

Topic: Commonly Confused Word Use

A lot

A lot is two words and indicates a large amount or to a great extent. Many spelling and grammar check programs will catch this mistake, but it's good to know the proper way to use this term.

- Are there *a lot* of assignments?
- The instructor knows *a lot*.

Effect and Affect

Although *effect* and *affect* can both be used as either nouns or verbs, commonly, *effect* used as a noun and *affect* as a verb. The right answer depends on how the words are used in a sentence.

- What *effect* will the weather have on your travel plans?
- Heavy rain will *affect* the flight schedule, resulting in delays.
- The research team is trying to find out if the new medicine has an *effect* on the disease.
- How will the new medicine *affect* the patient?

Farther and Further

Both of these words are used to indicate some sort of distance.

- Use *farther* to indicate a physical distance and *further* to convey figurative distance or time.
 - How much *farther* is the airport from here?
 - After a semester of advanced courses, she felt she couldn't go any *further* in her program.
 - She reviewed the recorded lectures in order to *further* understand the new theories.

Fewer and Less

Both of these words are used to indicate an amount of something.

- If you are referring to more than one person or thing, use *fewer*.
- If you are referring to something that is singular, isn't usually counted, related to time, or numbers, use *less*.
 - Students who also work full-time usually take *fewer* courses each semester.
 - A longer commute means *less* time to read in the evenings.
 - He graduated in *less* than three years.

It's and Its

This one is especially tricky, and an exception to the general rule of using an apostrophe to show possession.

- In this case, *it's* is only used as a contraction of *it* and *is* or *has*.
- Use *its* to show possession.
 - It's beginning to look like it will snow.
 - It's been snowing for a while now.
 - The school board hasn't reached its decision about school closings.

Lie and Lay

These words are both forms of irregular verbs that have some similarities in spelling, but are different in meaning.

- *Lie* is a verb used to describe the action someone is taking, usually “to recline.”
- *Lay* conveys action taken on someone or something else, usually “to put something down.” It can help to think through or write out the tenses of each verb before deciding which one to use:
- Lie, Lay, Lain (to recline oneself)
- Lay, Laid, Laid (to put something down)
 - Why don't you *lie* down and get some rest before we go?
 - The night before the exam I *lay* in bed awake worrying about my grade.
 - I was going to go to the library this morning, but had *lain* around until almost noon.
 - Before I start a new assignment, I *lay* out all of my course materials.
 - In the syllabus he *laid* down the law about group work and meeting deadlines.
 - I was on the way to the airport when I realized I had *laid* my ticket down in the kitchen.

Loose and Lose

- *Loose* is commonly used as an adjective to describe something that is the opposite of “tight, strict, or constrained.”
- *Lose* is a verb used to indicate loss or misplacement of someone or something.
 - She will *lose* her status as an honor student if she fails this course.
 - Keep your shoelaces *loose* while going through airport security.
 - Don't *lose* your focus on this assignment just because the guidelines for completion are loose.

Me or I

These words are both pronouns, used to replace your name in a sentence. Referring to yourself with your own name is awkward, but knowing when to use *me* or *I* can be confusing.

- If you are the subject of the sentence, taking action, use *I*.

- If you are the object of a sentence, something is happening to you, use *me*.
 - *I* am not going to fail this course.
 - Is there some reason she didn't want to work on the project with *me*?

If the action is taking place with other people, think about how you would describe the scene if only you were involved.

- He went with Jane and *me* to the bookstore. (You would say, "he went with me" not "he went with I.")
- Jane and *I* drank too much coffee while studying for the exam. (You would say "I drank too much coffee" not "me drank too much coffee.")

They're, Their, and There

- *They're* is a contraction of "they" and "are."
- *Their* is possessive and plural, indicating that something belongs to a group.
- *There* is a location. Can you see the differences in the following sentences?
 - They're going for a drive.
 - Their car is in the shop, so they will need a ride to the airport.
 - The keys are over there on the table.

Two, Too, and To

- *Two* is a way to write out the number "2."
- *Too* can be used to say "also" or convey that an excessive amount of something.
- *To* is a preposition when used with a noun, and an **infinitive** when used before a verb.

Take a look at these examples:

- He built that project with his own *two* hands.
- She always complains about having *too* much homework.
- It will be time to take the test when we get *to* school.

You're and Your

- *You're* is a contraction of *you* and *are*.
- *Your* is possessive and singular, used to indicate that something belongs to "you."
 - *You're* going to get an A in the course!
 - *Your* parents are going to be so proud of you!

Then and Than

- *Then* is related to time, often used to describe when something happens.
- *Than* indicates some sort of comparison.
 - Make sure there is a vacancy at the hotel, and *then* you can book the flight.
 - The high humidity is terrible, but I'd rather visit during summer *than* winter.

Weather and Whether

These two words often sound exactly the same, but that's where the relationship ends.

- *Weather* is a noun referring atmospheric conditions (i.e., temperature, rain, snow).
- *Whether* is a conjunction that is sometimes used instead of *if* or to introduce a question.
 - The airline canceled all flights into New York because of the *weather*.
 - The *weather* forecast for tomorrow says we'll have sun and high temperatures.
 - She said she is going on the trip *whether* it's cloudy or not.
 - Did you find out *whether* this is the right airport?

Which and That

Deciding whether you should use *which* or *that* depends on the information in the clause it will introduce.

- If the details in the clause could be left out of the sentence and not change the meaning of the sentence, use *which*.
- If the details are essential to the message being conveyed in the sentence, use *that*.
 - Courses *that* include scheduled meetings with the instructor are more engaging.
 - The instructor asked complex questions, *which* the students found challenging.
 - So many houses *that* were flooded in the storm had to be torn down.
 - The weather forecast called for record low temperatures, *which* was not welcome news.
 - Note that the phrases introduced by *which* are offset by a comma.

Who and Whom

- *Who* is used when you are referring to a person or object that is having something done to it.
- *Whom* is used to indicate the person or object that is doing something.
- If you would say *he* or *she* in a sentence, you would use *who*. And if you would say *him* or *her*, you might also use *whom*.
- Try substituting these words in the examples below, rearranging the sentences a bit, to see how it works.
- Note: The same rules apply for *whoever* and *whomever*.
 - The instructor invited a guest speaker *whom* she met at a conference last year. (The instructor met him.)
 - *Who* is the new librarian at the reference desk? (She is.)
 - *Whom* can we ask about the course schedule? (Ask him.)
 - Does anyone know *who* will be teaching this course next semester? (She will.)