

To Err is Human in Every Language

The fine art of admitting your mistakes in Russian.

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Diana Polekhina / unsplash

Вышла ошибочка: whoops

I'm not sure there's an art to making mistakes, but there is an art to deciding which verb or phrase you want to use in Russian to describe your particular screw-up. Was it a misunderstanding? A lapse of judgment? Did you get something wrong? Was it an honest mistake or did you commit a sin?

Or, if you're like most people: All of the above.

Не ошибается тот, кто ничего не делает (The only person who doesn't make a mistake is the one who doesn't do anything).

The basic verb pair for goofing up is ошибаться/ошибиться (to be mistaken/make a

mistake). This is for all variety of mistakes, especially misunderstandings. Если вы думаете, что нас никто не слушает, то ошибаетесь (If you think no one is listening to us, you are mistaken).

A good phrase to have in your pocket is если я не ошибаюсь (if I'm not mistaken). It can be a polite way of correcting someone or presenting information you are not sure of: А это, если не ошибаюсь, наша новая сотрудница (Over there, if I'm not mistaken, is our new co-worker). But it can also be a bit snarky. If I'm not mistaken = I know I'm right: Я, если я не ошибаюсь, сказал всё (If I'm not mistaken, I've said all there is to say).

Other kinds of mistakes and errors can be conveyed with verbs such as допустить (to let slip) or совершить (to commit) + ошибка. Автор допустил двойную ошибку (The author made a double error). Присяжные крайне редко совершают ошибки (Juries very rarely make errors). If you are error prone, it's good to know the word наделать, which can have the sense of doing a lot of something: Он быстро выступил с заявлением-покаянием: "Наделал ошибок, больше не повторится (He quickly made an announcement of repentance: I made a lot of mistakes. That won't happen again).

Ошибайся, да сознавайся (When you make a mistake, admit it).

And then there is ошибочка (a little mistake, a goof, a glitch). But often this word is used to underplay an enormous error. Say, for example, the government sends out — oh, I dunno — military call-up papers to women who have never been in the armed forces and have five underage children at home. Your local recruitment officer might come on television and say: Простите, народ, небольшая ошибочка вышла (Sorry, folks, there was a slight glitch). С кем не бывает, ошибочка вышла (Who hasn't slipped up now and again?) Whoopsie. Nothing to see here.

Спотыкается и конь, да поправляется (Even a horse may stumble, but he corrects himself).

Then there is a different kind of error — when you get something wrong, delude yourself, or are way off the mark about a person or event. The basic verb pair for this is заблуждаться/заблудиться (to be deluded, under a misconception). Можно заблуждаться, можно жить иллюзиями (You can be deluded, you can live with illusions). Между прочим, насчёт мужества, как впоследствии выяснилось, я сильно заблуждался (By the way, about his courage — as it became clear to me later, I had been seriously off the mark). This might be because someone led you down the path of delusion: Кто-то ввёл тебя в заблуждение сознательно (Someone intentionally misled you).

Огня без дыму, человека без ошибок не бывает (There no fire without smoke and no one who doesn't make mistakes).

You might also get muddled: путаться /спутаться (to get all tangled up, mixed up). This is the verb you use when, say, you confuse your 15 cousins' names, or forget what year you graduated from college. Все года, все даты спутались в старческой памяти (All the years and dates got muddled in his old-man's memory).

A very specific form of this kind of mistake is expressed by the verb pair сбиваться/сбиться (to lose your place, to stray). You know how this goes — you start counting something, your

Significant Other interrupts with a question about dinner, and then you can't remember if you were at 43 or 84. Он решил посчитать пальмы, но сбился после сотни (He decided to count the palm trees, but he lost track after a hundred). This is also the verb to use when you make a mistake and take the wrong turn. Недолго пройдя в темноте, я понял, что сбился с пути (After walking for a bit in the dark, I realized that I'd gone off the path).

You might miss the mark: промахиваться/промахнуться (to miscalculate, slip up). You know this kind of error — you are pulling together your going-on-an-interview suit and put on the wrong shoes. С одеждой-то вы промахнулись, ☒ друг сочувственно говорил ("You got your outfit wrong," his friend said sympathetically).

You can also say дать промах: В разговоре он почувствовал, что дал промах. (As they were talking, he realized that he'd put his foot in it).

Не бойся первой ошибки, избегай второй (Don't fear your first mistake, but avoid a second).

And finally, there are mistakes that are very big and very bad indeed. In describing one, you might use the verb провиниться (to be guilty, to commit an offense). Sometimes you don't even know what you did but the reaction of people around you lets you know how bad it was, whatever it was. –Что-то случилось? Я в чём-то провинился? Жена двигалась по квартире молча, даже в узком коридоре умудряясь обходить мужа ("Did something happen? What did I do wrong?" His wife moved around the apartment silently and even managed to walk around him in the narrow hallway).

Отрицание ошибки — двойная ошибка (Refusing to admit a mistake is a double mistake).

The worst kind of error is a sin. With verbs like the pair грешить/согрешить you have to pay attention to context. Sometimes it means a particular activity, and sometimes folks are flip about it: А что если её муж грешил с молодой Ворониной, воспользовавшись обеденным перерывом? (So what if her husband committed a sin with that young Voronina, making good use of their lunch break?) But sometimes it is much more serious: Может ли человек согрешить ради добра? (Can a person commit a sin for the greater good?)

I don't know the answer to that, but I do love folk wisdom about erring.

Всякому человеку свойственно ошибаться (To err is human).

Now ain't that the truth?