

Affect vs. Effect

One of the most common grammatical errors I see is the misuse of “affect” and “effect.” In normal usage, one is a verb; the other is a noun. The confusion is so widespread, in fact, that in the 1980s, it became popular to substitute the word “impact” for both “affect” and “effect,” thereby eliminating the possibility of using the wrong word. Today, however, “impact” is often overused, and learning the proper usage of affect and effect will make your writing more precise.

When writing, if you wish to use the verb, the word almost always will be “affect.” If you need a noun, the word almost always will be “effect.” I say “almost always” because there are rarely used—but opposite—usages for each.

Let’s consider a couple of examples that demonstrate their ordinary usage. A late frost can **affect** both the size and quality of the peach harvest. Here, “affect”—with an A—is used as a verb to mean “influence” or “act upon.” Likewise, a late frost can have devastating **effects** on the peach harvest. In this case, “effects”—with an E—is a plural noun, basically meaning “produced consequences.” “Effect” can also be used as a noun to mean “outward appearance” (as in a special make-up effect), or “a distinctive impression” (as in a horror movie’s eerie music for added effect), or “an operative state” (as in no longer in effect).

The less common form of the a-word—and it’s used as a noun—means a strong feeling or emotion, often demonstrated through facial expressions or outward appearance. For example, “He assumed the affect of a carefree individual.” When used as a noun, the accent is on the first syllable—AF-fect.

The less common form of the e-word—when used as a verb—means to cause or to bring about, as in the following: “The mediator effected a compromise through negotiation.”

A few years back, a student said to me, “I wish you’d come up with a rule to help us remember when to use either the a-word or the e-word. I told her I’d try to come up with something and get back to her. A couple of days later, I sent her the following email: When you want to use the verb—and verbs are action-words, and “action” begins with “A”—use the A-word. When you want a noun—and nouns name entities (that is, beings or things that exist), and “entity” begins with “E”—use the E-word. So most of the time, it’s “A for the action word” (the verb “affect”) and “E for the entity” (the noun “effect”).