

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

MISUSED WORDS

Adverse means detrimental and does not mean averse or disinclined.

- Correct: *There were adverse effects. / I'm not averse to doing that.*

Appraise means to ascertain the value of and does not mean to apprise or to inform.

- Correct: *I appraised the jewels. / I apprised him of the situation.*

As far as means the same as but cannot be used the same way as **as for**.

- Correct: *As far as the money is concerned... / As for the money...*

Begs the question means assumes what it should be proving and does not mean raises the question.

- Correct: *When I asked the dealer why I should pay more for the German car, he said I would be getting 'German quality,' but that just begs the question.*

Cliché is a noun and is not an adjective.

- Correct: *Shakespeare used a lot of clichés. / The plot was so clichéd.*

Credible means believable and does not mean credulous or gullible.

- Correct: *His sales pitch was not credible. / The con man took advantage of credulous people.*

Criteria is the plural, not the singular of criterion.

- Correct: *These are important criteria.*

Data is a plural count noun not, standardly speaking, a mass noun.

- Correct: *This datum supports the theory, but many of the other data refute it.*

Dichotomy means two mutually exclusive alternatives and does not mean difference or discrepancy.

- Correct: *There is a dichotomy between even and odd numbers. / There is a discrepancy between what we see and what is really there.*

Discreet means tactful or avoiding embarrassment, while **discrete** means separate or individually distinct.

- Correct: *The teacher was discreet in discussing the student's behavior. / Lemons and oranges are two discrete fruits.*

Disinterested means unbiased and does not mean uninterested.

- Correct: *The dispute should be resolved by a disinterested judge. / Why are you so uninterested in my story?*

Enormity means extreme evil and does not mean enormousness.

- Correct: *The enormity of the terrorist bombing brought bystanders to tears. / The enormousness of the homework assignment required several hours of work.*

Flaunt means to show off and does not mean to flout.

- Correct: *She flaunted her abs. / She flouted the rules.*

Fortuitous means coincidental or unplanned and does not mean fortunate.

- Correct: *Running into my old friend was fortuitous. / It was fortunate that I had a good amount of savings after losing my job.*

Hone means to sharpen and does not mean to home in on or to converge upon.

- Correct: *She honed her writing skills. / We're homing in on a solution.*

Hot button means an emotional, divisive controversy and does not mean a hot topic.

- Correct: *She tried to stay away from the hot button of abortion. / Drones are a hot topic in the tech world.*

Ironic means uncannily incongruent and does not mean inconvenient or unfortunate.

- Correct: *It was ironic that I forgot my textbook on human memory. / It was unfortunate that I forgot my textbook the night before the quiz.*

Irregardless is not a word but a portmanteau of regardless and irrespective.

- Correct: *Regardless of how you feel, it's objectively the wrong decision. / Everyone gets a vote, irrespective of their position.*

Literally means in actual fact and does not mean figuratively.

- Correct: *I didn't mean for you to literally run over here. / I'd rather die than listen to another one of his lectures — figuratively speaking, of course!*

Mitigate means to alleviate and does not mean to militate or to provide reasons for.

- Correct: *The spray should mitigate the bug problem. / Their inconceivable differences will militate against the treaty.*

New Age means spiritualistic, holistic and does not mean modern, futuristic.

- Correct: *He is a fan of New Age mindfulness techniques. / That TV screen is made from a high-end modern glass.*

Noisome means smelly and does not mean noisy.

- Correct: *I covered my nose when I walked past the noisome dump. / I covered my ears when I heard the noisy motorcycle speed by.*

Opportunism means seizing or exploiting opportunities and does not mean creating or promoting opportunities.

- Correct: *His opportunism brought him to the head of the company. / The party ran on promoting economic opportunities for the middle class.*

Parameter means a variable and does not mean a boundary condition, a limit.

- Correct: *The forecast is based on parameters like inflation and interest rates. / We need to work within budgetary limits.*

Phenomena is a plural count noun — not a mass noun.

- Correct: *The phenomenon was intriguing, but it was only one of many phenomena observed by the telescope.*

Practicable means easily put into practice and does not mean practical.

- Correct: *His French was practicable in his job, which required frequent trips to Paris. / Learning French before taking the job was a practical decision.*

Protagonist means active character and does not mean proponent.

- Correct: *Vito Corleone was the protagonist in 'The Godfather.'* / *He is a proponent of solar energy.*

Refute means to prove to be false and does not mean to allege to be false, to try to refute.

- Correct: *His work refuted the theory that the Earth was flat.*

Shrunk, sprung, stunk, and sunk are used in the past participle — not the past tense.

- Correct: *I've shrunk my shirt. / I shrank my shirt.*

Simplistic means naively or overly simple and does not mean simple or pleasingly simple.

- Correct: *His simplistic answer suggested he wasn't familiar with the material. / She liked the chair's simple look.*

Untenable means indefensible or unsustainable and does not mean painful or unbearable.

- Correct: *Now that all the facts have been revealed, that theory is untenable. / Her death brought him unbearable sadness.*

Urban legend means an intriguing and widely circulated but false story and does not mean someone who is legendary in a city.

- Correct: *Alligators in the sewers is an urban legend. / Al Capone was a legendary gangster in Chicago.*

An effect means an influence; **to effect** means to put into effect; **to affect** means either to influence or to fake.

- Correct: *They had a big effect on my style. / The law effected changes at the school. / They affected my style. / He affected an air of sophistication to impress her parents.*

To lie (intransitive: lies, lay, has lain) means to recline; **to lay** (transitive: lays, laid, has laid) means to set down; **to lie** (intransitive: lies, lied, has lied) means to fib.

- Correct: *He lies on the couch all day. / He lays a book upon the table. / He lies about what he does.*

Adapted from Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

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