

PARTS OF SPEECH

Words can function as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions or interjections. Most common errors made in students' written work involve incorrect word formation. There is often confusion between noun, adjective, adverb and verb forms and these have been categorised below.

Many English words can have several forms.

Examples:

research can be either a verb or a noun, but has no adjectival or adverbial forms.

simple is an adjective. It has an adverbial form, **simply**, a noun form, **simplicity**, and a verb form, **simplify**.

success is a noun, but it also has adjectival, adverbial and verb forms: **successful** (adj), **successfully** (adv) and **succeed** (v).

regularly is an adverb, but it also has noun, verb and adjectival forms: **regulation** (n), **regulate** (v) and **regular** (adj).

It is important to know the function of words in a sentence in order to use them correctly. A good quality dictionary will clearly show the various forms of a word and give examples.

Common confusions in parts of speech

In the sample sentences below, incorrect sentences come first with a cross at the start; incorrect items are in *italic font*. Correct sentences come second, with correct items in **bold font**.

1. Noun/verb confusion

A noun defines or names something. A verb expresses an action, something that happens or occurs, or a mode of being. Some nouns and verbs share the same form (e.g. project, record), but usually they are different. Many nouns end in '**tion**' or '**cion**', '**ment**' or '**ing**'. Verb forms vary according mainly to person, number and tense; they can also be active or passive.

Examples of noun/verb confusion:

- The group were able to *identity* the most serious academic problem
(Incorrect use of noun: should be the verb form, **identify**)
- At present, there is a lot of *compete* for good jobs
(Incorrect use of verb: should be the noun form, **competition**)

2. Noun/adjective confusion

A noun defines or names something. An adjective qualifies or tells us more about a noun or pronoun: it can be regular, comparative or superlative. In a sentence, the qualifying adjective usually comes directly before the noun or noun phrase.

Examples of noun/adjective confusion:

- As the members were aged from 15 to 55, it was a *difficulty* task to design a game to suit everyone
(Incorrect use of noun: should be the adjectival form, **difficult**)
- The company demonstrated a great deal of *successful* in developing client relationships
(Incorrect use of adjective: should be the noun form, **success**)
- The *important* of the case was emphasised
(Incorrect use of adjective: should be the noun form, **importance**)

3. Adjective/adverb confusion

An adjective is a word that qualifies or tells us more about a noun or pronoun. An adverb is a word that qualifies or tells us more about a verb (he studies **diligently**), or sometimes an adjective (an **extremely** expensive suit) or another adverb (she walked **very** slowly). Many adverbs end in 'ly'.

Examples of adjective/adverb confusion:

- A good business person should be *proactively*
(Incorrect use of adverb: should be the adjectival form, **proactive**.)
- She *ready* agreed to give her presentation
(Incorrect use of adjective: should be the adverbial form, **readily**.)

4. Confusion with gerund or other noun forms

Nouns based on verbs can end in either 'ing' (the gerund) or another ending such as 'tion' or 'ment'. If there is an object in the sentence, the gerund form is usually correct.

Examples of gerund and other noun form confusion:

- Development* a high quality product is of paramount importance.
- Developing** a high quality product is of paramount importance.
- Manufacture* clothing in China is very cost effective.
- Manufacturing** clothing in China is very cost effective

If there is no object in the sentence, the alternative to the gerund is usually used.

- Developing* is of paramount importance.
- Development** is of paramount importance.

5. Confusion with different forms of same root noun

Nouns may have different forms, usually with slightly different meanings, which can be confusing.

- She decided to move into a new flat to start a new *living*.
- She decided to move into a new flat to start a new **life**.

(The first sentence has a gerund meaning 'means of earning' or 'way of life' instead of the correct noun form meaning 'existence'.)

6. Confusion with pronoun form

A **pronoun** is an identifying word used instead of a noun. Personal pronouns, in English, are *I, you, he/she/it, we, you* (plural), and *they*. Possessive pronouns are *my, your, his, her, its, our, their*. Personal and possessive pronouns are sometimes confused. If a pronoun refers to a noun used previously, singular/plural agreement may be incorrect.

Examples of incorrect pronoun forms:

- All employees have been notified that *their* are to be made redundant.
- All employees have been notified that **they** are to be made redundant.
- The MD has seen the contracts and he wants *it* substantially altered.
- The MD has seen the contracts and he wants **them** substantially altered.

7. Confusion with adjective form

a) adjectives ending in ED and ING

Some adjectives are actually participles (verb forms with **-ing** and **-ed** endings). They can be confusing or you can be confused.

Generally, the **-ed** ending means that the noun so described has a passive role: you are confused **by** something (the subject matter, the way it is presented, etc.). The **-ed** ending modifiers are often accompanied by prepositions and often describe the human reaction to something.

The **-ing** ending means that the noun described has a more active role: if the help pages do not seem to clarify the point, they are confusing**ing** (to you and others).

Examples:

- I am **confused about** the new fire drill arrangements.
- A number of **confusing** messages were left by the I.T. Department.
- My parents were **disappointed by** my poor achievement.
- The rainy weather was **disappointing**.
- That was a very **satisfying** meal.
- The review panel were very **satisfied with** the new online course.
- The Committee are all **excited about** the new project.
- The new project is very **exciting**.
- I am never **bored in** my free time.
- My free time is never **boring**.

b) Omission of 'd' in adjectives ending in 'ed'

Examples:

- Our Company uses the most *advance* technology.
- Our Company uses the most **advanced** technology
- Detail* information is required from candidates.
- Detailed** information is required from candidates.

This is a fun site where you can practise your grammar:

<http://www.funbrain.com/grammar/>

These two sites have academic word lists; these words are commonly used at university and it is important to familiarize yourself with them:

<http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>

<http://www.englishcompanion.com/pdfDocs/acvocabulary2.pdf>

Adapted from:

English Language Centre n.d., *Parts of speech confusion*, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, accessed 20 September 2012, <<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/fyp/html/speech.htm>>.

