

Proofreading: tricky words and phrases that trip us up

They say English is the world's most difficult language to learn. And proofreading certainly has its challenges. The English language may be blessed with many words, but quite a few set out to trip us up. Here are some of the most common words that even the best English writers confuse and which are important to look out for when proofreading.



PROOFCOMMUNICATIONS

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Unique

Many businesses like to think of themselves as the most unique in their industry. But 'unique' means truly one of a kind. Therefore, you cannot be the 'most unique' or 'one of the most unique' or the 'only unique'. You are **unique** or you're not.

Affect vs. Effect

Affect is a verb that means 'cause a change in' or 'influence'. **Effect** is mostly used as a noun, although when we write in a formal style we occasionally use it as a verb meaning 'to carry out' or 'cause to happen'.

She was greatly *affected* by the sad news. Smoking will *affect* your health.

Take care of your personal *effects*. The sound *effects* are amazing. The lawyer *effected* a great result.

Compliment vs. Complement

Compliment, as a noun, means 'an expression of praise or admiration' and as a verb 'to pay a compliment to'.

As a noun a **complement** is 'something that completes or makes perfect' and as a verb means 'to complete'.

When you *compliment* mum's new car, mention how well the colour *complements* her eyes.

Principal vs. Principle

People dedicate their lives and careers to upholding **principles** of truth and justice.

Principals are people who head schools.

A school *principal* should always stick to her *principles*.

Advice and advise, practice and practise, licence and license

Advice is a noun, and **advise** is a verb, just as **practice** is a noun and **practise** is a verb. Likewise, **licence** is a noun, and **license** is a verb.

Noun: Take his *advice*.

Noun: She runs a large accounting *practice*.

Noun: Take my driving *licence* with you.

Verb: I *advise* you to keep quiet.

Verb: I will *practise* every day.

Verb: We need to get the hotel *licensed*.

Disinterested vs. Uninterested

Uninterested is the opposite of interested. **Disinterested** means impartial or unbiased (but not a lack of interest).

A referee should be *disinterested* in the game, but *interested* in the match.

Everyone vs. Every one

Everyone means **every person**, as in people. It is singular, as is **everybody**, **anybody**, **anyone**, **no-one**, **somebody** and **someone**.

Mistake: Everyone danced their socks off.

Instead: *Everyone* danced his socks off.

Every one is also singular and we use it to describe objects.

Mistake: Every one of the cars were new.

Instead: *Every one* of the cars was new.

Fewer vs. Less

Fewer means a smaller number of things or people. **Less** means a smaller amount or quantity of a single thing.

Mistake: Less cars, less dogs, less people.

Instead: *Fewer* cars, *fewer* dogs, *fewer* people.

There are fewer students at university these days.

Less paper usage means *less* waste.

