50 Small but Generally Irritating Errors

Michael Lahey

Following are a number of easily avoidable language errors, many of which occur from either *mishearing* small pronunciation differences in similarly sounding words or *misunderstanding* easily grasped distinctions in meaning between certain words (again often similarly sounding words).

1) 1980s
For a long while now, it has been considered incorrect to use an apostrophe ('s) with dates in numerical form.
Example:
- In the 1970s, Led Zeppelin performed their sophisticated brand of heavy metal as though it were both heavy blues improvisation and heavy classical music. In contrast, by the 1990s some brands were performing "death metal," which (to some) barely seems like music at all.

2) Accept/Except
To "accept" is to receive, while "except" signals exclusion.
Example:
- Most people accept the idea that autobiographical books are non-fiction, except, of course, when overly biased opinions contradict established fact.

3) Actually
"Actually" signals a distinction between what was presumed or misperceived and what really is. There is no need to use "actually" to state a plain fact not in dispute.
Example (incorrect):
- Actually, I would like a donair.
Example (correct):
- While long considered an Italian invention, spaghetti may actually be Chinese in origin.

4) Advise/Advice
To "advise" is to offer someone specific or expert guidance, whereas "advice," a noun, is that information or guidance offered.
Example:
- The teacher advised the students to proofread carefully for grammar errors, as well as to review all her previous advice on topic sentences and conciseness.

5) Affect/Effect
"Affect" is a verb, while "effect" is often a noun.
Example:
- The effect of caffeine alters heart rate and concentration; caffeine also affects vitamin retention. "Affect" means "to have an effect on. "Affect" may also mean

"to act on the emotions," as in, "The song deeply affects me." When "effect" occurs as a verb, it means "to bring about or execute" as in, "measures designed to effect savings."

Exception:
- Nineteenth-century novelists were concerned with the power of sentiment, with the "affects" of their readers. "Affect" in this case is a noun meaning strong emotion.

Reading on the "affective" level means responding to emotional cues embedded in images, metaphors, tone, and the like. So "affect" in some cases means emotion expressed in art or communication.

6) Aggravate/Annoy or Irritate
To "aggravate" means to make worse, while to "annoy" or "irritate" means merely to bother.
Example:
- While skiing yesterday, he aggravated his injured knee.
- He was irritated by their references to Chester, the lame sidekick deputy, in the old *Gunsmoke* TV series.

7) Allot/A lot
To "allot" something is to offer portions, while "a lot," *always two words*, means a great deal of, plenty, *mucho*.
Example:
- The committee needs to allot the scholarships and bursaries fairly, so these decisions require a lot of consideration.

"A lot" is considered *informal* phrasing, in many cases too informal for academic writing,

8) Allude/Elude
To "allude" is to refer to something, while "elude" means to evade.
Example:
- Alluding to the recent steroid scandal, the Olympic coach assured the press that cheaters using banned substances would not elude the team's strict new standards.

9) Allusion/Illusion
An "allusion" is a reference to a person, place, thing or event mentioned earlier, while an "illusion" is a deception, a false appearance.
Example:
- In the film *Wild at Heart*, the director makes several allusions to *The Wizard of Oz*, which similarly deals with danger and illusions.

10) Already/All ready
"Already" is an adverb whereas "ready" is an adjective that often serves as a verb complement preceded by the adjective "all." In other cases, "all" serves as subject of the sentence or main clause with "ready" serving as subject complement, as in the third example below.

Example:
- We were <u>already</u> dressed when she finally crawled out of her tent.
- We had the equipment packed; aside from her, we were <u>all ready</u> to leave.
- Aside from her, <u>all</u> of the campers were <u>ready</u> to leave.

