

Quick guide: common misspellings and word confusion

Use Australian English when you write for government. It is easy to confuse words that sound alike or are spelt in a similar way. If you're not sure of the meaning or spelling of a word, check an Australian dictionary. Style Manual recommends the:

- *Australian concise Oxford dictionary* (ACOD)
- *Macquarie dictionary*.

Use the spelling of the first word in the dictionary entry (the 'headword'). Dictionaries also provide guidance about hyphenation, capitalisation, plurals and derogatory or offensive use. The table below shows some commonly confused words. We've included the definitions of the words that people confuse most often. The spelling in this quick guide follows the sixth edition of the ACOD.

Word/Phrase	Definition/Explanation	Example
accept	agree to or receive (verb)	I accept your version of events.
except	not including (preposition)	I take the bus except when it rains.
advice	words given or offered as an opinion or recommendation about future action or behaviour (noun)	Kim asked for my advice on his presentation.
advise	give advice to (verb)	Amira's task is to advise her team on implementing the changes.
affect	produce an effect on (verb)	Their words affected me deeply.
effect	the result of an action (noun)	Legislation had a positive effect on productivity.
appraise	assess the value or quality (verb)	The dealer agreed to appraise my artworks.
advise	inform or tell (verb)	I will advise him of my findings.
ascent	an upward movement or rise (noun)	It was a tough ascent to the peak.
assent	agreement (noun)	This letter confirms his assent to your terms.
complement	to make complete (verb) something that completes something else (noun)	That hat complements your outfit. Janey's pearls were the perfect complement to her ball gown.
compliment	praise (verb)	I complimented Manaaki on her achievement.
conscience	moral sense of right and wrong (noun)	Follow your conscience on this issue.
conscious	awake and aware of one's surroundings (adjective)	The patient was conscious and breathing unaided.

Word/Phrase	Definition/Explanation	Example
continuance	remaining in existence or operation (noun)	Frequent phone calls ensured the continuance of their relationship.
continuation	extension or carrying on to a further point (noun)	After a brief respite, there was a continuation of the harassment.
could have (<i>not</i> could of)	Sometimes people mishear the verb phrase 'could have' (or could've) as 'could of'. 'Could have' is often used to refer to a possibility in the past.	They could have answered back but chose not to.
council	formal advisory body of people (noun)	Teresa was elected to the local council.
counsel	advice (noun)	His wise counsel helped me through a rough time.
councillor	member of a formal advisory body (noun)	Ted was sworn in as a town councillor.
counsellor	an adviser (noun)	I sought help from a qualified counsellor.
deep-seated (<i>not</i> deep-seeded)	firmly established (adjective)	Deep-seated beliefs led to an argument over the issue.
dependant	a person who relies on another, especially for financial support (noun)	She names 2 dependants in her will.
dependent	reliant on someone or something else (adjective)	Please list any dependent children on the form. Our health is dependent on the health of our planet.
discreet	careful or prudent (adjective)	I considered him a discreet person – until he shared my secret.
discrete	distinct, separate (adjective)	Each organisation has its own discrete role and culture.
disinterested	impartial and unbiased by personal interest (adjective)	The arbitration proceedings were chaired by a disinterested party.
uninterested	not interested, indifferent or unconcerned (adjective)	I'm uninterested in the technical details.
elicit	draw out, evoke (verb)	Their demands elicited an angry response from the board.
illicit	unlawful (adjective)	The documentary highlighted the illicit trade in native fauna.
foreword	introductory comments at the beginning of a book (noun)	The vice-chancellor offered to write a foreword for their book.
forward	in advance (of time), ahead or onward (adjective, adverb)	Our forward planning should include a data collection plan. Seb was reluctant to step forward.
free rein (<i>not</i> free reign)	full scope, something without constraints (noun) To 'give free rein to' means to remove any constraints.	The CEO gave the new director free rein to run the campaign.

