1. Do not use contractions (don’t, can’t, isn’t, etc.) in formal or semi-formal writing.

2. Do not use a noun as an adjective unless the sentence would otherwise be very awkward.

Change: The organization meeting is scheduled for Tuesday.
To: The organizational meeting is scheduled for Tuesday.

Change: Each state has similar registration requirements.
To: Each state has similar requirements for registration.

Do Not Change: The insurance salesman was persistent.
To: The man who sells insurance for a living was persistent.

3. Do not use an adjective as an adverb.

Change: The team played good yesterday.
To: The team played well yesterday.

Change: We poured the water slow into the container.
To: We poured the water slowly into the container.

Note: Some words are both adjectives and adverbs. Example: fast.

She ran fast in last Friday’s track meet.

4. Use who and whom correctly. Who is used in the subjective case and whom is used in the objective case. When in doubt about which form to use, try substituting a personal pronoun to see which one fits. If he, she, or they fits, use who. If him, her, or them fits, use whom.

Example: Who is the congresswoman from the 38th district?
She is the congresswoman from the 38th district.

Example: It depended upon them.
It depended upon whom?

Example: Whom should we call to fix the equipment?
We should call him to fix the equipment.
5. Use *lie* and *lay* correctly. *Lay* is a transitive verb (a verb that requires a direct object to complete its meaning) and means “to place” or “to put.” Its past tense form is *laid* and its perfect tense form is also *laid*.

Examples: We lay the foundation of the building one section at a time.  
We laid the first section of the foundation on June 27th.  
Since June we have laid all but the last two sections of the foundation.

*Lie* is an intransitive verb (a verb that does not require an object to complete its meaning) meaning “to recline” or “to remain.” The past tense form is *lay* (which causes some confusion because it is the same as the present tense form of lay) and its perfect tense form is *lain*.

Examples: An injured employee should lie down and remain still until help arrives.  
The injured employee lay still for approximately five minutes.  
The injured employee had lain still until the doctor arrived.

6. Use *leave* and *let* properly. Leave, as a verb, should never be used in the sense of “allow” or “permit.”

Change: Leave me do it my way.  
To: Let me do it my way.

7. The debate over whether data is a plural noun or a collective singular continues to rage. In informal writing and speaking, data is considered a collective singular. In strictly formal scientific and scholarly writing, however, data is generally used as a plural, with datum as the singular form.

Example: The data are voluminous in support of a link between smoking and lung cancer.

8. Use *I*, *he*, *she*, and *they* for the subjective case, and *me*, *him*, *her*, and *them* for the objective case.

Examples: She is the president of the company.  
Our subsidiary can do a better job than we can.  
They wrote me a letter stating that they had received my resume.  
We asked her to return the deposit.

9. Do not use *in order to* unless it is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Change: In order to start the engine, open the choke and throttle and then press the starter.  
To: To start the engine, open the choke and throttle and then press the starter.
Essential: If the vertical scale of a graph line would not normally show the zero point, use a horizontal break in the graph in order to include the zero point.

10. Know the difference between *in* and *into*. *In* means “inside of”; *into* implies movement from the outside to the inside.

Example: The equipment was in the test chamber, so she sent her assistant into the chamber to get it.

11. Use *farther* and *further* properly. Although current usage allows these two words to be interchanged, *farther* is preferred for comparisons involving physical distance or space, while *further* is preferred to mean “in addition” or “more.”

Examples: Hitler’s invasion of France was further evidence that he intended to conquer the world.

She can throw a baseball farther than I can.

12. Use the subjunctive mood properly. In the subjunctive mood, you are indicating that you know that something is contrary to fact.

Change: If I was president of the firm, I would change several personnel policies.

To: If I were president of the firm, I would change several personnel policies.

13. Recognize the difference between *transitive*, *intransitive*, and *linking* verbs. Transitive and intransitive verbs are modified by adverbs, whereas linking verbs are modified by adjectives.

A *transitive verb* requires at least one objective complement:

Example: He ate his apple quickly.

An *intransitive verb* has no complement. It does not transfer or transmit meaning; along with modifiers it can complete the comment on the topic.

Example: She sang quietly.

A linking verb links a subject to a noun or modifier. The most common linking verb is a form of the verb *to be*. Other common linking verbs are *remain, seem, look, feel, sound, taste,* and *smell.*
Examples:  Each department is important to the company's overall performance.
He became quiet after his Mother scolded him.
The repair crew looked tired.
She felt bad after yelling at her brother.
He grew angry.
That music sounds terrible.
He became a civil engineer by working hard.

14. Know the difference between its and it's. Its is possessive pronoun and does not use an apostrophe. It's is a contraction for “it is.”
Examples: The computer has served its purpose well.
It's much faster than our former system.

15. Do not split infinitives. A split infinitive is one in which an adverb is placed between the sign of the infinitive (to) and the infinitive itself.

Change: To initially build the table in the file, you could input transaction records containing the data.

To: To build the table in the file initially, you could input transaction records containing the data.

16. The following is a list of commonly misspelled words. The proper spelling is shown.
a lot (better to use many in technical writing)
annual
bentonite
different
eligible
field
illite
implement
kaolinite
montmorillonite
professional
professor
prerogative
receive
relevance
separate
17. Do not use abbreviations or acronyms unless you define them first.

Examples: The United States (US) is lagging behind Japan in the development of new technology.

The Standard Penetration Test (SPT) is widely used in geotechnical investigations.

The ground water table (GWT) is 7 ft below the ground surface and is rising rapidly.

18. Do not use colloquialisms in formal writing.

Change: The results of the plastic limit test basically indicate that the soil is not plastic.

To: The results of the plastic limit test indicate that the soil is not plastic.

19. Lab is an informal abbreviation for laboratory. In formal or semi-formal reports, use laboratory, not lab.

20. Affect versus effect: Affect is a verb meaning “to influence” or “to pretend.” Effect can function either as a verb meaning “to bring about” or as a noun meaning “result.”

Examples: The ionic concentration in the solution affected the plastic limit of the kaolinite.

The effect of an increase in ionic concentration in the solution was to reduce the plastic limit of the kaolinite.

She effected many changes in the organization.

References
