University of New Hampshire
Connors Writing Center

Commonly Confused Words

Accept and Except: *Accept* is a verb that means to receive. *Except* is both a preposition and a verb: meaning but and to leave out.

> Example: "He accepted a present" is different from "Everyone except Laurie received presents."

Advice and Advise: *Advice* is a noun that refers to guidance or recommendations. *Advise* is a verb meaning to offer suggestions about the best course of action to someone.

> Example: A person who advises students gives them advice on the best courses to take.

Affect and Effect: In terms of usage, *affect* is usually a verb and *effect* is usually a noun. However, the tricky part is that these words can also be used in other ways. *Affect* can be a noun, specifically when describing psychological conditions. *Effect* can be a verb meaning to bring about or to accomplish.

> Example: The party was affected by the weather. The effect of the plastic surgery was astounding.

> Example: The drug created a happy affect. The political party hoped to effect change with new policies.

Allude and Elude: *Allude* means to make an indirect reference to something. *Elude* means to escape from something or to fail to grasp (a concept).

> Example: Although he alluded to the secret, his meaning eluded me.

> Note: *Allusion* and *Illusion*: An *allusion* is an indirect reference, often to a literary work or historical event. An *illusion* is a misconception or false impression.

Aloud and Allowed: *Aloud* is an adverb that means out loud or audibly. *Allowed* is a verb that means permitted:

> Example: She sang the song aloud to her class. The boy was not allowed to play video games until he finished his homework.

'Alright' or All Right?: …technically, 'alright' is not a word, it's slang. It's a one-word derivation from the expression all right, which you should always use in lieu of 'alright,' especially in formal writing.

> Example: Your use of 'alright' is the only thing I am not all right with in your dissertation.

Bad and Badly: *Bad* is used after verbs that express emotion or states of being like looked or felt, whereas *badly* should be used with action verbs. These two most commonly get confused when verbs are used that can be either emotion of action verbs, such as feel. A trick to stop making this mistake is by checking with the 'to be' verb.

> Example: I feel bad or I am bad works whereas I feel badly or I am badly does not.

Compliment and Complement: A *compliment* expresses admiration for something. To *complement* means to enhance or complete something else.

> Example: The student received a wonderful compliment after his speech. A dessert of cherry pie complements a delicious turkey dinner.

Continuous and Continual: While similar, these two words imply very different meanings. *Continuous* implies an unending period of time or action without interruption, while *continual* does not have to mean uninterrupted, only repeated.

> Example: My roommate played her music continuously in her room from 9:00pm until 12:30am, even though I continually urged her to use her earphones.

Could've, Should've, and Would've: These are contractions for could have, should have, and would have. Though not mistaken for each other, they are often spelled incorrectly because of the way they sound; could of, should of, and would of. *Of* is not a substitute for *have* and should never be used as such. Thus, all three words should always be spelled correctly, as contractions: could've, should've, and would've.

Cite, Sight, and Site: *Cite* means to quote or document. *Sight* usually refers to the power of seeing or the thing that can be seen. *Site* refers to a particular area, position, or place.

> Example: Students must cite their sources when writing research papers. There are many sights to see in New York City. We visited the site of the September 11th monument.

Deserts and Desserts: Arid land is a *desert*. People who get what they deserve are getting what they deserve are getting their *deserts*—the accent on the second syllable. People who like goodies like ice cream and care are getting *desserts*.

> Example: While in the desert, I would have a popsicle for dessert.

e.g. and i.e.: *E.g.* is short for the Latin term exempli gratia, which means "for example." *I.e.* is short for the Latin id est, which means "that is."

> Example: Kirk and Spock had much in common, e.g., their interest in astronomy and their concerns for the ship and its crew. They had one obvious difference, i.e., their cars.

Elicit and Illicit: These words are not synonymous. *Elicit* means to evoke or draw out. *Illicit* refers to something that is illegitimate or unlawful.

> Example: The teacher tried to elicit comments from the students. Mary was arrested for possessing illicit drugs.

Emigrate From and Immigrate To: *Emigrate* means to leave one country or region and settle in another. *Immigrate* means to enter another country and reside there.

> Example: In 1910, my grandmother emigrated from Russia. Yet, many foreigners immigrate to the U.S. to find work.

Ensure and Insure: *Ensure* is a verb meaning something you do to guarantee an event or condition. *Insure* is a verb that can be done to a person, place, or thing, but it mainly refers to limiting financial liability.

> Example: To ensure that Bill would finish his paper on time, he started writing it a week in advance. We insured our house against fire and flood damage.

Farther and Further: Use *farther* when referring to a physical distance; use *further* to refer to abstract ideas or to indicate a greater extent or degree.

> Example: Jerry insisted that he could walk to father, and he refused to discuss it any further.

Fewer and Less: *Fewer* is used with nouns that can be counted, and *less* is used with nouns that cannot be counted.

> Example: The grocery line only accepts 10 items or fewer. There is less water in the lake than last summer.

