

Commonly Confused Words

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers some of the most often misused, confused, and misunderstood words in the English language, and how to select the correct words when writing:

1. Commonly Confused Words

You probably know that there are some words in the English language that are commonly used but easy to mix up. These are called **commonly confused words**, which are words that are homophones (they sound alike), but have different meanings and different spellings. They are used frequently in writing.

Because so many words get confused in English, this tutorial will just cover the worst of the worst, the most common culprits of so many incorrect sentences. If you get used to spotting these words, you'll be better able to catch errors while you proofread your writing.



TERM TO KNOW

Commonly Confused Words

Words that sound alike, but have different meanings and different spellings.

1a. Affect/Effect

“Affect” is most often a verb, meaning to change or influence something.

➞ EXAMPLE This headache affects my ability to read.

“Effect,” on the other hand, is most often a noun, meaning result.

➞ EXAMPLE The effect of this headache is that I can't read.

Is the word used correctly in the following sentence?

The hurricane effected many homes in the region.

No. Look at how the word is working in the sentence. The hurricane is doing something to those homes, so you know that this should be an action word, a verb, and therefore that you're looking for “affect.”

What about in this sentence?

The affects of the hurricane were visible everywhere.

If you look at what function the word is playing, you can again see which word you need here. In this sentence, there is something that is visible everywhere, so you need a thing. Nouns describe persons, places, and things. Thus, you want the noun form, “effect.”

1b. Its/It's

When you say “it’s” with an apostrophe, you’re indicating a contraction, it is or it has.

➞ EXAMPLE The thermometer shows that it’s cold in the house.

You could write “it is cold in the house” and mean the same thing, so that tells you that you’re using the apostrophe to indicate the combination of those two words.

When you say “its” without an apostrophe, however, you’re using a possessive pronoun.

➞ EXAMPLE Its temperature was low.

What about this next sentence?

Its time we went to see the monkey house at the zoo.

You’re trying to imply that you need to get to the monkey house at the zoo, that it is time to go. Thus, that “its” should have an apostrophe to show that you are contracting “it” and “is.”

Now how about this sentence?

The monkey house has been renovated; it's new name is The Monkey Experience.

Does it make sense to say, “it is new name is?” No. Thus, this should be “its” without the apostrophe. The name belongs to “it.”

One good trick is to replace any instance of “its” with “it is.” If the sentence still makes sense, then you have the contraction and should use the apostrophe. If not, then you have the possessive pronoun “it” and should lose that apostrophe.

1c. Your/You're

Here is another apostrophe confusion. “You’re” is the contraction of “you are.”

➞ EXAMPLE You’re going to the beach today.

“Your,” on the other hand, indicates the possessive pronoun.

➞ EXAMPLE Your trip to the beach starts today.

The trick to remembering this is to again think about the contraction. If “you are” makes sense in your sentence, then you’ve got the contraction form. If it doesn’t, just go for “your.”

Is this sentence working?

You're time at the beach is over.

It wouldn’t make sense to say, “you are time at the beach.” You need the possessive version.

What do you notice here?

Your tan after all that time at the beach.

In this case, using the wrong form of the word actually makes the sentence pretty confusing. You end up with the implication that this sentence is about your tan, and the whole meaning falls apart. Your tan after all that time at the beach is what? You might guess here that what is actually intended is “you are,” giving the sentence a much clearer meaning.

1d. Then/Than

“Then” is usually an adverb meant to show the passage of time or the order of things.

➞ EXAMPLE The snow stopped, so then I went out to shovel.

“Than,” on the other hand, makes a comparison between things.

➞ EXAMPLE My driveway seemed to have more snow than my neighbor’s driveway.

What do you think about this sentence?

We need to develop our pictures than frame them.

You see here that this “than” is comparing things. Does that make sense in this context? No, because this sentence is about a timeline. First you develop pictures, then you frame them.

What about this sentence?

I'd rather go to the frame shop then the photo shop, since the photo shop is so far away.

