

ENGLISH FOR INTERPRETERS

TERRIBLE TWOSOME: EFFICIENT OR EFFECTIVE?

WHY THE CONFUSION?

Because both *efficient* and *effective* have the meaning of *getting things done*, and because in some languages, you can often use a single word to express both ideas (e.g. in French, *efficace*). So what's the distinction?

EFFECTIVE vs. EFFICIENT

If something works properly or does what you want it to do, it is *effective*.
Peppermint is an effective cure for indigestion.
The government has no effective policy on drugs.

If a person or process makes best use of resources it is *efficient*.
Use *efficient* if you are conveying the idea of working better, of avoiding waste, or of saving time, money, energy, or raw materials.
Modern engines are much more efficient.
She organises her time very efficiently.
With a more efficient distribution system, we could cut our costs by half.

The nouns *effectiveness* and *efficiency* have the same connotations as their associated adjectives.

SIGHTINGS IN THE WILD

Effective (all examples from The Guardian, 2018):

The drugs do work: anti-depressants are effective, study shows...
The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's far right
Tax on sugary drinks will only be partially effective, claims study
An affordable hepatitis C treatment has been shown to be safe and effective

Efficient (all examples from the Guardian):

The five principles behind the world's most efficient health systems
Why efficient automation will not always be best for business
Could this be the world's most efficient solar electricity system?
For all its vaunted efficiency, capitalism has foisted wasteful inequality and environmental ruin on us.

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OTHER MEANINGS

Efficient is generally used in the sense I have explained above.

Effective has other meanings:

- striking, impressive: *His use of imagery in the novel was very effective.*
- operative, in effect: *The tax will become effective in 2019.*

SYNONYMS

Effective:

Depending on context, effective can mean *powerful, serviceable, useful, valid, successful* or *practical*, but if you're looking for an alternative, it's often better to reformulate the sentence into something like *'It has achieved the desired result'*.

Efficient:

It isn't easy to find synonyms for *efficient* in the sense of a process that makes best use of resources. Your options are probably limited to *rational, economical, streamlined, or productive* (obviously, depending on context).
On the other hand, if you're referring to *an efficient person*, you may be able to call them *capable, dynamic, competent, organised or well organised*.

EFFICACY

A little sting in the tail: in a medical context, we refer to a drug's *efficacy*, not its *effectiveness* (and certainly not its *efficiency*).

Here is an example from the European Medicines Agency:

The European Medicines Agency's scientific guidelines on the efficacy of veterinary medicines help applicants prepare marketing authorisation applications.