Paul Brians

Common Errors in English Usage



William James & Co.

Common Errors in English by Paul Brians

paulbrians@gmail.com

http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/

(Brownie points to anyone who catches inconsistencies between the main site and this version.)

Note that italics are deliberately omitted on this page.

What is an error in English?

The concept of language errors is a fuzzy one. I'll leave to linguists the technical definitions. Here we're concerned only with deviations from the standard use of English as judged by sophisticated users such as professional writers, editors, teachers, and literate executives and personnel officers. The aim of this site is to help you avoid low grades, lost employment opportunities, lost business, and titters of amusement at the way you write or speak.

But isn't one person's mistake another's standard usage?

Often enough, but if your standard usage causes other people to consider you stupid or ignorant, you may want to consider changing it. You have the right to express yourself in any manner you please, but if you wish to communicate effectively you should use nonstandard English only when you intend to, rather than fall into it because you don't know any better.

I'm learning English as a second language. Will this site help me improve my English?

Very likely, though it's really aimed at the most common errors of native speakers. The errors others make in English differ according to the characteristics of their first languages. Speakers of other languages tend to make some specific errors that are uncommon among native speakers, so you may also want to consult sites dealing specifically with English as a second language (see http://www.cln.org/subjects/esl_cur.html and http://esl.about.com/education/adulted/esl/). There is also a Help Desk for ESL students at Washington State University at http://www.wsu.edu/~gordonl/ESL/. An outstanding book you may want to order is Ann Raimes' Keys for Writers. This is not a question-and-answer site for ESL.

Aren't some of these points awfully picky?

This is a relative matter. One person's gaffe is another's peccadillo. Some common complaints about usage strike me as too persnickety, but I'm just covering mistakes in English that happen to bother me. Feel free to create your own page listing your own pet peeves, but I welcome suggestions for additions to these pages.

What gives you the right to say what an error in English is?

I could take the easy way out and say I'm a professor of English and do this sort of thing for a living. True, but my Ph.D. is in comparative literature, not composition or linguistics, and I teach courses in the history of ideas rather than language as such. But I admire good writing and try to encourage it in my students.

I found a word you criticized in the dictionary!

You will find certain words or phrases criticized here listed in dictionaries. Note carefully labels like "dial." (dialectical), "nonstandard," and "obsolete" before assuming that the dictionary is endorsing them. The primary job of a dictionary is to track how people actually use language. Dictionaries differ among themselves on how much guidance to usage they provide; but the goal of a usage guide like this is substantially different: to protect you against patterns which are regarded by substantial numbers of well-educated people as nonstandard.

Why do you discuss mainly American usage?

Because I'm an American, my students are mostly American, most English-speaking Web users are Americans, and American English is quickly becoming an international standard. I am slowly reworking the site to take note of American deviations from standard British practice. However, the job is complicated by the fact that Canadians, Australians, and many others often follow patterns somewhere between the two. If the standard usage where you are differs from what is described here, tell me about it, and if I think it's important to do so, I'll note that fact. Meanwhile, just assume that this site is primarily about American English.

Isn't it oppressive of immigrants and subjugated minorities to insist on the use of standard English?

Language standards can certainly be used for oppressive purposes, but most speakers and writers of all races and classes want to use language in a way that will impress others. The fact is that the world is full of teachers, employers, and other authorities who may penalize you for your nonstandard use of the English language. Feel free to denounce these people if you wish; but if you need their good opinion to get ahead, you'd be wise to learn standard English. Note that I often suggest differing usages as appropriate depending on the setting: spoken vs. written, informal vs. formal; slang is often highly appropriate. In fact, most of the errors discussed on this site are common in the writing of privileged middle-class Americans, and some are characteristic of people with advanced degrees and considerable intellectual attainments. However you come down on this issue, note that the great advantage of an open Web-based educational site like this is that it's voluntary: take what you want and leave the rest. It's interesting that I have received hundreds of messages from non-native speakers thanking me for these pages and none from such people complaining that my pages discriminate against them.

But you made a mistake yourself!

We all do, from time to time. Drop me a line if you think you've found an error in my own writing. If I think you're right, I'll correct it; but be prepared to be disagreed with. If you write me, please don't call me "Brian." My given name is Paul.

For instructions on how to write me, see the bottom of this page.

This resource is copyrighted by Paul Brians. Permission is granted to reprint or photocopy small numbers of it in its entirety or in part for all local nonprofit, educational purposes provided that the author is cited and the URL http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/ is included. As a courtesy, please notify the author if you copy or link to this material. Because the content changes frequently, and I need to maintain control over the site, requests to create Web mirrors of the site are usually declined.

Recommended in "Yahoo Internet Life Magazine," July, 1997, pp. 82-83 and cited as a Yahoo "Site of the Week." It has also been recommended in the pages of "The Weekend Australian," "The Bangkok Post," the "Los Angeles Times," the "Seattle Times," the "Indianapolis Star-Tribune," the "Halifax Chronicle-Herald," Ziff-Davis' "Inside the Internet" newsletter, "Netsurfer Digest," and "The Web" magazine.

100's/hundreds

It looks cheesy to spell "hundreds" as "100's"; and it isn't really logical because "100" doesn't mean "hundred"--it means specifically "one hundred."

360 DEGREES/180 DEGREES

When you turn 360 degrees you've completed a circle and are back where you started. So if you want to describe a position that's diametrically opposed to another, the expression you want is not "360 degrees away" but "180 degrees away."

A/AN

If the word following begins with a vowel sound, the word you want is "an": "Have an apple, Adam." If the word following begins with a consonant, but begins with a vowel sound, you still need "an": "An X-ray will show whether there's a worm in it." It is nonstandard and often considered sloppy speech to utter an "uh" sound in such cases.

When the following word definitely begins with a consonant sound, you need "a": "A snake told me apples enhance mental abilities."

See also "an historic."

A.D.

"A.D." does not mean "after death," as many people suppose. "B.C." stands for the English phrase "before Christ," but "A.D." stands confusingly for a Latin phrase: anno domini ("in the year of the Lord"--the year Jesus was born). If the calendar actually changed with Jesus' death, then what would we do with the years during which he lived? Since Jesus was probably actually born around 6 B.C. or so, the connection of the calendar with him can be misleading.

Many Biblical scholars and historians, and archeologists prefer the less sectarian designations "before the Common Era" (B.C.E.) and "the Common Era" (C.E.).

All of these abbreviations can also be spelled without their periods.

AM/PM

"AM" stands for the Latin phrase "Ante Meridiem"--which means "before noon"--and "PM" stands for "Post Meridiem": "after noon." Although digital clocks routinely label noon "12:00 PM" you should avoid this expression not only because it is incorrect, but because many people will imagine you are talking about midnight instead. The same goes for "12:00 AM." Just say or write "noon" or "midnight" when you mean those precise times.

It is now rare to see periods placed after these abbreviations: "A.M.", but in formal writing it is still preferable to capitalize them, though the lower-case "am" and "pm" are now so popular they are not likely to get you into trouble.

Occasionally computer programs encourage you to write "AM" and "PM" without a space before them, but others will misread your data if you omit the space. The nonstandard pattern of omitting the space is spreading rapidly, and should be avoided in formal writing.

ABJECT

"Abject" is always negative, meaning "lowly" or "hopeless." You can't experience "abject joy" unless you're being deliberately paradoxical.

ABLE TO

People are able to do things, but things are not able to be done: you should not say, "the budget shortfall was able to be solved by selling brownies."

ABOUT

"This isn't about you." What a great rebuke! But conservatives sniff at this sort of abstract use of "about," as in "I'm all about good taste" or "successful truffle-making is about temperature control"; so it's better to avoid it in very formal English.

ABSORBTION/ABSORPTION

Although it's "absorbed" and "absorbing" the correct spelling of the noun is "absorption."

But note that scientists distinguish between "absorption" as the process of swallowing up or sucking in something and "adsorption" as the process by which something adheres to the surface of something else without being assimilated into it. Even technical writers often confuse these two.

ABSTRUSE/OBTUSE

Most people first encounter "obtuse" in geometry class, where it labels an angle of more than 90 degrees. Imagine what sort of blunt arrowhead that kind of angle would make and you will understand why it also has a figurative meaning of "dull, stupid." But people often mix the word up with "abstruse," which means "difficult to understand."

When you mean to criticize something for being needlessly complex or baffling, the word you need is not "obtuse," but "abstruse."

ACADEMIA

Although some academics are undoubtedly nuts, the usual English-language pronunciation of "academia" does not rhyme with "macadamia." The third syllable is pronounced "deem." Just say "academe" and add "ee-yuh."

However, there's an interesting possibility if you go with "ack-uh-DAME-ee-yuh: although some people will sneer at your lack of sophistication, others will assume you're using the Latin pronunciation and being learned.

ACCEDE/EXCEED

If you drive too fast, you exceed the speed limit. "Accede" is a much rarer word meaning "give in," "agree."

ACCENT MARKS

In what follows, "accent mark" will be used in a loose sense to include all diacritical marks that guide pronunciation. Operating systems and programs differ in how they produce accent marks, but it's worth learning how yours works. Writing them in by hand afterwards looks amateurish.

Words adopted from foreign languages sometimes carry their accent marks with them, as in "fiance" "protege," and "cliche." As words become more at home in English, they tend to shed the marks: "Cafe" is often spelled "cafe." Unfortunately, "resume" seems to be losing its marks one at a time (see under "vita/vitae").

Many computer users have not learned their systems well enough to understand how to produce the desired accent and often insert an

apostrophe (curled) or foot mark (straight) after the accented letter instead: "cafe'." This is both ugly and incorrect. The same error is commonly seen on storefront signs.

So far we've used examples containing acute (right-leaning) accent marks. French and Italian (but not Spanish) words often contain grave (left-leaning) accents; in Italian it's a caffe. It is important not to substitute one kind of accent for the other.

The diaeresis over a letter signifies that it is to be pronounced as a separate syllable: "noel" and "naive" are sometimes spelled with a diaeresis, for instance. The umlaut, which looks identical, modifies the sound of a vowel, as in German Fraulein (girl), where the accent mark changes the "frow" sound of Frau (woman) to "froy." Rock groups like "Blue Oyster Cult" scattered umlauts about nonsensically to create an exotic look.

Spanish words not completely assimilated into English like pinata and nino retain the tilde, which tells you that an "N" is to be pronounced with a "Y" sound after it. In English-language publications accent marks are often discarded, but the acute and grave accents are the ones most often retained.

[Note: the accent marks in this entry may not display properly on all operating systems. Consult the page on accent marks to see them properly.]

ACCEPT/EXCEPT

If you offer me Godiva chocolates I will gladly accept them--except for the candied violet ones. Just remember that the "X" in "except" excludes things--they tend to stand out, be different. In contrast, just look at those two cozy "Cs" snuggling up together. Very accepting. And be careful; when typing "except" it often comes out "expect."

ACCESS/GET ACCESS TO

"Access" is one of many nouns that's been turned into a verb in recent years. Conservatives object to phrases like "you can access your account online." Substitute "use," "reach," or "get access to" if you want to please them.

ACCESSORY

There's an "ack" sound at the beginning of this word, though some mispronounce it as if the two "C's" were to be sounded the same as the two "SS's."

ACCIDENTLY/ACCIDENTALLY

You can remember this one by remembering how to spell "accidental." There are quite a few words with -ally suffixes (like "incidentally") which are not to be confused with words that have "-ly" suffixes (like "independently"). "Incidental" is a word, but "independental" is not.

ACCURATE/PRECISE

In ordinary usage, "accurate" and "precise" are often used as rough synonyms, but scientists like to distinguish between them. Someone could say that a snake is over a meter long and be accurate (the snake really does exceed one meter in length), but that is not a precise measurement. To be precise, the measurement would have to be more exact: the snake is 1.23 meters long. The same distinction applies in scientific contexts to the related words "accuracy" and "precision."

ACRONYMS AND APOSTROPHES

One unusual modern use of the apostrophe is in plural acronyms, like "ICBM's" "NGO's" and "CD's". Since this pattern violates the rule that apostrophes are not used before an S indicating a plural, many people object to it. It is also perfectly legitimate to write "CDs," etc. See also "50's." But the use of apostrophes with initialisms like "learn your ABC's and "mind your P's and Q's" is now so universal as to be acceptable in almost any context.

Note that "acronym" was used originally only to label pronounceable abbreviations like "NATO," but is now generally applied to all sorts of initialisms. Be aware that some people consider this extended definition of "acronym" to be an error.

ACROSSED/ACROSS

The chicken may have crossed the road, but did so by walking across it.

ACTIONABLE/DOABLE

"Actionable" is a technical term referring to something that provides grounds for a legal action or lawsuit. People in the business world have begun using it as a fancy synonym for "doable" or "feasible." This is both pretentious and confusing.

ACTUAL FACT/ACTUALLY

"In actual fact" is an unnecessarily complicated way of saying "actually."

AD NAUSEUM/AD NAUSEAM

Seeing how often "ad nauseam" is misspelled makes some people want to throw up.

ADD/AD

"Advertisement" is abbreviated "ad," not "add."

ADAPT/ADOPT

You can adopt a child or a custom or a law; in all of these cases you

are making the object of the adoption your own, accepting it. If you adapt something, however, you are changing it.

ADDICTING/ADDICTIVE

Do you find beer nuts "addicting" or "addictive"? "Addicting" is a perfectly legitimate word, but much less common than "addictive," and some people will scowl at you if you use it.

ADMINISTER/MINISTER

You can minister to someone by administering first aid. Note how the "ad" in "administer resembles "aid" in order to remember the correct form of the latter phrase. "Minister" as a verb always requires "to" following it.

ADMINISTRATE/ADMINISTER

Although it is very popular with administrators and others, many people scorn "administrate" as an unnecessary substitute for the more common verb form "administer."

ADULTRY/ADULTERY

"Adultery" is often misspelled "adultry," as if it were something every adult should try. This spelling error is likely to get you snickered at. The term does not refer to all sorts of illicit sex: at least one of the partners involved has to be married for the relationship to be adulterous.

ADVANCE/ADVANCED

When you hear about something in advance, earlier than other people, you get advance notice or information. "Advanced" means "complex, sophisticated" and doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the revealing of secrets.

ADVERSE/AVERSE

The word "adverse" turns up most frequently in the phrase "adverse circumstances," meaning difficult circumstances, circumstances which act as an adversary; but people often confuse this word with "averse," a much rarer word, meaning having a strong feeling against, or aversion toward.

ADVICE/ADVISE

"Advice" is the noun, "advise" the verb. When Ann Landers advises people, she gives them advice.

ADVISER/ADVISOR

"Adviser" and "advisor" are equally fine spellings. There is no distinction between them.

ADVOCATE FOR/ADVOCATE

When they are acting as advocates for a cause, people often say they are "advocating for"--say--traffic safety. This is not as widely accepted as "campaigning for" or "working toward." Saying you are "advocating for the blind" leaves a lot of listeners wondering what it is you advocate for them. If you can substitute "advocate" for "advocate for," you should do so: "I advocate for higher pay for teachers" becomes "I advocate higher pay for teachers."

AESTHETIC/ASCETIC

People often encounter these two words first in college, and may confuse one with the other although they have almost opposite connotations. "Aesthetic" (also spelled "esthetic") has to do with beauty, whereas "ascetic" has to do with avoiding pleasure, including presumably the pleasure of looking at beautiful things.

St. Francis had an ascetic attitude toward life, whereas Oscar Wilde had an esthetic attitude toward life.

AFFECT/EFFECT

There are five distinct words here. When "affect" is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is usually a verb meaning "have an influence on": "The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act."

Occasionally a pretentious person is said to affect an artificial air of sophistication. Speaking with a borrowed French accent or ostentatiously wearing a large diamond ear stud might be an affectation. In this sort of context, "affect" means "to make a display of or deliberately cultivate."

Another unusual meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning "emotion." In this case the word is used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists-- people who normally know how to spell it.

The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: "effect." This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: "When I left the stove on, the effect was that the house filled with smoke." When you affect a situation, you have an effect on it.

The less common is a verb meaning "to create": "I'm trying to effect a change in the way we purchase widgets." No wonder people are confused. Note especially that the proper expression is not "take affect" but "take effect"--become effective. Hey, nobody ever said English was logical: just memorize it and get on with your life.

The stuff in your purse? Your personal effects.

AFFLUENCE/EFFLUENCE

Wealth brings affluence; sewage is effluence.

AFRICAN AMERICAN

AFRICAN AMERICAN

There have been several polite terms used in the US to refer to persons of African descent: "colored," "negro," "Black," "Afro-American," and "African American." "Colored" is definitely dated, though "people of color" is now widely used with a broader meaning, including anyone with non-European ancestry, sometimes even when their skin is not discernibly darker than that of a typical European. A few contemporary writers like to defy convention by referring to themselves as "negro." "Black," formerly a proudly assertive label claimed by young radicals in the 1960s, is now seen by some people as a racist insult. Some people insist on capitalizing "Black," but others prefer "black." The safest and most common neutral term is "African American," but Americans sometimes misuse it to label people of African descent living in other countries or even actual Africans. To qualify as an "African American" you have to be an American.

Although it is traditional to hyphenate "African-American," "Irish-American," "Cuban-American," etc., there is a recent trend toward omitting the hyphen, possibly in reaction to the belittling phrase "hyphenated Americans." However, some styles still call for the hyphen when the phrase is used adjectivally, so that you might be an African American who enjoys African-American writers. Omitting the hyphen may puzzle some readers, but it's not likely to offend anyone.

AFTERALL/AFTER ALL

"After all" is always two words.

AFTERWARDS/AFTERWORDS

Like "towards," "forwards," and "homewards," "afterwards" ends with -wards.

"Afterwords," are sometimes the explanatory essays at the ends of books, or speeches uttered at the end of plays or other works. They are made up of words.

AGNOSTIC/ATHEIST

Both agnostics and atheists are regularly criticized as illogical by people who don't understand the meaning of these terms. An agnostic is a person who believes that the existence of a god or gods cannot be proven or known. Agnosticism is a statement about the limits of human knowledge. It is an error to suppose that agnostics perpetually hesitate between faith and doubt: they are confident they cannot know the ultimate truth. Similarly, atheists believe there are no gods. Atheists need not be able to disprove the existence of gods to be consistent just

as believers do not need to be able to prove that gods do exist in order to be regarded as religious. Both attitudes have to do with beliefs, not knowledge.

"Agnostic" is often used metaphorically of any refusal to make a judgment, usually on the basis of a lack of evidence; people can be agnostic about acupuncture, for instance, if they believe there is not enough evidence one way or another to decide its effectiveness.

AGREEANCE/AGREEMENT

When you agree with someone you are in agreement.

AHOLD/HOLD

In standard English you just "get hold" of something or somebody.

AIN'T

"Ain't" has a long and vital history as a substitute for "isn't," "aren't" and so on. It was originally formed from a contraction of "am not" and is still commonly used in that sense. Even though it has been universally condemned as the classic "mistake" in English, everyone uses it occasionally as part of a joking phrase or to convey a down-to-earth quality. But if you always use it instead of the more "proper" contractions you're sure to be branded as uneducated.

AISLE/ISLE

An aisle is a narrow passageway, especially in a church or store; an isle is an island. Propose to the person you're stranded on a desert isle with and maybe you'll march down the aisle together after you're rescued.

ALL BE IT/ALBEIT

"Albeit" is a single word meaning "although": "Rani's recipe called for a tablespoon of saffron, which made it very tasty, albeit rather expensive." It should not be broken up into three separate words as "all be it," just as "although" is not broken up into "all though."

ALL

Put this word where it belongs in the sentence. In negative statements, don't write "All the pictures didn't show her dimples" when you mean "The pictures didn't all show her dimples."

ALL AND ALL/ALL IN ALL

"The dog got into the fried chicken, we forgot the sunscreen, and the kids started whining at the end, but all in all the picnic was a success." "All in all" is a traditional phrase which can mean "all things considered," "after all," or "nevertheless." People unfamiliar with the traditional wording often change it to "all and all," but this

is nonstandard.

ALL FOR NOT/ALL FOR NAUGHT

"Naught" means "nothing," and the phrase "all for naught" means "all for nothing." This is often misspelled "all for not" and occasionally "all for knot."

ALL GOES WELL/AUGURS WELL

Some folks who don't understand the word "augur" (to foretell based on omens) try to make sense of the common phrase "augurs well" by mangling it into "all goes well." "Augurs well" is synonymous with "bodes well."

ALL OF THE SUDDEN/ALL OF A SUDDEN

An unexpected event happens not "all of the sudden" but "all of a sudden."

ALL READY/ALREADY

"All ready" is a phrase meaning "completely prepared," as in "As soon as I put my coat on, I'll be all ready." "Already," however, is an adverb used to describe something that has happened before a certain time, as in "What do you mean you'd rather stay home? I've already got my coat on."

ALLEGED, ALLEGEDLY

Seeking to avoid prejudging the facts in a crime and protect the rights of the accused, reporters sometimes over-use "alleged" and "allegedly." If it is clear that someone has been robbed at gunpoint, it's not necessary to describe it as an alleged robbery nor the victim as an alleged victim. This practice insultingly casts doubt on the honesty of the victim and protects no one. An accused perpetrator is one whose guilt is not yet established, so it is redundant to speak of an "alleged accused." If the perpetrator has not yet been identified, it's pointless to speak of the search for an "alleged perpetrator."

ALLITERATE/ILLITERATE

Pairs of words which begin with the same sound are said to alliterate, like "wild and wooly." Those who can't read are illiterate.

ALLS/ALL

"Alls I know is . . ." may result from anticipating the "S" in "is," but the standard expression is "All I know is. . . ."

ALLUDE/ELUDE

You can allude (refer) to your daughter's membership in the honor society when boasting about her, but a criminal tries to elude (escape)

captivity. There is no such word as "illude."

ALLUDE/REFER

To allude to something is to refer to it indirectly, by suggestion. If you are being direct and unambiguous, you refer to the subject rather than alluding to it.

ALLUSION/ILLUSION

An allusion is a reference, something you allude to: "Her allusion to flowers reminded me that Valentine's Day was coming." In that English paper, don't write "literary illusions" when you mean "allusions." A mirage, hallucination, or a magic trick is an illusion. (Doesn't being fooled just make you ill?)

ALLUSIVE/ELUSIVE/ILLUSIVE

When a lawyer alludes to his client's poor mother, he is being allusive. When the mole keeps eluding the traps you've set in the garden, it's being elusive. We also speak of matters that are difficult to understand, identify, or remember as elusive. Illusions can be illusive, but we more often refer to them as illusory.

ALMOST

Like "only," "almost" must come immediately before the word or phrase it modifies: "She almost gave a million dollars to the museum" means something quite different from "She gave almost a million dollars to the museum." Right? So you shouldn't write, "There was almost a riotous reaction when the will was read" when what you mean is "There was an almost riotous reaction."

ALONG THE SAME VEIN/IN THE SAME VEIN, ALONG THE SAME LINE

The expressions "in the same vein" and "along the same line" mean the same thing (on the same subject), but those who cross-pollinate them to create the hybrid "along the same vein" sound a little odd to those who are used to the standard expressions.

ALOT/A LOT

Perhaps this common spelling error began because there does exist in English a word spelled "allot" which is a verb meaning to apportion or grant. The correct form, with "a" and "lot" separated by a space is perhaps not often encountered in print because formal writers usually use other expressions such as "a great deal," "often," etc.

You shouldn't write "alittle" either. It's "a little."

ALOUD/ALLOWED

If you think Grandma allowed the kids to eat too much ice cream, you'd

better not say so aloud, or her feelings will be hurt. "Aloud" means "out loud" and refers to sounds (most often speech) that can be heard by others. But this word is often misused when people mean "allowed," meaning "permitted."

ALRIGHT/ALL RIGHT

The correct form of this phrase has become so rare in the popular press that many readers have probably never noticed that it is actually two words. But if you want to avoid irritating traditionalists you'd better tell them that you feel "all right" rather than "alright."

ALTAR/ALTER

An altar is that platform at the front of a church or in a temple; to alter something is to change it.

ALTERIOR/ULTERIOR

When you have a concealed reason for doing something, it's an ulterior motive.

ALTERNATE/ALTERNATIVE

Although UK authorities disapprove, in US usage, "alternate" is frequently an adjective, substituted for the older "alternative": "an alternate route." "Alternate" can also be a noun; a substitute delegate is, for instance, called an "alternate." But when you're speaking of "every other" as in "our club meets on alternate Tuesdays," you can't substitute "alternative."

ALTOGETHER/ALL TOGETHER

"Altogether" is an adverb meaning "completely," "entirely." For example: "When he first saw the examination questions, he was altogether baffled." "All together," in contrast, is a phrase meaning "in a group." For example: "The wedding guests were gathered all together in the garden." Undressed people are said in informal speech to be "in the altogether" (perhaps a shortening of the phrase "altogether naked").

ALUMNUS/ALUMNI

We used to have "alumnus" (male singular), "alumni" (male plural), "alumna" (female singular) and "alumnae" (female plural); but the latter two are now popular only among older female graduates, with the first two terms becoming unisex. However, it is still important to distinguish between one alumnus and a stadium full of alumni. Never say, "I am an alumni" if you don't want to cast discredit on your school. Many avoid the whole problem by resorting to the informal abbreviation "alum."

AMATURE/AMATEUR

Most of the words we've borrowed from the French that have retained their "-eur" endings are pretty sophisticated, like "restaurateur"

(notice, no "N") and "auteur" (in film criticism), but "amateur" attracts amateurish spelling.

AMBIGUOUS/AMBIVALENT

Even though the prefix "ambi-" means "both," "ambiguous" has come to mean "unclear," "undefined," while "ambivalent" means "torn between two opposing feelings or views." If your attitude cannot be defined into two polarized alternatives, then you're ambiguous, not ambivalent.

AMBIVALENT/INDIFFERENT

If you feel pulled in two directions about some issue, you're ambivalent about it; but if you have no particular feelings about it, you're indifferent.

AMERICAN

Some Canadians and many Latin Americans are understandably irritated when US citizens refer to themselves simply as "Americans." Canadians (and only Canadians) use the term "North American" to include themselves in a two-member group with their neighbor to the south, though geographers usually include Mexico in North America. When addressing an international audience composed largely of people from the Americas, it is wise to consider their sensitivities.

However, it is pointless to try to ban this usage in all contexts. Outside of the Americas, "American" is universally understood to refer to things relating to the US. There is no good substitute. Brazilians, Argentineans, and Canadians all have unique terms to refer to themselves. None of them refer routinely to themselves as "Americans" outside of contexts like the "Organization of American States." Frank Lloyd Wright promoted "Usonian," but it never caught on. For better or worse, "American" is standard English for "citizen or resident of the United States of America."

AMONGST/AMONG

Although in America "amongst" has not dated nearly as badly as "whilst," it is still less common in standard speech than "among." The -st forms are still widely used in the UK.

AMORAL/IMMORAL

"Amoral" is a rather technical word meaning "unrelated to morality." When you mean to denounce someone's behavior, call it "immoral."

AMOUNT/NUMBER

This is a vast subject. I will try to limit the number of words I expend on it so as not to use up too great an amount of space. The confusion between the two categories of words relating to amount and number is so pervasive that those of us who still distinguish between them constitute an endangered species; but if you want to avoid our ire, learn the

difference. Amount words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; number words to things that can be counted.

In the second sentence above, it would have been improper to write "the amount of words" because words are discrete entities which can be counted, or numbered.

Here is a handy chart to distinguish the two categories of words:

amount vs. number quantity vs. number little vs. few less vs. fewer much vs. many

You can eat fewer cookies, but you drink less milk. If you eat too many cookies, people will probably think you've had too much dessert. If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use number words. Even a substance which is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn't drink too much wine, but you should also avoid drinking too many glasses of wine. Note that here you are counting glasses. They can be numbered.

The most common mistake of this kind is to refer to an "amount" of people instead of a "number" of people.

Just to confuse things, "more" can be used either way: you can eat more cookies and drink more milk.

Exceptions to the less/fewer pattern are references to units of time and money, which are usually treated as amounts: less than an hour, less than five dollars. Only when you are referring to specific coins or bills would you use fewer: "I have fewer than five state quarters to go to make my collection complete."

AMPITHEATER/AMPHITHEATER

The classy way to pronounce the first syllable of this word is "amf-," but if you choose the more popular "amp-" remember that you still have to include the H after the P when spelling it. UK-standard writers spell it "amphitheatre," of course.

AN HISTORIC/A HISTORIC

You should use "an" before a word beginning with an "H" only if the "H" is not pronounced: "An honest effort"; it's properly "a historic event" though many sophisticated speakers somehow prefer the sound of "an historic," so that version is not likely to get you into any real trouble.

ANCESTOR/DESCENDANT

When Albus Dumbledore said that Lord Voldemort was "the last remaining ancestor of Salazar Slytherin," more than one person noted that he had made a serious verbal bumble; and in later printings of Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets author J. K. Rowling corrected that to "last remaining descendant." People surprisingly often confuse these two terms

with each other. Your great-grandmother is your ancestor; you are her descendant.

ANECDOTE/ANTIDOTE

A humorist relates "anecdotes." The doctor prescribes "antidotes" for children who have swallowed poison. Laughter may be the best medicine, but that's no reason to confuse these two with each other.

AND ALSO/AND, ALSO

"And also" is redundant; say just "and" or "also."

AND/OR

The legal phrase "and/or," indicating that you can either choose between two alternatives or choose both of them, has proved irresistible in other contexts and is now widely acceptable though it irritates some readers as jargon. However, you can logically use it only when you are discussing choices which may or may not both be done: "Bring chips and/or beer." It's very much overused where simple "or" would do, and it would be wrong to say, "you can get to the campus for this morning's meeting on a bike and/or in a car." Choosing one eliminates the possibility of the other, so this isn't an and/or situation.

ANGEL/ANGLE

People who want to write about winged beings from Heaven often miscall them "angles." A triangle has three angles. The Heavenly Host is made of angels. Just remember the adjectival form: "angelic." If you pronounce it aloud you'll be reminded that the E comes before the L.

ANOTHER WORDS/IN OTHER WORDS

When you reword a statement, you can preface it by saying "in other words." The phrase is not "another words."

ANTIHERO

In literature, theater, and film, an antihero is a central character who is not very admirable: weak, lazy, incompetent, or mean-spirited. However, antiheroes are rarely actually evil, and you should not use this word as a synonym for "villain" if you want to get a good grade on your English lit paper.

ANXIOUS/EAGER

Most people use "anxious" interchangeably with "eager," but its original meaning had to do with worrying, being full of anxiety. Perfectly correct phrases like, "anxious to please" obscure the nervous tension implicit in this word and lead people to say less correct things like "I'm anxious for Christmas morning to come so I can open my presents." Traditionalists frown on anxiety-free anxiousness. Say instead you are eager for or looking forward to a happy event.

ANY

Instead of saying "he was the worst of any of the dancers," say "he was the worst of the dancers."

ANY WHERE/ANYWHERE

"Anywhere," like "somewhere" and "nowhere," is always one word.

ANYMORE/ANY MORE

In the first place, the traditional (though now uncommon) spelling is as two words: "any more" as in "We do not sell bananas any more." In the second place, it should not be used at the beginning of a sentence as a synonym for "nowadays." In certain dialects of English it is common to utter phrases like "anymore you have to grow your own if you want really ripe tomatoes," but this is guaranteed to jolt listeners who aren't used to it. Even if they can't quite figure out what's wrong, they'll feel that your speech is vaguely clunky and awkward. "Any more" always needs to be used as part of an expression of negation except in questions like "Do you have any more bananas?" Now you won't make that mistake any more, will you?

ANYTIME/ANY TIME

Though it is often compressed into a single word by analogy with "anywhere" and similar words, "any time" is traditionally a two-word phrase.

ANYWAYS/ANYWAY

"Anyways" at the beginning of a sentence usually indicates that the speaker has resumed a narrative thread: "Anyways, I told Matilda that guy was a lazy bum before she ever married him." It also occurs at the end of phrases and sentences, meaning "in any case": "He wasn't all that good-looking anyways." A slightly less rustic quality can be imparted to these sentences by substituting the more formal "anyway." Neither expression is a good idea in formal written English. The two-word phrase "any way" has many legitimate uses, however: "Is there any way to prevent the impending disaster?"

APART/A PART

Paradoxically, the one-word form implies separation while the two-word form implies union. Feuding roommates decide to live apart. Their time together may be a part of their life they will remember with some bitterness.

APIECE/A PIECE

When you mean "each" the expression is "apiece": these pizzas are really cheap--only ten dollars apiece." But when "piece" actually refers to a piece of something, the required two-word expression is "a piece ":

"This pizza is really expensive--they sell it by the slice for ten dollars a piece."

Despite misspellings in popular music, the expression is not "down the road apiece"; it's "down the road a piece."

APPAULED/APPALLED

Those of us named Paul are appalled at the misspelling of this word. No U, two L's please. And it's certainly not "uphauled"!

APOSTROPHES

First let's all join in a hearty curse of the grammarians who inserted the wretched apostrophe into possessives in the first place. It was all a mistake. Our ancestors used to write "Johns hat" meaning "the hat of John" without the slightest ambiguity. However, some time in the Renaissance certain scholars decided that the simple "s" of possession must have been formed out of a contraction of the more "proper" "John his hat." Since in English we mark contractions with an apostrophe, they did so, and we were stuck with the stupid "John's hat." Their error can be a handy reminder though: if you're not sure whether a noun ending in "s" should be followed by an apostrophe, ask yourself whether you could plausibly substitute "his" or "her" for the S.

The exception to this pattern involves personal pronouns indicating possession like "his," "hers," and "its." For more on this point, see "its/it's."

Get this straight once and for all: when the S is added to a word simply to make it a plural, no apostrophe is used (except in expressions where letters or numerals are treated like words, like "mind your P's and Q's" and "learn your ABC's").

Apostrophes are also used to indicate omitted letters in real contractions: "do not" becomes "don't."

Why can't we all agree to do away with the wretched apostrophe? Because its two uses--contraction and possession--have people so thoroughly confused that they are always putting in apostrophes where they don't belong, in simple plurals ("cucumber's for sale") and family names when they are referred to collectively ("the Smith's").

The practice of putting improper apostrophes in family names on signs in front yards is an endless source of confusion. "The Brown's" is just plain wrong. (If you wanted to suggest "the residence of the Browns" you would have to write "Browns'," with the apostrophe after the S, which is there to indicate a plural number, not as an indication of possession.) If you simply want to indicate that a family named Brown lives here, the sign out front should read simply "The Browns." When a name ends in an S you need to add an ES to make it plural: "the Adamses."

No apostrophes for simple plural names or names ending in S OK? I get irritated when people address me as "Mr. Brian's." What about when

plural names are used to indicate possession? "The Browns' cat" is standard (the second S is "understood"), though some prefer "the Browns's cat." The pattern is the same with names ending in S: "the Adamses' cat" or--theoretically--"the Adamses's cat," though that would be mighty awkward.

Apostrophes are also misplaced in common plural nouns on signs: "Restrooms are for customer's use only." Who is this privileged customer to deserve a private bathroom? The sign should read "for customers' use."

For ordinary nouns, the pattern for adding an apostrophe to express possession is straightforward. For singular nouns, add an apostrophe plus an S: "the duck's bill." If the singular noun happens to end in one S or even two, you still just add an apostrophe and an S: "the boss's desk."

For plural nouns which end in S, however, add only the apostrophe: "the ducks' bills." But if a plural noun does not end in S, then you follow the same pattern as for singular nouns by adding an apostrophe and an S: "the children's menu."

It is not uncommon to see the "S" wrongly apostrophized even in verbs, as in the mistaken "He complain's a lot."

See also "acronyms and apostrophes."

APPRAISE/APPRISE

When you estimate the value of something, you appraise it. When you inform people of a situation, you apprise them of it.

APROPOS/APPROPRIATE

"Apropos," (anglicized from the French phrase "a propos") means relevant, connected with what has gone before; it should not be used as an all-purpose substitute for "appropriate." It would be inappropriate, for example, to say "Your tuxedo was perfectly apropos for the opera gala." Even though it's not pronounced, be careful not to omit the final "S" in spelling "apropos."

AROUND/ABOUT

Lots of people think it's just nifty to say things like "We're having ongoing discussions around the proposed merger." This strikes some of us as irritating and pointless jargon. We feel it should be "discussions about" rather than "around."

ARTHURITIS/ARTHRITIS

If there were such a word as "arthuritis" it might mean the overwhelming desire to pull swords out of stones; but that ache in your joints is caused by "arthritis."

ARTIC/ARCTIC

Although some brand names have incorporated this popular error, remember that the Arctic Circle is an arc. By the way, Ralph Vaughan Williams called his suite drawn from the score of the film "Scott of the Antarctic," the "Sinfonia Antartica," but that's Italian, not English.

ARTISANAL/ARTESIAN

For the past half-century foodies have referred to foods and drinks made in small batches by hand using traditional methods as artisanal--made by artisans: workers in handicrafts. It has also been extended to a wide variety of other handmade products. Dictionaries agree that the word should be pronounced "ARR-tizz-uh-nul" with the accent on the first syllable and the second syllable rhyming with "fizz." Just say "artisan" and add "-ul."

Diners and restaurant workers alike commonly confuse the pronunciation of its first three syllables with that of "artesian"--"arr-TEE-zhun"--which is an adjective to describe water which spurts out of the earth under natural pressure. In this word the accent falls on the second syllable, pronounced like "tea." A spring such as this is called on "artesian spring" or "artesian well."

If you hand-bottle water from a natural spring in your back yard I suppose you could label the result artisanal artesian water.

AS BEST AS/AS BEST

You can try to be as good as you can be, but it's not standard to say that you do something "as best as you can." You need to eliminate the second "as" when "good" changes to "best." You can try to do something as best you can. You can also do the best that you can (or even better, the best you can).

Unlike asbestos removal, "as best as" removal is easy, and you don't have to wear a hazmat suit.

AS FAR AS

Originally people used to say things like "As far as music is concerned, I especially love Baroque opera." Recently they have begun to drop the "is concerned" part of the phrase. Perhaps this shift was influenced by confusion with a similar phrase, "as for." "As for money, I don't have any," is fine; "As far as money, I don't have any," is clumsy.

AS FOLLOW/AS FOLLOWS

"My birthday requests are as follows." This standard phrase doesn't change number when the items to follow grow from one to many. It's never correct to say "as follow."

AS OF YET/YET

"As of yet" is a windy and pretentious substitute for plain old English "yet" or "as yet," an unjustified extension of the pattern in sentences like "as of Friday the 27th of May."

AS PER/IN ACCORDANCE WITH

"Enclosed is the shipment of #2 toggle bolts as per your order of June 14" writes the businessman, unaware that not only is the "as" redundant, he is sounding very old-fashioned and pretentious. The meaning is "in accordance with," or "in response to the request made;" but it is better to avoid these cumbersome substitutes altogether: "Enclosed is the shipment of bolts you ordered June 14."

AS SUCH

The expression "as such" has to refer to some status mentioned earlier. "The CEO was a former drill sergeant, and as such expected everyone to obey his orders instantly." In this case "such" refers back to "former drill sergeant." But often people only imply that which is referred to, as in "The CEO had a high opinion of himself and as such expected everyone to obey his orders instantly." Here the "such" cannot logically refer back to "opinion." Replace "as such" with "therefore."

ASCARED/SCARED

The misspelling "ascared" is probably influenced by the spelling of the synonym "afraid, " but the standard English word is "scared."

ASCRIBE/SUBSCRIBE

If you agree with a theory or belief, you subscribe to it, just as you subscribe to a magazine.

Ascribe is a very different word. If you ascribe a belief to someone, you are attributing the belief to that person, perhaps wrongly.

ASOCIAL/ANTISOCIAL

Someone who doesn't enjoy socializing at parties might be described as either "asocial" or "antisocial"; but "asocial" is too mild a term to describe someone who commits an antisocial act like planting a bomb. "Asocial" suggests indifference to or separation from society, whereas "anti-social" more often suggests active hostility toward society.

ASPECT/RESPECT

When used to refer to different elements of or perspectives on a thing or idea, these words are closely related, but not interchangeable. It's "in all respects," not "in all aspects." Similarly, one can say "in some respects" but not "in some aspects." One says "in this respect," not "in this aspect. " One looks at all "aspects" of an issue, not at all "respects."

ASSURE/ENSURE/INSURE

To "assure" a person of something is to make him or her confident of it. According to Associated Press style, to "ensure" that something happens is to make certain that it does, and to "insure" is to issue an insurance policy. Other authorities, however, consider "ensure" and "insure" interchangeable. To please conservatives, make the distinction. However, it is worth noting that in older usage these spellings were not clearly distinguished.

European "life assurance" companies take the position that all policy-holders are mortal and someone will definitely collect, thus assuring heirs of some income. American companies tend to go with "insurance" for coverage of life as well as of fire, theft, etc.

ASTERICK/ASTERISK

Some people not only spell this word without the second S, they say it that way too. It comes from Greek asteriskos: "little star." Tisk, tisk, remember the "-isk"; "asterick" is icky.

In countries where the Asterix comics are popular, that spelling gets wrongly used for "asterisk" as well.

ASTROLOGY/ASTRONOMY

Modern astronomers consider astrology an outdated superstition. You'll embarrass yourself if you use the term "astrology" to label the scientific study of the cosmos. In writing about history, however, you may have occasion to note that ancient astrologers, whose main goal was to peer into the future, incidentally did some sound astronomy as they studied the positions and movements of celestial objects.

ASWELL/AS WELL

No matter how you use it, the expression "as well" is always two words, despite the fact that many people seem to think it should be spelled "aswell." Examples: "I don't like plastic trees as well as real ones for Christmas." "Now that we've opened our stockings, let's open our other presents as well."

AT ALL

Some of us are irritated when a grocery checker asks "Do you want any help out with that at all?" "At all" is traditionally used in negative contexts: "Can't you give me any help at all?" The current pattern of using the phrase in positive offers of help unintentionally suggests aid reluctantly given or minimal in extent. As a way of making yourself sound less polite than you intend, it ranks right up there with "no problem" instead of "you're welcome."

ATM machine/ATM

"ATM" means "Automated Teller Machine," so if you say "ATM machine" you are really saying "Automated Teller Machine machine."

ATHIEST/ATHEIST

An atheist is the opposite of a theist. "Theos" is Greek for "god." Make sure the "TH" is followed immediately by an "E."

ATHLETE

Tired of people stereotyping you as a dummy just because you're a jock? One way to impress them is to pronounce "athlete" properly, with just two syllables, as "ATH-leet" instead of using the common mispronunciation "ATH-uh-leet."

ATTAIN/OBTAIN

"Attain" means "reach" and "obtain" means "get." You attain a mountaintop, but obtain a rare baseball card. "Attain" usually implies a required amount of labor or difficulty; nothing is necessarily implied about the difficulty of obtaining that card. Maybe you just found it in your brother's dresser drawer.

Some things you obtain can also be attained. If you want to emphasize how hard you worked in college, you might say you attained your degree; but if you want emphasize that you have a valid degree that qualifies you for a certain job, you might say you obtained it. If you just bought it from a diploma mill for fifty bucks, you definitely only obtained it.

ATTRIBUTE/CONTRIBUTE

When trying to give credit to someone, say that you attribute your success to their help, not contribute. (Of course, a politician may attribute his success to those who contribute to his campaign fund, but probably only in private.)

AUGUR/AUGER

An augur was an ancient Roman prophet, and as a verb the word means "foretell"--"their love augurs well for a successful marriage." Don't mix this word up with "auger," a tool for boring holes. Some people mishear the phrase "augurs well" as "all goes well" and mistakenly use that instead.

AURAL/ORAL

"Aural" has to do with things you hear, "oral" with things you say, or relating to your mouth.

AVAIDABLE/AVAILABLE

Many people mispronounce and misspell "available" as "avaidable," whose peculiar spelling seems to be influenced by "avoidable," a word which has opposite connotations.

"Avaidable" is avoidable; avoid it.

AVENGE/REVENGE

When you try to get vengeance for people who've been wronged, you want to avenge them. You can also avenge a wrong itself: "He avenged the murder by taking vengeance on the killer." Substituting "revenge" for "avenge" in such contexts is very common, but frowned on by some people. They feel that if you seek revenge in the pursuit of justice you want to avenge wrongs; not revenge them.

AVOCATION/VOCATION

Your avocation is just your hobby; don't mix it up with your job: your vocation.

