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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

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