

QUITE LITERALLY

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Problem Words and How to Use Them

Wynford Hicks



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INTRODUCTION

What's an alibi, a bete noire, a celibate, a dilemma? Should underway be two words? Is the word meretricious worth using at all? How do you spell realise—with an s or a z—and should bete be bête? Should you split infinitives, end sentences with prepositions, start them with conjunctions? What about four-letter words, euphemisms, foreign words, Americanisms, clichés, slang, jargon? And does the Queen speak the Queen's English?

This book tries to answer questions like these. It's intended for readers and writers, professional and amateur, established and aspiring, formal trainees and those trying to break in; students of English, both language and literature, and their teachers.

It concentrates on writing rather than speech. It certainly doesn't offer advice on how to pronounce words—there's nothing here about spoken accents. On the other hand, the advice given on how to use words in writing can usually be applied to formal speech—what is carefully considered, broadcast, presented, scripted or prepared for delivery to a public audience—as opposed to informal, colloquial speech.

The book is intended to be practical—and also fun. Many of the points made are illustrated with quotes. These come mainly from newspapers, magazines and books—in other words from sources that are publicly available. Although the emphasis is on British usage, papers like the *New York Times* and the *Australian* are included with the *Times* and the *Guardian*.

Some of the quotes are from language experts. This is not an attempt to embarrass them. It is because I have consulted books about language—dictionaries, style and usage books and those written by academic linguists—for their content and in passing found useful examples of usage. See page 250 for a list of books referred to.

It's noticeable that there is something of a divide among those who write about language between the conservatives and the radicals. The conservatives

are committed to standard English;

- want to preserve the grammar they were taught at school and extend it to everybody else;

- fight to keep the traditional meaning of words and expressions;

- think that dictionaries should be prescriptive rather than descriptive.

The radicals, on the other hand,

- want to undermine standard English, dismissing it as a mere dialect;

- insist that the grammar of 'uneducated' people is just as good as taught grammar;

- emphasise that words continually change their meanings—they generally prefer the newer, more popular ones;

- think that dictionaries should be descriptive rather than prescriptive.

In their extreme form both these positions are ridiculous and unhelpful. They make the problem of problem words worse.

Take these traditional precepts of old-fashioned English teaching:

don't start a sentence with a conjunction;
don't end a sentence with a preposition;
don't split an infinitive.

These instructions derive from the grammar of Latin, which was used as the model by the first English grammarians. None of them apply to modern English. Splitting infinitives and putting prepositions at the end of a sentence and conjunctions at the beginning are now clearly matters of style not grammar.

(And, by the way, to follow none by a plural instead of a singular verb—as I did in the previous paragraph—isn't a grammatical mistake, either. The belief that it is a mistake is based on the mistaken idea that none always means not one.)

The linguistic conservatives also have a simplistic approach to the meaning of words. To aggravate can only mean to make worse, they say (because it derives from the Latin word *gravis*, heavy); or celibate must mean unmarried (because that is what it used to mean); or fulsome cannot be used in the positive sense of abundant (because in the past it meant excessive).

The linguistic radicals are also inclined to oversimplify in their approach to changing meanings. They tend to see the new ones as driving out the old. Unfortunately, in the case of words like aggravate, disinterested and fulsome, it looks as though both old and new meanings are in current use with neither likely to 'drive out' the other.

Some words have been disputed for centuries—without any signs of a resolution of the dispute. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the earliest use (1662) of disinterested as 'without interest' and the earliest use of uninterested (1646) as 'impartial, unbiased'. These definitions are the opposite of the traditional ones.

The case of fulsome is even more striking. According to Kate Burridge, its earliest recorded sense, from the thirteenth century, was 'abundant, full, good'. Gradually the negative senses 'over-abundant, excessive' became dominant. Now, once again, the word is most often used in a positive sense—though this usage is challenged by the conservatives. James Cochrane, for example, says: 'The older meaning should be preserved, if only because it cannot so easily be replaced.'

But disagreements about what individual words mean are superficial compared with attitudes to grammar. The linguistic radicals propose nothing less than the rejection of traditional grammar as the cornerstone of standard English.

