

# COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS (PART 1)

## Improving Your Style

### SIMILAR WORDS

The English language is full of confusingly similar words. Many words that are spelt similarly or sound alike actually have very different meanings. Proper vocabulary is essential to effective writing.

Using the wrong word can confuse the reader and undermine the writer's authority on their subject. Below is a list of words that are often used incorrectly that writers should look out for to avoid making simple errors.

**Tip:** When in doubt about two similar words, consult a dictionary to check their meanings.



### ACCEPT VS. EXCEPT:

- **Accept:** *Verb*—To receive or to agree to something  
*She accepted the business proposal.*
- **Except:** *Preposition*—A condition, excluding something; *Conjunction*—With the exception (usually followed by *that*)  
*I'm available any day of the week except Saturday.*  
*I would stay except that I agreed to help my mom cook dinner.*

### ACCESS VS. EXCESS:

- **Access:** *Noun*—The ability to approach, enter, or use something; *Verb*—The act of approaching, entering, or using something  
*Only the manager has access to the safe.*  
*She accessed the road by a narrow footpath.*
- **Excess:** *Noun*—A surplus or abundance of something, too much  
*There was an excess of funds in the project's budget.*

### ADDITION VS. EDITION:

- **Addition:** *Noun*—The act of adding or joining  
*The artifact will make a wonderful addition to the museum's collection.*
- **Edition:** *Noun*—A version of a previously released item  
*The professor assigned a reading of the third edition of the textbook.*

### ADVICE VS. ADVISE:

- **Advice:** *Noun*—An opinion or recommendation offered for guidance  
*I often give my clients financial advice.*
- **Advise:** *Verb*—The act of offering advice  
*I often advise my clients about financial matters.*



### AFFECT VS. EFFECT:

- **Affect:** *Verb*—To act on, produce a result (an effect)  
The discovery *affected* how scientists understand medicine.
- **Effect:** *Noun*—A result or consequence of an action  
The medication has a number of side *effects*.

### ALLOWED VS. ALOUD:

- **Allowed:** *Verb*—Permitted, able to  
Students are *allowed* to leave the school during their lunch break.
- **Aloud:** *Adverb*—Out loud, audible  
She spoke the words *aloud* so she wouldn't forget them.

### ALLUDE VS. ELUDE:

- **Allude:** *Verb*—To make reference to something else  
The author *alludes* to many historical events in his novels.
- **Elude:** *Verb*—To avoid, escape, or evade  
The quick deer *eluded* capture.

### ALLUSION VS. ILLUSION:

- **Allusion:** *Noun*—A casual reference to another person, piece of fiction, event, etc.  
The novel makes many *allusions* to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.
- **Illusion:** *Noun*—Something that deceives or misleads  
The magician performed his *illusion* for the crowd.

### ASSURE VS. ENSURE VS. INSURE:

- **Assure:** *Verb*—To inform, encourage, or reassure  
I *assure* you; you will be prepared for the test if you study.
- **Ensure:** *Verb*—To make sure  
She *ensured* that she had packed all the essentials for her trip.
- **Insure:** *Verb*—To guarantee against loss, as in an insurance policy  
Is the car *insured*?

**Note:** The words *ensure* and *insure* are most commonly used in the above contexts; however, there is some debate as to whether or not they may be used interchangeably.

### BASE VS. BASS:

- **Base:** *Noun*—The bottom part of a structure  
They couldn't see the top of the mountain when they stood at its *base*.
- **Bass:** *Adjective*—Low in pitch; *Noun*—An instrument  
*Bass* music could be heard from a distance.  
He plays the *bass*.

### BREATH VS. BREATHE:

- **Breath:** *Noun*—The air inhaled and exhaled during respiration.  
Give me a minute to catch my *breath*.
- **Breathe:** *Verb*—The act of inhaling and exhaling air.  
It is important to remember to *breathe* regularly when exercising.

### CAPITAL VS. CAPITOL:

- **Capital:** *Noun*—City that officially houses the country or state's government; *Noun*—Wealth in the form of money and/or property; *Noun*—Uppercase letter  
Ottawa is Canada's *capital*.  
This chart projects the company's *capital* over the next two years.  
In English, days of the week are written beginning with *capital* letters.
- **Capitol:** *Noun*—A building occupied by state legislature  
The electoral debates will be held in the *capitol* building.

### CLIMACTIC VS. CLIMATIC:

- **Climactic:** *Adjective*—Relating to the climax (most intense point) of a subject  
Readers were shocked by the novel's *climactic* ending.
- **Climatic:** *Adjective*—Relating to climate  
Scientists studied the climatic impacts of the fuel source.

