

## 4.1 Commonly Confused Words

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify commonly confused words.
2. Use strategies to avoid commonly confused words.

Just as a mason uses bricks to build sturdy homes, writers use words to build successful documents. Consider the construction of a building. Builders need to use tough, reliable materials to build a solid and structurally sound skyscraper. From the foundation to the roof and every floor in between, every part is necessary. Writers need to use strong, meaningful words from the first sentence to the last and in every sentence in between.

You already know many words that you use everyday as part of your writing and speaking [vocabulary](#). You probably also know that certain words fit better in certain situations. Letters, e-mails, and even quickly jotted grocery lists require the proper selection of vocabulary. Imagine you are writing a grocery list to purchase the ingredients for a recipe but accidentally write down cilantro when the recipe calls for parsley. Even though cilantro and parsley look remarkably alike, each produces a very different effect in food. This seemingly small error could radically alter the flavor of your dish!

Having a solid everyday vocabulary will help you while writing, but learning new words and avoiding common word errors will make a real impression on your readers. Experienced writers know that deliberate, careful word selection and usage can lead to more polished, more meaningful work. This chapter covers word choice and vocabulary-building strategies that will improve your writing.

### Commonly Confused Words

Some words in English cause trouble for speakers and writers because these words share a similar pronunciation, meaning, or spelling with another word. These words are called [commonly confused words](#). For example, read aloud the following sentences containing the commonly confused words *new* and *knew*:

I liked her *new* sweater.

I *knew* she would wear that sweater today.

These words may sound alike when spoken, but they carry entirely different usages and meanings. *New* is an adjective that describes the sweater, and *knew* is the past tense of the verb *to know*. To read more about adjectives, verbs, and other parts of speech see [Chapter 2 “Writing Basics: What Makes a Good Sentence?”](#).

### Recognizing Commonly Confused Words

*New* and *knew* are just two of the words that can be confusing because of their similarities. Familiarize yourself with the following list of commonly confused words. Recognizing these words in your own writing and in other pieces of writing can help you choose the correct word.

#### Commonly Confused Words

##### A, An, And

- *A* (article). Used before a word that begins with a consonant.  
**a** key, **a** mouse, **a** screen
- *An* (article). Used before a word that begins with a vowel.  
**an** airplane, **an** ocean, **an** igloo
- *And* (conjunction). Connects two or more words together.  
peanut butter **and** jelly, pen **and** pencil, jump **and** shout

##### Accept, Except

- *Accept* (verb). Means to take or agree to something offered.  
They **accepted** our proposal for the conference.
- *Except* (conjunction). Means only or but.  
We could fly there **except** the tickets cost too much.

##### Affect, Effect

- *Affect* (verb). Means to create a change.  
Hurricane winds **affect** the amount of rainfall.
- *Effect* (noun). Means an outcome or result.  
The heavy rains will have an **effect** on the crop growth.

##### Are, Our

- *Are* (verb). A conjugated form of the verb *to be*.  
My cousins **are** all tall and blonde.
- *Our* (pronoun). Indicates possession, usually follows the pronoun *we*.  
We will bring **our** cameras to take pictures.

## By, Buy

- *By* (preposition). Means next to.  
My glasses are **by** the bed.
- *Buy* (verb). Means to purchase.  
I will **buy** new glasses after the doctor's appointment.

## Its, It's

- *Its* (pronoun). A form of *it* that shows possession.  
The butterfly flapped **its** wings.
- *It's* (contraction). Joins the words *it* and *is*.  
**It's** the most beautiful butterfly I have ever seen.

## Know, No

- *Know* (verb). Means to understand or possess knowledge.  
I **know** the male peacock sports the brilliant feathers.
- *No*. Used to make a negative.  
I have **no** time to visit the zoo this weekend.

## Loose, Lose

- *Loose* (adjective). Describes something that is not tight or is detached.  
Without a belt, her pants are **loose** on her waist.
- *Lose* (verb). Means to forget, to give up, or to fail to earn something.  
She will **lose** even more weight after finishing the marathon training.