They say that standard English is only one dialect among many. A typical view is Kate Burridge's: 'On purely linguistic grounds...all dialects are equal. All have the same potential, at least, for complexity and richness of expression.'

They say that standard English came about by accident—and at the same time was imposed from above. A typical view is Ronald Wardhaugh's:

The variety of English that we now refer to as standard English achieved its position by accident. It was the variety of the language that a powerful

group in society used at a time when it was desirable to promote that variety in order to consolidate power.

And they say that traditional English grammar should not be preferred to colloquial usage.

Crucial to their argument is a claim about the relationship between speech and writing. They say that languages are originally spoken phenomena and that writing evolved as a way of giving some kind of permanence to speech, which remains primary. Since speech comes first chronologically and logically, its naturally evolving patterns should not be subject to arbitrary rules imposed by grammarians.

In support of their argument the radicals point to the richness that can be found in colloquial and dialect speech. And they make the telling point that to remove the privileged status of standard English would be egalitarian and democratic. Millions of people would no longer suffer from the disadvantage of being told they use language in an inferior and ungrammatical way. They would no longer have to labour to acquire standard English in order to write acceptably.

This argument is attractive, particularly to those who want to promote social equality. But it suffers from several flaws.

First, it is based on a distinction between speech and writing that is crude and simplistic. Speech and writing are not two separate categories, one natural and informal, the other artificial and formal. Speech can be prepared and structured—and in the public world it usually is. Think of barristers and debaters; lecturers and store demonstrators; salespeople with their carefully contrived, rehearsed patter, after-dinner speakers, priests in the pulpit...

Not everybody is a public speaker but most people from time to time do stop and think before they speak, and so are likely to express themselves in a coherent and structured way. They are more likely on these occasions to try to speak in standard English.

At the same time writing doesn't have to be formal. Hand-written personal letters have often been rushed onto the page, punctuated by a series of dashes rather than full stops, written in snatches rather than complete sentences. Now, thanks to email and text messaging, millions of words are written every day in a loose, unstructured conversational form. Clearly they undermine the rigid speech—writing division.

Speech and writing interact constantly. Broadcast journalists, playwrights and screenwriters obviously need to keep the immediacy and freshness of speech. But successful print journalists and novelists write with their ears, too. The spoken word—above all when used in broadcasting—has a huge influence on the written word. Sentences are shorter nowadays; there's more elision (there is becoming there's); and in general grammar is simpler and looser. It would be difficult now—except in parody—to write: 'For whom tolls the bell?'

So rather than a speech—writing division, it makes better sense to distinguish between the informal, personal, colloquial style we use in both speech and writing to communicate with people like ourselves, friends, family, members of the same group, club, tribe—which is geared to them and not necessarily in standard English—and our public voice. This has to be in standard English if we want to ensure that we are understood.

For the second flaw in the radicals' position is that their historical claims are irrelevant. However standard English came about, it is now our public language. It has to

be learnt by anyone who wants to take part in the public world of politics, media and culture, as a writer or speaker. This point is—reluctantly—conceded by most of the radicals. Ronald Wardhaugh says that standard English ‘is probably a necessary ideal for such domains as administration, law, education, and literature’. And Steven Pinker says: ‘People should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in their society and to employ it in any formal settings.’

Since it is our public language it makes sense to accept it as a whole while trying to correct its defects. But unfortunately that is not what the radicals do. Instead they continue to attack its fundamental positions.

There isn’t the space to cover in detail all the grammatical points they make. But one stands out as an example of their perversity: the double negative.

Their argument goes like this. In early English a second or third negative word reinforced the first, as in the following quotation from Chaucer:

He nevere yet no vileyne ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.

In today’s colloquial English (Bethnal Green, Brixton, the Bronx) the doubling of the negative has the same force, as in ‘I didn’t see nothing’ (meaning ‘I saw nothing’).

As well as Chaucer the radicals routinely quote Mick Jagger, who sang: ‘I can’t get no satisfaction.’ And of course there is no ambiguity here—in context the second negative reinforces the first. But around the same time Tom Jones sang: ‘It’s not unusual’, using the second negative to counter the first—that was clear as well.

