

## MINIMAL DECENCIES

*Created by longtime English faculty member, Eleanor Burke, who taught at LWHS from 1978-1995, this guide has served as an important writing tool for many LWHS students and alumni. For those who did not have the pleasure of having Ms. Burke as an English teacher, we hope this is one small way to commemorate her legacy among the LWHS community.*

1. **a lot** is two words, not one: Wanda snores **a lot** when she sleeps, even sometimes when she's awake.

2. **already** and **although** and **nevertheless** and **nonetheless** are similarly one word. However, **even though** and **all right** are TWO words. ("alright" is not standard English)

### 3. CONTRACTIONS vs. POSSESSIVES:

#### its/it's:

**Its** is the possessive pronoun. **It's** a contraction for **it is**.

That's my pet parrot. **It's** cleaning **its** feathers more than it used to.

(NOTE: there is no such thing in English as **its'**)

#### your/you're:

**your** is the possessive; **you're** is the contraction:

I love **your** new puppy. **You're** going to love my new boyfriend

#### their/they're/there:

**there is** the possessive; **there is** the contraction; **there** is an adverb of place or a clause introducer:

**They're** in complete agreement about how to water **their** lemon tree.

**There** was no justifiable reason to invade Iraq. (i.e. no reason existed)

The detective found the body **there** on the sofa. (adverb)

### 4. SPELLING:

#### affect/effect:

**affect** is usually a verb, meaning to influence: Weather **affects** my mood.

**Effect** is usually a noun, meaning result: Cold, foggy weather has a bad **effect** on my mood.

#### accept/except:

**accept** is a verb, meaning to receive, to agree to, to believe in: Harold **accepted** John's apology without comment.

**except** is a preposition, meaning "but": Everyone **except** Emma went to the ball.

#### to/too/two:

**to** is a preposition or is used in infinitives; **too** means more than enough or also; **two** is the number between one and three:

Give the snake **to** me; I want **to** take it home. She wanted **too** much money for the gorilla.

Gretchen, **too**, felt the gorilla was overpriced. She paid **two** dollars for it.

#### eminent/imminent:

**eminent** means well-known, famous, respected; **imminent** means about to happen:

Wanda is an **eminent** heart surgeon, known throughout Asia and the United States.

Dark clouds and strong winds seemed to be announcing an **imminent** storm.

#### emigrate/immigrate (emigrant/immigrant):

**emigrate** means to leave a country; **immigrate** means to come to, enter a country; an

**immigrant** is a person who has come to live in your country from another country.

America is a land of **immigrants**. My grandparents **emigrated** from France.

**healthful/healthy:**

**healthful** is what gives health to a person or living thing; **healthy** is the result of **healthful** habits.

Fruits and vegetables are **healthful**; they make a person **healthy**.

**principal/principle:**

**principal** is usually an adjective meaning “main” or “most important”. When it is used as a noun (i.e. Miss Wills was the **principal** of our school), there is an unspoken or implied noun following it.

**principle** is a noun, meaning “value” or “standard”:

The **principal** reason I’m voting for Sam is that he’s cute. The **principal** (person) of our school waters her flowers on weekends. We paid \$10,000 on the outstanding **principal** (amount) of our loan. Not wearing fur coats is a matter of **principle** to me.

**than/then:**

**than** is a comparative form: George is taller **than** Molly.

**then** is an adverb of time: First she sipped her soup; **then** she sampled the soufflé.

**used to/supposed to:**

don’t forget the “d” on these words: Mai Ly is **used to** the heat of Vietnam. George is **supposed to** walk the dogs every day.

5. **COMMONLY CONFUSED:**

**liable/likely:**

**liable** means legally responsible; **likely** means apt to happen:

If you sign this agreement, you will be **liable** for monthly dues.

It is **likely** to rain today; you’d better take your wellies.

