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Commonly Confused Words
in
Technical Writing

Commonly Confused Words in Technical Writing

Good writing is not just about using an expansive vocabulary. It is also about properly using the words you already know. The wrong word at the wrong place confuses the reader who may have to reread your sentence many times to get your intended meaning.

Spell checkers may provide guidance to sentence structure and grammar, but do not correct mistakes related to the choice of words. For instance, spell checkers cannot distinguish between homonyms (words that are pronounced the same, but are spelled differently, and have different meanings) since both are examples of valid words. Writers must select the proper word themselves to make their writing accurate, precise and effective.

Lists of homonyms and confusing words have been compiled before – so why develop yet another. This one focuses on technical documentation. Based on a survey of Technical Writers, we have identified confusing words that are commonly used in technical writing.

Words	Meaning; When to Use	Example
A while	(n.): a short time or period; Use as the subject or object of a sentence; when preceded by a preposition.	*Our server is expected to be down for a while.*
Awhile	(adv.): for a short time or period; Use when no preposition precedes	*Please wait awhile before rebooting the system.*
Affect	(v.): to influence	*Extreme humidity may adversely affect the performance of the system.*
Effect	(v.): to bring about, to make happen	*We were unable to effect a change in the law.*
Effect	(n.): result	*Updating the software version had no effect on system performance.*
All	(adj.): the whole of; Use in all cases except when followed by a personal pronoun.	*All important words are listed in the index.*
All of	Use only when followed by a personal pronoun.	*The presentation interested all of us.*

Words	Meaning; When to Use	Example
Adverse	(adj.): unfavorable or antagonistic in purpose or effect; hostile; Use to describe effects and events.	*Too many simultaneous users have an adverse effect on system performance.*
Averse	(adj.): having a strong feeling of opposition, unwilling; Use to describe persons and means.	*We are averse to the use of screenshots in technical documents.*
All ready	Complete, prepared.	*The software is all ready for release.*
Already	(adv.): by this time, previously	*A beta version of the application is already out.*
Allude	(v.): to indirectly mention	*During training, he alluded to the material available on the website.*
Elude	(v.): to physically or mentally escape from	*The criminal was able to elude police for four days.*
Refer	(v.): to speak of directly	*Please refer to the release notes for the latest changes.*
Alternately	(adv.): in turn, one after the other	*Incoming support calls are alternately assigned to the two support techs.*
Alternatively	(adv.): on the other hand	*Alternatively, we can have our meeting via a conference call.*
Among	(prep.): in the midst of; Use to describe relationships between two or more people or things, use when entities are considered collectively.	*The CEO mingled among the employees.*
Between	(prep.): in the space separating; Use to describe relationships between two people or things, use when entities are considered individually.	*You can enter any value between 1 and 65535.*
Within	(prep): inside of	*The required resources existed within the corporation.*

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Amount	(n.): the sum total of two or more sums, quantity; Use when the items discussed cannot be counted.	*The amount of paperwork was enormous.*
Number	(n.): the sum total or count of a collection of units; Use when the items are countable.	*If the number of failures exceeds five in a day, it generates an alarm.*
Assure	(v.): to declare earnestly	*The engineer assured the team that all bugs had been removed.*
Ensure	(v.): to make sure or certain	*To ensure the best performance, download the latest software.*
Insure	(v.): to guarantee against loss or harm	*All shipments are insured for transit loss.*
Backward	(adv.): toward the back or rear, toward a less advanced state, retrogressively	*To go backward (or backwards), press the* **Previous** *key.*
Backwards	exactly the same as backward above	
Backward	(adj.): directed toward the back or past, behind in time or progress	*A backward glance disrupted her rhythm and cost her the race.*
Beside	(prep.): at the side of	*The* **Help** *button was right beside the* **Save** *button.*
Besides	(adv.): furthermore; in addition to	*There is no easy way to reset the system besides pressing* **Ctrl, Alt** *and* **Del**.
Biannual	(adj.): occurring twice a year	*New software releases were made available biannually (or semiannually).*
Semiannual	(adj.): occurring twice a year	
Biennial	(adj.): occurring every two years	*The group voted to have the user conference biennially, as every year seemed too much.*

