

Writing tips for busy drafters

As such?
Therefore?

De?
Des?

Continued?
Continuing?

Last?
Latest?

In view of?
With a view to?

Effective?
Efficient?



The complete Wordsmith
L'intégrale de l'Atelier des mots
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Table of contents

EN - What's in a word:

As such	2
Biannual / biennial / bimonthly	4
By / before	5
Continuous / continued / continuing / continual.....	6
Effective / efficient.....	8
Foresee.....	9
Important.....	10
Incoming / upcoming / forthcoming	12
Last / latest	13
Less / fewer	14
Notwithstanding / without prejudice to / by way of derogation from	15
A number of	16
Normally / actually	18
Orientation / direction.....	20
Organising meetings / holding meetings	21
Using 'respectively'	22
Such as / like	24
Take into account / account for	25
A tour of European idioms	26
Vacation vocab (anticipate, prolong, extend, join)	28
With a view to / in view of.....	31

FR - Le fin mot de l'histoire:

Bisannuel(le) / biennal(e).....	32
Dans / en	33
Efficace / effectif	35
Formulations trompeuses	36

Faux-amis:

Delay / délai	38
Deliver / délivrer	39
Digital / numérique	41
Dispose of / disposer de	42
Eventually / éventuellement	43
Merci de faire ceci / thank you for doing this.....	45
Passer / contrôler.....	47

Grammar and punctuation:

Accord des participes passés: les verbes pronominaux	49
Commas in defining and non-defining clauses	53

De / des	55
The humble apostrophe	58
Hyphens.....	61
Latin abbreviations.....	62
Modalities.....	64
Noun compounds.....	66
Order of adjectives.....	68
The serial comma	70

Dear colleague,

If you are reading this, congratulations! You have in your hand (or on your screen) the Wordsmith second anniversary collection!

The Wordsmith was conceived in 2018 by three LING quality controllers, with the support of the LING Communications Officer at the time. The aim is to help drafters in English and French, offering them practical assistance and tips on some of the most common linguistic issues encountered in drafting. The inspiration for our articles comes from texts submitted to the EN and FR editing services and from suggestions received from GSC colleagues through the Wordsmith functional [mailbox](#).

The group comprises translators and quality controllers from a range of language units, whose native languages cover not only English and French but other languages too. This diversity of input helps us look at linguistic issues from all angles and detect difficulties that are not immediately obvious to native speakers.

The Wordsmith publishes articles twice monthly on Domus. We try to make our articles short, fun, clear and easily comprehensible. This collection brings together all of the articles published in the Wordsmith's first two years, and we hope that it will be a handy resource for readers in all parts of the house.

As such

Suffering from Draftingschmerz? Traumatized by dangling modifiers? In this article the Wordsmith explains why 'as such' and 'therefore' sometimes might look like synonyms – and why they aren't.

You will often see the expression 'as such' appearing in places (generally the beginning of a sentence) where you might equally find 'therefore', and seemingly with a pretty similar sense. For example:

- 😊 *Drafting is a challenging process. It must therefore be approached with care.*
- 😊 *Drafting is a challenging process. As such, it must be approached with care.*

This apparent parallelism causes many users of English, including many native speakers, to imagine that 'as such' is synonymous and interchangeable with 'therefore'.

This leads to sequences like the following:

- 😊 *Drafting is a challenging process. You might therefore prefer to do something else.*
- 😞 *Drafting is a challenging process. As such, you might prefer to do something else.*

The reason the last example does not work is that 'such' functions as a pronoun, referring back to a noun in the preceding sentence or clause. If we spell out what it refers to in each case, we can immediately see where 'as such' works, where it does not, and why:

- 😊 *Drafting is a challenging process. As **a challenging process**, it must be approached with care.*
- 😞 *Drafting is a challenging process. As **a challenging process**, you might prefer to do something else.*

This last example is clearly a grave case of *dangling modifier* - 'as a challenging process' modifies the subject of the sentence it occurs in. But how can 'you' be a challenging process? (Anyone who feels that they are one is invited to identify themselves as such in the comments.) Instead, here the modifier dangles, with nothing suitable for it to modify.

Once the wrong idea of equivalence between 'therefore' and 'as such' has taken hold, things can go even further astray, as here:

- 😞 *The UK had a long tradition of Euroscepticism. As such, many were not surprised when it voted narrowly to leave the EU.*

Applying the spelling-out test here, we would get

- 😞 *The UK had a long tradition of Euroscepticism. As **Euroscepticism**, many were not surprised when it voted narrowly to leave the EU.*

'Therefore' would be an impeccable replacement for 'as such' here.

Note that the same analysis of 'as such' works in different sentence positions. Here are a couple of examples - you are invited to apply the spelling-out procedure yourself:

- 😊 *They called the people they sheltered their guests, and treated them **as such**.*
- 😊 *The information on this website does not constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon **as such**.*

Where the use of 'as such' would fail the test described here, use a more generic backwards-referring expression, such as 'so', 'thus', 'therefore', 'consequently', or, for legal or more formal texts, 'in light of the foregoing' (bearing in mind that English style favours concision).

Biannual / biennial / bimonthly

If a conference takes place on a 'biannual' basis, how often does it happen? And what if the conference is 'biennial'? If it is 'bimonthly', it's anyone's guess!

As the dictionary gives only one meaning for 'biannual', there is absolutely no doubt that if the conference is held on a biannual basis then it takes place twice a year.

If the conference is 'biennial' then it happens every two years.

So far, so good.

However, if something happens on a 'bimonthly' basis, is it twice a month or every two months? The reader has no way of telling, as 'bimonthly' can mean both! It is therefore much safer to spell out whether it happens 'every two months' or 'twice a month'.

Click [here](#) to read what happens in French!

By / before

Avoiding ambiguity in deadlines will save trouble down the line.

If 'applications must be submitted **by** 31 March 2019', that means no later than midnight (23.59 and 59 seconds) on 31 March. Just before April Fool's Day starts!

If 'applications must be submitted **before** 31 March 2019', that means applications need to be in before the clock strikes midnight (24.00!) on 30 March.

'By' includes the date mentioned, whereas 'before' does not.

To avoid ambiguity, in texts other than legal acts you have a couple of simple options: you can state an **exact time**; you can specify '**by ... at the latest**' or '**no later than ...**'.

For legal acts, page 106 of the [Manual of Precedents for Acts](#) provides a good explanation of how 'by' and 'before' work in such contexts.

Ambiguous deadlines could have legal consequences, so it is very important to be clear about the timing. And, if it is a vacancy notice, you might miss out on a dream candidate!

Continuous / continued / continuing / continual

In our continuing series on problems that continuously plague speakers of English, we will be focusing on an issue that is a continual source of headaches.

The adjectives 'continuous', 'continued', 'continuing' and 'continual' are easy to confuse. It is only natural, of course, since they are all derived from the same verb. Some of their meanings overlap, but there are also some slight differences between them. This is where things get complicated, and we have received several requests for an article on this topic.

'Continuous(ly)' means that something occurs non-stop, without interruption, either in time or space. For instance, let's work with the following sentence:

The Trans-Siberian Railway line runs continuously for 5 722 miles, from Moscow to Vladivostok.

The use of 'continuously' means that the focus is on the actual length of uninterrupted railway line, and not on any other aspects, [such as](#) where it starts or ends.

'Continual(ly)' means that something either occurs repeatedly over a long period of time or that it is recurrent and there are usually only (relatively) brief interruptions between instances of occurrence.

*The fight for civil rights involves a continual struggle.
Constantinople saw continual attacks by the Ottoman empire until 1453.*

In examples such as these, 'continual' indicates that the events do not happen every single second of every single day, but there are at most some periods of relative peace in between periods of harder effort.

'Continued' and 'continuing' mean 'extended' and in most cases are interchangeable. For instance, let's work with the following examples:

*Thank you for your continued support.
[Thank you](#) for your continuing support.*

If there is any distinction to be made, it would be in the focus: 'continued' focuses slightly more on the **past**, on what occurred up to the moment of speaking and beyond into the future, and can be understood as an acknowledgement. On the other hand, 'continuing' focuses more on the **present** and proceeds into the future, on what occurs at and beyond the moment of speaking, and conveys a slight degree of urging and encouragement. These nuances, however, are **extremely subtle**, so the Wordsmith would like to repeat that in very many cases these words can be used **interchangeably**.

The above sentences could be replaced by:

*Thank you for your support up to now.
We hope we can count on your support in the future.*

The one area where distinctions can be clearly made is in the case of some established

collocations which normally work better, or only, with one of the two options, such as 'continuing education'.

When in doubt, though, it is possible to replace these adjectives with others such as 'constant', 'permanent', 'non-stop' or 'uninterrupted', but these alternatives are not fully interchangeable in every context, so it is important to look out for the differences in their meaning.

To be continued in the comments (if our explanations are not clear enough). In the meantime, Happy New Year from the Wordsmith team!

Effective / efficient

Some like it efficient.

Has the desk in your office ever been so messy that to avoid tidying up, you considered changing jobs? Perish the thought. If you did, it could be an effective solution (assuming you'd get a nice new desk in your new job), but not a very efficient one.

'Effective' and 'efficient' are sometimes mistaken for each other, but there is a nuance, which can be relevant for our texts. If something is effective, it means it achieves the desired effect without specifying the manner in which it is achieved. If something is efficient, it doesn't waste time or resources.

So a sentence like:

The EU attaches great importance to the effective functioning of UN bodies.

means that for the EU it is important that these bodies deliver results.

If you wanted to emphasise that these bodies should work in a well-organised way, without waste, then it would be better to say:

The EU attaches great importance to the efficient functioning of UN bodies.

If both aspects (results + way they are achieved) are important, you can always use both 'effective' and 'efficient' to make things absolutely clear.

The EU attaches great importance to the effective and efficient functioning of UN bodies.

Or, as they say in Limerick:

When you want to fulfil an objective,
Be efficient as well as effective
A sledgehammer for cracking a nut
Will get the shell off all right, but
What about the work/output perspective?

Foresee

Weather services forecast. So do economists. But does anyone foresee?

For the uninitiated, the world of forecasts and predictions is usually shrouded in mystery, controversy and statistics, but there is one thing we can all [eventually](#) agree on: how to use the verbs themselves.

The verb 'to forecast' means that an **informed estimate or conjecture** about a future course of events is made on the basis of present indications and past experience. It is close to 'to predict', 'to estimate' or 'to project'. The verb 'to foresee', on the other hand, involves a statement about something that is going to happen in the future, but it is generally made **without relying on any specific evidence**.

The meanings of the two verbs overlap slightly in everyday language, and while 'to foresee' is not altogether incorrect for our texts, we **strongly recommend** using other verbs such as 'to anticipate', 'to expect' or even 'to imagine'.

Who could have expected / anticipated / imagined that [hyphens](#) could be so difficult?

The economists anticipated / expected the [oncoming](#) recession.

As a rule of thumb, the subject of 'to foresee' must be sentient. This ties in with the **most common misuse**, which, as we have seen on other occasions, comes from the influence of French. The verb *prévoir* (which does not always require a sentient subject) means 'to foresee', but it can also mean 'to arrange for', 'to plan', 'to envisage', 'to set out' or 'to provide for', so if that is what you want to say it would be wrong to use 'to foresee' in English.

The sentences

L'article 35 prévoit ce qui suit:

Des mesures additionnelles ont été prévues suite aux accidents intervenus.

Les tests sont prévus pour lundi après-midi.

would correspond to

Article 35 provides for the following:

Additional measures have been put in place / planned / arranged in response to the accidents.

The tests [will take place / will be held](#) on Monday afternoon.

Important

The importance of not being important all the time.

It is important not to underestimate how important it is to produce well-written texts. There are important advantages to conveying a clear message and, more importantly, there are also important legal consequences if important details are badly expressed.

By now you are probably aware that today's entry is about the word 'important', about how it is easy to overuse it and to misuse it and about alternatives that can be applied instead. The meaning of 'important' is, of course, 'something that is highly significant, highly valued or necessary'. However, there are several **alternatives** that can be used if you want to add a bit of nuance to your text or express your idea more clearly. For instance, if you focus on the significance and consequence, the sentence

Today's meeting will have important consequences for the region.

could become

Today's meeting will have significant / critical / substantial consequences for the region.

You could also focus on the duration and scope, turning the above sentence into

Today's meeting will have far-reaching / widespread / long-term consequences for the region.

You should not forget that important things are often relevant, so

He added a number of important questions to the survey.

could be turned into

He added a number of relevant / pertinent / on point questions to the survey.

People, of course, can be important too, but they can also be 'influential', 'authoritative', 'prominent' or 'distinguished'.

As regards **misuse**, a frequent problem is when 'important' is used to indicate a large number or quantity (thank you, French influence! We still love you, though). Going back to the earlier example, you can have

Today's meeting will have considerable / many / a large number of consequences for the region.

And now let's apply everything that has been discussed and re-write the opening paragraph:

It is essential not to underestimate how critical it is to produce well-written texts. There are many advantages to conveying a clear message and, more than anything

else, there are also far-reaching legal consequences if crucial details are badly expressed.

Of course, there are plenty of alternatives to 'important' depending on the context, and you should bear in mind the nuance and accuracy of what you are trying to convey. It is impossible to cover all of these alternatives in this article, but the next time you are planning on writing something important it is worth taking a minute to analyse whether, instead, it is relevant, extensive or valuable, or simply just numerous.

Incoming / upcoming / forthcoming

Finland is about to start its presidency. Now, would you say it is 'incoming', 'upcoming' or 'forthcoming'? And what about 'oncoming'? Read on to find out.

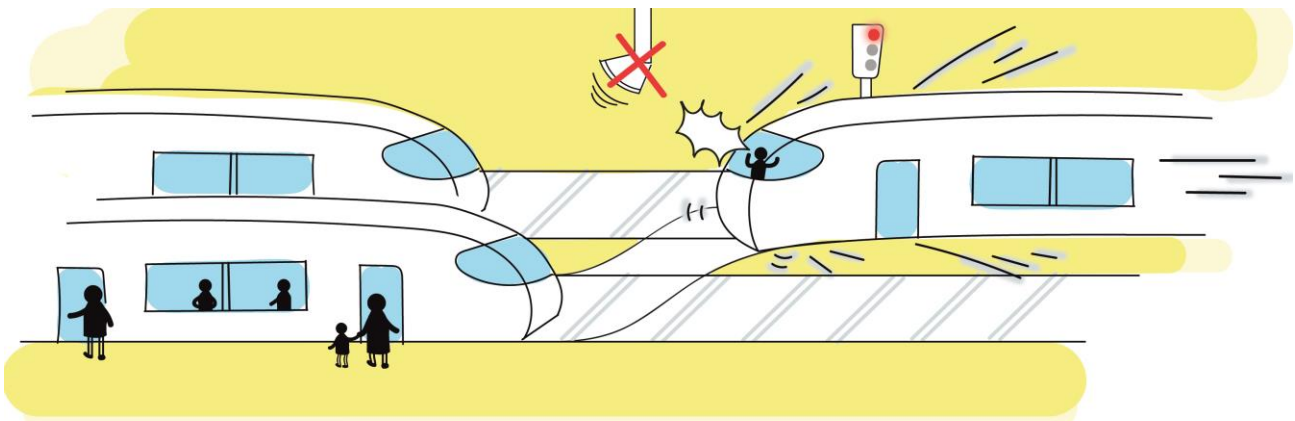
'Incoming' is used to express something that is approaching in space, either real ('an incoming missile') or metaphorical ('an incoming call'). You can use it to refer to a presidency or government if you want to indicate that they are just about to take up their duties or if you want to establish a contrast with the outgoing presidency or government.

