

Commonly Confused Words

Accept / Except

Accept is a verb meaning to receive. (I accept your apology.)

Except can be a preposition meaning “excluding” or a verb meaning to exclude. (Everyone is included except John.)

Adapt / Adopt / Adept

Adapt is a verb that means “to adjust to or become accustomed to.” (Employees adapt to changes positively.)

Adopt is a verb that means “to take or to choose something voluntarily.” (They decided to adopt both children even though they already had ten.)

Adept is an adjective that means “thoroughly proficient.” (He is adept at fixing cars.)

Advice / Advise

Advice is a noun. (The value of good advice is not immediately recognized.)

Advise is a verb. (I advise you to read the instruction manual.)

Affect / Effect

Affect is usually a verb meaning “to influence.” (Automobile emissions can affect the earth’s atmosphere.)

Effect is usually a noun meaning “result.” (The effects of global warming are difficult to determine.)

Effect can also be a verb meaning “to bring about.” (The medicine he was taking eventually effected a change in his behavior.)

Allude / Refer

To *allude* is to mention something indirectly.

To *refer* is to mention something directly.

Allusion/Illusion

An *allusion* is an indirect reference. (The poet made an allusion to the Bible.)

An *illusion* is a misleading image. (David Copperfield employs illusions in his magic tricks.)

Alot/ a lot / allot

A *lot* is the correct form. *Alot* is a misspelling.

Allot means to apportion.

Already / All Ready

Already means previously.

All Ready means prepared.

Altogether / All Together

Altogether means entirely.

All Together means gathered together.

Ambiguous / Ambivalent

Ambiguous is an adjective meaning “doubtful” or “unclear.”

Ambivalent is an adjective meaning “uncertain” or “having simultaneous and contradictory feelings.”

Among / Between

Use *among* when dealing with more than 2 and *between* when dealing with only 2.

Assure / Ensure / Insure

Assure means “to make safe” or to give confidence to.” (He looked back to assure himself no one was following.)

Ensure means “to make a thing or person sure” and may imply a virtual guarantee. (The government has *ensured* the safety of the refugees.)

Insure means “to make certain” and sometimes stresses the taking of necessary measures beforehand. (Careful planning should *insure* the success of the party.)

Bring / Take

Use *bring* when something is being brought to you.

Use *take* when something is being moved away.

Can / May

Use *can* to express an ability to do something.

Use *may* to express either permission or possibility.

Cite / Site / Sight

Cite means “to quote from or to refer to an authority.”

Site means “a place.”

Sight means “something that can be seen.”

Coarse / Course

Coarse is an adjective meaning “rough,” “harsh,” or “crude.”

Course is a noun meaning “accustomed procedure” or “unit of study.”

Complement / Compliment

Complement is a verb meaning “to go with” or “to complete.”

Compliment is a verb meaning “to flatter.”

Conscience / Conscious

Conscience is a noun meaning “moral principles.”

Conscious is an adjective meaning “to be awake” or “to be aware.”

Council / Counsel

A *council* is a group of people who meet to consult, deliberate, or discuss.

Counsel means “to advise or to recommend.”

Desert / Dessert

A *desert* is made up of sand.

A *dessert* is a tasty treat.

Elicit / Illicit

Elicit is a verb meaning “to bring out.”

Illicit is an adjective meaning “unlawful.”

Emigrate / Immigrate

Emigrate means “to leave one’s country to go somewhere else.”

Immigrate means “to come into a country.”

Eminent / Imminent

Eminent means “outstanding” or “distinguished.”

Imminent means “about to happen.”

Explicit / Implicit

Explicit means “directly expressed or clearly defined.”

Implicit means “implied or unstated.”

Good / Well

Good is an adjective. (Even though it is two weeks old, the fruit still looks good.)

Well is an adverb. (Did you sleep well?)

Both well and good can be used when referring to a state of health, but there are subtle

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differences; therefore, well is preferred. (I feel well today.)

Its / It’s / its’

Its is the possessive pronoun.

(The college will hold its graduation on Thursday.)

It’s is the contraction of it is.

(Because the storm clouds are rolling, it’s likely to rain before evening.)

Its’ is an error.

Led / Lead

Led is the past tense of the verb lead. (The performer led the audience in a sing-a-long.)

Lead is a noun that refers to metal. (Many older buildings are contaminated by lead paint.)

Loose / Lose

Loose is an adjective meaning “not tight.”

Lose is a verb meaning “to misplace.”

Passed / Past

Passed is the past tense of the verb pass.

Past usually refers to a former time.

Principal / Principle

Principal is a noun meaning “the head of a school or organization.”

Principle is a noun meaning “a basic truth, rule, doctrine, or assumption.”

Respectively / Respectfully

Respectively is an adverb meaning “singly, in the order designated.”

Respectfully is an adverb meaning “with respect.”

Stationary / Stationery

Stationary means “remaining in one place.”

Stationery refers to paper.

There / Their / They’re

There is an adverb specifying place. (Stand there to have your picture taken.)

Their is a possessive pronoun. (Their house is on the corner.)

They’re is a contraction of they are. (They’re too tired to stay awake.)

To / Too / Two

To is a preposition that also serves as an infinitive marker.

Too is an adverb meaning “also.”

Two is a number.

Weather / Whether

Weather relates to the condition of the atmosphere. (The weather outside is frightening.)

Whether is a conjunction used to introduce the first of two or more alternatives. (Whether you decide to stay or to go is of no concern to me.)

Who / Which / That

Who is used to refer to people and to animals with names.

Which is used to refer only to things and animals.

That is used to refer to things and to most animals, and it may also be used to refer to a group or class of people.

Who’s / Whose

Who’s is a contraction for who is.

Whose is a possessive pronoun.