The 50 Most Commonly Misused Words In The English Language

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**Affect/Effect** – Affect is a verb. Effect is a noun.

**Your/You’re** – Your shows possession. You’re is a contraction of the words you and are or you and were. The apostrophe in a contraction replaces a letter or two and makes two words into one. Read your sentence aloud using you are and you were in place of your. If the sentence sounds correct, use you’re.

**It’s/Its** – It’s is a contraction of the words it and is or it and has. Its shows possession and, contrary to common usage, does not require an apostrophe.

**Literally** – This one isn’t so much misspelled as it is misused by those that don’t understand the definition. If you’re not sure, literally means something that actually, truly and in all reality happened. No matter how much my son assures me, I know that his head didn’t literally explode. Not that it’s impossible, but that his ability to argue with me about the definition of literally makes it highly improbably.

**Irregardless** – After some research on this one, I have to concede that irregardless is technically a word…even if most English majors refuse to accept it as one. It is considered an improper word, as in ain’t and conversate. Words that find their way into our vernacular, even the ones stemming from misuse, are listed in the dictionary as improper words, dialect or jargon. To keep from sounding uneducated, just use regardless instead.

**A Lot/Alot** – This one resulted in the biggest shaming of my middle school English education. Alot is not a word. It is two words and I remember this one…a lot.

**e.g./i.e.** – When you see e.g. think ‘eggsample’. On the other hand, in essence is represented by i.e.

**Insure/Ensure/Assure** – Insure means to purchase or have insurance. Ensure is to make certain of something. Assure is comfort or lend confidence, as in the word reassure.

**Mute/Moot** – Mute is to make quite or without voice. Moot means something has little to no practical value. Note which definition is used in the phrase, ‘a moot point’.

**Disinterested/Uninterested** – Disinterested means you don’t have a stake, claim or interest in something. Uninterested is when there is no interest…as in unconcerned or unenthusiastic about something.

**Supposably/Supposedly** – Even my spell check doesn’t recognize supposably as a word. Supposedly is the correct use. If you struggle to keep this one straight, remember that the root word is suppose…or supposed, which are both actual words.

**Conversate** – This one also falls into the category of improper. Sure you can use it but it won’t help you sound educated.

**Factoid** – This word probably does not mean what you think it means. A factoid is misinformation presented as fact. A factoid is not a tidbit of info, small fact or trivia-like snipet of knowledge.

**Lay/Lie** – This one is kind of tricky because lay is also the past tense of lie. Any time you move an object you lay it down. Lie means to recline. A good rule of thumb is to use sit and set. If sit will work in its place, use lie. If set could be used, go with lay.

**Pacific** – Heck, I’ve seen ‘pacifically’ on t-shirts. If your intention is to refer to something in particular, the word is specifically…specific-ally. I think this one is more common in spoken language.

**Pique/Peek/Peak** – Something may pique your interest…or you might peek at a present…or reach a sort of peak.

**Decimated** – This word is usually used to imply ‘destroyed’ or ‘annihilated’ but in reality means to reduce something by one tenth. Hence the root word, deci. Yup, I just used hence.

**Stationary/Stationery** – Stationary, with an a, refers to something immovable or fixed…like a stationary bike. Stationery, with an e, is all the pretty paper, cards, pens and goodies I spend so much money on. Self-proclaimed nerd…and I used the word hence.

**Then/Than** – Then refers to time: First we will go to the post office, then we will stop at the store. Than is used when making a comparison: I like chocolate more than candy.

**Invoke/Evoke** – To invoke is to call upon a higher power for aid or assistance. To evoke to is recall a memory or feeling.

**Continuous/Continual** – Continuous is something that continues without cease. Continual happens over a long period of time. Because it’s constantly breaking down, my van is continually in the shop.

**Accept/Except** – To accept is to include. Except means to exclude. All my friends were accepted to Harvard, except Tom. Poor Tom.

**Chronic/Acute** – These two are commonly misunderstood or mistakenly used synonymously. Chronic is long-term and usually debilitating. The use of acute implies a sudden on-set of symptoms, like the flu or an asthma attack. Chronic and acute are also used to classify pain. Acute would be sudden, like stubbing your toe, while anyone who’s suffered recurring back pain knows the first-hand definition of chronic.

**Allusion/Illusion/Elusion** – Allusion is a reference to something. Illusion is a misconception and also refers to magic and illusionists (“It’s an illusion, Michael!”). Elusion is to escape. The writer alluded to the famous illusions of Houdini, who was famous for eluding death by narrow escape.

**Alternately/Alternatively** – Alternately (or alternate) means to take turns. Alternatively (or alternative) is one thing instead of another or either/or.

**Assent/Ascent** – Assent means to agree, while ascent refers to a journey upward.

**Borne/Born** – Borne means to bare or carry, born refers to the birth of something.

**Canvass/Canvas** – Canvass is when you spread the word about something or hand out fliers. You canvass the area. If you canvased the area, you would have covered it in fabric, namely canvas.

**Complimentary/Complementary** – Complimentary is something given for free (complimentary breakfast) or something said as a matter or praise, or compliment. Complementary is when things complement, or support and benefit, each other.

