

Study Advice Services

Student Support Services

HOMOPHONES

Author: Peter Wilson

A **homophone** is a word that sounds like another word, but is spelled differently.

To, too or two?

Two is the number '2'.

Too (pronounced long) means

- as well, also. "I like coffee. I like tea too."
- over much, surplus. "The weather is too hot for me."

To is the spelling for all other meanings of words that sound like this. It tends to be pronounced very short. Sometimes it sounds like 'teh', or can be written (in slang) as 'gotta'

Your or you're? Their, they're or there?

First, some patterns of spelling:

Words that mean 'a place' (here, there, everywhere, etc.) are all formed like **here**.

- If you mean 'in this place', say **here**. (But note: you **hear** with your **ears**.)
- If you mean 'in **that** place', use **there** (**th** + (**h**)**ere**).
- If you mean '**which** place', use **where** (**wh** + (**h**)**ere**). This applies to **everywhere** too.

Words that are contracted (short) forms of **are** (you're, we're, they're, etc) all show the shortening [(a)**re**] by an apostrophe ('). You are → **you're**, we are → **we're**, etc.

Second, some simple guides:

- Their** = of them. "Have you seen their house?"
- They're** = they are. "They're moving in today."
- There** is the spelling for all other meanings of words that sound like this. "*I left it there, in that chair*". "*There are three things I want you to remember*." "*There, there, have you hurt yourself?*" "*There's no chance you can get a ticket?*"
- Your** is like **their**. It means 'belonging to', or 'of', you. "It's your turn". "Your assignment this week is ..."
- You're** is like **they're**. It means 'you are'. "You're doing well". "You're to write an essay about"
- Where** is a place, like here.
- Were** is like **was**. So *Where were you* is the right way round.
- Its** = of it
- It's** = it is



Some commonly confused words

These are a few of the pairs that are often used wrongly. There are many of these. Some are more commonly met in some subject areas, and rare outside them. Keep your own list of the homophones you need to be careful of.

Compliment or complement?

A **compliment**, or a **complimentary** remark, is something you pay someone when you want to be nice: "What a nice dress!" "That's very clever". "You played very well" etc. Sometimes **complimentary** means 'free': e.g. complimentary tickets.

A **complement**, or a **complementary** thing, is something that completes something: e.g. a ship's **complement** is her crew; her assignment has a **complementary** guide to experimental techniques; yin is **complementary** to yang.

Principle or principal?

A **principle** is an underlying idea, or a moral belief, etc. A **principal** is either a Head (e.g. a sort of Head-teacher); or an adjective describing the most important thing, "The principal point in this lecture is..."

Practice or practise?

A **practice** is a noun – something that you do, "there is a football practice tonight"; "I did 5 hours' piano practice yesterday"; "my usual practice is to warm up for five minutes first"; "she is in General Practice". (If you can say "a practice" in your sentence, then it is practice.)

To **practise** is a verb – to do something, e.g. "I practised my vocabulary last night"; "he practised his speech in front of a mirror."

Affect or effect?

To **affect** is a verb – to do something, e.g. "she was affected deeply by the death of her husband"; "to raise taxes affects everyone".

An **effect** is a noun – a thing, or result. Cause and effect are opposites. "The effects of the war were...". Sometimes effects means possessions: "Carry your personal effects with you".

(There is a verb – which you are advised to avoid – to **effect**. It means, roughly, to carry out, or to put into effect: "You will effect my orders immediately.")

Found or Founded?

To **find** is a verb, roughly the opposite of to lose. Its past tense is **found**. "Yesterday I found a five pound note"; "He found the reference in his textbook".

Confusingly, there is also a verb **to found**, which means to lay the foundations of, or to begin. Its past tense is **founded**. "Robert Owen founded the socially experimental community of New Lanark"; "King Alfred is supposed to have founded the British Navy"; "Bill Gates founded Microsoft".

Lie or lay – or laid?

To **lie** is an intransitive verb – i.e. it has no object. You lie down.

To **lay** is a transitive verb – i.e. it has an object. You **lay something** down.

Confusingly, the past tense of to **lie** is **lay**: "She lay down for a moment at three o'clock". The past tense of to **lay** is **laid**: "They laid down their weapons".

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication

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