**Common Errors & Confusing Words**

**1. A While vs. Awhile**

*A while* is a noun phrase consisting of *a* and *while*, whereas *awhile* is an adverb meaning “for a while.” *A while* usually follows the preposition *for* or *in,* whereas if you cannot put “for a while” into a sentence, you need to use *a while.*

* He went to the store for *a while*. (if you replace *a while* with *for a while*, it does not make sense -> He went to the store for *for a while.*)
* You should sleep *awhile*. (if you replace *awhile* with *for a while*, it makes sense -> You should sleep *for a while.*)

**2. Advice vs. Advise**

*Advice* is a noun, whereas *advise* is a verb.

* She took my *advice* and took out a loan.
* I *advised* her to take out a loan.

**3. Alot vs. A Lot vs. Allot**

First of all, the “word” *alot* does not exist! *A lot* is frequently misspelled as one word, *alot*, but it is actually two words.

Memory tip: Think of *a lot* as meaning, *I want a whole lot full of something*. (a lot meaning *a parking lot*, a large area)

The word *allot* is a verb meaning *to distribute.*

* I have *allotted* this money to the charity.

**4. Among vs. Between**

*Among* is used to express a loose relationship of several items. *Between* expresses the relationship of one item to another item.

* I found a pen hidden *among* the papers on the desk.
* I found a pen hidden *between* two sheets of paper on the desk.

**5. Apostrophes**

Compare the following phrases:

* The girls are at home.
* The girl’s home.
* The girls’ home.

The meaning in the above phrases is changed dramatically based on the placement, if any, of the apostrophe. When talking about more than one person or object, there is *no apostrophe.*

* *chairs* (more than one chair)
* *boys* (more than one boy)
* *suitcases* (more than one suitcase)

The apostrophe with an *s* is added to show possession.

* The *girl’s* home. (the home belonging to the girl)
* The *student’s* notebook. (the notebook belonging to the student)

Likewise, an apostrophe is added after a plural word to show possession of that plural noun.

* The *girls’* home. (the home belonging to more than one girl)
* The *students’* notebook. (one notebook belonging to more than one student)
* The *students’* notebooks. (more than one notebook belonging to more than one student)

**6. Assure vs. Ensure vs. Insure**

*Assure* means “to tell someone that something will definitely happen.” *Ensure* means “to make sure of something.” *Insure* means “to buy an insurance policy.”

* She *assured* me that the house would not flood.
* She took steps to *ensure* that the house did not flood.
* She is glad the house was *insured* against flood damage.

**7. Breathe vs. Breath**

*Breathe* is a verb, and *breath* is the noun form of *breathe.*

* It seems that he *breathed* his last *breath.*

This also applies to the verb *bathe* and the noun *bath.*

**8. Capital vs. Capitol**

*Capital* can mean either an uppercase letter, the seat of the government, or money. *Capitol* is the actual building where the government sits.

* I would like to visit the *Capitol* in the *capital* of the United States, Washington, D.C.

**9. Complement vs. Compliment**

A *complement* completes something else, whereas a *compliment* is something nice you say to someone.

* His black suit was a nice *complement* to his black shoes.
* She *complimented* him on his shoes.

**10. Effect vs. Affect**

This one is straightforward–effect is a noun, and affect is a verb!

Memory tip for *affect*: A is for action, and verbs are about action. Affect is a verb, and it starts with A.

Memory tip for *effect*: Think of the phrase “cause and effect.” “Cause” ends with an E, and a cause leads to an effect!

**11. Emigrate vs. Immigrate**

*Emigrate* means “to move away from a city or country,” whereas *immigrate* means “to move into a country from somewhere else.”

* My father *emigrated* from Venezuela.
* My mother *immigrated* to the United States.

**12. Except vs. Accept**

*Except* is a preposition that means “excluding,” and *accept* is a verb meaning “to receive.”

* I don’t like any of my gifts, *except* this one. (there is only one gift that I like)
* Why did I *accept* all of these gifts?

**13. Further vs. Farther**

Use *farther* for physical distance, and *further* for metaphorical distance.

* How much *farther* do I need to drive?
* I would like to advance *further* in my career.

**14. Good vs. Well**

The word *good* is an adjective, whereas the word *well* is an adverb.

* How are you today? I am doing *well*.
* I feel *good* today.

**15. Historic vs. Historical**

*Historic* means “famous*,”* whereas *historical* means “related to history*.*”

* What a *historic* snowstorm!
* She decided to wear a *historical* costume for the Renaissance fair.

**16. “I feel bad”**

Isn’t *feel* a verb, so shouldn’t the word after it be an adverb, *badly*? The answer is, NO! *Feel* is a linking verb, linking the subject to the adjective that describes it. Therefore, the word after *feel* should, in fact, be an adjective. *I feel bad* is the correct sentence.

* The cake smells delicious. (*smells* is a linking verb; *delicious* is an adjective)
* Their talking is loud. (*Is* is a linking verb; *loud* is an adjective)

**17. I.e. vs. E.g.**

*I.e.* and *e.g.* are both abbreviations of Latin terms.

*E.g.* is used to introduce a few examples, whereas *i.e.* is used to mean “in other words.”

* After work, I’d like to check out the new supermarket, *i.e.*, Key Food.
* After work, I’d like to go to a supermarket, *e.g.*, Key Food or Waldbaum’s.

