

# Commonly Confused Words and Helpful Mnemonics



Mnemosyne  
Greek goddess of memory

The Prime Directive: When in doubt, pull the dictionary out.

*accept/except* — Accept means to approve, to admit, or to receive. Except means to leave out or X out.

*affect/effect* — Affect is the action which causes a change. Effect is the end result.

*allot/a lot* — Allot means to divide and share. A lot is a large amount. If you start with a lot but it gets allotted, you may end up with not much. (Note: “Alot” with no space is *not* a word.)

*as /like/such as* — As and is look and sound similar. If a person or object is the thing being described, then use as. Sugar is sweet, so it is sweet as sugar. However, a pear is like an apple because a pear is not an apple. Like implies comparison, while such as implies inclusion. Use such as when you are trying to say, “for example.” Fruits such as pears and apples are healthy.

*buy/by* — Buy means to make a purchase. Before U spend money, ask yourself, “Y am I buying this?” By means next to or near. There are only two letters, so they have to be side by side.

*capital/capitol* — See the o in capitol? That is its dome. Capitol refers only to the building with the dome. Otherwise, it is capital.

*complement/compliment* — Complement looks a lot like “complete.” To complement something is to help complete it. Compliment means to say something nice. I like this.

*desert/dessert* — Dessert (the after-dinner treat) has a second “s” because we usually want seconds on dessert. A desert is usually pretty uncomfortable. Who would want a second desert?

*elicit/illicit* — Elicit means to bring out or to draw forth. Illicit looks much like illegal. If it is illicit, it is against the rules.

*eminent/imminent* — Eminent means Important or noteworthy. Notice how imminent sounds a lot (and even looks) like “in a minute?” Imminent is related to time; eminent is not.

*Infer/imply* — To infer is to draw a conclusion. You need evidence to infer. The student inferred from the crowded waiting room that he would not be able to see a tutor at this hour. To imply is to express indirectly. The tutor implied by her rushed manner that they were very busy.

*its/it's* — Its is the possessive form. In the same way that the other third person-singular possessive pronouns (hers and his) do not have apostrophes, neither does its. The dog ate its dinner quickly. It's is a contraction that means “it is.” It's a beautiful day today.

*lay/lie* — Lay is a *transitive* verb. Action is transferred from the doer to the receiver. It means to put or to set down. On the other hand, lie is an *intransitive* verb meaning to rest in a horizontal position.

There is no transfer of action and no receiver is required. You may, therefore, lay a quilt on the bed and then lie on it for a nap. Lay = to place [something]. Lie = to recline.

peace/piece — This is an easy one. You can have a piece of pie, but if you take *my piece* of pie, there will be no peace (harmony) between us.

pedal/petal — A pedal is something pushed with a foot. Think pedestrian, a person who is walking. A petal is part of a flower. Does the t look a bit like a flower?

principal/principle — A principal is a chief or a head honcho. Remember your old pal, the principal? Principal can also be used as an adjective, meaning chief, as in “the principal ingredient.” A principle is a rule or standard. Aggies exhibit lofty principles in their Code of Conduct.

right/write — Write always involves words. The rest of the time, use right, which means correct or fair, or the opposite of left. The r in right always points to the right.

than/then — Than is used when making comparisons. Then answers this question: When?

that/who — That refers to things, and who refers to people. The th in that = the th in thing.

there/their/they're — There is simply here with an added letter. So, it is no longer here; it has been taken over there. The key to they're is the apostrophe—it signals a contraction. When you see “’re,” it stands for “are.” They're = “they are.” Their = the possessive form of they.

to/too — To is a preposition indicating movement, contact, or position. It also appears in front of verbs to indicate the infinitive, e.g., to study, to drive, etc. The way to remember that too means “very” or “excessive” is that there are too many o’s in it.

weather/whether — Weather refers to the state of the atmosphere at a place and time (e.g., hot/cold, dry/wet, windy/calm, etc.). Whether means “if” or introduces an alternative. Notice that many questioning words begin with wh, e.g., who, what, when, and where. Whether we go to Galveston depends on the weather.

were/we're/where — Distinguish between were and we're by the apostrophe. Were is the past tense of “be.” As with “they’re” (see above), 're is a contraction for “are.” We're = we are. We're sure we were on time for class.” As with “there,” where is a reference to place and so contains the word here. Where were we when that photo was taken?

who's/whose — The apostrophe signals that who's is a contraction meaning “who is.” Whose is the possessive form of “who.” Think: His, hers, ours, etc.—none of these has an apostrophe.

your/you're — Your means belonging to you. As with all possessive pronouns, there is no apostrophe in your (see “their” and “whose,” above). Apostrophes mean contractions; “to contract” means “to shorten.” Thus, the apostrophe shortens “you are” to you're.

**Note: Not all easily confused words contain visual and/or auditory cues to help remember which is which. Those simply have to be memorized, but these mnemonic devices can help with quite a few.**