

Grammar Cheatsheet

Who or Whom? Data or datum? And why do some people freak out when they see “15 items or less” at the grocery store?

If you’re writing a paper, getting grammar right is really helpful. For one thing, it will protect you from gangs of Grammar Nazis. But more important, it’ll make you a better writer. Your readers will appreciate it, even if they aren’t conscious of why.

This guide will cover those pesky words that we all get confused about from time to time. It will show you the right word to use when you’re clacking away at the keyboard. And above all, it will make your writing clearer.

Just One Small Caveat

The purpose of grammar is not to be 100%, absolutely correct. It’s to make your writing easier to understand. And there are few things in grammar where everyone agrees anyway. What’s more, grammar is constantly changing.

With that in mind, some of these rules skirt the official, unyielding rules of those who believe grammar to be prescriptive. Rather, they reflect how grammar is working today (for an example, check out [data vs datum](#)).

Affect vs Effect

If you’re only going to learn just *one* rule from this cheatsheet, make it this one.

Using these words incorrectly is so common that it’s difficult to know what the right usage is when you read it, let alone how to write it. That’s true of effect/affect more than anything. Fortunately, we’ve got a shortcut for you.

The Official Rules

In general, “affect” is a verb that means to have an impact on something and “effect” is a noun, as in the effect of something on something else. However, just to confuse things, “effect” can also be a verb meaning to cause something to happen.

And, to *further* complicate things, “affect” can be noun, but only very rarely — generally in psychology.

Examples

Affect as verb

The boy was *affected* by the trauma he had witnessed.

Affect as a noun

The experiment triggered a strong negative *affect* on the participants.

Effect as a noun

The *effect* of the economic downturn was a depressed job market.

Effect as a verb

I hope to *effect* significant change at my organization in the coming years.

Rules of Thumb

Given the variety of forms these particular words can take, you might still be confused. Fortunately, there's a shortcut.

Assume that if a verb makes sense, it's probably going to be "affect." And if it's a noun, it's probably going to be "effect."

If you're not sure, try switching in another noun and another verb to see if the sentence makes sense.

Take, for example, the sentence, "The boy was *streetcar* by trauma he witnessed." It doesn't make any sense, since "streetcar" is a noun.

But take the sentence, "The boy was *bamboozled* by the trauma he witnessed." It does make grammatical sense, because bamboozle is a verb.

The same goes for effect.

Consider: "The *streetcar* of the economic downturn was a depressed job market." Versus: "The *bamboozle* of the economic downturn was a depressed job market."

As you can see, only "streetcar" sounds right.

Except vs Accept

These two are difficult because they're similarly spelled homophones. But they have two very different meanings.

The Official Rules

"Except" means to exclude something or say "everything but this one thing."

"Accept" means to receive something or recognize an idea as true or correct.

Examples

Since this single word can completely reverse the meaning of a sentence, it's particularly problematic. For example, imagine the sentences:

- People usually *accept* facts of the argument.
- People usually *except* facts of the argument.

The first means that the facts are generally agreed to be true or correct. The second means that the facts are generally ignored or excluded.

what's why getting it right is so important.

Rules of Thumb

Fortunately, there is an easy way to remember:

- If you want to use “accept,” remember that it needs to be **a**-okay. If something is **a**-okay, then it can be accepted.
- If it's *not* **a**-okay, then it's probably going to be “except.”

That's because “accept” is usually used to describe something positive, whereas “except” is usually describing something that doesn't conform or is negative.

Lose vs Loose

In this case, the words don't sound the same, but are spelled very similarly. If you get this wrong, you might look silly, but it is unlikely that your reader will be confused.

The Official Rules

“Lose” is a verb that means to not win, to experience a loss, or to misplace something.

“Loose” is usually an adjective to mean not tightened down. However, it can also mean to release.

Examples

- When I play chess, I *lose* about half the time.
- The screw was *loose*, so the table fell apart.

Rules of Thumb

A good way to remember this is the rhyme, “There's a moose on the loose.”

If you're spelling it with two Os, then it has to rhyme with “moose.” If you're only spelling it with one, then you mean that you lost something.

