

6 Misuse

- 6.1** This material comes from [JW72], chapter IV, “Words and expressions commonly mis-used.”
- 6.2** Many of the words and expressions here listed are not so much bad English as bad style, the commonplaces of careless writing. The proper correction is likely to be not the replacement of one word or set of words by another, but the replacement of vague generality by definite statement.
- 6.3 All right.** Idiomatic in familiar speech as a detached phrase in the sense, “Agreed,” or “Go ahead.” In other uses better avoided. Always written as two words.
- 6.4 As good or better than.** Expressions of this type should be corrected by rearranging the sentence.
Bad: My opinion is as good or better than his.
Good: My opinion is as good as his, or better (if not better).
- 6.5 As to whether.** *Whether* is sufficient.
- 6.6 Case.** The Concise Oxford Dictionary begins its definition of this word: “instance of a something occurring; usual state of affairs.” In these two senses, the word is usually unnecessary.
Bad: In many cases, the rooms were poorly ventilated.
Good: Many of the rooms were poorly ventilated.
Bad: It has rarely been the case that any mistake has been made.
Good: Few mistakes have been made.
- 6.7 Certainly.** Used indiscriminately by some speakers, much as others use *very*, to intensify any and every statement. A mannerism of this kind, bad in speech, is even worse in writing.
- 6.8 Character.** Often simply redundant, used from a mere habit of wordiness.
Bad: Acts of a hostile character
Good: Hostile acts
- 6.9 Claim, vb.** With object-noun, means *lay claim to*. May be used with a dependent clause if this sense is clearly involved: “He claimed that he was the sole surviving heir.” (But even here, “claimed to be” would be better.) Not to be used as a substitute for *declare, maintain, or charge*.

- 6.10 Compare.** To *compare to* is to point out or imply resemblances, between objects regarded as essentially of different order; to *compare with* is mainly to point out differences, between objects regarded as essentially of the same order. Thus life has been compared to a pilgrimage, to a drama, to a battle; Congress may be compared with the British Parliament. Paris has been compared to ancient Athens; it may be compared with modern London.
- 6.11 Clever.** This word has been greatly overused; it is best restricted to ingenuity displayed in small matters.
- 6.12 Consider.** Not followed by *as* when it means, “believe to be.” “I consider him thoroughly competent.” Compare, “The lecturer considered Cromwell first as soldier and second as administrator,” where “considered” means “examined” or “discussed.”
- 6.13 Dependable.** A needless substitute for *reliable, trustworthy*.
- 6.14 Due to.** Incorrectly used for *through, because of, or owing to*, in adverbial phrases: “He lost the first game, due to carelessness.” In correct use related as predicate or as modifier to a particular noun: “This invention is due to Edison;” “losses due to preventable fires.”
- 6.15 Effect.** As noun, means *result*; as verb, means *to bring about, accomplish* (not to be confused with *affect*, which means “to influence”).
- As noun, often loosely used in perfunctory writing about fashions, music, painting, and other arts: “an Oriental effect;” “effects in pale green;” “very delicate effects;” “broad effects;” “subtle effects;” “a charming effect was produced by.” The writer who has a definite meaning to express will not take refuge in such vagueness.
- 6.16 Etc.** Not to be used of persons. Equivalent to *and the rest, and so forth*, and hence not to be used if one of these would be insufficient, that is, if the reader would be left in doubt as to any important particulars. Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list already given in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation.
- At the end of a list introduced by *such as, for example*, or any similar expression, *etc.* is incorrect.
- 6.17 Fact.** Use this word only of matters of a kind capable of direct verification, not of matters of judgment. That a particular event happened on a given date, that lead melts at a certain temperature, are facts. But such conclusions as that Napoleon was the greatest of modern generals, or that the climate of California is delightful, however incontestable they may be, are not properly facts.
- 6.18 Factor.** A hackneyed word; the expressions of which it forms part can usually be replaced by something more direct and idiomatic.
- Bad: His superior training was the great factor in his winning the match.

Good: He won the match by being better trained.

Bad: Heavy artillery is becoming an increasingly important factor in deciding battles.

Good: Heavy artillery is playing a larger and larger part in deciding battles.

6.19 Feature. Another hackneyed word; like factor it usually adds nothing to the sentence in which it occurs.

Bad: A feature of the entertainment especially worthy of mention was the singing of Miss A.

Good: (Better use the same number of words to tell what Miss A. sang, or if the programme has already been given, to tell something of how she sang.)

As a verb, in the advertising sense of *offer as a special attraction*, to be avoided.

6.20 Fix. Colloquial in America for *arrange, prepare, mend*. In writing restrict it to its literary senses, *fasten, make firm* or *immovable*, etc.

6.21 He is a man who. A common type of redundant expression.

Bad: He is a man who is very ambitious.

Good: He is very ambitious.

Bad: Spain is a country which I have always wanted to visit.

Good: I have always wanted to visit Spain.

