

# ◆ Crafting A Winning ◆ FRC Woodie Flowers Award Essay

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## **Bonus Content: The Grammar Guide**

Sometimes – actually, pretty much always – I write way too much of a good thing. I compiled some of the most frequent spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors I see along with a reference guide of powerful, descriptive adjectives that students might find helpful when crafting an essay. To check something quickly, the CTRL+F find function is your friend.

While I do hold a degree in English, I'm no grammarian. I love language mainly because I can bend it to my will. However, I am still prone to make the same mistakes as anyone would. If you do find a mistake or a place where I have mischaracterized a language rule, please send me a note and I will happily fix. I also welcome suggestions for additions.

Enjoy!

## ❖ Part 1: Common Mistakes/Misused Words

### *That vs. Which*

A *which* clause will start with a pause, but *that* goes with the flow. *Which* is kind of like saying, “oh, by the way...”.

*Commas, which cut out the fat, go with “which”, never with “that”.*<sup>1</sup>

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### *Its vs. It’s*

If you can substitute “it is” or “it has”, go with *it’s*. If it belongs to something (possessive form), go with *its*.

*It’s a shame Leslie has not won the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award yet.*

*I think the trophy, with its famous Moebius circle design, is beautiful.*

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### *Who’s vs. Whose*

If you can substitute “who is” or “who has”, go with *who’s*. If it belongs to something (possessive form), it’s *whose*.

*Who’s the second woman to win the Woodie Flowers Award? Kyle Hughes!*

*Chris Fultz, whose WFA trophy adorned the mantle, hosted the party.*

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### *That vs. Who*

A Person can be *that* or *who*, but a Thing is always *that*.

*The kind man that won the WFA is named Eric Stokely.* or *The kind man who won the WFA is named Eric Stokely.*

*The Moebius trophy that is awarded to WFA winners weighs over 10 lbs.*

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### *Who vs. Whom*

*Who* does something (like he, she, or they). *Whom* has something done to it (like him, her, or them).

If “he” fits, use *who* (both end in vowels). If “him” fits, use *whom* (both end in M).

*Kelly only nominated those who she felt were good candidates for the award.*

*Aven declined to tell them whom he nominated for the award.*

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### *To vs. Too*

*To* is used to describe an action, a destination, or a recipient.

*Too* is used to emphasize something, or in place of “as well” or “also”.

*Before submitting to the awards judges, the essay needed to be cut down to size. It was too long!*

*Too often, students do not leave enough time to complete well-crafted awards essay drafts.*

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<sup>1</sup> Excellent example and mnemonic guide from *Woe is I*, quoted frequently throughout this guide.

*Peak vs. Pique vs. Peek*

A *peak* is the top of something, especially of a geographic region.

To *pique* is to irritate, excite, or wound.

To *peek* is to look or glance at quickly.

*The teacher's career peaked upon winning the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award.*

*Allen's lessons piqued the curiosity of his students.*

*Curious about this year's Kit of Parts, Kate peeked into the bins eagerly.*

*Affect vs. Effect*

To *affect* something is to talk about changing. It is interchangeable with other verbs.

To have an *effect*, you are talking about the change itself. It is interchangeable with other nouns. In limited cases, you can also use *effect* as a verb that means to carry out or accomplish. If you aren't sure, substitute!

*How would Woodie's speech affect the world?* Substitution: *How would Woodie's speech change the world?*

*Liz Calef's speech had a profound effect on me.* Substitution: *Liz Calef's speech had a profound impact on me.*

*Their vs. There vs. They're*

*Their* is possessive, it indicates something belongs to "them". It can also be used as a non-gendered possessive.

*There* is a place.

*They're* is short for *they are*.

*After receiving approval from the WFA winners, Amelia carefully moved their trophies onto the table.*

*Andrew had just moved the trophies over there.*

*"They're coming soon to collect the trophies," said Dana.*

*Of vs. Have*

*Of* is a preposition, not a contraction. If you can break the sentence into two words (see below), do not use *of*.

