

Commonly Misused Terms and Phrases

Here are some of the most commonly confused and misused terms in English.

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A Whole Nother

This construction has grown out of the word *another*. However, “nother” is not an accepted word in English. The phrase “a whole other” or “an entirely different” should be used instead.

Absorb / Adsorb

While the word adsorb is not used in common speech, it is very prominent in science writing. This distinction is also important because spell checkers and grammar checkers do not distinguish between them: it’s up to the student to do so.

Absorb, which describes a general process, means “to soak in.” A more specialized term, *adsorb* describes the surface of a solid or liquid accumulating gas, vapor, or dissolved matter:

- This product claims to absorb excess dietary fat.
- Once the bacteria adsorb to the surface, they secrete organic molecules.

Accept / Except

Accept is a verb that means “receive with consent”:

- Paraguay did not accept the proposed treaty.

Except is sometimes a verb (meaning “exclude”) but it is more commonly used just as the word *but* is used:

- We could verify all of the important factors except one.

Affect / Effect

You are not alone if you commonly confuse *affect* and *effect*. These two terms were confused in print as early as 1494. The key to correct usage here is to determine whether the term is being used as a noun or verb, and to discern the intended meaning.

Affect is usually used as a verb. (I think of the *a* in *affect* standing for “active verb.”) To affect is to influence:

- The moon affects the tides.

Effect is usually used as a noun, and it means “outcome or result”:

- Inflation is one of the effects of war.
- Brackish water has negative effects on certain vegetation.

Finally—to the horror of many—*effect* can also be used as a verb to mean “to bring about,” as in the phrase “to effect a change,” while *affect* can be used as a noun (usually in psychology) to mean “conscious subjective emotion.” Such usages, though infrequent, highlight why you must be particularly careful to choose the correct term for the circumstances, keeping in mind both the intended meaning and the intended part of speech.

Alot / Allot

“Alot” is never correct. It is supposed to be two words—therefore: *a lot*. Never write a note to your composition professor at the end of the semester assuring her that you “really learned alot.”

Allot is to “assign a portion to”:

- Twenty minutes were allotted to each speaker.

Alright / All right

All wrong. *Alright* is listed in most dictionaries as a common misspelling of what should be two words. In your writing, use *all right*:

- Once you hear the high-pitched squeal of the recipient’s fax machine, it is all right to send your document.

Alternate / Alternative

As an adjective, *alternate* means “every other,” and it is usually used in relation to time or objects:

- We were asked to focus on alternate lines of the figure. (Every other one.)

Alternate is also a verb, meaning “to switch back and forth in turns”:

- The wet season alternates with the dry season.

Alternative denotes that a choice was made between at least two things:

- He chose the polygon method as the best alternative for measuring compressible subsonic flow.

Among / Between

Among is appropriate to describe broad relationships when more than two things are involved:

- Deforestation is among the world’s environmental problems.
- Laboratory experiments identified general relationships among crushing parameters, product size, and coal properties.

Between is used to describe specific relationships involving only two things:

- A satisfactory agreement was reached between the two countries.

Current usage also permits *between* when each entity is considered individually or severally in relation to the others:

- Between them, each client agreed that this solution was best.
- Ratios were calculated between each of the four fixed-location sites and two moveable sites.

Amount of / Number of

Amount of works with noncount nouns; *number of* works with count nouns:

- The amount of heat is lowered every three minutes. (*Heat* is noncount.)
- A number of toggle switches were used in the design of this device. (*Toggle switches* are countable.)

And / Or

If you have ever read a lengthy legal document, you have probably encountered an abundant use of *and/or*. However, this construction is not appropriate for academic writing. Besides, both *and* and *or* by themselves effectively link ideas that can be considered either individually or collectively. In other words, *and* can be used to suggest likely combinations of ideas, while *or* can be used to help the reader consider just one idea at a time.

