

Common Errors in English

The following is a list of words that are often used incorrectly in papers. This list is in no way a comprehensive one so, for more examples and explanations, please visit <http://wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html>

Accept/Except: Accept is a verb. When offered a gift, you gladly *accept* it. **Except** is used to show exclusion. E.g. I like any color *except* green.

Affect/Effect: There are four distinct words here. When “affect” is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is a verb meaning “have an influence on”: “The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act.” A much rarer meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning “emotion.” The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: “effect.” This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: “When I left the stove on, the *effect* was that the house filled with smoke.” When you *affect* a situation, you have an *effect* on it. The less common is a verb meaning “to create”: “I’m trying to *effect* a change in the way we purchase widgets.” No wonder people are confused. Note especially that the proper expression is not “take affect” but “take effect”—become effective.

Advice/Advise: “Advice” is the noun, “advise” the verb. When Ann Landers *advises* people, she gives them *advice*.

All right: The correct form of this phrase has become so rare in the popular press that many readers have probably never noticed that it is actually two words. But if you want to avoid irritating traditionalists you’d better tell them that you feel “all right” rather than “alright.”

Amount/Number: *Amount* relates to the quantity of things that can be measured in bulk while *Number* refers to things that can be counted.

Apart/A part: Paradoxically, the one-word form implies separation while the two-word form implies union. Feuding roommates decide to live apart. Their time together may be a part of their life they will remember with some bitterness.

A while/Awhile: When “awhile” is spelled as a single word, it is an adverb meaning “for a time” (“stay awhile”); but when “while” is the object of a prepositional phrase, like “Lend me your monkey wrench for a while” the “while” must be separated from the “a.” (But if the preposition “for” were lacking in this sentence, “awhile” could be used in this way: “Lend me your monkey wrench awhile.”)

Bought/brought: If you pay for something, you've *bought* it; if you bring something, you've *brought* it. These two words are probably interchanged most often out of mere carelessness. A spelling checker won't catch the switch, so watch out for it.

Capital/Capitol: A "capitol" is almost always a building. Cities which serve as seats of government are *capitals* spelled with an A in the last syllable, as are most other uses of the word as a common noun. The only exceptions are place names alluding to capitol buildings in some way or other, like "Capitol Hill" in DC, Denver, or Seattle (the latter either named after the hill in Denver or in hopes of attracting the Washington State capitol building). Would it help to remember that *Congress* with an O meets in the *Capitol* with another O?

Choose/chose: You chose tequila last night; you choose aspirin this morning. "Chose" is the past tense, "choose" the present.

Cite/Site/Sight: You *cite* the author in an endnote; you visit a Web *site* or the *site* of the crime, and you *sight* your beloved running toward you in slow motion on the beach (a sight for sore eyes!).

Council/Counsel: The first two words are pronounced the same but have distinct meanings. An official group that deliberates, like the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), is a "council." All the rest are "counsels:" your lawyer, advice, etc. A consul is a local representative of a foreign government.

Few/less: Yes, Wal-mart and Giant Eagle are both wrong. It should be *20 items or fewer*, not *20 Items or less*. *Amount* words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; *Amount* words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; *number* to things that can be counted. You can eat *fewer* cookies, but you drink *less* milk. If you eat too *many* cookies, people would probably think you've had too *much* dessert. If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use *number* words. Even a substance which is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn't drink too *much* wine, but you should also avoid drinking too *many* glasses of wine. Note that here you are *counting glasses*. They can be numbered.

Good/Well: You do something well, but a thing is good. The exception is verbs of sensation in phrases such as "the pie smells good," or "I feel good." Despite the arguments of nigglers, this is standard usage. Saying "the pie smells well" would imply that the pastry in question had a nose. Similarly, "I feel well" is also acceptable, especially when discussing health; but it is not the only correct usage.

Interracial/Biracial: Bi-racial describes someone with parents of two races, while interracial describes a union involving two races.

