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.*