

Problematic Words and Phrases

Many of the words below are often incorrectly used, usually because they sound similar to one another, or infer similar meaning; others are incorrectly used in the singular (when they should be in the plural) or vice versa. Their definitions and appropriate usage are outlined in detail so as to help writers decide when to use them.¹

ability; capability; capacity *Ability* refers to a person's physical or mental skill or power to achieve something (the ability to ride a bicycle). *Capability* refers more generally to power or ability (she has the capability to play soccer professionally) or to the quality of being able to use or be used in a certain way (a jet with long-distance-flight capability). *Capacity* refers especially to a vessel's ability to hold or contain something (a high-capacity fuel tank). Used figuratively, *capacity* refers to a person's physical or mental power to learn (an astounding capacity for mathematics).

accord; accordance The first word means "agreement" (we are in accord on the treaty's meaning); the second word means "conformity" (the book was printed in accordance with modern industry standards).

addicted; dependent One is physically *addicted* to something but psychologically *dependent* on something.

adduce; deduce; induce To *adduce* is to give as a reason, offer as a proof, or cite as an example (as evidence of reliability, she adduced her four years of steady volunteer work as a nurse's aide). *Deduce* and *induce* are opposite processes. To *deduce* is to reason from general principles to specific conclusions, or to draw a specific conclusion from general bases (from these clues about who committed the crime, one deduces that the butler did it). To *induce* is to form a general principle based on specific observations (after years of studying ravens, the researchers induced a few of their social habits).

adequate; sufficient; enough *Adequate* refers to the suitability of something in a particular circumstance (an adequate explanation). *Sufficient* refers to an amount that is enough to meet a need (always with an abstract concept, a mass noun, or a plural) (sufficient water) (sufficient information) (sufficient cause) (sufficient resources). *Enough*, the best word for everyday purposes, modifies both count nouns (enough people) and mass nouns (enough oil).

admission; admittance *Admission* is figurative, suggesting particularly the rights and privileges granted upon entry (the student won admission to a first-rate university). *Admittance* is purely physical (no admittance beyond this point).

adverse; averse *Adverse* means either "strongly opposed" or "unfortunate" and typically refers to things, not people (adverse relations between nations) (an adverse wind blew the ship off course). *Averse* means "feeling negatively about" and refers to people (averse to asking for directions).

affect; effect *Affect*, almost always a verb, means "to influence, have an effect on" (the adverse publicity affected the election). (The noun *affect* has a specialised meaning in psychology: manifestation of emotion or mood. Consult your dictionary.) *Effect*, usually a noun, means "outcome, result" (the candidate's attempted explanations had no effect). But it may also be a verb meaning "to make happen, produce" (the goal had been to effect a major change in campus politics).

afterward, adv.; afterword, n. The first means "later"; the second means "an epilogue." On *afterward(s)*, see toward.

¹ This is sourced from the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press, 2010), 263–300.

allude; elude; illude To *allude* is to refer to something indirectly (allude to a problem). It's often loosely used where *refer* or *quote* would be better—that is, where there is a direct mention or quotation. To *elude* is to avoid capture (elude the hunters). To *illude* (quite rare) is to deceive (your imagination might illude you).

alternate, adj. & n.; alternative, adj. & n. *Alternate* implies (1) substitute for another (we took the alternate route) or (2) taking turns with another (her alternate chaired the meeting). *Alternative* implies a choice between two or more things (I prefer the second alternative).

amend; emend The first is the general term, meaning “to change or add to” (the city amended its charter to abolish at-large council districts). The second means “to correct [text]” (for the second printing, the author emended several typos). The noun corresponding to *amend* is *amendment*; the one corresponding to *emend* is *emendation*.

amiable; amicable Both mean “friendly,” but *amiable* refers to people (an amiable waiter) and *amicable* to relationships (an amicable divorce).

amount; number *Amount* is used with mass nouns (a decrease in the amount of pollution), *number* with count nouns (a growing number of dissidents).

