

Commonly confused words

Effective writing is about increasing your awareness of problem areas. You don't need to learn all the commonly confused words, but you do need to hear an alarm bell when you use one — and get out the dictionary.

advice / advise

Can you give me some advice? NOUN

What would you advise? She advised him to give up smoking. VERB

affect / effect

Will the strike affect your business? VERB

What was the effect of the car crash? NOUN

How will we effect the change? VERB – limited use

already / all ready

We have already discussed this issue. ADJECTIVE/ADVERB (PREVIOUSLY)

They are all ready to be printed. ADJECTIVE (ALL PREPARED)

been / being

Your claim has been paid. / They have been to Spain twice.

(PAST EVENT/ ACTION)

Your claim is being reviewed at the moment. / Are you being serious?

(PRESENT ACTION)

complement / compliment

Our department finally has its full complement of staff. ADJECTIVE

That hat complements your eyes. VERB

She blushes whenever he gives her a compliment. NOUN

Acupuncture is a complementary therapy. ADJECTIVE

continually / continuously

It rained continuously for eight hours — the children couldn't go out to play at all. ADVERB (WITHOUT STOPPING)

He is continually late for work. ADVERB (FREQUENTLY)

cite / site / sight

He cited three reasons for his decision. VERB (STATED)

The site of the battle is overgrown. NOUN (LOCATION)

We did not get sight of the documents in advance. NOUN (A LOOK AT)

counsel / council TWO NOUNS

The counsel for the Defence will talk to him.

The council decided to close the park.

dependent / dependant

She is dependent on her son for a lift to work. ADJECTIVE

How many dependants have you got? Two children and an elderly aunt. NOUN

disinterested / uninterested TWO ADJECTIVES

A judge should be disinterested in a case. (IMPARTIAL)

She is uninterested in football. (NOT INTERESTED)

disk / disc TWO NOUNS

A computer disk can easily spread a virus.

He has a slipped disc. / I lost my insurance disc.

historic / historical TWO ADJECTIVES

The Belfast agreement was a historic event. (SIGNIFICANT IN HISTORY)

She writes historical novels. (OF/IN THE PAST)

imply / infer TWO VERBS

Are you implying my son is stupid? (HINT/ SUGGEST)

We can infer from this case that (DEDUCE/ UNDERSTAND)

licence / license

Where is my driving licence? NOUN

Are you licensed to sell alcohol? ADJECTIVE

The council licenses market traders. VERB

loose / lose

The arrangement was very loose. ADJECTIVE

Is he going to lose the case? VERB

may be / maybe

He may be late. VERB (MIGHT BE)

You may smoke outside. VERB (HAVE PERMISSION TO)

Are you going? Maybe. ADVERB (PERHAPS)

practice / practise

The GP is setting up a new practice. NOUN

They need to practise violin before the exam. VERB

principle / principal

The principal reason for the delay is a shortage of staff. ADJECTIVE (MAIN)

The school principal is retiring soon. NOUN (HEAD)

We agree in principle. NOUN (IN GENERAL)

She resigned on a matter of principle. NOUN (ETHICS)

precede / proceed TWO VERBS

Research precedes writing a memo. (GOES BEFORE)

When you have finished writing that memo, proceed to the next one. (CONTINUE)

stationary / stationery

She sat on the stationary bus for three hours. ADJECTIVE

He buys the stationery in bulk. NOUN

their / there/ they're

Their work on that feasibility study is excellent. (POSSESSIVE)

They don't want to work there. (PLACE)

They're hard workers. (THEY ARE)

who's / whose

Who's going to lead the brainstorming session? (WHO IS)

Whose book is this? (POSSESSIVE)

your / you're

Your department is very efficient. (POSSESSIVE)

You're going to the company picnic, aren't you? (YOU ARE)