

Commonly Misused Phrases

Here is a list of phrases that are commonly misused, misheard, or misspelled. Incorrect versions appear in red; correct versions appear in green. Each entry includes a sample sentence using the correct version of the phrase.

Alterior motive/ulterior motive:

The king had ulterior motives for seducing the enemy's queen.

A mute point/a moot point:

The judge has already handed down his verdict, so arguing about the case now is a moot point.

Antidotol evidence/anecdotal evidence:

To win a debate, you need to cite facts and statistics—you can't just rely on anecdotal evidence.

Case and point/case in point:

We need stronger environmental regulation, and the melting of the ice caps is a case in point.

Cease the day/seize the day:

Since life is short, you should seize the day.

Chalk full/chock full:

The mineshaft was chock full of valuable gems like diamonds and emeralds.

Chock it up/chalk it up:

The movie garnered huge success at the box office—chalk it up to effective advertising.

Could of/could have, should of/should have, etc.:

I could have been a contender.
I should have listened to Mom.
You would have regretted it.

Curve one's appetite (enthusiasm, temper, etc.)/curb one's appetite (enthusiasm, temper, etc.):

Eating a light snack every two hours is a good way to curb your appetite.
Curb your temper before you end up making a fool of yourself.



Day in age/day and age:

In this day and age, you can never be too careful.

Deep-seeded/deep-seated:

Ever since he was betrayed by his best friend, Rob has fostered a deep-seated anger.

Doggy-dog world/dog-eat-dog world:

You have to find a way to make yourself stand out in the dog-eat-dog world of business.

Down packed/down pat:

After rehearsing dozens of times, the cast had their lines down pat.

Enact vengeance, extract vengeance/exact vengeance:

The betrayed king was finally able to exact vengeance on his treacherous brother.

Fall out of flavor/fall out of favor:

The ratings suggest that reality television has fallen out of favor with most viewers.

Far-gone conclusion/foregone conclusion:

With the Tigers leading the Panthers 35-7 at halftime, it was a foregone conclusion that they would win.

Far it be it for me/far be it from me:

Far be it from me to criticize your career choices, but you should have taken the promotion!

For all intensive purposes/for all intents and purposes:

For all intents and purposes, magenta and fuchsia are the same color.

Gameful employment/gainful employment:

After years of toiling in a cubicle, Andy was finally able to secure gainful employment at a Fortune 500 company.

In the mist/in the midst:

Orville knew it was a bad idea to hum the “Imperial March” in the midst of *Star Trek* fans.

Jive with/jibe with:

The defendant’s alibi didn’t jibe with the evidence police had found at the crime scene.

Just desserts/just deserts:

I hope that evil criminal gets his just deserts.

Lame man’s terms/layman’s terms:

One of the most abundant chemical compounds is H₂O (water, in layman’s terms).

Mano-on-mano, mano-y-mano/mano-a-mano:

The two wrestlers grappled with each other mano-a-mano.

Note: “Mano-a-mano” is Spanish for “hand-to-hand,” not “man-on-man.”

Marshall law/martial law:

After the capital fell to the rebellion, the government declared martial law.

Minus well, mine as well/might as well:

Since we’ve come this far, we might as well keep going.

Money is no option/money is no object:

When it comes to buying the best food for my dogs, money is no object.

Much adieu, much to do/much ado:

There was much ado when the president announced he wouldn’t run for reelection.

New leash on life/new lease on life:

After his cosmetic surgery, Mike found himself with a new lease on life.

Once and a while/once in a while:

Every once in a while, Uranus becomes visible from Earth.



On masse, in masse/en masse:

The wizard despaired as savage orcs came pouring over the walls of the keep en masse.

Peaked interest (curiosity)/piqued interest (curiosity):

Documentaries about sharks always pique my interest.
Seeing the front door open when I got home piqued my curiosity.

Physical year (policy, deficit, etc.)/fiscal year (policy, deficit, etc.):

Despite slumps in sales during the summer, the company reported a good overall fiscal year.

Reap what one sows/reap what one sows:

Phil was turned away by the very friends he had betrayed a year ago—you reap what you sow.

Run the gambit/run the gamut:

A good fiddler can play music that runs the gamut from beautiful ballads to blazing breakdowns.

Same-o/same old:

Bill kept retelling the same old ghost story, even though nobody believed him.

Slight of hand/sleight of hand:

The street magician was able to fool his spectators through cunning sleight of hand.

Statue of limitations/statute of limitations:

The landlord tried to sue Jerry for unpaid rent, but the statute of limitations had already expired.

Straddle with/saddle with:

Saddled with high mortgage payments, Sally regretted buying her three-story mansion.

Vice-a-versa/vice versa:

The earth revolves around the sun—not vice versa.

Wet one's appetite/whet one's appetite:

The diva's stellar opening act whetted my appetite for even more great singing from her.



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Wreck havoc/wreak havoc:

Those fried pizza rolls I had for lunch are wreaking havoc on my digestive system!