

INPUT GUIDE

Two Be or Not Too Be: Are Those To Questions?

by Jean Sexton

Did that title make your head hurt? It certainly did mine and it may have permanently damaged the grammar checker in my word-processing program. This article is about homonyms (words that sound alike, but mean different things) that I've seen mixed up all too frequently in the past. (And by the way, the answer to the title's question is "no;" the questions are two sides of the same coin.)

Let's start with the to/too/two group. "To" is the simple preposition and adverb that we use so frequently to go places or to do things. "Too" is used to express an overabundance of something. "Two" is the number.

Steve Cole went *to* the store to get some Diet Dr. Pepper. Scott pointed out that 16 cans were *too* many to easily carry. Steve settled for *two* one-liter bottles.

Another group that frequently gets mixed up is rain/reign/rein. Nearly everyone knows that rain falls from the sky. However, missiles can do so as well. "Reign" is what one does to a kingdom or any area which one has control over. This tends to be a physical area and "rule" can usually be substituted. "Rein" has two uses. One is for the part of the bridle that is used to control a horse (or other riding or draft animal). The other is a concept that one would use a metaphorical "rein" to control emotions and is usually expressed as "to rein in" or conversely "to give free rein."

Kregg was ordered to rubble Vergaria and *rained* down missiles nonstop. He knew that when the missiles stopped falling, the leader of the Vergarians would have little to *reign* over. He allowed free *rein* to the weapons officer to give even the most junior crew members a chance to practice their gunnery.

"It's" and "its" are words that are frequently interchanged. Jean's tip: if you use "its," then substitute "his" and see if the sentence still makes sense; for "it's," use "it is."

Cat Who Eats Photons thought to himself, "*It's* a darn shame that D7 lost *its* shields ... not!" "Fire all weapons!" he ordered.

The "they're" and "their" pair is the plural form of the situation above. Add in "there" and disaster is sure to strike! Jean's tip: Use "they are" in place of "they're" to see if it is appropriate; try "his" in place of "their." If neither one works, then it is "there" you want.

Rob and Howard are plotting to have *their* empires carry out a joint war against the Federation. ("His empires" would work in a sentence.) *They're* plotting by email at this very minute! ("They are plotting" is good English.) *There* will be heck to pay when the plot is discovered. ("They are will be heck" and "His will be heck" aren't right, so you know "there" is!)

"Complement" and "compliment" are two that I struggle with. I finally figured out how to keep them straight. "I" have to get or receive a "compliment" and both "complete" and "complement" have an "e."

Patrick *complimented* John on a well-played game.

John's Hydran ships each had a full *complement* of Stingers.

"Sight" and "site" are another pair that are getting confused. "Site" is a place; "sight" has to do with seeing. "Sights" on a weapon help you see a target. "Site" is where your target is.

Frank set his *sights* on the *site* of the zombie encampment.

Here's one that I sometimes see: "stationery" used for "stationary." The only way that your ships are stationary is if you are

writing on them! If this pair baffles you, remember that "er" goes with "paper."

Captain Snyder was in his cabin and writing a letter on his personal *stationery* (he believed it added a personal touch to thank you notes) when the ship shuddered to a halt. He slapped the comm link and asked, "Bridge, why is my ship *stationary*?"

"Principle" and "principal" are a pair that have always given me fits, primarily because they gave a teacher of mine fits and she taught me the wrong thing. If the word is used as an adjective, it is always "principal." The nouns are pretty simple to sort out. If the noun can be your "pal," then the noun should be "principal." If not, then it is a rule or standard and thus "principle" is the word you want.

"Speed is life" is a *principle* to fly by! One of the *principal* doctrines in *SFB* is "Speed is life."

If the BBS were a high school (and it often seems that way), then WebMom would be the Griswold-wielding principal.

"Ensure" and "insure" have the same Latin root and are pretty interchangeable except in one instance. If you are writing about insurance, you should most assuredly use "insure."

Tony laughed maniacally as he rolled "1s" for each of his overloaded photon torpedoes and said to the Hydran captain, "You did remember to *insure* that ship, right?"

While these are not homonyms, "devastate" and "decimate" are used (incorrectly) interchangeably these days. They actually mean very different things. "Devastate" means to destroy fairly completely. "Decimate" actually means to destroy or kill one in 10. Here's an example (you want to be Chuck, not Mike).

Mike *decimated* Chuck's planet before Chuck *devastated* Mike's fleet.

It is probably going to make your sentence even more incorrect if you use a percentage with "decimate."

The Federation had arranged for a huge group of fleets to attack Remus which was defended by 100 ships; they *decimated* 90% of the Romulan ships.

Well, they only took out 10% of 90 ships which means the "huge fleet" only took out nine Romulan ships! Not exactly impressive, especially when compared to this statement: The huge conglomeration of Federation fleets destroyed 90 Romulan ships, leaving only 10 to defend Remus.

We hope that this helps you sort out those pesky homonyms and lets you write better both for us and in your personal and professional life.

Let Me Remind you about Commas!

I think the one piece of punctuation that we (the editors and proofreaders of ADB) add the most frequently is the comma. We always use the "Oxford comma" in our lists. This helps avoid confusion such as the following sentence creates:

Ryan Opel introduced the new staff member to Jean Sexton, his mother and worst enemy.

Did the new guy meet three people? Or is Ryan claiming that I'm both his mother and worst enemy? (I can see the title now: *Webmommy, Dearest!*) Our good friends at Steve Jackson Games love this example:

I'd like to thank my parents, God and L. Ron Hubbard.

Commas are also used when you are using a phrase after a specific name to explain who the person is.

Steve Cole, the president of ADB, Inc., spoke to the crowd. (This is not the Steve Cole who writes about Dr. Who.)

When going from general to specific, you don't use that comma, such as in this case:

Company president Steve Cole entertained the crowd by warbling his filk of "Does Your Mother Know" and garnered huge amounts of applause.

Those who were there know that he got more rotten tomatoes than he did applause, *but that's not the point*. The point is that in the second case, you don't need a comma.