

Common Usage and Spelling Errors

A lot of students have difficulty with those English words that sound alike, look alike, or have tricky meanings. Here is a list of common mistakes and examples of the correct usage.

These words sound alike but are spelled and used differently:

- To - two - too:** To is a preposition. I went **to** the store **to** shop for groceries.
Too means "also" or "excess." I want one, **too**. It is **too** big.
Two is the word for the number "2." There were **two** dogs.
- Witch - which:** A witch wears a black, pointed hat. The Wicked **Witch** of the West.
Which is a relative pronoun, used to connect two parts of a sentence.
I said "no," **which** I thought was funny.
Which can also be used to inquire. **Which** way did he go?
- Break - brake:** Break means to damage or destroy. Let's **break** the window.
Break can also mean a temporary stoppage. We took our lunch **break**.
Brake is the thing you use to stop your car, etc. Hit the **brake**!
- Flour - flower:** Flour is the white stuff used in cooking. The cake calls for two cups of **flour**.
Flower is the pretty, fragrant plant, like a rose. Today I picked a **flower**.
- Right - write:** Right is the opposite of left. Take a **right** turn at the light.
Right is also the opposite of wrong. I answered "A," and I was **right**.
Write is the process of putting words on paper. Today, I will **write** a paper.
- By - buy:** By is a preposition used in many ways. I walked **by** your house. The book is **by** Ross.
Buy means to purchase. I want to **buy** a car.
- Sense - cents - scents:** Sense is a means of reception or understanding. Use your common **sense**. The five **senses**
Cents are units of money. It costs ten **cents**.
Scents are fragrances. The morning air was full of fresh **scents**.
- Principle - principal:** A principle is a general or fundamental rule or truth. I live by the **principle** "never say never."
A principal is the person who runs your school. The **principal** is my pal.
A principal can also be a capital sum, as on a loan. The **principal** sum of my loan is \$1000.
- Straight - strait:** Straight means not bent or curved. I walk the **straight** path.
Straits are bodies of water. The **straits** of Gibraltar.
- Waste - waist:** Waste is garbage or something useless. What a **waste** of time! Haste makes **waste**.
Waist is the mid-section of a human body. She has a 26 inch **waist**.
- Their - there - they're:** Their is the possessive form of they. It is **their** home.
There designates a place. I saw him over **there**.
There is also used in conjunction with the verb "to be." **There** are holes in the roof.
They're is the conjunction of "they" and "are." **They're** going to the dance tonight.
- Its - it's:** Its is the possessive form of it. The dog licked **its** wounds.
It's is the conjunction of "it" and "is." I know **it's** going to be nice out today.

Your - you're:	Your is the possessive form of you. I want your money. You're is the conjunction of "you" and "are." You're sitting in my chair.
Hair - hare:	Hair grows from your body. She has blond hair . A hare is a rabbit. The hare leaped away from us in fear.
Seen - scene:	Seen is a past-tense form of the verb "to see." They had seen the movie before. Scene is a physical setting or background. The scene of the crime was a beautiful mountain scene where a hysterical women made a big scene .
Weather - whether:	Weather is the condition outdoors. The summertime brings the warmest weather . Whether is used to express alternatives. I need to know whether you are or are not happy.
A lot - allot:	A lot means much of something. I have a lot of homework to do. ** "Alot" is not a word! Allot means to ration out. I am allotted three meals a day.
Die - dye:	To die is to discontinue living. When I jump off the cliff I will die . To dye is to color something (with a dye). In order to make a blue shirt I dye it with blue dye .
Plain - plane:	Plain means not expanded or decorated. He likes his pizza plain . Plane is either a reference to an airplane or a flat surface (often used in math classes). The plane flew on a plane 30,000 feet above the earth.
I'll - aisle - isle:	I'll is the contraction for "I" and "will." I'll go to the store after this show. Aisle is the thing you walk down. She looked radiant as she walked down the aisle . Isle is another word for island. We made a trip to Belle Isle over Spring Break.
Poor - pour - pore:	Poor means lacking material wealth or less than adequate. I grew up in a poor neighborhood. To pour is to move stuff from one thing to another. Please pour me another glass of Coke. A pore is a tiny opening in the skin. A clogged pore can turn into a zit.
Do - due - dew:	Do is a verb meaning to accomplish. I need to do my homework. Due is money or rewards. I paid my dues to the organization. Someday he'll get his due Dew is the wet stuff on grass in the morning. I walked through the dew -covered grass.
Pear - pair - pare:	A pear is a fruit. I ate a prickly pear at lunch today. Pair means two. I need a pair of socks to match my outfit. Pare means to remove the outer layer of something. Please pare the fruit for the pie.
Hall - haul:	A hall is the space in a building off which are rooms. The bathroom is down the hall on the left. To haul is to move things. We had to haul all of our luggage around the airport.
Bear - bare:	A bear will growl at you if you disturb it. The black bear attacked the campers. Bare means with nothing on. We did not like the bare walls of the new house.
Through - threw:	Through means going in one side and out the other. The bullet went through the wall. Through can also mean finished. I am through will all of this nonsense! Threw is the past tense of the verb "to throw." I threw the ball too hard.
All ready - already:	All ready means in a state of preparedness. We were all ready for the trip. Already means previously. The boat had already left when we arrived.
Wine - whine:	Wine is a fermented beverage. I like red wine with my pasta. To whine is to complain. We all whine about the restrictive rules.

