

# A Comparative Analysis of “Admit” and “Acknowledge” in Legal Context Based on the COCA Corpus

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## Abstract

**In the legal language, the choice of vocabulary is crucial because legal texts require precise and clear expression. “Admit” and “acknowledge” are two near-synonyms that frequently appear in legal contexts. Although they can be used interchangeably in some cases, their subtle differences may affect the legal significance and outcomes. This paper will rely on the data from the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) to deeply explore the usage of “admit” and “acknowledge” in legal contexts, thereby revealing their actual application and meaning in legal texts.**

## Keywords

**COCA Corpus; Near-synonyms; Comparative Study; Legal Context.**

## 1. Introduction

In the legal context, the precise use of vocabulary is essential, as legal texts depend on precise language to convey clear meanings and legal consequences. Although near-synonyms in English have similar meanings, they may have subtle differences in specific legal contexts, which can be sufficient to affect the judgment of a case or the interpretation of legal documents. Therefore, the comparative study of these near-synonyms not only helps to understand the complexity of legal English but also enhances the language accuracy and sensitivity of legal professionals.

In recent years, with the rapid development of corpora, corpus linguistics has emerged, integrating into various fields of language research such as syntax and discourse analysis, and providing strong guidance for the differentiation of near-synonyms, keeping pace with the times. To deeply analyze the use and differences of these two words in the legal context, this study will be based on the widely recognized English corpus, COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English). It is the latest contemporary American English corpus developed by Professor Mark Davies of Brigham Young University in the United States, with a vocabulary volume of up to one billion, and is the largest balanced English corpus in the world today, which has been updated to 2019. It covers eight types of corpora including blogs, websites, television and movies, spoken language, novels, magazines, newspapers, and academic journals during this period in the United States, totaling 96 subcorpora, and is basically evenly distributed in these eight types. The COCA corpus provides a large number of text samples, including legal texts, providing us with abundant data to observe and compare the actual use of “admit” and “acknowledge” in legal contexts.

This study will analyze the frequency of occurrence of these two words in legal texts, collocation patterns, semantic tendencies, and their specific applications in different legal situations. The results of the study aim to reveal the subtle differences of “admit” and “acknowledge” in the legal context and provide guidance for legal professionals when using these terms to ensure the clarity and accuracy of legal texts. In addition, this study will also explore how the use of these words affects legal interpretation and judgment, and how to better teach and understand these terms in legal education and practice.

## 2. Comparative Analysis Based on the COCA Corpus

### 2.1. Word Frequency Distribution

Table 1 Word frequency distribution of “admit” and “acknowledge” in the COCA corpus

	Freq
admit	42337
acknowledge	19748

By searching the List section of the COCA corpus, we can obtain the data in Table From Table 1, it can be seen that the usage frequency of “admit” is the highest, reaching more than 40,000 times, while the usage frequency of “acknowledge” is only over 10,000 times. The usage frequency of “admit” is significantly higher than that of “acknowledge.”

### 2.2. Word Frequency Distribution in Different Registers

Raid introduced the concept of “register” in 1956, which was later refined by Halliday and others. Register refers to a variant of language that arises in actual linguistic activities due to the needs of communication, or because of differences in profession and interests, or due to the context of the discourse, the interlocutors, the location, and the topic. It is reflected in the different styles and tones of language (Yang Hui Zhong, 2002). Therefore, when discussing near-synonyms, considering the register is an essential step, providing important guidance for distinguishing these words. Different registers may affect the usage of near-synonyms, leading to differences in their meaning and connotation in specific contexts. By incorporating register into the analysis, we can more clearly identify and understand the subtle differences between these near-synonyms, thereby mastering their application more accurately.

By consulting the COCA corpus, we can obtain the usage frequency data for “admit” and “acknowledge” (see Tables 2 and 3 for details). In corpus linguistics, frequency is a core concept, indicating the number of times a word or phrase appears in one million words, also known as standardized frequency. Given the subtle differences that may exist between near-synonyms, they may exhibit different distribution patterns in different registers. Therefore, comparing their frequency differences across various registers is of great value for English learners to gain a deeper understanding of the usage of near-synonyms.

Table 2 The word frequency distribution of “admit” and “acknowledge” in different registers within the COCA corpus.

		BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SOKE	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
admit	Freq	8413	6698	7621	4407	6573	3762	2928	1975
acknowledge	Freq	3359	3045	762	2028	1327	2821	2315	4098

Table 2’s data provides us with a clear view of the usage frequency of the words “admit” and “acknowledge” in different genres. The data indicates that “admit” is most frequently used in the informal genre of blogs, likely because blogs typically reflect personal views and experiences, and the word “admit” carries a connotation of personal acknowledgment or revelation of truth, suitable for this more private and direct mode of communication.