'Forthcoming' and 'upcoming' refer to something approaching in time, possibly immediately but not necessarily. You can use both 'upcoming presidency' and 'forthcoming presidency', with 'forthcoming' being the more formal of the two. 'Forthcoming' also has other meanings, but those are beyond the scope of this article (sorry for not being more forthcoming!).

To complete our collection, we should also mention 'oncoming': something that is approaching from the front and is generally something to be wary of (traffic, storm).

You can even have fun combining as many of these words as you can in one sentence, although we do not recommend it as best practice for Council documents:

As information over the loudspeakers was not forthcoming, passengers on the outgoing train were unaware of the oncoming threat from the runaway incoming train.



(Disclaimer: No passengers, or trains, were harmed during the making of this illustration.)

In view of the upcoming holidays the Wordsmith will be taking a summer break. We are looking forward to more prompts from you and to seeing you all again in September.

Last / latest

Welcome to the latest, and hopefully not last, instalment of the Wordsmith. Featuring Marilyn Manson.

The words that we are going to analyse in today's article catch many people out at some point in their lives (even native English speakers!): the use of the adjective '**last**', and especially the difference between '**last**' and '**latest**'.

'Last' can be used in several ways. The first one is to talk about something that came immediately before an equivalent element that we are taking as a reference.

Last week we had a grand total of six minutes and thirty-two seconds of sunshine.

In this sentence, we are considering the week we are in currently as the reference and talking about the week before it. In some cases, however, this use can bring about a common linguistic ailment known as contextual ambiguity or, in other words, a situation that makes you think 'but, wait, do you mean X or Y?'.

Marilyn Manson's last album was Heaven Upside Down.

Do you mean that album is the one he has released most recently or do you mean that he is no longer involved in the music industry?

In this case, the ambiguity can be dispelled by distinguishing between 'last' and 'latest'. At this point, then, we can talk about the other, slightly more confusing, meaning of this adjective: if you use 'last' you are saying that **nothing comes after whatever you are talking about**. The series ends there. There is nothing more. By contrast, if you use 'latest' you are saying that what you are talking about is **the most recent in a series, but more instalments may come**.

Let's see some examples to illustrate this:

*Marilyn Manson's latest album is Heaven Upside Down.
The Beatles' last album was Let It Be.*

The first sentence indicates that the most recent album released by Marilyn Manson is *Heaven Upside Down*, but [eventually](#) he will release others (or at least some of us hope he will). In this case, 'latest' corresponds to 'most recent' or 'last album to date'. The second sentence indicates that The Beatles released no other records after *Let It Be*. In this case it would be possible to replace 'last' with 'final'.

We hope you find the latest instalment of the Wordsmith useful, and see you next time!

Less / fewer

Would you rather have less cake or fewer slices? Bite into our article before you answer!

Some words and expressions are so commonplace that not everyone is even aware that they actually pose a problem. One such example is the difference between less and fewer when they are qualifying a noun.

It is easy to find instances of sentences such as:

- ☹ *There are less cars in the centre of town.*
- ☹ *Less people are choosing to purchase a house instead of renting one.*

It is possible to hear this use of 'less' in spoken language, but it is not recommended in written language, especially in Council documents. Fortunately, the solution to it is really simple: 'less' is used only for uncountable nouns, such as 'coffee' or 'cake', whereas 'fewer' is used for countable nouns, such as 'cups of coffee' or 'slices of cake'. The above sentences should therefore be rewritten as:

- ☺ *There are fewer cars in the centre of town.*
- ☺ *Fewer people are choosing to purchase a house instead of renting one.*

Finally, 'less' is still the word to be used to qualify an adjective, even if the noun after it is countable. This can help to dispel ambiguities in sentences such as:

- Less stringent measures will be applied. (The measures that will be applied will not be as stringent)*
- Fewer stringent measures will be applied. (The measures will be stringent, but there will not be as many of them)*

And that is all there is to our latest article. Less is more!

Notwithstanding / without prejudice to / by way of derogation from

Small details make big differences (especially for sports enthusiasts).

We have all been there: you take up cycling/hockey/football/name your favourite sport and you do not know what to wear. You check the legislation on the subject and you come across these indecipherable phrases: 'notwithstanding', 'without prejudice to' and 'by way of derogation from'. So, what exactly can you wear? Here is a little help.

'Notwithstanding' commonly means 'despite', 'in spite of' or 'although', so it introduces a **reservation**. If clause B starts with 'Notwithstanding clause A', this means that clause A is subordinate to clause B. Clause B is saying 'never mind what clause A says, you need to take note of me, clause B, because I am probably introducing a variant to clause A'.

'Without prejudice to', on the other hand, establishes a **complementarity** between the two clauses. It indicates that the statements of the first clause apply, but also those of the second clause.

Finally, 'by way of derogation from' introduces an **exception** to whatever follows the word 'from'.

Here are a few examples from the world of cycling:

Article 1: All cyclists shall wear dark jerseys.

Article 2: Notwithstanding Article 1, all cyclists taller than 1m80 may wear lime green jerseys.

This means that even if there is a rule stating that all cyclists need to wear dark jerseys, any cyclists that are taller than 1m80 are allowed to wear a lime green jersey if they so choose.

Article 3: Without prejudice to Article 1, all cyclists who have won the Tour de France may affix a logo to their jersey.

This means that cyclists need to wear dark jerseys, and that only those that have won the Tour de France can add a logo if they want to.

Article 4: By way of derogation from Article 1, cyclists whose name starts with A shall wear red jerseys.

This means that an exception to Article 1 is created only for those cyclists whose name starts with an A.

Despite these indications, these terms need to be handled with extreme care (think 'holding a priceless Ming vase while cycling on a tightrope over a shark-infested lava pit' levels of care). When in doubt, do not hesitate to consult a legal expert.

A number of

Numbers are not always as exact a science as you might think.

Language is very much a tool that we all adapt to ourselves and our needs and that therefore acquires all our idiosyncrasies, so it causes some problems that do not have a straightforward answer. This is especially true for written language because in spoken language we can express many things through our facial expressions, intonation and other elements that are not obvious in writing (hence the recent popularity of smileys!), and it is also possible to ask the speaker for clarification about anything that remains unclear. These aids, however, are not available in written language, so when drafting a text it is critical to put ourselves in the shoes of the reader and ask ourselves 'can this be understood in ways that I had not thought about?'.

A good example of this problem is the use of the phrase 'a number of'. While nobody will have any problem with the meaning of the expression itself, would you be able to agree with your neighbours on, for example, exactly how many Member States, issues or lollipops there are in the following sentences?

A number of Member States supported the initiative.

A number of issues were raised during the meeting.

Little [Annie's](#) father bought a number of lollipops.

Try it. Get a coffee, go to your closest neighbours (or, rather, arrange a videoconference on Avaya) and try to agree on an answer. I will wait for you here.

As you will undoubtedly have noticed, expressions such as these do not explicitly establish an exact number of anything, but at most only a relative number in comparison with something else that may be obvious to the author but not necessarily to everyone else. This vagueness may be required on occasion if you are feeling noncommittal, but it is essential to bear in mind that such vagueness does exist. If you are going to use it, you should do so knowingly!

There are thus two conclusions that need to be drawn from this article:

Firstly, on a general level, it is always useful to re-read anything you write and to be on the lookout for things that you find obvious but may not be so to other readers.

Secondly, and more specifically, whenever possible you should try to replace the phrase 'a number of' with a concrete number or, at most, with expressions such as 'a few' or 'many', which, while not perfect for our purposes, do give a slightly clearer indication of the number of elements being mentioned. If you apply this to the examples above, you get the following:

A few Member States supported the initiative.

Five issues were raised during the meeting.

Little Annie's father bought an insane amount of lollipops.

Alternatively, you could also use 'some': this does not specify a number either, but it does convey the idea that reference is made to only a part of the total number of elements.

We will be dealing with a ~~number of~~ many other pitfalls in [forthcoming](#) articles. See you soon!

Normally / actually

Everyone is wondering what the new normal might look like.

Wordsmith doesn't have the answer yet, but what we can do is explain how to use the word 'normally'. And 'actually'. False friends alert!

We have already seen several examples of false friendships that occur between English and French, but we are afraid to say that there are plenty more!

The first one today is the contrast between 'actual(ly)' and *actuel (actuellement)*. This is a usual suspect in every list of false friends, so it needs little introduction: 'actually' does not mean *actuellement*, but rather *en fait*. To express *actuellement* in English you should use 'currently', 'at the moment', or something along those lines.

Je suis actuellement à la recherche d'un nouvel appartement.

= *I'm currently looking for a new apartment.*

≠ *I'm actually looking for a new apartment.* (This sentence is grammatically correct but does not have the same meaning as the French example.)

We are going to bet that you have passed through Brussels airport once or twice. According to their [website](#), their app allows you to 'stay [up-to-date](#) [*sic*] with actual waiting times at security'. The French version allows you to *consulter les temps d'attente actuels au [contrôle](#) de sûreté*. Depending on whether you want the real waiting times (as opposed to what?) or the current times, you might want to think about what language version you choose! And next time you are at the airport, listen closely to the announcements to see if anything sounds strange to you.

This distinction holds true even in cases where you could be tempted to assume that the author is talking about time, as in the following example, where 'actually' is used to introduce a negative response:

Q. Do you fancy coming to my party?

A. I'd love to, but we're actually in different social bubbles.

You could conceivably (but incorrectly!) argue that in this instance 'actually' means 'at the moment', but even here it still means 'in fact' or 'as a matter of fact'.

Another false friendship that catches many French and English speakers out is the apparent similarity between *normalement* and 'normally'. In English, 'normally' only means 'usually' or 'under the usual circumstances' as it is used as a general statement:

Normalement, c'est mon père qui va chercher les pizzas.

Normally it's my dad that collects the pizzas.

In French, *normalement* can also be used to express that something will happen if no unforeseen circumstances are encountered. However, in English you should use an expression along the lines of 'if nothing unexpected happens', 'barring exceptional circumstances', etc., when making a prediction about a specific situation:

Normalement, la [pizza](#) devrait arriver d'ici une demi-heure.

😊 *If all goes well, the pizza should be here in half an hour.*

😞 *Normally, the pizza should be here in half an hour.*

Normalement, notre prochain article paraîtra dans deux semaines... if all goes well. We are currently working on it, actually!

Orientation / direction

Lacking a sense of direction? Feeling disorientated or losing your way? You've come to the right place! The Wordsmith will help you navigate the differences between 'direction' and 'orientation' in English and in French.

This article is all about finding your bearings. The word **orientation**, in both English and French, usually describes: the act of determining one's position; a belief or preference; the position or direction of an object relative to its surroundings or the preparation for a new activity.

There are two common areas in the context of Council work where the use of 'orientation' can trip you up. The first is discussions on policy priorities: 'policy debate' sometimes erroneously appears in our documents as 'orientation debate' (doubtless influenced by the siren call of French: *débat d'orientation*).

The second is connected to the French plural *orientations*, which describes guidelines or guidance. Though you might have seen it rendered as 'orientations' in some English texts, you are unlikely to see it used this way outside the [international-English](#) bubble.

*Améliorer encore les articles de l'Atelier des mots: état des lieux et **orientations** pour 2021*

😊 *Making Wordsmith articles even better: state of play and **guidelines** for 2021*

☹️ *Making Wordsmith articles even better: state of play and **orientations** for 2021*

You might have also seen *orientations* appear as corresponding to 'directions' (e.g. in [Article 15\(1\) TEU](#): general political directions and priorities, *les orientations et les priorités politiques générales*). Treaty language is a law unto itself, of course, and you should be wary of replicating it unless you are quoting from the Treaties or referring directly to their wording. A practical rule of thumb might be to use 'guidelines' or 'guidance'.

Speaking of directions, we should briefly mention another set of false friends. Although 'direction' describes, in both English and French, a line along which a person or thing moves towards a point, or a general purpose or aim, watch out for those special contexts where the meaning in French is very different:

*La tâche a été gérée avec brio par la **direction**.*

*The task was handled brilliantly by the **management/directorate**.*

As we can see above, the word *direction* in French can be understood both as 'management' and as 'directorate' (i.e. an administrative unit in an organisation chart, especially in a public body).

*A: Je crains le pire pour ce voyage. B: Pas étonnant: la **direction** de la voiture ne fonctionne pas!*

A: I'm really expecting the worst on this trip. B: I'm not surprised. The [car steering](#) is broken!

The Wordsmith is here to help you steer clear of linguistic trouble: [please](#) keep those great suggestions coming!

Organising meetings / holding meetings

Here's an easy one, for a week of big meetings:

- When was the 10 April Brexit summit organised?

- Not on 10 April, for starters.

If you want to hold a meeting, you need to organise it beforehand. The GSC is all about organising and holding meetings, so the distinction between the two ought to be clear in our minds — and in our texts.

Meetings are generally organised some time before they take place. It makes sense: be it a humble unit meeting or a European Council summit, the venue has to be booked, participants have to be invited, time set aside, travel arrangements made, etc. The organising process often takes considerably longer than the actual meeting, and involves various disparate subtasks: registration, catering, finding a biro that works...

Meetings themselves should ideally be of more interest than the preparatory process. Sure, meetings *are* organised, but that is just one of those vital but not terribly riveting facts of administrative life. What sets pulses racing is not the *organising* of the meeting but its *holding*, its *taking place*, if you like.

So when writing about meetings, conferences and similar (organised) events, past or future, remember the difference between organising and happening. It would be factually incorrect to say:

A Brexit summit was organised on 10 April 2019.

The GSC is far too well-oiled a machine to organise a [crucial](#) meeting on the day it takes place. In reality:

A Brexit summit took place / was held on 10 April 2019.

Using 'respectively'

R-E-S-P-E-C-T-I-V-E: find out what it means to me.

Just a few weeks into 2020, the words 'respective' and 'respectively' had already appeared in about 500 GSC documents. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* comments: 'Delight in these words is a widespread but depraved taste ... [of] ten sentences in which they occur, nine would be improved by their removal.'

WHERE YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY USE 'RESPECTIVELY'

'Respectively' is used in sentences containing parallel series of items, and can be roughly paraphrased as 'in the order mentioned in each series of items'. It is necessary in cases where the point-for-point correspondence cannot be taken as obvious by default, e.g.:

☺ *Italian and cookery classes are available on Mondays and Tuesdays, respectively.*

Here, if we leave out 'respectively', the reader cannot tell if both types of class are available on both weekdays, and so on. It gets even less clear with longer lists:

☹ *Italian, legislative drafting, cookery and mindfulness classes are available on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays (there are no classes on Wednesdays).*

Since each list contains four items, one might guess that Italian classes are on Mondays, legislative drafting on Tuesdays, cookery on Thursdays and mindfulness on Fridays — but without 'respectively', one could easily be wrong, so it is helpful here.

