



Top Ten Confused Words

1. Affect or effect?
2. Accept or except?
3. Ensure or insure?
4. Imply or infer?
5. It's or its?
6. Lay or lie?
7. Less or fewer?
8. Loose or lose?
9. Principal or principle?
10. Stationery or stationary?

The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. It's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

Mark Twain

Abjure or adjure?

Abjure means 'formally renounce a belief': *He abjured his belief in Christianity.* *Adjure* means 'command or request solemnly and earnestly': *I **adjure** you to tell the truth.*

Aboriginal, aboriginal, or aborigine?

Use *Aboriginal* with a capital *A* when referring to native Australians. Use *aboriginal* with a lower case *a* when referring to indigenous populations generally. *Aborigine* is falling out of favour, as it is now seen to have disparaging overtones. Many Aboriginal people prefer more specific regional terms, such as *Koori* (New South Wales and Victoria), or *Murri* (south and central Queensland).

Abrogate or arrogate?

Abrogate means 'repeal, cancel or annul': *He cannot **abrogate** responsibility for what happens in his department.* *Arrogate* means 'lay claim to without justification': *The committee members **arrogated** to themselves considerable power and privilege.*

Absolve, acquit, exonerate, or pardon?

Absolve is a general term meaning 'set free or release': *She is **absolved** from all blame in the*

Aa

situation. *Acquit* is usually used in a legal sense: *The accused was **acquitted***. *Exonerate* means ‘free from guilt or blame’ or ‘relieve from an obligation, duty, or task’: **exonerated** *from the charge of cheating; exonerated from household chores*. *Pardon* refers to the release of someone from the legal consequences of an offence or conviction by a government or military official: *President Ford **pardoned** Richard Nixon following Nixon’s resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal*.

Abstruse or obtuse?

Abstruse means ‘difficult to understand’. *Obtuse* means ‘insensitive, stupid, or blunt in form’. A lengthy report may be **abstruse**, though perhaps some of its readers may be **obtuse**.

Accede or exceed?

Accede means ‘agree to’, and is used in formal contexts: *The other party will **accede** to our requests*. *Exceed* means ‘go beyond’: *It’s unwise to **exceed** the speed limit*.

Accent, ascent, or assent?

Accent means ‘emphasise or stress’: *The memo should **accent** the positive aspects of the downsizing*. An *ascent* is a rising movement: *The mountaineers made a careful **ascent** of the precipice*. *Assent* means ‘agree’: *Will they **assent** to the draft policies?*

Accept or except?

Accept means ‘receive’: *I can’t **accept** this shipment*. *Except* means ‘not including’: **Except** *for a few clouds, the sky is clear*.

Access or excess?

Access means ‘gain entrance to’: *Only bank employees have **access** to the vault*. *Excess* means ‘too much’.

*You’ll be charged an **excess** baggage fee if you exceed the baggage allowance*.

Ad hoc

This Latin phrase refers to something that is made or done for a particular purpose: *an **ad hoc** committee*. It is often printed in italics.

Ad hominem

This Latin phrase means literally ‘to the man’. It refers to an argument that uses emotions and prejudices rather than logic. It is usually used in the sense of attacking an opponent’s character or motives rather than their policy: *Politicians sometimes resort to **ad hominem** attacks on an opponent when their own case is weak*.

Adjacent or adjoining?

Adjacent means ‘near’: *The area **adjacent** to the crime scene was secured*. *Adjoining* means ‘actually touching’: *They had **adjoining** rooms in the hotel*.

Admission or admittance?

Admission is the price paid for entry: **Admission** *is \$20*. *Admittance* is the physical act of entry: *They were denied **admittance** to the nightclub*.

Adverse or averse?

Adverse means ‘unfavourable’: *The staff complained about the **adverse** working conditions*. *Averse* means ‘disinclined to’: *She is **averse** to taking time off during busy periods*.

Affect or effect?

The verb *affect* means ‘have an impact on’: *The new legislation will **affect** the way we do business*. The noun *effect* means ‘a result’: *It will be months before we see the full **effects** of our efforts*.

Both *affect* and *effect* have other less common uses. *Affect* is used as a noun in psychiatry and medicine to describe emotional expression: *A patient's **affect** can be a clinical indication of depression.* *Effect* is used as a verb in the expression *to effect*, meaning 'to bring about'. It is largely restricted to formal contexts: *The new management hopes to **effect** significant changes in business practice.*

Affect is also used as a verb in the sense of 'assume, or pretend': *She **affected** an air of indifference.*

Ageing or aging?

Both spellings are correct, but *ageing* is preferred in Australian English: *The Commonwealth Government has a Department of Health and **Ageing**.* *Aging* is more common in American English.