assumption; presumption An *assumption* is not drawn from evidence; typically, it is a hypothesis (your assumption can be tested by looking at the public records). A *presumption* implies a basis in evidence; if uncontradicted, a *presumption* may support a decision (the legal presumption of innocence).

attain; obtain To *attain* something is to accomplish it through effort (e.g., a goal) or endurance (e.g., an age); to *obtain* something is to gain possession of it. So in best usage you *attain* a degree and *obtain* a diploma. It can be a fine distinction, and in common usage the words are often treated as synonyms.

between; among; amid *Between* indicates one-to-one relationships (between you and me). *Among* indicates undefined or collective relationships (honour among thieves). *Between* has long been recognised as being perfectly appropriate for more than two objects if multiple one-to-one relationships are understood from the context (trade between members of the European Union). *Amid* is used with mass nouns (amid talk of war), *among* with plurals of count nouns (among the children). Avoid *amidst* and *amongst*.

born; borne *Born* is used only as an adjective (a born ruler) or in the fixed passive-voice verb *to be born* (the child was born into poverty). *Borne* is the past participle of *bear* (this donkey has borne many heavy loads) (she has borne three children). It is also used to form compound terms in the sciences (foodborne) (vector-borne).

bring; take The distinction may seem obvious, but the error is common. The simple question is, where is the action directed? If it's toward you, use *bring* (bring home the bacon). If it's away from you, use *take* (take out the trash). You *take* (not *bring*) your car to the mechanic.

can; could *Can* means “to be able to” and expresses certainty (I can be there in five minutes). *Could* is better for a sense of uncertainty or a conditional statement (Could you stop at the cleaners today?) (if you send a deposit, we could hold your reservation).

can; may *Can* most traditionally applies to physical or mental ability (she can do calculations in her head) (the dog can leap over a six-foot fence). In colloquial English, *can* also expresses a request for permission (Can I go to the movies?), but this usage is not recommended in formal writing. *May* suggests possibility (the class may have a pop quiz tomorrow) or permission (you may borrow my car). A denial of permission is properly phrased formally with *may not* (you may not borrow my credit card) or with *cannot* or *can't* (you can't use the computer tonight).

capital; capitol A *capital* is a seat of government (usually a city) (Austin is the capital of Texas). A *capitol* is a building in which a legislature meets (the legislature opened its new session in the capitol today).

career; careen The word *career's* career as a verb meaning "to go full speed" may be about over. Its duties have been assumed by *careen* ("to tip to one side while moving"), even though nothing in that verb's definition denotes high speed. Still, careful writers recognise the distinction.

cite, n.; site As a noun, *cite* is colloquial for *citation*, which refers to a source of information (a cite to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). A *site* is a place or location (building site) (grave site) (website). Cf. sight.

citizen; subject In a governmental sense, these are near-synonyms that should be distinguished. A *citizen* owes allegiance to a nation whose sovereignty is a collective function of the people (a citizen of Germany). A *subject* owes allegiance to an individual sovereign (a subject of the queen).

class This word denotes a category or group of things (the class of woodwind instruments), never one type (an oboe is a type of woodwind) or one kind of thing (a snare drum is one kind of percussion instrument).

classic; classical *Classic* means "important, authoritative" (*The Naked Night* is one of Bergman's classic films). *Classical* applies to the traditional "classics" of literature, music, and such (and sometimes to specific periods and movements) (classical Greek) (a classical composer) or to the definitive or earliest-characterised form (classical EEC syndrome).

collaborate; corroborate To *collaborate* means to cooperate on some undertaking; the participants are *collaborators*. To *corroborate* something means to back up its reliability with proof or evidence.

common; mutual What is *common* is shared by two or more people (borne by different mothers but having a common father). What is *mutual* is reciprocal or directly exchanged by and toward each other (mutual obligations). Strictly, *friend in common* is better than *mutual friend* in reference to a third person who is a friend of two others.

compare To *compare with* is to discern both similarities and differences between things. To *compare to* is to note primarily similarities between things.

