The results of a recent survey conducted by the Writing Center show that your professors sometimes tend to pull their hair out when grading papers. One reason for our beloved faculty’s brief lapses into insanity is misused/misspelled words. The following list will help you to identify foul misuses in your writing... and also to keep your professors calm.

1) The overwhelming winner in the contest for Most Misused Word is the confusion of its (the third person singular possessive pronoun) and it’s (the contraction of “it is”). For example:

- The airline canceled its early flight to New York.
- It’s usually necessary to book flight reservations in advance.

The easiest way to cure the “its/it’s disease” is to substitute “it is” in the sentence. It will become immediately apparent, as in the first example, that you do not need it’s, because “The airline canceled it is early flight to New York” does not make any sense.

***Please note that Spell-Check will not catch the misuse of “its” and “it’s.”

2) In addition to the above misuse of apostrophes, professors also profess annoyance at the misuse of singular and plural noun possessives. An example is writer’s vs. writers’:

- The writer’s book was a best seller. (the book of a single writer)
- That writer’s books are often best sellers. (multiple books, but from a single writer)
- The writers’ books were displayed at the convention. (multiple books of multiple writers)
- The writers’ convention had many books on display. (one convention, but for many writers)

Remember that the possessive pronoun is NOT affected by whether the noun is plural or singular. The question to ask yourself is: Does this noun belong to one thing, or many things?

3) Homonyms, or sound-alike words, also cause confusion. Spell-Check usually won’t catch misuse of these words as long as they are correctly spelled. The following are a trio and pairs that are troublesome.

**THEIR, THERE, THEY’RE**
- Their team won the championship. (the possessive form of “they”)
- Put the mail over there. (adverb describing “where”)
- They’re going to California for a vacation. (contraction of “they + are”)

**YOUR, YOU’RE**
- Your term paper was fantastic! (the possessive form of “you”)

Misuses Most Foul: Mistakes that drive your professors crazy!

courtesy of the Franklin & Marshall College Writing Center
• You’re one of the most intelligent people in the class. (contraction of “you + are”)

**AFFECT, EFFECT**

• Bad weather never affects my mood. (verb, most commonly used to mean “to influence”)
• The effect of the President’s tax increase was astounding. (noun, most commonly used to denote a situation brought about by a cause)

**WHO’S, WHOSE**

• Who’s the number one female tennis player in the country (contraction of “who + is”)
• Whose chemistry book is this? (possessive form of “who”)

4) Errors in number distinction are also irritants. Woman and women are often confused. However, more faculty members mentioned the Latin-based word *datum* and its plural *data* (“The datum is correct” vs. “The data are correct”) and medium and its plural media (“The medium favors the President” vs. “The media favor the President”).

5) *infer* vs. *imply*. Infer is sometimes confused with imply, but the distinction is a useful one. To imply is to make a suggestion without stating it outright. For example:

When the mayor said that she would not rule out a tax increase, she implied that some taxes might be raised.

To infer is to draw a conclusion not explicit in what is said. For example:

When the mayor said that she would not rule out a tax increase, we inferred that she had been consulting with some new tax advisers, since her old advisers were in favor of tax reductions.

6) *anxious* vs. *eager*. Anxious has a long history of use as a synonym for eager, but we should use anxious only when the subject is worried or uneasy about the anticipated event. For example:

• I was anxious about going to class because I knew I had done poorly on my exam.
• I was eager to go home because I missed my family tremendously!

7) *between* vs. *among*. Use between when the entities are considered as distinct and individual. For example:

The bomb landed between this house and that one.

Use among when the entities are considered a mass or collectivity. For example:

The bomb landed among the houses on that block.

8) *lie* vs. *lay*. Lay (to put, place, or prepare) and lie (to recline or be situated) are frequently confused. Lay is a transitive verb that takes an object, and its principal parts (laid, laying) are used correctly in the following sentences:

• He laid the newspaper on the table.
• The table was laid for four.

Lie is an intransitive verb meaning “to rest” and does not take an object. Lie and its principal parts (lay, lain, lying) are correctly used in the following sentences:

• She often lies down after lunch.
When I lay down, I fell asleep.
The garbage had lain there a week.
I was lying in bed when he called.

9) *due to*. Commonly used to mean *because of*. The original, correct use, however, is with the linking verb to be:
   wrong: Due to my hasty proofreading, my paper has many errors.
   right: The errors are due to my hasty proofreading, not to my ignorance.

10) *When to use that as opposed to who or whom*. Use *that* to refer to inanimate objects, and use *who* and *whom* to refer to people. For example:

   wrong: The girl that is playing volleyball is a senior.
   right: The girl who is playing volleyball is a senior.
   right: The chairs that are for sale are $25.00.

11) Spelling Sins. Finally, some misuses are simply spelling errors. Those most commonly committed are *alright* for *all right*, *alot* for *a lot*, *thru* for *through*, and *verticle* for *vertical*.

Avoiding these foul misuses when you write your next paper will keep your professors happier and will likely mean a higher grade when they are grading your papers. In addition, remember to use Spell-Check (whose neglect is another pet peeve of our professors, according to our survey) and to call the Writing Center if you need further assistance.