In contrast, “acknowledge” has the highest usage frequency in academic journals, probably because academic writing requires authors to use more formal and objective language when referring to previous research or acknowledging certain facts. “Acknowledge” is often used here to express recognition of known information or to acknowledge the contributions of others, in line with the principles of objectivity and respect for intellectual property in academic writing.

Additionally, we notice that the usage frequency of “acknowledge” in television and film texts is the lowest, probably because dialogue in television and films tends to imitate everyday

spoken language, and in daily communication, people are more inclined to use the concise and direct “admit” to express the meaning of acknowledgment or acceptance.

In other genres, such as spoken language, novels, magazines, news, and academic journals, the usage frequency of “admit” generally exceeds that of “acknowledge.” This phenomenon reflects that “admit” is more common in these contexts, possibly because the word is more accessible and direct when expressing the admission of mistakes, acceptance of facts, or revelation of personal emotions.

Specifically, we can see that in magazines, newspapers, and the most recently updated blogs and websites, the usage frequency of “admit” is very high, reaching thousands of times. This suggests that in these genres, authors may prefer to use “admit” to attract readers' attention or to express a candid attitude when discussing sensitive topics. In contrast, the usage frequency of “admit” in spoken language and television and film is relatively lower, probably because in these situations, people use other synonyms or more informal expressions more often.

On the other hand, the usage of “acknowledge” is different. In television and films, its usage frequency is only a few hundred times, which further emphasizes that “acknowledge” is a more formal and written vocabulary, less used in everyday spoken communication. This difference may stem from the contextual and semantic requirements of “acknowledge,” which is typically used to express a deeper level of recognition, rather than a simple acknowledgment.

In summary, the data from Table 2 reveals the differences in the use of “admit” and “acknowledge” across various genres, reflecting not only the semantic characteristics of these two words but also the different requirements for language formality in different genres. In writing and spoken communication, choosing the appropriate vocabulary is crucial for ensuring accurate information transmission and maintaining the appropriate context.

Table 3 The historical development trajectory of “admit” and “acknowledge” in the COCA corpus.

	admit	acknowledge
	Freq	Freq
1992-1994	2888	1239
1995-1997	3081	1267

By analyzing the data from the COCA corpus, we can observe the usage of the words “admit” and “acknowledge” over different time periods (see Table 3 for details). Historically, the usage frequency of these two words has not experienced significant fluctuations but has remained relatively stable. However, upon closer examination of the long-term trends, a slight upward trend in their usage frequency can be observed. This trend may reflect the ongoing development of the English language, where the use of certain words may become more common due to changes in society, culture, and technology. Nonetheless, for “admit” and “acknowledge,” their usage in different genres and contexts has not fundamentally changed over time, suggesting that they play relatively fixed roles in the language. Moreover, this stable usage pattern may provide linguists with an interesting case study on how near-synonyms maintain their semantics and usage over different time periods. Further semantic and contextual analysis can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the stability and persistence of these words in the process of language evolution.

### 3. Analysis of Usage in Legal Context

In the legal context, the use of “admit” and “acknowledge” has specific meanings and functions, and understanding these differences is crucial for the interpretation and writing of legal texts.

Legal Context of “Admit”

“Admit” is commonly used in legal contexts to denote the acknowledgment of an action, fact, or crime by a party. It often carries a degree of negative emotion or admission of responsibility.

Specific examples include:

Admittance of Guilt: “The defendant admitted to committing the crime.”

In criminal cases, this means the defendant acknowledges their criminal actions.

Admittance in Civil Cases: “The company admitted liability for the damages.”

In civil cases, this means the company acknowledges responsibility for damages.

Admittance in Legal Proceedings: “He admitted to breaching the contract terms.”

This means he acknowledges the violation of contract terms.

Legal Context of “Acknowledge”

“Acknowledge” is typically used in legal texts to formally recognize a fact, right, or the validity of a document. It conveys a sense of formal, objective recognition and confirmation of legal documents or facts.

Specific examples include:

Acknowledgment of Receipt: “The recipient acknowledges the receipt of the documents.”

In legal documents, this means the recipient formally acknowledges receiving certain documents.

Acknowledgment in Contracts: “The parties acknowledge that this agreement constitutes the entire agreement between them.”

In contracts, “acknowledge” is used to confirm the completeness and validity of the contract.

Acknowledgment of Debt: “The debtor acknowledges the debt of \$10,000.”

