Commonly Made Suggestions

I am getting a tremendous amount of mail about this site. I enjoy the compliments, try to answer the queries, and ignore the occasional insult. (One wit wrote of my site: "I could care less!" Cute.) The volume of correspondence has exceeded my ability to respond to all of it; so please forgive me if you don't hear back from me. I do read your letters.

Although I am now retired from Washington State University, that doesn't mean I spend a lot of time doing e-mail. I check it once or twice a day when I am not traveling, but I am not constantly sitting in front of the computer. I also have hand problems that prevent me from typing at long stretches at a time, so if you receive a very short reply to a long note, that's probably the reason. I'm not trying to be impolite, but I simply can't engage in lengthy e-mail exchanges.

And although I appreciate good prose (with real capital letters), don't be afraid I'll nitpick your letter for writing flaws. I don't normally critique other people's writing unless I'm hired to.

I also receive many suggestions for additions. These are usually welcome, and I adopt many of them; but at least half my mail involves points I have already covered in one way or another. If you would be so kind, please go through the following checklist before writing me.

- If your first encounter with my site was through a link to the list of errors, please go to the introductory page and read that first. If you are creating a link to my site, please link to that page at http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/; otherwise, users will miss important introductory remarks. The ":8080"string found in some links is obsolete.
- If you think a common error is missing from my list, use the Google Custom Search engine just above the alphabetical list of errors to search the site.
- Other places to look: "More Errors," "Commonly misspelled words," and "Non-Errors."
- This is not a general English grammar site, nor am I a grammarian. I am a literature professor interested in English usage, some of which involves grammar. You will find a list of comprehensive English grammar and writing sites at the bottom of my list of errors under "Other Good Resources." These are the folks to ask for help with your writing.
- This is not a site offering a tutorial service for people studying English. In my list of links on the main pages listing errors I include sites which do and which provide resources for the study of English as a second language. Try one of them instead. I am not an ESL specialist and have a full-time job which does not involve online interactive teaching. I hope you find what I have written useful and I do answer occasional questions, but this site does not provide a detailed question-and-answer service.
- Before you write to insist that some usage I recommend against is actually standard now, consider that although many dictionaries take it as their task to keep up with popular usage, my guide is meant to alert you to even very popular usage patterns that may get you into trouble with other people you encounter. No matter how many dictionaries say that "I could care less" is now a legitimate variant on the traditional "I couldn't care less," my job is to protect you from people who do not agree with this. Some dictionaries' approach is to tell the traditionalists to get over it. This is not likely to work. A usage guide's approach is to warn you that this usage may make you appear less well informed than the traditional one. What you do with the information is up to you, but at least you know that if you go with the new form you're taking a risk.
- Please do not write to me asking for a link on my site to yours. This is a university non-profit Web site which does not allow advertising. And the noncommercial links I create are always created at my own initiative, and I am very picky about what I link to.
- If you have checked thoroughly and still want to write me, please feel free; but be aware that I do not have time to deal with all my correspondence. "Common Errors" is not my

main Web project, and I work on it only sporadically (sometimes not for many months at a stretch). To see what other sorts of things I spend my time on, check out my home page.

- If you believe I have not sent you a response you deserve, consider these possibilities before deciding that I am deliberately not answering you: 1) I may be traveling and not doing e-mail, 2) your return address may be incorrect, causing my replies to you to "bounce" (if you rarely get replies to your e-mails, this is a good possibility), or 3) you have erred on the side of caution by blocking all incoming correspondence by people unknown to you.
- One more important point: this is a hobby for me, and not my job. I do not have the time to deal with long, complex messages covering a multitude of points. Short, focused messages are most likely to be answered.
- Before writing me, check the following list of commonly made suggestions.

Add "would of"
Look under "C" for "could of/should of/would of."

Add "intensive purposes."
"For all intensive purposes" is listed under "F."
You shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition.
Nonsense. See the second item under "Non-Errors."

You should say "Write to me" rather than "Write me."
Some people following the British tradition object to this usage; it's standard in the US. The expression probably evolved in analogy to expressions like "call me," "phone me" and "tell me." In the US, "write me" will do just fine in informal writing such as I use on this site.

The word is "pernickety," not "persnickety."
The original Scottish dialect form was indeed "pernickety," but Americans changed it to "persnickety" a century ago, and "pernickety" is generally unknown in the US. The *Supplement* to the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls "pernickety" obsolete, but judging from my correspondence, it's still in wide use across the Atlantic.

