Wait, That's Not Right!

25 Commonly Misused Phrases Every Writer Should Know

A fun guide to the expressions we say, write, and occasionally get completely wrong.

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A quick word before we start

Ever read a phrase you've heard a hundred times and thought, "Wait. Is that really how you say it?" You're in good company. Some of these mix-ups happen because we hear an expression long before we see it written.

This isn't a grammar test. It's a friendly cheat sheet to help you catch a few familiar slipups without sanding the personality out of your writing.

Let's have some fun.

1. For all intensive purposes

→ **For all intents and purposes**

It means for every practical purpose. No intensive effort required.

2. Could of / should of / would of

→ **Could have / should have / would have**

The contractions could've, should've, and would've sound like "of," but they contain have.

3. Nip it in the butt

→ **Nip it in the bud**

Stop a problem before it grows. Think flower bud, not backside.

4. One in the same

→ **One and the same**

Two descriptions refer to exactly the same thing.

5. Case and point

→ **Case in point**

Here's an example that proves the point.

6. Deep-seeded

→ **Deep-seated**

A deep-seated belief is firmly established, not planted like a seed.

7. Doggy-dog world

Dog-eat-dog world

This expression describes ruthless competition. Sorry, puppies.

8. Escape goat

Scapegoat

A scapegoat takes the blame for someone else's mistakes.

9. Mute point

Moot point

A moot point is debatable or no longer practically relevant; it isn't silent.

10. Hunger pains

Hunger pangs

Those sharp little feelings are pangs, although hunger can certainly be painful.

11. Tow the line

Toe the line

You put your toes at the line when you follow rules or expectations.

12. Free reign

Free rein

The image comes from loosening a horse's reins, not from ruling a kingdom.

13. Baited breath

Bated breath

Bated means held back. Fish bait has nothing to do with suspense.

14. Slight of hand

Sleight of hand

Sleight means dexterity or trickery, especially in magic.

15. Peaked my interest

Piqued my interest

Piqued means stimulated or aroused curiosity.

16. Wreck havoc

⟹ **Wreak havoc**

Wreak means cause or inflict. Wreck is what the havoc might do.

17. Chomping at the bit

⟹ **Champing at the bit**

Champing is the traditional idiom and is the older, traditional equestrian root (horses champ on their bits), though chomping is now common and accepted by many dictionaries.

18. On tender hooks

⟹ **On tenterhooks**

Tenterhooks once held cloth taut. The phrase means being anxiously on edge.

19. Pass mustard

⟹ **Pass muster**

To pass muster is to meet a required standard. Mustard belongs on a sandwich.

20. Make due

⟹ **Make do**

To make do is to manage with what you have.

21. Statue of limitations

⟹ **Statute of limitations**

A statute is a law. A statue is something you might put in the yard.

22. Per say

⟹ **Per se**

The Latin phrase means “in itself” or “by itself.”

23. Beckon call

⟹ **Beck and call**

Being at someone’s beck and call means being ready whenever they summon you.

24. Extract revenge

⟹ **Exact revenge**

Exact, as a verb, means to demand or inflict. Extract means to pull something out.

25. A complete 360

A complete 180

If you mean a reversal in direction, it's 180 degrees. A 360 brings you back to where you started.

When Breaking the Rules Makes Sense

People don't always speak in perfectly polished sentences. And thank goodness for that. Dialogue, regional expressions, humor, and a narrator's distinctive voice sometimes call for language that wouldn't pass a copyediting quiz.

Here's the difference: If you use an unusual phrase on purpose because it sounds like your character, your family, or you, that can be a smart writing choice. If you use it because you thought it was the standard expression, now you have the information to choose.

Good editing isn't about making everyone sound alike. It's about making sure your words say what you mean—and still sound like you.

Keep your voice. Know your choices.

Thanks for being here! I'm Holly, and at The Edit with Holly Totten, I talk about writing, editing, publishing, and telling stories without losing the voice that makes them yours.

Find more writing help: theeditwithhollytotten.com

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