If you feel, as some writers do, that you want to use *and/or* just to be fastidious, instead you should simply word the sentence appropriately to cover the different possibilities:

- Instead of: “The new propeller design is expected to reduce cavitation and/or drag.”
- Write: “The new propeller design is expected to reduce cavitation, or drag, or both.”

As / Like

These two words are not interchangeable. *As* means “to the same extent, degree, or in the way that”:

- The engine responds as it should.

Like means “similar to”:

- The spadix of a jack-in-the-pulpit looks like a club.

Assure / Ensure / Insure

In meaning, these three verbs seem to be nearly interchangeable; all three denote a certainty or guarantee being made. However, in practice, the best writers do distinguish among these terms, as follows:

Assure is used to refer to interaction between people:

- The editor assured me that my conclusion was incorrect.

Ensure is used more broadly to mean “to make certain”:

- The company uses monthly financial disclosures to ensure clients of its solvency.

Insure is favored in instances of guaranteeing life or property against risk:

- To insure your home against floods, you must purchase extra insurance separate from your homeowner’s policy.

Between . . . and / From . . . to

These combinations are not interchangeable, but many writers mistakenly combine *between* with *to* and *from* with *and*.

When defining two or more end parameters, *between* is most effectively linked with *and*; *from* is most effectively linked with *to* (and more than one *to* may be used in a series of linked terms or phrases):

- The Ministry plans to construct between 50 and 60 cyclone shelters.
- From May 1997 to May 2000, the city’s population swelled by 400,000 people.
- Citizens’ negative responses to Census 2000 ranged from the indifferent to the surly to the downright obscene.

Also, the hyphen between two values (such as 5-10) functions invisibly as the word *to* or *through*, but it should only be used alone. Therefore, “It moved 5-10 meters” is correct, while “It moved from 5-10 meters” or “It moved between 5-10 meters” is not.

Bi / Semi

These two prefixes create some confusion, because they both mean “occurring twice during.” By convention, a writer can correctly use *bimonthly* and *semimonthly* to mean either “twice a month” or

“once every two months.” To avoid confusion, I recommend that you follow these standard usage practices:

- *biweekly* = once every two weeks;
- *bimonthly* = once every two months;
- *semiweekly* = twice a week;
- *semimonthly* = twice a month;
- *semiannually* = twice a year.

If confusion still might result in context, avoid using the prefixes and simply write out the time-frame clearly (e.g., “every two weeks” or “twice per month”).

Can / Could

Both *can* and *could* are best used to express factual possibility and scientific likelihood. As opposed to *may* and *might*, which imply permission or human interpretation, *can* and *could* emphasize capacity and likelihood:

- Experiments show that polluted water can be purified by slow percolation through rocks and sediments. (*Can* emphasizes the capacity for purification.)
- The results suggested that low-energy photons could have been causing the problem. (*Could* suggests scientific likelihood.)

Cite / Site / Sight

Cite is a verb meaning “to mention” or “to make reference to”:

- She cited the Journal of Atmospheric Sciences in her paper.

Site is a noun meaning “location”:

- Raleigh is the site of the new mine.

Sight is both a noun and a verb that refers to seeing:

- We sighted the white smoke plumes before we reached the lime mine. It was quite a sight.

Coarse / Course

Coarse means “of low quality, not fine in texture.” The most common meanings for *course* are “a curriculum unit” or “the direction of continuing movement”:

- Most of the rock we encountered was coarse sandstone.
- A graduate is one who has successfully completed a course of study.

Compared to / Compared with

Use *compared to* when you want to point out similarities between things:

- RAM can be compared to ROM in that both involve memory storage.

Use *compared with* when noting both similarities and differences:

- By way of Bernoulli's principle, the mechanics and function of a dragonfly's wings can be compared with those of a dolphin's fins.