**18. Into vs. In To**

*Into* is a preposition showing what something is inside. *In* and *to* are two words that just happen to be next to each other on occasion.

* He got *into* the train. (*into* is one unit – a preposition)
* I dropped *in to* see you. (*drop in* is one unit on its own, and *to see* is another unit)
* Log *in to* the website by pressing this button. (*log in* is a phrasal verb)
* What is your *login*? (*login* is a noun)

The rules above apply to *onto* and *on to* as well.

**19. Less vs. Fewer**

*Fewer* is for count nouns, and *less* is for mass nouns. Check out our [Count Nouns & Mass Nouns](https://global-exam.com/blog/fr/count-nouns-mass-nouns/) study sheet if you forget the difference!

**20. Lie vs. Lay**

Compare these two sentences:

* You *lie* down on the sofa.
* You *lay* the book down on the table.

The second one has a direct object (*book*), whereas the first sentence does not.

HOWEVER:

* Last week, you *lay* down on the couch.
* Last week, you *laid* the book on the table.
* You have *lain* on the couch for a few hours.
* You have *laid* the book on the table.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| PRESENT TENSE | PAST TENSE | PAST PARTICIPLE |
| lie | lay | lain |
| lay | laid | laid |

It just so happens that the past tense of the verb *to lie* is the same as the present tense of the verb *to lay*. You just have to memorize it!

**21. Loose vs. Lose**

*Loose* is an adjective, and *lose* is a verb.

* This shirt is too *loose* on me.
* How did you *lose* your phone?!

**22. Numbers**

In English, numbers greater than one thousand and up to ten thousand can be written in two ways:

* 1000
* 1,000

Numbers above ten thousand can be written by using a comma in the following way:

* 10,000
* 247,533

Decimals and money amounts can be written by using a period in the following way:

* 7.24 = seven and twenty-four hundredths
* 2.14 = two and fourteen hundredths
* $1.37 = one dollar and thirty-seven cents
* $359.08 = three hundred fifty-nine dollars and eight cents

**23. Parallel Structure**

One of the most common errors in English is disrespecting parallel structure.

Here is an example:

* I like *hiking*, *swimming*, and *biking*.
* ~~I like hiking, to swim, and biking.~~

The second sentence disrespects parallel structure. Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words in a sentence.

* I was asked to write my report *quickly*, *thoroughly*, and *accurately*.
* ~~I was asked to write my report quickly, thoroughly, and in an accurate manner.~~

**24. Principal vs. Principle**

When *principal* is a noun, it refers to a person in charge of an organization; when it is an adjective, it means “most important.” A *principle* is a firmly held belief.

* What did the *principal* want to speak to you about?
* The *principal* reason she wanted to see me was to discuss my recent tuition payment.
* It’s not that I don’t have the money, it’s just a matter of *principle*.

**25. Stationary vs. Stationery**

*Stationary* means “not moving,” whereas *stationery* refers to paper and writing materials.

* Of course the door will remain *stationary* if you don’t push it the right way!
* I love this *stationery* you printed your resume on!

**26. Subject-Verb Agreement with Collective Nouns**

If the sentence shows more individuality, you would use a plural verb; however, if the noun is acting as a unit, use a singular verb.

* The team *is* heading for practice.
* The team *are* eating with their families.

With a prepositional phrase, use a verb tense that corresponds to the subject.

* Nearly one in four people *is* Muslim. (*one* is the subject, so we use a singular verb, *is*)
* 25% of people *are* Muslim. (fractions and percentages can be singular or plural depending on the prepositional phrase that follows; *people* is plural, so we use *are*)

**27. The “Bacon and Eggs” Rule**

When we have two nouns that are used so often together we think of them as a singular idea, we use a singular verb.

* Bacon and eggs *was* served at brunch.
* Macaroni and cheese *is* delicious.

Likewise, we use a singular verb when we talk about amounts or quantities.

* A thousand dollars *is* a lot of money.
* Ten miles *is* too far to walk.

Expressions with “one of” are followed by a singular verb.

* One of my students *is* a gymnast.
* One of my friends *is* going to Africa this summer.

**28. Title Capitalization**

Here are some basic rules about how to capitalize titles:

* Always capitalize the first and last word.
* Capitalize nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
* Do NOT capitalize articles, prepositions (shorter than five letters), or coordinating conjunctions.

Here are some examples:

* A Year in Paris
* Pride and Prejudice
* Cheaper by the Dozen

Of course, for every rule there are exceptions, so it is best to look it up if you are unsure of something.

**29. Who vs. Which vs. That**

*Who* refers to people, whereas *which* and *that* refer to groups or objects. *That* introduces an essential clause (which adds vital information to the sentence), whereas *which* introduces a nonessential clause (which adds supplementary, unnecessary information).

* She is the one *who* drove me home yesterday. (*who* refers to a person)
* I do not like cereal *that* has chocolate in it. (we do not know what type of cereal without the essential clause)
* This cereal, *which* has chocolate in it, is not good for you. (we do not need the information in the nonessential clause)

**30. Who vs. Whom**

*Who* refers to the subject of the sentence, whereas *whom* refers to the object of a verb or preposition.

* *Who* wants the last piece of pie? (*who* is the subject)
* *Whom* do you trust more? (*you* is the subject; *whom* is the object)