

Affect vs. Effect

Affect and *effect* are frequently confused in academic writing. Most of the time, the difference is fairly easy to detect: *affect* functions as a verb and *effect* functions as a noun.

Remember: Verbs carry action or transform. Nouns are objective; they are actors or placeholders in the sentence. They do not “act”; they just “are.”

However, there is an exception to this rule (e.g. *affect*=verb and *effect*=noun). In the worksheet below, you will practice “tips” for addressing the rule and the key exception.

Affect as a Verb

In its most common form, *affect* functions as a verb and means “to change” or “to influence.”

- **Affected** by climate change and deforestation, the declining salamander population worries researchers.
- In the last 100 years, the leading causes of death in the United States have shifted from infectious diseases to chronic diseases, a trend which **affects** average life expectancy since young people are particularly susceptible to infectious disease.

Effect as a Noun

Effect frequently functions as a noun. In noun form, *effect* means “result” or “consequence.”

- Salamanders are not the only amphibians experiencing population decline; scientists note that the fungal disease chytridiomycosis has had a devastating **effect** on many amphibian species’ populations.
- Epidemiologists worry about **the** dangerous **effects** of antibiotic-resistant bacterial pathogens.

Effect as a Verb (the exceptional case)

Occasionally, *effect* is used as a verb. In verb form, *effect* means “to bring about” or “to accomplish.”

- Throughout their lives, food animals are fed small amounts of antibiotics **to effect** faster growth.
- Some researchers believe that the FDA must enact stricter regulations on antibiotic use in food animals in order **to effect** positive change and prevent the proliferation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Affect as a Noun (the exceptional case)

Yes, *affect* can be a noun, too. *Affect* frequently used as a noun in psychology; thus applied, the word means (roughly) “the mood that someone appears to have.”¹

- **The** patient’s cheerful **affect** betrayed his inner anguish.

Metacognitive Strategies

The “To Be” Test

An easy way to determine whether *effect* is functioning as a verb or as a noun is to look for the infinitive or the “to be” form of a verb. A bare verb is a verb in its simplest form: the same form that you find when you look up verbs in the dictionary (“run,” “whistle,” “mumble”). The infinitive form of a verb is its bare form with “to” preceding it: “to run,” “to whistle,” “to mumble.” When *effect* functions as a verb, it commonly appears in the infinitive. Therefore, if your sentence contains “to effect,” *effect* is functioning as a verb.

¹ Fogarty, Mignon, *Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008. p. 11.

Example:

Ornithologists hope that this year's strange snowy owl migration will raise awareness about all birds' migratory habits and motivate people **to** _____ positive changes that will ultimately lead to more peaceful cohabitation with migrating fowl.

1. Is the word a verb or a noun?
2. "To" precedes "effect," so I realize that I am looking at an infinitive verb form.
3. I now know that *effect* is the right choice because "to" precedes it.

The "A, An, The" Test

To determine whether to use ***affect* (in verb form)** or ***effect* (in noun form)**, imagine inserting an article (a, an, the) before the word in question. Does the sentence still make sense? If so, the sentence's grammatical construction requires a noun, and therefore, *effect* is probably the correct choice. Remember that sometimes adjectives and adverbs fall before the noun and in between the article and the noun.

Example:

Experts disagree about **the** _____ that the snowy owl's unusual migratory pattern is having on the species.

1. I look at the first blank and notice that the mystery word has an article (the) in front of it.
2. I conclude that, because an article modifies it, the mystery word must be a noun.
3. I know that *effect* usually functions as a noun, and I think that its rough definition ("result," "consequence") would make sense when used in this context.
4. I now know that *effect* is the best word for the first blank.

Exercises

1. This winter, bird-watchers across the United States have been delighted to spot an unusually large number of snowy owls – birds that live in the arctic but migrate south during the winter - soaring through the air or perching on trees. Snowy owls' striking white colouring and intense yellow eyes have a memorable _____ on people.

2. Snowy owls have caused some disruptions; for example, Hawaiian airport officials – aware of the dangerous ways in which birds can _____ air traffic – shot and killed the first snowy owl ever to appear in Hawaii, because it threatened airport safety.

3. While data suggests that a few thousand snowy owls flew south this winter, researchers are unsure whether or not this larger-than-usual number has an _____ on the overall snowy owl population, which has been slowly decreasing for the past 60 years.

