

Mastering Commonly Confused Words

Stan C. Smith

(Note: some of these examples were borrowed from <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/commonly-confused-words>, as well as other sites)

We've all been there. Your spell checker shows you no error, but still you have used the wrong word. It happens to me more frequently than I like to admit. There are also those words that look or sound so similar that they are often used interchangeably, and therefore incorrectly.

Let's get these pesky words sorted out once and for all! The following list is not complete, of course, but it includes many of the most commonly confused words.

Who's vs. Whose

I think this is confusing because 's is usually used to show possessive.

Who's is a contraction of "who is."

"Who's going to go with Stan to the store?"

Whose is a possessive pronoun that means "belonging to [someone]."

"Stan, whose wallet is empty, wants you to go to the store with him to pay for his groceries."

Toward vs. Towards

Oh boy, I see this one all the time!

Toward is mostly used in American English.

"Stan drove toward the store by himself."

Towards is mostly used in British English.

Gray vs. Grey

Another common mistake.

Gray is the color in American English.

Grey is the color in British English.

Personally, I use *grey* to describe a mood, or to describe an object or person as being without interest or character. "Stan was in a grey mood when he saw the bill for his groceries."

To vs. Too

Oh, if I only had a nickel for every time these have been mixed up.

To is a preposition that indicates direction.

"Stan went to the dairy section to return his extra milk."

To is also used before an infinitive verb:

"Stan waited until the last minute to return his extra package of porkchops."

Too is used as an intensifier, and also means "also."

"Stan had too much extra stuff in his cart."

Too also means "also."

Stan had waited too long to do his shopping, too.

Affect vs. Effect

Affect is usually a verb.

“Stan’s eating habits affected his grocery bill.”

Effect is usually a noun.

“Stan was sorry for the effect his eating habits had on his grocery bill.”

A good test: Can you substitute the word with “alter?” Then use *affect*.
Can you substitute the word with “result?” Then use *effect*.

Among vs. Between

Among expresses a collective or loose relationship of several items.

“Stan found three extra packages of cheese among the other items in his cart.”

Between expresses a relationship of one thing to other things.

“Stan spent most of his shopping time between the cereal aisle and the juice aisle.”

Among vs. Amongst

Among is usually used in American English.

Amongst is usually used in British English.

Neither is wrong, but *amongst* may be too fancy for American readers.

Assure vs. Ensure vs. Insure

Assure means to convince someone that something is true.

“The checkout lady assured Stan that the grocery total was correct.”

Ensure means to make sure of something.

“Stan took steps to ensure that his grocery bill would not be so high the next time.”

Insure means to get an insurance policy for someone or something.

“Stan was glad his truck was insured as he drove home from the store on icy roads.”

Breath vs. Breathe

Breath is a noun, referring to a volume of air that goes in and out of your lungs.

“Stan held his breath as the checkout lady added up his total bill.”

Breathe is a verb, meaning to exhale or inhale

“After seeing the total, Stan had to remind himself to breathe again.”

Capital vs. Capitol

Capital has several meanings—an uppercase letter, money, or a city where government is located.

“Stan was shocked, with a capital S.”

Capitol means the building where a legislature meets.

“Stan considered going to the capitol in Jefferson City to protest outrageous grocery prices.”

Complement vs. Compliment

Complement is used to describe things that go well together.

“Stan’s blue grocery-shopping shoes were a perfect complement to his grocery-shopping shirt.”

Compliment is a noun meaning a nice thing to say.

“Stan received many compliments on his grocery-shopping outfit.”

Disinterested vs. Uninterested

Disinterested is an adjective meaning impartial.

“A panel of disinterested judges who had never met Stan before judged his shopping outfit.”

Uninterested is an adjective meaning bored or not wanting to be involved with something.

“Stan was claimed to be uninterested in the opinions of others regarding his shopping outfit.”

Defence vs. Defense

Defense is used in American English.

Defence is used in British English.

“In his own defense, Stan claimed that shopping was the only time he got out of the house.”

