Ten Sets of Similar-Sounding Words: A Usage Guide

There are numerous sets of similar-sounding words that writers often confuse. This usage guide summarizes when to use each, and then provides the most common definitions and examples of each word's usage.

Definitions from [Merriam-Webster's online dictionary](#).

accept/except

Use "accept" when someone receives something and "except" to exclude someone or something.

accept

verb: to receive willingly, give acceptance or approval, endure without protest, or recognize as true

Susan <u>accepted</u> a community service award at the city council meeting.

except

preposition: with the exclusion of

Everyone was present at the meeting <u>except</u> Mr. Jones.

affect/effect

Use "affect" to describe someone or something causing a change; use "effect" to refer to the change itself. Affect can also refer to emotion, feeling, or mood.

affect

verb: to produce an effect on

We wondered if the economic downturn would <u>affect</u> ticket sales.

noun: the conscious aspect of an emotion

He lacked both empathy and <u>affect</u>.

effect:

noun: something that is caused by something else, or something designed to produce an impression

The new treatment had only a negligible <u>effect</u>.

verb: to cause something to come into being

The students signed a petition because they wanted to <u>effect</u> a change in the curriculum.

aid/aide

Use "aid" to refer to any sort of assistance; use "aide" to refer to a person who assists another.

aid:

verb: to provide assistance
Paul promised to <u>aid</u> his brother during his recovery from the operation.
noun: help that is given
The government provided <u>aid</u> to the tornado-ravaged town.

aide:

noun: a person who acts as an assistant
The teacher's <u>aide</u> helped a student with her math problems.

capital/capitol

Use "capital" to refer to money or wealth, as well as the city in which a government is located; use "capitol" to refer to the physical building in which a legislature meets.

capital:

noun: accumulated goods or wealth or a city serving as a seat of government
Washington, DC is the <u>capital</u> of the United States.

capitol:

noun: a building in which a state legislative body meets, or (when capitalized) the building where the U.S. congress meets
Congress meets in the U.S. <u>Capitol</u>.

elicit/illicit

Use "elicit" to mean drawing out a response; use "illicit" when describing something illegal.

elicit:

verb: to call forth or draw out, or to draw forth or bring out
The reporter could <u>elicit</u> information from even the most tight-lipped informants.

illicit:

adjective: not permitted
The mayor announced a task force to shut down <u>illicit</u> gambling in the city.

insure/ensure/assure

Use "insure" when referring to an insurance policy. Use "ensure" when making sure that something happens. "Assure" could mean that something is sure to happen but is more commonly used to describe making someone feel better.

ensure:

verb: to make sure, certain, or safe
He wanted to <u>ensure</u> that his children would be taken care of if he were to die unexpectedly.

insure:
verb: to provide or obtain insurance on
John purchased a comprehensive policy that would <u>insure</u> his new car in case of any type of loss.

assure:
verb: to make sure or to inform positively
Sara wanted to <u>assure</u> her boss that she would finish the report by the end of the day.

loose/lose
Use "loose" to describe something that isn't tight, or to indicate that something has been released. Use "lose" to mean misplace.

loose:
adjective: not securely attached, having freedom of movement, or free from confinement.
He set the dogs <u>loose</u> in the park so that they could exercise.
verb: to let loose or free from restraint.
He took to Twitter to <u>loose</u> a stream of insults.

lose:
verb: to miss from one's possession, to suffer deprivation of, or to fail to use.
I was very careful not to <u>lose</u> the earrings my husband gave me.

principle/principal
Use "principle" to refer to ideas or beliefs; use "principal" to describe something that is important or to mean a person in authority. "Principal" can also refer to money.

principle:
noun: a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine or assumption, a code of conduct, or fact of nature
He grounds his advocacy work in the <u>principle</u> of social justice.

principal:
adjective: most important
My <u>principal</u> concern is your well-being.
noun: a person who has controlling authority or is in a leading position; a capital sum earning interest
The <u>principal</u> met with the teachers at the beginning of the school year.

there/they're/their

Use "there" to point something out or to describe a location and "their "to indicate possession. "They're" is short for "they are."

there:
adverb: in, at, to, or into that place; in that respect
I'll meet you <u>there</u>.
pronoun: used as a function word to introduce a sentence or clause
I'll never understand why <u>there</u> are eight buns in a package but ten hot dogs.

their:
adjective: of or relating to them or themselves as possessors, agents, or objects of an action.
Sally and Fred moved into <u>their</u> new house yesterday.

they're:
contraction: they are
My parents told me that <u>they're</u> not coming to dinner tonight.

your/you're

Use "your" to show possession. "You're" is short for "you are."

your:
adjective: of or relating to you, yourself, or yourselves as possessor, agent, or objects of an action.
Remember to take <u>your</u> books to school.

you're:
contraction: they are
Lisa thinks that <u>you're</u> a great speaker.