

Frequently Confused Words

Words can be confusing. Perhaps the most common writing questions are: “your” or “you’re”? “It’s” or “its”? Hopefully, this handout will help.

Your / You’re

- *Your* is used to indicate possession: “You will shoot your eye out.”
- *You’re* a contraction: it is you + are. Example: “You never know what you’re going to get in a box of chocolates.”

There / Their / They’re

- *There* is used as a pronoun: “There is no ice cream over there.”
- *Their* is used to indicate possession: “We’re going to kidnap their dog.”
- *They’re* is a contraction: it is they + are. “It’s too late to hide, they’re already here.”

It’s / Its

- *It’s* is NOT possessive! It is a contraction of it + is. “It’s pretty awesome at the writing center.”
- *Its* is used to show possession: “The dog chased its tail.”

Affect / Effect

- *Affect* is most commonly a verb, meaning to change something: “Losing power will affect people watching television.” OR it can refer to the idea of presenting oneself: “He affected a warm demeanor whenever he visited his parents.”
- *Effect* is most commonly a noun: “The effect of losing power was people not being able to watch television.”
- *Effect* can less commonly be a verb: “They effected great change in their term as president.”
- *Affect* can also be a noun to indicate an emotional disposition, though it is fairly uncommon unless you are speaking about Psychology. Example: “His affect changed dramatically when he heard the bad news.”

Who / Whom

- *Who* and *whom* have the same meaning, but they are each used in different circumstances. Both are used in questions, so a good rule of thumb is to rephrase the question and replace who/whom with another pronoun. If he/she, use who. If him/her, then whom is correct.
 - Example: “Whom did you dance with?” Rephrase the question: “Did you dance with her?” Whom is correct because that question makes sense.
 - Example: “Who went to the movies last night?” Rephrase the question: “Did she go to the movies last night?” In this case, who is correct.