## Of, Have

- *Of* (preposition). Means *from* or *about*.  
I studied maps **of** the city to know where to rent a new apartment.
- *Have* (verb). Means to possess something.  
I **have** many friends to help me move.
- *Have* (linking verb). Used to connect verbs.  
I should **have** helped her with that heavy box.

## Quite, Quiet, Quit

- *Quite* (adverb). Means *really* or *truly*.  
My work will require **quite** a lot of concentration.
- *Quiet* (adjective). Means not loud.  
I need a **quiet** room to complete the assignments.
- *Quit* (verb). Means to stop or to end.  
I will **quit** when I am hungry for dinner.

## Right, Write

- *Right* (adjective). Means proper or correct.  
When bowling, she practices the **right** form.
- *Right* (adjective). Also means the opposite of left.  
The ball curved to the **right** and hit the last pin.
- *Write* (verb). Means to communicate on paper.  
After the team members bowl, I will **write** down their scores.

## Set, Sit

- *Set* (verb). Means to put an item down.  
She **set** the mug on the saucer.
- *Set* (noun). Means a group of similar objects.  
All the mugs and saucers belonged in a **set**.
- *Sit* (verb). Means to lower oneself down on a chair or another place  
I'll **sit** on the sofa while she brews the tea.

## Suppose, Supposed

- *Suppose* (verb). Means to think or to consider  
I **suppose** I will bake the bread, because no one else has the recipe.
- *Suppose* (verb). Means to suggest.  
**Suppose** we all split the cost of the dinner.
- *Supposed* (verb). The past tense form of the verb suppose, meaning required or allowed.  
She was **supposed** to create the menu.

## Than, Then

- *Than* (conjunction). Used to connect two or more items when comparing  
Registered nurses require less schooling **than** doctors.
- *Then* (adverb). Means next or at a specific time.

Doctors first complete medical school and **then** obtain a residency.

#### Their, They're, There

- *Their* (pronoun). A form of *they* that shows possession.  
The dog walker feeds **their** dogs everyday at two o'clock.
- *They're* (contraction). Joins the words *they* and *are*.  
**They're** the sweetest dogs in the neighborhood.
- *There* (adverb). Indicates a particular place.  
The dogs' bowls are over **there**, next to the pantry.
- *There* (pronoun). Indicates the presence of something  
**There** are more treats if the dogs behave.

#### To, Two, Too

- *To* (preposition). Indicates movement.  
Let's go **to** the circus.
- *To*. A word that completes an infinitive verb.  
**to** play, **to** ride, **to** watch.
- *Two*. The number after one. It describes how many.  
**Two** clowns squirted the elephants with water.
- *Too* (adverb). Means *also* or *very*.  
The tents were **too** loud, and we left.

#### Use, Used

- *Use* (verb). Means to apply for some purpose.  
We **use** a weed whacker to trim the hedges.
- *Used*. The past tense form of the verb *to use*  
He **used** the lawnmower last night before it rained.
- *Used to*. Indicates something done in the past but not in the present  
He **used to** hire a team to landscape, but now he landscapes alone.

#### Who's, Whose

- *Who's* (contraction). Joins the words *who* and either *is* or *has*.  
**Who's** the new student? **Who's** met him?
- *Whose* (pronoun). A form of *who* that shows possession.  
**Whose** schedule allows them to take the new student on a campus tour?

## Your, You're

- *Your* (pronoun). A form of *you* that shows possession.

**Your** book bag is unzipped.

- *You're* (contraction). Joins the words *you* and *are*.

**You're** the girl with the unzipped book bag.

The English language contains so many words; no one can say for certain how many words exist. In fact, many words in English are borrowed from other languages. Many words have multiple meanings and forms, further expanding the immeasurable number of English words. Although the list of commonly confused words serves as a helpful guide, even these words may have more meanings than shown here. When in doubt, consult an expert: the dictionary!

## Exercise 1

Complete the following sentences by selecting the correct word.

