Spelling Problem Words

Some words are so close to others in spelling or meaning that they cause confusion. Words such as there and their are so frequently mistaken in the context of the sentence that they drive lecturers to distraction. If you do not want to annoy the very person you are trying to impress, it is a good idea to study these problem words:

1. Common misused words (choosing the wrong word)
2. Compound word errors (one or more words combined into a single word)
3. Common homophone errors (same sound, different spelling)

1. Common misused words

Words that sound alike or nearly alike but have different meanings often cause writers trouble. Here are a few of the most common words with correct definitions and examples:

- **a lot/allot** (alot) (There is no such word as ‘alot’).
  - a lot: A phrase meaning ‘a great many’. (e.g., There are a lot of rules for conducting an election.)
  - allot: A word meaning ‘to share out’ (e.g., Voters were asked to allot votes according to party preferences.)

- **accept/except/expect** (Each word has a completely different meaning.)
  - accept: A verb meaning ‘to consent’ or ‘take willingly’ (e.g., The politician accepted the offer to address the strikers.)
  - except: A preposition or a conjunction meaning ‘other than’ (e.g., Everyone, except for the elderly, must vote.)
  - expect: A verb meaning ‘to consider probable’ (e.g., Most people expected the popular party to win the election.)

- **affect/effect** (Spelling words have a noun and verb function.)
  - affect: A verb meaning ‘to influence’ (e.g., The politician’s speech affected my opinion before voting.)
  - effect: A noun meaning ‘result’ or ‘consequence’ (e.g., Her speech had a strong effect on the audience.)

- **could have/could’ve/(could of)** (There are no such terms as ‘could of’, ‘should of’ or ‘would of’).
  - could have: A modal verb group meaning ‘maybe’ (e.g., The election was close and either party could have won.)
  - could’ve: A contraction of ‘could have’ (e.g., The election could’ve been won by either party.)

- **in turn/intern/(inturn)** (There is no such word as ‘inturn’ as one word.)
  - in turn: A phrase meaning ‘likewise’ (e.g., The councillor was very supportive and the electors, in turn, were loyal.)
  - intern: A person in workplace training/imprisoned (e.g., The tax office intern was interned for fraud.)

- **practice/practise, advice/advise, licence/license** (Spelling words have a noun and verb function.)
  - practise: Australian usage as a verb to ‘perform repetitive actions’ (e.g., The politician practised her speech.)
  - practice: A noun for a habit, regular exercise, a usual way of doing, a professional business (e.g., The law practice was supposed to follow the practice of not employing politicians, but in practice this was ignored.)

- **then/than** (Each word has a completely different meaning.)
  - then: Means ‘at that time’, ‘next’, or ‘as a consequence’ (e.g., If the party wins, then they will be in power.)
  - than: Used for comparison (e.g., The party won the election by larger numbers than was expected.)

2. Compound word errors

There are over 2,000 compound words in the English language. If you write these words as two or more words instead of single words, then you are spelling these words incorrectly. The spelling checker will not assist you, so use a good Australian dictionary. Some examples of common compound words are:

- alongside, another, aftermath, anybody, background, beforehand, cannot, commonplace, elsewhere, everywhere, everything, however, keyboard, meantime, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, somewhat, spokesperson, therefore, underachievements, underdeveloped, underestimate, underground, update, upheaval, whatever, widespread, without
3. Common homophone errors

Your spell checker will not pick up the errors in sentences such as 'Their coming too sea if its reel' because the ‘offending’ words are not spelt incorrectly. They are just the wrong words. The computer is logical, but is not able to apply common sense to wording. There are hundreds of homophones in the English language. Following are the top 10 homophone errors in student writing.

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<th>Common homophones</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| 1. it’s & its  
   its (without an apostrophe): a possessive pronoun  
   it’s (with an apostrophe): a contraction meaning ‘it is’ OR ‘it has’ |  
   The parliament felt that its power was being blocked. Not The parliament felt that it’s X power was being blocked.  
   It’s (it is) difficult for parliament to operate when power is blocked.  
   Two members of the Cabinet were not re-elected. |
| 2. to, too, & two  
   to: part of an infinitive verb group or a preposition  
   too: meaning ‘excessively’ or ‘additionally’  
   two: a number |  
   The politicians wanted to choose a new party leader before going to the state elections.  
   The results of the election were too (excessively) close to announce a winner as votes from remote areas had to be counted too (additionally).  
   Two members of the Cabinet were not re-elected. |
| 3. there, their, & they’re  
   there: refers to location  
   their: a possessive pronoun (ownership)  
   they’re: a contraction meaning ‘they are’ |  
   The politicians were there waiting for the results.  
   Their results were announced to the media.  
   They’re (they are) announcing the winners of the election after the absentee votes are counted. |
| 4. who’s & whose  
   who’s: a contraction meaning ‘who is’ or ‘who has’  
   whose: a possessive pronoun |  
   They’ll announce who’s (who has) won the election.  
   When they know whose party has the most votes, the winning party will be announced. |
| 5. weather & whether  
   weather: a noun meaning ‘climatic conditions’  
   whether: a conjunction that introduces alternatives |  
   The freezing weather affected voting attendance.  
   As voting is compulsory, fines for absenteeism depend on whether there is a reasonable excuse. |
| 6. lose & loose  
   lose: a verb meaning ‘unable to find’ or ‘not win’  
   loose: an adjective meaning ‘not fastened’ OR ‘not tight’ |  
   The opposition party seemed set to lose the election.  
   The policies of the losing party seemed loose and unfocused when compared to the opposition party. |
| 7. where & were  
   where: refers to ‘a place’  
   were: a past form of the verb ‘to be’ |  
   The voters enquired about where (place) the poll booths were located for voting day.  
   There were voting booths in all state schools. |
| 8. past & passed  
   past: means ‘beyond’ or ‘before the present time’  
   passed: a verb (action) meaning ‘went by’ |  
   The politicians ignored protestors as they drove past them. In the past, they would stop to speak to them.  
   The politicians passed the protestors without acknowledging their presence. |
| 9. principle & principal  
   principle: means a ‘theory’ or ‘rule’  
   principal: means ‘first’ or ‘most important’ |  
   The principles (rules) of the party were upheld in their education policies.  
   The principal (most important) cause of losing the election was raised interest rates. |
| 10. quiet & quite  
   quiet: means ‘without noise’ or ‘calm’ or ‘unobtrusive’  
   quite: means ‘rather’ or ‘completely’ |  
   The streets were quiet after the election was over.  
   The results of the election were quite a surprise to those who were quite sure the opposition would lose. |