



Often Confused Words

Learning the differences between these often-confused words will help you overcome many of your spelling problems.

- a, an** Use *an* before a word that begins with a vowel *sound* (*a, e, i,* and *o,* plus when it sounds like *uh*) or silent *h*. Note that it's not the letter but the *sound* of the letter that matters.
an apple, an essay, an inch, an onion
an umpire, an ugly design (the *u*'s sound like *uh*)
an hour, an honest person (silent *h*)
Use *a* before a word that begins with a consonant sound (all the sounds except the vowels, plus *u* or *eu* when they sound like *you*).
a chart, a pie, a history book (the *h* is not silent in *history*)
a union, a uniform, a unit (the *u*'s sound like *you*)
a European vacation, a euphemism (*eu* sounds like *you*)
- accept, except** *Accept* means "to receive willingly."
I *accept* your apology.
Except means "excluding" or "but."
Everyone arrived on time *except* him.
- affect, effect** *Affect* is a verb and means "to alter or influence."
All quizzes will *affect* the final grade.
Effect is most commonly used as a noun and means "a result." If *a, an,* or *the* is in the front of the word, then you will know it isn't a verb, and you should use *effect*.
We studied the *effects* of sleep deprivation in my psychology class.
- all ready, already** If you can leave out the *all* and the sentence still makes sense, then *all ready* is the form to use. (In that form, *all* is a separate word and could be left out.)
We are *all ready* for the trip. (*We are ready for the trip* makes sense.)
The banquet is *all ready*. (*The banquet is ready* makes sense.)
But if you can't leave out the *all* and still have the sentence make sense, then use *already* (the form in which the *al* has to stay in the word).
They have *already* eaten. (*They have ready eaten* doesn't make sense.)
- are, our** *Are* is a verb.
We *are* going to Colorado Springs.
Our is a pronoun indicating possession.
We painted *our* fence to match the house.

choose, chose	<p>The difference here is one of time. Use <i>choose</i> for present and future; use <i>chose</i> for past.</p> <p>I will <i>choose</i> a new major this semester.</p> <p>We <i>chose</i> the wrong time of year to get married.</p>
coarse, course	<p><i>Coarse</i> describes a rough texture.</p> <p>I used <i>coarse</i> sandpaper to smooth the surface of the board.</p> <p><i>Course</i> is used for all other meanings.</p> <p>Of <i>course</i> we saw the golf <i>course</i> when we went to Pebble Beach.</p>
complement, compliment	<p>Complement means to complete something or bring it to perfection.</p> <p>Use a color wheel to find a <i>complement</i> for purple.</p> <p>Juliet's personality <i>complements</i> Romeo's; she is practical, and he is a dreamer.</p> <p>Compliment refers to praise. Remember "<i>I</i> like compliments," and you will remember to use the <i>i</i> spelling when you mean praise.</p> <p>My evaluation included nice <i>compliments</i> from my coworkers.</p> <p>We <i>complimented</i> them on their new home.</p>
conscious, conscience	<p><i>Conscious</i> means "aware."</p> <p>They weren't <i>conscious</i> of any problems before the accident.</p> <p><i>Conscience</i> means that inner voice of right and wrong. The extra <i>n</i> in <i>conscience</i> should remind you of <i>No</i>, which is what your <i>conscience</i> often says to you.</p> <p>My <i>conscience</i> told me to turn in the expensive watch I found.</p>
dessert, desert	<p><i>Dessert</i> is the sweet one, the one you like two helpings of. So give it two helpings of <i>s</i>.</p> <p>We had a whole chocolate cheesecake for <i>dessert</i>.</p> <p>The other one, <i>desert</i>, is used for all other meanings and has two pronunciations.</p> <p>I promised that I won't <i>desert</i> you.</p> <p>The snake slithered slowly across the <i>desert</i>.</p>
do, due	<p><i>Do</i> is a verb, an action. You <i>do</i> something.</p> <p>I always <i>do</i> my best work at night.</p> <p>But payment or an assignment is <i>due</i>; it is scheduled for a certain time.</p> <p>Our first essay is <i>due</i> tomorrow.</p> <p><i>Due</i> can also be used before to in a phrase that means because of.</p> <p>The outdoor concert was canceled <i>due</i> to rain.</p>
have, of	<p><i>Have</i> is a verb. Sometimes, in a contraction, it sounds like <i>of</i>. When you say <i>could've</i>, the <i>have</i> may sound like <i>of</i>, but it is not written that way. Always write <i>could have</i>, <i>would have</i>, <i>should have</i>, <i>might have</i>.</p> <p>We should <i>have</i> planned our vacation sooner.</p> <p>Then we could <i>have</i> used our coupon for a free one-way ticket.</p> <p>Use <i>of</i> only in a prepositional phrase.</p> <p>She sent me a box <i>of</i> chocolates for my birthday.</p>

