

## Writing Errors To Avoid

The following are writing errors that you should have learned to avoid long before you came to college. For **EACH TIME** one of them appears in a paper in one of my upper-division history courses, I will deduct **FIVE (5)** points off of that paper's grade:

### APOSTROPHES

#### **Do NOT form plurals by using apostrophes:**

- The English language normally indicates that a noun is plural (a "noun" is the name of a person, place, or thing; "plural" indicates more than one of something) by adding the letter "s" at the end of the noun, as in "birds", "boys", "girls". In a plural form, there is **NO** apostrophe between the end of the noun and the "s".

#### **Use apostrophes ONLY to indicate possession, or contraction:**

- Adding an apostrophe between the noun and the "s" is the way in which English normally indicates possession, as in "the bird's nest", "the boy's backwards baseball cap", "the girl's ridiculous makeup".
- When a plural noun possesses something, the apostrophe is placed **after** the "s", as in "the birds' nests", "the boys' backwards baseball caps", "the girls' ridiculous makeup".
- But: Pronouns do NOT use apostrophes in forming their possessives: "his", "hers", "its", "yours", "theirs", "ours".
- When a noun or pronoun is contracted with the verb "is", an apostrophe is inserted to indicate that the letter "i" has been dropped: "he is" = "he's"; "she is" = "she's"; and, of course, "it is" = "it's".

### HOMOPHONES (words that sound alike)

#### **affect vs. effect:**

**AFFECT** can be a verb meaning to have an effect on, or to pretend to have or feel something; it can also be a noun meaning emotion or desire as influencing behavior.

**EFFECT** can be a noun meaning a change that results from some action or other cause, or the state of becoming operative (e.g., "the law came into effect"); it can also be a verb meaning to cause to happen or to bring about.

**altar vs. alter:**

**ALTAR** is a noun which means a table, platform, or structure on which religious rituals and sacrifices are performed.

**ALTER** is a verb, meaning to change something.

**bare vs. bear:**

**BEAR** can be a verb meaning to carry or it can be a noun referring to someone named „Smokey“ .

**BARE** can be a verb meaning to reveal or it can be an adjective describing a thing as „revealed“ .

**boarder vs. border:**

**BOARDER** means someone who rents a room in your house.

**BORDER** means a boundary.

**cavalry vs. calvary:**

**CAVALRY** is soldiers riding horses.

**CALVARY** is where the Romans crucified Jesus.

**cite vs. site vs. sight:**

**CITE** is a verb meaning to quote or refer to.

**SITE** is a noun meaning locations or places.

**SIGHT** can be a verb meaning to see something, or it can be noun meaning something that is seen.

**could of vs. could have:**

**COULD OF** is a nonsense phrase, arising from confusing the combined sound of the two words with the sound of **COULD'VE**, which is a contraction for **COULD HAVE**. Use **COULD HAVE**. Contractions are generally to be avoided in formal academic writing.

**definite vs. definate:**

**DEFINITE** means “clearly stated or decided; not vague or doubtful”; certain” or “assured”.

**DEFINATE:** There is no such word as “**definate**”.

**deity vs. diety:**

**DEITY** means a god or goddess.

**DIETY** isn't even a word. If it were, it might mean someone who is trying to lose weight.

**desert vs. dessert:**

**DESERT** is a really, really dry place, where nothing lives, except scorpions, religious fanatics, and oilfield workers.

**DESSERT** is a treat you get if you eat all your vegetables, something like double-chocolate cake with extra ice cream.

**devine vs. divine:**

**DIVINE** means “god-like”.

**DEVINE:** There is no such word as “**devine**”.

**do vs. due vs. dew:**

**DO** is a verb meaning to accomplish something or to perform some action.

**DUE** is an adjective meaning something owed or expected, or something proper or appropriate. It can also be a noun referring to something that is a person’s by right, or an adverb referring to a point of the compass and meaning “directly”.

**DEW** is a noun meaning moisture that forms on objects during the early morning.

**dominate vs. dominant:**

**DOMINATE** is a verb, meaning to rule or control, or to tower over.

**DOMINANT** is an adjective indicating that the noun (i.e., person, place or thing) that it modifies exercises authority or rule.

**dual vs. duel:**

**DUAL** is an adjective, meaning to consist of two parts or elements.

**DUEL** is a noun, meaning a contest between two parties or persons.

**effect vs. affect:**

**EFFECT** can be a noun meaning a change that results from some action or other cause, or the state of becoming operative (e.g., “the law came into effect”); it can also be a verb meaning to cause to happen or to bring about.

