

# How to Use “i.e.” versus “e.g.”

The abbreviations "i.e." and "e.g." are very commonly misused because many people do not know what they stand for. This article should help improve your understanding of these abbreviations and their proper usage.

## Understand what the abbreviations stand for

"I.e." is an abbreviation of the Latin words *id est*, which means "that is." "E.g." is an abbreviation for the Latin words *exempli gratia*, which mean "for example".

## Associate each abbreviation with more easily remembered phrases

It's not easy to remember Latin words, so it may be helpful to pretend that "i.e." stands for "in essence" or "in other words" and "e.g." stands for "example given".

## Use "i.e." to paraphrase

Make a statement, then add "i.e." to explain or describe what you just said in a different way:

- The elephant is a pachyderm, i.e., an animal with thick skin and nails resembling hooves.
- I went to my least favourite place (i.e., the dentist).

## Note that what follows "i.e." is often a further definition

This can also be a metaphor. If you substitute "i.e." with "in other words" the sentences still make sense. If you plug in "for example" they do not.

## Try replacing the abbreviations with their meaning

If it sounds reasonable, then you are probably using the right one. For example, "I like quiet activities (e.g., reading)" becomes "I like quiet activities (for example, reading)". When trying this with i.e., it is often easier to use "in other words" instead of "that is."

## Use "e.g." before giving one or more examples

Think of what precedes "e.g." as a category, and what follows it as something (or a few things) that would fall into that category:

- Buy some vegetables, e.g., carrots.
- I like power metal (e.g., Firewind, Iced Earth, Sonata Arctica).



Observe how using "i.e." wouldn't make sense. "Carrots" is not another way to describe vegetables in general, it is *just one* of the many foods that are considered to be vegetables. If you wanted to use "i.e." you would write "Buy some vegetables, i.e., the edible part of any plant." Likewise, the bands given are examples of power metal, but not a description. If you were using "i.e." you would write something like "I like power metal, i.e., fast metal with symphonic elements and epic themes."

## Use parentheses or commas with both

To indicate a separate clause, you can either insert a comma before "i.e." or "e.g." or you can use parentheses, both of which are shown in the examples above. If you use parentheses, open them right before the "e.g." or "i.e." and close them after you have given your example or alternate definition.

- For American English usage, you should *always* put a comma right after both "i.e." and "e.g." as shown in the examples above. For British English usage, *do not* put a comma right after either "i.e." or "e.g."

## Tips

- It's best not to use "i.e." or "e.g." when speaking. Instead, say "that is" or "in other words" in place of "i.e.", and "for example" or "for instance" in place of "e.g."
- There is no need to use "etc." at the end of a list following "e.g.", as "e.g." implies an incomplete list.
- If you're still worried about misusing these terms, then the easiest way to avoid misusing them is to not use them at all, even in writing. When you mean "for example," write "for example." When you mean "that is," write "that is." It's not that much more to write, and there's no chance of getting it wrong.
- For a great example of the use of "i.e." vs. "e.g.", see the scene between Chili Palmer (John Travolta) and Ray "Bones" Barboni (Dennis Farina) in the 1995 movie *Get Shorty*.