In standard English ‘I didn’t see nothing’ becomes ‘I didn’t see anything.’ If the word ‘nothing’ is used instead, the sentence means roughly the opposite.

The fact is that the use of a double negative to assert a positive is not some weird academic throwback: it is a part of everyday English, particularly in its written form. And the evidence for this comes from the writings of the radicals themselves. For however much they claim to disapprove of standard English, they write in it rather than in scouse or cockney

Steven Pinker, for example, who quotes Mick Jagger with approval, says on page 376 of *The Language Instinct*: ‘In the grammar of standard English a double negative does *not* assert the corresponding affirmative.’

But in fact Pinker writes in standard English and uses the double negative. The first words of his book are: ‘I have never met a person who is not interested in language.’ And his second chapter begins: ‘By the 1920s it was thought that no corner of the earth fit for human habitation had remained unexplored. New Guinea, the world’s second largest island, was no exception.’ How many negatives in that?

As well as the double negative this book focuses on disputed grammatical points like may/can/might, lay/lie, who/whom, due/owing, that/which, will/shall, less/fewer—and like. Some people condemn the use of like to mean such as, as in the previous sentence and in:

Language experts like Robert Burchfield accept this use of like.

Here I agree with Burchfield, whose edition of Fowler is, in my opinion, the best reference book on English usage. But I disagree with his defence of less applied to people, as in:

Less people were there.

Many of these contentious grammatical points are difficult—perhaps impossible—to resolve. My intention in this book is to provide practical advice, but nobody can claim to have written the last word on any of them.

Meaning is the other main focus of the book. With fulsome (excessive or abundant) go words like aggravate (make worse or annoy), celibate (unmarried or abstaining from sex), dilemma (problem or awkward choice between two unwelcome possibilities). Often the choice is between a precise ‘educated’ meaning and a loose colloquial one—though as the example of fulsome shows, the issue can be more complicated than that. In all these cases the key issue is: what does the word mean to the people using it?

So too with pairs of words with the same root: disinterested/ uninterested; sensuous/sensual; masterly/masterful; admission/admittance; and with one triple: assure, ensure, insure. Distinctions between these words are acknowledged by some people but not by all.

Then there are pairs of words that are confused partly because they sound similar in some way, particularly their initial sound: flaunt (display ostentatiously) is confused with flout (treat with contempt); militate (contend) with mitigate (soften); and prevaricate (evade the truth) with procrastinate (defer action). The more latinate and pretentious the word, the more it qualifies to be called a malapropism, after Mrs Malaprop, in Sheridan’s play *The Rivals*, who consistently misuses elaborate words.

English has a lot of such elaborate words—meretricious for flashy, otiose for superfluous, rebarbative for repellent—which most readers will have to look up in the dictionary. In the wrong place they can certainly appear formal, pompous, pretentious. Here in this book they are often labelled ‘literary’ in an attempt to identify them without implying that they should never be used.

But some ‘literary’ words are ambiguous: peruse can mean read carefully and just read; quaff can mean drink in large draughts and just drink; reiterate can mean repeat again and again and just repeat. Then there is the word indicate. As well as its unambiguous and straightforward use (of a motorist, signal the intention to turn left or right), indicate can mean point out, show, imply, suggest, state, say.

There is a small but interesting category of paired words that can be called mirror words: imply/infer; learn/teach; ancestor/descendant; lend/borrow. The same action or relationship is described—from two opposite points of view. So if I imply something, you can infer it from what I say. If I teach you something, you learn it. If I am your ancestor, you are my descendant. If I lend you something, you borrow it. Sometimes the wrong one of the pair is chosen. People say: ‘Can I lend your book?’ Or: ‘Please learn me to swim.’

Another word category in the book is homophones and homonyms. A homonym is a word pronounced and spelt the same as another but with an entirely different meaning. So the two words cleave (meaning split) and cleave (meaning join) are homonyms. There aren’t many homonyms.

Homophones—two words pronounced in the same way but different in spelling and meaning—are far more common (and the more people rely on computer spell-checking, the more homophone mistakes there will probably be). The *Guardian’s* corrections and clarifications feature is full of homophone mistakes that have appeared in the paper: geyser/geezer; rein/reign; phase/faze...