**AFFECT** can be a verb meaning to have an effect on, or to pretend to have or feel something; it can also be a noun meaning emotion or desire as influencing behavior.

**emporer vs. emperor:**

**EMPEROR** is a noun meaning the ruler of an empire.

**EMPORER:** There is no such word as “**emporer**”.

**fair vs. fare:**

**FARE** can be a noun, meaning a) the money you pay to ride on an airplane, or in a bus or cab, or b) the type of food offered by a restaurant or eaten by a people.

**FARE** can also be a verb, meaning a) to get on in a specified manner, or b) to journey or travel. 4

**FAIR** can be an adjective, meaning pleasant, favorable, unbiased, or just.

**FAIR** can also be a noun, meaning a regular gathering of buyers and sellers, or an exhibition.

**FAIR** is **ONLY** used as a verb to mean making the surface of a ship or an airplane smooth.

**feet vs. feat:**

**FEET** means the things you walk on.

**FEAT** means an accomplishment.

**hear vs. here:**

**HEAR** is a verb, meaning to perceive sound.

**HERE** is an adverb meaning in this particular place or position.

**hoard vs. horde:**

**HOARD** means a bunch of stuff, like gold and jewels.

**HORDE** means a bunch of people, like Huns.

**ideas vs. ideals:**

**IDEAS** are thoughts that you have in your head about something.

**IDEALS** are values you aspire to live up to.

**it's vs. its:**

**IT'S** is the contracted form of "it is".

**ITS** is the possessive form of the pronoun "it".

**know vs. no:**

**KNOW** is a verb, meaning to be aware of something or to have good personal command of information.

**NO** is just a negative, the opposite of **YES**.

**led vs. lead:**

**LED** is the past tense of the verb "to lead" (pronounced with a long "e" sound, as in "each"). Verbs have tenses, indicating when the action they describe took place; the past tense indicates action in the past. "To lead" is the verb that indicates directing someone or something, as in "I will lead this discussion" or "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." Thus, **led** would be used as follows: "I **led** the discussion, but only two of the students had done the reading" or "I **led** the horse to water, and it fell in and drowned."

**LEAD:** Unless you're using the verb "to lead", **LEAD** is a noun, meaning a dense metal used for things like bullets. It sounds the same as **led** (making them "homophones", words that sound the same but are spelled differently), but could not conceivably be more different in meaning.

**lightening vs. lightning:**

**LIGHTENING** is a form of the verb “to lighten”, meaning to reduce something’s weight. **LIGHTNING** is a discharge of electricity in the atmosphere, characterized by a long streamer or streamers of bright light, and often accompanied by a loud booming noise called ‘thunder’.

**loose vs. lose:**

**LOOSE** as a verb means to release or to untie; as an adjective, it means partially released or untied.

**LOSE** is a verb which means to be deprived of or to cease to have.

**might of vs. might’ve:**

**MIGHT OF** is a nonsense phrase, arising from confusing the combined sound of the two words with the sound of **MIGHT’VE**, which is a contraction for **MIGHT HAVE**.

Use **MIGHT HAVE**. Contractions are generally to be avoided in formal academic writing.

**no vs. know:**

**NO** is a negative, the opposite of **YES**.

**KNOW** is a verb, meaning to be aware of something or to have good personal command of information.

**overtook vs. took over:**

**OVERTOOK** is the past tense of the verb **to overtake**, which means to catch up with someone, like in a race.

**TOOK OVER** is the past tense of the verb **to take over**, which means to gain control of or to conquer.

**passed vs. past:**

**PASSED** can be an adjective describing something as approved, or the past tense of the verb „to pass“ .

**PAST** can be an adjective describing something as being behind a point, either in space or time, or it can be a noun meaning a previous era.

**perform vs. preform:**

**PERFORM** means to do something, or to act on something.

**PREFORM** means to shape something in advance.

**predominate vs. predominant:**

**PREDOMINATE** is a verb that means to be the strongest element.  
**PREDOMINANT** is an adjective that means having or exerting the greatest control or power.

**principal vs. principle:**

**PRINCIPAL** is an adjective (that means “modifying word”) which means “first” or “foremost”; as a noun, it means the head of a school or leading figure in some enterprise.

