

1-2015

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Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Concordia University School of Law, tfordyce@cu-portland.edu

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Recommended Citation

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, Confusing Word Pairs III: D Words, 58 *Advocate* 52, 63 (2015).

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Confusing Word Pairs III: D Words

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

The beginning of the year seems to bring out in me a longing to know more about words. Perhaps it is my tendency when the weather is cold and the nights are dark to read more as I curl up by the fire with a good book and a nice glass of Idaho wine after work. Maybe it's that my students are thinking more about word choice as we dig into persuasive writing.

Whatever the cause, I have started several New Years off with columns on confusing words.

Sticking with that theme, this month we are going to delve into *D* words. So sit back (maybe by a nice fire with a cozy beverage) and prepare to be dazzled as we dig into an array of confusing word pairs that all begin with *D*.

Decimate/Destroy

Writers tend to switch the meaning of these two words. Both *decimate* and *destroy* mean to damage. The difference is in the amount of damage.

To *decimate* is to damage something greatly, but not to completely destroy it. *Deci-*



mate is derived from the Latin word for one-tenth.¹ To *destroy* is to damage something until it no longer exists. Writers tend to switch the meaning of these two words.

Thus, when you want to convey serious damage (but not complete destruction) use *decimate*.

The accident *decimated* the front of the truck, but the rear was intact.



If something is gone use *destroy*. The car was a total loss; the accident *destroyed* it.

Deduce/Deduct

This word pair creates confusion because the noun form of these two verbs is the same: deduction. *Deduce* and *deduct* as verbs, however, have very different meanings.

To *deduce* is to arrive at a conclusion through the use of logic, to apply general rules to specific facts.

The police *deduced* the truck was travelling too fast.

To *deduct* is to subtract.

One step in the editing process is to *deduct* unnecessary words.

Defective/Deficient

Deficient may mean *defective*, and that can create confusion. *Defective* means a thing is faulty. *Deficient* means that a number or amount is insufficient. *Deficient* can mean *defective* only in the sense that something is missing, not that the design is flawed or faulty.

Thus, a notice the missing critical information is both *deficient* and *defective*. (The design of the notice is fine, but the missing information makes it both faulty and insufficient.)

Definite/Definitive

Writers err with this word pair when they try to elevate the ordinary word *definite*. *Definite* means clear and exact. *Definitive* means done with authority and conclusively, or the most authoritative of its kind.

Suppose a court reached a decision, but the writing in its opinion was almost impenetrable. You could write: "The court's decision was *definitive*, but not so *definite*."

Don't make the mistake, however, of using definitive to mean definite. For instance, lay witnesses can give only *definite* answers (or indefinite if they aren't very clear), but not *definitive*.

Deprecate/Depreciate

To *deprecate* something is to express disapproval. To *depreciate*

something is to disparage or belittle it. If you dislike something, you can *deprecate* it without *depreciating* it — in fact, that’s more polite.

So don’t use *depreciate* to mean simple disapproval.

The judge *depreciated* the party’s argument.

Detract/Distract

Detract means to reduce or take away something’s worth or value. *Distract* means to prevent someone from paying full attention to something. *Detract* should be used as an intransitive verb; *Distract* should be used as a transitive verb.

In case you forgot that verb lesson from grammar school, here’s a refresher. Transitive verbs require both a subject and an object: The truck struck a car. The verb *struck* has both a subject (truck) and an object (car). Intransitive verbs require only a subject: The truck drove. The verb *drove* has only a subject: truck. Many verbs can be both transitive and intransitive.

But to use *detract* correctly, you should include only a subject.

Grammar errors *detract* from a brief’s impact.

Distract, on the other hand, should have both a subject and an object.

Grammar errors *distract* my attention from the message.

Discrete/Discreet

Oh yes, a confusing pair of homophone adjectives! A *discrete* thing is distinct or separate from others.

The book had several *discrete* chapters.

A *discreet* person is careful, unobtrusive, tactful, or circumspectly confidential.

I am *discreet* when discussing student performance.

Discreet can also be used to describe things.

She gave a *discreet* cough.

To remember which to use, think about this — the *e*’s in *discrete* are separate from each other.

Dominant/Dominate

Dominant is an adjective. It is used to describe a noun.

The car company had a *dominant* market position.

Dominate is a verb.

The car company *dominates* the market for mid-sized sedans.

Writers err when they use *dominate* as an adjective to describe a verb: *He had a dominant personality.*

As a reminder the end of *dominate* (“ate”) is also a verb.

Conclusion

I hope I delighted you with this selection of *D* words. I’m off to start a fire, find my book, and curl up for a lovely evening read!

Sources

- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style*, 231-235 (2d ed. West 2006).

Endnotes

1. “[D]ecimate was originally a repressive tactic in which every tenth person in a rebellious village or a defeated army was put to death.” Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Style*, 231 (2d ed. West 2006).

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Fisher Rainey Hudson. You can reach her at tfordyce@cu-portland.edu or <http://cu-portland.edu>

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P.O. Box 1776
Boise, ID 83701

Phone: (208) 345-7800
Fax: (208) 345-7894

E-Mail: tpark@thomaswilliamslaw.com

Law Office of Randal J. French, P.C.

1501 Tyrell Lane | Boise, ID 83706
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