Using the wrong word is called a usage error. This handout outlines some common usage errors and how to correct them.

**Introduction**

Often, the way we speak is much different from the way we write. While we may be able to get away with certain usage errors in conversation, they stand out in our writing.

In written communication, we need to say exactly what we mean. We also need to write according to the conventions and expectations of our audience. The wrong homophone here or the incorrect adjective there can make a dramatic difference in how you are perceived.

Learning how to avoid the common errors listed below will greatly improve your academic writing.

**Word Choice Errors**

This section explains many common word choice errors. Remember, while you may still be understood if you use the “wrong” word, you don’t want your readers to perceive you as sloppy or ignorant. Academic writing is precise writing, so choose the right word.

**Among vs. Between**

Use “between” when referring to two things and “among” when referring collectively to more than two things.

**Example:** She had to choose between steak and chicken for her reception entrée.

**Example:** She had to choose among several entrées for the reception.

However, use “between” when referring to more than two specific items.

**Example:** She had to choose between steak, chicken, and fish for her reception entrée.

**Amount vs. Number**

Use “amount” when referring to something that cannot be counted (i.e., non-count nouns). Things that cannot be counted usually include abstract concepts or ideas such as love, faith, or anxiety.

**Example:** The amount of love shown toward the speaker was inspiring.

Use “number” when referring to something that can be counted (i.e., count nouns). Things that can be
counted include common nouns like dogs, users, or apples.

Example: The number of tweets rose during the football game.

Disinterested vs. Uninterested
A disinterested person doesn’t have any thoughts or opinions on something. He or she is neutral.

Example: Jane is the perfect person to make the decision: she is disinterested when it comes to department politics.

An uninterested person simply doesn’t care or is bored.

Example: John is completely uninterested in learning about his father’s business. All he cares about is the money it will make him one day.

Fewer vs. Less
Like “amount” and “number,” “fewer” and “less” are often used interchangeably (especially in signage at checkouts) but have distinct meanings. If you cannot count the noun the adjective is describing (i.e., non-count nouns), use “less.”

Example: I wish I had less stress in my life.

If you can count the noun the adjective is describing (i.e., count nouns), use “fewer.”

Example: I wish fewer mistakes were made.

Lay vs. Lie
“Lie” means “to be horizontal on something.” It is an action that the subject performs on itself.

Example: I lie down on the couch after work.

“Lay” means “to put something down.” It is an action the subject performs on something else.

Example: When I come home, I lay my computer on the counter.

However, things get more complicated when you use “lie” and “lay” in various forms and tenses.

<table>
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<th>Tense</th>
<th>“Lie”: “to be horizontal”</th>
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<td>Simple Present</td>
<td>lie</td>
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Refer to these sample sentences in various tenses.

“Lie” in simple past tense: Yesterday after work, I lay down on the couch.

“Lay” in simple past tense: When I came home, I laid my computer on the counter.

“Lie” as a gerund-participle: The book is lying on the floor.
“Lay” as a gerund-participle: I am laying the computer down gently so that I don’t break it.

“Lie” as past participle: I had lain in bed for two hours.

“Lay” as past participle: When I came home, I noticed that I had laid my keys on the counter.

**Literally vs. Figuratively**

“Literally” refers to something that actually has or will happen.

**Example:** His brother literally had to carry him across the finish line. He just couldn’t complete the race on his own.

“Figuratively” refers to something happening metaphorically or symbolically.

**Example:** In The Great Gatsby, the glasses of Dr. T.J. Eckelberg figuratively represent the eyes of God.

Although “literally” is used for emphasis in casual speech, do not use it in this way in your academic writing.

**Inappropriate:** Our eyes were literally glued to the television.

**Regardless vs. Irregardless**

“Regardless” is a synonym for “despite.” Technically, “irregardless” isn’t a standard word, but because it is used so frequently in conversation, it has crept its way into some dictionaries. Don’t use it in formal writing—choose “regardless” instead.

**Example:** Regardless of the outcome of the contest, I’m content with my performance.

**When vs. Whenever**

Use “when” to refer to an event taking place at a specific date or time.

**Example: When** I was 23 years old, I married the love of my life.

Use “whenever” to refer to repeated events or events for which the date or time is uncertain.

**Example:** Whenever I use the bathroom at a restaurant, my food inevitably comes.

**Homophone Errors**

Homophones are words that sound the same but that have different meanings. This section addresses commonly confused homophones.

**Accept vs. Except**

“Accept” means to receive or believe something.

**Example:** I accept the fact that I will never be a professional football player.

“Except” means to exclude something. Remember that both “except” and “exclude” start with “ex.”

**Example:** Stir all the ingredients together except the coconut shavings.
Affect vs. Effect

An easy way to differentiate “affect” and “effect” is to remember that, for the most part, “affect” is used as a verb and “effect” is used as a noun. Since verbs convey action, think “A” for “action.” If you can remember this distinction, you will make the right choice the majority of the time.

When used as a verb, “affect” means “to influence” or “to produce a change.”

“Affect” as a verb: Rainy days affect my mood.

When used as a noun, “effect” refers to the result of something.

“Effect” as a noun: Typhoon Yolanda had a profound effect on the people of Tacloban.

However, “affect” can be used as a noun and “effect” as a verb. These uses have specialized meanings.

In psychology, “affect” is used as a noun to refer to one’s demeanor.

“Affect” as a noun: A sad, flat affect may be an indicator of depression.

As a verb, “effect” means “to cause” or “to bring to pass.”

“Effect” as a verb: The people of Tacloban wanted to effect a change in disaster preparedness.

A lot vs. Alot

“A lot” is two words—not one!

Example: “Affect” and “effect” cause a lot of problems for beginning writers.

