Commonly Confused Words
(Adapted from *A Pocket Style Manual 2nd Edition* by Diana Hacker)

**accept, except**—*Accept* is a verb meaning “to receive.” *Except* is usually a preposition meaning “excluding”: I will *accept* all the packages *except* that one.

**advice, advise**—*Advice* is a noun, *advise* a verb: We *advise* you to follow John’s *advice*.

**affect, effect**—*Affect* is usually a verb meaning “to influence.” *Effect* is usually a noun meaning “result”: The drug did not *affect* the disease, and it had several adverse side *effects*. *Effect* can also be a verb meaning “to bring about”: Only the president can *effect* such a dramatic change.

**all ready, already**—*All ready* means “completely prepared.” *Already* means “previously”: Susan was *all ready* for the concert, but her friends had *already* left.

**all right**—*All right* is always written as two words. *Alright* is nonstandard.

**all together, altogether**—*All together* means “everyone gathered.” *Altogether* means “entirely”: We were not *altogether* certain that we could bring the family *all together* for the reunion.

**allusion, illusion**—An *allusion* is an indirect reference; an *illusion* is a misconception or false impression: Did you catch my *allusion* to Shakespeare? Mirrors give the room an *illusion* of depth.

**a lot**—*A lot* is two words. Do not write *alot*.

**among, between**—Ordinarily, use *among* with three or more entities, *between* with two: The prize was divided *among* several contestants. You have a choice *between* carrots and beans.

**anxious**—*Anxious* means “worried” or “apprehensive.” In formal writing, avoid using *anxious* to mean “eager”: We are *eager* {not *anxious*} to see your new house.

**anymore, any more**—*Anymore*, an adverb, means “at the present; from now on” and is used in negative constructions. It is not yet acceptable to use *anymore* to mean, “nowadays.” *Any more* refers to anything additional or further. He doesn’t live here *anymore*, but would you like *any more* soup from his refrigerator? “That’s hard to get *anymore*,” is not considered standard, and in formal writing, one should use “nowadays.”

**anyone, any one**—*Anyone*, an indefinite pronoun, means “any person at all.” *Any one* refers to a particular person or thing in a group: *Anyone* from Chicago may choose *any one* of the games on display.

**awhile, a while**—*Awhile* is an adverb; it can modify a verb, but it cannot be the object of a preposition such as for. The two-word form *a while* is a noun preceded by an article and therefore must be the object of a preposition. Stay *awhile*. Stay for *a while*.

**bad, badly**—*Bad* is an adjective, *badly* an adverb: They felt *bad* about being early and ruining the surprise. Her arm hurt *badly* after she slid into second.
capital, capitol—*Capital* refers to a city, *capitol* to a building where lawmakers meet: The residents of the state *capital* protested the development plans. The *capitol* has undergone extensive renovations. *Capital* also refers to wealth or resources.

cite, site—*Cite* means “to quote as an authority or example.” *Site* is usually a noun meaning “a particular place”: He *cited* the zoning law in his argument against the proposed *site* of the gas station.

complement, compliment—*Complement* is a verb meaning “to go with or complete” or a noun meaning “something that completes.” *Compliment* as a verb means “to flatter”; as a noun it means “flattering remark”: Her skill at rushing the net *complements* his skill at volleying. Jill’s music arrangements receive many *compliments*.

conscience, conscious—*Conscience* is a noun meaning “moral principles”; *conscious* is an adjective meaning “aware or alert”: Let your *conscience* be your guide. Were you *conscious* of his love for you?

data—*Data* is the plural of *datum*, which means “a fact or proposition.” Many writers now treat *data* as singular or plural depending on the meaning of the sentence. Some experts insist, however, that *data* can only be plural: The new *data* suggest {not suggests} that our theory is correct. The singular form *datum* is rarely used.

e.g.—Use *for example* or *for instance* in formal writing.

etc.—Avoid ending a list with *etc*. It is more emphatic to end with an example, and in most contexts readers will understand that the list is not exhaustive. When you don’t wish to end with an example, *and so on* is more graceful than *etc*.

everyone, every one—*Everyone* is an indefinite pronoun: *Everyone* wanted to go. *Every one*, the pronoun one preceded by the adjective every, means “each individual or thing in a particular group.” *Every one* is usually followed by of: *Every one* of the missing books was found.

