Some words, phrases, and grammatical matters just tend to trip us up, even if we have been writing for many years. Take a minute to review these common errors. Since some of these words sound the same when said aloud, check to make sure you are using the right one. Additionally, since the problem is word choice and not spelling, a spellchecker may not identify them as incorrect.

**Accept/Except**

Accept means to receive.

Jason accepted the award for all his hard work.

Except means not including.

I remembered everything except my homework.

*Using both in a sentence:*

We accept all donations except perishable food.

**Affect/Effect**

The verb form of affect means to influence.

The demanding schedule could affect his relationships outside of work.

The noun form of effect means outcome or result.

The effects of the treatment were immediate.

The verb form of effect means to make happen or to produce. This form is less common.

Many people working together can effect a greater change.

*Using all three in a sentence:*

The early frost affected the crops negatively, and despite diligent farm hands trying to have a positive effect, the preventative measures effected little change.

**Farther/Further**

Farther usually describes distances.

San Francisco is farther away from Raleigh than from Las Vegas.

Further generally suggests quantity or degree.

You should have expanded your argument further in this paper.

*Using both in a sentence:*

We wanted to continue traveling farther, but we knew that would send us further into debt.

**i.e. and e.g.**

The Latin abbreviation i.e. stands for id est and is used to clarify, rephrase, or define (think of it as in essence).

I always spend a small fortune at my favorite place to study (i.e., the coffee shop).

The Latin abbreviation e.g. stands for exempli gratia, which means for example (think of it as example given). It is used to provide examples.

They serve many types of beverages (e.g., lattes, iced coffee, and tea).

*Using both in a sentence:*

My family went on vacation to the best place on earth (i.e., Disney World) where we visited many attractions (e.g., Epcot, Universal Studios, and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter).

* Note: A comma follows the use of ‘i.e.’ and ‘e.g.’ in the examples above.
**Its/It’s**

It’s is a contraction of it is. The apostrophe signals the missing i.

   *It’s raining out here!

Its shows ownership or possession.

   *The dog carried its leash in its mouth.

**Using both in a sentence:**

   *It’s sad that its meaning has caused so much confusion.

**Lay/Lie**

A transitive verb involves a transfer of action, so it must take an object.

   *Play the piano.* (Play is a transitive verb and the object is the piano.)

Lay is a transitive verb.

   *Lay the towel on the sand.*

An intransitive verb does not take an object and does not require an object to complete the verb action.

   *I cheer on the sidelines during the game.* (Cheer does not have an object.)

Lie is an intransitive verb.

   *I lie in the hammock.*

**Using both in a sentence:**

   *I laid the flowers on the table before I went to go lie down.*

   *Note: Some verbs, such as ‘cheer’ or ‘sang,’ can be either transitive or intransitive.

**Principal/Principle**

As a noun, principal means the person of highest authority OR a sum of money.

   *The principal at my elementary school was mean.* (person of highest authority)
   *Right now I’m only paying interest on my student loans, not the principal.* (sum of money)

As an adjective, principal means most important.

   *Raleigh is one of the principal cities in the Research Triangle.*

Principle is a fundamental truth or a rule by which someone lives.

   *Lying to her professors would be against Sophia’s principles.*

**Using more than one in a sentence:**

   *The principal at my high school had a set of moral principles that helped him govern his actions.
   *The principal reason why I have decided to forgo getting my Master’s degree is because the principal amount from my undergraduate loans is so high.*

**That/Which**

That indicates a restrictive clause. It narrows a category or identifies a particular object by providing necessary information. A restrictive clause, when removed, actually changes the meaning of the sentence. Restrictive clauses beginning with that do not need commas.

   *The animals that live at the zoo were fun to see.*

Which indicates a nonrestrictive clause. It provides additional information not needed to identify a particular object. Removing a nonrestrictive clause makes no difference because nonrestrictive clauses just add nonessential information to a sentence. Nonrestrictive clauses beginning with which...
are preceded by a comma.

Young dogs, which are called puppies, are very cute.

Nonrestrictive clauses provide additional information, which means they can be removed.

(Here the information is additional and nonessential to the meaning of the sentence and can be removed because that information doesn’t matter in this context. What is important is that young dogs are very cute and that nonrestrictive clauses provide additional information.)

To check whether you are using that or which correctly, try taking the clause out of the sentence. You can take a which clause out of a sentence and still clearly communicate the basic meaning, while taking out a that clause could dramatically change what you are trying to say.

Using both in a sentence:

The chairs that are at work are uncomfortable, which is why our office recently ordered new ones.

Their/There/They’re

Their signifies possession.

While doing laundry at his parent’s house, Billy accidentally mixed up his clothes with their clothes.

There identifies a place.

Can you put the flowers over there on the counter?

They’re is a contraction of they are. The apostrophe signals the missing a.

They’re tired after a long day at work.

Using all three in a sentence:

They’re too tired after work to go there and meet their friends.

To/Too/Two

As a preposition, to identifies direction.

Maria was walking down the street to the park.

To can also be used with the infinitive, or base form, of a verb. For example, to cry, to laugh, to sneeze.

What do you want to do?

Too means also or excessively.

Are the children coming too?

Bob was pulled over because he was driving too fast.

Two is a number.

There were two dogs that chased after Russ.

Using more than one in a sentence:

The two people walking down the street to the park didn’t know what to do when a bear appeared in front of them.

I felt awful we couldn’t go to the game and Susan did too.

Toward/Towards

Toward and towards are used interchangeably, though toward is preferred in written American English. Towards is often used more informally in everyday speech.

To get to Talley from Western Boulevard, walk toward Hillsborough Street.
**Was/Were**

Was and were are both the past tense of to be. Was is used for the first and third person singular forms of the infinitive to be when used in the indicative mood.

* I was in a good mood. She was on time for the meeting.

Were is used for the second person and the first and third person plural forms of the infinitive to be when used in the indicative mood.

* You were there, right? We were ready for a vacation. They were very tired.

However, were can also be present tense when it is the first, second, or third person form (both plural and singular) of the infinitive to be when used in the subjunctive mood.

* If I were wealthy, I would live on an island.

**Weather/Whether**

Weather is the state of the atmosphere.

* The weather was warm, sunny, and humid.

Whether signifies a choice between two options.

* I wasn’t sure whether to speak my mind or not.

Using both in a sentence:

* The weather was nice, but I wasn’t sure whether I should bring an umbrella because the forecast had called for rain.

**Who/Whom**

Who is used as the subject of a sentence.

* Who is driving us?

Whom is either the object of the verb or the object of a preposition.

* To whom should I write the check?

**Who’s/Whose**

Who’s is a contraction for who is. The apostrophe signals the missing i.

* Who’s responsible for all this graffiti?

Whose signifies ownership.

* Whose jacket is this?

**Your/You’re**

Your signifies possession.

* Where did you put your diploma?

You’re is a contraction for you are. The apostrophe signals the missing a.

* You’re right. You’re welcome.

Using both in a sentence:

* You’re welcome at any time to check your grade.

Works Consulted:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu/owl); Vanderbilt University Writing Studio (www.vanderbilt.edu/writing); The Norton Field Guide, 4th ed. (Bullock, Goggin, and Weinberg) The Everyday Writer, 5th ed. (Lunsford)