WHERE YOU SHOULD CONSIDER USING 'RESPECTIVELY'

A less clear-cut case is the following sentence:

☺ *The atomic numbers of hydrogen, oxygen and carbon are 1, 8 and 6, respectively.*

What 'respectively' says here is that hydrogen = 1, oxygen = 8 and carbon = 6. Without 'respectively', it would be possible (if unlikely) for a reader to wonder which number went with which element. Still, 'respectively' may seem almost superfluous: two series of items, equal numbers of items per series, and in contrast to the preceding examples, there must clearly be a 1:1 correspondence between the members of each series. Unless you are designing a quiz, why jumble the orders of the two series? Consider trusting your readers' intelligence and not using 'respectively':

☺ *The atomic numbers of hydrogen, oxygen and carbon are 1, 8 and 6.*

Using 'respective(ly)' to say explicitly something that is already clear is a very common misuse. That said, legal drafting, in particular, is likely to require a more cautious approach, since there the priority is to maximise precision and forestall even non-obvious misinterpretations:

😊 *The States Parties shall cooperate in accordance with their respective laws and international obligations.*

Without the 'respective' above, there might be legal uncertainty as to whether each State Party must act in accordance with the laws and obligations of the other States Parties as well as with their own, however unlikely (see final misuse example below for an alternative solution). In general, we should [take into account](#) that it *could* be helpful to confirm what might otherwise just seem likely.

WHERE YOU SHOULD **NOT** USE RESPECTIVELY

Next, here are a few cases where 'respectively' is commonly used but definitely should not be.

😞 *The Commission will discuss the proposal with Member States and with the Council, respectively.*

Above, we only have one series (Member States and Council), whereas we need two parallel series for 'respectively' to work, as we have seen.

😞 *The respective priorities of the various stakeholders will be taken into account in the action plan.*

Here, the drafter could use something like 'distinct' or 'separate' to indicate that the stakeholders have different priorities instead of shared ones, especially since the series are not explicitly listed.

😞 *The issue was discussed at a special conference and addressed in a Commission reflection paper and the **respective** Council conclusions.*

Here, the drafter might intend something like 'associated', 'corresponding', 'contemporaneous' or, most vaguely, 'relevant'. Again, no pair of series is mentioned that could be aligned by 'respectively'.

😞 *Each party shall cooperate within the scope of its **respective** competences and programmes.*

Here, 'respective' merely repeats what is already expressed by 'each... its'.

CONCLUSION

We should always keep in mind the immortal words of Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin and — particularly — Aretha's backing singers, here slightly adapted:

😊 *All I'm askin' for is a little 'respective' ([just a little bit](#)).*

Such as / like

How alike are 'like' and 'such as'?

'Like' is a pretty ubiquitous word, with many different uses; here we focus on the distinction between 'like' and 'such as' when introducing one or more elements as **examples** or **points of comparison**.

'Such as' is used to introduce **examples**, as sentences such as the following show:

My favourite things include items such as raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens.

'Like' can also introduce examples, but it is best restricted to informal contexts such as chatting about your favourite things, rather than, say, defining the scope of a Regulation:

☺ *My favourite things include stuff like raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens.*

☹ *Article 1(1): The Favourite Things Regulation shall apply to items like raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens.*

'Like' is best avoided in Council documents when introducing examples, for reasons of style — and also clarity: in contrast to the 'such as' case, 'like' sentences can leave it unclear whether or not the specific items mentioned are themselves included in the scope of application. In some cases, the items mentioned after 'like' are clearly not examples but **points of comparison**:

Today's music scene is sorely in need of giants like John Coltrane and Julie Andrews.

Here the individuals are not being put forward as candidate musical giants of today.

But in other cases, sentences with 'like' can create an ambiguity as to the status of the items introduced. Compare these sentences:

The shop did stock books like Finnegans Wake and Nova Express, but they didn't sell.

The shop did stock books such as Finnegans Wake and Nova Express, but they didn't sell.

In the 'like' version, the two items mentioned could be *among* those the shop stocked (examples), or they could just represent the *kind* of books it stocked (comparison): hard going and highbrow. In the 'such as' version, it is clear that the two specific titles mentioned were in the collection.

A simple test: if you could replace your preposition by 'for example', 'for instance' or 'including', go for 'such as'; if instead you could replace it with 'resembling', 'similar/comparable to' or the like, opt for 'like'. Try this on the last pair of sentences above to see the difference.

Take into account / account for

What do lollipops have in common with the EU budget?

The EU budget requires intense and lengthy negotiations. Many factors have to be taken into account in this complex and sensitive process, or else by the end of the year it might be difficult to account for all the expenses. And who wants that, right?

This article, of course, will not give advice on budgeting, be it for the EU or even for a household. Instead, it will unravel the key differences between two expressions that look similar but have different meanings: 'to take something into account' (or, synonymously, 'to take account of something') and 'to account for something'.

'To take something into account' means to treat something as a significant factor in a plan or a process.

Future EU budgets should take account of the objectives and priorities of the EU 2020 Strategy.

Little Annie's father should take into account that his daughter will share the lollipops with her friends.

In the above examples, if the services preparing the budget do not factor in the objectives and priorities of the EU 2020 Strategy, they might allocate the funds to something less relevant. Similarly, the fact that little Annie will share her lollipops with her friends is significant and if her father disregards it, he might not buy enough of them.

'Account for something', on the other hand, has several meanings but we can focus on three of the most important ones for our purposes: 'being a part (a particular amount) of something', 'explaining the presence or absence of something' and 'explaining the cause of something'. Let us illustrate these three meanings with a few examples:

Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) account for 72 % of EU spending. (The two policies make up 72 % of spending.)

Q: Was everybody accounted for during the evacuation? A: Yes, 10 were here and nine were teleworking. (Do we know where everybody is?)

Little Annie's generosity with her lollipops accounts for her popularity. (Her generosity is the cause of her popularity.)

Taking into account the differences between these expressions will surely be just as useful for households as for the EU. Who knows, one day little Annie might be the one accounting for the spending of the entire Union...

A tour of European idioms

Idioms: a minefield for language learners – but also a source of great delight, once you get the hang of them. The Wordsmith has compiled a little selection that might come in handy during the holidays. Ready?

Linguists like to say that each language reflects the world a bit differently. Idioms are a fun way to illustrate this. Most people think idioms are colourful, proverb-style sayings, but strictly an idiom is any expression whose sense cannot be derived directly from the senses of its components, including common expressions [like](#) 'with regard to' and 'in the light of'. Let's take a little tour around Europe to delve into some of the more picturesque idioms, and see whether you find them as mysterious as a dark forest (*tamsus miškas*, as they say in Lithuanian) or as clear as dumpling broth (*klar wie Kloßbrühe*, as they say in German).

1. It's raining cats and dogs

When we are fine-tuning our travel plans we all hope for sunny skies and a refreshing breeze. But when it starts pouring, imaginations seem to run wild: you can have a rain of bricks (*het regent bakstenen* in Dutch), cobbler's knives (*ag cur sceana gréasaí* in Irish) or even shoemaker's apprentices (*det regner skomagerdrenge* in Danish). Which expression would you use to describe heavy rain in English?

- (a) *It's raining cats and dogs.*
- (b) *It's raining the devil and pitchforks.*

(a) may seem more correct, because 'cats and dogs' are often cited in English textbooks, but 'the devil and pitchforks' can be heard too, e.g. in Florida. There are many regional variants: let us know your favourite ones in the comments.

2. Galoshes and pasta

What is the link between a pair of galoshes and pasta? It turns out you can use both when you want to describe a situation that is different from something that has just been mentioned (*to zupełnie inna para kaloszy*: it is a completely different pair of galoshes, in Polish; *ez más tészta*: it is a different pasta, in Hungarian). Which expression would you use in French?

- (a) *C'est une autre paire de manches.*
- (b) *C'est une autre histoire.*

The more correct answer is (b) because, unlike '*c'est une autre histoire*' and the above expressions in Polish and Hungarian, '*c'est une autre paire de manches*' very often refers to a situation that is not only different, but also more difficult. The expression originated in the 16th century, when [elaborate detachable](#) sleeves were an extravagant accessory that was popular among the wealthy. You could change your whole look just by wearing different sleeves. Sometimes, however, the design was too complicated (and, perhaps, the deadline too tight) and the tailors started to use the saying to describe a more than usually difficult task. Similar idioms can be found also in Italian and Croatian (*è un altro paio di maniche*; *to je drugi par rukava*), but they focus on the difference, not the difficulty.

Origins of the English version 'it's a different kettle of fish' are a bit harder to trace. According to one theory it refers back to fishing parties popular in the 18th century: the

catch was cooked on the spot and as some fishers were luckier, and more skilled as chefs, there were significant differences in the dining experience, depending on the kettle (an old word for a pot) you ate from.

3. It's all Greek to me

When people in Germany cannot understand a word they are hearing, they will sometimes say: '*für mich sind das böhmische Dörfer*' (that is Bohemian villages for me). The Czechs would say: '*je to pro mně španělská vesnice*' (that is a Spanish village for me). What do the Spanish say?

- (a) *Me suena a checo.* (It sounds like Czech to me.)
- (b) *Me suena a chino.* (It sounds like Chinese to me.)

(b) is correct. The English idiom is of course: 'It's all Greek to me', and Greek is also the reference language for incomprehensibility in Swedish and Maltese (*det är rena grekiskan; qisek qed tkellimni bil-Grieg*), but the Greeks themselves opt for Chinese, just like the French (*Είμαι κινέζικα; c'est du chinois*). Does anyone know what the Chinese say?

4. And pigs might fly

St. Never's or St. Neverly's Day is quite popular across Europe when you want to say that something will never happen (various versions of this idiom can be found, [e.g.](#) in Czech, Slovak, German, French, Greek, Slovenian or Lithuanian). Another school of thought refers to flying livestock ('and pigs might fly' in English; when cows fly, *lehmät lentävät*, in Finnish; when donkeys fly, *quando gli asini voleranno*, in Italian) or to chicken with teeth (*quand les poules auront des dents* in French, *quando as galinhas tiverem dentes* in Portuguese). Still others prefer to describe odd horticultural phenomena, e.g.: when pears grow on poplars and gillyflowers on willows (*când va face plopul pere și răchita micșunele* in Romanian), when an owl's tail blossoms (*kad pūcei aste ziedēs* in Latvian) or when wooden slippers blossom (*когато цъфнат налъмите* in Bulgarian).

In which languages can you still refer to the calendar of an ancient civilisation when you want to express impossibility?

- (a) *French and Portuguese.*
- (b) *French and Italian.*

(b) '*Aux calendes grecques*' is still sometimes used in French and Italian (*alle calende greche*). '*Calendae*' was a Latin term for the first day of each month, but Greek did not have such a term, so in fact you would be waiting for something that did not exist. The original Latin expression '*ad calendas graecas*' was reportedly coined by Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE).

Was this quiz as easy as blowing your nose (*nagu nuusata*, in Estonian)? Easy as bean soup (*preprosto kot pasulj*, in Slovenian) or as pie (*lätt som en plätt*, in Swedish)? A piece of cake? *Du gâteau? Un jeu d'enfants? Ein Kinderspiel?* We hope so, but if not, do not despair, everyone makes mistakes, or, as they say in Slovak, 'even a horse stumbles, and it has four legs' (*kôň má štyri nohy, a predsa sa potkne*).

We wish you all calm and relaxing holidays with no stumbles at all, keep us posted on your language adventures and see you back in September!

Special thanks to the linguists and librarians who helped with this article!

Vacation vocab (anticipate, prolong, extend, join)

Most of the year, we give you linguistic advice. This time we are offering a few tips on how to look forward to your holidays, think about making them longer, and plan ahead to avoid unwelcome surprise visitors.

Right now most of us are looking forward to our holidays, far away from our management, and perhaps wishing we could make those holidays longer. In this article we explore the ins and outs of a few groups of words connected (tenuously, maybe) with these seasonal preoccupations.

Anticipate

The Latin source words (*ante* + *capere*) mean roughly 'to take before', and from there, meanings of 'anticipate' have spread in all kinds of directions. Some of these are considered incorrect by some speakers, but they are all well established in current usage. Here are some of the main meanings of 'anticipate':

- expect

*Do you **anticipate** [stormy weather](#) on your holiday?*

- make plans in advance of some expected future situation

They went ahead and booked plane tickets in anticipation of travel restrictions being lifted.

- know in advance

*You should **anticipate** the possibility of flight cancellations this summer and plan accordingly.*

- mention, think, do or use something before the proper time

*Lush summertime tomatoes are ripening on the vine, but you can still indulge in sunny gazpacho with greenhouse-grown tomatoes to **anticipate** the season.*

- forestall, foil, preclude

*The authorities of the seaside town **anticipated** the risk of a summer surge in infections locally by imposing an extensive range of restrictive measures and publicising heavy penalties for infractions.*

- look forward to

*The kids are eagerly **anticipating** [sandcastle](#)-building on the beach.*

The various senses overlap considerably, but there are also significant differences between them, e.g. the difference between: merely expecting something to happen; expecting something to happen and taking steps in advance on the basis of that expectation; expecting something and looking forward to it eagerly. If contextual indications are insufficient, this can make it hard to know what to make of a sentence such as the following:

The government had anticipated considerable wage growth.

Had the government simply [expected](#) wage growth? Had they been enthusiastic about it? Or perhaps they had seen it as problematic and had prepared measures to dampen excessive wage growth? We cannot tell from this sentence. It is usually not difficult to save readers from this kind of confusion by choosing a simple unambiguous alternative expression, as here:

The government had expected considerable wage growth.

The government had hoped for and expected considerable wage growth.

The government had feared that there would be considerable wage growth.

The government had taken measures to suppress the wage growth that they believed would otherwise occur.

Prolong / extend

Here, instead of one word with several overlapping meanings, we have two words of similar meaning but with one of them having a much larger scope than the other.

The key idea in 'prolong' is making something specifically *longer*, in duration or space. Thus, we can talk of prolonging states and conditions, such as life, suffering, agony, suspense - and indeed anticipation; and in geometry we can prolong lines - but, please note, we do *not* prolong [deadlines \(which of course are points in time rather than lines\)](#), though we can idiomatically extend them.