compelled; impelled If you are *compelled* to do something, you have no choice in the matter (Nixon was compelled by the unanimous Supreme Court decision to turn over the tapes). If you are *impelled* to do something, you may not like it, but you are convinced that it must be done (the voter disliked some candidates but was impelled by the income-tax issue to vote a straight party ticket).

compliment; complement A *compliment* is a flattering or praising remark (a compliment on your skill). A *complement* is something that completes or brings to perfection (the lace tablecloth was a complement to the antique silver). The words are also verbs: to *compliment* is to praise, while to *complement* is to supplement adequately or to complete.

comprise; compose Use these with care. To *comprise* is "to be made up of, to include" (the whole comprises the parts). To *compose* is "to make up, to form the substance of something" (the parts compose the whole). The phrase *comprised of*, though increasingly common, is poor usage. Instead, use *composed of*, *consisting of*, or *made up of*.

concept; conception Both words may refer to an abstract thought, but *conception* also means "the act of forming an abstract thought." Avoid using either word as a high-sounding equivalent of *idea*, *design*, *thought*, or *program*.

consist There are two distinct phrases: *consist of* and *consist in*. The first applies to the physical components that make up a tangible thing (the computer-system package consists of software, the CPU, the monitor, and a printer). The second refers to the essence of a

thing, especially in abstract terms (moral government consists in rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked).

contagious; infectious A *contagious* disease spreads by direct contact with an infected person or animal (rabies is a contagious disease). An *infectious* disease is spread by germs on a contaminated object or element, such as earth or water (tetanus is infectious but not contagious). In nonliteral usage the terms are synonymous (his pessimism is contagious) (her smile is infectious).

contemporary; contemporaneous Both express coinciding time, but *contemporary* usually applies to people, and *contemporaneous* applies to things or actions. Because *contemporary* has the additional sense “modern,” it is unsuitable for contexts involving multiple times. That is, a reference to *Roman, Byzantine, and contemporary belief systems* is ambiguous; change *contemporary* to *modern*.

continual; continuous What is *continual* is intermittent or frequently repeated. What is *continuous* never stops—it remains constant or uninterrupted.

contravene; controvert To *contravene* is to conflict with or violate (the higher speed limit contravenes our policy of encouraging fuel conservation). To *controvert* is to challenge or contradict (the testimony controverts the witness’s prior statement).

corporal; corporeal What is *corporal* relates in some way to the body (corporal punishment); what is *corporeal* has a body (not our spiritual but our corporeal existence).

criteria This is the plural form of *criterion* (“a standard for judging”): one *criterion*, two *criteria*.

data Though originally this word was a plural of *datum*, it is now commonly treated as a mass noun and coupled with a singular verb. In formal writing (and always in the sciences), use *data* as a plural.

deadly; deathly *Deadly* means “capable of causing death” (deadly snake venom). *Deathly* means “deathlike” (deathly silence).

decide whether; decide if See determine whether.

definite; definitive. *Definite* means “clear, exact” (a definite yes). *Definitive* means “conclusive, final, most authoritative” (a definitive treatise).

despite; in spite of. For brevity, prefer *despite*.

determine whether; determine if. The first phrasing is irreproachable style; the second is acceptable as a colloquialism. The same is true of *decide whether* versus *decide if*. See also if.

different The phrasing *different from* is generally preferable to *different than* (this company is different from that one), but sometimes the adverbial phrase *differently than* is all but required (she described the scene differently than he did).

differ from; differ with *Differ from* is the usual construction denoting a contrast (the two species differ from each other in subtle ways). *Differ with* regards differences of opinion (the state’s senators differ with each other on many issues).

discreet; discrete *Discreet* means “circumspect, judicious” (a discreet silence). *Discrete* means “separate, distinct, unconnected” (six discrete parts).

disinterested This word should be reserved for the sense “not having a financial personal interest at stake, impartial” (and it is a term commonly used in art history and aesthetics). Avoid it as a replacement for *uninterested* (which means “unconcerned, bored”).

