

Communications

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Righting Words

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Extension Information

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.—Mark Twain

Letters to Abigail Wordsworth

Dear Abby,

I'm in big trouble. In school, I learned grammar for the big English test, but now I've forgotten all those rules.

Do I use affects or effects? Which do I chose? Do I lay down or lie down? Just what does parameter mean?

Help me, Abby, before its to late.

Groundless in Grammar



Dear Groundless,

It's never *too* late. You can learn how to *choose* the right word.

Open your dusty grammar book. Consult a dictionary. And if those measures fail, take a quick grammar lesson from a UMC Communications Guide.



Its? or It's?

How Well Can You "Right" Words?

Select the correct words in each sentence.

1. The students (poured, pored) over their animal science textbooks.
2. William Shakespeare had a (flair, flare) for writing plays.
3. She (peddled, pedaled) her bicycle down the street, running over three pedestrians.
4. Bernice enjoys the rich, (fulsome, wholesome) taste of organically grown vegetables.
5. The politician, (who's, whose) speech was boring, left the room quickly.
6. (Its, It's) raining, so we can't have a picnic.
7. The (principal, principle) reason we can't go on vacation is that we have no money.

8. Yesterday, the president (chose, choose) his secretary of agriculture.
9. “(Lay, Lie) down on the couch,” said the psychiatrist to his patient.
10. What are the (affects, effects) of the president’s economic policy?

Key: 1. pored; 2. flair; 3. pedaled; 4. wholesome; 5. whose; 6. it’s; 7. principal; 8. chose; 9. lie; 10. effects.

Scoring: Give yourself 10 points for each right answer.

90-100: You will receive a citation of merit from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Language (SPCL).

80: Not bad. You are concerned about using words correctly and do your part in fighting for truth, justice and the right word.

70: Quick! Look under the papers on your desk. Find your dictionary.

40-60: You don’t own a dictionary. So buy one.

20-40: Wrong words are holding you hostage. But don’t despair; help is on the way. We’re negotiating for your release.

20 and below: Perhaps English is not your native language.

Don’t Be a Verb Vandal!

Verbs are sensitive creatures that depend on humans for their health and well-being. Unfortunately, some writers are continually abusing them.

Here is a list of frequently misused verbs. Treat them with care.



Some frequently misused verbs.

Choose and Chose: Recently, an agricultural magazine published the following sentence: “John Block, the man Ronald Reagan choose to be USDA secretary, is an honest-to-goodness hog farmer.”

Do you see how the verb, choose, has been misused in this sentence?

Choose is the present tense form of the verb **to choose**, while **chose** is the verb form in the past tense.

Since Reagan appointed his secretary at some past date, the correct form in the sentence would be **chose**.

Loose and Lose: Unlike **choose and chose**, **loose and lose** are two entirely different verbs with different meanings. Loose is both a verb and an adjective.

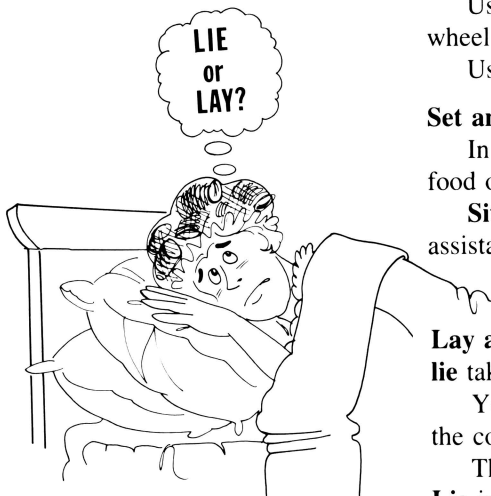
Use the verb with the double “oo” if you **loosen** your belt or if you have a **loose** wheel.

Use the verb with one “o” if you misplace your belt or if you **lose** your wheel.

Set and Sit: George **sets** food at the table where Martha **sits** waiting impatiently.

In this sentence, **set** takes an object (food). George had to physically place the food on the table. It didn’t get there on its own power.

Sit is a verb that takes no object. As far as we know, Martha required no assistance seating herself.



Lie down, and rest easy.

Lay and Lie: These two verbs behave just like **set** and **sit**. **Lay** takes an object, and **lie** takes no object.

You **lie** down on the examination table, but the doctor **lays** his stethoscope on the counter.

The verb **lay** implies that someone physically picks up and moves an object. **Lie** implies that someone moves on his or her own power.

The past tense is even more confusing. The past tense of **lay** is **laid**, but the past tense of **lie** is **lay**.

Last night, I **lay** down after I **laid** my book on the table.