If you look up 'extend' in a dictionary, you will usually find 'prolong' as one of the senses listed, but it also has several other related (as well as some unrelated) senses, notably including a wider range of ways of increasing the literal or figurative size or scope of something, such as 'enlarge', 'expand', 'widen, broaden'. Here are a few sentences where 'extend' works but 'prolong' does not:

😊 *Our neighbours want to extend their house with a conservatory at the back.*

😊 *The scope of the Regulation was extended to cover recreational fishing as well as the industrial fisheries sector.*

😊 *Time will tell whether the incumbent can extend her appeal beyond party loyalists.*

☹️ *Any of the above with 'prolong' instead of 'extend'.*

Join

This point does not crop up too often in Council texts, but it is definitely worth getting right in your correspondence with colleagues. While the French verb *joindre* means (among other things) ['to get through \[to someone\] by phone'](#), the English verb 'join' does not. It does, on the other hand, mean (also among other things) 'to get together with another person or group', much like the French verb *rejoindre*. Imagine the fright you would get if you received a message like this from your Director-General:

☹️ *Please provide me with your private phone numbers in case I need to **join** you during your holidays.*

You would probably be less troubled, if still a little disgruntled, if the message said instead what our imaginary DG no doubt intended to convey:

😊 *Please provide me with your private phone numbers in case I need to **contact** you during your holidays.*

In either case, the solution is of course to accidentally mistranscribe your number, in anticipation of unwanted interruptions. If you are tempted to prolong or extend your holidays (both of which are good English, if not necessarily a good career move), please make sure you are back in time to [join us again at the beginning of September](#). For those who will be working through July, we'll have a fun treat for you in two weeks. Meanwhile, enjoy the summer, and stay safe!

With a view to / in view of

When is a 'view' not a sight for sore eyes? When paired with the wrong preposition!

The phrases 'with a view to' and 'in view of' might seem very similar, but as we will see below, a slight change of preposition can change everything!

'With a view to' looks forward: it refers to a goal, an aim, an intention. It is followed by a verb in the -ing form. It is a synonym of 'with the aim of', 'with the intention of', 'in order to' and 'so as to'.

If you do A with a view to doing B, you do it because you hope it will result in B:

*She called a meeting of all parties with a view to leaving office with grace.
She bought a new bike with a view to training for the race.*

'In view of' relates to facts that need to be taken into consideration. It is followed by a noun. Some synonyms include 'considering', 'taking into account', 'given', 'in light of' and 'bearing in mind':

*In view of the impending storm, the captain just muttered 'Brace!'
In view of the late hour, we'll move the meeting to another place.*

In view of the complexity of English, the Wordsmith will keep offering you handy tips. Stay tuned with a view to making the most of them!

Bisannuel(le) / biennal(e)

Vous vous demandez à quelle fréquence vous devrez vous rendre à une conférence bisannuelle? Ou à une exposition biennale? Nous levons ici pour vous toutes les ambiguïtés!

Les termes bisannuel et biennal sont en grande partie synonymes. Si biennal ne pose guère de problème de compréhension, peut-être grâce au festival d'art contemporain couramment appelé "Biennale de Venise", bisannuel peut prêter à confusion chez le lecteur, celui-ci hésitant entre les sens *qui se produit deux fois par an* et *qui se produit tous les deux ans*. Pourtant, le jugement des dictionnaires est sans appel: il n'est jamais question de couper une année en deux. Ce qui revient tous les deux ans est dit **bisannuel** ou **biennal**; ce qui se rapporte à une période de deux ans est dit **biennal**... sauf, inévitable exception, en botanique, où une plante dont le cycle vital dure deux ans est dite **bisannuelle**.

Mais les dictionnaires n'ayant raison que lorsque leurs définitions sont connues, nous conseillerons, en cas d'ambiguïté, de résoudre celle-ci en utilisant *tous les deux ans*. Quant au sens erroné *qui se produit deux fois par an* parfois donné à **bisannuel**, rendons-le plutôt par **semestriel** ou, plus rare, **semi-annuel**.

Et en anglais, qu'en est-il ? Cliquez [ici](#) pour le savoir !

Dans / en

Dans les articles de l'Atelier des mots, qui se lisent en moins de dix minutes, on apprend des choses qui nous serviront certainement encore dans dix ans!

En français, la préposition "dans" est notamment utilisée lorsque l'on souhaite situer quelque chose **à l'intérieur** de quelque chose d'autre - sauf pour parler de pays, auquel cas on utilisera les prépositions "en" ou "à", comme "en Italie" ou "au Danemark" par exemple.

Toutefois, ici nous n'allons pas [voyager](#) à travers le monde, bien que cela nous manque à tous, mais plutôt dans le temps. En effet, aussi bien la préposition "dans" que la préposition "en" peuvent être utilisées, en français, pour situer une action dans le temps.

Là où certaines langues n'utilisent qu'une seule préposition (*in* en anglais par exemple), le français en utilise deux pour signifier deux choses assez différentes.

"Dans" s'utilise pour exprimer le moment où une action commencera, à compter du moment présent. Le verbe qui l'accompagne sera souvent au **futur**:

☺ *Nous pourrons aller nous promener dans trois mois.*

☹ *Nous pourrons aller nous promener en trois mois.*

Mais attention, "dans" peut prendre un sens différent s'il est suivi d'un article défini (le/la/les): "*je serai de retour dans **la** semaine*" indique que l'on rentrera [au cours de la semaine](#), tandis que "*je serai de retour dans **une** semaine*" signifie que l'on rentrera sept jours plus tard, mais pas avant.

La préposition "en", elle, est utilisée lorsque l'on souhaite indiquer la **durée** nécessaire pour réaliser une action passée ou future qui ne commence pas nécessairement au moment où l'on prononce la phrase:

☺ *Nous avons visité l'île en deux semaines.*

☹ *Nous avons visité l'île dans deux semaines.*

Notez que, pendant le confinement, vous pouvez toujours rêver et dire:

1. *Nous ferons le tour du monde dans 80 jours.*

2. *Nous ferons le tour du monde en 80 jours.*

Les deux phrases sont tout à fait correctes mais, bien qu'elles soient similaires, elles ne signifient pas la même chose et recèlent quelques subtilités.

Dans la première phrase, vous informez vos interlocuteurs que vous commencerez votre [tour du monde](#) 80 jours plus tard, **à compter du moment où vous prononcez cette phrase**. Vous ne leur dites pas combien de temps cela vous prendra.

Dans la deuxième phrase, en revanche, c'est le contraire: vous dites à vos interlocuteurs que le temps que vous avez **prévu** pour faire le tour du monde est de 80 jours. Vous ne leur dites pas quand vous allez partir.

Si le premier janvier 2021 vous décidez de partir le 21 mars pour une aventure de 80 jours, il faudra écrire: *dans 80 jours, nous ferons le tour du monde en 80 jours.*

Il en va de même pour le prochain article de l'Atelier des mots: nous espérons le mettre au point en quelques jours (et non quatre-vingts!), mais il ne sera publié que dans deux semaines!

Efficace / effectif

Comment être effectivement efficace.

Les termes "efficace" et "effectif", malgré leur évidente proximité, du moins à l'oreille, ont des sens bien distincts que l'usage ne respecte pas toujours.

C'est pourtant fâcheux car, pour le dire succinctement: un langage **efficace** permet de rédiger des textes **effectifs**.

Ou, pour le dire clairement: un langage **qui réalise, avec une économie de moyens et sans efforts inutiles, l'objectif poursuivi** permet de rédiger des textes **qui ont réellement un effet**.

Ainsi, la notion d'efficacité renvoie à l'adéquation entre les moyens mis en œuvre et l'effet obtenu, tandis que sera dit effectif ce qui produit un effet dans le réel.

Par ailleurs, depuis près d'un siècle, l'adjectif efficient voit sa popularité croître, en partie sous l'influence de l'anglais, et reprend dans l'usage une partie des sens de ces deux termes. D'abord issu du vocabulaire philosophique, il est devenu un quasi-synonyme d'efficace, désignant une chose qui produit l'effet **spécifique** attendu ou qui produit un effet par soi-même.

Le sens d'efficient étant soit très spécifique, soit mouvant au gré de l'usage, son utilisation n'est pas recommandée dès lors qu'il peut être remplacé par efficace.

Formulations trompeuses

Le diable est dans les détails: comment une phrase apparemment anodine peut cacher un sens... surprenant.

Lorsque nous rédigeons nos textes, nous pouvons être absorbés par notre sujet (ou pris par le temps) et il peut être difficile de sortir de notre document pour le lire avec les yeux du destinataire. Ainsi, nous risquons de ne pas nous apercevoir que nos lignes peuvent être lues de différentes façons, et ainsi y laisser des télescopages de sens qui, s'ils sont parfois savoureux, n'en sont pas moins à éviter, particulièrement lorsque le sujet est grave.

Voyons quelques exemples suivis d'astuces:

*À la suite de la visite officielle du rapporteur spécial des **Nations unies sur l'esclavage en début d'année**...*

Est-ce à dire que le rapporteur spécial néglige l'esclavage au-delà du printemps? Il faut ici séparer "l'esclavage" et "en début d'année" et, comme souvent, il suffit d'étoffer un peu la phrase pour lui donner le sens voulu, par exemple au moyen d'une incise entre virgules:

*À la suite de la visite officielle, **réalisée en début d'année**, du rapporteur spécial des Nations unies sur l'esclavage...*

Ou encore, en utilisant une construction verbale:

*À la suite de la visite officielle **que** le rapporteur spécial des Nations unies sur l'esclavage **a réalisée** en début d'année...*

Dans d'autres cas, c'est simplement l'ordre des mots qu'il faut modifier. Les inquiétudes à la lecture de la

*Déclaration de l'UE lors du débat thématique sur les **armes conventionnelles de l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies (AGNU)***

sont aisément apaisées en mettant l'AGNU à sa juste place (celle d'une entité ne possédant pas d'armes conventionnelles):

*Déclaration de l'UE lors du **débat thématique de l'AGNU** sur les armes conventionnelles*

Il convient d'être attentif au fait que, à la lecture, l'esprit va juger que les termes les plus proches 'géographiquement' sont mis en relation:

*L'année 2014 a été marquée par des tensions militaires entre les forces armées de la RENAMO et les forces de sécurité gouvernementales, principalement dans **les provinces du centre, qui ont influé négativement** sur la situation des droits de l'homme.*

Pour ne pas faire porter la responsabilité sur ces provinces, il convient de réorganiser la phrase et de rapprocher l'expression problématique ("qui ont influé négativement") de ce qu'elle qualifie:

*L'année 2014 a été marquée par des tensions militaires, **qui ont influé négativement sur la situation des droits de l'homme**, entre les forces armées de la RENAMO et les forces de sécurité gouvernementales, principalement dans les provinces du centre.*

Parfois, simplement choisir le bon mot permet de résoudre l'ambiguïté:

*Les organisations de la société civile (OSC) constituent également **d'importants partenaires de mise en œuvre de l'UE** dans son travail sectoriel.*

Les OSC sont certes des partenaires importants, mais la mise en œuvre de l'UE demeure du ressort de ses institutions. Une façon simple de réaffirmer ce principe serait d'écrire:

*Les organisations de la société civile constituent également d'importants partenaires de mise en œuvre **pour** l'UE dans son travail sectoriel.*

Les exemples ci-dessus sont loin de représenter l'ensemble des nombreux écueils pouvant aboutir à des formulations trompeuses. Souvent, c'est l'économie de mots qui mène à s'y heurter. Or celle-ci n'est pas toujours la meilleure alliée de l'expression claire et il peut souvent être utile de rajouter des verbes et d'utiliser différents outils syntaxiques pour s'exprimer clairement.

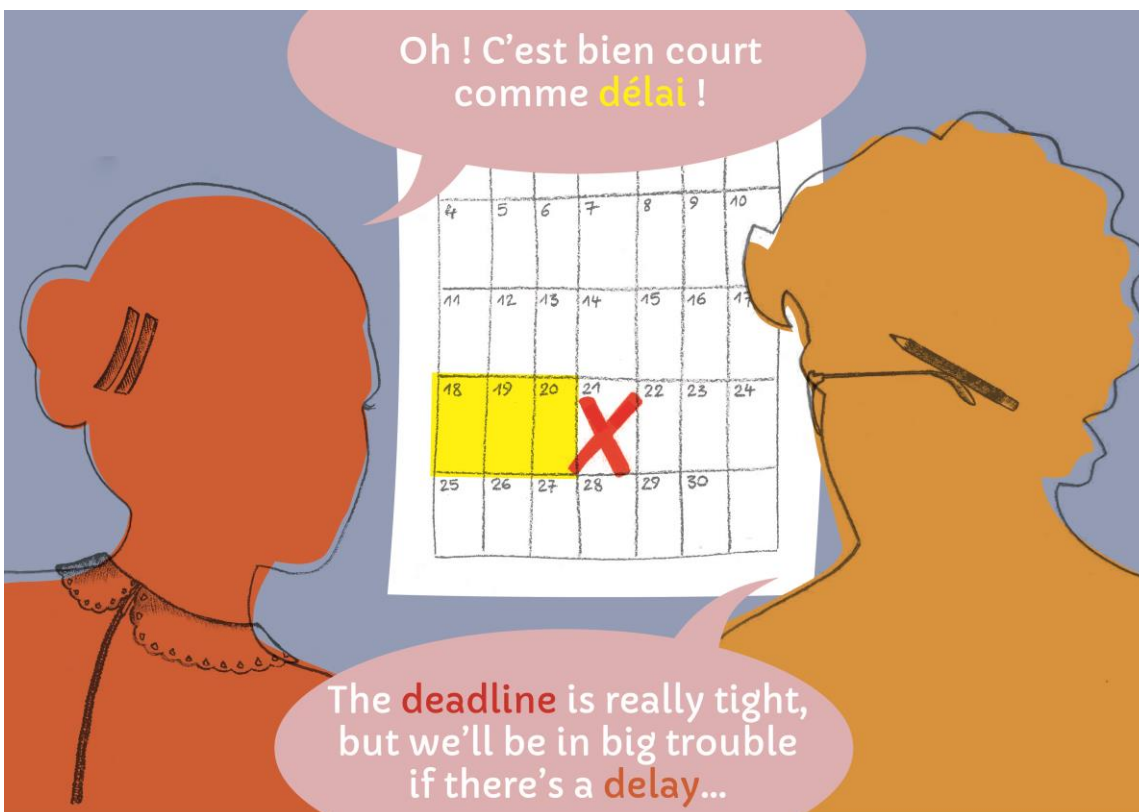
Delay / délai

Time is relative: it depends on whether you are speaking English or French.

The variety of languages in the EU institutions makes for interesting cultural exchanges, but also, naturally, for some [interesting-but-not-in-a-good-way](#) language concoctions. Today we are going to be seeing another one of those pairs of friends that resemble each other so much that it is hard to believe they are false friends: the English '**delay**' and the French '**délai**'.

These words are morphologically similar - the word in English actually comes from the French and they both refer to time - but their meanings have diverged over the centuries. While the English nowadays refers to '**a postponement or deferral of an action**', the French means '**time interval allowed to perform an action**'.

Therefore, the English 'delay' corresponds to the French verbs 'différer', 'retarder' or 'repousser' or the French noun 'retard'. In turn, the French 'délai' corresponds to 'period' or 'extension'. It is also possible to use the English 'deadline' when you have the French 'délai' in mind, but there is a slight difference in nuance between them.



A deadline in English corresponds to the time by which something needs to be finished (in other words, a point in time), whereas the French 'délai' refers to the period up to the *date limite* (i.e. a period of time). In the words of linguist Jean Darbelnet: '*le retard commence là où le délai finit*'.