Good and Well: Both good and well are often used incorrectly. *Good* is an adjective and is used to modify nouns and linking verbs, such as the verb 'to be.' *Well* is an adverb and is used to modify action verbs. When someone asks how you are, it is perfectly acceptable to reply, "I am good" because "am" is part of the verb 'to be' and is therefore modified by good instead of well. Eat, play, sleep, run, jump, walk, hike, talk, act, and write are all examples of action verbs, and they are done well, not good! Any noun—that is, any person, place, or thing—is good, not well.

Hopefully: There's only one way to use *hopefully* correctly: as an adverb meaning "in a hopeful manner." Remember: adverbs are using to modify verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—not nouns or pronouns. Strictly speaking, hopefully (and other introductory words like happily, sadly, honestly, seriously, frankly, etc.) shouldn't be used to replace phrases like "It is hoped" or "I hope." However, such usage is common in American speech.

Example: Genevieve looked hopefully at the lottery numbers.

I and Me: Although it is sometimes obvious when to use *me* and when to use *I*, it can be harder to tell when more than one person is listed. The best way to determine which to use is to temporarily remove any references to other people from the sentence and see what fits.

Example: Would you say, "meet Sam and I at the writing center", or "meet Sam and me at the writing center"?

By removing the reference to Sam, the answer becomes clear. You would not ask someone to meet I, you'd ask them to meet me. Therefore, the correct form is: "Meet Sam and me at the writing center."

Example: Would you say, "if you'll be at the writing center, Sam and I can meet you there", or "if you'll be at the writing center, Sam and me can meet you there"?

Again, remove Sam. You would tell someone I can meet them, not me can meet them. Therefore, the correct form is: "If you'll be at the writing center, Sam and I can meet you there."

Irregardless: *Irregardless* has become a commonly used term; however, the dictionary and other grammar sources list the word as incorrect usage of regardless or irrespective. It is the words pairing of the prefix (ir) and the suffix (less), which creates a double negative.

It's and Its: It's and its are two different words. *It's* is a contraction for 'it is'. *Its* is possessive. Apostrophes are usually used with words that are contractions and words that are possessive, but with it's and its, the apostrophe is kept in the contraction form but eliminated from the possessive form because its is a possessive pronoun. Other possessive pronouns such as yours, theirs, and ours do not use apostrophes either, but they are less confusing because they are not also contractions! Just remember that it's is only used with 'it is' or 'it has' could be used instead. If 'it is' or 'it has' does not fit in the sentence, then use the possessive form: its.

Example: It's sometimes difficult to determine the proper use of a word and its apostrophe.

Loose and Lose: *Loose* is the opposite of tight and *lose* is the opposite of win. A funny way to remember this important difference: the Pats are going to lose if their defensive end plays a loose defense again!

Principal and Principle: *Principal* refers to the person with the highest degree of authority in a school, organization, institution, or group. A *principle* is a fundamental rule or belief.

That and Which: Though there are times when it may appear that that and which can be used interchangeably, one cannot actually be used in place of the other. *Which* is used with nonrestrictive clauses and *that* is used with restrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause can be removed from the rest of the sentence without changing the meaning, whereas a restrictive clause cannot be taken out because it would give a different meaning.

> <u>Example</u>: Students work to improve their writing at the writing center, which is located in Dimond Library Room 329.

Which is used here because students work to improve their writing at the writing center regardless of whether or not we refer to the location.

> <u>Example</u>: Writing center appointments that only discuss grammar do not address organization.

This is a restrictive clause because it refers specifically to appointments only discussing grammar. If we were to remove the part of the sentence that refers to only discussing grammar, the meaning of the sentence would change. It would make it sound like we never talk about organization at the writing center, and that is definitely not the case! Thus, "only discuss grammar" is a restrictive clause and so that is used.

Their, They're, and There: Their, they're, and there are all pronounced the same but are three different words with three different uses. *Their* is used to show possession. *They're* is a contraction for 'they are'. *There* is used to indicate a place, or when the verb 'to be' is used. The easiest way to remember it: if it's possessive, use their. If you could use 'they are' instead, use they're. If it is not showing passion and 'they are does not fit, then use there.

> <u>Example</u>: At the writing center, we work with students to improve their writing. They're going to the writing center. Look over there, that's the writing center!

Then and Than: *Then* is used to show cause and effect: if this happens, then this will happen. *Than* is used to make a comparison between two separate things.

> <u>Example</u>: If I keep adding more and more words to this example, then it will become longer than the previous sentence.

Weather and Whether: *Weather* is referred to when using meteorology. *Whether* is used when making a choice.

> Example: The weather for today in Durham, New Hampshire is a chilly 30 degrees. I am going to decide whether to plan a trip to the Caribbean or to stay home for Spring Break.

Who and Whom: *Who* is used for subjects and subject complements. *Whom* is used for objects. Issues with these words arise when writing subordinate clauses or questions. It is helpful to check what the word's function in the clause or question is in order to choose which word.

> Example: You will work with our senior engineers whom you will meet later.

Whom is used here because it is the direct object of the verb will meet.

Your and You're: Use *your* to show possession, and use *you're* to express the contraction for you are. It sometimes helps if you break it down while you write: any place you could actually place 'you are.' write "you're' (except in formal writing when you do not use contractions!).

> Example: Now you're in possession of the knowledge necessary to correctly complete your assignment.