Americans have it all wrong, the correct usage is English (Canadian, Australian, etc.).
Read my page called "The President's English." Note that it was titled during the Clinton era, is just a joke referring to the phrase "the Queen's English," and has no connection with any particular president. And before writing to tell me that I should not claim that American English is THE international standard, go back and read again what I've written; I do not claim that.

A name which ends in an S needs an additional S after the apostrophe when it is made possessive, e.g., "Paul Brians's Page."
Some styles call for the extra *S*, some don't. I was forced by the publisher of my second book to follow this rule and I swore I would never do it again. I think it's ugly.

Please add [some particularly obscure word].
This site is concerned with *common* errors in English, not bizarre or esoteric ones, although I often enjoy reading about them. I admit to discussing some not-so-common errors if I find them amusing enough.

What is the correct spelling of _____?
Please try a dictionary first. The best on-line one is the WWWebster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster)

You've misspelled the title of an article.
When an item involves misspelling, the misspelled form is the one used for the title of the entry and for the name of the page. This helps people who don't know the correct spelling to find the entry. Remember this is a list of *errors*.

I was always taught X but all the authorities I've looked in say Y. What's happening to the English language?
It's changing—always has changed, and always will. When you reach the point that nobody seems to agree with your standard of usage any more, you may have simply been left behind. There is no ultimate authority in language—certainly not me—nor any measure of absolute "correctness." The best guide is the usage of literate and careful speakers and writers, and when they differ among themselves one has to make a choice as to which one prefers. My goal is to keep my readers' writing and speech from being laughed at or groaned over by average literate people.

How can you possibly approve of _____? Your effrontery in caving in to this ignorant nonsense is appalling [ranting, raving, foaming at the mouth . . .].
It's odd how some people with high standards of correctness seem to have no notion of manners at all. You and I both know that I am not the most conservative of commentators on usage. If you want to make a logical case for a rule I don't accept, please do so politely.

You should add more information about this word; it has other meanings than the ones you discuss.
My goal is to keep the entries as compact as possible, focusing only on those aspects of the words discussed which lend themselves to error. The sort of detailed discussion an unabridged dictionary provides is inappropriate here.

It would be easier to read through your site if you put navigational links on each page back to where the reader left off in the list of errors.

This site is designed for purposeful searches (use the Google Custom Search engine just above the alphabetical list of errors or just look down the list for the appropriate place in the alphabet) and casual browsing. Few people set out to read their way in order through all the entries. But if you want to do this, there are two methods you can use.

If you want to read the individual entries in order, when you have finished one, instead of clicking the link that says "Return to list of errors" just press alt-left arrow to go back to the spot you left in the list of errors. On a Mac, the equivalent sequence is command ["Apple"]-left arrow. Or click the back button in your browser.

If you would like to read straight through the whole body of the site as text on a single page I have provided a separate version which is much more suitable for this purpose and will keep you from having to click through over 1,400 pages. Click on the link called "Click here for the text-only version of this site." to go to http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.txt.

Because this page is not written in HTML, it lacks special characters like em-dashes and curled apostrophes, but it contains basically the same information as the formatted site.

Please use a different font on your site.
The code for this site specifies no particular font. What you see is the font your individual Web browser uses as its default. You can go into your browser's settings menu and change the default text font to anything you like, and—while you're at it—set the font size to something that pleases you as well.

Your site shows ugly gibberish wherever it should display quotation marks and apostrophes.
This site uses special codes to create properly curled quotation marks and apostrophes, and real dashes. Some browsers ignore the code and render the curled marks as straight ones, but other, older ones display the code itself. There are two solutions: 1) upgrade to a more recent version of your favorite browser, or 2) use the all-text version of the site which lacks the problem characters.

Note that with thousands of instances to be changed I had to use automatic global search-and-replace routines to curl these marks, and sometimes they misfired. I've tried hard to find the errors that resulted (typically a right quotation mark and a space where an apostrophe should be), but whenever I think I've found the last one somebody points out another. Keep 'em coming: I do really want to get all of these fixed.

Why don't you say when you last updated your site?
You'll find the latest revision date at the bottom of the all-text version of the site.

You should refer your readers to the on-line versions of Strunk and Fowler.
Well, I just did, didn't I? But not with enthusiasm. Because of copyright restrictions these are both very early editions (1918 and 1908!). If you're looking for confirmation of your views you may find solace, but the average reader has no way of knowing whether their advice still makes sense today. Would you use a 1908 dictionary to determine the meaning of a word now?

You left out one of my pet peeves!
I may simply not have gotten around to it yet, but remember to try the Search field before writing.

Still want to write? My address is paulbrians@gmail.com. Please don't call me "Brian." My name is Paul Brians.

Back to list of errors