Emigrate vs. Immigrate

Emigrate is a verb meaning to move *away* from a city or country to live somewhere else.

“Stan and Trish emigrated from Warrensburg to Truman Lake, hoping to find adequate grocery shopping.”

Immigrate is a verb meaning to move *into* a country from somewhere else.

“Stan met a shopper at the store who had immigrated to the US from Ireland in 1978.”

e.g. vs. i.e.

These Latin abbreviations are often mixed up

e.g. means “for example.”

“Stan bought too many similar types of cereal (e.g., Cheerios, Happy Os, Silly Os).

i.e. means “that is.”

“Stan spent too much of his budget on cereal (i.e., 25 percent).”

Empathy vs. Sympathy

Empathy is the ability to understand another person’s perspective or feelings.

“Stan had empathy for the Irish shopper he met, who had sixteen boxes on Lucky Charms in his cart.”

Sympathy is a feeling of sorrow for someone else’s suffering.

“Stan felt sympathy for lactose intolerant people who couldn’t put milk on their Cheerios.”

Farther vs. Further

This one is a pet peeve of mine!

Farther refers to *physical* distance.

“Stan lives farther from the nearest grocery store than he used to.”

Further refers to metaphorical distance.

“Stan is further away from accepting the grocery-store distance than Trish is.”

“And to make a further point, Stan likes milk on his cereal.”

Flaunt vs. Flout

Flaunt is a verb meaning to show off.

“Stan flaunted his expert ability to push a full grocery cart at a high speed.”

Flout is a verb meaning to defy, especially in a way that shows scorn.

“Stan flouted the standard casual-dress code by wearing his fanciest grocery-shopping outfit.”

Gaff vs. Gaffe

Gaff is noun for a type of spear or hook with a long handle.

“Stan brought along a fishing gaff to get Cheerios that were out of reach on the top shelf.”

Gaffe is a noun referring to an awkward social misstep.

“Stan made a gaffe when he accidentally called the checkout lady by the wrong name.”

Historic vs. Historical

Historic means famous, important, or influential.

“Stan visited the historic store where Cheerios were first sold on May 1, 1941.”

Historical means related to history.

“Stan donned his historical coonskin cap to attend the National Pioneer Grocery Shopping Festival.”

Imply vs. Infer

Imply is a verb meaning to hint at something without saying it directly.

“Stan rudely implied that grocery shopping was a great skill requiring years of training.”

Infer is a verb meaning to deduce something that hasn't been stated directly.

“Stan inferred that the Irish man was self-conscious about his Lucky Charms from the way he kept looking over his shoulder.”

It's vs. Its

It's is a contraction of “it is.”

“Stan needs to prepare for his next grocery-shopping trip because it's only two days away.”

Its is a possessive pronoun that means “belonging to it.”

“Stan is obsessed with the grocery store and its wonderful products.”

Lay vs. Lie

This is the big kahuna! How many times have I had to look these up? Hmm...

Lay is a verb meaning to put or to place something.

“Stan will lay out his shopping outfit for the bid day.”

Lie is a verb meaning to recline.

“After shopping, Stan will lie down for a nap.”

Oh no! It gets even more confusing!

The past tense of *lay* is **laid** (by the way... the word *layed* is archaic and is no longer considered proper).

“Stan laid out his outfit.”

And... the past tense of *lie* is **lay** (What the heck??)

“Stan lay down for a nap over an hour ago.”

Wait! Then there's the *past participle*:

For **lay**, it is **laid**.

“Stan had **laid** his outfit out before he left.”

For **lie**, it is **lain**.

Stan had **lain** there for some time before getting up.

(by the way... **lied** is only used as the past tense of *lie*, which means “to make an untrue statement.”)

Wait! There's also the *present participle*!

For **lay**, it is **laying**.

“Stan was **laying** the blanket on the floor.”

For **lie**, it is **lying**.

“Stan has been **lying** down since he got home from shopping.”

Pretty simple, huh? 😊