**Words Often Confused**

**CCU Writing Center**

2007  Revised by Lo Pirie

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**a, an** Use *an* before a word that begins with a vowel sound (*a, e, i, o, and u*).

- *an* orange, *an* essay, *an* heir (silent *h*), *an* honest man (silent *h*), *an* umbrella, *an* umpire, *an* uncle, *an* ulcer (all the *u*’s sound like *uh*)

Use *a* before a word that begins with a consonant sound (all the sounds except the vowels) plus *u* or *eu* when it sounds like *yu*.

- *a* pencil, *a* hotel, *a* history book, *a* university, *a* uniform, *a* union, *a* unit (all the *u*’s sound like *yu*).

**accept, except** *Accept* is a verb. Use *except* when it is not a verb.

- I *accept* your invitation.
- Everyone came *except* him.

**advice, advise** *Advise* is a verb. Use *advice* when it is not a verb. Pronounce these words correctly, remembering that the *s* sounds like *z*, and you will not confuse them.

- I *advise* you to go.
- I do not need any *advice*.

**affect, effect** *Affect* is a verb. Use *effect* when it is not a verb. If *a*, *an*, or *the* is in front of the word, then you know it is not a verb, and you will use *effect*.

- The lack of rain *affected* the crops.
- The lack of rain had an *effect* on the crops.
- The lack of rain had a bad *effect* on the crops.

**all ready, already** If you can leave out the *all* and the sentence still makes sense, then *all ready* is the form to use.

<ol>
  <li>I’m *all ready* to go. (*I’m ready to go* makes sense.)</li>
  <li>Dinner is *all ready*. (*Dinner is ready* makes sense.)</li>
</ol>

If you can’t leave out the *all* and still have the sentence make sense, then use *already* (the one with the *all* left in it).

- I’m *already* late. (*I’m ready late* does not make sense.)

**are, or, our** *Are* is a verb. *Or* is use between two possibilities as tea *or* coffee. *Our* shows we possess something.

<ol>
  <li>We *are* studying English.</li>
  <li>Take it *or* leave it.</li>
  <li>*Our* class meets at eight.</li>
</ol>

**brake, break** *Brake* means “to slow or stop motion.” It’s also the name of the devise that slows or stops motion. *Break* means “to shatter.”

- You *brake* the speed of a car.
- You slam on your *brakes*.
- You *break* a dish or an engagement or a track record.

**choose, chose** I will *choose* a partner right now.
I chose a partner yesterday.

clothes, cloths  Her clothes were attractive. We used soft cloths to polish the car.

course, coarse  Coarse describes texture, as coarse cloth. Course is used for all other meanings. Remember this sentence: Of course you are taking this course. Find the tree u’s in that sentence and then remember that those words are always spelled with u. Her suit was made of coarse material. Of course I enjoyed that course.

complement, compliment  A complement completes something. Compliment means “praise.” Remember “I like compliments,” and you will remember to use the i spelling. A 30-degree angle is the complement of a 60-degree angle. She gave him a compliment.

conscience, conscious  The extra n in conscience should remind you of NO, which is what your conscience often says to you. The other word conscious simply means “aware.” My conscience bothers me because I ignored him. I was not conscious that it was raining.

desert, dessert  Dessert is the sweet one, the one you like two helpings of. So give it two helping of s. The other one, desert, is used for all other meanings. We had apple pie for dessert. Don’t desert me. The camel moved slowly across the desert.

does, dose  Does is a verb. A dose is an amount of medicine. He does his work well. She does not care about cars. He took a dose of medicine.

forth, fourth  Fourth with four in it is a number. Otherwise use forth. Note that while fourth has four in it, forty does not. Remember the word forty-fourth. This is our fourth game. That was our forty-fourth point. She walked back and forth.

have, of  Have is a verb. When you say could have, the have sounds like of, but it must not be written that way. Of is a preposition. I should have finished my work sooner. Then I could have gone home. I often think of him.

it’s, its  It’s always means “it is” or “it has.” Its is a possessive.
It’s too late now.
It’s been a long time.
The committee gave its report.

knew, new  *Knew* has to do with knowledge (both start with *k*). *New* means “not old.”
I knew that I wanted a new job.

know, no  *Know* has to do with knowledge (both start with *k*). *No* means “not any.”
I know she has no money left.

moral, morale  *Moral* has to do with right and wrong; *morale* means “group spirit.”
It was a moral question.
The morale of the team was excellent.

passed, past  *Passed* is a verb. Use *past* when it’s not a verb.
He passed the house.
He walked past the house (it’s the same as *He walked by the house*, so you know it is not a verb).
He is living in the past.
He was going on his past reputation.

peace, piece  Remember “piece of pie.” The one meaning “a piece of something” always begins with *pie*. The other one, *peace*, is the opposite of war.
I gave him a piece of my mind.
They signed the peace treaty.

personal, personnel  Pronounce these two correctly, and you will not confuse them—pérsonal, personnel.
He had a personal interest in the election.
He was in charge of personnel in the factory.

principal, principle  *Principal* means “main.” Both words have *a* in them:
principal
main
The principal of the school spoke. (main teacher)
The principal difficulty is time. (main difficulty)
He lost both principal and interest. (main amount of money)
A principle is a “rule.” Both words end in *le*:
principle
rule
He lived by his principles. (rules)
I object to the principle of the thing. (rule)

quiet, quite  Pronounce these two correctly, and you will not misspell them. *Quiet* is pronounced *qui et*.
Be quiet.
The book is quite interesting.
than, then  *Than* compares two things. *Then* tells when (*then* and *when* sound alike and both have *e* in them).

I would rather have this than that.

Then he started home.

their, there, they’re  *Their* is a possessive. *There* points out something and is spelled like *here*.

Remember “here and there.” *They’re* always means “they are.”

Their house is painted pink.

There is where I left it.

There were clouds in the sky.

They’re planning to come.

threw, through  *Threw* means “to throw something” in past time. If you do not mean “to throw something,” use *through*.

He threw the ball. I threw away my chance.

I came in through the out door.

He threw the ball through the window.

to, too, two  *Two* is a number. *Too* means “more then enough” or “also.” Use *to* for all other meanings.

I have two brothers.

The lesson was too difficult and too long. (more than enough)

I found it difficult, too. (also)

It was too much for two people to eat.

weather, whether  *Weather* refers to atmospheric conditions. *Whether* means “if.”

Whether I’ll go depends on the weather.

were, where  *Were* is a verb. Where has herein it, and both where and here refer to a place.

Were you the winner?

Where is he? Here he is.

Where are you? Here I am.

who’s, whose  Who’s always means “who is” or “who has.” Whose is a possessive.

Who’s there?

Who’s been using my tennis racket?

Whose book is this?

woman, women  Remember that the word is just *man* or *men* with *wo* in front of it.

wo man ...woman ... one woman

wo men ...women ... two women

your, you’re  *You’re* always means “you are.” *Your* is a possessive.

You’re very welcome.

Your toast is ready.