



Commonly Confused Words

affect/effect: *Affect* is usually a verb meaning “to influence.” *Effect* is usually a noun meaning “result.”
The drug did not affect the disease, and it had adverse side effects.

all ready/already: *All ready* means “completely prepared.” *Already* means “previously.” *Susan was all ready for her concert, but her friends had already left.*

all together/altogether: *All together* means “everyone or everything in one place.” *Altogether* means “entirely.” *We were not altogether certain that we could bring the family all together for a reunion.*

a while/awhile: *Awhile* is an adverb; it can modify a verb, but it cannot be the object of a preposition such as *for*. The two-word form *a while* is a noun preceded by an article and therefore can be the object of a preposition. *Stay awhile. Stay for a while.*

beside/besides: *Beside* is a preposition meaning “at the side of” or “next to.” *Annie Oakley slept with her gun beside her bed. Besides* is a preposition meaning “except” or “in addition to.” *No one besides Terrie can have that ice cream.*

between/among: Ordinarily, use *among* with three or more entities, *between* with two. *The prize was divided among several contestants. You have a choice between carrots and beans.*

coarse/course: *Coarse* means “crude” or “rough in texture.” *The coarse weave of the wall hanging gave it a three-dimensional quality. Course* usually refers to a path, a playing field, or a unit of study; the expression *of course* means “certainly.” *I plan to take a course in car repair this summer. Of course, you are welcome to join me.*

complement/compliment: *Complement* is a verb meaning “to go with or complete” or a noun meaning “something that completes.” As a verb, *compliment* means “to flatter”; as a noun, it means “flattering remark.” *Her skill at rushing the net complements his skill at volleying. Martha’s flower arrangements receive many compliments.*

conscience/conscious: *Conscience* is a noun meaning “moral principles.” *Conscious* is an adjective meaning “aware or alert.” *Let your conscience be your guide. Were you conscious of his love for you?*

continual/continuous: *Continual* means “repeated regularly and frequently.” *She grew weary of the continual telephone calls. Continuous* means “extended or prolonged without interruption.” *The broken siren made a continuous wail.*

emigrate from/immigrate to: *Emigrate* means “to leave one country or region to settle in another.” *In 1903, my great-grandfather emigrated from Russia to escape the religious pogroms. Immigrate* means “to enter another country and reside there.” *More than fifty thousand Bosnians immigrated to the United States in the 1990s.*

farther/further: *Farther* usually describes distances. *Further* usually suggests quantity or degree. *Chicago is farther from Miami than I thought. I would be grateful for further suggestions.*

lie/lay: *Lie* is an intransitive verb meaning “to recline or rest on a surface.” Its forms are *lie, lay, lain. Lay* is a transitive verb meaning “to put or place.” Its forms are *lay, laid, laid.*

loose/lose: *Loose* is an adjective meaning “not securely fastened.” *Lose* is a verb meaning “to misplace” or “to not win.” *Did you lose your only loose pair of work pants?*

principal/principle: *Principal* is a noun meaning “the head of a school or an organization” or “a sum of money.” It is also an adjective meaning “most important.” *Principle* is a noun meaning “a basic truth or law.” *The principal expelled her for three principal reasons. We believe in the principle of equal justice for all.*

set/sit: *Set* is a transitive verb meaning “to put” or “to place.” Its past tense is *set*. *Sit* is an intransitive verb meaning “to be seated.” Its past tense is *sat*. *She set the dough in a warm corner of the kitchen. The cat sat in the doorway.*

than/then: *Than* is a conjunction used in comparisons; *then* is an adverb denoting time. *That pizza is more than I can eat. Tom laughed, and then we recognized him.*

there/their/they're: *There* is an adverb specifying place; it is also an expletive (placeholder). Adverb: *Sylvia is lying there unconscious.* Expletive: *There are two plums left.* *Their* is a possessive pronoun. *Fred and Jane finally washed their car.* *They're* is a contraction of *they are*. *They're later than usual today.*

to/too/two: *To* is a preposition; *too* is an adverb; *two* is a number. *Too many of your shots slice to the left, but the last two were just right.*

weather/whether: The noun *weather* refers to the state of the atmosphere. *Whether* is a conjunction referring to a choice between alternatives. *We wondered whether the weather would clear.*

your/you're: *Your* is a possessive pronoun; *you're* is a contraction of *you are*. *Is that your new bike? You're in the finals.*