

Commonly Confused Words



This handout addresses commonly confused and misused words.

•Accept and Except:

Accept is a verb that means to receive. *Except* is both a preposition and a verb: meaning but and to leave out.

Example: “He **accepted** a present” is different from “Everyone **except** Laurie received presents.”

•Advice and Advise:

Advice is a noun that refers to guidance or recommendations. *Advise* is a verb meaning to offer suggestions about the best course of action to someone. Example: A person who **advises** students gives them **advice** on the best courses to take.

•Affect and Effect:

In terms of usage, *affect* is usually a verb and *effect* is usually a noun. Example: The party was **affected** by the weather. The **effect** of the plastic surgery was astounding. However, the tricky part is that these words can also be used in other ways. *Affect* can be a noun, specifically when describing psychological conditions. *Effect* can be a verb meaning to bring about or to accomplish. Example: The drug created a happy **affect**. The political party hoped to **effect** change with new policies.

•Allude and Elude:

Allude means to make an indirect reference to something. *Elude* means to escape from something or to fail to grasp (a concept). Example: Although he **alluded** to the secret, his meaning **eluded** me.

•Allusion and Illusion:

An *allusion* is an indirect reference, often to a literary work or historical event. An *illusion* is a misconception or false impression.

•Aloud and Allowed:

Aloud is an adverb that means out loud or audibly. Example: She sang the song **aloud** to her class. *Allowed* is a verb that means permitted. Example: The boy was not **allowed** to play video games until he finished his homework.

•‘Alright’ or All Right?:

...technically ‘*alright*’ is not a word, it’s slang. It’s a one-word derivation from the expression *all right*, which you should always use in lieu of ‘*alright*’, especially in formal writing. Example: Your use of ‘**alright**’ is the only thing I am not **all right** with in your dissertation.

•Bad and Badly:

Bad is used after verbs that express emotion or states of being like looked or felt, whereas *badly* should be used with action verbs. These two most commonly get confused when verbs are used that can be either emotion or action verbs such as feel. A trick to stop making this mistake is by checking with the ‘to be’ verb. Example: I feel **bad** or I am **bad** works where as I feel **badly** or I am **badly** does not work.

•Compliment and Complement:

A *compliment* expresses admiration for something. To *complement* means to enhance or complete something else. Example: The student received a wonderful **compliment** after his speech. A dessert of cherry pie **complements** a delicious turkey dinner.

•**Continuous and Continual:**

While similar, these two words imply very different meanings. *Continuous* implies an unending period of time or action without interruption, while *continual* does not have to mean uninterrupted, only repeated. Example: My roommate played her music **continuously** in our room from 9PM until 12:30AM, even though I **continually** urged her to use her earphones.

•**Could've, Should've, and Would've:**

These are contractions for *could have*, *should have*, and *would have*. Though not mistaken for each other, they are often spelled incorrectly because of the way they sound: *could of*, *should of*, and *would of*. *Of* is not a substitute for *have* and should never be used as such. Thus, all three words should always be spelled correctly, as contractions: *could've*, *should've*, and *would've*.

•**Cite, Sight, and Site:**

Cite means to quote or document. Example: Students must **cite** their sources when writing research papers. *Sight* usually refers to the power of seeing or to a thing that can be seen. Example: There are many **sights** to see in New York City. *Site* refers to a particular area, position, or place. Example: We visited the **site** of the September 11th monument.

•**Deserts and Desserts:**

Arid land is a *desert*. People who get what they deserve are getting their *deserts*—the accent is on the second syllable. People who get goodies like ice cream and cake are getting *desserts*. Example: While in the **desert**, I will have a popsicle for **dessert**.

•**Disinterested and Uninterested:**

They are not the same: *disinterested* means impartial or neutral; *uninterested* means bored or lacking interest. Example: A good umpire should be **disinterested** but certainly not **uninterested**.

•**e.g. and i.e.:**

E.g. is short for the Latin term *exempli gratia*, which means “for example.” *I.e.* is short for the Latin *id est*, which means “that is.” Example: Kirk and Spock had much in common, **e.g.**, their interest in astronomy and their concern for the ship and its crew. They had one obvious difference, **i.e.**, their ears.

•**Elicit and Illicit:**

These words are not synonymous. *Elicit* means to evoke or draw out. Example: The teacher tried to **elicit** comments from the students. *Illicit* refers to something that is illegitimate or unlawful. Example: Mary was arrested for possessing **illicit** drugs.

•**Emigrate From and Immigrate To:**

Emigrate means to leave one country or region to settle in another. *Immigrate* means to enter another country and reside there. Example: In 1910, my grandmother **emigrated** from Russia. Yet, many foreigners **immigrate** to the U.S. to find work.

•**Ensure and Insure:**

Ensure is a verb meaning something you do to guarantee an event or condition. Example: To **ensure** that Bill would finish his paper on time, he started writing it a week in advance. *Insure* is a verb that can be done to a person, place, or thing, but it mainly refers to limiting financial liability.

•**Farther and Further:**

Use *farther* when referring to physical distance; use *further* to refer to abstract ideas or to indicate a greater extent or degree. Example: Jerry insisted that he could walk no **farther**, and he refused to discuss it any **further**.

•**Fewer and Less:** *Fewer* is used with nouns that can be counted, and *less* is used with nouns that cannot be counted. For example: notice how grocery items can be counted and a noun like water cannot be counted. The grocery line only accepts ten items or **fewer**. There is **less** water in the lake than last summer.

