**40 Incorrectly Used Words That Can Make You Look Dumb**

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While I like to think I know a little about business writing, I still fall into a few word traps. (Not to mention [a few cliché traps](http://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/business-writing-tips-9-cliches-to-retire-forever.html).)

Take the words "who" and "whom." I rarely use "whom" when I should -- even when spell check suggests "whom" I think it sounds pretentious. So I use "who." And then I sound dumb.

Just like one misspelled word can get your resume tossed onto the "nope" pile, one incorrectly used word can negatively impact your entire message. Fairly or unfairly, it happens -- so let's make sure it doesn't happen to you.

**Adverse and averse**

*Adverse* means harmful or unfavorable: "Adverse market conditions caused the IPO to be poorly subscribed." *Averse* refers to feelings of dislike or opposition: "I was averse to paying $18 a share for a company that generates no revenue."

But hey, feel free to have an aversion to adverse conditions.

**Affect and effect**

Verbs first. *Affect* means to influence: "Impatient investors affected our roll-out date." *Effect* means to accomplish something: "The board effected a sweeping policy change."

How you use *effect* or *affect* can be tricky. For example, a board can *affect* changes by influencing them and can *effect* changes by directly implementing them. Bottom line, use *effect* if you're making it happen, and *affect* if you're having an impact on something that someone else is trying to make happen.

As for nouns, *effect* is almost always correct: "Once he was fired he was given 20 minutes to gather his personal effects." *Affect* refers to an emotional state, so unless you're a psychologist you probably have little reason to use it.

**Bring and take**

Both have to do with objects you move or carry. The difference is in the point of reference: you bring things *here* and you *take* them there. You ask people to *bring* something to you, and you ask people to *take* something to someone or somewhere else.

“Can you bring an appetizer to John's party”? Nope.

**Compliment and complement**

*Compliment* means to say something nice. *Complement* means to add to, enhance, improve, complete, or bring close to perfection.

I can compliment your staff and their service, but if you have no current openings you have a full complement of staff. Or your new app may complement your website.

For which I may decide to compliment you.

**Criteria and criterion**

"We made the decision based on one overriding criteria," sounds fairly impressive but is also wrong.

Remember: one *criterion*, two or more *criteria*. Or just use "reason" or "factors" and you won’t have to worry about getting it wrong.

**Discreet and discrete**

*Discreet* means careful, cautious, showing good judgment: "We made discreet inquiries to determine whether the founder was interested in selling her company."

*Discrete* means individual, separate, or distinct: "We analyzed data from a number of discrete market segments to determine overall pricing levels." And if you get confused, remember you don't use “discretion” to work through sensitive issues; you exercise discretion.

**Elicit and illicit**

*Elicit* means to draw out or coax. Think of *elicit* as the mildest form of extract. If one lucky survey respondent will win a trip to the Bahamas, the prize is designed to elicit responses.

*Illicit* means illegal or unlawful, and while I suppose you could elicit a response at gunpoint ... you probably shouldn't.

**Farther and further**

*Farther* involves a physical distance: "Florida is farther from New York than Tennessee." *Further* involves a figurative distance: "We can take our business plan no further."

So, as we say in the South (and that "we" has included me), "I don't trust you any farther than I can throw you," or, "I ain't gonna trust you no further."

**Fewer and less**

Use *fewer* when referring to items you can count, like “fewer hours” or “fewer dollars.”

Use “less” when referring to items you can’t (or haven’t tried to) count, like “less time” or “less money.”

**Imply and infer**

The speaker or writer *implies,* which means to suggest. The listener or reader *infers,* which means to deduce, whether correctly or not.

So I might imply you're going to receive a raise. And you might infer that a pay increase is imminent. (But not *eminent,* unless the raise will somehow be prominent and distinguished.)

**Insure and ensure**

This one's easy. *Insure* refers to insurance. *Ensure* means to make sure.

