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Frequently Misused Words

ACCEPT, EXCEPT

"I **accept** the universe." (Margaret Fuller) (receive, approve, tolerate)

Everyone at the party was rowdy. I **except** Clyde from the inquiry because he was unconscious at the time. (excuse)

AFFECT, EFFECT

Writing papers has a strange **effect** on me. (result)

Poems **affect** me deeply. (move, influence)

The government wants to **effect** a policy of partial disclosure. (bring about)

AFFECT (PSYCHOLOGY)

Pronounced with emphasis on the first syllable, this **affect** means, according to Webster's Tenth, "the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes." That is, a person's **affect** is how she comes across: depressed, detached, wired, etc...

ALLUDE, ELUDE

She **alluded to** Lillian Hellman in her paper on the McCarthy Era. (referred)

The suspect **eluded** her pursuers. (evaded, escaped from)

ALL RIGHT

(two words) **Alright** is not all right.

A LOT

(two words)

AMBIGUOUS, AMBIVALENT

The language Plath uses is **ambiguous** in discussing death. Sometimes death is paradise; at other times it feels like hell. (suggestive of opposite ideas or feelings)

Plath obviously feels **ambivalent** about death. (torn between opposites)

ANECDOTE, ANTIDOTE

If you tell an amusing or instructive story, you're telling an **anecdote**.

If you're bit by a snake and require medical attention, you'll need an **antidote**, after which you can tell an **anecdote** about being bit by a snake.

APTITUDE, ATTITUDE

Aptitude is inclination or talent.

Attitude is a mental position.

BESIDE, BESIDES

Beside usually means by.

Besides usually means other than or except.

If used as an adverb, **besides** means moreover.

CITE, SIGHT, SITE

A good research paper will **cite** more than one authority on a subject. Congress **cited** the bureaucrat for contempt (issue citations or make references)

The campers **sighted** Bigfoot leaping from peak to peak. (spotted visually)

The house was **sited** over an underground river. (situated)

COLLABORATE, CORROBORATE

Try taking these apart. To **collaborate** means to work with: i.e. co-labor.

Corroborate means to support with authority, to strengthen. ("robur" means strength, as in "robust.")

COMPLACENCE, COMPLAISANCE, COMPLIANCE

Complacence means self-satisfaction.

Complaisance means affability.

Compliance means conformity or a disposition to give in to others.

COMPLEMENT, COMPLIMENT

Complement suggests completion.

Compliment suggests praise.

When Zeke had eaten his full **complement** of crayfish, the crowd paid him the **compliment** of singing, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

COMPREHENSIVE, COMPREHENDABLE

She took a **comprehensive** exam in economics. (covering all subjects)

She found the exam questions **comprehendable**. (understandable)

COMPOSE, COMPRISE, CONSTITUTE

Comprise

means includes, as the whole **comprises** its parts. (is made up of)

Compose means make up or fashion, as a painting is **composed** of lines, colors, and texture.

Constitute can also mean compose, but is more often used in the active voice to show how a part stands for a whole: "Greed **constitutes** his major motive."

CONTEMPTIBLE, CONTEMPTUOUS

Hellman thought McCarthy's methods **contemptible**. (worthy of contempt)

Hellman was **contemptuous** of McCarthy. (felt contempt for)

CONTINUAL, CONTINUOUS

By **continual** practice, she learned two of Chopin's Etudes. (frequently repeated)

The fire alarm made a **continuous** snarling whine. (without interruption, ceaseless)

COUNSEL, COUNCIL

Yes, you can **counsel** (give advice to) a **council** (meeting or group).

CRITIQUE, CRITICIZE

Professor Richard Cody writes occasional **critiques** of movies for *The Hampshire Gazette*. (noun, meaning critical review)

I asked her to **criticize** my latest poem. (offer critical remarks on)

DATA

Believe it or not, **data** is plural, the plural of datum.

So, don't say "the da

ta tells us," but "the **data tell** us," unless, of course, they don't.

(Similarly "criteria" is the plural of criterion and "media" is the plural of medium.)

DILEMMA

Dilemma, not dilemna

DISCRETE, DISCREET

The book was divided into **discrete** sections, each written by a different author. (separate)

She was **discreet** about her former relationships. (tactful, discerning)

DISINTERESTED, UNINTERESTED

The ideal judge is informed, wise, and **disinterested**. (above all special interests)

I am usually **uninterested** in television, except on weekends. (not interested)

ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT

We are studying the **ecology** of the Malaysian jungle. (relationship between organisms and environment)

We are afraid that nuclear waste will destroy the **environment**. (surroundings)

ENERVATE, ENERGIZE

Enervate

means to tire out.

Energize means to give energy to.

Opposites!

ENSURE, INSURE, ASSURE

These overlap when used to mean "make certain a specific outcome." But **ensure** means generally guarantee; **insure** implies taking specific measures to do so; and **assure** has the connotation of "give support or comfort."

