

Years 5 & 6 · Free resource

Homophones and confusable words: Years 5/6

Year group: 5/6

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 5–6, Homophones and other words that are often confused

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

Introduction

The Y5/6 homophone list extends beyond same-sound pairs to include words that are *often confused* even when they don't sound identical. Many of these are adult-level errors — they appear in professional writing, journalism, and official documents. Teaching them at Y5/6 builds habits that last.

The statutory Y5/6 pairs

aisle / isle

aisle /aɪl/ — a passage between rows of seats; a passage in a shop

isle /aɪl/ — an island (poetic/literary: the British Isles)

Memory: an **aisle** is inside a building (A for aisle, A for architecture). An **isle** is in the sea.

aloud / allowed

aloud — spoken so others can hear: "*Read it **aloud**."*

allowed — permitted: "*You're not **allowed** to run."*

Memory: **al-oud** = out **loud**. **al-lowed** = was **low**-ered/permited.

affect / effect

(carried from Y3/4 — reinforce at Y5/6 with more complex usage)

affect (verb) — to have an influence on

effect (noun) — the result; the outcome

effect (verb, rare) — to bring about: "*to **effect** change*"

effective (adjective) — producing a desired result

altar / alter

altar — a raised table used in religious ceremonies

alter — to change

Memory: an **altar** is in a church (ends in *-ar* like *pillar*). **alter** is what you do to something (a verb — ends like *other* verbs: *wander, matter*).

ascent / assent

ascent — a climb; an upward movement: "*the **ascent** of Everest*"

assent — agreement; to agree: "*She gave her **assent**."* "*He **assented**."*

Memory: **asCENT** contains *cent* — going up a hundred steps. **assenT** — they agreed, they're all senT in the same direction.

bridal / bridle

bridal — relating to a bride or wedding: *a **bridal** gown*

bridle — the headgear for controlling a horse; to show irritation: "*She **bridled** at the suggestion.*"

cent / scent / sent

cent — a coin; one hundredth

scent — a smell; a perfume

sent — past tense of *send*

Memory: **s-cent** = a smell that costs a **cent**. **sent** = simple past tense.

cereal / serial

cereal — a grain crop; a breakfast food

serial — a story told in episodes; a sequence: *a **serial** killer; a TV **serial***

Memory: **cereal** contains *real* — it's a real food you eat. **serial** contains *series*.

complement / compliment

complement — something that completes or goes well with something else: "*The wine **complements** the food.*"

compliment — an expression of praise: "*She gave him a **compliment**."*

Memory: a **complEment** makes something **complete** (same e). A **compliment** says "I" like you.

desert / dessert

desert — a dry, sandy area; to abandon: "*She was **deserted**.*"

dessert — a sweet course after a meal

Memory: **desseRt** — you want a **second** helping of something **sweet** (two *ss*). A **desert** has one sandy stretch (one *s*).

draft / draught

draft — a rough version of a document; (American English) a current of air

draught — (British English) a current of air; a serving of beer from a tap; a move in draughts

Note: In British English, use **draught** for air currents and beer; **draft** for documents and plans.

farther / further

farther — more far (physical distance): "*She walked **farther** than anyone.*"

further — more far (metaphorical); additionally; to advance: "***Further** discussion is needed.*"
"*We must **further** our understanding.*"

guessed / guest

guessed — past tense of *guess*: "*She **guessed** correctly.*"

guest — a visitor; someone invited

led / lead

led — past tense of *lead* (the verb): "*She **led** the team.*"

lead — (a) the verb, present tense: "*She will **lead** the team.*" (b) a heavy metal: "*a **lead** pipe*"
(rhymes with *head*)

This is one of the most common adult errors. The past tense of the verb *lead* is **led** — not *lead*.

morning / mourning

morning — the early part of the day

mourning — grieving after a death; wearing black as a sign of grief

past / passed

past — gone by; former; beyond: "*in the **past**; he walked **past** the house*"

passed — past tense of *pass*: "*She **passed** the exam.*"

Memory: **passed** is always a verb (past tense of *pass*). **past** can be a noun, adjective, preposition, or adverb — but never a verb.

precede / proceed

precede — to come before: "*Monday **precedes** Tuesday.*"

proceed — to go forward; to continue: "*Please **proceed** with the presentation.*"

Memory: **preCEDE** = come before (think *cede* = yield, go before). **proSEED** = go forward like a seed growing ahead.

principal / principle

principal — the head of a school; main; most important: "*the **principal** reason*"

principle — a fundamental belief or rule: "*a **principle** of fairness*"

Memory: the **principal** is your **pal** (principal ends in *-al* like *pal*). A **principle** is a rule (ends in *-le* like *rule*).

profit / prophet

profit — financial gain; to benefit: "*The company made a **profit**.*"

prophet — someone who foretells the future; a religious figure

stationary / stationery

stationary — not moving; still

stationery — paper, pens, and other writing materials

Memory: **stationary** — a **station** is a fixed place (not moving). **stationery** — you use a **pen** (letter *e* as in *envelopes*).

steal / steel

steal — to take without permission

steel — a hard metal made from iron

wary / weary

wary — cautious; watchful: "*She was **wary** of strangers.*"

weary — very tired; worn out: "*He was **weary** after the long journey.*"

who's / whose

who's — contraction of *who is* or *who has*: "***Who's** there?*"

whose — belonging to whom: "***Whose** book is this?*"

Memory: **who's** has an apostrophe because it's a contraction (something is missing). **whose** is a possessive pronoun (no apostrophe needed).

Teaching strategy for confusable words

Meaning first. The child must decide what they mean before they can choose the right spelling.

Sentence frames. Give each word its own sentence that makes the meaning unambiguous:

"I **passed** my test" (verb — did the action of passing)

"In the **past**, people didn't have phones" (noun — time gone by)

Etymology hooks. Many confusable pairs can be unlocked by their roots:

principal ends in *-al* (like *pal* — a person)

principle ends in *-le* (like *rule* — a thing)

Never teach the pair in isolation. Teach each word in context first. Presenting them as a pair before each one is secure creates confusion rather than resolving it.

Word sort

Place each word in the correct sentence.

stationary / stationery

The train was _____ at the platform.

She bought _____ for her new desk at the shop.

principal / principle

The _____ reason for the delay was the weather.

She refused to lie — it was against her _____.

past / passed

She _____ the finish line in first place.

In the _____, buildings were heated by coal fires.

led / lead

The captain _____ the team to victory last year.

The pipes were made of _____, which is a heavy metal.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). The statutory Y5/6 homophones and confusable words are listed explicitly in the document. All words verified against the published statutory list.