Avoid Dumb Mistakes

Your writing affects your credibility. Your writing should never get in the way of your argument or story. This means, at a minimum, avoiding dumb mistakes that tend to stick in the mind of the reader like a thorn in their side.

1. **In this day and age of spell-checkers, there is simply no excuse for spelling mistakes.** But be wary of spelling mistakes that spell checkers will not catch. Here are a few of our favorites:
   * there vs. their vs. they’re
   * to vs. too vs. two
   * your vs. you’re
   * a vs. an
   * by vs. buy
   * cite *vs.* sight *vs.* site (and similarly incite *vs.* insight)
   * weary *vs.* wary
   * forego *vs.* forgo
   * council *vs.* counsel *vs.* consul
   * You get the idea. If you are ever in doubt of the proper use of a particular word, or are having difficulty choosing between similar sounding or looking words, check a dictionary.
2. **Know your possessives:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subject Pronoun | Possessive Adjective | Possessive Pronoun | NOT |
| I | My | Mine |  |
| You | Your | Yours | You’re = you are |
| She | Her | Hers | Her’s = not a word |
| He | His | His |  |
| We | Our | Ours |  |
| They | Their | Theirs | They’re = they are |
| It | Its | Its | It’s= it is |

1. **Know your plurals**
   * Use the apostrophe correctly.
   * Plural of “index” is “indices”; the plural of "matrix" is "matrices"
   * "Data" is already plural, the singular is "datum". (So make sure other elements of the sentence agree: "these data are..." not "this data is...".)
2. **Know the difference between "affect" and "effect."** Most of the time the word "affect" is a verb meaning either: "to have an effect on" (as in, "your attitude will affect how successful you are in class"), or; "to feign" (as in, "she affected unconcern over her 'C'"). Most of the time, the word "effect" is a noun that means "the consequences of an action" (as in, "your attitude does have an effect on your grades").
3. **Do not make up words when there are perfectly good alternatives.**
   * "Irregardless" is not a word. It is either "irrespective" or "regardless" to mean pretty much the same thing.
4. **Make sure that you know what a word means before you use it.**
   * If you are unsure of a word’s meaning look it up!
   * Adding a prefix or suffix may or may not alter the meaning of a word. For example, the word "ultimate" and "penultimate" mean very different things. On the other hand the words "invaluable" and "valuable", despite the additional two letters, mean the same thing.
5. **Do not confuse *i.e.* and *e.g.*** "*i.e.*" stands for the latin "*id est*" and means "that is." "*e.g*" stands for the latin "*exempli gratia*" which means "for the sake of example." Note that latin (abbreviated or not) or for that matter any foreign language used in the text should be in italics.
6. **And while we are on the subject of latin abbreviations, here are a few more that may be useful:**
   * "*ca*" for "*circa*" to mean "about"
   * "*ibid*" for "*ibidem*" which means "in the same place" and to be used in the footnote to indicate that the footnote in question is identical to the one immediately preceding.
   * Note that "*vs.*" (*versus*) and "*v.s.*" (*vide super*) mean very different things. The former means "against," the latter "see above."
   * Though not abbreviations, remember that "*per annum*" means "per year", "*per diem*" means "per day", and "*per capita*" means "per person."
7. **Get basic formatting right.**
   * The first paragraph of each section or sub-section (any paragraph that follows a heading) should not be indented. The first lines of all subsequent paragraphs in that section or sub-section should be indented.
   * Block quotes should be used for any quote that extends beyond a couple of lines. When employing block quotes, the quote should be offset from the rest of the text by both right and left indentations, and the text should be justified. Regardless of the line spacing for the rest of the text, the block quote should be single spaced.
   * Use a consistent style (justification, line spacing, heading style, font, etc.) throughout. The "style-sheet" features of the modern word processor are useful in imposing style discipline.
   * Never use bold. If you want to emphasize something, use italics. The use of italics is preferable to underlines when referencing a book title.
   * Know the difference between a hyphen, en dashes (used to indicate a range, as in "between the years 1980–1990" or contrast values, as in "the Supreme Court voted 5–4 to uphold), and em dashes ("—" which are used to indicate parenthetical thoughts in the middle of a sentence, similar to parenthetical commas). While it may be difficult to tell them apart on the web page, they are of different length. Hyphens are shortest, the en dash is about the width of the letter "n", and em dashes are about the width of the letter "m" (hence their respective names). In mono spaced fonts (such as Courier), it is conventional to use two hyphens ("--") for en dashes, three ("---") for em dashes. Note that there is never a space before or after any of these.
   * The rule "double spaces after periods" was a convention of the typewriter age when everyone had no choice but to use the monospace typewriter font. It is considered unnecessary when using proportional fonts. Unless you are using a monospace font (*e.g.* Courier) there is no need for that second space.
   * Use the right font. You should never use a monospace font (*e.g.* Courier) unless you have a very specific reason for doing so. Proportional fonts-which varies type spacing according to character width-are much easier to read than monospace fonts. Similarly, you should never use sans-serif fonts. Sans-serif fonts were designed for on-screen legibility where the serifs may be lost on the relatively low resolution of computer screens. However, in print, the "serifs" contain visual information that makes it much easier to read. Before you get too creative with your font choice, you should seriously reflect on the fact that Times was originally designed to be the typeface of the Times of London.

McDougall, Walter, and Tomoharu Nishino. "Editing Tips for Effective Writing." *University of Pennsylvania: School of Arts and Sciences*. The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web. 16 Sep 2013. <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/irp/editing-tips-effective-writing>.