hear, here	<p>The last three letters of <i>hear</i> spell “ear.” You <i>hear</i> with your ear. When I listen to a sea shell, I <i>hear</i> ocean sounds. The other spelling <i>here</i> tells “where.” Note that the three words indicating a place or pointing out something all have <i>here</i> in them: <i>here, there, where</i>. I’ll be <i>here</i> for three more weeks.</p>
it’s, its	<p><i>It’s</i> is a contraction and means “it is” or “it has.” <i>It’s</i> hot. (<i>It is</i> hot.) <i>It’s</i> been hot all week. (<i>It has</i> been hot all week.) <i>Its</i> is a possessive. (Possessives such as <i>its, yours, hers, ours, theirs, whose</i> are already possessive and never need an apostrophe.) The jury had made <i>its</i> decision.</p>
knew, new	<p><i>Knew</i> has to do with knowledge (both start with <i>k</i>). <i>New</i> means “not old.” They <i>knew</i> that she wanted a <i>new</i> bike.</p>
know, no	<p><i>Know</i> has to do with knowledge (both start with <i>k</i>). By Friday, I must <i>know</i> all the state capitals. <i>No</i> means “not any” or the opposite of “yes.” My boss has <i>no</i> patience. <i>No</i>, I need to work late.</p>
loose, lose	<p><i>Loose</i> means “not tight.” Note how <i>l o o s e</i> that word is. It has plenty of room for two <i>o</i>’s. My dog’s tooth is <i>loose</i>. <i>Lose</i> is the opposite of win. If we <i>lose</i> this game, we will be out for the season.</p>
passed, past	<p>The past form of the verb “to pass” is <i>passed</i>. She easily <i>passed</i> her math class. We <i>passed</i> your house twice before we saw the address. Use <i>past</i> when it’s not a verb. We drove <i>past</i> your house. (the same as “We drove <i>by</i> your house”) In the <i>past</i>, he had to borrow his brother’s car.</p>
personal, personnel	<p>Pronounce these two correctly, and you won’t confuse them- <i>personal, personnel</i>. She shared her <i>personal</i> views as a parent. <i>Personnel</i> means “a group of employees.” I had an appointment in the <i>personnel</i> office.</p>
piece, peace	<p>Remember “piece of pie.” The one meaning “a <i>piece</i> of something” always begins with <i>pie</i>. One child asked for an extra <i>piece</i> of candy. The other one, <i>peace</i>, is the opposite of war. The two gangs discussed the possibility of a <i>peace</i> treaty.</p>
principal, principle	<p><i>Principal</i> means “main.” Both words have <i>a</i> in them: principal, main. The <i>principal</i> concern is safety. (main concern)</p>

He lost both *principal* and interest. (main amount of money)
Also, think of a school's "principal" as your "pal."
An elementary school *principal* must be kind. (main administrator)
A *principle* is a "rule." Both words end in *le*: *principle*, *rule*.
I am proud of my high *principles*. (rules of conduct)
We value the *principle* of truth in advertising. (rule)

quiet, quite Pronounce these two correctly, and you won't confuse them.
Quiet means "free from noise" and rhymes with *diet*.
Tennis players need *quiet* in order to concentrate.
Quite means "very" and rhymes with *bite*.
It was *quite* hot in the auditorium.

right, write *Right* means "correct" or "proper."
You will find your keys if you look in the *right* place.
It also means in the exact location, position, or moment.
Your keys are *right* where you left them.
Write means to compose sentences, poems, essays, and so forth.
I asked my teacher to *write* a letter of recommendation for me.

than, then *Than* compares two things.
I am taller *than* my sister.
Then tells when (*then* and *when* rhyme, and both have e in them.)
I always write a rough draft of a paper first; *then* I revise it.

**their, there
they're** *Their* is a possessive, meaning belonging to them.
Their cars have always been red.
There points out something. (Remember that the three words indicating a place or pointing out something all have *here* in them: *here*, *there*, *where*.)
I know that I haven't been *there* before.
There was a rainbow in the sky.
They're is a contraction and means "they are."
They're living in Canada. (*They are* living in Canada now.)

threw, through *Threw* is the past form of "to throw."
We *threw* snowballs at each other.
I *threw* away my chance at a scholarship.
If you don't mean "to throw something," use *through*.
We could see our beautiful view *through* the new curtains.

two, too, to *Two* is a number.
We have written *two* papers so far in my English class.
Too means "extra" or "also," and so it has an extra o.
The movie was *too* long and *too* violent. (extra)
They are enrolled in that biology class *too*. (also)
Use *to* for all other meanings.
They like *to* ski. They're going *to* the mountains.

who's, whose *Who's* is a contraction and means "who is" or "who has."
Who's responsible for signing the checks? (*Who is* responsible?)
Who's been reading my journal? (*Who has* been...?)

Whose is a possessive. (Possessives such as *whose, its, yours, hers, ours, theirs* are already possessive and never take an apostrophe.)

Whose keys are these?

you're, your

You're is a contraction and means "you are."

You're as smart as I am. (*You are* as smart as I am.)

Your is a possessive meaning belonging to you.

I borrowed *your* lab book.

Glazier, Teresa Ferster and Paige Wilson. *The Least You Should Know About English Writing Skills*. Fort Worth, Harcourt College Publishers: 2000. 3-17.