

Commonly confused words

Is this a boarder 
or a border?

If you had to stop and think, you've come to the right place. In Commonly Confused Words part 2, we'll discuss ten pairs of words that people often mix up.

- Access/excess
- Aspire/inspire
- Boarder/Border
- Bought/brought
- Brake/break
- Elicit/illicit
- Lead/led
- Loose/lose
- Pole/poll
- Pore/pour

What? you haven't seen our Commonly confused words part 1 yet? It's a useful, free resource you don't want to miss.

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Access/excess

Access

Use 'access' when you mean 'permission to use'. It can be a word that identifies things (noun), but it's uncountable — you can't say one access, two accesses.

The analysts have access to the financial data.

'Access' can also mean 'get into'. In this case, it is a doing word (verb), so you can say accesses, accessed, and accessing.

We need a ramp so that people in wheelchairs can access the building easily.

Excess

Use 'excess' when you mean 'extra'. It can be a word that identifies things (noun). 'Excess' and 'extra' both begin with E.

We printed too many brochures. What shall we do with the excess?

'Excess' can also be a word that describes things (adjective).

The shop is having a sale for its excess stock.

And in insurance, 'excess' is your 'upfront contribution' when you make a claim.

The damage is \$500. My excess is \$200, so I'll only get \$300 from the insurance company.

Aspire/inspire

Aspire

Use 'aspire' when you mean 'hope'. 'Aspire' happens inside you — you aspire to something. It is a doing word (verb), so you can also say aspires, aspiring, and aspired.

New Zealanders love rugby, so it's no surprise that some children aspire to be All Blacks.

The health and safety plan aspires to have zero workplace accidents within six months.

Inspire

Use 'inspire' when you mean 'motivate' in a positive way. We usually say someone or something inspires a person. It is a doing word (verb), so you can also say inspires, inspiring, and inspired.

A well-designed, user-friendly website inspires confidence.

We're sorry she has retired. She was an amazing manager who inspired all her staff to excellence.

Boarder/Border

Boarder

Use 'boarder' when you mean 'person who pays for accommodation and food'. It is a word that identifies things (noun). 'Boarder' is spelt with an A, just like accommodation.

My neighbours have taken on a boarder.

I attended that school as a boarder and only went home during school holidays.

Border

Use 'border' when you mean 'edge'. It can be a word that identifies things (noun).

Many soldiers patrol the border between the two countries.

'Border' can also be a doing word (verb), so you can say borders, bordering, and bordered.

The motif bordering the cover is stunning.

Bought/brought

Bought

Use 'bought' when you mean 'purchased'. 'Bought' is the past tense of 'buy'.

The company has bought me a new laptop that is twice as fast as my old one.

The chair we bought last week has collapsed.

Brought

Use 'brought' when you mean 'took'. 'Brought' is the past tense of 'bring'. Both 'brought' and 'bring' begin with Br.

Our manager brought us some yummy cheesecake for morning tea.

The projector I brought to the presentation did not work.

Brake/break

Brake

Use 'brake' when you mean 'stop'. It can be a doing word (verb), so you can say brake, braking, and braked.

Braking often uses more petrol.

'Brake' can also be a word that identifies things (noun).

When the driver saw the truck speeding through the red light, he slammed on his brakes.

Break

Use 'break' when you mean 'shatter'. It is a doing word ('verb'), so you can say breaks and breaking. The past tense is broke.

Our new business development manager keeps breaking sales records.

You can also use it to mean 'pause' or 'interruption'. In this case, it is a word that identifies things (noun).

Let's have a coffee break to recharge.

Elicit/illicit

Elicit

Use 'elicit' when you mean 'get'. 'Elicit' is often used for information or reaction. It is a doing word (verb), so you can also say elicits, eliciting, and elicited.

The politician was so non-committal that the journalist could not elicit a satisfactory answer from him.

We will have no trouble eliciting their agreement.

Illicit

Use 'illicit' when you mean 'illegal'. It is a word that describes things (adjective). Both 'illicit' and 'illegal' begin with ILL.

The government is cracking down on illicit drugs.

The minister could not say how much illicit trade there was.

Lead/led

Lead

Use 'lead' when you mean 'direct'. This is a doing word (verb), and is pronounced 'leed'.

We're looking for a manager to lead the team to new heights.

'Lead' can also refer to a material. In this case, it is a word that identifies things (noun) and is pronounced 'led'.

We say 'pencil lead', but it's not actually lead — it's graphite.

Led

Use 'led' when you mean the past tense of 'lead', as in 'directed'.

The teacher led the children to the playground.

Their hard work and innovation led to great success.

Loose/lose

Loose

Use 'loose' when you mean 'not tight'. It is a word that describes things (adjective).

We need to tie up those loose cables so that no one trips.

The board did not approve the business case because the arguments were too loose.

Lose

Use 'lose' when you mean 'misplace' or 'no longer have'. This is a doing word (verb). You can also say loses, losing, and lost.

He lost some money through the hole in his pocket.

'Lose' can also mean 'be defeated'.

She hates losing arguments.

Pole/poll

Pole

Use 'pole' when you mean 'long stick'. It is a word that identifies things (noun).

They used a pole to prop the shelf up.

'Pole' can also refer to the places at the very north and very south of the earth.

Use a capital P when you're referring to the North Pole, the South Pole, and a Polish person (Pole).

Poll

Use 'poll' when you mean 'survey'. It can be a word that identifies things (noun).

The organisation conducted a poll to see what people thought.

'Poll' can also be a doing word (verb). You can say polled, polls, and polling.

Most people who were polled disagreed with the decision.

Pore/pour

Pore

Use 'pore' when you mean 'read carefully'. This is a doing word (verb), so you can also say pores, pored, and poring.

The architect pored over the plans.

'Pore' can also mean 'small opening'. In this case, it is a word that identifies things (noun).

We have countless pores on our skin.

Pour

Use 'pour' when you mean 'tip' or 'put into'. This is a doing word (verb), so you can also say pours, poured, and pouring.

He poured himself a coffee as soon as he arrived.

Investors have poured millions of dollars into the project.