, spelling, and word usage, and some handy reference websites. We have caught ourselves making these errors and find it useful to maintain our own list of commonly misused words as a reference guide.

Its vs. it’s – the first is possessive (*Its coat is glossy*). The second is a contraction for “it is” (*It’s a beautiful day*).

Your vs. you’re – same thing. The first is possessive (*Your coat is on fire*), and the second is a contraction for “you are” (*You’re a grant wizard*).

Their vs. they’re vs. there – The first is possessive (*their programs serve all students*), the second means “they are,” and the third indicates where (*Leave the box over there*).

Affect vs. effect – Both are verbs *and* nouns, but “affect” is more common as a verb (*Drinking affects coordination*). “Effect” as a verb means to bring about (*They effected a change*); as a noun, it means a result (*The effect was devastation*).

Alot – no such word; “a lot” is two words.

Compliment vs. complement – The first is flattery (*I want to give you a compliment*), and the second indicates completion or enhancement (*The program complements our mission*). Think of “i” (as in “I compliment you”) vs. “e” (the letter in “complete” and “complement”).

Data vs. datum – In scientific circles, “data” are plural (*The data are in*), and “datum” is singular. Grant projects usually measure outcomes precisely, so it may be safer to use “data” in the plural sense. Outside scientific circles, both usages are becoming standard.

Principle vs. principal – “Principle” is a rule, basis, or law. As a noun, “principal” is an authority (*Principal of the school*), and as an adjective it indicates the highest in importance (*Her principal complaint was his bad grammar*).

Stationery vs. stationary – The first is what you use for letter writing; the second means “motionless.”

Some good online reference guides include:

Capital Community College’s [Guide to Grammar and Writing](#) offers a comprehensive alphabetical index, as well as drop-down menus on everything from sentence variety to interactive quizzes.

[Grammar Girl](#) is an entertaining, searchable blog on all things writing: lie vs. lay, blond or blonde, top ten grammar myths, and much, much more.

[Grammarist.com](#) offers an alphabetical index with entries from “active vs. passive voice” to “zee vs. zed.”

The [Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#) has a great section on grammar that covers common spelling errors, how to write numbers, irregular verbs, and more.

Do you have a pet grammatical peeve? Or a favorite online reference guide? Please share them on our [LinkedIn discussion group](#)!

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