

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences
9.68 -- Spring 2013

affect/effect

No wonder people are confused. There are four distinct words here.

One problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second.

When "affect" is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is a verb meaning "have an influence on": "The million-dollar donation from the coal company did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act."

When you *affect* a situation, in the foregoing sense, you are having *effect(s)* on it.

In 9.68, our much more specialized – and rarer -- main meaning of *affect* is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect). In this case the word is used to denote a realm of mental activity in which things and events and states of affairs take on some "evaluative" or "emotional" or "motivational" or "feeling" or "value-laden" aspects. Considered in this way "affect" (along with *cognition* and *behavior*) is a basic aspect of what is commonly called "*human nature*".

"Effect" too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun denoting something that is or has been "caused to happen": "The *effect* of leaving the stove on with the flue closed was that the house filled with smoke."

The less common is a verb meaning "to initiate or create": "We're trying to *effect* a change in the way you think about these two sets of terms and concepts ."

Note especially that the proper expression is not "the new regulations will take affect" but "...take effect"— meaning "to go into effect; become effective; The *effect* of the new regulations will be to *affect* our behavior."

Who ever said that proper English usage is simple, logical and straightforward?

Simply memorize the foregoing distinctions and let's all get on with our "inquiry into values."

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

9.68 Affect: Neurobiological, Psychological and Sociocultural Counterparts of "Feelings"
Spring 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.