

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.

ensor(v), censure

To **ensor** 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:

Base Form	Past Tense	Past Participle	Present Participle	-S Form
Lie (recline)	lay	lain	lying	lies
Lay (put)	laid	laid	laying	lays

Adapted from *The Everyday Writer, 5th edition (346)*. A. A. Lunsford, 2013, Boston: Bedford/St.Martin’s.

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.*

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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.*