Word/Phrase	Definition/Explanation	Example
intents and purposes (<i>not</i> intensive purposes)	in effect, essentially, in all important respects (idiom, adverbial phrase)	It was, to all intents and purposes, a hostile takeover.
lead	go before or with, show the way (verb) a metallic element (noun)	Dom tries to lead by example. The core of a pencil isn't made of lead; it's graphite mixed with silicone or clay.
led	past tense of lead (verb)	Faye led the scout group through the forest.
learned	past tense of learn (verb) having much knowledge acquired by study (adjective)	I learned about the history of Australia. My learned colleague advised me.
leeway (<i>not</i> leadway)	extra freedom, allowable drift or deviation (noun)	Simon had some leeway on the deadline.
licence	a permit from an authority giving formal permission (noun)	The police officer asked to see Elaina's licence.
license	grant a licence or obtain permission (verb)	The agency will license you to operate if you meet these criteria.
loose	not fixed or held by bonds or restraint, not held together (adjective)	He tripped on a loose carpet tile.
lose	be deprived of or cease to have (verb)	It was inevitable that I would lose the contest.
moot point (<i>not</i> mute point)	debatable, undecided, open to argument (noun)	Whether or not technology improves efficiency is a moot point.
on tenterhooks (<i>not</i> on tenderhooks)	in a state of suspense or mental agitation due to uncertainty (idiom, adverbial phrase)	I was on tenterhooks waiting for the announcement.
passed	moved onwards, overtook, exceeded or handed over (verb)	The driver passed the car in a reckless move. That pub patron passed the legal limit a while ago.
past	a previous time (noun) so as to pass by or beyond (adverb)	It's instructive to read newspapers of the past. She ran past me to cross the line first.
personal	of or relating to a particular person, private (adjective)	That is a personal matter.
personnel	the body of persons employed in any work, undertaking or service (noun)	Vetting ensures that personnel are eligible to work with classified material.
poke interest (<i>not</i> peak interest)	The verb 'poke' has several meanings, including to 'arouse or excite'. To 'poke interest' means to arouse interest in something.	The manuscript's margin note piqued my interest.
practice	habitual action or performance (noun)	Lim's practice of taking notes at every meeting proved invaluable.
practise	do repeatedly to improve a skill (verb)	I don't practise the piano as often as I should.

Word/Phrase	Definition/Explanation	Example
precede	come or go before in time, order or importance (verb)	Media speculation usually precedes ambassadorial appointments.
proceed	go forward or on further, go about doing something (verb)	A lack of clear direction meant I wasn't sure how to proceed.
principal	first in rank or importance (adjective) a head, ruler or superior (noun)	Their principal objection to the development was lack of consultation. The school principal was much-loved and respected.
principle	a fundamental truth or law (noun) a personal code of conduct (noun)	The <i>Privacy Act 1988</i> includes 13 privacy principles. Sammy always acts according to 2 principles: honesty and respect.
regardless (<i>not</i> irregardless)	without consideration (adjective)	They swam in the creek regardless of safety warnings.
should have (<i>not</i> should of)	Sometimes people mishear the verb phrase 'should have' (or should've) as 'should of'. 'Should have' is often used to refer to a likelihood or an obligation in the past, present or future.	I should have eaten less chocolate. The flight should have landed by now. By this time next year, I should have completed my studies and found a job.
spelt	past tense of spell (verb)	The student spelt every word correctly.
stationary	still, not moving (adjective)	You must wear a seatbelt when your car is stationary at traffic lights.
stationery	writing and office materials (noun)	There are no blue pens in our stationery cupboard.
that or which (for restrictive and non-restrictive clauses)	To make your writing clear, use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'that' for essential information 'which', with punctuation, for non-essential information. Using a comma pair (, text,) is an effective way to show non-essential information in a sentence.	A school that has teachers with the right qualifications can teach the Montessori curriculum. Knitting, which I adore, is now a fashionable pastime.
their	possessive form of the pronoun they (determiner)	Bob and Raelene lost their car keys at the markets.
there	in or at a position or location (adverb)	Look over there!
they're	contraction of they (pronoun) and are (verb)	They're not happy.
weather	state of the atmosphere with respect to wind, temperature, cloudiness, moisture, etc. (noun)	I could easily walk outside, but I check the weather app instead.
wether	a ram castrated when young (noun)	In 2015, a 41.1 kg merino fleece was shorn from 'Chris', a rescued wether.
whether	introduce the first of 2 or more alternatives (conjunction)	We didn't know whether to stay or to go.
would have (<i>not</i> would of)	Sometimes people mishear the verb phrase 'would have' (or would've) as 'would of'. 'Would have' is often used to refer to a conditional situation in the past.	Without my intervention, I don't believe they would have spoken at all.

Visit stylemanual.gov.au and search 'common misspellings and word confusion'.