

Word Choice: Homonyms

Homonyms are words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. When we speak, homonyms are not an issue; however, when we write, we can distort the meaning of a sentence by using the wrong word.

For example: I would like to lie back on a **plain** and gaze into the sky.
I would like to lie back on a **plane** and gaze into the sky.

Plain and **plane** are homonyms. These words sound alike, so in a spoken sentence, the listener would have to rely on the rest of the conversation to determine which word the speaker means. The two sentences written in the above example are identical except for the homonyms, yet the change in one word alters the entire meaning of the sentence. By choosing the wrong word from this pair of homonyms, the writer might end up with a sentence about reclining on an aircraft when he wants to talk about relaxing in a meadow!

As you can probably imagine, or perhaps have already experienced, choosing the wrong word from a pair of homonyms can be risky. It can annoy or distract your reader, and in some cases, it may hinder meaning.

Here is a list of some commonly confused homonyms along with their meanings¹. In the space provided, write a sentence for each word, being sure to use it correctly. This practice will help you become familiar with choosing the right words.

1. **their** belonging to them

there at that place; used with verbs *is, are, was, were, have, had*

they're contraction for *they are*

2. **then** at that time; next

than used in comparison

3. **right** correct; opposite of left; something to which one is entitled

write what you do in this class

¹ Taken from Langan, John. *Sentence Skills with Readings*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

4. **hear** perceive with the ear

here in this place

5. **hole** empty spot

whole entire

6. **its** belonging to it

it's contraction for *it is* or *it has*

7. **knew** past tense of *know*

new opposite of old

8. **your** belonging to you

you're contraction of *you are*

9. **threw** past tense of throw

through from one side to the other; finished

10. **too** also

to toward

two the number 2
