



Finding the Right Words (Part 4)

distinguishing between similar expressions with different meanings

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

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

account for or account to

You can *account for* either someone or something. To *account for someone* means “to have an accounting of.” To *account for something* means “to give an explanation or to answer for one’s actions.”

We’ve *accounted for* everyone who was known to be in the building at the time of the blast.

Can you *account for* your whereabouts on the night of the murder?

To *account to* someone means “to answer to or respond to a person.”

You will have to *account to* your probation officer for your whereabouts last night.

agree on, agree to, agree upon, or agree with

To *agree on* or *agree upon* means “to reach an understanding.” *Agree to* means “to accept a plan or proposal.” *Agree with* means “to concur with” a person or an idea.

I don’t *agree with* your assessment of the situation, but I will *agree to* investigate further if we can *agree on* how to best proceed.

compare to or compare with

Compare to means “to show a likeness or resemblance.”

People often *compare* the color of Sunnyvale’s yellow fire engines *to* that of a school bus.

Agree to means
“to accept a plan
or proposal.”

The judge agreed
to review the
report.



Agree with means
“to concur with” a
person or an idea.

I agree with the
judge’s decision.

Compare with is used to show actual comparisons (similarities and differences).

We'll have to *compare* the prints we found at the scene *with* those of our suspect.

Many experts say that only *compare with* should be used to show comparisons. Others say that either *compare to* or *compare with* may be used for this purpose.

correspond to or correspond with

Correspond to means "to match or be in agreement with." *Correspond with* means "to exchange letters."

The information on the MSDS does not *correspond to* the information we received from CHEMTREC.

I have *corresponded with* firefighters all over the country.

could care less or could not care less

Do not use *could care less* when you mean "do not care at all." The correct expression is *could not care less*.

The vandals *couldn't care less* about what it costs to repair the damage.

decide on or decide to

Use *decide on* before a noun or noun phrase. Use *decide to* before a verb.

We had to *decide on* a plan of action. We *decided to* use a defensive attack.

differ from or differ with

Differ from means "to be unlike." *Differ with* means "to disagree."

Mark's symptoms *differ from* those of the other patients.

I *differ with* you on the diagnosis of his illness.

different from or different than

Different from is preferred in most applications.

This counterfeit bill is *different from* most of the others we have seen.

Different than is considered acceptable when *different from* would result in a wordy or awkward sentence.

***Different from
is generally
preferred over
different than.***

***Our SCBAs are
different from
those used
elsewhere in
the county.***



***Different than is
acceptable when
different from
would result in a
wordy or awkward
sentence.***

***We selected our
SCBAs based on
different criteria
than other
departments did.***

Awkward: I would have managed the incident in a *different way from* the way in which you managed it.

Revised: I would have managed the incident in a *different way than* you did.

emigrate (from) or immigrate (to)

Emigrate means “to leave a country,” whereas *immigrate* means “to come to another country.”

They *emigrated* from Europe.

They *immigrated* to the United States.

fail in or fail to

Use *fail in* before a noun or noun phrase. Use *fail to* before a verb.

We *failed in* our attempt to convince the jury, although I *fail to* understand why.

practice for, practice of, or practice to

Use *practice for* or *practice to* when *practice* is a verb. Use *practice of* when *practice* is a noun.

Will you help me *practice for* the physical ability test?

The *practice of* recapping needles greatly increases the risk of exposure to disease.

reconcile to or reconcile with

Reconcile to means “to accept a condition.” *Reconcile with* means “to settle a quarrel or dispute.”

It wasn't until Sam was able to *reconcile with* his father that he was able to *reconcile himself to* the loss of his son.

speak to or speak with

Speak to means “to tell something to someone.” *Speak with* means “to discuss.”

We intend to *speak to* your parents about your reckless behavior.

The mayor wants to *speak with* the chief about yesterday's explosion at the plastics company.

***Speak with* means
“to discuss.”**

***We'd like to speak
with you about
our evacuation
procedures.***



***Speak to* means
“to tell something
to someone.”**

***I'll speak to the
engineering
department about
fixing the alarm
system before the
next drill.***

sympathy for or sympathy with

Sympathy for means “compassion for.” *Sympathy with* refers to sharing another’s feelings.

We need to show *sympathy for* those people whose homes were damaged or destroyed.

Even though I am in *sympathy with* your position, I don’t have the budget to hire more police officers.

wait for, wait on, or wait out

Wait for means “to remain ready for someone or something.” *Wait on* means “to serve.” *Wait out* means “to remain inactive during the course of something.”

Let’s *wait for* backup before we go in.

We were dispatched to a domestic dispute call before the waitress could *wait on* us.

They had to *wait out* the blizzard before they could continue the search.



Test Your Knowledge

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

1. The two-in/two-out rule requires us to wait for/wait on backup.
2. He showed no sympathy for/sympathy with his victims.
3. The new standard is significantly different from/different than the old one.
4. I could care less/couldn’t care less about the dangers.
5. Let’s compare the evidence to/with evidence collected at the last three fires.
6. Can you account for/account to the unusual burn patterns?
7. Do you agree to/agree with her decision?
8. The patient’s responses don’t correspond to/correspond with what we see on the monitor.
9. The M.O. differs from/differs with that of his previous crimes.
10. Our personnel are having a hard time reconciling themselves to/with our first line-of-duty death in more than two decades.

***Wait for* means
“to remain ready
for someone or
something.”**

***Wait for police to
secure the scene.***



***Wait out* means
“to remain
inactive during
the course of
something.”**

***We don’t have
time to wait out
the storm. We
need to transport
the patient now.***

Check Your Answers

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

1. The two-in/two-out rule requires us to wait for backup.
2. He showed no sympathy for his victims.
3. The new standard is significantly different from the old one. (*Different from* is generally preferred over *different than*, although either may be used.)
4. I couldn't care less about the dangers.
5. Let's compare the evidence with evidence collected at the last three fires.
6. Can you account for the unusual burn patterns?
7. Do you agree with her decision?
8. The patient's responses don't correspond to what we see on the monitor.
9. The M.O. differs from that of his previous crimes.
10. Our personnel are having a hard time reconciling themselves to our first line-of-duty death in more than two decades.



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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To account for something means “to give an explanation or to answer for one’s actions.”

No one can account for your whereabouts during recess.



To account to someone means “to answer to or respond to a person.”

You still need to account to your teacher and the principal.