

Grammar

Part Three: Commonly Confused Words

It's vs. Its

Rule:

“**It's**” means “it is.”

“**Its**” shows ownership or belongingness.

Examples:

It's hard for Dave to run long distances.

Dave sent his new iPod back because **its** screen was cracked.

A vs. An

Rule:

“**A**” comes before words that begin with a consonant sound.

“**An**” comes before words that begin with a vowel sound.

Examples:

Eric thought it was **a** great honor to be the class representative.

Eric thought it was **an** honor to be the class representative.

To vs. Too vs. Two

Rule:

“**To**” is a preposition that usually expresses motion or direction.

“**Too**” is an adverb that means "in addition," "in excess," "more than should be," or "also."

“**Two**” is the number between one and three.

Examples:

To: Dave couldn't think of anything to do yesterday, so he took a flight to Paris.

Too: While Dave loved eating ice cream for breakfast, he realized that a seven-scoop sundae was just too filling.

Two: Dave gave me two magic markers in 2008, and I still use them both every day.

Know vs. No

Rule:

“Know” means "to understand."

“No” means the opposite of yes.

Examples:

Know: I don't know what Pamela's plans are.

No: When asked if she would enter the pie-eating contest, Marisol said, "No."

A lot vs. Alot

Rule:

“A lot” is two words, not one.

Examples:

While it's not his favorite sport, Sam does play tennis **a lot**.

There was **a lot** of commotion in the room after the surprising announcement.

Gen didn't have **a lot** of time to get her homework done in the morning.

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Their vs. There vs. They're

Rule:

“**Their**” is a possessive pronoun; it shows that something belongs to multiple people.

“**There**” refers to a particular place or specific instance.

“**They're**” is a contraction for “they are.” The apostrophe replaces the “a” in “are.”

Examples:

Their: When they asked nicely, Dave gave the old men their canes back.

There: Before buying the house, Dave decided to head over there one last time to make sure it was the perfect fit.

They're: When Dave's two best friends can't look him in the eye, he knows they're lying.

PRACTICE!

Knot vs. Not

Rule:

“**Knot**” refers to an interlacing or looping of a rope used for fastening.

“**Not**” expresses negation, denial, or refusal.

Examples:

Knot: Even after Pat tied a thick knot, his shoelaces came undone.

Knot: We all knew Dave and Jane would get married eventually, and they finally tied the knot this weekend.

Not: Lexie made it clear she could not go to the dance that weekend.

Who's vs. Whose

Rule:

“**Who's**” means "who is."

“**Whose**” shows ownership or belongingness.

Examples:

Who's going to the party this weekend?

Whose autograph did Feliciano get at the game?

Right vs. Write

Rule:

“**Right**” is the opposite of wrong.

“**Write**” is to communicate in writing.

Examples:

Right: I was right that Billy Joel was a New York native.

Write: Eric's nutty roommate likes to write answers to his homework on the windows.

Passed vs. Past

Rule:

“**Passed**” indicates motion, the deliverance of an object, or the completion of an action.

“**Past**” either refers to a prior time period (in the past) or describes direction (marching past the school).

Examples:

Passed: Mark passed the Cobb salad to Liza.

Passed: I passed Sarah in the hallway and invited her to my Bar Mitzvah.

Past: Lady Gaga has won many awards in the past.

Past: The police drove past the crime scene.

Into vs. In to

Rule:

“**Into**” is a preposition that indicates movement toward the inside of a place.

“**In to**” is just the combination of the individual words "in" and "to" and does not indicate movement inside.

Examples:

Into: After getting a head start, Noah dove headfirst into the pool.

In to: Sarah was advised to turn herself in to police. (Note that she's not physically going "inside" the police).

In to: I dropped in to see you. (The expression is "dropped in," and "to" just explains for what purpose.)

Desert vs. Dessert

Rule:

"Desert" is a hot arid patch of land where few forms of life exist (noun).

"Dessert" is the yummy food that follows a meal (noun).

Examples:

Desert: When our car ran out of gas, Dave and I were stranded in the desert until our friends sent another vehicle to get us.

Dessert: When the waitress told Dave that the restaurant was out of dessert, he looked ready to cry.

Because vs. Cause

Rule:

- **Because**, and its informal cousin, **'cause**, suggest that two events have a cause/effect relationship. The apostrophe in **'cause** is meant to replace the letters "b-e." These words are conjunctions, which means they bring together two sentences and show a relationship between them.
- **Cause** (noun) means "a reason."
- **Cause** (verb) means "to make happen."

Examples:

- **Because:** Dave asked me to drive him to the gym because he's lazy.
- **'Cause (informal):** Dave asked me to drive him to the gym 'cause he's lazy.
- **Cause (noun):** Dave will fight for any cause he believes in.
- **Cause (verb):** Dave's freestyle dancing would cause almost anyone to chuckle.

Principal vs. Principle

Rule:

“Principal” means a chief, head, or high-ranking official.

"Principal" can also mean "main" or "primary."

“Principle” is a rule that people follow.

Examples:

Principal: I got sent to the **principal** for writing notes to Pat during class.

Principal: The **principal** reason that Jen won the race was her rocket-powered shoes.

Principle: I refused to give Pat a second chance as a matter of **principle**.

