

Lexical Choice and Usage

Using your dictionary and other resources

There are many errors that you as a non-native speaker can not avoid, but there are many more that you can avoid with an attitude of *actively* trying to find the right word. Many errors happen simply because the writer did not bother to use the writing resources that are available. When you are not certain that the preposition or the lexical form or the collocation is correct, consult:

- the dictionary, or
- the *British National Corpus* or *Collins Concordance and Collocations* (both are linked in Extras>General, under Writing)

(The search engines like Google and Yahoo are not reliable for confirming your accuracy; many non-native speakers of English write pages for the Web, and there are many mistakes.)

The dictionary

In either the definition or in the sample sentences you will often find the grammar information that you need. Here are a few examples:

Preposition error: “No sure measures, however, can be found in the government level as well.”

Collins entry: “4. If something is at a particular level, it is at that height. *Liz sank down until the water came up to her chin and the bubbles were at eye level.*”

Preposition, Collocation error: “Also, the welfare facilities like hospitals and elderly homes are far short in their needs.” (In the example below, the collocation for “be short of” is not “needs” but the item that is needed.)

Collins entry: “6. If you are short of something or if it is short, you do not have enough of it. If you are running short of something or if it is running short, you so not have much of it left. *Her father’s illness left the family short of money... Government forces are running short of ammunition and fuel... Supplies of everything are unreliable, food is short... Time is running short.*”

Preposition error: “The reason that Korea has been suffering from an imbalanced birth rate is because of the preference to male than female in Korea society.”

Collins entry: “1. If you have a preference for something, you would like to have or do that thing rather than something else. *Bill will allow parents the right to express a preference for the school their child attends... Many of these products were bought in preference to their own.*” (Note the nature of the object of the preposition.)

The writer could also have used *give preference*. *Collins* entry: “If you give preference to someone with a particular qualification or feature, you choose them rather than someone else. *The Pentagon has said it will give preference to companies with which it can do business electronically.*”

The writer could also have used *prefer*. *Collins* entry: “If you prefer someone or something, you like that person or thing better than another, and so you are more likely to choose them if there is a choice. *I became a teacher because I preferred books and people to politics.*”

Word choice error: “A more worrisome problem is the possibility of an increasing sex offense.”

1. Use the Korean-English dictionary to get close to the right word: The writer wasn’t sure of the English word for 성폭행, but could have found the word easily in a Korean-English dictionary. *Essence* presents “a sexual assault (violence); a sexual harassment.”

2. Confirm in the English-English dictionary: The entry provided by *Essence* is only partially correct (the ‘sexual’ part). “Sexual harassment” would not be suitable: *Collins* says: “Sexual harassment is repeated and unwelcome sexual comments, looks, or physical contact at work, usually a man’s actions that offend a woman,” but the writer isn’t speaking only of the problem that takes place at work. There is no entry for *sexual assault* near *sexual*, but there is some useful information at *assault*: “An assault on a person is a physical attack on them. *The attack is one of a series of savage sexual assaults on women in the university area...*” Another entry by *sexual* presents us with another possibility: *sexual abuse*. “If a child or other person suffers sexual abuse, someone forces them to take part in sexual activity with them, often regularly over a period of time.” But this lexical is no good for this writer’s intention, because the writer is not speaking of “over a period of time.”

One more important discovery in *Collins* is that the grammar that was used in *Essence* is incorrect: no article is used. Note that there is no article used in the *Collins* definitions or examples.

Try the British National Corpus (BNC) or Collins Concordance and Collocations

Preposition error: “The reason that Korea has been suffering from an imbalanced birth rate is because of the preference to male than female in Korea society.”

In the BNC, type in ‘preference,’ and this is part of what you will get:

Results of your search

Your query was

preference

Here is a random selection of 50 solutions from the 2175 found...

A62 637 Attitude questions explicitly sought statements of choice, preference, approval, or disapproval.

ADF 1271 We've already talked of anxious horses, and how no one would have one for preference.

AN3 405 Some large firms have demonstrated a preference for female workers, often on the grounds of their supposed nimble fingers though, in reality, usually because they can be paid less and are less likely to unionise and form any opposition to management.

ANR 773 Backed by the Emperor, Haussmann planned to bring fresh water to supply fountains and reservoirs by means of aqueducts, in preference to the use of the Seine which was itself becoming more and more contaminated.

APE 1320 He concluded that commentary has conformed very closely to the Committee's preference for a style that is appropriate and complementary to Commons proceedings.

B0K 32 The cattle that survived this vicious circle of pasture depletion were no doubt those that could make the most of small areas of rough grazing and it is likely that small, thrifty cattle were positively selected in preference to larger improved types which needed better feeding.

B0K 192 The polling factor probably arose as a natural mutation which local farmers selected for preference in due course, as they did later with the Aberdeen Angus.

B0W 1003 In the control sample the picture was slightly different; of the 13 who stated a preference at first interview for home care, five a preference for home care but a recognition of the necessity for institutional care, and two a clear preference for institutional care.

B2X 165 (The discrepancy could perhaps be explained if it is assumed that there is also a weak preference to continue with the first-named character.)

BN1 1749 Of itself, sexual preference is not a sufficiently crucial characteristic to make it very attractive as a graven image.

CBL 274 Light: Preference is for bright light, though it will grow quite satisfactorily in moderate conditions.

CBY 1873 Midland Montagu sees nervous investors exhibiting a preference for their home markets because of the current uncertainty.

CEP 5098 Preference is for the latter, below par last time, but who has lumps in hand on his close second to Sirrah Jay at Newton Abbot a month ago.