

Commonly Misused Words/Grammar Concepts

Abbreviation/acronym: If you can pronounce the shortened version of a phrase, like “scuba” for self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, then it’s an acronym. If you have to say the letters individually, like “PBS” for Public Broadcasting System, it’s an abbreviation. (An acronym is a type of abbreviation, so technically, you can call an acronym an abbreviation, but you cannot call an abbreviation an acronym.)

Adverse/averse: If you don’t want to do something, you are averse to it. If something has a negative effect, then it’s adverse. *I am averse to skydiving. The medication had the adverse effect of vertigo.*

Affect/effect: Affect is a verb, and it means something is having an impact on something else. Effect is a noun, the result of something (it can also be used as a verb “to cause”). *The snow and ice have affected the length of my commute. The salt and chemicals applied by crews have had a great effect on the streets. He will effect much change as the CEO.*

Allow/enable: This is a little like *May I ride my bicycle/Can I ride my bicycle?* (“May” means you are asking for permission; “can” means you have the skills to ride your bike.) If you give permission for something, you allow it. If you have the ability to do something, you are enabled. *Mom allowed me to go ride my bike. Dad enabled me to ride my bike by fixing the chain.*

Among/between: The most common rule people use if when it's two things, use between and if it's more than two, use among. However, when you are considering items that are distinct items, no matter how many, use between. *I had to choose between journalism, English and political science classes at 8 a.m.* When you are considering indistinct items or a collective group, use among. *I had to choose a winner among the seventh graders. Also, Excitement spread among the team.*

Capital/capitol: The building where a legislature meets is the capitol. Capitals are uppercase letters, wealth (a business’ money or property) and the geographic location of some type of government (e.g., country, state). *We are going on a field trip to the west wing of the Capitol. She told me not to use all capital letters when I write e-mails. Indianapolis is the capital of Indiana.* I remember this by thinking that a capitol building often has a dome, and both dome and capitol use the letter “o.”

Compliment/complement: When someone says something nice about something, it’s a compliment. When one thing adds to something else, it complements it. *I always try to compliment my friends’ new clothes. The throw pillows complement the room décor.* I think of complement as a version of “complete” and that I want a compliment.

Comprise/compose: Use comprise if you mean “contains.” Use compose if you mean “makes up.” If you use the word “of” in your sentence, then the word you need is composed, because comprise never takes “of.” *The week comprises seven days. Four weeks compose a month or A month is composed of four weeks.*

Discreet/discrete: If you are being subtle or unobtrusive you are being discreet (demonstrating discretion). If an item is separate unit or element from all others, it is discrete. *The Well House is not very discreet meeting place. A year is made up of 12 discrete months.*

Ensure/insure: Use insure only if you are talking about car, house or renters insurance. Use ensure if you are making sure that something will happen. *Allstate insures my house and my car. I set my clocks five minutes fast to ensure that I am never late.*

Every day/everyday: Everyday (one word) is an adjective. *That is my everyday jacket; the other one is for special occasions.* Otherwise, use two words: *Carrie runs five miles every day.*

Family pronouns: Only capitalize words like mom and dad if you could use the person’s name instead. For example, *I visited my mom in North Carolina.* You would not say *I visited my Kate in North Carolina.* But, *I visited Mom in North Carolina.*

Farther/further: Farther refers to distance: *Ed threw the ball farther than David.* Further is an extension of time or degree – think of it a little like a figurative distance. *Ed threw the ball farther than David; further, he is a better catcher. I will investigate the mystery further.*

Flaunt/flout: If you are showing off something, you are flaunting it. If you are disobeying a rule or law (generally with your awareness of doing so, to make a statement), you are flouting it. *Jane flaunted her new diamond earrings at the party. We flouted the “no food or drink in the computer lab” rule.*

Flesh out/flush out: What’s the first thing you think of when you hear “flush”? That’s right – getting rid of waste. So, why would I “flush out” an outline to provide more information? The correct usage is to “flesh out” an outline – that is, putting some meat on its bones. If you are getting rid of something, you can flush it out.

