Commonly misused and problem words and expressions

After. Following
*After* is the more precise word if a time sequence is involved: ‘We went home after the meal.’

Allow
Use *allows one to* instead of *allows to*: ‘this system allows to measure the position of positrons...’ should be ‘this system allows one to measure the position of positrons...’ or ‘this system allows the position of positrons to be measured’;

Alternate. Alternative
The first means every other one in a series; the second, one of two possibilities.

Among. Between
When more than two things or persons are involved, *among* is usually called for: The money was divided among the four players. When, however, more than two are involved but each is considered individually, *between* is preferred: An agreement was reached between the heirs.

Amount. Number
Use *amount* when you refer to a mass or aggregate; use *number* when countable units are involved: ‘The number of people in our laboratory is 5000’.

And/or
A device, or shortcut, that damages a sentence and often leads to confusion or ambiguity. First of all, would an honour system successfully cut down on the amount of stealing and/or cheating? First of all, would an honour system reduce the incidence of stealing or cheating or both?

Anticipate
Use *expect* in the sense of simple expectation. My brother *expected* the upturn in the market. My brother *anticipated* the upturn in the market. The second sentence should be understood as meaning that he acted in advance of the expected upturn in the market by buying stock.

Anybody
In the sense of ‘any person’ not to be written as two words. *Any body* means ‘any corpse’, or ‘any human form’, or ‘any group’. The rule holds equally for *everybody, nobody*, and *somebody*.

Anyone
In the sense of ‘anybody’, written as one word. *Any one* means ‘any single person’ or ‘any single thing’.

As to whether
*Whether* is sufficient.

As yet
*Yet* nearly always is as good, if not better. ‘No agreement has been reached as yet’. ‘No agreement has yet been reached’. The chief exception is at the beginning of a sentence, where *yet* means something different: ‘Yet (or despite everything) he has not succeeded’. ‘As yet (or so far) he has not succeeded’.
**Being**
Not appropriate after regard...as: ‘He is regarded as being the best dancer in the club’; ‘He is regarded as the best dancer in the club’.

**Beside, Besides**
Beside: (prep.) close to, by, near (to); on a level with; compared with; wide of (beside the point).
Besides: (adv. and prep.) in addition (to); moreover; otherwise, else (than).

**But**
Unnecessary after doubt and help.
‘I have no doubt but that . . .’ ‘I have no doubt that . . .’
‘He could not help but see that . . .’ ‘He could not help seeing that . . .’

**Can**
Means ‘am (is, are) able’. Not to be used as a substitute for may.

**Case**
Often unnecessary. ‘In many cases the rooms were poorly ventilated’. ‘Many of the rooms were poorly ventilated’.

**Compare**
To compare to is to point out or imply resemblance between objects regarded as essentially of a different order; to compare with is mainly to point out differences between objects regarded as essentially of the same order.
‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’
‘Congress may be compared with the British Parliament’.

**Complementary, Complimentary**
A complement fills up or completes something: complementary information; a compliment is an expression of esteem, respect, praise: complimentary tickets (given free as a courtesy or favour).

**Comprise**
Literally ‘embrace’: A zoo comprises mammals, reptiles, and birds. But animals do not comprise a zoo—they constitute a zoo.

**Consist of**
To be made up or composed of; to have as its constituent substance or elements.
An ordinary fence, consisting of a ditch and a bank

**Constitute**
To make up, form, compose; to be the elements or material of which the thing spoken of consists.
Reading, writing and arithmetic do not of themselves constitute an education.
The rocks which constitute the crest of the mountain
**Contrast**

You *compare* two or more items in terms of similarity; you *contrast* differences.

**Data**

Like *strata, phenomena, and media, data* is a plural and is best used with a plural verb. The word, however, is slowly gaining acceptance as a singular.

‘The data is misleading’. ‘These data are misleading’.

**Different from**

One thing differs from another, hence, *different from. Different to* is criticized by some people, but is considered acceptable.

**Divided into**

Not to be misused for *composed of*. An apple, halved, is divided into sections, but an apple is composed of seeds, flesh, and skin.

**Due to**

Loosely used for *through, because of, or owing to*, in adverbial phrases. In correct use *due to* is an adjective synonymous with *attributable to*:

‘The accident was due to bad weather’; ‘losses due to preventable fires’.

‘He lost the first game due to carelessness’. ‘He lost the first game *because of* carelessness’.

**Effect**

As a noun, means ‘result’; as a verb, means ‘to bring about’, ‘to accomplish’ (not to be confused with *affect*, which means ‘to influence’).

**Etc.**

Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list already given almost in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation. At the end of a list introduced by *such as, for example* or any similar expression, etc. is incorrect. Name all the items.

**Fact**

Use this word only of matter capable of direct verification, not of matters of judgement.

**Farther, Further**

*Farther* serves best as a distance word, *further* as a time or quantity word. You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*.

**Fix**

Colloquial in America for *arrange, prepare, mend*. The preferred meaning of the word is ‘to make firm’, ‘to place definitely’.

**Forgo. Forego**

*Forgo* means to do without. *Forego* means to go before.

**Fortuitous**

Limited to what happens by chance. Not to be used for *fortunate or lucky*. 
**Fraction**
Because *a fraction* can be large or small, it must be qualified: ‘a large fraction of the animals survived’.

**Get**
The colloquial *have got* for *have* should not be used in writing: ‘He has not got any sense’. ‘He *has* no sense’.