They're, Their, and There

This particular grammar rule gets a lot of discussion throughout popular culture. But the truth is, it's not that hard to get this just right. And unlike a lot of "rules" on this list, their/there/they're is one where there truly is no wiggle room. You're either correct or not.

Fortunately, it's easy to use the right one.

The Official Rules

"They're" is a contraction of "they are."

"Their" is the possessive form of "they." It shows ownership of something.

"There" is an adverb referring to a place or where something is. It points to where something is or is going.

Examples

- They're wondering where the dog went.
- Their dog ran into the cafe.
- They found the dog when they went over there.

Rules of Thumb

If you want to know if you should be using "they're" just switch out the word for "they are." If it still makes sense, you're good to go.

For "their" and "there," try replacing the word with "our." If it still makes sense, then you should "their." If it doesn't, then you need to use "there." For example:

- Our dog ran into the cafe. — Their dog ran into the cafe.
- They found the dog when they went over our. — They found the dog when they went over there."

The first sentence makes sense but the second doesn't. Thus, the first sentence uses "their" and the second uses "there."

Two vs To vs Too

"To," in its various forms, is one of the most common words you'll ever write. Knowing which "to" to use is critical.

Fortunately, the rules are easy to remember.

The Official Rules and Examples

“Two” is the written version of the number 2: “An infinitive has *two* words.”

“To” has two functions. First, it is used to show movement or direction: “Let’s go over *to* the library.”

Second, it is used to create infinitives, which are verbs that are not bound to a subject. For example: “*Star Trek* was a show meant *to* go boldly where no human had gone before.”

The word “too” has two functions as well. First, it can be used as an adverb meaning “also.” For example: “I went to the store *too*.”

“Too” can also be used as a modifier meaning “excessive.” For example, “The water was *too* hot.”

Rules of Thumb

Getting the right “to” is easy. First, unless you’re talking about the number 2, don’t use “two.”

Second, “too” will very often go at the end of a sentence: “We went to the library *too*.” If it’s mid-sentence, however, and you’re not sure, substitute the word with “very” or “also.” If it makes sense with either, use “too.”

Finally, if in doubt, use “to.” This is by far the most common one that you’ll use, so if you’re really not sure, this is your best guess.

Data vs datum

Yes, there is an actual rule here. However, it’s worth noting that, like many other words, data is used incorrectly so often it’s unlikely to have any impact on readability or comprehension.

If you simply use what you think sounds best, 99% of the time that’s going to be absolutely fine.

However, if you’re writing something academic, talking about primary research, or just want to get it 100% right, then here’s how you can know when to use data and when to use datum.

The Official Rules

“Data” is a Latin-based word and is the plural of “datum.”

“Datum” is the singular version of “data.”

Examples

- The *data* show that the hypothesis was correct.
- One outlying *datum* point is fairly standard to see in experiments.

Rules of Thumb

In general, you should *always* use “data.” Using “datum” will make you sound pedantic and pretentious. What’s more, it will confuse many of your readers.

The only time you should use “datum” is if you are writing for a publication that uses it. Thus, you might use “datum” in a scientific paper. But even in this context, it is getting increasingly rare.

Given this, the examples above should be changed to:

- The *data* show that the hypothesis was correct.
- One outlying *data* point is fairly standard to see in experiments.

Note: if anyone ever gives you any guff about “datum,” ask them what they think of the word “media” as in all the newspapers, magazines, and television shows. It is almost always treated as being singular. For example: “The media is biased!” But if someone insists that you say “datum point,” you can insist they say “media are.”

Quote vs Quotation

This is an easy one to get right. But it’s worth noting that, like so many things in language, the incorrect version is used so often now that it’s rarely seen as an error.

Thus, it’s not essential to get this one right. But if you want to keep your writing clean and clear, it helps to be correct.

The Official Rules

“Quote” is a verb. “Quotation” is a noun.

Examples

To *quote* Shakespeare, “Man delights not me.”

One of my favorite Shakespeare *quotations* is “Man delights not me.”

Rules of Thumb

The best way to know if you’re right is to switch the word for “goat.” If the sentence still makes sense, it’s “quotation.” If not, it’s “quote.” If you like rhyming couplets:

If it's "goat"
Don't use "quote."

Breath vs Breathe

This is another quote/quotation situation. But unlike there where it doesn't matter too much if you get it right, this distinction is important. You will look ignorant if you use the wrong word.