**Disburse/Disperse** – Disburse usually refers to funds or money and means to pay out. Disperse is to scatter or spread over an area.

**Reign/Rein** – Another two commonly misused words are reign and rein. To reign is to lord over. Reins are the straps you use to steer an animal.

**Redundant –** I wanted to include this one in our list of commonly misused words because I’ve literally heard it fumbled. Maybe it’s because I’m around teenagers. Just in case, the word redundant means that something is unnecessarily repeated. Double negatives are redundant. Saying something the same way twice in succession is redundant. I an example I liked from Samuel Goldwyn, “I never make predictions, especially about the future.”

**Imply/Infer** – Here are another set of words that are commonly confused. To imply something is to hint at it. It isn’t said directly but there is an implied meaning. To infer is to find meaning in what was left unsaid. The two together create a conversation, interpreted on both sides based on hidden meaning and things left unsaid. Soap operas and drama queens rock at these concepts.

**Set/Sit** – We kind of covered this before. Use set when placing something or setting something to a degree. Use sit when you are relaxing at a picnic table or on a log…or in a reclining pool chair in the sun.

**Pallet/Palate/Palette** – Pallets are wood shipping bases. Generally you stack them, you wrap them, and you move them with a pallet jack or forklift. The palate refers to your sense of taste. A palette is the board an artist uses for holding and mixing paints.

**Epitome/Epidemy** – Epitome is a typical or ideal example of something. Epidemy refers to epidemic…as in disease.

**Site/Sight/Cite** – These are common words and I’m sure you know the difference but for the sake of inclusion, site refers to an area. Use sight when seeing with your eyes or referring to vision. To cite is to refer to the work or accomplishment of another. Footnotes cite sources that you can find in the appendix.

**Whether/Weather** – Whether is when one thing relies on another or there is a choice. Use weather when talking about the conditions outside.

**Everyday/Every day** – The meanings of these commonly misused words are subtly different. The difference in choosing between them will be your intention as a writer. Everyday (one word) means average or common. Every day (two words) means each day, separately. That was redundant.

**Won’t/Wont** – Won’t is a loose contraction of the words will and not. Wont isn’t used much anymore but refers to a likelihood or accustomed behavior. When we say that someone is wont to do something, we mean that it is usual.

**Vain/Vein/Vane** – I love homophones, don’t you? Vain can mean concerned with one’s appearance, pointless, or not resulting in a desired outcome. Veins are the blood highways in the body. Weather vanes are vanes.

Pored/Poured – Here’s another subtle difference that results in misuse. When you use the word pore, you mean you carefully studied or meditated on something. When you write the word pour, there’s usually liquid involved.

**Suit/Suite** – Obviously a suit is an article of clothing but the word can also be used to describe a legal matter, the courting of a woman, or something appropriate or beneficial. A suite on the other hand refers to a collection. A collection of rooms becomes a hotel suite. Computer programs come in collections called suites. Even a personal staff of attendants is described as a suite.

**There/Their/They’re/There’re** – Quick run down. Use there to describe a place. Their is the possessive of they. They’re is a contraction (the apostrophe in the middle of a contraction replaces a letter or two) of they are or they were. There’re is rare outside of spoken language unless used by a writer to create an accent or dialect. I don’t think anyone writes this word by accident, though I’m sure I’ve said it.

**To/Two/Too** – I see these confused consistently on social media. To is when you send a letter or give a gift. I gave some old makeup to my daughter. Two is how the number is spelled. One plus one equals two. Too means in excess or in addition. She was talking about tacos and now I’m craving them, too. Or within a sentence: That girl is just too much. I’m a girl too, so I can use the g-word.

**Lose/Loose** – These commonly confused words are just plain similar, like chose and choose. The same rules apply to both. Lose rhymes with fuse and loose rhymes with goose. Chose rhymes with hose and choose rhymes with booze. I hope that helps.

**Faze/Phase** – Faze seems like such a sci-fi word to me. To be unfazed by something means to not be bothered. Obviously the definition then is to be affected. A fazer then, is a loose term used to describe a sci-fi laser gun. I don’t know the specifics. Finally, phase describes a step in a plan or development.

**Counsel/Council** – Counsel is advice or legal assistance and can be used as both a noun and a verb. You can obtain counsel or counsel someone else. Council is a group of people brought together to exchange ideas and make decisions and is always a noun.

**Further/Farther** – The difference between these two words was well-said in the movie, ‘Finding Forrester’. The difference is that further applies to degree, while farther denotes distance. If you’re reading the fifty most commonly misused words in the English language of your own free will and you haven’t seen ‘Finding Forrester’, you should.

**Who/Whom** – I saved the best for last. Who is the subject of the sentence and whom is the object. After some research, I think the best way to know which word to use is to test your sentence by replacing who/whom with him/her or he/she. If you are writing the question: To who/whom am I speaking?, try replacing the who/whom with both him/her and he/she. Are you speaking to him/her or are you speaking to he/she. Who=He/She and Whom=Him/Her…so the correct use in this instance is, ‘To whom am I speaking?’