

50 Most Misused and Abused Words in Business Writing

There's a famous quote from Mark Twain that goes like this: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

Twain was dead on. (No surprise there!) At the very least, using the wrong word in a report, proposal, paper or memo can be embarrassing. At its worst, misusing words can damage your credibility and even prove costly at times.

One big problem with language today is the way we speak and the way we write are often two different beasts. Why else would the phrase "for all intents and purposes" have metamorphosed into "for all intensive purposes"? The same is true for "could of" and "should of," which don't even make sense if you think about it. But because that's the way we say it, that's

the way many of us end up writing it on paper, instead of the proper "could have" and "should have."

What follows is a list of words and phrases we commonly misuse. Hopefully, most of them won't be eye-openers, but a few may surprise you:

accept, except

accept – (verb) To agree with, take in, receive. *Example:* We accept your decision.

except – (preposition) Apart from. *Example:* All committee members are present except for Ms. Brown.

acute, chronic

acute – (adjective) Sharp, intense, critical. *Example:* The company has an acute shortage of skilled workers right now.

chronic – (adjective) Constant, habitual, long-lasting. *Example:* She is unable to work because of a chronic illness.

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adverse, averse

adverse – (adjective) Unfavorable, opposing one's interest. *Example:* They found themselves in adverse circumstances.

averse – (adjective) Antipathy, repugnance, having the feeling of being opposed. *Example:* She is not averse to increasing her workload.

affect, effect

affect – (verb) To influence something. *Example:* How will that affect the bottom line?

effect – (noun) The result of. (verb) to cause something to be. *Example:* Her speech had the effect of motivating the listeners.

allusion, illusion

allusion – (noun) A casual reference of mention of something. *Example:* Was that an allusion to Hemingway?

illusion – (noun) Something that gives a false picture of reality. *Example:* He believes democracy is an illusion.

all right, alright

All right – Fine, OK. *Example:* It's all right to leave early.

Alright – Incorrect spelling.

apprise, appraise

apprise – (verb) Give notice to. *Example:* Please apprise me of the situation.

appraise – (verb) Determine the worth of something. *Example:* The ring was appraised before we purchased it.

assure, ensure, insure

assure – (verb) To state with confidence, pledge or promise. *Example:* I assure you the check is in the mail.

ensure – (verb) To make certain. *Example:* Following the instructions ensures you won't get hurt.

insure – (verb) To purchase insurance. *Example:* Insure the package before you mail it.

beside, besides

beside – (preposition) At the side of, next to, near. *Example:* Take a seat beside me.

besides – (adverb) Furthermore, in addition to. *Example:* Besides, several of us will be out of town next week.

compliment, complement

compliment – (verb) To give praise. *Example:* I complimented Steve on his speech.

complement – (verb) To complete something or match it well. *Example:* Her skills complement the needs of our department.

continual, continuous

continual – (adjective) Often repeated, very frequent – but occasionally interrupted. *Example:* They've received continual complaints.

continuous – (adjective) Uninterrupted. *Example:* We couldn't hear over his continuous talking.

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disburse, disperse

disburse – (verb) To pay, distribute, scatter.
Example: They disbursed name tags to everyone attending the meeting.

disperse – (verb) To drive off, spread widely, cause to vanish. *Example:* The throng of fans dispersed into the stands.

farther, further

farther – (adverb) At or to a greater distance. *Example:* We are located farther down the highway.

further – (adverb) More or additional -- but not related to distance. *Example:* We need to have further discussion on that.

fewer, less

fewer – (adjective) Of a small number, only used with countable items. *Example:* He made fewer mistakes than last time.

less – (adjective or adverb) To a smaller extent, amount or degree -- used with quantities that cannot be individually counted. *Example:* If they made less noise, we could concentrate.

imply, infer

imply – (verb) To suggest. *Example:* What are you implying by that accusation?

infer – (verb) To deduce from evidence. *Example:* From the look on your face, I can infer you're not happy with the decision.

its, it's

its – (pronoun) Possessive form of "it."
Example: The machine has lost its ability to scan documents.

it's – Contraction of "it is." *Example:* It's not a question of right or wrong.

lose, loose

lose – (verb) Fail to win, misplace.
Example: Did you lose your file?

loose – (adjective) Free from anything that restrains. *Example:* Since losing weight, his clothes seem loose.

of, have

of – (preposition) Frequently confused with "have" since "could've" is pronounced "could of." But "of" cannot be used as a verb.

have – (verb) Proper verb form for "could have," "should have" and "would have."

principal, principle

principal – (noun) Person who has controlling authority. (adjective) Something essential or important. *Example:* Let's talk about the principal reason we're meeting today.

principle – (noun) Basic truth, policy or action. *Example:* It's important to stick to our principles.

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regardless, irregardless

regardless – (adjective or adverb) In spite of. *Example:* We are leaving, regardless of whether you're ready.

irregardless – This is not a word. (Yes, you may find it in your dictionary, but you're only embarrassing yourself if you use it.)

than, then

than – (preposition) In contrast to. *Example:* I'd rather speak face-to-face than communicate by e-mail.

then – (adverb) Next. *Example:* We met for dinner, then went to a movie.

their, there, they're

their – (pronoun) Belonging to them. *Example:* Where is their car?

there – (adverb) In a place. *Example:* Let's visit there.

they're – Contraction of "they are." *Example:* They're not leaving without saying good-bye, are they?

whose, who's

whose – (pronoun) Possessive case of "who" or "which." *Example:* Whose keys are these?

who's – Contraction of "who is." *Example:* Who's going to the game after work?

your, you're

your – (pronoun) Belonging to you. *Example:* Your briefcase is over there.

you're – Contraction of "you are." *Example:* You're not going to believe this.