

Errors with Commonly Used Words/Phrases

All information below is taken directly from “Common Errors in English Usage” by Paul Brians.

Affect/Effect

There are five distinct words here. When “affect” is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is usually a verb meaning “have an influence on”: “The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act.”

Occasionally a pretentious person is said to affect an artificial air of sophistication. Speaking with a borrowed French accent or ostentatiously wearing a large diamond ear stud might be an affectation. In this sort of context, “affect” means “to make a display of or deliberately cultivate.”

Another unusual meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning “emotion.” In this case the word is used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists—people who normally know how to spell it.

The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: “effect.” This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: “When I left the stove on, the *effect* was that the house filled with smoke.” When you *affect* a situation, you have an *effect* on it.

The less common is a verb meaning “to create”: “I’m trying to *effect* a change in the way we purchase widgets.” No wonder people are confused. Note especially that the proper expression is not “take affect” but “take effect”—become effective. Hey, nobody ever said English was logical: just memorize it and get on with your life.

The stuff in your purse? Your personal *effects*.

The stuff in movies? Sound effects and special effects.

A while/awhile

When “awhile” is spelled as a single word, it is an adverb meaning “for a time” (“stay awhile”); but when “while” is the object of a prepositional phrase, like “Lend me your monkey wrench for a while” the “while” must be separated from the “a.” (But if the preposition “for” were lacking in this sentence, “awhile” could be used in this way: “Lend me your monkey wrench awhile.”)

Comprised/Composed of

Although “comprise” is used primarily to mean “to include,” it is also often stretched to mean “is made up of”—a meaning that some critics object to. The most cautious route is to avoid using “of” after any form of “comprise” and substitute “is composed of” in sentences like this: “Jimmy’s paper on Marxism was composed entirely of sentences copied off the Marx Brothers Home Page.”

Continuously/Continually

“Continuous” refers to actions which are uninterrupted: “My upstairs neighbor played his stereo continuously from 6:00 PM to 3:30 AM.” Continual actions, however, need not be uninterrupted, only repeated: “My father continually urges me to get a job.”

Criterion/Criteria

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in *A* are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, [data](#) and [media](#). You can have one criterion or many criteria. Don't confuse them.

Different from/Different than

Americans say "Scuba-diving is different from snorkeling," the British often say "different to" (though most UK style guides disapprove), and those who don't know any better say "different than." However, though conservatives object, you can usually get away with "different than" if a full clause follows: "Your pashmina shawl looks different than it used to since the cat slept on it."

Farther/Further

Some authorities (like the Associated Press) insist on "farther" to refer to physical distance and on "further" to refer to an extent of time or degree, but others treat the two words as interchangeable except for insisting on "further" for "in addition," and "moreover." You'll always be safe in making the distinction; some people get really testy about this.

Imply/Infer

These two words, which originally had quite distinct meanings, have become so blended together that most people no longer distinguish between them. If you want to avoid irritating the rest of us, use "imply" when something is being suggested without being explicitly stated and "infer" when someone is trying to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence. "Imply" is more assertive, active: I *imply* that you need to revise your paper; and, based on my hints, you *infer* that I didn't think highly of your first draft.

Less and Fewer

When your words need to express a relative quantity or measure, pay close attention to some basic rules. Grammatical errors in this area abound!

First, here's a little chart (taken from "Common Errors in English Usage" by Paul Bryans, my "go to" authority) to aid the discussion:

Amount	Number
quantity	number
little	few
less	fewer
much	many

When you're writing or talking about amounts of things that are measured in bulk, use the modifiers in the "Amount" column; when referring to things that can be counted, use the modifiers in the "Number" column.

You can make *fewer* mistakes, and you'll speak with *less* uncertainty. If you make too *many* blunders, you'll experience too *much* frustration.

From Paul Bryans, "If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use a modifier related to numbers. Even a substance which is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn't drink too *much* wine, but you should also avoid drinking too *many* glasses of wine. Note that here you are counting glasses. They can be numbered."

Common Errors:

You might here folks refer to an "amount" of people instead of a "number" of people. If you can count 'em, and you can, it's a *number* of people. Your grocery store's express line likely has signage that says "15 items or less." Wrong. Likewise, you will commonly see on surveys or forms, "50 or less lawyers," when it should be "50 or fewer."

Just to keep you off balance, "more" can be used in either situation: you can make more mistakes and be more uncertain ;-)

And another little exception — references to units of time and money are usually treated as amounts: *less* than ten minutes (even though you can count the minutes), *less* than twenty dollars (even though you can count the dollars). Only when you are referring to specific coins or bills would you use fewer: "I need fewer than five pennies to make my collection complete."