**hang/hung:**

the verb **hang/hung/hung** means to put something up, usually on a wall

the verb **hang/hanged/hanged** means to put a rope around someone’s neck and execute him:

Charlie **hung** the portrait of Fuzzy the Rat over the mantelpiece.

Percy the Pitiless Pirate was **hanged** at dawn.

**lie/lay:**

The verb whose principal parts are **lie/lay/lain** means to be in a reclining position. It is an intransitive verb (takes no direct object) and implies no movement. What follows it is an adverb of place:

Mary likes to **lie** down for a nap after lunch. She **lay** on the grass all afternoon, soaking up the sun. Right now, she is on the recliner, where she has **lain** all day (or: where she has been **lying** all day).

The verb **lay/laid/laid** means to put something (somewhere). It is a transitive verb (must have a direct object, which will be a noun or pronoun):

This hen can **lay** three eggs in one morning. She **laid** three eggs yesterday. She has **laid** at least three eggs every morning this week.

NOTE: There is no thing in standard English as: **layed**, **lieing** or **lied** (though **lied** is indeed the past tense of the verb not to tell the truth: Marge **lied** about her age).

**currently/presently:**

**currently** means happening at the same time; **presently** means something will happen shortly:

**Currently** the Giants are in second place in their division (i.e. at this moment).

**Presently** the rain will begin to fall (i.e. at any moment, but not RIGHT now).

**among/between:**

**between** implies two; **among** implies more than two:

Just **between** the two of us, I think Jane is smarter than Sally.

**Among** all of Emma’s many friends, I liked Archie the best.

**aggravate/irritate:**

**aggravate** means to make a bad situation worse; **irritate** means to annoy:

The blister on my heel was **aggravated** by the long hike. Sue’s snoring **irritated** Sam.

**farther/further:**

**farther** is a measurable, linear distance; **further** is an amount that cannot be measured in a linear way or quantified:

My car ran out of gas; it would go no **farther**. I was too tired to read any **further**.

**if/whether:**

**whether** implies an either-or (or not) situation; **if** sets up a condition: **if** this, **then** that:

I have no idea **whether** (or not) the U.S. will be out of Iraq by next year (i.e. it will either happen or it won't happen).

**If** the Philly Phanatic wins the election for President, I guarantee we will be out of Iraq (i.e. if condition a – the Phanatic wins the election – exists, then result b – we will be out of Iraq – will follow).

**fewer/less:**

**fewer** (or **number**) implies an amount that can be counted; **less** (or **amount**) refers to something that cannot be counted or quantified.

**Fewer** than thirty birds showed up for Sophie's birthday party. A **number** of them were dressed in bright pink.

Sophie had **less** interest in birthday gifts than in dessert. She devoured a large **amount** of strawberry shortcake.

**as if/as though vs. like:**

**as if** and **as though** are conjunctions – they connect clauses that have a subject and a verb; **like** is a preposition and will be followed instead by an object (noun or pronoun) but no verb:

It looks **as if** we will be in Iraq for many years. It seems **as though** we feel a responsibility to demand that every country in the region be democratic.

Cody looks just **like** his father. Wendy felt **like** a drowned rat after the downpour.

**imply/infer:**

to **imply** is to hint at something without saying it, to suggest; to **infer** is to draw meaning from that hint:

Grace didn't say so directly, but she **implied** that she would be home late. Nicole **inferred** that she had a hot date.

6. **NO-NO's:**

**different than** is a no-no...the preferred idiom is **different from**:

Omar's curve ball is entirely **different from** George's.

The **reason is because** is redundant; better to say **the reason is that**:

odious: The **reason** I am cheering **is because** Bumgarner just hit a grand slam.

better: The **reason** I am cheering **is that** Bumgarner just hit a grand slam.

even better: I am cheering **because** Bumgarner just hit a grand slam.

