

Finding the Right Words (Part 1)

distinguishing between similar words with slightly different meanings

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

It is sometimes difficult to choose the right words when similar words have different meanings. This is the first in a series of newsletters designed to help you distinguish between two or more similar words.

accept or except

Accept is a verb meaning “to receive or to agree to.” *Except* is usually a preposition or a conjunction (both connecting words) meaning “but or excluding.”

The chief *accepted* all of our suggestions *except* the one to implement a driver’s training program for the volunteers.

Except can also be used as a verb meaning “to exclude or leave out.”

Earthquake damage is *excepted* from coverage in the basic insurance policy.

advice or advise

Advice is a noun that refers to a recommendation or suggestion. *Advise* is a verb meaning “to give counsel, to recommend, or to suggest.”

When people ask us for *advice* as to how to make their homes more secure, we *advise* them to install deadbolt locks.

affect or effect

Affect is usually a verb meaning “to influence or change.” *Effect* is usually a noun referring to a result or a state of being operational.

Smoke inhalation can *affect* a person’s judgment.

The *effects* of smoke inhalation can be seen after only a brief exposure.

Accept means “to receive or to agree to.”

Please accept my apology.



Except means “but or excluding.”

We can’t give that information to anyone except the immediate family.

Effect is sometimes used as a verb meaning “to produce a result.”

We must *effect* a quick rescue.

Affect is used as a noun only in the field of psychiatry. It refers to an expressed or observed emotional response.

The *affect* is typical of a schizophrenic individual.

assure, ensure, or insure

Assure, *ensure*, and *insure* all mean “to make secure or certain.” However, there are subtle differences between them. *Assure* refers to persons, with the sense of setting a person’s mind at rest. *Ensure* means to “make sure” or “make safe.” *Insure* is used when referring to insurance.

We must *ensure* there are no hot spots before we can *assure* the residents that the fire is completely extinguished.

I hope they were *insured* against fire.

cite, sight, or site

Cite can mean “to order someone to appear in court,” “to give an example or quote an authority,” or “to recognize someone, such as for outstanding service.”

I am *citing* you for exceeding the speed limit.

The instructor *cited* directly from the penal code.

Bill was *cited* for his many contributions to the fire service.

Sight can be used as either a verb or a noun referring to vision.

Mary lost her *sight* after her optic nerves were damaged by scarlet fever.

Site refers to a position, location, place, or scene.

Police found her body at an isolated *site* along the river.

device or devise

Device is a noun referring to a thing, an invention, or a contrivance. *Devise* is a verb meaning “to contrive, plan, or invent.”

I want to *devise* a *device* to help us quickly locate victims in a smoke-filled room.

Affect is usually a verb meaning “to influence or change.”

Alcohol will affect a person’s ability to drive.



Effect is usually a noun referring to a result.

I don’t drink alcohol because I don’t like the effect it has on me.

elicit or illicit

Elicit means “to evoke or bring out.” *Illicit* means “illegal or unlawful.”

See if you can *elicit* information from any of our snitches regarding the sale of *illicit* drugs in the neighborhood.

incite or insight

Incite means “to stir up or prompt.” *Insight* refers to an intuitive understanding.

If they *incite* a riot, we are going to need more help.

Give me some *insight* on what we can expect tonight.

miner or minor

A *miner* is someone who works in a mine.

Rescuers worked feverishly to save three *miners* trapped underground after a methane gas explosion rocked through the coal mine.

As a noun, *minor* can refer to person under legal age or to an academic course of study that is subordinate to a major. As an adjective, *minor* means “not serious” or “lesser in importance.”

He was arrested for having sex with a *minor*.

Catherine sustained only *minor* cuts and bruises.

personal or personnel

Personal means “individual or private.” *Personnel* refers to employees.

We have issued *personal* alarm devices to all *personnel*.

Personals (usually plural) refers to a column or section of a newspaper or magazine that contains personal notices or items.

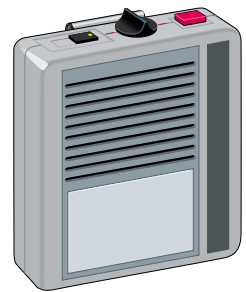
The murderer is selecting his victims from among women who advertise in the *personals*.

principal or principle

The noun *principal* can refer to the person in charge of an organization (often an educational one), the primary person responsible for something (such as the principal [versus the accessory] in a crime), or to a capital sum of money (as distinguished from interest or profit).

Personnel refers to employees.

Page the off-duty personnel.



Personal means “individual or private.”

Have them respond directly to the scene in their personal vehicles.

The *principal* is concerned about students bringing weapons to school.

These boys are accessories to the crime. We still haven't identified the *principal*.

The interest rates are so high that I'm hardly making a dent in the *principal*.

Principal is also used as an adjective meaning "primary or most important."