The Official Rules

"Breath" is a noun, meaning the air in your lungs. You can take a quick *breath* or you can hold your *breath*.

"Breathe" is a verb. It's the doing version of breath. You take breaths, but what you are doing is breathing.

Examples

- He took a deep *breath* to steady his nerves.
- If you're feeling stressed, remember to *breathe* through your nose.

Rules of Thumb

If you're struggling to remember which one to use, here are two tricks to help you.

1. Remember the extra "e" in "breathe" is for "exhale," since that's what you do when you "breathe."
2. Switch the word for the word "death." If it still makes sense, then "breath" is the word you want. If it doesn't, then it needs to be "breathe." Here's another rhyming couplet:

If it works with death
It must be breath.

It's vs Its

Even experienced writers make this mistake. And there's a good reason: it isn't logical.

The Official Rules

"It's" is a contraction of "it is" or "it has." "Its" (with no apostrophe) is the possessive form of "it" and is used as an attributive adjective. This means that it connects the adjective to the noun being described.

Examples

- *It's* very cold outside.
- *It's* been very cold outside.
- My cat destroyed *its* favorite toy.

Rules of Thumb

Like most contractions, expanding the word into its separate terms will tell you if you're right or not. If you expand "it's" into "it is" or "it has" and the sentence still makes sense, then using the apostrophe is correct.

If not, then you should drop the apostrophe and use "its."

You're vs Your

Yet another problem caused by apostrophes.

The Official Rules

"You're" is a contraction of "you are." "Your" is the possessive version of you. It's used mostly to show ownership of something, but it can be used for a few other things like an informal collective: "He's *your* Average Joe."

The possessive function is the most common, and where the most mistakes crop up.

Examples

- *Your* suit is really nice.
- *You're* suited well for this job.

Rules of Thumb

Like all contractions, the best way to know if you're right is to simply expand the words out to *you are*. If the sentence says what you want, then it should be "you're." If it doesn't then it should be *your* with no apostrophe.

For example, "*You are* suit is really nice" doesn't make sense. But "*You are* suited well for this job" does.

Who's vs Whose

Once again, the apostrophe rears its ugly head. But as with It's/Its and You're/Your, it isn't hard to figure out which one is right.

The Official Rules

“Who’s” is a contraction of “who is.” “Whose” is the possessive form of “who” or, more informally, “which.”

Examples

- Who’s going to host the party?
- Whose party are you going to?
- Whose [Which] team are you supporting?

Rules of Thumb

The *best* way to make sure you’re using any contraction correctly is to separate out the words. If you can swap in “who is” for your word and it still makes sense, then you need the apostrophe. If it doesn’t then the answer is “whose.”

We’re vs Were

Although these two words look similar and sound identical, they are very different.

The Official Rules

“We’re” is short for “we are.”

“Were” is the past version of the verb “to be.”

Examples

- *We’re* going to be movies.
- Where *were* you last night?
- *Were* you going to the game later?

Rules of Thumb

Like all apostrophe problems involving contractions, simply read your sentence aloud with the un-contracted words. In this case, “we are.” For example, “We are going to the movies” makes sense. “Where we are you last night” does not.

If it makes sense when you un-contract, use *we’re*. If it doesn’t, then you need to use *were*.

Each Other’s vs Each Others’

This is another funny apostrophe that seems to throw a lot of people off, but the fact is only one of these is right: “each other’s.”

The Official Rules and Example

Each other's is the possessive form of each. Since we generally add 's to nouns to make them possessive, we do that here.

The reason that it's not "each others" is because it would imply that "other" was a plural noun.

For example, "We held *each other's* hands" is correct. "We held *each others'* hands" is not.

Rules of Thumb

The easiest way to remember this is to remember that "other" is singular. If you remember that, then you can't go wrong.

Alot vs A Lot

Sorry to all you "alot" fans out there, but there's some bad news. "Alot" just isn't a word. No major dictionary recognizes it. (Note: "alot" is a word!)

So the rule is easy. Never, ever use "alot." It's *always* "a lot."

Then vs Than

The difference between "then" and "than" is probably one of the most confusing issues commonly facing a writer. This is particularly true because each of these words has so many functions.

