Confusing Word Pairs III: D Words

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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. Decimate is derived from the Latin word for one-tenth. 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\textit{ deprecate} it without\textit{ depreciating} it — in fact, that’s more polite.

So don’t use\textit{ deprecate} to mean simple disapproval. The judge\textit{ deprecated} the party’s argument.

\textbf{Detract/Distract}

\textit{Detract} means to reduce or take away something’s worth or value. \textit{Distract} means to prevent someone from paying full attention to something. \textit{Detract} should be used as an intransitive verb; \textit{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 \textit{struck} has both a subject (truck) and an object (car). Intransitive verbs require only a subject: The truck drove. The verb \textit{drove} has only a subject: truck. Many verbs can be both transitive and intransitive.

But to use \textit{detract} correctly, you should include only a subject. Grammar errors\textit{ detract} from a brief’s impact.

\textit{Distract}, on the other hand, should have both a subject and an object.

Grammar errors\textit{ distract} my attention from the message.

\textbf{Discrete/Discreet}

- Oh yes, a confusing pair of homophone adjectives! A \textit{discrete} thing is distinct or separate from others. The book had several \textit{discrete} chapters.
- A \textit{discreet} person is careful, unobtrusive, tactful, or circumspectly confidential.
- I am\textit{ discreet} when discussing student performance.
- \textit{Discreet} can also be used to describe things.
- She gave a \textit{discrete} cough.
- To remember which to use, think about this — the \textit{e}'s in \textit{discrete} are separate from each other.

\textbf{Dominant/Dominate}

- \textit{Dominant} is an adjective. It is used to describe a noun.
- The car company had a\textit{ dominant} market position.
- \textit{Dominate} is a verb.
- The car company\textit{ dominates} the market for mid-sized sedans.
- Writers err when they use \textit{dominate} as an adjective to describe a verb: He had a\textit{ dominant} personality.

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

\textbf{Conclusion}

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

\textbf{Sources}


\textbf{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, \textit{The Redbook: A Manual on Style}, 231 (2d ed. West 2006).

\textbf{About the Author}

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