disorganised; unorganised Both mean “not organised,” but *disorganised* suggests a group in disarray, either thrown into confusion or inherently unable to work together (the disorganised 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago).

dive, vb. The preferred conjugation is *dive–dived–dived*. Do not use *dove*.

dream Use *dreamt* for the past-tense and past-participial forms.

drink, vb. Correctly conjugated *drink–drank–drunk* (they had not drunk any fruit juice that day).

drown, vb. Conjugated *drown–drowned–drowned*.

due to. In strict traditional usage, *due to* should be interchangeable with *attributable to* (the erratic driving was due to some prescription drugs that the driver had taken). When used adverbially, *due to* is often considered inferior to *because of* or *owing to*. So in the sentence *due to the parents' negligence, the entire family suffered*, the better phrasing would be *because of [or owing to] the parents' negligence, the entire family suffered*.

dumb This word means either “stupid” or “unable to speak.” In the second sense, *mute* is clearer for most modern readers.

each other; one another. Traditionalists use *each other* when two things or people are involved, *one another* when more than two are involved.

economic; economical *Economic* means “of or relating to large-scale finances” (federal economic policy). *Economical* means “thrifty; financially efficient” (an economical purchase).

elicit; illicit *Elicit* (“to draw out [an answer, information, etc.]”) is a verb (to elicit responses); *illicit* (“illegal”) is an adjective (an illicit scheme). Writers often mistakenly use *illicit* when they mean *elicit*.

elude See [allude](#).

emend See [amend](#).

emigrate See [immigrate](#).

enumerable; innumerable What's *enumerable* is countable. What's *innumerable* can't be counted, at least not practically (innumerable stars in the sky).

epidemic; endemic; pandemic. An *epidemic* disease breaks out, spreads through a limited area (such as a state), and then subsides (an epidemic outbreak of measles). (The word is frequently used as a noun (a measles epidemic).) An *endemic* disease is perennially present within a region or population (malaria is endemic in parts of Africa). (Note that *endemic* describes a disease and not a region: it is incorrect to say *this region is endemic for [a disease]*.) A *pandemic* disease is prevalent over a large area, such as a nation or continent, or the entire world (the 1918–19 flu pandemic).

every day, adv.; everyday, adj. The first is adverbial, the second adjectival. One may wear one's *everyday* clothes *every day*.

every one; everyone The two-word version is an emphatic way of saying “each” (every one of them was there); the second is a pronoun equivalent to *everybody* (everyone was there).

evoke; invoke To *evoke* something is to bring it out (evoke laughter) or bring to mind (evoke childhood memories). *Invoke* has a number of senses, including to assert (something) as authority (invoke martial law), to appeal (to someone or a higher power) for help (invoke an ally to intervene), or to conjure up (invoke spirits of the past).

exceptional; exceptionable What is *exceptional* is uncommon, superior, rare, or extraordinary (an exceptional talent). What is *exceptionable* is objectionable or offensive (an exceptionable slur).

explicit; implicit If something is *explicit* it is deliberately spelled out, as in the writing of a contract or the text of a statute. If it is *implicit* it is not specifically stated but either is suggested in the wording or is necessary to effectuate the purpose. Avoid *implicit* to mean “complete, unmitigated.”

fact that, the This much-maligned phrase is not always avoidable. But hunt for a substitute before deciding to use it. Sometimes *that* alone suffices.

farther; further The traditional distinction is to use *farther* for a physical distance (we drove farther north to see the autumn foliage) and *further* for a figurative distance (let's examine this further) (look no further).

fewer See less. **flounder; founder** Keep the figurative meanings of these terms straight by remembering their literal meanings. To *flounder* is to struggle awkwardly, as though walking through deep mud (the professor glared while the unprepared student floundered around for an answer). To *founder* is to sink or fall to the ground (without any editorial expertise, the publisher soon foundered).

following Avoid this word as an equivalent of *after*. Consider: *Following the presentation, there was a question-and-answer session*. *After* is both simpler and clearer. But *following* is unobjectionable in meaning "next" (the following example illustrates the point).