Complement / Compliment

One could argue that most writers confuse these terms as an error of spelling rather than usage—all the more reason to distinguish between them carefully and avoid an embarrassing, sloppy habit. The distinction is simple: *complement* (note the *e* in the middle) means “something that completes,” and *compliment* (note the *i* in the middle) means “to express praise” or “thanks to”:

- Jupiter Scientific Publishing Company recently published *The Bible According to Einstein: a Scientific Complement to the Holy Bible for the Third Millennium*.
- The compliments provided in the “Acknowledgments” section of this manual are provided compliments of the author.

Spelling *complement* correctly is especially important in fields such as biochemistry, where complement components and complement pathways are cited frequently.

Compose / Constitute / Include

To *compose* or to *constitute* is “to form” or “to make up”:

- Smog is composed of smoke and fog.
- Three parts constitute the whole.

Include indicates a selective, incomplete listing of constituents, implying the presence of other constituents as well:

- The formation includes limestone and shale. (Other constituents are implied.)

Comprise

Literally, *to comprise* is “to include” or “to contain.” The earth comprises rocks (it includes them), but rocks do not comprise the earth (they do not include it). Therefore:

- The Union comprises 50 states.
- The whole comprises the parts, but not vice versa.

Strict writers say that using *comprise* in the passive (“One foot is comprised of 12 inches”) is unacceptable; instead, use “is composed of” or “is made up of.”

Continual / Continuous

Continual describes intermittent activity; *continuous* denotes unceasing, uninterrupted activity. Meals are continual; time is continuous:

- The Vesuvius volcano in Italy has erupted continually over the past century.
- Seismometers, which constantly detect and record ground movement, are designed to receive seismic impulses continuously.

Different than / Different from

Established usage dictates that *different than* is not correct; good writers use *different from*:

- In relation to its accessibility, a private web client is different from a public web client.

Due to the fact that / The reason is because

These two phrases are both too wordy and too colloquial for formal writing. They also fail to express a simple causal relationship with efficiency. Handily, these phrases can usually be replaced by the word *because*:

- Instead of: “The experiment was halted due to the fact that funding was withdrawn.”
- Write: “The experiment was halted because funding was withdrawn.”

e.g. / i.e. / et al.

It is important to use these abbreviations literally and to punctuate them correctly. Many writers confuse *e.g.* and *i.e.*, and many type *et al.* improperly or do not properly recognize what words it represents.

The abbreviation *e.g.* is from the Latin *exempli gratia* and means, literally, “for example.” Periods come after each letter and a comma normally follows unless the example is a single word and no pause is natural:

- Any facial response (e.g., a surprised blink of both eyes) was recorded.

The abbreviation *i.e.* is from the Latin *id est*, meaning “that is.” Loosely, *i.e.* is used to mean “therefore” or “in other words.” Periods come after each letter and a comma normally follows, depending on whether the wording following the abbreviation dictates a natural pause:

- In every case Angle 1 was greater than Angle 2—i.e., every viewer perceived a circle.

The phrase *et al.*—from the Latin *et alii*, which literally means “and others”—must always be typed with a space between the two words and with a period after the *l* (since the *al.* is an abbreviation). A comma does not follow the abbreviation unless the sentence’s grammar requires it. Some journals italicize the phrase because it comes from the Latin, but most do not.

- Schweiger et al. applied the neural network method.

Never begin a sentence with any of these three abbreviations; if you want to begin a sentence with *for example* or *therefore*, always write the words out.

etc.

This abbreviation means, literally, “and other things.” Many professors urge against using *etc.* in formal writing because it is, by definition, nonspecific, but it can be used effectively when you have responsibly chosen representative constituents in order to avoid a cumbersome list:

- All prime numbers between 1 and 101 (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, etc.) were transmitted by the pulsing signal in the movie *Contact*.

Adding *etc.* to the end of a list that is introduced by *for example* or *such as* is poor usage because *for example* suggests that you have already carefully selected and presented the key constituents, which the *etc.* then undermines. Good alternatives to *etc.* are *for example*, or *such as* followed by just a few concrete representative examples that best demonstrate your point.