**He is a man who**
Redundant expression: ‘He is a man who is very ambitious’; ‘He is very ambitious’.

**Hopefully**
An adverb meaning ‘with hope’ not ‘I hope’ or ‘it is to be hoped’.

**However**
Avoid starting a sentence with *however* when the meaning is ‘nevertheless’. The word usually serves better when not in first position.

  When *however* comes first, it means ‘in whatever way’ or ‘to whatever extent’.

  ‘However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best’.

**Imply. Infer**
Not interchangeable. Something implied is something suggested or indicated, though not expressed. Something inferred is something deduced from evidence at hand.

  ‘Farming implies early rising’. ‘Since he was a farmer, we inferred that he got up early’.

**Importantly**
Avoid by rephrasing. More importantly, he paid for the damages. What’s more, he paid for the damages.

**In order to**
Means *to*.

**In regard to**
Often wrongly written *in regards to*. But *as regards* is correct, and means the same thing.

**In terms of**
Padding. The job was unattractive in terms of salary. The salary made the job unattractive.

**In view of the fact that**
Say *because*.

**Irregardless**
There is no such word. Should be *regardless*. The error results from failure to see the negative in *less* and from a desire to get it in as a prefix, suggested by such words as *irregular, irresponsible*.

**Its. It’s**
The first is the possessive of ‘it’. The second means ‘it is’.
Lay
A transitive verb. Do not misuse it for the intransitive verb lie. The hen lays an egg; the llama lies down. The playwright went home and lay down.

   lay; laid; laid; laying
   lie; lay; lain; lying

Less
Should not be misused for fewer. Ten items or less. Ten items or fewer. Less refers to quantity, fewer to number.

Like
Not to be used for the conjunction as. Like governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is as.

   ‘We spent the evening like in the old days’. ‘We spent the evening as in the old days’.

Meaningful
A bankrupt adjective. Choose another, or rephrase.

   ‘His was a meaningful contribution’. ‘His contribution was significant’.

Methodology
Means the study of methods. In most scientific papers, you should refer to a method.

Nor
Often used wrongly for or after negative expressions:

   ‘He cannot eat nor sleep’. ‘He cannot eat or sleep’. ‘He can neither eat nor sleep’.

Partially
Not always interchangeable with partly. Best used in the sense of ‘to a certain degree’, when speaking of a condition or state: ‘I’m partially resigned to it’.

People
A word with many meanings. The word people is best not used with words of number, in place of persons. Say ‘six persons, one person’.

Presently
Has two meanings: ‘in a short while’ and ‘currently’. Because of this ambiguity it is best restricted to the first meaning: ‘He’ll be here presently’ (‘soon’, or ‘in a short time’).

Principal. Principle
Principal is usually an adjective, meaning ‘most important’.

Principle is a noun meaning ‘a rule of conduct’.

Respective. Respectively
These words can often be omitted since they are redundant (‘works of fiction are listed under their respective authors’), but can be helpfully used to clarify the relationship between two or more groups: ‘She and I live in London and Birmingham respectively.’ makes it clear who lives where.
Shall. Will
We are old-fashioned and prefer *shall* for the first person in the future tense and *will* for the second and third.

Split infinitive
There is long precedent for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive it governs, but the construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.

Than
Any sentence with *than* (to express comparison) should be examined for completeness.

‘I’m probably closer to my mother than my father’. (Ambiguous.) ‘I’m probably closer to my mother *than to* my father’. ‘I’m probably closer to my mother *than my father is*’.

That. Which
*That* is the defining, or restrictive pronoun, *which* the non-defining, or non-restrictive.

‘The lawnmower that is broken is in the garage’. (Tells which one.)

‘The lawnmower, which is broken, is in the garage’. (Adds a fact about the only mower in question.)

They
Not to be used when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each, each one, everybody, every one*. Use the singular pronoun:

‘Each one of us knows they are fallible’. ‘Every one of us knows *he* is fallible’.

This. These
The antecedent of *this* or *these* should always be grammatically clear.

*Antecedent in doubt*: A thousand industries need such basic data on which to build progress. *This* is one purpose of the Bureau of Census.

*Better*: A thousand industries need such basic data on which to build progress. *Providing these data* is one purpose of the Bureau of Census

Transpire
Not to be used in the sense of ‘happen’, ‘come to pass’. It is correct, however, in the sense of ‘become known’, ‘come to light’.

Try
Takes the infinitive: ‘try to fix it’, not ‘try and fix it’.

Unique
Means ‘having no like or equal’. Hence there can be no degrees of uniqueness. Something is either unique or not unique. It cannot be very unique, most unique, or quite unique.

While
In general, use only with strict literalness, in the sense of ‘during the time that’. ‘Nero fiddled while Rome burned’.

Worth while
Strictly applicable only to actions: ‘Is it worth while to discuss it further?’
**Worthwhile**
A worthwhile journey.

**Various. Varying**
Various means ‘of differing kinds’, ‘diverse’: ‘There are various programs available’. Varying means ‘exhibiting or undergoing change’ (intransitive), e.g., ‘a constantly varying sky’, or making a partial change (transitive), e.g., ‘varying the temperature’.

**Prepositions**
The bugbear of non-native English speakers. Correct current usage is simply idiomatic and has to be learned or looked up. A useful list appears in Thomas L. Warren, *Words into Type*, Prentice Hall, 1999.