11) <u>American/British/Canadian Spellings</u>
In 1890, by order-in-council, Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald legislated the British spelling of certain "–our" words, e.g., "colour," "favour," "odour," "glamour," and "honour." Some believe passionately that there is little honour in spelling the word "honor," although the Canadian Press resisted Sir John A's wishes until 1998. Since then, there has been a marked trend of Canadian newspapers using "-our" endings for these noted words. Most Canadian educational institutions prefer the noted "-our" endings and various other British spelling choices, such as "centre" rather than "center," and "practice" for the noun rather than "practise." Canada also prefers "defence" to "defense" but "program" to "programme." Canada being Canada, it is almost impossible to resolve upon a national "right" choice, as various authorities take different directions. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary is an excellent choice for spellings in Canada. Gage tends to follow American practice (or, as it would write the word, "practise"). The Nelson Canadian Dictionary, an Encyclopedic Reference, indicates variant spellings, American and British versions, without saying which should be followed. The following short list of spellings in Canada simply indicates a general preference.
Example:
- colour, centre, defence, aesthetic, enroll, organize, analyze, grey, sceptical, mould, cheque, program

Be aware that spell checks are notoriously unreliable for various reasons, and "Canadianized" versions can be especially faulty. For more interesting information on Canadian words and spellings, see See Cornerstone's Canadian English page, on line. Also see Margaret Slaght's entertaining short film *Talking Canadian*. It was produced in 2004 by Morningstar Entertainment and CBC Home Video.

12) <u>Amoral/Immoral</u>
"Amoral" means without morals or morally neutral, while "immoral" means morally wrong.
Example:
- In contract disputes and many cases where the law clearly applies as already written, the court is supposed to perform <u>amorally</u>, neutrally. Many people, however, believe an unfair contract is <u>immoral</u> in and of itself.

13) <u>Amount/Number</u>
"Amount" indicates an uncountable sum (such as water, heartache or joy), while "number" indicates a countable sum (such as red cars or orange popsicles).
Example:
- James Brown, the tireless godfather of soul music, demands a large <u>amount</u> of expertise, timing and dedication from his band, since these musicians run through a large <u>number</u> of demanding songs on any given night.

14) Anxious/Eager

"Anxious" indicates anxiety or worry, whereas "eager" indicates anticipation; "anxious" has a negative meaning, while "eager" a positive meaning.
Example:

- Tatsuo Miyajima, a Tokyo artist, is a bit anxious about his work appearing in an international New York exhibit, but he is certainly eager to gain some wider acclaim and exposure.

15) Anyways

There is no such word as "anyways," so always use "anyway."
Example:

- Our lab's results establish a link between yogurt consumption and weight loss, but this correlation needs to be further examined. Anyway, we now speculate that the calcium in yogurt may help burn fat.

16) Assure/Ensure/Insure

To "assure" someone is to impart confidence or speak with certainty to him or her, while to either "insure" or "ensure" is to act so that something certainly does or does not happen. To "insure" also means to purchase an insurance policy.
Example:

- Frank Lloyd Wright assured his clients that their house would be finished on time, and he began to work overtime to ensure he would meet his deadline, since he well knew these clients had insured themselves with a policy that could hurt his architectural company in case of default.

17) Biased Language and Presumptions

Watch out for sexist language and racial, religious, ethnic or cultural presumptions through your writing; they invariably signal narrowness in your thinking and therefore your judgments. Quite simply, why recklessly offend the potential readers you seek to communicate with and possibly persuade of your observations?
Example (ridiculous):

- We heard that a medical doctor would be at the party and we wondered what his specialty would be. We also heard that Akissi Solange Loukou, who came from Uganda to study accounting at the University of Toronto, would drop by with some of her friends, so we hoped that a lot of good foot-stomping and hand-clapping would ensue as the evening wore on. Pierre Rioux and Louise Mennier, a Francophone New Brunswick couple, would also be there and—who knows?— maybe they will bring some fresh lobster, tasty fish chowder and poutine. Stephanie, the party's host, is a third-generation Japanese-Canadian, so we will all probably have to take our shoes off at the door after we bow. I'm so clumsy with chopsticks, especially with lobster and poutine!

