32. Common Spelling Problems

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Who Made Up This Language?

For some writers, their main spelling problem is similar-sounding words, for example, *principle* and *principal* or *affect* and *effect*. These problems cannot be flagged by software spell-checking functions.

Here is a list of these commonly confused homophones (different spelling; same or very similar pronunciation), with examples of their correct use.

All definitions in this section are from the Merriam Webster dictionary via the Merriam Webster Dictionary mobile application.

**accept, except**

The construction form *accepted* the offer to build the bridge. Everything has been finished *except* for the paint job.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Accept: (verb) to receive or take (something offered): to take (something) as payment: to be able or designed to take or hold (something)

Except: (preposition) not including (someone or something): other than (something or someone)

**advice, advise**

The construction firm ignored the engineer's *advice*. The engineer *advised* the firm to use single-suspension walkways.
Advice: (noun) an opinion or suggestion about what someone should do

Advise: (verb) to give an opinion or suggestion to someone about what should be done: to give advice to (someone): to recommend or suggest (something): to give information to (someone)

**affect, effect**

The *effect* of the increased oil prices has been devastating on our economy.
The increased oil prices have *affected* our economy drastically.

**cite, site, sight**

The consulting engineer *cited* a paragraph from the building code.
At the construction *site*, the workers carefully erected the scaffolding.
The collapse of the walkways was a terrible *sight*.

**complement, compliment**
The programmer has received many compliments on her new system. The colors that have been selected for the room do not complement each other.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Complement: (noun) something that completes something else or makes it better: the usual number or quantity of something that is needed or used: grammar: a word or group of words added to a sentence to make it complete

Compliment: (noun) a remark that says something good about someone or something: an action that expressed admiration or approval

counsel, council, consul

She was appointed consul to the embassy in Beirut. There was lengthy debate on the tax proposal at city council last night. He counselled her to get a degree in technical communication.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Counsel: (verb) to give advice to (someone): to suggest or recommend (something)

Council: (noun) a group of people who are chosen to make rules, laws, or decisions about something: a group of people who provide advice or guidance on something

Consul: (noun) a government official whose job is to live in a foreign country and protect and help the citizens of his or her own country who are traveling, living, or doing business there: either one of two chief officials of the ancient Roman republic who were elected every year

its, it's

It's time to go home; it's getting late. The car has lost one of its headlights.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Its: (adjective) relating to or belonging to a certain thing, animal, etc.: made or done by a certain thing, animal, etc.

It's: (contraction) it is: it has

lose, loose
Your car loses power when it is out of tune.
I have some loose change in my pocket.
Don't let Mamie get loose!

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Lose: (verb) to be unable to find (something or someone): to fail to win (a game, contest, etc.): to fail to keep or hold (something wanted or valued)

Loose: (adjective) not tightly fastened, attached, or held: not pulled or stretched tight: *of clothing*: not fitting close to your body: not tight

**personal, personnel**

They plan to take out a *personal* loan to build the deck.
Send your application to the *personnel* office.
The CEO wants to have a *personal* chat with all this company's *personnel*.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Personal: (adjective) belonging or relating to a particular person: made or designed to be used by one person --used to describe someone whose job involved working for or helping a particular person

Personnel: (noun) the people who work for a particular company or organization: a department within a company or organization that deals with the people who work for it

**principal, principle**

The *principal* component of the solar panel is the collector.
Explain to me the *principle* of convection.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Principal: (adjective) most important

Principle: (noun) a moral rule or belief that helps you know what is right and wrong and that influences your actions: a basic truth or theory: an idea that forms the basis of something: a law or fact of nature that explains how something works or why something happens

**stationary, stationery**
Use company *stationery* for company business purposes only. The derrick may not remain *stationary* during the gale-force winds.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Stationary: (adjective) not moving: staying in one place or position: not changing

Stationery: (noun) materials (such as paper, pens, and ink) that are used for writing or typing: paper that is used for writing letters and that usually has matching envelopes

**than, then**

My utility bill was higher this month *than* it was last month. The hurricane reached the Texas coast; *then* it plunged right into the heart of Houston.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Than: (conjunction) rather than: other than: when

Then: (adverb) at that time: at the time mentioned --used to indicate what happened or happens next --used to indicate what should be done next

**their, there, they're**

*Their* calculus course is much harder than ours. *Over there* on the table is your calculus book. *They're* not taking calculus this semester.

**Merriam Webster Definitions**

Their: (adjective) relating to or belonging to certain people, animals, or things: made or done by certain people animals, or things: his or her: his: her: its

There: (adverb) in that place: at that location: to or into that place: at that point in a process, activity, story, etc.

They're: (contraction) they are

**to, too, two**

Are they going *to* pave the street today? It is still *too* rainy to pave the street. *Two* hours ago, the sky was clear.
Merriam Webster Definitions

To: (preposition) --used to indicate the place, person, or thing that someone or something moves toward  --used to indicate the place where someone participates in a particular activity  --used to indicate the direction of something

Too: (adverb) in addition: more than what is wanted, needed, acceptable, possible, etc.: to a high degree or extent: very or extremely

Two: (adjective) being more than one in number: being the second

whose, who's

Whose technical writing book is this?
There is the woman whose technical report won top honors.
Do you know who's in charge around here?
He's a man who's not afraid of criticism.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Whose: (adjective) --used in questions to ask who owns something, has something, etc. --used to show which person or thing you are talking about --used to give more information about a person or thing that has already been mentioned

Who's: (contraction) who is

your, you're

Your technical writing book is on the table.
You're going to have review Part 1 before writing that report.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Your: (adjective) relating to or belonging to you: made or done by you --used to refer to any person or to people in general --used in the titles or royalty, judges, etc.

You're: (contraction) you are