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Callout	(n.): an act or instance of calling out, a letter, number, or other device for identifying or calling attention to a particular part of an illustration	*Add callouts to these screenshots to highlight important features.*
Call out	to speak in a loud voice; shout	*The woman turned when she heard someone call out her name.*
Chose	(v.): to make a choice, past tense	*If you chose the "save as" option, enter a file name.*
Choose	(v.): to make a choice, present tense	*Choose one from the following options.*
Cite	(v.): to quote a passage, book, etc.	*He cited numerous references in his paper.*
Sight	(n.): something seen; spectacle	*The sight of the finish line inspired the runners.*
Site	(n.): the area or exact plot of ground on which anything is located, has been located, or will be located	*The site of the new building had recently been chosen.*
Compare to	Use when stressing the similarities between two items	*Compared to other MP3 players, the iPoD is much easier to use.*
Compare with	Use when examining both similarities and differences	*Our product compares favorably with other networking devices.*
Complement	(n.): something that improves or completes	*Our product is a great complement to your router.*
Compliment	(n.): praise or flattery	*The designer received many compliments for the new website.*
Concurrent	(adj.): simultaneously or happening at the same time	*The system can handle 1,000 users concurrently.*
Consecutive	(adj.): successive or following one after the other	*The system failed every day for four consecutive days.*

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Constitute	(v.): to compose, form; Use when the listed parts make up the whole.	*The Senate and the House of Representatives constitute the legislative branch.*
Compose	(v.): to be or constitute a part of; Use when discussing parts that make up the whole.	*Thirteen colonies composed the original United States of America.*
Comprise	(v.): to include or contain; Use when discussing a whole that consists of parts.	*Limestone is comprised of sand and gravel.*
Consist	(v.): to be made up or composed; Use when the listed parts make up the whole.	*Table salt consists of sodium and chlorine.*
Include	(v.): to contain as a whole contains part; Use when the listed parts do not make up the whole.	*The document includes a section on proper grammar.*
Concurrent	(adj.): simultaneously or happening at the same time	*The system can handle 1,000 users concurrently.*
Consecutive	(adj.): successive or following one after the other	*The system failed every day for four consecutive days.*
Connote	(v.): to imply or suggest	*The word "Cadillac" connotes high quality.*
Denote	(v.): to indicate or refer to specifically	*The term pi denotes the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter.*
Continual	(adj.): of regular or frequent recurrence; repeated at frequent intervals	*The system's continual breakdown indicated a software bug.*
Continuous	(adj.) uninterrupted in time; without cessation	*The system is designed for continuous operations for months.*

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Criteria	(n.): a standard of judgment or criticism, plural	*Users evaluated the software on numerous criteria such as ease of use, features, cost etc.*
Criterion	(n.): a standard of judgment or criticism, singular	*The only criterion used to judge a salesperson's performance was sales.*
Definite	(adj.): certain, sure	*A definite time for the meeting was not yet set.*
Definitive	(adj.): decisive and with authority; Use when describing a judgment or description that serves as a standard or reference point for others.	*The study results were incomplete, no definitive conclusion could be drawn.*
Different from	Use when comparing two persons or things.	*My views are very different from yours.*
Different than	Use when followed by a full clause.	*The user interface is different than it was in the last release.*
Disc	(n.): reproduces data optically with lasers, a compact disc, CD-ROM's, DVD's	*To start, insert the compact disc in the optical drive.*
Disk	(n.): reproduce data magnetically	*We back up all hard disks every night.*
Discreet	(adj.): showing prudence and circumspection	*The company was very discreet about users' password information.*
Discrete	(adj.): apart or detached from others, separate, distinct	*The test consisted of three discrete parts.*
Especially	(adv.): particularly, exceptionally	*Avoid complicated words, especially in documents that have to be translated.*
Specially	(adv.): in a particular manner	*The software was designed specially for lawyers.*

