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“.

boader 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”.

deiity 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.

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

**Prophesy vs. Prophecy:**
- **Prophesy** is a verb, meaning to predict something.
- **Prophecy** 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”.