Its/its: The exception to the general rule that one should use an apostrophe to indicate possession is in possessive pronouns. Some of them are not a problem. "Mine" has no misleading "s" at the end to invite an apostrophe. And few people are tempted to write "hi's," though the equally erroneous "her's" is fairly common, as are "our's" and "their's"—all wrong, wrong, wrong. The problem with avoiding "it's" as a possessive is that this spelling is perfectly correct as a

contraction meaning “it is.” Just remember two points and you’ll never make this mistake again. (1) “it’s” always means “it is” or “it has” and nothing else. (2) Try changing the “its” in your sentence to “his” and if it doesn’t make sense, then go with “it’s.”

Lose/Loose: This confusion can easily be avoided if you pronounce the word intended aloud. If it has a voiced Z sound, then it’s “lose.” If it has a hissy S sound, then it’s “loose.” Here are examples of correct usage: “He tends to lose his keys.” “She lets her dog run loose.” Note that when “lose” turns into “losing” it loses its “E.”

Pass/Past/Passed/Paste: If you are referring to time or distance, use “past”: “the team performed well in the past,” “the police car drove past the suspect’s house.” If you are referring to the action of *passing*, however, you need to use “passed”: “when John passed the gravy, he spilled it on his lap,” “the teacher was astonished that none of the students had passed the test.”

Principal/Principle: Generations of teachers have tried to drill this one into students’ heads by reminding them, “The principal is your pal.” Many don’t seem convinced. “Principal” is a noun and adjective referring to someone or something which is highest in rank or importance. (In a loan, the principal is the more substantial part of the money, the interest is—or should be—the lesser.) “Principle” is only a noun, and has to do with law or doctrine: “The workers fought hard for the principle of collective bargaining.”

Then/Than: When comparing one thing with another you may find that one is more appealing *than* another. Than is the word you want to when making comparisons. But if you are referring to time, use *then*. (e.g) *First came love, then came marriage*. Mary is taller than Nancy.

There/Their/They’re: Many people are so spooked by apostrophes that a word like “they’re” seems to them as if it might mean almost anything. In fact, it’s always a contraction of “they are.” If you’ve written “they’re,” ask yourself whether you can substitute “they are.” If not, you’ve made a mistake. “Their” is a possessive pronoun like “her” or “our” “They eat their hotdogs with sauerkraut.” Everything else is “there.” “*There* goes the ball, out of the park! See it? Right *there!* *There* aren’t very many home runs like that.” “Thier” is a common misspelling, but you can avoid it by remembering that “they” and “their” begin with the same three letters. Another hint: “there” has “here” buried inside it to remind you it refers to place, while “their” has “heir” buried in it to remind you that it has to do with possession

Two/To/Too: People seldom mix “two” up with the other two; it obviously belongs with words that also begin with *TW*, like “twice” and “twenty” that involve the number 2. But the other two are confused all the time. Just remember that the only meanings of “too” are “also” (“I want some ice cream too.”) and “in excess” (“Your walkman is playing too loudly.”). Note that extra *O*. It should remind you that this word has to do with adding more on to something. “To” is the proper spelling for all the other uses.

Throne/thrown: A *throne* is that chair a king sits on, at least until he gets thrown out of office.

Who’s /Whose: This is one of those cases where it is important to remember that possessive pronouns never take apostrophes, even though possessive nouns do (see [it’s/its](#)). “Who’s” always and forever means only “who is,” as in “Who’s that guy with the droopy mustache?” or “who

has,” as in “Who’s been eating my porridge?” “Whose” is the possessive form of “who” and is used as follows: “Whose dirty socks are these on the breakfast table?”

Your/You’re: “You’re” is always a contraction of “you are.” If you’ve written “you’re,” try substituting “you are.” If it doesn’t work, the word you want is “your.” Your writing will improve if you’re careful about this. If someone thanks you, write back “you’re welcome” for “you are welcome.”