AWAY/A WAY

"Jessica commented on my haircut in a way that made me think maybe I shouldn't have let my little sister do it for me." In this sort of context, "a way" should always be two distinct words, though many people use the single word "away" instead. If you're uncertain, try substituting another word for "way": "in a manner that," "in a style that." If the result makes sense, you need the two-word phrase. Then you can tell Jessica to just go away.

AWE, SHUCKS/AW, SHUCKS

"Aw, shucks," is a traditional folksy expression of modesty. An "aw-shucks" kind of person declines to accept compliments. "Aw" is an interjection roughly synonymous with "oh." "Awe" is a noun which most often means "amazed admiration." So many people have begun to misspell the familiar phrase "awe, shucks," that some writers think they are being clever when they link it to the current expression "shock and awe." Instead, they reveal their confusion.

AWHILE/A WHILE

When "awhile" is spelled as a single word, it is an adverb meaning "for a time" ("stay awhile"); but when "while" is the object of a prepositional phrase, like "Lend me your monkey wrench for a while" the "while" must be separated from the "a." (But if the preposition "for" were lacking in this sentence, "awhile" could be used in this way: "Lend me your monkey wrench awhile.")

AX/ASK

The dialectical pronunciation of "ask" as "ax" is a sure marker of a substandard education. You should avoid it in formal speaking situations.

AXEL/AXLE

The center of a wheel is its axle. An axel is a tricky jump in figure skating named after Axel Paulsen.

BACK/FORWARD/UP IN TIME

For most people you move an event forward by scheduling it to happen sooner, but other people imagine the event being moved forward into the future, postponed. This is what most--but not all--people mean by saying they want to move an event back--later. Usage is also split on whether moving an event up means making it happen sooner (most common) or later (less common). The result is widespread confusion. When using these expressions make clear your meaning by the context in which you use them. "We need to move the meeting forward" is ambiguous; "we need to move the meeting forward to an earlier date" is not.

Just to confuse things further, when you move the clock ahead in the spring for daylight saving time, you make it later; but when you move a meeting ahead, you make it sooner. Isn't English wonderful?

BACKSLASH/SLASH

This is a slash: /. Because the top of it leans forward, it is sometimes called a "forward slash."

This is a backslash: \. Notice the way it leans back, distinguishing it from the regular slash.

Slashes are often used to indicate directories and subdirectories in computer systems such as Unix and in World Wide Web addresses. Unfortunately, many people, assuming "backslash" is some sort of technical term for the regular slash, use the term incorrectly, which risks confusing those who know enough to distinguish between the two but not enough to realize that Web addresses rarely contain backslashes.

BACKWARD/BACKWARDS

As an adverb, either word will do: "put the shirt on backward" or "put the shirt on backwards." However, as an adjective, only "backward" will do: "a backward glance." When in doubt, use "backward."

BAIL/BALE

You bail the boat and bale the hay.

In the expression "bail out" meaning to abandon a position or situation, it is nonstandard in America to use "bale," though that spelling is widely accepted in the UK. The metaphor in the US is to compare oneself when jumping out of a plane to a bucket of water being tossed out of a boat, though that is probably not the origin of the phrase.

BALDFACED, BOLDFACED/BAREFACED

The only one of these spellings recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning "shameless" is "barefaced." Etymologies often refer to the prevalence of beards among Renaissance Englishmen, but beards were probably too common to be considered as deceptively

concealing. It seems more likely that the term derived from the widespread custom at that time among the upper classes of wearing masks to social occasions where one would rather not be recognized.

BALL, BAWL

To "bawl" is to cry out loudly, so when you break down in tears you bawl like a baby and when you reprimand people severely you bawl them out. Don't use "ball" in these sorts of expressions. It has number of meanings, but none of them have to do with shouting and wailing unless you're shouting "play ball!"

BARB WIRE, BOB WIRE/BARBED WIRE

In some parts of the country this prickly stuff is commonly called "barb wire" or even "bob wire." When writing for a general audience, stick with the standard "barbed wire."

BARE/BEAR

There are actually three words here. The simple one is the big growly creature (unless you prefer the Winnie-the-Pooh type). Hardly anyone past the age of ten gets that one wrong. The problem is the other two. Stevedores bear burdens on their backs and mothers bear children. Both mean "carry" (in the case of mothers, the meaning has been extended from carrying the child during pregnancy to actually giving birth). But strippers bare their bodies--sometimes bare-naked. The confusion between this latter verb and "bear" creates many unintentionally amusing sentences; so if you want to entertain your readers while convincing them that you are a dolt, by all means mix them up. "Bear with me," the standard expression, is a request for forbearance or patience. "Bare with me" would be an invitation to undress. "Bare" has an adjectival form: "The pioneers stripped the forest bare."

BASED AROUND, BASED OFF OF/BASED ON

You can build a structure around a center; but bases go on the bottom of things, so you can't base something around something else.

Similarly, you can build something off of a starting point, but you can't base anything off of anything. Something is always based on something else.

BASICLY/BASICALLY

There are "-ly" words and "-ally" words, and you basically just have to memorize which is which. But "basically" is very much overused and is often better avoided in favor of such expressions as "essentially," "fundamentally," or "at heart."

BAITED BREATH/BATED BREATH

Although the odor of the chocolate truffle you just ate may be

irresistible bait to your beloved, the proper expression is "bated breath." "Bated" here means "held, abated." You do something with bated breath when you're so tense you're holding your breath.

BARTER/HAGGLE

When you offer to trade your vintage jeans for a handwoven shirt in Guatemala, you are engaged in barter--no money is involved. One thing (or service) is traded for another.

But when you offer to buy that shirt for less money than the vendor is asking, you are engaged in haggling or bargaining, not bartering.

BAZAAR/BIZARRE

A "bazaar" is a market where miscellaneous goods are sold. "Bizarre," in contrast, is an adjective meaning "strange," "weird."

BEAUROCRACY/BUREAUCRACY

The French bureaucrats from whom we get this word worked at their bureaus (desks, spelled "bureaux" in French) in what came to be known as bureaucracies.

BEAT/BEAD

In American English when you focus narrowly on something or define it carefully you "get a bead" or "draw a bead" on it. In this expression the term "bead" comes from the former name for the little metal bump on the end of a gun barrel which helped the shooter aim precisely at a target. "Beat" is often mistakenly substituted for "bead" by people who imagine that the expression has something to do with matching the timing of the person or activity being observed, catching up with it.

BECKON CALL/BECK AND CALL

This is a fine example of what linguists call "popular etymology." People don't understand the origins of a word or expression and make one up based on what seems logical to them. "Beck" is just an old shortened version of "beckon." If you are at people's beck and call it means they can summon you whenever they want: either by gesture (beck) or speech (call).

FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME

Stephen Hawking writes about the beginning of time, but few other people do. People who write "from the beginning of time" or "since time began" are usually being lazy. Their grasp of history is vague, so they resort to these broad, sweeping phrases. Almost never is this usage literally accurate: people have not fallen in love since time began, for instance, because people arrived relatively late on the scene in the cosmic scheme of things. When I visited Ferrara several years ago I was interested to see that the whole population of the old city seemed to use bicycles for transportation, cars being banned from the central area. I asked how

long this had been the custom and was told "We've ridden bicycles for centuries." Since the bicycle was invented only in the 1860s, I strongly doubted this (no, Leonardo da Vinci did not invent the bicycle--he just drew a picture of what one might look like--and some people think that picture is a modern forgery). If you really don't know the appropriate period from which your subject dates, you could substitute a less silly but still vague phrase such as "for many years," or "for centuries"; but it's better simply to avoid historical statements if you don't know your history.

See "today's modern society."

BEGS THE QUESTION

An argument that improperly assumes as true the very point the speaker is trying to argue for is said in formal logic to "beg the question." Here is an example of a question-begging argument: "This painting is trash because it is obviously worthless." The speaker is simply asserting the worthlessness of the work, not presenting any evidence to demonstrate that this is in fact the case. Since we never use "begs" with this odd meaning ("to improperly take for granted") in any other phrase, most people now suppose the phrase implies something quite different: that the argument demands that a question about it be asked--raises the question. Although using the expression in its original sense is now rare, using it in the newer sense will cause irritation among traditionaalists.

BEHAVIORS

"Behavior" has always referred to patterns of action, including multiple actions, and did not have a separate plural form until social scientists created it. Unless you are writing in psychology, sociology, anthropology, or a related field, it is better to avoid the use of "behaviors" in your writing.

See also "peoples."

BEING THAT/BECAUSE

Using "being that" to mean "because" is nonstandard, as in "Being that the bank robber was fairly experienced, it was surprising that he showed the teller his ID card when she asked for it." "Being as how" is even worse. If "because" or "since" are too simple for your taste, you could use "given that" or "in that" instead.

BELIEF/BELIEVE

People can't have religious "believes"; they have religious beliefs. If you have it, it's a belief; if you do it, you believe.

BELIEF TOWARD/BELIEF IN

You may have a positive attitude toward an idea, but you have a belief in it.

BELOW TABLE/TABLE BELOW

When calling your readers' attention to an illustration or table further on in a text, the proper word order is not "the below table" but "the table below."

BEMUSE/AMUSE

When you bemuse someone, you confuse them, and not necessarily in an entertaining way. Don't confuse this word with "amuse."

BENEFACTOR/BENEFICIARY

Benefactors give benefits; beneficiaries receive them. We expect to hear of generous benefactors and grateful beneficiaries.

BESIDE/BESIDES

"Besides" can mean "in addition to" as in "besides the puppy chow, Spot scarfed up the filet mignon I was going to serve for dinner." "Beside," in contrast, usually means "next to." "I sat beside Cheryl all evening, but she kept talking to Jerry instead." Using "beside" for "besides," won't usually get you in trouble; but using "besides" when you mean "next to" will.

BETTER

When Chuck says "I better get my research started; the paper's due tomorrow," he means "I had better," abbreviated in speech to "I'd better." The same pattern is followed for "he'd better," "she'd better," and "they'd better."

BETWEEN

"Between 1939 to 1945" is obviously incorrect to most people--it should be "between 1939 and 1945"--but the error is not so obvious when it is written thus: "between 1939-1949." In this case, the "between" should be dropped altogether. Also incorrect are expressions like "there were between 15 to 20 people at the party." This should read "between 15 and 20 people."

BETWEEN YOU AND I/BETWEEN YOU AND ME

"Between you and me" is preferred in standard English.

See "I/me/myself."

BEYOND THE PAIL/BEYOND THE PALE

A pale is originally a stake of the kind which might make up a palisade, or enclosure. The uncontrolled territory outside was then "beyond the pale." The expression "beyond the pale" came to mean "bizarre, beyond proper limits"; but people who don't understand the phrase often alter

the last word to "pail."

The area of Ireland called "the Pale" inside the Dublin region formerly controlled by the British is often said to have been the inspiration for this expression, but many authorities challenge that explanation.

BIAS/BIASED

A person who is influenced by a bias is biased. The expression is not "they're bias," but "they're biased." Also, many people say someone is "biased toward" something or someone when they mean biased against. To have a bias toward something is to be biased in its favor.

See also "prejudice/prejudiced."

BIBLE

Whether you are referring to the Jewish Bible (the Torah plus the Prophets and the Writings) or the Protestant Bible (the Jewish Bible plus the New Testament), or the Catholic Bible (which contains everything in the Jewish and Protestant Bibles plus several other books and passages mostly written in Greek in its Old Testament), the word "Bible" must be capitalized. Remember that it is the title of a book, and book titles are normally capitalized. An oddity in English usage is, however, that "Bible" and the names of the various parts of the Bible are not italicized or placed between quotation marks.

Even when used metaphorically of other sacred books, as in "The Qur'an is the Bible of the Muslims," the word is usually capitalized; although in secular contexts it is not: "Physicians' Desk Reference is the pharmacists' bible." "Biblical" may be capitalized or not, as you choose (or as your editor chooses).

Those who wish to be sensitive to the Jewish authorship of the Jewish Bible may wish to use "Hebrew Bible" and "Christian Scriptures" instead of the traditionally Christian nomenclature: "Old Testament" and "New Testament." Modern Jewish scholars sometimes use the Hebrew acronym "Tanakh" to refer to their Bible, but this term is not generally understood by others.

BICEP/BICEPS

A biceps is a single muscle with two attaching tendons at one end. Although "bicep" without the S is often used in casual speech, this spelling is frowned on in medical and anatomical contexts.

BIT THE BULLET/BIT THE DUST

Someone of whom it is said "he bit the bullet" has made a tough decision and decided to act on it. The expression is derived from the old practice of having a wounded soldier bite down on a bullet to brace himself against the pain of undergoing an amputation or other painful operation. Some people confuse this with "bit the dust," which means simply "died" (or more often, "was killed").

BIWEEKLY/SEMIWEEKLY

Technically, a biweekly meeting occurs every two weeks and a semiweekly one occurs twice a week; but so few people get this straight that your club is liable to disintegrate unless you avoid these words in the newsletter and stick with "every other week" or "twice weekly." The same is true of "bimonthly" and" semimonthly," though "biennial" and "semi-annual" are less often confused with each other.

BLATANT

The classic meaning of "blatant" is "noisily conspicuous," but it has long been extended to any objectionable obviousness. A person engaging in blatant behavior is usually behaving in a highly objectionable manner, being brazen. Unfortunately, many people nowadays think that "blatant" simply means "obvious" and use it in a positive sense, as in "Kim wrote a blatantly brilliant paper." Use "blatant" or "blatantly" only when you think the people you are talking about should be ashamed of themselves.

BOARDERS/BORDERS

Boarders are residents in a boarding house or school paying for their room and board (food), fighters who board ships, or more recently, people who go snowboarding a lot. You can also board animals, though usually only people are called "boarders." All of these have some connection with boards: hunks of wood (the planks of a table, the deck of a ship, a snowboard).

All uses having to do with boundaries and edges are spelled "border": border collies, Doctors Without Borders, borderline disorders, border guard.

BONAFIED/BONA FIDE

"Bona fide" is a Latin phrase meaning "in good faith," most often used to mean "genuine" today. It is often misspelled as if it were the past tense of an imaginary verb: "bonafy."

BORED OF/BORED WITH

When you get tired of something you are bored with it (not of it).

BORN/BORNE

This distinction is a bit tricky. When birth is being discussed, the past tense of "bear" is usually "born": "I was born in a trailer--but it was an Airstream." Note that the form used here is passive: you are the one somebody else--your mother--bore. But if the form is active, you need an "E" on the end, as in "Midnight has borne another litter of kittens in Dad's old fishing hat" (Midnight did the bearing).

But in other meanings not having to do with birth, "borne" is always the

past tense of "bear": "My brother's constant teasing about my green hair was more than could be borne."

BORN OUT OF/BORN OF

Write "my love of dance was born of my viewing old Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire movies," not "born out of." The latter expression is probably substituted because of confusion with the expression "borne out" as in "my concerns about having another office party were borne out when Mr. Peabody spilled his beer into the fax machine." The only correct (if antiquated) use of "born out of" is in the phrase "born out of wedlock."

BORROW/LOAN

In some dialects it is common to substitute "borrow" for "loan" or "lend," as in "borrow me that hammer of yours, will you, Jeb?" In standard English the person providing an item can loan it; but the person receiving it borrows it.

For "loan" vs. "lend, see "Non-Errors."

BORROW OFF/BORROW FROM

In some dialects you can borrow five dollars off a friend; but in standard English you borrow the money from a friend.

BOTH/EACH

There are times when it is important to use "each" instead of "both." Few people will be confused if you say "I gave both of the boys a baseball glove," meaning "I gave both of the boys baseball gloves" because it is unlikely that two boys would be expected to share one glove; but you risk confusion if you say "I gave both of the boys $50." It is possible to construe this sentence as meaning that the boys shared the same $50 gift. "I gave each of the boys $50" is clearer.

BOUGHTEN/BOUGHT

"Bought, " not "boughten" is the past tense of "buy." "Store-bought," a colloquial expression for "not home-made," is already not formal English; but it is not improved by being turned into "store-boughten."

BOUNCE/BOUNDS

A leaky ball may be out of bounce, but when it crosses the boundary line off the basketball court or football field it goes out of bounds. Similarly, any action or speech that goes beyond proper limits can be called "out of bounds": "Mark thought that it was out of bounds for his wife to go spelunking with Tristan, her old boyfriend."

BOURGEOIS

In the original French, a bourgeois was originally merely a free inhabitant of a "bourg," or town. Through a natural evolution it became

the label for members of the property-owning class, then of the middle class. As an adjective it is used with contempt by bohemians and Marxists to label conservatives whose views are not sufficiently revolutionary. The class made up of bourgeois (which is both the singular and the plural form) is the bourgeoisie. Shaky spellers are prone to leave out the "E" from the middle because "eoi" is not a natural combination in English; but these words have remarkably enough retained their French pronunciation: boorzhwah and boorzhwazee. The feminine form, "bourgeoise," is rarely encountered in English.

BOUYANT/BUOYANT

Buoys are buoyant. In the older pronunciation of "buoyant" as "bwoyant" this unusual spelling made more sense. Now that the pronunciation has shifted to "boyant" we have to keep reminding ourselves that the U comes before the O. The root noun, however, though often pronounced "boy" is more traditionally pronounced "BOO-ee."

BRAINCHILD

Some people misuse "brainchild," as in "Steve Jobs is the brainchild behind the iPhone." A brainchild is not a person, but the child (product) of someone's brain. So the iPhone is the brainchild of Steve Jobs.

BRAND NAMES

Popular usage frequently converts brand names into generic ones, with the generic name falling into disuse. Few people call gelatin dessert mix anything other than "Jell-O," which helps to explain why it's hard to find Nabisco's Royal Gelatin on the grocery shelves. All facial tissues are "Kleenex" to the masses, all photocopies "Xeroxes." Such commercial fame is, however, a two-edged sword: sales may be lost as well as gained from such over-familiarity. Few people care whether their "Frisbee" is the genuine Wham-O brand original or an imitation. Some of these terms lack staying power: "Hoover" used to be synonymous with "vacuum cleaner," and the brand name was even transmuted into a verb: "to hoover" (these uses are still common in the UK). Most of the time this sort of thing is fairly harmless, but if you are a motel operator offering a different brand of whirlpool bath in your rooms, better not call it a "Jacuzzi."

BRANG, BRUNG/BROUGHT

In some dialects the past tense of "bring" is "brang" and "brung" is the past participle; but in standard English both are "brought."

BREACH/BREECH

Substitute a K for the CH in "breach" to remind you that the word has to do with breakage: you can breach (break through) a dam or breach (violate the terms of) a contract. As a noun, a breach is something broken off or open, as in a breach in a military line during combat.

"Breech" however, refers to rear ends, as in "breeches" (slang spelling "britches"). Thus "breech cloth," "breech birth," or "breech-loading gun."

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends," means "let's charge into the gap in the enemy's defenses," not "let's reach into our pants again."

BRAKE/BREAK

You brake to slow down; if your brakes fail and you drive through a plate-glass window, you will break it.

BREATH/BREATHE

When you need to breathe, you take a breath. "Breathe" is the verb, "breath" the noun.

BRING/TAKE

When you are viewing the movement of something from the point of arrival, use "bring": "When you come to the potluck, please bring a green salad." Viewing things from the point of departure, you should use "take": "When you go to the potluck, take a bottle of wine."

BRITAIN/BRITON

A British person is a Briton; only the country can be referred to as "Britain."

BRITISH/ENGLISH

Americans tend to use the terms "British" and "English" interchangeably, but Great Britain is made up of England plus Scotland and Wales. If you are referring to this larger entity, the word you want is "British." Britons not from England resent being referred to as "English."

BROACH/BROOCH

A decorative pin is a "brooch" even though it sounds like "broach"--a quite different word. Although some dictionaries now accept the latter spelling for jewelry, you risk looking ignorant to many readers if you use it.

BROKE/BROKEN

When you break something, it's broken, not "broke," though a person or organization which has run out of money can be said in informal speech to be "broke." Otherwise, use "broke" only as the simple past tense of "break," without a helping verb: "Azfar broke the record," but "The record was broken by Azfar."

BOUGHT/BROUGHT

If you pay for something, you've bought it; if you bring something you've brought it. These two words are probably interchanged most often out of mere carelessness. A spelling checker won't catch the switch, so watch out for it.

BRUNT/BUTT

A person who is the target of jokers is the butt of their humor (from an old meaning of the word "butt": target for shooting at). But the object of this joking has to bear the brunt of the mockery (from an old word meaning a sharp blow or attack). A person is never a brunt. The person being attacked receives the brunt of it.

BRUSSEL SPROUT/BRUSSELS SPROUT

These tiny cabbage-like vegetables are named after the Belgian city of Brussels, which has an "S" on the end. The correct spelling is "Brussels sprout."

BUILD OFF OF/BUILD ON

You build "on" your earlier achievements, you don't build "off of" them.

BULLION/BOUILLON

Gold bricks are bullion. Boil down meat stock to get bouillon. It's an expensive mistake to confuse bullion with bouillon in a recipe.

BULLY PULPIT

We occasionally still use the old positive meaning of the word "bully" when congratulating somebody (sincerely or sarcastically) by saying "Bully for you!" A century ago "bully" meant "good," "great."

That's why Theodore Roosevelt called the American presidency a "bully pulpit," meaning that it provided him an outstanding platform from which to preach his ideas. The expression is often misused by writers who mistakenly think it has something to do with preaching at people in a bullying way.

BUMRUSH/BUM'S RUSH

A 1987 recording by the rap group Public Enemy popularized the slang term "bumrush" as a verb meaning "to crash into a show hoping to see it for free," evidently by analogy with an earlier usage in which it meant "a police raid." In the hip-hop world to be "bumrushed" (also spelled as two words) has evolved a secondary meaning, "to get beaten up by a group of lowlifes, or "bums." However, older people are likely to take all of these as mistakes for the traditional expression "bum's rush," as in "Give that guy the bum's rush," i.e. throw him out unceremoniously, treating him like an unwanted bum. It was traditionally the bum being rushed, whereas in the newer expressions the bums are doing the rushing. It's good to be aware of your audience when you use slang expressions like this, to avoid baffling listeners.

Side note: Britons laughed themselves silly when they saw Americans wandering around in sportswear with "B.U.M." plastered in huge letters across their chests. "Bum" means "rear end" in the UK

BUTT NAKED/BUCK NAKED

The standard expression is "buck naked," and the contemporary "butt naked" is an error that will get you laughed at in some circles. However, it might be just as well if the new form were to triumph. Originally a "buck" was a dandy, a pretentious, overdressed show-off of a man. Condescendingly applied in the US to Native Americans and black slaves, it quickly acquired negative connotations. To the historically aware speaker, "buck naked" conjures up stereotypical images of naked "savages" or--worse--slaves laboring naked on plantations. Consider using the alternative expression "stark naked."

BUTTOX/BUTTOCKS

The popular phonetic spelling "buttox" ignores the fact that "buttocks" (the traditional spelling) is a plural: one buttock, two buttocks.

BY/'BYE/BUY

These are probably confused with each other more often through haste than through actual ignorance, but "by" is the common preposition in phrases like "you should know by now." It can also serve a number of other functions, but the main point here is not to confuse "by" with the other two spellings: "'bye" is an abbreviated form of "goodbye" (preferably with an apostrophe before it to indicate the missing syllable), and "buy" is the verb meaning "purchase." "Buy" can also be a noun, as in "that was a great buy." The term for the position of a competitor who advances to the next level of a tournament without playing is a "bye." All others are "by."

BY FAR AND AWAY/BY FAR, FAR AND AWAY

You could say that Halloween is by far your favorite holiday, or you can say that it's far and away your favorite holiday; but if you combine the two expressions and say "by far and away" you'll annoy some people and puzzle others who can't figure out why it doesn't sound quite right.

CACHE/CACHET

"Cache" comes from the French verb "cacher," meaning "to hide," and in English is pronounced exactly like the word "cash." But reporters speaking of a cache (hidden hoard) of weapons or drugs often mispronounce it to sound like cachet--"ca-SHAY"--a word with a very different meaning: originally a seal affixed to a document, now a quality attributed to anything with authority or prestige. Rolex watches have cachet.

CADDY-CORNER/CATTY-CORNER, CATER-CORNER, KITTY-CORNER

This expression, meaning "diagonally opposite," was formed from a mispelling in English of the French word quatre ("four") prefixed to "corner." Although the word has nothing to do with cats or kittens, in various dialects all three spellings are acceptable: "catty," "cater" or "kitty."

But unless you have somebody holding your golf clubs permanently stationed in the corner of your room, you shouldn't use the spelling "caddy corner."

CALL THE QUESTION

This is more a matter of parliamentary procedure than of correct English, but people are generally confused about what "calling the question" means. They often suppose that it means simply "let's vote!" and some even imagine that it is necessary to call for the question before a vote may be taken. You even see deferential meeting chairs pleading, "Would someone like to call for the question?"

But "calling the question" when done properly should be a rare occurrence. If debate has dragged on longer than you feel is really warranted, you can "call the question," at which time the chair has to immediately ask those assembled to vote to determine whether or not debate should be cut off or continue. The motion to call the question is itself not debatable. If two-thirds of those voting agree that the discussion should have died some time ago, they will support the call. Then, and only then, will the vote be taken on the question itself.

Potentially this parliamentary maneuver would be a great way to shut down windy speakers who insist on prolonging a discussion when a clear consensus has already been arrived at; but since so few people understand what it means, it rarely works as intended.

Chairs: when someone "calls the question," explain what the phrase means and ask if that is what's intended. Other folks: you'll get further most of the time just saying "Let's vote!"

CALLOUS/CALLUSED

Calling someone callous is a way of metaphorically suggesting a lack of feeling similar to that caused by calluses on the skin; but if you are speaking literally of the tough build-up on a person's hand or feet, the word you need is "callused."

CALLS FOR/PREDICTS

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?

Shakespeare: Henry IV, Part 1

Newspeople constantly joke that the weather service is to blame for the

weather, so we shouldn't be surprised when they tell us that the forecast "calls for rain" when what they mean is that it "predicts" rain. Remember, wherever you live, the weather is uncalled for.

CALM, COOL, AND COLLECTIVE/CALM, COOL, AND COLLECTED

Unless you're living in an unusually tranquil commune, you wouldn't be "calm, cool, and collective." The last word in this traditional phrase is "collected," in the sense of such phrases as "let me sit down a minute and collect my thoughts." If you leave out "cool" the last word still has to be "collected."

CALVARY/CAVALRY

"Calvary," always capitalized, is the hill on which Jesus was crucified. It means "hill of skulls." Soldiers mounted on horseback are cavalry.

CAN GOODS/CANNED GOODS

Is there a sign at your grocery store that says "can goods"? It should say "canned goods."

CANADIAN GEESE/CANADA GEESE

"Canadian geese" would be any old geese that happen to be in Canada. What people usually mean to refer to when they use this phrase is the specific species properly called "Canada geese."

CANON/CANNON

"Canon" used to be such a rare word that there was no temptation to confuse it with "cannon": a large piece of artillery. The debate over the literary canon (a list of officially-approved works) and the popularity of Pachelbel's Canon (an imitative musical form related to the common "round") have changed all that--confusion is rampant. Just remember that the big gun is a "cannon." All the rest are "canons." Note that there are metaphorical uses of "cannon" for objects shaped like large guns, such as a horse's "cannon bone."

CANNOT/CAN NOT

These two spellings are largely interchangeable, but by far the most common is "cannot"; and you should probably use it except when you want to be emphatic: "No, you can not wash the dog in the Maytag."

See also "may/might."

CAPITAL/CAPITOL

A "capitol" is almost always a building. Cities which serve as seats of government are capitals spelled with an A in the last syllable, as are most other uses of the word as a common noun. The only exceptions are place names alluding to capitol buildings in some way or other, like

"Capitol Hill" in DC, Denver, or Seattle (the latter either named after the hill in Denver or in hopes of attracting the Washington State capitol building). Would it help to remember that Congress with an O meets in the Capitol with another O?

CARAMEL/CARMEL

Take Highway 1 south from Monterey to reach the charming seaside town of Carmel, of which Clint Eastwood was formerly mayor. Dissolve sugar in a little water and cook it down until the sugar turns brown to create caramel. A nationwide chain uses the illiterate spelling "Karmelkorn(TM)," which helps to perpetuate the confusion between these two words.

CARAT/CARET/CARROT/KARAT

"Carrots" are those crunchy orange vegetables Bugs Bunny is so fond of, but this spelling gets misused for the less familiar words which are pronounced the same but have very different meanings. Precious stones like diamonds are weighed in carats. The same word is used to express the proportion of pure gold in an alloy, though in this usage it is sometimes spelled "karat" (hence the abbreviation "20K gold"). A caret is a proofreader's mark showing where something needs to be inserted, shaped like a tiny pitched roof. It looks rather like a French circumflex, but is usually distinct from it on modern computer keyboards. Carets are extensively used in computer programming. Just remember, if you can't eat it, it's not a carrot.

CAREER/CAREEN

A truck careening down the road is swerving from side to side as it races along, whereas a truck careering down the road may be simply traveling very fast. But because it is not often clear which meaning a person intends, confusing these two words is not likely to get you into trouble.

CARING

Most people are comfortable referring to "caring parents," but speaking of a "caring environment" is jargon, not acceptable in formal English. The environment may contain caring people, but it does not itself do the caring.

CAST IN STONE/CAST IN CONCRETE, CARVED IN STONE

People expressing flexibility say that their ideas or rules are "not cast in concrete," meaning they have not hardened into rigidity. You cast concrete in a mold by pouring it in and letting it set; so the expression can also be "not set in concrete."

A similar expression is "not carved in stone" (like the Ten Commandments).

People frequently mix these two expressions up and say things like "It's

not cast in stone." They may be influenced by the unrelated Christian saying, "Don't cast [throw] the first stone."

CAST DISPERSIONS/CAST ASPERSIONS

"Aspersions" is an unusual word whose main meaning is "false or misleading accusations," and its only common use is in the phrase "cast aspersions." To disperse a crowd is to break it up and scatter it, which perhaps leads some people to mistakenly associate "cast" ("throw") with "disperse" but the expression is "cast aspersions."

CATCH-22/CATCH

People familiar with Joseph Heller's novel are irritated when they see "Catch-22" used to label any simple hitch or problem rather than this sort of circular predicament: you can't get published until you have an agent, and you can't get an agent until you've been published. "There's a catch" will do fine for most other situations.

CD-ROM disk/CD-ROM

"CD-ROM" stands for "compact disc, read-only memory," so adding another "disc" or "disk" is redundant. The same goes for "DVD" (from Digital Video Disc" or "Digital Versatile Disc"--there are non-video versions). Don't say "give me that DVD disk," just "give me that DVD."

CEASAR/CAESAR

Did you know that German "Kaiser" is derived from the Latin "Caesar" and is pronounced a lot more like it than the English version? We're stuck with our illogical pronunciation, so we have to memorize the correct spelling. (The Russians messed up the pronunciation as thoroughly as the English, with their "Czar.") Thousands of menus are littered with "Ceasar salads" throughout America which should be "Caesar salads"--named after a restaurateur, not the Roman ruler (but they both spelled their names the same way).

CELIBATE/CHASTE

Believe it or not, you can be celibate without being chaste, and chaste without being celibate. A celibate person is merely unmarried, usually (but not always) because of a vow of celibacy. The traditional assumption is that such a person is not having sex with anyone, which leads many to confuse the word with "chaste," denoting someone who does not have illicit sex. A woman could have wild sex twice a day with her lawful husband and technically still be chaste, though the word is more often used to imply a general abstemiousness from sex and sexuality. You can always amuse your readers by misspelling the latter word as "chased."

CELTIC

Because the Boston Celtics basketball team pronounces its name as if it began with an S, Americans are prone to use this pronunciation of the

word as it applies to the Bretons, Cornish, Welsh, Irish and Scots; but the dominant pronunciation among sophisticated US speakers is "keltik." Just remember: "Celts in kilts."

Interestingly, the Scots themselves often use the "S" pronunciation, notably in referring to the Glasgow soccer team, the "Celtic Football Club."

CEMENT/CONCRETE

People in the building trades distinguish cement (the gray powder that comes in bags) from concrete (the combination of cement, water, sand, and gravel which becomes hard enough in your driveway to drive your car on). In contexts where technical precision matters, it's probably better to speak of a "concrete sidewalk" rather than of a "cement sidewalk."

CENTER AROUND/CENTER ON, REVOLVE AROUND

Two perfectly good expressions--"center on" and "revolve around"--get conflated in this nonsensical neologism. When a speaker says his address will "center around the topic of" whatever, my interest level plummets.

CENTER OF ATTRACTION/CENTER OF ATTENTION

"Center of attraction" makes perfect sense, but the standard saying is "center of attention."

CENTS

On a sign displaying a cost of twenty-nine cents for something the price can be written as ".29," as "$.29," or as "29c," but don't combine the two forms. ".29c" makes no sense, and "$.29c" is worse.

CHAI TEA/CHAI

"Chai" is simply the word for "tea" in Hindi and several other Asian languages. The spicy, milky variety known in India as "masala chai" is called "chai" in the US Since Americans likely to be attracted by the word "chai" already know it's a tea-based drink, it's both redundant and pointless to call the product "chai tea."

CHAISE LONGUE

When English speakers want to be elegant they commonly resort to French, often mangling it in the process. The entree [acute accent over the second E], the dish served before the plat, usurped the latter's position as main dish. And how in the world did French "lingerie" (originally meaning linen goods of all sorts, later narrowed to underwear only) pronounced--roughly--"lanzheree" come to be American "lawnzheray"? Quelle horreur! "Chaise longue" (literally "long chair"), pronounced--roughly--"shezz lohng" with a hard G on the end became in English "shayz long." Many speakers, however, confuse French "chaise" with English "chase" and French longue with English "lounge" (understandable since the article in question is a sort of couch or

lounge), resulting in the mispronunciation "chase lounge." We may imagine the French as chasing each other around their lounges, but a chaise is just a chair.

CHALK-FULL/CHOCK-FULL, CHUCK-FULL

Originally a person or thing stuffed to the point of choking was "choke-full." In modern speech this expression has become "chock-full," or in less formal American English, "chuck-full." Chalk has nothing to do with it.

CHAMPAIGN/CHAMPAGNE

Champaign is the name of a city and county in Illinois.

Champagne is a region of France which produces the sparkling wine of that name.

CHAUVINIST/MALE CHAUVINIST, SEXIST

Nicolas Chauvin of Rochefort became a laughingstock in Napoleon's army for his exaggerated nationalism, and his name gave rise to the term "chauvinism," which characterizes people who wildly overestimate the excellence and importance of their own countries while denigrating others. The word was then broadened to cover an exaggerated belief in the superiority of one's own kind in other respects. Following this pattern, feminists in the 1970s invented the term "male chauvinist" to label people who considered women inferior to men. Unfortunately, this was the context in which many people first encountered "chauvinism" and not understanding that it had a broader meaning, dropped the "male," thinking that "chauvinist" was a synonym for "sexist." This misunderstanding is so widespread that only occasionally will you encounter someone who knows better, but in formal writing it is wise to avoid the abbreviated form in this restricted meaning. However, if you do intend the older meaning of the word, it's also a good idea to make that clear from your context, for a great many of your readers will assume you are talking about sexism.

CHECK/CZECH

Pronounce the name of the country which broke away from the former Czechoslovakia to form the Czech Republic as "check," but don't spell it that way. Its citizens are Czechs.

CHEESE QUESADILLA/QUESADILLA

"Queso" is the Spanish word for "cheese," so it's redundant to write "cheese quesadilla" on a menu. If you think your customers need a definition or if you want to distinguish the purely cheese-filled ones from--say--chicken quesadillas, you can add a brief explanation such as "cheese-filled fried tortilla."

CHEMICALS

Markets offering "organic" produce claim it has been raised "without chemicals." News stories fret about "chemicals in our water supply." This common error in usage indicates quite clearly the lamentable level of scientific literacy in our population. Everything on earth save a few stray subatomic particles and various kinds of energy (and--if you believe in it--pure spirit) is composed of chemicals. Pure water consists of the chemical dihydrogen oxide. Vitamins and minerals are chemicals. In the broadest sense, even simple elements like nitrogen can be called chemicals. Writers who use this term sloppily contribute to the obfuscation of public debate over such serious issues as pollution and malnutrition.

CHICANO/LATINO/HISPANIC

"Chicano" means "Mexican-American," and not all the people denoted by this term like it. When speaking of people living in the US from various other Spanish-speaking countries, "Chicano" is an error for "Latino" or "Hispanic." Only "Hispanic" can include people with a Spanish as well as with a Latin American heritage; and some people of Latin American heritage object to it as ignoring the Native American element in that population. Only "Latino" could logically include Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, though that is rarely done.

CHOOSE/CHOSE

You chose tequila last night; you choose aspirin this morning. "Chose" is the past tense, "choose" the present.

CHRISPY/CRISPY

There are a lot of menus, signs, and recipes out there featuring "chrispy chicken." Is this misspelling influenced by the "CH" in "chicken" or the pattern in other common words like "Christmas"? At any rate, the proper spelling is "crispy."

CHUNK/CHUCK

In casual conversation, you may get by with saying "Chuck [throw] me that monkey wrench, will you?" But you will mark yourself as illiterate beyond mere casualness by saying instead "Chunk me that wrench." This is a fairly common substitution in some dialects of American English.

CHURCH

Catholics routinely refer to their church as the Church, with a capital "C." This irritates the members of other churches, but is standard usage. When "Church" stands by itself (that is, not as part of a name like "First Methodist Church") you should normally capitalize it only to mean "Roman Catholic Church." Note that protestant theologians and other specialists in religion do refer to the whole body of Christians as "the Church," but this professional usage is not common in ordinary writing.

CITE/SITE/SIGHT

You cite the author in an endnote; you visit a Web site or the site of the crime, and you sight your beloved running toward you in slow motion on the beach (a sight for sore eyes!).

CLASSIC/CLASSICAL

"Classical" usually describes things from ancient Greece or Rome, or things from analogous ancient periods like classical Sanskrit poetry. The exception is classical music, which in the narrow sense is late 18th and 19th-century music by the likes of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, and in the broader sense formal concert music of any period in the West or traditional formal music from other cultures, like classical ragas.

"Classic" has a much looser meaning, describing things that are outstanding examples of their kind, like a classic car or even a classic blunder.

CLEANUP/CLEAN UP

"Cleanup" is usually a noun: "the cleanup of the toxic waste site will cost billions of dollars." "Clean" is a verb in the phrase "clean up": "You can go to the mall after you clean up your room."

CLICHE/CLICHED

One often hears young people say "That movie was so cliche!" "Cliche" is a noun, meaning an overfamiliar phrase or image. A work containing cliches is cliched.

CLICK/CLIQUE

Students lamenting the division of their schools into snobbish factions often misspell "clique" as "click." In the original French, "clique" was synonymous with "claque"--an organized group of supporters at a theatrical event who tried to prompt positive audience response by clapping enthusiastically.

CLOSE/CLOTHES

Because the TH in "clothes" is seldom pronounced distinctly, it is often misspelled "close." Just remember the TH in "clothing," where it is obvious. Clothes are made of cloth. Rags can also be cloths (without an E).

CLOSED-MINDED/CLOSE-MINDED

"Closed-minded" might seem logical, but the traditional spelling of this expression is "close-minded." The same is true for "close-lipped" and "close-mouthed."

COARSE/COURSE

"Coarse" is always an adjective meaning "rough, crude." Unfortunately,

this spelling is often mistakenly used for a quite different word, "course," which can be either a verb or a noun (with several different meanings).

COLD SLAW/COLE SLAW

The popular salad made of shredded cabbage was originally "cole slaw," from the Dutch for "cabbage salad." Because it is served cold, Americans have long supposed the correct spelling to be "cold slaw"; but if you want to sound more sophisticated go with the original.

COLLAGE/COLLEGE

You can paste together bits of paper to make a collage, but the institution of higher education is a college.

COLLECTIVE PLURAL

In UK English it is common to see statements like "Parliament have raised many questions about the proposal" in which because Parliament is made up of many individuals, several of whom are raising questions, the word is treated as if it were plural in form and given a plural verb. This is the proper-noun form of what is called the "collective plural." Many UK authorities object when this pattern is applied to organization names if the organization is being discussed as a whole and not as a collection of individuals. According to them, "The BBC have been filming in Papua New Guinea" should be "The BBC has been filming. . . ."

This sort of collective plural applied to the names of organizations is almost unheard of in the US, and in fact strikes most Americans as distinctly weird, with the exception of an occasional sports team with a singular-form name like the Utah Jazz, the Miami Heat, the Orlando Magic, or the Seattle Storm. There's a sarcastic saying, "The Utah Jazz are to basketball what Utah is to jazz."

COLOMBIA/COLUMBIA

Although both are named after Columbus, the US capital is the District of Columbia, whereas the South American country is Colombia.

COMMAS

What follows is not a comprehensive guide to the many uses of commas, but a quick tour of the most common errors involving them.

The first thing to note is that the comma often marks a brief pause in the flow of a sentence, and it helpfully marks off one phrase from another. If you write "I plan to see Shirley and Fred will go shopping while we visit" your readers are naturally going to think the announced visit will be to both Shirley and Fred until the second half surprises them into realizing that Fred is not involved in this visit at all. A simple comma makes everything clear: "I plan to see Shirley, and Fred will go shopping while we visit." People who read and write little have

trouble with commas if they deal with English primarily as a spoken language, where emphasis and rhythm mark out phrases. It takes a conscious effort to translate the rhythm of a sentence into writing using punctuation.

Not many people other than creative writers have the occasion to write dialogue, but it is surprising how few understand that introductory words and phrases have to be separated from the main body of speech in direct address: "Well, what did you think of that?" "Good evening, Mr. Nightingale."

Commas often help set off interrupting matter within sentences. The proper term for this sort of word or phrase is "parenthetical." There are three ways to handle parenthetical matter. For asides sharply interrupting the flow of the sentence (think of your own examples) use parenthesis marks. For many other kinds of fairly strong interjections, dashes--if you know how to type them properly--work best. Milder interruptions, like this, are nicely set off with commas. Many writers don't realize that they are setting off a phrase, so they begin with the first comma but omit the second, which should conclude the parenthetical matter. Check for this sort of thing in your proofreading.

A standard use for commas is to separate the items in a series: "cats, dogs, and gerbils." Authorities differ as to whether that final comma before the "and" is required. Follow the style recommended by your teacher, editor, or boss when you have to please them; but if you are on your own, I suggest you use the final comma. It often removes ambiguities.

A different kind of series has to do with a string of adjectives modifying a single noun: "He was a tall, strong, handsome, but stupid man." But when the adjectives modify each other instead of the noun, then no comma is used: "He was wearing a garish bright green tie." A simple test: if you could logically insert "and" between the adjectives in a series like this, you need commas.

English teachers refer to sentences where clauses requiring some stronger punctuation are instead lightly pasted together with a comma as "comma splices." Here's an example: "He brought her a dozen roses, he had forgotten she was allergic to them." In this sentence the reader needs to be brought up sharply and reoriented mid-sentence with a semicolon; a comma is too weak to do the trick. Here's a worse example of a comma splice: "It was a beautiful day outside, she remembered just in time to grab the coffee mug." There is no obvious logical connection between the two parts of this sentence. They don't belong in the same sentence at all. The comma should be a period, with the rest being turned into a separate sentence.

Some writers insert commas seemingly at random: "The unabridged dictionary, was used mainly to press flowers." When you're not certain a comma is required, read your sentence aloud. If it doesn't seem natural to insert a slight pause or hesitation at the point marked by the comma, it should probably be omitted.

See also "colons/semicolons" and "hyphens & dashes."

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Hey kids, here's a chance to catch your English teacher in a redundancy! To compare two things is to note their similarities and their differences. There's no need to add "and contrast."

COMPARE TO/COMPARE WITH

These are sometimes interchangeable, but when you are stressing similarities between the items compared, the most common word is "to": "She compared his home-made wine to toxic waste." If you are examining both similarities and differences, use "with": "The teacher compared Steve's exam with Robert's to see whether they had cheated."

COMPLEMENT/COMPLIMENT

Originally these two spellings were used interchangeably, but they have come to be distinguished from each other in modern times. Most of the time the word people intend is "compliment": nice things said about someone ("She paid me the compliment of admiring the way I shined my shoes."). "Complement," much less common, has a number of meanings associated with matching or completing. Complements supplement each other, each adding something the others lack, so we can say that "Alice's love for entertaining and Mike's love for washing dishes complement each other." Remember, if you're not making nice to someone, the word is "complement."