18) Can/May

The auxiliary "can" simply means able to, while "may" signals a request, permission to.
Example:

- Yolanda certainly <u>can</u> ask Thomas Sutpen a personal question, but she should ask "<u>May</u> I ask you a personal question" before she does.

19) <u>Conscience/Conscious</u>

"Conscience," a noun, is that specifically psychological, social or spiritual quality of a person that quietly registers deeper feelings or conflict, doubt, regret, or guilt. "Conscious," an adjective, means awake or aware.

Example:

- Although <u>conscious</u> that junk food offers no nutrition and can cause long term health problems, advertisers still try to influence children's interest, apparently without a troubled <u>conscience</u>.

20) <u>Deny/Refute</u>

To "deny" is to <u>claim</u> otherwise, sometimes even emotionally, and often the opposite. To "refute" is to <u>prove</u>, conclusively, meticulously that the claim is not true.

Example:

- Mayor Gus Oilpipe <u>denies</u> he is indifferent to environmental concerns, although nobody can <u>refute</u> the needless ozone damage his Hummer represents.

21) <u>Disinterested/Uninterested</u>

"Disinterested" means concerned and aware but completely neutral, objective, not invested in any particular outcome, whereas "uninterested" means not at all concerned: indifferent, perhaps even bored.

Example:

- Malissa James, a volleyball official, is <u>disinterested</u> in the tournament's outcome; some of the crowd seem <u>uninterested</u> in today's boring match between Manitoba and Prince Edward Island.

22) <u>e.g./etc./i.e.</u>

The abbreviation "e.g." means "example given," while "etc." means "more of the same" and "i.e." means "that is to say." Science and business reports use such abbreviations, but English essays not so much.

Example:

- Emergency workers (<u>e.g.</u> paramedics, trauma team doctors and nurses) often endure the same stress levels as those in highly dangerous jobs, such as police, war zone journalists, fire-fighters, <u>etc.</u> For instance, C.P.R., <u>i.e.</u> cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, is often stressful for both patient and rescuer.

23) <u>Elicit/Illicit</u>

"Elicit" is a verb meaning to obtain or receive, while "illicit" is an adjective meaning illegal, unethical or immoral.

Example:

- Rock and roll music was once considered <u>illicit</u> activity because of the response it seemed to <u>elicit</u> from teenagers.

24) First/Firstly

Firstly seems a bit ridiculous to experienced writers, but it is not technically wrong (though perhaps it should be). If you like to use "firstly," however, you need to follow it with "secondly," "thirdly," (when necessary) rather than mix "secondly" with "third" and "fourth" with "fifthly."
Example:

- Noor Inayat Khan was remarkable for several reasons. First, she was a British spy in the Second World War. Second, Khan was a Muslim woman working against (but using as part of her cover) all the narrow 1940s gender and cultural stereotypes. Third, she was awarded the prestigious "George Cross" for her wartime espionage, the only Muslim the British government has honoured with this medal.

25) Further/Farther

"Further" measures intangible (intellectual, emotional) concepts, while "farther" measures real physical distance.
Example:

- Lionel became further involved in desperate gambling even though he often parked his car far away from the casino, hoping that, with farther to walk, he would lose less money by closing time.

26) Hopefully

"Hopefully" means "full of hope" or "with hope." It does not mean "it is hoped." You can attend your final exam with a hopeful attitude, but you cannot tell your friend that "hopefully, I'll receive a B" or "the teacher will hopefully overlook the errors."
Example:

- Tanya, Lisa, Stephanie and Patricia are looking hopefully to the future, confident in their belief that life can become increasingly rich and interesting.

27) Illusion/Delusion

An illusion is an erroneous perception or belief, but not necessarily one that was deliberately created. To delude is to deceive the mind of judgement, so a delusion is an erroneous perception or belief that was manufactured by someone or something. In psychiatry, a delusion is a false belief that is strongly held in spite of invalidating evidence.
Example:

- As we grow older and visit other places, we lose some of our illusions about life.
- The true intent of the psychic experiment was to equip military agents with a device that could inflict delusions upon the perceived enemy.
- The protected and privileged populace of that country, already harboring a number of naive illusions, began to suffer serious delusions once the new government's propaganda campaign went into high gear.