The Official Rules

"Then" is an adverb but can be used as an adjective. Normally, it's used in some way related to time or process.

"Than" is a conjunction used to compare two or more things.

Examples

- I was at the pool *then*.
- First you add the eggs, *then* you add the sugar.
- I like potatoes more *than* carrots.

Rules of Thumb

If you're talking about something that happens in a series, you use "then." If you're not talking about a series like that, you probably mean "than."

Another way to remember it is “than” is for making comparisons. Finally, you always have more “than” or less “than” someone else. Never more “then” someone else.

Ensure vs insure

You might be surprised, but ensure and insure actually have subtly different meanings. And in some contexts, getting just the right word can be important.

The Official Rules

“Ensure” means to guarantee something will or won’t happen.

“Insure” means to arrange for insurance for something or arrange protection against something.

Examples

- I *ensure* that my clients get the best service.
- He *insured* his boat for \$25,000.

Rules of Thumb

To get the right word, just remember that *insure* relates to insurance.

If you’re not talking in some way about insurance, you probably mean “ensure.”

Principle vs principal

Principle or principal is always tricky because you probably don’t use these words all that often *and* they’re extremely similar. It makes it hard to remember the right one, and usually means you have to look it up every time you want to use it.

The Official Rules

“Principle” is straightforward. It’s a noun that means idea or rule. “Principal” is harder. It’s both an adjective and a noun, depending on how it’s used. As an adjective, it describes something of primary importance. And as a noun, it means the most important part of something.

“Principal” also has special meaning in finance having to do with the amount of money borrowed or invested.

Examples

- Our organization is built on the *principle* of respect.
- She is the *principal* architect of the project.
- I bought a house for \$100,000 with 30% down, so my *principal* is \$70,000.

Rules of Thumb

If you're talking about an idea or rule, it's usually principle. If you're talking about something being first or important, then it's usually principal.

If in doubt, remember the sentence: "The head of the school is *Principal Al*."

Fewer vs Less

Despite what grammar enthusiasts might think, language and grammar are not set in stone. And for some words, the rules and their use don't match up very clearly at all. "Fewer" and "less" are two examples of this.

The Official Rules

"Fewer" is only for use when the things you're referring to are countable. "Less" is for referring to things that are uncountable.

Examples

- I have *fewer* bottles of waters.
- I have *less* water.

Rules of Thumb

If you can count the thing you're referring to, it should be "fewer." If you can't count it, it should be "less." However, this is a distinction that few readers are even aware of. More important, confusing the two words *never* creates confusion.

Farther vs Further

"Farther" and "further" are often used interchangeably. Which is great! It means it's much harder to be wrong. But using these words as intended will make your writing more exacting.

The Official Rules

Technically, there is very little difference between these words. "Further" can be used as a verb whereas "farther" cannot. For example: "They were *furthering* their careers by taking night classes."

Otherwise, they're both used adverbs and adjectives to describe putting distance between two things.

Officially, there is no real rule on when to use one or the other, but generally “farther” relates to measurable distances and “further” relates to abstract distances. This is particularly true in American English.

Examples

- I can throw the ball *farther* than you.
- I had gone *further* in my career than I ever expected.

Rules of Thumb

The best way to remember which one to use is that you use “farther” for physical distances and “further” for metaphorical ones.

Grammar Girl podcast creator [Mignon Fogarty](#) says the easiest way to remember this is that *farther* had *far* in it, which obviously relates to physical distance.

Lay vs Lie

“Lay” and “lie” (not to be confused with lye) are two little, tiny, completely bewildering words. Here’s how you use them correctly every time.

The Official Rules

“Lay” is a verb that means to put something down carefully. It can usually be replaced with the verb “to place.” “Lie” is a verb that means to rest on a horizontal surface. It’s a synonym of “recline.”

Lay requires a direct object — you need something to lay down, like a brick. Lie has no such requirement — you don’t need a direct object to lie down. That’s why you can “lie down for a nap.” There’s no direct object, so we use “lie.”

Where it gets confusing is with the past tense. The past tense of *lie* is *lay*. Confused? Maybe this table will help:

Simple Present	Present Participle	Simple Past	Past Participle
Lie	Lying	Lay	Lain
Lay	Laying	Laid	Laid

Examples

Lay

- They *lay* down the beach towels.
- They are *laying* down the beach towels.

