Frequently Misused Words

**accede:** to agree *(I accede to your demands.)*

**exceed:** to surpass *(I exceed my goals.)*

**accept:** to receive

**except:** to exclude—usually a preposition *(I can accept everything except your behavior.)*

**adapt:** to fit for a new use *(Can she adapt to the situation?)*

**adept:** proficient *(You’re adept at painting.)*

**adopt:** to take as one’s own *(Let’s adopt these new standards.)*

**affect:** verb— to influence *(Did the movie affect your mood?)*

**effect:** noun— result *(It had no effect on me.)*

**effect:** verb— to bring about *(I tried to effect a change.)*

**aggravate:** to make worse *(Don’t aggravate my headache!)*

**irritate:** to annoy *(You are irritating me!)*

**alley:** a narrow passageway

**ally:** a friend *(He took his ally to a side alley.)*

**allusion:** an indirect reference *(Literary allusions are confusing.)*

**illusion:** a misleading appearance *(That picture is an optical illusion.)*

**delusion:** an error of judgment *(He’s suffering from delusions of grandeur.)*

**all ready:** completely ready

**already:** previously *(I was all ready to go, but my ride had already left.)*

**altar:** a sacred place of worship

**alter:** to change *(I don’t want you to alter once I get you to the altar.)*

**alright:** unacceptable form of all right

**a lot:** unacceptable form of a lot

**all together:** in one body *(We were all together at the inn.)*

**altogether:** wholly, completely *(We are not altogether free of problems.)*

**among:** used for three or more objects *(You are among friends.)*

**between:** applies to only two objects *(A rat ran between my legs.)*

**amount:** refers to quantity *(It amounts to $10.)*

**number:** refers to things that can be counted *(I have a number of ideas.)*

**and/or:** using and/or is a confusing short cut that should be avoided *(Did you see John or Jim or both [not John and/or Jim]?)*
anxious: informal for eager or desirous (I am eager [not anxious] to sleep.)

any place, every place: incorrect in formal usage; use anywhere and everywhere

anyways: incorrect for anyway
anywheres: incorrect for anywhere
everywheres: incorrect for everywhere

around: refers to place, not time (What can we do around here?)
about: use to refer to time
at about: unnecessary; use at or about (Did you see a cat about [not at about] two?)

ascent: act of rising, climbing
assent: to express agreement (The hiking expert gave his assent to the planned ascent.)

avocation: a secondary occupation or hobby
vocation: a regular occupation (My vocation is accounting but my avocation is photography.)

back of: unacceptable substitute for behind (I sit behind [not back of] Charley.)

balance: a bookkeeping term (Show me your bank balance.)
remainder: the part left over (I spent the remainder of my vacation in California.)

blame...on: informal version of blame, unacceptable in formal usage (Why did you blame me for it [not blame it on me]?)

borrow: a person borrows from a friend (I want to borrow your notes.)
lend: a person lends to a friend (Will you lend me your car?)
loan: usually a noun, but may be used as a verb (I can’t pay my car loan.)

breath: respiration (Try to catch your breath.)
breathe: to inhale and exhale (Breathe, man!)

can: used for ability (You can dance.)
may: used for permission; also used after a verb in present tense (Don says you may lie.)
might: used after a verb in the past tense (Mom said you might lie.)

canvas: a cloth
canvass: to seek votes, opinions (Let’s canvass opinions on this new canvas sail.)

complement: something that completes
compliment: an expression of admiration (I want to compliment you on your complement of men.)

conscience: sense of right and wrong (Be guided by your conscience.)
conscious: aware (He was conscious during the operation.)

consul: a delegate of a government
council: a body of people (I ran for council.)
counsel: advice, or a lawyer (The Indian consul gave me counsel on my visit to India.)

contemptible: deserving contempt
contemptuous: showing contempt (They were contemptuous of his contemptible attitude.)

deadly: causing death
deatlhy: looking like death (Her deadly stare and deathly lips attracted me.)

disinterested: unselfish (Her disinterested action meant a lot to me.)
uninterested: without interest (She was uninterested in me.)

eminent: distinguished
imminent: threatening to occur immediately (The imminent storm stopped the experiments of the eminent scientist.)

had have, had of: incorrect for had (if they had [not had of ] tried, they might have won.)
its: belonging to it
it’s: it is (It’s time to trim its fur)

later: further on in time (It’s later than that.)
latter: the second of two (If the choice is money or freedom, I choose the latter.)

learn: to acquire knowledge
teach: to give instruction (Let him teach you, so that you might learn.)

loose: unbound (The prisoner is loose.)
lose: to fail, cease to have (Lose that attitude.)

may be: a verb (It may be true.)
maybe: adverb- perhaps (Maybe I’ll leave.)

notable: famous (I’m a notable teacher.)
notorious: infamous (He’s a notorious slob.)

persecute: to injure or harass (They persecuted him because he was different.)
prosecute: to proceed against by legal process (They prosecuted her for assult.)

practical: opposite of theoretical (This is practical mechanics.)
practicable: workable (It’s a practicable idea.)

precede: to go before (A precedes B.)
proceed: to continue (Proceed with the story.)
**stationary:** fixed *(Is the fan stationary?)*
**stationery:** writing paper *(Use the proper stationery for business letters.)*

**statue:** a sculptured figure
**stature:** height *(Andrew’s statue shows a man of great stature.)*
**statute:** written law *(This statute is irrelevant to our case.)*