Easily Confused Words: Mnemonic Homonyms

A mnemonic is a memorization tool such as a short phrase or image. For instance, when music students memorize the phrase "Every Good Boy Does Fine," the phrase helps them remember the order of letters E G B D F on the musical scale. Another phrase, "Oh Be a Fine Girl/Guy, Kiss Me Right Now" helps astronomers remember the sequence of stars, from type O, to type B, to type F, and so on. The phrase, "It is Classy to have Order in your Family, says G. S." helps biologists and taxonomists remember that biological class is the larger category into which biological classes, orders, families, genus, and species fit respectively. Visually oriented images may help other students memorize facts. For instance, when I want to remember the geography of southern England, I imagine the image of my cousin Wight lying down with a laundry hamper on his back, and a shotgun inside the hamper. That reminds me that the Isle of Wight is farthest south, with the county of Hampshire [hamper] above that, and the city of Winchester [the shotgun] inside Hampshire. Other students prefer rhymes. Pick whatever mnemonic works for you--whatever it may be.

Mnemonics are often useful for grammarians and students. Though exceptions abound to the rule, some students find it useful to remember "I before E except after C, except when pronounced 'ay' as in neighbor and weigh."

Similar words that are spelled differently (homonyms or homophones) can be tricky. Making mnemonics can help students remember the difference. Here are some of the most commonly confused words and phrases. If you can't distinguish between them, you need to look them up in the dictionary or a grammar guidebook and then invent a mnemonic to learn the difference. Homonyms are particularly dangerous on computers since spell-checkers will not spot them.

affect / effect
accept / except
advise / advise
already / all ready
altogether / all together
elude / allude
illusion / allusion
immoral / amoral
anyone / any one
a while / awhile
backup / back up
capital / capital
ensor / sensor
cite / site / sight
complement / compliment
conscious / conscience
counsel / council
( and counselor / counsel)
desert / dessert
discourage / dissuade
dislike / dislike
delict / illicit
forth / forth
hear / here
its / it's
may be / maybe
past / passed
principal / principle
stationary / stationery
there / their / they're

vain / vein / vane
to / too / two
whether / weather
who's / whose

Other words, while not homonyms, are also frequently confused, misspelled, or misused:

emigrate / immigrate
eminent / imminent
ever / envelop
eventually / ultimately
explicit / implicit
hanged / hung
ingenious / ingenuous
regardless / irregardless
(smaller words don't take comparatives)
parameters / guidelines
phenomenon / phenomena
plus / moreover
quote / quotation
relation / relationships
shall / will
since / because
try to / try and
who / whose
who / whom
who / that