Words Often Confused

The words listed below are often misused. The words in each pair or group may look alike or have a similar meaning however; one word cannot replace another. Study the following list and learn to use each word correctly.

Altogether - entirely or on the whole
All together - all parts of a group are considered together

Desert - a dry barren place (des ert)
Desert - to abandon ( de sert)
Dessert - a sweet food at the end of a meal (des sert)

Hear - to listen or to receive sound by the ear
Here - refers to this place

Its - a possessive, meaning belonging to it
It's- the contraction for it is

Loose - not tight or free and untied
Lose - to be unable to find or keep; the opposite of win

Principal - leader, chief or highest in importance
Principle - basis truth, rule or law

Stationary - not moving, fixed
Stationery - writing paper and envelopes

Their - possession by them
There - in that place
They're - the contraction for they are

To - toward or as far as
Too - also or extremely

Weather - condition of the atmosphere
Whether - indicates a choice between two things

Who's - contraction for who is
Whose - possessive form of who

Your - possession by you
You're - contraction for you are

Practice Exercises - Choose the right word for each sentence.
The union member met (all together, altogether) and agreed to strike.

The (deserted, desserted) building was about to be demolished.

Sand dunes in the (desert, dessert) are always shifting due to wind and rain.

We could (here, hear) the alarm four blocks away.

The computer at our school can correct some of (its, it's) own mistakes.

(Its, It's) time to leave for the show.

Ballet slippers should be tight, not (loose, lose).

I do not want to (lose, loose) this game.

The (principals, principles) stated in the Hippocratic Oath are still important to doctors.

The letter was typed on official (stationary, stationery).

We ate (their, there) for Mom's birthday.

The bowling ball veered (to, too) far to the left.

The Rosens drove (to, too) Amherst for Thanksgiving.

I wonder (weather, whether) I should call her or write her a letter.

(Who's, Whose) responsible for that decision?

(Your, You're) too worried about how you look.

When Annie moved (hear, here) she did not speak English.

The schools were closed yesterday because of the (weather, whether).

The fish has jumped out of (its, it's) bowl.

Will you three girls lift the mat (altogether, all together) and bring it here?

Troublesome Verbs

Learning the difference and proper usage of the following verbs will improve both your speech
and your writing. It will even get the English teacher off your back!

Bring and Take
Bring refers to movement toward the person speaking. The pipeline brings water here to the desert. (bring, brought, brought)
Take refers to motion away from the speaker. Did you take the books back to the library? (take, took, taken)

Learn and Teach
Learn means to gain knowledge or skill. Did you learn the new dance step in class today? (learn, learned, learned)
Teach means to help someone learn. Will you teach me to swim? (teach, taught, taught)

Let and Leave
Let means to allow or permit. Let her go! (let, let, let)
Leave means to go away from. Leave me alone! (leave, left, left)

Lie and Lay
Lie means to rest in a flat position or to be in a certain place. Lie still. (lie, lay, lain)
Lay means to place. Lay the wreath here. (lay, laid, laid)

May and Can
May refers to the granting of permission or to something that is possible. May we have dessert? It might snow. (Might is the past of may)
Can means being physically or mentally able to do something. Can you do a push-up? (Could is the past of can)

*** May and might and can and could are NEVER used alone. They are used as auxiliary verbs.

Rise and Raise
Rise means to go upward. The sun rises. (rise, rose, risen)
Raise means to lift or to make something go up. Raise your right hand. (raise, raised, raised)

Sit and Set
Sit means to occupy a seat. Sit on this bench. (sit, sat, sat)
Set means to place. Set the tools there, please. (set, set, set)

Practice Exercises - Choose the right verb from the two given.

We (sat, set) aside some money in a savings account.
The sales tax has (raised, risen) to 15 percent.
Litter (lay, laid) all over the park.
Stranded passengers (sat, set) in the airport.

You can't (bring, take) your bike in here.

The dog (learned, taught) to obey simple commands.

Someone (left, let) the computer turned on.

(May, Can) I use Dad's jigsaw.

The photographer (sat, set) the film in a jar to develop.

Mom's boss (raised, rose) her pay.

Lynn insists she (may not, cannot) carry a tune.

(Take, Bring) those books to the library, please.

Mr. Ross (laid, lay) a new kitchen floor today.

Who (learned, taught) you judo?

When (may. can) you cut the grass?

The gymsuit has (lain, laid) in that locker all year.

Will you (let, leave) us skate on your pond?

Jenny says we (may, can) have the party here.

Annie Sullivan (taught, learned) Helen Keller to speak.

The factory (raised, rose) its level of production.

Usage Problems

The words below are often used incorrectly. Notice the standard usages for these problem words.

Accept - to agree to something or to receive something willingly
Except - to leave out or not including

Agree on - to come to an understanding
Agree to - to consent to
Agree with - to have the same opinion as someone else

All right - is the correct spelling, alright is not a word of the English language.

Among - a group of more than two people or things
Between - refers to two people or things

Anywhere, nowhere, somewhere and anyway are the standard usages. The words anywheres, nowheres, somewheres and anyways are slang.

Between each - between should not be used with a singular noun.

Borrow - to receive something on loan
Lend - means to give out temporarily

Fewer - refers to numbers of things to be counted
Less - refers to amount or quantity

In - inside something
Into - tells of motion from the outside to the inside of something

Kind of a and sort of a are slang. The a is not necessary.

Like - using like as a conjunction before a clause is not acceptable in formal writing or speech. It is better to use as or as if.

Of - is sometimes incorrectly used in phrases like could of, shouldn't of and must of. The correct word is have or its contraction: could have, must have, should have etc.

Ways - does not refer to distance. Way is the correct usage.

Practice Exercises

Look at the following sentences and decide if they are correct or contain nonstandard usage. Correct any nonstandard usage with the proper form.

Between each quarter of the game, the band plays.

Every block accept ours has sidewalks.

Will you borrow me your bicycle?

Do you feel all right?
TV time was divided equally among the three candidates.

Did you agree on what that columnist wrote?

Scott couldn't find his calculator anywheres.

The jury agreed on a verdict.

My purse has to be around here somewheres.

Jane found it hard to except praise.

Bill borrowed me his new video game.

The shoe store has every size accept the one I need.

Did Jessica and David agree with the best route to take?

Alright, tell me what's bothering you.

The family chose among the two sailboats.

Rock walls stood between each field.

The vice-president agreed with the plan.

Anyways, I'm heading for home.

Ken borrowed my hat for the costume party.

The president excepted the resignation of his aide.

Chris acted like the world was ending.

I make less phone calls than Penny.

Carolyn stuffed her change in her pocket.

A dalmatian is less nervous than a poodle.

Like the Mayor says, we must conserve energy.

There are less new TV programs this season.

The center should of practised her lay-up shots.
What kind of penalty did the ref call?

Kate has less lines to memorize in this play.

The reservoir is quite a ways from here.