28) Imply/Infer

To "imply" means to suggest, while to "infer" means to surmise, to tentatively conclude.
Example:

- North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il frequently <u>implies</u> he would immediately resort to long-range nuclear missile use, if provoked. Based on international opinion, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan <u>infer</u> North Korea is a serious security threat.

29) <u>I myself</u>
This phrasing belongs in the Department. of Redundancy, since "I" is always "myself."

30) <u>In addition</u>
Many students begin body paragraphs with this transition in contexts that raise the immediate question, "in addition to <u>what</u>?" It is always best to be <u>specific</u>, to articulate the intended connection <u>explicitly</u> for the reader.
Example:
- <u>In addition</u> to his television work, Kiefer Sutherland has also starred in such films as *Lost Boys* and *Bright Lights, Big City*.

31) <u>Irregardless</u>
This word does not exist, though many people seem to use it
Example:
- <u>Regardless</u> of the heat, the track meet will continue as planned.

32) <u>It's/Its</u>
"It's" is a contraction for "it is," while "its" is a possessive pronoun (like "his," "her," or "their") that signals an antecedent.
Example:
- <u>It's</u> good that Brad and Angelina donate to charity, just as Microsoft often gives some of <u>its</u> vast wealth to good causes.

33) <u>Less/Fewer</u>
These adjectives have the same meaning, but "less" applies to nouns that are *unquantifiable* while "fewer" modifies nouns that are *quantifiable*—that is, countable.
Example:
- There are recently <u>fewer</u> optimistic predictions about the U.S. presence in Iraq, especially since the American military has <u>less</u> justification than it initially claimed for the invasion.

34) <u>Nouns into Verbs</u>
For about twenty years or so, a furious and slightly pretentious tendency to turn perfectly good nouns into dubious verbs has puzzled many writing teachers. Not surprisingly, many of these "new" pretentious verbs emerge from the business world, business schools and, of course, public relations departments spewing silliness. Try to avoid such "verbifying," since the English language has enough verbs already, thank you very much.
Example (dubious):
- Karen, the bistro's manager, <u>incentivizes</u> Al, the bartender, with extra tips, but when he constantly says "<u>beer</u> me," she rightfully <u>self-assesses</u> how this incessant demand for promo drinks will <u>impact</u> her paying patrons' morale.

Example (better):
- Karen, the bistro's manager, <u>rewards</u> Al, the bartender, with extra tips, but when he constantly <u>asks</u> for free beer, she <u>wonders</u> how this incessant demand for promo drinks will <u>affect</u> the paying customers' morale.

The construction "impact on…" and the transitive use of impact (e.g. to impact a customer) are relatively new, having arisen from the corporate world. Many writers still avoid these uses of "impact" as pretensions, but as the Nelson Dictionary predicts, they will probably seem completely acceptable before too much longer. Perhaps all of us, including snobby English professors, must prepare to "transition" to a new era.

35) <u>Of/Have</u>
Many students form incorrect expressions in speech and writing by wrongly substituting the preposition "of" for the auxiliaries "have," "should," "may," or "could."
Example:
- England's Margaret Thatcher, Canada's Maureen McTeer, and America's Hillary Clinton <u>may</u> <u>have</u> set some of the most vivid examples of independent women in Western politics in the second half of the twentieth century. Each <u>could</u> <u>have</u> written several books on her experiences.

36) <u>Practice/Practise</u>
In Canada , for a majority of us,"practice" is a <u>noun</u>, whereas "practise" is a <u>verb</u>. In the United States, however, "practice" is both a noun <u>and</u> a verb.
Example:
- Dr. Monica Penner's medical <u>practice</u> has many patients in Kelowna, including Allison Hill and Uta Hengst, who need to <u>practise</u> their tennis more to qualify for the British Columbia finals.

