

year end and year out/year in and year out

When something goes on continually, it is traditional to say it happens “year in and year out,” meaning “from the beginning of the year to its end—and so on year after year.”

The mistaken form “year end and year out” doesn’t make sense because “year end” and “year out” both refer to the same part of the year, so no time span is being described.

New Year’s Day

January

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*“Other men will come and go—
but if you ask me, Dom Pérignon
is good year in and year out.”*

grammer/grammar

It's amazing how many people write to thank me for helping them with their "grammer." It's "grammar." The word is often incorrectly used to label patterns of spelling and usage that have nothing to do with the structure of language, the proper subject of grammar in the most conservative sense. Not all bad writing is due to bad grammar.

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SATURDAY/SUNDAY

As a *science*, grammar treats of a connection between ideas and words, and the principles of language. As an *art*, it is the practice of speaking or writing language, in accordance with its true principles and correct usage.

— Josiah Swett & Lindley Murray,
An English Grammar

shone/shown

“Shone” is the past tense of “shine”:
“long after sunset, the moon still
shone brightly in the sky.”

“Shown” is a past tense form
of “show”: “foreign films are rarely
shown at our local theater.”

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²⁴ / ₃₁	25	26	27	28	29	30

minature/miniature

Few people pronounce the second syllable in “miniature” distinctly, so it often gets dropped in spelling.

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possessed of/possessed by/possessed with

If you own a yacht, you're possessed of it. If a demon takes over your body, you're possessed by it. If that which possesses you is more metaphorical, as in the case of an executive determined to get ahead, he or she can be possessed by or with the desire to win.

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brainchild

Some people misuse “brainchild,” as in “Steve Jobs is the brainchild behind the iPhone.”

A brainchild is not a person, but the child (product) of someone’s brain. So the iPhone is the brainchild of Steve Jobs.



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*Warren was no one's brainchild;
he was just an ordinary child.*

parameters/perimeters

When parameters were spoken of only by mathematicians and scientists, the term caused few problems; but now that it has become widely adopted by other speakers, it is constantly confused with “perimeters.” A parameter is most commonly a mathematical constant, a set of physical properties, or a characteristic of something. But the perimeter of something is its boundary. The two words shade into each other because we often speak of factors of an issue or problem being parameters, simultaneously thinking of them as limits; but this is to confuse two distinct, if related, ideas. A safe rule is to avoid using “parameters” altogether unless you are confident you know what it means.

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inflammable/flammable

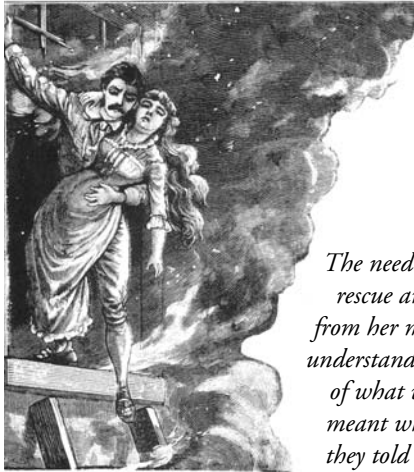
The prefix “in-” does not indicate negation here; it comes from the word “inflammable.” “Flammable” and “inflammable” both mean “easy to catch on fire,” but so many people misunderstand the latter term that it’s better to stick with “flammable” in safety warnings.

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*The need for
rescue arose
from her mis-
understanding
of what was
meant when
they told her
the apartment
was inflammable.*

disc/disk

“Compact disc” is spelled with a *C* because that’s how its inventors decided it should be rendered; but a computer hard disk is spelled with a *K*. In modern technological contexts, “disks” usually reproduce data magnetically, while “discs” (CD-ROMs, DVDs, etc.) reproduce it “optically,” with lasers.

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autobiography/biography

When you write the story of your own life, you write an autobiography; but when you write the story of someone else's life, it's just a plain old biography.