*Have* is a helping verb, and you should use it if you could technically make something into a contraction (adding 've).

*Not one of us had ever written an awards essay before, but we were determined to have our teacher win.*

*I must have read several hundred WFA essays over the last several years. (must've)*

*I could have read a few hundred more, if only a greater number of submissions were available. (could've)*

*I would have read them if only more students wrote and submitted them. (would've)*

*A common mistake is that "could of", "would of", and "should of" are correct, but the phrase is actually "coulda, woulda, shoulda" shortened from "could have, would have, should have". To help remember, think, "I could have a cookie right now. I should have a cookie right now." when you go to use these in a sentence. Then reward yourself with a cookie.*

*i.e. vs. e.g.*

*i.e.* stands for *id est* in Latin, and means roughly "in other words," or "that is,".

*e.g.* stands for *exempli grata* in Latin, and means roughly "for example,".

*You must submit 3,000 characters, i.e. all marks including spaces, punctuation, and carriage returns (Enter).*

*The students made several grammar mistakes (e.g. To vs. Too, Their vs. They're) in their essay.*

*Into vs. In To*

*Into* describes where something is, such as inside of something else.

*In to* should be used if you can replace it with “in order to” in the same space. Some phrasal verbs may trip you up, though, such as “log in”, “break in”, “let in”. In these situations, you should still use *in to* (see incorrect usage below).

*Paul Copioli carefully placed his Moebius trophy back into the trophy case.*

*Jerry needed to log in to his computer to edit the team’s WFA essay.*

*Incorrect: Mack was tired and decided to turn into bed. (Unless, of course, he was turning into a bed like a Transformer.)*

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*Loose vs. Lose*

*Loose* means that something is free or releasing from attachment.

*Lose* means that you have failed to retain something or that you are without it.

*Mary used WD-40 to pry the screws loose.*

*Though their nominee did lose, they still cheered for the winner of the award.*

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*A lot vs. Allot*

*A lot* implies a great amount. *Allot* is not a word.

*Allot* means that you’ve allocated something.

*The judges were prepared to receive a lot of awards essays during the build season.*

*The judge knew she would need to allot six hours to review each of the awards essays received.*

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*Then vs. Than*

*Then* is used when talking about something related to time.

Use *Than* when comparing two things.

*I saw a picture of Andy Baker from the old TechnoKat days, and he looked the exact same back then as he does now!*

*I strongly prefer using rubber tubing rather than the standard polycord on my intake designs.*

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*Farther vs. Further*

*Farther* indicates distance.

*Further* is more abstract. It refers to going a figurative distance – not an actual measure.

*I guarantee that Dan Green can run farther than I can, even after I chug a Red Bull.*

*Dave Verbrugge went even further by becoming a FIRST Master of Ceremonies in addition to his mentoring.*

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*Compliment vs. Complement*

It is a tremendous *compliment* to be told that you have beautiful eyes, since it is flattering. And you do!

A *complement* is a piece of a whole thing, or a supplement to make it even better.

*Someone once mistook me for Dave Lavery, and I took it as a huge compliment.*

*Rich’s brainstorming complements my ability to make quick prototypes for proofs of concepts.*

*Assure vs. Insure vs. Ensure*

If you are *assuring* someone, you are telling them not to worry.

If you are *ensuring* something, you are making sure it happens.

If you are *insuring* something, you are financially protecting something (or you are Jake, from State Farm).

*On the call, I was assured that my friend would wish Bill Beatty a happy birthday on my behalf.*

*I called FIRST to ensure that our essay was properly submitted and eligible for judging.*

*The school board took out an insured bond to help build the new STEM center.*

~~~~~  
*Faze vs. Phase*

To *faze* someone is to bug them or otherwise disturb them.

A *phase* is a step in a process or a time period.

*Ken Patton was totally unfazed when I ran up to him for a handshake and a hug. What a guy!*

*The last phase of our essay editing was the worst and longest by far. It took forever!*

~~~~~  
*Accept vs. Except*

When you *accept* something, it is being given to you.

