

Commonly Misused Words and Phrases

**Why should you bother to read this handout?*

The transition from spoken to written language can often be a bumpy one because the way we talk tends to be a lot less formal than the way we write. When we try to translate spoken ideas into writing, it is often hard to remember correct grammar. Also, we hear incorrect grammar used so often that correct grammar might sound odd or even Awrong@ to us.

Homonyms can present an especially difficult problem because they sound alike, but the different spellings mean different things. Changing one letter in a word could alter the whole meaning of a sentence. Common phrases are also likely to be written incorrectly because in speech words are often shortened or slurred together so that not all of the letters are pronounced, making it easy to inadvertently leave these letters out when writing.

Knowing which word to use or how to write a phrase correctly can make a big difference in your writing. It is easier for readers to take a piece of writing more seriously when the grammar is correct. This handout contains a list of commonly confused homonyms and problem phrases, as well as a few hints to help you remember the grammar rules.

Words that sound alike (homonyms):

We have selected the ones we see in the Writing Center most often. For a complete list of homonyms you may [click here](#).

Accept, Except:

Accept is a verb meaning Ato receive.@ Except is usually a preposition meaning Aexcluding.@ I will accept all the packages except that one. Except is also a verb meaning Ato exclude.@ Please except that item from the list.

Affect, Effect:

Affect is usually a verb meaning Ato influence. @ Effect is usually a noun meaning Aresult.@ The drug did not affect the disease, and it had several adverse side effects. Effect can also be a verb meaning Ato bring about.@ Only the president can effect such a dramatic change.

Allusion, Illusion:

An *Allusion* is an indirect reference. An *illusion* is a misconception or false impression. *Did you catch my allusion to Shakespeare? Mirrors give the room an illusion of depth.*

Capital, Capitol:

Capital refers to a city, *capitol* to a building where lawmakers meet. *Capital* also refers to wealth or resources. *The capitol has undergone extensive renovations. The residents of the state capital protested the development plans.*

Climactic, Climatic:

Climactic is derived from *climax*, the point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events. *Climatic* is derived from *climate*; it refers to meteorological conditions. *The climactic period in the dinosaurs= reign was reached just before severe climatic conditions brought on the ice age.*

Elicit, Illicit:

Elicit is a verb meaning to bring out or to evoke. *Illicit* is an adjective meaning unlawful. *The reporter was unable to elicit information from the police about illicit drug traffic.*

Emigrate from, Immigrate to:

Emigrate means to leave one country or region to settle in another. *In 1900, my grandfather emigrated from Russia. Immigrate means to enter another country and reside there. Many Mexicans immigrate to the U.S. to find work.*

Hints:

Emigrate begins with the letter AE, as does Exit. When you **emigrate**, you exit a country.

Immigrate begins with the letter AI, as does In. When you **immigrate**, you go into a country

Principle, Principal:

Principal is a noun meaning the head of a school or an organization or a sum of money. *Principle* is a noun meaning a basic truth or law. *The principal taught us many important life principles.*

Hint:

To recognize the spelling of **Principal** first think of yourself as a greedy opportunist. You definitely would want to be a **Apal@** of anyone who is in a position of power or anything to do with money. This **principal** has **Apal@** in it.

Than, Then:

Than is a conjunction used in comparisons; *then* is an adverb denoting time. *That pizza is more than I can eat. Tom laughed, and then we recognized him.*

Hints:

Than is used to compare; both words have the letter **Aa@** in them.

Then tells when; both are spelled the same, except for the first letter.

There, Their, They=re:

There is an adverb specifying place; it is also an expletive. Adverb: *Sylvia is lying there unconscious.* Expletive: *There are two plums left.* *Their* is a possessive pronoun. *They=re* is a contraction of *they are*. *Fred and Jane finally washed their car. They=re later than usual today.*

Hints:

If you are using **there** to tell the reader *where*, both words have h-e-r-e. *Here* is also a place.

If you are using **their** as a possessive pronoun, you are telling the reader what "they@ own. **Their** has h-e-i-r, which also means *heir*, as in someone who inherits something. Both words have to do with ownership.

They=re is a contraction of they are. Sound out **Athey are@** in the sentence and see if it works. If it does not, it must be one of the previous versions.

To, Too, Two:

To is a preposition; *too* is an adverb; *two* is a number. *Too many of your shots slice to the left, but the last two were right on the mark.*

Hints:

If you are trying to spell out the number, it is always t-w-o. **Two** has a Aw@ which is the first letter in Aword.@ The opposite of word is number.

Too is usually used as also when adding or including some additional information. Whenever you want to include something else, think of it as adding; therefore you also need to add an extra Ao.@

Your, You=re:

Your is a possessive pronoun; *you=re* is a contraction of *you are*. *You=re* going to catch a cold if you don=t wear *your* coat.

Hints:

Sound out you are in the sentence. If it works in the sentence it can be written as **you=re**. If it sounds awkward, it is probably supposed to be **Your**.

EXAMPLE: **You=re** shoes are muddy. "You are shoes are muddy" does not work, so it should be written as: **Your** shoes are muddy.

Words that don=t sound alike but confuse us anyway:

Lie, Lay:

Lie is an intransitive verb meaning Ato recline or rest on a surface.@ Its principal parts are *lie, lay, lain*. *Lay* is a transitive verb meaning Ato put or place.@ Its principal parts are *lay, laid*.

Hint: Chickens lay eggs. I lie down when I am tired.

Set, Sit:

Set is a transitive verb meaning Ato put@ or Ato place.@ Its principal parts are *set, set, set*. *Sit* is an intransitive verb meaning Ato be seated.@ Its principal parts are *sit, sat, sat*. *She set the dough in a warm corner of the kitchen. The cat sat in the warmest part of the room.*

Who, Which, That:

Do not use *which* to refer to persons. Use *who* instead. *That*, though generally used to refer to things, may be used to refer to a group or class of people. *I just saw a boy who was wearing a yellow banana costume. I have to go to math next, which is my hardest class. Where is the book that I was reading?*

Problem phrases:

Supposed to: Do not omit the Ad.@ *Suppose to* is incorrect.

Used to: Same as above. Do not write *use to*.

Toward: There is no As@ at the end of the word.

Anyway: Also has no ending As.@ *Anyways* is nonstandard.

Couldn't care less: Be sure to make it negative. (Not *I could care less*.)

All walks of life: Not *woks of life*. This phrase does not apply to oriental cooking.

Chest of drawers: Not *chester drawers*.

For all intents and purposes: Not *intensive purposes*.