Farther / Further

Farther is used literally to describe matters of measurable distance (I think of the imbedded word *far*, suggesting distance); *further* is more figurative and is used for broader general comparison:

- Long Island is farther away from Cape Charles than Cape May.
- Antarctica must be explored further.
- She is further along in her schooling than I.

Few / Less

Both these words are adjectives, but *few* is usually used to describe countable nouns while *less* is used to describe noncount nouns. Countable nouns are often physical whereas noncount ones are often abstract or nonphysical:

- The industrial trend is in the direction of more machines and fewer people. (*People* is a count noun.)
- Less destruction was caused by the earthquake than one would have expected. (*Destruction* is a noncount noun.)

If you memorize the phrase “few units = less quantity,” you will remember the distinction—*few* is for things you can count, while *less* is for things that cannot be counted.

As often happens in English, exceptions do arise. Sentences involving periods of time, sums of money, or specific measurements usually require *less*:

- The sonde was lowered less than 50 feet.
- Excavation took less than two weeks.

Former / Latter

These two words, sometimes used in combination, are often misused in technical writing. *Former* refers back to the first of two things mentioned; *latter* refers back to the second of two things mentioned:

- The chief spices used in this dish are coriander and cumin, the former being less pungent.
- The two diseases studied were Hodgkin’s disease and leukemia, with the latter resulting in more fatalities this year.
- Last year’s tornadoes in Tracy, Minnesota, and Kansas City, Kansas—the former measuring F4 and the latter F5—were the two most destructive tornadoes of the summer.

When more than two members of a list are involved, or when the sentence’s context does not clearly indicate an antecedent (a word or phrase being referred back to), then strictly avoid using *former* and *latter*.

Good / Well

One of the most commonly confused adjective/adverb pairs is *good* versus *well*. There isn’t really a good way to remember this besides memorization. *Good* is an adjective: it always modifies nouns. *Well* is an adverb: it modifies adjectives, verbs, and other adverbs.

For example, *good* is misused in the sentence “She plays basketball good.” In this sentence *good* is supposed to be modifying *plays*, a verb; therefore the use of *good*—an adjective—is incorrect. *Plays* should be modified by an adverb. The correct sentence would read as follows:

- She plays basketball well.

In the sentence, “I’m doing good,” *good* is supposed to be modifying *doing*, a verb. Once again, this means that *well*—an adverb—should be used instead:

- I’m doing well.

Note: The sentence “I’m doing good” can be grammatically correct, but only when it means “I’m doing good things,” rather than when it is describing how a person is feeling.

Imply / Infer

These two words are too often used interchangeably, but they are completely different in meaning. *Imply* means to suggest or to indicate; *infer* involves a person actively applying deduction:

- Water droplets accumulating on the outside of a cold glass of water can imply a hot humid day.
- We can infer that Stonehenge was an early calendar.

Another way to look at it: We can substitute *suggest* for *imply* and *reason* for *infer*, still retaining the correct meaning.

Irregardless

Irregardless is not an accepted word in Standard American English. The prefix *ir-* is negative, but the word *regardless* is already negative, so the prefix is not needed. In academic writing, you should just use *regardless*:

- The department decided to purchase the geophone regardless of the cost.

It's / Its

These two words probably represent the most common usage problem in papers, but the distinction between the words is painfully simple. *It's* always means "it is." *Its* is just a possessive pronoun.

At first glance, there seems to be an inherent inconsistency, because we usually use apostrophes to indicate possession, but no possessive pronouns use apostrophes: *its, hers, ours, yours, his*. When you write *it's*, be certain that you mean two words rather than one. Read it to yourself aloud if you have to, reading every *it's* as "it is."

- In war, a country must protect its borders.
- It is understood that part of the area's soil is of glacial origin.

Lay / Lie

Lay means "to put, place, or prepare."

- I lay the nugget in the empty pan. (Present tense—the nugget was put there by an agent.)
- They were laid there centuries ago. (Past tense—they were placed by an agent.)

