Commonly Confused Words

Words evolve with use and misuse over time, sometimes obscuring their meanings. Here are current conjugations and clarifications of some commonly confused words. For more, see the sources we used to compile this list: The Everyday Writer, 5th edition; Writers, Inc.; The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition; and Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage.

accept, except
Accept is a verb that means to receive or agree to. The principal accepted the boy’s story about the broken window. Except is usually a preposition that means aside from or excluding. I want all of the mugs to be washed except for the blue one.

affect, effect
As a verb, affect means to influence. His money affected the way people treated him. Used in the past as a noun also, though almost exclusively in the mental health field, affect referred to a person’s mood. The patient presented with a somber affect. Effect is usually a noun meaning a result. The drug had several adverse side effects. But it is also used as a verb meaning to cause. The new laws effected less cultural change than anticipated.

allusion, illusion
An allusion is an indirect reference. Did you catch my allusion to Shakespeare? An illusion is a false or misleading appearance. Mirrors give the room an illusion of depth.

assure, ensure, insure
Assure and ensure are generally interchangeable, though assure is more often used for people. I assure you, sir, I am unarmed. Please ensure that the lid is tight. Insure is almost exclusively used in a financial sense. Have you insured your car yet?

a while, awhile
A while is a noun phrase. Let’s sit for a while. Awhile is an adverb. Let’s sit awhile. Many agree this is a nitpicky distinction, since the only difference seems to be the use of a preposition before a while.

bring, take
If the action is directed toward you, use bring. Bring home the bacon. If the action is away from you, use take. Take out the trash.

censer, censor(n), sensor
A censer is either a container of burning incense or the person who carries it. A censor is someone who suppresses objectionable subject matter. A sensor is a mechanical or electronic detector.

censor(v), censure
To censor is to suppress objectionable subject matter. Many school libraries censored The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. To censure is to criticize strongly or disapprove. The press will often censure the government if they disagree.

conscience, conscious
Conscience is a noun referring to a sense of right and wrong. I would have stayed in bed, but my conscience said I should get up. Conscious is an adjective meaning awake or aware. Being conscious now of the light, how could I live in the dark?

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continuous, continual
*Continuous* means constant, without interruption.  *Continual* means recurring or frequently repeated.

could have, could of
Promoting the confusion is the contraction “could’ve,” which sounds like “could of.”  In formal prose, have should follow “could,” “would,” “should,” or “might.”  *Compromise could have ensured our success.*

different than, different from
People commonly use *than* with *different*, but than is used for comparisons, and *different* is not comparative. *Different from* is preferred.  *The second blast was not bigger, just different from the first.*

elicit, illicit
The verb *elicit* means to evoke or draw out.  *The police elicited from the criminal the names of his accomplices.*  The adjective *illicit* means illegal.  *George was guilty of committing illicit acts.*

emigrate, immigrate, migrate
*Emigrate* means to move away from one’s country.  *We emigrated from Canada in 2002.*  *Immigrate* means to move into another country.  *We immigrated to the United States.*  *Migrate*, when referring to people, means to relocate within the same land.  *Thousands of pioneers sought their freedoms by migrating west.*  For animals, *migrate* means to relocate.  *Geese spend much of the spring and fall migrating between warm and cool climates.*

eminent, imminent, immanent
*Eminent* means prominent or famous.  *We have gathered this evening to honor three eminent authors.*  *Imminent* means pending or expected soon.  *Sir, core breach is imminent.*  *Immanent* means inherent or ever-present.  *God’s immanence is most apparent in the phenomenon of creation.*

empathy, sympathy
*Empathy* is a psychological attachment in which one imagines another’s experience.  *Sympathy* is compassion for or emotional alignment with a person or other entity.

