English Words That Often Get Confused

Sometimes people get words confused because they look or sound similar; some are confused because they are rarely used or because people hear other people misusing them.

**idle / idol**

If you are *idle*, you are lazy and inactive. An *idol* is something that is loved or worshipped. *She was my idol. I worshipped her.*

**illegal / illicit**

*Illegal* means that something is against the law. The word *illicit* refers to an action which may be against the law or it may simply be not generally acceptable in terms of general social norms.

**abdicate / abrogate**

To *abdicate* means that a monarch resigns from office, e.g. The king abdicated in favor of his son. The word *abrogate* means to end an official agreement or law.

**accede / exceed**

To *accede* to a request is to agree to it; to *exceed* something is to go over/above a specific limit in terms of such things as speed or quantity.

**accept / except**

We *accept* something when we agree to take it. The word *except* points out someone or something that is different. *We all agreed except for John.*

**adjacent / adjoining**

*Adjacent* means nearby but *adjoining* means directly connected.

**advice / advise**

Advice is a noun (*She gave him some good advice.*) and the second is a verb (*I advise you to*.....).

**affect / effect**

*Affect* relates to someone or something having an influence: *His illness affected him badly.* The noun *effect* concerns the *result* of something. *The effect of the stock market crash was disastrous.* Less commonly, *effect* is used as a verb meaning to cause something to happen *The company will effect these changes immediately.*

**afflict / inflict**

Something bad *afflicts* someone (*He was afflicted by malaria.*). Someone *inflicts* themselves or something else *on* someone. (*The Australians inflicted a stunning defeat on the English cricket team.*)

**aggravate / exacerbate**

*Aggravate* means to annoy someone, probably in an on-going way not just one-off; *exacerbate* means to make a situation worse.

**all ready / already**

*We are all ready to go*; in other words, all prepared. This is different from *already* as in *They have already left;* something has happened previously.

**all right / alright**

*Your answers are all right (correct).* Contrast this with the adverb *alright* which means things are fine or generally OK but perhaps not excellent.

**altar / alter**

A church or other religious building has an altar; the word *alter* means to change something. *She altered the design of the jacket.*

**ambiguous / ambivalent**

*Ambiguous* means that there are two or more possible meanings to a sentence (*Below the garage was burning.*). *Ambivalent* refers to someone who is unsure about something; *He was ambivalent about the proposal.*

**amiable / amicable**

*Amiable* = friendly and easy going, generally used for people; *amicable* also relates to easy going relationships and describes the relationship between two people or perhaps it describes an agreement or even disagreement. (*They agreed to have an amicable disagreement.*)

**amoral / immoral**

*Amoral* means that a person has no morals; *immoral* means that someone has low or poor morals.

**annex / annexe**

*Annex* is a verb ( *Japan annexed part of China before WW2.* ) An *annexe* is a place which is adjacent to a larger building.

**antagonist / protagonist**

An *antagonist* is an enemy; someone you are fighting. A *protagonist* describes a main character in a novel or play, or it could be used to describe someone pushing a particular social or political agenda, or viewpoint. *They are the main protagonists in this political battle.*

**assure / insure**

*Assure* means to make certain yourself or to overcome someone else's uncertainty; *I'd like to assure you that I am well.* Insure has to do with protecting yourself again loss or damage or injury. *I want to insure my car.*

**astronomy / astrology**

*Astronomy* is a science and it deals with observing stars and planets while *astrology* is a belief that life is influenced by the stars and planets.

**atheist / agnostic**

An *atheist* believes that god does not exist; an *agnostic* is not sure whether god exists or not.

**aural / oral**

The word *aural* relates to what we hear and the word *oral* to what we say.

**backward / backwards**

If my son does poorly at school someone could regard him as *backward*. The word *backwards* simply describes the direction of movement. *He tried to walk backwards.*

**bale / bail**

*He has many bales of hay on his farm.* The word *bail* relates to emptying a boat of water to stop it sinking. Another meaning relates to the payment that someone makes to a court so that person can stay out of prison while waiting for a case to come to court.