On spelling this book makes recommendations within the limits defined by dictionaries. First, it identifies some words commonly misspelt (accidentally not accidentally, hiccup not hiccough). Second, it prefers British to American usage (axe not ax). Third, if a word is of foreign origin, the spelling recommended is usually that of the original language (largesse not largess), unless the anglicised spelling is generally accepted (naivety not naïveté). Fourth, spelling distinctions are made if they help to clarify a distinction between two words (linage, payment by the line, as opposed to lineage, descent).

A practice that is not recommended is to use two different spellings of the same word to refer to different types of activity, eg inquiry (for a formal investigation), enquiry (for a simple question) and judgment (for a legal decision), judgement (for a simple opinion). However, in the world of computers where American spelling rules, we now have program and disk, whereas elsewhere we keep programme and disc.

Fifth, a spelling can help to show the most common pronunciation of an unfamiliar word (adrenalin, with a short i, not adrenaline; swathe, with a long a, not swath).

And finally, all other things being equal, the shorter, plainer spelling is preferred to the longer, more elaborate one. So the consonant is not doubled (biased not biassed); or the e is left out (judgment not judgement). The extra syllable is left out (preventive not preventative; dissociate not disassociate) and so is the extra flourish, added by those wishing to create a literary effect (among not amongst; while not whilst).

Examples are also given of words now joined up as one: commonsense as a noun as well as an adjective; underway; onto (as in 'the cat jumped onto the chair' as opposed to 'they went on to London'). Hyphenation is covered and so are various points of punctuation, such as the use of the apostrophe.

There are entries in the book for things like four-letter words, euphemism and jargon; Americanisms, clichés and foreign words; rhyming slang, feminine forms and French. I have also included a number of medical problem words, such as acute, remission and resuscitation, because they are increasingly used by non-medical people.

Finally, my answer to the question 'Does the Queen speak the Queen's English?' comes in the entry on that and which (see pages 226–8).

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A

a/an

an replaces a before a vowel (an owl), unless the vowel is sounded as a consonant (a use), and before a silent h (an hour). Some writers in the past insisted on using an before words like hotel, habitual, historical, horrendous and heroic (partly because some upper-class people didn't sound the h in speech), but this practice was always dubious and now seems affected. In the following examples it is ludicrous:

This was an habitual exchange.

(Donna Tartt)

It was an horrendous day for a team that proved itself to be the best in the country.

(*Sunday Times*)

If you use a before these words—in speech and writing—you will sound natural and be correct.

abbreviations

no longer need to be marked by full stops, whether they are truncations (where only the first part of the word is given, as in prof for professor or in for inch), contractions (where the first and last letters are given, as in st for saint and rd for road) or single letters (BBC, PD James). Some abbreviations are spoken and written as words starting with a capital letter (Nato, Aids): these are called acronyms. Abbreviations should not be followed by words they include so ITN news and PIN number are incorrect.

abortion

is the ordinary word for what doctors call a termination (that is, a pregnancy ended by intervention). Technically, an abortion is the premature expulsion of a fetus however caused.

abrogate

cancel, revoke, is confused with arrogate, claim for yourself.

absorb

but

absorption

accede to

is used to mean agree to (a request) and come to (the throne) but it sounds formal elsewhere:

for women and minorities to accede to positions of real authority.

(Guardian)

accents

whether you should keep the accent on a word of foreign origin depends on all sorts of things including how common it is in English and whether the accent distinguishes it from another word of the same spelling. For example, résumé (summary, cv) needs acute accents to distinguish it from resume, whereas château can get by without its circumflex accent. If you put an accent on a word to show how it is pronounced, you must include any other accents it has, so emigré should be émigré and pâté should be pâté.

accessible

not accessible

accidentally

not accidentally

accolade

high public praise, is confused with acolyte, faithful follower:

When, for the third time, she mentions the ‘accolades’ who sought to protect Blair I correct her. ‘You mean acolytes, Mo.’
(profile of Mo Mowlam, *Sunday Times*)

accommodate

is often misspelt—remember the two m’s.

accrue

come as a natural growth or increment, is confused with acquire, get or gain:

Schools at the bottom of the heap accrue more of society's downtrodden.
(Ted Wragg, professor of education)

achilles heel/tendon

needs no capital A and no apostrophe.

acknowledgement

not acknowledgment

acolyte *see* accolade

acronyms *see* abbreviations

actor, actress *see* feminine forms

actual, actually

are usually padding words with no function in a sentence ('In actual fact it exists', 'He's here, actually'). But they can be used for emphasis. 'He actually arrived early' suggests astonishment that he came at all.

