

When writing, you need to choose the correct word according to its spelling and meaning in the context. Not only does selecting the correct word improve your vocabulary and your writing, but it also makes a good impression on your readers. It also helps reduce confusion and improve clarity.

Everyone knows the problem with spell-check: your word might be spelled right, but it may be the wrong word. English is full of confusing words that sound alike but are spelled differently. It's also full of words that share similar (but not identical) meanings that are easy to misuse. Below are some of the most commonly confused and misused words in English.

Commonly Confused Words

A, An, And

- *A* (article). Used before a word that begins with a consonant.

a key, **a** mouse, **a** screen

- *An* (article). Used before a word that begins with a vowel.

an airplane, **an** ocean, **an** igloo

- *And* (conjunction). Connects two or more words together.

peanut butter **and** jelly, pen **and** pencil, jump **and** shout

Accept, Except

- *Accept* (verb). Means to take or agree to something offered.

They **accepted** our proposal for the conference.

- *Except* (conjunction). Means only or but.

We could fly there **except** the tickets cost too much.

Affect, Effect

- *Affect* (verb). Means to create a change.

Hurricane winds **affect** the amount of rainfall.

- *Effect* (noun). Means an outcome or result.

The heavy rains will have an **effect** on the crop growth.

Are, Our

- *Are* (verb). A conjugated form of the verb *to be*.

My cousins **are** all tall and blonde.

- *Our* (pronoun). Indicates possession, usually follows the pronoun *we*.

We will bring **our** cameras to take pictures.

By, Buy

- *By* (preposition). Means next to.

My glasses are **by** the bed.

- *Buy* (verb). Means to purchase.

I will **buy** new glasses after the doctor's appointment.

Its, It's

- *Its* (pronoun). A form of *it* that shows possession.

The butterfly flapped **its** wings.

- *It's* (contraction). Joins the words *it* and *is*.

It's the most beautiful butterfly I have ever seen.

Know, No

- *Know* (verb). Means to understand or possess knowledge.

I **know** the male peacock sports the brilliant feathers.

- *No*. Used to make a negative.

I have **no** time to visit the zoo this weekend.

Loose, Lose

- *Loose* (adjective). Describes something that is not tight or is detached.

Without a belt, her pants are **loose** on her waist.

- *Lose* (verb). Means to forget, to give up, or to fail to earn something.

She will **lose** even more weight after finishing the marathon training.

Of, Have

- *Of* (preposition). Means *from* or *about*.

I studied maps **of** the city to know where to rent a new apartment.

- *Have* (verb). Means to possess something.

I **have** many friends to help me move.

- *Have* (linking verb). Used to connect verbs.

I should **have** helped her with that heavy box.

Quite, Quiet, Quit

- *Quite* (adverb). Means *really* or *truly*.

My work will require **quite** a lot of concentration.

- *Quiet* (adjective). Means not loud.

I need a **quiet** room to complete the assignments.

- *Quit* (verb). Means to stop or to end.

I will **quit** when I am hungry for dinner.

Right, Write

- *Right* (adjective). Means proper or correct.

When bowling, she practices the **right** form.

- *Right* (adjective). Also means the opposite of left.

The ball curved to the **right** and hit the last pin.

- *Write* (verb). Means to communicate on paper.

After the team members bowl, I will **write** down their scores.

Set, Sit

- *Set* (verb). Means to put an item down.

She **set** the mug on the saucer.

- *Set* (noun). Means a group of similar objects.

All the mugs and saucers belonged in a **set**.

- *Sit* (verb). Means to lower oneself down on a chair or another place

I'll **sit** on the sofa while she brews the tea.

Suppose, Supposed

- *Suppose* (verb). Means to think or to consider

I **suppose** I will bake the bread, because no one else has the recipe.

- *Suppose* (verb). Means to suggest.

Suppose we all split the cost of the dinner.

- *Supposed* (verb). The past tense form of the verb suppose, meaning required or allowed.

She was **supposed** to create the menu.

Than, Then

- *Than* (conjunction). Used to connect two or more items when comparing

Registered nurses require less schooling **than** doctors.

- *Then* (adverb). Means next or at a specific time.

Doctors first complete medical school and **then** obtain a residency.

Their, They're, There

- *Their* (pronoun). A form of *they* that shows possession.

The dog walker feeds **their** dogs everyday at two o'clock.

