

Top Ten Confused Words

1. **its/it's:** *Its* is a possessive pronoun. Possessive pronouns, unlike possessive nouns (e.g., *sister's*, *dog's*, *Bob's*), do not contain an apostrophe: *ours*, *yours*, *his*, *theirs*, *its*. *It's* is a contraction of the words *it* and *is*. Before including the apostrophe, be sure you mean *it is*.

- As it made the sharp turn, the Honda lost **its** hubcap.
- Many people believe **it's** possible to travel in time. (*Think*: Many people believe **it is** possible to travel in time.)

2. **to/too/two:** *To* is usually a preposition and begins a prepositional phrase (*to the store*, *to Grandmother's house*, *to Chicago*). If *to* is followed by a verb, it is being used as an infinitive (*to leave*, *to eat*, *to grow*).

- I asked Melanie **to** the prom.
- I would like **to** visit the Grand Canyon.

Too is an adverb meaning "to an excessive degree," "also," or "very." Use *too* when modifying verbs, adjectives or adverbs.

- Trigonometry is **too** hard for me.
- I like artichokes **too**.

Two is the number. You know, the one that comes between *one* and *three*?

- It takes **two** to tango.

3. **lie/lay:** This one confuses just about everybody. *Lie* is an intransitive verb. That means you don't lie *something*, you just lie. *Lay*, on the other hand, is transitive—you have to lay *something*.

- I think I'll **lie** on the sofa and take a nap.
- **Lay** your coat on the sofa.

What makes this really confusing, however, is that the past form of the verb *lie* is *lay* (no kidding). The past form of *lay*, on the other hand, is *laid*.

- Yesterday, I **lay** on the sofa.
- Yesterday, I **laid** my coat on the sofa.

Note: Due to common usage, the intransitive use of *lay* is becoming increasingly acceptable.

4. **affect/effect:** Usually, *affect* is the verb and *effect* is the noun.

- Plentiful sunshine greatly **affects** the health of house plants.
- Plentiful sunshine has many **effects** on house plants.

It's not common, but *effect* can be used as a verb too, meaning "to bring about."

- We all hope the new CEO can **effect** some needed change in company morale.

5. **their/there/they're:** *Their* is a possessive pronoun. Use it to show ownership.

- My teammates left **their** soggy socks in my locker

There is a pronoun that sometimes shows location and other times precedes a linking verb, taking the place of the subject.

- I put my chewed gum right **there** behind the sofa.
- **There** are twelve flamingoes in the gazebo.

They're is a contraction of *they* and *are*.

- I can't believe **they're** raising my taxes! (*Think*: I can't believe **they are** raising my taxes!)

6. **fewer/less:** *Fewer* is used with items that can be counted. *Less* should be used with amounts that cannot be counted. **Note:** This is a general principle; there are some exceptions, and contemporary experts increasingly disregard the distinction here.

- That actress gets **fewer** roles than she used to.
- That actress has **less** talent than my Aunt Patsy.

There are several related errors here that all revolve around the difference between *amount* and *number*. This chart will help distinguish words that belong to particular categories:

not countable	example	countable	example
amount	<i>a small amount of color</i>	number	<i>a small number of insects</i>
less	<i>less beauty</i>	fewer	<i>fewer people</i>
quantity	<i>a vast quantity of liquid</i>	number	<i>a vast number of stars</i>
much	<i>much applause</i>	many	<i>many standing ovations</i>

7. **than/then:** *Than* is used in comparisons. Use *then* when referring to time.

- Disco was more popular **than** punk rock.
- Finish high school first, **then** you can think about college.

8. **accept/except:** *Accept* means to receive willingly. *Except* means to leave something out or exclude it.

- Vinnie felt obligated to **accept** the gift of ballet tickets.
- I like all flavors of ice cream **except** those with nuts.

9. **anxious/eager:** *Anxious* has traditionally meant “filled with anxiety.” That’s not a good thing. So, when you say, “I’ve been anxious to meet you,” you probably mean “eager to meet you.” *Eager* means “anticipating with pleasure.”

- I am **anxious** about my root canal this afternoon.
- I am **eager** to see my favorite uncle, Henry, at the reunion.

Note: The use of *anxious* as a synonym for *eager* is becoming increasingly acceptable due to common usage

10. **complement/compliment:** When you say something nice about somebody, you are offering a *compliment*. When something goes nicely with something else or makes up for what something else lacks, we say it *complements* the object.

- The tablecloth nicely **complements** the wallpaper.
- When I asked if she had lost some weight, I meant it as a **compliment**.

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