Again, you can see some multiple meanings come up here. This could mean, “I’d rather go first to the frame store and then do the photo shop.” But based on the whole construction and context, you might guess that this speaker would rather go to the shop they are closer to than they would the photo shop. Thus, you can infer that this author intends “than.”

1e. There/Their/They’re

“There” is an adverb; it’s about location.

➞ EXAMPLE The backpack is over there.

It can also be used as a placeholder.

➞ EXAMPLE There is no one with the backpack now.

“Their” is another possessive pronoun, so it’s about ownership.

➞ EXAMPLE Their backpack is on the grass.

“They’re” is a contraction for “they are.”

➞ EXAMPLE They’re going to the grass now.

The trick once again is to start by un-contracting the word. Do you mean “they are?” If so, use that contraction. If not, ask yourself if the next word in the sentence belongs to someone. If it does, then you have possession and want “their.” If not, then you’ve got the adverb working for you, so check that your sentence denotes space.

What’s wrong with this sentence?

They're is no one answering there telephone so their probably not home.

“They are is.” That doesn’t make sense, so which version of the word should you use? You can’t own “is,” so

this shouldn't be possessive. That means you need "there," indicating some kind of location.

At the next spot in the sentence, you see "there telephone." That telephone is an object, so are you describing ownership? The phone belongs to them—you need to use "their."

Could you substitute "they are" in the last spot? "They are probably not home" makes sense. This doesn't indicate possession or place, so you should have the contraction form "they're" here.

1f. To/Too/Two

"Two" is the written form of the numeral 2, so it indicates the amount of two.

➞ EXAMPLE There are two bears in our tent.

"Too," on the other hand, indicates excess or addition.

➞ EXAMPLE There are too many bears here.

The basic "to" is a preposition indicating movement.

➞ EXAMPLE I need to get to my car and escape these bears.

Take a look at these in the following sentence:

There are two many cooks in here, some need too leave the kitchen.

Starting at the end this time, does "too leave" make sense? Can you have multiple or additional leaving? No. Instead, this is probably telling some cooks to leave the kitchen. You thus want the form of "to."

Then you have "too many." Would you usually use numerals that way to say, "I have three many cookies?" No. The "many" is telling you that this is about excess. You need "too."

Now is this sentence indicating movement, excess, or numbers?

I have to cooks left in the kitchen, which is just right.

This seems like it's telling you that the correct amount of cooks for this kitchen is two, so you want the numeral form "two."

1g. Sight/Site/Cite

"Cite" is a verb, meaning to quote as an authority.

➞ EXAMPLE I will cite Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in my paper.

"Sight" is a noun referring to something that is seen.

➞ EXAMPLE The March on Washington would have been an amazing sight.

Finally, "site" is the noun describing a particular location.

➞ EXAMPLE I would like to go to the site of the March someday.

What is this sentence trying to say?

I can't find the cite of the party on this map.

Here you're trying to find a location; you're not looking for a bibliography. Thus, you want to use "site."

When in doubt, look at the part of speech. If you can remember that “cite” is a verb, then you can tell that it doesn’t make sense in this context.

What about here?

The decorations at this party are a beautiful site.

Here you’re describing another noun, something beautiful. “Site” is a noun, but are those decorations a location? No, they’re objects, such as streamers and balloons. You’re looking at these decorations, and therefore the word should be “sight.”

Does this sentence work?

If I copy these decorations, I’ll sight the hostess as my inspiration.

Here you’re using a verb because you will be doing something—crediting the hostess. Therefore, you want the verb version, “cite.”



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that the English language has many **commonly confused words**. These are words that sound the same, but have different meanings and spellings. Some of the most prevalent examples of these words are **affect vs. effect, its vs. it’s, your vs. you’re, then vs. than, there vs. their vs. they’re, to vs. too vs. two**, and **sight vs. site vs. cite**.

With many of these words, the key to selecting the correct version in a sentence is to consider the part of speech of the word and the context around it. Although these are not the only instances of commonly confused words that you will encounter in writing, knowing the differences between these few is a great start and will give you the skills to identify other word choice errors.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.



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