Dealing with Tricky Words

Farther/Further
Farther usually describes distances. Further usually suggests quantity or degree.

San Francisco is farther from Nashville than Memphis.
You should have expanded your argument further in this paper.

Toward/Towards
Toward and towards are used interchangeably, though toward is preferred in American English.

Who/Whom
Who is used as the subject of a sentence. Whom is either the object of the verb or the object of a preposition.

Who is my instructor?
"To whom should I give this paper?"

Lay/Lie
Lay is a transitive verb. It must take an object.

I lay the book down. [The past tense is laid: “I laid it down.” The past participle is laid, “I have laid it down.”]

That/Which
Strictly speaking, that is a restrictive relative clause and which is a non-restrictive relative clause. That narrows a category or identifies a particular object and in so doing provides necessary information. Which provides additional information not needed to identify a particular object.

i.e. and e.g.
The Latin abbreviation i.e. stands for id est and is roughly equivalent to that is, or that is to say, or in other words. i.e. is used to clarify or provide a definition for a previous part of the sentence. Example: I’m going to the place where I work best, i.e., the coffee shop.

The Latin abbreviation e.g. stands for exempli gratia which means “for example” (but can also be thought of as “example given”). It is used to provide examples. Example: Humans have several innate abilities, e.g., language learning, walking, and recognizing faces.

Affect/Effect
The verb affect means “to influence” or “have an effect on.” The noun affect means feeling or emotion. The noun effect means outcome or result. The verb effect means “to make happen” or “to produce.” The verb form of affect and noun form of effect are more common.

Was/Were
Was and were are both the past tense of to be. Was is the first and third person singular form of the infinitive to be when used in the indicative mood. (I was. He was.) Were is the second person and the first and third person plural form of the infinitive to be when used in the indicative mood. (You were. We were. They were.) However, were can also be present tense when it is the first, second, or third person form (both plural and singular) of the infinitive to be when used in the subjunctive mood. One should NEVER use was in the present subjunctive: If I was a rich man. I wish I was in Tahiti. Rather one should use were: If I were a rich man. I wish I were in Tahiti.

FOR A FULL GLOSSARY OF TROUBLESOME WORDS, SEE THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE §5.202