

HANDOUT | Editing: Words Often Confused

Many errors occur because the writer uses a word that *sounds* like the right word, but isn't.

- We can't tell if **its** or **it's**? engines are working.
- I think he will **except** or **accept**? your apology.
- No one knows what **there** or **they're** or **their**? thinking of!

When you edit, be sure to check for any of these words that may be confused.

accept / except

accept—to consent to receive or agree to undertake

- The victims accepted the perpetrator's apology.
- Our top candidate has accepted the offer of the position with our firm.
-

except—means “not including” or “other than”

- The test will cover all the material in the textbook except Chapters 7 and 9.

advise / advice

advise—verb meaning to provide guidance, give input

- I'll need my attorney to advise me on how I should proceed.

advice—is the guidance or input provided

- I always follow my attorney's advice.

affect / effect

These words are especially confusing because each can be a noun or a verb. Their most common meanings are

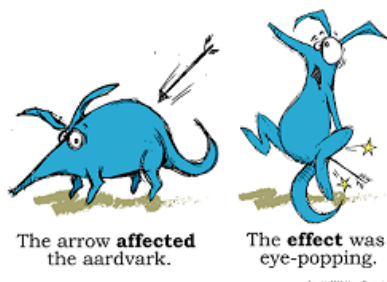
affect—verb: to influence or exert change

- The missing quiz grades don't *affect* my grade.

effect—noun: the result or changed caused

- The noise had an effect on our concentration.

Here's a “Quick & Dirty Trick” from the *Grammar Girl* website to help you remember which to use when:



As explained by Grammar Girl, “*affect* with an *a* goes with the *a*-words, *arrow* and *aardvark*, and ... *effect* with an *e* goes with the *e*-word, *eye-popping*.” If you visualize this poor little blue aardvark, it will be easier to remember that *affect* with an “a” is something acting on the aardvark, and *effect* with an e is the result of the act.

Source: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/affect-versus-effect.aspx>

a lot / a lot / allot

The most common problem here isn't with two words being confused but with the correct word being misspelled.

a lot—is an informal way of saying “many” or “much”

- The investigators found a lot of evidence at the crime scene.
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“alot” – “a lot” is very commonly misspelled as “alot.” *Alot is NOT A WORD in English.*

allot—verb meaning to divide and distribute or parcel out.

- In this class we will allot time for book work and for hands-on practice.

here / hear

here—is an indicative pronoun meaning “in this place ” (as opposed to “there,” which means “in that place”—there's a difference in *proximity* to the speaker.

- You can put your things right here so that you won't lose them.
-

hear—is what you do with your ears, if you have your hearing. It also refers to the presentation of a case before a judge.

- Nobody can hear the speaker when the airplanes fly overhead.
- The judge is not willing to hear the case.

its / it's

These two words get misused because the apostrophe confuses us.

Its: this form is *possessive*, but it does NOT use the apostrophe

- The team scored **its** first touchdown in the second half.
- **Its** bark is worse than **its** bite.

It's: this form is a *contraction*; it means “it is” or “it has”

- We think **it's** (it is) the shellfish that made us sick.
- **It's** (it has) been a decade since the economy was so badly off.

Editing tip: Any time you use either form of its/it's, read the word as “it is.”

- The team scored **it is** first touchdown...? *no; its.*
- *We think it is the shellfish...? yes; it's.*

lead / led

lead—pronounced “leed” is a verb meaning to conduct or guide someone or something

- The usher will lead you to the balcony seats.

led—past tense of the verb “lead”

- The tour guide led us around the entire campus and into a café.

lead—pronounced “led” is a soft gray metal. ***This word is often mistakenly used for “led.”***

- Pencils are made with graphite, not with lead, as many believe.

lie / lay

These are commonly misused verbs, and they're doubly confusing because of how they are used in present and in past tense. ("Lie" meaning "to tell an untruth" does not cause us much trouble; it's the meaning associated with being stretched out on the ground or bed that creates confusion.)

lie—a *present-tense* reflexive verb that indicates what someone will do *oneself*.

- The animals tend to lie down in the shade in the afternoon.

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The *past tense* form is "lay." ("Lied" means telling a lie in the past.)

- Yesterday the animals lay down for most of the day.

lay—in the *present tense* indicates the action of putting something *else* down

- As he spoke, he lay the newly pressed clothes on the back of the chair.

The *past tense* form is "laid."

- He finished pressing the shirt, and then he laid it on the back of the chair.

Most people would not use "lie" when "lay" is appropriate (e.g., "He lied the newly pressed clothes..."). The error comes most often with using "lay" when "lie" is required.

then / than

then: having to do with time; at that moment, next, after that

- First we ate; then we went shopping.
- We didn't know then what we know now.

than: used to form comparisons

- My boat is better than your boat.
- The students were more responsive than they had been in the past.

they're / their / there

These three words cause writers a lot of grief. Check every use of any of them to be sure you have chosen the correct form.

they're—a contraction meaning *they are*.

- The notice says they're appearing at the local theatre.

their—possessive pronoun, "belonging to them"

- The others have gone by to get their tickets.

there—an *indicative pronoun* indicating place, as in *here and there*

- The groups have gathered there for the protest.

threw / through

threw—is the past tense of the verb “to throw.” This is something someone did in the past.

- The fraternity threw a party, and the partygoers threw a football on the front lawn.

through—is a preposition that indicates movement that does not go around

- The police had to wade through the crowd to reach the front of the stage.
- I wonder if you can throw the ball through the hole in the tire.

who’s / whose

who’s—is a contraction of “who is”

- Who’s (who is) on first? Who’s (who is) in charge around here?

whose—is a possessive pronoun that asks to whom something belongs

- He wanted to know whose car had been parked illegally out front.

Editing tip: When you edit, try to say “who is” any time you use either form of this word to be sure you are using the right one. If you can say “who is,” use *who’s*.

write / right

write—the verb meaning to transcribe into letters

- Students in college write many essays for their classes.

right—can mean *correct* or indicate *direction* (opposite of left)

- This is the right class for that requirement.
- You’ll find the professor’s office to the right of the classroom.
-

your / you’re

your—possessive

- Have you gotten your exam back yet?

you’re—contraction of *you are*

- We learned that you’re applying for that scholarship.