

DICTION DEMONS

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“Diction” means word choice, the precise words we use to convey our intended meaning. We are not, however, always as precise as we would wish. We may confuse words that sound alike, or have similar meanings. In some dialects of English this is not a problem, but Standard English tries to keep clear distinctions between such “diction demons.” Because many terms sound alike, they can also cause spelling problems even when the writer knows the accepted definition of the terms. You should be able to define, spell, and use correctly the following terms.

ACCEPT: take or receive.

We do not accept personal cheques.

EXCEPT: but or with the exception of.

No one except you knows the secret.

ADAPT: to fit for a new use.

She adapted the novel for television.

ADEPT: highly skilled.

He is adept at producing Web pages.

ADOPT: to accept as one’s own

We adopted their policy with only minor changes.

ADVERSE: opposing, contrary, harmful.

The quiz had an adverse effect on my grade.

AVERSE: unwilling, reluctant.

I was averse to studying for the quiz.

ADVICE: suggestion, opinion.

She gave me some good advice.

ADVISE: to counsel, recommend.

My lawyer advised me to sign nothing.

AFFECT: to influence.

How will this quiz affect my grade?

EFFECT: result.

The quiz had a very good effect on my grade.

Note: “affect” can also be a noun meaning a display of emotion: *The killer showed no affect when he saw his victim’s photograph.* And “effect” can also be a verb meaning to carry out or perform: *You will effect this change in policy at once.* But these are relatively rare usages.

A LOT: much or many (colloquial)

We interviewed a lot of lawyers on our trip.

ALLOT: to give out in portions

We allotted each contestant the same amount of time.

Note: “Alot” is *always* a misspelling of either term. In formal writing, use “much” or “many” instead of “a lot.”

ALL READY: prepared.

We are all ready to run the videotape.

ALREADY: by now, before now.

She was already there when we arrived.

ALL RIGHT: everything correct.

Your idea is all right with me.

ALRIGHT: misspelling of “all right.”

Note: Although some dictionaries accept this spelling, and it often appears in print, it is not yet Standard English; it may never be.

ALTERNATE: to act in turn or step by step; another.

Thelma and Louise alternated at the wheel.

I served as an alternate delegate to the convention.

ALTERNATIVE: one or the other.

If you don't want to go to Point Pelee, your only alternative is to stay home.

ALTOGETHER: completely.

We were altogether wrong in our predictions.

ALL TOGETHER: everyone or everything together.

We were all together for Christmas.

AMONG: refers to three or more.

We divided the cake among four children.

BETWEEN: refers to two.

We divided the cake between two children.

Note: “Between” can sometimes be acceptable in describing relationships involving several individuals or groups: *Ottawa regulates trade between the provinces.*

AMOUNT: refers to uncountable mass items.

The recipe calls for a large amount of flour.

NUMBER: refers to countable items.

The recipe makes a large number of bagels.

ANXIOUS: fearful, worried.

I'm anxious about the test.

EAGER: pleasantly anticipating.

I'm eager to take the test.

ANY ONE: any one person or thing out of several.

Any one of you could do this job.

ANYONE: any person.

Anyone would be grateful for this help.

Note: If you have to use “of,” as in the first example, “any one” will be two words. If you don't need “of,” as in the second example, then “anyone” will be one word.

APPRAISE: estimate, assess.

An expert appraised the property.

APPRISE: to inform.

His attorney apprised him of the lawsuit.

AS: conjunction used at the beginning of a clause.

He ran as he had never run before.

LIKE: used before a word or phrase.

He ran like the wind.

ASSURE: to promise or create trust.

He assured us of his good intentions.

ENSURE: make certain.

We want to ensure a fair resolution of the dispute.

INSURE: protect against loss.

He insured his car for \$30,000.

Note: “Insure” can also mean “to make certain,” but you will be clearer if you avoid that usage.

A WHILE: part of prepositional phrase for a period of time; always takes “for” or “in” as part of the phrase.

Plan to stay and visit us for a while.

AWHILE: adverb for a period of time.

We talked awhile and then left the house.

BESIDE: next to.

Along came a spider that sat down beside her.

BESIDES: in addition to.

I can't go to the party. Besides, I don't like parties.

BLATANT: Deliberately public, without concealment.

The mayor made a blatant appeal to anti-immigrant voters.

