

Usage Confusing Word Pairs

This handout refers to commonly confused word groups and pairs. It also indicates certain words that are nonstandard, which means they are acceptable in conversation but incorrect in formal writing.

ACCEPT/ EXCEPT

accept: A verb meaning “to agree to” or “to receive.”

EXAMPLE: I **accept** your apology.

except: A preposition meaning “excluding.”

EXAMPLE: I like all vegetables **except** broccoli.

AFFECT/ EFFECT

affect: A verb meaning “to influence.”

EXAMPLE: Will missing class **affect** my grade?

effect: A noun meaning “result” or a verb meaning “to cause.”

EXAMPLE: The **effect** of missing class will be a lower grade. (noun)

Only the supervisor could **effect** change to the rules. (verb)

ALLUSION/ ILLUSION

allusion: A noun describing an indirect reference to something.

EXAMPLE: The speaker made an **allusion** to a Greek myth.

illusion: A noun indicating something that misleads or gives a false meaning or appearance.

EXAMPLE: A magician uses **illusion** to entertain the audience.

ALOT/ A LOT

alot: This is the incorrect form of “a lot.”

a lot: An adverb meaning “many.”

EXAMPLE: She has **a lot** of friends.

AMONG/ BETWEEN

among: A preposition meaning “surrounded by” that refers to **three or more** people or things.

EXAMPLE: There was a discussion **among** the group of friends.

between: A preposition meaning “common to” that refers to *two* people or things.

EXAMPLE: The argument was **between** him and me.

CITE/ SITE/ SIGHT

cite: A verb meaning “to quote an example or authority.”

EXAMPLE: You must **cite** all of your sources in your research paper.

site: A noun meaning “a particular place.”

EXAMPLE: We visited several tourist **sites**.

sight: A noun describing the function of “seeing.”

EXAMPLE: Human beings have five senses: **sight**, touch, taste, sound, and smell.

COMPLIMENT/ COMPLEMENT

compliment: A noun that means “an expression of flattery, praise, or admiration.”

EXAMPLE: Her **compliment** made my day.

complement: A noun that means “to complete” or “to add to” something.

EXAMPLE: Butter is the perfect **complement** for bread.

Usage Confusing Word Pairs

COUNCIL/ COUNSEL

council: A noun meaning “a group of people who meet together to make decisions.”

EXAMPLE: Kamri was elected as president for the school’s student **council**.

counsel: A noun meaning “advice” or a verb meaning “to advise.”

EXAMPLE: My mom gave me good **counsel** about living on my own. (noun)

EXAMPLE: She **counseled** me to not procrastinate my homework. (verb)

EXPLICIT/ IMPLICIT

explicit: An adjective meaning “direct.”

EXAMPLE: Professor Anderson gave **explicit** instructions for writing the paper.

implicit: An adjective meaning “implied.” It is the opposite of explicit.

EXAMPLE: A tuition increase is **implicit** in the president’s plan.

FARTHER/ FURTHER

farther: An adjective that describes an actual distance and that means “a greater extent or degree.”

EXAMPLE: My house is **farther** from campus than yours.

further: An adjective meaning “more distant in degree, time, space, or quantity.”

EXAMPLE: Nothing could be **further** from the truth.

FEWER/ LESS

fewer: An adjective meaning “a small number” that refers to things that can be counted.

EXAMPLE: Children have **fewer** teeth than adults.

less: An adjective meaning “little” that refers to a general amount or non-countable measurement.

EXAMPLE: I prefer **less** salt on my popcorn.

GOOD/ WELL

good: An adjective meaning “suitable.”

EXAMPLE: It was a **good** movie.

well: An adverb meaning “in a proper manner.”

EXAMPLE: She plays basketball **well**.

IMPLY/ INFER

imply: A verb meaning “to suggest or state indirectly” that refers to the action of the speaker.

EXAMPLE: He **implied** that I wasn’t capable of completing the job.

infer: A verb meaning “to conclude” that refers to the action of the listener.

EXAMPLE: I **inferred** there was trouble from the sight of the police cars.

ITS/ IT’S

its: A personal possessive pronoun of “it.”

EXAMPLE: The bird broke **its** wing.

it’s: A contraction meaning “it is” or “it has.”

EXAMPLE: **It’s** time to leave. (or) *It’s* been a while since I’ve seen you.

LAY/ LIE

lay: A verb that means “to put or place” and that needs a direct object.