*Excepting* something means “unless...”, or that you are not including it.

*I accepted David’s analysis of the malfunctioning motor and went online to buy a new one.*

*We decided to keep everything except the last sentence. It was just too many characters to include.*

~~~~~  
*Pore vs. Pour*

*Pore* as a verb means to closely study something. As a noun, it’s a tiny hole in the surface of something, like your skin.

To *pour* is to flow quickly, such as when it is raining heavily.

*Josh pored over the essay to make sure he deleted every double-space between sentences.*

*Tired from editing, I poured myself a cup of tea. “Will I ever be satisfied with this guide?”, I thought. “Probably not.”*

~~~~~  
*Bare vs. Bear*

*Bare*, plainly put, means naked or without cover.

A *bear* is a bear, obviously. But it can also mean to put up with something in some contexts.

*She could not believe that she had built the robot’s subsystem with her own bare hands.*

*I heard Andy Baker wrestled a bear once. I couldn’t bear to watch the video.*

~~~~~  
*Lay vs. Lie*

To *lay* is to transport something, but it’s also the past tense of *lie*. I realize that’s pretty confusing.

*Lie* is when you stretch the truth, but also what you do when you are sleepy.

*“My chickens lay eggs each morning,” I lied. In reality, I had just bought them from the store minutes ago.*

*I wasn’t feeling well after I told that massive lie earlier, so I decided to lie down and think about my terrible life choices.*

*I actually decided to lay down yesterday afternoon after a similar incident. Maybe I have a lying problem.*

*Cord vs. Chord*

A *cord* is a long rope or something you pull.

A *chord* is when multiple music notes are combined to make a new sound.

*If we can't secure the robot in the trailer with a few pieces of cord, it will be unsafe to transport.  
It really unnerved me when the piano player hit that specific chord – I got goosebumps!*

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*Meddle vs. Medal vs. Mettle vs. Metal*

If you are *meddling* in something, you're generally interfering with the way it is supposed to go.

A *medal* is what you win for the Chairman's Award and the WFA, among other awards.

*Mettle* is courageousness or strength in a person.

*Metal* is an alloy, such as aluminum or steel.

*I knew that no one would meddle with our robot if we left it alone. That is not gracious OR professional behavior!  
Our team was so confident in our robot that we could practically feel the gold medals hanging around our necks.  
Despite losing our build space and our teacher, our team withstood the test of our mettle and continued onward.  
I realized a magnet would not be strong enough to hold the pieces of metal together – we'd need to weld them.*

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*Site vs. Sight vs. Cite*

A *site* is a location or a place.

*Sight* is specific to vision, or anything having to do with viewing.

To *cite*, as a verb, is to call or quote. It is generally short for "citation", so keep that in mind.

*On this site in 2001, the robot pits flooded when the Epcot parking lot did not adequately drain the rain.  
The robot's sight was severely impaired when our opponents accidentally ripped out our vision sensor's loose cables.  
Frank Merrick cited a long-beloved quote when he said it "inhaled audibly".*

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*Disassemble vs. Dissemble*

\* Spellcheck will frequently attempt to use "dissemble" when you intend to use "disassemble".

To *disassemble* a robot is a true nightmare where you must take the entire thing apart.

Someone who *dissembles* is hiding who they really are, or creating a false appearance.

*I cannot believe the inspector wants us to disassemble the entire intake just to fix one little thing! Oh well.  
We didn't mean to mislead and dissemble the inspector, but he took it that way.*

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*Weather vs. Wether vs. Whether*

\* Spellcheck will sometimes attempt to use "wether" or "weather" when you intend to use "whether".

The *weather* is the current meteorological condition, or what you talk about when you have nothing else to say.

A *wether* is another word for a sheep. You never mean this... well, you *probably* never mean this.

*Whether* is an implied choice, as in "whether or not".

*You know what they say about the weather in New Hampshire, right? If you don't like it, wait an hour and it will change.  
I can't say I've ever pet a wether, and to be honest I probably never will, so... I guess I've got that going for me.  
