

## Commonly Confused Words

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### THE UNDISPUTED CHAMPION

**its** shows possession.

**it's** is a contraction for "it is" or "it has."

*The dog wagged its tail.*

*It's [it is] a sunny day.*

*It's [it has] been a long time.*

These two are likely the most commonly confused words in the English language. This is because we often use an apostrophe when indicating possession – for example, "Tom's car is red," but we do not use an apostrophe when indicating possession with "its."

There is an easy way to avoid this error. Whenever you see "it's," you should be able to insert the phrase "it is" or "it has." For example: "The dog wagged it's tail" would be read as: "The dog wagged it is tail." This is clearly wrong, hence you can delete the apostrophe.

### THE RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)

**accept** means to receive something.

**except** means "other than."

*The actor will accept the award with pride.*

*Everyone except John is going to university.*

to **adapt** is to modify one's behaviour to suit new conditions.

to **adopt** is to take up and use an idea or practice.

*The Russians were forced to adapt to the new economy.*

*The government chose to adopt a controversial position on this issue.*

### verbs

**affect** means "to influence."

**effect** means "to bring about."

*Did the new policy affect his decision to quit?*

*The aim of revolution is to effect fundamental change.*

nouns

**affect** refers to feeling or emotion. [Note: this word is rarely used, except in psychology.]

**effect** means “result.”

*The patient displayed a lack of affect.*

*The effect of such a loss can be devastating.*

**conscience** is a noun that refers to moral principles of right and wrong.

**conscious** is an adjective that refers to an awareness of something.

*If you have any conscience, you will not steal that jacket.*

*She was not conscious of the fact that her husband was a mass murderer.*

**fewer** refers to items that can be counted.

**less** refers to general amounts that are not easily counted.

*She owns fewer compact discs than he does.*

*He has less energy than he did before.*

**lead** is a metal.

**lead** is also a verb meaning “to guide.”

**led** is the past tense of the verb “to lead.”

*The fish contained lead.*

*You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.*

*He led her away.*

**loose** means “not secure.”

**lose** refers to a defeat or when something has been misplaced.

*The top button on my shirt is loose.*

*You should learn how to lose graciously.*

*Did you lose your car keys?*

**passed** is the past tense of “to pass.”

**past** means “belonging to a former time” or “beyond a place.”

*She passed the exam.*

*It is now in the past.*

*It is past the next intersection.*

a **principal** is an individual who is the head of a school.  
**principal** can also mean “most important.”  
**principle** refers to basic moral beliefs.

*The school children were afraid of the principal.*  
*The principal problem with today’s youth is that they don’t have enough discipline.*  
*The principle “thou shalt not kill” is part of every culture.*

There is an easy way to avoid this error. “Principle” is like a “rule” – they both end in “le.”

**than** is used to compare.  
**then** means “at that time” or “soon afterward.”

*I am taller than my father.*  
*Back then, life was easier.*  
*Let’s eat first, then we’ll go to the concert.*

**their** is the possessive of “they.”  
**there** implies direction, a reference to at (or in) some place.  
**they’re** is a contraction of “they are.”

*We were driving their new car.*  
*We’re going over there this afternoon.*  
*They’re crazy.*

**which** refers to things.  
**who** refers to persons.

*These rights, which are guaranteed by law, make democracy work.*  
*They are the men who robbed the store.*

**who’s** is a contraction of “who is” or “who has.”  
**whose** indicates possession/ownership.

*Who’s [who is] there?*  
*Who’s [who has] seen the movie?*  
*Whose book is that?*