EXAMPLE: **Lay** the book on the table.

lie: A verb that means “to rest or recline” and that takes no direct object.

EXAMPLE: I’m going to **lie** down for a while.

Usage Confusing Word Pairs

LIKE/ AS

like: A preposition meaning “resembling closely.”

EXAMPLE: The boy swam **like** a fish.

as: An adverb meaning “equally” that is used when making a comparison.

EXAMPLE: Bryce dressed up **as** a doctor for his presentation.

LOOSE/ LOSE

loose: An adjective meaning “not tight.”

EXAMPLE: I like to wear **loose** clothing.

lose: A verb that means “to misplace” or “to be defeated.”

EXAMPLE: I hate it when I **lose** my keys.

MAY BE/ MAYBE

may be: A verb phrase meaning “it might be possible.” In this case, “be” is a verb and “may” is a modal that supplements it.

EXAMPLE: The storm **may be** more hazardous than we thought.

maybe: An adverb showing possibility.

EXAMPLE: **Maybe** you should go to the doctor and have your sore throat checked.

PRINCIPAL/ PRINCIPLE

principal: A noun meaning “the head of a school” or an adjective meaning “most important.”

EXAMPLE: Mrs. Smith, the **principal** of the school, is a very energetic woman. (noun)

EXAMPLE: The **principal** speaker of the program spoke first. (adjective)

principle: A noun meaning “a basic truth.”

EXAMPLE: Lying is against my **principles**.

QUITE/ QUIET/ QUIT

quite: An adverb meaning “whole” or “complete.”

EXAMPLE: He is **quite** thorough in his calculations.

quiet: An adjective meaning “not making noise.”

EXAMPLE: Please be **quiet**; the baby is sleeping.

quit: A verb meaning “to stop” or “give up.”

EXAMPLE: I **quit** my job last Thursday.

SET/ SIT

set: A verb meaning “to place” and requiring a direct object.

EXAMPLE: Ashley **set** her books on the table and got a snack.

sit: A verb meaning “to be seated” and that takes no direct object.

EXAMPLE: Come **sit** by me.

THAN/ THEN

than: A conjunction introducing a second element in a comparison.

EXAMPLE: I am taller **than** my sister.

then: An adverb meaning “at that time,” “next,” or “after.”

EXAMPLE: He picked up the tickets, and **then** he picked up his date.

Usage Confusing Word Pairs

THERE/ THEIR/ THEY'RE

there: An adverb meaning “in that place.”

EXAMPLE: Put the books down **there**.

their: A personal possessive pronoun for “they.”

EXAMPLE: It's **their** fault!

they're: A contraction for “they are.”

EXAMPLE: **They're** going to eat dinner at seven.

THOROUGH/ THROUGH/ THREW

thorough: An adjective meaning “complete in all respects.”

EXAMPLE: Steve did a **thorough** job washing my car.

through: A preposition meaning “in one side and out another side.”

EXAMPLE: To get to my apartment, you must drive **through** the tunnel.

threw: The irregular past tense form of the verb “throw.”

EXAMPLE: Chris **threw** the ball at me and hit me in the head.

To/ Too/ Two

to: Either a preposition or the initial part of an infinitive verb phrase.

EXAMPLE: My mom sent me **to** the store. (preposition)

EXAMPLE: **To** break the law is wrong. (infinitive)

too: An adverb meaning “also.”

EXAMPLE: I like dancing, and I like singing, **too**.

two: An adjective describing the number that is more than one but less than three.

EXAMPLE: I have **two** dogs.

WEATHER/ WHETHER

weather: A noun referring to the condition of the atmosphere.

EXAMPLE: We are having unusual **weather** for this time of year.

whether: A conjunction that indicates a choice between things.

EXAMPLE: Sarah couldn't decide **whether** she should go to the dance or stay home and study.

WHOSE/ WHO'S

whose: A personal possessive pronoun for “who.”

EXAMPLE: **Whose** book is that anyway?

who's: A contraction for “who is” or “who has.”

EXAMPLE: **Who's** here? (or) **Who's** got the answer?

WOULD OF/ WOULD'VE

would of: This is the incorrect form of “would have.”

would've: A contraction for “would have.”

EXAMPLE: I **would've** gotten a better grade if I had tried harder.

YOUR/ YOU'RE

your: A personal possessive pronoun for “you.”

EXAMPLE: Is that **your** new car?

you're: A contraction for “you are.”

EXAMPLE: **You're** a good friend.