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).”