



## Commonly Confused Words

Abbreviation/acronym. Both abbreviations and acronyms are ways of shortening words or phrases. The difference is that abbreviations are pronounced letter-by-letter while acronyms are pronounced as a single word:

*The **abbreviation** for the Federal Bureau of Investigation is FBI.*

*The **acronym** for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is NASA.*

Accept/except. To accept is to receive something. Except can either be a verb meaning “exclude” or a preposition (often with “for”):

*He graciously **accepted** the award.*

*Everyone thought he was deserving **except** for me.*

Adapt/adopt. To adapt is to change to meet new needs. To adopt is to come up with something or take control of something:

*If a company is going to survive, it needs to **adapt** to meet new challenges.*

*We **adopted** a new plan to deal with the weak economy.*

Adverse/averse. Adverse means harmful. Averse means opposed to:

*Acid rain has an **adverse** effect on the environment.*

*John is **averse** to spicy food after eating a ghost pepper.*

Advice/advise. Advice is a noun meaning counsel or guidance. Advise is a verb meaning to offer counsel or guidance:

*My manager gave me good **advice** for working with customers.*

*My manager **advises** me to be patient with customers.*

Affect/effect. Almost always, affect is used as a verb while effect is used as a noun:

*His speech did not **affect** me.*

*His speech had no **effect** on me.*

Aid/aide. Aid refers to help or a verb meaning “to help.” An aide is someone who helps, such as an advisor or an assistant:

*The university offers financial **aid** for students who need it.*

*After the devastating hurricane, locals from surrounding states offered to **aid** the survivors.*

*The president consulted his closest **aides** before making a decision.*



Amoral/immoral. Amoral means not concerned with the morality of something. Immoral means corrupt or evil:

*While most politicians take a strong stance on abortion, Governor Brown is **amoral** toward it. The **immoral** warden had no qualms about letting his prisoners go hungry.*

Anecdote/antidote. An anecdote is a story. An antidote is a cure for poison:

*My grandpa always tells amusing **anecdotes** about his childhood. If only Horatio had an **antidote**, Hamlet may not have died from poison.*

Appraise/appraise. To appraise is to determine the value of something (often with “at”). To apprise is to inform:

*My aunt’s diamond neckless was **appraised** at more than a million dollars. Your professors should keep you **apprised** of any changes they make to their syllabus.*

Assent/ascent. Assent refers to agreement or a verb meaning “to agree” (often with “to”). An ascent is an upward climb:

*Before the president passes this law, he should make sure he has the **assent** of his advisors. Our enemy reluctantly **assented** to our offer for a truce. The sharp **ascent** of the mountain intimidated the climbers.*

Assure/ensure/insure. To assure is to confirm or promise. To ensure is to make certain. Insure means to protect or cover and is typically only used when writing about insurance policies:

*She **assured** me that werewolves are not native to Arkansas. Nevertheless, I bought some silver bullets to **ensure** my safety. The salesman told me that his policy does not **insure** me against werewolf attacks.*

Aural/oral. Aural refers to the ears or the sense of hearing. Oral refers to the mouth or speech:

*An **aural** exam will determine whether you need hearing aids. Good **oral** hygiene, like brushing your teeth, can prevent gingivitis. The Spanish students feared their **oral** exam, in which they had to tell a story in Spanish.*

Bear/bare. Bear refers either to the ursine animal, a verb meaning “to carry” or “to hold,” or a verb meaning “to endure.” Bare means simple, unadorned, or naked.

***Bears** are native to North America. I come **bearing** gifts. Minnesotans often have to **bear** brutal blizzards during the winter. The little kids were running around their backyard in **bare** feet.*

Between/among. Use between when referring to exactly two things. Use among when referring to more than two things:

*Between fire and ice, I prefer fire.*

*But among earth, wind, and fire, I'd choose earth any day.*

Brake/break. Brake refers to a mechanism for stopping or a verb meaning to slow down (often to a complete stop). Break refers to a fracture or a verb meaning to fracture; it can also refer to a brief pause or period of respite:

*When you buy a new car, always make sure the **brakes** work well.*

*Always **brake** for pedestrians.*

*If you **break** your leg, the doctor might make you wear a cast.*

*Students need a **break** from their classes every now and then.*

Capital/capitol. Capitol is only used to refer to the actual building that houses a government (note also that the United States Capitol Building is a proper noun and should be capitalized). Capital is used in all other instances, such as when referring to capital cities, capital letters, and capital (money):