37) <u>Principle/Principal</u>
A "principle" is an ethic or belief, while a "principal" runs a high school or is a major player in an event or negotiation.
Example:
- When the law firm finally contacts all the <u>principals</u> involved in the polluted water class action suit, a discussion of environmental and legal <u>principles</u> will ensue.

38) <u>Quotations (missing [opening or closing] or under-used [plagiarism])</u>
You need to quote all language and attribute by page number all paraphrased or summarized ideas that come from a research source (newspaper, scholarly article, book chapter) and <u>never</u> to quote <u>only partially</u> or slip someone else's ideas in <u>unattributed</u>.
Example:
- Sonja del Rio points out that Buddy Holly's songs are "distinctive for their punctuated vocals" (142) and then goes on to say that his music was instrumentally sophisticated for its time (157).

39) Quote/Quotation

"Quote" is a verb; "quotation" is a noun.
Example:

- Susan <u>quoted</u> the Warren Zevon song "Werewolves of London" when she said "I saw a werewolf drinking a pina colada at Trader Vic's." Another <u>quotation</u> from this song is "his hair was perfect."

40) Someone, Somebody, Nobody, Everyone

All these words, ending in "one" or "body" are <u>singular</u>, so always use a <u>singular</u> verb form to achieve subject-verb agreement.
Example:

- <u>Everyone</u>, including Mengyuan, Xue, Depreet, Theodore, Vasaliki and Nanxuan's neighbours, <u>is</u> waiting for the Neil Young concert to come to town. <u>Nobody</u> <u>wants</u> to miss Young's eclectic mix of folk, classic rock, ballads and even some guitar feedback.

41) Statements/Questions

Sometimes a statement can seem like a question, but still <u>remains</u> a statement, so you need to end it with a period, <u>not</u> a question mark.
Example:

- The police <u>wondered</u> if Daphne's alibi was truthful. Daphne <u>questioned herself</u> about <u>whether</u> the full truth could be told.

42) That (*not* for people)

Watch out not to use "that," a relative pronoun, as a qualifier for people. Instead, use "who" for people. Even if referring to a position that a person holds (lawyer, soccer player, Zamboni driver), use "who" as your qualifier.
Example:

- Jack Kirby was a visionary comic book artist <u>who</u> invented an entire universe of charismatic characters, including the original X-men. Those comic book historians <u>who</u> claim that Neal Adams, <u>who</u> radically drew Batman, The Green Lantern and The Green Arrow as gritty, realistic figures in the 1970s, remains the most talented artist need to look again at the way Kirby, unlike Adams, imagined an entire world <u>that</u> resonated fully.

43) Their/They're/There

"Their," a possessive pronoun, refers to more than one person as an antecedent, while "they're" is a contraction for "they are." "There" specifies in or at a place.
Example:

- The musicians gathered <u>their</u> sheet music because <u>they're</u> giving a concert tomorrow over <u>there</u> by the monument.

44) Then/Than

"Then," an adverb refers to time or sequence, while "than," a preposition or conjunction, signals a comparison.

Example:

- Susan is taller <u>than</u> she, and Vancouver has more rainfall <u>than</u> Saskatoon.
- We went swimming and <u>then</u> walked home.

In the first example, the nominative case of the pronoun is used after "than" because the construction is understood to be saying "Susan is taller than she is." Informal English might say "Susan is taller than her."

45) <u>There are/Here is</u>

When "there" or "here" begins a clause, the subject <u>follows</u> the verb (usually, in other sentence structures, the subject appears somewhere before the verb).

Example:

- There <u>are</u> many <u>scholars</u> who say the English language began around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire. There <u>is</u> <u>evidence</u> it was spoken near the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea five thousand years ago.

These words are called "expletives" or "dummy subjects." See Exercise 1, p. 10, in "Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors" at this website, Handbook. . Do questions 12 and 13 of Exercise 1 p. 11). Then see the answer key for those two questions for further discussion of the expletive construction.

46) <u>This</u>

"This" is probably the world's most common unclear pronoun reference. You avoid "this" as a vague reference by finding a <u>precise noun</u> to follow it.