Whether or not we win the Woodie Flowers Award, at least we can say our writing has significantly improved.*

## ❖ Part 2: Punctuation

### A. Quotes

I see a lot of incorrectly done quotations in essays. I promise that it is actually pretty easy! Just remember that the punctuation goes *inside* of the quotes, even if the sentence isn't finished. Let's test this out with both a comma and a period.

*"I believe," said Emma, "that Ms. Ana is one of the best mentors I've ever had!"*

*Ms. Riley has an excellent knack for teaching, said Alyse, with "just the right amount of motivation to help you persevere and achieve your goal!"*

The only time you would ever NOT put your comma or period inside the quotes would be a partial/incomplete quote or a list where the items are individual. I think this is usually a waste of characters, though. For instance,

*When asked about some of Mr. Patel's many qualities, we all had the same thoughts: "helpfulness", "positivity", and even "kindness".*

### B. Parentheses

I don't always recommend using parentheses in your essay, but I've seen some creative essays written in the third person (more on this in a minute) where it makes sense. Like how I threw that in there? The parentheses can enclose a related, but additional thought, or something that goes along with the main text but doesn't make sense when on its own. Here are a few other examples.

*Riley makes us feel understood (and is always good for an Among Us reference). They're totally not sus.*

Don't actually write something like this in your essay, but this is an example of an additional separate thought being included. In that case, the period goes outside of the parenthesis because it isn't a complete sentence. You can see how it is different in the next example:

*Ms. Ana showed me a lot of different references when I showed an interest in learning Python outside of the robotics team meetings. (She even helped me loan a Chromebook from the school to take home.) It was really helpful and I ended up being able to brag about my new skills on my college applications.*

In both examples, the sentence in parentheses doesn't necessarily *need* them, but many times in English this is used as a narrative to supplement what we're saying. This is extra information that you are providing to the reader that you think will be helpful. Just note that you can't have a full sentence in parentheses *INSIDE* of another sentence. You can either separate them into two sentences, combine them with a semicolon, or just drop one of the periods. Exclamation points are an exception.

*Avi Patel has many positive traits (kindness, graciousness, positivity) but his courage is by far the best.*

*Riley once told us that life is like a box of chocolates, and that really resonated with us (this is from the Forrest Gump movie).*

In other words, the period goes with the full sentence. If the sentence is complete on the outside, it goes on the outside. If it's a complete sentence inside, it can stay inside. If both are complete, go with the outside.

### C. Ellipses

An ellipsis is the three “thinking” or incomplete thought dots. You know: “...”. Often, I see them used at the beginning of a quote where only half the quote is used, but technically the AP Style Guide says that isn’t correct. In other words, save your characters and don’t bother with it. I’m personally very guilty of including them!

*Blake has known Ana since she was in college and said that “...she’s always been incredibly helpful.”*  
should become

*Blake has known Ana since she was in college and said that “she’s always been incredibly helpful.”*

However, if you are quoting someone and you are only using part of their quote (such as cutting out the middle that isn’t relevant), you’ll want to make sure to use this to accurately quote someone. This is useful during editing if you want to keep the best parts of a quote but do not have room for all of it.

*Blake has known Ana for many years and believes that her excellent mentorship comes from a deep love of helping others. “She’s always been a positive influence that’s willing to teach others. ~~I’ve always said that~~ she’s the model of gracious professionalism.”*

can become

*Blake has known Ana for many years and believes that her excellent mentorship comes from a deep love of helping others. “She’s always been a positive influence that’s willing to teach others... she’s the model of gracious professionalism.”*

### D. Tenses

I will state, for the record, that I am the worst at changing tenses. I tell you this as a word of caution so that you can be a much better writer than I am. Here are a few examples so you know what to watch for in your writing.