FLAGRANT: Offensive whether public or not.

For the mayor to accept a bribe would be a flagrant breach of trust.

BOYCOTT: Refusal to buy for political or moral reasons.

We are boycotting your firm's products until you change your hiring policies.

EMBARGO: Government prohibition on buying or selling.

Ottawa has slapped an embargo on arms sales to the combatants.

CENSOR: to delete or suppress before making public

Both sides in the Gulf War censored news reports.

CENSURE: to express blame or disapproval, often formally

The Senate voted to censure Senator Jones.

CHILDISH: immature, irresponsible.

She behaved childishly last night.

CHILDLIKE: innocent, natural.

He has a childlike love of animals.

CITE: quote or summon.

He can cite several precedents for this case.

SIGHT: to see or take aim.

The pilot said he had sighted a UFO.

SITE: location.

They chose a controversial site for the shopping mall.

Please visit our Web site for the details.

CLIMACTIC: pertaining to a climax.

The climactic scene of the film is shocking.

CLIMATIC: pertaining to climate.

Experts say a climatic change is already under way.

COARSE: rough in texture.

His jacket was of coarsely woven wool.

COURSE: direction, part of a meal, unit of learning.

What course did you enroll in?

COLLABORATE: work together.

They collaborated on several Broadway musicals.

CORROBORATE: confirm.

We corroborated the policeman's testimony.

COMPLEMENT: complete or make perfect.

The necktie complemented his elegant suit.

COMPLIMENT: praise.

I must compliment you on that elegant necktie.

COMPOSE: make up.

The committee is composed of three delegates.

COMPRISE: constitute, embrace.

The committee comprises three delegates.

Note: Never say "comprised of."

CONTEMPTIBLE: deserving of contempt.

Kicking the dog was a contemptible act.

CONTEMPTUOUS: showing contempt.

He looked at his enemy with a contemptuous sneer.

CONTINUAL: recurring at short intervals.

We suffered continual calls from sales agents.

CONTINUOUS: without interruption.

The continuous roar of the air conditioning is a nuisance.

CONVINCE: cause to believe something by proof

The statistics convinced him to change his business plan.

PERSUADE: cause to believe something by appeals to feeling

The heartbreaking story persuaded him to donate to the charity.

COUNCIL: governing or advisory body.

He went before the city council with his request.

COUNSEL: advise, advisor.

We counselled her to buy the stock while it was cheap.

She is the defendant's counsel.

COUNTRY: the territory of a nation.

Canada is a very large country.

NATION: the people of a country.

Canadians are a largely peaceable nation.

DEPENDANT: a person who relies on another for support.

Her dependants are two teenage sons.

DEPENDENT: variable, depending on.

Their climb to the summit would be dependent on the weather.

DESERT: desolated area, to abandon, or something deserved.

The rocky desert had never been crossed on foot.

He deserted his companions.

The king praised each knight according to his desert.

DESSERT: a sweet at the end of a meal.

We had Nanaimo bars for dessert.

DIFFERENT FROM: used before a noun or pronoun.

Prince George is different from Prince Rupert.

DIFFERENT THAN: used before a clause.

Newfoundland was different than I had expected.

DISBURSE: pay out.

The treasurer will disburse money for your expenses.

DISPERSE: scatter.

The raiders dispersed into the jungle.

DISC: correct spelling for all non-computer references.

He suffered a slipped disc.

DISK: correct spelling for computer references.

The files are on a ZIP disk.

The floppy disk was corrupted.

DISCREET: prudent, tactful.

He maintained a discreet silence about his past legal troubles.

DISCRETE: separate, distinct.

We face three discrete problems here.

DISINTERESTED: impartial.

The judge gave a disinterested hearing to the opposing arguments.

UNINTERESTED: bored, apathetic.

The class was uninterested in studying semicolons.

EMIGRATE: move out of a country.

A million people emigrated from Ireland after the potato famine.

IMMIGRATE: move into a country.

She immigrated to Canada from Indonesia last year.

ENORMITY: Great crime or wickedness.

The enormity of the Holocaust was beyond description.

MAGNITUDE: Size (not a synonym for “enormity”).

The magnitude of the problem has stumped the experts.

ENVELOP: wrap, enfold.

Thick fog can often envelop the harbour.

ENVELOPE: wrapper.

