

Commonly Confused Words

Pairs of words that are frequently confused with each other.

Pairs	Definitions
adoptive adopted	children are adopted , but parents are adoptive .
adverse averse	adverse , 'unfavourable, bad', with averse , which means 'strongly disliking or opposed to', as in <i>I am not averse to helping out</i> .
affect effect	affect means 'make a difference to', whereas effect means 'a result' or 'bring about (a result)'
ambiguous ambivalent	ambiguous primarily means 'having more than one meaning, open to different interpretations', while ambivalent means 'having mixed feelings'.
amoral immoral	amoral means 'not concerned with morality', while immoral means 'not conforming to accepted standards of morality'.
appraise apprise	appraise means 'assess', while apprise means 'inform'
censure censor	censure means 'express strong disapproval of', whereas censor means 'suppress unacceptable parts of (a book, film, etc.)'
climactic climatic	climactic , 'forming a climax', with climatic , which means 'relating to climate'.
complacent complaisant	complacent , 'smug and self-satisfied', with complaisant , which means 'willing to please'.
complement compliment	complement , 'a thing that enhances something by contributing extra features', with compliment , which means 'an expression of praise' or 'politely congratulate'.
continuous continual	continuous and continual : continuous primarily means 'without interruption', and can refer to space as well as time, as in <i>the cliffs form a continuous line along the coast</i> ; continual , on the other hand, typically means 'happening frequently, with intervals between', as in <i>the bus service has been disrupted by continual breakdowns</i> .
council counsel	council , an administrative or advisory body, with counsel , advice or guidance.
councillor counsellor	a councillor is a member of a council, whereas a counsellor is someone who gives guidance on personal or psychological problems
credible creditable	credible means 'believable, convincing', whereas creditable means 'deserving acknowledgement and praise'.
definite definitive	definite ('certain, sure') with definitive , which means 'decisive and with authority'.
defuse diffuse	defuse , 'remove the fuse from (an explosive device)' or 'reduce the danger or tension in (a difficult situation)', with diffuse , which means 'spread over a wide area'.
desert dessert	desert (a waterless area) with dessert (the sweet course)
discreet discrete	discreet , 'careful not to attract attention or give offence', with discrete , which means 'separate, distinct'.

draft draught	In British English draft means 'a preliminary version' or 'an order to pay a sum', whereas a draught is a current of air or an act of drinking; in North American English the spelling draft is used for all senses. The verb is usually spelled draft .
draw drawer	draw , which is primarily a verb, with drawer meaning 'sliding storage compartment'.
egoism egotism	it is egotism , not egoism , that means 'excessive conceit or self-absorption'; egoism is a less common and more technical word, for an ethical theory that treats self-interest as the foundation of morality.
envelop envelope	envelop without an e at the end means 'wrap up, cover, or surround completely', whereas an envelope with an e is a paper container used to enclose a letter or document.
exceptionable exceptional	exceptionable ('open to objection; causing disapproval or offence') with exceptional ('not typical' or 'unusually good').
fawn faun	a fawn is a young deer, and a light brown colour; a faun is a Roman deity that is part man, part goat.
flaunt flout	flaunt means 'display ostentatiously', while flout means 'openly disregard (a rule)'.
flounder founder	flounder generally means 'have trouble doing or understanding something, be confused', while founder means 'fail or come to nothing'.
forego forgo	forego means 'precede', but is also a less common spelling for forgo , 'go without'.
grisly grizzly	grisly means 'causing horror or revulsion', whereas grizzly is from the same root as grizzled and refers to the bear's white-tipped fur.
hoard horde	a hoard is a store of something valuable; horde is a disparaging term for a large group of people.
imply infer	Imply is used with a speaker as its subject, as in <i>he implied that the General was a traitor</i> , and indicates that the speaker is suggesting something though not making an explicit statement. Infer is used in sentences such as <i>we inferred from his words that the General was a traitor</i> , and indicates that something in the speaker's words enabled the listeners to deduce that the man was a traitor
its it's	the possessive its (as in <i>turn the camera on its side</i>) with the contraction it's (short for either it is or it has , as in <i>it's my fault; it's been a hot day</i>).
loath loathe	loath ('reluctant; unwilling') with loathe , 'dislike greatly'.
loose lose	as a verb loose means 'unfasten or set free', while lose means 'cease to have' or 'become unable to find'
luxuriant luxurious	luxuriant , 'rich and profuse in growth', with luxurious , which means 'characterized by luxury; very comfortable and extravagant'.
marital martial	marital , 'of marriage', with martial , 'of war'!
militate mitigate	militate , which is used in the form militate against to mean 'be an important factor in preventing', with mitigate , which means 'make (something bad) less severe'.
naturism naturist	naturism (nudism) and naturist (a nudist) with naturalism and naturalist : naturalism is an artistic or literary approach or style; a naturalist is an expert in natural history, or an exponent of naturalism.
officious official	officious , 'asserting authority or interfering in an annoyingly domineering way', with official , which means 'relating to an authority or public body' and 'having the approval or authorization of such a body'.
ordnance ordnance	ordnance , 'an authoritative order', with ordnance , which means 'guns' or 'munitions'.