foreword; preface A *foreword* (not *forward*) is a brief essay of endorsement that is written by someone other than the book's author. An introductory essay about the book written by the book's author is called a *preface* and is usually shorter and more personal than the book's introduction, which gives an overview of the book's content. See 1.39, 1.40, 1.42, 1.46.

former; latter In the best usage, these words apply only to pairs. The *former* is the first of two, the *latter* the second of two.

get Though shunned by many writers as too casual, *get* often sounds more natural than *obtain* or *procure* (get a job). It can also substitute for a stuffy *become* (get hurt). The verb is conjugated *get–got–gotten* in American English, *get–got–got* in British English.

go This verb is conjugated *go–went–gone*. *Went* appears as a past participle only in dialect.

guild, n.; gild, vb. A *guild* is an organization of persons with a common interest or profession (a guild of fine carpenters). To *gild* is to put a thin layer of gold on something (gild a picture frame).

hanged; hung *Hanged* is used as the past participle of *hang* only in its transitive form when referring to the killing (just or unjust) of a human being by suspending the person by the neck (criminals were hanged at Tyburn Hill). But if death is not intended or likely, or if the person is suspended by a body part other than the neck, *hung* is correct (he was hung upside down as a cruel prank). In most senses, of course, *hung* is the past form of *hang* (Mark hung up his clothes). All inanimate objects, such as pictures and Christmas stockings, are hung.

historic; historical The shorter word refers to what is momentous in history (January 16, 1991, was a historic day in Kuwait). *Historical*, meanwhile, refers simply to anything that pertains to or occurred in history.

home in This phrase is frequently misrendered *hone in*. (*Hone* means "to sharpen.") *Home in* refers to what homing pigeons do; the meaning is "to come closer and closer to a target."

if; whether While *if* is conditional, *whether* introduces an alternative, often in the context of an indirect question. Use *whether* in two circumstances: (1) to introduce a noun clause (he asked whether his tie was straight) (the answer is either *yes* or *no*), and (2) when using *if* would produce ambiguity. In the sentence *He asked if his tie was straight*, the literal meaning is "whenever his tie was straight, he asked"; the popular meaning "he wanted someone to tell him whether his tie needed straightening" may not be understood by all readers. More tellingly, *call me to let me know if you can come* means that you should call only if you're coming; *call to let me know whether you can come* means that you should call regardless of your answer. Avoid substituting *if* for *whether* unless your tone is intentionally informal or you are quoting someone. See also determine whether.

immigrate; emigrate To *immigrate* is to enter a country to live, leaving a past home.

To *emigrate* is to leave one country to live in another one. The cognate forms also demand attention. Someone who moves from Ireland to the United States is an *immigrant* here and an *emigrant* there. An *émigré* is also an *emigrant*, but especially one in political exile.

imply; infer The writer or speaker *implies* (hints, suggests); the reader or listener *infers* (deduces). Writers and speakers often use *infer* as if it were synonymous with *imply*, but careful writers always distinguish between the two words.

in connection with This is a vague, fuzzy phrase (she explained the financial consequences in connection with the transaction) (a liking for everything in connection with golf) (Phipson was compensated in connection with its report). Try replacing the phrase with *of*, *related to*, or *associated with* (she explained the financial consequences of the transaction), *about* (a liking for everything about golf), or *for* (Phipson was compensated for its report).

ingenious; ingenuous These words are similar in form but not in meaning. *Ingenious* describes what is intelligent, clever, and original (an ingenious invention). *Ingenuous* describes what is candid, naive, and without dissimulation (a hurtful but ingenuous observation).

innate; inherent An *innate* characteristic is one that a living thing has from birth; it should be distinguished, then, from a talent or disposition that one acquires from training or experience. An *inherent* characteristic is also part of a thing's nature, but life is not implied; a rock, for example, has an inherent hardness.

in order to; in order for Often these expressions can be reduced to *to* and *for*. When that is so, and rhythm and euphony are preserved or even heightened, use *to* or *for*.

