Common grammatical and usage errors

Here is a laundry list of the most common errors that I’ve seen in student writing. I reserve the right to charge a full point penalty for committing these errors.

• Scientific names must be set apart from the rest of the text. You may do this by using italics or underlining. The first letter of the genus must be capitalized and the first letter of the species name must be in lower case (Homo sapiens). Once you use a name, you may abbreviate it later (H. sapiens).

• You must use metric measurements for everything. I know this can be cumbersome because our daily lives are not in metric. However, as scientists, we must follow the rules of the scientific community. So convert your miles to kilometers, your gallons to liters, your ounces to milliliters, etc.

• Use an active voice; avoid a passive voice. Unfortunately, scientific articles were traditionally written using a passive voice and only during the past 30 years has this changed. You will read scientific articles that have been written using the passive voice. This doesn’t mean you should too. Here are several examples of using an active versus a passive voice.

  Passive: It was found that the 5% nitrogen treatment was associated with greater plant growth than the 1% nitrogen treatment.
  Active: Plant growth was significantly greater in the 5% nitrogen treatment as compared to the 1% nitrogen treatment.

  Passive: Two liters of water were measured and applied to the soil.
  Active: We measured and applied two liters of water to the soil.

  Passive: There was a significant negative relationship between soil salinity and plant growth.
  Active: Plant growth was significantly less in the high soil salinity treatments as compared to the low salinity treatments.

• If you are reporting on a project that you completed, you will use the past tense. Whatever you found in your experiment occurred in the past. There is a tendency for students to mix up the tenses, flipping back and forth between present and past. Stick with the past!

• Numbers are generally spelled out if less than 12, while the numerals are used if 12 or greater. If I have ten eggs, I would NOT say I have 10 eggs. However, if I have 15 eggs, I would NOT say I have fifteen eggs. If you are discussing actual numbers such
as the score of a game, you use the numeric version of the number rather than spelling it out.

- The word “species” is both plural and singular. There can be a single species or several species. The word “specie” doesn’t exist.

- “Offspring” is also both plural and singular. “Offsprings” doesn’t exist.

- “Young” is both plural and singular. “Youngs” doesn’t exist.

- The word “data” is plural; the word “datum” is singular. The data were collected. Data are collected. The following sentence is incorrect: The data was collected. For you Trekkies, the android should have been named “Datum” not “Data” as there was only one of him.

- “Taxon” is singular and “taxa” is plural.

- “Affect” is a verb; “effect” is most commonly used as a noun. The effects of rain are getting wet and cold. Rain affects some people by making them wet and cold. “Effect” can also be used as a verb. A war could effect a change in the economy.

- “Among” is used when comparing three or more items; “between” is used when comparing two items. The differences among Fords, Chevys, and VWs are profound. The difference between Fords and Chevys is questionable.

- Only capitalize proper nouns and the first words of sentences. The names of elements, like nitrogen or carbon, are not capitalized. Capitalize the formal taxonomic names of groups (Arthropoda, Chordata, and Reptilia) but not the informal names (arthropods, chordates, and reptiles).

- The word “less” is used when something is measured, while the word “fewer” is used when something is counted. “Less toads” is incorrect; “fewer toads” is correct.