farther, further—*Farther* describes distances: Detroit is *farther* from Miami than I thought. *Further* suggests quantity or degree: You extended the curfew *further* than you should have.

hanged, hung—*Hanged* is the past-tense and past-participle form of the verb *hang*, meaning “to execute”: The prisoner was *hanged* at dawn. *Hung* is the past-tense and past-participle form of the verb *hang*, meaning “to fasten or suspend”: The stockings were *hung* by the chimney with care.

hopefully—*Hopefully* means “in a hopeful manner”: We looked *hopefully* to the future. Do not use *hopefully* in constructions such as the following: *Hopefully*, your daughter will recover soon. Indicate who is doing the hoping: *I hope that your daughter will recover soon*.

i.e.—Use *that is* in formal writing.

irregardless—*Irregardless* is nonstandard. Use *regardless*.
its, it’s—Its is a possessive pronoun; it’s is a contraction for it is: The dog licked its wound whenever its owner walked into the room. It’s a perfect day to walk the twenty-mile trail.

lead, led—Lead is a noun referring to a metal. Led is the past tense of the verb to lead: He led me to the treasure.

lie, lay—Lie is an intransitive verb meaning “to recline or rest on a surface.” Its forms are lie, lay, lain, lying, and lies. Lay is a transitive verb meaning “to put or place.” Its forms are lay, laid, laying, and lays.

like, as—Like is a preposition, not a subordinating conjunction. It should be followed only by a noun or a noun phrase. As is a subordinating conjunction that introduces a subordinate clause. In casual speech you may say She looks like she hasn’t slept or You don’t know her like I do. But in formal writing, use as: She looks as if she hasn’t slept. You don’t know her as I do.

loose, lose—Loose is an adjective meaning “not securely fastened.” Lose is a verb meaning “to misplace” or “to not win”: Did you lose your only loose pair of work pants?

maybe, may be—Maybe is an adverb meaning “possibly”; may be is a verb phrase: Maybe the sun will shine tomorrow. Tomorrow may be a brighter day.

passed, past—Passed is the past tense of the verb to pass: Emily passed me another slice of cake. Past usually means “belonging to a former time” or “beyond a time or place”: Our past president spoke until past midnight. The hotel is just past the next intersection.

precede, proceed—Precede means “to come before.” Proceed means “to go forward”: As we proceeded up the mountain, we noticed fresh tracks in the mud, evidence that a group of hikers had preceded us.

principal, principle—Principal is a noun meaning “the head of a school or organization” or “a sum of money.” It is also an adjective meaning “most important.” Principle is a noun meaning “a basic truth or law”: The principal expelled her for three principal reasons. We believe in the principle of equal justice for all.

real, really—Real is an adjective; really is an adverb. Real is sometimes used informally as an adverb, but avoid this use in formal writing: She was really {not real} angry.

set, sit—Set means “to put” or “to place”; sit means “to be seated”: She set the dough in a warm corner of the kitchen. The cat sits in the warmest part of the room.

than, then—Than is a conjunction used in comparisons; then is an adverb denoting time: That pizza is more than I can eat. Tom laughed, and then we recognized him.

there, their, they’re—There is an adverb specifying place; it is also an expletive. Adverb: Sylvia is lying there unconscious. Expletive: There are two plums left. Their is a possessive pronoun: Fred and Jane finally washed their car. They’re is a contraction of they are: Surprisingly, they’re late today.
to, too, two—To is a preposition; too is an adverb; two is a number: Too many of your shots slice to the left, but the last two were right on the mark.

toward, towards—Toward and towards are generally interchangeable, although toward is preferred.

who, which, that—Use who, not which, to refer to persons. Generally, use that to refer to things or, occasionally, to a group or class of people: Fans wondered how an old man who {not that or which} walked with a limp could play football. The team that scores the most points in this game will win the tournament.

who, whom—Who is used for subjects and subject complements; whom is used for objects.

who’s, whose—Who’s is a contraction of who is; whose is a possessive pronoun: Who’s ready for more popcorn? Whose coat is this?

your, you’re—Your is a possessive pronoun; you’re is a contraction of you are: Is that your new motorcycle? You’re on the list of finalists.