

When spellchecker just doesn't cut it

Spellchecker is a great tool. But one thing it can't do is tell you when a correctly spelt word is being misused. Should you write "principle" or "principal"? Is it "militate" or "mitigate"? Plenty of smart people struggle with these and other easily confused word pairs.

If you're one of them, then the following list is for you.

Feedback and suggestions for additional word pairs are welcomed. Please email ken.grace@departmentofwriting.co.nz

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The list

1. **Abdicate / Abrogate**

To abdicate is to relinquish a position of power (eg, the king abdicated the throne). To abrogate is to formally abolish an agreement or law.

2. **Accede / Exceed**

To accede is to agree to something – you might accede to a request, or to the terms of a contract. To exceed is to go beyond a limit or boundary. It's better to exceed peoples' expectations than it is to exceed the speed limit.

3. **Accept / Except**

To accept something is to agree to it. Except means 'with the exclusion of' – everyone accepted the idea, except me.

4. **Accurate / Precise**

Accurate is a rough synonym for "true". It's accurate to say the sun is millions of kilometres from Earth. If you want to be precise, though, you'd say it's 150,000,000 kilometres away. Precision does not make a statement accurate - "I am 4.567m tall" is a precise statement, but clearly false. Scientists are pedantic about the difference in the meaning of accurate and precise, with good reason.

5. **Adjacent / Adjoining**

Being adjacent to something means being close to it; adjoining something means being connected or attached to it.

6. **Advice / Advise**

Advice is a noun (let me give you some advice); advise is a verb (I advise you to...)

7. Affect / Effect

Affect is usually used as a verb, to refer to something having an influence (how will the upcoming election affect the economy?). Effect is generally used as a noun to describe the result of something (the recent election had little effect on the economy).

8. Afflict / Inflict

You are afflicted by something bad, whereas you inflict something bad on someone else.

9. Annoy / Aggravate / Exacerbate

To annoy is to cause frustration or annoyance; to aggravate or exacerbate is to make an already bad situation worse. Avoid using aggravate to mean annoy. Although this sense is becoming accepted, that acceptance is far from universal just yet.

10. All ready / Already

All ready is the same as all prepared – “we are all ready to leave”. Already refers to something that happened in the past tense – “we’ve left already”.

11. All right / Alright

All right literally means everything right – as in “I think I got the test answers all right”. Alright is an adverb meaning not bad, but probably not great either – “I think I did alright in the test”.

12. Altar / Alter

An altar is a structure at which religious ceremonies take place. To alter something is to change it.

13. Ambiguous / Ambivalent

Ambiguous means unclear, open to more than one interpretation. To be ambivalent is to be unsure about something, or to have mixed emotions about it.

14. Amiable / Amicable

Someone who is amiable is friendly and easy to get along with. Amicable also means easy going and friendly but refers to relationships between people rather than individuals themselves.

15. Amoral / Immoral

Someone who is amoral has no morals, while someone who is immoral has low morals.

16. Antagonist / Protagonist

An antagonist is similar to an adversary or enemy. A protagonist is the hero or main character in a story, and can also be used to describe someone pushing a particular agenda or viewpoint.

17. Assure / Insure

To assure is to assert confidently. To insure is to guarantee against loss or damage.

18. Astronomy / Astrology

Astronomy is the scientific study of stars and planets, while astrology is the belief that stars and planets influence our lives.

19. Atheist / Agnostic

An atheist believes God doesn't exist; an agnostic is undecided.

20. Aural / Oral

Aural is what we hear, while oral is what we say.

21. Bale / Bail

A bale is what you make out of hay on farms. Bail is the payment someone makes to the court to stay out of jail until their hearing.

22. Beside / Besides

Beside is “next to”. Besides is “in addition to”.

23. Bought / Brought

If you bought it, you paid money for it. If you brought it, then – to use a hillbillyism – you brung it.

24. Burned / Burnt

Burned is a verb used in the past tense – “I burned my toast this morning”. Burnt is an adjective used to describe something – “Look at this burnt toast”.

25. Cannon / Canon

A cannon is a weapon that fires cannonballs; the word canon has several meanings. It can relate to Christianity, formal rules or laws, collections of literature or a type of choral music.

26. Canvas / Canvass

Canvas is a type of strong cloth. To canvass votes is to approach people to vote for a political party. To canvass opinions is to ask people for their view on specific topics.

27. Carat / Carrot

Carat is a measurement for gold or diamonds. A carrot is a vegetable.