COMPLEMENTARY/COMPLIMENTARY

When paying someone a compliment like "I love what you've done with the kitchen!" you're being complimentary. A free bonus item is also a complimentary gift. But items or people that go well with each other are complementary.

In geometry, complementary angles add up to 90 degrees, whereas supplementary ones add up to 180 degrees.

COMPRISED OF/COMPOSED OF

Although "comprise" is used primarily to mean "to include," it is also often stretched to mean "is made up of"--a meaning that some critics object to. The most cautious route is to avoid using "of" after any form of "comprise" and substitute "is composed of" in sentences like this: "Jimmy's paper on Marxism was composed entirely of sentences copied off the Marx Brothers Home Page."

COMPTROLLER

Although it is less and less often heard, the traditional pronunciation of "comptroller" is identical with "controller." The Oxford English Dictionary, indeed, considers "comptroller" to have begun as a misspelling of "controller"--back in the 16th century.

CONCENSUS/CONSENSUS

You might suppose that this word had to do with taking a census of the participants in a discussion, but it doesn't. It is a good old Latin word that has to do with arriving at a common sense of the meeting, and the fourth letter is an "S."

CONCERTED EFFORT

One cannot make a "concerted effort" all by one's self. To work "in concert" is to work together with others. The prefix "con-" means "with."

CONFLICTED/CONFLICTING FEELINGS

Phrases like "conflicted feelings" or "I feel conflicted" are considered jargon by many, and out of place in formal writing. Use "I have conflicting feelings" instead, or write "I feel ambivalent."

CONFUSIONISM/CONFUCIANISM

Confucius is the founder of Confucianism. His name is not spelled "Confucious," and his philosophy is not called "Confusionism." When you spot the confusion in the latter term, change it quickly to "Confucianism."

CONGRADULATIONS/CONGRATULATIONS

I fear that all too many people are being "congradulated" for graduating from high school who don't know that this word should be spelled "congratulations." Try a search for this misspelling on your favorite Web search engine and be prepared to be astonished.

CONSERVATIVISM/CONSERVATISM

The conservative spelling of this word is "conservatism."

CONTACT

Although some still object to "contact" as a verb, sentences like "contact me when the budget is ready" are now standard English.

CONTAMINATES/CONTAMINANTS

When run-off from a chemical plant enters the river it contaminates the water; but the goo itself consists of "contaminants."

CONTINUAL/CONTINUOUS

"Continuous" refers to actions which are uninterrupted: "My upstairs neighbor played his stereo continuously from 6:00 PM to 3:30 AM." Continual actions, however, need not be uninterrupted, only repeated: "My father continually urges me to get a job."

CONVERSATE/CONVERSE

"Conversate" is what is called a "back-formation" based on the noun "conversation." But the verb for this sort of thing is "converse."

CORE/CORPS/CORPSE

Apples have cores. A corps is an organization, like the Peace Corps. A corpse is a dead body, a carcass.

COLLABORATE/CORROBORATE

People who work together on a project "collaborate" (share their labor); people who support your testimony as a witness "corroborate" (strengthen by confirming) it.

COLONS/SEMICOLONS

Colons have a host of uses, but they mostly have in common that the colon acts to connect what precedes it with what follows. Think of the two dots of a colon as if they were stretched out to form an equal sign, so that you get cases like this: "he provided all the ingredients: sugar, flour, butter, and vanilla."

There are a few exceptions to this pattern, however. One unusual use of colons is in between the chapter and verses of a Biblical citation, for instance, "Matthew 6:5." In bibliographic citation a colon separates the city from the publisher: "New York: New Directions, 1979." It also separates minutes from hours in times of day when given in figures: "8:35." It is incorrect to substitute a semicolon in any of these cases.

Think of the semicolon as erecting a little barrier with that dug-in comma under the dot; semicolons always imply separation rather than connection. A sentence made up of two distinct parts whose separation needs to be emphasized may do so with a semicolon: "Mary moved to Seattle; she was sick of getting sunburned in Los Angeles." When a compound sentence contains commas within one or more of its clauses, you have to escalate to a semicolon to separate the clauses themselves: "It was a mild, deliciously warm spring day; and Mary decided to walk to the fair." The other main use of semicolons is to separate one series of items from another--a series within a series, if you will: "The issues discussed by the board of directors were many: the loud, acrimonious complaints of the stockholders; the abrupt, devastating departure of the director; and the startling, humiliating discovery that he had absconded with half the company's assets." Any time the phrases which make up a series contain commas, for whatever reason, they need to be separated by semicolons.

Many people are so terrified of making the wrong choice that they try to avoid colons and semicolons altogether, but I'm afraid this just can't be done. Formal writing requires their use, and it's necessary to learn the correct patterns.

COME WITH

In some American dialects it is common to use the phrase "come with" without specifying with whom, as in "We're going to the bar. Want to come with?" This sounds distinctly odd to the majority of people, who would expect "come with us."

COMPANY NAMES WITH APOSTROPHES

Some company names which have a possessive form use an apostrophe before the S and some don't: "Macy's" does and "Starbucks" doesn't. Logo designers often feel omitting the apostrophe leads to a cleaner look, and there's nothing you can do about it except to remember which is standard for a particular company. But people sometimes informally add an S to company names with which they are on familiar terms: "I work down at the Safeway's now" (though in writing, the apostrophe is likely to be omitted). This is not standard usage.

CONCERNING/WORRISOME, TROUBLING

People commonly say of things that are a cause for concern that they are "concerning": "My boyfriend's affection for his pet rattlesnake is concerning." This is not standard English. There are many better words that mean the same thing including "worrisome," "troubling," and "alarming."

CONNOTE/DENOTE

The literal meaning of a word is its denotation; the broader associations we have with a word are its connotations. People who depend on a thesaurus or a computer translation engine to find synonyms often choose a word with the right denotation but the wrong connotations.

"Determined" and "pig-headed" both denote stubbornness; but the first connotes a wise adherence to purpose and the second connotes foolish rigidity.

"Boss" and "Chief Executive Officer" (CEO) can refer to the same office; but the first is less admiring and likely to connote the view of employees lower down in the company--nobody wants to be thought of as "bossy." Higher executives would be more likely to speak admiringly of a "CEO."

I often write "insufficiently complex" at the bottom of student papers instead of "simple-minded." Although they denote essentially the same quality, the connotations of the first are less insulting.

CONSCIENCE, CONSCIOUS, CONSCIOUSNESS

Your conscience makes you feel guilty when you do bad things, but your consciousness is your awareness. If you are awake, you are conscious. Although it is possible to speak of your "conscious mind," you can't use "conscious" all by itself to mean "consciousness."

See unconscience.

CONTRARY/CONTRAST

The phrases "on the contrary" and "to the contrary" are used to reply to an opposing point. Your friend tells you she is moving to New York and you express surprise because you thought she hated big cities. She replies, "On the contrary, I've always wanted to live in an urban area."

When a distinction is being made that does not involve opposition of this sort, "in contrast" is appropriate. "In New York, you don't need a car. In Los Angeles, in contrast, you can't really get along without one, though you won't need a snow shovel."

Here's a simple test: if you could possibly substitute "that's wrong" the phrase you want is "on the contrary" or "to the contrary" If not, then use "in contrast."

CONTRASTS/CONTRASTS WITH

"With" must not be omitted in sentences like this: "Julia's enthusiasm for rugby contrasts with Cheryl's devotion to chess."

COPE UP/COPE WITH

When you can't keep up with your work you may not be able to cope with your job; but you never "cope up" with anything. In casual speech we say "I can't cope," but in formal writing "cope" is normally followed by "with."

COPYWRITE/COPYRIGHT

You can copyright writing, but you can also copyright a photograph or song. The word has to do with securing rights. Thus, there is no such word as "copywritten"; it's "copyrighted."

COSTUMER/CUSTOMER

Just what would a "costumer service" do? Supply extra-shiny spangles for a Broadway diva's outfit? But this phrase is almost always a typographical error for "customer service," and it appears on an enormous number of Web pages. Be careful not to swap the U and O when you type "customer."

COULD CARE LESS/COULDN'T CARE LESS

Cliches are especially prone to scrambling because they become meaningless through overuse. In this case an expression which originally meant "it would be impossible for me to care less than I do because I do not care at all" is rendered senseless by being transformed into the now-common "I could care less." Think about it: if you could care less, that means you care some. The original already drips sarcasm, so it's pointless to argue that the newer version is "ironic." People who misuse this phrase are just being careless.

More on "COULD CARE LESS"

People who use the shortened form are often convinced they are right because they are being "ironic" and some even claim it's the original form. But here's the entry in "The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms":

"This expression originated about 1940 in Britain and for a time invariably used couldn't. About 1960 could was occasionally substituted, and today both versions are used with approximately equal frequency, despite their being antonyms."

"I could care less" just isn't logically ironic. The people speaking feel irony, but their words don't convey it. "I'd buy those jeans" could be ironic if you really meant the opposite: you wouldn't buy those jeans if they were the last pair in the world. But "I could care less" isn't used to imply its opposite: that you care more. Thus it is not ironic.

"Couldn't care less" is a strong statement because it says you don't care at all, zero!

"Could care less," whatever meaning you take it to have, does not have that crucial message of zero interest which gives the original saying its sting. See http://incompetech.com/gallimaufry/care_less.html

See also Michael Quinion on this point:
http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-ico1.htm.

COULD OF, SHOULD OF, WOULD OF/COULD HAVE, SHOULD HAVE, WOULD HAVE

This is one of those errors typically made by a person more familiar with the spoken than the written form of English. A sentence like "I would have gone if anyone had given me free tickets" is normally spoken in a slurred way so that the two words "would have" are not distinctly separated, but blended together into what is properly rendered "would've." Seeing that "V" tips you off right away that "would've" is a contraction of "would have." But many people hear "would of" and that's how they write it. Wrong.

Note that "must of" is similarly an error for "must have."

COUNCIL/COUNSEL/CONSUL

The first two words are pronounced the same but have distinct meanings. An official group that deliberates, like the Council on Foreign Relations, is a "council"; all the rest are "counsels": your lawyer, advice, etc. A consul is a local representative of a foreign government.

COUPLE/COUPLE OF

Instead of "she went with a couple sleazy guys before she met me," write "a couple of guys" if you are trying to sound a bit more formal. Leaving the "of" out is a casual, slangy pattern.

COWTOW/KOWTOW

You can tow a cow to water, but you can't make it drink. But the word that means bowing worshipfully before someone comes from the Chinese words for knocking one's head on the ground, and is spelled "kowtow."

CRACKER JACKS/CRACKER JACK

"Crackerjack" is an old slang expression meaning "excellent," and the official name of the popcorn confection is also singular: "Cracker Jack." People don't pluralize its rival Poppycock as "Poppycocks," but they seem to think of the individual popped kernels as the "jacks." A similarly named candy is "Good and Plenty." All three have descriptive names describing qualities and shouldn't be pluralized. A way to remember this: in "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" "Cracker Jack" rhymes with "back."

CRAFTS

When referring to vehicles, "craft" is both singular and plural. Two aircraft, many watercraft, etc. Do not add an "S."

But when referring to hobbies and skills such as "woodcrafts" or "arts and crafts" adding an "S" in the plural form is standard.

CREDIBLE/CREDULOUS

"Credible" means "believable" or "trustworthy." It is also used in a more abstract sense, meaning something like "worthy": "She made a credible lyric soprano." Don't confuse "credible" with "credulous," a much rarer word which means "gullible." "He was incredulous" means "he didn't believe it" whereas "he was incredible" means "he was wonderful" (but use the latter expression only in casual speech).

See also "incredible."

CRESCENDO/CLIMAX

When something is growing louder or more intense, it is going through a crescendo (from an Italian word meaning "growing"). Traditionalists object to its use when you mean "climax." A crescendo of cheers by an enthusiastic audience grows until it reaches a climax, or peak. "Crescendo" as a verb is common, but also disapproved of by many authorities. Instead of "the orchestra crescendos," write "the orchestra plays a crescendo."

CREVICE/CREVASSE

Crevices are by definition tiny, like that little crevice between your teeth where the popcorn hulls always get caught. A huge crack in a glacier is given the French spelling: crevasse.

CRITERIA/CRITERION

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, data and media. You can have one criterion or many criteria. Don't confuse them.

CRITICISM

Beginning literature or art history students are often surprised to learn that in such contexts "criticism" can be a neutral term meaning simply "evaluating a work of literature or art." A critical article about The Color Purple can be entirely positive about Alice Walker's novel. Movie critics write about films they like as well as about films they dislike: writing of both kinds is called "criticism."

CRITIQUE/CRITICIZE

A critique is a detailed evaluation of something. The formal way to request one is "give me your critique," though people often say informally "critique this"--meaning "evaluate it thoroughly." But "critique" as a verb is not synonymous with "criticize" and should not be routinely substituted for it. "Josh critiqued my backhand" means Josh evaluated your tennis technique but not necessarily that he found it lacking. "Josh criticized my backhand" means that he had a low opinion of it.

You can write criticism on a subject, but you don't criticize on something, you just criticize it.

CROISSANT

The fanciful legend which attributes the creation of the croissant to Christian bakers celebrating a 17th-century victory over the Turks is widely recounted but almost certainly untrue, since there is no trace of the pastry until a century later. Although its form was probably not influenced by the Islamic crescent, the word croissant most definitely is French for "crescent." Pastries formed from the same dough into different shapes should not be called "croissants." If a customer in your bakery asks for a pain au chocolat (PAN oh-show-co-LA), reach for that rectangular pastry usually mislabeled in the US a "chocolate croissant."

CRUCIFICTION/CRUCIFIXION

One might suppose that this common misspelling was a product of skepticism were it not for the fact that it most often occurs in the writings of believers. The word should make clear that Jesus was affixed to the cross, not imply that his killing is regarded as a fiction.

CRUCIFIX/CROSS

A crucifix is a cross with an image of the crucified Christ affixed to it. Reporters often mistakenly refer to someone wearing a "crucifix" when the object involved is an empty cross. Crucifixes are most often

associated with Catholics, empty crosses with Protestants.

CUE/QUEUE

"Cue" has a variety of meanings, but all uses of "queue" relate to its original French meaning of "tail," which becomes a metaphor for a line (beware, however: in French "queue" is also rude slang for the male sex organ). Although a few dictionaries accept "cue" as an alternative spelling for the braided tail some people make of their hair or a waiting line, traditionally both are queues: "Sun Yat Sen ordered that all Chinese men should cut off their queues," "I have over 300 movies in my Netflix queue."

CURRANT/CURRENT

"Current" is an adjective having to do with the present time, and can also be a noun naming a thing that, like time, flows: electrical current, currents of public opinion. "Currant" refers only to little fruits.

CURVE YOUR APPETITE/CURB YOUR APPETITE

A "curb" was originally a device used to control an unruly horse. Already in the 18th century people were speaking by analogy of controlling their appetites as "curbing" them. You do not "curve" your hunger, appetite, desires, etc. You curb them.

CUT AND DRY/CUT AND DRIED

Many people mishear the standard expression meaning "set," "not open to change," as "cut and dry." Although this form is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, it is definitely less common in sophisticated writing. The dominant modern usage is "cut and dried." When used to modify a noun, it must be hyphenated: "cut-and-dried plan."

CUT AND PASTE/COPY AND PASTE

Because "cut and paste" is a familiar phrase, many people say it when they mean "copy and paste" in a computer context. This can lead to disastrous results if followed literally by an inexpert person. If you mean to tell someone to duplicate something rather than move it, say "copy." And when you are moving bits of computer information from one place to another the safest sequence is often to copy the original, paste the copy elsewhere, and only then delete (cut) the original.

CUT OF TEA/CUP OF TEA

An astounding number of people write "cut of tea" when they mean "cup of tea," especially in phrases like "not my cut of tea" instead of "not my cup of tea." This saying is not about fine distinctions between different ways the tea's been harvested; it just refers to the ordinary vessel from which you drink the stuff.

Is this mistake influenced by the expression "the cut of his jib" or is

it just a goofy typo?

DAMP SQUID/DAMP SQUIB

Squid are indeed usually damp in their natural environment; but the popular British expression describing a less than spectacular explosion is a "damp squib" (soggy firecracker).

DAMPED/DAMPENED

When the vibration of a wheel is reduced it is damped, but when you drive through a puddle your tire is dampened. "Dampened" always has to do with wetting, if only metaphorically: "The announcement that Bob's parents were staying home after all dampened the spirits of the party-goers." The parents are being a wet blanket.

DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Dangling and misplaced modifiers are discussed at length in usage guides partly because they are very common and partly because there are many different kinds of them. But it is not necessary to understand the grammatical details involved to grasp the basic principle: words or phrases which modify some other word or phrase in a sentence should be clearly, firmly joined to them and not dangle off forlornly on their own.

Sometimes the dangling phrase is simply too far removed from the word it modifies, as in "Sizzling on the grill, Theo smelled the Copper River salmon." This makes it sound like Theo is being barbecued, because his name is the nearest noun to "sizzling on the grill." We need to move the dangling modifier closer to the word it really modifies: "salmon." "Theo smelled the Copper River salmon sizzling on the grill."

Sometimes it's not clear which of two possible words a modifier modifies: "Felicia is allergic to raw apples and almonds." Is she allergic only to raw almonds, or all almonds--even roasted ones? This could be matter of life and death. Here's a much clearer version: "Felicia is allergic to almonds and raw apples." "Raw" now clearly modifies only "apples."

Dangling modifiers involving verbs are especially common and sometimes difficult to spot. For instance, consider this sentence: "Having bought the harpsichord, it now needed tuning." There is no one mentioned in the sentence who did the buying. One way to fix this is to insert the name of someone and make the two halves of the sentence parallel in form: "Wei Chi, having bought the harpsichord, now needed to tune it." If you have a person in mind, it is easy to forget the reader needs to be told about that person; but he or she can't be just "understood."

Here's another sentence with a dangling modifier, in this case at the end of a sentence: "The retirement party was a disaster, not having realized that Arthur had been jailed the previous week." There is nobody here doing the realizing. One fix: "The retirement party was a disaster because we had not realized that Arthur had been jailed the previous

week."

Using passive verbs will often trip you up: "In reviewing Gareth's computer records, hundreds of hours spent playing online games were identified." This sort of thing looks fine to a lot of people and in fact is common in professional writing, but technically somebody specific needs to be mentioned in the sentence as doing the identifying. Inserting a doer and shifting to the active voice will fix the problem. While we're at it, let's make clear that Gareth was doing the playing: "The auditor, in checking Gareth's computer records, identified hundreds of hours that he had spent playing online games."

Adverbs like "almost," "even," "hardly," "just," "only," and "nearly," are especially likely to get stuck in the wrong spot in a sentence. "Romeo almost kissed Juliet as soon as he met her" means he didn't kiss her--he only held her hand. True, but you might want to say something quite different: "Romeo kissed Juliet almost as soon as he met her." The placement of the modifier is crucial.

DARING-DO/DERRING-DO

The expression logically should be "feats of daring-do" because that's just what it means: deeds of extreme daring. But through a chain of misunderstandings explained in the Oxford English Dictionary, the standard form evolved with the unusual spelling "derring-do," and "daring-do" is an error.

DATA/DATUM

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, "criteria" and "media." "Datum" is so rare now in English that people may assume "data" has no singular form. Many American usage communities, however, use "data" as a singular and some have even gone so far as to invent "datums" as a new plural. This is a case where you need to know the patterns of your context. An engineer or scientist used to writing "the data is" may well find that the editors of a journal or publishing house insist on changing this phrase to "the data are." Usage is so evenly split in this case that there is no automatic way of determining which is right; but writers addressing an international audience of nonspecialists would probably be safer treating "data" as plural.

DATELINE/DEADLINE

The word "dateline" is used today mainly to label the bit of text at the top of a printed news story that indicates where and--often, but not always--when it was written. For instance, after a headline about events in Kenya, the deadline might read"NAIROBI, Kenya, June 2, 2010."

Probably because this rather obscure word has been popularized by its use for the name of an NBC television news show, some people confuse it with "deadline," which is most often the date by which something must be accomplished. You can miss deadlines, meet deadlines, or have to deal

with short deadlines-- but not datelines.

DAY IN AGE/DAY AND AGE

The expression is "in this day and age; but it's a worn-out expression, so you'd be better off writing "these days."

DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME/DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME

The official term is "daylight saving time," not "savings time."

DEBRIEF

"Debrief" has leaked out of the military and national security realms into the business world, where people seem pretty confused about it. When you send people out on missions, you brief them--give them information they'll need. You give them a briefing. When they come back, you debrief them by asking them what they did and found out. Note that in both cases it's not the person doing the actual work but the boss or audience that does the briefing and debriefing. But people commonly use "debrief" when they mean "report."

The verb "brief" comes originally from law, where someone being given a legal brief (instructions on handling a case) can be said to have been briefed. Debriefing has nothing to do with underwear.

DECEPTIVELY

If you say of a soldier that he is "deceptively brave" you might be understood to mean that although he appears cowardly he is actually brave, or that although he appears brave he is actually cowardly. This ambiguity should cause you to be very careful about using "deceptive" and "deceptively" to make clear which meaning you intend.

DECIMATE/ANNIHILATE, SLAUGHTER, ETC.

This comes under the heading of the truly picky. Despite the fact that most dictionaries have caved in, some of us still remember that when the Romans killed one out of every ten (decem) soldiers in a rebellious group as an example to the others, they decimated them. People sensitive to the roots of words are uncomfortably reminded of that ten percent figure when they see the word used instead to mean "annihilate," "obliterate," etc. You can usually get away with using "decimate" to mean "drastically reduce in numbers," but you're taking a bigger risk when you use it to mean "utterly wipe out."

DEEP-SEEDED/DEEP-SEATED

Those who pine for the oral cultures of Ye Olden Dayes can rejoice as we enter an era where many people are unfamiliar with common expressions in print and know them only by hearsay.* The result is mistakes like "deep seeded." The expression has nothing to do with a feeling being planted deep within one, but instead refers to its being seated firmly within one's breast: "My aversion to anchovies is deep-seated." Compounding

their error, most people who misuse this phrase leave the hyphen out. Tennis players may be seeded, but not feelings.

*The notion that English should be spelled as it is pronounced is widespread, but history is against the reformers in most cases. Pronunciation is often a poor guide to spelling. The veneration of certain political movements for the teaching of reading through phonics is nicely caricatured by a t-shirt slogan I've seen: "Hukt awn fonix."

DEFENCE/DEFENSE

If you are writing for a British publication, use "defence," but the American "defense" has the advantages of greater antiquity, similarity to the words from which it was derived, and consistency with words like "defensible."

DEFINATE/DEFINITE

Any vowel in an unstressed position can sometimes have the sound linguists call a "schwa:" "uh." The result is that many people tend to guess when they hear this sound, but "definite" is definitely the right spelling. Also common are various misspellings of "definitely," including the bizarre "defiantly."

DEFAMATION/DEFORMATION

Someone who defames you, seeking to destroy your reputation (making you ill-famed), is engaging in defamation of character. Only if someone succeeded in actually making you a worse person could you claim that they had deformed your character.

DEFUSE/DIFFUSE

You defuse a dangerous situation by treating it like a bomb and removing its fuse; to diffuse, in contrast, is to spread something out: "Bob's cheap cologne diffused throughout the room, wrecking the wine-tasting."

DEGRADE/DENIGRATE/DOWNGRADE

Many people use "downgrade" instead of "denigrate" to mean "defame, slander." "Downgrade" is entirely different in meaning. When something is downgraded, it is lowered in grade (usually made worse), not just considered worse. "When the president of the company fled to Rio with fifteen million dollars, its bonds were downgraded to junk bond status." "Degrade" is much more flexible in meaning. It can mean to lower in status or rank (like "downgrade") or to corrupt or make contemptible; but it always has to do with actual reduction in value rather than mere insult, like "denigrate." Most of the time when people use "downgrade" they would be better off instead using "insult," "belittle," or "sneer at."

DEGREE TITLES

When you are writing phrases like "bachelor's degree," "master of arts

degree" and "doctor of philosophy degree" use all lower-case spelling. Less formally, these are often abbreviated to "bachelor's," "master's," and "doctorate": "I earned my master's at Washington State University." Be careful not to omit the apostrophes where needed.

The only time to capitalize the spelled-out forms of degree names is when you are specifying a particular degree's name: "Master of English Composition." However the abbreviations BA, MA, and PhD are all capitalized. In modern usage periods are not usually added.

DEJA VU

In French "deja vu" means literally "already seen" and usually refers to something excessively familiar. However the phrase, sans accent marks, was introduced into English mainly as a psychological term indicating the sensation one experiences when feeling that something has been experienced before when this is in fact not the case. If you feel strongly that you have been previously in a place where you know for a fact you have never before been, you are experiencing a sensation of deja vu. English usage is rapidly sliding back toward the French meaning, confusing listeners who expect the phrase to refer to a false sensation rather than a factual familiarity, as in "Congress is in session and talking about campaign finance reform, creating a sense of deja vu." In this relatively new sense, the phrase has the same associations as the colloquial "same old, same old" (increasingly often misspelled "sameo, sameo" by illiterates).

"It seems like it's deja vu all over again," is a redundantly mangled saying usually attributed to baseball player Yogi Berra. Over the ensuing decades clever writers would allude to this blunder in their prose by repeating the phrase "deja vu all over again," assuming that their readers would catch the allusion and share a chuckle with them. Unfortunately, recently the phrase has been worn to a frazzle and become all but substituted for the original, so that not only has it become a very tired joke indeed--a whole generation has grown up thinking that Berra's malapropism is the correct form of the expression. Give it a rest, folks!

DEMOCRAT PARTY/DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Certain Republican members of Congress have played the childish game in recent years of referring to the opposition as the "Democrat Party," hoping to imply that Democrats are not truly democratic. They succeed only in making themselves sound ignorant, and so will you if you imitate them. The name is "Democratic Party."

DENIED OF/DENIED

If you are deprived of your rights you are denied them; but that's no reason to confuse these two expressions with each other. You can't be "denied of" anything.

DEPENDS/DEPENDS ON

In casual speech, we say "it depends who plays the best defense"; but in writing follow "depends" with "on."

DEPRECIATE/DEPRECATE

To depreciate something is to actually make it worse, whereas to deprecate something is simply to speak or think of it in a manner that demonstrates your low opinion of it. People who make unflattering jokes or comments about themselves are self-deprecating.

DERISORY/DERISIVE

Although "derisory" and "derisive" can both mean "laughable," there are sometimes subtle distinctions made between them. "Derisory" is most often used to mean "worthy of being laughed at": "Ethan" made a derisory effort to clean the cat box while talking on his cell phone." Sneering laughter is usually described as "derisive."

You might more unusually speak of an effort as "derisive," but most people would think it odd to use "derisory" to describe the tone of someone's laughter.

DESERT/DESSERT

Perhaps these two words are confused partly because "dessert" is one of the few words in English with a double "S" pronounced like "Z" ("brassiere" is another). That impoverished stretch of sand called a desert can only afford one "S." In contrast, that rich gooey extra thing at the end of the meal called a dessert indulges in two of them. The word in the phrase "he got his just deserts" is confusingly pronounced just like "desserts."

DEVIANT/DEVIATE

The technical term used by professionals to label someone whose behavior deviates from the norm is "deviate," but if you want to tease a perv friend you may as well call him a "deviant"--that's what almost everybody else says. In your sociology class, however, you might want to stick with "deviate."

DEVICE/DEVISE

"Device" is a noun. A can-opener is a device. "Devise" is a verb. You can devise a plan for opening a can with a sharp rock instead. Only in law is "devise" properly used as a noun, meaning something deeded in a will.

DEW/DO/DOO/DUE

The original pronunciation of "dew" and "due" rhymed with "pew", but American pronunciation has shifted toward sounding all of these words alike, and the result is much confusion in standard phrases. On a damp morning there is dew on the grass. Doo on the grass is the result of failing to pick up after your dog. The most common confusion is

substituting "do" for "due" (owing) in phrases like "credit is due," "due to circumstances," and "bill is due."

"Do" is normally a verb, but it can be a noun with meanings like "party," "hairdo," and "dos and don'ts." Note that in the last phrase it is not necessary to insert an apostrophe before the "S," and that if you choose to do so you'll wind up with two apostrophes awkwardly close together: "don't's."

DIALOGUE/DISCUSS

"Dialogue" as a verb in sentences like "the Math Department will dialogue with the Dean about funding" is commonly used jargon in business and education settings, but abhorred by traditionalists. Say "have a dialogue" or "discuss" instead.

DIETIES/DEITIES

This one is always good for a laugh. The gods are deities, after the Latin "deus," meaning "god."

DIFFERENT THAN/DIFFERENT FROM/TO

Americans say "Scuba-diving is different from snorkeling," the British often say "different to" (though most UK style guides disapprove), and those who don't know any better say "different than." However, though conservatives object, you can usually get away with "different than" if a full clause follows: "Your pashmina shawl looks different than it used to since the cat slept on it."

DIFFER/VARY

"Vary" can mean "differ," but saying "our opinions vary" makes it sound as if they were changing all the time when what you really mean is "our opinions differ." Pay attention to context when choosing one of these words.

DILEMMA/DIFFICULTY

A dilemma is a difficult choice, not just any difficulty or problem. Whether to invite your son's mother to his high school graduation when your current wife hates her is a dilemma. Cleaning up after a hurricane is just a problem, though a difficult one.

"Dilemna" is a common misspelling of "dilemma."

DIRE STRAIGHTS/DIRE STRAITS

When you are threading your way through troubles as if you were traversing a dangerously narrow passage you are in "dire straits." The expression and the band by that name are often transformed by those who don't understand the word "strait" into "dire straights."

See also "straightjacket/straitjacket."

DISBURSE/DISPERSE

You disburse money by taking it out of your purse (French "bourse") and distributing it. If you refuse to hand out any money, the eager mob of beggars before you may disperse (scatter).

DISC/DISK

"Compact disc" is spelled with a "C" because that's how its inventors decided it should be rendered; but a computer hard disk is spelled with a "K" (unless it's a CD-ROM, of course). In modern technological contexts, "disks" usually reproduce data magnetically, while "discs" (CD-ROMs, DVDs, etc.) reproduce it "optically," with lasers.

DISCONCERNING/CONCERNING, DISCERNING

This odd word looks like it might be an error for "disconcerting," but people who use it seem mostly to mean something like "discerning" (perceiving) or "concerning" (in the sense "of concern," itself widely considered an error).

DISCREET/DISCRETE

The more common word is "discreet," meaning "prudent, circumspect": "When arranging the party for Agnes, be sure to be discreet; we want her to be surprised." "Discrete" means "separate, distinct": "He arranged the guest list into two discrete groups: meat-eaters and vegetarians." Note how the T separates the two Es in "discrete."

DISCUSSED/DISGUST

"Discussed" is the past tense of the verb "discuss." Don't substitute for it the noun "disgust" in such sentences as "The couple's wedding plans were thoroughly discussed."

DISGRESSION/DISCRETION

Discretion has to do with being discreet or with making choices. A lot of people hear it and get influenced by the quite different word "digression" which is used to label instances of people wandering off the point. The result is the nonword "disgression." The expression is "you can do it at your own discretion."

DISINTERESTED/UNINTERESTED

A bored person is uninterested. Do not confuse this word with the much rarer "disinterested," which means "objective, neutral".

DISRESPECT

The hip-hop subculture has revived the use of "disrespect" as a verb. In the meaning to have or show disrespect, this usage has been long

established, if unusual. However, the new street meaning of the term, ordinarily abbreviated to "dis," is slightly but significantly different: to act disrespectfully, or--more frequently--insultingly toward someone. In some neighborhoods "dissing" is defined as merely failing to show sufficient terror in the face of intimidation. In those neighborhoods, it is wise to know how the term is used; but an applicant for a job who complains about having been "disrespected" elsewhere is likely to incur further disrespect . . . and no job. Street slang has its uses, but this is one instance that has not become generally accepted.

DISSEMBLE/DISASSEMBLE

People who dissemble are being dishonest, trying to hide what they are really up to. This is an uncommon word, often misused when "disassemble" is meant. People who disassemble something take it apart--they are doing the opposite of assembling it.

DO RESPECT/DUE RESPECT

When you preface your critical comments by telling people "with all due respect" you are claiming to give them the respect they are due--that which is owed them. Many folks misunderstand this phrase and misspell it "all do respect" or even "all-do respect." You shouldn't use this expression unless you really do intend to be as polite as possible; all too often it's used merely to preface a deliberate insult.

DOCTORIAL/DOCTORAL

"Doctoral" is occasionally misspelled--and often mispronounced--"doctorial."

DOESN'T SUPPOSED TO/ISN'T SUPPOSED TO

You aren't supposed to say "doesn't supposed to." The expression is "isn't supposed to."

DOLLY/HANDCART

A dolly is a flat platform with wheels on it, often used to make heavy objects mobile, or by an auto mechanic lying on one under a car body. Many people mistakenly use this word to designate the vertically oriented two-wheeled device with upright handles and horizontal lip. This latter device is more properly called a "handcart" or "hand truck."

DOMINATE/DOMINANT

The verb is "dominate"; the adjective is "dominant." The dominant chimpanzee tends to dominate the others.

DONE/DID

The past participle of "do" is "done," so it's not "they have did what they promised not to do" but "they have done. . . ." But without a

helping verb, the word is "did." Nonstandard: "I done good on the test." Standard: "I did well on the test."

DO'S AND DON'TS/DOS AND DON'TS

One unusual use of apostrophes is to mark plurals of words when they are being treated as words, as in "pro's and con's," although plain old "pros and cons" without apostrophes is fine. But "don't" already has one apostrophe in it, and adding another looks awkward in the phrase "do's and don't's," so people wind up being inconsistent and writing "do's and don'ts." This makes no logical sense. You can also skip the extra apostrophes and write "dos and don'ts," unless you're afraid that "dos" will remind your readers of MS-DOS (but that unlamented operating system is fast becoming a distant memory).

DOUBLE NEGATIVES

It is not true, as some assert, that double negatives are always wrong; but the pattern in formal speech and writing is that two negatives equal a mild positive: "he is a not untalented guitarist" means he has some talent. In informal speech, however, double negatives are intended as negatives: "he ain't got no talent" means he is a lousy musician. People are rarely confused about the meaning of either pattern, but you do need to take your audience into account when deciding which pattern to follow.

One of the funniest uses of the literary double negative is Douglas Adams' description of a machine dispensing "a substance almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea."

DOUBT THAT/DOUBT WHETHER/DOUBT IF

If you really doubt that something is true (suspect that it's false), use "doubt that": "I doubt that Fred has really lost 25 pounds." If you want to express genuine uncertainty, use "whether": "I doubt whether we'll see the comet if the clouds don't clear soon." "Doubt if" can be substituted for "doubt whether," though it's considered somewhat more casual, but don't use it when you mean "doubt that."

DOUBTLESSLY/DOUBTLESS

Leave off the unnecessary "-ly" in "doubtless."

DOVE/DIVED

Although "dove" is a common form of the past tense of "dive," a few authorities consider "dived" preferable in formal writing.

DOWNFALL/DRAWBACK

A downfall is something that causes a person's destruction, either literal or figurative: "expensive cars were Fred's downfall: he spent his entire inheritance on them and went bankrupt." A drawback is not nearly so drastic, just a flaw or problem of some kind, and is normally

applied to plans and activities, not to people: "Gloria's plan to camp on Mosquito Island had just one drawback: she had forgotten to bring her insect repellent." Also, "downfall" should not be used when the more moderate "decline" is meant; reserve it for ruin, not to designate simple deterioration.

DRANK/DRUNK

Many common verbs in English change form when their past tense is preceded by an auxiliary ("helping") verb: "I ran, I have run." The same is true of "drink." Don't say "I've drank the beer" unless you want people to think you are drunk. An even more common error is "I drunk all the milk." it's "I've drunk the beer" and "I drank all the milk."

DRASTIC

"Drastic" means "severe" and generally has negative or frightening associations. Drastic measures are not just extreme, they are likely to have harmful side-effects. Don't use this word or "drastically" in a positive or neutral sense. A drastic rise in temperature should be seen as downright dangerous, not just surprisingly large. Often when people use phrases like "drastic improvement," they mean "dramatic" instead.

DREDGE/DRUDGE/TRUDGE

You use machinery to scoop stuff up from underwater--called a dredge--to dredge up gunk or debris from the bottom of a river or lake. Metaphorically, you also dredge up old memories, the past, or objects buried in the mess in your room.

To drudge is to do hard, annoying work; and a person who does such work can also be called a "drudge." If you find yourself saying "drudge up" about anything you're trying to uncover you almost certainly should be using "dredge up" instead.

When you slog laboriously up a hill, you trudge up it. Trudging may be drudgery; but the act of walking a difficult path is not drudging, but trudging.

And you cooks wondering whether dredging a chicken breast with flour has anything to do with river-bottom dredging will be relieved to know it does not. The two words have completely different origins ("sprinkling" vs. "scooping").

DRIER/DRYER

A clothes dryer makes the clothes drier.

DRIBBLE/DRIVEL

"Dribble" and "drivel" originally meant the same thing: drool. But the two words have become differentiated. When you mean to criticize someone else's speech as stupid or pointless, the word you want is "drivel."

DRIPS AND DRABS/DRIBS AND DRABS

Something doled out in miserly amounts is provided in "dribs and drabs." A drib is a smaller relative of a dribble. Nobody seems to be sure what a drab is in this sense, except that it's a tiny bit larger than a drib.

Since the origin of the phrase is obscure, people try to substitute a more familiar word for the unusual word "drib" by writing "drips and drabs." But that's not the traditional formula.

DRIVE/DISK

A hard drive and a hard disk are much the same thing; but when it comes to removable computer media, the drive is the machinery that turns and reads the disk. Be sure not to ask for a drive when all you need is a disk.

DRUG/DRAGGED

"Well, look what the cat drug in!" Unless you are trying to render dialectical speech to convey a sense of down-home rusticity, use "dragged" as the past tense of "drag."

DUAL/DUEL

"Dual" is an adjective describing the two-ness of something--dual carburetors, for instance. A "duel" is a formal battle intended to settle a dispute.

DUCK TAPE/DUCT TAPE

A commercial firm has named its product "Duck Tape," harking back to the original name for this adhesive tape (which was green), developed by Johnson & Johnson during World War II to waterproof ammunition cases. It is now usually called "duct tape," for its common use in connecting ventilation and other ducts (which match its current silver color). Note that modern building codes consider duct tape unsafe for sealing ducts, particularly those that convey hot air.

DUE TO THE FACT THAT/BECAUSE

Although "due to" is now a generally acceptable synonym for "because," "due to the fact that" is a clumsy and wordy substitute that should be avoided in formal writing. "Due to" is often misspelled "do to."

DYEING/DYING

If you are using dye to change your favorite t-shirt from white to blue you are dyeing it; but if you don't breathe for so long that your face turns blue, you may be dying.

E.G./I.E.

When you mean "for example," use e.g. It is an abbreviation for the

Latin phrase exempli gratia. When you mean "that is," use "i.e." It is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase "id est." Either can be used to clarify a preceding statement, the first by example, the second by restating the idea more clearly or expanding upon it. Because these uses are so similar, the two abbreviations are easily confused. If you just stick with good old English "for example" and "that is" you won't give anyone a chance to sneer at you. If you insist on using the abbreviation, perhaps "example given" will remind you to use "e.g.," while "in effect" suggests "I.E."

Since e.g. indicates a partial list, it is redundant to add "etc." at the end of a list introduced by this abbreviation.

EACH

"Each" as a subject is always singular: think of it as equivalent to "every one." The verb whose subject it is must also be singular. Some uses, like "to keep them from fighting, each dog has been given its own bowl," cause no problem. No one is tempted to say "have been given." But when a prepositional phrase with a plural object intervenes between subject and verb, we are likely to be misled into saying things like "Each of the children have to memorize their own locker combinations." The subject is "each," not "children." The tendency to avoid specifying gender by using "their" adds to pressure toward plurality; but the correct version of this sentence is "Each of the children has to memorize his or her own locker combination." One can avoid the entire problem by pluralizing throughout: "All the children have to memorize their own locker combinations" (but see the entry on singular "they"). In many uses, however, "each" is not the subject, as in "We each have our own favorite flavor of ice cream" which is correct because "we" and not "each" is the subject of the verb "have".

"Each other" cannot be a subject, so the question of verb number does not arise; but the number of the possessive creates a problem for some writers. "They gazed into each other's eyes" is correct and "each others'" is incorrect because "each other" is singular. Reword to "each gazed into the other's eyes" to see the logic behind this rule. "Each other" is always two distinct words separated by a space although it functions grammatically as a sort of compound word.

EARLY ADAPTER/EARLY ADOPTER

An "early adopter," is a person who quickly adopts something new quickly--usually a technological innovation. If you just have to rush out and buy the latest and coolest gadget, you're an early adopter. If it meant anything, an "early adapter" would be someone who reworked something first for his or her own purposes; but most of the time this version of the phrase is just a mistake.

EARTH, MOON

Soil is lower-case "earth." And in most uses even the planet itself remains humbly in lower-case letters: "peace on earth." But in astronomical contexts, the Earth comes into its own with a proud initial

capital, and in science fiction it drops the introductory article and becomes "Earth," just like Mars and Venus. A similar pattern applies to Earth's satellite: "shine on, harvest moon," but "from the Earth to the Moon." Because other planets also have moons, it never loses its article.

EASEDROP/EAVESDROP

The area under the eaves right next to the front of a building used to be called the "eavesdrop," and somebody listening in secretively from such a position came to be called an "eavesdropper." Unfortunately, so few people distinctly pronounce the V in "eavesdrop" that many are misled into misspelling it "easedrop."

ECOLOGY/ENVIRONMENT

"Ecology" is the study of living things in relationship to their environment. The word can also be used to describe the totality of such relationships; but it should not be substituted for "environment" in statements like "improperly discarded lead batteries harm the ecology." it's not the relationships that are being harmed, but nature itself: the batteries are harming the environment.

ECONOMIC/ECONOMICAL

Something is economical if it saves you money; but if you're talking about the effect of some measure on the world's economy, it's an economic effect.

ECSTATIC

Pronounced "eck-sta-tic," not "ess-ta-tic."

ECT./ETC.

"Etc." is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase et cetera, meaning "and the rest." ("Et" means "and" in French too.) Just say "et cetera" out loud to yourself to remind yourself of the correct order of the "T" and "C." Also to be avoided is the common mispronunciation "excetera." "And etc." is a redundancy.

NEEDS -ED/-ING

In some dialects it is common to say "my shoes need shined" instead of the standard "my shoes need shining" or "my shoes need to be shined."

-ED/-T

You have learnt your lessons only in UK-influenced countries, you've learned them in the US There are several common verbs which often have "T" endings in Britain which seem a little quaint and poetic in American English, where we prefer "-ED." Other examples: "dreamt/dreamed," "dwelt/dwelled," "leant/leaned," "leapt/leaped," and "spelt/spelled." However, the following alternatives are both common in the US:

"burned/burnt" and "kneeled/knelt."

EFFORTING/TRYING

Among the new verbs created out of nouns, "efforting" is one of the most bizarre and unnecessary, and has been met with a chorus of objections. You are not "efforting" to get your report in on time; you are trying to do so. Instead of saying "we are efforting a new vendor," say "we are trying to find a new vendor."

EI/IE

The familiar rule is that English words are spelled with the "I" before the "E" unless they follow a "C," as in "receive." But it is important to add that words in which the vowel sound is an "A" like "neighbor" and "weigh" are also spelled with the "E" first. And there are a few exceptions like "counterfeit," "seize, and "weird."

See also "neice/niece."

EITHER

"Either" often gets misplaced in a sentence: "He either wanted to build a gambling casino or a convent" should be "He wanted to build either a gambling casino or a convent." Put "either" just before the first of the two things being compared.

EITHER ARE/EITHER IS

As a subject, "either" is singular. It's the opposite of "both," and refers to one at a time: "Either ketchup or mustard is good on a hot dog." But if "either" is modifying a subject in an "either . . . or" phrase, then the number of the verb is determined by the number of the second noun: "Either the puppy or the twins seem to need my attention every other minute."

ELAPSE/LAPSE

Both these words come from a Latin root meaning "to slip." "Elapse" almost always refers to the passage of time. "Lapse" usually refers to a change of state, as in lapsing from consciousness into unconsciousness. Here are examples of the correct uses of these words you might get in the mail: "Six months have elapsed since your last dental appointment" and "You have allowed your subscription to Bride Magazine to lapse." Occasionally "lapse" can be used as a synonym of "elapse" in the sense "to slip away." Substituting one for the other is dangerous, however, if you are a lawyer. Insurance policies and collective bargaining agreements do not elapse when they expire, they lapse.