palate palette	the palate is the roof of the mouth; a palette , on the other hand, is an artist's board for mixing colours.
pedal peddle	Pedal is a noun denoting a foot-operated lever; as a verb it means 'move by means of pedals'. Peddle is a verb meaning 'sell (goods)'. The associated noun from pedal is pedaller (US pedaler), and the noun from peddle is pedlar or peddler
perquisite prerequisite	a perquisite is a special right or privilege enjoyed as a result of one's position; prerequisite is something that is required as a prior condition for something else; prerequisite can also be an adjective, meaning 'required as a prior condition'
perspicuous perspicacious	perspicuous , 'expressing things clearly', with perspicacious , which means 'having a ready understanding of things'.
principal principle	principal , 'first in order of importance; main', with principle , which is a noun meaning chiefly 'a basis of a system of thought or belief'.
proscribe prescribe	proscribe is a rather formal word meaning 'condemn or forbid', whereas prescribe means either 'issue a medical prescription' or 'recommend with authority'.
regretful regrettable	regretful , 'feeling or showing regret', with regrettable , which means 'giving rise to regret; undesirable'.
shear sheet	shear , 'cut the wool off (a sheep)', with sheer , which as a verb means 'swerve or change course quickly' or 'avoid an unpleasant topic', and as an adjective means 'nothing but; absolute', 'perpendicular', or '(of a fabric) very thin'.
stationary stationery	stationary and stationery : stationary is an adjective with the sense 'not moving or changing', whereas stationery is a noun meaning 'paper and other writing materials'.
story storey	story and storey : a story is a tale or account, while a storey is a floor of a building. In North America the spelling story is sometimes used for storey .
tortuous torturous	tortuous , 'full of twists and turns' or 'excessively lengthy and complex', with torturous , which means 'characterized by pain or suffering'.
unexceptionable unexceptional	unexceptionable , 'that cannot be taken exception to, inoffensive', with unexceptional , 'not exceptional; ordinary'.
unsociable unsocial and antisocial	unsociable means 'not enjoying the company of or engaging in activities with others'; unsocial usually means 'socially inconvenient' and typically refers to the hours of work of a job; antisocial means 'contrary to accepted social customs and therefore annoying'
weather whether	weather relates to the conditions in the air above the Earth such as wind, rain or temperature whereas whether is used in questioning and relates to two or more possibilities, for example, if or not
who's whose	who's is a contraction of who is or who has , while whose is used in questions such as <i>whose is this?</i> and <i>whose turn is it?</i>
wreath wreathe	wreath with no e at the end means 'arrangement of flowers', while wreathe with an e is a verb meaning 'envelop, surround, or encircle'.
your you're you're	is a contraction of you are , while your is a possessive determiner used in phrases such as <i>your turn</i> .

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