Aggravate or annoy?

Aggravate means 'make worse something that is already bad': *The bad weather has **aggravated** the traffic chaos.* *Annoy* means merely 'irritate': *It **annoys** him when people are late.*

A lot or allot?

The two-word phrase, *a lot*, means 'to a considerable quantity or extent': *Thanks **a lot** for your help with the report.* To *allot* is to distribute or assign a share of something: *The accountant will **allot** a portion of next year's budget towards added security measures.*

All ready or already?

All ready means 'all prepared': *I am **all ready** for the meeting tomorrow.* *Already* means 'previously': *The widgets have **already** been shipped.*

All right or alright?

Many authorities still consider the spelling *alright* to be incorrect, or best reserved for informal contexts:

*I feel **all right** [not alright].* However, *alright* is becoming more accepted. The *Macquarie Dictionary* accords it a full entry.

All together or altogether?

If we are *all together*, then everyone is gathered in a group: *When we are **all together** we have more fun.* *Altogether* means 'completely or entirely': *She is **altogether** too sensitive.*

Allude or elude?

Allude means 'make reference to': *In her speech to the shareholders she **alluded** to the crisis in the housing market.* *Elude* means 'avoid or escape by stratagem or deceit': *The escaped prisoner **eluded** capture by using a disguise.*

Allusion, illusion, or delusion?

An *allusion* is an indirect reference: *His speech contained **allusions** to the time he spent in the military.* An *illusion* is something that deceives the eye: *an optical **illusion**.* *Illusion* can also mean 'a mistaken belief': *Enron's huge profits turned out to be an **illusion**.* A *delusion* is a false or mistaken idea or belief: ***delusions** of grandeur.*

Though *illusion* and *delusion* sometimes overlap in meaning, careful users maintain a distinction. An *illusion* is a temporary misapprehension that can be dispelled fairly easily. A *delusion* results from disordered thinking, and is usually chronic and persistent.

Altar or alter?

An *altar* is a table for religious rites: *The archaeologists uncovered a stone **altar**.* To *alter* is to change: *The new manager **altered** their whole delivery system to reduce waste.*



Alternate or alternative?

Alternate means ‘every other’: *The club meets on **alternate** Tuesdays.* *Alternative* means ‘offering a choice’: **alternative** routes. Some authorities dislike the use of *alternate* in place of *alternative*: *We went by an **alternative** [not *alternate*] route.*

Although or though?

In most uses, these two words are interchangeable: *They went jogging **although/though** it was raining heavily.*

Amend or emend?

Amend means ‘make modifications’, and is the more common of the two words: **amend** legislation; *The Second **Amendment** of the Constitution of the United States.* *Emend* refers to the correction of errors in a printed text: *The scholar **emended** the manuscript.*

America or USA?

See **US, USA, or America?**

Among, amongst, or between?

Use *among* when referring to more than two persons or things: *The bonus was divided evenly **among** all ten sales representatives.* Use *between* when referring to two persons or things: *The bonus was divided evenly **between** the two sales representatives.* *Among* and *amongst* are interchangeable in all contexts, though *among* is more frequent in modern usage.

Amoral or immoral?

See **Immoral or amoral?**

Amount or number?

Use *amount* to describe an uncountable quantity: *a huge **amount** of work.* Use *number* with items you can count: *a huge **number** of emails to answer.* You

can count the emails (one, two, three, and so on), but you can’t ‘count’ *work*.

And/or

This is a cumbersome construction, although it is sometimes necessary in legal documents. Use sparingly. A more elegant way of expressing this is: *Use X or Y or both.*

Anticipate or expect?

Anticipate means ‘prepare for a contingency’: Residents **anticipate** a hurricane by boarding up windows. If you only *expect* something, you will not necessarily prepare for it: *We **expect** rain tonight (but we are not taking an umbrella).*

Antisocial, asocial, unsocial, or unsociable?

Antisocial and *unsociable* describe someone who avoids the company of others: *John was grumpy and **antisocial/unsociable.*** *Antisocial* can also describe behaviour that causes damage or harm to others: *the **antisocial** act of writing graffiti on walls.* *Asocial* implies a deeper withdrawal from society: *Cats are considered **asocial** animals.* *Unsocial* is mostly used in the expression *unsocial hours*.

Antivenom, antivenin, or antivenene?

The terms *antivenin* and *antivenene* have been replaced by *antivenom* in accordance with a 1979 World Health Organization directive. It is a serum preparation used as an antidote to snakebite and so on.

Anxious or eager?