- They *laid* down the beach towels.
- They have *laid* down the beach towels.

Lie

- They *lie* down for a nap.
- They are *lying* down for a nap.
- They *lay* down for a nap.
- They have *lain* for a nap.

Rules of Thumb

A good way to remember which is which is the term, “Lay it on me.” “It” is the direct object, which is why it’s “Lay it on me,” and not “Lie it on me.”

And whenever you’re not sure, just write out the six words above. Usually, when you write them all out, it becomes clear which one is right.

Die vs Dye

This is another tricky one because of the similarities between die and dye in spelling and the fact that they’re homophones. Plus, they’re funny looking words.

The Official Rules

“Die” is both a verb meaning to become dead as well as a noun, as in the singular form of “dice” — the things people use for gambling and role playing games. “Dye” is both a noun and a verb and refers to coloring something and that something being colored.

Examples

- He rolled the *die* and got a six.
- Fred *died* from cancer last year.
- She *dyed* her friend’s hair blue.
- He used a red *dye* for his project.

Rules of Thumb

The easiest way to remember whether to use “die” or “dye” is to think of the movie *Die Hard*. It’s about a rogue cop fighting off Hans Gruber at Christmas, not about a Scottish shepherd dying wool.

Discreet vs Discrete

Discreet and discrete, though they sound the same, actually have very different meanings. Here's how to know when to use each one.

The Official Rules

“Discreet” is an adjective that means to unobtrusive, quiet, and careful to blend into the background. It can also mean to be cagey and obfuscate the true meaning of something.

“Discrete,” on the other hand, means “a distinct and separate entity.” It's often used in academic and scientific literature to describe data where each point is unrelated to the point before and after it. For example, flipping a coin creates a series of “discrete” events because the results of the first one don't impact later coin flips.

Examples

- When I picked up the cake for the surprise party, the baker was mercifully *discreet* so as not to alert my wife.
- An orchestra might sound like a single entity, but in reality it's lots and lots of *discrete* sounds.

Rules of Thumb

Given that “discreet” is used much more often in general writing than “discrete,” just memorize how “discreet” is spelled. When you run into a situation where you need to use the word “discrete,” just look it up.

Elicit vs Illicit

“Elicit” and “illicit” are two words you do *not* want to confuse. You might end up in legal hot water if you do!

The Official Rules

“Elicit” is a verb meaning to ask for help or assistance. Oftentimes, it's used to describe asking for money or a donation.

“Illicit,” on the other hand, means something is underhanded or illegal, like the *illicit* sales of drugs or the *illicit* use of software for music piracy.

You can see why you don't want to mix the two up!

Examples

- The President called to *elicit* donations to support the campaign.
- There's a rising tide of *illicit* economic activity in our cities.

Rules of Thumb

“Illicit” is obviously derived from the same word as “illegal.” So that isn’t hard to remember. “Elicit” comes from the Latin word *elicere*, which means to produce as if by magic, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. But mostly, you will know you want to use the word “elicit” because what is being done is *not* illegal.

Precede vs Proceed

“Precede” and “proceed” are uniquely frustrating for writers because not only do they sound the same, but they mean broadly the same things — go forward. However, their more nuanced meanings are quite different, so it’s worth knowing when to use one over the other.

The Official Rules

“Precede” is a verb that means to happen before something else or be in front of something in an order or process.

“Proceed,” on the other hand, means to go forward, usually after an interruption. The idea is that whatever action or thing you’re talking about is part of a process that’s already in motion, rather than an action or thing that happens before a process starts.

Examples

- The eggs usually *precede* the flour when you’re making cookies.
- The cook *proceeded* despite not having any eggs, and the cookies were terrible.

Rules of Thumb

Pre- usually means “come before.” Prenuptial agreements come before marriage, pre-K comes before kindergarten, pre-order means order before the product comes out.

The same goes for the pre- in “precede.” If you’re using precedes, you’re talking about something that comes before something else.

A vs An

Word processors are usually good at picking up this particular error, but it’s still good to know when to use “a” and when to use “an.”