ELECTROCUTE/SHOCK

To electrocute is to kill using electricity. If you live to tell the tale, you've been shocked, but not electrocuted. For the same reason, the phrase "electrocuted to death" is a redundancy.

ELICIT/ILLICIT

The lawyer tries to elicit a description of the attacker from the witness. "Elicit" is always a verb. "Illicit," in contrast, is always an adjective describing something illegal or naughty.

ELLIPSES

Those dots that come in the middle of a quotation to indicate something omitted are called an "ellipsis" (plural "ellipses"): "Tex told Sam to get the . . . cow out of the bunk house." Here Tex's language has been censored, but you are more likely to have a use for ellipses when quoting some source in a paper: "Ishmael remarks at the beginning of "Moby Dick," 'some years ago . . . I thought I would sail about a little' --a very understated way to begin a novel of high adventure." The three dots stand for a considerable stretch of prose that has been omitted. If the ellipsis ends your sentence, some editorial styles require four dots, the first of which is a period: From the same paragraph in Moby Dick: "almost all men . . . cherish very nearly the same feelings. . . ." Note that the period in the second ellipsis has to be snug up against the last word quoted, with spaces between the other dots.

Some modern styles do not call for ellipses at the beginning and ending of quoted matter unless not doing so would be genuinely misleading, so check with your teacher or editor if you're uncertain whether to use one in those positions. It is never correct to surround a quoted single word or short phrase with ellipses: "Romeo tells Juliet that by kissing her again his 'sin is purged'" (note, by the way, that I began the quotation after the first word in the phrase "my sin is purged" in order to make it work grammatically in the context of the sentence).

When text is typeset, the spaces are often but not always omitted between the dots in an ellipsis. Since modern computer printer output looks much more like typeset writing than old-fashioned typewriting, you may be tempted to omit the spaces; but it is better to include them and let the publisher decide whether they should be eliminated.

An ellipsis that works perfectly well on your computer may "break" when your text is transferred to another if it comes at the end of a line, with one or more of the dots wrapping around to the next line. To avoid this, learn how to type "non-breaking spaces" between the dots of ellipses: in Word for Windows it's Control-Shift-Spacebar; on a Mac, it's Option-Spacebar. When writing HTML code to create a Web page, make a nonbreaking space with this code:

EMAIL/E-MAIL

Although the spelling "email" is extremely popular, many people prefer "e-mail," which follows the same pattern as "e-commerce." The "E" stands for "electronic."

EMBARESS/EMBARRASS

You can pronounce the last two syllables as two distinct words as a jog to memory, except that then the word may be misspelled "embareass," which isn't right either. You also have to remember the double R: "embarrass."

EMERGENT/EMERGENCY

The error of considering "emergent" to be the adjectival form of "emergency" is common only in medical writing, but it is becoming widespread. "Emergent" properly means "emerging" and normally refers to events that are just beginning--barely noticeable rather than catastrophic. "Emergency" is an adjective as well as a noun, so rather than writing "emergent care," use the homely "emergency care."

EMIGRATE/IMMIGRATE

To "emigrate" is to leave a country. The E at the beginning of the word is related to the E in other words having to do with going out, such as "exit." "Immigrate," in contrast, looks as if it might have something to do with going in, and indeed it does: it means to move into a new country. The same distinction applies to "emigration" and "immigration." Note the double M in the second form. A migrant is someone who continually moves about.

EMINENT/IMMINENT/IMMANENT

By far the most common of these words is "eminent," meaning "prominent, famous." "Imminent," in phrases like "facing imminent disaster," means "threatening." It comes from Latin minere, meaning "to project or overhang." Think of a mine threatening to cave in. Positive events can also be imminent: they just need to be coming soon. The rarest of the three is "immanent," used by philosophers to mean "inherent" and by theologians to mean "present throughout the universe" when referring to God. It comes from Latin "manere," "remain." Think of God creating "man" in his own image.

When a government exercises its power over private property it is drawing on its eminent status in society, so the proper legal phrase is "eminent domain."

EMPATHY/SYMPATHY

If you think you feel just like another person, you are feeling empathy. If you just feel sorry for another person, you're feeling sympathy.

Sometimes people say they "emphasize" with someone when they mean they "empathize" with him or her.

EMPHASIZE ON/EMPHASIZE

You can place emphasis on something, or you can emphasize it, but you can't emphasize on it or stress on it, though you can place stress on

it.

EMULATE/IMITATE

People generally know what "imitate" means, but they sometimes don't understand that "emulate" is a more specialized word with a purely positive function, meaning to try to equal or match. Thus if you try to climb the same mountain your big brother did, you're emulating him; but if you copy his habit of sticking peas up his nose, you're just imitating him.

ENAMORED BY/ENAMORED OF

If you're crazy about ferrets, you're enamored of them. It is less common but still acceptable to say "enamored with"; but if you say you are enamored by ferrets, you're saying that ferrets are crazy about you.

ENDEMIC/EPIDEMIC

"Endemic" is in danger of losing its core meaning through confusion with "epidemic." An endemic condition is one characteristic of a particular region, population, or environment: "sore thumbs are endemic among teen text-messagers." A condition need not affect a majority or even a very large number of people in a population to be endemic. In biology, an endemic disease is one that is maintained locally without the need for outside influence: "Cholera is endemic in Kolkata." It keeps recurring there, but still only a small minority of the population gets cholera.

An epidemic condition is widespread, rampant: " Overindulgence in fatty foods in epidemic throughout the world." The dominance of the noun "epidemic" ("the threat of a flu epidemic") may make people reluctant to use it as an adjective ("flu may become epidemic") but both uses are legitimate. It's best to stick with "epidemic" unless you have a specific need for the technical term "endemic."

ENGINE/MOTOR

People who work on them distinguish between the electrically powered unit called the "motor" and the engine which it starts; but even in auto-parts stores the stuff which by that logic should be called "engine oil" is marketed as "motor oil." Similarly, the English go motoring on motorways. In everyday American discourse, the terms are often interchangeable (you can buy a powerful engine for your motorboat), but you'll embarrass yourself if you don't make the distinction when talking to your mechanic.

ENJOY TO/ENJOY -ING

The expression "enjoy to" (or "enjoyed to") is nonstandard, influenced by "like to." You don't enjoy to jog; you either enjoy jogging or like to jog.

ENORMITY/ENORMOUSNESS

Originally these two words were synonymous, but "enormity" got whittled down to meaning something monstrous or outrageous. Don't wonder at the "enormity" of the Palace of Versailles unless you wish to express horror at this embodiment of Louis XIV's ego. "Enormity" can also be used as a noun meaning "monstrosity."

END RESULT/END

Usually a redundancy. Most of the time plain "result" will do fine.

ENQUIRE/INQUIRE

These are alternative spellings of the same word. "Enquire" is perhaps slightly more common in the UK, but either is acceptable in the US

IN ROUTE/EN ROUTE

"En route" is a French phrase meaning "on the way," as in "En route to the gallows, Lucky was struck by lightning." Don't anglicize this expression as "in route."

ENSUITE

Americans who have wandered chilly London hallways in the middle of the night in search of a toilet will appreciate learning the peculiar British meaning of the word "ensuite."

In French, a set of two rooms or more forming a single accommodation can be advertised as rooms "en suite" (forming a suite). But the single word French word "ensuite" means something entirely different: "then, later." Around the middle of the 20th century English landlords and hoteliers began to anglicize the phrase, placing it before the noun, so that traditional "rooms en suite" became "en suite rooms," Ads read "bath ensuite" or "toilet ensuite" as if the phrase meant "in the suite." The phrase "en suite" came to be used solely to designate bathrooms attached to a bedroom.

Following standard English patterns, they hyphenated the phrase as "en-suite bath" and often made the phrase into a single word: "ensuite bath." These have become standard British usage; but hoteliers often go a step further by writing "all rooms ensuite" (Americans would write "all rooms with bath").

It is clearly nonstandard to use "ensuite" as if it were a noun synonymous with "toilet" or "bathroom": "I went to the ensuite to take a shower." You may puke on your suit, but not into "the ensuite."

ENTHUSE

"Enthuse" is a handy word and "state enthusiastically" is not nearly so striking; but unfortunately "enthuse" is not acceptable in the most formal contexts.

ENTOMOLOGY/ETYMOLOGY

Entomology is the study of insects, like ants ("ant" looks like "ent-") but etymology is the study of the history of words (from Greek, originally meaning "the true meaning of words").

ENVELOP/ENVELOPE

To wrap something up in a covering is to envelop it (pronounced "enVELLup"). The specific wrapping you put around a letter is an envelope (pronounced variously, but with the accent on the first syllable).

ENVIOUS/JEALOUS

Although these are often treated as synonyms, there is a difference. You are envious of what others have that you lack. Jealousy, on the other hand, involves wanting to hold on to what you do have. You can be jealous of your boyfriend's attraction to other women, but you're envious of your boyfriend's CD collection.

ENVIROMENT/ENVIRONMENT

The second N in "environment" is seldom pronounced distinctly, so it's not surprising that is often omitted in writing. If you know the related word "environs" it may help remind you.

EPIC/EPOCH

An "epoch" is a long period of time, like the Pleistocene Epoch. It often gets mixed up with "epic" in the sense of "large-scale." Something really big has "epic proportions," not "epoch proportions."

EPICENTER

The precise location where the earth slips beneath the surface in an earthquake is its hypocenter (or focus) and the spot up on the surface where people feel the quake is its epicenter. Geologists get upset when people use the latter word, designating a point rather removed from the main action, as if it were a synonym of "epitome" and meant something like "most important center." The British spell it "epicentre."

EPIGRAM/EPIGRAPH/EPITAPH/EPITHET

An epigram is a pithy saying, usually humorous. Mark Twain was responsible for many striking, mostly cynical epigrams, such as "Always do right. That will gratify some of the people, and astonish the rest." Unfortunately, he was also responsible for an even more famous one that has been confusing people ever since: "Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody." it's true that the moon keeps one side away from the earth, but--if you don't count the faint glow reflected from the earth--it is not any darker than the side that faces us. In fact, over time, the side facing us is darkened slightly more often because it is occasionally eclipsed by the shadow of the earth.

An epigraph is a brief quotation used to introduce a piece of writing or the inscription on a statue or building.

An epitaph is the inscription on a tombstone or some other tribute to a dead person.

In literature, an epithet is a term that replaces or is added to the name of a person, like "clear-eyed Athena," in which "clear-eyed" is the epithet. You are more likely to encounter the term in its negative sense, as a term of insult or abuse: "the shoplifter hurled epithets at the guard who had arrested her."

EPITOMY/EPITOME

Nothing makes you look quite so foolish as spelling a sophisticated word incorrectly. Taken directly from Greek, where it means "abridgement," "epitome" is now most often used to designate an extremely representative example of the general class: "Snow White is the epitome of a Disney cartoon feature." Those who don't misspell this word often mispronounce it, misled by its spelling, as "EP-i-tohm," but the proper pronunciation is "ee-PIT-o-mee." The word means "essence," not "climax," so instead of writing "the market had reached the epitome of frenzied selling at noon," use "peak" or a similar word.

EPONYMOUS/SELF-TITLED

It has become popular among certain critics to call recordings named after their performing artists "eponymous." Thus the album by the Beatles titled "The Beatles" would be an eponymous album. (Don't remember it? It's the one most people call "The White Album;" the title was embossed on the cover rather than printed on it.) This pretentious term is not only so obscure as to be almost useless, these writers are not using it in its original sense; it was the person who was eponymous, not the thing named after the person. I prefer the usage of critics who call such recordings "self-titled." It's an awkward phrase, but at least it's easy for the reader to figure out what is meant.

ERROR/ERR

When you commit an error you err. The expression is "to err is human."

-ES

Latin-derived terms whose singular form ends in "-is" and whose plurals are made by changing the "-is" to "-es" such as "thesis" (plural: "theses") have their final syllables pronounced "eez." This pattern causes some people to do the same in other words without a Latin singular "-is" form, like "processes" whose last syllable should sound like "says."

ET AL.

"Et al.' is a scholarly abbreviation of the Latin phrase "et alia,"

which means "and others." It is commonly used when you don't want to name all the people or things in a list, and works in roughly the same way as "etc." "The reorganization plan was designed by Alfred E. Newman, General Halftrack, Zippy the Pinhead, et al.; and it was pretty useless." The "al." in this phrase needs a period after it to indicate it is an abbreviation of "alia"; but it is incorrect to put a period after "et."

ETHICS/MORALS/MORALE

Strictly speaking, ethics are beliefs: if you have poor ethics, you have lax standards; but your morals are your behavior: if you have poor morals, you behave badly. You can have high standards but still fail to follow them: strong ethics and weak morals. "Morale" formerly had both these meanings and you will find them attached to the word in some dictionaries, but you would be wise to avoid it in either of these senses in modern writing. By far the most common current use of "morale" is to label your state of mind, particularly how contented you are with life. A person with low morals is bad; but a person with low morale may be merely depressed.

ETHNIC

it's misleading to refer to minority groups as "ethnics" since everyone has ethnicity, even a dominant majority.

EVERY

"Every," "everybody" and "everyone" and related expressions are normally treated as singular in American English: "Every woman I ask out tells me she already has plans for Saturday night." However, constructions like "everyone brought their own lunch" are widely accepted now because of a desire to avoid specifying "his" or "her." See "they/their (singular)."

EVERYONE/EVERY ONE

"Everyone" means "everybody" and is used when you want to refer to all the people in a group: "Everyone in my family likes spaghetti carbonara."

But if you're referring to the individuals who make up a group, then the phrase is "every one." Examples: "God bless us, every one" (may each individual in the group be blessed). "We wish each and every one of you a Merry Christmas" (every single one of you). In the phrase "each and every one" you should never substitute "everyone").

For "everyone" as singular or plural, see "every."

EVER SO OFTEN/EVERY SO OFTEN

In UK English people sometimes speak of something that happens frequently as happening "ever so often."

But when something happens only occasionally, it happens "every" so often.

EVERY SINCE/EVER SINCE

The expression is not "every since" but "ever since."

EVERYDAY

"Everyday" is a perfectly good adjective, as in "I'm most comfortable in my everyday clothes." The problem comes when people turn the adverbial phrase "every day" into a single word. It is incorrect to write "I take a shower everyday." It should be "I take a shower every day."

EVERYTIME/EVERY TIME

"Every time" is always two separate words.

EVIDENCE TO/EVIDENCE OF

You can provide evidence to a court, even enough evidence to convict someone; but the standard expression "is evidence of" requires "of" rather than "to" in sentences like this: "Driving through the front entrance of the Burger King is evidence of Todd's inexperience in driving." You can also omit the pronoun altogether by using "evidences" or "evidenced": "his driving evidences (or evidenced) his inexperience."

EVOKE/INVOKE

"Evoke" and "invoke" are close together in meaning, and are often confused with each other.

The action of "invoking" is usually more direct and active. It originally involved calling upon or summoning up a god or spirit. An invocation calls upon whatever is invoked to do something or serve a function. "Invoke" now can also be used to mean "to appeal to, to cite": "in his closing argument, the lawyer invoked the principle of self-defense."

"Evoke" is usually less purposefully active, more indirect, often used to mean "suggest." If you invoke the spirit of Picasso, you're trying to summon his soul up from the grave; but if your paintings evoke the spirit of Picasso, it means their style reminds viewers of that artist's work.

EXACT SAME/EXACTLY THE SAME

In casual speech we often say things like, "The fruitcake he gave me was the exact same one I'd given him last Christmas," but in formal English the phrase is "exactly the same."

EXALT/EXULT

When you celebrate joyfully, you exult. When you raise something high (even if only in your opinion), you exalt it. Neither word has an "H" in it.

EXCAPE/ESCAPE

The proper spelling is "escape." Say it that way too.

EXASPERATE/EXACERBATE

People get exasperated (irritated); situations get exacerbated (made worse).

PAR EXCELLANCE/PAR EXCELLENCE

Photoshop is the picture-editing software par excellence. We often italicize this phrase--meaning roughly "finest or most characteristic of its type," "exemplary"--to indicate it is French. The French pronounce the final syllable "-ahnss" (with a nasalized N which is hard for English-speakers to master), but that is no justification for misspelling the word as "excellance." Although they pronounce it differently, they spell "excellence" the same way we do.

EXCRABLE/EXECRABLE

When you execrate (detest) something, you find it execrable. The second syllable is not often clearly pronounced, but that's no excuse for leaving it out when you spell the word.

EXCEPTIONAL/EXCEPTIONABLE

If you take exception (object) to something, you find it "exceptionable." The more common word is "exceptional," applied to things that are out of the ordinary, usually in a positive way: "these are exceptional Buffalo wings."

EXORCISE/EXERCISE

You can try to exorcise evil spirits using an exorcist; but when you give your body a workout, it's exercise.

EXHILERATION/EXHILARATION

"Exhilaration" is closely related to "hilarious," whose strongly accented A should help remind you of the correct spelling.

EXPATRIOT/EXPATRIATE

An expatriot would be somebody who used to be a patriot; but that's not how people use the term. Instead, it is a common misspelling of "expatriate," meaning someone who chooses to live abroad.

EXPONENTIAL

Something grows exponentially when it repeatedly grows by multiples of some factor in a rapidly accelerating fashion. Don't use the word loosely to refer to ordinary rapid, but steady, growth.

See also "orders of magnitude."

EXPRESSED/EXPRESS

One of the meanings of "express" is "explicit": "Izaak claimed that his old boss had given him express permission to shop on eBay for fishing rods during work hours." Some people feel the word should be "expressed," and that form is not likely to get anyone into trouble; but if you use it you should not presume to correct others who stick with the traditional form: "express permission" (or orders, or mandate, or whatever).

EXPRESSES THAT/SAYS THAT

"In her letter Jane expresses that she is getting irritated with me for not writing" should be corrected to "In her letter Jane says that. . . " You can express an idea or a thought, but you can't ever express that. In technical terms, "express" is a transitive verb and requires an object.

EXPRESSO/ESPRESSO

I've read several explanations of the origin of this word: the coffee is made expressly for you upon your order, or the steam is expressed through the grounds, or (as most people suppose--and certainly wrongly) the coffee is made at express speed. One thing is certain: the word is "espresso," not "expresso."

While you're at an American espresso stand, you might muse on the fact that both "biscotti" and "panini" are plural forms, but you're likely to baffle the barista if you ask in correct Italian for a biscotto or a panino.

EXTEND/EXTENT

People often write "to a great extend" or "to a lesser extend." "Extend" is a verb only, and should not be used as a noun. It's "to a great extent," and "to a lesser extent."

EXTRACT REVENGE/EXACT REVENGE

The use of a rare sense of "exact" confuses people, but the traditional phrase is "exact revenge", not the seemingly more logical "extract revenge" or "enact revenge."

IN THE FACT THAT/BY THE FACT THAT

The correct phrase is "by the fact that," not "in the fact that." While we're at it, "infact" is not a word; "in fact" is always a two-word phrase.

FACTOID

The "-oid" ending in English is normally added to a word to indicate that an item is not the real thing. A humanoid is not quite human. Originally "factoid" was an ironic term indicating that the "fact" being offered was not actually factual. However, CNN and other sources have taken to treating the "-oid" as if it were a mere diminutive, and using the term to mean "trivial but true fact." As a result, the definition of "factoid" is hopelessly confused and it's probably better to avoid using the term altogether.

FAIR/FARE

When you send your daughter off to camp, you hope she'll fare well. That's why you bid her a fond farewell. "Fair" as a verb is a rare word meaning "to smooth a surface to prepare it for being joined to another."

FAR BE IT FOR ME/FAR BE IT FROM ME

The mangled expression "far be it for me" is probably influenced by a similar saying: "it's not for me to say." The standard expression is "far be it from me" (may this possibility be far away from me).

FARTHER/FURTHER

Some authorities (like the Associated Press) insist on "farther" to refer to physical distance and on "further" to refer to an extent of time or degree, but others treat the two words as interchangeable except for insisting on "further" for "in addition," and "moreover." You'll always be safe in making the distinction; some people get really testy about this.

FASTLY/FAST

"Fastly" is an old form that has died out in English. Interest in soccer is growing fast, not "fastly."

FATAL/FATEFUL

A "fatal" event is a deadly one; a "fateful" one is determined by fate. If there are no casualties left lying at the scene--whether mangled corpses or failed negotiations--the word you are seeking is "fateful." The latter word also has many positive uses, such as "George fondly remembered that fateful night in which he first met the woman he was to love to his dying day."

FAZE/PHASE

"Faze" means to embarrass or disturb, but is almost always used in the negative sense, as in "the fact that the overhead projector bulb was burned out didn't faze her." "Phase" is a noun or verb having to do with an aspect of something. "He's just going through a temperamental phase." "They're going to phase in the new accounting procedures gradually."

Unfortunately, Star Trek has confused matters by calling its ray pistols phasers. Too bad they aren't fazers instead.

FEARFUL/FEARSOME

To be "fearful" is to be afraid. To be "fearsome" is to cause fear in others. Remember that someone who is fierce is fearsome rather than fearful.

FEBUARY/FEBRUARY

Few people pronounce the first R in "February" distinctly, so it is not surprising that it is often omitted in spelling. This poor month is short on days; don't further impoverish it by robbing it of one of its letters.

FEELINGS FOR/FEELINGS ABOUT

When someone says "I'm developing feelings for you," the message is "I'm falling in love with you." Feelings for are always positive feelings. In contrast, feelings about something or someone can be either positive or negative: "I've got a bad feeling about this."

FEINT/FAINT

A feint, whether in chess or on the battlefield, is a maneuver designed to divert the opponent's attention from the real center of attack. A feint is a daring move. Do not use this very specialized word in the expression "faint of heart" (or "faint at heart"), which implies timidity.

FEMALE/WOMAN

When referring to an adult female of the human species it sounds weird and may even be considered insulting to use the noun "female" instead of "woman." "The female pointed the gun at the cop" should be "the woman pointed the gun at the cop."

In the case of the related adjectives some people argue that since we say--for instance--"male doctor" we should always say "female doctor" rather than "woman doctor." It may be inconsistent, but the pattern of referring to females as women performers, professionals, etc. is very traditional, dating back at least to the 14th century. People who do this cannot be accused of committing an error.

Technical adjectival uses defining gender like "female genes" are fine (but don't confuse them with "women's jeans").

FIANCE/FIANCEE

Your fiance is the man you plan to marry; your fiancee is the woman you plan to marry.

FINE TOOTHCOMB/FINE-TOOTH COMB

Brush your teeth, but don't comb them. Although the spelling "fine toothcomb" is common enough to be listed as a variant in dictionaries, it looks pretty silly to people who prefer the traditional expression used to describe examining a territory or subject minutely: going over it with a "fine-tooth comb"--a comb with fine teeth. Some people prefer "fine-toothed comb."

FIREY/FIERY

it's "fire," so why isn't it "firey"? If you listen closely, you hear that "fire" has two distinct vowel sounds in it: "fi-er." Spelling the adjective "fiery" helps to preserve that double sound.

50s

There's no requirement for the apostrophe before the "S" in decade names like 50s and 60s, since there are no omitted letters, though it's also acceptable to include one. The term may be written '50s since "19" is being omitted, but 50s is fine too. Writers who wish to have their references to decades clearly understood in the twenty-first century would be well advised not to omit the first two digits.

Note that you may have to turn off "smart quotes" in your word processor to get a leading apostrophe like the one in "'50s" to curl correctly unless you know how to type the character directly. Or you can just type two and delete the first one.

FINALIZE/FINISH, PUT INTO FINAL FORM

"Finalize" is very popular among bureaucrats, but many people hate it. Avoid it unless you know that everyone in your environment uses it too.

FIRST ANNUAL

Some people get upset when the "first annual" occurrence of some event is announced, arguing that it doesn't become annual until it's been repeated. But "first annual" simply means "the first of what is planned to be an annual series of events"--it's a fine expression.

FIRST PERSON

Some teachers frown on the first-person voice in student writing, striking out "I," "me," and "myself" whenever they encounter them; but although there are times when it is inappropriate to call attention to yourself, writing something like "public displays of affection are disgusting" is not more modest than "public displays of affection disgust me." The impersonal form arrogantly implies that you are the final authority and that all right-minded people must agree with you. The phrase "the author" substituted for "I" is no longer generally used even in the most formal writing. When you are arguing for a theory or opinion, it is often best to stand squarely behind it by using the first-person voice.

FIRSTABLE/FIRST OF ALL

The odd word "firstable" seems to be based on a mishearing of the expression "first of all."

FISCAL/PHYSICAL

The middle syllable of "physical" is often omitted in pronunciation, making it sound like the unrelated word "fiscal." Sound that unaccented "I" distinctly.

FIT THE BILL/FILL THE BILL

Originally a "bill" was any piece of writing, especially a legal document (we still speak of bills being introduced into Congress in this sense). More narrowly, it also came to mean a list such as a restaurant "bill of fare" (menu) or an advertisement listing attractions in a theatrical variety show such as might be posted on a "billboard." In nineteenth-century America, when producers found short acts to supplement the main attractions, nicely filling out an evening's entertainment, they were said in a rhyming phrase to "fill the bill." People who associate bills principally with shipping invoices frequently transform this expression, meaning "to meet requirements or desires," into "fit the bill." They are thinking of bills as if they were orders, lists of requirements. It is both more logical and more traditional to say "fill the bill."

FITTEST

In evolutionary terms, "the survival of the fittest" refers not to physical fitness in the sense of vigor and strength, but to the ability to reproduce successfully. Rabbits and ants are fitter to survive in most environments than lions: that's why there are so many more of them. If you use the phrase "survival of the fittest" as if it referred to a contest of brute strength, you will annoy biologists and some editors, who will judge your usage as unfit to survive.

FIXING/PREPARING

"Fixing" as a synonym of "getting ready" is a feature of several dialects of US English, especially rural and Southern ones: "I'm fixin' to take this pie over to the parsonage." Using it outside of these dialects risks making you sound unsophisticated.

FLAIR/FLARE

"Flair" is conspicuous talent: "She has a flair for organization." "Flare" is either a noun meaning "flame" or a verb meaning to blaze with light or to burst into anger.

FLAK/FLACK

"Flak" is WW II airman's slang for shells being fired at you in the air, so to catch a lot of flak is to feel in danger of being shot down.

However, most civilians these days have never heard of "flak," so they use "flack" instead, which originally meant "salesman" or "huckster." You need to worry about this only if you're among old-time veterans.

You're more likely to embarrass yourself if you mix up the expression "catch a lot of flak" with "give a lot of slack," which has almost the opposite meaning. You can't catch slack.

FLAMMABLE/INFLAMMABLE

The prefix "in-" does not indicate negation here; it comes from the word "inflame." "Flammable" and "inflammable" both mean "easy to catch on fire"; but so many people misunderstand the latter term that it's better to stick with "flammable" in safety warnings.

FLAUNT/FLOUT

To flaunt is to show off: you flaunt your new necklace by wearing it to work. "Flout" has a more negative connotation; it means to treat with contempt some rule or standard. The cliche is "to flout convention." Flaunting may be in bad taste because it's ostentatious, but it is not a violation of standards.

FLESH OUT/FLUSH OUT

To "flesh out" an idea is to give it substance, as a sculptor adds clay flesh to a skeletal armature. To "flush out" a criminal is to drive him or her out into the open. The latter term is derived from bird-hunting, in which one flushes out a covey of quail. If you are trying to develop something further, use "flesh"; but if you are trying to reveal something hitherto concealed, use "flush."

FLOPPY DISK/HARD DISK

Floppy disks are fast disappearing from the computer world, but it's been many years since they were literally floppy. The fact that a 3 1/2" diskette is enclosed in a hard plastic case should not lead you to call it a "hard disk." That's a high-capacity storage medium like the main disk inside your computer on which your programs, operating system, and data are stored.

FLOUNDER/FOUNDER

As a verb, "founder" means "to fill with water and sink." It is also used metaphorically of various kinds of equally catastrophic failures. In contrast, to flounder is to thrash about in the water (like a flounder), struggling to stay alive. "Flounder" is also often used metaphorically to indicate various sorts of desperate struggle. If you're sunk, you've foundered. If you're still struggling, you're floundering.

FLUKE

A fluke was originally a lucky stroke in billiards, and it still means a

fortunate chance event. It is nonstandard to use the word to label an unfortunate chance event. There are lucky flukes, but no unlucky ones.

FLYS/FLIES

"Flys" is a misspelling of "flies" except when the word is being deliberately changed from its traditional spelling as in the name of the popular music group, "The Flys."

FOCUS AROUND/FOCUS ON

The popular expression "focus around" makes little sense. An example: "Next quarter's advertising will focus around our line of computer games." It is presumably meant to convey something like "concentrate on a number of different items in a single category." But "focus on" better conveys the idea of a sharp focus. "Focus around" suggests a jittery, shifting view rather than determined concentration.

FOLLOWUP/FOLLOW UP, FOLLOW-UP

A doctor can follow up with a patient during a follow-up visit (note that the adjectival form requires a hyphen). Neither phrase should be turned into a single hyphenless word.

FONT/TYPEFACE

Although "font" has largely replaced "typeface" in common usage, professionals who deal with type prefer to distinguish between the two. "Typeface" refers to letter design; Times, Helvetica, and Garamond are all typefaces. Typefaces are usually made up of a number of fonts: complete sets of characters in that style, like Times Roman, Times Italic, and Times Bold. The distinction is important only when dealing with such professionals.

FOOT/FEET

You can use eight-foot boards to side a house, but "foot" is correct only in this sort of adjectival phrase combined with a number (and usually hyphenated). The boards are eight feet (not foot) long. It's always X feet per second and X feet away.

FOOTNOTES/ENDNOTES

About the time that computers began to make the creation and printing of footnotes extremely simple and cheap, style manuals began to urge a shift away from them to endnotes printed at the ends of chapters or at the end of a book or paper rather than at the foot of the page. I happen to think this was a big mistake; but in any case, if you are using endnotes, don't call them "footnotes."

FOR/FORE/FOUR

The most common member of this trio is the preposition "for," which is not a problem for most people. "Fore" always has to do with the front of

something (it's what you shout to warn someone when you've sent a golf ball their way). "Four" is just the number "4."

FOR ALL INTENSIVE PURPOSES/FOR ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES

Another example of the oral transformation of language by people who don't read much. "For all intents and purposes" is an old cliche which won't thrill anyone, but using the mistaken alternative is likely to elicit guffaws.

FOR FREE/FREE

Some people object to "for free" because any sentence containing the phrase will read just as well without the "for," but it is standard English.

FOR GOODNESS' SAKES/FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

Picky folks point out that since the mild expletive "for goodness' sake" is a eumphemism for "for God's sake" the second word should not be pluralized to "sakes"; but heavens to Betsy, if little things like that are going to bother you, you'll have your dander up all the time.

FOR ONE/FOR ONE THING

People often say "for one" when they mean "for one thing": "I really want to go to the movie. For one, Kevin Spacey is my favorite actor." (One what?) The only time you should use "for one" by itself to give an example of something is when you have earlier mentioned a class to which the example belongs: "There are a lot of reasons I don't want your old car. For one, there are squirrels living in the upholstery." (One reason.)

FOR SALE/ON SALE

If you're selling something, it's for sale; but if you lower the price, it goes on sale.

FOR SELL/FOR SALE

If you have things to sell, they are for sale. Nothing is ever "for sell."

FOR SURE/SURE

In casual speech, when you agree with somebody's statement, you may say "for sure." Your date says "That was outstanding tiramisu," and you, wanting to show how in tune you are, reply "For sure!" You can also use the phrase to mean "for certain," as in "I couldn't tell for sure that the bench was wet until I sat on it."

But people often substitute this phrase when they should use plain old "sure," as in "I couldn't be for sure." That should be "I couldn't be sure."

FORBIDDING/FOREBODING/FORMIDABLE

"Foreboding" means "ominous," as in "The sky was a foreboding shade of gray" (i.e. predictive of a storm). The prefix "fore-" with an E, often indicates futurity, e. g. "forecast," "foreshadowing" and "foreword" (a prefatory bit of writing at the beginning of a book, often misspelled "forword"). A forbidding person or task is hostile or dangerous: "The trek across the desert to the nearest latte stand was forbidding." The two are easily confused because some things, like storms, can be both foreboding and forbidding.

"Formidable," which originally meant "fear-inducing" ("Mike Tyson is a formidable opponent") has come to be used primarily as a compliment meaning "awe-inducing" ("Gary Kasparov's formidable skills as a chess player were of no avail against Deep Blue").

See also "fearful/fearsome."

FORCEFUL, FORCIBLE, FORCED

These words sometimes overlap, but generally "forceful" means "powerful" ("he imposed his forceful personality on the lions") while "forcible" must be used instead to describe the use of force ("the burglar made a forcible entry into the apartment"). "Forced" is often used for the latter purpose, but some prefer to reserve this word to describe something that is done or decided upon as a result of outside causes without necessarily being violent: "a forced landing," "a forced smile," "forced labor."

FOREGO/FORGO

The E in "forego" tells you it has to do with going before. It occurs mainly in the expression "foregone conclusion," a conclusion arrived at in advance. "Forgo" means to abstain from or do without. "After finishing his steak, he decided to forgo the blueberry cheesecake."

FOREVER/FOR EVER

UK writers most often use the two-word phrase "for ever," whereas Americans strongly prefer the one-word form "forever." Each nationality is liable to think the other is making a mistake.

FORMALLY/FORMERLY

These two are often mixed up in speech. If you are doing something in a formal manner, you are behaving formally; but if you previously behaved differently, you did so formerly.

FORESEE/FORSEE

"Foresee" means "to see into the future." There are lots of words with the prefix "fore-" which are future-oriented, including "foresight," "foretell," "forethought," and "foreword," all of which are often

misspelled by people who omit the E. Just remember: what golfers shout when they are warning people ahead of them about the shot they are about to make is "fore!"

FORTUITOUS/FORTUNATE

"Fortuitous" events happen by chance; they need not be fortunate events, only random ones: "It was purely fortuitous that the meter reader came along five minutes before I returned to my car." Although fortunate events may be fortuitous, when you mean "lucky," use "fortunate."

FORWARD/FORWARDS/FOREWORD

Although some style books prefer "forward" and "toward" to "forwards" and "towards," none of these forms is really incorrect, though the forms without the final S are perhaps a smidgen more formal. The same generally applies to "backward" and "backwards." There are a few expressions in which only one of the two forms works: step forward, forward motion, a backward child. The spelling "foreword" applies exclusively to the introductory matter in a book.

FOUL/FOWL

A chicken is a fowl. A poke in the eye is a foul.

FOURTY/FORTY

"Four" loses its U when it changes to "forty."

FOWL SWOOP/FELL SWOOP

Poor Macduff, learning that Macbeth has had his wife and children murdered, cries "What, all my pretty chickens and their dam/At one fell swoop?" Thus enters the language a popular phrase meaning "terrible blow" (the image is of a ruthless hawk swooping down to slaughter helpless chicks).

The old meaning of "fell" to mean "savage," "cruel," or "ruthless" has otherwise pretty much died out, so that many people mistakenly substitute "foul" or "fowl" for "fell." "Fell" in this sense is related to words like "felon" and "felony."

The mangled form "swell foop" is a popular bit of humor which should at least remind you that the first word in the phrase has to rhyme with "swell."

FRAMEWORK/GROUNDWORK

You lay groundwork; you erect, build, or construct a framework.

FRANKENSTEIN

"Frankenstein" is the name of the scientist who creates the monster in Mary Shelley's novel. The monster itself has no name, but is referred to

popularly as "Frankenstein's monster."

FRANKLY

Sentences beginning with this word are properly admissions of something shocking or unflattering to the speaker; but when a public spokesperson for a business or government is speaking, it almost always precedes a self-serving statement. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" is correct; but "Frankly, I think the American people can make their own decisions about health care" is an abuse of language. The same contortion of meaning is common in related phrases. When you hear a public figure say, "to be completely honest with you," expect a lie.

FRENCH DIP WITH AU JUS

This diner classic consists of sliced roast beef on a more or less firm bun, with a side dish of broth in which to dip it. "Au jus" means "with broth"; so adding "with" to "au jus" is redundant. In fancier restaurants, items are listed entirely in French with the English translation underneath:

Tete de cochon avec ses tripes farcies Pig's head stuffed with tripe

Mixing the languages is hazardous if you don't know what the original means. "With au jus broth" is also seen from time to time. People generally know what a French dip sandwich is, and they'll see the broth when it comes. Why not just call it a "French dip?"

FRESHMAN/FRESHMEN

"Freshman" is the singular noun: "Birgitta is a freshman at Yale." "Freshmen" is the plural: "Patricia and Patrick are freshmen at Stanford." But the adjective is always singular: "Megan had an interesting freshman seminar on Romanesque architecture at Sarah Lawrence."

FROM . . . TO

"From soup to nuts" makes sense because soup was the traditional first course in a formal meal, nuts the last. Similarly "from A to Z" makes sense because these are the first and last letters of the alphabet. But this construction, which identifies the extremes of a spectrum or range is often improperly used when no such extremes are being identified, as in "She tried everything from "penicillin to sulfa drugs." These are not extremes, just examples of different sorts of drugs. Even worse is "He gave his daughter everything from a bicycle to lawn darts to a teddy bear." A range can't have more than two extremes. "He gave his daughter everything from paper dolls to a Cadillac" conveys the notion of a spectrum from very cheap to very expensive, and is fine. Often when people are tempted to use "from . . . to" they would be better off using a different expression, as, for example, in this sentence: "She tried all sorts of medicines, including penicillin and sulfa drugs."

MOUNT FUJIYAMA/FUJIYAMA

"Yama" means "mountain" in Japanese, so when you say "Mount Fujiyama" you are saying "Mount Fuji Mountain." The Japanese usually say "Fujisan"; but "Fujiyama," or "Mount Fuji" is standard in English--just be aware that both sound "foreign" to Japanese native speakers.

-FUL/-FULS

it's one cupful, but two cupfuls, not "two cupsful." The same goes for "spoonfuls" and "glassfuls."

FULL PROOF/FOOLPROOF

If you want to get credit for solving a complicated mathematical problem, you will have to provide a full proof. But if you're trying to make something as easy as possible, you want to make it foolproof--so simple even a fool could couldn't screw it up.

FULLY WELL/FULL WELL

Back in the Middle Ages and Renaissance it was common for "full" to modify adverbs. The only instance in which this continues today is the traditional phrase "full well," mostly in "knowing full well." People who "correct" this to "knowing fully well" may have modern grammar on their side, but they sound as if they aren't acquainted with the standard idiom.

FULSOME

In modern usage, "fulsome" has two inconsistent meanings. To some people it means "offensive, overdone," so "fulsome praise" to them would be disgustingly exaggerated praise.

To other people it means "abundant," and for them "fulsome praise" is glowingly warm praise.

The first group tends to look down on the second group, and the second group tends to be baffled by the first. Best to just avoid the word altogether.

FUNCTIONALITY

You'll find "functionality" in dictionaries, but it's almost always used as a pretentious and inaccurate substitute for "function" or "usefulness."

FURL/FURROW

When you concentrate really hard so that furrows appear in your forehead, you furrow your brow--an expression that means "worry, puzzle over." When you lower a sail and wrap it tightly around the mast to secure it you furl it. If you can furl your brow you belong in a sideshow.

FUSHIA/FUCHSIA

The flowers known as "fuchsias" are named after German Renaissance botanist Leonhard Fuchs. Although the word is pronounced "FYOO-sha" in English, it should not be misspelled "fushia."

G/Q

Lower-case "q" is the mirror image of lower-case "g" in many typefaces, and the two are often confused with each other and the resulting misspelling missed in proofreading, for instance "quilt" when "guilt" is intended.

GP PRACTICE/GENERAL PRACTICE

If you want to be technical, "GP Practice" to label the work of a physician is redundant, because "GP" stands for "General Practitioner." But if you don't want to spell it out, there doesn't seem to be a good substitute for the phrase--it won't bother many people.

GAFF/GAFFE

"Gaffe" is a French word meaning "embarrassing mistake," and should not be mixed up with "gaff": a large hook.

GAMUT/GAUNTLET

To "run a gamut" is to go through the whole scale or spectrum of something. To "run the gauntlet" (also gantlet) is to run between two lines of people who are trying to beat you. And don't confuse "gamut" with "gambit," a play in chess, and by extension, a tricky maneuver of any kind.

GANDER/DANDER

When you get really angry you "get your dander up." The derivation of "dander" in this expression is uncertain, but you can't replace it with "dandruff" or "gander." The only way to get a gander up is to awaken a male goose.

GAURD/GUARD

Too bad the Elizabethan "guard" won out over the earlier, French-derived spelling "garde"; but the word was never spelled "gaurd." The standard spelling is related to Italian and Spanish "guarda," pronounced "gwarda."

GENIUS/BRILLIANT

In standard English "genius" is a noun, but not an adjective. In slang, people often say things like "Telling Mom your English teacher is requiring the class to get HBO was genius!" The standard way to say this is "was brilliant."

GET ME/GET MYSELF

"I gotta get me a new carburetor," says Joe-Bob. Translated into standard English, this would be "I have to get myself a new carburetor." Even better: leave out the "myself."

GHANDI/GANDHI

Mohandas K. Gandhi's name has an H after the D, not after the G. Note that "Mahatma" ("great soul") is an honorific title, not actually part of his birth name. The proper pronunciation of the first syllable should rhyme more with "gone" than "can." Among Indians, his name is usually given a respectful suffix and rendered as Gandhiji, but adding Mahatma to that form would be honorific overkill.

GIBE/JIBE/JIVE

"Gibe" is a now rare term meaning "to tease." "Jibe" means "to agree," but is usually used negatively, as in "the alibis of the two crooks didn't jibe." The latter word is often confused with "jive," which derives from slang which originally meant to treat in a jazzy manner ("Jivin' the Blues Away") but also came to be associated with deception ("Don't give me any of that jive").

GIFT/GIVE

Conservatives are annoyed by the use of "gift" as a verb. If the ad says "gift her with jewelry this Valentine's Day," she might prefer that you give it to her.

GIG/JIG

"The jig is up" is an old slang expression meaning "the game is over--we're caught." A musician's job is a gig.

GILD/GUILD

You gild an object by covering it with gold; you can join an organization like the Theatre Guild.

GOAL/OBJECTIVE

Most language authorities consider "goal" to be a synonym of "objective," and some dismiss the popular bureaucratic phrase "goals and objectives" as a meaningless redundancy.

However, if you have to deal with people who insist there is a distinction, here is their usual argument: goals are general, objectives are more specific. If your goal is to create a safer work environment, your objective might be to remove the potted poison ivy plant from your desk. In education, a typical example would be that if your goal is to improve your French, one objective might be to master the subjunctive.

GOD

When "God" is the name of a god, as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam ("Allah" is just Arabic for "God," and many modern Muslims translate the name when writing in English), it needs to be capitalized like any other name. When it is used as a generic term, as in "He looks like a Greek god," it is not capitalized.

If you see the word rendered "G*d" or "G-d" it's not an error, but a Jewish writer reverently following the Orthodox prohibition against spelling out the name of the deity in full.

GOES

"So he goes" I thought your birthday was tomorrow," and I'm--like--" well, duh!" Perhaps this bizarre pattern developed in analogy to childish phrases such as "the cow goes "moo" and "the piggy goes "oink, oink." Is there any young person unaware that the use of "go" to mean "say" drives most adults crazy? Granted, it's deliberate slang rather than an involuntary error; but if you get into the habit of using it all the time, you may embarrass yourself in front of a class by saying something witless like "So then Juliet goes "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

GONE/WENT

This is one of those cases in which a common word has a past participle which is not formed by the simple addition of -ED and which often trip people up. "I should have went to the business meeting, but the game was tied in the ninth" should be "I should have gone. . . ." The same problem crops up with the two forms of the verb "to do." Say "I should have done my taxes before the IRS called" rather than "I should have did. . . ."

See "drank/drunk."

GONNA/GOING TO

How do you pronounce "going to" in phrases like "going to walk the dog"? "Gonna," right? Almost everyone uses this slurred pronunciation, but it's not acceptable in formal writing except when you're deliberately trying to convey the popular pronunciation. In very formal spoken contexts you might want to (not "wanna") pronounce the phrase distinctly.

