

Rogue grammar - the dirty dozen

Twelve little things that make a big difference

Affect / Effect

Simply, 'affect' means 'to influence' (generally a verb) while 'effect' means 'as a result of' (noun). **"The catnip affected the cat. The effect was hilarious."**

May / Might

'May' and 'might' are generally interchangeable, but 'may' implies the possibility of something happening remains open while 'might' suggests this possibility is no longer open or is improbable. **"The cat may come in. It might even sing and dance."** Also use 'may' instead of 'can' when asking for permission – **"May I feed the cat?"**

Like / As if

Use 'like' as a preposition when talking about a specific thing – **"It looks like a cat."** Here you could replace 'like' with 'similar to'. 'As if' should be used as a conjunction to join two ideas together – **"It looks as if the cat wants to come in."** Here you cannot replace 'as if' with 'similar to'.

That / Which

'That' introduces essential clauses – **"The cat that you like is in the window"**, while 'which' introduces non-essential clauses – **"The cat, which is in the window, is the one you like."** Note that 'which' has commas all around it while 'that' does not.

Among / Between

Use 'between' when talking about two or more distinct items – **"The food was shared equally between the tabby, tortoiseshell and moggy."** 'Among' should be used when the choice isn't distinct – **"The food was shared equally among all three cats."**

Fewer / Less

When talking about a number, use 'fewer' – **"I bought fewer than ten tins of cat food"**, but when talking about a quantity, use 'less' – **"The cat food cost me less than £10."**

Dependant / Dependent

A 'dependant' (noun) relies on something or someone, which makes them 'dependent' (adjective). **"The cat is my dependant. She is dependent on me."**

Into / In to

'Into' is a preposition generally used when answering the question, "where?" – **"The cat came into the house."** 'In' and 'to' have no relationship but just find themselves placed together – **"The cat came in to eat its food."** Say it out loud and you won't get it wrong.

Compare to / with

If you are likening something to something specific, use 'compare to'. Use 'compare with' to show comparison. **"I sometimes compare my cat to a Bengal tiger but I wouldn't compare her with any other big cat."**

As / Since

'As' and 'since' are interchangeable but the former is seen as less formal than the latter (which is temporal). **"I cannot stroke the cat as it is out. I have stroked the cat a lot since I bought it."**

Compliment / Complement

A 'compliment' is praise – **"I complimented the cat on its excellent mouse kill."** 'Complement' shows completeness – **"My two cats complement each other perfectly. I now have a full complement of felines."**

Stationary / Stationery

If you are 'stationary' you are not moving. If you are 'stationery' you are a pencil. **"I wanted to do a crossword but the cat was lying stationary on my stationery."**