Allude vs. Elude

When you allude to something, you refer to it indirectly.

Example: She alluded to Robert Frost’s “The Road Less Traveled” when she mentioned taking an unconventional route toward graduation.

When you elude something, you avoid it.

Example: The criminal was able to elude the police as he carefully covered his tracks.

Bear vs. Bare

As a verb, “to bear” something means “to carry,” “to support,” or “to be equipped with it.” The past tense form of “bear” is “bore.”

Example: I couldn’t bear the load any longer, so my father carried it for me.

“Bare” is an adjective that has several meanings including “having the minimum amount of something” or “being naked.”

Example: Since we went into the woods with only the bare necessities, we were freezing when the unexpected snowstorm hit.

As a verb, “bare” means “to uncover” or “to reveal.” The past tense form is “bared.”

Example: The dog bared its teeth.
Besides vs. Beside
“Besides” means “in addition to.”

Example: Besides soccer, I enjoy weightlifting and lacrosse.

“Beside” means “next to.”

Example: During the meeting, I sat beside my boss.

Cite vs. Site vs. Sight
When you cite, you attribute work to its original author.

Example: Don’t forget to cite your sources when using APA!

“Site” refers to a location or place.

Example: The mayor broke ground today on the site of the city’s latest tourist attraction.

Finally, “sight” refers to one’s eyesight or the ability to see.

Example: I could no longer see the plane over the horizon. It was finally out of sight.

Council vs. Counsel
“Council” is a noun which refers to a group of people appointed to discuss and decide on issues.

Example: The neighbor’s concerns about the construction taking place were brought to the school council.

Generally, “counsel” is used a verb meaning “to advise.” However, it can also be used as a noun to refer to the act of advising or a group lawyers advising on legal matters and participating in court.

Example: My grandmother was a wise woman. I always looked to her to counsel me during difficult times.

Complement vs. Compliment
Something that complements another thing means it goes well with it.

Example: The red wine complemented the steak dinner perfectly!

To give someone a compliment, means to praise him or her. Remember this: “I like compliments.”

Example: She paid me a nice compliment when she told me she liked my new haircut.

Decent vs. Descent vs. Dissent
“Decent” is an adjective. It describes people or things that are respectable or adequate. “Decent” is pronounced with a long “e” sound and rhymes with “recen.t”

Example: He was a decent date; he didn’t stand me up like the last one.

“Descent” is a noun (from the verb “descend”) which has several meanings. The most common ones refer to the act of moving downward, family lineage, and a sudden attack.

Example: She began her descent down the canyon hoping to reach the bottom by lunchtime.

Example: My family is of Irish descent—that’s where my red hair comes from!
Finally, “dissent” can be used as a verb or a noun meaning either “to disagree with common opinion” or “to hold opinions in disagreement with those commonly held.” “Descent” and “dissent” sound exactly alike, sharing a short “i” sound as in “dig.”

Example: Obama has faced much dissent during his second term in office.

**Desert vs. Dessert**
A dessert is a tasty treat typically eaten after dinner.

Example: We had brownies for dessert.

A desert is a hot, sandy land mass.

Example: I grew up in a desert.

It’s easy to remember the difference between the two because dessert has a double “s,” and you always want more of it.

**Discreet vs. Discrete**
“Discreet” and “discrete” are both adjectives.

“Discreet” means “reserved.”

Example: The mouse was incredibly discreet—the owners of the house never knew of its presence.

“Discrete” means “distinct or separate.”

Example: There are several discrete factors related to our study which are worth mentioning.

**Ensure vs. Insure**
While “ensure” and “insure” essentially have the same meaning (i.e., “to guarantee”), “insure” should only be used when referencing insurance specifically.

Example: She couldn’t ensure a response within thirty days, so I decided to go with another company.

Example: We are insured against any water damage to our home.

**Farther vs. Further**
Use “farther” to refer to physical distance. Remember that it has the word “far” in it.

Example: How much farther until we arrive?

Use “further” to refer to additions or metaphorical distance.

Example: If you have any further questions, please e-mail me.

**Lead vs. Led**
“Led” is the past tense of the verb “lead,” which means “to direct or guide from one point to another.”

Example: They will lead the discussion.

Example: She led us to the convention center.
“Led” sounds like the noun “lead,” which refers to the element commonly found in paint.

**Example:** Gasoline used to have lead in it.

**Principal vs. Principle**

“Principal” can be either a noun or an adjective. Its noun form means “the head of a school.”

**Example:** I have a meeting with my daughter’s principal.

The adjective form of “principal” indicates that something is of the greatest importance.

**Example:** Equipping their children to navigate the world without them is the principal responsibility of parents.

“Principle,” on the other hand, is only a noun. It is synonymous with “foundational” or “fundamental.”

**Example:** A principle of Christianity is that Jesus is the son of God.

**Stationary vs. Stationery**

“Stationary” means “to remain still.”

**Example:** I enjoy working out on the stationary bike when I’m at the gym.

“Stationery” is another name for paper. Remember that both “stationery” and “write” have an “e” in them.

**Example:** I decided to write my grandfather a handwritten thank you note on the stationery he gave me for my birthday.

**To vs. Too vs. Two**

“To” is a preposition expressing direction or motion toward something.

**Example:** I need to go to the store.

“To” is also used when forming the infinitive form of a verb.

**Example:** I want to do that!

“Too” means “also” or indicates excess.

**Example:** I want ice cream too! But I don’t want too much.

Finally, “two” is the number after one and before three.

**Example:** I want two cats.

**Toward vs. Towards**

These words can be used interchangeably because they both mean, “in the direction of.” “Toward” is more common in American English, while “towards” is more common in British English.