GOOD/WELL

You do something well, but a thing is good. The exception is verbs of sensation in phrases such as "the pie smells good," or "I feel good." Despite the arguments of nigglers, this is standard usage. Saying "the pie smells well" would imply that the pastry in question had a nose. Similarly, "I feel well" is also acceptable, especially when discussing health; but it is not the only correct usage.

GOT/GOTTEN

In the UK, the old word "gotten" dropped out of use except in such stock phrases as "ill-gotten" and "gotten up," but in the US it is frequently used as the past participle of "get." Sometimes the two are interchangeable, However, "got" implies current possession, as in "I've got just five dollars to buy my dinner with." "Gotten," in contrast, often implies the process of getting hold of something: "I've gotten five dollars for cleaning out Mrs. Quimby's shed" emphasizing the earning of the money rather than its possession. Phrases that involve some sort of process usually involve "gotten": "My grades have gotten better since I moved out of the fraternity." When you have to leave, you've got to go. If you say you've "gotten to go" you're implying someone gave you permission to go.

GOVERNMENT

Be careful to pronounce the first "N" in "government."

GRADUATE/GRADUATE FROM

In certain dialects (notably that of New York City) it is common to say "he is going to graduate school in June" rather than the more standard "graduate from." When writing for a national or international audience, use the "from."

GRAMMER/GRAMMAR

it's amazing how many people write to thank me for helping them with their "grammer." It's "grammar." The word is often incorrectly used to label patterns of spelling and usage that have nothing to do with the structure of language, the proper subject of grammar in the most conservative sense. Not all bad writing is due to bad grammar.

GRATIS/GRATUITOUS

If you do something nice without being paid, you do it "gratis." Technically, such a deed can also be "gratuitous"; but if you do or say something obnoxious and uncalled for, it's always "gratuitous," not "gratis."

GRAY/GREY

"Gray" is the American spelling, "grey" the British spelling of this color/colour. When it's part of a British name--like Tarzan's title, "Lord Greystoke"--or part of a place name--like "Greyfriars"--it should retain its original spelling even if an American is doing the writing.

GREATFUL/GRATEFUL

Your appreciation may be great, but you express gratitude by being grateful.

GRIEVIOUS/GRIEVOUS

There are just two syllables in "grievous," and it's pronounced "grieve-us."

GRILL CHEESE/GRILLED CHEESE

The popular fried sandwich is properly called "grilled cheese."

GRISLY/GRIZZLY

"Grisly" means "horrible"; a "grizzly" is a bear. "The grizzly left behind the grisly remains of his victim." "Grizzled," means "having gray hairs," not to be confused with "gristly," full of gristle.

GROUND ZERO

"Ground zero" refers to the point at the center of the impact of a nuclear bomb, so it is improper to talk about "building from ground zero" as if it were a place of new beginnings. You can start from scratch, or begin at zero, but if you're at ground zero, you're at the end.

The metaphorical extension of this term to the site of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers is, however, perfectly legitimate; but because in this case it is a place name it needs to be capitalized: "Ground Zero."

GROUP (PLURAL VS. SINGULAR)

When the group is being considered as a whole, it can be treated as a single entity: "the group was ready to go on stage." But when the individuality of its members is being emphasized, "group" is plural: "the group were in disagreement about where to go for dinner."

GROW

We used to grow our hair long or grow tomatoes in the yard, but now we are being urged to "grow the economy" or "grow your investments." Business and government speakers have extended this usage widely, but it irritates traditionalists. Use "build," "increase," "expand," "develop," or "cause to grow" instead in formal writing.

GUESS WHO?/GUESS WHO!

Since "Guess who" is a command rather than a real question, technically it should not be followed by a question mark. A period or exclamation point will do fine. Similarly, there should be no question mark after the simple command "Guess!"

GUT-RENDING, HEART-WRENCHING/GUT-WRENCHING, HEART-RENDING

Upsetting events can be gut-wrenching (make you sick to the stomach) or heart-breaking (make you feel terribly sad); but many people confuse the two and come up with "heart-wrenching." "Gut-rending" is also occasionally seen.

GYP/CHEAT

Gypsies complain that "gyp" ("cheat") reflects bias; but the word is so well entrenched and its origin so obscure to most users that there is little hope of eliminating it from standard use any time soon.

Note that the people commonly called "Gypsies" strongly prefer the name Rom (plural form Roma or Romanies).

HIV VIRUS

"HIV" stands for "human immunodeficiency virus," so adding the word "virus" to the acronym creates a redundancy. "HIV" is the name of the organism that is the cause of AIDS, not a name for the disease itself. A person may be HIV-positive (a test shows the person to be infected with the virus) without having yet developed AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). HIV is the cause, AIDS the result.

HADN'T HAVE/HADN'T

Many people throw in an extra "have" when they talk about things that might have happened otherwise: "If he hadn't have checked inside the truck first he wouldn't have realized that the floorboards were rusted out." This is often rendered "hadn't of" and pronounced "hadn'ta." In standard English, omit the second word: "If he hadn't checked inside the truck. . . ."

HAIRBRAINED/HAREBRAINED

Although "hairbrained" is common, the original word "harebrained," means "silly as a hare" (the little rabbit-like creature) and is preferred in writing.

HAND AND HAND/HAND IN HAND

"Poverty goes hand in hand with malnutrition." The image here is of the two subjects holding hands, one hand in the other. The phrase is very frequently misspelled "hand and hand," which does not convey the same sort of intimate connection.

HANDICAP/DISABILITY

In normal usage, a handicap is a drawback you can easily remedy, but a disability is much worse: you're just unable to do something. But many people with disabilities and those who work with them strongly prefer "disability" to "handicap," which they consider an insulting term. Their argument is that a disability can be compensated for by--for instance--a wheelchair, so that the disabled person is not handicapped. Only the person truly unable by any means to accomplish tasks because of a disability is handicapped. The fact that this goes directly counter to ordinary English usage may help to explain why the general public has been slow to adopt it; but if you want to avoid offending anyone, you're

safer using "disability" than "handicap."

Many of the people involved also resent being called "disabled people"; they prefer "people with disabilities."

HANGED/HUNG

Originally these words were pretty much interchangeable, but "hanged" eventually came to be used pretty exclusively to mean "executed by hanging." Does nervousness about the existence of an indelicate adjectival form of the word prompt people to avoid the correct word in such sentences as "Lady Wrothley saw to it that her ancestors' portraits were properly hung"? Nevertheless, "hung" is correct except when capital punishment is being imposed or someone commits suicide.

HANGING INDENTS

Bibliographies are normally written using hanging indents, where the first line extends out to the left-hand margin, but the rest of the entry is indented.

Twain, Mark. Mark Twain at the Buffalo Express: Articles and Sketches by America's Favorite Humorist, edited by Joseph B. McCullough and Janice McIntire-Strasburg (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

These are extremely easy to create on a word processor, but many people have never mastered the technique. Normally the left-hand margin marker at the top of the page consists of two small arrows. Drag the top one to the right to make a normal indent, the bottom one to create a hanging indent. In most programs, you have to hold down the Shift key while dragging the bottom marker to leave the top part behind. Don't get into the habit of substituting a carriage return and a tab or spaces to create hanging indents because when your work is transferred to a different computer the result may look quite different--and wrong.

HANUKKAH, CHANUKAH

This Jewish holiday is misspelled in a host of ways, but the two standard spellings are "Hanukkah" (most common) and "Chanukah" (for those who want to remind people that the word begins with a guttural throat-clearing sound).

HARD/HARDLY

Everybody knows "hard" as an adjective: "Starfleet requires a hard entrance exam." The problem arises when people needing an adverb try to use the familiar pattern of adding -ly to create one, writing things like "we worked hardly at completing the test." The adverbial form of this word is in fact the same as the adjectival form: "hard." So it should be "we worked hard at completing the test."

In American English "hardly" always means something like "scarcely," as in "we hardly worked on the test." In British English the word "hardly" is sometimes used to mean "severely, harshly," as in "Trevor felt

himself to have been used hardly [badly treated] by the executive committee"; but this pattern is unfamiliar to most American readers.

HARDLY

When Bill says "I can't hardly bend over with this backache," he means he can hardly bend over, and that's what he should say. Similarly, when Jane says "you can feed the cat without hardly bending over" she means "almost without bending over."

HARDLY NEVER/HARDLY EVER

The expression is "hardly ever" or "almost never."

HARDY/HEARTY

These two words overlap somewhat, but usually the word you want is "hearty." The standard expressions are "a hearty appetite," "a hearty meal," a "hearty handshake," "a hearty welcome," and "hearty applause." Something difficult to kill is described as a "hardy perennial," but should not be substituted for "hearty" in the other expressions. "Party hearty" and "party hardy" are both common renderings of a common youth saying, but the first makes more sense.

HARK/HEARKEN

One old use of the word "hark" was in hunting with hounds, meaning to turn the dogs back on their course, reverse direction. It was this use that gave rise to the expression "hark back." It refers to returning in thought to an earlier time or returning to an earlier discussion: "That tie-died shirt harks back to the days we used to go to rock festivals together."

The expression is not "hearkens back." Although "hark" and "hearken" can both mean "listen," only "hark" can mean "go back."

HE DON'T/HE DOESN'T

In formal English, "don't" is not used in the third person singular. "I don't like avocado ice cream" is correct, and so is "they don't have their passports yet" and "they don't have the sense to come in out of the rain"; but "he don't have no money," though common in certain dialects, is nonstandard on two counts: it should be "he doesn't" and "any money." The same is true of other forms: "she don't" and "it don't" should be "she doesn't" and "it doesn't."

HEADING/BOUND

If you're reporting on traffic conditions, it's redundant to say "heading northbound on I-5." it's either "heading north" or "northbound."

HEAL/HEEL

Heal is what you do when you get better. Your heel is the back part of your foot. Achilles' heel was the only place the great warrior could be wounded in such a way that the injury wouldn't heal. Thus any striking weakness can be called an "Achilles' heel." To remember the meaning of "heal," note that it is the beginning of the word "health."

HEAR/HERE

If you find yourself writing sentences like "I know I left my wallet hear!" you should note that "hear" has the word "ear" buried in it and let that remind you that it refers only to hearing and is always a verb (except when you are giving the British cheer "Hear! Hear!"). "I left my wallet here" is the correct expression.

HEARING-IMPAIRED/DEAF

"Hearing-impaired" is not an all-purpose substitute for "deaf" since it strongly implies some residual ability to hear.

HEAVILY/STRONGLY

"Heavily" is not an all-purpose synonym for "strongly." It should be reserved for expressions in which literal or metaphorical weight or density is implied, like "heavily underlined," "heavily influenced," "heavily armed," or "heavily traveled." Not standard are expressions like "heavily admired" or "heavily characteristic of." People sometimes use "heavily" when they mean "heartily," as in "heavily praised."

HEIGHTH/HEIGHT

"Width" has a "TH" at the end, so why doesn't "height"? In fact it used to, but the standard pronunciation today ends in a plain "T" sound. People who use the obsolete form misspell it as well, so pronunciation is no guide. By the way, this is one of those pesky exceptions to the rule, "I before E except after C," but the vowels are seldom switched, perhaps because we see it printed on so many forms along with "age" and "weight."

HELP THE PROBLEM

People say they want to help the problem of poverty when what they really mean is that they want to help solve the problem of poverty. Poverty flourishes without any extra help, thank you. I guess I know what a "suicide help line" is, but I'd rather it were a "suicide prevention help line." I suppose it's too late to ask people to rename alcoholism support groups as sobriety support groups, but it's a shoddy use of language.

HENCE WHY/HENCE

Shakespeare and the Bible keep alive one meaning of the old word "hence": "away from here" ("get thee hence"). There's no need to add "from" to the word, though you often see "from hence" in pretentious writing, and it's not likely to bother many readers.

But another sense of the word "hence" ("therefore") causes more trouble because writers often add "why" to it: "I got tired of mowing the lawn, hence why I bought the goat." "Hence" and "why" serve the same function in a sentence like this; use just one or the other, not both: "hence I bought the goat" or "that's why I bought the goat."

HERBS/SPICES

People not seriously into cooking often mix up herbs and spices. Generally, flavorings made up of stems, leaves, and flowers are herbs; and those made of bark, roots, and seeds and dried buds are spices. However saffron, made of flower stamens, is a spice. The British pronounce the H in "herb" but Americans follow the French in dropping it.

HERO/PROTAGONIST

In ordinary usage "hero" has two meanings: "leading character in a story" and "brave, admirable person." In simple tales the two meanings may work together, but in modern literature and film the leading character or "protagonist" (a technical term common in literary criticism) may behave in a very unheroic fashion. Students who express shock that the "hero" of a play or novel behaves despicably reveal their inexperience. In literature classes avoid the word unless you mean to stress a character's heroic qualities. However, if you are discussing the main character in a traditional opera, where values are often simple, you may get by with referring to the male lead as the "hero"--but is Don Giovanni really a hero?

See also "heroin/heroine."

HEROIN/HEROINE

Heroin is a highly addictive opium derivative; the main female character in a narrative is a heroine.

HIGHLY LOOKED UPON/HIGHLY REGARDED

Many people, struggling to remember the phrase "highly regarded," come up with the awkward "highly looked upon" instead; which suggests that the looker is placed in a high position, looking down, when what is meant is that the looker is looking up to someone or something admirable.

HIM, HER/HE, SHE

There is a group of personal pronouns to be used as subjects in a sentence, including "he," "she," "I," and "we." Then there is a separate group of object pronouns, including "him," "her," "me," and "us." The problem is that the folks who tend to mix up the two sets often don't find the subject/object distinction clear or helpful, and say things like "Her and me went to the movies."

A simple test is to substitute "us" for "her and me." Would you say "us went to the movies?" Obviously not. You'd normally say "we went to the movies," so when "we" is broken into the two persons involved it becomes "she and I went to the movies."

But you would say "the murder scene scared us," so it's correct to say "the murder scene scared her and me."

If you aren't involved, use "they" and "them" as test words instead of "we" and "us." "They won the lottery" becomes "he and she won the lottery," and "the check was mailed to them" becomes "the check was mailed to him and her."

See also "I/me/myself"

HINDI/HINDU

Hindi is a language. Hinduism is a religion, and its believers are called "Hindus." Not all Hindus speak Hindi, and many Hindi-speakers are not Hindus.

HIPPIE/HIPPY

A long-haired 60s flower child was a "hippie." "Hippy" is an adjective describing someone with wide hips. The IE is not caused by a Y changing to IE in the plural as in "puppy" and "puppies." It is rather a dismissive diminutive, invented by older, more sophisticated hipsters looking down on the new kids as mere "hippies." Confusing these two is definitely unhip.

HISSELF/HIMSELF

In some dialects people say "hisself" for "himself," but this is nonstandard.

AN HISTORIC/A HISTORIC

You should use "an" before a word beginning with an "H" only if the "H" is not pronounced: "an honest effort"; it's properly "a historic event" though many sophisticated speakers somehow prefer the sound of "an historic," so that version is not likely to get you into any real trouble.

HOARD/HORDE

A greedily hoarded treasure is a hoard. A herd of wildebeests or a mob of people is a horde.

HOI POLLOI

Hoi polloi is Greek for "the common people," but it is often misused to mean "the upper class" (does "hoi" make speakers think of "high" or "hoity-toity"?). Some urge that since "hoi" is the article "the hoi polloi" is redundant; but the general rule is that articles such as

"the" and "a" in foreign language phrases cease to function as such in place names, brands, and catch phrases except for some of the most familiar ones in French and Spanish, where everyone recognizes "la"--for instance--as meaning "the." "The El Nino" is redundant, but "the hoi polloi" is standard English.

HOLD YOUR PEACE/SAY YOUR PIECE

Some folks imagine that since these expressions are opposites, the last word in each should be the same; but in fact they are unrelated expressions. The first means "maintain your silence," and the other means literally "speak aloud a piece of writing" but is used to express the idea of making a statement.

HOLE/WHOLE

"Hole" and "whole" have almost opposite meanings. A hole is a lack of something, like the hole in a doughnut (despite the confusing fact that the little nubbins of fried dough are called "doughnut holes"). "Whole" means things like entire, complete, and healthy and is used in expressions like "the whole thing," "whole milk," "whole wheat," and "with a whole heart."

HOLOCAUST

"Holocaust" is a Greek-derived translation of the Hebrew term "olah," which denotes a sort of ritual sacrifice in which the food offered is completely burnt up rather than being merely dedicated to God and then eaten. It was applied with bitter irony by Jews to the destruction of millions of their number in the Nazi death camps. Although phrases like "nuclear holocaust" and "Cambodian holocaust" have become common, you risk giving serious offense by using the word in less severe circumstances, such as calling a precipitous decline in stock prices a "sell-off holocaust."

HOME PAGE

On the World Wide Web, a "home page" is normally the first page a person entering a site encounters, often functioning as a sort of table of contents for the other pages. People sometimes create special pages within their sites introducing a particular topic, and these are also informally called "home pages" (as in "The Emily Dickinson Home Page"); but it is a sure sign of a Web novice to refer to all Web pages as home pages.

HOMOPHOBIC

Some object to this word--arguing that it literally means "man-fearing," but the "homo" in "homosexual" and in this word does not refer to the Latin word for "man," but is derived from a Greek root meaning "same" while the "-phobic" means literally "having a fear of," but in English has come to mean "hating." "Homophobic" is now an established term for "prejudiced against homosexuals."

HONE IN/HOME IN

You home in on a target (the center of the target is "home"). "Honing" has to do with sharpening knives, not aim.

HORS D'OEUVRES

If you knew only a little French, you might interpret this phrase as meaning "out of work," but in fact it means little snack foods served before or outside of ("hors") the main dishes of a meal (the "oeuvres"). English speakers have trouble mastering the sounds in this phrase, but it is normally rendered "or-DERVES," in a rough approximation of the original. Mangled spellings like "hors' dourves" are not uncommon. Actually, many modern food writers have decided we needn't try to wrap our tongues around this peculiar foreign phrase and now prefer "starters." They are also commonly called "appetizers."

HOW COME/WHY

"How come?" is a common question in casual speech, but in formal contexts use "why?"

HOW TO/HOW CAN I

You can ask someone how to publish a novel; but when you do, don't write "How to publish a novel?" Instead ask "How can I publish a novel?" or "How does someone publish a novel?" If you're in luck, the person you've asked will tell you how to do it. "How to" belongs in statements, not questions.

HUNDREDS/CENTURY

"Eighteen hundreds," "sixteen hundreds" and so forth are not exactly errors; the problem is that they are used almost exclusively by people who are nervous about saying "nineteenth century" when, after all, the years in that century begin with the number eighteen. This should be simple: few people are unclear about the fact that this is the twenty-first century even though our dates begin with twenty. For most dates you can just add one to the second digit in a year and you've got the number of its century. It took a hundred years to get to the year 100, so the next hundred years, which are named "101," "102," etc. were in the second century. This also works BC. The four hundreds BC are the fifth century BC. Using phrases like "eighteen hundreds" is a signal to your readers that you are weak in math and history alike.

HYPHENATION

The Chicago Manual of Style contains a huge chart listing various sorts of phrases that are or are not to be hyphenated. Consult such a reference source for a thorough-going account of this matter, but you may be able to get by with a few basic rules. An adverb/adjective combination in which the adverb ends in "-LY" is never hyphenated: "His necktie reflected his generally grotesque taste." Other sorts of adverbs are followed by a hyphen when combined with an adjective: "His

long-suffering wife finally snapped and fed it through the office shredder." The point here is that "long" modifies "suffering," not "wife." When both words modify the same noun, they are not hyphenated. A "light-green suitcase" is pale in color, but a "light green suitcase" is not heavy. In the latter example "light" and "green" both modify "suitcase," so no hyphen is used.

Adjectives combined with nouns having an "-ED" suffix are hyphenated: "Frank was a hot-headed cop."

Hyphenate ages when they are adjective phrases involving a unit of measurement: "Her ten-year-old car is beginning to give her trouble." A girl can be a "ten-year-old" ("child" is implied). But there are no hyphens in such an adjectival phrase as "Her car is ten years old." In fact, hyphens are generally omitted when such phrases follow the noun they modify except in phrases involving "all" or "self" such as "all-knowing" or "self-confident." Fractions are almost always hyphenated when they are adjectives: "He is one-quarter Irish and three-quarters Nigerian." But when the numerator is already hyphenated, the fraction itself is not, as in "ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths." Fractions treated as nouns are not hyphenated: "He ate one quarter of the turkey."

A phrase composed of a noun and a present participle ("-ing" word) must be hyphenated: "The antenna had been climbed by thrill-seeking teenagers who didn't realize the top of it was electrified."

These are the main cases in which people are prone to misuse hyphens. If you can master them, you will have eliminated the vast majority of such mistakes in your writing. Some styles call for space around dashes (a practice of which I strongly disapprove), but it is never proper to surround hyphens with spaces, though in the following sort of pattern you may need to follow a hyphen with a space: "Stacy's pre- and post- haircut moods."

HYPHENS & DASHES

Dashes are longer than hyphens, but since some browsers do not reliably interpret the code for dashes, they are usually rendered on the Web as they were on old-fashioned typewriters, as double hyphens--like that. Dashes tend to separate elements and hyphens to link them. Few people would substitute a dash for a hyphen in an expression like "a quick-witted scoundrel," but the opposite is common. In a sentence like "Astrud--unlike Inger--enjoyed vacations in Spain rather than England," one often sees hyphens incorrectly substituted for dashes.

When you are typing for photocopying or direct printing, it is a good idea to learn how to type a true dash instead of the double hyphen (computers differ). In old-fashioned styles, dashes (but never hyphens) are surrounded by spaces -- like this. With modern computer output which emulates professional printing, this makes little sense. Skip the spaces unless your editor or teacher insists on them.

There are actually two kinds of dashes. The most common is the "em-dash"

(theoretically the width of a letter "M"--but this is often not the case). To connect numbers, it is traditional to use an "en-dash" which is somewhat shorter, but not as short as a hyphen: "cocktails 5-7 pm." All modern computers can produce en-dashes, but few people know how to type them. For most purposes you don't have to worry about them, but if you are preparing material for print, you should learn how to use them.

HYPOCRITICAL

"Hypocritical" has a narrow, very specific meaning. It describes behavior or speech that is intended to make one look better or more pious than one really is. It is often wrongly used to label people who are merely narrow-minded or genuinely pious. Do not confuse this word with "hypercritical," which describes people who are picky.

HYSTERICAL/HILARIOUS

People say of a bit of humor or a comical situation that it was "hysterical"--shorthand for "hysterically funny"--meaning "hilarious." But when you speak of a man being "hysterical" it means he is having a fit of hysteria, and that may not be funny at all.

I/ME/MYSELF

In the old days when people studied traditional grammar, we could simply say, "The first person singular pronoun is "I" when it's a subject and "me" when it's an object," but now few people know what that means. Let's see if we can apply some common sense here. The misuse of "I" and "myself" for "me" is caused by nervousness about "me." Educated people know that "Jim and me are goin' down to slop the hogs," is not elegant speech, not "correct." It should be "Jim and I" because if I were slopping the hogs alone I would never say "Me is going. . . ." If you refer to yourself first, the same rule applies: It's not "Me and Jim are going" but "I and Jim are going."

So far so good. But the notion that there is something wrong with "me" leads people to overcorrect and avoid it where it is perfectly appropriate. People will say "The document had to be signed by both Susan and I" when the correct statement would be, "The document had to be signed by both Susan and me." Trying even harder to avoid the lowly "me," many people will substitute "myself," as in "The suspect uttered epithets at Officer O'Leary and myself."

"Myself" is no better than "I" as an object. "Myself" is not a sort of all-purpose intensive form of "me" or "I." Use "myself" only when you have used "I" earlier in the same sentence: "I am not particularly fond of goat cheese myself." "I kept half the loot for myself." All this confusion can easily be avoided if you just remove the second party from the sentences where you feel tempted to use "myself" as an object or feel nervous about "me." You wouldn't say, "The IRS sent the refund check to I," so you shouldn't say "The IRS sent the refund check to my wife and I" either. And you shouldn't say "to my wife and myself." The only correct way to say this is, "The IRS sent the refund check to my wife and me." Still sounds too casual? Get over it.

On a related point, those who continue to announce "It is I" have traditional grammatical correctness on their side, but they are vastly outnumbered by those who proudly boast "it's me!" There's not much that can be done about this now. Similarly, if a caller asks for Susan and Susan answers "This is she," her somewhat antiquated correctness is likely to startle the questioner into confusion.

-IC

In the Cold War era, anti-socialists often accused their enemies of being "socialistic" by which they meant that although they were not actually socialists, some of their beliefs were like those of socialists. But the "-ic" suffix is recklessly used in all kinds of settings, often without understanding its implications. Karl Marx was not "socialistic," he was actually socialist.

IDEA/IDEAL

Any thought can be an idea, but only the best ideas worth pursuing are ideals.

IF I WAS/IF I WERE

The subjunctive mood, always weak in English, has been dwindling away for centuries until it has almost vanished. According to traditional thought, statements about the conditional future such as "If I were a carpenter . . ." require the subjunctive "were"; but "was" is certainly much more common. Still, if you want to impress those in the know with your usage, use "were" when writing of something hypothetical, unlikely, or contrary to fact.

The same goes for other pronouns: "you," "she," "he," and "it." In the case of the plural pronouns "we" and "they" the form "was" is definitely nonstandard, of course, because it is a singular form.

IF NOT

"He was smart if not exactly brilliant." In this sort of expression, "if not" links a weaker with a stronger word with a related meaning. Other examples: "unattractive if not downright ugly," "reasonably priced if not exactly cheap," "interested if not actually excited."

But this sort of "if not" is often misused to link words that don't form a weaker/stronger pair: "obscure if not boring," "happy if not entertained," "anxious if not afraid." The linked terms in these examples do have some logical relationship, but they do not form a weaker/stronger pair.

IGNORANT/STUPID

A person can be ignorant (not knowing some fact or idea) without being stupid (incapable of learning because of a basic mental deficiency). And those who say, "That's an ignorant idea" when they mean "stupid idea"

are expressing their own ignorance.

ILLINOIS

It annoys Chicagoans when people pronounce their state's final syllable to rhyme with "noise." The final "S" in "Illinois" is silent. The final "S" in "Illinois" is silent.

ILLUDE/ELUDE

"Illude" is a very rare word, most of whose former meanings are obsolete, but which can mean "to deceive, lead astray." But in modern usage this word is almost always used as an error for "elude," meaning "escape, evade." Similarly, you would be better off avoiding the word "illusive" and using the much more common word "illusory" to mean "deceptive." "Illusive" is almost always an error for "elusive."

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION/VIRGIN BIRTH

The doctrine of "immaculate conception" (the belief that Mary was conceived without inheriting original sin) is often confused with the doctrine of the "virgin birth" (the belief that Mary gave birth to Jesus while remaining a virgin).

IMPACT

One (very large) group of people thinks that using "impact" as a verb is just nifty: "The announcement of yet another bug in the software will strongly impact the price of the company's stock." Another (very passionate) group of people thinks that "impact" should be used only as a noun and considers the first group to be barbarians. Although the first group may well be winning the usage struggle, you risk offending more people by using "impact" as a verb than you will by substituting more traditional words like "affect" or "influence."

IMPACTFUL/INFLUENTIAL

Many people in business and education like to speak of things that have an impact as being "impactful," but this term does not appear in most dictionaries and is not well thought of by traditionalists. Use "influential" or "effective" instead.

IMPERTINENT/IRRELEVANT

"Impertinent" looks as if it ought to mean the opposite of "pertinent," and indeed it once did; but for centuries now its meaning in ordinary speech has been narrowed to "impudent," specifically in regard to actions or speech toward someone regarded as socially superior. Only snobs and very old-fashioned people use "impertinent" correctly; most people would be well advised to forget it and use "irrelevant" instead to mean the opposite of "pertinent."

IMPLY/INFER

These two words, which originally had quite distinct meanings, have become so blended together that most people no longer distinguish between them. If you want to avoid irritating the rest of us, use "imply" when something is being suggested without being explicitly stated and "infer" when someone is trying to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence. "Imply" is more assertive, active: I imply that you need to revise your paper; and, based on my hints, you infer that I didn't think highly of your first draft.

IN REGARDS TO/WITH REGARD TO

Business English is deadly enough without scrambling it. "As regards your downsizing plan . . ." is acceptable, if stiff. "In regard to" "and "with regard to" are also correct. But "in regards to" is nonstandard. You can also convey the same idea with "in respect to" or "with respect to," or--simplest of all--just plain "regarding."

IN SHAMBLES/A SHAMBLES

Your clothes are in tatters, your plans are in ruins, but you can console yourself that your room cannot be "in shambles."

The expression meaning "like a wreck" is "a shambles": "Your room is a shambles! It looks like a cyclone hit it."

A shambles used to be the counter in a meat stall and later, a bloody butchery floor. Settings like the throne room at the end of Hamlet or a disastrous battlefield strewn with body parts can be called "a shambles" in the traditional sense. Now the phrase usually means just "a mess."

IN SPITE OF/ DESPITE

Although "in spite of" is perfectly standard English, some people prefer "despite" because it is shorter. Be careful not to mix the two together by saying "despite of" except as part of the phrase "in despite of" meaning "in defiance of."

And note that unlike "despite," "in spite" should always be spelled as two separate words.

IN STORE

Some people say things like "he is in store for a surprise on his birthday" when they mean he is in line for a surprise. The metaphor is not based on the image of going shopping in a store but of something awaiting you--stored up for you--so the correct form would be "a surprise is in store for him on his birthday."

IN TERMS OF

Originally this expression was used to explain precise quantifiable relationships: "We prefer to measure our football team's success in terms of the number of fans attending rather than the number of games won." But it has for a long time now been greatly overused in all kinds

of vague ways, often clumsily.

Here are some awkward uses followed by recommended alternatives:
"We have to plan soon what to do in terms of Thanksgiving." (for)
"What are we going to do in terms of paying these bills?" (about)
"A little chili powder goes a long way in terms of spicing up any dish." (toward).
"What do you like in terms of movies?" (What kind of movies do you like?)

IN THE FACT THAT/IN THAT

Many people mistakenly write "in the fact that" when they mean simply "in that" in sentences like "It seemed wiser not to go to work in the fact that the boss had discovered the company picnic money was missing." Omit "the fact." While we're at it, "infact" is not a word; "in fact" is always a two-word phrase.

IN THE MIST/IN THE MIDST

When you are surrounded by something, you're in the midst of it--its middle. If you're in a mist, you're just in a fog.

INCASE/IN CASE

Just in case you haven't figured this out already: the expression "in case" is two words, not one. There is a brand of equipment covers sold under the incase brand, but that's a very different matter, to be used only when you need something in which to encase your iPod.

INCENT, INCENTIVIZE

Business folks sometimes use "incent" to mean "create an incentive," but it's not standard English. "Incentivize" is even more widely used, but strikes many people as an ugly substitute for "encourage."

INCIDENCE/INCIDENTS/INSTANCES

These three overlap in meaning just enough to confuse a lot of people. Few of us have a need for "incidence," which most often refers to degree or extent of the occurrence of something: "The incidence of measles in Whitman County has dropped markedly since the vaccine has been provided free." "Incidents," which is pronounced identically, is merely the plural of "incident," meaning "occurrences": "Police reported damage to three different outhouses in separate incidents last Halloween". Instances (not "incidences") are examples: "Semicolons are not required in the first three instances given in your query." Incidents can be used as instances only if someone is using them as examples.

INCREDIBLE

The other day I heard a film reviewer praise a director because he created "incredible characters," which would literally mean unbelievable characters. What the reviewer meant to say, of course, was precisely the opposite: characters so lifelike as to seem like real people.

Intensifiers and superlatives tend to get worn down quickly through overuse and become almost meaningless, but it is wise to be aware of their root meanings so that you don't unintentionally utter absurdities. "Fantastic" means "as in a fantasy" just as "fabulous" means "as in a fable." A "wonderful" sight should make you pause in wonder (awe). Some of these words are worn down beyond redemption, however. For instance, who now expects a "terrific" sight to terrify?

INCREDULOUS/INCREDIBLE

"When Jessica said that my performance at the karaoke bar had been incredible, I was incredulous." I hope Jessica was using "incredible" in the casual sense of "unbelievably good" but I knew I used "incredulous" to mean "unbelieving, skeptical," which is the only standard usage for this word.

INDEPTH/IN DEPTH

You can make an "in-depth" study of a subject by studying it "in depth," but never "indepth." Like "a lot" this expression consists of two words often mistaken for one. The first, adjectival, use of the phrase given above is commonly hyphenated, which may lead some people to splice the words even more closely together. "Indepth" is usually used as an adverb by people of limited vocabulary who would be better off saying "profoundly" or "thoroughly." Some of them go so far as to say that they have studied a subject "indepthly." Avoid this one if you don't want to be snickered at.

INDIAN/NATIVE AMERICAN

Although academics have long promoted "Native American" as a more accurate label than "Indian," most of the people so labeled continue to refer to themselves as "Indians" and prefer that term. In Canada, there is a move to refer to descendants of the original inhabitants as "First Nations" or "First Peoples," but so far that has not spread to the US

UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA

There is no such place as "the University of Indiana"; it's "Indiana University."

I should know; I went there.

INDIVIDUAL/PERSON

Law-enforcement officers often use "individual" as a simple synonym for "person" when they don't particularly mean to stress individuality: "I pursued the individual who had fired the weapon at me for three blocks." This sort of use of "individual" lends an oddly formal air to your writing. When "person" works as well, use it.

INFAMOUS/NOTORIOUS

"Infamous" means famous in a bad way. It is related to the word

"infamy." Humorists have for a couple of centuries jokingly used the word in a positive sense, but the effectiveness of the joke depends on the listener knowing that this is a misuse of the term. Because this is a very old joke indeed you should stick to using "infamous" only of people like Hitler and Billy the Kid.

"Notorious" means the same thing as "infamous" and should also only be used in a negative sense.

INFACT/IN FACT

"In fact" is always two words.

INFINITE

When Shakespeare's Enobarbus said of Cleopatra that "age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety," he was obviously exaggerating. So few are the literal uses of "infinite" that almost every use of it is metaphorical. There are not an infinite number of possible positions on a chessboard, nor number of stars in the known universe. To say of snowflakes that the possible variety of their shape is infinite is incorrect: surely one could theoretically calculate the maximum possible size of something one could justly call a "snowflake," calculate the number of molecules possible in that volume, and the number of possible arrangements of those molecules. The result would be a very large number, but not an infinity. Things can be innumerable (in one sense of the word) without being infinite; in other words, things which are beyond the human capacity to count can still be limited in number. "Infinite" has its uses as a loose synonym for "a very great many," but it is all too often lazily used when one doesn't want to do the work to discover the order of magnitude involved. When you are making quasi-scientific statements you do a disservice to your reader by implying infinity when mere billions are involved.

INFLAMMABLE

"Inflammable" means the same thing as "flammable": burnable, capable of being ignited or inflamed. So many people mistake the "in-" prefix as a negative, however, that it has been largely abandoned as a warning label.

INFLUENCIAL/INFLUENTIAL

If you have influence, you are "influential," not "influencial."

INK PEN/PEN

If there were any danger of confusing pens for writing with other kinds of pens (light-, sea-, pig-) the phrase "ink pen" might be useful, but it seems to be mainly a way of saying "not a pencil." Plain old "pen" will do fine.

INPUT

Some people object to "input" as computer jargon that's proliferated unjustifiably in the business world. Be aware that it's not welcome in all settings; but whatever you do, don't misspell it "imput."

INSIGHT/INCITE

An insight is something you have: an understanding of something, a bright idea about something.

To incite is to do something: to stimulate some action or other to be taken. You can never have an incite.

INSTALL/INSTILL

People conjure up visions of themselves as upgradable robots when they write things like "My Aunt Tillie tried to install the spirit of giving in my heart." The word they are searching for is "instill." You install equipment, you instill feelings or attitudes.

INSTANCES/INSTANTS

Brief moments are "instants," and examples of anything are "instances."

INTEND ON/INTEND TO

You can plan on doing something, but you intend to do it. Many people confuse these two expressions with each other and mistakenly say "intend on." Of course if you are really determined, you can be intent on doing something.

INTENSE/INTENSIVE

If you are putting forth an intense effort, your work is "intense": "My intense study of Plato convinced me that I would make a good leader." But when the intensity stems not so much from your effort as it does from outside forces, the usual word is "intensive": "the village endured intensive bombing."

INTENSIFIERS

People are always looking for ways to emphasize how really, really special the subject under discussion is. (The use of "really" is one of the weakest and least effective of these.) A host of words have been worn down in this service to near-meaninglessness. It is good to remember the etymological roots of such words to avoid such absurdities as "fantastically realistic," "absolutely relative," and "incredibly convincing." When you are tempted to use one of these vague intensifiers consider rewriting your prose to explain more precisely and vividly what you mean: "Fred's cooking was incredibly bad" could be changed to "When I tasted Fred's cooking I almost thought I was back in the middle-school cafeteria."

See also "Incredible."

INTERCESSION/INTERSESSION

In theology, "intercession" is a prayer on behalf of someone else; but an alarming number of colleges use the word to label the period between regular academic sessions. Such a period is properly an "intersession."

INTERGRATE/INTEGRATE

There are lots of words that begin with "inter-" but this is not one of them. The word is "integrate" with just one R.

INTERESTING

The second syllable is normally silent in "interesting." It's nonstandard to go out of your way to pronounce the "ter," and definitely substandard to say "innaresting."

INTERFACE/INTERACT

The use of the computer term "interface" as a verb, substituting for "interact," is widely objected to.

INTERMENT/INTERNMENT

Interment is burial; internment is merely imprisonment.

INTERMURAL/INTRAMURAL

"Intramural" means literally "within the walls" and refers to activities that take place entirely within an institution. When at Macbeth State University the Glamis Hall soccer team plays against the one from Dunsinane Hall, that's an intramural game. When MSU's Fighting Scots travel to go up against Cawdor U. in the Porter's Bowl, the game is "intermural" (though the perfectly correct "intercollegiate" is more often used instead). "Intermural" is constantly both said and written when "intramural" is meant.

INTERNET/INTRANET

"Internet" is the proper name of the network most people connect to, and the word needs to be capitalized. However "intranet," a network confined to a smaller group, is a generic term which does not deserve capitalization. In advertising, we often read things like "unlimited Internet, $35." It would be more accurate to refer in this sort of context to "Internet access."

INTERPRETATE/INTERPRET

"Interpretate" is mistakenly formed from "interpretation," but the verb form is simply "interpret." See also "orientate."

INTO/IN TO

"Into" is a preposition which often answers the question, "where?" For

example, "Tom and Becky had gone far into the cave before they realized they were lost." Sometimes the "where" is metaphorical, as in, "He went into the army" or "She went into business." It can also refer by analogy to time: "The snow lingered on the ground well into April." In old-fashioned math talk, it could be used to refer to division: "two into six is three." In other instances where the words "in" and "to" just happen to find themselves neighbors, they must remain separate words. For instance, "Rachel dived back in to rescue the struggling boy." Here "to" belongs with "rescue" and means "in order to," not "where." (If the phrase had been "dived back into the water," "into" would be required.)

Try speaking the sentence concerned aloud, pausing distinctly between "in" and "to." If the result sounds wrong, you probably need "into."

Then there is the 60s colloquialism which lingers on in which "into" means "deeply interested or involved in": "Kevin is into baseball cards." This is derived from usages like "the committee is looking into the fund-raising scandal." The abbreviated form is not acceptable formal English, but is quite common in informal communications.

INTRICATE/INTEGRAL

An integral part of a machine, organization, or idea is a necessary, inseparable part of it. Many people mistakenly substitute "intricate" for "integral" in the phrase "an integral part."

A very simple bit of metal can be an integral part of an intricate machine.

INTRIGUE

Something mysterious or alluring can be called "intriguing," but "intrigue" as a noun means something rather different: scheming and plotting. Don't say people or situations are full of intrigue when you mean they are intriguing. The Oldsmobile car model called the Intrigue is probably based on this common confusion.

INVITE/INVITATION

"Invite" (accent on the second syllable) is perfectly standard as a verb: "Invite me to the birthday party and I'll jump out of the cake."

But "invite" (accent on the first syllable) as a noun meaning "invitation" is less acceptable: "I got an invite to my ex-wife"s wedding." Though this formn has become extremely popular, even in fairly formal contexts, it is safer to use the traditional "invitation."

IRAQ

Want to sound like a good old boy who doesn't give a hoot what foreigners think? Say "EYE-rack." But if you want to sound knowledgeable, say "ear-ROCK." Politicians who know better sometimes adopt the popular mispronunciation in order to sound more folksy and

down to earth.

Similarly in standard English, Iran is not pronounced "eye-RAN" but "ear-RON."

On a related matter, the first syllable of "Italian" is pronounced just like the first syllable in "Italy," with an "it" sound. "Eye-talian" sounds distinctly uneducated.

IRONICALLY/COINCIDENTALLY

An event that is strikingly different from or the opposite of what one would have expected, usually producing a sense of incongruity, is ironic: "The sheriff proclaimed a zero-tolerance policy on drugs, but ironically flunked his own test." Other striking comings-together of events lacking these qualities are merely coincidental: "the lovers leapt off the tower just as a hay wagon coincidentally happened to be passing below."

IRREGARDLESS/REGARDLESS

Regardless of what you have heard, "irregardless" is a redundancy. The suffix "-less" on the end of the word already makes the word negative. It doesn't need the negative prefix "ir-" added to make it even more negative.

IS, IS

In speech, people often lose track in the middle of a sentence and repeat "is" instead of saying "that": "The problem with the conflict in the Balkans is, is the ethnic tensions seem exacerbated by everything we do." This is just a nervous tic, worth being alert against when you're speaking publicly.

However, when you begin a sentence with the phrase "What it is," it's normal, though awkward, to follow the phrase with another "is": What it is, is a disaster." This colloquialism is probably derived from expressions like this: "I'll tell you what it is; it is a disaster." In this case, each "is" has its own proper "it," whereas the condensed version sounds like a verbal stumble. If you would rather avoid this sort of "is, is" you can avoid using "what it is" and say something simple like "It's a disaster," or "The point is that it's a disaster."

Of course, I suppose it all depends on what you think the meaning of "is" is.

ISN'T IT/INNIT

In South Asia you often hear people end sentences with "isn't it?" in contexts where traditional English would require "doesn't it," "won't it," "aren't you," and related expressions. In Britain and among American Indians, among others, this "invariant isn't" is reduced to "innit," and may be used even more broadly as a general emphatic exclamation at the end of almost any statement.

This interesting pattern is liable to puzzle, amuse, or annoy those who aren't used to it, isn't it?

ISLAMS/MUSLIMS

Followers of Islam are called "Muslims," not "Islams." "Muslim" is now widely preferred over the older and less phonetically accurate "Moslem."

The S in "Islam" and "Muslim" is sibilant like the S in "saint." It should not be pronounced with a Z sound.

ISREAL/ISRAEL

To remember how to spell "Israel" properly, try pronouncing it the way Israelis do when they're speaking English: "ISS-rah-el."

ISSUES/PROBLEMS

An "issue" used to be a matter for consideration or discussion. For instance, a group might discuss the issue of how best to raise funds for its scholarship program. But people could also disagree with each other by saying "I take issue [disagree] with you on that point."

But then mental health professionals began to talk about "child-rearing issues" and "relationship issues," and such. In this context the meaning of "issues" began to blur into that of "problems" and cross-pollinate with "take issue," leading ordinary folks to began saying things like "I have tendonitis issues." or "I have issues with telemarketing." This very popular sort of expression is viewed with contempt or amusement by many traditionalists, who are truly appalled when it's extended to the inanimate world: "these laptops have issues with some wireless cards."

ITCH/SCRATCH

Strictly speaking, you scratch an itch. If you're trying to get rid of a tingly feeling on your back scratch it, don't itch it.

ITS/IT'S

The exception to the general rule that one should use an apostrophe to indicate possession is in possessive pronouns. Some of them are not a problem. "Mine" has no misleading "s" at the end to invite an apostrophe. And few people are tempted to write "hi's," though the equally erroneous "her's" is fairly common, as are "our's" and "their's" --all wrong, wrong, wrong. The problem with avoiding "it's" as a possessive is that this spelling is perfectly correct as a contraction meaning "it is." Just remember two points and you'll never make this mistake again. (1) "it's" always means "it is" or "it has" and nothing else. (2) Try changing the "its" in your sentence to "his" and if it doesn't make sense, then go with "it's."

JACK/PLUG

In electronics, a jack is a female part into which one inserts a plug, the male part. People get confused because "Jack" is a male name. The cyberpunk term (from William Gibson's "Neuromancer") "jack in" should logically be "plug in," but we're stuck with this form in the science fiction realm.