*Mr. Patel explained things to us every time we ask.*

*Mr. Patel explains things to us every time we ask, or Mr. Patel explained things to us every time we asked.*

Most WFA essays are written in the present tense with some past-tense verbs. This is because you are describing the present-day person but giving past-tense examples that happened in the past. This is okay – you can shift tenses when the time frame of what you’re talking about is changing.

*Riley helped us to realize that we love mechanical engineering, and that we love the robot we’ve built.*

In this case, these students “helped” and “built” in past tense because they have now realized that they “love” in present tense, but are not currently realizing nor are they currently building.

In all honesty, reading your essay out loud and having others proof it will help catch a lot of these kinds of mistakes. It is harder to see tense switching when you are spending so much time on one document (and why there is probably some tense switching in this guide!).



## ❖ Part 3: Power Words

Included below are adjectives that you may find helpful to use in your essay. Remember, you want to find the *right* word, not the *longest* word. This list is meant to be a starting point, so if you can't find the perfect match for what you are trying to say, try using [Thesaurus.com](https://www.thesaurus.com).

|               |               |                  |                |                 |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| accomplished  | dependable    | guiding          | motivated      | sensible        |
| acute         | determined    | hallowed         | nimble         | sharp           |
| adaptable     | devoted       | handy            | noteworthy     | shrewd          |
| adept         | dexterous     | hard-working     | obliging       | significant     |
| admirable     | diligent      | helpful          | observant      | sincere         |
| agile         | diplomatic    | heroic           | optimistic     | skillful        |
| agreeable     | direct        | highly regarded  | perceptive     | spectacular     |
| ambitious     | discerning    | idolized         | persevering    | stoic           |
| amiable       | distinguished | imaginative      | persistent     | straightforward |
| analytical    | dutiful       | impartial        | persuasive     | substantial     |
| approachable  | dynamic       | impassioned      | pioneering     | successful      |
| ardent        | eager         | impressive       | plucky         | superhuman      |
| articulate    | earnest       | independent      | practical      | sympathetic     |
| assertive     | easy-going    | indomitable      | praiseworthy   | tactful         |
| attentive     | educated      | influential      | prepared       | take-charge     |
| balanced      | effectual     | ingenious        | prestigious    | talented        |
| broad-minded  | effortless    | innovative       | proactive      | tenacious       |
| candid        | empathetic    | insightful       | productive     | thoughtful      |
| capable       | energetic     | intelligent      | profound       | tireless        |
| captivating   | engaging      | intrepid         | prominent      | tolerant        |
| cheerful      | enterprising  | intuitive        | punctual       | trustworthy     |
| clever        | entertaining  | inventive        | qualified      | unassuming      |
| commanding    | enthusiastic  | inviolable       | quick          | undaunted       |
| compassionate | enviable      | jovial           | quick-witted   | unflinching     |
| compelling    | estimable     | keen             | realistic      | unyielding      |
| conclusive    | exceptional   | knowledgeable    | reassuring     | vaunted         |
| conscientious | experienced   | larger than life | reliable       | vehement        |
| considerate   | extensive     | laudable         | resilient      | versatile       |
| consistent    | faithful      | likable          | resolute       | virtuous        |
| convincing    | fearless      | lively           | resourceful    | visionary       |
| convivial     | focused       | logical          | responsible    | vital           |
| cool-headed   | formative     | masterly         | revered        | warmhearted     |
| courageous    | gifted        | methodical       | robust         | well-respected  |
| decisive      | gratifying    | mighty           | self-confident | well-rounded    |
| dedicated     | gregarious    | modest           | self-reliant   | wondrous        |