Deliver / délivrer

Libérée, délivrée, je ne me tromperai plus jamais...

Les verbes *deliver* et *délivrer* se ressemblent tellement que l'on a parfois envie d'utiliser l'un pour l'autre... mais c'est un piège dont nous allons vous libérer!

Le premier sens de ces deux verbes est assez proche. En français, "délivrer" signifie **libérer, tirer de captivité**. Il peut s'appliquer à des personnes, comme des prisonniers par exemple, et on peut le remplacer par "libérer" ([comme dans la chanson](#)). En anglais, un des sens de *deliver* est **to set free**, mais il n'est pas très courant et s'utilise dans des contextes bien plus spécifiques, comme dans "*deliver us from evil*".

En français, "délivrer" signifie également **donner** ou **remettre, après avoir rempli certaines formalités**. Il se réfère à des objets **concrets**, comme des papiers ou des documents. On dira donc:

- ☺ *Le médecin délivre une ordonnance à son patient.*
- ☺ *L'administration communale est habilitée à délivrer des permis de séjour.*

Mais, comme les choses ne sont jamais simples, c'est maintenant qu'elles se corsent!

En effet, si "délivrer" se limite à ces deux acceptions, le verbe anglais *deliver* peut avoir bien d'autres sens et est donc beaucoup plus fréquent. Voici dans quels cas il faut **éviter** d'utiliser "délivrer" et ne pas se laisser influencer par l'anglais:

Dans le sens de **livrer**, pour des choses **concrètes**:

- ☺ *Le restaurant a livré la pizza à 19h30.*
- ☹ *Le restaurant a délivré la pizza à 19h30.*

Si la pizza était prisonnière, nous aurions pu la délivrer, mais dans le cas plus fréquent où le frigo est vide et le manque d'envie de cuisiner se fait sentir, on parlera d'une livraison.

Dans le sens de **fournir**, pour des choses plus **abstraites**:

- ☺ *Notre association apporte un soutien aux population les plus fragiles.*

Ce sens est assez proche des exemples précédents mais il se réfère à des choses moins concrètes.

Dans les cas abstraits, on pourra aussi utiliser les verbes suivants: **fournir** des services ou un soutien, **apporter** des solutions, **dispenser** une formation, etc.

Dans le sens de **prononcer**:

- The President will deliver a speech just before his pizza arrives.*

Un discours n'étant pas un objet concret, ni un papier, ni en captivité, on dira, en français:

- ☺ *Le président prononcera un discours juste avant que sa pizza n'arrive.*

Dans le sens de **produire**, à l'issue d'un processus:

Contrairement au premier cas où *deliver* en anglais a un sens proche de "donner", ici on met l'accent sur un processus et son **résultat**, dans un sens plus ou moins figuré.

The new system will deliver better results.

😊 *Le nouveau système produira de meilleurs résultats.*

En fonction du contexte on pourrait également utiliser d'autres verbes, comme **atteindre** un objectif, **aboutir** à une solution, mais aussi **être conforme** ou **répondre** à des attentes, **respecter** ou **honorer** ses engagements, **tenir** ses promesses, **être à la hauteur**, etc.

Enfin, la dernière acception de *deliver* est sans doute la plus joyeuse: *Elsa delivered a cute baby* signifie bien accoucher ou mettre au monde... à moins qu'Elsa ne soit une cigogne!

Digital / numérique

Croisons les doigts pour que ces termes ne soient plus confondus!

Les adjectifs "digital" et "numérique" en français font l'objet d'un grand débat. Lequel faut-il utiliser? Dans quels cas? Sont-ils synonymes?

Dans la langue de Shakespeare, l'adjectif *digital* a deux sens, qui ont la même racine. Le premier, dont l'usage est limité, est identique au sens de "digital" en français et signifie "qui se rapporte aux doigts". On parlera ainsi de *digital dexterity* pour un pianiste. La deuxième acception de cet adjectif en anglais dérive du mot *digit*, qui se rapporte aux chiffres inférieurs à 10. Autrement dit, ceux que l'on peut compter... sur nos doigts!

Cette polysémie n'existe pas dans la langue de Molière et, pour traduire le deuxième sens du *digital* anglais, on utilise l'adjectif "numérique". Au-delà de leur sens initial, réservé aux chiffres, ces mots sont aujourd'hui utilisés dans le domaine des nouvelles technologies pour se référer au fonctionnement binaire des ordinateurs, par opposition à "analogique".

D'ailleurs, "le numérique" en français se réfère à toutes ces technologies qui nous permettent aujourd'hui d'envoyer en quelques instants des photos de nos repas à nos amis en Australie, tout en regardant un grand classique du cinéma depuis notre canapé, après un apéro virtuel avec notre famille. Qui y aurait cru il y a cinquante ans?

Mais avec l'avènement du numérique, un nombre toujours plus grand d'anglicismes se glissent subrepticement dans la langue française. Ainsi, l'adjectif "digital" en français est parfois utilisé comme synonyme de "numérique", et ce même par des locuteurs natifs. Les puristes vous montreront peut-être du doigt si vous tombez dans ce piège, mais, si c'est le cas, ne vous en mordez pas trop les doigts: certains dictionnaires vont d'ailleurs jusqu'à qualifier ces deux termes de synonymes. Les faux-amis sont-ils donc à deux doigts de devenir de vrais amis?

En réalité, pas vraiment, et il est préférable d'utiliser l'adjectif "numérique", qui est réellement l'équivalent de *digital*:

- les appareils photo numériques sont très communs de nos jours, tandis qu'il n'y a pas encore d'appareil photo "digital" (une sorte d'appareil photo situé sur vos doigts? - ça arrivera peut-être plus tôt qu'on ne le pense!)
- on parle aussi de transition numérique et non de transition "digitale"
- une empreinte numérique, terme flou qui désigne les traces que l'on laisse sur internet, n'est bien sûr pas à confondre avec une empreinte digitale

Toutefois, dans certains domaines comme le marketing, les deux adjectifs semblent être utilisés et revendiqués non pas comme synonymes, mais comme termes complémentaires: la différence qui est souvent faite est que "numérique" se référerait plutôt à la technologie en elle-même, tandis que le concept de "digital" serait davantage lié à l'expérience utilisateur, de l'autre côté de l'écran, même si cette acception ne fait pas l'unanimité.

Les sources reconnues en la matière privilégient "numérique": mieux vaut donc suivre leur exemple et connaître sur le bout des doigts la différence entre ces deux adjectifs!

Dispose of / disposer de

Même lorsque l'on est disposé à faire des efforts, il est parfois difficile de ne pas tomber dans le piège des faux-amis; grâce à l'Atelier des mots vous disposerez de tous les éléments nécessaires pour ne pas vous tromper!

Vous le savez désormais, les membres de l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots font la chasse aux faux-amis pour vous [délivrer](#) de leur emprise. Les verbes "disposer" en français et *dispose* en anglais sont un exemple caractéristique: ces deux verbes à l'allure similaire peuvent certes avoir un sens très semblable, mais aussi totalement opposé dès lors qu'on les associe à "de" et *of*.

En français, on dit que l'on **dispose de** quelque chose lorsqu'on l'a **à sa disposition**, en sa possession, ou que l'on peut en faire usage. En anglais, on pourra utiliser *have* ou *have at your disposal* par exemple. Employer dans ce sens-là le verbe *dispose of* en anglais mènerait au mieux à une phrase complètement absurde, et au pire à un véritable contresens. En effet, *dispose of* en anglais signifie pratiquement le contraire puisqu'il est synonyme de *get rid of*. Dans ce sens on utilisera par exemple "jeter" ou "se débarrasser" en français.

Nous disposons d'une énorme quantité de gel antibactérien.
= *We have a large quantity of hand sanitiser (at our disposal).*
≠ *We dispose of a large quantity of hand sanitiser.*

Si vous souhaitez impressionner vos amis avec votre réserve secrète de gel antibactérien, il vaut donc mieux utiliser la première phrase en anglais et éviter ainsi que l'on vous reproche de gaspiller un produit fort recherché. Et dans l'autre sens:

Please dispose of your mask in the bin.
= *Merci de jeter vos masques dans la poubelle.*
≠ *Merci de disposer de vos masques dans la poubelle.*

Si l'on suivait à la lettre les instructions de la phrase incorrecte en français, on pourrait être tentés de récupérer des masques dans la poubelle, ce qui n'est clairement pas conseillé.

En résumé, on se débarrasse de quelque chose avec *dispose of* en anglais, tandis qu'on l'a en notre possession avec "disposer de" en français.

Remarquons également que le nom *disposal* en anglais représente bien cette ambivalence puisqu'il peut à la fois se référer à l'élimination de quelque chose (*discarding*) et au fait d'avoir quelque chose à sa disposition (*availability for use*).

Il est vrai que les verbes "disposer" et *dispose* ont d'autres sens qui se recoupent plus ou moins. Leur usage est donc moins problématique lorsqu'ils ne sont pas suivis des prépositions "de" et *of*, mais n'hésitez pas à nous poser vos questions éventuelles à cet égard, nous sommes à votre disposition!

Eventually / éventuellement

We'll master our 'faux amis', starting with...

- Knock, knock!
- Who's there?
- Eventually.
- Eventually who?
- Eventually you'll see. Keep reading.

The words **eventually** and **éventuellement** look similar (very convenient) but can have different, even opposite, meanings (very inconvenient).

Éventuellement in French means that, depending on the circumstances, a certain thing might happen in the future but there is no certainty about it:

Nous allons éventuellement organiser une réunion la semaine prochaine.

means that we **might** organise a meeting next week, but the meeting might also not take place after all.

In the case of **eventually** in English, on the other hand, it does not express a doubt about whether that thing will happen or not. It conveys the idea that it happens, happened or will happen at the end of a process or a period of time, sometimes after a delay or some difficulties:

*We wanted to negotiate the contract via video-conferencing, but **eventually** we decided to organise a meeting.*

which in French would be:

*Nous voulions négocier le contrat par vidéo-conférence mais **finalement** nous avons décidé d'organiser une réunion.*

In the two previous examples, you could still choose to use either of the words and both sentences would be logically correct, though with different meanings (you just need to choose what you want to say). However, in some other cases borrowing the word from the other language could create a contradiction that could only happen to Alice in Wonderland.

For example:

***Eventually** he was appointed chair of the Committee.*

☹ *Il a **éventuellement** été nommé président du Comité.*

Indeed, it is impossible to combine the meaning of *éventuellement*, which refers to an uncertain situation in the future, with a fact that has already been determined in the past and is therefore certain (*Il a été nommé*). Thus, the meaning of the English sentence in French is:

*Il a **fini par** être nommé président du Comité.*

So, if you need to make sure you are delivering the desired message, you can double-check the meaning of these words by replacing them with one of these synonyms: in the end, finally, at last, (*finalement, a fini par...*) **for eventually**; and *peut-être, potentiellement, le cas échéant* (maybe, might) **for éventuellement**.

Merci de faire ceci / thank you for doing this

Good manners never go out of style and will always get you far. Wordsmith will attempt to navigate you through the subtleties of 'please' and 'thank you' in English and French. Please read carefully!

By this point it will surely come as no surprise to anyone that the world of false friends is a minefield which can cause anything from mild misunderstandings and raised eyebrows to outright embarrassment and, in some extreme cases, offence, diplomatic incidents and world-changing events. Yes, sadly things can escalate pretty quickly.

An example that can get you into a little bit of trouble is the confusion between the French *merci de faire ceci* and the English 'thank you for doing this', as in the following example:

Merci de suivre les conseils de l'Atelier des mots.
≠ *Thank you for following the guidance of the Wordsmith.*

It is easy to understand why this confusion would occur, since the structures are almost parallel (similar to what happens with ['in view of'](#) and ['with a view to'](#)). Nevertheless, while the French phrase is meant as a request, the English is meant as a response.

If Annie wrote *Merci de suivre les conseils de l'Atelier des mots* in a message to Joe, she would be asking him to follow the advice of the Wordsmith, suggesting that more action will result after the message (in this example, Joe will probably draft a beautifully worded article):

Merci de suivre les conseils de l'Atelier des mots.
= *Please follow the guidance of the Wordsmith.*

On the other hand, if Annie used the English *Thank you for following the guidance of the Wordsmith*, she would be thanking Joe for having written a beautifully worded article:

Thank you for following the guidance of the Wordsmith.
= *Merci d'avoir suivi les conseils de l'Atelier des mots.*

As you can see though, politeness, be it with a 'please' or a 'thank you', is a must, regardless of what language you are using.

Now, there is one other thing, however: an exception... because a Wordsmith article would not be complete without exceptions to complicate matters. In English it is also possible, in some situations, to use the structure in the same way as in French: in both languages, requests in public spaces are commonly worded as 'thank you' messages — with 'in advance' often being understood — but it is just a polite way of asking for something:

Thank you for wearing a mask at all times.
Thank you for not smoking inside the hospital.

While we are on the subject of *merci*, you might have wondered about the usage of *merci pour* and *merci de*. Only *merci de* can precede an infinitive, but both can precede a noun. When followed by a noun, *merci pour* is more commonly used to refer to something

tangible, but both can be used for abstract nouns. *Merci de* is generally considered more polite and less colloquial, however, so if you are unsure about which one to use, *merci de* is a safe bet!

Thank you for following our articles (and this is not meant as a request! It is a real thank you!).

Passer / contrôler

Vous passez actuellement un concours? Ou vous l'avez déjà réussi? Si l'Atelier des mots ne peut pas vous donner toutes les réponses, il peut toutefois vous aider pour annoncer les résultats à vos proches.

Les vacances d'été touchent peut-être à leur fin mais nous vous invitons à repartir pour de nouvelles aventures.

Passer / to pass

Commençons par le monde des examens et des évaluations. Mais pas de stress cette fois-ci: nous voulons simplement attirer votre attention sur la différence entre "passer" en français et *to pass* en anglais!

Le verbe "passer" en français a beaucoup d'usages variés, par exemple se déplacer, être accepté ou acceptable, aller quelque part, s'écouler (temps) ou traverser. Il est aussi utilisé pour décrire l'action de se présenter à un examen ou un concours, qui sera suivie par une réussite (espérons-le!) ou un échec.

☺ *Joe a **passé** un examen d'économie mercredi mais il attend de savoir s'il a réussi ou échoué.*

To pass en anglais signifie *to go past, get through, overtake, hand to somebody, approve (law)* - il a donc quelques points communs avec "passer" en français. Mais revenons au contexte de nos fameux examens, où *to pass* signifie *to succeed*. Une petite confusion pourrait ainsi avoir de lourdes conséquences!

Pour exprimer le sens de "passer" en anglais, on dit *to sit/take/do an exam*, avec, comme résultat, *to pass or fail*.

☺ *Big Annie likes to sit EPSO tests as often as possible as she finds them enjoyable; she does not mind whether she **passes** or fails.*

☺ *Annie's sister, on the other hand, would rather **pass** a kidney stone than take an exam she cannot possibly pass.*

Contrôler / to control

Toujours dans le contexte des épreuves et des tests, la deuxième paire de faux-amis du jour est le verbe "contrôler", et le nom qui y est associé, "contrôle". En français, on utilise "contrôler" lorsque l'on parle de dominer, maîtriser, diriger.

