

Editing Writing: Four More Common Errors

For this activity, use a highlighter to help you identify problems with the clarity of your prose.

1. **Spell checker errors.** Use a spell checker, and then re-read your paper after the spell checker is complete. One of the most common error students make is “word choice,” the result of unintended words created by a spell checker; for example, the word “apgar” appears when a student intended “after.” There is no substitute for re-reading – and re-reading aloud is more effective than reading silent. Do this now.
2. **Incorrect tense shift.** Often through revision writers will switch tenses, as from the present to the past, without realizing that they have made the switch in the middle of a sentence or paragraph. Example: “President Bush was president for seven years; during this time he is becoming ever-less popular.” If you have a tense shift problems, read through your draft and highlight *all* the verbs; then go back and analyze what tense you should use. The most important principle to remember is to be consistent.
3. **Vague pronoun reference.** Pronouns replace words so that the replaced word (antecedent) doesn't have to be repeated again and again. We use pronouns all the time, as in, “In Malcolm X’s essay *he* uses his own story to teach a lesson about reading and writing.” In this sentence, *he* is the pronoun; we're glad to have it used here because we didn't need to read “Malcolm X” twice in one sentence. It sounds clumsy.

However, frequently writers (and speakers) overuse pronouns. They write *he, she, it, they, this, that, which* and *who* in ways that are not clear. Readers can't actually figure out what the pronoun refers to (what the antecedent is) when pronouns are used inappropriately. Here's an example: “The teachers would yell at the students all the time, often hysterically. Sometimes they would end up almost crying, and in trouble with the principal.” The writer means to say that the students would end up crying and in trouble, but the sentence is written to actually mean that the teachers were crying and at the principal’s office.

U.S. law prohibits illegal immigration, *which* many citizens support.” Here the use of *which* is inappropriate. As readers we don't know if citizens support illegal immigration or if they support the law that *prohibits* illegal immigration.

If you have a problem with vague pronouns, go back through your paper and highlight every time you use a pronoun (see list above, in italics). Then, re-read the essay and judge each highlighted pronoun: is the meaning completely clear? For more examples of over-use of pronouns, see your handbook under pronoun reference.

4. **Words that sound the same or almost the same, but which have different meanings.**

If you have a tendency to confuse words that have the same sound, but are spelled differently, you should read your essay through for the sole purpose of finding and correcting incidences of this problem. It's a kind of writing problem that some people make all the time, and others seldom do. Go through your paper and circle every time you use one of the words on the list below. After you have circled these words, check in a dictionary or the handbook (Glossary of Usage section) to make sure you know what these words mean. Once you are clear on the meaning of these words, check over each time you have used the problematic words to make sure you have chosen the correct spelling.

to/too/two their/there/they're where/we're your/you're
its/it's whose/who's except/accept advice/advise

There are more examples in the Glossary of Usage. Some students see these kinds of errors as unimportant, but most teachers are aggravated by these kinds of errors.