28. Censor / Censure

A censor is someone who examines material (usually media) to decide if it is socially acceptable. Censure is the strong expression of disapproval.

29. Cereal / Serial

Cereal is a food made from grains. A serial is something published or broadcast in short instalments at regular intervals, such as a TV miniseries.

30. Chord / Cord

Chord is a musical term meaning a combination of notes; cord is a type of thick string or rope.

31. Cloths / Clothes

The first is pieces of cloth such as you'd use to wash a car; the second is what we wear on our bodies.

32. Complement / Compliment

To complement something is to add to it or enhance it. A compliment is an expression of praise or approval.

33. Council / Counsel

A council is a ruling body, committee or other group of representatives. Counsel means advice or the act of giving advice.

34. Credible / Creditable

Credible is similar to believable. His excuse for not coming into work was not credible. Creditable means an action that deserves credit or praise.

35. Credulous / Incredulous

A credulous person is extremely gullible. Someone is incredulous when they've seen or heard something they're shocked by or find hard to believe. They were incredulous when they found out how long it would be until their meal was served.

36. Crevice / Crevasse

A crevice is a small crack in rock or ice, etc; a crevasse is a much larger crack - one you could fall into.

37. Criterion / Criteria

The former is singular and the latter plural. Also phenomenon/phenomena.

38. Currant / Current

Currants are dried grapes. Currents are flows, usually to do with liquids, gases and electricity. The current carried the swimmer out to sea.

39. Deduce / Induce

To deduce something is to consider evidence and draw a conclusion. To induce is to cause something to happen.

40. Definite / Definitive

A definite answer refers to a choice or decision which we are absolutely sure of and will not change. A definitive answer is one that is authoritative.

41. Defuse / Diffuse

Bombs are defused to keep them from exploding. Diffuse light is spread so that it produces a soft glow rather than a bright light.

42. Dependent / Dependant

Children are dependent on their parents; a child is a dependant. In other words, the former is an adjective and the latter is a noun.

43. Desert / Dessert

We cross the desert on a camel; we eat dessert after dinner (whether on a camel or not).

44. Device / Devise

A device is an object for doing something. Devise means to produce or create something with a specific goal in mind.

45. Discreet / Discrete

Someone who is discreet won't spread information you tell them in confidence. Discrete means separate and distinct from others.

46. Disinterested / Uninterested

A disinterested person – such as the referee in a sports match – has no specific involvement and gains no advantage, whatever the outcome. An uninterested person may be involved, but certainly doesn't care. While many authorities, including the Oxford English Dictionary, accept that this distinction between disinterested and uninterested no longer carries the force of law, it's still a useful one to keep – and will certainly keep you on the right side of careful/pedantic readers.

47. Draft / Draught

The first is a rough sketch or outline; the second means cold wind blowing under doors or through windows.

48. Dual / Duel

Dual means consisting of two – dual engines on an airplane for example. A duel used to describe a fight to the death, usually with guns or swords. Nowadays it's used to refer to less deadly forms of combat between two competitors.

49. Dying / Dyeing

The first is a life ending and the second is colouring hair or cloth with dye.

50. Elder / Older

Elder refers to a member of a family or other group of people who has seniority over most of the other members. The word older is the comparative form of old; I'm ten years older than you.

51. Emigrant / Immigrant

An emigrant is someone who left this country to live in a different one. An immigrant is someone who came from another country to live in this one.

52. Eminent / Imminent

Eminent people are well known and well respected. Something that is imminent is about to happen.

53. Expunge / Expound

If you expunge something, you delete it or strike it out. Expounding, on the other hand, is when you explain something in detail. After five years, his conviction for assault was expunged from the official record. Einstein expounded a whole new theory of gravity.

54. Flare / Flair

A flare is something that produces a burst of bright light, often kept on boats or in planes for safety reasons. Having a flair for something is a lot like having a talent. James has a flair for photography.

55. Flaunt / Flout

To flaunt something is to show it off. Claire flaunted her new haircut. To flout something is to show disdain for it or ignore it. It's usually used in reference to someone breaking a rule or law.

56. Formally / Formerly

Formally means officially. You are formally invited to our wedding. Formerly means something that used to be, but isn't anymore. He was formerly a police officer but has since retired.

57. Hangar / Hanger

Planes are kept in a building called a hangar. A hanger is what you use to hang your clothes on. We hope.

