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
   - **there/they’re/their**:
     - 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 use. 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:

Mary 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.