

Choose the Correct Word – #1

To make the best impression on your clients, it is essential your documents be written in the best English. Here are 10 quick word choices that stymie even experienced writers

Lie vs lay? It seems to be mostly Americans who get these verbs confused. Interestingly, it's not such a problem in Britain or Canada. Here's the rule:

- "To lie" means to recline. *I lie down. Your dog lies down. The book is lying on the table.*
- "To lay" means to put something down – and the verb must be followed by the name of that something. You *lay a book* on the table, *lay a child* in her crib, *lay your keys* on the counter, "*lay me* down to sleep."

Lay vs laid? The past tenses of "to lie" and "to lay" are so little known they get their own entry:

- The past tense of "lie" is "lay." *The check lay on the table for 15 minutes before anyone noticed it.*
- The past tense of "lay" is "laid" followed by whatever was laid down: The waiter *laid the check* on the table 15 minutes ago. The goose *laid an egg*.

Its vs it's? Once you know the rule, it's an easy choice:

- As in the sentence above, "it's" is a contraction of "it is." When deciding which version to use, try substituting "it is." If the result makes sense, the choice is "it's." *It's not easy being green.*
- "Its," without an apostrophe, indicates possession. It refers to a single person or entity. *I returned the wallet to its owner. The library is holding its annual book sale.* Substituting "it is" here makes no sense at all.

A lot vs alot? An easy choice: There's no such word as "alot."

- If you mean "many" or "much," you need two words: "*Thanks a lot.*" "*Bill Gates has a lot of money.*"
- Of course, you may also want "allot," which means to apportion. *The town planners allotted 500 acres for public parks.*

All right vs alright? Another simple decision, for the same reason as above: There's no such word as "alright." The fact that the filmmakers got this correct in "*The Kids Are All Right*" is almost reason enough to recommend the movie.

Your vs you're? Facebook is killing this usage. The selection process is the same as "its" vs "it's":

- "You're" is a contraction for "you are." If you don't know which word to use, try substituting "you are." If it makes sense, you want "you're." *You're not even trying to understand.*
- "Your" is a possessive of "you." *Your time is up.* You can't possibly replace "your" with "you are" here.

Lead vs led? The confusion probably arises because there's a heavy metal spelled "lead" but pronounced "led." "Led" is the past tense of the verb "to lead" (pronounced "leed").

- *Jefferson asked Lewis and Clark to lead an expedition to the American West.*
- *The men led their party all the way to the Pacific.*

Affect vs effect? These words each have multiple definitions. In the most common usages, however, "affect" is a verb meaning "to have an impact on something"; "effect" is a noun denoting an impact.

- *Heavy smoking affects the health of your lungs.*
- *The effect of smoking on your lungs isn't pretty.*

There vs their vs they're? Once again, your choices include a contraction – which should make it easy. "They're" is the shortened "they are." If you don't know which word to choose, substitute "they are." If it makes sense, you need "they're."

- *The students insist they're getting too much homework.*
- "Their," like "its," is a possessive pronoun, this time referring to plural people or things. *They claim their teachers are being unfair.*
- "There" is an adverb denoting place. *There is no there there.*

Loose vs lose? These two words aren't related but they do confuse people. "Lose" is the present tense for "lost"; "loose" is the opposite of unconfined.

- *The goose is loose and menacing the ducks*
- *She wants to lose weight before the prom.*