in regard to This is the phrase, not *in regards to*. Try a single-word substitute instead: *about*, *regarding*, *concerning*.

in spite of See despite.

intense; intensive *Intense* is preferred in reference to colours, emotions, and personal efforts. *Intensive* describes concentration of attention and resources and is more often used to refer to work or study methods (labour-intensive) (intensive care).

in the affirmative See affirmative, in the.

in the event that See event.

in the near future See future.

in the negative See affirmative, in the.

irregardless An error. Use *regardless* (or possibly *irrespective*).

it is I; it is me Both are correct and acceptable. The first phrase is strictly grammatical (and stuffy); the second is idiomatic (and relaxed), and it is often contracted to *it's me*. In the third-person constructions, however, a greater stringency holds sway in good English (this is he) (it isn't she who has caused such misery).

its; it's *Its* is the possessive form of *it*; *it's* is the contraction for *it is* (it's a sad dog that scratches its fleas).

lay; lie *Lay* is a transitive verb—that is, it demands a direct object (lay your pencils down). It is inflected *lay–laid–lain* (I laid the book there yesterday) (these rumours have been laid to rest). (The children's prayer *Now I lay me down to sleep* is a good mnemonic device for the transitive *lay*.) *Lie* is an intransitive verb—that is, it never takes a direct object (lie down and rest). It is inflected *lie–lay–lain* (she lay down and rested) (he hasn't yet lain down).

less; fewer

Use *less* for amounts or mass nouns; for example, *less salt, dirt, water*. Use *fewer* for countable things; for example, *fewer people, calories, suggestions*. One easy guideline is to

use *less* with singular nouns (such as *less money*) and *fewer* with plural nouns (such as *fewer dollars*).

like; as The use of *like* as a conjunction (as in the old jingle “like a cigarette should”) has long been a contentious issue. Purists insist that *as* must introduce a clause and *like* must always be a preposition coupled with a noun (cool like spring water). The fall of that old rule has been predicted for five decades, but today *like* as a conjunction is still not standard.

literally This word means “actually; without exaggeration.” It should not be used loosely as an intensifier, as in *they were literally glued to their seats* (unless glue had in fact been applied).

masterful; masterly *Masterful* describes a person who is dominating and imperious. *Masterly* describes a person who has mastered a craft, trade, or profession; the word often means “authoritative” (a masterly analysis). Because *masterly* does not readily make an adverb (*masterlily* being extremely awkward), try *in a masterly way*.

may; can See can.

may; might *May* expresses what is possible, is factual, or could be factual (I may have turned off the stove, but I can’t recall doing it). *Might* suggests something that is uncertain, hypothetical, or contrary to fact (I might have won the marathon if I had entered).

much; very *Much* generally intensifies past-participial adjectives (much obliged) (much encouraged) and some comparatives (much more) (much worse)(much too soon). *Very* intensifies adverbs and most adjectives (very carefully) (very bad), including past-participial adjectives that have more adjectival than verbal force (very bored). Try to avoid both.

myself Avoid using *myself* as a pronoun in place of *I* or *me*. Use it reflexively (I did myself a favour) or emphatically (I myself have tried to get through that tome!).

none This word may take either a singular or a plural verb. A guideline: if it is followed by a singular noun, treat it as a singular (none of the building was painted); if by a plural noun, treat it as a plural (none of the guests were here when I arrived). But for special emphasis, it is quite proper (though possibly stilted) to use a singular verb when a plural noun follows (none of the edits was accepted).

notwithstanding One word. Less formal alternatives include *despite*, *although*, and *in spite of*. The word *notwithstanding* may precede or follow a noun(notwithstanding her bad health, she decided to run for office) (her bad health notwithstanding, she decided to run for office).

off Never put *of* after this word (we got off the bus).

on; upon Prefer *on* to *upon* unless introducing an event or condition (put that on the shelf, please) (upon the job’s completion, you’ll get paid). For more about *on*, see onto.

on behalf of See behalf.

