
Commonly Confused Words

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. They are sometimes referred to as “parenthetical” clauses, or a “nonessential aside”.

Examples:

1. Movies that have superheroes are unrealistic.
(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.
(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.
(It would sound awkward to refer to a chair as who)
2. The girl who usually sits here is Rhea.
(Rhea is a person, not an inanimate object)

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?
 (“he/ she is.”)
2. Whom does this scarf belong to?
 (“to him/her.”)

Than vs. Then

Key difference:

Than is primarily used to make comparisons. 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.
(A comparison of size)
2. Scrooge has much more money than his employees.
(A comparison of quantities)
3. If you are speeding at a sharp turn, then you are more likely to get into an accident.
(This is an “if...then” clause, so the then describes the potential consequence. The consequence comes later in the timeline than the action.)
4. Simba defeated Scar and then took back his kingdom.
(This describes the order in which events took place)
5. I was much younger then.
(Describing something that was earlier in the timeline)
Compare this statement: “I was much younger than the instructor.”

Effect vs. Affect

Key difference:

Affect is usually a verb, meaning “to have an effect on”, whereas effect is commonly used as a noun, meaning “a change resulting from an action or cause”. You affect something to cause an effect. Complicating the issue, 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 is important when trying to distinguish these two.

Examples:

1. The forecasted storm is expected to affect several people.
(The storm is affecting them, which will cause an effect)
2. When he was being cross examined, his affect was cold and emotionless.
(Affect as in an emotional state or display)
3. The tsunami had a negative effect on the livelihood of residents.
(The storm affected the residents, causing a negative effect)
4. By voting in elections, citizens can effect change in the country.
(To effect change is to bring about a new state of affairs)

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.