

## General Writing Tips

From Bem:

### Common Errors of Grammar and Usage

The following errors seem to me to be the most frequent in journal writing (listed alphabetically):

*Compared with* versus *Compared to*. Similar orders of things are compared *with* one another; different orders of things are compared *to* one another: “Let me not compare thee *with* previous lovers I have had; rather, let me compare thee *to* a summer’s day.” “Mischel’s articles are often compared *with* Bandura’s articles; Bem’s articles are often compared *to* Mozart’s sonatas.”

*Data*. The word *data* is plural: “Analyze those data thoroughly.” [HF: *datum* is singular.]

*Different from* versus *Different than*. The first is correct, the second, incorrect (although, alas for us purists, very common and gaining respectability). The confusion arises because *than* correctly follows comparative adjectives. Thus you are correct to suppose that life is more *than* psychology, that living a good life is harder in many respects *than* writing a good article, and that living well requires broader skills *than* does writing well. Just remember that life is different *from* psychology, that living a good life is different in many respects *from* writing a Writing the Empirical Journal Article 24 good article, and that living well requires skills different *from* those required for writing well.

*None, No one*. These words are singular: “None of them is likely to obtain data that are more convincing.”

*Since* versus *Because*. *Since* means “after that.” It should not be used as a substitute for *because* if there is any ambiguity of interpretation. *Wrong (but at least not ambiguous)*: “Since the study of motivation is a high and hazardous undertaking, I wish fewer people would meddle with it.” *Better*: “Because the study of motivation is a high and hazardous undertaking, I wish fewer people would meddle with it.” *Ambiguous*: “Since I read Montaigne, I have been tempted to abandon the study of motivation.” This last case is correct if the writer is using *since* in the temporal sense: “Ever since reading Montaigne, I have been tempted ...” It is incorrect if the writer means *because*.

*That* versus *Which*. *That* clauses (called restrictive) are essential to the meaning of the sentence; *which* clauses (called nonrestrictive) merely add further information. The following example illustrates the correct use of both words: “Dissonance theory, *which* has received major attention, is one of the theories *that* postulates a motivational process. Thus, if a person holds two cognitions *that* are inconsistent...” Most *which*’s in journal writing are incorrect. You should go on a *which* hunt in your own manuscripts and turn most of them into *that*’s. [HF: as a general rule, *which* will occur after a comma and *that* won’t.]

*While* versus *Although, But, Whereas*. *While* means “at the same time” and in most cases cannot substitute for these other words. *Wrong*: “*While* inferential statistics are important, descriptive statistics are the heart of your narrative.” *Right*: “*Although* inferential statistics are important,

descriptive statistics are the heart of your narrative.” Or, “Inferential statistics are important, *but* descriptive statistics are the heart of your narrative.” *Wrong*: “*While* I like personality traits, Mischel prefers a social learning approach.” *Right*: “*Whereas* I like personality traits, Mischel prefers a social learning approach.” Interestingly, the following usage is correct: “*While* I like personality traits, I find merit in Mischel’s social learning approach.” This can be seen by substituting “at the same time” for “while”: “I like personality traits; at the same time, I find merit in Mischel’s social learning approach.”

From Hugh:

*This* is not a noun. *Wrong*: “This tells us not to go forward.” *Right*: “This sign tells us not to go forward.”

*Pronouns*. You need to use singular and plural pronouns properly, while still avoiding “sexist” language. *Their* is plural. *Wrong*: “The participant raised their hand when finished.” *Right*: “The participant raised his or her hand when finished.” *Right*: “Participants raised their hands when finished.” You’ll typically benefit from writing in the plural whenever possible.

*Their/There*. *Their* is a possessive pronoun (“belongs to them”). Thus, you might say, “Give them their credit for participating in the study.” *There* is typically used as a noun or adverb that talks about location (“Put your hat there.”).

*Affect/Effect*. People often have difficulty with this distinction. For the most part, *effect* will be used as a noun and *affect* will be used as a verb. *Effect* can be used as a verb with the specific meaning of “to cause” or “to make,” as in “To effect a change in my financial situation I robbed a bank.” *Affect* can be used as a noun, as we all know, to talk about an emotional state, as in “His response was totally without affect.” Most often, though, you’ll use *affect* as a verb meaning “to cause a change” (as would be true for an IV). Thus, “Levels of fear affect heart rate.” And you’ll use *effect* as a noun (“What is the effect of fear on heart rate?”)

*Then/Than*. *Then* is used to give a sense of time: “First, I’ll complete this task, then I’ll complete the second task.” *Than* is used in a comparison: “This weight is heavier than that weight.”

*It’s/Its*. *It’s* is a contraction for “it is,” and therefore should not be used in APA-style papers. Although it may look like it’s possessive, it’s not. *Its* is possessive (“belonging to it”).

*Quantity Words for Mass/Count Nouns*. You need to work to ensure agreement between quantity word and the noun it modifies. Suppose that you’re writing about sleep (which is not countable). Would you say “number of sleep” or “amount of sleep”? OK, then suppose that you’re writing about hours of sleep (which is countable). Would you say “number of hours of sleep” or “amount of hours of sleep”? Thus, you might drink “some water” and you might drink “a few cups of water” but you wouldn’t drink “a few water(s).”