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A Quick Reference: Tricky Prepositions and Confusing Adjectives

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I'll admit it: This month's column is a little bit for my students (and newer law grads). It seems that about this time each year my students start to notice that they struggle with certain prepositions and adjectives.

So as I begin to deal with these issues in my class, it occurred to me that it might be helpful to my readers to have the same type of quick guide. This month we'll cover the most common preposition and adjective mistakes, and some tips for remembering their correct usage.

Tricky prepositions

As anyone who has had to learn English as a second language can tell you, preposition usage is idiomatic. There are no rules that govern preposition usage, yet a change in the preposition can change the meaning of a sentence.

Before we get too far into tricky prepositions, let's go back to the basics for a moment. Prepositions are "words or phrases that link an object and an antecedent to show the relationship between them"¹ While some words can function as both a preposition and another part of speech, prepositions always have an object.

She skied down the hill. (preposition)

She sat down. (adverb)

He kept the rental skis behind the counter. (preposition)

As he looked behind, he crashed. (adverb)

But back to tricky prepositions. Sometimes writers will pick a preposition based on how it sounds to her ear or because it sounds "right." Indeed, all language shifts, and prepositions aren't the exception. Here are some of the more common tricky prepositions.

The length of these prepositions can help you remember which to use — the more you know, the longer the preposition should be.

Into/In to

If you're not sure whether to choose *into* or *in to*, here is a simple trick. If you can answer the question, "where?" then use *into*. *Into* shows motion toward a place.

She walked into the ski shop. (Where did she walk?)

If you could write *in order to*, then use *in to*.

She called in to set up ski lessons. (She called *in order to* set up ski lessons.)

Think of/Think about

This tricky pair is more nuanced. One choice suggests a specific choice and the other suggests pondering over something for a while.

He was thinking of a number between one and ten. (specific choice)

He was thinking about going to law school. (pondering)

Here is my trick to remember which is which for this pair: *Of* is short, like making a quick decision. *About* is longer, like pondering options.

Ask for/Ask to

The difference in this pair comes from whether the request is for an object or an action. If the request was for a noun (the object), then use *ask for*.

She asked for new snowshoes for her birthday. (snowshoes = object)

If the request is for an action, use *ask to*.

She asked to hike on her birthday. (hike = action)

To remember this difference, remember that actions are verbs, and all verbs have a "to" form.

Heard of/Heard about

This is another nuanced pair of prepositions. *Heard of* suggests that you were aware of something; *heard about* suggests you know more details.

I've heard of ski joring. (I understand this sport exists.)

I've heard about a ski joring competition in Wood River. (I've learned more details.)

The length of these prepositions can help you remember which to use — the more you know, the longer the preposition should be.

Confusing adjectives

No wonder writers get confused with certain adjectives. Many of the confusing pairs sound similar and function very similarly, although some have very different meanings. The correct usage can depend on understanding the noun in the sentence.

So a bit of basics on nouns: Nouns can be divided into two groups: mass nouns and count

nouns.² Mass nouns cannot be broken into individual units, while count nouns can. Count nouns also take a plural form, while mass nouns don't.

I would like more hot chocolate to help warm up. (mass noun)

I need a cup of hot chocolate. (count noun)

The lodge served over two hundred cups of hot chocolate. (count noun)

Many/Much

These two adjectives sound similar, function in a similar manner, and mean similar things. But they cannot be used interchangeably. Use *much* with mass nouns and singular nouns. Use *many* with plural nouns. Here's an example.

I didn't have much coffee this morning.

I don't have much time for hobbies.

But I have many interests.

Few/A Few

These two sound even more similar than the previous pair, but these are almost opposites. *A few* conveys a positive quantity, although it denotes a small number. *A few* can only be used with count nouns. *Few* represents a negative quantity or shortage.

Jill has a few friends.

Jenny has few friends.

Little/A little

More almost opposites: *little* and *a little* represent negative and positive quantities. *Little* expresses a diminutive size or a negative quantity. *A little* emphasizes how small the amount is. Always use *a little* with mass nouns.

Chad is little.

Marsha had little interest in writing.

There is a little wine left.

Would you like a little more?

Each/Every

Use *each* with individual or separate items — count nouns. Use *every* when referring all individual things in a group or with an amount when describing the frequency of actions.

The tickets are \$20 each.

Each student received a handout.

The hotel assures every guest of personal attention.

Tenielle wishes to go to the mountains every weekend.

Farther/Further

Farther (root word far) is always used for distance, and *further* (think furthermore) implies a metaphorical advancement.

How much farther is the trailhead?

Further topics will be covered next issue.

In casual speech and writing there is little usage difference between these two. That is not yet the case in more formal writing.

Last /Latter/Latest

While these sound very similar, they each have different meanings. *Last* is the opposite of first.

Read the first and last chapters.

Latter is the antithesis of the former.

Of the two choices, she prefers the latter.

Latest means the most recent.

The latest innovations were astounding.

High/Tall

High is used to define an object's position from the ground, including bridges, planes, shelves, and horizontal objects.

The Perrine Bridge is exceptionally high.

Tall describes the size or height of vertical items, such as people and buildings.

The author of this column is very tall.

Conclusion

I hope you enjoyed these tips. I'm off to contemplate topics for my next article.

Sources

- *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 247-49 (16th ed. 2010).
- *Commonly Confused Adjectives with Examples*, available at http://www.grammar.net/adjectives_pairs#sthash.pEwZpw7U.dpuf.

Endnotes

1. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 247 (16th ed. 2010).
2. For more on the difference in these types of nouns, see my January 2012, *Confusing Word Pairs*, *The Advocate* (January 2012).

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