

Commonly Confused Words

(Adapted from *A Pocket Style Manual 2nd Edition* by Diana Hacker)

accept, except—*Accept* is a verb meaning “to receive.” *Except* is usually a preposition meaning “excluding”: I will *accept* all the packages *except* that one.

advice, advise—*Advice* is a noun, *advise* a verb: We *advise* you to follow John’s *advice*.

affect, effect—*Affect* is usually a verb meaning “to influence.” *Effect* is usually a noun meaning “result”: The drug did not *affect* the disease, and it had several adverse side *effects*. *Effect* can also be a verb meaning “to bring about”: Only the president can *effect* such a dramatic change.

all ready, already—*All ready* means “completely prepared.” *Already* means “previously”: Susan was *all ready* for the concert, but her friends had *already* left.

all right—*All right* is always written as two words. *Alright* is nonstandard.

all together, altogether—*All together* means “everyone gathered.” *Altogether* means “entirely”: We were not *altogether* certain that we could bring the family *all together* for the reunion.

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.

a lot—*A lot* is two words. Do not write *alot*.

among, between—Ordinarily, use *among* with three or more entities, *between* with two: The prize was divided *among* several contestants. You have a choice *between* carrots and beans.

anxious—*Anxious* means “worried” or “apprehensive.” In formal writing, avoid using *anxious* to mean “eager”: We are *eager* {not *anxious*} to see your new house.

anymore, any more—*Anymore*, an adverb, means “at the present; from now on” and is used in negative constructions. It is not yet acceptable to use *anymore* to mean, “nowadays.” *Any more* refers to anything additional or further. He doesn’t live here *anymore*, but would you like *any more* soup from his refrigerator? “That’s hard to get *anymore*,” is not considered standard, and in formal writing, one should use “nowadays.”

anyone, any one—*Anyone*, an indefinite pronoun, means “any person at all.” *Any one* refers to a particular person or thing in a group: *Anyone* from Chicago may choose *any one* of the games on display.

awhile, a while—*Awhile* is an adverb; it can modify a verb, but it cannot be the object of a preposition such as *for*. The two-word form *a while* is a noun preceded by an article and therefore must be the object of a preposition. Stay *awhile*. Stay *for a while*.

bad, badly—*Bad* is an adjective, *badly* an adverb: They felt *bad* about being early and ruining the surprise. Her arm hurt *badly* after she slid into second.

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

cite, site—*Cite* means “to quote as an authority or example.” *Site* is usually a noun meaning “a particular place”: He *cited* the zoning law in his argument against the proposed *site* of the gas station.

complement, compliment—*Complement* is a verb meaning “to go with or complete” or a noun meaning “something that completes.” *Compliment* as a verb means “to flatter”; as a noun it means “flattering remark”: Her skill at rushing the net *complements* his skill at volleying. Jill’s music arrangements receive many *compliments*.

conscience, conscious—*Conscience* is a noun meaning “moral principles”; *conscious* is an adjective meaning “aware or alert”: Let your *conscience* be your guide. Were you *conscious* of his love for you?

data—*Data* is the plural of *datum*, which means “a fact or proposition.” Many writers now treat *data* as singular or plural depending on the meaning of the sentence. Some experts insist, however, that *data* can only be plural: The new *data* suggest {not suggests} that our theory is correct. The singular form *datum* is rarely used.

e.g.—Use *for example* or *for instance* in formal writing.

etc.—Avoid ending a list with *etc.* It is more emphatic to end with an example, and in most contexts readers will understand that the list is not exhaustive. When you don’t wish to end with an example, *and so on* is more graceful than *etc.*

everyone, every one—*Everyone* is an indefinite pronoun: *Everyone* wanted to go. *Every one*, the pronoun one preceded by the adjective every, means “each individual or thing in a particular group.” *Every one* is usually followed by of: *Every one* of the missing books was found.