Example:

- The semi-occult film *Cat People*, starring Malcolm McDowell and Natassia Kinski, has a strange plot, little logic, and a theme song by David Bowie. <u>This music</u> is surprisingly good, particularly the haunting lines "See these eyes so green/I can stare for a thousand years."
- Some chefs, especially those in Europe, like to marinate flank steak in wine or citrus juice so that <u>this acidic liquid</u> tenderizes the meat and adds flavour, especially if the steak is slightly sliced when it is soaking. <u>This gourmet technique</u> is not necessary at a barbeque or rushed meal, however.

47) <u>Unique</u>

"Unique" strictly means "one of a kind" rather than "sort of interesting in a neat kind of way." "Unique" as a description certainly applies to fingerprints, DNA and snowflakes, but only rarely to political situations, cultural products, scientific outcomes, geographical or architectural formations (and seldom to people); you should therefore refrain from writing "unique" all over every page. Instead, find a more particular and precise word.

Example (incorrect):

- Quebec, where my really <u>unique</u> friend Marcel lives in this sort of <u>unique</u> one-bedroom apartment with two <u>unique</u> goldfish, is our most <u>unique</u> province because it has the largest land size—a <u>unique</u> fact.

Example (better):

- Quebec, where my really <u>interesting and zany</u> friend Marcel lives in this <u>unusual</u> one-bedroom apartment with two <u>distinctly coloured</u> goldfish, is arguably among

our most self-contained cultural regions as well as our largest province—the latter point an <u>often overlooked</u> fact.

48) <u>Which/That</u>
"Which" is a restrictive pronoun that works with <u>non-restrictive qualifiers</u>, while "that," also a relative pronoun, works with <u>restrictive qualifiers</u>. A non-restrictive qualifier requires <u>two</u> commas to set it apart in a sentence; a restrictive qualifier requires no commas, but exists instead simply as part of the sentence's flow.
Example:
- During the Second World War, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, an international hero for defying the Nazis, inflicted, in India, famine policies <u>that</u> resulted in approximately 3.5 million deaths. This gruesome fact, <u>which</u> is not well known, reveals the dangerous implications of all wartime strategies.

49) <u>Whose/Who's</u>
"Whose" is a possessive pronoun ("whose book is this?"), while "who's," a contraction, stands for "who is."
Example:
- <u>Whose</u> report is this? <u>Who's</u> the author of this report?
Contractions are considered informal and often discouraged in academic writing.

50) <u>Using Nouns (or Other Words) as Adjectives</u>
An increasingly common and undeniably irritating trend today is for students to misspell adjectives, often spelling them as nouns, sometimes even as verbs, as in the following examples.

Example (Incorrect):
- She is a world <u>renown</u> concert pianist.
Example (Correct):
- She is a world <u>renowned </u>concert pianist.
Example (Incorrect):
- It is an <u>endanger</u> species.
Example (Correct):
- It is an endangered species.

No doubt this increasingly common error results in part from a failure to hear the "-ed" pronounced at the end of such adjectives, as well as a tendency for more and more speakers not to pronounce the ending. Many adjectives derive from past participles of verbs, e.g., "a rectified situation." One should not write "a rectify" situation, using the verb form instead of the participle form, to serve as the adjective. If you have any doubts whether a certain word you have used as an adjective really is an adjective according to your spelling of the word, check your dictionary. Adjectives are identified as "adj." Apart from reasons of mishearing, nouns are increasingly being used as adjectives in business and the media, e.g. "a Canada offer" rather than "a Canadian offer." Guard against this informal practice in your academic writing.

51) Mad/Angry

"Mad" means insane. Angry means upset with anger.

Example:

- King Lear is <u>angry</u> when told by his eldest daughter to leave her castle; later in the play, however, when he tears off his clothes in the midst of a pounding storm, he is clearly <u>mad</u>.

Even though this final entry means departing from our title "50 Common Errors," the inconsistency is worth it, because this particular misuse really makes us mad!