

Finding the Right Words (Part 2)

**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 second in a series of newsletters designed to help you distinguish between two or more similar words.

**Bad is an
adjective meaning
“not good.”**

bad or badly

Bad is an adjective meaning “not good.” *Badly* is an adverb meaning “in a defective, incorrect, or undesirable way.”

John was hurt *badly* in a *bad* accident.

Most experts say that you should use *bad* as an adjective either before a noun (*bad decision, bad mistake*) or after a linking verb (*feel bad, look bad*). Although many people use the phrase *feel badly*, it is best to avoid it in writing.

I feel *bad* (not *badly*) about what happened to him.



bring or take

Bring refers to moving something *closer* to the speaker. *Take* refers to moving something *away* from the speaker.

Please *bring* me the stretcher. Then you can help me *take* the patient out to the ambulance.

**Badly is an adverb
meaning “in a
defective,
incorrect,
or
undesirable way.”**

can or could / may or might

Can and *could* indicate ability or power. *May* and *might* are used to express permission. *Can* and *may* are often used interchangeably in conversation when asking or granting permission. However, in writing, you should maintain the distinction between the two.

I don't know if we *can* pull together a mass casualty drill that quickly.
(ability)

May I check your injury? (permission)

**The patient was
badly injured.**

May and *might* also indicate possibility.

Do you think the tank *might* rupture? (*possibility*)

Can/could and *may/might* are often used interchangeably when referring to possibility. Many experts insist you should maintain a distinction between the words, but there are times when any of them may be appropriate. *The tank can rupture* means it has the ability to do so. *The tank may rupture* means that it has the ability to do so and that there is a likelihood of the rupture occurring.

dragged or drug

Drug is a nonstandard form of *dragged*, the past tense and past participle of *drag*. Use *dragged*, not *drug*.

We *dragged* the victim out of the burning building.

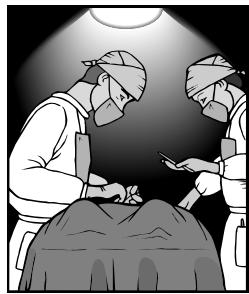
**Use *dragged*,
not *drug*,
for the past
tense or past
participle
of *drag*.**

good or well

Good is an adjective used to modify a noun or pronoun. *Well* is an adverb used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

We have a *good* crew that works *well* together.

When referring to the state of one's health, it is possible to use either *good* or *well*. *To feel or look well* means "to be in good health," whereas *to feel good* generally means "to be in good spirits." *To look good* means "to look pleasing in appearance."



hanged or hung

Both *hanged* and *hung* are used to describe "death by hanging." *Hanged* is the preferred form when referring to a legal execution, while *hung* is more common when referring to suicide. *Hung* is also used for all meanings other than "death by hanging."

Wilson was *hanged* by the neck for his crimes. Three days later, his former cellmate *hung* himself.

Elizabeth *hung* her head in shame.

**The victim
suffered severe
injuries after
being dragged
by a car for
400 feet.**

lay or lie

The verbs *lay* and *lie* are often confused because they are so similar. However, *lay* means "to put or place" someone or something, whereas *lie* means "to rest or recline." *Lay* is a transitive verb; it requires a direct object to complete its meaning. *Lie* is an intransitive verb; it never takes a direct object. In other words, you can *lay* something, but you cannot *lie* anything.

I ordered him to *lay* the gun down and come out with his hands up.

Please *lie* still while I check for injuries.

Lie also means “to remain in a position of inactivity or concealment.”

They were *lying* in ambush for us.

It is easy to confuse the various forms of *lie* and *lay*, especially since the past tense form of *lie* is *lay*.

<u>Present</u>	<u>Past</u>	<u>Present Participle</u>	<u>Past Participle</u>
lay [place]	laid [placed]	laying [placing]	(had) laid [placed]
lie [rest]	lay [rested]	lying [resting]	(had) lain [rested]

To *lie*, meaning “to speak falsely,” is unlikely to be confused with *lay*. The past tense and past participle is *lied*. The present participle is *lying*.

leave or let

Leave means “to depart or to go away from.” It can also mean “to allow to remain in the same place or condition.” *Let* means “to allow or permit.”

If you *leave* the scene of an accident without stopping, you can be charged with felony hit-and-run.

The doctor suggested that I *leave* the bandage in place for at least 48 hours.

Don’t *let* him get away.

Leave and *let* can be used interchangeably when followed by a noun or pronoun and the word *alone*. However, use *let alone*, not *leave alone*, in the sense of “not to mention.”

Leave/let me alone.

I don’t like missing out on any fires in our jurisdiction, *let alone* (not *leave alone*) one of this magnitude.

raise or rise

The verbs *raise* and *rise* are often confused because they are so similar. However, *raise* is a transitive verb; it requires a direct object to complete its meaning. *Rise* is an intransitive verb; it does not take a direct object. In other words, you can *raise* something, but you cannot *rise* anything.

