

Six Common Phrases We Get Wrong



So you're at an office party telling this great story to a group of your colleagues, when suddenly, you notice that the editorial type in the group is looking at you intently and seems to have developed a strange eye twitch. Did you say something wrong? Did you double your negative or dangle your participle? Or worse, could you have used a common phrase, or idiom, incorrectly? Chances are that's the thing that would drive the editor bonkers, while most of the other people in the group could care less, er... rather, couldn't care less.

It's unlikely even those who do care would correct you on these minor conversational slip-ups, unless they're close friends or family members, and editorial types know that even that's asking for trouble. So just to keep you all on good terms (so to speak) and confident about what you're saying and writing, here are six commonly misused idiomatic phrases, along with the correct way to say them.

A complete 360

Correct phrase: A complete 180

If you've been using "a complete 360" to indicate a change in perspective, try this little exercise: From a standing position, turn all the way around until you're back at your starting point—a 360-degree turn. What do you see? Probably the same thing you saw when you started. Now turn just halfway around so you're facing the opposite direction—a 180-degree turn. What do you see now? Something completely different. When you change your mind and end up with an entirely different perspective, that's a complete 180.

Chomping at the bit

Correct phrase: Champing at the bit

This phrase, used when people can't wait to get started, comes from horse racing. The "bit" in this case is a horse bit, the metal piece of a bridle that goes into the horse's mouth. Equestrians will tell you that, when horses are eager to get moving, they tend to roll their bits around in the back of their mouths and gnaw on them a little—or "champ at the bit." They're really not chomping on it, as you would chomp on an apple. While some grammarians have started to accept the more commonly used "chomping at the bit" as interchangeable with the original phrase, true editorial purists and horse lovers are not going to let that one fly.

Hone in on

Correct phrase: Home in on

Hone means to sharpen something, as with a knife. While it's perfectly OK to "hone"—meaning refine or perfect—your marketing message, it's not OK to "hone in on" it. When you're trying to zero in on a particular idea or strategy, or the perfect wording, your actions are similar to those of a homing pigeon trying to fly home or to another targeted location, which is why the phrase is "home in on."

I could care less

Correct phrase: I couldn't care less

All you really need to do to understand this one is to just say "I could care less," then stop and really think about what you just said. Generally, you would utter this phrase to indicate that you don't care, but if you could care less, you do care, even if just a little. If you "couldn't care less," you don't care at all.

Nip it in the butt

Correct Phrase: Nip it in the bud

This phrase essentially means putting an end to an undesirable situation before it gets out of hand. So if you're thinking about stopping a burglar by siccing your dog on him, "nip it in the

butt” might make a tiny bit of sense, but it’s still wrong. The correct phrase, “nip it in the bud,” refers to cutting off the bud of a flower so it doesn’t have a chance to grow. Metaphorically, it means preventing a little problem from growing into a bigger one.

You have another thing coming

Correct Phrase: You have another think coming

Using this phrase with “thing” implies that, if you have a particular view or take a certain action, something you didn’t expect will happen. In actuality, the original phrase, “You have another think coming,” is simply meant to say, “If you know what’s good for you, pal, you’d better think again.”

Once you have these correct phrases down, keep in mind that there is debate among grammarians on whether some of the misused phrases are actually right or wrong. Some believe that, because a phrase is more commonly said a certain way (e.g. “chomping at the bit”; “you have another thing coming”), the more widely used version has become correct. Other editorial types find that line of thinking fraught with peril, as it changes the meaning (e.g. “I could care less”). Your best bet is to stick with the original and true version of the phrase when your grammar matters, such as when you’re trying to impress a well-read job interviewer or write the perfect report or simply prevent your eye-twitching colleague from going into convulsions. A simple, correctly uttered idiomatic phrase is enough to turn that twitch into well-earned smile of editorial respect.

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When writer/editor Julie Vallone isn’t blogging about marketing hacks, lifestyle trends and quirky little grammar tips, she’s turning complex technical concepts into clear, engaging content guaranteed to remove the knitted brow from your favorite technophobe. In her “free” time, she’s a dedicated stage mom, creating big, elaborate props and calming her resident thespian, or she’s busy at home herding way too many cats.