- *They're* (contraction). Joins the words *they* and *are*.

They're the sweetest dogs in the neighborhood.

- *There* (adverb). Indicates a particular place.

The dogs' bowls are over **there**, next to the pantry.

- *There* (pronoun). Indicates the presence of something

There are more treats if the dogs behave.

To, Two, Too

- *To* (preposition). Indicates movement.

Let's go **to** the circus.

- *To*. A word that completes an infinitive verb.

to play, **to** ride, **to** watch.

- *Two*. The number after one. It describes how many.

Two clowns squirted the elephants with water.

- *Too* (adverb). Means *also* or *very*.

The tents were **too** loud, and we left.

Use, Used

- *Use* (verb). Means to apply for some purpose.

We **use** a weed whacker to trim the hedges.

- *Used*. The past tense form of the verb *to use*

He **used** the lawnmower last night before it rained.

- *Used to*. Indicates something done in the past but not in the present

He **used to** hire a team to landscape, but now he landscapes alone.

Who's, Whose

- *Who's* (contraction). Joins the words *who* and either *is* or *has*.

Who's the new student? **Who's** met him?

- *Whose* (pronoun). A form of *who* that shows possession.

Whose schedule allows them to take the new student on a campus tour?

Your, You're

- *Your* (pronoun). A form of *you* that shows possession.

Your book bag is unzipped.

- *You're* (contraction). Joins the words *you* and *are*.

You're the girl with the unzipped book bag

Advice is a noun: Chester gave Posey good advice. *Advise* is a verb: Chester advised Posey to avoid the questionable chicken salad.

Affect/Effect *Affect* is usually a verb: Chester's humming affected Posey's ability to concentrate. *Effect* is usually a noun: Chester was sorry for the effect his humming had. If you find yourself stumped about which one to use in a sentence, try substituting the word "alter" or "result." If "alter" fits (Chester's humming altered Posey's ability to concentrate), use *affect*. If "result" fits (Chester was sorry for the result his humming had), use *effect*.

Among/Amongst *Among* is the preferred and most common variant of this word in American English. *Amongst* is more common in British English. Neither version is wrong, but *amongst* may seem fussy to American readers.

Among/Between *Among* expresses a collective or loose relationship of several items: Chester found a letter hidden among the papers on the desk. *Between* expresses the relationship of one thing to another thing or to many other things: Posey spent all day carrying messages between Chester and the other students. The idea that *between* can be used only when talking about two things is a myth—it's perfectly correct to use *between* if you are talking about multiple binary relationships.

Assure/Ensure/Insure *Assure* means to tell someone that something will definitely happen or is definitely true: Posey assured Chester that no one would

cheat at Bingo. *Ensure* means to guarantee or make sure of something: Posey took steps to ensure that no one cheated at Bingo. *Insure* means to take out an insurance policy: Posey was glad the Bingo hall was insured against damage caused by rowdy Bingo players.

Breath/Breathe *Breath* is a noun; it's the air that goes in and out of your lungs: Chester held his breath while Posey skateboarded down the stairs. *Breathe* is a verb; it means to exhale or inhale: After Posey's spectacular landing, Chester had to remind himself to breathe again.

Capital/Capitol *Capital* has several meanings. It can refer to an uppercase letter, money, or a city where a seat of government is located: Chester visited Brasília, the capital of Brazil. *Capitol* means the building where a legislature meets: Posey visited the cafe in the basement of the capitol after watching a bill become a law.

Complement/Compliment A *complement* is something that completes something else. It's often used to describe things that go well together: Chester's lime green boots were a perfect complement to his jacket. A *compliment* is a nice thing to say: Posey received many compliments on her purple fedora.

Disinterested/Uninterested *Disinterested* means impartial: A panel of **disinterested** judges who had never met the contestants before judged the singing contest. *Uninterested* means bored or not wanting to be involved with something: Posey was uninterested in attending Chester's singing class.

Defence/Defense *Defense* is standard in American English. *Defence* is found mainly in British English.

Emigrate/Immigrate *Emigrate* means to move away from a city or country to live somewhere else: Chester's grandfather emigrated from Canada sixty years

ago. *Immigrate* means to move into a country from somewhere else: Posey's sister immigrated to Ireland in 2004.

E.g./I.e. These two Latin abbreviations are often mixed up, but *e.g.* means "for example," while *i.e.* means "that is."