I don’t like to *raise* the 24-foot ladder by myself when it is this windy.

Our aerial ladder *rises* to a height of 100 feet.

Lay means “to put or place” someone or something.

Lay the bottle down.



Lie means “to rest or recline.”

Lie still while we check for injuries.

Lie also means “to speak falsely.”

We can’t help you if you lie to us.

Raise and *rise* are also used as nouns. *Raise* is used primarily to indicate an increase in wages. *Rise* is more versatile and is used in connection with most other increases.

Our contract calls for a 10% *raise* over the next two years.

A sudden *rise* in temperature may cause organic peroxides to become highly unstable.

The following are the different forms of the verbs *raise* and *rise*.

<u>Present</u>	<u>Past</u>	<u>Present Participle</u>	<u>Past Participle</u>
raise	raised	raising	(has) raised
rise	rose	rising	(has) risen

real or really

Real is an adjective used to modify a noun or pronoun. *Really* is an adverb used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

Those look like *real* injuries.

You do a *really* good job of applying moulage.

Real is often used informally as an adverb: *You do a real good job*. However, you should avoid using *real* as an adverb in writing.

set or sit

The verbs *set* and *sit* are often confused because they are so similar. *Set* is primarily a transitive verb, requiring a direct object to complete its meaning. Use *set* when your meaning is “to put or place” something. *Sit* is chiefly an intransitive verb, not requiring a direct object. Use *sit* when you mean “to be seated.”

Set the gun down on the table, then we'll *sit* down and talk.

Both *set* and *sit* have numerous other meanings. *Set* is relatively easy. For example, one *sets* goals, *sets* things on fire, or *sets* traps. *Sit*, however, is used in other situations where one might mistakenly use *set*. Use *sit* when you mean “to cause to be seated,” “to remain quiet or inactive,” or “to be accepted as indicated.”

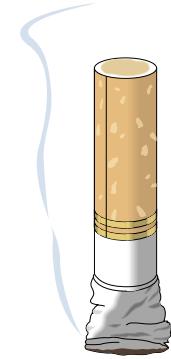
If I could only *sit* him down and talk to him, I could probably figure out what he's up to.

Let's *sit* on this for a while before we make a decision.

The defendant's story doesn't *sit* well with me.

***Raise* is a transitive verb; it requires a direct object to complete its meaning.**

Congress voted to raise the tax on cigarettes.



***Rise* is an intransitive verb; it does not take a direct object.**

If the incidence of lung cancer continues to rise, Congress may raise the taxes even further.

The following are the different forms of the verbs *set* and *sit*.

<u>Present</u>	<u>Past</u>	<u>Present Participle</u>	<u>Past Participle</u>
set	set	setting	(has) set
sit	sat	sitting	(has) sat

sure or surely

Sure is an adjective used to modify a noun or pronoun. *Surely* is an adverb used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

I was *sure* Rick was innocent.

Rick was *surely* innocent.

Sure is often used informally as an adverb: *He sure seemed innocent to me.* However, you should avoid using *sure* as an adverb in writing.



Test Your Knowledge

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

1. Steven feels bad/badly about causing the fire.
2. I don't feel good/well. I need to lay/lie down.
3. The situation was real/really dangerous.
4. Please let me know when I can/may take a day off.
5. The victim committed suicide. She hanged/hung herself in the garage.
6. I asked Truck 5 to raise/rise the aerial on the A side of the building.
7. I'm going to set/sit this one out.
8. Engine 7 laid/lay 400 feet of five-inch hose.
9. Please bring/take the coffee to the command post.
10. Who do you think could/might have started the fire?

***Set* means “to put or place something.”**

Set the chair in the corner.



***Sit* means “to be seated.”**

Please sit down.

Check Your Answers

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

1. Steven feels bad about causing the fire.
2. I don't feel good/well. (Use *well* if you mean "in good health" or *good* if you mean "in good spirits.") I need to lie down.
3. The situation was really dangerous.
4. Please let me know when I may take a day off. (While either *can* or *may* is acceptable in informal speech, *may* is preferable in writing.)
5. The victim committed suicide. She hung herself in the garage.
6. I asked Truck 5 to raise the aerial on the A side of the building.
7. I'm going to sit this one out.
8. Engine 7 laid 400 feet of five-inch hose.
9. Please bring/take the coffee to the command post. (Use *bring* if you are at the command post, requesting coffee be brought to you. Use *take* if you are elsewhere, asking someone to take the coffee away from you and to the command post.)
10. Who do you think could/might have started the fire? (Both words are often used interchangeably when referring to possibility. Technically, however, *could* suggests ability, whereas *might* implies possibility. The correct choice in this example would depend on your meaning.)



**Real is an
adjective.**

**It looked
like a real
head wound.**



**Really is
an adverb.**

**Maria did a
really good job
of moulage.**

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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