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## Commonly Confused Latin Abbreviations in English

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These days, a sound rule for using Latin [abbreviations](#) (such as *e.g.*, *etc.*, *et al.*, and *i.e.*) is not to use them at all.

Such abbreviations were popular when Latin was the universal academic language in Europe and America. That's no longer the case. Because so few people study Latin anymore, expressions that once were common have fallen into disuse or misuse.

In our time, Latin abbreviations are generally appropriate only in special circumstances that prize brevity, as in footnotes, bibliographies, and technical lists. But if we *must* use Latin abbreviations, we should learn how to use them correctly.

Let's look at four Latin abbreviations that still appear in modern English--and that are often confused with one another.

### 1) *e.g.* (for example)

*Example:*

"One and the same thing can at the same time be good, bad, and indifferent, *e.g.*, music is good to the melancholy, bad to those who mourn, and neither good nor bad to the deaf."

(Baruch Spinoza)

*What **e.g.** stands for in Latin:* *exempli gratia*

*What **e.g.** means in English:* for example

*How **e.g.** is punctuated:* with periods after *e* and *g*, followed by a comma

*How **e.g.** is used:* to introduce examples

*How **e.g.** should not be used:* as a synonym for *etc.* or to introduce an all-inclusive list.

*How **e.g.** can be avoided:* use "for example" or "for instance" instead.

### 2) *etc.* (and so on)

*Example:*

"None of my own experiences ever finds its way into my work. However, the stages of my life--motherhood, middle age, *etc.*--often influence my subject matter."

(Anne Tyler)

*What **etc.** stands for in Latin:* *et cetera*

*What **etc.** means in English:* and other things

*How **etc.** is punctuated:* with a period at the end

*How **etc.** is used:* in informal or technical writing, to suggest the logical continuation of a list of things (not, as a general rule, of people)

*How **etc.** should not be used:* (1) after *and*; (2) as a synonym for *e.g.* or *et al.*; (3) in reference to people; (4) vaguely to refer to "other things" that are not at all clear to the reader.

*How **etc.** can be avoided:* specify all of the items in a list or use "and so on."

### 3) **et al.** (and others)

*Example:*

"Why is it that any time any of us mentions that women can be something other than just mothers, teachers, nurses, *et al.*, some mother, teacher, nurse, *et al.* comes in demanding that we re-affirm that it's okay to be a mother, teacher, nurse, *et al.*?"

(Shelley Powers)

*What **et al.** stands for in Latin:* et alii

*What **et al.** means in English:* and others

*How **et al.** is punctuated:* with a period after the *l* but not after the *t*

*How **et al.** is used:* in bibliographic citations or in informal or technical writing to suggest the logical continuation of a list of people (not things)

*How **et al.** should not be used:* (1) after *and*; (2) as a synonym for *e.g.* or *etc.*; (3) in reference to things; (4) vaguely to refer to "others" that are not at all clear to the reader.

*How **et al.** can be avoided:* specify all of the items in a list or use "and so on."

### 4) **i.e.** (that is)

*Example:*

"Software is like entropy. It is difficult to grasp, weighs nothing, and obeys the second law of thermodynamics; *i.e.*, it always increases."

(Norman R. Augustine)

*What **i.e.** stands for in Latin:* id est

*What **i.e.** means in English:* that is

*How **i.e.** is punctuated:* with periods after *i* and *e*, followed by a comma

*How **i.e.** is used:* to introduce an explanatory phrase or clause

*How **i.e.** should not be used:* as a synonym for *because*.

*How **i.e.** can be avoided:* use "that is" instead.

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