Like literally, actually can be misused to try to justify a stale metaphor:

The road to hell is—and in this case, actually was—paved with good intentions.

(*Guardian*)

No, it wasn't: good intentions didn't become paving stones. See **rhetorical adverbs**.

actualité

a French word meaning topicality or current events which is misused to mean truth in the phrase 'economical with the actualité', a euphemism for lying. Since the Tory politician Alan Clark used the phrase, as a variation on 'economical with the truth', it has become a nonsensical cliché to be avoided. But Anthony Howard, reviewing Tony Benn's diaries in the *Sunday Times*, managed to make the phrase work by using actualité in something like its original French sense:

Benn, never one to be economical with the actualité, dictated more reams than have ever appeared.

acute

from the Latin *acutus*, means sharp. Thus an acute shortage is a very bad one; acute indigestion is particularly painful; and an acute observation by someone is keenly perceptive. In the sense of severe, acute is contrasted with chronic, which means lingering, lasting, deep-seated. But the two words are often confused: chronic (which sounds bad) is used to mean severe, as in the phrase 'something chronic'.

There is a further problem. In medical jargon acute does not now mean severe at all. Instead the doctors contrast acute (of a condition arising suddenly) with severe (critical or dangerous). Something can be acute without being severe or severe without being acute—or it can be both. Hence the term given in 2003 to a particularly virulent form of flu: severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars).

But in ordinary English an acute shortage and a severe shortage continue to mean the same thing.

adaptation

not adaption

adapter, adaptor

an adapter is someone who adapts, eg a novel for the stage, while an adaptor is what you need when your electric plug doesn't match the socket.

addenda

is the plural of addendum.

additionally, in addition, in addition to

are formal alternatives to also, as well as.

address

(issues, problems) is political and management jargon for face, apply yourself to:

One of our own former spy chiefs, Stella Rimington, has said this war will be impossible to win unless we address the underlying causes of terrorism.

(Guardian)

We're much better off having a plan to address the problem proactively rather than reacting to an incident.

(Australian)

In real life people address things like envelopes and golf balls—and then act: they take their letters to the post or hit the ball with their club. What politicians and managers do with an issue once they have addressed it is less clear.

See also: **proactive**.

adherence, adhesion

both these words come from the verb adhere which means both stick (to), in the literal sense, and keep (to). Adhesion and its adjective adhesive refer to sticking; adherence and adherent refer to keeping, belonging. Here the wrong one has been used:

Our secular adhesion to the principles of peace, tolerance and sharing cannot be shaken by expressions of hate.

(Moroccan newspaper report)

adipose

is literary for obese (abnormally fat).

administer

not administrate

admissible

not admissable

admission, admittance

both words come from admit but they are used differently: admission is used of something admitted or conceded (admission of guilt) and the price of entry (admission £5), while admittance is particularly used of attempts to keep people out (no admittance). Here the writer has used the wrong one:

Hilda...attends the Left Book Club only because admittance is free.
(Christopher Hitchens)

adrenalin

not adrenaline

advance (planning)

a case of tautology or saying it twice—you can hardly plan after the event.

adverbs

are a problem for most writers. In many cases they are merely padding: ‘He currently owns 50 acres’; ‘Researchers have successfully developed’; ‘The plans were originally drawn up.’ And what about the ‘merely’ in the previous sentence?

There is a tendency to include an adverb automatically, without thinking, as when the New Labour spin doctor Jo Moore said sorry for trying to bury bad British news on 11 September 2001. Her opening words were: ‘I want to again sincerely apologise...’ ‘Sincerely’ sticks out here: who sets out to apologise insincerely?