☺ [Annie a gardé le contrôle](#) de sa voiture malgré le verglas sur la route.

On l'utilise également dans le sens de vérifier, examiner, inspecter, surveiller, et c'est ce sens qui est souvent confondu avec son faux-ami anglais.

☺ *Les véhicules en Belgique fêtent leur quatrième anniversaire avec un **contrôle** technique.*

☺ *Les douanes **contrôlent** les bagages suspects à la frontière.*

To control en anglais signifie *to exercise influence over, dominate, command, reduce the incidence of (e.g. a disease)*.

- 😊 *The government brought in measures to **control** the spread of COVID-19.*
- 😊 *The finance team **controls** the company's purse strings (i.e. it is in charge of spending).*
- 😊 *You need to **control** your anger, or else you will fall to the [Dark Side of the Force](#).*

Avant de traduire "contrôler" par *control* en anglais, il vaut donc mieux se demander si l'on ne devrait pas utiliser l'un des verbes suivants: *to check, inspect, verify, monitor, supervise, evaluate*.

- 😊 *At Brussels airport, customs officials **inspect** the passports of passengers arriving from non-Schengen countries.*
- 😊 *Tax authorities **check** a random of sample of tax returns every year.*

Maintenant que vos passeports ont été contrôlés, vous pouvez tenter de passer les frontières et partir à l'aventure!

Accord des participes passés: les verbes pronominaux

Nous vous l'accordons, la grammaire française n'est pas des plus simples, mais accordez-nous votre confiance pour tenter d'y voir plus clair!

L'accord du participe passé est l'un des grands casse-têtes de la langue française, encore plus lorsque l'on a affaire à un verbe pronominal (verbe précédé du pronom réfléchi "se" ou ses variantes "me", "te", "nous", "vous"). Voici donc quelques règles pour vous y retrouver un peu mieux et, pour accompagner votre lecture, vous trouverez un diagramme ci-dessous pour que ce soit plus clair.

Tout d'abord, il faut savoir qu'il y a différents types de verbes pronominaux. La première catégorie est la plus simple: elle regroupe les verbes qui **sont toujours pronominaux**, c'est-à-dire ceux qui ne peuvent pas se passer du pronom réfléchi "se" (se méfier, se réfugier, s'envoler, s'évanouir, [etc.](#)).

Le participe passé de ces verbes **s'accorde toujours** avec le sujet. Par exemple:

☺ *Il*s se sont méfiés des pièges de la grammaire française (on ne peut pas leur en vouloir!)

La deuxième catégorie regroupe les verbes qui ne sont pas toujours pronominaux, et c'est là que les choses se compliquent. Il faudra essentiellement faire attention à deux éléments: le complément d'objet direct (COD) et le complément d'objet indirect (COI). Commençons par le premier, qui est aussi le plus compliqué.

1. Quand il y a un COD: repérer d'abord quel est le COD

Le **complément d'objet direct (COD)** du verbe est l'objet de l'action menée par le sujet. Pour le repérer, le plus simple est de se poser la question "qui?" ou "quoi?" (sujet + verbe + qui/quoi?). Il peut s'agir du pronom réfléchi "se" (ou de ses variantes) ou d'un groupe nominal qui se trouve avant ou après le verbe.

Pour illustrer les différentes possibilités liées à la présence du COD, prenons un même exemple assez simple et très actuel:

☺ *Les filles* se sont lavées

☺ *Les filles* se sont lavé les mains

☺ *Les mains* que les garçons se sont lavées sont très propres

Le COD est le pronom réfléchi "se": accord avec le sujet

Dans le premier exemple, le sujet ("les filles") effectue l'action **sur lui-même** (les filles ont lavé quoi/qui? - elles-mêmes). Le pronom réfléchi a donc la fonction de COD. Dans ce cas-là, on accordera le participe passé du verbe pronominal avec **le sujet**.

Le COD est un groupe nominal explicite: avant ou après le verbe?

Dans les deux derniers exemples introduits précédemment, le COD est toujours "les mains" (les filles ont lavé quoi? - leurs mains / les garçons ont lavé quoi? - leurs mains) mais celui-ci se situe à deux endroits différents dans la phrase. Au grand désarroi de toute personne apprenant le français, et même dont c'est la langue maternelle, la règle pour l'accord du participe passé n'est pas la même dans les deux cas.

Si le COD se trouve **après** le verbe pronominal, le participe passé du verbe **ne s'accorde pas**.

C'est pour cette raison que, dans le deuxième exemple (*les filles se sont lavé les mains*), le participe passé de "se laver" reste au masculin singulier. En réalité, "se" prend ici la fonction de COI (à qui les filles ont lavé les mains? - à elles-mêmes) et c'est aussi pour cette raison, comme nous le verrons plus loin, qu'il n'y a pas d'accord.

Si le COD se trouve **avant** le verbe pronominal, vous pouvez commencer à vous arracher les cheveux, puisque cette fois-ci le verbe pronominal **s'accorde avec le COD**, et non pas avec le sujet du verbe, comme nous l'avions fait précédemment.

Ainsi, dans le troisième exemple (*les mains que les garçons se sont lavées sont très propres*), le participe passé s'accorde avec "les mains" (féminin pluriel) et non pas "les garçons" (masculin pluriel).

Pour résumer, prenons l'exemple suivant:

Roméo et Juliette se sont envoyé les lettres qu'ils avaient écrites

Le participe passé "envoyé" ne s'accorde pas parce que le COD ("les lettres") se situe **après** le verbe. En revanche, le participe passé "écrites" s'accorde avec le COD "les lettres" puisque celui-ci est féminin et se situe **avant** le verbe. Il y a de quoi perdre la tête, je vous l'accorde!

Mais, si vous êtes arrivés jusqu'ici, félicitations! Le chemin pour comprendre l'accord des participes passés est semé d'embûches, mais il touche à sa fin puisqu'il ne nous reste plus que le COI à voir.

2. Quand il y a uniquement un COI: aucun accord

Le **complément d'objet indirect (COI)** du verbe est aussi l'objet de l'action mais on le trouve en se posant la question "à qui?/à quoi?". Si le verbe pronominal admet un COI, il s'agira du pronom "se" (ou de ses variantes).

S'il y a uniquement un COI, la règle est assez simple: le participe passé du verbe pronominal **ne s'accorde pas**.

Parmi ces verbes, on trouve, entre autres: se permettre (permettre **à**), se plaire (plaire **à**), s'en vouloir (en vouloir **à**), se ressembler (ressembler **à**), etc.

*Le ministre des transports et le ministre du développement se sont téléphoné aujourd'hui → Le ministre des transports a téléphoné **au** ministre du développement (et vice-versa)*

Les réunions se sont succédé sans interruption

Prenons enfin un exemple d'erreur assez fréquente: le verbe "se permettre". Restez avec nous, c'est bientôt fini!

Comme on "permet quelque chose à quelqu'un", le verbe s'accompagne d'un COI, et son participe passé ne s'accorde donc pas. Ainsi, on dira

☺ *Elle s'est **permis** de faire une suggestion à l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots*

et non pas

☹ *Elle s'est **permise** de faire une suggestion à l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots*

Vous avez survécu à la lecture de cet article mais êtes encore un peu perplexe? Vous souhaitez tester vos connaissances? Voici donc un petit quiz. Choisissez le bon accord pour le participe passé:

1. Lorsque leurs regards se sont crois_, Roméo et Juliette se sont immédiatement pl_.
 - a) é ; u
 - b) és ; us
 - c) és ; u

2. Ils se sont rencontr_ lors d'une fête et se sont parl_ toute la nuit.
 - a) és ; é
 - b) és ; és
 - c) é ; és

3. Chaque soir, Roméo lit les lettres d'amour qu'ils se sont échang_.
 - a) és
 - b) ées
 - c) é

4. Les amants se sont ensuite rebell_ contre leurs familles et se sont enfu_.
 - a) é ; i
 - b) é ; is
 - c) és ; is

Réponses (sélectionnez les lignes ci-dessous pour faire apparaître les réponses):

1. c) Le COD de "se croiser" est "se", donc on accorde avec le sujet (leurs regards). Le verbe "plaire" admet un COI et n'a pas de COD, donc pas d'accord.

2. a) Le COD de "se rencontrer" est "se", donc on accorde avec le sujet (ils). Le verbe "parler" admet un COI et n'a pas de COD, donc pas d'accord.

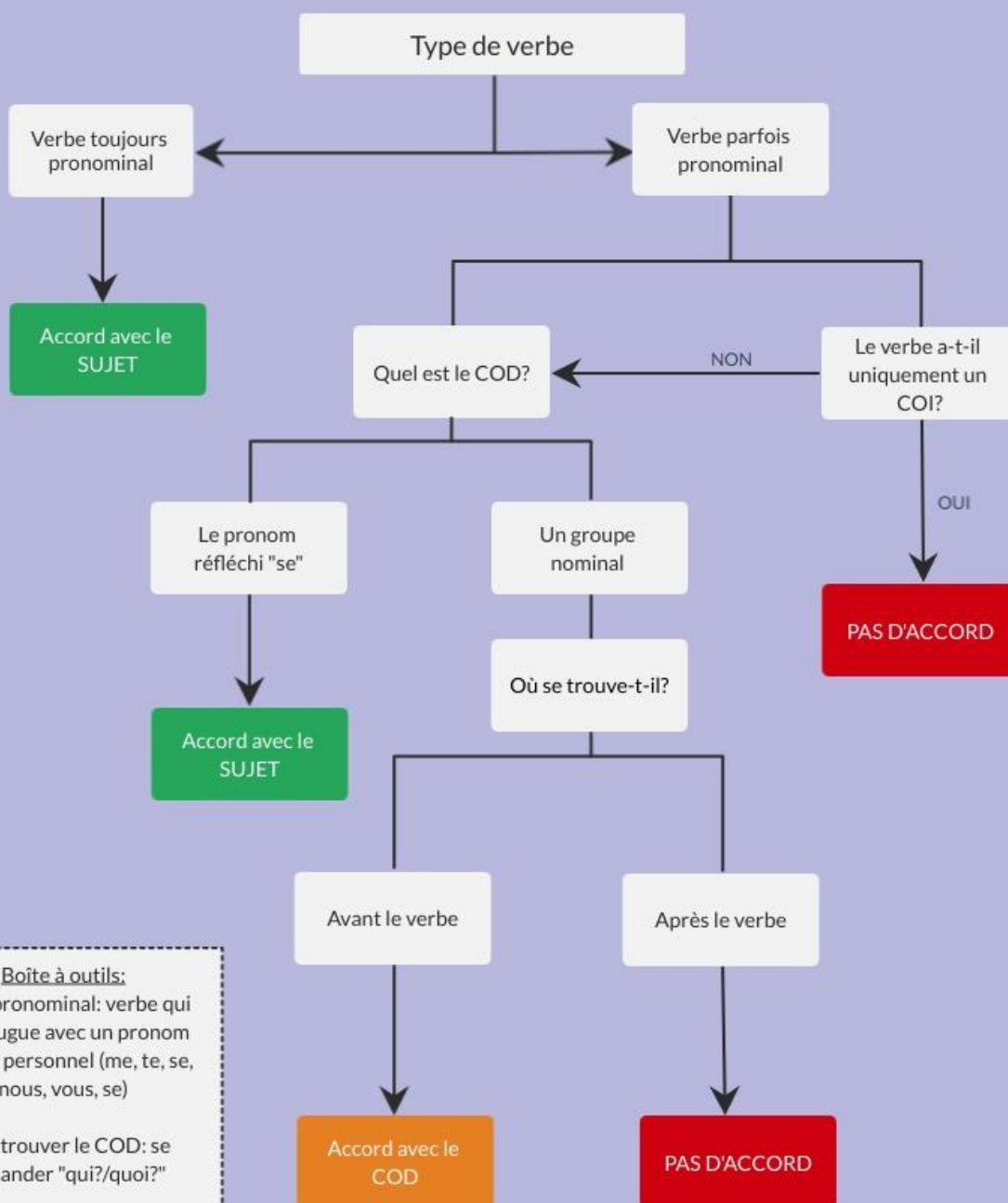
3. b) Le COD (les lettres d'amour) est placé avant le verbe pronominal, donc on accorde avec le COD.

- 4.c) Le COD des verbes "se rebeller" et "s'enfuir" est "se", donc on accorde avec le sujet (les amants).

Vous êtes encore perplexes? Vous ne comprenez pas les réponses du quiz? N'hésitez pas à poser vos questions dans les commentaires!

L'Atelier des mots présente...

L'ACCORD DU PARTICIPE PASSÉ DES VERBES PRONOMINAUX



Boîte à outils:
Verbe pronominal: verbe qui se conjugue avec un pronom réfléchi personnel (me, te, se, nous, vous, se)
Pour trouver le COD: se demander "qui?/quoi?"
Pour trouver le COI: se demander "à qui?/à quoi?"

Commas in defining and non-defining clauses

Commas save lives and scooters. Use them wisely.

Commas are small, but they are extremely important. The first thing we are going to do is to bluntly dispel the doubts of anybody who thinks otherwise. Check out the following sentence:

Let's eat, kids.

Do you realise what would happen if you removed the comma? Exactly! Poor kids!

One of the most important functions of commas is to differentiate between what is known as 'defining clauses' and 'non-defining clauses' in linguistic geek speak. Let's work with the following example, opting for tomatoes this time:

The tomatoes which were juicy were tasteless.
The tomatoes, which were juicy, were tasteless.

In the first example not all the tomatoes were juicy but those that *were* juicy were tasteless. This is called a defining clause because it provides information about the noun ('tomatoes') that is essential to fully and correctly understand the meaning of the sentence. In other words, it is a defining characteristic.

The second example, on the other hand, has a non-defining clause, which is marked out by the commas. Here, all the tomatoes were juicy and they were all tasteless. The fact that they were juicy is additional information which does not change what the tomatoes were like. If you took out the section between commas, the meaning would remain the same. Thus, commas are **never used in defining clauses**, but are **indispensable in non-defining clauses**.

The same rule applies when clauses are long:

The scooters which were parked in the Harley-Davidson-only parking area were crushed.
The scooters, which were parked in the Harley-Davidson-only parking area, were crushed.

In the first example not all the scooters were parked in the [Harley-Davidson-only](#) parking area, but those that *were* parked there were crushed. In the second example, on the other hand, all the scooters were crushed because they were all parked in the wrong place. Finally, it is important to note that **defining clauses can be introduced by any relative pronoun** ('that', 'which', 'who', etc.):

😊 *The sweater that my partner made me wear for Christmas is horrendous.*

or **by no pronoun at all**:

😊 *The sweater my partner made me wear for Christmas is horrendous.*

Non-defining clauses, on the other hand, always need to be introduced by a relative pronoun, which can be any of the above **except for 'that'**:

😊 *The sweater, which my partner made me wear for Christmas, is horrendous.*

😞 *The sweater, that my partner made me wear for Christmas, is horrendous.*

We are now going to take an early break for the holidays, but we will be back in January.
See you next year!

