WORD CHOICE TIP 1

Know the difference between they're, their, and there.

They're, **their**, and **there** are three very common words in English. Because they occur so often in a piece of writing, you must choose the correct form. Otherwise, you will indicate to your reader that you cannot control simple, everyday words. Here are the differences:

They're is a contraction for **they are**. If you cannot substitute **they are** in the sentence and have it make sense, you are using the wrong word.

After their long run in the hot sun, the dogs are in the kitchen where *they're* [or *they are*] stretched out on the cool tiles.

Their is the possessive pronoun that means *belonging to them*. You use this form when you are showing ownership.

My neighbors are always complaining about the Heinmillers because *their* weedy lawn and barking dogs ruin the beauty and peace of the street. [The lawn and dogs *belong to them*, the Heinmillers.]

There can indicate location or is an expletive, an often unnecessary filler word that delays the subject.

There sits Grandpa, dozing in front of a baseball game. [**There** indicates location.]

There are honeybees buzzing around Helen's just-shampooed hair. [**Honeybees**, the subject, is delayed because **there** comes in the usual place for a subject, before the verb.]

If you cannot decide which form to use, go through the following elimination process:

Question 1 — Do I need they're?

If you think you might need *they're*, substitute *they are* in the sentence. Does the sentence still make sense? If it does, you have the correct form. Read this example:

The twenty-five computers hum in the lab as if they're a church choir warming up to sing.

As if *they are* a church choir? Yes! *They're* is thus correct. Now read this sentence:

Gilda and Shaunda spent all evening memorizing the names of human bones, so they feel ready to take *they're* anatomy and physiology quiz.

They feel ready to take *they are* anatomy and physiology quiz? Of course not! You must choose another form, in this case *their*.

Question 2 — Do I need their?

If you have chosen *their* for the sentence, you must be showing ownership. Look at the word that follows *their*. Is it something *possessed by them*? If the answer is yes, you have the correct form. Look at this sentence:

When my cat Rocky leaves the house, the squirrels must dash to the safety of a nearby tree, *their* tails snapping in frustration.

Do the tails **belong to them**, the squirrels? Yes! **Their** is thus the correct form. Now read this example:

Richard buys broken appliances at yard sales with the good intentions of repairing them. *Their* still sitting in his garage, which drives his wife Sue crazy.

Can **still** belong to them, the appliances? Of course not! **Still** is an adverb that cannot be possessed by anything. You must choose another form, in this case **they're**.

Question 3 — Do I need there?

If you cannot substitute *they are* and have the sentence make sense, and if you are not showing ownership, then you need your last option, *there*. Keep in mind, however, that many times you can eliminate *there* altogether. Here is a sample sentence:

There were so many students crowding the cafeteria that poor LuAnne gave up buying a greasy burger before her next class.

Although this sentence uses the right word, the *there* is unnecessary. A tighter sentence reads like this:

So many students crowded the cafeteria that poor LuAnne gave up buying a greasy burger before her next class.

Quick Test

Directions: Correct any problems you find with *they're*, *their*, and *there*.

- 1. Because their always broke, I bring a credit card when I have dinner with Michelle and Joe.
- 2. The chemistry students dragged there heavy textbooks to class only to discover that a substitute teacher would be showing a movie.
- 3. Derek peeked under the top slice of bread on his sandwich. They're on the lettuce he found the remaining half of the bug he had just eaten.
- 4. Lydie and Yve-Marie spent there time in the library playing on the Internet. Their going to be in big trouble when they're presentation is due in Mr. Shuman's biology class tomorrow morning!
- 5. Warren ran to class, hoping to get their on time. When he peeked through the window, he saw his classmates already taking notes at they're desks.