Then there are the adverbs designed to rescue an impossible or dubious claim, as in ‘White Hart Lane was virtually deserted last night’ or ‘He is arguably England’s best player.’ Cutting the adverb won’t help here: the problem is in the sentence as a whole.

And there are the clumsy ones made to do an impossible job, as in this obituary:

Even when lucratively denied television, he kept busy on stage and in movies.

(Guardian)

He can't have been *lucratively* denied since that would mean he made money out of the denial. The writer is struggling to say the opposite.

Even the best writers sometimes trip themselves up over adverbs, as in this example from the stylish TV critic AA Gill:

What it is, is telly repertory. And I must say, it's appealing. But it's also deeply shallow.

Deeply shallow?

The American virus of putting the adverb before the verb when it belongs after it has spread all over the English-speaking world as in: 'Because Windows was not properly shut down ...' The adverb is often, though not always, more effective after the verb.

The following is not English either:

I would take more seriously your leader if you had not used so much of your magazine explaining what jolly fun pornography is.

(Observer letter)

See also **split infinitive** (for position of adverb) and **literally**.

adverse

meaning opposed, unfavourable, is confused with averse, disinclined, reluctant.

adviser

not advisor but

advisory

aerodrome, aeroplane, airplane

aeroplane, the traditional British spelling of airplane, now looks quaint, although it is still recommended by most authorities. I think that airplane will eventually replace it; in the short term aircraft removes the problem. By contrast the word aerodrome works for a small airfield used by light aircraft—it's an old-fashioned word for something that has changed very little over the years.

affect, effect

the dictionary distinguishes between affect meaning to assume, pretend to have (he affected a false superiority) and affect meaning to influence (the weather affected icecream sales). They are different words. To complicate matters, to effect means to carry out or accomplish (he effected the sale). As a noun affect (in psychology an emotional state) is rare but effect is very common. It means the result of an action (the effect of the weather was increased sales) and in the plural goods, property (his personal effects).

after

there are two ways of saying that something is the second biggest, longest etc while referring to the first. This is the simplest:

Mr Aznar is, after Mr Blair, the most important and enthusiastic world leader backing the Washington hawks.

(Guardian)

It's also possible to say that something comes second while putting the winner in brackets:

Vietnam...the world's second-largest exporter (after Thailand).

(Economist)

The brackets are essential. When they are left out the effect is to demote the runner-up to third place:

Texas is the second-most-populous state after California.

(Economist)

In fact Texas is the *most* populous American state after California.

aftermath

technically, the aftermath is a second mowing of grass which springs up after the first mowing in early summer, but the word is commonly used to mean the consequences of a particular event:

The first such settlement, of which all succeeding ones have been modifications, was in the aftermath of the first world war.

A 'domino democratisation'...is not likely in the Middle East in the aftermath of even a successful, low-casualty war in Iraq.

(Guardian)

[on swear words] the 1960s and their aftermath brought matters up to date.

(Kingsley Amis)

ageing

not aging

agenda

is now considered a singular word (although it was originally Latin for 'those things that need to be done'); its plural is agendas. Agenda is French (and also American) for diary:

I fished a worn crocodile agenda with a doubled rubber band around it out of his jacket pocket.

(Dirk Wittenborn)

agents provocateurs

is the plural of agent provocateur.

aggravate

is used to mean make worse (he aggravated the injury) and also annoy:

He had pronounced and aggravating views on what the United States was doing for the world.

(Graham Greene)

She notes that he never intends to provoke which is 'in itself an aggravation' ... Aggravation is [Penelope] Lively's forte.

(*Observer* book review)

Use with care since purists disapprove of the second usage.

aggression, aggressiveness

aggression always implies a hostile attitude whereas aggressiveness suggests being assertive.

agreement

or concord is the grammatical principle that a singular subject is followed by a singular verb and a singular pronoun, whereas a plural subject is followed by matching plurals.

See **number agreement**. In the following example variation should be plural to match their:

Geographical, social, stylistic and personal variation can be teased out, and their interaction explored.

