Commonly Confused Words

Part 1

'Practise makes perfect.' Hang on, or is it 'practice makes perfect'? Darn, some words are downright confusing!

Don't worry. We'll show you how to tell the difference between 10 pairs of commonly confused words. Soon you'll know your principles from your principals, and you'll be able to use tricky words confidently and communicate effectively.
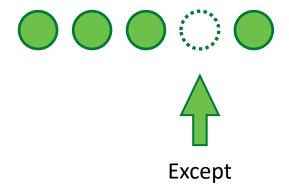
- Accept/except
- Affect/effect
- All together/altogether
- Complement/compliment
- Continual/continuous
- Damage/damages
- Discreet/Discrete
- Imply/infer
- Practice/practise
- Principal/principle

Accept/except

Accept

Except

Use 'accept' when you mean 'receive'.

> The prime minister accepted the minister's resignation.

> That company only accepts online payments, not cash.

Use 'except' when you mean 'not including' or 'other than'.

> She completed all the tasks on her to-do list except one.

> Except Thomas, everyone was at work.

Affect/effect

Affect

Goal!

Effect

Goal!

Use 'affect' when you mean 'influence'.

> Alcohol affects your reaction times, so don't drink and drive.

> Some countries have been more severely affected by the crisis than others.
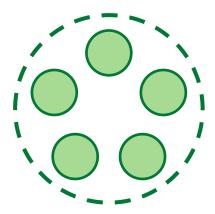
Use 'effect' when you mean 'result'.

> The pain medication helped, but it also gave him nausea, a side effect.

> Winning first prize had a positive effect on her confidence.
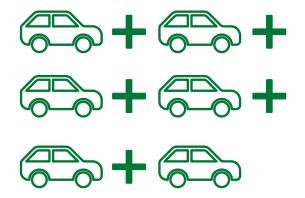
All together/altogether

All together

Use 'all together' when you mean 'in a group'.

> After everyone has given their comments, we'll combine the information all together in one document.

> We are all in this all together.

One way to check whether to use 'all together' is to see if you can put a word in the middle. For example, 'We are all in this all together' can also be 'We are all in this together'.

Altogether

Use 'altogether' when you mean 'in total'.

> The company has six cars altogether, but none of them is electric.

> The project was altogether a success.

Complement/compliment

Complement

Use 'complement' when you mean 'contribute to' or 'enhance'.

Her skills will complement our team's strengths. Let's hire her.

The music for the Christmas party complemented the festive mood beautifully.

Compliment

Use 'compliment' when you mean 'praise' or 'best wishes'.

The manager complimented her team on their excellent report.

We enclose a copy of our brochure, with our compliments.

Continual/continuous

Continual

Continuous

Use 'continual' when you mean 'frequent'.

Continual exposure to loud noise will damage your hearing.

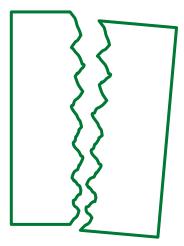We continually assess and analyse results.

Use 'continuous' when you mean 'non-stop'.

Some hydroelectricity schemes need a continuous flow of water to generate electricity.

In the story of Noah's Ark, it rained continuously for 40 days and 40 nights.

Damage/damages

Damage

Use 'damage' when you mean 'harm'.

> The photocopier damaged the certificate.

> The factory sustained considerable damage in the storm.

Damages

Use 'damages' only when you mean 'compensation', usually in court or insurance claims.
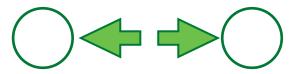
> The judge awarded damages for loss of pride.

> They filed an insurance claim for damages.

Discreet/discrete

Discreet

Discrete

Use 'discreet' where you mean 'discerning' or 'careful'.

'Discreet' has two Es together, just like sealed lips.

> He's very discreet. He won't pass on confidential information.

> The bodyguards keep a discreet distance.

Use 'discrete' when you mean 'separate'.

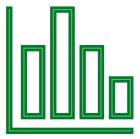'Discrete' has a T between two Es, just like keeping things separate.

> It's much easier to analyse data that is in discrete categories.

> Though the events were discrete, they led to the same conclusion.

Imply/infer

Imply

Infer

Use 'imply' when you mean 'suggest', as in something or someone implies something.

> The results imply that those exercises improve stamina.

> She implied she was happy with your work.

Use 'infer' when you mean 'conclude'. People infer — a thing cannot infer.

> The scientists infer from the results that the drug would be too risky to test on people.

> We infer from his talk that we'll get a pay rise — yippee!
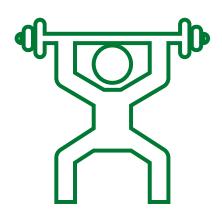
Practice/practise

Practice

Use 'practice' when you mean 'habit' or 'custom'. 'Practice' often comes *after* a describing word, for example, 'standard practice'.

> It's common practice to have fireworks on New Year's Eve.

'Practice' can also be used for a business that requires a professional qualification.

> The doctor intends to start her own private practice.

Practise

Use 'practise' when you mean 'rehearse'. The word 'practise' often comes *before* what it describes.

> The rugby players need to practise tackling.

> He trained as a lawyer but never practised law.

US English uses 'practice' for all meanings of the word. It doesn't use 'practise'.

Principal/principle

Principal

#1

Use 'principal' when you mean 'most important' or 'person in charge of something'. You can use it for things or people.

> The principal reason for the review was to improve organisational performance.

> The job description for the principal engineer says that they will manage a large project and a team.

Principle

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

Use 'principle' when you mean 'rule' or 'belief'.

'Principle' and 'rule' both end with -le.

> The Pareto principle states that 20 percent of the effort produces 80 percent of the result.

If you use 'principle' to describe something, you would say 'principled'.

> You can rely on him to do what he says — he's principled.