
Commonly Confused Words

There are several words in the English language that are commonly used incorrectly. If you find yourself confused by the difference between some of the words below, you are not alone. This handout is designed to provide a brief summary of the differences between some commonly confused words to help you understand these errors and make your writing stronger.

That vs. Which

Key difference:

That is used with restrictive clauses (parts of the sentence you cannot get rid of because they specify what you are talking about), and which is used with non-restrictive clauses. Hint: Non-restrictive clauses are often surrounded by commas and the sentence will not lose its meaning if you remove it.

Examples:

1. Movies that have superheroes are unrealistic.
(Here you can tell that as soon as you remove “that have superheroes” the meaning of the sentence changes.)
2. Movies with superheroes, which are quite expensive to make, are unrealistic.
(Here, even if you take out the clause surrounded by commas, the sentence does not lose its meaning.)

That vs. Who

Key difference:

That is used when you are referring to a thing, whereas who is used when you are talking about a person. Writers have used them interchangeably in the past; however, you run the risk of making a person sound inanimate or lifeless when you do so. With regards to animals, which are neither human beings nor inanimate, this is a grey area. Use your best judgement and see which one sounds appropriate.

Examples:

1. The chair that swivels is more comfortable.
(Here you use that to refer to the chair. It would sound awkward to use who.)
2. The girl who usually sits here is Rhea.
(Here you use who to refer to Rhea, who is a person.)

Who vs. Whom

Key difference:

Who is used when you are referring to the subject of a sentence, whereas whom is used when you are referring to the object of a sentence. Tip: To know which one to use, ask yourself, “Who/Whom am I referring to?” If the answer is “he/she,” then you should use who. Conversely, if your answer is “him/her,” you should be using whom.

Examples:

1. Who is in charge here?
(Here the answer would be “he/ she is.”)
2. Whom does this scarf belong to?
(Here the answer would be “to him/her.”)

Than vs. Then**Key difference:**

Than is primarily used to make comparisons. On the other hand, then is used to place actions on a timeline or to illustrate consequence. Then is also the opposite of “now.”

Examples:

1. My dog is bigger than all of her dogs.
(Here you are comparing things.)
2. In terms of money, Scrooge has much more than his employees.
(Here you are comparing quantities.)
3. If you are speeding at a sharp turn, then you are more likely to get into an accident.
(Here there is an “if...then” clause, so the then describes the potential consequence.)
4. Simba defeated Scar and then took back his kingdom.
(Here you can tell the order in which events took place based on the word used.)
5. I was much younger then.
(Here we know that this sentence is about the past because we can infer that the speaker is much older now.)

Effect vs. Affect**Key difference:**

Affect is usually a verb, whereas effect is commonly used as a noun. Sometimes the words also have other meanings. Affect can also mean “a show of emotion” (noun), and effect can mean “bringing about” something (verb). Context can help you decide which one to use if the words are not being used in common contexts.

Examples:

1. The forecasted storm is expected to affect several people.
2. When he was being cross examined, his affect was cold and emotionless.
3. The tsunami had a negative effect on the livelihood of residents.
4. By voting in elections, citizens can effect change in the country.

Learnt vs. Learned**Key difference:**

When using the past tense of the word “learn,” British writers use learnt, whereas writers from North America use learned. Learnt is considered to be more colloquial (informal). Note that learned (pronounced lur-ned) can also mean “profoundly knowledgeable” when it is being used as an adjective to describe a person.

Examples:

1. I have learnt to be patient as I practice playing the piano.
2. I learned about commonly confused words the other day.