Fix Up Spelling Mix Ups

The easiest way to make sure all the words in your paper are spelled correctly is to use the “spelling and grammar” check in Microsoft Word. However, be aware that spell check is a very limited tool. Notably, it cannot catch word choice errors. For example, typing “To bee, or not to bee, that is the question . . .” will be, in your computer’s eyes, considered correct spelling.

Here’s a list of commonly confused homophones:

- “Its” and “It’s”: whenever you choose to use “it’s” read “it is” to yourself. For example: “It’s a nice day.” -- “It is a nice day.” Both sound correct and they are. However, “The robot moved it’s laser beam to the right” -- “The robot moved its laser beam to the right.” In this sentence stretching “it’s” to “it is” sounds completely wrong. The correct word choice is “its”.
- “Your” and “You’re” and “Whose” and “Who’s” use the same strategy as “its” and “it’s”.
- “There”, “Their”, and “They’re”: “There” is used primarily as an adverb or a pronoun. As an adverb: “Put the napkins over there”. As a pronoun: “There are many ways to study for an exam”. “Their” is an adjective: Mary and Joan picked up their backpacks and left. “They’re means they are: “They’re a very nice group of boys”.
- “Affect” and “Effect”: These two are tricky, but it’s worth learning how to use them correctly. The difference is clearly described in Grammar Smart, a workbook produced by the Princeton Review:

  These two words have two distinct meanings: affect means to influence and effect means cause to happen. Use affect as a noun only when you are using it as a psychological term meaning mood. As verbs, you can grammatically use affect/effect in the same sentence as above, but the meaning will be different. Think of effect as the stronger, more active choice. (98)

For example, “The special effects in the movie affected my perception of reality”.

Take care to avoid slang words. While “lite” and “tonite” grace billboards and sub shops around the country, they are not acceptable spellings.

Finally, there are the myriad silly mistakes to avoid: deer/dear, purpose/porpoise, pique/peek/peak, son/sun, read/reed, spine/spin, grate/great, immigrate/emigrate—this list could go on forever!

111 O’Boyle Hall 202-319-4286 english.cua.edu/wc/