



## **Ms. Particular Presents: *Alternate vs. Alternative***

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These brief “lessons” are designed to address common mistakes in English usage and to administer instruction in small, palatable doses.

## **“alternate” has two meanings**

- 1. Something that proceeds by turns with another**
- 2. Something that replaces another**

“The axial structure consists of alternating regions where the radius of the flow,  $r_f(z)$ , and the curvature of the magnetic field lines change from convex to concave.”

**If you mean “one *after* the other,” use *alternate***

**If you mean “one *in place of* the other,” use *alternate***

*Alternate* takes the preposition *with*—one thing alternates *with* the other.

## **“alternative” means a choice or option**

“An alternative method to investigate nucleon resonances employs decays of charmonium states such as  $J/\psi$  and  $\psi(3686)$ .”

***Alternatives* are usually mutually exclusive**

**If you mean “one or the other” or “one *instead* of the other,” use *alternative***

Some language purists insist that *alternative* may be used only in the case of two mutually exclusive options (one alternative or the other) [Ernest Gowers called it a fetish], but that narrow definition is not supported by most stylistic experts. It’s perfectly fine to have three or more *alternatives*.

But an *alternative* implies more than just a choice.

According to Bryan Garner, “Indeed, *alternative* carries with it two nuances absent from *choice*. First, *alternative* may suggest adequacy for some purpose <an alternative to driving>; and second, it may suggest compulsion to choose <the alternatives are liberty and death>.” *Garner’s Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 38.

These nuances apply in some cases, not all. (After all, it’s English.)