58. Hanged / Hung

The word hanged refers specifically to someone who was executed. Hung is the past tense form (past participle) of the verb to hang.

59. Horde / Hoard

A horde is a large group. Every autumn a horde of noisy tourists descends on the town. Hoard means to stockpile items in a safe place for future use.

60. Idle / Idol

Someone who's idle is inactive, lazy, not doing much. An idol is something that is worshipped and admired – a religious figurehead for example.

61. Illegal / Illicit

Illegal means against the law. Illicit is a more broad term that can include anything considered generally unacceptable by societal norms.

62. Illusion / Delusion

An illusion is something which deceives and produces a false impression of reality. A delusion is an idea or belief which is illogical and ignores evidence to the contrary.

63. Imply / Infer

To imply is to suggest something without saying it outright. To infer is to deduce the meaning without hearing it outright.

64. Ingenious / Ingenuous

The former means clever or creative; that's an ingenious way to solve the problem. The latter means innocent and unsuspecting.

65. Lie / Lay

Lie is the present tense (I think I need to lie down); lay is past tense (I was so tired that I lay in bed for an extra hour).

66. Lose / Loose

If you have a wobbly tooth, then it is loose. If it falls out and you don't pick it up then you may lose it.

67. Militate / Mitigate

Militate means count or work against; mitigate means to ease or lessen. The rain may militate against your going to the movies tonight; discovering there's an even better movie on TV may mitigate your disappointment. Lawyers are also fond of talking about mitigating circumstances when they hope to achieve a merciful sentence for their client.

68. Moral / Morale

The moral of a story is the lesson learned from it. Morale means confidence, or spirits. Often refers to soldiers in war – the troops' morale is at an all time high!

69. Motive / Motif

A motive is a reason for doing something. A motif is a recurring theme or subject or idea.

70. Naval / Navel

The word naval relates to seafaring. The word navel means 'belly button'.

71. Notable / Noticeable

If someone or something is notable, they are important in some way. If something is noticeable it is hard to miss, likely to be one of the first things you see when you walk into the room.

72. Passed / Past

Passed is a verb and behaves in the normal way that verbs do. I'm afraid the years have passed me by. The word past relates to a time before now. In the past I was a young man.

73. Perfunctory / Peremptory

The first word means done without feeling, going through the motions. He gave them a perfunctory greeting. The word peremptory means imperative, leaving no opportunity for denial or refusal.

74. Plane / Plain

Planes fly (mostly). A plain is a flat area of land. A plane can also describe a carpenter's tool, while plain can describe something commonplace and ordinary.

75. Pray / Prey

We pray to religious figures for spiritual guidance (or stuff we want). Prey are the unfortunate animals that predators kill and eat.

76. Principal / Principle

A principal is the head of an institution, usually an educational one. It can also be used for important people. He is one of the principal engineers on the project. A principle is a rule or standard which is important to someone and which they are guided by.

77. Role / Roll

Role describes a position or job or post. People sometimes roll down hills for fun.

78. Sew / Sow

People sew with needle and cotton, and sow seeds in a field.

79. Stationary / Stationery

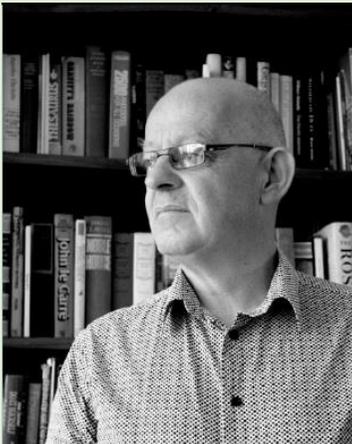
If you are stationary, you are not moving. Stationery is what you kept in your pencil case at school.

80. Story / Storey

We tell a child a story to help it get to sleep. The word storey relates to the levels of a building. American spelling uses story in both cases. (Note that the plural of story is stories, and the plural of storey is storeys.)

81. Wave / Waive

Waves are the things surfers like to ride. We also wave to someone when we see them from a distance. When the bank waives a payment that you were supposed to make, it means you won't be charged. (But the surprise may kill you.)



About the author

Ken Grace is a professional business writer and writing coach. In a 25-year career, he has edited international medical journals and trade magazines, crafted advertising copy for brands like Vodafone, GM, Air New Zealand and Westpac, and written multimillion dollar bid documents, countless websites and even more countless direct marketing letters (remember them?). He's also trained hundreds of people to write clear, succinct, compelling copy.

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