4. The birds' presence _____ experienced and amateur bird-watchers alike, as both groups flocked to see five snowy owls that migrated to Kansas City, MO; savvy snowy owl experts note that the birds' fame could be an _____ of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which features Hedwig, a snowy owl and companion to fictional wizard Harry Potter.

5. **Does *effect* function as a noun or as a verb in the following sentence?** Although bird sanctuaries confirm that the northern United States is seeing a greater number of migrating snowy owls than usual, snowy owls might have a larger-than-normal **effect** on amateur spectators since the owls are diurnal, active during the day.

6. **Does *effect* function as a noun or as a verb in the following sentence?** If researchers discovered that snowy owls were being treated badly in their new territory, they might suggest that people call their congresspersons and ask them **to effect** legislation that protects migrating birds.

Answer Key

1. This winter, bird-watchers across the United States have been delighted to spot an unusually large number of snowy owls – birds that live in the arctic but migrate south during the winter - soaring through the air or perching on trees. Snowy owls' striking white colouring and intense yellow eyes have a memorable **effect** on people.

Using the “A, An, The” Test, locate the “a” before “memorable.” Because “memorable” is an adjective, we take it out of the sentence and notice that the “a” precedes the mystery word. Therefore, the word must be a noun, and we can conclude that the correct word is *effect*.

2. Snowy owls have caused some disruptions; for example, Hawaiian airport officials – aware of the dangerous ways in which birds can _____ air traffic – shot and killed the first snowy owl ever to appear in Hawaii, because it threatened airport safety.

Using the “A, An, The” Test, we insert “a” before the mystery word. The phrase becomes “birds can a _____ air traffic.” This does not make sense. Therefore, the mystery word cannot be a noun and must be a verb. We know that *affect* usually appears as a verb, and *affect*'s definition (“to influence”) fits nicely into this context, so we can conclude that the correct word is *affect*.

3. While data suggests that a few thousand snowy owls flew south this winter, researchers are unsure whether this larger-than-usual number has an _____ on the overall snowy owl population, which has been slowly decreasing for the past 60 years.

Using the “A, An, The” Test, locate the “an” before the mystery word. We know that “an” comes in front of a noun, which means that the mystery word is a noun. Because *effect* is usually used as a noun and its definition (“consequence” or “result”) matches this context, we conclude that *effect* belongs in the sentence.

4. The birds' presence _____ed experienced and amateur bird-watchers alike, as both groups flocked to see five snowy owls that migrated to Kansas City, MO; savvy snowy owl experts note that the birds' fame could be an _____ of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which features Hedwig, a snowy owl and companion to fictional wizard Harry Potter.

First Blank: Using the “A, An, The” Test, insert “a” after “presence” and before the mystery word. The phrase becomes “birds' presence a _____ experienced and amateur bird-watchers alike.” This does not make sense. Therefore, the mystery word cannot be a noun and must be a verb. *Affect* most frequently functions as a verb, and its definition (“to influence”) fits in this context.

Second Blank: Using the “A, An, The” Test, we see that “an” precedes the mystery word. We know that “an” comes before nouns, so we can conclude that the mystery word is a noun. *Effect* most commonly functions as a noun, and it is the appropriate word for this sentence.

5. **Does *effect* function as a noun or as a verb in the following sentence?** Although bird sanctuaries confirm that the northern United States is seeing a greater number of migrating snowy owls than usual, snowy owls might have a larger-than-normal **effect** on amateur spectators since the owls are diurnal, active during the day.

Using the “To Be” Test, look to see whether *effect* appears in the infinitive. The words that precede *effect* are “a larger-than-normal.” Not only does “to” not fall before *effect*, but an

article (“a”) occurs before the word. Therefore, *effect* is not in the infinitive and does not function as a verb. We assume that *effect* functions as a noun here, and we are correct since *effect* is preceded by an article.

6. Does *effect* function as a noun or as a verb in the following sentence? If researchers discovered that snowy owls were being treated badly in their new territory, they might suggest that people call their congresspersons and ask them to **effect** legislation that protects migrating birds.

We use the “To Be” Test and look to see if *effect* appears in the infinitive. The word that precedes *effect* is “to.” We have located the infinitive form of *effect*: “to effect.” Therefore, we know that *effect* functions as a verb in this sentence.