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Quick Tips to Choosing the Right Word



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

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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.

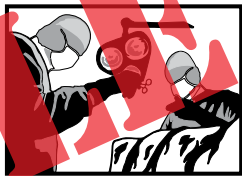
It is a *principle* of nature that gases expand when heated.



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.

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