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.

Susan Butler
The Editor
Macquarie Dictionary