He sent the letter in a large envelope.

EVERY DAY: each day.

We clean the coffee maker every day.

EVERYDAY: routine. Always an adjective.

Sales meetings are an everyday event in this office.

EVERY ONE: each person or thing. Always takes “of.”

Every one of you will be tested tomorrow.

EVERYONE: all in a group.

Everyone should be on time for the test.

EXPLICIT: expressed openly.

Her explicit rejection deeply embarrassed him.

IMPLICIT: implied, suggested.

His remarks contained an implicit hostility.

FARTHER: a greater distance.

We drove farther today than we did yesterday.

FURTHER: additional, to help forward.

For further information, please consult the prospectus.

Note: Not all dictionaries make this distinction.

FEWER: used with countable items.

We have fewer hits on our Web site this week.

LESS: used with uncountable items.

We have less traffic on our Web site this week.

FLACK: Slang term for a publicist.

We've hired one of the best flacks in town to help market our band.

FLAK: Anti-aircraft weapon; slang for serious criticism.

The company took a lot of flak for its toxic-waste policy.

FLAUNT: make a gaudy or defiant display.
He loved to flaunt his wealth.

FLOUT: mock or show contempt for.
Too many drivers flout the speed limit.

FORCEFUL: energetic.
He made a forceful speech supporting the policy.

FORCIBLE: using physical force or violence.
The witness was forcibly removed from the courtroom.

FOREWORD: introductory comments.
He explains his motives in the foreword of his book.

FORWARD: direction.
We moved forward under enemy fire.

FULSOME: excessive and insincere
He paid the CEO some oily, fulsome compliments.

FULL: complete, filled up
The bus was full of sightseers.

Note: Do not use “fulsome” as a synonym for “complete.”

HISTORIC: important in history.
Hiroshima was a historic moment for humanity.

HISTORICAL: based on history.
He wrote a historical novel about Louis Riel.

HOARD: a supply of something.
We have a hoard of canned goods in the basement.

HORDE: a large number of people.
A horde of bargain hunters swarmed into the shop.

IMPLY: suggest, hint.
He implied that his opponent was a drug addict.

INFER: deduce, conclude.
She inferred from his frown that she would not get the job.

INCIDENCE: rate of occurrence.
The incidence of tuberculosis has been rising.

INCIDENT: event.
The brawl was just one incident in a busy night for the police.

INGENIOUS: clever, resourceful.
She made an ingenious use of limited office space.

INGENUOUS: frank, naive.
From anyone else, her ingenuous remark would have been tactless and insulting.

INCREDIBLE: unbelievable.

He told us an incredible story about seeing a sasquatch.

INCREDULOUS: unbelieving.

She stared incredulously at the sasquatch.

IRREGARDLESS: a nonstandard or humorous usage.

REGARDLESS: without concern for.

Regardless of his opinion, she mailed the letter.

ITS: belonging to it.

For Sabrina, web design had lost its charm.

IT'S: contraction of "it is."

It's a lovely day in the neighbourhood.

LAY: put or place.

Lay the book on that table.

LIE: recline.

All he does is lie around watching soap operas every day.

Note: These verbs can be confusing in other tenses also. The past tense of "lay" is "laid":

He laid the book on the table.

The present continuous is "laying":

He is laying the book on the table.

The past tense of "lie" is "lay":

We lay sunbathing on the beach all day.

The present continuous is "lying":

We're lying on the beach all day.

The past perfect tense of "lie" is "lain":

We had lain sunbathing on the beach all day.

Of course, "lie" meaning "to tell an untruth" is quite different:

He is lying through his teeth.

He lied despite the evidence.

LOATH: reluctant.

He was loath to argue with her.

LOATHE: detest.

She loathes people who play loud radios outdoors.

LOOSE: unfastened.

Kids' shoelaces always seem to be loose.

LOSE: misplace.

Don't lose this receipt.

LUXURIANT: lush, overgrown.

We hacked through luxuriant underbrush to reach the crash site.

LUXURIOUS: rich, elegant.

She admired the luxurious decor of the house.

MARITAL: pertaining to marriage.
Your marital status is unimportant for this job.

MARTIAL: pertaining to war.
His martial exploits won him rapid promotion.

MEANTIME: noun meaning “at the same time”; takes the prepositions “in” or “for.”
In the meantime, we had already arrived.

