



Spelling: Common Words that Sound Alike

Brought to you by the Purdue University Online Writing Lab.

Many words sound alike but mean different things when put into writing. This list will help you distinguish between some of the more common words that sound alike. Click on any of the blue underlined links to open a longer and more complete definition of the word in a new window.

Forms to remember

Accept, Except

- **accept** = verb meaning to receive or to agree: He **accepted** their praise graciously.
- **except** = preposition meaning all but, other than: Everyone went to the game **except** Alyson.

For more information on these words, plus exercises, see our document on [accept/except and affect/effect](#).

Affect, Effect

- **affect** = verb meaning to influence: Will lack of sleep **affect** your game?
- **effect** = noun meaning result or consequence: Will lack of sleep have an **effect** on your game?
- **effect** = verb meaning to bring about, to accomplish: Our efforts **have effected** a major change in university policy.

A memory-help for affect and effect is **RAVEN**: Remember, **A**ffect is a **V**erb and **E**ffect is a **N**oun.

For more information on these words, plus exercises, see our document on [accept/except and affect/effect](#).

Advise, Advice

- **advise** = verb that means to recommend, suggest, or counsel: I **advise** you to be cautious.
- **advice** = noun that means an opinion or recommendation about what could or should be done: I'd like to ask for your **advice** on this matter.

Conscious, Conscience

- **conscious** = adjective meaning awake, perceiving: Despite a head injury, the patient remained **conscious**.
- **conscience** = noun meaning the sense of obligation to be good: Chris wouldn't cheat because his **conscience** wouldn't let him.

Idea, Ideal

- **idea** = noun meaning a thought, belief, or conception held in the mind, or a general notion or conception formed by generalization: Jennifer had a brilliant **idea** -- she'd go to the Writing Lab for help with her papers!
- **ideal** = noun meaning something or someone that embodies perfection, or an ultimate object or endeavor: Mickey was the **ideal** for tutors everywhere.
- **ideal** = adjective meaning embodying an ultimate standard of excellence or perfection, or the best; Jennifer was an **ideal** student.

Its, It's

- **its** = possessive adjective (possessive form of the pronoun it): The crab had an unusual growth on **its** shell.
- **it's** = contraction for it is or it has (in a verb phrase): **It's** still raining; **it's** been raining for three days. (Pronouns have apostrophes only when two words are being shortened into one.)

Lead, Led

- **lead** = noun referring to a dense metallic element: The X-ray technician wore a vest lined with **lead**.
- **led** = past-tense and past-participle form of the verb to lead, meaning to guide or direct: The evidence **led** the jury to reach a unanimous decision.

Than, Then

Than	used in comparison statements: He is richer than I. used in statements of preference: I would rather dance than eat. used to suggest quantities beyond a specified amount: Read more than the first paragraph.
Then	a time other than now: He was younger then . She will start her new job then . next in time, space, or order: First we must study; then we can play. suggesting a logical conclusion: If you've studied hard, then the exam should be no problem.

Their, There, They're

- **Their** = possessive pronoun: They got **their** books.
- **There** = that place: My house is over **there**. (This is a place word, and so it contains the word here.)
- **They're** = contraction for they are: **They're** making dinner. (Pronouns have apostrophes only when two words are being shortened into one.)

To, Too, Two

- **To** = preposition, or first part of the infinitive form of a verb: They went **to** the lake **to** swim.

- **Too** = very, also: I was **too** tired to continue. I was hungry, **too**.
- **Two** = the number 2: **Two** students scored below passing on the exam.

Two, twelve, and between are all words related to the number 2, and all contain the letters tw. Too can mean also or can be an intensifier, and you might say that it contains an extra o ("one too many")

We're, Where, Were

- **We're** = contraction for we are: **We're** glad to help. (Pronouns have apostrophes only when two words are being shortened into one.)
- **Where** = location: **Where** are you going? (This is a place word, and so it contains the word here.)
- **Were** = a past tense form of the verb be: They **were** walking side by side.

Your, You're

- **Your** = possessive pronoun: **Your** shoes are untied.
- **You're** = contraction for you are: **You're** walking around with your shoes untied. (Pronouns have apostrophes only when two words are being shortened into one.)

One Word or Two?

All ready/already

- **all ready**: used as an adjective to express complete preparedness
- **already**: an adverb expressing time

At last I was **all ready** to go, but everyone had **already** left.

All right/alright

- **all right**: used as an adjective or adverb; older and more formal spelling, more common in scientific & academic writing: Will you be **all right** on your own?
- **alright**: Alternate spelling of all right; less frequent but used often in journalistic and business publications, and especially common in fictional dialogue: He does **alright** in school.

All together/altogether

- **all together**: an adverb meaning considered as a whole, summed up: **All together**, there were thirty-two students at the museum.
- **altogether**: an intensifying adverb meaning wholly, completely, entirely: His comment raises an **altogether** different problem.

Anyone/any one

- **anyone**: a pronoun meaning any person at all: **Anyone** who can solve this problem deserves an award.
- **any one**: a paired adjective and noun meaning a specific item in a group; usually used with of: **Any one** of those papers could serve as an example.

Note: There are similar distinctions in meaning for everyone and every one

Anyway/any way

- **anyway**: an adverb meaning in any case or nonetheless: He objected, but she went **anyway**.
- **any way**: a paired adjective and noun meaning any particular course, direction, or manner: **Any way** we chose would lead to danger.

Awhile/a while

- **awhile**: an adverb meaning for a short time; some readers consider it nonstandard; usually needs no preposition: Won't you stay **awhile**?
- **a while**: a paired article and noun meaning a period of time; usually used with for: We talked for **a while**, and then we said good night.

Maybe/may be

- **maybe**: an adverb meaning perhaps: **Maybe** we should wait until the rain stops.
- **may be**: a form of the verb be: This **may be** our only chance to win the championship.

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