

COMMONLY CONFUSED AND ABUSED WORDS

Ability, Capacity	<i>Ability</i> is the power of applying knowledge; <i>capacity</i> is the power of receiving and retaining it.
Accept, Except	The verb <i>accept</i> means to receive; the verb <i>except</i> means to leave out or take out. The preposition <i>except</i> means other than.
Across, Acrossed Affect, Effect	Neither is correct. Use <i>across</i> . To sort out the confusion about these two words, remember that the most common use of <i>affect</i> is as a verb and of <i>effect</i> is a noun. A less common meaning of <i>affect</i> as a verb is to pretend, to simulate or imitate in order to make a desired impression. The noun <i>effect</i> means result or consequence. The verb <i>effect</i> means to bring about.
Allude, Refer	To <i>allude</i> to something is to mention it indirectly. To <i>refer</i> is to indicate directly.
Allusion, Illusion	<i>Allusion</i> is an indirect reference to something; <i>illusion</i> is a false picture or idea.
Alot	<i>Alot</i> is not one word; a lot (two words) is a vague descriptive phrase which should not be used in formal writing.
Alright	Not yet accepted. Use the correct spelling of <i>all right</i> .
Among, Between	<i>Among</i> is used when speaking of more than two persons or things. <i>Between</i> is used when speaking of only two.
Ante, Anti	<i>Ante</i> means before or in front of. <i>Anti</i> means against.
Annual, Biannual, Semiannual, Biennial, Perennial	An <i>annual</i> event happens once every year. A <i>biannual</i> event happens twice a year (<i>semiannual</i> means the same as <i>biannual</i>). A <i>biennial</i> event happens every two years. A <i>perennial</i> event is active throughout the year and continues to happen every year.
Anxious, Eager	Use <i>anxious</i> where there is a sense of anxiety. <i>Eager</i> where there is pleasant expectation.
Anyways	This is the incorrect form of <i>anyway</i> .

Apt, Likely, Liable

Apt implies a natural tendency. *Liable* suggests the possibility of risk, while *likely* conveys simple probability.

Ascent, Assent

Ascent is rising; *assent* is agreement.

Bad, Badly

To help you decide whether to use the adjective *bad* or the adverb *badly*, substitute a synonym in a sentence that calls for one or the other. Substitute *unhappy* and *unhappily*, Which fits?

Be sure and

Use *be sure to* instead.

Between, Among

Use *between* when individual relationships are emphasized and the number is unspecified. Use *among* with unspecified numbers if individual relationships are not emphasized.

Bi, Semi

To minimize the confusion surrounding these two prefixes, use *bi* in the sense of every two weeks (*biweekly*) or every two months (*bimonthly*); use *semi* to mean twice each week (*semiweekly*), twice each month (*semimonthly*), and so on.

Bring, Take

Bring means the action is directed toward the speaker; *take* means the action is directed away from the speaker.

Can, May

The rule that distinguishes between *can* (the ability or power to do something) and *may* (permission to do it) is weakening. Formal usage still required the distinction, despite the prevalence of *can* for *may* in speech.

Capital, Capitol

Capital refers to wealth, the city that is the seat of government, or an uppercase letter. *Capitol* is the building in which state or federal officials congregate.

Complement, Compliment

Complement is both a verb and a noun, meaning to complete a whole or satisfy a need. *Compliment* also functions as both verb and noun, meaning praise.

Comprise	<p>One of our most abused words, <i>comprise</i> means to include or be made up of; it is frequently confused with <i>compose</i> or incorrectly used as a synonym for <i>constitute</i>. The whole <i>comprises</i> the parts: the parts <i>constitute</i> the whole.</p> <p>Wrong: High tech companies <i>comprise</i> only six percent of GNP.</p> <p>Right: High tech companies <i>constitute</i> only six percent of GNP.</p>
Contact	<p>Not acceptable as a verb. . . use <i>phone</i> or <i>visit</i>, etc.</p>
Continual, Continuous	<p>Dictionaries now list these words as synonymous, but maintaining the distinction between them helps preserve the richness of our vocabulary. <i>Continual</i> means over and over again; <i>continuous</i> means uninterrupted or unbroken.</p>
Convince, Persuade	<p>Synonyms; however use <i>persuade</i> to precede an infinitive.</p>
Council, Counsel, Consul	<p><i>Council</i>, always a noun, refers to an assemblage of persons or a committee. <i>Counsel</i> has both verb and noun forms, meaning to advise, the advice itself, or an attorney.</p>
Different from, Different than	<p><i>Different from</i> is preferred when it is followed by a single noun, pronoun, or short phrase. <i>Different than</i> is acceptable when it is followed by a clause or avoids wordiness.</p>
Dilemma	<p>Reserve the use of <i>dilemma</i> for situations involving a choice between roughly equal alternatives.</p>
Disburse, Disperse	<p><i>Disburse</i> is to pay out. <i>Disperse</i> means to scatter.</p>
Discreet, Discrete	<p><i>Discreet</i> is used to describe behavior that is prudent or respectful of propriety. <i>Discrete</i> frequently has a scientific connotation and means separate, distinct, or individual.</p>
Disinterested, Uninterested	<p>Cautious writers still observe the distinction between these two words. <i>Disinterested</i> means objective or impartial, not influenced by personal advantage. <i>Uninterested</i> means indifferent or lacking interest in an outcome.</p>