JAM/JAMB

The only common use for the word "jamb" is to label the vertical part of the frame of a door or window. It comes from the French word for "leg"; think of the two side pieces of the frame as legs on either side of the opening.

For all other uses, it's "jam": stuck in a jam, traffic jam, logjam, jam session, etc.

JERRY-BUILT/JURY-RIGGED

Although their etymologies are obscure and their meanings overlap, these are two distinct expressions. Something poorly built is "jerry-built." Something rigged up temporarily in a makeshift manner with materials at hand, often in an ingenious manner, is "jury-rigged." "Jerry-built" always has a negative connotation, whereas one can be impressed by the cleverness of a jury-rigged solution. Many people cross-pollinate these two expressions and mistakenly say "jerry-rigged" or "jury-built."

JEW/JEWISH

"Jew" as an adjective ("Jew lawyer") is an ethnic insult; the word is "Jewish." But people who object to "Jew" as a noun are being oversensitive. Most Jews are proud to be called Jews. The expression "to Jew someone down"--an expression meaning "to bargain for a lower price"--reflects a grossly insulting stereotype and should be avoided in all contexts.

JEWELRY

Often mispronounced "joolereee." To remember the standard pronunciation, just say "jewel" and add "-ree" on the end. The British spelling is much fancier: "jewellery."

JOB TITLES

The general rule is to capitalize a title like "President" only when it is prefixed to a particular president's name: "It is notable that President Grover Cleveland was the first Democratic president elected after the Civil War." Similar patterns apply for titles like "principal," "senator," "supervisor," etc.

But often the American president's title is used as a sort of substitute for his name, and routinely capitalized despite the objections of some style manuals: "The President pardoned the White House Thanksgiving turkey yesterday." And the British would never write anything other than

"The Queen ate strawberries in the Royal Enclosure." The Pope is also usually referred to with a capital P when the specific individual is meant: "The Pope announced that he will visit Andorra next month." Following these common patterns is not likely to get you in trouble unless your editor has adopted a contrary rule.

If no specific individual is meant, then definitely use lower case: "We need to elect a homecoming queen"; "The next president will inherit a terrible budget deficit."

JOHN HENRY/JOHN HANCOCK

John Hancock signed the Declaration of Independence so flamboyantly that his name became a synonym for "signature." Don't mix him up with John Henry, who was a steel-drivin' man.

JOHN HOPKINS/JOHNS HOPKINS

The famous university and hospital named Johns Hopkins derives its peculiar name from its founder. "Johns" was his great-grandmother's maiden name. It is an error to call these institutions "John Hopkins."

JOINT POSSESSIVES

When writing about jointly owned objects, people often fret about where to place apostrophes. The standard pattern is to treat the two partners as a single unit--a couple--and put an apostrophe only after the last name: "John and Jane's villa," "Ben & Jerry's ice cream." Add more owners and you still use only one apostrophe: "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice's party."

If each person owns his or her own item, then each owner gets an apostrophe: "John's and Jane's cars" (each of them separately owns a car).

But when you begin to introduce pronouns the situation becomes much murkier. "Jane and his villa" doesn't sound right because it sounds like Jane and the villa make a pair. The most common solution--"Jane's and his villa"--violates the rule about using the possessive form only on the last partner in the ownership. However, most people don't care and using this form won't raise too many eyebrows.

How about when you have two pronouns? "She and his villa" definitely won't work. "Her and his villa" might get by; but if you say "his and her villa" you inevitably remind people of the common phrase "his and hers" with a very different meaning: male and female, as in a sale on "his and hers scarves."

If you have time to think ahead, especially when writing, the best solution is to avoid this sort of construction altogether by rewording: "Jane and John have a villa outside Florence. Their villa is beautiful." "The villa owned by Jane and him is beautiful." "The villa is Jane's and his." "The villa that he and she own is beautiful."

JUDGEMENT/JUDGMENT

In Great Britain and many of its former colonies, "judgement" is still the correct spelling; but ever since Noah Webster decreed the first E superfluous, Americans have omitted it. Many of Webster's crotchets have faded away (each year fewer people use the spelling "theater," for instance); but even the producers of Terminator 2: Judgment Day, chose the traditional American spelling. If you write "judgement" you should also write "colour."

JUST ASSUME/JUST AS SOON

People sometimes write, "I'd just assume stay home and watch TV." The expression is "just as soon."

KEY

"Deceptive marketing is key to their success as a company." "Careful folding of the egg whites is key." This very popular sort of use of "key" as an adjective by itself to mean "crucial" sets the teeth of some of us on edge. It derives from an older usage of "key" as a metaphorical noun: "The key to true happiness is an abundant supply of chocolate." "Key" as an adjective modifying a noun is also traditional: "Key evidence in the case was mislaid by the police."

But adjectival "key" without a noun to modify it is not so traditional. If this sort of thing bothers you (as it does me), you'll have to grit your teeth and sigh. It's not going away.

KICK-START/JUMP-START

You revive a dead battery by jolting it to life with a jumper cable: an extraordinary measure used in an emergency. So if you hope to stimulate a foundering economy, you want to jump-start it. Kick-starting is just the normal way of getting a motorcycle going.

KINDERGARDEN/KINDERGARTEN

The original German spelling of the word "kindergarten" is standard in English.

KOALA BEAR/KOALA

A koala is not a bear. People who know their marsupials refer to them simply as "koalas." Recent research, however, indicates that pandas are related to other bears.

l/1

People who learned to type in the pre-computer era sometimes type a lower-case letter "l" when they need a number "1." Depending on the font being used, these may look interchangeable, but there are usually subtle differences between the two. For instance, the top of a letter l is

usually flat, whereas the top of a number 1 often slopes down to the left. If your writing is to be reproduced electronically or in print, it's important to hit that number key at the top left of your keyboard to produce a true number 1.

LCD DISPLAY/LCD

"LCD" stands for "liquid crystal display," so it is redundant to write "LCD display." Use just "LCD" or "LCD screen" instead.

Many people confuse this abbreviation with "LED," which stands for "light-emitting diode"--a much earlier technology. You will often see explanations even in technical contexts in which "LCD" is incorrectly defined as "liquid crystal diode."

LOL

The common Internet abbreviation "lol" (for "laughing out loud") began as an expression of amusement or satirical contempt: "My brother-in-law thought the hollandaise sauce was gravy and poured it all over his mashed potatoes (lol)." It has become much overused, often to indicate mere surprise or emphasis with no suggestion of humor: "The boss just told us we have to redo the budget this afternoon (lol)." And some people drop it into their prose almost at random, like a verbal hiccup. It is no longer considered hip or sophisticated, and you won't impress or entertain anyone by using it.

Note that this initialism has had two earlier meanings: "Little Old Lady" and "Lots Of Love."

LAISSEZ-FAIRE

The mispronunciation "lazy-fare" is almost irresistible in English, but this is a French expression meaning "let it be" or, more precisely, "the economic doctrine of avoiding state regulation of the economy," and it has retained its French pronunciation (though with an English R): "lessay fare." It is most properly used as an adjective, as in "laissez-faire capitalism," but is also commonly used as if it were a noun phrase: "the Republican party advocates laissez-faire."

LAND LOVER/LANDLUBBER

"Lubber" is an old term for a clumsy person, and beginning in the 18th century sailors used it to describe a person who was not a good seaman. So the pirate expression of scorn for those who don't go to sea is not "land lover" but "landlubber."

LANGUISH/LUXURIATE

To languish is to wilt, pine away, become feeble. It always indicates an undesirable state. If you're looking for a nice long soak in the tub, what you want is not to languish in the bath but to luxuriate in it.

The word "languid" (drooping, listless) often occurs in contexts that

might lead people to think of relaxation. Even more confusing, the related word "languorous" does describe dreamy self-indulgent relaxation. No wonder people mistakenly think they want to "languish" in the bath.

LARGE/IMPORTANT

In colloquial speech it's perfectly normal to refer to something as a "big problem," but when people create analogous expressions in writing, the result is awkward. Don't write "this is a large issue for our firm" when what you mean is "this is an important issue for our firm." Size and intensity are not synonymous.

LAST NAME/FAMILY NAME

Now that few people know what a "surname" is, we usually use the term "last name" to designate a family name; but in a host of languages the family name comes first. For instance, "Kawabata" was the family name of author Kawabata Yasunari. For Asians, this situation is complicated because publishers and immigrants often switch names to conform to Western practice, so you'll find most of Kawabata's books in an American bookstore by looking under "Yasunari Kawabata." It's safer with international names to write "given name" and "family name" rather than "first name" and "last name."

Note that in a multicultural society the old-fashioned term "Christian name" (for "given name") is both inaccurate and offensive.

LATE/FORMER

If you want to refer to your former husband, don't call him your "late husband" unless he's dead.

LATER/LATTER

Except in the expression "latter-day" (modern), the word "latter" usually refers back to the last-mentioned of a set of alternatives. "We gave the kids a choice of a vacation in Paris, Rome, or Disney World. Of course the latter was their choice." In other contexts not referring back to such a list, the word you want is "later."

Conservatives prefer to reserve "latter" for the last-named of no more than two items.

LAUNDRY MAT/LAUNDROMAT

"Laundromat" was coined in the 1950s by analogy with "automat"--an automated self-service restaurant-- to label an automated self-service laundry. People unaware of this history often mistakenly deconstruct the word into "laundry mat" or "laundrymat."

LAY/LIE

You lay down the book you've been reading, but you lie down when you go to bed. In the present tense, if the subject is acting on some other object, it's "lay." If the subject is lying down, then it's "lie." This distinction is often not made in informal speech, partly because in the past tense the words sound much more alike: "He lay down for a nap," but "He laid down the law." If the subject is already at rest, you might "let it lie." If a helping verb is involved, you need the past participle forms. "Lie" becomes "lain" and "lay" becomes "laid.": "He had just lain down for a nap," and "His daughter had laid the gerbil on his nose."

LEACH/LEECH

Water leaches chemicals out of soil or color out of cloth, your brother-in-law leeches off the family by constantly borrowing money to pay his gambling debts (he behaves like a bloodsucking leech).

LEAD/LED

When you're hit over the head, the instrument could be a "lead" pipe. But when it's a verb, "lead" is the present and "led" is the past tense. The problem is that the past tense is pronounced exactly like the above-mentioned plumbing material ("plumb" comes from a word meaning "lead"), so people confuse the two. In a sentence like "She led us to the scene of the crime," always use the three-letter spelling.

LEAST/LEST

American English keeps alive the old word "lest" in phrases like "lest we forget," referring to something to be avoided or prevented. Many people mistakenly substitute the more familiar word "least" in these phrases.

LEAVE/LET

The colloquial use of "leave" to mean "let" in phrases like "leave me be" is not standard. "Leave me alone" is fine, though.

LEGEND/MYTH

Myths are generally considered to be traditional stories whose importance lies in their significance, like the myth of the Fall in Eden; whereas legends can be merely famous deeds, like the legend of Davy Crockett. In common usage "myth" usually implies fantasy. Enrico Caruso was a legendary tenor, but Hogwarts is a mythical school. Legends may or may not be true. But be cautious about using "myth" to mean "untrue story" in a mythology, theology, or literature class, where teachers can be quite touchy about insisting that the true significance of a myth lies not in its factuality but in its meaning for the culture which produces or adopts it.

LENSE/LENS

Although the variant spelling "lense" is listed in some dictionaries,

the standard spelling for those little disks that focus light is "lens."

LESSEN/LESSON

Although not many people try to teach someone a "lessen," many people try to "lesson" their risks by taking precautions.

"Lessen" is something you do--a verb--and means to make smaller. "Lesson" is a noun, something you learn or teach. Remember this lesson and it will lessen your chances of making a mistake.

LET ALONE

"I can't remember the title of the book we were supposed to read, let alone the details of the story." In sentences like these you give a lesser example of something first, followed by "let alone" and then the greater example. But people often get this backwards, and put the greater example first.

The same pattern is followed when the expression is "much less": "I can't change the oil in my car, much less tune the engine." The speaker can much less well tune the engine than he or she can change the oil.

Another common expression which follows the same pattern uses "never mind," as in "I can't afford to build a tool shed, never mind a new house."

See also "little own."

LET'S/LETS

The only time you should spell "let's" with an apostrophe is when it means "let us": "Let's go to the mall."

If the word you want means "allows" or "permits," no apostrophe should be used: "My mom lets me use her car if I fill the tank."

LIABLE/LIBEL

If you are likely to do something you are liable to do it; and if a debt can legitimately be charged to you, you are liable for it. A person who defames you with a false accusation libels you. There is no such word as "lible."

LIAISE

The verb "liaise," meaning to act as a liaison (intermediary between one group and another), has been around in military contexts since early in the 20th century; but recently it has broken out into more general use, especially in business, where it bothers a lot of people. Although dictionaries generally consider it standard English, you may want to avoid it around people sensitive to business jargon.

LIBARY/LIBRARY

The first R in "library" is often slurred or omitted in speech, and it sometimes drops out in writing as well; and "librarian" is often turned into "libarian."

LIGHT-YEAR

"Light-year" is always a measure of distance rather than of time; in fact it is the distance that light travels in a year. "Parsec" is also a measure of distance, equaling 3.26 light-years, though the term was used incorrectly as a measure of time by Han Solo in "Star Wars."

Please, "Star Wars" fans, don't bother sending me elaborate explanations of why Solo's speech makes sense; I personally heard George Lucas admit in a TV interview that it was just a mistake.

LIGHTED/LIT

Don't fret over the difference between these two words; they're interchangeable.

LIKE

Since the 1950s, when it was especially associated with hipsters, "like" as a sort of meaningless verbal hiccup has been common in speech. The earliest uses had a sort of sense to them in which "like" introduced feelings or perceptions which were then specified: "When I learned my poem had been rejected I was, like, devastated." However, "like" quickly migrated elsewhere in sentences: "I was like, just going down the road, when, like, I saw this cop, like, hiding behind the billboard." This habit has spread throughout American society, affecting people of all ages. Those who have the irritating "like" habit are usually unaware of it, even if they use it once or twice in every sentence: but if your job involves much speaking with others, it's a habit worth breaking.

Recently young people have extended its uses by using "like" to introduce thoughts and speeches: "When he tells me his car broke down on the way to my party I'm like, 'I know you were with Cheryl because she told me so.' " To be reacted to as a grown-up, avoid this pattern.

(See also "goes.")

Some stodgy conservatives still object to the use of "like" to mean "as," "as though" or "as if." Examples: "Treat other people like you want them to treat you" (they prefer: "as you would want them to treat you"). "She treats her dog like a baby" (they prefer "she treats her dog as if it were a baby"). In expressions where the verb is implied rather than expressed, "like" is standard rather than "as": "she took to gymnastics like a duck to water."

In informal contexts, "like" often sounds more natural than "as if," especially with verbs involving perception, like "look," "feel," "sound," "seem," or "taste": "It looks like it's getting ready to rain"

or "It feels like spring." In expressions where the verb is implied rather than expressed, "like" is standard rather than "as": "she took to gymnastics like a duck to water."

So nervous do some people get about "like" that they try to avoid it even in its core meaning of "such as": "ice cream flavors like vanilla and strawberry always sell well" (they prefer "such as vanilla . . ."). The most fanatical even avoid "like" where it is definitely standard, in such phrases as "behaved like a slob" ("behaved as a slob" is their odd preference).

Like you care.
"as": "she took to gymnastics like a duck to water."

LIP-SING/LIP-SYNCH

When you pretend you are singing by synchronizing your lip movements to a recording, you lip-synch--the vocal equivalent of playing "air guitar." Some people mistakenly think the expression is "lip-sing," and they often omit the required hyphen as well. Note that you can lip-synch to speech as well singing.

LIQUOR

Although it may be pronounced "likker," you shouldn't spell it that way, and it's important to remember to include the "U" when writing the word.

LISTSERV

"LISTSERV" is the brand name of one kind of electronic mail-handling software for distributing messages to a list of subscribers. Other common brand names are "Majordomo" and "Listproc". You can subscribe to the poodle-fluffing list, but not the LISTSERV. People at my university, where only Listproc is used, often (and erroneously) refer to themselves as managers of "listservs." English teachers are frequently tripped up when typing "listserv" as part of a computer command; they naturally want to append an E on the end of the word. According to L-Soft, the manufacturer of LISTSERV, the name of their software should always be capitalized. See their Web site for the details:
http://www.lsoft.com/manuals/1.8d/user/user.html#1.1

"LITE" SPELLING

Attempts to "reform" English spelling to render it more phonetic have mostly been doomed to failure--luckily for us. These proposed changes, if widely adopted, would make old books difficult to read and obscure etymological roots which are often a useful guide to meaning. A few, like "lite" for "light," "nite" for "night," and "thru" for "through" have attained a degree of popular acceptance, but none of these should be used in formal writing. "Catalog" has become an accepted substitute for "catalogue," but I don't like it and refuse to use it. "Analog" has triumphed in technical contexts, but humanists are still more likely to write "analogue."

LITERALLY

Like "incredible," "literally" has been so overused as a sort of vague intensifier that it is in danger of losing its literal meaning. It should be used to distinguish between a figurative and a literal meaning of a phrase. It should not be used as a synonym for "actually" or "really." Don't say of someone that he "literally blew up" unless he swallowed a stick of dynamite.

LITTLE OWN/LET ALONE

When Tom writes "I don't even understand what you're saying, little own agree with it" he is misunderstanding the standard phrase "let alone." In the same context many people would say "never mind."

LITTLE TO NONE/LITTLE OR NONE

The expression "little or none" is meant to describe a very narrow distinction, between hardly any and none at all: "The store's tomatoes had little or none of the flavor I get from eating what I grow in my garden." The mistaken variation "little to none" blunts this expression's force by implying a range of amounts between two extremes.

LIVED

In expressions like "long-lived" pronouncing the last part to rhyme with "dived" is more traditional, but rhyming it with "sieved" is so common that it's now widely acceptable.

LOATH/LOATHE

"Loath" is a rather formal adjective meaning reluctant and rhymes with "both," whereas "loathe" is a common verb meaning to dislike intensely, and rhymes with "clothe." Kenji is loath to go to the conference at Kilauea because he loathes volcanos.

LOGIN, LOG-IN, LOG IN

There is a strong tendency in American English to smoosh the halves of hyphenated word and phrases together and drop the hyphen, so we commonly see phrases such as "enter your login and password." This is a misuse of "login" since logging in involves entering both your ID and password, and "login" is not a proper synonym for "ID" alone, or "user name" --commonly abbreviated to the ugly "username". Such mash-ups are influenced by the world of computer programming, where hyphens and spaces are avoided.

If you would prefer to use more standard English, it would be appropriate to use "log-in" as the adjectival phrase: "Follow the correct log-in procedure." But the verb-plus-adverb combination should not be hyphenated: "Before viewing the picture of Britney you'll need to log in."

"Log on" and "log-on" mean the same thing as "log in" and "log-in" but

are less common now.

LOGON/VISIT

You log on to a Web site by entering your ID and password. If you are merely encouraging people to visit a site which has no such requirement, it is misleading to ask them to "log on" to it. News reporters often get this wrong by reporting how many people "logged on" to a particular site when they mean "visited." "Visit" or just "go to" will do just fine.

LONG STORY SHORT/TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT

The traditional expression "to make (or cut) a long story short" is now commonly abbreviated by omitting the first phrase: "Long story short, I missed my plane." Although there's a certain appeal to the notion of abbreviating an expression about abbreviation, the shorter form sounds odd to people not used to it.

LOSE/LOOSE

This confusion can easily be avoided if you pronounce the word intended aloud. If it has a voiced Z sound, then it's "lose." If it has a hissy S sound, then it's "loose." Here are examples of correct usage: "He tends to lose his keys." "She lets her dog run loose." Note that when "lose" turns into "losing" it loses its "E."

LOSER/LOOSER

A person who's a failure is a loser, often a "real loser." If something is loosened, it becomes looser. If you've written "a" before "looser" you've made a mistake--you need "loser."

LOZENGER/LOZENGE

"Lozenger" is an archaic spelling still in use in a few American dialects. It is occasionally mistaken for a singular form of "lozenges." The standard spelling is "lozenge."

LUSTFUL/LUSTY

"Lusty" means "brimming with vigor and good health" or "enthusiastic." Don't confuse it with "lustful," which means "filled with sexual desire."

MAC/Mac

Apple's Macintosh computers are usually referred to as "Macs" for short. Windows users unfamiliar with the usual way of rendering the name often write it as if it were an acronym, in all caps: "MAC."

But a MAC is something quite different. Every computer on a network has a Media Access Control number; so when your IT support person asks you for your "MAC address," don't say you don't have one just because you

use Windows. Don't ask me how to find the MAC address for your Windows computer though; I'm a Mac user.

MACABRE

"Macabre" is a French-derived word which in its original language has the final "ruh" sound lightly pronounced. Those who know this are likely to scorn those who pronounce the word "muh-COB." But this latter pronunciation is very popular and blessed by some American dictionaries, and those who prefer it sometimes view the French-derived pronunciation as pretentious. It's up to you whether you want to risk being considered ignorant or snooty.

MAJORITY ARE/MAJORITY IS

"Majority" is one of those words that can be either singular or plural. Common sense works pretty well in deciding which. If you mean the word to describe a collection of individuals, then the word should be treated as plural: "The majority of e-mail users are upset about the increase in spam." If the word is used to describe a collective group, then consider it singular: "A 90% majority is opposed to scheduling the next meeting at 6:00 A.M." If you are uncertain which you mean, then choose whatever form sounds best to you; it's not likely to bother many people.

MAJORLY/EXTREMELY

"Majorly," meaning "extremely" is slang and should not be used in formal writing, or even speech if you want to impress someone. "Brad was extremely [not 'majorly'] worried about the course final until he got around to reading the syllabus and found out there wasn't one."

MAKE PRETEND/MAKE BELIEVE

When you pretend to do something in a game of fantasy, you make believe.

MANTLE/MANTEL

Though they stem from the same word, a "mantle" today is usually a cloak, while the shelf over a fireplace is most often spelled "mantel."

MANUFACTURE/MANUFACTURER

When your company makes stuff, it manufactures it; but the company itself is a manufacturer. Both in speech and writing the final R is often omitted from the latter word.

MARITAL/MARTIAL

"Marital" refers to marriage, "martial" to war, whose ancient god was Mars. These two are often swapped, with comical results.

MARSHALL/MARSHAL

You may write "the Field Marshal marshalled his troops," but you cannot

spell his title with a double "L." A marshal is always a marshal, never a marshall.

MARSHMELLOW/MARSHMALLOW

Your s'mores may taste mellow, but that gooey confection you use in them is not "marshmellow," but "marshmallow." It was originally made from the root of a mallow plant which grew in marshes.

MASH POTATOES/MASHED POTATOES

You mash the potatoes until they become mashed potatoes.

MASS/MASSIVE

When the dumb Coneheads on Saturday Night Live talked about consuming "mass quantities" of beer they didn't know any better, but native Earth humans should stick with "massive" unless they are trying to allude to SNL. "Mass" is often used by young people in expressions where "many" or even the informal "a lot of" would be more appropriate.

MASSEUSE/MASSEUR

"Masseuse" is a strictly female term; Monsieur Philippe, who gives back rubs down at the men's gym, is a masseur. Because of the unsavory associations that have gathered around the term "masseuse," serious practitioners generally prefer to be called "massage therapists."

MAUVE

"Mauve" (a kind of purple) is pronounced to rhyme with "grove," not "mawv."

MAY/MIGHT

Most of the time "might" and "may" are almost interchangeable, with "might" suggesting a somewhat lower probability. You're more likely to get wet if the forecaster says it may rain than if she says it might rain; but substituting one for the other is unlikely to get you into trouble--so long as you stay in the present tense.

But "might" is also the past tense of the auxiliary verb "may," and is required in sentences like "Chuck might have avoided arrest for the robbery if he hadn't given the teller his business card before asking for the money." When speculating that events might have been other than they were, don't substitute "may" for "might."

As an aside: if you are an old-fashioned child, you will ask, "May I go out to play?" rather than "Can I go out to play?" Despite the prevalence of the latter pattern, some adults still feel strongly that "may" has to do with permission whereas "can" implies only physical ability. But then if you have a parent like this you've had this pattern drilled into your head long before you encountered this page.

ME EITHER/ME NEITHER

Inside a longer sentence, "me either" can be perfectly legitimate: "whole-wheat pie crust doesn't appeal to me either." But by itself, meaning "neither do I," in reply to previous negative statement, it has to be "me neither": "I don't like whole-wheat pie crust." "Me neither."

MEAN/MEDIAN

To find the mean (or average) of a series of numbers, for example 1,2,3,4,5 & 6, add them all together for a total of 21; then divide by the number of numbers (6) to give the mean (or average) of 3.5.

In contrast, when half the data of a set are above a point and half below, that point is the median. The difference between mean and median can be quite significant, but one often sees the terms used wrongly even in technical contexts.

MEANTIME/MEANWHILE

Although most authorities now consider these words interchangeable, some people still prefer to use "meanwhile" when it stands alone at the beginning of a sentence: "Meanwhile the dog buried the baby's pacifier in the garden." They prefer "meantime" to be used only in the expression "in the meantime": "In the meantime, the dog chewed up my last tennis ball."

MEDAL/METAL/MEDDLE/METTLE

A person who proves his or her mettle displays courage or stamina. The word "mettle" is seldom used outside of this expression, so people constantly confuse it with other similar-sounding words.

MEDIA/MEDIUM

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, "criteria" and "data." Radio is a broadcast medium. Television is another broadcast medium. Newspapers are a print medium. Together they are media. Following the tendency of Americans to abbreviate phrases, with "transistor radio" becoming "transistor," (now fortunately obsolete) and "videotape" becoming "video," "news media" and "communications media" have been abbreviated to "media." Remember that watercolor on paper and oil on black velvet are also media, though they have nothing to do with the news. When you want to get a message from your late Uncle Fred, you may consult a medium. The word means a vehicle between some source of information and the recipient of it. The "media" are the transmitters of the news; they are not the news itself.

MEDIEVAL AGES/MIDDLE AGES

The "eval" of "Medieval" means "age" so by saying "Medieval Ages" you are saying "Middle Ages Ages." Medievalists also greatly resent the common misspelling "Midevil."

MEDIOCRE

Although some dictionaries accept the meaning of this word as "medium" or "average," in fact its connotations are almost always more negative. When something is distinctly not as good as it could be, it is mediocre. If you want to say that you are an average student, don't proclaim yourself mediocre, or you'll convey a worse impression of yourself than you intend.

MEDIUM/MEDIAN

That strip of grass separating the lanes going opposite directions in the middle of a freeway is a median. But if you're trying to achieve a balance between extremes, you're trying to strike a happy medium.

MEMORIUM/MEMORIAM

The correct spelling of the Latin phrase is "in memoriam."

METHODOLOGY/METHOD

A fondness for big words isn't always accompanied by the knowledge of their proper use. Methodology is about the methods of doing something; it is not the methods themselves. It is both pretentious and erroneous to write "The architect is trying to determine a methodology for reinforcing the foundation now that the hotel on top of it has begun to sink."

MFR./MFG.

"Mfr." is the abbreviation for "manufacturer" and "mfg." is the abbreviation for "manufacturing." Acme Mfg. Co. is a mfr. of roadrunner traps.

MIC/MIKE

Until very recently the casual term for a microphone was "mike," not "mic." Young people now mostly imitate the technicians who prefer the shorter "mic" label on their soundboards, but it looks distinctly odd to those used to the traditional term. There are no other words in English in which "-ic" is pronounced to rhyme with "bike"--that's the reason for the traditional "mike" spelling in the first place. Although the new spelling has largely triumphed in casual usage, editors may ask you to use the older spelling in publication.

MIDRIFT/MIDRIFF

"Midriff" derives from "mid-" and a very old word for the belly. Fashions which bare the belly expose the midriff. People think of the gap being created by scanty tops and bottoms as a rift, and mistakenly call it a "midrift" instead. In earlier centuries, before belly-baring was in, the midriff was also the piece of cloth which covered the area.

MIGHT COULD/MIGHT, COULD

In some American dialects it is common to say things like "I might could pick up some pizza on the way to the party." In standard English, "might" or "could" are used by themselves, not together.

MIGHT OUGHT/MIGHT, OUGHT

In some dialects it's common to say things like "you might ought to [pronounced oughta] turn off the engine before changing the spark plugs." If you want to sound educated, you might want to avoid this combination. If you want to sound sophisticated you definitely ought to.

MIGHT HAS WELL/MIGHT AS WELL

You might as well get this one right: the expression is not "might has well" but "might as well."

MILITATE/MITIGATE

These are not very common words, but people who use them--especially lawyers--tend to mix them up. "Militate" is usually followed by "against" in a phrase that means "works against": "His enthusiasm for spectacular collisions militates against his becoming a really effective air traffic controller."

"Mitigate" means almost the opposite: to make easier, to moderate. "His pain at leaving was mitigated by her passionate kiss." It should not be followed by "against."

MIND OF INFORMATION/MINE OF INFORMATION

A book, a person, or any other source stuffed with gems of useful knowledge is a mine of information, a metaphorical treasure trove of learning. The information involved may or may not be in someone's mind.

MINER/MINOR

Children are minors, but unless they are violating child-labor laws, those who work in mines are miners.

MINORITY

In the US the term "minority" frequently refers to racial minorities, and is used not only of groups, but of individuals. But many authorities object to calling a single person a minority, as in "We hired a minority for the job." Even phrases like "women and minorities" bother some people. They think it should be "members of minorities."

MINUS/HYPHEN

When baffled computer users phone Support they may say they have a Model

AB "minus" 231. In the model name "AB-231" the linking character is a hyphen, though "dash" will do. "Minus" makes no sense in such contexts, but is so common that support personnel have begun to adopt it too.

MINUS WELL/MIGHT AS WELL

When you see the way some people misspell common phrases you sometimes feel you might as well give up. It's simply amazing how many people think the standard phrase "might as well" is "minus well."

MISCHIEVIOUS/MISCHIEVOUS

The correct pronunciation of this word is "MISS-chuh-vuss," not "miss-CHEE-vee-uss." Don't let that mischievous extra "I" sneak into the word.

MISNOMER

A misnomer is mistake in naming a thing; calling a debit card a "credit card" is a misnomer. Do not use the term more generally to designate other sorts of confusion, misunderstood concepts, or fallacies, and above all do not render this word as "misnamer."

MISPLACED STRESS

"We WILL be descending shortly INTO Denver," says the flight attendant, sounding very weird. People who have to repeat announcements by rote--including radio station-break announcers and others--often try to avoid sounding like monotonous robots by raising and lowering the pitch of their voices at random and stressing words not normally stressed: mostly prepositions and auxiliary verbs. One has to sympathize; imagine having to repeatedly lecture a planefull of people on seat-belt use when you know for a fact the only adults on board likely not to know already how to fasten a buckle are too demented to understand what you're saying. But the absurd sing-song into which many of these folks fall is both distracting and irritating, making them sound like malfunctioning robots. Those who speak in natural voices, stressing main nouns, verbs, and adjectives where it makes sense, are much easier to listen to.

MIXED-UP MEDIA

Mixed media can be great; mixed-up media not so much.

Books are published, movies and musical recordings released, and plays and TV shows premiered.

Movies are shown, plays staged, and TV shows broadcast.

Technically recordings get deleted (from catalogs) or withdrawn rather than going out of print like books (which may also be remaindered: sold at discount, or worse--pulped). However, there is a strong tendency to use "out of print" for all kinds of media: CDs, DVDs, etc. Movies and stage shows close or end their runs, but only stage shows fold.

MONEY IS NO OPTION/MONEY IS NO OBJECT

The expression "money is no object" means that cost is no obstacle: you're willing to pay whatever is required to get what you want.

People who don't understand this unusual meaning of "object" often substitute "option," saying "money is no option," which makes no sense at all.

MONO E MONO/MANO A MANO

"Mono e mono" is an error caused by mishearing the Spanish expression "mano a mano" which means not "man-to-man" but "hand-to-hand," as in hand-to-hand combat: one on one.

MORAL/MORALE

If you are trying to make people behave properly, you are policing their morals; if you are just trying to keep their spirits up, you are trying to maintain their morale. "Moral" is accented on the first syllable, "morale" on the second.

MORAYS/MORES

The customs of a people are its mores. These may include its morals (ethics), but the word "mores" is not synonymous with "morals." Some eels are morays, but they aren't known particularly for their social customs, though both words are pronounced the same.

MORE IMPORTANTLY/MORE IMPORTANT

When speakers are trying to impress audiences with their rhetoric, they often seem to feel that the extra syllable in "importantly" lends weight to their remarks: "and more importantly, I have an abiding love for the American people." However, these pompous speakers are wrong. It is rarely correct to use this form of the phrase because it is seldom adverbial in intention. Say "more important" instead. The same applies to "most importantly"; it should be "most important."

MORESO/MORE SO

"More so" should always be spelled as two distinct words. It is also overused and misused. Wherever possible, stick with plain "more."

MOST ALWAYS/ALMOST ALWAYS

"Most always" is a casual, slangy way of saying "almost always." The latter expression is better in writing. The same is true of "most every," "most all" and related expressions where the standard first word is "almost."

MOTHERLOAD/MOTHER LODE

Although you may dig a load of ore out of a mother lode, the spelling

"motherload" is a mistake which is probably influenced by people thinking it means something like "the mother of all loads." A "lode" was originally a stream of water, but by analogy it became a vein of metal ore. Miners of precious metals dream of finding a really rich vein, which they refer to as a "mother lode," most often spelled as two words, though you also commonly see it spelled as one.

MOTION/MOVE

When you make a motion in a meeting, say simply "I move," as in "I move to adjourn"; and if you're taking the minutes, write "Barbara moved," not "Barbara motioned" (unless Barbara was making wild arm-waving gestures to summon the servers to bring in the lunch). Instead of "I want to make a motion . . ." it's simpler and more direct to say "I want to move. . . ."

MUCH DIFFERENTLY/VERY DIFFERENTLY

Say "We consistently vote very differently," not "much differently." But you can say "My opinion doesn't much differ from yours."

MUCUS/MUCOUS

Mucous membranes secrete mucus. "Mucus" is the noun and "mucous" is the adjective. It's not only snotty biologists who insist on distinguishing between these two words.

MUSIC/SINGING

After my wife--an accomplished soprano--reported indignantly that a friend of hers had stated that her church had "no music, only singing," I began to notice the same tendency among my students to equate music strictly with instrumental music. I was told by one that "the singing interfered with the music" (i.e., the accompaniment). In the classical realm most listeners seem to prefer instrumental to vocal performances, which is odd given the distinct unpopularity of strictly instrumental popular music. People rejoice at the sound of choral works at Christmas but seldom seek them out at other times of the year. Serious music lovers rightly object to the linguistic sloppiness that denies the label "music" to works by such composers as Palestrina, Schubert, and Verdi. From the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century, vocal music reigned supreme, and instrumentalists strove to achieve the prized compliment of "sounding like the human voice." The dominance of orchestral works is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

In contrast, my students often call instrumental works "songs," being unfamiliar with the terms "composition" and "piece." All singing is music, but not all music is singing.

MUST OF/MUST HAVE

"Must of" is an error for "must have."

See "could of/should of/would of."

MUTE POINT/MOOT POINT

"Moot" is a very old word related to "meeting," specifically a meeting where serious matters are discussed. Oddly enough, a moot point can be a point worth discussing at a meeting (or in court)--an unresolved question--or it can be the opposite: a point already settled and not worth discussing further. At any rate, "mute point" is simply wrong, as is the less common "mood point."

MYRIAD OF/MYRIAD

Some traditionalists object to the word "of" after "myriad" or an "a" before, though both are fairly common in formal writing. The word is originally Greek, meaning 10,000, but now usually means "a great many." Its main function is as a noun, and the adjective derived from it shows its origins by being reluctant to behave like other nouns expressing amount, like "ton" as in "I've got a ton of work to do." In contrast: "I have myriad tasks to complete at work."

N'/'N'

In your restaurant's ad for "Big 'n' Juicy Burgers," remember that the apostrophes substitute for both omitted letters in "and"--the A and the D--so strictly speaking it's not enough to use just one, as in "Big n' Juicy."

By so doing, you'll improve on the usage of McDonald's, which has actually created the registered trademark "Big N' Tasty.'

NAME, PRONOUN

In old English ballads, it is common to follow the name of someone with a pronoun referring to the same person. For instance: "Sweet William, he died the morrow." The extra syllable "he" helps fill out the rhythm of the line.

Though this pattern is rare in written prose it is fairly common in speech. If you say things like "Nancy, she writes for the local paper"; people are less likely to think your speech poetic than they are to think you've made a verbal stumble. Leave out the "she."

The same pattern applies to common nouns followed by pronouns as in "the cops, they've set up a speed trap" (should be "the cops have set up a speed trap").

NAUSEATED/NAUSEOUS

Many people say, when sick to their stomachs, that they feel "nauseous" (pronounced "NOSH-uss" or "NOZH-uss") but traditionalists insist that this word should be used to describe something that makes you want to throw up: something nauseating. They hear you as saying that you make

people want to vomit, and it tempers their sympathy for your plight. Better to say you are "nauseated," or simply that you feel like throwing up.

NAVAL/NAVEL

Your belly button is your navel, and navel oranges look like they have one; all terms having to do with ships and sailing require "naval."

NEAR/NEARLY

Some dialects substitute "near" for standard "nearly" in statements like "There weren't nearly enough screws in the kit to finish assembling the cabinet."

NECK IN NECK/NECK AND NECK

When a race is very tight, it's described not as "neck in neck" but "neck and neck."

NEICE/NIECE

Many people have trouble believing that words with the "ee" sound in them should be spelled with an "IE." The problem is that in English (and only in English), the letter I sounds like "aye" rather than "ee," as it does in the several European languages from which we have borrowed a host of words. If you had studied French in high school you would have learned that this word is pronounced "knee-YES" in that language, and it would be easier to remember. Americans in particular misspell a host of German-Jewish names because they have trouble remembering that in that language IE is pronounced "ee" and EI is pronounced "aye." The possessors of such names are inconsistent about this matter in English. "Wein" changes from "vine" to "ween," but "Klein" remains "kline."

NEVADA

"Nuh-VAH-duh" is a little closer to the original Spanish pronunciation than the way Nevadans pronounce the name of their home state, but the correct middle syllable is the same "A" sound as in "sad." When East Coast broadcasters use the first pronunciation, they mark themselves as outsiders.

NEVER THE LESS, NOT WITHSTANDING\NEVERTHELESS, NOTWITHSTANDING

For six centuries we have been spelling "nevertheless" and "notwithstanding" as single words, and today it is definitely not standard to break them up into hyphenated or non-hyphenated multiword phrases.

NEVERMIND/NEVER MIND

The standard spelling of this phrase is as two words: "never mind." The popularity of the alternative one-word form "nevermind" was certainly enhanced by its use in 1991 as the title of a bestselling Nirvana album. "Nevermind" can look immature or

slangy to some readers. You can still be cool by imitating the vocabulary choice in the title of another famous album: "Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols."

In expressions like "pay him no nevermind" where the word means "attention" it's always one word, but those expressions are both slangy and old-fashioned.

NEW LEASE OF LIFE/NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Reinvigorated people are traditionally said to have been granted not a "new lease of life" but a "new lease on life." After all, you take out a lease on a house, right? Same thing.

NEXT/THIS

If I tell you that the company picnic is next Saturday it would be wise to ask whether I mean this coming Saturday or the Saturday after that. People differ in how they use "next" in this sort of context, and there's no standard pattern; so it's worth making an extra effort to be clear.

In the UK the distinction is made clear by saying "Saturday next" or "Saturday week."

NEXT STORE/NEXT DOOR

You can adore the boy next door, but not "next store."

NIEVE/NAIVE

People who spell this French-derived word "nieve" make themselves look naive. In French there is also a masculine form: "naif"; and both words can be nouns meaning "naive person" as well as adjectives. "Nieve" is actually the Spanish word for "snow." "Naivete" is the French spelling of the related noun in English.

If you prefer more nativized spelling, "naivety" is also acceptable.

NIGGARD

"Niggard" is a very old word in English meaning "miser" or "stingy person." Americans often mistakenly assume it is a variant on the most common insulting term for dark-skinned people. You may embarrass yourself by attacking a writer for racism when you see it in print; but since so many people are confused about this it might be better to use "miser" and "stingy" instead of "niggard" and "niggardly."

NINTY/NINETY

"Nine" keeps its E when it changes to "ninety."

NIP IT IN THE BUTT/NIP IT IN THE BUD

To nip a process in the bud is to stop it from flowering completely. The

hilariously mistaken "nip it in the butt" suggests stimulation to action rather than stopping it.

NOBLE PRIZE/NOBEL PRIZE

Nobel laureates may indeed be intellectual nobility, but the award they get is not the "Noble Prize" but the "Nobel Prize," named after founder Alfred Nobel.

NONE

There's a lot of disagreement about this one. "None" can be either singular or plural, depending on the meaning you intend and its context in the sentence. "None of the pie is left" is clearly singular. But "None of the chocolates is left" is widely accepted, as is "None of the chocolates are left." If it's not obvious to you which it should be, don't worry; few of your readers will be certain either.

NONPLUSSED

"Nonplussed" means to be stuck, often in a puzzling or embarrassing way, unable to go further ("non"="no" + "plus"="further"). It does not mean, as many people seem to think, "calm, in control."

NOONE/NO ONE

Shall we meet at Ye Olde Sandwyche Shoppe at Noone? "No one" is always two separate words, unlike "anyone" and "someone."

NO SOONER WHEN/NO SOONER THAN

The phrase, "No sooner had Paula stopped petting the cat when it began to yowl" should be instead, "No sooner had Paula stopped petting the cat than it began to yowl."

NOT

You need to put "not" in the right spot in a sentence to make it say what you intend. "Not all fraternity members are drunks" means some are, but "All fraternity members are not drunks" means none of them is.

NOT ALL

The combination of "not" and "all" can be confusing if you're not careful about placement. "All politicians are not corrupt" could theoretically mean that no politician is corrupt; but what you probably mean to say is "Not all politicians are corrupt" When "not all is a minority, it's sometimes better to replace "not all" with "some." "The widescreen version is not available in all video stores" can be made clearer by saying "The widescreen version is not available in some stores."

NOT ALL THAT/NOT VERY

The slangy phrase "not all that" as in "the dessert was not all that tasty" doesn't belong in formal writing. "Not very" would work, but something more specific would be even better: "the pudding tasted like library paste."

NOT HARDLY/NOT AT ALL

"Not hardly" is slang, fine when you want to be casual--but in a formal document? Not hardly!

NOTATE/NOTE

To notate a text is to write annotations about it. This technical term should not be used as a synonym for the simple verb "note." It is both pretentious and incorrect to write "notate the time you arrived in your log."

NOTORIOUS

"Notorious" means famous in a bad way, as in "Nero was notorious for giving long recitals of his tedious poetry." Occasionally writers deliberately use it in a positive sense to suggest irony or wit, but this is a very feeble and tired device. Nothing admirable should be called "notorious."

The same goes for "notoriety," which also indicates a bad reputation.

NOW AND DAYS/NOWADAYS

Although it used to be hyphenated on occasion as "now-a-days," this expression is nowadays usually rendered as a single unhyphenated word. Some folks mistakenly think the expression is "now and days," which makes no sense.

NUCLEAR

This isn't a writing problem, but a pronunciation error. President Eisenhower used to consistently insert a "U" sound between the first and second syllables, leading many journalists to imitate him and say "nuk-yuh-lar" instead of the correct "nuk-lee-ar." The confusion extends also to "nucleus." Many people can't even hear the mistake when they make it, and only scientists and a few others will catch the mispronunciation; but you lose credibility if you are an anti-nuclear protester who doesn't know how to pronounce "nuclear." Here's one way to remember: we need a new, clear understanding of the issues; let's stop saying "Nuke you!"

NUMBER OF VERB

In long, complicated sentences, people often lose track of whether the subject is singular or plural and use the wrong sort of verb. "The ultimate effect of all of these phone calls to the detectives were to make them suspicious of the callers" is an error because "effect," which

is singular, is the subject. If you are uncertain about whether to go with singular or plural condense the sentence down to its skeleton: "The effect . . . was to make them suspicious."

Another situation that creates confusion is the use of interjections like "along with," "as well as," and "together with," where they are often treated improperly as if they meant simply "and." "Aunt Hilda, as well as her pet dachshund, is coming to the party" (not "are coming").

