TROUBLESOME WORDS

affect / effect *Affect* is almost always a verb and means to influence or to have an effect on. *Effect*, usually a noun, is an outcome or result. As a verb, *effect* means to cause or to bring about.

    Petroleum spills can affect the quality of groundwater.
    The effects of pollution on water quality can be an enormous issue for municipalities.
    The goal was to effect a major change in the abandoned mine regulations.

RAVEN = **r**emember **a**ffect is the **v**erb and **e**ffect is the **n**oun.

cleanup / clean up *Cleanup* is both a noun and adjective; *clean up* is a verb.

    The cleanup will take 6 weeks.
    Workers will clean up the site in 6 weeks.
    The cleanup work will take 6 weeks.

compare with / compare to To *compare with* is to discern both similarities and differences between like things. To *compare to* is to note primarily similarities between things; use it when the intent is to assert. In most of your writing you will use *compare with*, unless you mean to imply irony, as in the second example below.

    We compared 2015 findings with 2014 findings and saw 10 differences.
    Some people compare learning grammar to getting teeth pulled.

compose / comprise *Compose* means to assemble or constitute; *comprise* means to encompass that which is already assembled. Things <u>compose</u> groups and groups <u>comprise</u> things. Never use *is comprised of*, which is incorrect grammar, but you do use *is composed of*.

    The project manager, field advisor, and ground staff compose the inspection team.
    The inspection team comprises a project manager, field advisor, and ground staff.
    The inspection team is composed of a project manager, field advisor, and ground staff.

continuous / continual *Continuous* means uninterrupted; *continual* means frequently recurring.

dispose / dispose of *To dispose* means to arrange, to give a tendency to, or make ready; to *dispose of* means to get rid of something.

    The on-site inspector is disposed to clean up the site now.
    The facility will dispose of the hazardous material at an approved landfill.
    Improper use: EPA will dispose the hazardous material.

effects of / effect on The statement is vague; be as specific as possible instead.

> **Vague:** Irrigation can have an effect on downstream water users.
> **More precise:** Irrigation can reduce flow for downstream water users.

e.g. / i.e. *E.g.* means for example (*exempli gratia*); *i.e.* means that is (*id est*). The two are not interchangeable. Both are always followed by a comma and are best used in parentheses in technical or formal writing.

> I gathered information for the loan application (e.g., legal description, proposed plans, current issues).

> Contamination has fallen below risk-based screening levels (i.e., contaminants no longer pose a threat to groundwater).

farther / further Use *further* when referring to matters that are not physically measurable; use *farther* when referring to physical distances.

> The further we investigate, the more issues we uncover.
> The farther we go down the road, the more interesting the scenery gets.

fewer / less In general, *fewer* is used for individual items, while *less* is used for bulk, quantity, or matters of degree. *Less* modifies collective nouns, mass nouns, and nouns denoting an abstract whole. *More than* is the opposite of both. Avoid the redundant *fewer in number* or *fewer number of people*. A simple *fewer* will do.

> The more we study the problem, the less faith I have in finding an easy solution.
> I have less than $20 in my wallet. **But:** I have fewer than 20 one-dollar bills.
> Montana suffered fewer chemical spills this year than last year.

historic / historical A *historic* event is an important occurrence, one that stands out in history. Any occurrence in the past is a *historical* event. They are not interchangeable. The moon landing was historic; past irrigation use is not. Thus, "historical irrigation use has bearing on current rights"; better yet, use "past" instead of "historical."

if / whether *If* introduces a conditional situation; *whether* introduces an alternative, often in the context of an indirect question. Use *whether* in two circumstances: (1) to introduce a noun clause and (2) when using *if* would cause ambiguity.

> If I told you how much I don't like adjudicating water rights, would you still make me do it?
>
> (1) He asked whether his group was eligible for a conservation loan. *The answer is either yes or no.*
>
> (2) He asked if the loan had been granted. *The statement literally means* "Whenever the loan was granted, he asked," *which doesn't make sense.*

impact As a verb it is over used, vague, and literally means to drive or press closely into something. Use *affect* or *effect* and their variants instead, unless you can be even more precise by saying exactly what you mean.

> **Avoid:** Diesel spills can impact the soil.
> **Better:** Diesel spills can have a negative effect on soil.
> **Most precise:** Diesel spills can damage soil and prevent plants from growing in spill areas.

shall In legal terms troublesome because its meaning varies depending on how drafters of legal documents intended the meaning, leaving courts to determine. *Shall* is used to mean *does*, *will*, *should*, *might, must*, or *may*; thus, readers wonder whether they are required to do something versus having a choice or whether they are being given a right. Avoid using *shall* and opt for a more precise word. If something is required, use *must* to say so.

should / will / must *Should* implies ought to; *will* suggests intention; *must* is a command.

> You should try to understand the regulations before applying for a NPDES permit.
> I will read the document thoroughly before formulating an opinion.
> Permit holders must follow all the rules or risk having their permits revoked.

that / which In American English, *that* tells something about a subject specific and necessary to the meaning of a phrase. *Which* tells something about the subject that is unnecessary, an aside. The *which* clause, in this case, is always set off by commas; *that* is never set off by commas.

> The report, which is 6 weeks overdue, is still with the contractor. *The report happens to be 6 weeks overdue but that is unimportant; the point is, the contractor still has the report.*
>
> Let's review the report that is 6 weeks overdue (as opposed to reviewing the report that is on schedule).

then / than *Then* refers to time; *than* is used for comparison.

> Before the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, there was little regulation of air and water pollution. Back then, people could dump just about anything into our waterways with impunity. Today, our environment is much better off with strict pollution control than without it.

who / whom *Who* is a pronoun and takes a verb (*who* does the action). *Whom* is an object of the verb (the action is received by *whom*). So how do you know which to use? Here's the test:

1. Isolate the clause containing the who(ever)/whom(ever).
2. Substitute *he* or *him* (or *they* or *them* in the case of plurals).
3. Test which pronoun substitute makes sense.

Remember: The M's go together, that is, *him*/*them* relates to *whom*; *he*/*they* relates to *who*.

> He is the person <u>who</u> answers questions about reporting oil spills. (Test: <u>He</u> answers questions.)
>
> This is the person <u>whom</u> I met at the meeting last night. (Test: I met <u>him</u> at the meeting.)
>
> She was asked to keep track of <u>whoever</u> didn't submit the proper permit application. (Test: He didn't submit the proper permit application; or they didn't submit…)
>
> <u>Whomever</u> you recommend for the job, I will hire that person. (Test: You recommend <u>him</u> for the job.)

<u>Whom</u> has she chosen to be the project leader? (Test: She chose <u>him</u>.)