*Protesters gathered around the **capitol** as the politician began his speech.*

*The **capital** of Liberia is Monrovia.*

*It takes a lot of **capital** to start a business.*

Censor/censure. To censor is to ban or edit (usually because the thing banned or edited is considered controversial). Censure refers to criticism or a verb meaning “to criticize”:

*In order to show the movie to children, the editors had to **cancel** a particularly violent scene.*

*The politician's foolish decision drew the **censure** of his allies and opponents alike.*

*His constituents **censured** him for his politically incorrect remarks.*

Cite/site/sight. To cite is to make reference to. A site is a location. Sight refers to the ability to see or to something seen:

*A good writer **cites** plenty of reliable sources.*

*This would be a good **site** for the new football stadium.*

*An eye doctor can determine if you have problems with your **sight**.*

*You're a **sight** for sore eyes.*

Compare/contrast. To compare is to note the similarities and differences between two or more things. To contrast is to analyze two or more things with the explicit purpose of showing the differences between them:

*The professor asked us to **compare** the writing styles of Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain.*



*The professor, a big Twain fan, **contrasted** Twain's humor with other authors' seriousness.*

Complement/compliment. A compliment is a statement of praise or a token of appreciation (e.g., a complimentary breakfast). A complement is something that goes well with something else:

*Some cultures consider it a **compliment** to bow to others.*

*The carrots in this stew are a nice **complement** to the potatoes.*

Comprise/compose. Comprise means “consist of.” Compose means “make up”:

*Many American folk songs **comprise** just two or three simple chords.*

*Just two or three simple chords **compose** many American folk songs.*

Consequently/subsequently. Something is a consequent of something else if it happens because of the first thing. Something is subsequent if it follows the first thing but was not necessarily caused by it:

*I failed my history test. **Consequently**, my mom grounded me.*

*The city passed a new law banning mongooses as pets. **Subsequently**, more and more cities started outlawing certain pets.*

Corps/corpse. Broadly speaking, a corps (pronounced “core”) is a group of people; more specifically, it usually refers to a company or a branch of the military. A corpse is a dead body (more likely of a human than an animal—a dead animal body is more often called a carcass):

*The Marine **Corps** is looking for new recruits at the mall.*

*Upon discovering a man's mutilated **corpse** in the park, Bill immediately called the police.*

Council/counsel. A council is a committee or similar organization tasked with making decisions. Counsel refers to advice or the lawyers that give it:

*The **council** voted to repeal the ordinance Friday.*

*When buying a house, it's important to seek the **counsel** of a good real estate agent.*

*The defendant's **counsel** entered a “no contest” plea.*

Denotation/connotation. Denotation is the dictionary definition of a word. Connotation is all of the metaphorical things a word represents:

*The **denotation** of fire is the heat and light caused by combustion.*

*But it also carries the **connotation** of intensity and passion.*

Desert/dessert. Desert refers to a dry, sandy biome or to a verb meaning “to abandon.” A dessert refers to a sweet food (candy, cake, ice cream, etc.) that often follows the main course of a meal:



*When traveling through the **desert**, be sure to drink plenty of water.*  
*After their cruise ship wrecked, Jerry and Rob were **deserted** on a small tropical island.*  
*After I eat spicy Thai food, I like to order ice cream for **dessert**.*

Note: “Just deserts” is a somewhat rare English idiom meaning “that which one deserves” (e.g., “I hope that evil dictator gets his just deserts”—that is, “I hope that evil dictator gets the punishment he deserves”). Desert is now an archaic noun, but do not use deserts in this usage.

Disinterested/uninterested. Disinterested means unbiased or impartial. Uninterested means not interested:

*A good judge is one who is **disinterested** in either party.*  
*A bad judge is one who is **uninterested** in case law.*

Dissent/descent. Dissent refers to disagreement or a verb meaning “to disagree.” Descent is a noun referring to a downward slope or one’s lineage (see the difference between assent and ascent for a similar case):

*Despite his advisor’s **dissent**, the king chose to invade England.*  
*The greedy boss’s employees **dissented** when he increased their hours.*  
*The climbers approached the cliff side’s sharp **descent** with caution.*  
*Pete was excited to hear that he was of Scottish **descent**.*