Enthused	<i>Enthused</i> may never become acceptable in formal writing. Careful writers use <i>enthusiastic</i> .
Farther, Further	Traditional American usage calls for <i>farther</i> when actual physical distance is involved and when physical distance is only figurative (The dispute is taking us <i>farther</i> apart.) <i>Further</i> is used in the sense of "more" or "additional" and is increasingly used in the figurative sense of distance (We are moving <i>further</i> from the truth).
Flammable, Inflammable	Both mean capable of burning. Because of the danger that <i>inflammable</i> will be mistaken for "not flammable," use <i>flammable</i> to mean combustible and <i>nonflammable</i> for its antonym.
For Free	Use <i>free</i> or <i>for nothing</i> instead.
Get, Got	Although <i>get</i> and <i>got</i> can claim a long history of use in the English language, careful writers will avoid their casual overtones by substituting words such as <i>have</i> or <i>receive</i> whenever possible.
Good, Well	<i>Good</i> is an adjective; <i>well</i> is nearly always an adverb. Exception: When used to indicate state of health, <i>well</i> is an adjective.
Hanged, Hung	Men are <i>hanged</i> ; things are <i>hung</i> .
Home, Hone	The verb <i>hone</i> , meaning to sharpen, is sometimes incorrectly substituted for <i>home</i> in the expression <i>home in</i> , meaning to be guided to a target.

I, Me, Myself

I is the subjective case and thus should be used when it is the subject of a sentence (the **who** or **what** that the rest of the sentence is about). **Me** is the objective case and should be used when it is the object of the action or thought conveyed by the verb or when it is the object of a preposition. **Myself** is correctly used for emphasis (**I, myself, will see to it**) or as a reflexive (**I hurt myself** falling off the roof). Do not use **myself** as a substitute for **I** or **me**.

Imply, Infer

Imply means to suggest or express indirectly; **infer** means to draw a conclusion from facts.

Insure, Ensure, Assure

Insure means to cover with insurance; **Ensure** means to make sure or certain; **Assure** means to inform confidently, with a view to removing doubt; to cause to feel sure; convince

Inter, Intra

Inter- means between; **intra-** means among

Irregardless

A redundancy. Use **regardless**.

It's, Its

It's is the contraction of **it is** or **it has**. **Its** is a possessive pronoun.

Kind of, Sort of

These expressions are clumsy in formal writing. However when either one is used, no article (**a**, **an**, or **the**) should follow.

Lay, Lie

Lay is an intransitive verb (i.e. it does not take an object); it means to recline. The past tense of **lie** is **lay**.

Lend, Loan

Lend means to give or allow use of something temporarily on the condition that it or its equivalent will be returned; **Loan** means a sum of money lent at interest.

Liabile, Likely

Liabile means responsible according to the law or exposed to an adverse action; **likely** means in all probability.

Literally

Literally has strayed into being used for emphasis in ways that are anything but literal. Your credibility is jeopardized if you write, **We were literally climbing the walls**.

Loose, Lose	Loose (v) means to set free, while lose (v) means to suffer a loss, to mislay
Meantime, Meanwhile	Meantime is a noun that refers to an interval between events. Meanwhile is an adverb meaning during the intervening time.
Nauseated, Nauseous	A person who feels sick is no more nauseous than a person who has been poisoned is poisonous . Something that makes you feel sick is nauseous (nauseous fumes); what you feel is nauseated .
Of, Have	Of should not be used in place of have . “I should have (not should of) known that.”
Off of	Drop the of “How many times do I have to tell you to stay off (not off of) my blue suede shoes?”
Orientate	The correct word is orient .
Real, very, really	Do not use real in place of the adverbs very or really . Examples: Pimples are very (not real) embarrassing. This cake is really stale – I mean, it’s just about fossilized.
Principle, Principal	Principal functions as both noun and adjective. The noun refers to the head of a school or firm, or to capital that earns interest; the adjective means chief or main. Principle is a noun-meaning rule or standard.
Set, Sit	Sit means to put the body in a seated position. Set means to place.
Shall, Will	Just let your ear be your guide.
Site, Cite	Cite means to quote or to refer to. Site means location or position.
Stationary, Stationery	Stationary means fixed in position, not moving. Stationery is writing paper and envelopes.
Tenant, Tenet	Tenant is one who occupies a dwelling, while a tenet is an opinion or belief held.
Than, Then	Than is used in a comparison; then tells when.
That, Who, Whose	Using who to refer to persons makes them seem more human. Use that to refer to things.

Their, There, They're

Their is the possessive personal pronoun.
There is an adverb used to point out location.
They're is the contraction for **they are**.

To, Too

To is the preposition, which can mean in the direction of. **To** also is used to form an infinitive. **Too** is an adverb indicating degree.

Verbal, Oral

Verbal is anything in words; anything spoken is **oral**.

Was, Were

Was means the first and third person singular past tense of be;
Were means the second person singular past tense of be;

Weather, Whether

Weather refers to the condition of the atmosphere. **Whether** refers to a possibility.

Who, Whom

The best guide for deciding whether to use **who** or **whom** is to substitute a personal pronoun. If *he, she, or they* would fit, use **who** (nominative case); if *him, her, or them* would fit, use **whom** (objective case).

Who's Whose

Who's is the contraction for **who is**. **Whose** is the possessive pronoun.

Would of

Incorrect usage. Write **would have**.

Your, You're

Your is a possessive pronoun. **You're** is the contraction for **you are**.

Adapted from: Write Right, (Venolia), Business Letter Writing (Lindsell-Roberts), and Writers Inc. (Sebranak, Myer, Kemper)

OTHER CONFUSED WORDS YOU'VE HEARD OR SEEN USED IN WRITING: