

Commonly Misused Words

Many words in the English language are commonly misused because they sound similar; however, they have different spellings and meanings (*homonyms*). Other words may not sound alike but may still be confusing. Below is a list of some of the more commonly misused words.

Affect, Effect – **Affect** is a verb meaning “influence, shape” and **effect** is a noun meaning “result, outcome.” **Effect** can be used as a verb only when it means “to bring about or cause something to happen.”

Examples: Will the study affect the school’s budget? (verb)

We are studying the effects of the environment on behavior. (noun)

We are hoping that the results will effect a change in his behavior. (verb)

It’s, Its – **Its** is a possessive pronoun that indicates ownership or possession; **it’s** is a contraction of **it is** or **it has**. *Note:* The use of contractions needs to be avoided in formal writing.

Examples: Place each item in **its** designated box. (possessive)

It’s a shame that Jerry cannot make it to the concert tonight. (contraction for “it is”)

It’s been a long time since he attended any musical event. (contraction for “it has”)

There, Their, They’re – **There** refers to a place that indicates where something is located and can be used as a pronoun that introduces a sentence. **Their** is a plural possessive pronoun.

They’re is a contraction of **they are**.

Examples: Please leave your dripping umbrella over **there**. (location)

There is no room for argument here. (introduces a sentence)

The students had to turn in **their** proposals on Wednesday. (possessive)

They’re meeting in the boardroom. (contraction for “they are”)

Ensure, Insure, Assure – **Ensure** means to make something certain; **insure** means to guarantee something against monetary loss, or protect against risk; **assure** means to state in a convincing manner.

Examples: I cannot **ensure** that the contract is legally binding.

The stolen ring was **insured** for \$5,000.

I can **assure** you of her sincerity.

Compliment, Complement – **Compliment** means a statement of praise; **complement** means to go well with, complete, or perfect something else.

Examples: The customer sent his **compliments** to the chef.

The picture **complements** the design perfectly.

Accept, Except – **Accept** is a verb that means to receive; **except** is a preposition that means excluding.

Examples: John will **accept** his award during the ceremony.

Everyone will be in attendance **except** his father.

Elicit, Illicit – **Elicit** means to bring out, draw out, or evoke. **Illicit** means illegal.

Examples: Nothing the teacher said could **elicit** a response from the child.

He is in jail for **illicit** drugs.

Allusion, Illusion – **Allusion** is an indirectly made reference. **Illusion** is a misconception or false impression.

Examples: He made several **allusions** to the poem in his paper.

John was under no **illusion** about his new job; he knew exactly what to expect.

Principle, Principal – **Principle** means rule or standard. **Principal** refers to a person who holds a high position or plays an important role; it also an adjective that means chief or leading.

Examples: The school **principal** will be resigning next year.

He has a **principal** reason for resigning.

He has always refused to compromise his **principles**.

Emigrant, Immigrant – An **emigrant** is one who leaves one's native country to settle in another; an **immigrant** is one who enters and settles in a new country.

Examples: The **emigrant** spent four weeks aboard the ship before it docked in Los Angeles.

It is very hard for **immigrants** to find jobs once arriving in their new countries.

Council, Counsel – A **council** is group of people that assembles for discussion; **counsel** means advice or guidance.

Examples: The **council** met twice every month.

He obviously did not want any legal **counsel**.

That, Which – **That** usually introduces an essential phrase that is not set off by commas; **which** introduces a non-essential phrase that is set off by commas.

Examples: This is the room **that** had vaulted ceilings. (essential)

The old car, **which** I've had for years, has finally broken down. (not essential)

Comprise, Compose – The whole **comprises** (or includes) the parts, and the parts **compose** (or make up) the whole.

Examples: The United States **comprises** fifty states.

Organic compounds **compose** the fertilizer used by the farmer.

Lie, Lay – **Lie** means to recline or rest on a surface; its principal parts (tenses) are lie, lay, lain.

Lay means to put or place; its principal parts are lay and laid.

Examples: I was so tired after work I had to **lie** down for a short time.

I **laid** the files on the desk.

Practice

Choose the correct word to complete the intended meaning of the sentence.

1. The sound of falling rain had a calming (affect, effect) on me.
2. He made several (allusions, illusions) to his latest book in his speech.
3. Her new sweater was a perfect (compliment, complement) to the outfit.
4. The police department would not release any information of the (illicit, elicit) activities going on in the neighborhood.
5. We cannot discuss the case and (it's, its) implications.
6. As a matter of (principle, principal), she always purchases recyclable products.
7. Every house on the street (accept, except) ours is painted white.
8. The Bible (composes, comprises) several books.
9. The church (council, counsel) will be meeting for further deliberation.
10. They all (lie, lay) the blame on the new accountant.

Answers: 1) effect 2) allusions 3) complement 4) illicit 5) its 6) principle 7) except 8) comprises 9) council 10) lay