De / des

Manger des muffins ou ne pas manger de muffins? De ou des? Telle est la question. Nous allons vous aider à y voir plus clair et, si cet article vous donne faim, nous vous proposons une solution à la fin!

En français, "des" peut signifier deux choses, qui ne sont, en fin de compte, pas si différentes que cela. Il peut s'agir, d'une part, de l'article indéfini "un" ou "une" au pluriel et, d'autre part, de l'article **partitif** issu de la fusion de la préposition "de" et de l'article défini pluriel "les".

Il peut parfois être difficile de choisir, dans certains contextes et dans certains types de phrases, entre "des" et "de". En effet, dans quels cas utiliser l'un plutôt que l'autre? Pourquoi les deux premières phrases ci-dessous sont-elles correctes, tandis que la dernière ne l'est pas, alors qu'elles ont pratiquement le même sens?

- ☺ *Je refuse de manger **des** muffins poire-gingembre.*
- ☺ *Je ne veux pas manger **de** muffins poire-gingembre.*
- ☹ *Je refuse de manger **de** muffins poire-gingembre.*

Vous vous en doutez peut-être déjà, mais ces exemples répondent à des règles bien différentes, que nous allons tâcher de vous expliquer.

Après un adverbe de quantité

Lorsque l'on se réfère à une quantité, on utilisera la préposition "de" après l'adverbe qui se réfère à cette quantité. C'est le cas pour "beaucoup", "trop", mais aussi "moins" ou "plus", entre autres. Ainsi, on dira:

- ☺ *J'ai préparé assez **de** muffins pour toute l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots.*

Il est parfois possible d'utiliser "des" après "beaucoup" lorsque l'on se réfère à un ensemble précis et défini d'éléments qui constituent une **partie** d'un tout, par opposition à une réalité plus générale. Le nom sera alors **déterminé** par une relative, un participe ou un complément:

- ☺ *J'ai constaté que beaucoup **des** textes publiés par l'Atelier des mots parlaient de petits gâteaux.*

Dans l'exemple ci-dessus, l'ensemble précis et déterminé que l'on souhaite mettre en avant est "les textes publiés par l'Atelier des mots", on peut donc employer "des" pour insister sur l'idée **partitive** (de+les). Notons toutefois que dans ce même exemple il sera également possible d'utiliser "de", tout dépend de ce sur quoi on souhaite mettre l'accent.

Devant un nom précédé d'un adjectif

En français, les adjectifs sont généralement placés après le nom auquel ils se rapportent, et dans ce cas on utilisera "des", comme dans l'exemple suivant:

- ☺ *J'ai mangé **des** muffins délicieux.*

Néanmoins, dans certains cas, l'adjectif peut être placé **devant** le nom (adjectif généralement court et courant ou effet de style), et c'est dans ce cas que l'on devrait utiliser la préposition "de":

😊 *Tu as préparé **de** très bons muffins.*

Une exception concerne ici le cas des couples "adjectif+nom" qui forment un tout, comme "petits pois", "grands-parents" ou même "grand frère" par exemple. Cela s'explique par le fait que l'adjectif n'a pas vraiment une valeur d'adjectif mais qu'il forme un nom à part entière.

😊 *J'ai mangé **des** [petits pois](#).*

😊 *J'ai mangé **de** petits pois (des pois qui sont petits).*

Dans les phrases négatives

Le dernier cas, et pas des moins complexes, concerne les phrases négatives. Dans le cas d'une négation **absolue**, on utilisera la préposition "de". Il s'agit des cas dans lesquels on peut ajouter "aucun/aucune" devant le nom. Ainsi, on dira:

😊 *J'ai apporté **des** croissants pour l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots.*

Si on transforme cette phrase en phrase négative, on pourra dire "je n'ai apporté aucun croissant" et il faudra donc utiliser "de":

😊 *Je n'ai pas apporté **de** croissants pour l'équipe de l'Atelier des mots.*

On peut toutefois employer "des" dans une phrase négative lorsque l'on se réfère à un ensemble précis et déterminé de choses, ce qui n'est pas sans rappeler l'exception vue précédemment avec "beaucoup". Là aussi, pour que ce soit possible, il faudra que le nom soit **complété** par une relative ou un complément, afin d'insister sur le partitif:

😊 *Je ne veux pas manger **de** muffins.*

😊 *Je ne veux pas manger **des** muffins au chocolat, mais **des** muffins poire-gingembre.*

Enfin, la phrase suivante peut être trompeuse:

😊 *Nous n'avons mangé que **des** muffins ce week-end.*

En effet, on pourrait penser à première vue qu'elle est négative, alors qu'elle n'est que restrictive. Son sens est bien "nous avons mangé uniquement des muffins ce week-end", raison pour laquelle on utilise "des" et non pas "de".

Si vous êtes arrivés jusqu'ici, félicitations! Si vous hésitez encore, peut-être que ce guide pratique pourra vous aider en cas de doute.

L'atelier des mots présente...

De ou des?

un guide pratique et simplifié

DE

- après un adverbe de quantité
(*beaucoup, trop, moins, plus, ...*)

- avant un nom précédé d'un adjectif

- dans les phrases négatives
(*"ne...pas"*)

DES

- après beaucoup pour un ensemble précis et déterminé
(+ *relative, participe ou complément*)

- avant un nom suivi d'un adjectif

- dans les phrases négatives pour un ensemble précis et déterminé
(+ *relative, participe ou complément*)



The humble apostrophe

The important difference between "Your dinner" and "You're dinner".

It's or its, p's and q's, theirs and there's. When do you use an apostrophe and when do you not? The basic use of apostrophes falls into two main categories:

Contractions

If you're running out of characters in a tweet or just want to be more parsimonious with your word count, the humble apostrophe can work magic! An early word of warning: contractions are usually restricted to casual situations, so it is best to avoid them when writing formal documents in the Council. An exception to this is *o'clock* - the full form of *the clock* is essentially obsolete.

By far the most common instance of this is with verbs, including the following:

- will - 'll (you'll)
- will not – n't (won't)
- would - 'd (he'd)
- are - 're (they're)
- is/has - 's (there's)

There are of course other instances of contractions in words. In poetry or songs you might come across *e'er* instead of *ever*, for instance, or *nothin'* to illustrate the way people sometimes drop the final 'g' in speech.

Possession

If we want to talk about the cats that belong to the girl, instead of writing out the whole phrase we can use our magic apostrophe to simplify things, leaving us with *the girl's cats*. Or how about the pen that the Secretary-General owns? *The Secretary-General's pen*.

For possessives of plural nouns, add an apostrophe when the noun ends in *s* (such as *coaches' speeches*, *two weeks' holidays*, *three years' experience*, *the families' camper vans*), and apostrophe + *s* when it ends in a letter other than *s* (*the women's bicycles*).

Names ending in -s

Opinions are divided on this one. The most common option here is probably to add *apostrophe + s* (*Denis's racing car*); however, some add only an apostrophe (*Francis' microphone*). The safest bet is probably to pick one option and stick with it.

There is no need to use an apostrophe with possessive pronouns [such as](#) *his*, *its*, *yours*, *ours*, *theirs* or the possessive adjective *its*. If you use a possessive indefinite or impersonal pronoun, however, call on your friend the apostrophe! *Anybody's guess*, *each other's articles*, *somebody else's fault*.

Selected other cases

- The use of an apostrophe at the beginning of the words *cello* (violoncello), *flu* (influenza) and *phone* (telephone), while still acceptable, is no longer essential, as these are now established words in their own right.

- Although in past times the apostrophe was used in abbreviations and numerals, its usage has decreased, leaving examples such as *MPs*, *the 1970s* (but *'70s* is still very common), *the two Ts*.

- Keep the apostrophe where its omission would lead to confusion, e.g. *dot your i's and cross your t's; there are two p's in happiness.*

Common difficulties

Both native and non-native English speakers regularly fall into the apostrophe's trap. Here are some dangers to watch out for:

Its/it's - as you already know, there is no need for an apostrophe in *its* if you are using it as a possessive pronoun or possessive adjective. But if you are using the contracted form of *it + is*, use an apostrophe!

😊 *The festival says **it's** (it is) important to check **its** website regularly for updates.*

Theirs/There's - *theirs* is a possessive pronoun in the third person plural; it refers to something belonging to them. *There's*, on the other hand, is a contraction of *there + is* or *there + has*.

😊 ***There's** (there is) evidence that the money that was found in the park was **theirs**.*

Your/You're - *your* is a possessive adjective and comes before a noun or pronoun. *You're* is a contraction of the words *you + are*:

😊 ***You're** (you are) in trouble if you can't spell **your** name right!*

Back in the 17th century, apostrophes slunk into use in the case of plurals of nouns ending in vowels, and the resulting (errant!) apostrophe is often called the greengrocers' apostrophe, given its usage in signs and shops (banana's, orange's etc.). But do not be fooled! If you have braved the streets and done your shopping, you will hopefully come back with *bananas* and *oranges* (no apostrophe!).

Quiz time!

Think you have mastered the apostrophe? Take our short quiz to see if everything is clear! Make a note of the correct answers in each of the pairs below, and when you have finished, highlight the section entitled 'answers' and all will be revealed.

1.

- (a) The dog's bark was worse than it's bite.
- (b) The dogs bark was worse than it's bite.
- (c) The dog's bark was worse than its bite.
- (d) The dogs bark was worse than it's bite.

2.

- (a) It's hard to work from home on sunny days.
- (b) Its hard to work from home on sunny days.

3.

- (a) Two apples and a [Shakespeare sonnet](#) a day will keep the doctor away.
- (b) Two apple's and a Shakespeare sonnet a day will keep the doctor away.

4.

- (a) Theirs a [bright golden haze](#) on the meadow.
- (b) There's a [bright golden haze](#) on the meadow.

5.

(a) Its work to be reviewed.

(b) It's work to be reviewed.

Answers

1c – Dog gets an apostrophe here but none for *its* as it shows possession.

2a – This is the contraction of *it is*.

3a – Beware of the greengrocers' apostrophe!

4b – This is the contraction of *there is*.

5a and 5b – Both are correct! In the first sentence, the work by 'it' (which could be a committee, for example), will be reviewed. In the second sentence, *it* is a contraction of *it + is*

On this note, we too are always happy to be reviewed by our readers, so feel free to like, comment and spread the Word(smith) among your colleagues!

Hyphens

Hyphens may look small and harmless, but they can be extremely dangerous. Just like some chickens.

One of the most common functions of hyphens is to link words that should be understood as one unit and that are used as adjectives qualifying the same noun:

*I have only two goals in life: one is long-term and the other is short-term.
My long-term goal is to finish the 10-kilometre race.*

but

My goal in the short term is to buy a pair of trainers.

Where, then, do you use hyphens? The words that are hyphenated are normally a noun + an adjective (*accident-prone*), a noun + a participle (*computer-assisted*) or an adjective + a participle (*good-looking*). Adjectives modified by 'well' (*well-known*) or formed by a phrase (*state-of-the-art*) should also be hyphenated (when they precede the noun), as should nouns that are turned into verbs (*ice skate* > *to ice-skate*), phrasal verbs that are turned into nouns (*to build up* > *a build-up*) and prefixes when they are necessary to eliminate some ambiguity (*recover* vs *re-cover*).

And when do you use hyphens? They tend to be dropped from some common terms (*law enforcement officer*, *web page editor*), but they are indispensable to remove ambiguity in certain phrases. Not convinced? Check out these examples:

Man eating chicken.

has the pretty straightforward meaning of a man who is eating chicken. However, if we add a hyphen between 'man' and 'eating' (*'man-eating chicken'*) we imply that the meaning of the first two words should be understood together, and the phrase changes to indicate that there exists a particularly vicious type of poultry.

Here is another example of potential ambiguity. The sentence

He returned the stolen vehicle report.

is ambiguous because, despite what our intuition might tell us, strictly speaking it indicates that what was stolen is the report about vehicles. To unambiguously indicate that the report deals with stolen vehicles, it is necessary to add a hyphen:

He returned the stolen-vehicle report.

If there are still people out there who are not convinced about how critical these little devils are, check out the following phrase: three hundred year old trees. It can have hyphens in several places, and the meaning changes accordingly.

Three-hundred-year-old trees – the trees are all three hundred years old.
Three hundred-year-old trees – three trees, each one hundred years old.
Three hundred year-old trees – three hundred trees, each one year old.

Latin abbreviations

Latin is alive and kicking in our modern languages, although not enough for you to need to polish up your 'mensa, mensae', don't worry.

Nowadays, Latin is the official language of the Vatican only, but Latin expressions are still used in many languages. To varying degrees, some of these may cause trouble, so today we are going to analyse some of the most common ones in English.

The first two might surprise some people:

- **e.g.:** this comes from '*exempli gratia*', which means 'for (the sake of) example'. The words that follow 'e.g.' denote one or more instances of whatever has been mentioned.

- **i.e.:** this comes from '*id est*', which means 'that is' or 'in other words'. It is used to clarify a point that may otherwise be unclear to the reader by rephrasing it or elaborating on it. The words that follow 'i.e.' refer to the same thing as those which precede it.

The meanings of 'e.g.' and 'i.e.' are normally clear when they are read in isolation, but, since they are both different ways of adding information about a point that has just been made, **it is easy to confuse them and inadvertently insert one instead of the other.**

Let's see these expressions in action:

*The meeting will be [held](#) in one of the Commission buildings (e.g. the Berlaymont).
The meeting will be held in the Commission's flagship building (i.e. the Berlaymont).*

In the first sentence, the part between brackets is simply an example of a Commission building where the meeting could be held: the one that is indicated is a possibility but, of course and as we all know, there are many others.

In the second sentence, the part between brackets reformulates or clarifies what has just been mentioned, in this case the building that the author is referring to specifically. The elements before and after 'i.e.' can be swapped around and the sentence still makes perfect sense.

- **(sic) / [sic]:** this comes from '*sic erat scriptum*', which means 'thus it was written'. It is used in quotations to indicate that the text is reproducing or reporting something exactly as it was originally written or said. This is useful if there is something from the original wording that looks out of place or incorrect in the final text (e.g. a mistake, a difference in register or an alternative, but nevertheless correct, spelling).

The Queen shrugged and replied 'Ain't (sic) much I can do'.

- **v / vs. / vs :** this comes from '*versus*', which means 'in the direction of' or 'so as to face'. Nowadays it is used to express an opposition, confrontation or comparison between two elements or groups of elements. While there are at least three variants in the spelling of the abbreviation, the [Interinstitutional Style Guide](#) (i.e. the drafter's bible) recommends 'v' without a full stop.

*It was me vs. the law, and the law won.
Case C-700/17: Finanzamt Kyritz v Wolf-Henning Peters.*

- **NB**: this comes from '*nota bene*', which means 'note well'. It is used to draw attention to an important fact that complements a statement ([such as](#) a key assumption of or exception to an argument) but does not need to be included in the main body of the text. It therefore differs from 'i.e.' in that 'NB' provides additional information, and not simply an explanation or clarification about the preceding text.

The pressure in the right rear tyre of a dirt sprint car is between 4-6 psi (NB: tyre pressures should be measured when the tyres are cold).

