

Misused Words: Part III

Though usage often depends on context, below are some explanations of the general situations in which some words are used (or not used).

1. amount, number:

- *Amount* refers to something that cannot be counted. *This amount of food can feed us for a week!*
- *Number* refers to something that can be counted. *This number of granola bars will not last the hour.*

2. apt, liable, likely:

- *Apt* is related to habit or tendency based on someone or something's characteristics. *With her horrible sense of direction, she is apt to get lost in this city.*
- *Liable* has a negative connotation. *If you cheat, you are liable to get caught.* It is also used in legal matters to express obligation or responsibility. *You are liable for any damage to the rental car.*
- *Likely* expresses likelihood or probability and has a neutral connotation. *Sheila is likely to get promoted this quarter.*

3. assure, ensure, insure:

- To *assure* means to make an individual feel confident about something. *I assure you that this situation will not get out of hand.*
- To *ensure* means to secure something beyond a doubt. *Parents must ensure their children's safety.*
- To *insure* is related to protecting one's money or belongings. *We insured ourselves against automotive damage.*

4. awhile, a while:

- Only use *awhile* (one word) if it does not follow a preposition such as *for*, *in*, or *after*. *It has been awhile since I last saw you.*
- After a preposition, always use *a while* (two words). *Why don't you stop by and chat for a while? (A *while* comes after the preposition *for*.)*

5. between, among:

- Use *between* for exactly two items. *We raised a total of \$1,500 between our two teams.*

- Use *among* for three or more items. *The study examines the differences among three species of fish.*

6. breathe, breath:

- To *breathe* is to perform the action of inhaling and exhaling. It is a verb. *If you start to panic, remember to breathe.*
- *Breath* is what is actually exhaled. It is a noun. *It's so cold today that I can see my breath.*

7. continual, continuous:

- An action or event is *continual* if it happens again and again. *I am tired of Danny's continual late-night phone calls.* (Danny calls every night.)
- An action or event is *continuous* if it occurs without interruption. *I had the longest continuous conversation with Danny last night.* (The conversation lasted three hours without an interruption.)

8. could of, should of, would of, might of:

- These are incorrect forms of verb phrases that normally consist of a verb and a helping verb. The word *of* is incorrect because it is a preposition, not a helping verb. The correct forms of these verb phrases are *could have*, *should have*, *would have*, and *might have*. Written as contractions, they are *could've*, *should've*, *would've*, and *might've*.
- Incorrect: *could* (verb) + *of* (preposition)
Correct: *could* (verb) + *have* (helping verb)
- Incorrect: *If I could of gone, I would of.*
Correct: *If I could have gone, I would have.*

9. enormity, enormousness:

- *Enormity* is the severity—the “figurative size”—of a situation or phenomenon. *We have yet to understand the enormity of this discovery.*
- *Enormousness* is the literal size of an object. *Few people can fathom the enormousness of the ocean.*

10. everyday, every day:

- *Everyday* is an adjective that expresses the perception or occurrence of something on a daily or regular basis. Make sure to use this word to describe nouns. *We have grown accustomed to having bland, everyday conversation over bland, everyday meals.*
- *Every day* is an adverbial phrase meaning “each day.” Use this phrase to describe how often an activity or action is done. *I water the houseplants every day.*

11. farther, further:

- Use *farther* in cases of measurable distance through space. *We had to take a break because my sister couldn't walk any farther. Your house is much farther than I expected.*
- Use *further* in cases of abstract concepts or phenomena. *I don't want to upset you further, so I'm just going to step out before I say something I'll regret.*

12. someday, some day:

- *Someday* is an unclear, unknown day in the future; the event to which it refers may not end up occurring. *Someday, I'll get a place of my own and take care of lots of orphaned animals.*
- *Some day* is a single not-yet-decided day in the future. *Let's go out for coffee some day next week.*

Activity 1

Correct the word choice errors in the following sentences. Some sentences have multiple errors.

1. Some day, sharks will be able to breath out of water.
2. Felicia is a warm, caring person who is liable to brighten your day.
3. We could of gotten to the store in the time we spent arguing!
4. That alarm hasn't stopped ringing all day long; I can't stand that continual racket!
5. Today we ran further than we ever have before.
6. Pet owners want to insure that their companions receive the best care possible.
7. You can't imagine the amount of complaint letters we receive everyday.
8. Between the three of us, I am the rational one.
9. Go ahead and watch the movie without me; I'll be stuck at work for awhile.
10. Imagine the enormousness of an affair between an influential politician and an everyday housekeeper.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Someday, sharks will be able to breathe out of water.
2. Felicia is a warm, caring person who is apt (or likely) to brighten your day.
3. We could have gotten to the store in the time we spent arguing!
4. That alarm hasn't stopped ringing all day long; I can't stand that continuous racket!
5. Today we ran farther than we ever have before.
6. Pet owners want to ensure that their companions receive the best care possible.
7. You can't imagine the number of complaint letters we receive every day.
8. Among the three of us, I am the rational one.
9. Go ahead and watch the movie without me; I'll be stuck at work for a while.
10. Imagine the enormity of an affair between an influential politician and an everyday housekeeper.

References

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The Everyday Writer*. 4th Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010. Print.