Empathy/Sympathy *Empathy* is the ability to understand another person's perspective or feelings. *Sympathy* is a feeling of sorrow for someone else's suffering. A *sympathizer* is someone who agrees with a particular ideal or cause.

Farther/Further *Farther* refers to physical distance: Posey can run farther than Chester. *Further* refers to metaphorical distance: Chester is further away from finishing his project than Posey is.

Flaunt/Flout *Flaunt* means to show off: Chester flaunted his stylish new outfit. *Flout* means to defy, especially in a way that shows scorn: Posey flouted the business-casual dress code by wearing a tiara and flip-flops.

Gaff/Gaffe A *gaff* is a type of spear or hook with a long handle: Chester completed his sailor costume with a gaff borrowed from his uncle's fishing boat. A *gaffe* is a faux pas or social misstep: Posey made a gaffe when she accidentally called Chester by the wrong name.

Gray/Grey *Gray* is the standard American English spelling. *Grey* is the standard British English spelling.

Historic/Historical *Historic* means famous, important, and influential: Chester visited the beach in Kitty Hawk where the Wright brothers made their historic first airplane flight. *Historical* means related to history: Posey donned a historical bonnet for the renaissance fair.

Imply/Infer *Imply* means to hint at something without saying it directly: Chester implied that Posey was in trouble, but he wouldn't tell her why. *Infer* means to deduce something that hasn't been stated directly: Posey inferred that Chester was nervous about something from the way he kept looking over his shoulder.

It's/Its *It's* is a **contraction** of "it is": Posey needs to pack for her trip because it's only two days away. *Its* is a possessive pronoun that means "belonging to it": Chester is obsessed with both the book and its author.

Lay/Lie *To lay* means to put or to place. One way to remember this is that there is an a in both *to lay* and *to place*: Posey will lay out her outfit before she goes to bed. *To lie* means to recline. One way to remember this is that there is an e in both *to lie* and *to recline*: Chester will lie down for a nap. Be careful, though. The past tense of *to lay* is *laid*: Posey laid out her outfit. The past tense of *to lie* is *lay*: Chester lay down for a nap over an hour ago.

Lead/Led *Lead*, when it rhymes with "bed," refers to a type of metal: Posey wore a lead apron while the dentist X-rayed her teeth. *Led* is the past tense of the verb *to lead*, which means to guide or to be first: Chester led the way.

Learned/Learnt *Learned* is standard in American English. *Learnt* is standard in British English.

Loose/Lose *Loose* is usually an adjective: Posey discovered that the cows were loose. *Lose* is always a verb. It means to misplace something or to be unvictorious in a game or contest: Chester was careful not to lose his ticket.

Principal/Principle *Principal* can be a noun or adjective. As a noun, it refers to the person in charge of a school or organization: Posey was called into the principal's office. As an adjective, it means most important: The principal reason

for this meeting is to brainstorm ideas for the theme of Chester's birthday party. A *principle* (always a noun) is a firmly held belief or ideal: Posey doesn't like surprise parties as a matter of principle.

Inquiry/Enquiry *Inquiry* and *enquiry* both mean "a request for information." *Inquiry* is the standard American English spelling. *Enquiry* is the British spelling.

Stationary/Stationery *Stationary* means unmoving: The revolving door remained stationary because Posey was pushing on it the wrong way. *Stationery* refers to letter writing materials and especially to high quality paper: Chester printed his résumé on his best stationery.

Than/Then *Than* is used for comparisons: Posey runs faster than Chester. *Then* is used to indicate time or sequence: Posey took off running, and then Chester came along and finished her breakfast.

Their/There/They're *Their* is the possessive form of "they": Chester and Posey took their time. *There* indicates a place: It took them an hour to get there. *They're* is a contraction of "they are": Are Chester and Posey coming? They're almost here.

To/Too *To* is a preposition that can indicate direction: Posey walked to school. She said hello to Chester when she saw him. *To* is also used in the infinitive form of verbs: Chester waited until the last minute to do his homework. *Too* is used as an intensifier, and also means "also": Posey waited too long to do her homework, too.

Toward/Towards *Toward* is standard in American English. *Towards* is standard in British English.

Who's/Whose *Who's* is a contraction of "who is": Who's calling Chester at this hour? *Whose* is a possessive pronoun that means "belonging to [someone]": Chester, whose phone hadn't stopped ringing all morning, barely ate anything for breakfast.