

Easily confused words

Part of our job as editors and proofreaders is to ensure that the author says what they mean to say. And sometimes, because of easily confused words, what they mean to say is different from what they actually *do* say. Added to this is the fact that even editorial professionals can sometimes get confused by words that look alike but mean different things.

To help, we've put together a list of some easily confused words in British English. Where we can, we've included some tips for remembering differences. We've also covered some keyboard slips: a paired list of words that look very similar but mean different things. Remember, spell check won't save you from any of these!

Word one	Word two	What's the difference?
adverse	averse	If you're <i>averse</i> to something, you have a strong dislike of it. You could remember this by imagining that someone dislikes 'a verse' from a poem. <i>Adverse</i> means 'unfavourable' or 'harmful'. Remember this by thinking of the noun form, <i>adversity</i> – a difficult situation.
affect	effect	The way something <i>affects</i> something is its <i>effect</i> . Bear in mind that <i>affect</i> is also used as a term for emotional impact, and <i>effect</i> can also be a verb – you can <i>effect</i> change.
born	borne	<i>Born</i> means given birth to; <i>borne</i> means carried or transported. You might have been <i>born</i> a long time ago, but you're <i>borne</i> along on the tide.
canvas	canvass	<i>Canvas</i> is the material a painting is painted on or from which a tent is made; to <i>canvass</i> is to ascertain the views of a person or group, or to solicit political support.
complement	compliment	If something <i>complements</i> something, it contributes to its wholeness. <i>Compliment</i> means 'to praise'. Note the 'e' in the middle of both <i>complement</i> and 'wholeness', and the 'i' in the middle of both 'praise' and <i>compliment</i> .
descendant	descendent	A <i>descendant</i> (noun) is somebody (or something) that is <i>descendent</i> (adjective) from somebody (or something). One way to remember the difference is to think whether you need an 'a' before the word. If you do, you need an 'a' in it, too.
discreet	discrete	<i>Discreet</i> means to keep quiet about something; <i>discrete</i> means set apart on its own. You could remember this by observing how the two 'e's in <i>discreet</i> appear to be a closed unit, like a <i>discreet</i> person should be, and that the 't' in <i>discrete</i> sets the 'e's apart from each other.
disused	unused	<i>Disused</i> means no longer used; <i>unused</i> means not used yet or being unaccustomed to something – as in 'he was <i>unused</i> to dogs'. It might help to associate <i>disused</i> with 'discarded' in order to remember this.
elicit	illicit	<i>Elicit</i> means draw forth; <i>illicit</i> means illegal.
ensure	insure	If you <i>insure</i> something you protect it against damage or loss. <i>Ensuring</i> something means that you make it certain, as in 'I want to <i>ensure</i> that you understand the difference between these words'. Remember that <i>insure</i> is always linked to 'insurance' (for example house, car, pet); there is no equivalent 'ensurance' for <i>ensure</i> .
envelope	envelop	An <i>envelope</i> <i>envelops</i> its contents. The syllable stress is different in these two words so it can be useful to say them aloud. An <i>envelope</i> can act as an <i>envoy</i> ; <i>velvet</i> <i>envelops</i> jewellery.
formally	formerly	<i>Formal</i> is official; <i>former</i> is previous. Think of the words without the 'ly' endings to remember which is which.
flaunt	flout	To <i>flaunt</i> is to make an exhibition of; you <i>flout</i> rules when you treat them with disdain. So you don't flaunt rules, unless you're showing them off. To remember this, think of <i>flouting</i> as throwing <i>out</i> the rules.