one another See each other.

oneself One word—not *one’s self*.

onto; on to; on When is *on* a preposition and when is it an adverb? The sense of the sentence should tell, but the distinction can be subtle. *Onto* implies a movement, so it has an adverbial flavour even though it is a preposition (the gymnast jumped *onto* the bars). When *on* is part of the verbal phrase, it is an adverb and *to* is the preposition (the gymnast held *on to* the bars). One trick is to mentally say “up” before *on*: if the sentence still makes sense, then *onto* is probably the right choice. Alone, *on* does not imply motion (the gymnast is good *on* the parallel bars).

oppress; repress *Oppress*, meaning “to persecute or tyrannise,” is more negative than *repress*, meaning “to restrain or subordinate.”

orient; orientate To *orient* is to get one's bearings or point another in the right direction (literally to find east) (it took the new employee a few days to get oriented to the firm's suite). Unless used in the sense "to face or turn to the east," *orientate* is a poor variation to be avoided. It is a back-formation from the noun *orientation*, analogous to the illegitimate *interpretate* for *interpret*.

ought; should Both express a sense of duty, but *ought* is stronger. Unlike *should*, *ought* requires a fully expressed infinitive, even in the negative (you ought not to see the movie).

overly Avoid this word, which is widely considered poor usage. Try *over-* as a prefix or *unduly*.

partake in; partake of To *partake in* is to participate in (the new student refused to partake in class discussions). To *partake of* is either to get a part of (partake of the banquet) or to have a quality, at least to some extent (this assault partakes of revenge).

partly; partially Both words convey the sense "to some extent; in part" (partly disposed of). *Partly* is preferred in that sense. But *partially* has the additional senses of "incompletely" (partially cooked) and "unfairly; in a way that shows bias toward one side" (he treats his friends partially).

pastime This word combines *pass* (not *past*) and *time*, and is spelled with a single *t*.

penultimate This word means "the next to last." Many people have started misusing it as a fancy equivalent of *ultimate*.

practice, n.; practise, v. Practice is the noun (her artistic practice generates her main source of income); practise is the verb (she practised her newly learnt drawing technique).

presently This word is ambiguous. Write *now* or *soon*, whichever you really mean.

principle; principal A *principle* is a natural, moral, or legal rule (the principle of free speech). The corresponding adjective is *principled* (a principled decision). A *principal* is a person of high authority or prominence (a school principal) or a loan amount requiring repayment (principal and interest). A *principal* role is a primary one.

prior to Make it *before* or *until*.

process of, in the You can almost always delete this phrase without affecting the meaning.

prophecy; prophesy *Prophecy* is the verb (the doomsayers prophesied widespread blackouts for Y2K). *Prophecy* is the noun (their prophecies did not materialise). *Prophesise* is an erroneous form sometimes encountered.

question whether; question of whether; question as to whether The first phrasing is the best, the second is next best, and the third is to be avoided. See [as to](#).

quick(ly) *Quickly* is the general adverb. But *quick* is properly used as an adverb in the idiomatic phrases *get rich quick* and *come quick*.

quote; quotation Traditionally a verb, *quote* is often used as an equivalent of *quotation* in speech and informal writing. Also, there is a tendency for writers (especially journalists) to think of *quotes* as contemporary remarks usable in their writing and of *quotations* as being wisdom of the ages expressed pithily.

rein; reign A *rein* (usu. plural) controls a horse; it is the right word in idioms such as "take the reins," "give free rein," and, as a verb, "rein in." A *reign* is a state of or term of dominion, especially that of a monarch but by extension dominance in some field. This is the right word in idioms such as "reign of terror" and, as a verb, "reign supreme."

since This word may relate either to time (since last winter) or to causation (since I'm a golfer, I know what "double bogey" means). Some writers erroneously believe that the word relates exclusively to time. But the causal *since* was a part of the English language before Chaucer wrote in the fourteenth century, and it is useful as a slightly milder way of expressing

causation than *because*. But where there is any possibility of confusion with the temporal sense, use *because*.