A compound subject requires a plural verb even if the words which make it up are themselves singular in form: "widespread mold and mildew damage [not damages] the resale value of your house."

NUMBERS

If your writing contains numbers, the general rule is to spell out in letters all the numbers from zero to nine and use numerals for larger numbers; but there are exceptions. If what you're writing is full of numbers and you're doing math with them, stick with numerals. Approximations like "about thirty days ago" and catch-phrases like "his first thousand days" are spelled out. Large round numbers are often rendered thus: "50 billion sold." With measurements, use numerals: "4 inches long." Never start a sentence with a numeral. Either spell out the number involved or rearrange the sentence to move the number to a later position.

See also "50's."

NUPTUAL/NUPTIAL

"Nuptial" is usually a pretentious substitute for "wedding," but if you're going to use it, be sure to spell it properly. For the noun, the plural form "nuptials" is more traditional.

O/zero

When reciting a string of numbers such as your credit card number it is common and perfectly acceptable to pronounce zero as "oh." But when dealing with a registration code or other such string of characters which mixes letters and numbers, it is important to distinguish between the number 0 and the letter O. In most typefaces a capital O is rounder, fatter, than a zero; but that is not always the case. What looks unambiguous when you type it may come out very unclear on the other end on a computer which renders your message in a different typeface.

In technical contexts, the distinction is often made by using zeros with slashes through them, but this can create as many problems as it solves: those unfamiliar with the convention will be confused by it, numbers using such characters may not sort properly, and slashed zeros created in some fonts change to normal zeros in other fonts.

If you work for a company that requires registration codes you do a disservice to your customers and yourself by including either zeros or O's in your codes where there is any possibility of confusion.

OBSOLESCENT/OBSOLETE

Many people assume the word "obsolescent" must be a fancy form of "obsolete," but something obsolescent is technically something in the process of becoming obsolete. Therefore it's an error to describe something as "becoming obsolescent.

OF

"Of" is often shoved in where it doesn't belong in phrases like "not that big of a deal," and "not that great of a writer." Just leave it out.

OF ___'S

Phrases combining "of" with a noun followed by "'S" may seem redundant, since both indicate possession; nevertheless, "a friend of Karen's" is standard English, just as "a friend of Karen" and "Karen's friend" are.

OFFENSE/OFFENCE

In the US "offense" is standard; in the UK use "offence." The sports pronunciation accenting the first syllable should not be used when discussing military, legal, or other sorts of offense.

See also DEFENSE/DEFENCE

OFTEN

People striving for sophistication often pronounce the "T" in this word, but true sophisticates know that the masses are correct in saying "offen."

OGGLE/OGLE

If you're being leered at lustfully you're being ogled (first vowel sounds like "OH")--not "oggled," even if you're being ogled through goggles. The word is probably related to the German word "augeln," meaning "to eye," from augen ("eye").

OK/OKAY

This may be the most universal word in existence; it seems to have spread to most of the world's languages. Etymologists now generally agree that it began as a humorous misspelling of "all correct": "oll korrect." "OK" without periods is the most common form in written American English now, though "okay" is not incorrect.

OLD FASHION/OLD-FASHIONED

Although "old fashion" appears in advertising a good deal, the traditional spelling is "old-fashioned."

OLD-TIMER'S DISEASE/ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

I've always thought that "old-timer's disease" was a clever if tasteless pun on "Alzheimer's Disease"; but many people have assured me that this is a common and quite unintentional error.

Some medical authorities prefer the form "Alzheimer Disease," though that is seldom used by nonprofessionals.

OLD WISE TALE/OLD WIVES' TALE

An absurd superstition is an "old wives' tale": according to sexist tradition a story popular among credulous old ladies. It's not an "old wise tale" or--even worse--an "old wives' tail."

ON ACCIDENT/BY ACCIDENT

Although you can do things on purpose, you do them by accident.

ON THE LAMB/ON THE LAM

When a criminal hides out, he's on the lam. He wouldn't get far on a lamb.

ON TOMORROW/TOMORROW

You can meet on Monday or on the 21st of March, but it's an error to say "on tomorrow," "on yesterday" or "on today" Just leave "on" out (except, of course, in phrases like "let's meet later on today" using the phrase "later on").

ONCE/ONES

"Once" always has to do with time and answers the questions, "how many times?" or "when?" For instance: "I only played handball once." "Once I got my boot off, I saw my sock had a hole in it."

In contrast, "ones" have to do with things. In your tool collection, the ones you should keep handy are the ones you use most.

ONCE AND A WHILE/ONCE IN A WHILE

The expression is "once in a while."

ONE OF THE (SINGULAR)

In phrases like "pistachio is one of the few flavors that appeals to me," I think you should use the singular form for the verb "appeals" because its subject is "one," not "flavors." However, note that usage experts are all over the place on this subject and you're not likely to get into much trouble by using the plural, and some authorities absolutely prefer it.

ONE-DIMENSIONAL/TWO-DIMENSIONAL

Once upon a time most folks knew that "three-dimensional" characters or ideas were rounded, fleshed out, and complex and "two-dimensional" ones were flat and uninteresting. It seems that the knowledge of basic geometry has declined in recent years, because today we hear uninteresting characters and ideas described as "one-dimensional." According to Euclid, no physical object can be one-dimensional (of course, according to modern physics, even two-dimensionality is only an abstract concept). If you are still bothered by the notion that two dimensions are one too many, just use "flat."

ONE IN THE SAME/ONE AND THE SAME

The old expression "they are one and the same" is now often mangled into the roughly phonetic equivalent "one in the same." The use of "one" here to mean "identical with each other" is familiar from phrases like "Jane and John act as one." They are one; they are the same.

ONE OF THE ONLY/ONE OF THE FEW

Although it has recently become much more popular, the phrase "one of the only" bothers some of us in contexts in which "one of the few" would traditionally be used. Be aware that it strikes some readers as odd. "One of only three groups that played in tune" is fine, but "one of the only groups that played in tune" is more likely to cause raised eyebrows.

ONGOINGLY/CURRENTLY, CONTINUOUSLY

"Ongoingly" is not standard English. When something is occurring in an ongoing manner, you can speak of it as happening "currently" or "continuously."

ONLINE/ON LINE

The common adjective used to label Internet activities is usually written as one word: "online": "The online site selling banana cream pies was a failure." But it makes more sense when using it as an adverbial phrase to write two separate words: "When the teacher took her class to the library, most of them used it to go on line." The hyphenated form "on-line" is not widely used; but would be proper only for the adjectival function. However, you are unlikely to get into trouble for using "online" for all computer-related purposes.

As for real physical lines, the British and New Yorkers wait "on line" (in queues), but most Americans wait "in line."

ONLY

Writers often inadvertently create confusion by placing "only" incorrectly in a sentence. It should go immediately before the word or phrase it modifies. "I lost my only shirt" means that I had but one to begin with. "I lost only my shirt" means I didn't lose anything else. "Only I lost my shirt" means that I was the only person in my group to

lose a shirt. Strictly speaking, "I only lost my shirt" should mean I didn't destroy it or have it stolen--I just lost it; but in common speech this is usually understood as being identical with "I lost only my shirt." Scrutinize your uses of "only" to make sure you are not creating unwanted ambiguities.

ONTO/ON TO

"Onto" and "on to" are often interchangeable, but not always. Consider the effect created by wrongly using "onto" in the following sentence when "on to" is meant: "We're having hors d'oeuvres in the garden, and for dinner moving onto the house." If the "on" is part of an expression like "moving on" it can't be shoved together with a "to" that just happens to follow it.

OP-ED

Although it looks like it might mean "opinion of the editor" the "op-ed" page is actually a page written by columnists or outside contributors to a newspaper, printed opposite the editorial page.

OPEN/UNLOCKED/UNLATCHED

Many people refer to doors as being "open" when they mean to say they are merely unlocked. Telling people to leave a house open may mislead them into making the place more inviting to casual intruders than you intend if you really only want it to be unlocked. And you may unnecessarily alarm the driver if you report from the back seat of a car that one of the doors is open when you mean that it is merely unlatched.

OPPRESS/REPRESS

Dictators commonly oppress their citizens and repress dissent, but these words don't mean exactly the same thing. "Repress" just means "keep under control." Sometimes repression is a good thing: "During the job interview, repress the temptation to tell Mr. Brown that he has toilet paper stuck to his shoe." Oppression is always bad, and implies serious persecution.

ORAL/VERBAL

Some people insist that "verbal" refers to anything expressed in words, whether written or spoken, while "oral" refers exclusively to speech; but in common usage "verbal" has become widely accepted for the latter meaning. However, in legal contexts, an unwritten agreement is still an "oral contract," not a "verbal contract."

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

Many pretentious writers have begun to use the expression "orders of magnitude" without understanding what it means. The concept derives from the scientific notation of very large numbers in which each order of magnitude is ten times the previous one. When the bacteria in a flask have multiplied from some hundreds to some thousands, it is very handy

to say that their numbers have increased by an order of magnitude, and when they have increased to some millions, that their numbers have increased by four orders of magnitude.

Number language generally confuses people. Many seem to suppose that a 100% increase must be pretty much the same as an increase by an order of magnitude, but in fact such an increase represents merely a doubling of quantity. A "hundredfold increase" is even bigger: one hundred times as much. If you don't have a firm grasp on such concepts, it's best to avoid the expression altogether. After all, "Our audience is ten times as big now as when the show opened" makes the same point more clearly than "Our audience has increased by an order of magnitude."

Compare with "quantum leap."

ORDINANCE/ORDNANCE

A law is an ordinance, but a gun is a piece of ordnance.

OREGON

Oregon natives and other Westerners pronounce the state name's last syllable to sound like "gun," not "gone."

ORGANIC

The word "organic" is used in all sorts of contexts, often in a highly metaphorical manner; the subject here is its use in the phrase "organic foods" in claims of superior healthfulness. Various jurisdictions have various standards for "organic" food, but generally the label is applied to foods that have been grown without artificial chemicals or pesticides. Literally, of course, the term is a redundancy: all food is composed of organic chemicals (complex chemicals containing carbon). There is no such thing as an inorganic food (unless you count water as a food). Natural fertilizers and pesticides may or may not be superior to artificial ones, but the proper distinction is not between organic and inorganic. Many nitrogen-fixing plants like peas do a great job of fertilizing the soil with plain old inorganic atmospheric nitrogen.

When it comes to nutrition, people tend to generalize rashly from a narrow scientific basis. After a few preservatives were revealed to have harmful effects in some consumers, many products were proudly labeled "No Preservatives!" I don't want harmful preservatives in my food, but that label suggests to me a warning: "Deteriorates quickly! May contain mold and other kinds of rot!" Salt is a preservative.

ORIENTAL/ASIAN

"Oriental" is generally considered old-fashioned now, and many find it offensive. "Asian" is preferred, but not "Asiatic." it's better to write the nationality involved, for example "Chinese" or "Indian," if you know it. "Asian" is often taken to mean exclusively "East Asian," which irritates South Asian and Central Asian people.

ORIENTATE/ORIENT

Although it is standard in British English "orientate" is widely considered an error in the US, with simple "orient" being preferred.

OSTENSIVELY/OSTENSIBLY

This word, meaning "apparently," is spelled "ostensibly."

OVER-EXAGGERATED/EXAGGERATED

"Over-exaggerated" is a redundancy. If something is exaggerated, it's already overstressed.

OVERDO/OVERDUE

If you overdo the cocktails after work you may be overdue for your daughter's soccer game at 6:00.

OVERSEE/OVERLOOK

When you oversee the preparation of dinner, you take control and manage the operation closely. But if you overlook the preparation of dinner you forget to prepare the meal entirely--better order pizza.

OVERTAKE/TAKE OVER

When you catch up with the runners ahead of you in a marathon, you overtake them; but when you seize power, you take over the government.

PAGE/SITE

In the early days of the Internet, it became customary to refer to Web sites as "pages" though they might in fact consist of many different pages. The Jane Austen Page, for instance, incorporates entire books, and is organized into a very large number of distinct Web pages. This nomenclature is illogical, but too well established to be called erroneous. However, it is not wise to write someone who has created a large and complex site and call it a "page." Not everyone appreciates having their work diminished in this way.

PAIR (NUMBER)

"This is a left-handed pair of scissors." "There is a pair of glasses on the mantelpiece." "Pair" is singular in this sort of expression. Note that we say "that is a nice pair of pants" even though we also say "those are nice pants."

PALATE/PALETTE/PALLET

Your "palate" is the roof of your mouth, and by extension, your sense of taste. A "palette" is the flat board an artist mixes paint on (or by extension, a range of colors). A "pallet" is either a bed (now rare) or

a flat platform onto which goods are loaded.

PARALLEL/SYMBOL

Beginning literature students often write sentences like this: "He uses the rose as a parallel for her beauty" when they mean "a symbol of her beauty." If you are taking a literature class, it's good to master the distinctions between several related terms relating to symbolism. An eagle clutching a bundle of arrows and an olive branch is a symbol of the US government in war and peace.

Students often misuse the word "analogy" in the same way. An analogy has to be specifically spelled out by the writer, not simply referred to: "My mother's attempts to find her keys in the morning were like early expeditions to the South Pole: prolonged and mostly futile."

A metaphor is a kind of symbolism common in literature. When Shakespeare writes "That time of year thou mayst in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/Upon those boughs which shake against the cold" he is comparing his aging self to a tree in late autumn, perhaps even specifically suggesting that he is going bald by referring to the tree shedding its leaves. This autumnal tree is a metaphor for the human aging process.

A simile resembles a metaphor except that "like" or "as" or something similar is used to make the comparison explicitly. Byron admires a dark-haired woman by saying of her "She walks in beauty, like the night/Of cloudless climes and starry skies." Her darkness is said to be like that of the night.

An allegory is a symbolic narrative in which characters may stand for abstract ideas, and the story convey a philosophy. Allegories are no longer popular, but the most commonly read one in school is Dante's "Divine Comedy" in which the poet Virgil is a symbol for human wisdom, Dante's beloved Beatrice is a symbol of divine grace, and the whole poem tries to teach the reader how to avoid damnation. Aslan in C. S. Lewis' Narnia tales is an allegorical figure meant to symbolize Christ: dying to save others and rising again ("aslan" is Turkish for "lion").

PARALLELLED/PARALLELED

The spelling of the past tense of "parallel" is "paralleled."

PARALLELISM IN A SERIES

Phrases in a series separated by commas or conjunctions must all have the same grammatical form. "They loved mountain-climbing, to gather wild mushrooms, and first aid practice" should be corrected to something like this: "They loved to climb mountains, gather wild mushrooms, and practice first aid" (all three verbs are dependent on that initial "to"). Fear of being repetitious often leads writers into awkward inconsistencies when creating such series.

PARALYZATION/PARALYSIS

Some people derive the noun "paralyzation" from the verb "paralyze," but the proper term is "paralysis."

PARAMETERS/PERIMETERS

When parameters were spoken of only by mathematicians and scientists, the term caused few problems; but now that it has become widely adopted by other speakers, it is constantly confused with "perimeters." A parameter is most commonly a mathematical constant, a set of physical properties, or a characteristic of something. But the perimeter of something is its boundary. The two words shade into each other because we often speak of factors of an issue or problem being parameters, simultaneously thinking of them as limits; but this is to confuse two distinct, if related ideas. A safe rule is to avoid using "parameters" altogether unless you are confident you know what it means.

PARAMOUNT/TANTAMOUNT

"Paramount" means "best," "top." Think of Paramount Pictures' trademark of a majestic mountain peak encircled with stars.

"Tantamount" means "equivalent."

"The committee's paramount concern is to get at the truth; your continued insistence that you don't remember any of the meetings you attended is tantamount to a confession of incompetence."

PARANOID

The most common meaning of "paranoid" has to do with irrational fears of persecution, especially the unjustified fear that people are plotting against you. More generally it is applied to irrational fears of other kinds; but it is often misused of rational fears, as in "I know my Mom has been reading my blog, so I'm paranoid that she's found out what Jason and I did last Saturday night." That's not paranoia, but fully justifiable fear. It also doesn't make sense to use "paranoid" about mild worries and fears. When you say you are paranoid, you should be conveying your own irrationality, not the risks you feel you are running.

PARENTHESES

The most common error in using parenthesis marks (besides using them too much) is to forget to enclose the parenthetical material with a final, closing parenthesis mark. The second most common is to place concluding punctuation incorrectly. The simplest sort of example is one in which the entire sentence is enclosed in parentheses. (Most people understand that the final punctuation must remain inside the closing parenthesis mark, like this.) More troublesome are sentences in which only a clause or phrase is enclosed in parentheses. Normally a sentence's final punctuation mark--whether period, exclamation point, or question mark--goes outside such a parenthesis (like this). However, if the material inside the parenthesis requires a concluding punctuation mark

like an exclamation point or question mark (but not a period!), that mark is placed inside the closing mark even though another mark is outside it. This latter sort of thing is awkward, however, and best avoided if you can help it.

For some reason, many writers have begun to omit the space before a parenthetic page citation, like this:(p. 17). Always preserve the space, like this: (p. 17).

PARLIMENT/PARLIAMENT

Americans unfamiliar with parliamentary systems often mistakenly leave the second "A" out of "parliament" and "parliamentary."

PARTAKE/PARTICIPATE

"Partake" looks like it might mean "take part," and that's how many people mistakenly use it where they should say "participate." The main modern meaning of "partake" is "consume," especially in relation to food. One can partake of the refreshments at a party, but one can also partake of Twinkies at home alone, without any thought of sharing.

So don't ask people to "partake" in a planning process when you mean to ask them to participate.

PASSED/PAST

If you are referring to a period of time before now or a distance, use "past": "the team performed well in the past," "the police car drove past the suspect's house." If you are referring to the action of passing, however, you need to use "passed": "when John passed the gravy, he spilled it on his lap," "the teacher was astonished that none of the students had passed the test." Remember that no matter however you have "passed the time" you have never "past the time," not even in the distant past.

PASSIVE VOICE

There are legitimate uses for the passive voice: "this absurd regulation was of course written by a committee." But it's true that you can make your prose more lively and readable by using the active voice much more often. "The victim was attacked by three men in ski masks" isn't nearly as striking as "three men in ski masks attacked the victim." The passive voice is often used to avoid taking responsibility for an action: "my term paper was accidentally deleted" avoids stating the truth: "I accidentally deleted my term paper." Over-use of passive constructions is irritating, though not necessarily erroneous. But it does lead to real clumsiness when passive constructions get piled on top of each other: "no exception in the no-pets rule was sought to be created so that angora rabbits could be raised in the apartment" can be made clearer by shifting to the active voice: "the landlord refused to make an exception to the no-pets rule to allow Eliza to raise angora rabbits

in the apartment."

PAST TIME/PASTIME

An agreeable activity like knitting with which you pass the time is your pastime. Spell it as one word, with one "S" and one "T."

PASTORIAL/PASTORAL

Whether you are referring to poetry or art about the countryside or the duties of a pastor, the word you want is "pastoral." "Pastorial" is a common misspelling.

PATIENCE/PATIENTS

Doctors have patients, but while you're waiting to see them you have to have patience.

PAUSE FOR CONCERN/CAUSE FOR CONCERN, PAUSE

Something worrisome can give you pause, or cause for concern. But some people confuse these two expressions and say they have "pause for concern."

PAWN OFF/PALM OFF

Somebody defrauds you by using sleight of hand (literal or figurative) to "palm" the object you wanted and give you something inferior instead. The expression is not "to pawn off," but "to palm off."

PAYED/PAID

If you paid attention in school, you know that the past tense of "pay" is "paid" except in the special sense that has to do with ropes: "He payed out the line to the smuggler in the rowboat."

PEACE/PIECE

it's hard to believe many people really confuse the meaning of these words; but the spellings are frequently swapped, probably out of sheer carelessness. "Piece" has the word "pie" buried in it, which should remind you of the familiar phrase, "a piece of pie." You can meditate to find peace of mind, or you can get angry and give someone a piece of your mind. Classical scholars will note that "pax" is the Latin word for peace, suggesting the need for an "A" in the latter word.

PEAK/PEEK/PIQUE

It is tempting to think that your attention might be aroused to a high point by "peaking" your curiosity; but in fact, "pique" is a French word meaning "prick," in the sense of "stimulate." The expression has nothing to do with "peek," either. Therefore the expression is "my curiosity was piqued."

PEAL OUT/PEEL OUT

Bells and thunderclaps peal out; but if your car "lays down rubber" in a squealing departure, the expression is "peel out" because you are literally peeling a layer of rubber off your tires.

PEASANT/PHEASANT

When I visited the former Soviet Union I was astonished to learn that farmworkers were still called "peasants" there. In English-speaking countries we tend to think of the term as belonging strictly to the feudal era. However you use it, don't confuse it with "pheasant," a favorite game bird. Use the sound of the beginning consonants to remind you of the difference: pheasants are food, peasants are people.

PEDAL/PEDDLE

If you are delivering newspapers from a bike you can pedal it around the neighborhood (perhaps wearing "pedal-pushers"), but when you sell them from a newsstand you peddle them.

PEDAL TO THE MEDAL/PEDAL TO THE METAL

When you depress the accelerator all the way so that it presses against the metal of the floorboards you put the pedal to the metal. You get no medals for speeding.

PEN/PIN

In the dialect of many Texans and some of their neighbors "pen" is pronounced almost exactly like "pin." When speaking to an audience outside this zone, it's worth learning to make the distinction to avoid confusion.

PENULTIMATE/NEXT TO LAST

To confuse your readers, use the term "penultimate," which means "next to last," but which most people assume means "the very last." And if you really want to baffle them, use "antepenultimate" to mean "third from the end."

Many people also mistakenly use "penultimate" when they mean "quintessential" or "archetypical."

PEOPLES

In the Middle Ages "peoples" was not an uncommon word, but later writers grew wary of it because "people" has a collective, plural meaning which seemed to make "peoples" superfluous. It lived on in the sense of "nations" ("the peoples of the world") and from this social scientists (anthropologists in particular) derived the extended meaning "ethnic groups" ("the peoples of the upper Amazon Basin"). However, in ordinary usage "people" is usually understood to be plural, so much so that in the bad old days when dialect humor was popular having a speaker refer

to "you peoples" indicated illiteracy. If you are not referring to national or ethnic groups, it is better to avoid "peoples" and use "people."

See also "behaviors."

PER/ACCORDING TO

Using "per" to mean "according to" as in "ship the widgets as per the instructions of the customer" is rather old-fashioned business jargon, and is not welcome in other contexts. "Per" is fine when used in phrases involving figures like "miles per gallon."

PERCENT/PER CENT

In the US the two-word spelling "per cent" is considered rather old-fashioned and is rarely used; but in the UK and countries influenced by it, the two-word form is still standard, though use of "percent" is spreading fast even there.

PERCENT DECREASE

When something has been reduced by one hundred percent, it's all gone (or if the reduction was in its price, it's free). You can't properly speak of reducing anything by more than a hundred percent (unless it's a deficit or debt, in which case you wind up with a surplus).

PERCIPITATION/PRECIPITATION

Rain, snow, hail, etc. are all forms of precipitation. This word is often misspelled and mispronounced as "percipitation."

PERNICKETY/PERSNICKETY

The original Scottish dialect form was "pernickety," but Americans changed it to "persnickety" a century ago. "Pernickety" is generally unknown in the US though it's still in wide use across the Atlantic.

PEROGATIVE/PREROGATIVE

"Prerogative" is frequently both mispronounced and misspelled as "perogative." It may help to remember that the word is associated with PRivileges of PRecedence.

PERPETUATE/PERPETRATE

"Perpetrate" is something criminals do (criminals are sometimes called "perps" in cop slang). When you seek to continue something you are trying to perpetuate it.

PERSE/PER SE

This legal term meaning "in, of, or by itself") is a bit pretentious, but you gain little respect if you misspell per se as a single word.

Worse is the mistaken "per say."

PERSONAL/PERSONNEL

Employees are personnel, but private individuals considered separately from their jobs have personal lives.

PERSPECTIVE/PROSPECTIVE

"Perspective" has to do with sight, as in painting, and is usually a noun. "Prospective" generally has to do with the future (compare with "What are your prospects, young man?") and is usually an adjective. But beware: there is also a rather old-fashioned but fairly common meaning of the word "prospect" that has to do with sight: "as he climbed the mountain, a vast prospect opened up before him."

PERSECUTE/PROSECUTE

When you persecute someone, you're treating them badly, whether they deserve it or not; but only legal officers can prosecute someone for a crime.

PERSONALITY

In show business personalities are people famous for being famous (mostly popular actors and singers); people with more substantial accomplishments like distinguished heads of state and Nobel Prize winners should not be referred to as "personalities" even when they appear on the Tonight Show.

PERUSE

This word, which means "examine thoroughly" is often misused to mean "glance over hastily." Although some dictionaries accept the latter meaning, it is not traditional.

When it is used to mean "look through" it is not standard to add "through" to "peruse." It's not "peruse through the records" but "peruse the records."

PERVERSE/PERVERTED

The sex-related meanings of words tend to drive out all other meanings. Most people think of both "perverse" and "perverted" only in contexts having to do with desire; but "perverse" properly has the function of signifying "stubborn," "wrong-headed." Nothing erotic is suggested by this sort of thing: "Josh perversely insisted on carving wooden replacement parts for his 1958 Ford's engine." It's better to use "perverted" in relation to abnormal sexual desires; but this word also has non-sexual functions, as in "The bake-sale was perverted by Gladys into a fundraiser for her poker habit."

People sometimes mispronounce "pervert" as "PREE-vert."

PHANTOM/FATHOM

Brianna exclaims confusedly, "I can't phantom why he thought I'd want a coupon for an oil change for Valentine's Day!" A phantom is a ghost, but a fathom is nautical measure of depth. When you can't understand something--being unable to get to the bottom of it--you should say "I can't fathom it." "Phantom" is not a verb.

PHENOMENA/PHENOMENON

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in "A" are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, "criteria" and "media" and "data." it's "this phenomenon," but "these phenomena."

PHILIPPINES/FILIPINOS

The people of the Philippines are called "Filipinos." Don't switch the initial letters of these two words.

PHYSICAL/FISCAL

In budget matters, it's the fiscal year, relating to finances with an "F."

PICARESQUE/PICTURESQUE

"Picaresque" is a technical literary term you are unlikely to have a use for. It labels a sort of literature involving a picaro (Spanish), a lovable rogue who roams the land having colorful adventures. A landscape that looks as lovely as a picture is picturesque.

PICKUP/PICK UP

The noun is spelled "pickup" as in "drive your pickup" or "that coffee gave me a pickup," or "we didn't have a real date; it was just a pickup." If it's a thing, use the single-word form. But if it's an action (verb-plus-adverb phrase) then spell it as two words: "pick up your dirty underwear."

There's also the adjectival form, which has to be hyphenated: "Jeremy tried out one of his corny pick-up lines on me at the bar." According to this rule, it should be a "pick-up game" but you're unlikely to get into trouble for writing "pickup game."

PICTURE

The pronunciation of "picture" as if it were "pitcher" is common in some dialects, but not standard. The first syllable should sound like "pick."

PIN number/PIN

Those who object to "PIN number" on the grounds that the N in "PIN" stands for "number" in the phrase "personal identification number" are

quite right, but it may be difficult to get people to say anything else. "PIN" was invented to meet the objection that a "password" consisting of nothing but numbers is not a word. Pronouncing each letter of the acronym as "P-I-N" blunts its efficiency. Saying just "PIN" reminds us of another common English word, though few people are likely to think when they are told to "enter PIN" that they should shove a steel pin into the terminal they are operating. In writing, anyway, PIN is unambiguous and should be used without the redundant "number."

The same goes for "VIN number"; "VIN" stands for "Vehicle Identification Number." And "UPC code" is redundant because "UPC" stands for "Universal Product Code."

PINNED UP/PENT UP

If you wear your heart on your sleeve I suppose you might be said to have "pinned up" emotions; but the phrase you want when you are suppressing your feelings is "pent-up emotions." Similarly, it's pent-up demand." "Pent" is a rare word; but don't replace it with "penned" in such phrases either.

PIT IN MY STOMACH/IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH

Just as you can love someone from the bottom of your heart, you can also experience a sensation of dread in the pit (bottom) of your stomach. I don't know whether people who mangle this common expression into "pit in my stomach" envision an ulcer, an irritating peach pit they've swallowed or are thinking of the pyloric sphincter; but they've got it wrong.

PITH AND VINEGAR/PISS AND VINEGAR

To say that people are "full of piss and vinegar" is to say that they are brimming with energy. Although many speakers assume the phrase must have a negative connotation, this expression is more often used as a compliment, "vinegar" being an old slang term for enthusiastic energy.

Some try to make this expression more polite by substituting "pith" for "piss," but this change robs it of the imagery of acrid, energetically boiling fluids and conjures up instead a sodden, vinegar-soaked mass of pith. Many people who use the "polite" version are unaware of the original.

PLAIN/PLANE

Both of these words have to do with flatness. A flat prairie is a plain, and you use a plane to smooth flat a piece of wood.

"Plain" is also an adjective which can describe things that are ordinary, simple, or unattractive.

But whether you go the airport to catch a plane or meditate to achieve a higher plane of consciousness, the meanings that have to do with things high up are spelled "plane."

PLAYS A FACTOR/PLAYS A ROLE

Some people say that an influential force "plays a factor" in a decision or change. They are mixing up two different expressions: "is a factor" and "plays a role."

PLAYWRITE/PLAYWRIGHT

It might seem as if a person who writes plays should be called a "playwrite"; but in fact a playwright is a person who has wrought words into a dramatic form, just as a wheelwright has wrought wheels out of wood and iron. All the other words ending in "-wright" are archaic, or we'd be constantly reminded of the correct pattern.

PLEAD INNOCENT

Lawyers frown on the phrase "plead innocent" (it's "plead guilty" or "plead not guilty"); but outside of legal contexts the phrase is standard English.

PLEASE RSVP/ PLEASE REPLY

RSVP stands for the French phrase "Repondez s'il vous plait" ("reply, please"), so it doesn't need an added "please." However, since few people seem to know its literal meaning, and fewer still take it seriously, it's best to use plain English: "Please reply." It is a mistake to think that this phrase invites people to respond only if they are planning to attend; it is at least as important to notify the person doing the inviting if you cannot go. And no, you can't bring along the kids or other uninvited guests.

PLUG-IN/OUTLET

That thing on the end of an electrical cord is a plug, which goes into the socket of the wall outlet.

PLUS/ADD

Some people continue a pattern picked up in childhood of using "plus" as a verb to mean "add," as in "You plus the 3 and the 4 and you get 7." "Plus" is not a verb; use "add" instead.

PODIUM/LECTERN

Strictly speaking, a podium is a raised platform on which you stand to give a speech; the piece of furniture on which you place your notes and behind which you stand is a lectern.

POINT BEING IS THAT

"The point being is that" is redundant; say just "the point is that" or "the point being that."

POINT IN TIME

This redundancy became popular because it was used by astronauts seeking to distinguish precisely between a point in time and a point in space. Since most people use the expression in contexts where there is no ambiguity, it makes more sense to say simply "at this point" or "at this time."

POINT OF YOU/POINT OF VIEW

Your viewpoint on a subject is your "point of view," not your " point of you." "Your" and "of you" mean the same thing, and combining the two makes little sense; but the expression really gets weird when it turns into "my point of you," "her point of you," "their point of you," etc.

POISONOUS/VENOMOUS

Snakes and insects that inject poisonous venom into their victims are venomous, but a snake or tarantula is not itself poisonous because if you eat one it won't poison you. A blowfish will kill you if you eat it, so it is poisonous; but it is not venomous.

POINSETTA/POINSETTIA

Those showy plants that appear in the stores around Christmas are "poinsettias," named after American diplomat John R. Poinsett who introduced them into the US from Mexico. The Latin ending "-ia" is seldom pronounced as spelled, but that's no justification for misspelling the word as "poinsetta."

POLE/POLL

A pole is a long stick. You could take a "poll" (survey or ballot) to determine whether voters want lower taxes or better education.

POMPOM/POMPON

To most people that fuzzy ball on the top of a knit hat and the implement wielded by a cheerleader are both "pompoms," but to traditionalists they are "pompons," spelled the way the French--who gave us the word--spell it. A pompom, say these purists, is only a sort of large gun. Though you're unlikely to bother many people by falling into the common confusion, you can show off your education by observing the distinction.

POO-POO/POOH-POOH/PUPU

The toddler with a soggy diaper proudly announces "I go poo-poo"!

The skeptic is inclined to pooh-pooh outlandish ideas. Don't mix up matter for skepticism with material for the septic system.

A selection of snacks served on a wooden platter in a Chinese restaurant is called a "pupu platter"--a custom and word that made its way to the

US from Hawaii.

POPULACE/POPULOUS

The population of a country may be referred to as its populace, but a crowded country is populous.

PORE/POUR

When used as a verb, "pore" has the unusual sense of "scrutinize," as in "She pored over her receipts." If it's coffee or rain, the stuff pours.

POSSESSED OF/POSSESSED BY/POSSESSED WITH

If you own a yacht, you're possessed of it. If a demon takes over your body, you're possessed by it. If that which possesses you is more metaphorical, like an executive determined to get ahead, he or she can be possessed by or with the desire to win.

PRACTICE/PRACTISE

In the United Kingdom, "practice" is the noun, "practise" the verb; but in the US the spelling "practice" is commonly used for both, though the distinction is sometimes observed. "Practise" as a noun is, however, always wrong in both places: a doctor always has a "practice," never a "practise."

PRACTICLE/PRACTICAL

Some words end in "-icle" and others in "-ical" without the result being any difference in pronunciation. But when you want somebody really practical, call on good old AL.

PRAY/PREY

If you want a miracle, pray to God. If you're a criminal, you prey on your victims. Incidentally, it's "praying mantis," not "preying mantis." The insect holds its forefeet in a position suggesting prayer.

PRECEDE/PROCEED

"Precede" means "to go before." "Proceed" means to go on. Let your companion precede you through the door, then proceed to follow her. Interestingly, the second E is missing in "procedure."

PRECEDENCE/PRECEDENTS

Although these words sound the same, they work differently. The pop star is given precedence over the factory worker at the entrance to the dance club. "Precedents" is just the plural of "precedent": "If we let the kids adopt that rattlesnake as a pet and agree to let them take it for a walk in Death Valley, we'll be setting some bad precedents."

PRECIPITATE/PRECIPITOUS

Both of these adjectives are based on the image of plunging over the brink of a precipice, but "precipitate" emphasizes the suddenness of the plunge, "precipitous," the steepness of it. If you make a "precipitate" decision, you are making a hasty and probably unwise one. If the stock market declines "precipitously," it goes down sharply.

PRECURSE/FORETELL, FORESHADOW, PREFACE, ANTICIPATE, PRECEDE

Tempted to "precurse" that guy who looks like he might be going to cut into the lane ahead of you? Until recently "precurse" as a verb was a rare archaic word, but lately people have been using it to mean "be a precursor to." Use a more ordinary and precise word like "foretell," "foreshadow," "preface," "anticipate," or "precede."

PREDOMINATE/PREDOMINANT

"Predominate" is a verb: "In the royal throne room, the color red predominates." "Predominant" is an adjective: "The predominant view among the touts is that Fancy Dancer is the best bet in the third race."

PREDOMINATELY/PREDOMINANTLY

"Predominantly" is formed on the adjective "predominant," not the verb "predominate"; so though both forms are widely accepted, "predominantly" makes more sense.

PREEMPTORY/PEREMPTORY

"Peremptory" (meaning "imperative") is often misspelled and mispronounced "preemptory" through confusion caused by the influence of the verb "preempt," whose adjectival form is actually "preemptive."

PREFERABLY

Although some US dictionaries now recognize the pronunciation of "preferably" with the first two syllables pronounced just like "prefer"--first "E" long and the stress on the second syllable--the standard pronunciation is "PREFFerublee," with the first syllable stressed, just like in "preference." The alternative pronunciation sounds awkward to some people.

PREJUDICE/PREJUDICED

People not only misspell "prejudice" in a number of ways, they sometimes say "he's prejudice" when they mean "he's prejudiced."

See also "bias/biased."

PRE-MADONNA/PRIMA DONNA

The leading soprano in an opera is the "prima donna" (Italian for "leading lady"). As an insult, "prima donna" implies that the person under discussion is egotistical, demanding, and doesn't work well as

part of a team.

Don't write "pre-Madonna" unless you intend to discuss the era before the singer Madonna became popular.

PREMIER/PREMIERE

These words are, respectively, the masculine and feminine forms of the word for "first" in French; but they have become differentiated in English. Only the masculine form is used as an adjective, as in "Tidy-Pool is the premier pool-cleaning firm in Orange County." The confusion arises when these words are used as nouns. The prime minister of a parliamentary government is known as a "premier." The opening night of a film or play is its "premiere."

"Premiere" as a verb is common in the arts and in show business ("the show premiered on PBS"), but it is less acceptable in other contexts ("the state government premiered its new welfare system"). Use "introduced," or, if real innovation is involved, "pioneered."

PREMISE/PREMISES

Some people suppose that since "premises" has a plural form, a single house or other piece of property must be a "premise," but that word is reserved for use as a term in logic meaning something assumed or taken as given in making an argument. Your lowly one-room shack is still your premises.

PREPONE

South Asian speakers have evolved the logical word "prepone" to mean the opposite of "postpone": to move forward in time. It's a handy word, but users of it should be aware that those unfamiliar with their dialect will be baffled by this word.

PREPOSITIONS (REPEATED)

In the sentence "Alex liked Nancy, with whom he shared his Snickers bar with" only one "with" is needed--eliminate either one. Look out for similarly duplicated prepositions.

Incidentally, an often-cited example of this pattern is from Paul McCartney's "Live and Let Die": "this ever-changing world in which we live in"; but if you listen closely, you'll hear instead a quite correct "this ever-changing world in which we're livin'." Americans have a hard time hearing the soft British "R" in "we're."

PREPOSITIONS (WRONG)

One of the clearest indications that a person reads little and doesn't hear much formal English is a failure to use the right preposition in a common expression. You aren't ignorant to a fact; you're ignorant of it. Things don't happen on accident, but by accident (though they do happen "on purpose"). There are no simple rules governing preposition usage:

you just have to immerse yourself in good English in order to write it naturally.

See also "different than/different from/to."

PRESCRIBE/PROSCRIBE

You recommend something when you prescribe it, but you forbid it when you proscribe it. The usually positive function of "pro-" confuses many people.

PRESENTLY/CURRENTLY

Some argue that "presently" doesn't mean "in the present." It means "soon." If you want to talk about something that's happening right now, they urge you to say it's going on currently.

PRESUMPTIOUS/PRESUMPTUOUS

"Presumptive" has an I in it, but "presumptuous." does not.

PRETTY/SOMEWHAT

it's pretty common to use "pretty" to mean "somewhat" in ordinary speech; but it should be avoided in formal writing, where sometimes "very" is more appropriate. The temptation to use "pretty" usually indicates the writer is being vague, so changing to something more specific may be an even better solution: "a pretty bad mess" might be "chocolate syrup spilled all over the pizza which had been dumped upside down on the carpet."

PRIMER

When this word is used in the US to mean "elementary textbook" it is pronounced with a short "I": "primmer" (rhymes with "dimmer"). All other meanings are pronounced with a long "I": "prymer" (rhymes with "timer").

PRIMEVIL/PRIMEVAL

The existence of a music group and a comic book using the deliberately punning misspelling "Primevil" helps to further confusion about this word. Something ancient and primitive is "primeval." The "-eval" sequence comes from a root having to do with ages, as in "medieval." It has nothing to do with the concept of evil. The word can also be spelled "primaeval."

PRINCIPAL/PRINCIPLE

Generations of teachers have tried to drill this one into students" heads by reminding them, "The principal is your pal." Many don't seem convinced. "Principal" is a noun and adjective referring to someone or something which is highest in rank or importance. (In a loan, the principal is the more substantial part of the money, the interest is--or should be--the lesser.) "Principle" is only a noun, and has to do with

law or doctrine: "The workers fought hard for the principle of collective bargaining."

PRIORITIZE

Many people disdain "prioritize" as bureaucratic jargon for "rank" or "make a high priority."

PRIORITY

It is common to proclaim "in our business, customer service is a priority," but it would be better to say "a high priority," since priorities can also be low.

PROACTIVE

See "reactionary/reactive."

PROBABLY

The two Bs in this word are particularly difficult to pronounce in sequence, so the word often comes out as "probly" and is even occasionally misspelled that way. When even the last B disappears, the pronunciation "prolly" suggests drunken slurring or, at best, an attempt at humor.

AS TIME PROGRESSED/AS TIME PASSED

Events may progress in time, but time itself does not progress--it just passes.

PRONE/SUPINE

"Prone" (face down) is often confused with "supine" (face up). Some people use the phrase "soup in navel" to help them remember the meaning of the latter word. "Prostrate" technically also means "face down," but is often used to mean simply "devastated."

See also "prostate/prostrate."

PROPHECY/PROPHESY

"Prophecy," the noun, (pronounced "PROF-a-see") is a prediction. The verb "to prophesy" (pronounced "PROF-a-sigh") means to predict something. When a prophet prophesies he or she utters prophecies.

PRONOUNCIATION/PRONUNCIATION

"Pronounce" is the verb, but the "O" is omitted for the noun: "pronunciation." This mistake ranks right up there in incongruity with "writting."

PROSTATE/PROSTRATE

The gland men have is called the prostate. "Prostrate" is an adjective meaning "lying face downward."

PRODIGY/PROGENY/PROTEGE

Your progeny are your kids, though it would be pretty pretentious to refer to them as such. If your child is a brilliantly outstanding person he or she may be a child prodigy. In fact, anything amazingly admirable can be a prodigy. But a person that you take under your wing in order to help promote his or her career is your protege.

Avoid misspelling or mispronouncing "prodigy" as "progidy."

THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING/THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING IS IN THE EATING

This common truncated version of an old saying conjures up visions of poking around in your dessert looking for prizes, but "the proof of the pudding is in the eating" means that you don't really know that your dessert has come out right until you taste it.

PROTRAY/PORTRAY

There are a lot of words in English that begin in "pro-." This is not one of them. When you make a portrait, you portray someone.

PROVED/PROVEN

For most purposes either form is a fine past participle of "prove," though in a phrase like "a proven talent" where the word is an adjective preceding a noun, "proven" is standard.

PSYCHOLOGIST/PSYCHIATRIST/PSYCHOTHERAPIST/PSYCHOANALYST/

A psychologist is a person who has studied the mind and earned a Ph.D. or Psy.D. Although some definitions state that psychologists have undergone clinical training but cannot prescribe medicines, there are research psychologists who are not engaged in clinical work at all, but merely do experiments to discover how our minds work. Some of their work can concern animal rather than human minds.

A psychiatrist is technically an M.D. specializing in the treatment of mental problems who can prescribe medicines. They are licensed medical doctors, and get irritated when they are called "psychologists" and when psychologists are called "psychiatrists."

Psychotherapist is not a technical term, and may be used by anyone claiming to offer therapy for mental problems. That someone is called a "psychotherapist" tells you nothing about his or her qualifications. But qualified clinical psychologists and psychiatrists can be properly called "psychotherapists."

A psychoanalyst is a very specific kind of psychotherapist: a licensed practitioner of the methods of Sigmund Freud.

PUNDINT/PUNDIT

"Pundit" is one of those words we get from India, like "bungalow" and "thug." It comes from pandit, meaning "scholar," "learned person." The first premier of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was often referred to respectfully as "Pandit Nehru."

In English it has come to refer to opinionated commentators on public affairs, but it is often mispronounced and misspelled "pundint" or "pundant."

PURPOSELY/PURPOSEFULLY

If you do something on purpose (not by accident), you do it purposely. But if you have a specific purpose in mind, you are acting purposefully.

Q/G

See "G/Q."

QUANTUM LEAP

The thing about quantum leaps is that they mark an abrupt change from one state to a distinctly different one, with no in-between transitional states being possible; but they are not large. In fact, in physics a quantum leap is one of smallest sorts of changes worth talking about. Leave "quantum leap" to the subatomic physicists unless you know what you're talking about.

SQUASH/QUASH

You can squash a spider or a tomato; but when the meaning you intend is "to suppress," as in rebellions or (especially) legal motions, the more sophisticated term is "quash."

