

List of the most common mistakes made by non-native English speakers in physics.
(Sometimes also by native speakers as well)

Other resources

General common errors: <https://brians.wsu.edu/common-errors/>

Astronomy & Astrophysics language guide:

<https://www.aanda.org/images/stories/author/EnglishGuide.pdf>

1. Extent vs extend :
extent is a noun, extend is a verb
“We will **extend** the dataset in order to measure the **extent** of the extended emission”
“The database will be **extended**, to some **extent**.”
2. Constraint vs constrain :
constraint is a noun, constrain is a verb.
“This **constraint** is very **constraining**; it **constrains** the results most considerably out of all **constraints**.”
3. Sensitive vs sensible :
a false friend in French, German, Spanish...
“CTA will be more **sensitive** than H.E.S.S.”
“that was a stupid thing to do, not **sensible** at all”.
Sensitive = sensible, sensibel, sensible
Sensible = raisonnable, vernünftig, sensato
4. Safe vs save :
Believe it or not, these are pronounced differently! (by most native speakers, at least)
“Stay **safe** and healthy!”, “the telescopes are in **safe** mode”
“Did you **save** the data?”
5. “Can not” vs “cannot” :
Second version is much more usual. First version is used when leading into something.
“The importance of clarity in scientific writing **cannot** be emphasised enough”
“This method **can not** only be used in astronomy but also in data science.
Note that sentence is more naturally written as:
“This method **can** be used **not** only in...” which splits can and not.
6. “May be” vs “maybe” :
first version is two verbs; second is an adverb. Not interchangeable
For German speakers: may be = kann sein, maybe = vielleicht.
“I thought it was turned off, but **maybe** I was wrong.”
“Yes, that **may be** the case” or “that **may well be** the case”,
i.e. a word can fit between may and be.
7. Affect vs effect :

“Adding CT5 to the array had several **effects**; most notably, it **affected** the data rate...”

“How do the cuts **affect** the results? The **effect** is quite strong.”

8. Nebula vs nebulae vs nebular : one nebula, many nebulae , nebular adjective (astronomy) “nebulous” = general descriptor.

“This pulsar wind **nebula**, one among many **nebulae**, has a **nebulous** appearance.”

9. By vs until:

Usage of these two is not a one-to-one mapping from German.

“We will wait **until** they are ready.”

“Please complete this task **by** Friday”.

10. Since / for

Example: “Fermi **is in** orbit **since** 13 years” is wrong.

Correct versions: “Fermi **has been** in orbit **for** 13 years” or “Fermi **has been** in orbit **since** Autumn 2008”.

As a general rule, “for” is used to denote a period of time, whereas “since” is used with reference to a point in time.

Note also the change of tense (present perfect, rather than present simple).

(cf German: Fermi **ist seit** 13 Jahren in der Umlaufbahn. French: Fermi **est** en orbite **depuis** 13 ans. In both cases, seit & depuis translate to **for**. Whereas **since** would be used with “2008”)

11. Hyphenation:

Gamma ray vs gamma-ray astronomy

Both are commonly seen, but “gamma-ray”, i.e. using a hyphen for compound adjectives, is generally accepted for adjectival use, whereas “gamma ray” is used for the noun form.

E.g. “**Gamma-ray** telescopes detect **gamma rays** from cosmic sources.”

“Very-high-energy **gamma-ray** astronomy is the study of the Universe in **gamma rays**.”

See also this style guide:

https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CMS_list.pdf

12. Oxford comma

The Oxford comma is the use of placing a comma directly before the conjunction (such as “and”) in a list to clarify meaning.

With the Oxford comma: “We invited the strippers, jfk, and Stalin.”

Without the Oxford comma: “We invited the strippers, jfk and Stalin.”

<https://www.verbicidemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Oxford-Comma.jpg>

Similarly, a panda that “eats, shoots, and leaves” is considerably more dangerous than a panda that “eats shoots and leaves”.

A simple comma can change the meaning - be careful!

13. Allow/enable/permit

These verbs require an object. Never “This program **allows to** analyse the data”

Correct versions: "This program **allows** us **to** analyse the data" or "This program **allows** the data **to** be analysed."

Plural form: "These programs **allow** us **to** analyse the data"

"Allows for" is used in the sense of "to take into consideration" rather than "enables"

E.g. wrong: "This analysis allows for a better background rejection."

Right: "This analysis allows for a degradation of the mirror reflectivity."

14. To model (not modelise)

"Modelise" - not an English word (and neither is "modelisation"); the phrase should be "to model" (and "modeling" in American or "modelling" in British English).

15. Farther/further

Farther usually refers to distance, whereas further can refer to time / a new point etc.

16. While / whilst

More or less synonymous, whilst is more common in British usage.

Generally, while is used more often to refer to two things occurring simultaneously, whereas whilst is used mainly to make comparisons.

17. Plural acronyms:

In general, the last letter of the ending that is modified is added to the end of the acronym to denote the plural form.

I.e. Telescope → telescopes & IACT → IACTs

Nucleus → Nuclei & AGN → AGNs (an exception to the rule)

Nebula → Nebulae & PWN → PWNe

18. Lose / loose:

"Loose" describes how tight something is, usually an adjective; "lose" is a verb.

E.g. "You may **lose** your data if it isn't saved",

"only **loose** constraints could be made on the model"

Adding an s... "He frequently loses his wallet, incurring significant financial losses"

Looses = to let something loose (e.g. a dog)

Loosens = to make something less tight (e.g. a constraint)

19. Near / nearby

Both can be used as adverbs, only near can be used as a preposition. Near can be used for time, but not nearby. Nearby can be used for space, but rarely near (unless it is contrasted with far).

E.g. The house is **near** the park. Spring is **near**. We stayed at a **nearby** hotel.