every day, everyday
*Every day* is a noun phrase.  *What time do you wake up every day?  Everyday* is an adjective.  *How do you like my everyday attire?*

every one, everyone
*Every one* is a noun phrase meaning each.  *Every one of the flowers bloomed.*  *Everyone* is a noun meaning all, and usually refers exclusively to people.  *Everyone finished the course with ease.*

fewer, less; many, much; number, amount
Use *fewer*, *many*, and *number* with nouns that can be counted.  *I have fewer pieces than you do.*  Use *less*, *much*, and *amount* with general amounts that cannot be counted.  *I have less candy than you do.*

height, heighth
While both of these spellings are etymologically sound (*heighth* is an Old English variant of *height*), most sources recommend using the more commonly accepted spelling *height.*

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I, me; he, him; who, whom
I refers to the subject (the actor) in a sentence or clause; me refers to the object (the thing or person being acted upon). *Who will attend the conference, he or I? Please send your abstract to my assistant or me.* The same applies for he(s), him(o); who(s), whom(o); and whoever(s), whomever(o).

I am done, I am finished
Pedants pounce on I am done, often “correcting” it with I am finished. To get even more persnickety, whether one uses done or finished is not really the issue. The confusion—if you’re really confused—is caused by the passive voice of the sentence. The construction I am done uses the passive voice to say that someone or something did you. However, I have finished keeps the sentence in active voice and the meaning clear. Of course, it could also be argued that the construction I am done treats the word done as an adjective describing the state of having finished, in which case I am done would be just fine.

infer, imply
To imply something is to hint it, basically. *But that statement implies that my involvement was deliberate.* To infer something is to gather it, surmise it, or come to the conclusion. *Am I to infer, Governor, that if we do not surrender our land we will be evicted or killed?*

lay, lie
*LAY* means to put or place. It takes a direct object specifying the thing that is put or placed. *She laid her books on the desk.* *LIE* does not take a direct object. For living things, lie means to recline. *She lay awake until two.* For nonliving things, it means to exist or be located. *That valley lies to the north.* The confusion is caused by the conjugation of lay and lie. Here are the verb forms:

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led, lead
*Led* is the past-tense form of the verb lead (to direct or escort). *Lead* is the element.

log in, login, log-in
Use *log in* as a verb phrase. *Go ahead and log in.* *Login* and log-in are used as nouns or adjectives. *Use your own login information.*

okay, OK
*Okay* is a younger variant of OK, but either is acceptable if kept consistent.

phenomena, phenomenon
*Phenomena* is the plural form of *phenomenon.*

than, then
Use *then* with sequenced events. *I laughed, and then I cried.* Use *than* in comparisons. *The cat was bigger than the dog.*
Commonly Confused Words

**there, their, they’re**
The adverb *there* is used to point out a location. *Do you see them over there?* Their is a possessive pronoun. *Their dog is always chasing cars.* And *there* is the contraction for “they are.” *They’re quite a couple.*

**to, too**
*To* is a preposition meaning toward or in the direction of. *Are you going to the store?* It can also be used to form an infinitive verb. *The divers must be careful to swim.* Too has two meanings: also (*I like candy too*) and to an excessive degree (*In fact, I like it too much*).

**toward, towards**
The preferred form is without the *s* in American English, with the *s* in British English. The same is true for other directional words, such as upward, downward, backward, and forward.

**uninterested, disinterested**
Uninterested means not interested. *She was uninterested in my art.* Disinterested means unbiased. *Finding a disinterested judge in this matter may prove difficult.*

**utilize, use**
Utilize, which means to use to the best effect, is an overused version of *use* and is only occasionally the better choice. *Use* is generally the best choice for simplicity.

**when, whenever**
These are not interchangeable. Use *whenever* only to emphasize uncertainty in the time of an event. *Well whenever you get here, I guess just I’ll be waiting.* Use *when* in all other cases. *When I was ten, I went to Disneyworld.*

**your, you’re**
Your is a possessive pronoun. *Bring your sleeping bag along.* You’re is the contraction for you are. *You’re in the wrong sleeping bag.*