

SSU Writing Center

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Usage Demons: Some Commonly Misused Words

Keep this sheet handy--it discusses many of the problem spots all writers face.

Accept: to take or receive: "I accepted the award."

Except: to leave out: "I excepted myself from duty." Also a preposition indicating that something's left out: "Everyone except me went to the movie."

Affect: almost always a verb--"That speech really affected me."

Effect: almost always a noun--"What effect did the speech have on you?" In rare cases, "effect" can be a verb that very specifically signals a shift or change: "The committee effected a change in the wage policy."

A lot. Two words (think of how strange "alittle" looks). In formal writing, use "many" instead.

Bad/badly, sad/sadly, good/well, real/really: in each case, the first is an adjective, modifying only nouns, and the second is an adverb, modifying verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Tricky cases occur when the word *seems* to be modifying a verb but really isn't. Notice the difference:

John felt bad (not "badly") because he wrote badly (not "bad").

In fact, John looked so sad (not "sadly") that he put his head down and walked sadly (not "sad") homewards.

But I've seen John be a good (not "well") writer; if he's interested in the topic, he writes really well (not "good").

This time, however, he was really (not "real") disappointed in himself.

Insure: guarantee financial recompense; what insurance companies do.

Ensure: to make certain. "Ensure that you insure your car."

Lead (pronounced with a long E [lead]): to direct followers.

Lead (pronounced with a short E [led]): a kind of metal; part of a pencil.

Led: past tense of the verb "lead": "Today I will lead the same followers I led yesterday."

Loose: an adjective, meaning "not tight."

Lose: a verb, meaning "misplace."

Personal: private, subjective, pertaining to individuals. "Hey, man, you're invading my personal space."

Personnel: members of an organization, as in the Personnel Department.

Saw/seen: "Saw" is the plain old past tense: "Yesterday I saw a red-shouldered hawk on campus."

"Seen" is the past participle, almost always used following an auxiliary verb form of "to be" or "to have":

"Mine eyes have seen the glory..."; "Two kids were seen stealing lollipops from the corner store."

They're: "they are"; a contraction. Say "they are" out loud as you read your sentence to see if it fits.

Their: the possessive of "they"--their car, their ideas. As with all possessives, you'll almost always find a noun after "their."

There: a place, either literally ("it's over there") or conceptually ("there are five things I'd like you to remember:...").

To: a preposition (“to the store”) or part of an infinitive verb (to go, to walk).

Too: an adverb synonymous with “also” (“I’m going too”) or denoting excessiveness (“it’s too hot”). Note that, in speech, “too” is always pronounced with a long O (toooooo), while “to” is almost always abbreviated (“I’m goin’ t’ go t’ the store”).

Was/were: the past tense of “is” and “are,” of course. Confusions arise around the use of the subjunctive, a grammatical case currently in flux in English (though fairly clear and strictly used in other Old World languages). In formal writing, even though it may sound wrong, use “were” in all kinds of subordinate clauses expressing conditional, wished for, or otherwise not-yet-true realities:

If I were (not “was”) a better ball player, I’d have caught that pop fly.
John wished that Mary were (not “was”) ready to settle down and start producing children.
The ice cream was melting as if it were (not “was”) sitting in the hottest corner of Hades.

Weather: the climate (rain, sunshine, etc.).

Whether: the conditional; often means the same thing as “if.” “Whether we go now or go later, I’m happy to come along.”

Who and **whom** are, respectively, the subjective and objective forms of the same word. Test for correctness by substituting “he” and “him”: “Who (he) is sorry now? You gave your cold to whom (him)?”

Who’s: “who is”; a contraction. Say “who is” out loud as you read your sentence to see if it fits.

Whose: the possessive of who. “Whose paper is this?”

You’re: “you are”; a contraction. Say “you are” out loud as you read your sentence to see if it fits.

Your: the possessive of “you”--your bicycle. Again, look for the noun after the “your.”

A Few Minor Points of Controversy

1. **Ending sentences with prepositions.** Formal grammarians prefer not to end sentences with prepositions; rather, they shift sentence elements around so that the preposition precedes its object:

Faulty: “Which store are you going to?”

Correct: “To which store are you going?”

Faulty: “French fries are exactly the right food to eat hamburgers with.”

Correct: “French fries are exactly the right food with which to eat hamburgers.”

Here’s a case where language is evolving. Most modern grammarians agree that ending sentences with prepositions is not a great sin, especially in informal contexts. Consult your teacher or supervisor regarding whether or not you should revise your sentences to eliminate terminal prepositions.

2. **Splitting infinitives:** Because Latin does not have the “to” element in infinitive verbs (in Latin “to love” is simply *amare*), and because English grammar was codified following the example of Latin, early grammarians urged writers not to interrupt the two elements of infinitive verbs. Thus, “to boldly go where no one has gone before” should (some argue) be revised as “boldly to go...” or “to go boldly....” Yes, the logic is a bit fuzzy, especially as splitting infinitives normally does not impede clarity and can sometimes even enhance readability.

This issue is one of organizational and reader preference. If you know that readers might be offended at seeing split infinitives, then it’s best to avoid them.

A Brief Quiz

1. I liked all the animals at the zoo _____ (accept or except) for the tigers, because they scared me.
2. I saw Kelly today and she didn't look too _____ (good or well).
3. They had _____ (saw or seen) a bear in the woods while they were camping.
4. I went _____ (to or too) the movies with my two best friends.
5. I am _____ (sad or sadly) today because I got a C- on my math test.
6. I always _____ (loose or lose) my books when I just throw them in my room.
7. I had seen _____ (they're, their, or there) dog run up the street just before.
8. What _____ (affect or effect) did the error have on the other team?
9. Jane _____ (accepted or excepted) the raise that her father had given for her allowance.
10. _____ (They're, Their, or There) are many students who attend Sonoma State.
11. You followed _____ (who or whom) at the store?
12. To _____ (insure or ensure) your car will run safely you must check the oil and the air in your tires.
13. I saw _____ (you're or your) teacher at the store today and she told me to tell you hello.
14. The error the pitcher made _____ (affected or effected) the outcome of the baseball game.
15. That is too _____ (personal or personnel) to tell you.
16. I felt sorry for Henry because he swam _____ (bad or badly) for the swim meet.
17. The _____ (weatherman or whetherman) on TV said to look for low clouds in the south bay.
18. Today I _____ (saw or seen) a yellow bus with red stripes heading to California.
19. I thought that I had tightened the ropes, but they became _____ (loose or lose) while we were driving.
20. It was _____ (to or too) late to catch the bus because I was already one hour behind schedule.
21. _____ (Who's or Whose) knocking on the door so loudly?
22. I went to the _____ (personal or personnel) office to turn in an application for employment.
23. David has a _____ (real or really) big problem completing his chemistry work.
24. _____ (They're, Their, or There) the nicest family I have ever met.
25. The car _____ (was or were) speeding past as though it _____ (was or were) on fire.
26. _____ (Whether or weather) or not to go is up to you.
27. _____ (Who or Whom) should I say is calling?
28. _____ (Who's or Whose) shoes are those on the floor?