People travelled from **near** and far.

Never "We stayed at a **near** hotel" or "Spring is **nearby**".

20. Insure / ensure

Insure = to purchase insurance. Ensure = to make certain.

E.g. Please **ensure** that your belongings are **insured**.

21. Arch / arc

An **Arch** is a physical structure, such as a doorway or a bridge, that is shaped like an **arc**.

22. To make up / made up → comprised of

Make up / made up = to invent or create

When describing constituent parts, “comprised of” or “composed of” is generally preferred.

23. “Somewhen” → some time / at some point

Coming from the German “irgendwann” - rare but allowed in English. The more usual equivalent is “some time”

24. Unprecedented

= “never done or known before”

Usually used in the context of surprise / astonishment.

Personally, I dislike its use in the context of CTA, as it implies that we think it will be surprisingly good, i.e. our modelling is wrong / we don't know what to expect. This is, however, just a matter of taste.

Home office (british)

= a department of the UK government responsible for immigration, security and law.

You can have a “home office”, but you'd never say e.g. “these days I'm in home office”. The English term is “working from home”.

25. Complement / compliment

Different meanings. E.g. The way in which the two groups **complemented** each other was a real **compliment** to the organisation.

26. “consists in” → “consists of”

27. “Overview on” → “overview of”

28. Prize / price

Price = cost or value; prize = an award or reward.

E.g. The **price** of the **prize** was unknown.

29. Life / live

Life = noun e.g. you have one **life**, a cat has nine **lives** (plural)

Live = verb e.g. you have to **live** your life, the discussion was **lively** (adjective)

30. Break / brake

To break = to damage / interrupt; to brake = to slow down.

Cars **brake** so that they don't **break** the speed limit. Pulsars have a **braking** index, not a “breaking” index.

31. Assess / asses

Assess = to evaluate or estimate a quality or situation etc. (see assessment)

Asses = plural of ass

32. Latter

Often used as a synonym for “the just mentioned” or “the above mentioned”, which it is not. It seems true to German native speakers translating “letzteres”. It is the correct translation for “letzteres” only if relating to the last thing of a group of at least two things referred to.

(example to be added)

33. From vs of

(example to be added)

34. “Evidences”

No – in almost all cases you mean “evidence”.

35. “Scenarii”

Very unusual – in general you mean “scenarios” (unless you are writing in Latin)

36. Though vs although

(example to be added)

37. Especially vs specially

(example to be added)

E.g. Not “This is **specially** true...” → rather “This is **especially** true...”

38. Principle vs principal

Principle refers to ideas, such as “Huygen’s **principle**”

Principal refers to “main” or “first” in a given context, such as “**principal** component analysis”

39. “Data” is plural!

Example: The data **were** reduced. The singular is “datum” (rarely used) or “data point”.

40. “A” vs “an”

The usage of “a” versus “an” follows pronunciation, not spelling. So the correct forms are “a uniform prior” but “an uninformative prior”. Similarly: “a humorous remark” but “an honest error”.

41. “A” vs “an” before acronyms

The usage of “a” versus “an” follows pronunciation also before abbreviations and acronyms. Therefore: “a B filter”, “an R filter”, “a U filter”, “an H filter”, “an L filter”, “a Y filter”, “an I filter”

42. “How does it look like”

No, it doesn’t.

Rather, it should be one of the two:

“How something looks” vs “what something looks like”

This is similar to a simile vs metaphor: in the first you are describing the characteristics of something, in the second you are comparing that thing to another thing. You **cannot** say “how something looks like”.

“What does the car look like? It looks like a red BMW.” vs “How does the car look? It is in good condition.”

Similar for other attributes: “What does it taste like? It tastes like apples. How does it taste? Disgusting.”

43. CTA telescope acronyms

LST = Large-Sized Telescope

MST = Medium-Sized Telescope

SST = Small-Sized Telescope

With capitals, with the hyphen, and with the “d”.

Not “size” which is grammatically incorrect in this context.

44. “In the following”

A classic phrase that no native speaker would ever use. In this phrase, “following” becomes an adjective - it is still, however, not a noun and must be followed by a noun.

E.g. “In the following sections” or “in the following examples” or “in the next section” but never just “in the following,” without a noun.

If at the end of a sentence or there is no appropriate noun, the phrase is better replaced by “**from now on**” or “**hereafter**” instead.

At the start of a sentence, one can occasionally use “**henceforth**”.

45. “Explain you” / “introduce you”

Common spoken mistake, needs “to” as in “explain to you” / “introduce to you”

46. “Proof” vs “Prove”

See also safe vs save, these two are also pronounced differently. “Proof” is a noun, whilst “prove” is a verb.

“Did they **prove** it?” “Yes, they provided the **proof**.”

47. “Send” vs “Sent” similarly “build” vs “built”

Present vs past tense of the verb.

“Are you going to **send** it?” “No, he already **sent** it.”

“Is the facility **built** yet?” “No, they are still obtaining permission to **build**.”

Or active vs completed state, e.g. “they will **build** it and it will be **built**”

48. “We do no longer”

Not valid English, possible alternatives:

“We no longer do it” or “We don’t any more” or “not any more”

49. “Advice” vs “advise”

Advise is a verb, advice is a noun.

“They might need some **advice** - would you be willing to **advise** them?”

50. “enquiry” and “inquiry” (similarly “enquire” vs “inquire”)

51. “Me either” vs “Me neither”

52. Common typos to avoid:

Do not forget the “f” when referring to the “shift crew”

Do not switch the “r” and “d” around in “hadron”

53. “Could of” and “should of”

This is always wrong, no matter how often native speakers do this. The correct versions are “could’ve” and “should’ve” respectively, as contractions of “have”.