



Affect or Effect

The **affect/effect** distinction poses a challenge for many writers. Because these words are commonly used, it is worth investing a little time to learn the distinction between them. This handout will cover the meaning and difference between **affect** and **effect** and outline some grammar guidelines to help you learn how to correctly use **affect** and **effect** in sentences.

Guidelines will be accompanied by examples. You will also be able to test your understanding of the **affect/effect** distinction with a challenge exercise.

Effect

The definition of **effect** (NOUN) is as follows: “An **effect** is a change that is caused in a person or thing by another person or thing” (Collins Cobuild Dictionary, 1990, p. 451).

In other words, an **effect** is a noun used to denote a consequence, an outcome, a result, or an influence.

Here are some guidelines for using **effect** in a sentence. Each guideline will have one or more associated examples.

Grammar guideline 1

Write **effect** (not **affect**) if you could use another noun, such as **consequence** or **outcome**, in place of effect, without changing the meaning of the sentence. In the following example, the sentence has the same meaning when effect is replaced by outcome.

Example:

Sentence 1: The interventions had many positive **effects**.

Sentence 2: The interventions had many positive **outcomes**.

Grammar guideline 2

Write **effect** (not **affect**) before or after articles and prepositions such as **an**, **the**, **of**, and **on**. These articles and prepositions indicate that a noun form is needed. The following example demonstrates the use of effect in sentences containing articles and prepositions.

Example:

The policy had **an** unexpected **effect** on enrolment.

Affect

The definition of **affect** (VERB) is as follows: “If something affects someone or something else, it influences them or causes them to change in some way” (Collins Cobuild Dictionary, 1990, p. 24). In other words, **affect** is a verb used to indicate an action that has a consequence on someone or something.

Here are some guidelines for using **affect** in a sentence. Each guideline will have one or more associated example.

Grammar guideline 1

Write **affect** (not effect) if you could use another verb, such as **alter** or **influence**, in place of **affect**, without changing the meaning of the sentence. In the following example, the sentence has the same meaning when affect is replaced by **influence**.

Example:

Sentence 1: The new Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy legislation will **affect** many aspects of our work.

Sentence 2: The new Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy legislation will **influence** many aspects of our work.

Grammar guideline 2

In most instances one would expect to use **affect** when using the suffixes **-ed** or **-ing**, or when using a modal like **should**, **might**, **can**, or **will**. These forms indicate that a verb form is needed. (Note: there are instances where effect can be used with the suffixes **-ed** or **-ing**, but these are less commonly encountered.) In the following examples, sentence 1 shows the use of affect with the modal “can” and sentence 2 shows the use of affect with the “-ed” suffix.

Examples:

Sentence 1: He studies how violence in movies can **affect** children’s behaviours.

Sentence 2: His remarks deeply **affected** me.

Challenge exercise

In the following paragraph, you will encounter several instances where you will find **[affect/effect]** within a sentence. In each instance where you encounter **[affect/effect]** in the passage, decide whether **affect** or **effect** is the correct choice for the sentence. The key to the challenge exercise can be found at the end of the handout.

Challenge paragraph:

Many factors **[affect/effect]** readability, that is, the ease with which a piece of writing can be read. For example, the distance between the subject of the sentence and the verb can have an **[affect/effect]** on readability, as can sentence and word length. Even the layout of a document

[affects/effects] how easily it can be read. Can you suggest other factors that might influence the [affect/effect] of readability in a document?

Less common uses of affect and effect

There are rarer uses of affect and effect that you may encounter from time to time. Here are two less common usages, with examples.

Less common usage 1

Effect as a verb: **Effect** can be used as a verb meaning to implement or put into place

Example: The new government wanted to **effect** rapid changes.

Less common usage 2

Affect as a noun: **Affect** can be used as a noun meaning a person's emotional presentation. This use as a noun is common in psychology.

Example: She had a cheerful **affect**.

Challenge exercise key

How did you do on the challenge exercise? The paragraph below indicates the correct word choices for the challenge exercise paragraph.

Challenge paragraph key:

Many factors **affect** readability, that is, the ease with which a piece of writing can be read. For example, the distance between the subject of the sentence and the verb can have an **effect** on readability, as can sentence and word length. Even the layout of a document **affects** how easily it can be read. Can you suggest other factors that might influence the **effect** of readability in a document?