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Farther Further	(adv.): at or to a greater distance (adv.): at or to a more advanced point, to a greater extent	*The lighter the plane, the farther it goes.* *For further information, please go to our website.*
Fewer Less	(adj.): of a smaller number (adj.): smaller in amount, size, or magnitude	*A fewer number of people participated in the second event.* *Far less money was spent this year.*
Flammable Inflammable	(adj.): easily set on fire (adj.): easily set on fire (same as above)	*The chemicals used in the experiment are extremely flammable.* *The books were inflammable and burned quickly.*
Flesh out Flush out	to develop something further, to give it substance to drive something out into the open	*First we need an outline, and then we can flesh out the idea with more details.* *A "beta trial" will help flush out the potential software problems.*
Forego Forgo	(v.): to go before, precede (v.): to do without	*"About this Guide" needs to forego the main document.* *He refused to forgo a final edit of the paper.*
Foreword Forward	(n.): introduction note in a publication (adv.): toward the front	*The book included a foreword written by a leading expert.* *To move forward, press the Next key.*

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Graphic	(n.): a picture or visual representation	*This graphic is extremely helpful in understanding the subject.*
Graphic	(adj.): giving a clear and effective picture, vivid	*A graphic account of an earthquake.*
Graphics	(n.): the art of drawing as used in mathematics, engineering, etc.	*We use several different graphics packages for illustrations.*
Imply	(v.): to indicate or suggest without being explicitly stated	*He implied that software bugs may be the cause of performance problems.*
Infer	(v.): to derive by reasoning, conclude or judge from premise or evidence	*The frequent crashes lead me to infer that all bugs had yet to be resolved.*
Its	(pron.): of, belonging to, or done by it	*For a company to perform well, all of its employees must contribute.*
It's	contraction of it is or it has	*It's imperative to save the file before logging off.*
Later	(adv.): after the expected, usual, or proper time	*He arrived later then expected.*
Latter	(adj.): being the second mentioned of two	*I prefer the latter of the two designs you presented.*
Lay	(v.): to place or deposit; Forms - lay, laid, laid, laying; Use when followed by a direct object.	*Please lay the note on the table and leave.*
Lie	(v.): to be in a reclining position; Forms - lie, lay, lain, lying; Use when no direct object follows.	*Please lie down while I measure your blood pressure.*
Layout	(n.): an arrangement or plan	*The screen's layout had been carefully edited many times.*
Lay out	to plan, plot, design	*They laid out plans for a launch in July.*

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Lightening	(v.): to illuminate, brighten	*The small flame lightened the tiny room entirely.*
Lightening	(v.): to make less heavy	*Lightening of a car's weight improves both gas mileage and handling.*
Lightning	(n.): electrical charges that cause flashes of light during storms	*All systems are required to use lightning protectors.*
Material	(n.): the substance or substances of which a subject is composed	*The mattress was made of a soft foam material.*
Materiel	(n.): the equipment needed in any business, operation, or undertaking	*The materiel needs to be transported to the jobsite.*
Partially	(adv.): to a certain degree; Use when describing a condition or state.	*Worker strike is partially to blame for the project delay.*
Partly	(adv.): a part - usually of a physical object, as distinct from the whole	*The house was partly submerged in the rising waters.*
Precedence	(n.): the right to precede as in order, rank, or importance	*With QoS, voice packets take precedence over data packets.*
Precedents	(n.): established course of action	*The Supreme Court establishes important precedents every day.*
Principal	(n.): person with the highest rank or main participant	*The school's principal retired this year.*
Principal	(adj.): most important	*The principal concern is that the document be accurate.*
Principle	(n.): a standard or rule that often pertains to morality or nature	*Religion gave him many principles by which to live.*

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Words	Meaning; When to Use	Example
Regardless	(adj.): having or showing no regard, heedless; unmindful	*He made his decision regardless of other people's opinions.*
Irregardless		This is not a word and its use is incorrect.
Shutdown	(n.): a cessation of operations	*The shutdown of the factory had hurt the local economy.*
Shut down	to close	*It is important to shut down nightly.*
Transient	(adj.): short-lived, occurring or existing briefly, fleeting; Use when describing people.	*They were transient laborers, moving from place to place in search of work.*
Transitory	(v.): short-lived, occurring or existing briefly, fleeting; Use when describing events and situations.	*Our website is down, but the situation is transitory and it should be up shortly.*
Warrantee	(n.): the person to whom a warrant is made	*Issue the check to the warrantee whose name is on the contract.*
Warranty	(n.): a written guarantee given to the purchaser of a new appliance	*All systems carry a one year warranty.*

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