

FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same but have different meanings and usually different spellings, such as write and right, or their, there and they're. They matter most in writing and in IELTS Listening, where spelling counts, and a wrong choice changes the meaning.

What to know

What are homophones?

The word homophone comes from Greek and means 'same sound'. Homophones are words with the same pronunciation but a different meaning and, usually, a different spelling. You hear them as one sound, but you must choose the right one when you write.

- *write · right*
- *hear · here*
- *sea · see*

Homophones to know

These sets appear very often in everyday writing and in IELTS topics. Learn each word with a short example.

- their (belonging to them), there (a place), they're (they are)
- to (direction), too (also or very), two (the number 2)
- write (to put words on a page), right (correct, or the opposite of left)
- hear (to listen with your ears), here (in this place)
- knew (past of know), new (not old)

Why they cause mistakes

In speaking, homophones are not a problem. You say the word the same way whichever spelling is used, and the sentence tells your listener which word you mean. The problem is in writing, where your brain finds the sound first and then guesses the spelling.

Homophones depend on accent

Words are homophones only in a particular accent. In standard British English, which does not pronounce r after a vowel, some words that look different sound the same: caught and court, father and farther, saw and sore, and lord and laud. In an accent that does pronounce the r, these are different words.

More pairs that cause mistakes

Some pairs are not exact homophones but cause the same kind of mistake. Affect and effect, for example, are said /ə'fekt/ and /ɪ'fekt/, and the weak first vowel can sound alike in fast speech. Other pairs are exact homophones with very different meanings. Principal and principle are both /'prɪnsəpl/: the main person at a school, or a basic rule or reason. Stationary (not moving) and stationery (pens, envelopes and notebooks) are also said the same way.

Exercises

1. I can't _____ you because the music is too loud.
 - a. hear
 - b. here
2. _____ going to visit us next month.
 - a. They're
 - b. Their
 - c. There
3. Which word sounds exactly like *whole*?
 - a. while
 - b. hole
 - c. wall
4. We stayed at a small hotel by the _____.
 - a. see
 - b. sea
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) I think (2) there house (3) is very old.
6. Write the word that sounds like *right* and means to put words on a page.
7. Which pair are homophones in British English?
 - a. father and farther
 - b. bat and bad
 - c. cat and cart
8. She has a _____ of new shoes.
 - a. pear
 - b. pair
9. Which word sounds exactly like *knew*?
 - a. known
 - b. now
 - c. new
10. The _____ is shining brightly today.
 - a. sun
 - b. son

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/homophones/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Listening test, a wrong spelling in your answer is marked wrong, even when you heard the word correctly, so check homophones such as their and there. In the Writing test, a wrong homophone can make your sentence mean something different. Read your essay once at the end, looking only for these pairs.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Homophones

AIM	Learners will recognise common homophones, choose the correct spelling in context, and know why accent changes which words are homophones.
TIME	25 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Say 'I can hear it' and 'I'm here' aloud and ask learners what is the same and what is different.

Lesson steps

1. Present three or four sets of common homophones with a sentence each. Learners say each word and note the spelling.
2. Gap-fill: give sentences with a choice of two homophones and ask learners to choose.
3. Dictation: dictate five sentences with homophones. Learners write and then check in pairs.
4. Accent discussion: show that father and farther sound the same in British English but not in all accents.

Extension

Learners find their own list of five homophone pairs that they often confuse and write a sentence for each.

Answer key

1. a) hear. Hear is the verb for listening with your ears. Here means in this place.
2. a) They're. They're means they are. Their shows belonging, and there shows a place.
3. b) hole. Whole and hole are both /həʊl/. Wall and while have different vowels.
4. b) sea. Sea is the large body of salt water. See is a verb meaning to look.
5. Part 2: *there house* → **their house**. Their shows that the house belongs to them. There is a place, and they're means they are.
6. write. Write /raɪt/ is the verb for putting words on a page. Right is correct, or the opposite of left.
7. a) father and farther. In British English the r is silent after a vowel, so father and farther are both /'fɑːðə/.
8. b) pair. A pair is two things together. A pear is a fruit.
9. c) new. Knew and new are both /njuː/, and the k in knew is silent. Now has a different vowel, and known ends with n.

10. a) sun. Sun is the star in the sky. Son is a male child. They sound the same.

Questions learners often ask

What is a homophone? A homophone is a word that sounds the same as another word but has a different meaning, and usually a different spelling, such as write and right.

What is the difference between homophones and homographs? Homophones sound the same but may be spelled differently. Homographs are spelled the same but may be said differently, like lead the metal and lead to guide.

Do homophones matter in IELTS? They matter in Writing and Listening, where spelling counts. A wrong homophone can change your meaning or lose a mark in an answer.

How can I remember which homophone to use? Link each word to a clue, such as ear in hear. Write a short example sentence for each word in the pair, and check your essay for the pairs that you often confuse.

Sources

- Roach, P., Setter, J., & Esling, J. (Eds.). (2011). Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary (18th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.

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