Flier/flyer: Flyer is only used when you are referring to the Radio Flyer brand wagon. If you are referring to someone on an airplane or a handbill, use flier. *She accrued many frequent flier miles last year. He posted fliers promoting his band in all the residence halls.*

Hopefully: Hopefully is an adverb, meaning it is used to describe a verb: *She watched the weather forecast hopefully.* It is incorrect to say *Hopefully, the sun will shine this week.* Instead, say *I hope the sun will shine this week.*

I.e./e.g.: This takes me back to high school Latin class. I.e. stands for “id est,” which means “that is.” Use it when you are introducing a list of things that is a complete list of items related to the object you are describing. For example, *I love the colors of the American flag, i.e., red, white and blue.* There are no other colors in the American flag, so this is a complete list. E.g. stands for “exempli gratia,” which means “for example.” Use it when you are providing just a few examples of things that are part of the object, such as *You should eat five servings of fruit (e.g., bananas, strawberries and apples) every day.* You’re not listing every type of fruit in the world, just some examples. I remember which one to use by thinking “in essence” for “i.e.” and “example given” for e.g. Always, always, use a comma after these abbreviations.

Immigrate/emigrate: When someone leaves a country, they emigrate. When someone arrives in a country, they immigrate. *My great-grandparents emigrated from Antigua. My great-grandparents immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s.* I remember this by thinking exit=emigrate (the letter “e” starts both words) and into=immigrate (the letter “i” starts both words).

Imply/infer: If you are the speaker/writer and you are subtly suggesting something, you are implying. If you are the listener/reader and come to a conclusion, you are inferring. *Steve implied that I should exercise more often. When she said that the company had not been profitable, I inferred that I would not be getting a raise.*

In order to/to: Any time you see “in order to,” double-check to see if “in order” is really necessary. Sometimes it is, for clarity, but most times, you can delete “in order.” For example, *In order to get to work on time, I leave at 7 a.m.* The meaning is clear if you just say *To get to work on time...*

Irregardless: Is not a word. Use “regardless.”

It’s/its, they’re/their, you’re/your: Contractions (words with apostrophes) indicate that one or more letters have been removed. It’s really means “it is” and the apostrophe is standing in for the second “i.” Its is a possessive pronoun. *The dog buried its bone. It’s somewhere in the back yard.* The same with they’re and you’re – these are contractions for they are and you are, while their and your are possessive.

Lay/lie: Present tense: If you are putting something down, you lay it down. If you are going to sleep, you lie down. “Lay” requires an object, such as *Lay the flowers on the table.* “Lie” does not use an object. Past tense: The past tense of “lie” is “lay” and the past tense of “lay” is “laid.” So, *The chicken lay an egg, and He laid down under the tree.*

Less/fewer: If you can count the things you are referring to, then use fewer. If it is an intangible object that cannot be counted, use less. *I lost fewer pounds this week than last week. She is less entertaining than her sister.* This means that all those grocery store check-out signs that say “10 items or less” are wrong! (But the exceptions are time, money and distance – those can use “less.” *She spent less on lunch than I did.*) The same rules apply to **amount/number**. Amount is for an unspecified quantity, and number is for something that can be counted.

Literally: Literally means it is really happening exactly as you say. *I am literally dying. I was literally going crazy.* You probably mean figuratively.

Me/I: Pronouns can be subjective (the thing doing the action – *I threw the ball*) or objective (the thing upon which the action is performed – *The ball hit me*). It gets confusing when there is more than one person involved in the action. Every day I hear someone say, incorrectly, *Send the report to John and I*. The way to determine if it’s correct is to “punch the other person out” (Thanks to Martha Barnette of “A Way with Words”). Take the other person out of the sentence and see if it’s correct. So you should say *Send the report to John and me*, because *Send the report to me* is correct.

Myself: Pronouns that end in “self” are called reflexive – himself, herself, ourselves, myself. It seems that people think they sound more intelligent if they say *If you have questions, see Tom or myself*. But a verb only takes a reflexive pronoun if it is something you do to yourself: you dress yourself, talk to yourself, etc. But if someone else is doing the action, the correct usage is *If you have questions, see Tom or me*. I remember this by thinking about the reflex in your knee – you can make your leg jump by hitting that spot under the patella. You can do that to yourself. (Okay, I don’t know if that’s medically true, but it’s enough of a connection for me to remember the right word to use.)