NOTE ALSO: If you wish to tell how an action begun in the past continues into the present, the following examples apply.

I **have lain** on my bed for two hours.

I **have laid** the carpet in my house several times.

It Pays to Increase Your Pronoun Power

Do your pronouns “poop out” when they should pop?
Give your prose pizzazz by picking the proper pronoun.



Do you confuse its and it's? Pick the pronoun **its** only if it takes along **its** possessions: the book—**its** pages, **its** words, **its** chapters.

Pick the pronoun **it's** (with a contraction) only if **it is** doing something: if **it's** running, **it's** jumping, or if **it's** raining.

How about whose and who's? These two pronouns behave exactly like “its and it's.” Pick the pronoun **whose** if you're asking about someone's possessions, as in “**Whose** clothes are you wearing?”

Pick the pronoun **who's** if you want to know what someone is doing, as in “**Who's** having a baby?”

Who's there?

Know the Best of Both Words

Good writers put the right word in the right place at the right time. They don't confuse, bend, fold, or mutilate the meanings of the words on the following list.

Although many of these words have additional meanings, we've listed the ones most often confused.

Adverse and Averse: Adverse means unfavorable or harmful; averse means not willing, reluctant or opposed.

- Examples:
- An agricultural specialist spoke on the **adverse** effects of rabbits on carrot crops.
 - Many students are **averse** to studying rabbits.



Affect and Effect: Affect is a verb meaning to influence or change. Effect as a verb, means to bring about; as a noun, effect is the result.

- Examples:
- How do rabbits **affect** crops?
 - How can those rabbits **effect** a change on their owners?
 - What are the **effects** of this change on rabbits?

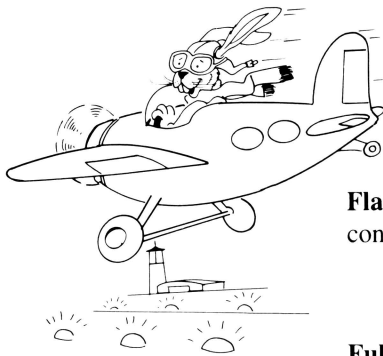
Read all about rabbits on alternate Tuesdays.

Alternate and Alternative. Alternate implies the taking of turns, and alternative is a choice, option or substitute.

- Examples:
- We make our rabbit report on **alternate** Tuesdays. (This means that every second Tuesday, we report on rabbits.)
 - The president's committee studied energy **alternatives** for rabbits.

Flair and Flare: Flair is a natural talent or ability. A flare is a sudden bright light or signal.

- Examples:
- Beatrix Potter had a **flair** for writing about rabbits.
 - They used **flares** to light the landing field for the cargo plane filled with rabbits.



Landing a plane is easy when flares light the runway.

Flaunt and Flout: Flaunt means to display ostentatiously. Flout means to show contempt.

- Examples:
- The playboy **flaunted** his physique in front of the pretty bunny.
 - Rebel rabbits **flout** authority.

Fulsome and Wholesome: Fulsome is disgusting and offensive, while wholesome is healthful and sound.

- Examples:
- The **fulsome** odor of rotting carrots filled the rabbit hutch.
 - The story of Peter Rabbit is a **wholesome** tale for children.

Lectern and Podium: A lectern is a stand for holding the lecturer's notes. The podium is the platform where the speaker stands.

Examples: ● The man in the rabbit suit mounted the **podium** and hopped slowly to the **lectern** to present a speech in which he would split hares.

Negligent and Negligible: Someone who is negligent is neglectful and careless, habitually failing to do the required thing. Something that is negligible can be neglected because it is small, unimportant and trifling.

Examples: ● Fred was charged with **negligent** rodenticide in the death of his pet rabbit.
● After taxes, the profits from Fred's rabbit-raising venture were **negligible**.



This rabbit died before his negligent owner saw the light.

Parameter and Perimeter: A mathematical term, parameter is not a boundary or limit but a quantity or constant whose value varies with the circumstances of its application. Perimeter is the distance around or outer boundary of a figure or area. Although perimeter has worked its way into everyday language, parameter should be used only in its complex mathematical context.

Example: ● The task before us is to explore the limits (NOT **parameters**) of our problem with rabbits.



The rabbit peeked at the wily fox.

Peak and Peek: To peak is to reach or bring to a high point. To peek is to glance or look quickly.

Examples: ● The rabbit population **peaked** early in the season.
● The rabbit **peeked** around the corner of the hutch at the wily fox.



Bob waits for a lift while Georgia pedals around the block.

Pedal and Peddle: To peddle means to go from place to place selling small articles. To pedal means to move or operate by a pedal.