**beside / besides**

Beside relates to position; *She sat beside me in the train.* **Besides** means *in addition to. Besides oranges, what other fruit do you like?*

**burned / burnt**

When we use the verb *burn* in the past tense we use *burned*. *He can't cook. He burned a chicken last week.* We use *burnt* as an adjective to describe something: *the burnt chicken.*

**cannon / canon**

A *cannon* is used by soldiers and it fires bullets or shells; the word *canon* is used in various ways to do with Christianity, formal rules or laws, collections of literature or a type of choral music.

**canvas / canvass**

*Canvas* is a type of strong cloth (used in Levis jeans). To *canvass votes* is to approach people to persuade them to vote for your political party; to *canvass opinions* is to ask people for their view on specific topics.

**carat / carrot**

*Carat* is a measurement for gold or diamonds; *a 24-carat gold watch.* A *carrot* is a root vegetable.

**censor / censure**

A censor is someone who, for example, classifies films and decides if they are suitable for public viewing. It can also be a verb: *His letters were censored while he was in the army.* To *censure* something is to criticize it officially; *The opposition censured the government over the war in Iraq.*

**cereal /serial**

*Cereal* is breakfast food made of things like wheat and barley. A *serial* often relates to a program on the radio or TV which goes on for a long time and is built around a set of characters.

**chord / cord**

*Chord* relates to music and is a combination of notes; cord is a type of thick-ish string or rope.

**cloths/ clothes**

The first is pieces of cloth e.g. *cleaning cloths*; the second is the clothes or garments that we wear.

**complement / compliment**

*Complement* means to enhance something else; to make it better by adding something suitable to it. *That jacket really complements the colours of your skirt.*

**council / counsel**

A council is a ruling body, committee or other group of representatives, *The Council for Environmental Change.* 'council' is never used as a verb.*Counsel* is advice that we give someone else. A counsel is also a type of lawyer. 'counsel' is used a noun or verb depending on context.

**credible / creditable**

*credible* means believable. *The story he told me was not credible*. *Incredible* means unbelievable or to emphasize the exceptional nature of something. *She is incredibly hardworking.* *Creditable* relates to an action that deserves credit or praise.

**credulous / incredulous**

A *credulous* person is one who will believe anything however silly. Someone is *incredulous* if they see or hear something they are unwilling or unable to believe. *He was incredulous when I told him how much I had won on the lottery*.

**crevice / crevasse**

A *crevice* is a small to medium crack in rock; a *crevasse* is a large crack in an ice-sheet or glacier which people could fall in to.

**criterion / criteria**

The former is singular and the latter plural because of the Latin base. *The most important criterion is honesty. The other criteria are less important.*

**currant / current**

We eat currants (dry grapes). Currents are flows especially of liquids, gases and electricity. The thermal currents carried the hot-air balloon far from home. The strong currents carried the swimmer out to sea. The ampere is a measure of electrical current.

**deduce / induce**

We *deduce* something when we work out the meaning from the evidence. We *induce* something when we cause something to happen; often in the passive form. *I was induced into handing over the papers.*

**definite / definitive**

A *definite* answer is one that is one taken when a decision has been made and that decision will not be changed. A *definitive* answer is one that is (as far as we can tell) absolutely and unchallengeably correct. *The judge gave a definitive judgment in the case.*

**defuse / diffuse**

Bombs are *defused* (made safe). *Diffuse* light is light that is spread so that it produces a soft glow not a hard, bright light.

**dependent / dependent**

Children are *dependent* on their parents; a child is therefore a *dependent*. In other words, the former is an adjective and the latter a noun.

**derisive / derisory**

If someone laughs or shouts in a *derisive* way this is intended to hurt and to humiliate. If something is derisory, then people may shout in this way.