The Official Rules

“A” and “an” are indefinite articles that tell the reader the noun that’s being talked about is generic, not specific. For example, “I saw *a* movie about *a* boat.” Compare that to, “I saw *the* movie *Titanic* about *the* boat *Titanic*.”

Oddly, in English, for indefinite articles, it's the sound that's important to whether you use "a" or "an." "An" is used when the next word starts with a vowel, or makes a vowel sound. "A" is used the rest of the time.

Examples

- I want to get *a* snickers bar.
- I want to get *an* ice cream cone.
- I went to the cafe for *an* hour. (Note that even though "hour" doesn't start with a vowel, the *sound* of the word does, so it is preceded by "an" rather than "a.")

Rules of Thumb

The rules here are easy. Keep vowels separate! If you're not sure, read the sentence out loud and listen to how it sounds. Most of the time, what sounds right is what will *be* right.

There is still some disagreement about words like "historical." As far back as Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926), the advice has been to use "a" if you aspirate the "h." Since virtually no one says "Istorical" today, you should use "a historical" and not "an historical." When speaking, this is obviously true. Saying "an historical" makes the speaker look paradoxically ignorant *and* pretentious.

Advice vs Advise

"Advice" and "advise" are often used interchangeably, but in fact carry two distinctly different meanings.

The Official Rules

"Advice" is a noun meaning "guidance or recommendations." "Advise" is the verb meaning to provide advice.

Examples

- I would like some *advice* on how best to write a blog.
- I *advised* my friend on how to shop for backpacks.

Rules of Thumb

The easiest way to remember this distinction is to read the words aloud. The "s" in "advise" is pronounced with a "z" sound and is clearly the verb. "Advice" sounds just like it is spelled and is clearly the noun.

Compliment vs Complement

These two words are particularly easy to confuse because they look and sound similar *and* have similar meanings. However, they do actually mean different things.

The Official Rules

“Compliment” is a noun and a verb meaning praise (noun) or to praise (verb). “Complement” is a noun and a verb meaning to enhanced or to be made so.

Examples

- My *compliments* to the chef! The green beans *complemented* the steak beautifully.

Rules of Thumb

The best way to keep these straight is to remember that if something “**complements**” something, it “**completes**” it.

Latter vs ladder

This is one of those pesky little grammar confusions that, unfortunately, will make you look like a dingus if you get it wrong. On the plus side, there’s a very easy trick to getting it right every single time.

The Official Rules and Examples

“Latter” refers to something that happened towards the end of something, like the *latter* (second) half of the movie. Usually, it means the second thing to happen of two, but it can be used to mean the last of a series.

Most frequently, it’s used in the term *the former and the latter*, as in:

- The professor made two arguments. The former was convincing, but the *latter* was not.

“Ladder” is a noun, which refers to the thing that you climb onto roofs with. Think of “stepladder” or a “frame ladder.”

Rules of Thumb

“Latter” refers to the end of something or the second of a comparison. You can remember this because it is similar to “late.” You can remember “ladder” just because it isn’t “latter.”

Lead vs Led

This is a classic mistake. There are a few reasons why this is so. For one thing, the similarly structured word “read” does not change to “red” for its past tense. Equally vexing is that “led” is pronounced the same way the element “lead” is.

The Official Rules

“Lead” is a verb meaning to be in charge of something else. And as we just mentioned, it is also a metal that is pronounced “led.”

“Led” is the past tense of lead.

Examples

- I like to *lead* my team to victory.
- Last night, I *led* my team to victory.
- *Lead* is extremely toxic, especial to children.

Rules of Thumb

The best way to remember that led is the past tense of lead is to remember these rhyming couplets:

In present tense, you lead the way
But once you’re done, you drop the “a.”

Aisle vs Isle

These two funny looking words cause no end of confusion. Here’s how you get them right.

The Official Rules and Examples

“Aisle” is a noun meaning a narrow passage through something. For example, “The store was so crowded it was hard to get through the toy aisle.”

“Isle,” on the other hand, is a term for a small island, and is often made plural (“isles”) to describe a chain of small islands. For example, “The *Isle* of Man is a small island in the Irish Sea.”

Rules of Thumb

Remember that “isle” and “island” look the same, and you’ll never be browsing the “isles” again.

