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?