Top Writing Errors (of My Students)

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In honor of New Years’ top-ten lists, I thought you might be interested in the top writing errors made in student papers that I graded recently. Some of these errors are classics in any writing; some are more science-oriented. I’m sure you-all never would make such elementary mistakes as those in my list (right?) but feel free to point these out to your own students, colleagues, and friends. It’s a good exercise to do this without sounding too pedantic (an exercise I am about to fail at here, but oh well).

1. *it’s* vs. *its*. Incorrect use of these was the most common problem I saw. I wrote a haiku about this:

   It’s existential.
   ‘It’s’ has an apostrophe
   Only when it is.

2. *each other* vs. *one another*. Use “each other” when there are two things. Use “one another” when there are more than two things. No haiku for this one, yet.

3. *between* vs. *among*. This is similar to the previous error. Use “between” only for two things; use “among” for more than two things.

4. *effect* vs. *affect*. “Effect” is usually a noun, meaning “impact”: “Steve Jobs had a huge effect on the personal electronics industry”. It is sometimes a verb, meaning to create something or to make something happen, e.g., “Can Obama effect a Mideast peace treaty?”. “Affect” is the verb form of the noun “effect”: “Steve Jobs significantly affected the personal electronics industry”, meaning he had a large impact on it. A bigger fan of Steve Jobs might say something like “Steve Jobs singlehandedly effected the personal electronics industry”, meaning, he was singlehandedly the person who made it happen.

   Other, less common meanings: “affect” (stress on first syllable) means “emotion”.

5. Don’t use “they” or “their”, or “his” or “her” or “it” or any other pronoun far away from its original reference, or where the reference might be ambiguous. This error is very common in my students’ writings. “I enjoyed reading about cellular automata and genetic algorithms. It is an important topic in computer science.” Or “The author of the paper did not talk about the meaning of the results. They ranged from high to low. It might have been due to an error. They were unexpected and he didn’t say how he got them.” Help!
6. Don’t use passive voice. E.g., “Experiments were performed to demonstrate that…” is worse than “We performed experiments to demonstrate that…”. In the first, it’s not clear who did the experiments — the author, or someone else?

7. Be aware of the singular versus plural forms of Latinate words. For example: optimum is singular, optima is plural. Automaton is singular, automata is plural. It’s not correct to say “I studied one cellular automata”.

8. Don’t use overly long, complex sentences, at least in non-fiction writing. You are free to be another James Joyce or David Foster Wallace in your novel, but it’s not a good idea in a scientific paper.

9. Avoid “identity-crisis sentences” — my term for sentences such as, “As a student of Shakespeare, Hamlet is my favorite play.”

10. Avoid “lonely comparisons”—that is, sentences like “For experiment 2 I used a more complex system.” More complex than what? This lonely comparison is missing its other half.

11. Use complete sentences. Please!

12. (Not exactly a writing error, but a plea to students.) If you include a figure or a table in your paper (or talk), include an informative caption. If you include a plot, please, please, puhleez, I beg you: label the axes.

For future work, the list needs “the proper role of the semicolon” and “the difference between an n-dash and an m-dash”. I’m sure you can hardly wait. Happy New Year!