

Affect and Effect Are Problem Words

English is an excellent language for technical writing. Its copious vocabulary allows for accurate and concise expression. Nevertheless, some English words are troublesome because they occur in confusing pairs. Such a confusing pair is “affect” and “effect.” As commonly used in technical writing, “affect” is a verb and “effect” is a noun. The words are closely related and this leads to confusion. When a performer *affects* (a verb meaning to have an influence upon) an object or a process, the object or process experiences an *effect* (a noun meaning the result or consequence of some action).



Example: Herbicides *affect* plants, and the *effect* of herbicides upon plants may be death.

To add to the confusion, “effect” can also be a verb. As a verb it means “to cause” or “to make happen.”

Example: Herbicides can *effect* (a verb meaning to cause) profound changes in plant biochemistry.

Most sentences using “effect” as a verb are weak if the thing “effected” is a noun made from a verb, and can be improved if “effect” is eliminated.

Examples:

Poor: Surfactants can *effect* an acceleration of herbicide penetration.

Better: Surfactants can accelerate herbicide penetration.

Poor: How can I *effect* the death of crabgrass?

Better: How can I kill crabgrass?

“Effective” is a common adjective meaning “capable of producing an intended result.” It is made from the noun “effect,” and is always spelled with “e.”

Although seldom used in technical writing, “affect” can be a verb that means “to pretend,” “to imitate,” “to choose to use,” or “to assume the character of.”

Examples: The speaker *affected* a British accent. He *affected* an unusual hair style.

In every-day usage, we are apt to encounter “affect” with this definition as the participial adjective “affected,” meaning “put on” or “unnatural.”

Example: His speech seemed *affected*.

According to Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, an obscure definition of “affect” applies to plants or animals and means “to occupy or inhabit.”

Examples: Saber-toothed tigers once *affected* North America. Downy brome *affects* wheat fields in Idaho. This meaning could relate to weeds and their control, but I have never seen it so used. If used in this way, it would be ambiguous and confusing because the second example above could have a different meaning based on the familiar definition of “affect.”

“Affect” even has a meaning as a noun. In psychology, “affect” can mean “feeling” or “emotion.” From this noun, an adjective “affective” can be made, which means “causing feeling” or “emotional.”

The following models demonstrate the correct uses of “affect” and “effect” in technical writing:

A performer may *affect* (have an influence upon) an object or process, and then an *effect* (result or consequence) in the object or process may occur.

A performer may *effect* (cause) an *effect* (result or consequence) in an object or process.

Remember:

Use *affect* as a verb
that starts with an “a”;

Use *effect* as a noun
and you won’t go astray.

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