(introduction to *The Chambers Dictionary* 1998 by Jean Aitchison)

aid and abet

is lawyer's jargon for help.

akimbo

has a precise meaning: with hand on hip and elbow out. So legs that are apart can't be akimbo and nor can arms that are waving about.

à la mode

French for a type of stew (boeuf a la mode); American for served with icecream (apple pie a la mode).

albeit

is formal for although, even if:

The Ardagh I meet does now sleep, albeit...attached all night to an oxygen machine. (*Guardian*)

A level

with cap but no hyphen, for advanced level examination

alga

is the singular of algae.

alibi

from the Latin for elsewhere, has a precise meaning known to all readers of crime thrillers; viewers of police procedurals; detectives, villains and their briefs... It is a suspect's claim that they were somewhere else at the time the crime was committed; by extension an alibi is also the witness who vouches for them. Because it is so widely used and commonly understood in its original sense, alibi is a weak general excuse for failure.

alliteration

repetition of initial sound, should be avoided in serious contexts as in:

Seven people died in a horrific house fire in Huddersfield.
(newspaper report)

all right

not alright, which still looks wrong

allusive

alluding, hinting, is confused with elusive, practising elusion, deceptive.

almost

is misused before adverbs like literally and invariably; see **literally, invariably** and **rhetorical adverbs**.

Alsatian

for a person from Alsace; alsatian is a popular British term for a German shepherd dog.

alternative

although in Latin *alter* means other (of two), it is a superstition that in English you can have only two alternatives. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the word has been used to mean a choice between more than two things.

although, though

there is no difference in meaning between these two words when they introduce a phrase or clause, though the shorter form is more informal. Only 'though' can be used as a tag-on as in: 'It's a bit colloquial, though.'

alumnae, alumni

are the plurals of alumna and alumnus, ex-students of a particular school or college.

amateur(ish)

amateur, as opposed to professional, is not derogatory, but amateurish means slipshod.

Americanisms

yesterday's Americanism is today's standard (British) English, as with raise for bring up and truck for lorry. But where there is a risk of confusion, prefer British usage to American (unless you are writing mainly for Americans). Some differences between British and American usage are given in this book, eg see **appeal**. For lists of differences see *The Economist Style Guide* (sixth edition), the *Hutchinson British—American Dictionary* and the American—English/English—American glossary published by Abson Books London.

The problem should not be exaggerated. All over the world English speakers grow up with American as their second language or an alternative dialect; they are rarely baffled by it. For non-English speakers, however, there are pitfalls, as is shown by this *Guardian* letter:

Lecturing at a foreign university, I had a colleague who was convinced that the American sign Parking-Free Zone meant somewhere drivers could park without paying.

amid

not amidst, but prefer among

amok

not amuck

among

not amongst, which is literary

among, between

something is traditionally divided between two people and among three or more. But Lille lies between, not among, Paris, London and Brussels. And the usage 'divide it between the three of us' is increasingly popular and difficult to object to.

ampersand (&)

use to mean 'and' only in official and company names where the organisation uses it.

analyse

not analyze

ancestor

is confused with descendant:

They [Gibraltarians] ‘want to remain British’ (though that’s a slightly complex concept in a distant sub-colony largely populated by the ancestors of Italians, Greeks and Maltese).

(Guardian)

See **mirror words**.

and, but

there is no reason why these words should not begin a sentence. The belief, encouraged by some English teachers, that this is a breach of literary etiquette is one of the great mysteries.

and...which, who, that

to introduce a clause, needs an earlier which, who or that; ‘and which’ should not follow ‘that’. See **that, which**.

annex, annexe

use annex for the verb; annexe for the noun.

answerphone

is the ordinary spelling; Ansaphone is the name of a particular brand. To avoid confusion, use answering machine.

anticipate

is often misused as a pompous variant of expect (we don't anticipate rain). It is also used by careful writers to mean forestall or act in advance or come before:

On social spending, opinion moved sharply rightwards in the 1970s, anticipating Margaret Thatcher's victory.