Nauseous/nauseated: Something that makes people queasy is nauseous (*That wall color is nauseous*). If you are in the state of feeling queasy, you are nauseated: *I was nauseated the whole first trimester*. See now why it’s not a good idea to go around telling people you are nauseous? It’ll be tough to find anyone to eat lunch with you!

Over/more than: As a general guideline, over refers to spatial placement; more than refers to a quantity. *Hang the sign over the table. The U.S. won more than 35 medals*. However, there are times to break the rule; the AP Stylebook says to try both options out and go with whatever sounds best. *She is over 40* sounds better than *She is more than 40*.

Premier/premiere: The first and best example of something is premier. The opening night for a movie is the premiere. *That is the premier tricep exercise. I cannot wait to go to the premiere of Avatar*.

Principle/principal: Principle is only ever a noun – *It’s the principle of the matter*. Principal is most often an adjective, meaning the chief or primary. *My principal reason for swimming is to lose weight*. A school principal is the “chief” of the school, and by remembering that he or she is my “pal,” I can connect principal with the meaning for chief/primary.

Since/because: Use since when you are referring to time; use because when you are talking about a reason for something. *The baby has been napping since 11:30. I put the baby down for a nap because she was cranky*. It is not correct to say *Since the baby was cranky, I put her down for a nap*.

Stationery/stationary: Something that is not moving is stationary. *She rode the stationary bike for 20 minutes*. You write your thank you notes on stationery. *Mom gave me some beautiful engraved stationery for my birthday*. I remember this by matching the e in stationery to the e in envelope.

That/which: If you can remove the clause that begins with one of these words, without changing the meaning of the sentence then you should use which. “That” is used to qualify the item being described such as, *The games that I like all involve words*. If you were to delete “that I like,” the meaning of the sentence would change. *The chicken pot pie recipe, which came from my mom, needs peas and carrots*. If you deleted “which came from my mom,” you still have the original intent of the sentence – that you better have peas and carrots on your shopping list. Notice that the which clause is also set off by commas.

To/too/two: Too means “as well” or “in addition.” *I like hockey too!* It also is used if you are talking to about an excess – *There are too many pandas at the zoo* or *I ate too much*. Do I really need to explain the other two?

Try to/try and: It is incorrect to say *I will try and clean the house*. That is, in essence, saying that you are doing two things – trying and cleaning. Instead, you really mean *I will try to clean the house*.

Unique: Unique is unique, no modifier necessary or accepted. You cannot say “the most unique” or “very unique.”

Who/whom: The simplest mnemonic is to use who where you would use he and to use whom when you would use him (notice that whom/him both end in “m.”) This is because you use who when it is the subject and whom when it is the object. For example, *Who kicked the ball? He kicked the ball.* and *I should give the report to whom? Give the report to him.*

“Ward” words: It’s always afterward and toward, never afterwards or towards. Same is true of anyway – don't put an "s" on the end.

Resources

Some of the great grammar and writing resources that I use regularly (and that helped explain many of the choices here) include:

- *The AP Style Book*, www.apstylebook.com – I’ve owned copies of various editions since my days at the IU School of Journalism, and you can also get an online subscription for faster searching.
- *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White
- *Eats, Shoots & Leaves, The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Lynne Truss
- Copyblogger, www.copyblogger.com – A list of 27 commonly misused words (<http://www.copyblogger.com/commonly-misused-words>) and many other writing tips.
- Grammar Girl, grammar.quickanddirtytips.com – great weekly podcasts of short grammar tips, and a searchable database of grammar rights and wrongs. She also uses great examples and mnemonics.
- A Way with Words, www.waywordradio.org – less a grammar source and more an all-things-related-to-language source. Each week, Martha and Grant take calls about words, phrases and usage.
- National Grammar Day, nationalgrammarday.com – They have a great list of Top 10 Grammar Tips.