

Confusing Words I & L

I

if versus whether

These two words are often interchangeable, but they have distinct uses. To make matters simpler, it is best to use **whether** when there is a choice or alternatives (We're going whether you do or not), and **if** when there is a condition involved (If you go, we will go). Both **if** and **whether** are subordinating conjunctions; that is, they are elements that form sentences into word groups called subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause (dependent clause) is a clause that does not form a sentence by itself and is connected to a main clause (independent clause), which could stand alone as a complete sentence.

An **If** clause is a subordinate clause of a conditional sentence—a sentence that states a relation between cause and effect, makes a prediction, or speculates about what might happen. The “if” or “cause” clause can either start the sentence or end it without changing the meaning. However, when “if” begins the sentence, the clause must be followed by a comma before beginning the “result” clause. Examples:

If you speed, you will likely get a ticket. OR You will likely get a ticket if you speed. (cause and effect)

If you study hard, you will succeed. OR You will succeed if you study hard. (prediction)

If it rains too hard, your house may flood. OR Your house may flood if it rains too hard. (speculation)

Whether usually starts a subordinate clause that asks an indirect question having two stated or implied possibilities or alternatives. This is where the confusion starts: “if” can also be used in this sense. In other words, whether and if are interchangeable when used to report a yes/no question.

Example: I'm not certain whether/if she has already arrived. (Has she arrived? -yes/no)

Grammatically, there is a hint that calls for using “whether” instead of “if”: “whether” is the one that precedes an infinitive (to + base verb).

Example: I'm wondering whether to go on vacation this summer.

The phrase “whether or not” is often used, meaning in any case, without regard to or in spite of other considerations or whatever else is done.

Example: We are going to the movies whether or not you decide to come along.

The "or not" of the phrase does not need to immediately follow "whether".

Example: We are going to the movies whether you decide to come along or not.

illegal versus illicit

Illegal is an adjective and means against the laws of the country or state. Anything against the law is illegal, but not all illegal acts are criminal acts. For example, driving over the speed limit is illegal, but it is not a criminal act. In sports, “illegal” also means against the rules. Examples:

The private detective was charged with illegal entry of the home of his client’s wife.

The wrestler received a penalty for an illegal hold on his opponent.

Illicit functions as an adjective and describes something that is not approved by society or that is illegal.

Example: The man’s use of illicit drugs caused him to be evicted from his apartment.

These adjectives are synonyms, so either of them is considered correct. In modern English “illicit” carries shades of immorality, like an illicit love affair, and is not as commonly used as “illegal”. When in doubt, use “illegal”.

implicit versus explicit

Implicit, an adjective, describes something that is understood but not clearly or directly expressed. In other words, there is an implication, assumption or question that is not spoken or written outright. “Implicit” can also describe something that is a permanent, essential or characteristic feature that is impossible to separate in an item. Examples:

The students found an implicit political statement in their professor’s remarks. (implication)

“Bugs” are implicit in new computer programs. (impossible to separate)

Explicit is an adjective that means that something being described is very clear and complete without vagueness (lack of clarity) or implication (suggestion). “Explicit” can also be used to describe writing, photography or films that openly show offensive or vulgar nudity, violence or sexuality that leave nothing to the imagination. Examples:

The students were given explicit instructions on how to write an essay. (clear and complete)

That film has an “R” rating because of explicit violence. (offensive)

imply versus infer

Imply is a verb which means to hint at what we mean; to not say something directly. In other words, “imply” is an act of the writer or speaker.

Example: He implied that I was mistaken about what happened.

Infer is also a verb which means to guess or to come to a conclusion based on something you think someone implied. “Infer” is an act of the reader or listener.

Example: Am I right to infer that you think I was mistaken about what happened?

inter versus intra

Inter is a prefix used to make words that mean between or among groups. Therefore, an interstate highway is a road system that goes between all 50 states.

Example: Interstate 10 runs from the east coast to the west coast.

Intra is also a prefix used to form words that mean on the inside or within. A highway system that is only within the border of a single state would be called an intrastate highway.

Example: All 50 states have an intrastate highway system.

into versus in to

Confusion between “into” and “in to” happens because they sound exactly the same. However, misusing them changes the meaning of a sentence, so it’s important to know the difference.

