

THINGS YOU'VE BEEN SAYING WRONG YOUR WHOLE LIFE

Could care less

What you actually mean: Couldn't care less... You want to say you care so little already that you couldn't possibly care any less.

Less

What you actually mean: Fewer... In general, use fewer when you're specifying a number of countable things ('200 words or fewer'); reserve less for a mass ('less than half'). So when you're composing a tweet, do it in 140 characters or fewer, not less.

Bring

What you could mean: Take... The choice depends on your point of view. Use 'bring' when you want to show motion toward you ('Bring the dog treats over here, please'). Use 'take' to show motion in the opposite direction ('I have to take Rufus to the vet'). The rule gets confusing when the movement has nothing to do with you. In those cases, you can use either verb, depending on the context: 'The assistant brought the shot to the vet' (the vet's point of view); 'the assistant took the shot to the doctor' (the assistant's). This is the grammar rule you didn't know you already knew.

Who

What you could mean: Whom... It all depends. Do you need a subject or an object? A subject (who) is the actor of the sentence: 'Who left the rollerskates on the sidewalk?' An object (whom) is the acted-upon: 'Whom are you calling?'

Brother-in-laws, runner-ups, hole in ones, etc.

What you actually mean: Brothers-in-law, runners-up, holes in one, etc. Plurals of these compound nouns are formed by adding an 's' to the thing there's more than one of (brothers, not laws). Some exceptions: words ending in '-ful' (mouthfuls) and phrases like cul-de-sacs. On the other hand, it's hard to believe these irregular plurals are actually correct.

Try and

What you actually mean: Try to... Try and try again, yes, but if you're planning to do something, use the infinitive form: 'I'm going to try to run a marathon.'

Different than

What you actually mean: Different from... This isn't the biggest offense, but if you can easily substitute 'from' for 'than' (My mother's tomato sauce is different from my mother-in-law's), do it. Use 'than' for comparisons: My mother's tomato sauce is better than my mother-in-law's.

Beg the question

What you actually mean: Raise the question... Correctly used, 'begging the question' is like making a circular argument (I don't like you because you're so unlikable). This is how to win an argument with someone who's always right. But unless you're a philosophy professor, you shouldn't ever need this phrase. Stick to 'raise the question.'

More than

You can also say: Over... The two are interchangeable when the sentence is 'Over 6,000 hats were sold.' We like grammarian Bryan Garner's take on it: 'The charge that 'over' is inferior to 'more than' is a baseless crotchet.'

Supposably

What you probably mean: Supposedly... Supposably is, in fact, a word—it means 'conceivably' but not the one you want if you're trying to say 'it's assumed,' and certainly not the one you want if you're on a first date.

All of

What you actually mean: All... Why: Drop the 'of' whenever you can, as Julia Roberts recently did, correctly: 'Every little moment is amazing if you let yourself access it. I learn that all the time from my kids.' But you need 'all of' before a pronoun ('all of them') and before a possessive noun ('all of Julia's kids').

That

What you probably mean: Which... The money that is on the table is for you' is different from 'the money, which is on the table, is for you.' 'That' pinpoints the subject: The money that is on the table is yours; the money in my pocket is mine. 'Which' introduces an aside, a bit of extra information. If you remove 'which is on the table,' you won't change the meaning: The money is for you (oh, and unless you don't want it, it's on the table). If the clause is necessary to your meaning, use 'that;' if it could safely be omitted, say 'which.'

Outside of

What you actually mean: Outside... These two prepositions weren't meant for each other.

Each other

What you actually mean: One another... Tradition says that 'each other' should be used with two people or things, and 'one another' with more than two, and careful speakers should follow suit: 'The three presenters argued with one another over who should announce the award, but Ann and Barbara gave each other flowers after the ceremony.' (By the way, if you need the possessive form of either one when writing that business letter, it's always each other's and one another's; never end with s'.)

Confusing pair: Wary vs Weary

A wary or leery person is suspicious, but someone who is weary is simply tired.

Confusing pair: Farther vs Further

Use 'farther' when talking about physical distance and 'further' for metaphorical distance or time. He hopes to run farther at his next race, but right now, he's focused on reading further in his new novel. These are the books you should have read by now.

Confusing pair: Principal vs Principle

A principal is a person, and a principle is a rule. The principal of a school lives her life by certain principles that she set for herself.

Confusing pair: Compliment vs Complement

Compliments are nice things to say. A complement makes something complete or perfect; it's also used as a verb. You can give a compliment to a coworker who found a scarf that complements her outfit.

Confusing pair: Continual vs Continuous

Continual means ongoing but intermittent. Something that is continuous has no interruptions.

Confusing pair: Stationary vs Stationery

A stationary soldier stands still, but he writes letters on fancy stationery.

Confusing pair: Imply vs Infer

To imply is to suggest a meaning, and to infer means to draw meaning from something. The speaker does the implying, and the listener infers something from that statement. People can also infer a lot about you through your body language.

Confusing pair: Affect vs Effect

Affect is typically a verb, meaning 'to act upon or cause an effect'; as a noun, it's 'an emotional response.' On the other hand, effect is typically a noun, meaning 'something produced,' like a special effect; as a verb, 'to bring about,' as in 'to effect change.'