Homonym Tip Sheet

A **homonym** is a word that shares the same pronunciation and/or spelling of another or multiple other words. Homonyms come in two forms: homographs and homophones.

**Homographs** are words that are spelled, but not necessarily pronounced, in the same way. Some examples:

- Desert - either a noun meaning a hot, arid region OR a verb meaning “to leave.”
- Produce - either a verb meaning “to create” OR a noun referring to fruits and vegetables.
- Minute - either a noun indicating a period of 60 seconds OR an adjective applied to something small in terms of size, significance, or degree.

**Homophones** are words that are pronounced, but not necessarily spelled, in the same way. Some examples:

- Their/They’re/There
  - *Their* is a possessive pronoun indicating something that belongs to “them.”
  - *They’re* is a contraction of “they are” (e.g. “they’re happy” = “they are happy”).
  - *There* is an adverb indicating a place opposite of “here.”
- Weather/Whether
  - *Weather* is a noun describing temperature, clouds, wind, and so on.
  - *Whether* is a conjunction used to introduce the first of two alternatives (with “or” typically being used to introduce the second of the two).
- Yore/Your/You’re
  - *Yore* is an uncommon noun referring to time past.
  - *Your* is a possessive pronoun indicating something belonging to “you.”
  - *You’re* is a contraction of “you are” (e.g. “you’re tired” = “you are tired”).
- Its/It’s
  - *Its* is a possessive pronoun indicating something that belongs to “it.”
  - *It’s* is a contraction of “it is” (e.g. “it’s going to be fun!” = “it is going to be fun!”).

Since they are easier to confuse, issues concerning homophones present themselves more often in writing. Addressing these problems in terms of checking spelling won’t work, as an improperly used word can still be spelled correctly. Looking to pronunciation as a guide won’t help either, as the words sound the same, thus making it difficult to distinguish the right word from its homophones.

The main way to keep homophones in mind is to simply memorize the words giving you trouble. First, look up a list of homophones; this handout lists some of the most common ones, but there exist many comprehensive lists. Try to memorize the distinctions between homophones you commonly confuse, and associate each word’s meaning with its spelling. Also take note of the suggestions on your word processor’s grammar check, as many can now detect when a homonym has been used incorrectly.