

CONFUSING WORD PAIRS

How to avoid making some common errors with word usage

Some of the most common errors involve confusion about words that look or sound alike. Teachers regard these mistakes as **faults in word usage**—more serious than simple spelling errors.

Your computer's spell-check will not catch these errors. Below are some common confusing word pairs (and threesomes) along with some tips on how to remember which word is which.

THEIR / THERE / THEY'RE

- **Their** is the **possessive** pronoun of **they**, showing **ownership of something**.
- **There** refers to a place. It is the opposite of **here**.
- **They're** is the contraction of **they are**. The apostrophe indicates a missing letter.
- Compare:
 - **Their** class is interesting. We found **their** books.
 - **There** are three problems. I used to live **there**.
 - **They're** all taking the same course. **They're** happy to see you.

ITS / IT'S

- **Its** is a **possessive** pronoun (like his, your, my, etc.) and thus has no apostrophe.
- **It's** is the contraction of 'it is' or 'it has'.
- A contraction always requires an apostrophe.
- Compare:
 - **Its** wheels fell off. The tree lost **its** leaves.
 - **It's** time to go. **It's** been nice to meet you.

WHOSE / WHO'S

- **Whose** is a **possessive** pronoun (like his, your, my, their, etc.).
- It has no apostrophe.
- It can be singular or plural.
- **Who's** is a contraction of 'who is'.
- Like all contractions, it requires an apostrophe.
- Compare:
 - **Whose** pen is this? The man **whose** son was born yesterday is Canadian.
 - **Who's** arriving today? Tell us **who's** responsible.

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Continued

LOSE / LOOSE

- **Lose** is a verb, which sounds like 'looze'. Use it to express **no longer having something**. **Lost** is the past tense of **lose**.
- **Loose** is an adjective, which sounds like 'looze'. Use it to describe something that is **not tight or contained**.
- **Spelling memory aid:** In the word **lose**, you **lose** an **O**.
- Compare:
 - No one wants the team to **lose** the game.
 - I always **lose** my appetite when I have a cold.
 - She **lost** her father last week to cancer.
 - A **loose** shirt is comfortable in the summer.

AFFECT / EFFECT

- **Affect** is a verb. It is similar to **influence** or **make a difference**.
- **Effect** is a noun. It is similar to an **outcome** or a **result**. (The verb 'to effect' is not seen very often)
- **Memory aid:** **Affect** is a verb so it will come after a subject. **Effect** is a countable **noun** so it will have an **article** (an/the) before it and an 's' on the **plural form**.
- Compare:
 - The bad weather does not **affect** me.
 - Supply often **affects** price.
 - The bad weather does not have **an effect** on me.
 - **The effects** of the pandemic are tragic.

THEN / THAN

- **Then** refers to **time** or the **sequence of events**.
- **Than** is used in making a **comparison**.
- Compare:
 - I planned my essay, and **then** I wrote it.
 - Dawson is larger **than** most colleges.

LEAD / LED / LEAD

- **Lead**, which sounds like 'leed', is a verb. It is similar to **guide**. It is also used to describe a **way** or a **direction** to a physical place or a state of being.
- **Led** is the **past tense** of 'lead'.
- **Lead** is a noun, which sounds like **led**. It is a type of **metal**.
 - The band will **lead** the parade.
 - Smoking can **lead** to cancer.
 - The coach **led** the team to the field.
 - Shields made of **lead** can block x-rays.

For more information, contact the Academic Skills Centre (ASC).