

Homophones:

Sound-Alike Impediments to Effective Communication

“A powerful agent is the right word.”

— Mark Twain

Essay on William Dean Howells
(1906)

A forty-ate-year-old elicit drug user named lues complains that the heals and souls of her feat or soar. On examination, she has facial hare, a subtle neck, crooked knows, hemorrhages in her write optic fungus, course skin and mental contusion as in mixed edema, split pea to on oscillation, rite-cited plural affusion, descended abdomen with cirrus fluid in her perineal cavity, shoddy lymphadenopathy, tender mussels, normal refluxes, and venus insufficiency in both legs. Her doctor diagnoses virile inflection. Wood ewe?

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If you could not see this case description but heard it presented at a medical conference or as part of a lecture, you probably would have little or no difficulty understanding the gist of it. But when you read it without first having heard it, you are momentarily confused, and perhaps even shocked and irritated, by so many words that look incorrect to your eye but sound correct to your ear. Such incongruity is typical of misused homophones—words that sound alike but differ fundamentally in meaning, origin, and spelling.

To satisfy our curiosity and to challenge our minds, we decided to document as many homophones as we could by poring (not pouring) over several standard English-language dictionaries. After only a few days, we had compiled 440 homophones. We then decided to search specifically for medical homophones. This time, however, we looked solely online, using “medical homophones” as the search words. That decision proved fruitful and time-saving, because we found more than we could handle, quickly and effortlessly. See Table I for some of the medical and non-medical “sound-alikes” that we assembled.

In everyday conversation, the incorrect use of homophones can readily escape recognition. As an example, take the word foreword. Notice how much it sounds like forward, four-word, and four-ward. Even the spellings are similar, but the resemblances stop there. When written, however, these words are easy to differentiate. Likewise, the incorrect use of homophones in manuscripts submitted for publication is easy to spot. And, depending on the reviewers’ and editors’ tolerance of sloppy writing (which too often indicates sloppy thinking), bad word choices by themselves can be a reason for rejecting the manuscript.

Why emphasize homophones? First of all, words form language, language enables communication, and communication is our link with each other. Without effective communication, marriages fail, businesses fold, and education falters. And in medicine, poor communication fosters poor patient care, sometimes with fatal outcomes. So paying attention to sound-alikes can reduce or eliminate their inappropriate use. It can also improve your spelling, increase your vocabulary, strengthen your knowledge, and protect you against mental inertia.

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TABLE I. Illustrative Homophones

Non-Medical		Medical	
access – assess	mail – male	aberrant - apparent	menorrhagia – menorrhagia
affect – effect	meat – meet	abduction – adduction	metaphysis – metastasis
air – ere – heir	might – mite	absorption – adsorption	modeling - mottling
all – awl	mince – mints	achymosis – ecchymosis	mucous – mucus
are – or		affusion – effusion	muscle – mussel
ascent – assent	nay – neigh	aphagia – aphasia	myelogram – myogram
ate – eight	none – nun	apposition – opposition	
		aural – oral	narcosis – necrosis
bare – bear	oar – ore	auscultation – oscillation	naval – navel
berry – bury	ode – owed		
bi – buy – by – bye	one – won	basal – basil	osteal – ostial
bread – bred		breach – breech	
	pause – paws	breadth – breath	palate – palette
cent – scent – sent	pea – pee		palpation – palpitation
cereal – serial	poor – pore – pour	carbuncle – caruncle	palliation – papillation
cite – sight – site	pray – prey	carpus – corpus	pedicle – pellicle
coarse – course		cell – sell	perfuse - profuse
colonel – kernel	rain – reign	chord – cord	perineal – peroneal
	raise – rays – raze	cirrhosis – xerosis	phosphorous – phosphorus
dear – deer	road – rode	cor – core	pleural – plural
dew – do – due		cytology – sitology	pleuritic – pruritic
dine – dyne	seas – sees – seize		prostate – prostrate
	sew – so	descended – distended	psychosis – sycosis
elicit – illicit	soar – sore	dysphagia – dysphasia – dyspragia	
ewe – yew – you	sole – soul		radical – radicle
ewer – your	son – sun	enteric – icteric	radicular – reticular
	suede – swayed		reflex – reflux
feat – feet		facies – feces	semantic – somatic
forth – fourth	tense – tents	fasciculation – vesiculation	separation – suppuration
foul – fowl	than – then	flair – flare	sublingual – subungual
	their – there – they're	fundus – fungus	subtle – supple
gait – gate	to – too – two		
grate – great		gavage – lavage	thenar – thinner
	vary – very	gastrostomy – gastrotony	track – tract
hair – hare	ware – wear – where	glands – glans	tympanites – tympanitis
hall – haul	watt – what		
heal – heel	way – weigh – whey	heroin – heroine	varicose – verrucose
hour – our	weather – whether		venous – venus
	when – win	infection – inflection	vesical – vesicle
l – aye – eye	wood – would	ingestion – injection	vial – vile
	write – right – rite	incite – insight	villous – villus
jewry – jury			viscus – viscous
		labial – labile	
know – no		liver – livor	yoke – yolk
lay – lei			
loan – lone			