•**Good and Well:**

Both *good* and *well* are often used incorrectly. *Good* is an adjective and is used to modify nouns and linking verbs, such as the verb ‘to be’. *Well* is an adverb and is used to modify action verbs. When someone asks how you are, it is perfectly acceptable to reply, “I am good” because “am” is part of the verb ‘to be’ and is therefore modified by *good* instead of *well*. Eat, play, sleep, run, jump, walk, hike, talk, act, and write are all examples of action verbs, and they are all done *well*, not *good*! Any noun—that is, any person, place, or thing—is *good*, not *well*.

•**Hopefully:** There’s only one way to use *hopefully* correctly: as an adverb meaning “in a hopeful manner.” Remember: adverbs are using to modify verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—not nouns or pronouns. Strictly speaking, *hopefully* (and other introductory words like happily, sadly, honestly, seriously, frankly, etc.) shouldn’t be used to replace phrases like “It is hoped” or “I hope.” However, such usage is common in American speech. Example: Genevieve looked **hopefully** at the lottery numbers.

•**I and Me:**

Although it is sometimes obvious when to use *me* and when to use *I*, it can be harder to tell when more than one person is listed. The best way to determine which to use is to temporarily remove any references to other people from the sentence and see what fits. Example: Would you say, “meet Sam and **I** at the writing center”, or “meet Sam and **me** at the writing center”? By removing the reference to Sam, the answer becomes clear. You would not ask someone to meet *I*, you’d ask them to meet *me*. Therefore, the correct form is: “Meet Sam and **me** at the writing center.” Example: Would you say, “if you’ll be at the writing center, Sam and **I** can meet you there”, or “if you’ll be at the writing center, Sam and **me** can meet you there”? Again, remove Sam. You would tell someone *I* can meet them, not *me* can meet them. Therefore, the correct form is: “If you’ll be at the writing center, Sam and **I** can meet you there.”

•**Irregardless:**

Irregardless has become a commonly used term; however, the dictionary and other grammar sources list the word as incorrect usage of regardless or irrespective. It is the words pairing of the prefix (ir) and the suffix (less), which creates a double negative.

•**It’s and Its:**

It’s and *its* are two different words. *It’s* is a contraction for ‘it is’. *Its* is possessive. Apostrophes are usually used with words that are contractions and words that are possessive, but with *it’s* and *its* the apostrophe is kept in the contraction form but eliminated from the possessive form because *its* is a possessive pronoun. Other possessive pronouns such as yours, theirs, and ours do not use apostrophes either, but they are less confusing because they are not also contractions! Just remember that *it’s* is only used when ‘it is’ or ‘it has’ could be used instead. If ‘it is’ or ‘it has’ does not fit in the sentence, then use the possessive form: *its*. Example: **It’s** sometimes difficult to determine the proper use of a word and **its** apostrophe.

•**Loose and Lose:**

Loose is the opposite of tight and *lose* is the opposite of win. A funny way to remember this important difference: The Pats are going to **lose** if their defensive end plays a **loose** defense again!

•**Principal and Principle:**

Principal refers to the person with the highest authority in a school, organization, institution, or group. A *principle* is a fundamental rule or belief.

•That and Which:

Though there are times when it may appear that *that* and *which* can be used interchangeably, one cannot actually be used in place of the other. *Which* is used with nonrestrictive clauses and *that* is used with restrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause can be removed from the rest of the sentence without changing the meaning, whereas a restrictive clause cannot be taken out because it would give a different meaning to the sentence. Example: Students work to improve their writing at the writing center, **which** is located in Ham Smith Room 7. *Which* is used here because students work to improve their writing at the writing center regardless of whether or not we refer to the location. Example: Writing center appointments **that** only discuss grammar do not address organization. This is a restrictive clause because it refers specifically to appointments only discussing grammar. If we were to remove the part of the sentence that refers to only discussing grammar, the meaning of the sentence would change. It would make it sound like we never talk about organization at the writing center, and that is definitely not the case! Thus, “only discuss grammar” is a restrictive clause and so *that* is used.

•Their, They’re, and There:

Their, *they’re*, and *there* are all pronounced the same but are three different words with three different uses. *Their* is used to show possession. *They’re* is a contraction for ‘they are’. *There* is used to indicate a place, or when the verb ‘to be’ is used. The easiest way to remember it: if it’s possessive, use *their*. If you could use ‘they are’ instead, use *they’re*. If it is not showing possession and ‘they are’ does not fit, then use *there*. Example: At the writing center, we work with students to improve **their** writing. **They’re** going to the writing center. Look over **there**, that’s the writing center!

•Then and Than:

Then is used to show cause and effect: If this happens, *then* this will happen. *Than* is used to make a comparison between two separate things. Example: If I keep adding more and more words to this example, **then** it will become longer **than** the previous sentence.

•Weather and Whether:

Weather is referred to when using meteorology. *Whether* is used when making a choice. Example: The **weather** for today in Durham, New Hampshire is a chilly 30 degrees. I am going to decide **whether** to plan a trip to the Caribbean or to stay home for Spring Break.

•Who and Whom:

Who is used for subjects and subject complements. *Whom* is used for objects. Issues with these words arise when writing subordinate clauses or questions. It is helpful to check what the word’s function in the clause or question is in order to choose which word. Example: You will work with our senior engineers, **whom** you will meet later. *Whom* is used here because it is the direct object of the verb will meet.

•Your and You’re:

Use *your* to show possession, and use *you’re* to express the contraction for *you are*. It sometimes helps if you break it down while you write: any place you could actually place ‘*you are*,’ write ‘*you’re*’ (except in formal writing when you do not use contractions!). Example: Now **you’re** in possession of the knowledge necessary to correctly complete **your** assignment!

Resources:

- St. Martin’s Pocket Style Manual, 4th edition.
- Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

Last updated: Fall 2010.