
Commonly Misused Words

accept, except: *accept* means to agree to something; *except* implies that you are excluding something: “We will not accept delivery of any items except those we have ordered.”

adapt, adopt: *Adapt* means to adjust or to modify; *adopt* means to take on. “Management decided to adapt the quality-circle plan rather than adopt it as is.”

affect, effect: *Affect* is a verb: “How will the news affect him?” *Effect* is most commonly a noun: “What will be the effect of the increase in allowable limits?” *Effect* is also (rarely) a verb meaning to bring about or cause to happen: “The new plant is expected to effect a change in our marketing strategy.”

already, all ready: *Already* usually refers to the rapid passing of time; *All ready* refers to a number of things that are ready: “The reports had already been sent to the printer when the writer discovered that they were not all ready.” If the sentence still makes sense without the “all,” use *all ready*.

alright, all right: *Alright* is a misspelling of *all right*.

among, between: In general, *among* is used for relationships of more than two items; *between* is used for only two items. “The collaboration among the writer, the illustrator, and the printer,” but “the agreement between the two companies.”

assure, ensure, insure: To *assure* means to put someone’s mind at ease: “let me assure you.” To *ensure* and to *insure* both mean to make something a certainty: “the new plan will ensure [or insure] good results.” Some writers prefer to use *insure* only when referring to insurance: “to insure against fire loss.”

can, may, might: *Can* refers to ability: “We can produce 300 chips per hour.” *May* is used to formally request permission: “May I telephone your references?” *Might* refers to possibility: “We might see declines in prices this year.”

compliment, complement: A *compliment* is a statement of praise: “The owner offered a gracious compliment to the architect on his design.” *Compliment* is also a verb: “The owner graciously complimented the architect.” A *complement* is something that fills something up or makes it complete, or something that is an appropriate counterpart: “The design is a perfect complement to the landscape.” *Complement* is also a verb: “The design complements the landscape perfectly.” To remember which one has an “i” in the middle, just remember that “i” like compliments.

could of: *could of* is often mistakenly used in place of the contraction “could have”: “She could have mentioned the abrasion problem in the report.”

discreet, discrete: *Discreet* means careful and prudent: “She is a very discreet manager; you can confide in her.” *Discrete* means separate or distinct: “The company will soon split into three discrete divisions.”

effective, efficient: *Effective* means that someone or something does what it is meant to do; *efficient* also carries the sense of accomplishing the goal without using more resources or time than necessary. “Air Force One is an effective way to fly the president around, but it is not efficient; it costs some \$40,000 per hour to fly.”

farther, further: *Farther* refers to distance: “one mile farther down the road.” *Further* means greater in quantity, time, or extent: “Are there any further questions?”

fewer, less: *Fewer* is used for counting items: “fewer salt shakers”; *less* is used for non-counting items: “less salt.” It’s the same distinction as between number and amount.

foreword, forward: A *foreword* is a preface, usually written by someone other than the author, introducing the book. *Forward* refers to advancing movement or being in advance: “The company decided to move forward with the project.”

i.e., e.g.: *I.e.* is Latin for “id est,” which means “that is.” *E.g.* is Latin for “exempli gratia,” which means “for example.” Writers often confuse them. For this reason, it’s recommended to use the English versions. Also, add commas after them: “Use the main entrance, that is, the one on Broadway.”

imply, infer: The writer or speaker *implies*; the reader or listener *infers*.

its, it’s: *Its* is the possessive pronoun: “The lab rat can’t make up its mind.” *It’s* is the contraction of it is: “It’s too late to apply for this year’s grant.” The source of confusion between these two words stems from the fact that almost all possessives take apostrophes, for example, “Bob’s computer.” However, “its” is a possessive pronoun, like his, hers, theirs, ours, and yours, a word specifically created to fulfill only one function: to indicate possession. It is not the possessive form of another word, and therefore it does not take an apostrophe.

lay, lie: *Lay* is a transitive verb meaning to place: “Lay the equipment on the table.” *Lie* is an intransitive verb meaning to recline: “Lie down on the couch.”

lead, led: *Lead* is the infinitive verb: “We want to lead the industry.” *Led* is the past tense: “Last year we led the industry.”

plain, plane: *Plain* means simple and unadorned: “The new company created a very plain logo.” It also refers to the geographical feature “The Great Plains of the central United States.” *Plane* has several meanings: an airplane, the act of smoothing a surface, the tool used to smooth a surface, and the flat surface itself.

precede, proceed: *Precede* means to come before: “Should Figure 1 precede Figure 2?” *Proceed* means to move forward: “We decided to proceed with the project despite the setback.”

sight, site, cite: *Sight* refers to vision; *site* is a place or a specific page or group of pages on the internet; *cite* is a verb meaning to document a reference.

than, then: *Than* is a conjunction used in comparisons: “Plan A works better than Plan B.” *Then* is an adverb referring to time: “First we went to the warehouse. Then we went to the plant.”

their, there, they’re: *Their* is the possessive pronoun: “They brought their equipment with them.” *There* refers to a place—“We went there yesterday”—or in expletive expressions—“There are three problems we have to solve.” *They’re* is the contraction of they are.

to, too, two: *To* is used in infinitive verbs, “to buy a new microscope” and in expressions referring to direction, “go to Detroit.” *Too* means excessively or also: “The refrigerator is too big for the lab,” or “I want to go too.” *Two* is the number 2.

weather, whether: *Weather* refers to sunshine and temperature. *Whether* refers to alternatives. “The demonstration will be held outdoors whether or not the weather cooperates.”

who, whom: *Who* refers to the subject of the sentence, “He is the one who was arrested.” *Whom* refers to the one who receives the action of the sentence, “To whom it may concern:” or “You are not the person whom I invited to dinner.”

who’s, whose: *Who’s* is the contraction of who is. *Whose* is the possessive case of who: “Whose printer are we using?”

your, you’re: *Your* is the possessive pronoun: “Bring your calculator to the meeting.” *You’re* the contraction of you are.