

Tricky Terms

adverse, averse

Adverse means negative or disadvantageous: “The weather conditions were adverse.” *Averse* means opposed: “He was averse to the idea of walking on a treadmill.”

adopt, adapt

To adopt something is to accept it as your own. To adapt something is to change it to suit a particular purpose.

affect, effect

Affect is almost always a verb, as in “the earthquake affected traffic nearby,” unless referring to an emotional state: “the patient had a flat affect.” *Effect* is almost always a noun, as in “the effect was devastating,” unless referring to accomplishing something: “the protesters were able to effect a change in salary.”

ally, alley

An ally is a supporter. An alley is a space between buildings.

alternate, alternative

Alternate suggest switching back and forth; *alternative* suggests having an additional option.

among, between

Among describes relationships involving multiple entities. *Between* describes a relationship of one entity with one or more others.

apprise, appraise

To apprise someone is to inform them. To appraise something is to assign it a value.

bemused, amused

If you are bemused you are bewildered or dazed, probably not an amusing (enjoyable) experience.

biannual, biennial

Biannual means twice a year; *biennial* means once every other year. *Semiannual* is a less confusing alternative for *biannual*.

capitol, capital

A capitol is a building in which a legislative body meets. A capital is a city that is a seat of government. *Capital* can also be an adjective.

cohort, colleague

A cohort is a group (e.g., of study subjects) followed together over time. If you are a member of a cohort, the other members are your colleagues.

compliment, complement

A compliment is a nice thing to say. Free samples are complimentary. Things that together make a whole are complementary.

compose, comprise

A large thing may comprise (include) many smaller ones. The smaller things thus compose the larger one. Nothing is ever “comprised of” other things.

compare with, compare to

In comparing two things with each other, you consider similarities and differences in detail. In comparing one thing to another, you consider a single similarity or dissimilarity.

continual, continuous, contiguous

Something that is continual recurs frequently. Something that is continuous is uninterrupted. Things that are contiguous are next to each other.

criterion, criterium

A criterion is a characteristic trait or something you use to make a choice. A criterium is a kind of bicycle race. The plural of both is *criteria*.

data are, data is

Data is technically a plural form. “The data agree with our conjecture.” When talking about data as a concept, it can be referred to as singular: “Big data is a hot topic these days.”

discrete, discreet

If items are distinct from each other, they are discrete. If you are careful with whom you share secrets, you are discreet.

disinterested, uninterested

If you are disinterested, you do not have a personal stake in the subject. If you are uninterested, you just don’t care about it.

doctor, physician

A doctor is a person with a doctoral degree. A physician is a person whose job it is to heal others.

due to, owing to

Avoid using “due to” as a replacement for “owing to” or “because of.” It introduces an adjectival phrase (“The increase in wildfires is due to global warming”), not an adverbial one (“Because of global warming, more wildfires are occurring.”).

e.g., i.e.

e.g. (exempli gratia) means “for the sake of example.” *i.e.* (id est) means “that is.” The latter refers to a specific thing, not one of many.

endemic, epidemic

A condition that is endemic to an area is prevalent or naturally occurring there. An epidemic is a sudden, temporary increase in the incidence.

ensure, insure

To ensure something is to make sure it happens or is so. To insure something is to provide insurance.

fewer, less

Use *less* for volume or mass; use *fewer* for counts. “There were fewer people drinking less water.”

flammable, inflammable

Oddly, both mean possible to set on fire.

flaunt, flout

To flaunt something is to show it off. To flout something is to defy it.

forward, foreword

You can move forward, and you can write a foreword. There is no such word as foreward.

hone, home

To hone something is to sharpen it. One can home in on a target.

imply, infer

To infer something is to reason it from other facts. To imply something is to suggest it without overtly saying it.

incidence, prevalence

Incidence is the rate of new cases (e.g., of a disease or trait). *Prevalence* is the proportion of individuals in the population with the trait currently.

inter-, intra-

The prefix *inter-* means between. The prefix *intra-* means within.

interment, internment

Interment is burial. *Internment* is imprisonment.

its, it's

An apostrophe is appropriate only when the word is a contraction for “it is.”

lay, lie

Of the two verbs whose infinitive forms are *to lie* and *to lay*, only *to lay* takes a direct object, and it always takes a direct object: "lay your money down." Trickier still, the past tense of *to lie* is *lay*: "she lay on the bed and refused to budge."

literally, figuratively

Something literally true is actually true. Something figuratively true is not true at all.

negative, positive

Tests are not negative or positive; results are.

over, more than

For a period of time, *more than* is better (*over* could mean "during"); for an age, *older than* is better; for units of something, *more than* is better.

precipitous, precipitate

Precipitous means steep. *Precipitate* means hasty.

prescribed, proscribed

These words are nearly opposites. Something that is *prescribed* is directed or governed by rules. Something *proscribed* is forbidden.

principle, principal

Principle is a noun, as in "He applied the principle of least privilege." *Principal* is an adjective, as in "He was the principal investigator."

quantitate, quantify, measure

All three mean "measure." *Quantitate* is a dubious back-formation, *quantify* suggests novelty.

repeat, repeated

Repeat is a noun or verb, not an adjective. *Repeated* can be used as an adjective.

restive, restless

If you are restive you are unmoving. If you are restless, you are unwilling to be still.

reticent, reluctant

If you are reticent, you are quiet. If you are reluctant, you refuse, possibly quite loudly.

sensitivity, specificity

The sensitivity of a test is the rate of true positive results [true positives/(true positives + false negatives)]. The specificity is the true negative rate [true negatives/(true negatives + false positives)].

significance, importance

To a nontechnical audience, *significance* means importance, not statistical significance. Make sure your audience understands what kind of significance you are talking about.

stationary, stationery

Something stationary does not move around. You might write a letter on stationery. Mnemonic: *stationery* and *letter* both have e's.

suspicious of, suggestive of, suspicious for

People are suspicious of things; results are suggestive of things. I am suspicious of the use of *suspicious for*.

there, their, they're

There is the opposite of here. *Their* indicates ownership by a plural entity. *They're* is a contraction for "they are."

use, utilize

Utilize suggests novelty; *use* usually is the word to use.

while, whereas

While implies two things happening at the same time. *Whereas* is best when the meaning is not temporal.

whose, who's

Whose is the adjectival form of who. *Who's* is only correct when used as a contraction for "who is."