

Electronic vs. Electrical

In a number of instances, people tend to use the terms *electronic* and *electric* interchangeably. While both terms are commonly employed when discussing electronics, there is a subtle difference between the correct usages of each word. Here is what you should know about the proper way to make use of both electronic and electric when speaking or writing.

Electric has to do with the general concept of electricity. It is generally acceptable to use the terms electric and electrical interchangeably. Essentially, the word "electric" will function as a way of qualifying the flow of electricity as it relates to a specific event. For example, if a fire starts due to a problem with wiring in a building, the event can be described as an electric or electrical fire, caused by the electric or electrical wiring. The use of electric identifies a source of power that serves to create a logical effect when conducted through a process or device.

In contrast, **electronic is a term that is descriptive of devices that are powered by electricity.** An electronic device is often constructed using one or more electric elements that make it possible to manage the flow of electricity into the device. A television is a good example, since it is partially composed of a series of individual electric components that help to conduct the flow of electricity. In like manner, desktop and laptop computers are electronic in nature. Handheld devices such as cell phones are also electronic, while operating with the use of an electric component – a battery.

There does appear to be some gray area when it comes to defining various devices as being electric or electronic. Light bulbs are sometimes referred to as both electronic and electric. The common flashlight has also been described as both electronic and electric. The gray area seems to come into play when the device in question is both the means of receiving the flow of electricity and the origin of the completed function of the electronic aspect of the device. For example, the light bulb receives electricity from wiring, but at the same time emits light, which is the primary function of the device.

There are some differences in usage between electronic and electric that have to do with cultural factors as well. For example, it is not unusual for citizens of Great Britain to refer to the local power company as the “electrics.” In decades past, persons in the United States would often refer to small kitchen appliances as the “electric” skillet or the “electric” coffeepot, even though these types of appliances would be more properly known as electronic in nature.

With the living nature of language, there is no doubt that the fine differences between electronic and electric will continue to become blurred over time. The good news is that people may use either word to describe an electrical device of any type and still be understood.