Commonly Confused Words

Good communication involves using words appropriately to articulate your ideas and support your assertions. Using words correctly will also ensure that your reader will not be distracted from the content of your writing. Below are some of the most commonly confused English word pairs and their meanings.

**accept/except:** *Accept* is a verb; it means to receive. “We accept your invitation with pleasure.” *Except* is usually a preposition, and it means to leave out. “My grades are satisfactory in every subject except English.”

**adapt/adopt:** *Adapt* means to change in order to fit, or be more suitable; to adjust. “To survive, an animal must adapt to its environment.” “Some adult novels have been adapted for young readers.” *Adopt* means to take something and make it one’s own. “They adopted their physician’s suggestions and adopted a baby.”

**affect/effect:** In general, *affect* is a verb that means to influence or to cause change (it can be used as a noun when referring to an emotional response). For example: “Her campaign strategy affected the outcome of the election.” *Effect* is a noun that signifies a result brought about by an action. “The study examined the effects of sugar on children’s behavior.” Occasionally, *effect* is used as a verb when it means to bring about, as in “Her efforts effected a change.”

**amount/number and less/fewer:** *Amount* and *less* can only be used with uncountable quantities, such as the “amount of peanut butter,” or “less peanut butter.” For countable things, use *number* and *fewer*: “the number of peanuts” and “fewer peanuts.”

**because/since:** The word *because* denotes cause and effect. “She ran because he chased her.” *Since* refers to the passage of time. “I have been a professor since 2008.”

**between/among:** In general, use *between* to show a relationship between two things. “I could not choose between the apple or the pumpkin pie.” For relationships involving three or more things, use *among*: “I could not decide among the four delicious desserts.”

**capital/capitol:** As a noun, *capital* refers to a city or it can refer to wealth or resources. “Do you know the capital of Wyoming?” “His business had enough capital to open offices across the country.” *Capitol* refers to a building where lawmakers meet. “The capitol has undergone extensive renovations.”

**compliment/complement:** A *compliment* is an expression of praise or admiration. “I received a compliment about my new jacket.” A *complement* completes a number or quantity: “We had a full complement.” It can also mean to add to or embellish, such as: “The Persian rug complemented the furniture in the room.”
**connote/denote:** *Connote* is used to suggest unstated meaning or ideas; something implied. “The word mother *connotes* unconditional love.” *Denote* is used to refer to the literal meaning of something. “White flags are used to *denote* surrender.”

**could of/ought to of/ might of/must of:** These are sometimes carelessly written for *could have, ought to have/might have/must have.* Remember *not* to use of for have. “She *could have* warned me about the dangerous roads.”

**data:** This is the plural form of the Latin *datum.* In standard informal English, *data* is a collective noun and should be written with a plural verb. “These *data* were collected by the committee.”

**desert/dessert:** As a noun, a *desert* is an arid, sandy place. “The Sahara *desert* is home to nomadic tribes.” It can also be used as a verb meaning to leave behind. “Her husband *deserted* her and the children.” *Dessert* is that sweet treat we eat after a meal. “Monique had blueberry pie for *dessert.*” An easy way to commit this to memory is to remember that *dessert* has a double s and is twice as pleasant as the dry, arid *desert!*

**due to/because of:** *Due to* means *caused by* and often follows the verb “to be” (is, was, were, am, etc.) in a sentence. For example: “The game’s postponement is *due to* rain.” “It was *due to* the storm that the game was canceled.” Note that using *due to* is not a formal way to writing *because of.* In general, the use of *because of* answers the question, “why?” and is followed by a noun or a noun phrase. “The tow truck was late *because of* another accident.”

**elicit/illicit:** *Elicit* is a verb meaning to obtain, bring out, or to evoke. *Illicit* is an adjective meaning unlawful. “The reporter was unable to *elicit* information from the police about *illicit* drug trafficking.”

**emigrate/immigrate:** *Emigrate* means to exit or to leave a country. *Immigrate* means to move into a new country. “The McKays were *emigrants* from Scotland who *immigrated* to Canada.” An easy way to remember is that *emigrate* begins with the letter E, as does Exit. When you *emigrate*, you exit a country. *Immigrate* begins with the letter I, as does In. When you *immigrate*, you go into a country.

**ensure/assure/insure:** While many sources believe that *ensure, assure, and insure* are synonymous, conservative grammarians believe they each have a specific use. *Assure* is used when talking to or about a person and you are implying certainty; you are putting one’s mind at ease or removing doubt. “I *assure* you that I will be on time for the wedding.” *Ensure* means to make certain. “An excellent outline will *ensure* that your research paper is well organized.” *Insure* is generally used when talking about protecting against a financial loss, such as with an insurance policy. “In case of a natural disaster, they *insured* their home.”
One way to help remember whether to use *assure*, *ensure*, or *insure*, is to remind yourself that:

You *assure* a person (or something that is alive; remember the *a* in alive).
You *ensure* anything else (when you guarantee something; remember the *e* at the end of guarantee).
You *insure* your car (remember that insurance protects income; remember the *i* for income).