This means the debtor formally acknowledges the existence of the debt.

### 3.1. Semantic Differences in Legal Context

The semantic differences between “admit” and “acknowledge” are particularly important in legal contexts. “Admit” usually involves the acknowledgment of negative emotions or responsibilities, typically used when a person or entity acknowledges an action, mistake, or crime. For instance, admitting to criminal behavior or a breach of contract. According to Black’s Law Dictionary, the definition of “admit” in law is: “To concede as true or valid; to give judicial recognition to” (Garner, 2020).

In actual legal cases, “admit” is often used to describe a defendant or party acknowledging an unfavorable fact or responsibility. For example, in criminal cases, a defendant might “admit guilt,” acknowledging their crime. In civil cases, a party might “admit liability,” acknowledging responsibility for a certain harm or breach of contract (Bibas, 2004).

“Acknowledge” is more neutral and formal, typically used to acknowledge the existence and validity of a fact or document without necessarily implying negative emotions or responsibilities. According to Black’s Law Dictionary, the definition of “acknowledge” is: “To recognize (something) as being factual or valid; to show that one accepts the existence or truth of” (Garner, 2020).

In legal documents and contracts, “acknowledge” is often used to acknowledge the legitimacy of a fact or document. For example, when signing a contract, parties need to “acknowledge” the terms of the contract, confirming and accepting the content and binding force of the contract. This acknowledgment does not imply any admission of fault or responsibility but merely confirms the existence of a fact or the validity of a document (Osborne, 1953).

In the *Miranda v. Arizona* case, the defendant “admitted” to the crime during police interrogation, and this admission was used as crucial evidence for conviction, reflecting the negative sense of responsibility associated with “admit” (*Miranda v. Arizona*, 1966). In contrast,

in the *Texas v. Johnson* case, the defendant “acknowledged” their actions were for expressing an opinion, not admitting a crime, showing the neutrality of “acknowledge” (*Texas v. Johnson*, 1989).

### 3.1.1. Application in Contract Law

“Admit” may appear in the context of breach or dispute resolution. For example: Admission of Breach: “The vendor admitted to failing to deliver the goods on time.” “Admit” is used to acknowledge that a party has failed to fulfill contractual obligations, which may lead to legal responsibility.

“Acknowledge” is commonly used in clauses to confirm the understanding and agreement of the contracting parties. For example: Acknowledgment Clause: “The parties acknowledge that they have read and understood the terms of this agreement.” “Acknowledge” is used to formally confirm that the parties have read and understood the contract terms, helping to prevent future disputes.

### 3.1.2. Application in Criminal Law

“Admit” is used to acknowledge criminal actions or facts. For example: Admission of Guilt: “The suspect admitted to the robbery during the interrogation.” Here, “admit” is used to acknowledge criminal actions, which is often a key step in the conviction process.

“Acknowledge” may be used to formally acknowledge certain legal procedures or documents. For example: Acknowledgment of Rights: “The suspect acknowledges being informed of their Miranda rights.” Here, “acknowledge” is used to confirm that the suspect has been informed of their legal rights, which is part of procedural safeguards.

### 3.1.3. Application in Civil Litigation

“Admit” is used to acknowledge certain actions or facts that may lead to the assumption of responsibility. For example: Admission of Liability: “The company admitted liability for the environmental damage caused.” Here, “admit” is used to acknowledge responsibility for certain damages, which may affect the outcome of compensation.

## 4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the data in the COCA corpus, especially the usage of “admit” and “acknowledge” in legal texts, we can find that these two words have distinct differences and specific legal meanings in the legal context. “Admit” is typically used to express the acknowledgment of an action, mistake, or crime by an individual or entity, often accompanied by the acceptance of responsibility. For example, in court, when one party “admits” to a fact, it means they recognize the legal responsibility or factual basis associated with it. In contrast, “acknowledge” tends to be used to formally confirm the existence and validity of a fact, document, or right without necessarily admitting responsibility. For example, a party may “acknowledge” receiving a contract, but this does not mean they agree to all the terms or assume any responsibility. Precise use of these terms is crucial for legal professionals. Writers of legal documents, lawyers, judges, and legal scholars all need a deep understanding of these nuances to ensure the accuracy and legal force of legal documents and oral statements. Accurate word choice not only conveys legal intent clearly but also prevents unnecessary legal disputes arising from misunderstandings. In summary, through the analysis of the COCA corpus, we not only grasp the specific usage of “admit” and “acknowledge” in the legal context but also recognize the importance of precise legal language in avoiding misunderstandings, improving the quality of legal documents, and protecting the rights and interests of legal parties.

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