MEANWHILE: adverb describing when some action took place; never takes a preposition.
Meanwhile, I applied to two other colleges.

MORAL: ethical.
She rejected the offer on moral grounds.

MORALE: attitude.
Employees’ morale soared after the strike ended.

NAUSEATED: sickened.
I was nauseated by the stench.

NAUSEOUS: inducing nausea.
The corpse gave off a nauseous odour of decay.

NOISOME: smelly, disgusting.
We were forced to use a noisome outhouse.

NOISY: loud.
We complained about his noisy parties.

ORAL: spoken.
We have an oral agreement, but nothing on paper.

VERBAL: pertaining to words.
Her verbal skills make her a good interviewer and a fine writer.

PASSED: past tense of “to pass.”
He passed the ball for a touchdown.

PAST: time gone by.
His past crimes have long been forgiven.

PEOPLE: A group of individuals too large to count precisely.
Thousands of people marched on Parliament.

PERSONS: A specific number of individuals.
Police arrested twenty-two persons.

PERQUISITE: a special privilege (perk).
A new car is one of the perquisites of the job.

PREREQUISITE: a condition or requirement.
A BA is a prerequisite for admission to our program.

PERSONAL: private, individual.

He is her personal assistant.

PERSONNEL: employees.

All personnel are aware of the new policy.

PRACTICABLE: capable of being done.

Your scheme seems practicable.

PRACTICAL: sensible, oriented toward results.

Emphasis in this course is on practical, job-related problems.

PRINCIPAL: first or most important.

Her principal reason for leaving was to travel.

PRINCIPLE: rule or idea.

We support the principle of democracy.

PROPONENT: advocate.

He is a strong proponent of free speech on the Internet.

PROTAGONIST: central character in a story.

Dominic Da Vinci is the protagonist of the TV drama *Da Vinci's Inquest*.

PROSTATE: male gland.

He suffered from an enlarged prostate.

PROSTRATE: lying face down.

He prostrated himself before the king.

RAVAGE: to lay waste.

The barbarians ravaged Britain after the Romans left.

RAVISH: to seize, carry away with emotion.

Her musical artistry ravished her listeners.

REGRETFULLY: in a manner displaying regret.

We regretfully left the scene of the accident.

REGRETTABLY: *in a manner that others disapprove of.*

Regrettably, he refused to accept blame.

Note: Only human actions are regrettable. Do not say, "The earthquake was regrettable."

REIN: a cord to control a horse; metaphorically, to control a person or persons.

He kept a tight rein on his stallion.

She gave her researchers free rein to explore the subject.

REIGN: the time of a monarch's rule.

The 13 colonies broke away from Britain during the reign of King George III.

REND: to tear.

TV coverage of the famine victims was heart-rending.

RENDER: to give, cause, or yield.

Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

RESPECTABLY: correctly, decently.

He dressed respectably despite his poverty.

RESPECTFULLY: in a manner showing respect.

She spoke respectfully to the judge.

RESPECTIVELY: in the order named.

Joe and Janet earned an A and a B, respectively.

SEASONABLE: appropriate to the season.

Autumn was seasonably cool.

SEASONAL: pertaining to the season.

We enjoyed a seasonal high temperature yesterday.

SHALL: Expressing determination; also used in legal writing.

We shall win despite the odds.

The commissioner shall hold the position at Her Majesty's pleasure.

WILL: Expressing future intent.

We will ship version 2.0 by May 1.

SIMULATE: pretend, imitate.

To obtain her wealth, he simulated mad adoration of her.

STIMULATE: provoke, arouse.

Her secretive behaviour stimulated his curiosity.

STATIONARY: unmoving.

We remained stationary; the brake was still on.

STATIONERY: writing materials.

The letter was on official stationery.

THEIR: possessive of "they."

Their success was predictable.

THERE: at that place or point.

Be there at noon tomorrow.

THEY'RE: contraction of "they are."

They're some of my best friends.

TO: preposition or sign of an infinitive.

She went to college to improve herself.

TOO: also or excessively.

He read too fast to comprehend the material.

TWO: number.

The two sales representatives made a very professional presentation.

VENAL: corruptible.

The government is full of venal politicians hoping to get rich by illegal means.

VENIAL: pardonable.

Compared to his crimes, your offences are venial.