These words are similar in meaning, usage, or pronunciation and are easily confused:

- All right:** All right means that everything is O.K. Don't worry about me because I'm **all right**.
** "Alright" is **not** a word!**
- Our - are:** Our is used to express group ownership. We are going sailing on **our** boat.
Are is the plural form of the verb "to be." You **are** getting better at this.
- Accept - except:** To accept is to agree or to take. I **accept** the nomination for President.
Except is used to exclude. Everyone went to the game **except** me.
- Fewer - less:** Fewer is usually used with nouns that can be counted. There are **fewer** stores than there used to be.
Less is usually used with nouns that cannot be counted. I like **less** sauce on my pasta than you.
- Of - have:** Of is a preposition. I need a lot **of** love. In English, we often shorten the word "have" to the sound "uv." Thus when we write, we sometimes use "of" when we should use "have" or "ve."
Correct: We should **have** gone to the other movie.
Incorrect: We should **of** gone to the other movie.
- Collage - college:** A collage is a picture made up of other pictures. In art class we made a **collage** from magazines.
College is an institute of higher learning. We all love Adrian **College**
- Saw - seen:** These two verbs are often used interchangeably. This is not correct.
Correct: I **saw** her at the gym. I have **seen** her at the gym.
Incorrect: I **seen** her at the gym. I have **saw** her at the gym.
- Amount - number:** Number is usually used with nouns that can be counted. I saw three pumpkins on four porches.
Amount is usually used with nouns that cannot be counted. I saw a large amount of garbage in the street. There should be a lot more freedom in the world.
- Affect - effect:** Affect is *usually* a verb. How will this **affect** our relationship?
Effect is *usually* a noun. What was the **effect** of the virus on the monkey?
Occasionally, affect is used as a noun (by psychologists) and effect is used as a verb - we want to **effect** a change.
- Sit - set:** Sit is something one does with one's person. I **sit** in the third chair in band.
Set is something one does to another thing. I **set** the pan on the stove.
- Lie - lay:** Lie is something one does with one's person. I **lie** on the bed each night.
A lie is also an expression of a falsehood. When I said "yes" it was a **lie**.
Lay is something one does to another thing. I **lay** the towel on the sand.
Note: the past tense of **lie is **lay** whereas the past tense of **lay** is **laid**.
- Allude - elude:** To allude is to refer to something indirectly. I **alluded** to the fact I was angry.
To elude is to escape or avoid. I was able to **elude** the police.
- Allusion - illusion:** An allusion is a reference (the noun form of "allude"). My **allusion** to the quote was misunderstood.
An illusion is a misleading image. The magician created the **illusion** that the dove had disappeared.
- Assure - ensure - insure:** To assure means to convince. I **assured** him that I was sincere.
To ensure or insure means to make certain or safe. I hope my education will **ensure** me a good job.
I knew it was a good idea to **insure** my car with Allstate.
- Cite - site:** To cite is to quote or give reference. Whenever I use a direct quote I must **cite** my source.
A site is a place or a scene. We arrived at the **site** of the photo shoot early.

Leave - let: To leave means to depart. I must **leave** home when I turn 18.

To let means to allow. **Let** me help you with your geometry.

****Note:** Leave alone and let alone may be used interchangeably. **Leave/let** me alone!

Perspective - prospective: Perspective is a noun meaning a view. In my **perspective**, life is always better than death.

Prospective is an adjective meaning potential. She is a **prospective** member of our organization.

Stationary - stationery: Stationary means not moving. Any **stationary** objects must be bolted down.

Stationery means writing material. I like to write on flowered **stationery**.

Which - who - that: Which is used to refer to places, things, or events. The trip, **which** was planned by Joe, was fun.

Who is used to refer to people or animals with individual qualities or given names.

My dog, Ralph, **who** is a mutt, barked all night long.

That is used to refer to places, things, events, or groups of people. The store **that** I like best is Marshall Fields.

Much of this information was taken from Dr. Borland's Adrian College Freshman English Handbook, Second Edition, or The College Writer's Reference by Toby Fulwiler, Alan R. Hayakawa, and Cheryl Kupper. Both of these valuable references are available for use at the Adrian College Writing Center.

For more help with common spelling and usage errors, see Jill at the Writing Center.