(Guardian)

Sometimes people use it both ways, undermining the subtle distinction: here's film director David Cronenberg:

Kafka basically anticipated the whole 20th century... I just always anticipated being an artist.

anti-semitism *see* Semitic

apostrophes

the apostrophe has three uses: to show that something has been left out (don't for do not); to mark a possessive (lamb's liver); and where necessary, to clarify an unusual plural (mind your p's and q's).

With words ending in s, including proper nouns, the apostrophe comes after the s; then an extra s is added if it is sounded (St Thomas's hospital but for Jesus' sake). It's a mistake to put the apostrophe before the s: to call Tony Parsons' book 'Tony Parson's book'. Expressions like two weeks' notice and in two days' time need the apostrophe; for goodness' sake is better with it.

With words like men, women and children the apostrophe goes before the s, as in children's. With names of places and organisations follow their practice (Harrods, Sainsbury's) unless it is obviously illiterate, so never write womens' (apostrophe in the wrong place) or womens (no apostrophe), even if you find the organisation listed this way in the phone book. Menswear, however, is OK.

John o'Groat's in the far north of Scotland is a curiosity. It was originally John o'Groat's house, hence the second apostrophe, but as the house has been dropped from the placename, the apostrophe has tended to go with it. Reference books are divided on whether to keep/restore it.

The most common apostrophe confusion is its/it's. As a possessive its does not take an apostrophe—and nor do his, hers, theirs, yours etc. But when 'it is' is shortened, it becomes 'it's'.

There is no need to use an apostrophe to mark plurals like the 1970s, MPs or Ps and Qs because they are clearly plurals. But p's and q's needs apostrophes. Even this may change: what was once 'do's and don't's' with three apostrophes is now 'dos and don'ts' with one.

appeal

in Britain you appeal against a ruling or judgment; in the US you appeal it.

appendixes

is the plural of appendix, both in books and in the body. The traditional Latin plural appendices (used only of books) is dying out.

appertain

is sometimes used as a formal variation on belong or refer (this comment appertains to him). Worse, it is confused with obtain, meaning apply or hold good, as here:

if the current law on copyright had appertained at the time.

(London Review of Books)

appetizer

is American for first course, starter etc.

appraise, apprise

to appraise is to assess the value of; to apprise is to inform, give notice to:

Governments...[will want]...to be appraised of the lessons.
(*Guardian* corrections)

approx(imately)

use about.

apropos

with or without of after it, the word apropos (from the French *à propos*) is used to mean to the point or in reference to. And it is also used to mean the opposite: incidentally, by the way. See **opposite meanings**.

archaisms

eg abed for in bed, anon for soon, aught for anything, should be avoided unless you want to sound medieval.

arguably

is often used instead of possibly/probably: since these words have more precise meanings, it is better to choose one or the other rather than blur the issue with arguably.

around

if around means about (he earns around £30,000 a year), use about.

arrogate *see* abrogate

artefact

not artifact

artist

not artiste

as

there are several common mistakes in the use of as. In a comparison there's a tendency to lose the second as: 'He is as old, if not older, than his sister.' This doesn't work because you can't say 'as old...than': you have to say 'as old as'. So the sentence becomes: 'He is as old as, if not older than, his sister.' But this sounds very stilted. The more natural-sounding way of saying and writing this is: 'He is as old as his sister—if not older.'

Sometimes in a comparison the verb is left out, which changes the meaning altogether, as here:

While many Northern Irish Catholics found the Provisional IRA campaign as odious as their Protestant neighbours, it tapped deep into a tacit vein of support.

(Guardian)

The writer wants to say that many Catholics hated the IRA as much as the Protestants did—but as it stands the sentence means that the Catholics hated the IRA as much as they hated the Protestants.

In the following example there is conflict between as much and rather than:

I am as much responsible for that, as a writer, rather than Roy.
(footballer Roy Keane's ghostwriter Eamonn Dunphy, writing in the
Observer)

Perhaps this is because Dunphy isn't clear himself whether to share responsibility with Keane or to take it from him.

Another mistake is to introduce the redundant word equally as in: 'He is equally as good as his sister.'

assist

is formal for help.

assure

to give confidence to, is confused with ensure (to make happen) and insure (to arrange insurance).

attaché

needs the accent.

attorney general

no hyphen