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Some February Fun: F Words

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I've wanted to write another column on word pairs for a while.¹ I decided that this month is it. Let's celebrate the shortest month of the year by looking at "F" words.

First/firstly

The first "F" word comes from my students wondering whether using *firstly* was correct, or whether they should simply use *first*. Turns out, either is correct. When creating lists, however, be careful not to mix the two. So if you begin your list with a *first*, use *second*, *third*, and so on.

Farther/further

Traditionally, *farther* is used to indicate literal distance, space, and time, and *further* is used to indicate distance, space, and time, but in a figurative sense.² Thus, use *farther* literally.

The court traveled farther this year than last, racking up hundreds of miles in travel.



And use *further* figuratively.

The court refused to extend the doctrine any further.

While using *further* to indicate literal distance, space, or time has become common, in more formal writing it's best to stick with the traditional differentiation.

Feign/feint

These similar words have similar meanings. *Feign* means to fake or pretend to be affected by something. *Feint* is a pretend blow or attack designed to mislead an opponent: The boxer *feinted* a jab then threw an up-percut.



Feign could be a great, emotive word choice to show a reader how insincere someone is.

The defendant feigned remorse over his actions.

Fictional/fictitious

Both of these adjectives indicate that something is made up. *Fictional* has a more neutral connotation.

Mary Poppins is a fictional character.

Fictitious, however, has a more negative connotation, indicating that something is a sham or nonexistent.

She pleaded guilty to embezzling thousands of dollars by having fictitious accounts payable.

Flair/flare

Flair is a knack or style for something, an outstanding skill.

Megan had a flair for writing about grammar.

Flare is a sudden burst of emotion or bright flames used to provide light.

The students felt a flare of happiness at the end of the exam period.

The driver used flares to warn other motorists of his disabled truck.

Flammable/inflammable

Both *flammable* and *inflammable* mean easily set on fire. Many writers believe that *inflammable* has the opposite meaning. This confusion is caused by the little known meaning for the Latin prefix *in-*: into or intensifying the meaning of the root.

To avoid confusion use the more common *flammable*.

The pajamas were flammable.

The opposite of both words is *nonflammable*. So if you mean to write that something is not easily set on fire, use that.

The wet wood was nonflammable.

Flaunt/flout

Perhaps it's that these words sound so similar, but many writers confuse them. *Flaunt* is an ostentatious display.

If you've got grammar skills, flaunt them!

Flout is to ignore rules or conventions.

Flouting the rules of grammar can lead to confusion.

Forbear/forebear

These two words are mistakenly used interchangeably, even though *forbear* is a verb and *forebear* is a noun, and they aren't related. To *forbear* is to refrain from doing something. A *forebear* is an ancestor. That little "e" in the middle drastically changes the meaning.

As part of the settlement, the plaintiff agreed to forbear future claims.

Like my forebears, I grew up on a ranch.

Founder/flounder

These similar verbs get many writers. *Flounder* means to struggle or flail about. *Founder* means to fail. While they describe similar aspects of a bad situation, they should not be used interchangeably.

The professor waited while the unprepared student floundered.

Students who fail to study founder their exams.

Use this simple trick to keep yourself from floundering for the correct usage and possibly founder-ing. Think of a fish flopping around, like a flounder!

Forgo/forego

Here is another set of words with a pesky "e" that creates confusion.

Indeed, the misuse of *forego* for *for-go* is widespread. *Forgo* means to go without. *Forego* means to go before.

The parties agreed to forgo having a jury.

In light of the foregoing discussion, I recommend that you consult a dictionary to ensure correct usage.

To help keep these words straight, remember this trick: Before and *forego* both have the "e" in *fore*.

Fortuitous/fortunate

Fortuitous, unfortunately, is often misused for *fortunate*. Perhaps a spirit of optimism creates this confusion: *fortuitous* means to happen by chance, and *fortunate* means auspicious or lucky. Maybe optimistic writers think that every chance happening will turn out to be lucky. They would have a better chance at correct usage, however, if they recognized the difference.

A fortuitous turn of events made the student late for class.

You are fortunate to be near the end of a great column.

Conclusion

First, I hope that the foregoing discussion of F words didn't make you feign delight. Second, I hope it led to a flare of understanding. Finally, I hope that you won't flounder too much trying to use these words

correctly. Remember, you can always forgo using an F word.

Sources

- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style*, § 12.3 (2d ed. Thompson/West 2006).
- Suzanne E. Rowe, *F-Words: The First Flames of Fall*, Oregon State Bar Bulletin (October 2012), available at <http://www.osbar.org/publications/bulletin/12oct/legalwriter.html>.

Endnotes

1. I first wrote about confusing word pairs in the January 2012 edition of *The Advocate*.
2. These are the traditional definitions. It's now commonplace to use further to indicate both literal and figurative distance, and even dictionaries will cross-reference these words.

About the Author

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