

FROM THE LEGAL WRITING CLINIC
WRITING TIP OF THE WEEK

PRINCIPAL AND PRINCIPLE



Principal and **principle** look and sound alike, yet have different meanings. While **principal** can be a noun or an adjective, **principle** is a noun.

As a noun, **principal** generally means main or head person, such as the **principal** of a school. (Some people remember this meaning using the memory device, “the **principal** is our **pal**.”) **Principal** can also mean a capital sum of money (not interest); a perpetrator or aider and abettor to a crime; or one who employs another (an agent) to act for him. Similarly, when used as an adjective, **principal** means “main” or “primary,” such as the **principal** finding in a study.

On the other hand, **principle** is a noun that means a rule, tenet, or basic truth, such as the **principle** of gravity.

Thus, use **principal** as a noun to refer to important people and as an adjective to signify someone or something important. In contrast, use **principle**, a noun, when you mean a rule or doctrine.

- The **principal** of the high school led the students in singing the national anthem. (**principal** as a noun meaning the main or head person)
- The **principal** issue in this case is whether the defendant waived his right to trial by jury. (**principal** as an adjective meaning main or primary)
- Freedom and justice are the **principles** upon which our country was founded. (**principle** meaning rule, tenet or basic truth)

For more information, see Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, Just Writing 311 (3d ed. 2009) and Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, The Legal Writing Handbook 775-76 (5th ed. 2010).