Anxious means ‘uneasy’. To be *eager* is to have a keen desire or longing. So one can be **anxious** about flying, but not **eager** to do so. The two words coalesce in expressions such as **anxious** to please.

Any more or anymore?

Any more (two words) is preferred in Australia, and *anymore* (one word) in the USA. Both mean 'any longer' or 'not now': *I don't go there any more.*

Anyone or any one?

Anyone, meaning 'anybody' or 'any person', is more common: *Can anyone help me fix this computer?* Use two words when you mean 'any single person or thing': **Any one** of them could be guilty.

Note: The following compound pronouns are always singular and require a singular verb: *anybody, anything, anyone, any one, everybody, everything, everyone, every one, somebody, something, someone, some one, nobody, nothing, no one*: **Everybody** is working hard. **Nobody** is paying any attention.

Appendixes or appendices?

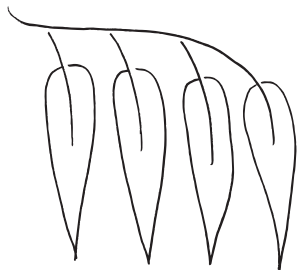
Both are the plural form of *appendix*. Use *appendices* for the supplements to books or reports: *One of the **appendices** is a glossary of technical terms.* Use *appendixes* for anatomical appendages: *The surgeon has removed many **appendixes**.*

Appraise, apprise, or appease?

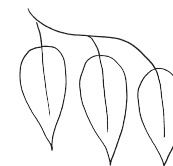
Insurance agents *appraise* a house for its value. Then they *apprise* (inform) the owner of any changes to the premium. They might need to *appease* (placate) them if the premium is too high. *Appease* is also used in the sense of 'allay': **appease** an appetite or thirst.

Artefact or artifact?

Artefact is the preferred spelling in Australian English. The word means 'anything made by a human being'.

**As or like?**

Use *as* to make comparisons before adverbs and verbs: *She performed, **as** always, in an exemplary manner.* Use *like* before nouns and noun phrases: *It fits **like** a glove. They're selling **like** hot cakes. There's no business **like** show business.* To remember the difference, insert a silent *to* after *like*: **like** (to) hot cakes.



Grammarians have long debates about the use of *like* as a conjunction to mean 'as' or 'as if': *It looks **as if** he's finished* is considered correct, while *It looks **like** he's finished* is considered incorrect. The distinction is rapidly becoming blurred.

Assume or presume?

These two words are virtually interchangeable when used to mean 'take for granted': *They **assume/presume** that we will go ahead with the new project.*

Assume can also mean 'suppose without proof': *It would be reasonable to **assume** that the public will accept the new by-laws.* *Presume* can also mean 'suppose that something is the case based on evidence': *Dr Livingstone, I **presume**?*

Assure, ensure, or insure?

Ensure means 'make certain': *I will **ensure** that all safety precautions are taken.* *Assure*, meaning 'give someone confidence about something', should always have a person as the object of the verb: *I **assure** you that all safety precautions have been taken.* *Insure* means 'protect against loss': *It is wise to **insure** your house against flood damage.*

ATM or ATM machine?

ATM stands for *Automatic Teller Machine*, so there's no need to add *machine* after *ATM*.

Authoritarian or authoritative?

Authoritarian refers to rule by an absolute authority: *George Orwell's* novel, 1984, describes an *authoritarian* regime. *Authoritative* means 'with authority': an **authoritative** source of information.

Avenge or revenge?

See **Revenge or avenge?**

Aural, oral, or verbal?

See **Oral, aural, or verbal?**

Avoid, evade, or elude?

See **Elude, evade, or avoid?**

Average, mean, or median?

An *average* or *mathematical mean* is determined by dividing a total of several numbers by their number. The *median* is the number that has the same number of values larger than it as there are values smaller than it. It's right in the middle. So in real estate, a property's value is compared with the *average* price, which might be different from the *median* price (where half the values are higher and half lower than the value given). Just a few properties with a very high or a very low price can skew the figure for the *average* price.

Avocation or vocation?

An *avocation* is a hobby: *Stamp collecting is her avocation*. A *vocation* is a strong feeling of one's suitability for a profession, especially a religious calling: *Some have a vocation to be a nun or a priest*.

Awhile or a while?

Use *a while* (two words) in constructions such as: *It's been a long while since our last meeting. We hiked for an hour, then rested for a while*. The one word form,

awhile, is an adverb: *You will have to wait awhile*.
Hint: Do not use *for* with *awhile*.

Ayers Rock or Ayer's Rock?

No apostrophe. Many proper names lose the apostrophe when they are so designated. It is now known as *Uluru*.