PRACTICE!

Use "who" when the pronoun is the subject of a clause.

I know **who** **ate** the last cupcake.
subject verb

Who **went** on the field trip?
subject verb

Use "whom" when the pronoun is the object of a clause.

To **whom** **am** **I** speaking?
object verb subject

Whom **did** **you** see at school?
object verb subject

Subjects tell us who or what a clause is about.
("Who helped him?")

Verbs tell us what the subject is doing.
("Who **helped** him?")

Objects are "acted on" by the subject.
("He helped **whom**?")

Subject		Object
I	} went to the mall with {	me
you		you
we		us
he		him
she		her
it		it
they		them
who		whom

Quiet vs. Quite

Rule:

"Quiet" is the opposite of noisy.

"Quite" means "completely" or "entirely."

Examples:

Quiet: The library was quiet until Pat began singing Justin Bieber songs.

Quite: Pat's house can be quite messy sometimes.

Morning vs. Mourning

Rule:

“Morning” is the time from sunrise to noon.

“Mourning” is the act of sorrowing.

Examples:

Morning: I wanted to spend the morning sleeping in, but Connor woke me up to play catch.

Mourning: It was hard for the old man to laugh since he was still mourning the loss of his daughter.

Maybe vs. May be

Rule:

“Maybe” means “possibly” as if to indicate a situation is possible.

“May be” is just a combination of the individual words “may” and “be”.

*If you're not sure which to use, plug in the words “perhaps” and “possibly,” and if one of them fits, use “maybe.” Otherwise, use “may be.”

Examples:

Maybe: Pat thinks he can get the job, and maybe he's right.

May be: Adam may be funnier than Seinfeld (note how plugging in “perhaps” or “possibly” wouldn't work in this sentence).

Good vs. Well

Rule:

“Good” is an adjective, and thus it can only be used to describe nouns.

“Well” is usually an adverb that describes verbs, and it can also be used as an adjective when referring to a person's health.

Examples:

Good: Tyler is a good dancer, and I could learn a lot from her.

Well: I did so well on my exam that Austin took me out for pizza.

Well: Alexis stayed home from school because she wasn't feeling well.

Everyday vs. Every day

Rule:

“Everyday” means "ordinary" or "regular" (adjective).

“Every day” refers to each specific day.

Examples:

Everyday: Dave couldn't decide whether to wear his cross-training sneakers or his everyday ones to practice.

Every day: Every day, Dave brings a bright red lunchbox to school, and there's always something delicious inside.

Everyone vs. Every one

Rule:

“**Everyone**” means "all the people" (pronoun).

“**Every one**” emphasizes the word "one" and could refer either to "every single person" or "every single thing" (unlike "everyone"). "Every one" is often followed by the word "of".

Examples:

Everyone: Everyone in the room had helped themselves to thirds of the cake.

Every one: Dave had heard every one of his mother's excuses.

Anyone vs. Any one

Rule:

“**Anyone**” means "any person" (pronoun).

“**Any one**” refers to a single unspecified object, idea, place, or person.

Examples:

Anyone: Can anyone help Sarai push the truck up the hill?

Any one: Any one of these ideas will get Dennis excited.

Affect vs. Effect

Rule:

“**Affect**” is a verb that means “to influence.”

“**Effect**” is a noun that means “result.” It can also be a verb meaning “to bring about a result.”

Examples:

Affect: The light rain did not affect Adam's picnic on the hill.

Effect: The inevitable effect of smoking, Emma explained, is lung cancer.

Effect: The performance effected tears from the audience.

Accept vs. Except

Rule:

“**Accept**” means “to receive or agree to.”

“**Except**” means “excluding.”

Examples:

Accept: I hope Gil will **accept** my apology for eating the last cookie.

Except: I tasted all the sweets at the bake sale **except** for the peanut clusters.

PRACTICE!

Prejudiced vs. Prejudice

Rule:

“Prejudiced” means "having or showing bias" (adjective).

“Prejudice” is the noun and verb form of "prejudiced." People can not be described as "prejudice individuals." (They are "prejudiced individuals.")

Examples:

Prejudiced: Michael knew he didn't get a promotion because his boss was prejudiced against tall people.

Prejudice: The boss had a clear prejudice, thought Tori.

Prejudice: Maddie hoped her client's skin color wouldn't prejudice the jury.

Later vs. Latter

Rule:

“Later” means "after a period of time."

“Latter” refers to the second of two things mentioned.

Examples:

Later: I plan to follow up with Paige later.

Latter: Of the two ideas presented to Autumn, she thought that latter had more business potential.

Biased vs. Bias

Rule:

“Biased” means "having or showing prejudice" (adjective).

“Bias” is the noun (and verb form). People can not be described as "bias individuals" (they are "biased individuals").

Examples:

Biased: The judge was too biased, thought Ashley, to make an objective decision.

Bias: The judge had a clear bias, thought Teresa.

Bias: Araceli hoped her client's skin color wouldn't bias the judge.

Altar vs. Alter

Rule:

“**Altar**” is an elevated place or structure (noun).

“**Alter**” means “to make different” (verb).

Examples:

Altar: Jose was left by his spouse at the altar.

Alter: Liza asked Yadi not to alter their plans any more that day.

PRACTICE!