Common Errors in English

What is an error in English?
The concept of language errors is a fuzzy one. I'll leave to linguists the technical definitions. Here we're concerned only with deviations from the standard use of English as judged by sophisticated users such as professional writers, editors, teachers, and literate executives and personnel officers. The aim of this site is to help you avoid low grades, lost employment opportunities, lost business, and titters of amusement at the way you write or speak.

But isn't one person's mistake another's standard usage?
Often enough, but if your standard usage causes other people to consider you stupid or ignorant, you may want to consider changing it. You have the right to express yourself in any manner you please, but if you wish to communicate effectively, you should use nonstandard English only when you intend to, rather than fall into it because you don't know any better.

Why don't you cover all important points of grammar?
Other sites do this; mine is dedicated to errors in usage. This is not a site dealing with grammar in general.

I'm learning English as a second language. Will this site help me improve my English?
Very likely, though it's really aimed at the most common errors of native speakers. The errors others make in English differ according to the characteristics of their first languages. Speakers of other languages tend to make some specific errors that are uncommon among native speakers, so you may also want to consult sites dealing specifically with English as a second language (see

http://www.cln.org/subjects/esl_cur.html and http://esl.about.com/education/adulted/esl/). There is also a Help Desk for ESL students at Washington State University at http://www.wsu.edu/~gordonl/ESL/. An outstanding book you may want to order is Ann Raimes' *Keys for Writers.*

Aren't some of these points awfully picky?
This is a relative matter. One person's gaffe is another's peccadillo. Some common complaints about usage strike me as too persnickety, but I'm just discussing mistakes in English that happen to bother me. Feel free to create your own page listing your own pet peeves, but I welcome suggestions for additions to these pages. First, read the Commonly Made Suggestions page, and if you still want to write me, please do so, after reading the instructions on that page.

What gives you the right to say what an error in English is?
I could take the easy way out and say I'm a professor of English and do this sort of thing for a living. True, but my Ph.D. is in comparative literature, not composition or linguistics, and I teach courses in the history of ideas rather than language as such. But I admire good writing and try to encourage it in my students.

I found a word you criticized in the dictionary!
You will find certain words or phrases criticized here listed in dictionaries. Note carefully labels like *dial.* (dialectical), *nonstandard*, and *obsolete* before assuming that the dictionary is endorsing them. The primary job of a dictionary is to track how people actually use language. Dictionaries differ among themselves on how much guidance to usage they provide; but the goal of a usage guide like this is substantially different: to protect you against patterns which are regarded by substantial numbers of well-educated people as nonstandard.

Why do you discuss mainly American usage?
Because I'm an American, my readers are mostly American, and American English is quickly becoming an international standard. I often take note of American deviations from standard British practice. However, the job is complicated by the fact that Canadians, Australians, and many others often follow patterns somewhere between the two. If the standard usage where you are differs from what is described here, tell me about it, and if I think it's important to do so, I'll note that fact. Meanwhile, just assume that this site is primarily about *American* English. If you feel tempted to argue with me, click here first.

If you write mainly about American English, why do you so often cite the Oxford English Dictionary?
First of all, I do not write exclusively about American English. I address UK usage in many entries on this site. Second, the *OED* strives to cover both UK and US usage, and often notes words or expressions as having either originated in or being used mainly in the US. It is by no means an exclusively British dictionary. Third, the *OED* is the recognized authority among linguists for etymology. It's not always the last word in explanations of word origins and history, but it is the first source to turn to. That's the main purpose for which I use the *OED*. Fourth, because the *OED* tends to be more conservative than some popular American dictionaries, when it accepts a controversial usage, that's worth noting. If even the *OED* regards a usage as accepted in modern English, then one should hesitate to argue that such usage is an error. But because the *OED* is so conservative, and doesn't always note when a formerly obsolete word is revived or changes in usage, it's not a perfect guide to contemporary usage. It is particularly weak in noting changes in spoken rather than written English.

Does it oppress immigrants and subjugated minorities to insist on the use of standard English?
Language standards can certainly be used for oppressive purposes, but most speakers and writers of all races and classes want to use language in a way that will impress others. The fact is that the world is

full of teachers, employers, and other authorities who may penalize you for your nonstandard use of the English language. Feel free to denounce these people if you wish; but if you need their good opinion to get ahead, you'd be wise to learn standard English. Note that I often suggest differing usages as appropriate depending on the setting: spoken vs. written, informal vs. formal; slang is often highly appropriate. In fact, most of the errors discussed on this site are common in the writing of privileged middle-class Americans, and some are characteristic of people with advanced degrees and considerable intellectual attainments. However you come down on this issue, note that the great advantage of an open Web-based educational site like this is that it's voluntary: take what you want and leave the rest. It's interesting that I have received hundreds of messages from non-native speakers thanking me for these pages and none from such people complaining that my pages discriminate against them.

But you made a mistake yourself!
We all do, from time to time. If you think you've found an error in my own writing, first read the "Commonly Made Suggestions" page, then follow the instructions on that page if you still think I need correcting. I've changed many aspects of these pages in response to such mail; even if I disagree with you, I try to do so politely. If you write me, please don't call me "Brian." My given name is Paul.

Go to list of errors.

Read about the book based on this site.

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Paul Brians' home page containing links to many other useful resources.

Some of the material in this site was inspired by the handy little booklet *Correcting Common Errors in Writing,* by Nancy P. McKee and George P. Kennedy, published by Kendall/Hunt Publishing. Write to them for further information about obtaining copies.

This resource is copyrighted by Paul Brians. Permission is granted to reprint or photocopy small numbers of it in its entirety or in part for all local nonprofit, educational purposes provided that the author is cited and the URL of this page is included. As a courtesy, please notify the author if you copy or link to this material. Because the content changes frequently, and I need to maintain control over the site, requests to create Web mirrors of the site are declined.

Over 10 million visitors since 1997.

In its first three years this site was visited more than a million times. Because of various technical and design problems which caused it to lag far behind the actual traffic, the counter has since been removed from this page. After the first million hits, a link to a more sophisticated counter was installed

on the next page, where most visitors go directly. Click on the "Site Meter" icon at the bottom of that page and add 1 million to get a fair idea of how many people have dropped in. Note that this counter measures discrete visits, not just "hits."

If you search for the word "English" in Google, which gives a measure of popularity by ranking its results in order of the number of links other people have created to them, my site is always on the first page of hits. (Not even counting a huge number of links because many people still use the old, many years out-of-date address www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/errors/ instead of the correct current address at www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/.) Thanks, folks!

Recommended as an "Incredibly Useful Site" in *Yahoo Internet Life Magazine*, July, 1997, pp. 82-83 and cited as a Yahoo "Site of the Week" and recommended by *Netsurfer Digest* March 5, 1999. It has also been recommended in the pages of *The Weekend Australian, The Bangkok Post,* the *Los Angeles Times* (a David Colker column widely reprinted around the US), the *Seattle Times,* the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, Ziff-Davis' *Inside the Internet,* newsletter *The Web* magazine,

and March 15, 1999, the Florence, Alabama *Times Daily*, and many other periodicals.