FEWER, LESS

fewer

in number, **less** in amount, i.e.:

Fewer people than last year showed up to see if the amount of beans in the jar was **less** than they had guessed.

FLOUT, FLAUNT

Some people like to **flout** the idea of joining fraternities; others like to **flaunt** the fact that they've joined.

flout = mock, make fun of

flaunt = show off

HOPEFULLY

Hopefully

describes how something is done or how the subject feels: "**Hopefully** I shall turn in this paper" does not mean "I hope I get it in," but "I shall turn in this paper in a hopeful manner."

ILLICIT, ELICIT

The lovers had an **illicit** rendezvous. (outside the law)

The idea of a party will **elicit** everybody's approval. (garner, draw forth)

IMMINENT, EMINENT, IMMANENT

Adrienne Rich is an **eminent** (famous) poet whose appearance on campus is **imminent** (about to happen). Feminism is **immanent** (indwelling, present) in her work.

IMPLY, INFER

The speaker **implies** that UFOs exist. (suggests)

The hearer **infers** that the speaker believes in UFOs. (gathers, concludes)

INCREDIBLE, INCREDULOUS

I was **incredulous** (astonished, unbelieving) when I heard the **incredible** (not-to-be-believed) news.

INHERENT

intrinsic, belonging to by nature

LEAD, LED, LEAD

The Pied Piper **leads** the children of Hamelin.

Once upon a time he **led** the rats into the river.

After walking six miles up a mountain, his feet felt like **lead**.

LEAVE, LET

Greta Garbo wants us to **leave** her alone. (depart from)

I want to be **let** alone. (allowed to be)

LIE, LAY

If you **lie** down with dogs, you will get up with fleas. (present tense of **lie**)

I **lay** down with dogs and got up with fleas. (past tense of **lie**)

Lay your weary body down. (present tense of **lay**, which takes an object)

He **laid** himself down on the bed. (past tense of **lay**)

LIKE, AS

"Where did you get that quiz of a hat? It makes you look **like** an old witch."
(Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*) (**like** matches up nouns or noun phrases)

"**As** when a dab-chick waddles through the copse

On wings and feet, and swims and flies and hops."

(Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*) (**as** goes with verbs)

LITERALLY, FIGURATIVELY

Do NOT say "My cousin Billy-Bob is **literally** a horse's butt," unless you are a horse and Billy-Bob has gone to the knacker's.

You can say, however, that your cousin Billy-Bob is **figuratively** a horse's whatever if he is acting like one.

LOAN, LEND

Use **lend** when you mean **lend** a hand.

Use **loan** for a noun, meaning money lent at interest.

When used in connection with material goods, **loan** is, contrary to what some purists will tell you, a legitimate verb, as in "My cousin Billy Bob **loaned** me his horse van to use over vacation."

LOSE, LOOSE

Don't set the fox **loose** in the henhouse or else we'll **lose** our chickens.

MITIGATE, MILITATE

Mitigate means to soften or mollify, as you **mitigate** a blow to the ego with soft words.

Militate means to engage in warfare.

Opposites!

ORAL, VERBAL

I have to give an **oral** report in history class. (spoken)

My **verbal** skills need improvement. (having to do with words, either written or spoken)

PHENOMENON, PHENOMENA

One **phenomenon**, several **phenomena**.

POPULOUS, POPULACE

Los Angeles has a teeming **populace**. (noun, short for population)

New York is also quite **populous**. (adjective, meaning "filled with people")

PRECEDING, PROCEEDING

Preceding

means going before, prior, or former.

Proceeding means advancing or moving along a course.

PRETENSE, PRETEXT

He was fired for not being a team player, but this was only a **pretext** for his not getting along with the insiders. (cover-up, false reason)

Those fancy phrases are all **pretense**. (vain show)

PRINCIPLE, PRINCIPAL

My high-school **principal** was a fuddy-duddy. (short for **principal** person)

The **principal** cause of Nixon's Watergate mess was his anxiety about re-election. (main, chief)

The **principal** drew \$200 interest. (capital sum)

I support your **principle**, but I disagree with your methods. (aim, ideal)

SOCIETAL, SOCIAL

Societal

means exclusively "of or pertaining to society."

Social has many more meanings, such as "sociable," involving allies or confederates, or relating to the members of society, as in "social practices."

THAN, THEN

"First I'll pray, **then** I'll sleep." *King Lear* (adverb of time)

I like pizza better **than** Big Macs. (comparative conjunction)

THEIR, THERE, THEY'RE

Students don't always turn **their** papers in on time, claiming that since **there** are too many deadlines, **they're** often too busy.

UNIQUE

Unique

means one-of-a-kind.

That Victorian piano-stool-barber's chair-footlocker is certainly **unique**.
(RIGHT)

He is a rather **unique** person. WRONG: He can't be rather one-of-a-kind.

WARY, WEARY

Wary

means suspicious.

Weary means tired (see [enervate](#)).

Some professors are **weary** of reading **wary** when the writer means **weary**.
Such practices make them **wary** of reading papers.

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