Into is a preposition that positions an element in space, and it means placing something physically inside something else. The container may be real or abstract. Use “into” to show movement or action.

Example: The students walked into the classroom.

The only time when “into” does not mean “to place inside” is when a change or transformation has occurred; i.e., when it is part of a phrasal verb.

Example: The caterpillar turned into a beautiful butterfly.

In to is used when “in” is part of a phrasal verb (e.g., log in, drop in, hand in) that is followed by an infinitive.

Example: He used his password to log in to the tutoring program. (“In” is part of the phrasal verb “log in”.)

invaluable versus valuable

Invaluable is an adjective that means unable to be valued or appraised (priceless), but it can also mean very important or highly esteemed. Examples:

The lessons we learn in life are invaluable. (very important)

The gem collection at the royal museum is invaluable. (priceless)

Valuable is also an adjective meaning able to be valued or appraised; something that is costly or precious.

Example: Real estate is a valuable asset.

“Valuables” can only be used as a plural noun that means expensive belongings. Examples:

Many people keep their valuables in a safe. (noun)

Many people keep their valuable possessions in a safe. (adjective)

its versus it's

Its is a possessive pronoun of “it”. “It” is a third-person singular neuter pronoun.

Example: The cat is licking its paws. (The paws belong to the cat.)

It's is a contraction of the words “it is” or “it has”. A contraction is a word or group of words that have been shortened and the omitted letters replaced by an apostrophe. Examples:

The antique chair is expensive. It's in a furniture museum. (it's = it is)

It's come to my attention that classes will be dismissed early. (it's - it has)

L

ladder versus latter

Even though these two words sound alike, they are in no way similar.

Ladder is a noun and refers to a piece of equipment used to reach high places. It has short steps that are set between two long sides. “Ladder” is also used figuratively to mean a way to get to a greater height socially, in business, etc. Examples:

Roofers must use ladders in their work. (equipment)

She is too busy climbing the social ladder to go out with friends. (figurative)

Latter, on the other hand, is basically an adjective when the noun generally refers to a time period. In formal conversations and writing, it is used to describe the time near the end of a period of time. However, the word is often used in the structure “the latter”, and this is when

“latter” becomes a noun meaning the second of two elements that have just been mentioned in the current or previous sentence. Examples:

The latter half of the twentieth century brought a lot of technological changes. (adjective)

When choosing between his time-consuming job and his marriage, John chose the latter.
(noun)

latitude versus longitude

Latitude is a noun which refers to the angular distance north or south (up and down, or vertical, on a globe or map) from the equator to a point on the earth’s surface. An easy way to think of “latitude” is to think of a distance that expands far and wide, from north to south covering an area from top to bottom.

In everyday language, “latitude” is used to mean freedom from narrow restrictions.

Example: These days parents give their children latitude to express themselves creatively.

Longitude is also a noun which describes the angular distance east or west (left to right, or horizontal, on a globe or map) from pole to pole.

led versus lead

Led is the past tense of the irregular verb “lead” (pronounced “leed”). Confusion is probably caused by a similar irregular verb “read” which has a past tense that is spelled the same as the base form. However, the correct way to conjugate “lead” is lead (present) led (past) led (past participle).

Example: The guide led the tourists around the museum. (correct)

The guide lead the tourists around the museum. (incorrect)

If you see the word “led” written in uppercase--LED--it is an acronym that stands for light emitting diode, something we see every day in light bulbs and electronic equipment.

Lead, as a noun, is a certain type of metal. When used for metal, the word “lead” is pronounced just like “led”. This also causes confusion!

Example: Many years ago, paint used in houses contained lead which is a toxin. Nowadays, paint is lead-free.

lend versus loan versus borrow

Lend is a verb. If you lend something of yours to someone else, you allow them to have it for a period of time and then return it. You lend something to someone.

Example: I lent my laptop to my friend so she could write her essay.

Loan is a noun that means something that one lends to another, with the expectation that it will be returned. “Loan” is frequently misused as a verb, but even though this error occurs so often that it has almost become an acceptable usage, it is still incorrect.