farther, further—*Farther* describes distances: Detroit is *farther* from Miami than I thought. *Further* suggests quantity or degree: You extended the curfew *further* than you should have.

hanged, hung—*Hanged* is the past-tense and past-participle form of the verb *hang*, meaning “to execute”: The prisoner was *hanged* at dawn. *Hung* is the past-tense and past-participle form of the verb *hang*, meaning “to fasten or suspend”: The stockings were *hung* by the chimney with care.

hopefully—*Hopefully* means “in a hopeful manner”: We looked *hopefully* to the future. Do not use *hopefully* in constructions such as the following: *Hopefully*, your daughter will recover soon. Indicate who is doing the hoping: *I hope that your daughter will recover soon.*

i.e.—Use *that is* in formal writing.

irregardless—*Irregardless* is nonstandard. Use *regardless*.

its, it's—*Its* is a possessive pronoun; *it's* is a contraction for *it is*: The dog licked *its* wound whenever *its* owner walked into the room. *It's* a perfect day to walk the twenty-mile trail.

lead, led—*Lead* is a noun referring to a metal. *Led* is the past tense of the verb *to lead*: He *led* me to the treasure.

lie, lay—*Lie* is an intransitive verb meaning “to recline or rest on a surface.” Its forms are lie, lay, lain, lying, and lies. *Lay* is a transitive verb meaning “to put or place.” Its forms are lay, laid, laid, laying, and lays.

like, as—*Like* is a preposition, not a subordinating conjunction. It should be followed only by a noun or a noun phrase. *As* is a subordinating conjunction that introduces a subordinate clause. In casual speech you may say *She looks like she hasn't slept* or *You don't know her like I do*. But in formal writing, use *as*: *She looks as if she hasn't slept*. *You don't know her as I do*.

loose, lose—*Loose* is an adjective meaning “not securely fastened.” *Lose* is a verb meaning “to misplace” or “to not win”: Did you *lose* your only *loose* pair of work pants?

maybe, may be—*Maybe* is an adverb meaning “possibly”; *may be* is a verb phrase: *Maybe* the sun will shine tomorrow. Tomorrow *may be* a brighter day.

passed, past—*Passed* is the past tense of the verb *to pass*: Emily *passed* me another slice of cake. *Past* usually means “belonging to a former time” or “beyond a time or place”: Our *past* president spoke until *past* midnight. The hotel is just *past* the next intersection.

precede, proceed—*Precede* means “to come before.” *Proceed* means “to go forward”: As we *proceeded* up the mountain, we noticed fresh tracks in the mud, evidence that a group of hikers had *preceded* us.

principal, principle—*Principal* is a noun meaning “the head of a school or organization” or “a sum of money.” It is also an adjective meaning “most important.” *Principle* is a noun meaning “a basic truth or law”: The *principal* expelled her for three *principal* reasons. We believe in the *principle* of equal justice for all.

real, really—*Real* is an adjective; *really* is an adverb. *Real* is sometimes used informally as an adverb, but avoid this use in formal writing: She was *really* {not *real*} angry.

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. The cat *sits* in the warmest part of the room.

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.

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: Fred and Jane finally washed *their* car. *They're* is a contraction of *they are*: Surprisingly, *they're* late today.

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.

toward, towards—*Toward* and *towards* are generally interchangeable, although *toward* is preferred.

who, which, that—Use *who*, not *which*, to refer to persons. Generally, use *that* to refer to things or, occasionally, to a group or class of people: Fans wondered how an old man *who* {not *that* or *which*} walked with a limp could play football. The team *that* scores the most points in this game will win the tournament.

who, whom—*Who* is used for subjects and subject complements; *whom* is used for objects.

who's, whose—*Who's* is a contraction of *who is*; *whose* is a possessive pronoun: *Who's* ready for more popcorn? *Whose* coat is this?

your, you're—*Your* is a possessive pronoun; *you're* is a contraction of *you are*: Is that *your* new motorcycle? *You're* on the list of finalists.