

Quick Guide: Troublesome Pairs of Words

A major challenge of the English language is that many words sound alike but have different meanings or spellings. You need to be able to distinguish between words that sound alike or are spelled similarly. There are many pairs of words that get confused but here are ten of the most common ones:

- Affect (verb, to influence)** We are all affected by the economic conditions in Britain.
Effect (mainly used as a noun so will usually have 'the' or 'an' before it and means an outcome or result) The recession is having an effect on everybody.
- Council (noun, assembly or governing body)** The council has kept its costs the same.
Counsel (noun, legal adviser or advice or verb meaning to give advice) His counsel has advised him to not take the case any further.
- Dependant (noun describing someone who depends on another for support)** She has five dependants.
Dependent (adjective, relying on) The college place is dependent on his results.
- Fewer (adjective used for individual units ie you can count them)** I had fewer days off last year than this year.
Less (adjective used for general amounts) I will have less time off next year.
- Judgment (noun, a court judgment)** After the hearing, the judge passed judgment.
Judgement (noun, personal opinion) Against my better judgement, I ordered more wine!
- Licence (noun, document giving official permission)** Your driving licence is valid until you are seventy.
License (verb, to give permission) You are licensed to drive.
- Practise (verb, to do something repeatedly)** I have been practising law for twenty years.
Practice (noun, work or business place of doctor or lawyer) My practice is in the city.
- Principal (noun, main or chief)** My client's principal objection is the cost of the project. (Tip: if you can substitute 'main' for principal, then it is principal – both have an 'a' in them.)
Principle (noun, rule or standard or basic belief) His principles should be considered as he feels strongly about this.
- That (relative pronoun, used for defining and specifies the noun it relates to)** I wrote this article with the pen that my friend bought for me. (Specifies the pen.)
Which (relative pronoun, used for adding descriptive detail) I wrote this article with a pen, which my friend bought for me. (Adds detailed description about the pen.) NB These relative pronouns can sometimes be interchanged.
- Your (possessive pronoun, belonging to)** This is your document.
You're (contraction of 'you are') You're late for the start of the conference.

There are many more! I hope these few have made you think about which is the correct word to use. Always use a dictionary to help you decide which is the correct word to use.

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