My *principal* complaint is that we didn't get enough hands-on training in the class.

Principle refers to a fundamental rule, a code of conduct, or a natural tendency.

We operate under the *principle* that a person is considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

It is against my *principles* to provide a certificate of completion to someone who cannot perform proficiently.

It is a *principle* of nature that gases expand when they are heated.

steal or steel

Steal means "to take illegally or without permission" or "to move quietly or secretly." It is also used informally in reference to a bargain.

He tried to *steal* my purse.

The surveillance tape shows the burglar *stealing* about through the electronics store late at night.

Steel is a form of iron metal.

Steel beams, girders, and columns will fail relatively quickly in a fire if not protected by gypsum, concrete, or an appropriate spray-on application.

Steel is also used as a verb meaning "to fill with determination or resolve."

Steel yourself. It's not a pretty scene.

to, too, or two

To is a preposition. *To* is also used in conjunction with a verb to form an infinitive (for example, *to drink*). *Too* is an adverb meaning "also," "excessively," or "very." *Two* is the number 2.

Monica had *too* much *to drink*. She should have gone *to* bed. She went for a drive instead and ended up injuring *two* people when she lost control of her car.

A *principal* is the person in charge of a school.

The *principal* accused Manny of defacing school property.



A *principle* is a fundamental rule.

We operate under the *principle* that a person is considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

weather or whether

The noun *weather* refers to wind, rain, snow, and other atmospheric conditions. The verb *weather* means “to endure and come safely through something.”

Bad *weather* contributed to the accident.

If we pull together, I know we can *weather* this crisis.

Whether is a conjunction used to introduce or imply alternatives.

Whether the ambulance goes Code 2 or Code 3 to the hospital depends largely on the patient’s condition.

It is sometimes necessary to use the expression *whether or not* for clarity. However, if *whether* alone will suffice, drop the words *or not*.

Whether or not he is lying, I don’t trust him.

I can’t tell *whether* he is lying.



Test Your Knowledge

In each of the sentences below, circle the word that is most correct.

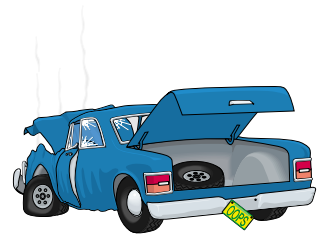
1. There have been to/too/two many accidents to dismiss this latest event as a coincidence.
2. The drug affects/effects the central nervous system.
3. Police anticipate that she will return to the cite/sight/site of the crime to destroy any evidence.
4. My first priority is to assure/ensure/insure the safety of my crew.
5. Everyone accept/except the bus driver had only miner/minor injuries.
6. My advice/advise is to train all personal/personnel in how to use the fire extinguishers.
7. Police found an explosive device/devise in the lobby.
8. I couldn’t tell weather/whether he was transporting elicit/illicit drugs.
9. The principal/principle hazard with this chemical is toxicity.
10. The detectives have more incite/insight as to what’s happening.

***Too means
“excessive.”***

***Monica drank
too much at
the party.***

***Two is the
number 2.***

***She injured
two other
people when
she fell asleep
at the wheel.***



***To is used
as part of an
infinitive.
To is also a
preposition.***

***We are going to
take her to jail.***

Check Your Answers

The following are answers to the quiz on the previous page.

1. There have been too many accidents to dismiss this latest event as a coincidence.
2. The drug affects the central nervous system.
3. Police anticipate that she will return to the site of the crime to destroy any evidence.
4. My first priority is to ensure the safety of my crew.
5. Everyone except the bus driver had only minor injuries.
6. My advice is to train all personnel in how to use the fire extinguishers.
7. Police found an explosive device in the lobby.
8. I couldn't tell whether he was transporting illicit drugs.
9. The principal hazard with this chemical is toxicity.
10. The detectives have more insight as to what's happening.



For More Information

This newsletter is adapted from Chapter 10 of *Take Command of Your Writing* by Jill Meryl Levy. *Take Command of Your Writing* is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel. It is an essential resource for anyone who wants to present ideas more effectively, write more accurate reports, and create more readable and user-friendly documents of any kind. It is also an excellent tool for anyone who wants to place higher on promotional exams requiring any kind of writing exercise.

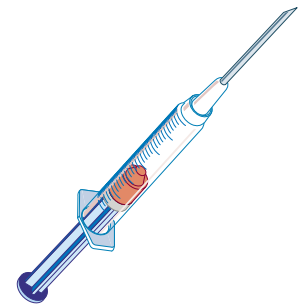
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***Elicit* means
“to evoke or
bring out.”**

***We were unable
to elicit any
information
from their
coworkers.***



***Illicit* means
“illegal or
unlawful.”**

***We arrested
them for
possession of
illicit drugs.***