Lie (present tense) means "to recline" or "to be situated."

- This tomb has lain undisturbed for thousands of years. (Used with the helper "has"—it has been situated.)
- During field camp in the Connecticut Valley last year, he lay down next to an eight-foot black rat snake. (Past tense—he reclined, albeit briefly, to be sure.)

A lot of the confusion comes from the fact that the simple past tense of *lie* is *lay*. Here are the different forms of the two verbs:

Infinitive	<i>To Lie</i>	<i>To Lay</i>
Past	<i>Lay</i>	<i>Laid</i>
Past Participle	<i>Lain</i>	<i>Laid</i>
Present	<i>Lie</i>	<i>Lay</i>
Present Participle	<i>Lying</i>	<i>Laying</i>
Future	<i>Will Lie</i>	<i>Will Lay</i>

Lead / Led

Lead is a present tense verb meaning “to guide” or “to direct.” *Led* is the past tense of the same verb, and it must not be spelled with an *a*:

- She led a discussion on how best to lead the group.

Literally

How many times have you heard things like "It was literally the worst thing that has ever happened to me," or "His head literally exploded when I told him I was going to be late again"? Some people love this phrase while it makes other people want to pull their hair out.

So what's the problem with this? According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, the actual definition of *literal* is as follows:

- involving the ordinary or usual meaning of a word
- giving the meaning of each individual word
- completely true and accurate : not exaggerated ("[Literal](#)." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 20 June 2016.)

According to this definition, *literally* should be used only when something actually happened. Our cultural usage may be slowly shifting to allow *literally* as an intensifier, but it's best to avoid using *literally* in any way other than its dictionary definition, especially in formal writing.

Lose / Loose

Lose is the opposite of *win*. *Loose* is the opposite of *tight*. *Losing* is the present participle form of *lose*. *Loosing* is not a real word: *loosening* is the correct word.

May / Might

May expresses possibility, permission, or human interpretation. *Might* is used in the same way, but implies possibility over permission:

- This outcrop may be studied. (Implies that permission has been given.)
- This outcrop might be studied. (Implies that the possibility merely exists.)

Many writers puzzle between *may* and *can*, and I always advise them to elect *may* when human permission or human interpretation (especially speculation) is involved, and *can* when the point is more factual or proven:

- The calculated R2 value of 0.68 demonstrates that a relationship may exist between silica concentration and the presence of iron. (Human speculation is involved.)
- Tests show that dust particles produced by breakage can carry elementary electrostatic charges. (The statement is more factual and proven than interpretive.)

Per

Literally, *per* means “for every” or “according to”:

- It costs 30 cents per gallon.
- Per your instructions, I completed the lab.

The phrase “as per” is incorrect—a redundancy.

Percent / Percentage

These two terms are not interchangeable. *Percent* means “per hundred” and can either be written out or expressed by the symbol %. Ideally, *percent* is always associated with a specific number:

- The maximum error that can be introduced by over-mixing is 10%.

Percentage is used to refer to a general relationship rather than a specific measure:

- A large percentage of the people voted, but only 20 percent of the votes counted.

In published literature, many writers use *percent* as an adjective (*percent quartz*) for economy, especially in figures and tables. If this is done, the same phrasing should be used consistently to refer to the same thing.

Perfect / Unique

Unique means “being the only one of its kind”; *perfect* means “without flaw.” These are noncomparable adjectives: something cannot be more unique or more perfect.

Professors reading of “a unique insight” or “a perfect software package” could correctly challenge these absolutes—i.e., the insight would certainly parallel others, and the software package could certainly be improved. By definition, uniqueness and perfection are so rare in scientific contexts that the concepts are best avoided in formal writing. And if you dare to refer to something as “perfectly unique,” keep an aspirin handy for your professor.

Perspective / Prospective

These two terms are frequently confused, but their meanings are highly different from each other. The most common use of *perspective* is to mean “point of view”:

- Pickett explained the problem of poverty from a socialist perspective.