stationary; stationery *Stationary* describes a state of immobility or of staying in one place (if it's stationary, paint it). *Stationery* denotes writing materials (love letters written on perfumed stationery). To remember the two, try associating the *-er* in *stationery* with the *-er* in *paper*, or remember that a *stationer* is someone who sells the stuff.

such This word, when used to replace *this* or *that*—as in “such building was later condemned”—is symptomatic of legalese. *Such* is actually no more precise than *the*, *this*, *that*, *these*, or *those*. It is perfectly acceptable, however, to use *such* with a mass noun or plural noun when the meaning is “of that type” or “of this kind” (such impudence galled the rest of the family) (such vitriolic exchanges became commonplace in the following years).

there; their; they're *There* denotes a place or direction (stay there). *Their* is the possessive pronoun (all their good wishes). *They're* is a contraction of *they are* (they're calling now).

toward; towards The preferred form is without the *-s* in American English, with it in British English. The same is true for other directional words, such as *upward*, *downward*, *forward*, and *backward*, as well as *afterward*. The use of *afterwards* and *backwards* as adverbs is neither rare nor incorrect.

transcript; transcription A *transcript* is a written record, as of a trial or a radio program. *Transcription* is the act or process of creating a transcript.

unique Reserve this word for the sense “one of a kind.” Avoid it in the sense “special, unusual.” Phrases such as *very unique*, *more unique*, *somewhat unique*, and so on—in which a degree is attributed to *unique*—are poor usage.

use; usage; utilise *Use* is usually the best choice for simplicity. *Usage* refers to a customary practice. *Utilise* is usually an overblown alternative of *use*, but it is occasionally the better choice when the distinct sense is “to use to best effect”.

verbal; oral If something is put into words, it is *verbal*. Technically, *verbal* covers both written and spoken utterance. But if you wish to specify that something was conveyed through speech, use *oral*.

while *While* may substitute for *although* or *whereas*, especially if a conversational tone is desired (while many readers may disagree, the scientific community has overwhelmingly adopted the conclusions here presented). Yet because *while* can denote either time or contrast, the word is occasionally ambiguous; when a real ambiguity exists, *although* or *whereas* is the better choice.

who; whom Here are the traditional rules. *Who* is a nominative pronoun used as (1) the subject of a finite verb (it was Jim who bought the coffee today) or (2) a predicate nominative when it follows a linking verb (that's who). *Whom* is an objective pronoun that may appear as (1) the object of a verb (I learned nothing about the man whom I saw) or (2) the object of a preposition (the woman to whom I owe my life). Today there are two countervailing trends: first, there's a decided tendency to use *who* colloquially in most contexts; second, among those insecure about their grammar, there's a tendency to overcorrect oneself and use *whom* when *who* would be correct. Writers and editors of formal prose often resist the first of these; everyone should resist the second.

whoever; whomever Avoid the second unless you are certain of your grammar (give this book to whoever wants it) (I cook for whomever I love). If you are uncertain why these examples are correct, use *anyone who* or (as in the second example) *anyone*.

who's; whose The first is a contraction (Who's on first?), the second a possessive (Whose life is it, anyway?). Unlike *who* and *whom*, *whose* may refer to things as well as people (the Commerce Department, whose bailiwick includes intellectual property).

whosever; whoever's The first is correct (though increasingly rare) in formal writing (whosever bag that is, it needs to be moved out of the way); the second is acceptable in casual usage (whoever's dog got into our garbage can, he or she should clean up the mess).

wrong; wrongful These terms are not interchangeable. *Wrong* has two senses: (1) "immoral, unlawful" (it's wrong to bully smaller children) and (2) "improper, incorrect, unsatisfactory" (the math answers are wrong). *Wrongful* likewise has two senses: (1) "unjust, unfair" (wrongful conduct) and (2) "unsanctioned by law; having no legal right" (it was a wrongful demand on the estate).

your; you're *Your* is the possessive form of *you*. *You're* is the contraction for *you are*.