**anyways** is non-standard English; don't use it - the word is **anyway**

**irregardless** is also non-standard English; don't use it either - say **regardless**

**alright** is also not proper English, though you may see it written that way – say instead **all right**

**double negatives** in English are another no-no:

not ok: One **can't hardly** blame Howard for being tired: he studied late every night this week.

I **can't help but** feel sad for Howard: he failed the test anyway.

fine: One **can hardly** blame Howard for being tired: he studied late every night this week.

I **can't help feeling** sad for Howard: he failed the test anyway.

Avoid **hopefully**: to use it to mean "I hope" or "it is to be hoped" is wrong and silly. To say "Hopefully my dog will learn to heel and sit" is nonsense, as if you meant that your dog will learn to heel and sit in

a hopeful frame of mind. Probably you mean rather “I **hope** my dog will learn to heel and sit.”

Similarly, avoid **utilize**. Say **use** instead: I **used** the toilet. (The same is true for any latinized word – see George Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language.”)

Also, avoid the wimpy word **very** if you can. Instead use strong words in themselves rather than modifying weaker words with **very**:

not good: Marcy was a **very** nice girl.

better: Marcy was an honest, generous and kind girl.

The same holds true for the wimpy verb **to be**; try to find a more colorful verb:

not good: The stage lighting for the play **was** excellent.

better: The stage lighting for the play **dazzled** the audience.

7. **SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT:**

The following pronouns are **singular** and thus take verbs in the third person singular; pronouns that refer to them should be in the singular as well:

anyone everyone no one someone  
anybody everybody nobody somebody

**Everyone** I know **thinks his** dog is the best. **No one**, in Jake’s opinion, can possibly take **his** own dog for granted.

8. **PLURAL NOUNS:**

The following nouns are **plural** (their singular forms are in parentheses) and the verbs that go with them should be in the third person **plural**:

data (datum) media (medium) phenomena (phenomenon) criteria (criterion):

**These data are** incorrect; you must redo the calculations. Many people believe that the **media have** been unfair to Obama.

9. **MUST HAVE/ SHOULD HAVE/ OUGHT TO HAVE:**

We often slur the **have** in speech, making it sound like **of**, and then when it comes to writing, write the **of** instead of the **have**. But **of** is a preposition, not a helping verb:

Marcy must **have** fed her cobra too many mice: it died.

Horace should **have** taken the garbage out yesterday.

10. **APOSTROPHES:**

apostrophes belong on nouns that are possessing something and should be put after the last letter of whoever/whatever is possessing. **NEVER** put an apostrophe on a possessive pronoun.

**Sam’s** jacket needs to be washed. My **dog’s** fleas trouble him. Our local library has a **children’s** hour every Monday. The **People’s** Republic of Bongoland exports lime trees. Our school requires **girls’** PE (i.e. PE for all the girls).

11. **ADVERBS vs. ADJECTIVES:**

**adverbs** modify (i.e. say something about) verbs, adjectives or other adverbs; **adjectives** modify nouns or pronouns:

Marcy feels **strongly** that women should receive equal pay to men. (“strongly” modifies “feels”, a verb)  
Cecilia felt so **strong** after surgery that she was able to walk home on her own. (“strong” modifies “Cecilia,” a noun)

Drive **slowly** when you go by a school; children might run out into the street. (modifies “drive”)

Fred plays the guitar **well**. (Not “good” or worse, “real good” – “well” modified “plays”)

12. **UNDERLINING** vs. **QUOTES**:

Underline (or use italics) the titles of books, plays, magazines, newspapers – anything major. Put the “smaller” things in quotation marks: the name of a poem, the title of a short story, an article in the newspaper, for example:

I read in The Chronicle today that my neighbor has announced his candidacy for Mayor.

*A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry is an excellent book about India.

Harvey read his very moving poem “On the Lifecycle of the Trapdoor Spider” to the kids.

13. **NUMBERS**:

The general rule in English is to spell out numbers under 100 but to use numerals 100 or over:

Henry VIII had **six** wives, not **300**.