Word one	Word two	What's the difference?
hoard	horde	A <i>hoard</i> is a store of something; a <i>horde</i> is a crowd. You can remember the difference by thinking of a <i>hoard</i> in a cupboard.
home	hone	Sometimes people write or talk about ' <i>honing in on</i> ' something when they mean ' <i>homing in on</i> ' it. It's an easy mistake to make: to <i>hone</i> means 'to sharpen', which would suggest an increased focus. Grammar Girl covers this in one of her Quick and Dirty Tips (quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/hone-in-or-home-in).
imply	infer	To <i>imply</i> is to suggest; to <i>infer</i> is to draw a conclusion from available evidence – or information, which, substituting one letter, could help to remember the meaning of <i>infer</i> .
inflammable	non-flammable	<i>Inflammable</i> means easily set alight; <i>non-flammable</i> means not easily set alight. To remember this, think of <i>in</i> flame.
insidious	invidious	<i>Insidious</i> means to progress so gradually as to be almost unnoticeable, but in a harmful way. A useful way to remember this is to think of the word ' <i>sidle</i> ', which is associated with being furtive. ' <i>Invidious</i> ' means unpleasant and objectionable, likely to cause resentment or anger.
lead	led	Here's a present-tense sentence to help: 'I <i>lead</i> my puppy on a lead made of lead – or at least it seems that way.' If you are later asked about your slow walk, you might say: 'We daw <i>led</i> ; we trund <i>led</i> ; we poot <i>led</i> .' Any of these verbs would remind you that <i>led</i> is the past tense of <i>lead</i> .
loose	lose	You <i>lose</i> something, but <i>loose</i> means to cast off or set free. Philip Gooden (see Resources) points out that 'lost' has one 'o', like <i>lose</i> . You can also think of a runaway <i>goose</i> being <i>loose</i> .
moot	mute	These are sometimes confused when talking about a point that's being made. 'That's a <i>mute</i> point' is not correct, unless your argument is physically muffled – use <i>moot</i> ('subject to debate') instead.
peak	peek	A <i>peak</i> is the height of something; a <i>peek</i> is a quick look at something. Denise Cowle offers a useful explainer (denisecowleeditorial.com/blog/sneak-peak-or-sneak-peek): the capital A in 'PEAK' looks like a mountain; the double 'e' in 'peek' looks like eyes. Of course, there is also 'pique', which means 'feeling annoyed' or 'provoke'. See Stan Carey's article (link in Resources) for tips on how to distinguish all three.
pore	pour	You may read descriptions of people 'pouring' over an article or a book. <i>Poring</i> (being absorbed in) is what's meant here. You might find it useful to associate <i>pour</i> with 'jug' as they both contain a 'u'.
practice (noun)	practise (verb)	<i>Practice</i> and <i>practise</i> sound the same, but 'advice' (noun) and 'advise' (verb) do not, so swap practice/practise for advice/advise and see if it makes sense. For example, 'I will get some advise' and 'I will advice you' are obviously incorrect.
prescribe	proscribe	To <i>prescribe</i> means to lay out a rule for others to follow. A doctor will <i>prescribe</i> medicine. To <i>proscribe</i> means to forbid something. A teacher will <i>proscribe</i> fighting in the classroom. To remember the 'pro' beginning for this meaning, think of ' <i>prohibit</i> '.
principal	principle	A <i>principle</i> is a rule or belief; a <i>principal</i> is the most important thing or person. To remember this, think 'the school <i>principal</i> is your <i>pal</i> '.
reign	rein	<i>Reign</i> means to possess sovereign power; <i>rein</i> (verb) means to employ a rein (noun) – a strap to guide a horse. You could remember <i>reign</i> as part of ' <i>sovereign</i> '. You might see 'free reign' when 'free rein' is meant, and it's easy to understand why, as in effect they mean something similar – unhampered freedom, which sovereignty could also provide. Here you might have to employ visualisation – of a <i>rein</i> lengthening – to remember the difference.
stationary	stationery	The easy way to remember this is 'e for envelope' – <i>stationery</i> with an 'e' refers to writing materials so beloved of editors, and you will often observe us <i>stationary</i> (standing still) by <i>stationery</i> displays in shops.
uncharted	unchartered	Territory that is <i>uncharted</i> is unmapped. <i>Unchartered</i> means 'without a charter', which is why our honorary president, David Crystal, used it as a pun in his focus paper on the value of editors who belong to a chartered body (ciep.uk/resources/factsheets/#IAE).

