

Assume and presume both mean "to take something for granted" or "to take something as true." The difference between the words lies in the degree of confidence held by the speaker or writer. If he or she is making an informed guess based on reasonable evidence, presume is the word to use; if a guess is made based on little or no evidence, assume is usually used. (This is not true, however, in the legal catchphrase "presumed innocent until proven guilty." That sense of presume is separately defined as "to suppose to be true without proof" and is based on the fact that legal systems grant the presumption of innocence, thereby placing the burden of proof on the prosecution.)

In the 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster nicely distinguishes the different uses of the words. He defines *presume* as "to take or suppose to be true or entitled to belief, without examination or positive proof, or on the strength of probability," and *assume* as "to take for granted, or without proof; to suppose as a fact." The etymologies of these words reflect Webster's defining. Both words ultimately derive from the Latin verb *sumere*, meaning "to take." The ancestor of *presume* was formed by joining that verb with the Latin prefix *prae-* (*pre-* in English), meaning "before," whereas the ancestor of *assume* was formed with *ad-*, meaning "to" or "toward." Translated: *praesumere* means "to take in advance," and *adsumere*, "to take to oneself." Hence, for Webster, to presume something was to take it to be true or likely in advance because it is "entitled to belief" or because of "the strength of probability," and to assume something was to take it and adopt it as fact.

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