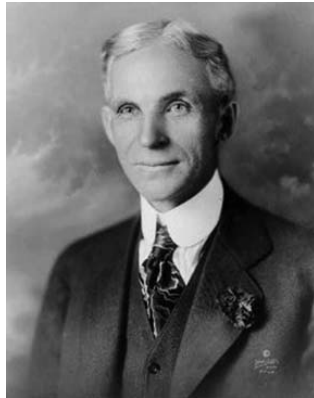
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TUESDAY



The story of Henry Ford and his cars is rather auto biographical.

**you've got another thing coming/
you've got another think coming**

Here's a case in which eagerness to avoid error leads to error. The original expression is the last part of a deliberately ungrammatical joke: "If that's what you think, you've got another think coming."

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if I was/if I were

The subjunctive mood, always weak in English, has been dwindling away for centuries until it has almost vanished. According to traditional thought, statements about the conditional future such as “If I were a carpenter . . .” require the subjunctive “were”; but “was” is certainly much more common. Still, if you want to impress those in the know with your usage, use “were.” The same goes for other pronouns: “you,” “she,” “he,” and “it.” In the case of the plural pronouns “we” and “they” the form “was” is definitely nonstandard, of course, because it is a singular form.

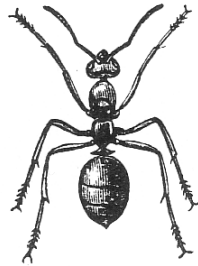
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Meet Rusty the red wood ant. His version of “If I Were a Carpenter” used to knock ‘em dead at the coffee houses.

crowbar/wrecking bar

A crowbar is a straight bar with one end only slightly bent and sharpened into a beak. This beak gave the tool its name, originally just a “crow.”

The tool with the much more pronounced hook on the end—designed for prying loose boards and drawing nails—is properly called a “wrecking bar.”

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definate/definite

Any vowel in an unstressed position can sometimes have the sound linguists call a “schwa”: “uh.” The result is that many people tend to guess when they hear this sound, but “definite” is definitely the right spelling. Also common are various misspellings of “definitely,” including the bizarre “defiantly.”

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enthus

“Enthuse” is a handy word and “state enthusiastically” is not nearly so striking; but unfortunately “enthuse” is not acceptable in the most formal contexts.

*“I’m happy to hear you ‘enthuse’
about my word choice, but please
forgive my not returning the
compliment.”*



Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

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anymore/any more

In the first place, the traditional (though now uncommon) spelling is as two words: “any more” as in “We do not sell bananas any more.” In the second place, it should not be used at the beginning of a sentence as a synonym for “nowadays.” In certain dialects of English it is common to utter phrases like, “Anymore you have to grow your own if you want really ripe tomatoes,” but this is guaranteed to jolt listeners who aren’t used to it. Even if they can’t quite figure out what’s wrong, they’ll feel that your speech is vaguely clunky and awkward. “Any more” always needs to be used as part of an expression of negation except in questions like, “Do you have any more bananas?” Now you won’t make that mistake any more, will you?

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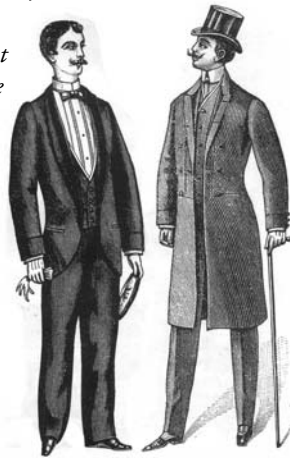
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doubt that/doubt whether/doubt if

If you really doubt that something is true (suspect that it's false), use "doubt that": "I doubt that Fred has really lost 25 pounds." If you want to express genuine uncertainty, use "whether": "I doubt whether we'll see the comet if the clouds don't clear soon." "Doubt if" can be substituted for "doubt whether," though it's considered somewhat more casual, but don't use it when you mean "doubt that."

—*"And I doubt that you'd be the one to tell me."*

—*"Sir, I doubt whether you've phrased that correctly."*



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ecology/environment

“Ecology” is the study of living things in relationship to their environment. The word can also be used to describe the totality of such relationships; but it should not be substituted for “environment” in statements like “Improperly discarded lead batteries harm the ecology.” It’s not the relationships that are being harmed, but nature itself: the batteries are harming the environment.

