Tricks to Remember Homonym Spellings

Here are some mnemonic (that is, memory) tricks to help you remember the correct spellings of homonyms (words that sound alike but have different meanings and spellings) and words that are almost homonyms.

The trick, in most cases, is to think about the spelling of only part of the word and what that means. It’s just a way to remember – a way, as in highway, the way you get there. Weigh, as in measuring weight, has all those heavy extra letters at the end that drag its spelling down (think about the dragging “g” in weigh).

Sometimes, the best way to remember is by how a word is not spelled. It’s like the old trick to remember the names of stalactites and stalagmites in caves. They sound so much alike! How do you remember which is which?

Well, a stalactite is formed by dissolved minerals dripping down from the roof of a cave and creating a rocky, icicle-like formation that sticks “tight” to the roof. Even though tite and “tight” are spelled differently, they still give you a memory trick to remember the word for the hanging formations.

Now you also know which formations are stalagmites, the rocky spears that stick up from the cave floor where stalactites have dripped minerals down to them. You can remember their names because they’re the formations which are not stalactites, by process of elimination. (Also, you might remember them because you might trip over them.)

First, though, consider these “words within words” memory tricks:

There = PLACE (contains here, a place or STATE OF EXISTENCE)
She went there or There are 100 senators in Congress or We saw it here and there
They’re = CONTRACTION they are
Their = POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE belonging to them (contains heir, as in the possessor of an inheritance): It was their choice
Theirs = POSSESSIVE PRONOUN belonging to them: The choice was theirs
Rule: Pronouns that become possessive with an “s” don’t get an apostrophe
Funny memory trick for theirs = the IRS (Internal Revenue Service)
We thought our money belonged to us, but actually, the IRS agents thought it was theirs

Your = POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE, contains our (belonging to us)
Yours = POSSESSIVE PRONOUN, contains ours and no apostrophe
You’re = CONTRACTION you are

Its = POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE, no apostrophe, as in theirs, yours, ours, his, hers, theirs
It’s = CONTRACTION for it is
It’s clear that every bird has its nest and every fox has its den
Memory trick rule: Contractions always use an apostrophe. Possessive adjectives never use an apostrophe
Where = PLACE (contains here, a place) Where are you going?
Were = ONE PAST TENSE FORM of to be: We were going to pick up a pizza
We’re = CONTRACTION for we are: We’re going to pick up a pizza right now.

Here = PLACE (contains here, a place)
Hear = LISTEN with your ears

Affect = VERB to influence; verbs are action words, and action starts with “a,” just like affect
Effect = NOUN the result; think of the common “e” sound in effect and result

Accept = allow (memory trick: acc has an “a” plus two consonants; so does all)
Except = leave out, not include (ex it out)

To = CONNECTOR WORD short, with only one “o,” like a connecting pipe, wire, board, or brace is usually short
Too = means “also” – LONGER with two “o’s” – in other words, one “o” and also one more
Two = the number 2; the “w” is silent but it can be heard in such two-related words as “twice” and “twins,” so remember you need a “w” in the silent number word that gives those other words their “tw” family roots

Then = introduces next item in sequence, rhymes with when, a pronoun that also deals with time
Than = comparative word: “less than,” “more than,” analogy, analogous, various “is like” words

Definite = for certain or right, rhymes with night
Defiant = rebellious, “I won’t!”

Conscious = aware
Conscience = sense of right vs. wrong; plus it has the word “science” in it

Idea = thought, concept
Ideal = ADJECTIVE best possible; NOUN positive moral concept or value (has “L” sound)