

3-1-2016

32. Common Spelling Problems

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Recommended Citation

McMurray, David and Reardon, Tiffani, "32. Common Spelling Problems" (2016). *Sexy Technical Communications*. 32.
<http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/oertechcomm/32>

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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 firm *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.

Merriam Webster Definitions

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.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Affect: (verb) have an effect on; make a difference to.

Effect: (noun) a change that results when something is done or happens: an event, condition, or state of affairs that is produced by a cause: a particular feeling or mood created by something: an image or a sound that is created in television, radio, or movies to imitate something real

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*.

Merriam Webster Definitions

Cite: (verb) to write or say the words of (a book, author, etc.): to mention (something) especially as an example or to support an idea or opinion: *law*: to order (someone) to appear before a court of law

Site: (noun) the place where something (such as a building) is, was, or will be located: a place where something important has happened: a place that is used for a particular activity

Sight: (noun) the sense through which a person or animal becomes aware of light, color, etc. by using the eyes: the ability to see: the act of seeing someone or something: a position in which someone or something can be seen

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