**PRINCIPLE** is a noun which means a rule or a guiding truth.

**profit vs. prophet:**

**PROFIT** either means an advantage or benefit, or is a financial term referring to the difference between an initial outlay and the subsequent amount earned. It can also be a verb meaning to benefit someone or something.

**PROPHET** is an inspired teacher of divine will, or a person who predicts the future.

**prophecy vs. prophesy:**

**PROPHECY** is a verb, meaning to predict something.

**PROHECY** is a noun, meaning a prediction.

**province vs. providence:**

**PROVINCE** refers to an area of authority, usually geographical, as in “the Roman province of Britannia” or “the Roman provinces of Spain.”

**PROVIDENCE** refers to the protective care of God or to timely preparation for some future eventuality..

**purpose vs. propose:**

Used as a verb, **PURPOSE** means to intend or to form a resolve. Used as a noun, it means something you intend to do, or a resolution or determination.

**PROPOSE** is a verb which means to put something forward for consideration.

**rain vs. rein vs. reign:**

**RAIN** is both a noun meaning “liquid precipitation” and a verb meaning “to fall from the sky.”

**REIN** is a strap you hold in your hand to steer a horse; **REIN IN** is a verb meaning “to restrain.”

**REIGN** is both a noun meaning “the period of a monarch’s authority” and a verb meaning “to exercise monarchical authority.”.

**rights vs. rites:**

**RIGHTS** are moral or legal entitlements, such as the right to freedom of assembly.  
**rites** are solemn ceremonies or acts, usually religious in nature.

**roll vs. role:**

**ROLL** is either a noun, meaning something round, or a verb meaning to turn something over and over.  
**ROLE** means a part you play, like in life.

**shepard vs. shepherd:**

**SHEPHERD** means someone who herds sheep, and by extension, the act of guiding or directing someone or something.  
**SHEPARD:** There is no such word as “**shepard**”.

**should of vs. should have:**

**SHOULD OF** is a nonsense phrase, arising from confusing the combined sound of the two words with the sound of **SHOULD'VE**, which is a contraction for **SHOULD HAVE**. Use **SHOULD HAVE**. Contractions are generally to be avoided in formal academic writing.

**sites vs. sights:**

**SITES** are places or locations.  
**SIGHTS** are things you see.

**sew vs. sow:**

**SEW** means to stitch or connect things, usually cloth.  
**SOW** means to plant or to disseminate.

**their vs. there vs. they're:**

**THEIR** is the possessive form of the pronoun **they**.  
**THERE** indicates either a place or the beginning of an assertion (“there is ...”).  
**THEY'RE** is the contracted form of “they are”.

**theirs vs. there's:**

**THEIRS** is a possessive pronoun used to refer to a thing or things belonging to or associated with two or more people or things that you have previously mentioned.  
**THERE'S** is a contraction of “there is”.

**than vs. then:**

**THAN** is a conjunction used to compare one thing with another: “This paper is better **THAN** that one, because it contains no Writing Errors to Avoid.”

**THEN** is an adverb which is used either to indicate time (“I’ll turn my paper in **THEN**”), or to indicate consequence (“If your paper contains Writing Errors to Avoid, **THEN** your grade will suffer”).

**throne vs. thrown:**

**THRONE** is what a monarch sits on.

**THROWN** is the participial form of the verb "to throw".

**to vs. too vs. two:**

**TO** is a preposition expressing direction or position in relation to something.

**TOO** is an adverb meaning either “to a higher degree than desirable”, or “in addition.”

**TWO** is a number, meaning twice as much as one and half as much as four.

**weather vs. whether:**

**WEATHER** refers to meteorological conditions and phenomena, such as “clear weather”, “stormy weather”, “winter weather”. You get the idea, don’t you?

**WHETHER** is a conjunction used to indicate conditionality, as in “I don’t know *whether* or not Bob will flunk me on this paper” or “My grade depends on *whether* I pay attention to Writing Errors to Avoid.”

**who’s vs. whose:**

**WHO’S** is the contracted form of “who is”.

**WHOSE** is the possessive form of “who”.

**would of vs. would've:**

**WOULD OF** is a nonsense phrase, arising from confusing the combined sound of the two words with the sound of **WOULD'VE**, which is a contraction for **WOULD HAVE**.

Use **WOULD HAVE**. Contractions are generally to be avoided in formal academic writing.

**you're vs. your:**

**YOU'RE** is the contracted form of “you are”.

**YOUR** is the possessive form of “you”.