**desert / dessert**

We can cross a *desert* on a camel; we eat *dessert* after our main meal.

**device / devise**

A device (noun) is an object for doing something; *I have a device for saving files more quickly.* Devise (verb) relates to producing or investing something with a special purpose; *I have devised a new way to win in the casino.*

**disc / disk**

We have *discs* between the bones of the spine, we also have music *discs*. However, we generally talk about a *disk* when referring to computers.

**discreet / discrete**

*She won't say anything; she is very discreet.* In other words, it is safe to tell her something; she won't tell other people. The word *discrete* refers to something specific which is separate from and significantly different from something else in some way or other. *There are discrete departments in our company, although all with the same overall objective.*

**disinterested / uninterested**

*Disinterested* means that a person has no specific involvement; *We need a disinterested judge to make the decision.*

**draft / draught**

The first refers to a bank transfer or bank *draft*; the second relates to cold wind blowing under a door or between windows.

**dual / duel**

We talk about a road with four lanes (two in each direction) as a *dual* carriageway. A *duel* is word to describe a fight with guns or swords in the past. Sometimes it is used to describe what the protagonists in a debate are doing with the sharp cut and thrust of verbal debate.

**dying / dyeing**

The first refers to the end of life and the second to coloring hair or cloth. We also use the first if we want something badly; *I'm dying to go to the toilet!*

**eatable / edible**

If something is OK to eat it is eatable; *Is that apple eatable?* We use edible to refer to something that it is possible to eat without ill-effects. *Are those berries edible?*

**elder / older**

We use *elder* to pick out an individual within a family as older in comparison with others. *He's my elder brother.* The word older is the comparative form of old; *I'm ten years older than my sister.*

**emigrant / immigrant**

Migrants are people who move from one country to another for residence (often permanent). Emigrants leave a country and immigrants enter a country. For example, the UK receives thousands of immigrants each year but many people emigrate from the UK to Australia and elsewhere.

**eminent / imminent**

*Eminent* people are well known and often famous for something serious like politics or science. Something that is *imminent* is something that is about to happen; *The fall of the bridge is imminent.*

**farther / further**

Farther is to do with distance; *It's farther from Nottingham to London than it is from Glasgow to Edinburgh*. *Further* has to do with, for example, additional tasks; *He's got further investigations to carry out before he can be sure.*

**fictional / fictitious**

The word *fictional* is used to describe, for example, imaginary characters. *It's a fictional story about two people who fly to the Moon.* The word *fictitious* has to do with truth. *He came up with a fictitious story to explain his absence.*

**flare / flair**

A *flare* is something that produces a bright light and it is often used on boats or by climbers. If someone has a *flair* for something, it means that they have a talent for doing something. *He has a flair for music.*

**flaunt / flout**

If we flaunt something we show it off in a confident way. *She flaunted her new clothes.* The word flout is generally to do with ignoring a rule or a law. *He flouted the law and sold the watches on the pavement.*

**flounder / founder**

We *flounder* around when we have problems and we don't know what to do sp we think about all sorts of options. A ship *founders* when it is overcome by the waves and sinks.

**for ever / forever**

These words have various meanings, typically 'for all time' or 'permanently' (eg. *Food does not last forever.* or (informally) taking 'a long time' (as in: *I have been waiting for the bus forever.*; *I want to stay here for ever.* 'forever' sometimes has a different meaning such as 'always','typically' or 'extremely frequently'. (e.g. *He is forever making jokes* means that makes jokes very often, perhaps too often!

**formally / formerly**

The word *formally* means *officially* or in an official way. *The building was formally opened by the Mayor.* The word formerly has to do with things that happened in the past. *He was formerly a ship's captain before he retired.*

**gorilla / guerrilla**

The former is a large mammal and the latter is a fighter in an informally organized army.