So if you promise an order will ship on time, ensure that it actually happens. Unless, of course, you plan to arrange for compensation if the package is damaged or lost -- then feel free to insure away.

(While there are exceptions where *insure* is used, the safe move is to use *ensure* when you will do everything possible to make sure something happens.)

**Irregardless and regardless**

*Irregardless* appears in some dictionaries because it's widely used to mean “without regard to” or “without respect to”... which is also what *regardless* means.

In theory the *ir-*, which typically means "not," joined up with regardless, which means "without regard to," makes irregardless mean "not without regard to," or more simply, "with regard to."

Which probably makes it a word that [does not mean what you think it means](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D58LpHBnvsI).

So save yourself a syllable and just say *regardless*.

**Number and amount**

I goof these up all the time. Use *number* when you can count what you refer to: "The *number* of subscribers who opted out increased last month." *Amount* refers to a quantity of something that can't be counted: "The amount of alcohol consumed at our last company picnic was staggering."

Of course it can still be confusing: "I can't believe the number of beers I drank," is correct, but so is, "I can't believe the amount of beer I drank." The difference is you can count beers, but beer, especially if you were way too drunk to keep track, is an uncountable total and makes *amount* the correct usage.

**Precede and proceed**

*Precede* means to come before. *Proceed* means to begin or continue. Where it gets confusing is when an -*ing* comes into play. "The proceeding announcement was brought to you by..." sounds fine, but *preceding* is correct since the announcement came before.

If it helps, think *precedence*: anything that takes precedence is more important and therefore comes first.

**Principal and principle**

A *principle* is a fundamental: "Our culture is based on a set of shared principles." *Principal* means primary or of first importance: "Our startup's principal is located in NYC." (Sometimes you'll also see the plural, *principals*, used to refer to executives or relatively co-equals at the top of a particular food chain.)

*Principal* can also refer to the most important item in a particular set: "Our principal account makes up 60% of our gross revenues."

*Principal* can also refer to money, normally a sum that was borrowed, but can be extended to refer to the amount you owe -- hence principal and interest.

If you're referring to laws, rules, guidelines, ethics, etc., use *principle*. If you're referring to the CEO or the president (or an individual in charge of a high school), use *principal*.

**Slander and libel**

Don't like what people say about you? Like *slander*, *libel* refers to making a false statement that is harmful to a person's reputation.

The difference lies in how that statement is expressed. Slanderous remarks are spoken while libelous remarks are written and published (which means defamatory tweets could be considered libelous, not slanderous).

Keep in mind what makes a statement libelous or slanderous is its inaccuracy, not its harshness. No matter how nasty a tweet, as long as it's factually correct it cannot be libelous. Truth is an absolute defense to defamation; you might wish a customer hadn't said something derogatory about your business... but if what that customer said is true then you have no legal recourse.

And now for those dreaded apostrophes:

**It's and its**

*It's* is the contraction of *it is*. That means *it's* doesn't own anything. If your dog is neutered (the way we make a dog, however much against his or her will, gender neutral), you don't say, "It's collar is blue." You say, "Its collar is blue."

Here's an easy test to apply. Whenever you use an apostrophe, un-contract the word to see how it sounds. Turn *it's* into *it is*: "It's sunny," becomes, "It is sunny."

Sounds good to me.

**They're and their**

Same with these: *They're* is the contraction for *they are*. Again, the apostrophe doesn't own anything. We're going to *their* house, and I sure hope *they're* home.

**Who's and whose**

"*Whose* password hasn't been changed in six months?" is correct. Use the non-contracted version of *who’s*, like, "Who is (the non-contracted version of *who's*) password hasn't been changed in six months?" and you sound a little silly.

**You're and your**

One more. *You're* is the contraction of *you are*. *Your* means you own it; the apostrophe in *you're* doesn't own anything.

For a long time a local nonprofit displayed a huge sign that said, "You're Community Place."

Hmm. "You Are Community Place"? No, probably not.

**Now it's your turn: any words you'd like to add to the list?**