Examples: ● The salesman traveled around the countryside **peddling** rabbit food to rabbit raisers.
● Georgia **pedaled** her bicycle down the street in search of her pet rabbit, Bob.

Pore and Pour: To pore is to gaze intently, read or study carefully. To pour is to cause to flow in a stream.

Examples: ● Fred **poured** water from the rabbit's dish.
● Georgia **pored** over her book on rabbits.



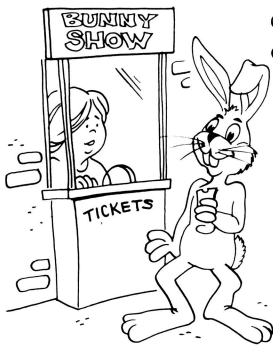
Principal and Principle: As an adjective, principal means first in rank, character or importance. As a noun, it refers to someone who takes a leading part, such as the head officer of a school. Principal is also the amount of a debt on which the interest is computed. Principle is a noun meaning a fundamental truth, law, doctrine or a rule of conduct.

- Examples:
- Sam is the **principal** rabbit producer in the area.
 - These are the **principles** of rabbit raising.

Their and There: Their refers to something belonging to somebody, as in “their lunch.” There is a structural filler as in “there is nothing left.” There is also an adverb which points to a place or time.

- Examples:
- **There** are too many rabbits.
 - **Their** rabbits are over **there** in the hutch.

There are too many rabbits.



To and Too: Too is an adverb meaning in addition or also. It also means more than enough or very. To is a preposition meaning in the direction of, along with, on, at, or next. To is also used before a verb as a sign of the infinitive, as in “to go.”

- Examples:
- “I want **to** go, **too**,” said the rabbit.
 - The rabbit ate the carrot **too** quickly.
 - The rabbit hopped **to** town **to** see the bunny show.

“I want to see the bunny show.”

Some Examples

Do you recognise the errors in these examples. If not, we’ve included some references to clue you in.

“The Government of Iran must realize that it cannot **flaunt**, with impunity, the expressed will and law of the world community.”

—A *New York Times* transcript of Jimmy Carter’s speech to the U.N.

(See **flaunt** and **flout**.)

“It seems to me that the discreet thing for young men and women would be to remain in the same house or apartment and not **flout** their new relationship with such ostentatious displays as dinner parties, anniversaries, children and the like.”

—Gerald Nachman, *Playing House*.

(See **flaunt** and **flout**.)

In eulogizing Theodore Bernstein, an authority on the English language, the *New York Times* referred to his **flare** for turning a proper phrase.

(See **flair** and **flare**.)

The *Boston Globe* wrote about a man arraigned “on charges of **negligible** homicide.”

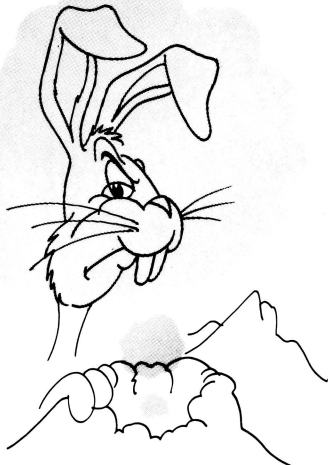
(See **negligible** and **negligent**.)

“Climber **peaks** inside volcano.”

—A headline in the *San Francisco Examiner*.

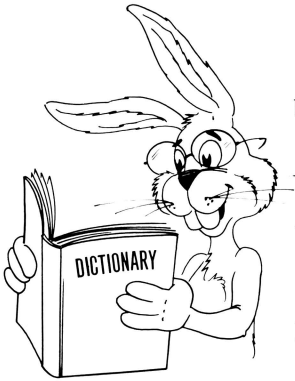
(See **peak** and **peek**.)

Don’t peek!



Reading for Writers

We don't mean to solicit business for these writers and their publishers, but we do recommend these books as desk references.



Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. This dictionary is more comprehensive than most. It has clear definitions, usage notes and includes many scientific terms.

Bernstein, Theodore. *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage.* New York: Atheneum, 1977. More than 2,000 entries on questions of usage, meaning, grammar and punctuation.

Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style.* New York, Macmillan, 1979. A concise guide for writers. Presents rules of usage, principles of composition and an approach to clear writing.

Walsh, J. Martyn and Anna Kathleen Walsh. *Plain English Handbook: A Complete Guide to Good English.* New York: McCormick-Mathers, 1977. Everything you want to know about good English, from parts of speech to sentence form to paragraph requirements to choice of words.

The Right Words to Write By

“Don't write to be merely understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood.”

—Robert Louis Stevenson

