

Spelling Tips 4 – Homophones

Homophones are words which sound the same but which have different origins and different spellings. *Arms* and *alms*, for example. *Altar* and *alter*. *Arms* are weapons from the verb meaning to arm oneself. *Alms* are gifts of charity. The word *alms* isn't a plural word but from the Old English *almysse*, which in turn is from the Greek word for 'charity'. *Altar* is from the Latin *altaria* meaning 'a high place', whereas *alter* is from the Latin *alter* meaning 'other'.

Sometimes the difficulty arises when a word is borrowed from another language. The word *buoy* is from Dutch and should have had the spelling *boy* but because it was pronounced *bwoy* in Dutch it was given the *u* to indicate the different pronunciation. Now it has dropped that pronunciation but retained the strange spelling!

Again, when two words are pronounced in exactly the same way, you sometimes need a memory-jogger to help you sort out which one you want. *Stationary* and *stationery*. Remember there is an envelope (an *e*) in *stationery*. *Currant* and *current*. Remember that you can eat a currant – the one with the *a*.

Here are some more homophones that are often confused.

bare / bear

Don't confuse the spelling of **bare**, to be uncovered, with **bear** which sounds the same. A **bear** is a large animal with short fur. To **bear** something is to hold or carry it.

bizarre / bazaar

Don't confuse the spelling of **bizarre** with **bazaar** (a kind of market) which sounds the same. The word **bizarre** means 'unusual' and its spelling certainly is! Remember especially the *arre* ending. It comes from Basque, a language spoken in parts of Spain and France.

boar / boor / bore

Don't confuse the spelling of **boar**, a male pig, with **boor** or **bore** which sound the same. A **boor** is a rude person, and a **bore** is a hole made by drilling, or a dull person.

feat / feet

An action requiring great skill, courage or strength is a **feat**. Don't confuse the spelling of **feat** with **feet** which sounds the same but is spelt with a double *e*. Your **feet** are at the end of your legs.

foul / fowl

Don't confuse **foul** with **fowl** which sounds the same. If something is **foul**, it is extremely unpleasant. A **fowl** is a bird kept for eating or for its eggs, such as a hen, duck or turkey.

jeans / genes

Don't confuse the spelling of **jeans** with **genes** which has the same sound. **Jeans** are something you wear, while **genes** are the units in the body responsible for passing on physical characteristics, like blue eyes, from parents to their children.

prey / pray

Prey is an animal hunted for food by another. Don't confuse the spelling of **prey** with **pray** which has the same sound. When someone **prays**, they talk to the god they believe in.

principal / principle

Don't confuse **principal**, the head of a school, with **principle** which has the same sound. A **principle** is a general truth or rule.

there / their / they're

There means in or at a particular place: *The book is there, on the top shelf.* Don't confuse the spelling of **there** with **their** or **they're**, both of which have the same sound. **Their** is a form of *they* that shows something belongs to them: *The boys are with their mother.* **They're** is a short form of *they are*.

strait / straight

Don't confuse **strait**, which is a narrow channel connecting two large bodies of water, with **straight** which describes something with no bends.

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