Keyboard slips

Adding or subtracting a letter or character in a word or term, or swapping two letters, could pass under the radar of a spell checker while transforming your meaning. Check extra carefully if you're typing or editing any of these.

appraise (assess)	apprise (inform)
brake (slow or stop)	break (separate)
causally (by way of cause and effect)	casually (informally)
climactic (culminating)	climatic (relating to the climate)
complaint (protest)	compliant (biddable)
current (present-day; flow)	curreant (small dried fruit)
deprecate (deplore)	depreciate (diminish in value)
desert (dry land; leave behind)	dessert (pudding)
dual (double)	duel (combat between two people)
eerie (sinister)	eyrie (large nest)
exhort (urge)	extort (obtain by force)
factious (divided)	fractious (irritable)
faint (indistinct; light-headed)	feint (deceptive movement)
faun (mythological creature)	fawn (young deer; light brown; court favour)
flounder (struggle; a type of fish)	founder (sink; be unsuccessful; originator; owner of a foundry)
forbear (refrain)	forebear (ancestor)
forth (out; away; forward)	fourth (number four in a sequence)
heal (make well)	heel (part of a foot; untrustworthy person)
heroin (an opioid)	heroine (courageous or outstanding woman or girl)
indented (spaced at the edge; officially requested)	intended (planned)
ingenious (clever and original)	ingenuous (unsuspecting)
immanent (inherent)	imminent (impending)
interment (burial)	internment (confinement)
its (belonging to it)	it's (it is)
lama (title of spiritual leader)	llama (South American relative of the camel)
leach (drain)	leech (parasite)
licence (noun: a permit)	license (verb: to permit)
lightening (making lighter)	lightning (electrical weather event)
mantel (supporting beam, stone or arch)	mantle (cloak; responsibility)
meter (a measuring device)	metre (100cm; poetic rhythm)
moral (ethical; lesson)	morale (confidence and enthusiasm)
mucous (relating to mucus)	mucus (substance secreted by mucous membranes)
naval (relating to the navy)	navel (belly button)
ordinance (decree; ritual)	ordnance (military supplies)
perpetrate (commit)	perpetuate (make perpetual)
pray (speak to a deity)	prey (a hunted creature)
prise (use force to lift or separate)	prize (reward for victory)
prophecy (noun: prediction)	prophesy (verb: predict)
prostate (gland in the male body)	prostrate (lying face down)
rebound (bounce back)	redound (produce a good or bad effect)
recourse (source of help in difficulty; legal agreement)	resource (stock or supply; action or strategy)
Santa (Father Christmas)	Satan (the devil)

shear (cut hair)	sheer (absolute; perpendicular)
statue (carved or cast figure)	statute (law or rule)
too (to a higher degree; also)	to (a wide-ranging preposition, infinitive marker and adverb. See Cambridge Dictionary's definition at dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/to)
torpid (lethargic)	torrid (hot and dry; involving strong emotions)
tortuous (full of twists and turns)	torturous (involving pain and suffering)
trooper (soldier; police officer)	trouper (longstanding member of an acting or performing troupe)
undeserving (unworthy)	underserving (inadequately providing for)
waiver (relinquishment of a right or claim)	waver (flicker; falter)
... and public (the people or of the people)	unless you really do mean to say pubic (of or near the genitals).

Tip

If you know there are words that always trip you up, make a list of them, with meanings, and put it somewhere on your workstation. Or explore the capabilities of PerfectIt, which has the facility to list easily confused words and include notes on their differences.

Resources

Claire Bacon (2019). Using words properly in research writing: Common confusables and how to avoid them. Blog. baconediting.com/blog/using-words-properly-in-research-writing

Jeremy Butterfield. Confusable words. jeremybutterfield.wordpress.com/category/confusable-words

Stan Carey (2020). Don't be piqued by peek and peak. Macmillan Dictionary blog. macmillandictionaryblog.com/dont-be-piqued-by-peek-and-peak

Philip Gooden (2004). *Who's Whose? A no-nonsense guide to easily confused words*. London: Bloomsbury.

Online dictionaries and editing societies regularly produce helpful explainers of the differences between similar words. Make sure you keep up to date with:

- ACES: The Society for Editors (US): aceseditors.org/news
- Cambridge Dictionaries blog: dictionaryblog.cambridge.org
- Merriam-Webster Words at Play (US): merriam-webster.com/words-at-play

If you're a CIEP member, you'll find that easily confused words and terms are often discussed in our forums, so make sure you're registered to join in the chat: ciep.uk/resources/forums

Written by the CIEP information team

The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) is a non-profit body promoting excellence in English language editing. We set and demonstrate editorial standards, and we are a community, training hub and support network for editorial professionals – the people who work to make text accurate, clear and fit for purpose.



facebook.com/EditProof



twitter.com/The_CIEP



linkedin.com/company/the-ciep

ciep.uk