Dual/duel. Dual means twofold or double. Duel refers to a fight between two individuals or a verb meaning to participate in such a fight:

*A **dual** processor computer system can run more programs at a time.*  
*Alexander Hamilton was defeated in his **duel** with Aaron Burr.*  
*Hamilton and Burr **dueled** on July 11, 1804.*

Eager/anxious. Eager (often with “to”) means excited and implies that the eager person *wants* something to happen. Anxious (often with “about”) means nervous and implies that the anxious person *dreads* something happening:

*I am **eager** to finish this semester.*  
*I am **anxious** about my Latin exam tomorrow.*

Elicit/illicit. Elicit is a verb meaning “to draw out.” Illicit is an adjective meaning “unlawful”:

*It can sometimes be hard to **elicit** participation from students at 8:00 in the morning.*  
*It is a bad idea to bring **illicit** drugs to school.*

Eminent/immanent/imminent. Eminent means well-known and respected. Immanent means inherent to something. Imminent means happening soon:



The **eminent** Professor White will be giving a lecture on Tuesday.  
It is an **immanent** duty of Congress to protect Americans' rights.  
With their allies having abandoned them, the Romans knew that defeat was **imminent**.

Farther/further. Farther refers to actual measurable distance or depth while further refers to unmeasurable (metaphorical) distance or depth:

Molly was able to run **farther** than Chris.  
We should explore this topic **further**.

Fewer/less. Use fewer to refer to countable nouns. Use less to refer to uncountable nouns:

This lane is only for people who have 10 items or **fewer**.  
Christine brought **less** food to the potluck than she did last year.

Flare/flair. Flare always involves fire or the light caused by it. Flair refers to talent or (especially in advertising) a fashionable quality:

As the campfire **flared** up, the campers got ready to toast their marshmallows.  
Clair has a **flair** for styling hair.  
The ruffle on this dress gives it a unique **flair**.

Flaunt/flout. To flaunt is to show off. To flout is to ignore or disobey a command or request:

Nathan loved to **flaunt** the feather boa he bought from Tahiti.  
He **flouted** our wishes to eat our dinner in peace.

Formal/former. Formal means official and proper (e.g., "formal attire"). Former means previous:

The wedding ceremony was a **formal** event, but the reception afterward was quite casual.  
The **former** president gave an inspiring speech when he resigned from his position.

Hoard/horde. Hoard refers to a stockpile or a verb meaning "to stockpile." A horde is a crowd (usually of people):

Captain Greenbeard greedily **hoarded** all of the treasure for himself.  
Consequently, a **horde** of angry pirates gathered in front of his cabin.

Illusion/allusion. An illusion is a deception. An allusion is a reference:

The magician created the **illusion** that he had sawed his assistant in half.  
Professor White made an **allusion** to Star Trek when he said, "Live long and prosper."



Imply/infer. To imply is to subtly hint or suggest. To infer is to draw a conclusion based on evidence:

*His serious look **implied** that he was in no mood for games.  
Based on his serious look, we **inferred** that he was in no mood for games.*

Lie/lay. To lie is to recline; this verb is intransitive (it does not take a direct object—you cannot lie something). To lay is to set something down; this verb is transitive (it takes a direct object—there must be something that is laid down).

*After a long day at work, I like to **lie** on my bed and read Shakespeare.  
When I finish reading, I **lay** the book on the nightstand next to my bed.*

Lose/loose. Loose is the opposite of tight. To lose is to misplace something or to be defeated at a contest or game:

*A **loose** rope won't do a good job keeping your boat tied down.  
If you don't make that rope tight, you're going to **lose** your boat.  
If your boat drifts away, you're certain to **lose** the boat race.*

Metal/medal/mettle/meddle. Metal is a hard element such as iron, gold, or silver. A medal is a pendant typically made out of a kind of metal and awarded to contestants in a game or sport. Mettle is courage or determination. Meddle means “to interfere with”:

*Tungsten has the highest melting point of all **metals**.  
The athlete was awarded a silver **medal** for second place.  
The gladiator showed remarkable **mettle** as he bravely entered the Coliseum.  
Those **meddling** kids once again foiled the villain's plan.*

Moral/morale. Moral (in the singular) refers to the life lesson conveyed by a fable or story. Morals (in the plural) are ethics. Morale is optimism:

