**Commonly confused words – a few in more detail**

**Compliment or complement?**

A **compliment**, or **complimentary** remark, is something you pay someone when you want to be nice: “What a nice dress!” “That’s very clever.” “You played very well.” Sometimes **complimentary** means ‘free’: e.g. **complimentary** tickets.

A **complement**, or a **complementary** thing, is something that completes something: e.g. a ship’s **complement** is her crew; her assignment has a **complementary** guide to experimental techniques; yin is **complementary** to yang.

**Principle or principal?**

A **principle** is an underlying idea, or a moral belief. A **principal** is either a Head (e.g. a Head-teacher); or an adjective describing the most important thing, “The principal point in this lecture is…”

**Practice or practice?**

A **practice** is a noun – *something* that you do: “There is a football practice tonight.” “I did 5 hours’ piano practice yesterday.” “It is good practice to reference all your sources in your work.” “She is in general practice.” (If you can say “a” or “the” before the word practice in your sentence, then it is practice).

To **practise** is a verb – to do something, e.g. “I **practised** my vocabulary last night.” “He **practised** his speech in front of a mirror.”

**Affect or effect?**

To **affect** is a verb – to do something, e.g. “She was affected deeply by the death of her husband.” “To raise taxes affects everyone.”

An **effect** is a noun – a thing, or result. Cause and effect are opposites, e.g. “The effects of war were…” “The butterfly effect suggests that…” Sometimes ‘effects’ means ‘possessions’: “Carry your personal effects with you.”

**Lie or lay – or laid?**

To **lie** is an intransitive verb – i.e. it has no object. You lie down.

To **lay** is a transitive verb – i.e. it has an object. Hens lay eggs. You **lay** *something* down.

Confusingly, the past tense of to **lie** is **lay**: “She lay down for a moment at three o’clock.” The past tense of to **lay** is **laid**: “They laid down their weapons.”

**Past or passed?**

**Past** refers to time or events that have already happened, while **passed** is the past tense of the verb **pass** and is used to indicate completed actions or events. For example, “She finally **passed** the driving test, leaving all her doubts in the **past**.”

**Past** can function as several different parts of speech, each with different meanings, though the most common usage of past is as a noun to indicate an earlier time or era. It can also function as an adjective, adverb, or preposition and mean the following things:

**Noun**: Past means “an earlier period of time.”

Houses were more affordable in the past.

**Adjective**: Past can also be used to describe a noun. In this form, past also means “gone by in time.”

In past summers, we’d go to the beach in Delaware.

**Adverb**: The word past is also a common adverb used to describe a verb or adjective and can indicate passing from one side of something to the other.

Ari worked past her issues with Gina.

As a **preposition**: Lastly, past as a preposition is typically used to tell time or to refer to being beyond a particular point or stage.

It is half past five o’clock.

The milk was past its expiration date.

The definition of passed

**Passed** is the past tense and past participle of the word **pass**. Because of this, passed functions only as a verb. Nonetheless, the word pass has many different meanings; here are some of the main ones you’ll encounter:

To move or proceed

To be transferred

To throw or kick (a ball)

To go away

To die (with religious connotations)

To give up control

To decline to speak or bid

To be confirmed as a law or rule

To go from one state of being to another

The one quality that unites all of these different meanings of passed is they are each indicative of an action or event that has already happened. The addition of the -ed suffix to the verb pass makes it past tense, signaling a preceding era.

**Past vs. passed**

With commonly confused words, it’s useful to commit a distinguishing trick to memory. In the case of past and passed, all you have to do is remember that passed is always a verb.

While both words have many meanings that have to do with motion and time, past is never a verb. As long as you identify whether or not the word is a verb, you will know which usage is correct.

**Past vs. passed examples**

Need a few more examples of past and passed being used correctly? Here are some additional sentences that get it right:

Examples with **past**:

She liked to reminisce about the past and recall happier times.

They couldn’t move past the car that was blocking the road.

Ada’s past year of voracious reading has turned her into a real expert on film history.

I think we’re past the point of no return.

Examples with **passed**:

My grandmother passed away in January.

The filly passed us at a trot, leaving a trail of dust in her wake.

He passed the baton to his young and talented predecessor.

Excitement passed through the crowd with mere minutes remaining in the match.

**What does past mean?**

**Past** refers to time or events that have already happened, while **passed** is the past tense of the verb pass and is used to indicate completed actions or events.

Adapted from Farrar, P. (n.d.). *Spelling: including commonly misspelled words and plurals checklist.* Skills Team. University of Hull.

Adapted from Konya, K. (2023, August 8). *When to Use “Past” vs. “Passed”: Definitions and Examples.* <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/past-passed/>