1. My little cousin turns \_\_\_\_\_(to, too, two) years old tomorrow.
2. The next-door neighbor's dog is \_\_\_\_\_(quite, quiet, quit) loud. He barks constantly throughout the night.
3. \_\_\_\_\_(Your, You're) mother called this morning to talk about the party.
4. I would rather eat a slice of chocolate cake \_\_\_\_\_(than, then) eat a chocolate muffin.
5. Before the meeting, he drank a cup of coffee and \_\_\_\_\_(than, then) brushed his teeth.
6. Do you have any \_\_\_\_\_(loose, lose) change to pay the parking meter?
7. Father must \_\_\_\_\_(have, of) left his briefcase at the office.
8. Before playing ice hockey, I was \_\_\_\_\_(suppose, supposed) to read the contract, but I only skimmed it and signed my name quickly, which may \_\_\_\_\_(affect, effect) my understanding of the rules.
9. Tonight she will \_\_\_\_\_(set, sit) down and \_\_\_\_\_(right, write) a cover letter to accompany her résumé and job application.
10. It must be fall, because the leaves \_\_\_\_\_(are, our) changing, and \_\_\_\_\_(it's, its) getting darker earlier.

## Strategies to Avoid Commonly Confused Words

When writing, you need to choose the correct word according to its spelling and meaning in the context. Not only does selecting the correct word improve your vocabulary and your writing, but it also makes a good impression on your readers. It also helps reduce confusion and improve clarity. The following strategies can help you avoid

misusing confusing words.

1. **Use a dictionary.** Keep a dictionary at your desk while you write. Look up words when you are uncertain of their meanings or spellings. Many dictionaries are also available online, and the Internet's easy access will not slow you down. Check out your cell phone or smartphone to see if a dictionary app is available.

2. **Keep a list of words you commonly confuse.** Be aware of the words that often confuse you. When you notice a pattern of confusing words, keep a list nearby, and consult the list as you write. Check the list again before you submit an assignment to your instructor.

3. **Study the list of commonly confused words.** You may not yet know which words confuse you, but before you sit down to write, study the words on the list. Prepare your mind for working with words by reviewing the commonly confused words identified in this chapter.

### Tip

Figure 4.1 A Commonly Misused Word on a Public Sign



Commonly confused words appear in many locations, not just at work or at school. Be on the lookout for misused words wherever you find yourself throughout the day. Make a mental note of the error and remember its correction for your own pieces of writing.

### Writing at Work

All employers value effective communication. From an application to an interview to the first month on the job, employers pay attention to your vocabulary. You do not need a large vocabulary to succeed, but you do need to be able to express yourself clearly and avoid commonly misused words.

When giving an important presentation on the effect of inflation on profit margins, you must know the difference between *effect* and *affect* and choose the correct word. When writing an e-mail to confirm deliveries, you must know if the shipment will arrive in *to* days, *too* days, or *two* days. Confusion may arise if you choose the wrong word.

Consistently using the proper words will improve your communication and make a positive impression on your boss and colleagues.

### Exercise 2

The following paragraph contains eleven errors. Find each misused word and correct it by adding the proper word.

The original United States Declaration of Independence sets in a case at the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom as part of the National Archives in Washington, DC. Since 1952, over one million visitors each year of passed through the Rotunda too snap a photograph to capture they're experience. Although signs state, "No Flash Photography," forgetful tourists leave the flash on, an a bright light flickers for just a millisecond. This millisecond of light may not seem like enough to effect the precious document, but supposed how much light could be generated when all those milliseconds are added up. According to the National Archives administrators, its enough to significantly damage the historic document. So, now, the signs display quit a different message: "No Photography." Visitors continue to travel to see the Declaration that began are country, but know longer can personal pictures serve as mementos. The administrators' compromise, they say, is a visit to the gift shop for a preprinted photograph.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

### Key Takeaways

- In order to write accurately, it is important for writers to be aware of commonly confused words.
- Although commonly confused words may look alike or sound alike, their meanings are very different.
- Consulting the dictionary is one way to make sure you are using the correct word in your writing. You may also keep a list of commonly confused words nearby when you write or study the chart in this book.
- Choosing the proper words leaves a positive impression on your readers.



### **Writing Application**

Review the latest assignment you completed for school or for work. Does it contain any commonly confused words? Circle each example and use the circled words to begin your own checklist of commonly confused words. Continue to add to your checklist each time you complete an assignment and find a misused word.