

## Misused Words: A Learner's Guide

With how constantly English is evolving, it's easy to misuse words in emails, papers, and everyday conversation. We have technologies that help us catch some of these small mistakes like autocorrect or Grammarly, but these tools aren't foolproof, so this handout provides ways you can identify misused words or phrases you may have used before without realizing it.

### Grammar and Syntax Inconsistencies

#### *Affixes*

Grammar and syntax can play a major role in the misuse of words. One way that happens is when we plug a group of letters into the front or back of a root word to change the meaning of a root word and turn that word into a different part of speech. We call these **affixes**. Affixes are separated into two categories: prefixes, which are placed at the front of the root and suffixes, which are placed at the end of the root. For example, the word **happy** has its own meaning, but when we add the prefix **un-**, we get **unhappy**, which means "not happy."

*How is this related to misusing words?* Well, sometimes, prefixes and suffixes can have similar meanings or look/sound similar in meaning. Some examples are provided below.

#### *Prefix Example*

##### **Ensure versus Insure**

Root word: Sure – "marked by or given to feelings of confident certainty" (Merriam-Webster)

Prefix **en-** and **in-** can both mean "in" or "inside."

**Ensure** means "to make sure, certain, or safe." | **Insure** means the same but in relation to securing insurance on something.

#### *Suffix Example*

##### **Continual versus Continuous**

Root word: Continue – "to maintain without interruption" or "remain in existence" (Merriam-Webster)

Suffix **-al**: "pertaining/relating to" | Suffix **-ous**: "possessing a quality/full of"

**Continual** means "relates to frequent recurrence." | **Continuous** means something "possesses a quality without interruption."

### Homonyms

Homonyms also relate to parts of speech. The term “homonym” is typically used as an umbrella term for words that have the same spelling, pronunciation, or both while having different meanings. We can divide this term into two common categories: homophones, which are words with different meanings that sound the same or similar, no matter the spelling; and homographs, which are words that are spelled the same but mean different things, regardless of pronunciation.

#### *Homophone Examples*

**There** (adverb) versus **They’re** (contraction of “they are”) versus **Their** (pronoun)

**Affect** (verb) versus **Effect** (noun)

**Dessert** (food) versus **Desert** (biome)

#### *Homograph Examples*

**Bass** (fish versus guitar type)

**Minute** (measure of time versus very short time period)

**Tear** (a liquid versus a rip)

### Word and Spelling Choice

In other instances of misuse, it’s a simple case of spelling and word choice, which both go hand-in-hand. Some common examples are **replacing prepositions** (‘of’ replacing ‘have’ in ‘should, would, could’ phrases), **missing apostrophes** (its [pronoun] / it’s [it is], your [pronoun] / you’re [you are]), and **colloquial spellings** (a lot [formal] / alot [colloquial]; all right [formal] / alright [colloquial]).

### Compounded Words

Some words change meaning when combined or separated with other words, similar to the function of affixes. Be careful when you’re combining words together; you may be using a word or phrase imprecisely. Review some additional examples below.

**Everyday** (common items) vs **Every day** (daily occurrence)

Examples: “I wear an everyday jacket, nothing special.” / “I wear this jacket every day.”

**Into** (transformation or movement) vs **In to** (phrasal verb)

Examples: “She went into the mailroom.” / “She came in to say hello.”

**Everyone** (collection of all people) vs **Every one** (individual things)

Examples: “Everyone, run from the building!” / “Take out every one of your electronics.”

## Nuances

Remember that the English language has shifted over the course of centuries and will continue to shift words, meanings, and spellings. There are many homonyms throughout the English language, so checking definitions can help you decipher how and in what context you're using words. Grammarians are still holding contentious arguments about the meaning and synonymy of words such as "continuous" and "continual" because of their historical usage (Merriam-Webster).

If you're unsure about what words to use or what is the appropriate phrasing, resources like this handout, dictionaries, and thesauruses are great starting points. Word precision is a skill to develop, so don't be afraid to use the tools at your disposal. (Also see [Misused Words: A Glossary](#), our companion to this handout that delves deeply into specific examples.)

## Activity: Pick the Correct Word

Read each sentence below at least twice and aloud once. Carefully consider the words encased in brackets, and then choose the correct word to use for each sentence. Use a dictionary or [Misused Words: A Glossary](#) if needed.

1. I have [less/fewer] apples today [then/than] yesterday.
2. "He seems to be walking from here to [their/there/they're]," my father said.
3. I have no [effect/affect] on him? Why isn't he [effected/affected]?
4. This party is [to/too] loud. Should we leave and head to [your/you're] house instead?
5. I wonder how they get to the library [every day/everyday].

## Answer Key for Activity

1. Fewer; than (Use "fewer" for a number of things; use "than" for comparing things.)
2. There (Use "there" when referring to a place.)
3. Effect; affected (Use "effect" as a noun when referring to a result; use "affected" as a verb when referring to someone/something having an impact or being impacted.)
4. Too; your (Use "too" when talking about excess; use "your" for possession.)
5. Every day (Use "every day" for daily occurrences.)

## References

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