Council officials in transition can also express their interest in the post.

NB: If an administrator in transition is selected and moves to the post, they will keep their 'in transition' status.

- **etc.**: this one hardly needs any explanation, but there are a few points that should be made on usage. Its first purpose is to shorten a list of equivalent elements, in which case it can be translated as 'and others'. All the elements in the list therefore must refer to the same thing.

😊 *Kids love annoying noises ([raspberries](#), burps, kazoos, etc.).*

☹️ *Kids love annoying noises (raspberries, reading comic books, bubble juice, etc.).*

Secondly, it can be used to avoid writing something that is already known, in which case it can be translated as 'and the rest'. It is often used, e.g., in the words of [songs](#) so as not to have to reprint the chorus every time it occurs.

Thirdly, 'etc.' comes from the Latin '*et cetera*', so it should not be preceded by 'and' because the 'and' is already expressed by the '*et*', but you do need to insert a comma before it.

Finally, 'etc.' is always written with a full stop; it is never followed by an ellipsis, nor can an ellipsis be used in place of it:

😊 *Kids love annoying noises (raspberries, burps, kazoos, etc.).*

☹️ *Kids love annoying noises (raspberries, burps, kazoos, etc...).*

☹️ *Kids love annoying noises (raspberries, burps, kazoos, ...).*

NB: You should never use 'e.g.' and 'etc.' in the same phrase; i.e. a sentence such as this is wrong:

☹️ *Kids love annoying noises (e.g. raspberries, burps, kazoos, etc.).*

Usque ad articulum proximum, vale! (Until the next article, goodbye!)

Modalities

An old saying holds that there is a time and a place for everything. We wondered whether this applied even to using the word 'modalities' in English. The answer turns out to be yes, but not just any time and any place.

Some English words look familiar to non-native speakers, who may reasonably suppose they are used in the same way as a similar word in their own language. This could be the case with 'modality', which, in English, is a technical word with precise meanings in various fields, including logic, music, statistics and grammar. In a number of European languages, the cognate noun corresponding to 'modalities' (*modalités*, *Modalitäten*, *modalidades*, etc.) has a meaning similar to 'procedures' or 'arrangements' - but it happens that English is not among them. In everyday, non-technical English, 'modalities' is not used at all.

It is true that the Oxford English Dictionary includes the following as its eighth (and last) sense entry for '[modality](#)':

Esp. in politics, diplomacy, etc.: an arrangement or condition; a procedure or method; a means for the attainment of a desired end.

But in its list of seven examples, the first three are translations (from French and German) and two explicitly draw attention to the strangeness of the word, [such as](#) this one, dating from 1960:

He did hear nine members of the Council praise his statesmanship and the procedures ('modalities' is the new and foolish word) he had adopted.

Research indicates that 'modalities' has become established usage in certain international organisations (WTO, UN, and to some extent the EU institutions), and users of international English in such environments will no doubt understand it.

Even there, however, it is often an unnecessary alternative to familiar options. The Wordsmith suggests that you limit use of 'modalities' to its technical senses, and that you do not use it where one or a combination of *arrangements*, *conditions*, *procedures*, *methods*, or *means* would do the job. Here are a few examples of appropriate technical uses:

☺ *The modality of a distribution is determined by the number of peaks it contains.*
[mathematics]

☺ *Clearly any comparison of medieval and modern modality would recognise that the latter takes place against a background of some three centuries of harmonic tonality.* [music]

☺ *The [noun](#) counterparts of these adjectives also express modality, so that a situation can be described as a possibility, a probability, a necessity, or a certainty.*
[grammar]

And here is an imaginary example of an unclear use, followed by a rewording with some possible alternatives:

☹ *The new working modalities will be introduced in Q4.*

😊 *The new working procedures/conditions/arrangements will be introduced in Q4.*

To conclude, [here](#) is a link to a pleasing application of musical modality (in the Mixolydian mode) courtesy of one of the Wordsmith team members.

Noun compounds

It's not you, it's English grammar.

One of the most confusing aspects of English for any student is what is known as **noun compounds**. The principle is simple enough: a noun is used to describe another noun.

Car racing - a form of racing where cars are involved.

Racing car - a car that is used for racing.

There are many aspects of this structure that make it much more complex than it seems (linguists have been throwing dictionaries at each other for years over this subject), but for our purposes we will only deal with a couple of practical aspects.

Firstly, nouns that are used as adjectives (the first one in the pair) follow two basic rules of English adjectives: they **go before the noun they qualify** and **they are almost never used in the plural**, even if there is more than one of whatever we are talking about. Take, for instance, the following phrase:

A computer shop

The word 'computer' is describing a characteristic of the shop, so it is clearly the adjective. The shop will obviously have more than one computer for sale but it is nonetheless incorrect to add an -s to turn 'computer' into a plural.

Having said that, though, there are certain exceptions to this rule (there always are, aren't there?): nouns with no singular form (such as 'news') and nouns whose meaning changes depending on whether they are in the singular or the plural (such as 'arms').

News agency

Customs duties

The accounts department

An arms race

In short, the noun should be in the singular in the vast majority of cases. If you are still in doubt and you think your noun compound does not fit into any of the categories above, check with [EDITING EN](#).

Finally, it is also important to mention that it is possible to group several nouns together in the same way as with regular adjectives, and even to add other adjectives into the mix. This can lead to simple clusters [such as](#):

affordable time-travel machine

or to more complex ones, which are used commonly in newspaper headlines to shorten them and which have to be read backwards to be understood:

[Five-thousand-year-old](#) ice mummy discovery controversy

These clusters rely on the reader being aware of and knowledgeable about the context, so they can sometimes be ambiguous and hard to grasp. That, however, is a difficulty inherent in English, so, as we said earlier, it's not you: it's the language! In that case, you can reformulate or simplify the sentence and, if possible, provide more context.

We hope that this complex noun-compounding system explanation is clear, but if it is not, feel free to leave a comment!

Order of adjectives

Order. [ORDER!!!](#) Are you working on a new important legal document or an important new legal document? And what does the Big Bad Wolf have to do with all of this? In this article the Wordsmith tackles the order of adjectives: read on to find out more.

As you might have noticed after reading some of our articles, nothing is ever simple when it comes to language, and that goes for adjectives too. Did you know that there is a default order that can be applied in most cases? If you need several adjectives before a noun, here is a model you can use:

possession – quantity – observation/evaluation – size – physical quality – age – shape – colour – origin – material/type – purpose

Looks intimidating? The good news is that we rarely use more than three adjectives in a row. Think:

Little Red Riding Hood (size – colour – purpose)

or, if you want to push the [most-adjectives-in-the-title](#) game to the limit:

'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' (possession – size – physical quality – origin).

In our documents we are likely to find less colourful examples but the basic order still applies:

single European sky (quantity – origin)
important new legal document (evaluation – age – type).

Now for the tricky cases. Of course, not all of them can be covered in this article, but we will analyse a few examples that might be confusing.

Jon Avnet's film 'Fried Green Tomatoes' might look as if it is bucking the trend (colour should come before type), but 'green' and 'tomatoes' function as a single multi-word **unit** here, describing the type of tomatoes. It is the same principle as 'French red wine' ('red wine' as a type of wine), even if the example is much less common.

That 'green' does not always have to refer primarily to colour is perhaps more obvious in the 'European Green Deal', in which it describes the purpose of the agreement. The comparable US 'Green New Deal' might also seem to be in the wrong order (age should come before colour), but 'New Deal' needs to stay together because it refers to F. D. Roosevelt's famous eponymous programme of economic reforms.

Watching out for units formed by a noun and an adjective (or verbs in '-ing' form and [nouns functioning as adjectives](#)) can help you sort out more complicated cases.

Take for example 'effective preventive restructuring procedures': ['effective'](#) comes first, because it is an evaluation, followed by 'preventive', which specifies the unit consisting of 'restructuring procedures'.

Units reflect the focus of your argument. If you were taking *work permit* as a unit, for example, you might say 'temporary Slovak work permit' (observation – origin – purpose). However, if the discussion focused on different types of *temporary work permit* – another unit – and you wanted to draw attention to the distinction between, say, a Slovak and Czech one, the adjective expressing the origin would come first: 'Slovak temporary work permit'.

Finally, an oft-quoted exception to our model concerns the 'Big Bad Wolf'. Granted, this character is unlikely to appear in our documents, but the example is worth noting. Usually, evaluation should come before size, but in the case of 'Big Bad Wolf', it is the *ablaut reduplication* rule that applies. This is a fancy way of saying that if you repeat a consonant sound followed by a different vowel, the order is usually I – A – O: 'zig' before 'zag', 'hip' before 'hop' and 'ding dang dong' (or 'bim bam bom' if you choose [Panie Janie](#) instead of Frère Jacques).

Stay tuned for more tips from your renowned multinational drafting support team, a.k.a. the Wordsmith.

The serial comma

Recently, we introduced the humble apostrophe. Now we present its cousin from the other side of the tracks, often called the Oxford or Harvard comma, in honour of its distinguished origins. Here we use the less grand but more descriptive name serial comma.

The [comma](#)'s core business is, in general, to clarify the organisation of a sentence into its component parts.

More often than not, a list in a sentence does not need a comma between the last two items; the conjunction 'and' or 'or' is sufficient to keep them apart. For example, take Churchill's famous promise:

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

Here the 'and' is all that is needed to separate the sweat from the tears. Sometimes, however, troublesome ambiguities can crop up in sentences where the list is a bit more complex. That is where the serial comma comes in to supplement the conjunction, as we will see shortly.

The following sentence is a work of fiction; but any resemblance to actual sentences appearing in Council documents is not entirely coincidental:

*The Council invites the Commission to develop an action plan on the circular economy, speeding up the **green transition and electric vehicles**.*

As it stands, that sentence is ambiguous between (at least) two interpretations:

- (i) [...] to develop an action plan on
 - (1) the circular economy,
 - (2) speeding up the green transition and
 - (3) electric vehicles;
- (ii) [...] to develop an action plan on the circular economy, speeding up
 - (1) the green transition and
 - (2) electric vehicles.

However unlikely the second interpretation may seem, readers need to be sure which one was intended. This type of ambiguity arises often enough in Council texts to have a substantial cost in toil, tears, sweat and time, if not quite in blood (as far as we know).

But here comes the serial comma to the rescue! All we need to do is insert it between 'transition' and 'and', and the ambiguity vanishes:

*The Council invites the Commission to develop an action plan on the circular economy, speeding up the green **transition, and** electric vehicles.*

Carelessness about serial commas can be seriously costly, while careful reading of punctuation can boost your income. In 2014, three US truck drivers sued their employer, Oakhurst Dairy, of Portland, Maine, for breaking a state law that required overtime pay for hours worked beyond 40 hours a week, with the following exemptions:

*The canning, processing, preserving, freezing, drying, marketing, storing, **packing for shipment or distribution** of: (1) agricultural produce; (2) meat and fish products; and (3) perishable foods.*

The interpretation favoured by the Dairy, whereby they would not have to pay overtime to the drivers, was that the exemption covered:

- (i) **packing for shipment** of (1), (2) and (3);
- (ii) **distribution** of (1), (2) and (3).

This would exempt the Dairy from paying overtime to drivers, whose job was 'distribution'.

The drivers' lawyers used the lack of a serial comma after 'shipment' to argue for a different interpretation, whereby 'packing for shipment or distribution' meant:

- (i) **packing for shipment** of (1), (2) and (3);
- (ii) **packing for distribution** of (1), (2) and (3).

Here, the overtime exemption applied to 'packing for distribution', not to 'distribution' itself, so the Dairy was not exempt from paying overtime to the drivers who distributed its products.

The court accepted the [drivers' lawyers' argument](#), at a cost to the Dairy of \$5 million. All because the law did not say '**packing for shipment, or distribution**'.

The serial comma is not the only way to fix this type of ambiguity. Reordering listed items can also work. In our examples this could yield the following, which do not create any problematic ambiguity:

an action plan on the circular economy, electric vehicles and speeding up the green transition

and

distribution or packing for shipment of agricultural produce [etc.]

That said, there are independent motives in both our examples for the original word order: in the (fictional) Council example, there is an implied descending hierarchy of importance in the ordering, while in the Maine legislation there is a sort of logical sequence: packing for shipment precedes distribution. However, that will not always be the case, and if it is not, rearranging your items is just as good a solution as inserting the serial comma.

In any case, the Wordsmith would welcome any interesting [serial-comma-related sentences](#) you may have come across.

A

a number of, 16
abbreviations, Latin, 62
accord du participe passé, les verbes pronominaux, 49
account for something, 25
actually, 18
adjectives, order of, 68
anticipate, 28
apostrophe, 58
arrangements, 64
as such, 2
at last, 44
at the latest, 5

B

bearing in mind, 31
before, 5
biannual, 4
biennial, 32
biennial, 4
bimonthly, 4
bisannuel, 32
by, 5
by way of derogation from, 15

C

check, 48
comma
 in defining and non-defining clauses, 53
comma, serial, 70
comparable to, 24
conditions, 64
consequently, 3
considering, 31
continual, continued, continuing, continuous, 6
control, contrôler, 47
currently, 18

D

dans, 33
de, des, 55
deadline, 38
débat d'orientation, 20
délai, 38
delay, 38
deliver, délivrer, 39
digital, 41
directorate, 20
dispose of, 42
disposer de, 42

E

e.g., 62
effective, efficient, 8
efficace, effectif, 35
en, 33
etc., 63
evaluate, 48

eventually, éventuellement, 43
extend, 28
extension, 38

F

fewer, 14
final, 13
finally, 44
for instance, 24
forecast, foresee, 9
formulations trompeuses, 36
forthcoming, 12
fournir, 39

G

get rid of, 42
given, 31
guidance, guidelines, 20

H

hold (a meeting), 21
hyphen, 61

I

i.e., 62
idioms from all EU languages, 26
important, 10
in order to, 31
in the end, 44
in view of, in (the) light of, 31
including, 24
incoming, 12
inspect, 48

J

jeter, 42
join, 28

L

last, latest, 13
le cas échéant, 44
less, 14
libérer, 39
like, 24
livrer, 39

M

management, 20
means, 64
merci (de faire ceci), 45
methods, 64
modalities, 64
monitor, 48

N

NB, 63
no later than, 5
normalement, 18
normally, 18
notwithstanding, 15
noun compounds, 66
numérique, 41

O

oncoming, 12
organise (a meeting), 21
orientation, orientations, 20

P

pass, passer, 47
period, 38
potentiellement, 44
prévoir, 9
procedures, 64
produire, 40
prolong, 28
prononcer, 39
provide for, 9

R

repousser, 38
resembling, 24
respective, respectively, 22

retard, 38

S

semestriel, semi-annuel, 32
sic, 62
similar, 24
so, 3
so as to, 31
such as, 24
supervise, 48

T

take something into account, 25
taking into account, 31
thank you (for doing this), 45
therefore, 2
thus, 3

U

upcoming, 12

V

v / vs. / vs, 62
verify, 48

W

with a view to, 'with the aim of, with the intention of, 31
without prejudice to, 15

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