*The **moral** of “The Ant and the Grasshopper” is that we should always be prepared.  
It is rare these days to find a politician with good **morals**.  
After listening to their leader's inspiring speech, the soldiers' **morale** greatly improved.*

Number/amount. Use number when referring to countable nouns. Use amount when referring to uncountable nouns (see the difference between fewer and less for a similar case):

*A large **number** of pigeons suddenly descended on Times Square.  
They were feasting on the large **amount** of food that people had dropped on the sidewalk.*

Pair/pare. A pair refers to a group of two or the act of putting things in groups of two (often used with “off”). To pare is to trim or to peel:



Have you seen my **pair** of polka dot stockings?  
The teacher told the students to **pair** off and work together.  
The gardener **pared** the shrubs in front of the mansion.  
Sally **pared** the orange and split it into eight pieces.

Perpetrate/perpetuate. Perpetrate is a verb meaning “to do” or “to commit”; it is typically used in reference to crime. Perpetuate is a verb meaning “to continue” or “to prolong”:  
The evil dictator **perpetrated** crimes against humanity.  
Early humans were able to **perpetuate** the species despite harsh conditions.

Personal/personnel. Personal means owned by an individual or private. Personnel means staff:

I would love to have my own **personal** dog trainer.  
The contents of my sister’s diary are **personal**.  
Feeling generous, the boss gave a bonus to all of his **personnel**.

Petal/pedal/peddle. A petal is part of a flower. A pedal is a lever depressed with the foot and often used on a vehicle for braking or accelerating. Peddle is a verb meaning “to sell” (although it usually carries a negative connotation):

The **petals** of the lily bring vibrant color to your garden.  
Ted tried frantically to push down the brake **pedal** as he swerved to avoid traffic.  
The unscrupulous car salesman made a living by **peddling** old clunkers to gullible customers.

Prescribe/proscribe. To prescribe is to recommend (usually medication). Proscribe is a rather rare verb meaning “to forbid”:

The doctor **prescribed** medicine for my migraines.  
My church **proscribes** drinking and smoking.

Principle/principal. Principle is only used to mean a rule or tenet. Principal is used in all other instances, such as when referring to the principal of a school, an account total minus interest, or a primary component of something:

It is a defining **principle** of physics that an object in motion tends to stay in motion.  
The **principal** of my high school had a reputation for being strict.  
If you get a credit card, make sure to pay off the **principal** as quickly as possible.  
Annie’s **principal** characteristic is her pugnacity.

Proceed/precede. To proceed is to continue. To precede is to come before:

Once you finish reading The Hobbit, I suggest you **proceed** to The Lord of the Rings.  
The Hobbit **precedes** The Lord of the Rings.





Prosecute/persecute. To prosecute is to accuse someone of a crime. To persecute is to oppress or harass someone for their beliefs:

*Pat was **prosecuted** for shoplifting after he stole a nut log from Stuckey's.  
The pilgrims left their home country to avoid **persecution** from England.*

Purposely/purposefully. Purposely means “on purpose.” Purposefully means forcefully or with determination:

*Saul **purposely** hid his detention slip from his parents.  
When his mother found out, she **purposefully** walked into the room and scolded him.*

Respectfully/respectively. Respectfully means “politely” or “courteously.” Respectively means “correspondingly” or “in that order”:

*The mother told her children to behave **respectfully**.  
The capitals of Oregon and Washington are Salem and Olympia, **respectively**.*

Quote/quotation. Use quote as a verb; use quotation as a noun:

*It is important to **quote** other scholars when making your argument.  
You should include **quotations** from other scholars when making your argument.*

Serial/cereal. Serial means occurring in a series or ongoing. Cereal refers to the breakfast food:

*The TV station is running a new **serial** program about a family of talking beavers.  
The younger beavers like to eat **cereal** for breakfast.*

Ulterior/alterior. Alterior is a common misspelling of ulterior—it is not a word. Ulterior means hidden or underlying:

*The evil king had **ulterior** motives for seducing the enemy's queen.*

Who/whom. Use the pronoun who to replace a subject or subject complement. Use the pronoun whom to replace an object:

*I know **who** stole your bicycle.  
He is **who** will lead us to victory.  
**Whom** did Sam hit on the head?*

Note: One way to test whether to use who or whom is to ask yourself whether *he* or *him* would make sense in its place. If *he* makes more sense, use *who*. If *him* makes more sense, use *whom*.