

Evaluation copy only. Not for resale, field, or classroom use.  
May not be printed in whole or in part.

# Quick Tips to Choosing the Right Word



Based on the book  
*Take Command of Your Writing*  
by Jill Meryl Levy

© 2003 Firebelle Productions

Post Office Box 110848, Campbell, CA 95011-0848

Phone: (800) 477-7151 or (408) 866-2081 / Fax: (408) 866-6108

Web Site: [www.firebelleproductions.com](http://www.firebelleproductions.com)

Reference cards can be purchased through Firebelle Productions.

## Principal or Principle

The noun *principal* can refer to the person in charge of an organization, the primary person responsible for something, or to a capital sum of money.

The *principal* found a gun in the boy's locker.

These students are accessories to the crime.  
The *principal* is still at large.

Here's the total loan amount with *principal* and interest.

*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.

A *principle* is 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 a *principle* of nature that gases expand when heated.



## Vain (in Vain), Vane, or Vein

*Vain* is an adjective that can mean “conceited and self-centered” or “futile and unsuccessful.” The phrase *in vain* means “without effect or to no purpose.”

His *vain* attempts to make this look like an attempted suicide didn't fool investigators or the doctors who tried to save her life.



Don't let their deaths be *in vain*.

*Vane* is a noun. It can refer to a device used for indicating wind direction, to the blade of a windmill or turbine, or to the feathers of an archery arrow.

A lightning bolt struck the weather *vane*.

*Vein* is a noun. It can refer to a blood vessel, to a mineral deposit (as in a vein of gold), to the framework of a leaf or a wing, or to a line of thought.

We had trouble finding a good *vein* for the IV.

I'm afraid we may overlook something if we continue along the same *vein*.

## Its or It's (and Related Words)

One of the most common mistakes writers make is to confuse *its* and *it's*. *Its* is a possessive pronoun; it shows possession. *It's* is the contraction of *it is*.

The car rolled several times and landed on *its* roof.

*It's* (it is) going to be difficult to extricate the victims.



An easy way to determine the correct word is to try substituting the longer expression. For example, if you can use *it is* in your sentence, then *it's* is correct. If not, use *its*. You can use the same substitution test to distinguish between other contractions and possessive pronouns.

### Contraction (and the Original Words)

it's	(it is)
they're	(they are)
who's	(who is or who has)
you're	(you are)

### Possessive Pronoun

its
their
whose
your

## Advice or Advise, Device or Devise

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

The incident commander based his decision on *advice* from the bomb squad.

The bomb squad will *advise* us how far to evacuate.

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

Don't assume this is the only bomb. Look for a secondary *device*.

The caller threatened to *devise* a weapon that will cause massive destruction.



## Incidence or Incidents, Patience or Patients

*Incidence* refers to rate of occurrence. *Incidents* refers to individual events.

The community is upset about the high *incidence* of accidental releases from the refinery.

There have been three *incidents* in the last four months alone.

*Patience* refers to tolerance. *Patients* are people who are under medical treatment.

I'm sorry you had to wait.  
Thank you for your *patience*.

We've transported several *patients* complaining of respiratory distress after inhaling smoke from the refinery fire.



## 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.

The homeowner *assured* us that everyone was out.

*Ensure* means to “make sure” or “make safe.”

Overhaul is done to *ensure* that the fire is out and that there are no hidden hot spots.

*Insure* is used when referring to insurance.

Did they *insure* the home against fire?



## 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.

Alcohol can quickly *affect* a person’s ability to drive safely.

With some people, the *effects* of alcohol impairment can be seen after only a single drink.

*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.



## Bad or Badly

*Bad* is an adjective meaning “not good.” It is used to modify a noun or pronoun. *Badly* is an adverb meaning “in a defective, incorrect, or undesirable way.” It is used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

It was a *bad* earthquake.

Several people were *badly* injured.

We rescued three people from their *badly* damaged apartment.



Most experts say that you should use *bad* as an adjective either before a noun (e.g., *bad accident*, *bad decision*) or after a linking verb (e.g., *feel bad*, *look bad*). (A linking verb expresses a state of being. Examples include *be*, *appear*, *look*, *feel*, and *seem*.) Although many people use the phrase *feel badly*, it is best to avoid it in writing.

I *feel bad* for all the people injured by the earthquake.

Evaluation copy only. Not for resale, field, or classroom use.  
May not be printed in whole or in part.

## Take Command of Your Writing

**Take Command of Your Writing** by Jill Meryl Levy is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel.

- Each chapter provides a thorough coverage of the rules, answering many questions that other grammar books leave unanswered.
- The most important rules are highlighted in easy-to-read sidebars for quick reference.
- Thousands of examples make it easy to understand how to apply the rules.
- Professionally drawn illustrations provide an attractive, user-friendly format.
- A thorough index makes information easy to find.

This 670-page reference book contains 17 informative chapters that can help you become a more effective writer.

- Commas
- Other Marks of Punctuation
- Parts of Speech
- Subject-Verb Agreement
- More on Verbs
- Adjectives and Adverbs
- Pronouns and Antecedents
- Spelling
- Compound Words
- Finding the Right Words
- Capitalization
- Abbreviations and Acronyms
- Numbers
- More Effective Writing
- Writing for Special Applications
- In the Eye of the Beholder
- Glossary

A single copy of *Take Command of Your Writing* is \$49.95 plus \$5 for shipping and handling (plus sales tax in California). Volume discounts are available.

To order, call (800) 477-7151 or (408) 866-2081 (after 8:30 a.m. California time).

Reference cards can be purchased through Firebelle Productions.