**hangar / hanger**

Planes are kept on a large building called a *hangar*. A *hanger* is used to put clothes on, for example, in a cupboard.

**hanged / hung**

The word *hanged* is only used when we are referring to someone who was executed. The word *hung* is the past tense form and past participle of the verb *to hang*.

**hoofs / hooves**

These are two spellings of the same word, and both are accepted in the UK.

**horde / hoard**

A *horde* relates to groups of people. *He was surrounded by a horde of autograph hunters. The Mongol horde swept down on the town*. The word *hoard* relates to a collection of hidden coins, gold or food.

**illusion / delusion**

*Illusions* are ideas which are wrong; *He has the illusion that he's good looking.* The word *delusion* is used for ideas which are illogical and against all evidence, and is often linked to mental illness.

**imply / infer**

I *imply* and you *infer*. In other words, I hint at something and you pick up on my meaning. *He implied that I was fat! I inferred from what he said that she was not to be trusted.*

**ingenious / ingenuous**

The former means clever or inventive; *He invented an ingenious way to open bottles.* The latter means lacking in any false thoughts or dishonest motives.

**its / it's**

The word *its* indicates possession; *He looked at its paws*. *It's* = it is.

**leeward / windward**

The leeward side of a boat is the sheltered side; the windward side is exposed to the wind.

**licence / license**

With the noun, the former is the UK spelling and the latter is the US spelling. In the UK , the latter is the verb; *The boat is licensed to carry 10 passengers.*

**lie / lay**

If we place ourselves horizontally on the floor, then we *lie* down (verb *tolie*). If we did this yesterday, then we *lay* on the floor. *I lay on the floor for an hour this morning doing my relaxation exercises.* There is also the verb *to lay* which refers to, for example, *laying* a table. *I laid the table at 8 o'clock.*

**lose / loose**

If you drop something and cannot find it then you may *lose* it. If you have a tooth which is wobbly, then it is a *loose* tooth.

**may be / maybe**

Both mean *perhaps* but the word *maybe* can be replaced by *perhaps. Are you coming tonight? Well, maybe, but we'll decide later.* However, *may be* cannot be directly replaced by perhaps. *We may be late tonight so don't wait up for us.*

**meter / metre**

A **meter** is a device for measuring something such as a *parking meter* or a *speedometer*. **Metre**, **millimetre** and **kilometre** are units of measurement of length. In American English, meter, millimeter and kilometer have an –er ending rather than and –re ending .

**moral / morale**

Children's stories often have a *moral* to them. The *moral* of Red Riding Hood may be that young girls should not go wandering in woods by themselves. If we say something is **immoral** we mean it is evil or wicked. Morale has to do with attitudes especially feelings of confidence, or lack of it. *The army's morale is low after several major defeats.*

**motive / motif**

A motive is a reason for doing something, either good or bad. *I suspected his motives when he offered to give her a lift.* A *motif* is a particular decorative pattern, often one that is repeated on printed cloth or carved wood.

**naval / navel**

The word naval relates to the ships and the navy. *There were many naval battles in the First World War.* The word *navel* relates to someone's tummy, specifically the 'belly button'.

**no one / no-one**

Both of these are widely used.

**notable / noticeable**

If something or someone is *notable* it is worthy of respect and viewed as important. *It was a notable victory and the first of many.* If something (usually a *thing*) is *noticeable* it is a thing that is easy to see and likely to be seen. *It was noticeable that his hair had turned white in the year he'd been away.*

**nutritional / nutritious**

Both are adjectives (describing words) but *nutritional* has to do with broader issues of food processing and absorption. *The nutritional impact of eating plenty of fruit and vegetables is unchallengeable.* The word *nutritious* deals with whether or not foods contain the minerals and vitamins that can keep us healthy. *Oranges are far more nutritious than a hamburger.*

**passed / past**

*Passed* is a verb and behaves in the normal way that verbs do. *He passed his driving test on Tuesday and now he likes to pass other cars.* The word *past* relates to time that has gone by. *In the past he was very adventurous.*