6.22 However. In the meaning *nevertheless*, not to come first in its sentence or clause.

Bad: The roads were almost impassable. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

Good: The roads were almost impassable. At last, however, we succeeded in reaching camp.

When *however* comes first, it means *in whatever way* or *to whatever extent*.

Good: However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best.

Good: However discouraging the prospect, he never lost heart.

6.23 Kind of. Not to be used as a substitute for *rather* (before adjectives and verbs), or except in familiar style, for *something like* (before nouns). Restrict it to its literal sense: “Amber is a kind of fossil resin;” “I dislike that kind of notoriety.” The same holds true of *sort of*.

6.24 Less. Should not be misused for *fewer*.

Bad: He had less men than in the previous campaign.

Good: He had fewer men than in the previous campaign.

Less refers to quantity, *fewer* to number. “His troubles are less than mine” means “His troubles are not so great as mine.” “His troubles are fewer than mine” means “His troubles are not so numerous as mine.” It is, however, correct to say, “The signers of the petition were less than a hundred,” where the round number, a hundred, is something like a collective noun, and *less* is thought of as meaning a lesser quantity or amount.

6.25 Line, along these lines. Line in the sense of *course of procedure, conduct, thought*, is allowable, but has been so much overworked, particularly in the phrase along these lines, that a writer who aims at freshness or originality had better discard it entirely.

Bad: Mr. B. also spoke along the same lines.

Good: Mr. B. also spoke, to the same effect.

Bad: He is studying along the line of French literature.

Good: He is studying French literature.

6.26 Literal, literally. Often incorrectly used in support of exaggeration or violent metaphor.

Bad: A literal flood of abuse

Good: A flood of abuse

Bad: Literally dead with fatigue

Good: Almost dead with fatigue (dead tired)

6.27 Lose out. Meant to be more emphatic than *lose*, but actually less so, because of its commonness. The same holds true of *try out, win out, sign up, register up*. With a number of verbs, *out* and *up* form idiomatic combinations: *find out, run out, turn out, cheer up, dry up, make up*, and others, each distinguishable in meaning from the simple verb. *Lose out* is not.

6.28 Most. Not to be used for *almost*.

Bad: Most everybody

Good: Almost everybody

Bad: Most all the time

Good: Almost all the time

6.29 Nature. Often simply redundant, used like *character*.

Bad: Acts of a hostile nature

Good: Hostile acts

Often vaguely used in such expressions as “a lover of nature;” “poems about nature.” Unless more specific statements follow, the reader cannot tell whether the poems have to do with natural scenery, rural life, the sunset, the untracked wilderness, or the habits of squirrels.

6.30 Near by. Adverbial phrase, not yet fully accepted as good English, though the analogy of *close by* and *hard by* seems to justify it. *Near*, or *near at hand*, is as good, if not better.

Not to be used as an adjective; use *neighboring*.

6.31 Oftentimes, ofttimes. Archaic forms, no longer in good use. The modern word is *often*.

6.32 One hundred and one. Retain the *and* in this and similar expressions, in accordance with the unvarying usage of English prose from Old English times.

6.33 One of the most. Avoid beginning essays or paragraphs with this formula, as, “One of the most interesting developments of modern science is, etc.,” “Switzerland is one of the most interesting countries of Europe.” There is nothing wrong in this; it is simply threadbare and forcible-feeble.

6.34 People. *The people* is a political term, not to be confused with *the public*. From the people comes political support or opposition; from the public comes artistic appreciation or commercial patronage.

The word *people* is not to be used with words of number, in place of *persons*. If of “six people” five went away, how many “people” would be left?

6.35 Phase. Means a stage of transition or development: “the phases of the moon;” “the last phase.” Not to be used for *aspect* or *topic*.

Bad: Another phase of the subject

Good: Another point (another question)

6.36 Possess. Not to be used as a mere substitute for *have* or *own*.

Bad: He possessed great courage.

Good: He had great courage (was very brave).

Bad: He was the fortunate possessor of

Good: He owned

6.37 Respective, respectively. These words may usually be omitted with advantage.

Bad: Works of fiction are listed under the names of their respective authors.

Good: Works of fiction are listed under the names of their authors.

Bad: The one mile and two mile runs were won by Jones and Cummings respectively.

Good: The one mile and two mile runs were won by Jones and by Cummings.

In some kinds of formal writing, as in mathematical proofs, it may be necessary to use *respectively*, but it should not appear in writing on ordinary subjects.

6.38 So. Avoid, in writing, the use of *so* as an intensifier: “so good;” “so warm;” “so delightful.”

6.39 State. Not to be used as a mere substitute for *say, remark*. Restrict it to the sense of *express fully* or *express clearly*, as, “He refused to state his objections.”

6.40 Student body. A needless and awkward expression, meaning no more than the simple word students.

Bad: A member of the student body

Good: A student

Bad: Popular with the student body

Good: Liked by the students

Bad: The student body passed resolutions.

Good: The students passed resolutions.