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bailout/bail out

Whether you are bailing out a rowboat or a bank, use the two-word spelling to describe the action of doing it (the verb form): “we need to bail out the boat before we can go fishing.”

But to label the activity itself (the noun form), use the one-word spelling: “this bailout is going to be expensive.”

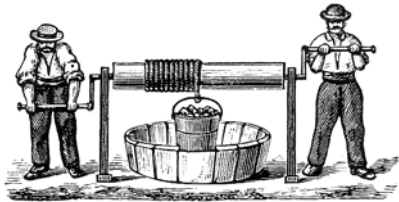
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*Hearing a bailout was needed set
Jackson and Kellan right to the task.*

expresses that/says that

“In her letter Jane expresses that she is getting irritated with me for not writing” should be corrected to “In her letter Jane says that. . . .” You can express an idea or a thought, but you can’t ever express *that*. In technical terms, “express” is a transitive verb and requires an object.

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legend/myth

Myths are generally considered to be traditional stories whose importance lies in their significance, like the myth of the Fall in Eden; whereas legends can be merely famous deeds, like the legend of Davy Crockett. In common usage “myth” usually implies fantasy. Enrico Caruso was a legendary tenor, but Hogwarts is a mythical school. Legends may or may not be true. But be cautious about using “myth” to mean “untrue story” in a mythology, theology, or literature class, where teachers can be quite touchy about insisting that the true significance of a myth lies not in its factuality but in its meaning for the culture that produces or adopts it.

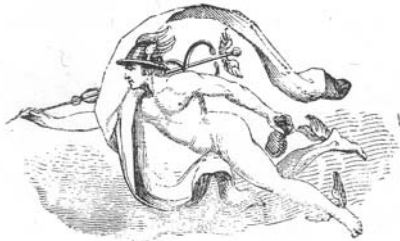
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Meet Hermes, the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology, doing his legendary “flying ribbon” routine.

majorly/extremely

“Majorly,” meaning “extremely,” is slang and should not be used in formal writing, or even speech if you want to impress someone. “Brad was extremely [not ‘majorly’] worried about the course final until he got around to reading the syllabus and found out there wasn’t one.”

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rational/rationale

“Rational” is an adjective meaning “reasonable” or “logical”: “Ivan made a rational decision to sell his old car when he moved to New York.”

“Rational” rhymes with “national.”

“Rationale” is a noun which most often means “underlying reason”: “His rationale for this decision was that it would cost more to pay for parking than the car was worth.”

“Rationale” rhymes with “passion pal.”

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motion/move

When you make a motion in a meeting, say simply “I move,” as in “I move to adjourn”; and if you’re taking the minutes, write “Barbara moved,” not “Barbara motioned” (unless Barbara was making wild arm-waving gestures to summon the servers to bring in the lunch). Instead of “I want to make a motion . . .” it’s simpler and more direct to say “I want to move. . . .”

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Sedentary Sam was never interested in moving or making any motion whatsoever.

A.D.

“A.D.” does not mean “after death,” as many people suppose. “B.C.” stands for the English phrase “before Christ,” but “A.D.” stands confusingly for a Latin phrase: *anno domini* (“in the year of the Lord”—the year Jesus was born). If the calendar actually changed with Jesus’ death, then what would we do with the years during which he lived? Since Jesus was probably actually born around 6 B.C. or so, the connection of the calendar with him can be misleading.

Many Biblical scholars, historians, and archeologists prefer the less sectarian designations “before the Common Era” (B.C.E.) and “the Common Era” (C.E.).

All of these abbreviations can also be spelled without their periods.

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entitled/titled

Some people argue that you should say a book is “titled” such-and-such rather than “entitled.” But no less a writer than Chaucer is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as having used “entitled” in this sense, the very first meaning of the word listed by the *OED*. It may be a touch pretentious, but it’s not wrong.

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