

A Simple, Handy Usage and Grammar Resource

1. Accept, except. To accept is to receive or agree to something. Except means “but” and it excludes something.
2. Adverse, averse. Adverse means unfavorable, like unfavorable weather conditions. To be averse means you are opposed to or reluctant about something.
3. Affect, effect. Affect is usually the verb; effect is the noun. “The speech did not affect the outcome.” “The speech had a strong effect on the students.” Effect is also a verb meaning to bring about: “Their charter is to effect change in spending habits.”
4. All right. Two words. Don’t be misled, even if you find “alright” in the dictionary.
5. Annual. Don’t use “first annual.” Only after the first time is something annual.
6. Anxious, eager. If you are anxious, you are worried. If you are eager, you are excited.
7. Appraise, apprise. Appraise is to evaluate. You appraise the situation in the boardroom. Apprise is to inform. You apprise the chairman what she or he will find there.
8. Between, among. Between is used with two items or things; among is used when there are more than two things. “Between the two of them, they were able to distribute the work among five writers.”
9. Complement, compliment. To complement is to complete, supplement, benefit. To compliment is to offer praise.
10. Compose, comprise. To compose is to create or put together. To comprise is to include.
11. Couple of. You need to include “of.” It is never “a couple benefits”; it is “a couple of benefits.”
12. Different from. Things and people are different from each other, or they differ from each other. Do not use “different than.”
13. Drowned. A person drowned. Unless there’s a crime involved and a victim’s head was deliberately held under water, do not use “was drowned.”
14. Ecology and environment are not the same thing. Ecology is the study of the relationship between organisms and their environment.
15. Either, each. Either means one or the other, but not both. Each means both, one by one.
16. Explicit, implicit. Something explicit is clearly shown or stated. Something implicit is suggested or implied.
17. Farther, further. Farther is for physical distance; further is for figurative distance.
18. Fewer, less. Fewer should be used with plural items that are not specific in number. Less is used with quantities or amounts.
19. Flier, flyer. Flier is the preferred spelling for handouts and pilots.
20. Head up. People head committees; do not write “head up.”
21. Healthy, healthful. Healthy refers to living in good health; a condition. Things that promote good health are healthful.
22. Imply and infer. The speaker implies (suggests). The listener infers (deduces).

23. In advance of, prior to. Skip them both and use before. It's simpler.
24. Its, it's. Few things make you look sillier than confusing these two. Its is the possessive: Its tail is red. It's is a contraction for "it is:" It's going to rain.
25. Like, as. Do not use "like" for "as" or "as if." Use "like" to compare phrases and clauses with nouns and pronouns; use as when comparing phrases that contain a verb. "The supervisor runs the department as she should." Or "The supervisor presents like a pro."
26. Mean, average, median. Use mean as synonymous with average. "The mean is the sum of all components divided by the number of components." Median is the number that has as many components above as it has below it. Mode is the number that appears most frequently in a distribution.
27. Nouns. Resist the urge to convert nouns into verbs. Among the most frequent offenders are "contact," "author," and "host."
28. "Over" and "more than" are not interchangeable. Over refers to spatial relationships: "The banners were over their heads." More than is used with figures: "There were more than 100 banners."
29. Poured, pored. One pours a liquid. To pore over something is to study it.
30. Pretense and pretext are different but often hard to discern. A pretext is something put forward to conceal the truth. A pretense is a false show, intended to conceal personal feelings.
31. Principle, principal. A guiding rule or basic truth is a principle; it is always a noun. The first, dominant, or leading thing is principal. Principal may be a noun or an adjective.
32. Redundancies.
1. Easter, not Easter Sunday.
 2. Owns his own car. Owns his car.
 3. The company will close, not "close down"
 4. During the winter, not "during the winter months."
 5. We have three reasons, not "three different reasons."
33. Reluctant, reticent. Reluctant relates to action; reticent relates to speech. "The child is reluctant to play catcher but reticent to talk to the coach."
34. Reign and rein don't seem too confusing, but you would be surprised. To reign is to rule; reins are used to guide a horse. To be turned loose to handle a project on your own is to be given free rein.
35. Say, said. Let a person "say" something rather than declaring it, allowing it, admitting it, or pointing it out.
36. Spelling. It is essential. Check it yourself and let your computer do the same.
37. Stationery, stationary. Items that are stationary do not move. Stationery is used for correspondence.
38. Temperatures get higher or lower, but they do not get warmer or cooler.

39. That, which. "That" is often used to restrict the reader's thought and direct it along a path determined by you; "which" is nonrestrictive, introducing supporting information. For example, "The knife that is in the drawer has the sharpest blade." More than one knife is available; the one in the drawer is the sharpest. "The bouquet, which is on the table, came from the kids." Our bouquet is from the kids; it happens to be on the table.
40. Under way. Instead of writing that something is under way, write that it began or it started.
41. Unique. A unique thing is the only one of its kind. Therefore, it cannot be very unique or quite unique. Keep it simple.
42. Uninterested, disinterested. Uninterested means having no interest. Disinterested means impartial or neutral.
43. Up is not a verb.