



Tips for Remembering Homonyms

created by Barbara Toth for the BGSU Writers Lab

Knowing when to use such words as then/than, too/to/two, and there/they're/their can be tricky. A memory device, which distinguishes the meanings of these words, is a valuable tool. Here are some memory devices that you can use or that can give you ideas for creating your own!

1. then/than

a. Try connecting "then," which refers to a certain time, with "when." "Then" refers to time, so does "when." Notice that "then" and "when" are spelled the same except for the first letter. So remember—

Question: When?



Answer: Then.

Example: *Shenikwa will go to school then.*

b. Because "than" is used in comparisons, try connecting the "a" in "than" with the "a" in "compare."

Example: *The red hat is prettier than the purple one.*

2. too/two/to

a. "Too" means "also." In this case, try connecting the extra "o" in "too" with the "o" in "also."

Aisha will go to the Eminem concert too (i.e., also)

"Too" also means excessively. Try connecting the extra "o" in "too" with excess. For example, if a homework assignment is excessively long, it is "too" long.

b. Most writers easily connect "two" with the number "2." But if you have trouble, try making a rhyme to help you remember:

Three letters has the number 2.

The middle one is a "W."

The rhyme may seem silly, but remembering the correct spelling is smart!

c. By process of elimination, use "to" when you don't mean excess or the number "two." Keep in mind that "to" is often followed by a verb (present tense) as in "to go," "to see," "to be," etc.

"To" is also followed by a noun as in such phrases as "to school," "to the store," or "to town."

3. there/they're/their

a. Try connecting "there," which refers to location with "where." "There" refers to location or a particular space, so does "where." Both words are spelled the same except for the first letter.

Remember—

Question: Where?



Answer: There.

b. They're = they are. In the contraction "they're," the apostrophe signals the missing "a" in "are." Try connecting the apostrophe in "they're" with the missing letter "a."

Example: *They're (they are) going to see a movie tomorrow.*

c. By process of elimination, you will then know when to use "their." But you can also connect the word "heir" in "their": an heir implies ownership and "their" indicates ownership as well.

Example: *Their inheritance included not only crown jewels but also a tendency toward humor.*

4. it's/its

a. It's = it is. In the contraction "it's," the apostrophe signals the missing "i" in "it's." Remember to connect the missing apostrophe in "it's" with the missing letter "i."

Test: *A remarkable feature of Pablo Neruda's poetry is it's (it is) surreal imagery.*

Correction: *A remarkable feature of Pablo Neruda's poetry is its surreal imagery.*

b. "Its" indicates possession. By process of elimination, you will know when to use it. Can you think of another way to differentiate between "it's" and "its"?