

Choosing a Variant

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[This is a list of choices between (or among) variants in English, concentrating on lexical choices, but also including some constructional choices and some (mostly involving longer vs. shorter variants) in between. The list includes some clearly non-standard alternants, some alternations between two (or more) standard variants, and many cases of disputed usage. It's also slanted towards topics that I have worked on myself. The ordering of items within sections is essentially random.]

1. mostly lexical

which vs. *that* in restrictive relatives

sentence-initial *but* vs. *however*

if vs. *whether*

much/many vs. *a lot of*

lots vs. *a lot*

since vs. *because*

logical *while* vs. *whereas/(al)though*

temporal *while* vs. *as*

choice of subordinators *once, after, when, as soon as*

-*body* pronouns (*anybody*) vs. -*one* pronouns (*anyone*)

further vs. *farther*

each other vs. *one another*

choice of intensifiers *so, very*, etc.

kind of vs. *sort of*

kind/sort of vs. other hedges

with numerical expressions, *over* and *under* vs. *more than* and *less than*

universal *ever* vs. *always, forever* (*I have ever been your friend*)

nevertheless vs. *much less, not to mention, to say nothing of*

sentence-initial adverbial *additionally, also, in addition, besides, plus, as well*, etc.

quotative *all* (vs. *like, say, go*, etc.)

intensifier *all* (vs. *so, very*, etc.)

will vs. *be going to*

past tense vs. *used to*

must vs. *have to* vs. ('ve) *got to*

have vs. ('ve) *got* for possession

under/in/within the circumstances

to/on/quite the contrary

may vs. *might*

one of the only vs. *one of the few*

degree modifier *pretty* (vs. *rather, fairly, somewhat*, etc.)

hard vs. *difficult*

fast vs. *quickly*

like vs. *such as*

like vs. *the way/as*

less vs. fewer
about vs. almost vs. nearly
about vs. around
alone vs. only
but vs. besides vs. other than
apart from vs. aside from vs. besides
as long as vs. so long as
as though vs. as if
between vs. among
can vs. may
due to vs. owing to vs. because of
shall vs. will
different than/from/to

morphological and morphosyntactic:

themselves, themselves, themselves, theirselves; ourselves, ourselves
persons vs. people as the plural of person
alternative inflection classes (*dwarfs, dwarves*; zero plurals)
alternative category assignment (*e-mail* as count or mass; *data, chad, ice plant*, etc.)
pronoun case in coordination (*between you and I/me*)
who vs. whom (esp. for subjects of object complements)
Democratic Party vs. Democrat Party (and other Adj vs. N choices)
nonstandard past participle = past (*I was took/taken to school*)

2.1. “pleonasm” (Omit Needless Words)

plain P (*inside*) vs. P + *of* (*inside of*): *out, off, outside, inside, alongside*
except for vs. except
correlative *either... or* vs. simple *or*; similarly with *neither... nor*
into vs. in; onto vs. on; within vs. in
in back of vs. back of vs. behind
if... (then)
a half a vs. half a, a half
full PP vs. bare NP adverbial: *I'll see you (on) Tuesday*
and in numbers: *one hundred (and) ten*
“plupluperfect” (double perfect in counterfactuals) (*If you had have asked him, he would have...*)
vs. single *had* (*If you had asked him*)
double perfect with modals (*I would have not have done that*) vs. single *have* (*would have not, would not have*)
get (a) hold of
all/both (of) my children
two (out) of three

of in exceptional degree modification: *how big (of) a dog*
where... (at/to)?
(in order) to
or (else)...
double P: *determine the table to which a column belongs to*
from off vs. *from* vs. *off*
article truncation in titles: *a new (The) Simpsons*
being as/that for *since/because*
left/right(-hand)
transitive V + Prt: *print (out)*, *start (up)*, *type (in)*, etc.
multiple vs. single negation

2.2. “truncation” (Include All Necessary Words)

a couple (of) friends
coordinating *so* vs. *so that*, *and so*
plain temporal *then*: *I opened the file, (and) then printed it out*
truncated *the* in *Problem is,...*, *Time was when...* (and many more)
depart (from) / *arrive (at)* PLACE
that being (said)
(to make a) long story short
reason stands for *it stands to reason*
as far as NP (with no final *goes* or *is concerned*)
subject (+auxiliary) omission in informal registers: *Glad to see you.*
copula omission in AAVE
“recipe object omission”: *Boil (it) for three hours*

3. constructional

quasi-serial verbs (*go* V) vs. hendiadys (*go and* V) vs. infinitival (*go to* V)
contiguous vs. postposed particles (*look up* NP vs. *look* NP *up*)
that complements vs. zero-marked complements
wh and *that* relatives vs. zero relatives
ordering of adverbials with respect to the parts of an infinitival VP (*to* + VP)
stranded vs. fronted prepositions
expression of counterfactuality (*were I*, *if I were*, *if I was*, *if I would have*)
topic marking schemes: Left Dislocation, *about*, *as to*, *as for*, *in terms of*, *as far as,...*
try and V vs. *try to* V vs. *try Ving* (and non-standard *try* V)
Isis vs. standard; Extris alternants
or for *nor* and *nor* for *or* in correlatives
dative alternation
WH + *that* vs. plain WH: *I wonder how many people (that) were at the party*
placement of *only* and *ever*
verb agreement with *one of those who...* and similar expressions

verb agreement with disjunctive subjects

verb forms in existentials

verb agreement in pseudoclefts: *What we saw was/were dogs*

anaphor choice with indefinite subjects: *Everyone opened ___ books*

verb agreement (and anaphora) with plural titles: *Dead Tongues is/are a Stanford linguistics band*

be-passive vs. *get*-passive

passive vs. active

hopefully vs. *I hope*, etc.

reflexives vs. plain pronouns

possessives: *Pete's picture, a picture of Pete, a picture of Pete's*

WH clefts vs. *it* clefts

needs Ving vs. *needs Ved* vs. *needs to be Ved*

GoToGo (*I'm going to town and shop for cheese*) vs. infinitival (*I'm going to town to shop for cheese*) vs. full version (*I'm going to go to town and shop for cheese*)

full yes-no questions (*Are you going?*) vs. reduced versions (*You going? / Going?*)

independent *to* (*want to*) vs. *to*-contraction (*wanna*)

independent negation (*will not*) vs. affixal negation (*won't*)

full auxiliaries (*she is*) vs. reduced auxiliaries (*she's*)

gapping (*I ate sushi, and Kelly sashimi*) vs. pseudogapping (*I won't eat sushi, but I will sashimi*) vs. VPE (verb phrase ellipsis: *I won't eat sushi, but Kelly will*)

VPE (*I asked if we could meet, but he was unwilling to*) vs. complement deletion (... *but he was unwilling*)

VPE vs. *do so* (... *but he was unwilling to do so*) vs. *do that* (... *but he was unwilling to do that*)

VPE (... *but I can't*) vs. *do so* (... *but I can't do so*) vs. *do it* (... *but I can't do it*)

hypotactic thingy-N (*The thing is that S*) vs. paratactic thingy-N (*The thing is, S; Thing is, S*)

explicit vs. absorbed P: *hard territory to mount a rescue (in)*

degree modification of comparatives: *how much safer* vs. *how safer*

hypotactic conditionals (*If you ask a good question, you'll get a good answer*) vs. paratactic conditionals (*You ask a good question, you'll get a good answer*)