### COMPLEMENT VS. COMPLIMENT:

- **Complement:** *Noun*—Something that completes or accompanies something else; *Verb*—To complete or accompany something  
The wine *complemented* the meal.
- **Compliment:** *Noun*—A form of praise; *Verb*—To praise  
He *complimented* the cook for his delicious meal.

### CURRENT VS. CURRANT:

- **Currant:** *Noun*—A small fruit  
She made her famous *currant* sauce to go with the dessert.
- **Current:** *Adjective*—In the present; *Noun*—Something that flows (e.g., water or electricity)  
He was very knowledgeable on *current* affairs.  
Visitors are advised not to swim in the river due to its strong *current*.

### DESERT VS. DESSERT:

- **Desert:** *Noun*—An arid ecosystem; *Verb*—To abandon  
Cacti are accustomed to a *desert* climate.  
She would never *desert* her friends when they needed her.
- **Dessert:** *Noun*—A sweet treat  
I made an apple pie for *dessert*.

## DISINTERESTED VS. UNINTERESTED:

- **Disinterested:** *Adjective*—To be impartial or unbiased  
The critic was known to be *disinterested* in the pieces she judged.
- **Uninterested:** *Adjective*—To have no interest in or to be bored by something  
You shouldn't pursue a profession that you are *uninterested* in.

## E.G. VS. I.E.:

*E.g.*, and *i.e.*, are two common abbreviations that are often thought to be interchangeable. However, they have different meanings.

They derive from the Latin phrases *exempli gratia* meaning “for example” and *id est*, which means “that is”.

- **E.g.:** is used to elaborate or to give an example  
This chapter covers mammals (e.g., dogs, cats, and humans).
- **I.e.:** is used to clarify or to phrase something in different terms  
The company will not accept applications from minors (i.e., individuals under 18 years of age).

## ELICIT VS. ILLICIT:

- **Elicit:** *Verb*—To bring about, to cause  
She hoped her *speech* would elicit change.
- **Illicit:** *Adjective*—Immoral or illegal  
The criminals were punished for their *illicit* behaviour.

## EMIGRATE VS. IMMIGRATE:

- **Emigrate:** *Verb*—To leave one's country of origin  
They were forced to *emigrate* from their birthplace due to political unrest.
- **Immigrate:** *Verb*—To come to or settle in a new country  
His family *immigrated* here after the war.

## EMINENT VS. IMMINENT:

- **Eminent:** *Adjective*—High in rank, prominent, distinguished  
Steven Spielberg is one of the most *eminent* filmmakers of his generation.
- **Imminent:** *Adjective*—Due to occur soon, impending  
Meteorologists forecasted that the storm was *imminent*.

## ENVELOP VS. ENVELOPE:

- **Envelop:** *Verb*—To surround, wrap around, enclose  
She felt the silence *envelop* her as soon as she stepped into the library.
- **Envelope:** *Noun*—Something that surrounds, or envelops  
He mailed the letter in an *envelope*.



## FARTHER VS. FURTHER:

Farther and further can generally be used interchangeably as *adverbs* meaning “to a greater physical or figurative distance or extent”.

How much *farther/further* do we have to walk?

He decided to go *farther/further* with his education.

HOWEVER

*Further* has another meaning that **does not** apply to the word *farther*.

Further can also be used as a *verb* meaning “to advance something” (e.g., a cause or an endeavour).

The promotion helped her *further* her career.

It can also be used as a transition at the beginning of a sentence in the same sense as *furthermore* or *additionally*.

Carbon-based fuels are costly to produce.

*Further*, they increase greenhouse gas emissions, which are detrimental to the environment.

## FORMALLY VS. FORMERLY:

- **Formally:** *Adverb*—In a formal, ceremonial, or conventional manner; Regarding an object’s physical form

Guests are expected to dress *formally* for the occasion.

The globe is *formally* spherical.

- **Formerly:** *Adverb*—Previously, not anymore
- The professor was *formerly* a student at the university at which he teaches.

## FORTH VS. FOURTH:

- **Forth:** *Adverb*—Onward or outward in space or time
- From this day *forth*, I will never take my education for granted again.

- **Fourth:** *Adjective*—Following third, preceding fifth;  
*Noun*—A quarter part or the fourth object in a series
- American Independence Day takes place on the *fourth* of July.

**Sources:** (MLA 8<sup>th</sup> Edition)

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