

Confusing Pairs of Words

Many pairs of words sound alike or nearly alike, but each has different meaning. For example affect means to influence something, while effect means the result of something. Words like these can be easily confused with each other.

You must be careful to use the correct word from a pair of such confusing words when you are writing and speaking. If not, you may express something different to what you intended to express.

For example, suppose you are writing about the importance of a good marriage. You write that “martial bliss is a wonderful thing”. The word martial refers to war or military intervention. You should have written “marital bliss is a wonderful thing”. Marital refers to marriage.

You would not want to embarrass yourself by addressing a letter to the administrator of College as “Dear Principle”. The word principle means a fundamental truth. You should write “Dear Principal”. The word principal refers to the head of a school/college.

Below are some word pairs which are commonly used and confused. Learn the meaning of each of the words so that you use them correctly.

Accept – to take something that is given to you	Except – to leave out
Altar – a raised place used in religious services	Alter – to change
Ascent – to climb	Assent – to agree
Brake – a device for stopping a vehicle	Break – to come apart
Cite – to document	Site – a place
Coarse - rough	Course – moving from one point to another or a programme of study
Complement – Something that makes a thing whole or perfect	Compliment – praise
Conscience – a sense of right and wrong	Conscious – state of being awake
Descent – coming from a higher to a lower place	Dissent – to disagree

Desert – a dry, hot, sandy area	Dessert – the sweet final part of a meal
Device – something made for a specific purpose	Devise – to invent something or develop a plan
Elicit – to bring out	Illicit – illegal
Eminent – famous or well respected	Imminent – about to happen
Faint – weak or temporarily pass out	Feint – a movement meant to deceive
Forth - forward	Fourth - an ordinal number
Here –at or in a place	Hear – to receive sound through one’s ears
Hoard – to save or store away	Horde – a very large group
Hole – an opening through something	Whole - an entire thing
Loath - reluctant	Loathe – greatly dislike
Palate – the roof of the mouth	Palette – an artist’s board for mixing paint
Peace – absence of fighting or quiet	Piece - a portion of something
Plain – clearly seen, heard or understood. Not fancy	Plane – a flat surface
Pore – a very small opening in the skin	Pour – to cause something to flow
Precede – to come before	Proceed – to go forward
Shear – to cut e.g. the wool off a sheep	Sheer – so thin you can see through it
Stationary – to stand still	Stationery – writing paper
Waist – the part of the human body between the ribs and hips	Waste – to use or spend carelessly or rubbish
Weak – without strength	Week – a period of seven days

Don’t be CONFUSED! Learn the meanings of these words to use them correctly