

Commonly Misused Words

- **Accept/except**

“Accept” means to receive. “Except” is usually a preposition meaning “other than” or “leaving out” or “everything but.” As verbs, they are near opposites, with “accept” signaling approval and “except” indicating exclusion.

- **Advice/advise**

“Advice” is a noun meaning “informed recommendation.” “Advise” is the corresponding verb form, as in “to give an informed recommendation.”

Ex. I would *advise* against giving that new mother any further unsolicited *advice*.

- **Affect/effect**

“Affect” is a verb meaning “to influence.” “Effect” is usually a noun meaning “result.” As a verb, it means “to bring about or cause.”

Ex. The bad weather will not *affect* our plans.

The compliment he paid her had an immediate *effect* on her mood.

It is never too late to *effect* a change in our approach to this problem.

- **All ready/Already**

“All ready” is a phrase that means “completely prepared.” “Already” means “by this or that time.”

Ex. She is finally *all ready* to go to the concert, which has *already* begun.

- **All right**

In all forms of writing, “all right” is always best as two words. Though very common, “alright” is considered non-standard and should be avoided.

- **All together/altogether**

“All together” means “joined in a single group,” whereas “altogether” means “in all” or “entirely.”

Ex. The tourists traveled *all together* on a single bus, and I believe there were fifty of them *altogether*. Some passengers thought that was *altogether* too crowded!

- **Allusion/illusion**

An “allusion” is an indirect reference. An “illusion” is a deceptive appearance.

Ex. The opening lines of the novel might be understood as an *allusion* to the main character’s troubled childhood.

A good magician can create a believable optical *illusion*.

- **Can/may**

Remember to use “can” to mean “able to,” and not to use it when the best meaning is “may,” meaning “permitted to.”

- **Complement/compliment**

A “complement” is something that reinforces or completes a whole. A “compliment” is a flattering remark or statement of praise.

Ex. Use the documentary film as a *complement* to our text.

Tom appreciated the *compliment* you paid him on his new suit.

- **Device/devise**

Something used for a specific purpose is the noun “device.” To create or plan something is the verb “devise.”

- **Discreet/discrete**

Being “discreet” is using good judgment or prudence. Something which is “discrete” is separate.

Ex. The committee was being *discreet* in their endeavor to divide the organization into two *discrete* entities.

- **Disinterested/uninterested**

To be “disinterested” is to be unbiased; to not be partial. Being “uninterested” is lacking any interest at all.

Ex. We sought out a *disinterested* party to help us settle our dispute.

- **Ensure/insure**

To “ensure” means “to make certain,” in a general sense. To “insure” is the same, but in a context of financial/legal protection.

- **Evoke/invoke**

To “evoke” is to call forth an image or emotion. To “invoke” is to appeal to a higher authority.

- **Farther/further**

“Farther” is a comparative of “far” in reference to distance. “Further” is a comparative of “far” when it describes amount, degree, or time.

Ex. She will have to travel *farther* to get to the bigger library, but her thesis does require *further* research.

- **Good/well**

“Good” is an adjective often used with a linking verb such as “look” or “taste.” “Well” is an adjective meaning “healthy” or an adverb meaning something between “adequately” and “exceptionally.”

Ex. Does that soup taste as *good* as it looks?

This morning’s lecture on eighteenth century literature was presented *well*.

Are you sure you are feeling *well* enough to go outside today?

- **Irrespective (of)/regardless**

These near-synonyms are commonly, but completely incorrectly, blended into the non-existent word “irregardless.” Normally, regardless is what is meant.

- **Lay/lie**

With “lay,” the action always takes an object because it means “to place something down.” In the case of “lie,” no object is taken since it means “to recline or be placed.”

Ex. Please *lay* the book down on the table next to the lamp.

At the beach, my friends and I prefer to *lie* in the sun rather than swim.

If you leave the dog alone, it will *lie* there all day.

- **Loose/lose**

These are never confused in spoken language because the pronunciation makes the meaning clear. However, “loose” is an adjective meaning “not tight,” and “lose” is a verb meaning “to misplace.” In writing, just remember that “loose” has a soft “s,” while the “s” in “lose” sounds like a “z.”

- **Persecute/prosecute**

To “persecute” is to harass, ostracize or cause injury. To prosecute is to bring a legal claim against a person, usually for a crime.

Ex. They intend to *prosecute* anyone who tries to *persecute* homeless people.

- **Perspective/prospective**

A “perspective” is a point of view. “Prospective” is an adjective which means “potential or possible.”

Ex. From our *perspective*, these are some excellent *prospective* jurors.

- **Prescribe/proscribe**

To “prescribe” is to set down a directive, often medical. To “proscribe” is to limit or prohibit. They can be considered near opposites.

- **Single/singular**

“Single” is an individual person or thing. “Singular” means “distinctive.”

Ex. She had a *singular* charm that not a *single* other girl possessed.

- **Supposed to**

“Supposed to” means “meant to.” In writing, take care never to drop the final “d” in imitation of how it sounds when spoken.

- **Then/than**

“Than” is used in comparisons. “Then” refers to time and sequence.

Ex. One professor’s course may be much harder *than* another’s in the same subject.

First, you have to be accepted by the university; *then*, you must register for courses.

- **That/which/who**

“That” refers to things, animals, or a class or type of person. “Which” is used for animals and things, and “who” refers exclusively to people or named animals. The general rule is that “which” is used to introduce a clause that *is not* essential to the meaning of the sentence, whereas “that” is used to introduce a clause that *is* essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Ex. The newest Harry Potter book is the only one *that* I haven’t read.

The most annoying dogs are the ones *which* bark incessantly.

Between Ann and her cat, Leo, I can’t tell *who* enjoys milk more.

- **Their/there/they’re**

“Their” is the possessive pronoun, “there” refers to a location, and “they’re” is the contraction of “they are.”

- **To/too/two**

“To” is used in prepositional phrases or has part of an infinitive and is correct in all cases except for “too,” which means “also” or “excessively,” and “two” (the number).

- **Who/whom**

These words follow the same pattern as “he/him” and “they/them.”

Ex. *He* is going to school. / She is going with *him*.

Who is going to school? / She is going with *whom*?

-also-

They vacation in the summer. / I will vacation with *them*.

Who vacations in the summer? / With *whom* will I vacation?

- **Who’s/whose**

“Who’s” is the contraction of “who is,” and “whose” is the possessive (to whom something belongs.)

- **You’re/your**

“You’re” is the contraction of “you are,” and “your” is the possessive (belonging to you).