

Affect or Effect: Overview

The affect/effect distinction poses a challenge for many writers. Because these words are used commonly, it is worth investing a little time in learning this distinction.

Effect

(NOUN): “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 consequence, an outcome, a result, or an influence.

Hint 1: Write “**effect**” (not “**affect**”) if you could use “**consequence**” or “**outcome**” in the sentence. Note that “**effect**” and its synonyms—consequence, outcome, and result—contain the letter “e” but no “a.”

Example 1

The interventions had many positive **effects** (or outcomes).

Hint 2: Write “**effect**” (not “**affect**”) after “**an**” and “**the**” or before “**of**” and “**on**.” These articles and prepositions indicate that a noun form is needed.
e.g., *The policy had an unexpected effect on enrolment.*
His research focuses on the effects of advertising on children.

Example 2

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

Example 3

His **research** focuses on the **effects of** advertising on children.

Affect

(VERB): “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, someone or something is affected by an action.

Hint 1: Write “**affect**” if the meaning is close to “**act on**”; note the “**a**” that begins both words.

Hint 2: Use “**affect**” when using the suffixes “**-ed**” or “**-ing**”. Use “**affect**” when using a modal like “**should**,” “**might**,” “**can**,” or “**will**.” These forms indicate that a verb form is needed.

Example 4

The new Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy legislation will **affect** (or act on) many aspects of our work.

Example 5

He is studying how violence on television **affects** children’s behaviours.

Example 6

His remarks deeply **affected** me.

Challenge: Insert the correct form: **effect** or **affect**

Many factors _____ readability, 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 _____ on readability, as can sentence and word length. Even the layout of a document _____ how easily it can be read. Can you suggest other factors that might _____ readability?

Less Common Uses of Affect and Effect

Effect as a verb = to implement or put into place (e.g., *The new government **effected** rapid changes*).

Affect as a noun = a person's emotional presentation (e.g., *She had a depressed **affect***). This use as a noun is common in psychology.