Stationery vs Stationary

These words are asymmetric. Writing “stationery” for “stationary” would likely look bad. Most people wouldn’t notice if you wrote “stationary” for “stationery,” however.

The Official Rules

“Stationary” is an adjective meaning fixed or not moving. It can also mean stable or unchanging.

“Stationery” refers to the stuff on your desk — pens, papers, envelopes, and other generic office material. In particular, it’s often used to mean paper that has matching envelopes.

Examples

- The truck was idling at the light, completely *stationary*.
- Wilson had some beautiful *stationery* on his desk.

Rules of Thumb

Most people know the word “stationary,” which is why “stationery” is so often misspelled “stationary.” All you really have to remember is that “stationery” is *not* “stationary.” Then you can look it up, or just remember that it has that odd “e” where the “a” ought to go.

Poor vs Pore vs Pour

So many options. Which poor to use?

The Official Rules

“Poor” is an adjective meaning to be without. Usually it refers to money (“alms for the poor”) but can also be combined with other words to reference being without something other than cash (eg, “time poor”).

“Pore” is both a noun meaning a tiny hole in a surface (using skin) and a verb, meaning to look something over extremely carefully and with great interest.

Finally, “pour” is a verb meaning to move liquid in the form of a stream.

Examples

- *Poor* people often can’t cover basic expenses.
- If your *pores* get clogged, it can lead to infection.
- It *poured* with rain all weekend.

Rules of Thumb

Most people have no trouble with “poor” and “pour.” They are common words that we all use a lot. “Pore,” however, is a bit of a pain. You can associate “pore” with “bore.” That makes sense because pores are like holes that have been bored in a surface. The other definition of “pore,” is harder. But it is also the least used. Like so many words, the key is knowing that there is something to know. And remembering that “looking something over carefully” has a word that sounds like “poor” should be all you need to remember that it is spelled “pore.”

Illusion vs Allusion

“Illusion” and “allusion” look so similar that it’s no wonder that people find them so confusing.

The Official Rules

“Illusion” is a fake or mistaken belief or a deliberate effort to hide or cover up the truth.

“Allusion” is an often subtle reference to something else, like an “allusion” to a past book an author wrote or an “allusion” to a shared experience.

Examples

- The magician presented the *illusion* of a ball floating in the air.
- The hat sequence in *Waiting for Godot* is an *allusion* to Charlie Chaplin.

Rules of Thumb

An “illusion” is something that is illustrated. An allusion is something that is alluding to something else.

Alley vs ally

“Alley” and “ally” do sound different which means they’re never confused when spoken. But when you’re writing, it’s a whole different story.

The Official Rules

“Alley” is a narrow passage, often between tall buildings. “Ally” is someone or something who has a positive relationship or agreement with you.

Examples

- The *alley* behind the restaurant was always creepy at night.
- In WWII, the UK, US, and USSR were *allies* against Germany and Japan.

Rules of Thumb

All you need to do is picture an old Greek or Roman **galley** with a single narrow path between all the rowers and remember: galleys have alleys.

You can also remember that the two words are spelled just about the opposite of what you would expect. For example, “alley” sounds like it ends with -ly, but doesn’t. And “ally” *does* end with -ly, but doesn’t sound like that at all.

Summary

As you start to expand your blog and explore writing more, you’ll discover that grammar is more of a loose set of guideline than an absolute authority.

And this isn’t a bad thing.

In fact, its dynamism is exactly what makes language so incredible. It’s the reason that we can add words like “quiz,” “selfie,” “computer,” “sticky-outy,” and “bug-eyed” to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As humans, we’re always inventing new stuff, and we need words to describe it.

One thing to watch out for is over-reliance on your computer. This article is filled with words that your computer will not have a problem with. If you write, “The Alleys won the Second World War,” your computer won’t have any problem with it. (It might amuse your reader, but not in a way you want.) So you have to take responsibility for what you write.

One step in doing that is to bookmark this cheatsheet. It really is handy. You can always avoid embarrassing yourself by searching Google, but most of your questions are answered right here.

The main thing is to concentrate on writing well. Don’t let the story you’re trying to tell get destroyed by obsessing over grammar details. Just the same, you don’t want bad grammar to destroy the story you are trying to tell. It’s a balancing act.

Have fun blogging!