

Some Troublesome Words

One of the English words most often misused is “comprise.” Following are three ways that “comprise” may be found written:

Wrong: Eight species comprise the genus.

Wrong: The genus is comprised of eight species.

Correct: The genus comprises eight species.



Only the last form is correct, because the whole comprises its parts. “Comprise” means “to be made up of” or “to include.” It does *not* mean “to make up” or “to be included in.” Other examples of correct use of “comprise” are:

The mixture comprised oats, wheat, and rye.

The department comprised six divisions.

The state comprises 37 counties.

Many people find “adopt” and “adapt” a confusing pair. “Adopt” means to accept something to oneself. “Adapt” means to make oneself, something, or someone compatible with another by some kind of change. Perhaps “adopt” is most commonly used for the process whereby parents accept orphans and make them children in their own families. People can also *adopt* words into their vocabulary, foods into their diet, customs into their habits. People can *adapt* themselves to a new climate or to a new work situation. Mechanics can *adapt* an engine to fit a new vehicle. Chefs can *adapt* a recipe to the ingredients available.

Another misused word pair is “infer and imply.” “Infer” involves receiving information, whereas “imply” involves giving information. Your tone of voice might *imply* a meaning other than that stated, and I might *infer* that you are lying. My statement might *imply* that I am satisfied, and upon hearing it, you might *infer* the same.

“Alternate” and “alternative” have distinct meanings, but the two words are often interchanged. “Alternate” means “every other one” and refers to things succeeding by turns. An “alternative” is a “substitute.” The strictest definition of “alternative” is “one of two choices,” but the word is increasingly being used to mean “one choice among two or more possibilities.” The substitution of “alternate” for “alternative” in terms such as “alternate routes,” “alternate names,” “alternate choices” has become very common. For correct use of the two words, use “alternate” to mean “succeeding in turn,” and “alternative” to mean “substitute.” Examples of correct use:

Place the samples *alternately* in the red and blue boxes.

Alternative herbicides are atrazine and cyanazine.

Remember:

When we *adapt* a thing,
A change then starts;
And that the whole
Comprises its parts.

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