**every day/everyday**: *Every day* means each day. “Every day Luke walks to school.” When you use the word *everyday*, it should tell the reader that something is typical or ordinary. “Rain is an everyday occurrence in Seattle.”

**famous/notorious**: *Famous* means widely known. *Notorious* means widely known, but is used in an unfavorable sense. “Katherine Hepburn and Bette Davis are among the most famous American film actresses.” “Jesse James is probably America’s most notorious outlaw.”

**farther/further**: *Farther* is refers to physical distance or length, whereas *further* means to a greater degree or additionally. “Newington is farther south than Windsor Locks.” “Her paper requires further research to support her thesis.”

**i.e./e.g.:** These are both Latin terms. I.e. is an abbreviation for *id est* and is used to say “in other words” or “that is.” E.g. is an abbreviation for *exempli gratia* and is used to mean “for example” or “including.”

**imply/infer**: *Imply* means to suggest. “The postcard implied that they were having fun on their trip.” *Infer* means to interpret or conclude. “I inferred from the article that Jones was a proponent of the bill.”

**in/into**: *In* indicates location or condition. “I am in the grocery store.” *Into* is a preposition and generally suggests movement or direction. “At two o’clock we walked into the principal’s office.” “Rachel found the diary in the trunk after she had moved it into the attic.”

**lie/lay**: *Lie* means to recline or to rest on a surface. *Lay* means to put or place. What confuses us when using these two words is the various verb tenses or forms they take.

The principal parts of *lie* (to recline) are:

- **lie** (present tense): I *lie* on the children’s bed to read them a story.
- **lay** (past tense): I *lay* on the children’s bed to read them a story.
- **lain** (past participle): I *had lain* on the children’s bed to read them a story.
- **lying** (present participle): I am *lying* on the children’s bed to read them a story.
The principal parts of lay (to place or put down) are:

**lay** (present tense): I lay the book on the table.

**laid** (past tense): I laid the book on the table.

**laid** (past participle): I had laid the book on the table.

**laying** (present participle): I am laying the book on the table.

A simple strategy to remember them is to write or say them as a ditty:

lie, lay, lain, lying (to recline)

lay, laid, laid, laying (to place or put down).

**like/as:** *Like* is a preposition and introduces a prepositional phrase. “She walks like her mother.” *Like* should not be used for *as if* or *as though*, which are used to imply the opposite of what something or someone seems, or if something seems unreal. “It looks as though he forgot to call.” “He reacts as if it were her fault.” “She is acting as if/as though I had two heads.” *As* is usually a conjunction, and it introduces a subordinate clause. “She cooks spaghetti as the Italians do.”

**persecute/prosecute:** *Persecute* means to attack or annoy someone, often for a person’s beliefs. *Prosecute* means to bring legal action against someone for unlawful behavior. “Hitler persecuted people who opposed the Nazi government.” “Trespassers will be prosecuted.”

**phenomena/phenomenon:** *Phenomena* is the plural form of *phenomenon*. Do not use it as a singular noun. “These natural phenomena are most interesting.” “This natural phenomenon is most interesting.”

**principle/principal:** *Principal* is a noun meaning the head of a school or an organization. It can also refer to a sum of money or an important idea. “A principal theory in education is Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development.” *Principle* is a noun meaning a basic truth or law. “The principal of our school taught us many important life principles.” An easy way to remember which word to use is to remember that the principal of your school can be your “pal.”

**set/sit:** *Set* means to put or to place. *Sit* means to be seated. “She set the dough in a warm corner of the kitchen.” “I sit on the bench to put on my shoes.” “The cat sat in the warmest part of the room.”

**stationary/stationery:** When something is not moving, it is *stationary*. People use *stationery*, or writing materials, when they send a letter through the mail.

**that/which/in which:** *That* is used with restrictive clauses, which is a clause that contains information essential to the meaning of the sentence. “The photograph that was in the gallery was a landscape.” (*Who* should be used when referring to people. “I just saw a boy who was wearing a yellow banana costume.”) *Which* is used with nonrestrictive clauses. These clauses contain additional descriptive information within a sentence, but
are not essential to complete the sentence. Commas are placed around the clause. “The photograph, which was in the gallery, was a landscape.” “I have to go to math next, which is my hardest class.” Use in which to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. “This is the book in which the essay was referenced.”

then/than: Then is an adverb denoting time. Than is a conjunction and is used to make comparisons. “Tom raised his hand, and then he asked a question.” “Hugh ate more pizza than I could ever eat.”

there/their/they’re: There refers to a place. Their is a possessive pronoun and means belonging to, as in “their shoes.” They’re is a contraction for they are.

who/whom: Who and whom are pronouns used when referring to a person. Employ who when describing the subject of a sentence. The subject is the person performing an action. “Christina is the student who wrote the poem.” Whom describes the object of a sentence, or the person receiving the action. “Christina is the student to whom Robert gave the book.”