

Frequently Confused/Misspelled Words

Directions: Below are some common word usage confusions. Study and practice the correct use these words. Use this handout as a checklist for your writing.

infer/imply: Think of **imply** as an outgoing message: The girl's remarks **implied** ("suggested") that her family is rich. Think of **infer** as an incoming message: We **inferred** ("concluded") from the girl's remarks that her family is rich.

allusion/illusion: An **allusion** is an indirect reference to someone or something: My sister makes frequent **allusions** ("references") to Shakespeare. An **illusion** is a false picture or idea: She is under the **illusion** ("false idea") that she is a Shakespeare scholar.

complement/compliment: A **compliment** is an expression of admiration or praise: The girl received a **compliment** on my new dress. To **complement** refers to that which completes or accompanies something else: The color of the dress **complements** her complexion.

affect: A verb meaning "to influence," as in: The new schedule will **affect** us all.

effect: As a verb, effect means "to bring about or to produce a result," as in: The new schedule will **effect** many changes. As a noun, effect means "the result," as in: The **effect** of the new schedule was a negative feeling on campus.

fewer: Used to describe things that can be counted, as in: Shirley has **fewer** clients this year.

less: Used to describe quantity (or uncountable things) or degree, as in: There has been **less** rain this year, or: The new neighbors will give you **less** trouble than the previous neighbors.

accept / except: The verb **accept** means "to receive": I **accept** the award. The preposition **except** means "other than": All of the winners **except** Betty received an award.

number / amount: The word **number** is used for anything countable; **amount** is for collective or bulk measurement. I bought a **number** of chocolate bars. Each contained an **amount** of caffeine.

suppose / supposed to: **Suppose** is a verb: I **suppose** you are right; **supposed to** is an obligation or expectation: I am **supposed to** go to my grandmother's house for dinner.

its / it's: **Its** is a possessive pronoun like his, hers; it does not need an apostrophe. **It's** is a contraction for it is.

then / than: A time word, **then** is used like "next" (it has "ne" like *next*); **than** is a comparison: taller **than**

a lot (vs. alot): Always two words (don't be confused with "to allot" – to portion out)

there / their / they're: If you can use "here," you can use "**there**" ("here" with a "t"); **their** is possessive (belonging to them); **they're** is a contraction for they are.

to / too / two: **To** is a preposition meaning "in the direction of"; **too** means "also" or "very."

wear / where / were: We **wear** items; **where** is a place word like "here" (here, where, there); **were** is a verb.

aloud / allowed: Read the sentence **aloud** (loud). Texting is not **allowed**. Think of **allow** as **allaw**, as in legal.

already / all ready: We are **all ready** (all of us are ready); it is **already** noon (an adverb for "by this time").

a / an: Use **an** before a word beginning with a vowel sound: I ate **an** egg and **a** banana. I wore **a** uniform.

use / used to: Use is a verb: I **use** a fork to eat pizza; **used to** refers to the past: I **used to** use a fork to eat pizza.

cause / because: A **cause** is a noun, a reason: A sprain is **the cause** of her pain. **Because** is a conjunction that means "for the reason that" or "on account of": I am in pain **because** of my sprain.

should have / should of: Always use **should have**: should is a helping verb to the main verb have.

passed / past: The **past** is a noun: In the **past**, I used a fork to eat pizza; **passed** is a verb: I **passed** the pizza to her.

are / our: Proofread carefully: **are** is a verb: We **are** ready; **our** is a possessive pronoun: We took **our** time.

threw / through: **Threw** is a verb: I **threw** the pizza at her; **through** is a preposition: It went **through** the window.

who's / whose: Always read a contraction as two words to hear it aloud: **Who's** ("**who is**") going to the dance?; **whose** is a possessive pronoun: **Whose** book is this?

your / you're: Always read a contraction as two words: **You're** ("you are") very quiet today. **Your** is a possessive pronoun: This is **your** award.

quit / quite / quiet: Read as: "stop" (**quit**), "rather" (**quite**), and "silent" (**quiet** – say "**qui-ette**" to hear the word).

all right / already: The word "**alright**" is a slang word, not standard English, and should only be used when writing fiction or poetry to reflect conversational speaking. The correct us is **all right**: It is **all right** with us. **Already** means "before this time": We **already** ate lunch. As two words, **all ready** means "all of us are ready": We are (all) **ready**.

weather / whether: Don't confuse the outdoor atmosphere (**weather**) with the word for a possibility: **Whether** (or not) you go to the dance is your business.

minute / minuet: Proofread carefully: a **minuet** ("min-u-ette") is a dance.

die / dying: To **die** is to lose life; I am **dying**; I **died**. To **dye** is to color an item; I am **dyeing** the shirt; I **dyed** the shirt.

loose: An antonym (opposite in meaning) of tight, as in: My shoe is **loose**.

lose: An antonym of win, as in: The team did not **lose** their game.

choose: To select, as in: We will **choose** our next president.

chose: Past tense of "to choose," as in: We **chose** our former president, too.

cause: A noun; the reason for something, as in: The **cause** of the Civil War is complex.

because: A conjunction, as in: We lost the game **because** nobody came to practices.

definitely: With certainty, absolutely, as in: We **definitely** are going to Ralph's party. (The word "finite" is in it.)

defiantly: Done with bold resistance, with defiance, as in: The rebels **defiantly** raised their fists in protest.

(Memory suggestion: an **ant** is small but **defiant**.)

like: Used to compare, as in: Shirley looks **like** her sister, Jane. Or, a verb, as in: Students don't **like** homework.

such as / for example: Use these expressions to introduce examples, as in: Many students enjoy after school activities **such as** sports and clubs. Many students enjoy after school activities, **for example**, sports and clubs.

feel like: A comparison of emotions or sense data, as in: Her hands **feel like** sandpaper, or: **I feel like** crying.

think that: Describes the action of having an opinion or a thought, as in: I **think that** dogs are good pets.

then: A word associated with time, as in: After the bell rang, we **then** headed to McDonald's.

than: A word used to compare, as in: His car is newer **than** mine.

lay: The verb *lay* means “to put or place *something*” (it needs an object), as in: Where did you **lay** the book?

I **lay** the book down. (present tense) I **am laying** the book down. (present progressive)

I will **lay** the book down. (future tense)

I **laid** the book down. (past tense) I **have laid** the book down. (past participle)

lie: The verb *lie* means “being in a horizontal position or to remain or to be situated” as in resting or reclining. (It does *not* take an object.) Used as in: Where will you **lie** down?

I **lie** down and nap after school. (present tense) I **am lying** down to take a nap. (present progressive)

I will lie down and nap. (future tense)

I **lay** down and napped yesterday. (past tense) I **have lain** down and napped every day. (past participle)

lie: A homonym meaning “to tell an untruth,” as in: She will **lie** whenever she is in trouble. She **lied** to me yesterday. (past tense) She **has lied** to me many times. (past participle) She **is lying** to me now. (present progressive)