Prospective means “expected or likely to happen”:

- The National Agricultural Statistics Service publishes data projecting the prospective plantings for crops each year in the United States.
- The university requires prospective students to apply by February 1.

Pretty / Quite / Rather / Very

In academic writing, you should avoid the adverbial intensifiers *pretty*, *quite*, *rather*, and *very*. Some writers mistakenly use these words to create emphasis or lend the appearance of exactitude, but this backfires—“the pebble is round” is clearer than “the pebble is quite round.”

By definition, these words are nonspecific, and many professors are highly sensitive to their use. Other terms such as *virtually*, *highly*, *essentially*, or *relatively*, may work in their place, but be certain to use these terms literally and sparingly.

Rather as a comparative word is, of course, valid in an “a rather than b” construction.

Principal / Principle

These two terms are often confused, but the fact is they have no meanings in common. *Principal* means “first, primary, or main”:

- The principal feldspar is orthoclase.

Principle implies an abstraction, and it means “a doctrine,” “a truth”:

- MAN01 teaches basic management principles.

Principal, of course, also denotes the head of a school, and in some fields, *principal* has specialized meaning: in law, a principal empowers another to act as his or her representative; in finance, the principal is the capital of a financial holding as distinguished from the interest.

Precede / Proceed / Subsequent

Various forms of *precede* and *subsequent* are often confused with each other, but the two terms are opposites. To *precede* is “to come before”; *subsequent* means “following in time”:

- Record albums preceded compact discs.
- Decades can be devoted to the discovery and subsequent clinical development of a single drug.

Precede is also sometimes confused with *proceed*, which means to go forward:

- When stuck on a particular exam question, proceed to the next question, then return to the difficult question if time allows.

Respective / Respectively

Respective is an adjective, usually meaning “particular”:

- On a References page, article titles appear after their respective authors.

Respectively means “in the order mentioned,” and is usually preceded by a comma:

- Aluminum and iron are evident in about 8 and 5 percent, respectively, of the earth’s crust.

That / Which

The rules governing these two words are a bit flexible, but *which* is too often used where *that* should be. *That* is preferable when you are limiting or restricting a noun:

- A law that does not have public support cannot be enforced. (“A law that” helps to limit the meaning to just one kind of law.)
- The air dry loss moisture factor appears to control the amount of airborne respirable dust that is liberated from the product. (“Airborne respirable dust that” restricts the dust just to that liberated from the product.)

The following line from a nursery rhyme is instructive here, because all of the *thats* are correct:

- This is the rat that ate the cat that lived in the house that Jack built.

In contrast, “which” introduces a phrase that provides descriptive yet incidental information, and “which” often requires commas on one or both ends of the phrase it introduces:

- The law, which was enacted in 1897, was soon challenged by the courts.
- Approximately 71 percent of the earth’s surface is covered by a worldwide body of sea water, which is interconnected.
- The trawl consists of five net bags in a row which are collected on board one at a time as they become filled with oil.

In short, you use *that* to complete a noun and *which* simply to describe a noun.

Try and / Try to

Try and is often used incorrectly to introduce a verb that must be linked with *to*. *Try to* is the correct choice:

- They will try to perform a new survey.

Will / Would

Will suggests strong probability or future likelihood. *Would* implies the same, but is typically used when the probability is more hypothetical.

- Eventually these sediments will be deposited on a sea floor. (*Will* expresses strong probability and future likelihood.)
- At still higher temperatures, the radiation would probably become stronger. (*Would* suggests hypothetical probability.)

Be especially careful not to overuse *will* and *would*, in particular when affirming facts. Some writers habitually compose sentences such as “A comparison of MWD logs and wire line logs would be difficult because they will operate in different environments.” In a revised version of this sentence, the writer should eliminate “will” and “would,” simply affirming the fact that she knows to be true: “A comparison of MWD logs and wire line logs is difficult because they operate in different environments.”