Example: Anna got a bank loan to buy a new car. (correct)

I loaned Anna my car (incorrect)

Borrow is a verb. If you borrow something that belongs to someone, you use it for a period of time and then return it. The preposition “from” is used with this verb, so you borrow something from someone.

Example: Anna borrowed money from the bank to buy a new car.

Note: An indirect object can be used with lend, but not with borrow.

Examples: Can you lend me some money? (correct)

Can you borrow me some money? (incorrect)

lie versus lay

These two verbs confuse even native English speakers! Confusion arises from their similarity in the physical world (in both cases the object or person is or winds up “at rest”) and from the fact that the past tense of “lie” and the present tense of “lay” are identical.

Lie is an intransitive verb (does not take an object) meaning to be in a flat position on a surface. In other words, when you lie down on a bed, you are in a horizontal position.

“Lie” is used for something or someone moving on their own or something that is already in position. When used in this way, “lie” is an irregular verb (present - lie, past - lay, past participle - lain)

Example: I told him he could lie down there, so he lay there all day yesterday.

Lay is a transitive verb requiring a direct object. It means to place something on something else. There has to be a thing or person being placed. “Lay” is an irregular verb (present - lay, past - laid, past participle - laid)

Example: I always lay my textbooks on my table. I have laid them there all semester.

Other meanings of “Lie”

Another meaning of “**lie**” is to make an untrue statement. When used in this way, “lie” is an irregular verb (present - lie, past - lied, past participle - lied)

Example: She has lied to me in the past; therefore, I don’t trust her.

Lie can also be a noun meaning an untruth, and a person telling untruths is a liar.

Example: Juliette tells lies all the time; unfortunately, she's a habitual liar.

listen versus hear

Listen is a verb that means paying attention to a sound or to what is being said. When you listen to something, it is an active action.

Example: Ellen likes to listen to music before going to bed.

Hear is also a verb, and it means being aware of a sound with your ears, but that does not necessarily mean that any attention is being given to the thing heard. When you hear something, it is a passive action.

Example: When you live by a busy street, you hear the noise of traffic all the time.

log in versus log on

Log in is a phrasal verb and means providing credentials to access material. The most common way you log in is online when you log in to a specific program with a predetermined username and password. Examples:

Students log in to Canvas when they want to see their assignments.

Employees must log in and log out their time when working.

Log on is also a phrasal verb and means accessing digital resources without necessarily needing to provide credentials.

Example: Carlos logged on to Google to access information for the essay he was composing.

loose versus lose versus loss

These three words are the cause of many writing errors. Although they are related to each other, they cannot be interchanged. The trick to remembering the difference is to keep in mind the parts of speech each word represents: "loose" is an adjective, "lose" is a verb, and "loss" is a noun.

Loose is an adjective that has many meanings; the most common meanings are free, unattached, not fitting tightly, or uncontrolled. The word "loose" is often confused with the verb "lose". Examples:

The dog is loose in their neighbor's yard. (free)

There was a loose hinge on the screen door. (unattached)

It's a good idea to wear loose clothing in summer. (not tight fitting)

There was a loose bull running wildly on the street. (uncontrolled)

Lose is an irregular transitive verb that is used in many ways. Some of the most common meanings are:

- 1.) to be deprived of or to be unable to keep something

Example: You may lose your driving privileges if you are convicted of drunk driving.

- 2.) to be deprived of a friend or family member because of death or the breaking off of a relationship. Examples:

It is painful to lose a loved one.

He will lose his best friend when he moves out of state.

- 3.) to be destroyed or killed (passive voice - form of "to be" + past participle). Examples:

Many thousands of trees were lost in the forest fire.

Over 150 lives were lost in the earthquake.

- 4.) to be unable to find something or someone

Example: He frequently loses his sunglasses.

- 5.) to cause someone to be unable to follow what has been said

Example: I'm sorry. Did I lose you? I'll repeat what I said.

- 6.) to fail to win a game or competition.

Example: It's always frustrating when you lose a competition.

Loss is a noun meaning the fact or process of losing something or someone. Examples:

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a terrible loss of life worldwide.

The loss of jobs created a huge economic crisis.

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