**patient (patience) / patient (in hospital)**

It's the same spelling! *He waited for an hour but he was very patient. I was a patient in the hospital for a week. The patients will be seen by the doctor soon. She needed great patience to deal with his annoying habits.*

**perfunctory / peremptory**

The first word has the meaning of an action being done without any real feeling, in a casual way. *He gave her a perfunctory kiss.* The word *peremptory* has to do with an action taken in a dictatorial, rather unfriendly, unsympathetic manner. *He dismissed my request with a peremptory gesture towards the door.*

**plane / plain**

*Planes* fly. A *plain* is an area of fairly flat land. Someone can be *plain* which means not very attractive at first sight. A plane is also a carpenter's tool and a mathematical term!

**pray/ prey**

We *pray* in a church, mosque, temple or other holy place. The word *prey* relates to the food that animals like to eat. *The lions watched their prey but the antelope were unaware.*

**principal / principle**

A principal is the head of an institution, normally an educational one. *He is the principal of Marangu Teachers' Training College .* It can also be used for important people or institutions. *He is one of the principal conductors in this country.* If I have a *principle*, it is an important rule by which I try to direct my life. If someone has no principles, we might say that they are *unprincipled*.

**recipe / receipt**

A *recipe* is something that we use as a guide when we are cooking. A *receipt* is something that we collect when we purchase something in a shop.

**recount / re-count**

When we *recount* a story we re-tell it. *He recounted his exploits in Morocco .* When we *re*-*count* something, we count it again. This happened when Bush was elected.

**recover / re-cover**

When we *recover*, we get better after an accident or illness. *It took him a month to recover after the illness.* When we *re-cover* something we cover it again. *I wanted to re-cover my chairs and so I went to buy some material.*

**regal / royal**

The word *regal* really means royal in appearance and so could be used to refer to someone in a royal family as well as someone who had nothing to do with royalty. *She looked very regal whenever she dressed up for the theatre.* The word *royal* is generally to do with a family with historical connections which enable them to be described as *royal*. *There have been a number of scandals in the British royal family.*

**role / roll**

*Role* has to do with position or job or post. *What role did he have in the last play you put on?* A *roll* is round and made of bread. It can also be a verb; *He rolled down the hill.*

**sarcastic / sardonic**

A *sarcastic* comment is *designed* to hurt someone. The words used are often contemptuous or mocking. Words are sometimes used in precisely the opposite of what they normally mean. *Oh, yes! She looked so 'elegant' when she came in. It's a pity she fell over!* It is sometimes described as *the lowest form of wit.* A sardonic comment is not so hurtful but it is also mocking and can sometimes be hurtful.

**skeptic / septic**

A *skeptic* is someone who does not believe most of the things that s/he is told. If you cut yourself you must try to ensure that the cut does not become infected and turn *septic*.

**sew / sow**

We *sew* with needle and cotton. We *sow* seeds in a field.

**some time / sometime / sometimes**

The words *some time* mean *for a little while*. *He wanted to stay in Zanzibar for some time.* The word *sometime* is often used interchangeably but really it means *at an indeterminate point in the future*. *Why don't we meet up for a coffee sometime? Sometimes* means occasionally or from time to time. *We sometimes meet for coffee at lunch.*

**stationary / stationery**

If you are *stationary*, you are not moving. *Stationery* consists of paper and envelopes and similar office items.

**story / storey**

We often read a story to children at night time. The word storey relates to the height of a building. *It's a ten-storey office block.*

**swap / swop**

Two spellings of the same word!

**wave / waive**

*Waves* are found in the sea and sometimes in large lakes. We also *wave* to someone when we see them in the distance, perhaps at a railway station. When the bank *waives* a payment that you are supposed to make, it means that you will not be charged. *My bank waived my bank charges after I wrote a letter of complaint.*