

Confusing Verbs in English

Close / Shut

You can use both close and shut with doors and windows:

- Please close the door.
- Please shut the door.
- I shut the window because the bugs were getting in.
- I closed the window because the bugs were getting in.

With eyes and mouths, “close” is probably a little more common than “shut” (especially with mouth):

- She closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep.
- The dentist asked me to close my mouth.

“Shut your mouth!” is a VERY rude way to tell somebody to stop talking.

If you say somebody “closed his/her eyes to something,” it means they ignored something wrong or bad and pretended they were not aware of it.

- She closed her eyes to the problems in their relationship, and now she’s in a miserable marriage.

When talking about a store, bank, post office, etc. stopping its operations for the day – or a road that is blocked because of construction or damage – we use only close:

- The bank closes at 4 PM.
- What time does the post office close?
- The road is closed because of the snowstorm.

Start / Begin

You can use both start and begin for an activity:

- I started playing the piano when I was 8 years old.
- What time does the meeting start?
- He’s beginning to read more advanced books in English.
- We left the park when it began to rain.

When you turn on a car or vehicle, use “start”:

- I had to call a mechanic because my car wouldn’t start.

In general, begin is used for more formal and more abstract ideas:

- Scientists are studying how life on earth began.
- World War II began in 1939.

End / Finish

When something ends, it means it stops:

- My English class ends at 7:30.
- I ended my last relationship because I felt we had nothing in common.

When something finishes, it means it is completed:

- She finished the test and gave it to the teacher.
- We need to finish painting the house.

Listen / Hear

Hear is often used for the action that you do accidentally:

- Did you hear that? It sounded like a gunshot!

Listen is often used for the action that you do intentionally:

- I listened to the new CD.

There are some exceptions – some cases when “hear” is used for intentional listening:

- I heard (= listened to) an interesting show on the radio last night.

The word “hear” can also refer to communication – when you learn something because somebody told you:

- I heard (= somebody told me) your daughter got into a car accident. Is she all right?
- Have you heard about the new Batman movie coming out soon?

Finally, the expression “hear from” a person or company means to receive any type of communication from them (could be a phone call, an e-mail, or a letter).

- I sent my application for the job, but I haven’t heard from the company yet. (= they haven’t contacted me yet)
- I was thrilled to get your e-mail – it was so nice to hear from you after all these years!