QUESTION/ASK

When you question someone, you may ask a series of questions trying to arrive at the truth: "The police questioned Tom for five hours before he admitted to having stolen the pig." "Question" can also mean "challenge": "His mother questioned Timmy's claim that the cat had eaten all the chocolate chip cookies." But if you are simply asking a question to get a bit of information, it is not appropriate to say "I questioned whether he had brought the anchovies" when what you really mean is "I asked whether he had brought the anchovies."

QUEUE

If you're standing in a queue you'll have plenty of time to ponder the unusual spelling of this word. Remember, it contains two "U's."

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

The earliest meaning of the word "quick" in English is "alive." When a

baby was first felt to move in its mother's womb it was considered to have come to life, and this moment was called "quickening." This original meaning of the word "quick" has now died out except in the phrase "the quick and the dead," kept alive by the King James translation of Acts 10:42, which speaks of Jesus as judge "of quick and dead," but even more by the continued recitation of the Apostles' Creed, which says of Jesus that "he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

People who use this phrase to imply that speed is involved--liveliness rather than aliveness--sometimes get credit for creating a clever pun but more often come off as ignorant.

QUIET/QUITE

This is probably caused by a slip of the fingers more often than by a slip of the mental gears, but one often sees "quite" (very) substituted for "quiet" (shhh!). This is one of those common errors your spelling checker will not catch, so look out for it.

QUOTE

A passage doesn't become a quote (or--better--"quotation") until you've quoted it. The only time to refer to a "quote" is when you are referring to someone quoting something. When referring to the original words, simply call it a passage.

QUOTATION MARKS

The examples below are set off in order to avoid confusion over the use of single and double quotation marks.

There are many ways to go wrong with quotation marks. They are often used ironically:

She ran around with a bunch of "intellectuals."

The quotation marks around "intellectuals" indicate that the writer believes that these are in fact so-called intellectuals, not real intellectuals at all. The ironic use of quotation marks is very much overdone, and is usually a sign of laziness indicating that the writer has not bothered to find the precise word or expression necessary.

Advertisers unfortunately tend to use quotation marks merely for emphasis:

"FRESH" TOMATOES 59 CENTS A POUND

The influence of the more common ironic usage tends to make the reader question whether these tomatoes are really fresh. Underlining, bold lettering, all caps--there are several less ambiguous ways to emphasize words than placing them between quotation marks.

In American usage, single quotation marks are used normally only for

quoted words and phrases within quotations.

"Angela had the nerve to tell me "When I saw 'BYOB' on your invitation, I assumed it meant 'Bring Your Old Boyfriend'."

British usage has traditionally been to reverse this relationship, with single quotation marks being standard and double ones being used only for quotations within quotations. (The English also call quotation marks "inverted commas," though only the opening quotation mark is actually inverted--and flipped, as well.) However, usage in the UK is shifting toward the US pattern, (see, for instance, "The Times" of London); though the printing of fiction tends to adhere to the older British pattern, where US students are most likely to encounter it.

Block quotations like this should not be surrounded by any quotation marks at all.

(A passage this short should not be rendered as a block quotation; you need at least three lines of verse or five lines of prose to justify a block quotation.) Normally you should leave extra space above and below a block quotation.

When quoting a long passage involving more than one paragraph, quotation marks go at the beginning of each paragraph, but at the end of only the final one. Dialogue in which the speaker changes with each paragraph has each speech enclosed in its own quotation marks.

Titles of books and other long works that might be printed as books are usually italicized (except, for some reason, in newspapers); but the titles of short poems, stories, essays, and other works that would be more commonly printed within larger works (anthologies, collections, periodicals, etc.) are enclosed in quotation marks.

There are different patterns for regulating how quotation marks relate to other punctuation. Find out which one your teacher or editor prefers and use it, or choose one of your own liking, but stick to it consistently. One widely accepted authority in America is The Chicago Manual of Style, whose guidelines are outlined below. Writers in England, Canada, Australia, and other British-influenced countries should be aware that their national patterns will be quite different and variable.

I spent the morning reading Faulkner's "Barn Burning," which seemed to be about a pyromaniac.

Periods are also normally placed inside quotation marks (with the exception of terms being defined, see above). Colons and semicolons, however, are preceded by quotation marks.

If the quoted matter ends with a question mark or exclamation point, it is placed inside the quotation marks:

John asked, "When's dinner?"

But if it is the enclosing sentence which asks the question, then the question mark comes after the quotation marks:

What did she mean, John wondered, by saying "as soon as you make it"?

Similarly:

Fred shouted, "Look out for the bull!"

but

When I was subsequently gored, all Timmy said was "this is kinda boring"!

Finally, I must lament that many standard character sets, including ASCII and basic HTML, lack true quotation marks which curl to enclose the quoted matter, substituting instead ugly "inch" or "ditto" marks. As far as I am concerned, there is not a single proper quotation mark on this page. Some browsers can translate the code for a true quotation mark (and true, curled apostrophes), but many cannot.

RBI/RBIs

Some people reason that since "RBI" stands for "runs batted in," there is no need for an additional "S" to indicate a plural, and speak of "120 RBI." However, though somewhat illogical, it is standard to treat the initialism as a word and say "RBIs." In writing, one can add an optional apostrophe: "RBI's." Definitely nonstandard is the logical but weird "RsBI."

The same pattern applies to other such plural initialisms as "WMDs" ("weapons of mass destruction," "POWs" ("prisoners of war"), and "MREs" ("meals ready to eat"); but "RPMs" ("revolutions per minute") is less widely accepted.

RPMs/RPM

"RPM" means "revolutions per minute," so it is redundant to add an S at the end of the abbreviation--it's already plural. Adding the S is so common among people working with cars that it's not likely to get you into trouble, but you will impress some by avoiding it.

RACISM

The "C" in "racism" and "racist" is pronounced as a simple "S" sound, Don't confuse it with the "SH" sound in "racial."

RACK/WRACK

If you are racked with pain or you feel nerve-racked, you are feeling as if you were being stretched on that Medieval instrument of torture, the rack. You rack your brains when you stretch them vigorously to search out the truth like a torturer. "Wrack" has to do with ruinous accidents, so if the stock market is wracked by rumors of imminent recession, it's

wrecked. If things are wrecked, they go to "wrack and ruin."

RAISE/RAZE

To raze a building is to demolish it so thoroughly that it looks like it's been scraped right off the ground with a razor. To raise a building is just the opposite: to erect it from the ground up.

RAN/RUN

Computer programmers have been heard to say "the program's been ran," when what they mean is "the program's been run."

RANDOM

Kyle can choose the shirt he'll wear for the day at random--they're all orange. This sort of use of "at random" to mean "by chance," is perfectly standard. (Kyle should get some new shirts, though.)

Less widely accepted are a couple of slangy uses of the word, mostly by young people. In the first, "random" means "unknown," "unidentified" as in "some random guy told me at the party that I reminded him of his old girlfriend."

The other is to use random to mean "weird," "strange," as in "The party at Jessica's was so random, not what I was expecting at all!" Evidently in this expression randomness is being narrowed down to unlikelihood and that is in turn being connected with strangeness, though randomness in real life is usually quite ordinary and boring.

Use of either of these two expressions in formal speech or writing is likely to annoy or confuse your audience.

RAPPORT

Many more people hear this word, meaning "affinity," than read it, judging by the popularity of various misspellings such as "rapore" and "rapoire." If you get along really well with someone, the two of you have rapport.

RATE OF SPEED/RATE, SPEED

Lots of people like to say things like "traveling at a high rate of speed." This is a redundancy. Say instead "traveling at a high rate" or "traveling at high speed."

RATIO

A ratio is a way of expressing the relationship between one quantity and another. If there is one teacher to fifty students, the teacher/student ratio is one to fifty, and the student/teacher ratio fifty to one. If a very dense but wealthy prince were being tutored by fifty teachers, the teacher/student ratio would be fifty to one, and the student/teacher ratio would be one to fifty. As you can see, the order in which the

numbers are compared is important.

The ratios discussed so far are "high"--the difference between the numbers is large. The lowest possible ratio is one to one: one teacher to one student. If you are campaigning for more individual attention in the classroom, you want a higher number of teachers, but a lower student/teacher ratio.

RATIONAL/RATIONALE

"Rational" is an adjective meaning "reasonable" or "logical": "Ivan made a rational decision to sell his old car when he moved to New York." "Rational" rhymes with "national."

"Rationale" is a noun which most often means "underlying reason": "His rationale for this decision was that it would cost more to pay for parking than the car was worth." "Rationale" rhymes with "passion pal."

RATIONALE/RATIONALIZATION

When you're explaining the reasoning behind your position, you're presenting your rationale. But if you're just making up some lame excuse to make your position appear better--whether to yourself or others--you're engaging in rationalization.

RAVAGING/RAVISHING/RAVENOUS

To ravage is to pillage, sack, or devastate. The only time "ravaging" is properly used is in phrases like "when the pirates had finished ravaging the town, they turned to ravishing the women." Which brings us to "ravish": meaning to rape, or rob violently. A trailer court can be ravaged by a storm (nothing is stolen, but a lot of damage is done) but not ravished. The crown jewels of Ruritania can be ravished (stolen using violence) without being ravaged (damaged).

To confuse matters, people began back in the fourteenth century to speak metaphorically of their souls being "ravished" by intense spiritual or esthetic experiences. Thus we speak of a "ravishing woman" (the term is rarely applied to men) today not because she literally rapes men who look at her but because her devastating beauty penetrates their hearts in an almost violent fashion. Despite contemporary society's heightened sensitivity about rape, we still remain (perhaps fortunately) unconscious of many of the transformations of the root meaning in words with positive connotations such as "rapturous."

Originally, "raven" as a verb was synonymous with "ravish" in the sense of "to steal by force." One of its specialized meanings became "devour," as in "the lion ravened her prey." By analogy, hungry people became "ravenous" (as hungry as beasts), and that remains the only common use of the word today.

If a woman smashes your apartment up, she ravages it. If she looks stunningly beautiful, she is ravishing. If she eats the whole platter of hors d'oeuvres you've set out for the party before the other guests

come, she's ravenous.

REACTIONARY/REACTIVE

Many people incorrectly use "reactionary" to mean "acting in response to some outside stimulus." That's "reactive." "Reactionary" actually has a very narrow meaning; it is a noun or adjective describing a form of looking backward that goes beyond conservatism (wanting to prevent change and maintain present conditions) to reaction--wanting to recreate a lost past. The advocates of restoring Czarist rule in Russia are reactionaries. While we're on the subject, the term "proactive" formed by analogy with "reactive" seems superfluous to many of us. Use "active," "assertive," or "positive" whenever you can instead.

READABLY/READILY

Some people mistakenly say of something easily available that it is "readably available." The original expression has nothing to do with reading; it is "readily available," ready at hand.

REAL/REALLY

The correct adverbial form is "really" rather than "real"; but even that form is generally confined to casual speech, as in "When you complimented me on my speech I felt really great!" To say "real great" instead moves the speaker several steps downscale socially. However "really" is a feeble qualifier. "Wonderful" is an acceptable substitute for "really great" and you can give a definite upscale slant to your speech by adopting the British "really quite wonderful." Usually, however, it is better to replace the expression altogether with something more precise: "almost seven feet tall" is better than "really tall." To strive for intensity by repeating "really" as in "that dessert you made was really, really good" demonstrates an impoverished vocabulary.

REALTOR

For some reason, this word is often mispronounced as "real-a-ter" instead of the proper "ree-ul-ter." Incidentally, realtors insist that this is a term originally trademarked by the National Association of Real Estate Boards (now renamed the "National Association of Realtors"), that it must be capitalized, and that all non-members of that association are mere "real estate associates." Common usage, however, calls both "real estate agents," despite their protests.

REAP WHAT YOU SEW/REAP WHAT YOU SOW

When you plant seeds you sow them. Galatians 6:7 says "A man reaps what he sows" (harvests what he plants, gets what he deserves). This agricultural metaphor gets mangled frequently into you "you reap what you sew." At best, you might rip what you sew; but you probably wouldn't want to tell people about it.

REASON BECAUSE

We often hear people say things like, "the reason there's a hole in the screen door is because I tripped over the cat on my way out." The phrase "is because" should be "is that." If you wanted to use "because," the sentence should be phrased, "There's a hole in the screen door because I tripped over the cat." U. "The reason being is" should be simply "the reason being."

The similarly redundant common expression "the reason why" is generally regarded as standard now, although some people still object to it.

REBELLING/REVOLTING

Even though "rebel" and "revolt" mean more or less the same thing, people who are revolting are disgusting, not taking up arms against the government.

REBUT/REFUTE

When you rebut someone's argument you argue against it. To refute someone's argument is to prove it incorrect. Unless you are certain you have achieved success, use "rebut."

RECENT/RESENT

There are actually three words to distinguish here. "Recent," always pronounced with an unvoiced hissy S and with the accent on the first syllable, means "not long ago," as in, " I appreciated your recent encouragement." "Resent" has two different meanings with two different pronunciations, both with the accent on the second syllable. In the most common case, where "resent" means "feel annoyed at," the word is pronounced with a voiced Z sound: "I resent your implication that I gave you the chocolates only because I was hoping you'd share them with me." In the less common case, the word means "to send again," and is pronounced with an unvoiced hissy S sound: "The e-mail message bounced, so I resent it." So say the intended word aloud. If the accent is on the second syllable, "resent" is the spelling you need.

RECOGNIZE

In sloppy speech, this often comes out "reck-uh-nize." Sound the "G."

RECREATE/REINVENT

The expression "no need to reinvent the wheel" loses much of its wit when "recreate" is substituted for the original verb. While we're at it, "recreate" does not mean "to engage in recreation." If you play basketball, you may be exercising, but you're not recreating.

RECUPERATE/RECOUP

If you are getting over an illness, you are recuperating; but if you insist on remaining at the roulette table when your luck has been running against you, you are seeking to recoup your losses.

REDICULOUS/RIDICULOUS

You may ridicule ideas because you find them ridiculous, but not rediculous.

REDO IT OVER/REDO IT, DO IT OVER

"Redo it over" is redundant; say either "redo it" or "do it over." The only time this phrase makes sense is in the phrase "redo it over and over again."

REDUNDANCIES

There are many examples of redundancies in these pages: phrases which say twice what needs to be said only once, like "past history." Advertisers are particularly liable to redundancy in hyping their offers: "as an added bonus" (as a bonus), "preplan" (plan), and "free gift" (but look out for the shipping charges!). Two other common redundancies which are clearly errors are "and plus" (plus) and "end result" (result). But some other redundancies are contained in phrases sanctioned by tradition: "safe haven," "hot water heater," "new beginning," and "tuna fish."

REEKING HAVOC/WREAKING HAVOC

"Reeking" means "smelling strongly," so that can't be right. The phrase simply means "working great destruction." "Havoc" has always referred to general destruction in English, but one very old phrase incorporating the word was "cry havoc," which meant to give an army the signal for pillage. To "play havoc with" means the same thing as to "wreak havoc." Avoid as well the mistaken "wreck havoc."

REFRAIN/RESTRAIN

"Restrain" is a transitive verb: it needs an object. Although "refrain" was once a synonym for "restrain" it is now an intransitive verb: it should not have an object. Here are examples of correct modern usage: "When I pass the doughnut shop I have to restrain myself" ("myself" is the object). "When I feel like throwing something at my boss, I usually refrain from doing so." You can't refrain yourself or anyone else.

REFRIDGERATOR/REFRIGERATOR

Although "fridge" is short for "refrigerator," there is no "D" in the longer word.

REFUTE/REJECT

To refute someone's argument is to prove it incorrect. If you attempt no such proof but simply disagree with an argument the word you want is "reject."

REGARD/REGARDS

Business English is deadly enough without scrambling it. "As regards your downsizing plan . . ." is acceptable, if stiff. "In regard to" "and "with regard to" are also correct. But "in regards to" is nonstandard. You can also convey the same idea with "in respect to" or "with respect to."

REGRETFULLY/REGRETTABLY

Either word can be used as an adverb to introduce an expression of regret, though conservatives prefer "regrettably" in sentences like "Regrettably, it rained on the 4th of July." Within the body of a sentence, however, "regretfully" may be used only to describe the manner in which someone does something: "John had to regretfully decline his beloved's invitation to go hang-gliding because he was terrified of heights." If no specified person in the sentence is doing the regretting, but the speaker is simply asserting "it is to be regretted," the word is "regrettably": "Their boss is regrettably stubborn."

REIGN/REIN

A king or queen reigns, but you rein in a horse. The expression "to give rein" means to give in to an impulse as a spirited horse gives in to its impulse to gallop when you slacken the reins. Similarly, the correct expression is "free rein," not "free reign."

REKNOWN/RENOWN

When you won the national spelling bee you achieved great renown (fame). Now you are a renowned speller (notice the -ed ending on the adjectival form).

Many people mistakenly suppose that because "renown" has to do with being well known the word should be spelled "reknown," but in fact it is derived from the French word nom and has to do with gaining a name. In French, fame is renomee.

RELIGION

Protestants often refer to "the Catholic religion." Catholicism is a faith or a church. (Only Protestants belong to "denominations.") Both Catholics and Protestants follow the Christian religion.

RELIGION BELIEVES/RELIGION TEACHES

People often write things like "Buddhism believes" when they mean to say "Buddhism teaches," or "Buddhists believe." Religions do not believe, they are the objects of belief.

RELIGIOSITY/PIETY

The main modern use of "religiosity" is to describe exaggerated or ostentatious showing off of one's religiousness. A better word to label

the quality of being truly religious is "piety."

RELUCTANT/RETICENT

"Reticent" denotes only reluctance to speak; do not use it for any other form of reluctance.

REMOTELY CLOSE

"Not even remotely close" is a fine example of an oxymoron. An idea can be "not even remotely correct," but closeness and remoteness are opposites; it doesn't make sense to have one modify the other. There are lots of lists of oxymorons on the Web, but they mostly mix jokey editorializing ("military intelligence" and "Microsoft Works") with true oxymorons. Good for a laugh, but not providing much guidance to writers. If there's a truly helpful oxymoron site you know of, I'd like to hear about it.

REMUNERATION/RENUMERATION

Although "remuneration" looks as if it might mean "repayment" it usually means simply "payment." In speech it is often confused with "renumeration," which would mean re-counting (counting again).

REPUNGENT/REPUGNANT, PUNGENT

"Repungent" is an amusing mash-up of "repugnant" (disgusting) and "pungent" (strong, especially used of smells). It is used for repulsive smells; and though it is vivid, it's not standard English and may get you laughed at.

RIFFLE/RIFLE

To rifle something is to steal it. The word also originally had the sense of "to search thoroughly," often with intent to steal. But if you are casually flipping through some papers, you riffle through them. You never "rifle through" anything.

RONDEZVOUS/RENDEZVOUS

The first syllable of "rendezvous" rhymes with "pond" but is not spelled like it. It comes from a word related to English "render" and is hyphenated in French: "rendez-vous." In English the two elements are smooshed together into one: "rendezvous."

REOCCURRING/RECURRING

It might seem logical to form this word from "occurring" by simply adding a RE- prefix--logical, but wrong. The word is "recurring." The root form is "recur," not "reoccur." For some reason "recurrent" is seldom transformed into "reoccurrent."

REPEL/REPULSE

In most of their meanings these are synonyms, but if you are disgusted by someone, you are repelled, not repulsed. The confusion is compounded by the fact that "repellent" and "repulsive" mean the same thing. Go figure.

REPLETE/COMPLETE

"Replete" usually means "stuffed," "full to overflowing." After eating a complete ten-course meal, you are replete.

Although it has been used as a simple synonym for "complete," this is now an unusual usage, and it is better to stick with the more common word "complete" when you have a choice.

REPLY BACK/REPLY

"Reply back" is redundant because "reply" already conveys the idea of getting back to someone. The same is true of "answer back" except in the rather old-fashioned use of the phrase to describe the behavior of a lippy kid rudely refusing to submit to the wishes of parents or teachers.

REPORT INTO/REPORT ON

You can conduct an investigation into a matter, like a scandal or a crime; but the result is a report on or of the results. You don't make a report into anything. You could eliminate "into" altogether by using the simpler "investigate" instead.

REQUEST/ASK

If you want something you can request it or you can ask for it. Many people like "request" because it sounds more formal, more elegant; but to other people it just sounds pretentious. There are many instances in which plain old "ask" works better: "I'm asking my buddies to go camping with me." "She asked him to walk the dog." Except on wedding invitations, try to avoid "request" where "ask" will do as well.

RESIGNATE/RESONATE

When an idea gives you good vibes it resonates with you: "His call for better schools resonates with the voters." Not resignates--resonates.

RESISTER/RESISTOR

A resistor is part of an electrical circuit; a person who resists something is a "resister."

RESPIRATORY

Even health professionals tend to mispronounce this word by smooshing the second and third syllables into one. This word has several possible pronunciations, but "resp-uh-tory." is not one of them. However you say it, try to at least hint at all five syllables.

RESPOND BACK/RESPOND, REPLY

It's possible that some people think they have to write "respond back" to distinguish a reply from other kinds of responses, like groaning and cursing, or chucking a request in the wastebasket; but most of the time the context makes perfectly clear that "respond" means "answer" and the "back" is redundant. Or you can just say "reply."

RESTIVE

"Restive" can mean "stubborn," "impatient," or "restless," but never "relaxed" or "rested."

RETCH/WRETCH

If you vomit, you retch; if you behave in a wretched manner or fall into wretched circumstances, you are a wretch.

RETROSPECTIVE/RETROACTIVE

"Retrospective" has to do with looking back, as is shown by the similarity of its middle syllable to words like "spectacles." A retrospective exhibit looks back at the earlier work of an artist.

"Retroactive," on the other hand, refers to actions, and is about making a current change applicable to the past, especially in law. Retroactive punishment is generally considered unjust. For instance, the city council can't pass an ordinance retroactively punishing you for having sung off-key in the karaoke bar on Main Street last Saturday night.

RETURN BACK/RETURN

"Return back" is a redundancy. Use just "return," unless you mean to say instead "turn back."

REVELANT/RELEVANT

"Revelant" is both spoken and written frequently when "relevant" is intended. The same is true of "revelance," a misspelling of "relevance."

REVERT/REPLY

The most common meaning of "revert" is "to return to an earlier condition, time, or subject." When Dr. Jekyll drank the potion he reverted to the brutish behavior of Mr. Hyde. But some pretentious people have begun to use it mistakenly instead of "reply," writing when they want you to get back to them about something, "revert to me at this address." This would literally mean they are asking you to become them.

REVOLVE/ROTATE

In ordinary speech these two words are often treated as interchangeable, though it's "revolving credit account" and "rotating crops." Scientists

make a sharp distinction between the two: the earth revolves (orbits) around the sun but rotates (spins) around its axis.

REVUE/REVIEW

You can attend a musical revue in a theatre, but when you write up your reactions for a newspaper, you're writing a review.

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

A rhetorical question implies its own answer; it's a way of making a point. Examples: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" "What business is it of yours?" "How did that idiot ever get elected?" "What is so rare as a day in June?" These aren't questions in the usual sense, but statements in the form of a question.

Many people mistakenly suppose that any nonsensical question, or one which cannot be answered, can be called a rhetorical question. The following are not proper rhetorical questions: "What was the best thing before sliced bread?" "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?" "Who let the dogs out?"

Sometimes speakers ask questions so they can then proceed to answer them: "Do we have enough troops to win the war? It all depends on how you define victory." The speaker is engaging in rhetoric, but the question asked is not a rhetorical question in the technical sense. Instead this is a mock-dialogue, with the speaker taking both roles.

RIGHT OF PASSAGE/RITE OF PASSAGE

The more common phrase is "rite of passage"--a ritual one goes through to move on to the next stage of life. Learning how to work the combination on a locker is a rite of passage for many entering middle school students. A "right of passage" would be the right to travel through a certain territory, but you are unlikely to have any use for the phrase.

RING ITS NECK/WRING ITS NECK

Wring the chicken's neck; and after you've cooked it, ring the dinner bell.

RIO GRANDE RIVER/RIO GRANDE

Rio is Spanish for "river," so "Rio Grande River" is a redundancy. Just write "Rio Grande." Non-Hispanic Americans have traditionally failed to pronounce the final "E" in "Grande", but they" ve learned to do it to designate the large size of latte, so perhaps it's time to start saying it the proper Spanish way: "REE-oh GRAHN-day." Or to be really international we could switch to the Mexican name: "Rio Bravo."

RISKY/RISQUE

People unfamiliar with the French-derived word "risque" ("slightly indecent") often write "risky" by mistake. Bungee-jumping is risky, but nude bungee-jumping is risque.

ROAD TO HOE/ROW TO HOE

Out in the cotton patch you have a tough row to hoe. This saying has nothing to do with road construction.

ROLE/ROLL

An actor plays a role. Bill Gates is the entrepreneur's role model. But you eat a sausage on a roll and roll out the barrel. To take attendance, you call the roll.

ROLLOVER/ROLL OVER

A rollover used to be only a serious highway accident, but in the computer world this spelling has also been used to label a feature on a Web page which reacts in some way when you roll the ball inside a mouse or a trackball over it without having to click. It also became an adjective, as in "rollover feature." However, when giving users instructions, the correct verb form is "roll over"--two words: "roll over the photo of our dog to see his name pop up."

Since most people now use either optical mice or trackpads the term "rollover" has become technically obsolete, but it persists.

ROMANTIC

If you are studying the arts, it's important to know that the word "romantic" is used in such contexts to mean much more than "having to do with romantic love." It originated in the Middle Ages to label sensational narratives written in romance languages--rather than Latin--depicting events like the fall of King Arthur's Round Table (in French, novels are still called "romans" whether they depict love affairs or not). In literature and art it often refers to materials that are horrifying, exotic, enthralling, or otherwise emotionally stimulating to an extreme degree. A romantic art song is as likely to be about death as about love.

ROOT/ROUT/ROUTE

You can root for your team (cheer them on) and hope that they utterly smash their opponents (create a rout), then come back in triumph on Route 27 (a road).

ROUGE/ROGUE

You can create an artificial blush by using rouge; but a scoundrel who deserves to be called a rogue is unlikely to blush naturally.

RUBBAGE

Although the generally obsolete form "rubbage" persists in some dialects, many people will assume if you use it that you are confusing "rubbish" with "garbage."

RUEBEN/REUBEN

Diner owners who put "Rueben sandwiches" on their menus may rue the day they did so when they encounter a customer who cares about the correct spelling of this classic American concoction of corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese and Russian dressing on rye bread. Although the origin of the sandwich is obscure, being credited to several different restaurateurs, all of them spelled their name "Reuben," with the E before the U.

RUFF/ROUGH

The slangy spelling "ruff" for "rough" is not appropriate in formal writing, but your spelling-checker won't flag it because "ruff" has a traditional meaning of its own, denoting a frilled collar.

RYE/WRY

"Wry" means "bent, twisted." Even if you don't have a wry sense of humor you may crack a wry smile. No rye is involved.

SACRED/SCARED

This is one of those silly typos which your spelling checker won't catch: gods are sacred, the damned in Hell are scared.

SACRELIGIOUS/SACRILEGIOUS

Doing something sacrilegious involves committing sacrilege. Don't let the related word "religious" trick you into misspelling the word as "sacreligious."

SAFETY DEPOSIT BOX/SAFE DEPOSIT BOX

Those who prefer "safe deposit box" feel that the box in question is a container for the safe deposit of goods; it is not a box in which to deposit your safety. But manufacturers and dealers in this kind of safe are split in their usage. Just be aware that some people feel that "safety deposit" is an error whereas no one is likely to look down on you for saying "safe deposit box."

SAIL/SALE/SELL

These simple and familiar words are surprisingly often confused in writing. You sail a boat which has a sail of canvas. You sell your old fondue pot at a yard sale.

SALSA SAUCE/SALSA

"Salsa" is Spanish for "sauce," so "salsa sauce" is redundant. Here in the US, where people now spend more on salsa than on ketchup (or catsup, if you prefer), few people are unaware that it's a sauce. Anyone so sheltered as not to be aware of that fact will need a fuller explanation: "chopped tomatoes, onions, chilies and cilantro."

SAME DIFFERENCE

This is a jokey, deliberately illogical slang expression that doesn't belong in formal writing.

SARCASTIC/IRONIC

Not all ironic comments are sarcastic. Sarcasm is meant to mock or wound. Irony can be amusing without being maliciously aimed at hurting anyone.

SATELLITE

Originally a satellite was a follower. Astronomers applied the term to smaller bodies orbiting about planets, like our moon. Then we began launching artificial satellites. Since few people were familiar with the term in its technical meaning, the adjective "artificial" was quickly dropped in popular usage. So far so bad. Then television began to be broadcast via satellite. Much if not all television now wends its way through a satellite at some point, but in the popular imagination only broadcasts received at the viewing site via a dish antenna aimed at a satellite qualify to be called "satellite television." Thus we see motel signs boasting:

AIR CONDITIONING * SATELLITE

People say things like "the fight's going to be shown on satellite." The word has become a pathetic fragment of its former self. The technologically literate speaker will avoid these slovenly abbreviations.

*At least motels have not yet adopted the automobile industry's truncation of "air conditioning" to "air."

SAW/SEEN

In standard English, it's "I've seen" not "I've saw." The helping verb "have" (abbreviated here to "'ve") requires "seen." In the simple past (no helping verb), the expression is "I saw," not "I seen." "I've seen a lot of ugly cars, but when I saw that old beat-up Rambler I couldn't believe my eyes."

SAY/TELL

You say "Hello, Mr. Chips" to the teacher, and then tell him about what you did last summer. You can't "tell that" except in expressions like "go tell that to your old girlfriend."

SCEPTIC/SKEPTIC

Believe it or not, the British spellings are "sceptic" and "scepticism"; the American spellings are "skeptic" and "skepticism."

SCHIZOPHRENIC

In popular usage, "schizophrenic" (and the more slangy and now dated "schizoid") indicates "split between two attitudes." This drives people with training in psychiatry crazy. "Schizo-" does indeed mean "split," but it is used here to mean "split off from reality." Someone with a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality is suffering from "multiple personality disorder" (or, more recently, "dissociative identity disorder"), not "schizophrenia."

SCI-FI

"Sci-fi," the widely used abbreviation for "science fiction," is objectionable to most professional science fiction writers, scholars, and many fans. Some of them scornfully designate alien monster movies and other trivial entertainments "sci-fi" (which they pronounce "skiffy") to distinguish them from true science fiction. The preferred abbreviation in these circles is "SF." The problem with this abbreviation is that to the general public "SF" means "San Francisco." "The Sci-Fi Channel" has exacerbated the conflict over this term. If you are a reporter approaching a science fiction writer or expert you immediately mark yourself as an outsider by using the term "sci-fi."

SCONE/SCONCE

If you fling a jam-covered biscuit at the wall and it sticks, the result may be a "wall scone"; but if you are describing a wall-mounted light fixture, the word you want is "sconce."

SCOTCH/SCOTS

Scottish people generally refer to themselves as "Scots" or "Scottish" rather than "Scotch."

SCOTCH FREE/SCOT FREE

Getting away with something "scot free" has nothing to do with the Scots (or Scotch). The scot was a medieval tax; if you evaded paying it you got off scot free. Some people wrongly suppose this phrase alludes to Dred Scott, the American slave who unsuccessfully sued for his freedom. The phrase is "scot free": no H, one T.

SEA CHANGE

In Shakespeare's "Tempest," Ariel deceitfully sings to Ferdinand:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;

Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

This rich language has so captivated the ears of generations of writers that they feel compelled to describe as "sea changes" not only alterations that are "rich and strange," but, less appropriately, those that are simply large or sudden. Always popular, this cliche has recently become so pervasive as to make "sea" an almost inextricable companion to "change," whatever its meaning. In its original context, it meant nothing more complex than "a change caused by the sea." Since the phrase is almost always improperly used and is greatly over-used, it has suffered a swamp change into something dull and tiresome. Avoid the phrase; otherwise you will irritate those who know it and puzzle those who do not.

SEAM/SEEM

"Seem" is the verb, "seam" the noun. Use "seam" only for things like the line produced when two pieces of cloth are sewn together or a thread of coal in a geological formation.

SECOND OF ALL/SECOND

"First of all" makes sense when you want to emphasize the primacy of the first item in a series, but it should not be followed by "second of all," where the expression serves no such function. And "secondly" is an adverbial form that makes no sense at all in enumeration (neither does "firstly"). As you go through your list, say simply "second," "third," "fourth," etc.

SEGWAY/SEGUE

When you shift to a new topic or activity, you segue. Many people unfamiliar with the unusual Italian spelling of the word misspell it as "segway." This error is being encouraged by the deliberately punning name used by the manufacturers of the Segway Human Transporter.

SELECT/SELECTED

"Select" means "special, chosen because of its outstanding qualities." If you are writing an ad for a furniture store offering low prices on some of its recliners, call them "selected recliners," not "select recliners," unless they are truly outstanding and not just leftovers you're trying to move out of the store.

SELF-WORTH/SELF-ESTEEM

To say that a person has a low sense of self-worth makes sense, though it's inelegant; but people commonly truncate the phrase, saying instead, "He has low self-worth." This would literally mean that he isn't worth much rather than that he has a low opinion of himself. "Self-esteem" sounds much more literate.

SENSE/SINCE

"Sense" is a verb meaning "feel" ("I sense you near me") or a noun meaning "intelligence" ("have some common sense!"). Don't use it when you need the adverb "since" ("since you went away," "since you're up anyway, would you please let the cat out?")

SENSUAL/SENSUOUS

"Sensual" usually relates to physical desires and experiences, and often means "sexy." But "sensuous" is more often used for esthetic pleasures, like "sensuous music." The two words do overlap a good deal. The leather seats in your new car may be sensuous; but if they turn you on, they might be sensual. "Sensual" often has a slightly racy or even judgmental tone lacking in "sensuous."

SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

There are actually many fine uses for sentence fragments. Here's a brief scene from an imaginary Greek tragedy composed entirely of fragments:

Menelaus: Aha! Helen! Helen (startled): Beloved husband! Menelaus: Slut! Paris (entering, seeing Menelaus): Oops. 'Bye. Menelaus: Not so fast! (stabs Paris). Paris: Arrggh!

Some people get into trouble by breaking a perfectly good sentence in two: "We did some research in newspapers. Like the National Inquirer." The second phrase belongs in the same sentence with the first, not dangling off on its own.

A more common kind of troublesome fragment is a would-be sentence introduced by a word or phrase that suggests it's part of some other sentence: "By picking up the garbage the fraternity had strewn around the street the weekend before got the group a favorable story in the paper." Just lop off "by" to convert this into a proper complete sentence.

SERGEANT OF ARMS/SERGEANT AT ARMS

The officer charged with maintaining order in a meeting is the "sergeant at arms," not "of arms."

SERVICE/SERVE

A mechanic services your car and a stallion services a mare; but most of the time when you want to talk about the goods or services you supply, the word you want is "serve": "Our firm serves the hotel industry."

SET/SIT

In some dialects people say "come on in and set a spell," but in standard English the word is "sit." You set down an object or a child you happen to be carrying; but those seating themselves sit. If you mix

these two up it will not sit well with some people.

SETUP/SET UP

Technical writers sometimes confuse "setup" as a noun ("check the setup") with the phrase "set up" ("set up the experiment").

SHALL/WILL

"Will" has almost entirely replaced "shall" in American English except in legal documents and in questions like "Shall we have red wine with the duck?"

SHEAR/SHEER

You can cut through cloth with a pair of shears, but if the cloth is translucent it's sheer. People who write about a "shear blouse" do so out of sheer ignorance.

SHEATH/SHEAF

If you take your knife out of its sheath (case) you can use it to cut a sheaf (bundle) of wheat to serve as a centerpiece.

SHERBERT/SHERBET

The name for these icy desserts is derived from Turkish/Persian "sorbet," but the "R" in the first syllable seems to seduce many speakers into adding one in the second, where it doesn't belong. A California chain called "Herbert's Sherbets" had me confused on this point for years when I was growing up.

SHIMMY/SHINNY

You shinny--or shin (climb)--up a tree or pole; but on the dance floor or in a vibrating vehicle you shimmy (shake).

SHOE-IN/SHOO-IN

A race horse so fast that you can merely shoo it across the finish line rather than having to urge it on with stronger measures is a "shoo-in": an easy winner. It is particularly unfortunate when this expression is misspelled "shoe-in" because to "shoehorn" something in is to squeeze it in with great difficulty.

SHOOK/SHAKEN

Elvis Presley couldn't have very well sung "I'm all shaken up," but that is the grammatically correct form. "Shook" is the simple past tense of "shake," and quite correct in sentences like "I shook my piggy bank but all that came out was a paper clip." But in sentences with a helping verb, you need "shaken": "The quarterback had shaken the champagne bottle before emptying it on the coach."

SHRUNK/SHRANK

The simple past tense form of "shrink" is "shrank" and the past participle is "shrunk"; it should be "Honey, I Shrank the Kids," not "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids." (Thanks a lot, Disney.)

"Honey, I've shrunk the kids" would be standard, and also grammatically acceptable is "Honey, I've shrunken the kids" (though deplorable from a child-rearing point of view).

SHUTTER TO THINK/SHUDDER TO THINK

When you are so horrified by a thought that you tremble at it, you shudder to think it.

SICK/SIC

The command given to a dog, "sic 'em," derives from the word "seek." The 1992 punk rock album titled "Sick 'Em" has helped popularize the common misspelling of this phrase. Unless you want to tell how you incited your pit bull to vomit on someone's shoes, don't write "sick 'em" or "sick the dog."

The standard spelling of the -ing form of the word is "siccing."

In a different context, the Latin word sic ("thus") inserted into a quotation is an editorial comment calling attention to a misspelling or other error in the original which you do not want to be blamed for but are accurately reproducing: "She acted like a real pre-Madonna (sic)." When commenting on someone else's faulty writing, you really want to avoid misspelling this word as sick.

Although it's occasionally useful in preventing misunderstanding, "sic" is usually just a way of being snotty about someone else's mistake, largely replaced now by "lol." Sometimes it's appropriate to correct the mistakes in writing you're quoting; and when errors abound, you needn't mark each one with a "sic"--your readers will notice.

SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS/SIERRA NEVADAS

Sierra is Spanish for "sawtooth mountain range," so knowledgeable Westerners usually avoid a redundancy by simply referring to "the Sierra Nevadas" or simply "the Sierras." Transplanted weather forecasters often get this wrong.

Some object to the familiar abbreviation "Sierras," but this form, like "Rockies" and "Smokies" is too well established to be considered erroneous.

SIGNALED OUT/SINGLED OUT

When a single individual is separated out from a larger group, usually by being especially noticed or treated differently, that individual is being "singled out." This expression has nothing to do with signalling.

SILICON/SILICONE

Silicon is a chemical element, the basic stuff of which microchips are made. Sand is largely silicon. Silicones are plastics and other materials containing silicon, the most commonly discussed example being silicone breast implants. Less used by the general public is "silica": an oxide of silicon.

SIMPLISTIC

"Simplistic" means "overly simple," and is always used negatively. Don't substitute it when you just mean to say "simple" or even "very simple."

SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS

In standard American writing, the only use for single quotation marks is to designate a quotation within a quotation. Students are exposed by Penguin Books and other publishers to the British practice of using single quotes for normal quotations and become confused. Some strange folkloric process has convinced many people that while entire sentences and long phrases are surrounded by conventional double quotation marks, single words and short phrases take single quotation marks. "Wrong," I insist.

SISTER-IN-LAWS/SISTERS-IN-LAW

Your spouse's female siblings are not your sister-in-laws, but your sisters-in-law. The same pattern applies to brothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and mothers-in-law.

SKIDDISH/SKITTISH

If you nervously avoid something you are not "skiddish" about it; the word is "skittish."

SLIGHT OF HAND/SLEIGHT OF HAND

"Sleight" is an old word meaning "cleverness, skill," and the proper expression is "sleight of hand." it's easy to understand why it's confused with "slight" since the two words are pronounced in exactly the same way.

SLOG IT OUT/SLUG IT OUT

Slogging is a slow, messy business, typically tramping through sticky mud or metaphorically struggling with other difficult tasks. You might slog through a pile of receipts to do your taxes. If you are engaged in a fierce battle with an adversary, however, you slug it out, like boxers slugging each other. There is no such expression as "slog it out."

SLOW GIN/SLOE GIN

A small European plum named a "sloe" is used to flavor the liqueur

called "sloe gin." You should probably sip it slowly, but that has nothing to do with its name.

SLUFF OFF/SLOUGH OFF

You use a loofah to slough off dead skin.

SNUCK/SNEAKED

In American English "snuck" has become increasingly common as the past tense of "sneak." This is one of many cases in which people's humorously self-conscious use of dialect has influenced others to adopt it as standard and it is now often seen even in sophisticated writing in the US But it is safer to use the traditional form: "sneaked."

SOMETIME/SOME TIME

"Let's get together sometime." When you use the one-word form, it suggests some indefinite time in the future. "Some time" is not wrong in this sort of context, but it is required when being more specific: "Choose some time that fits in your schedule." "Some" is an adjective here modifying "time." The same pattern applies to "someday" (vague) and "some day" (specific).

SO/VERY

Originally people said things like "I was so delighted with the wrapping that I couldn't bring myself to open the package." But then they began to lazily say "You made me so happy," no longer explaining just how happy that was. This pattern of using "so" as a simple intensifier meaning "very" is now standard in casual speech, but is out of place in formal writing, where "very" or another intensifier works better. Without vocal emphasis, the "so" conveys little in print.

SO FUN/SO MUCH FUN

Strictly a young person's usage: "That party was so fun!" If you don't want to be perceived as a gum-chewing airhead, say "so much fun."

SOAR/SORE

By far the more common word is "sore" which refers to aches, pains and wounds: sore feet, sore backs, sores on your skin. The more unusual word used to describe the act of gliding through the air or swooping up toward the heavens is spelled "soar." This second word is often used metaphorically: eagles, spirits, and prices can all soar. If you know your parts of speech, just keep in mind that "soar" is always a verb, and "sore" can be either a noun ("running sore") or an adjective ("sore loser") but never a verb. In archaic English "sore" could also be an adverb meaning "sorely" or "severely": "they were sore afraid."

SOCIAL/SOCIETAL

"Societal" as an adjective has been in existence for a couple of

centuries, but has become widely used only in the recent past. People who imagine that "social" has too many frivolous connotations of mere partying often resort to it to make their language more serious and impressive. It is best used by social scientists and others in referring to the influence of societies: "societal patterns among the Ibo of eastern Nigeria." Used in place of "social" in ordinary speech and writing it sounds pretentious.

SOJOURN/JOURNEY

Although the spelling of this word confuses many people into thinking it means "journey," a sojourn is actually a temporary stay in one place. If you're constantly on the move, you're not engaged in a sojourn.

SOLE/SOUL

The bottom of your foot is your sole; your spirit is your soul.

SOMEWHAT OF A/SOMEWHAT, SOMETHING OF A

This error is the result of confusing two perfectly good usages: "She is somewhat awkward," and "He is something of a klutz." Use one or the other instead.

SOME WHERE/SOMEWHERE

"Somewhere," like "anywhere" and "nowhere," is always one word.

SONG/WORK OR COMPOSITION

When you're writing that cultural event report based on last night's symphony concert, don't call the music performed "songs." Songs are strictly pieces of music which are sung--by singers. Instrumental numbers may be called "works," "compositions," or even "pieces." Be careful, though: a single piece may have several different movements; and it would be wrong to refer to the Adagio of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata as a "piece." It's just a piece of a piece.

See also music/singing.

SOONER/RATHER

"I'd sooner starve than eat what they serve in the cafeteria" is less formal than "I'd rather starve."

SOONER THAN LATER/SOONER RATHER THAN LATER

The traditional expression "sooner rather than later" is now commonly abbreviated to the less logical "sooner than later." The shorter form is very popular, but is more likely to cause raised eybrows than the similarly abbreviated expression "long story short."

See "long story short."

SOUP DU JOUR OF THE DAY/SOUP OF THE DAY

"Soupe du jour" (note the "E" on the end of "soupe") means "soup of the day." If you're going to use French to be pretentious on a menu, it's important to learn the meaning of the words you're using. Often what is offered is potage, anyway. Keep it simple, keep it in English, and you can't go wrong.

SORT AFTER/SOUGHT AFTER

Something popular which many people are searching for is "sought after". If you are sorting a thing, you've presumably already found it. When this phrase precedes a noun or noun phrase which it modifies, it has to be hyphenated: "Action Comics #1 is a much sought-after comic book because it was the first to feature Superman."

SOUR GRAPES

In a famous fable by Aesop, a fox declared that he didn't care that he could not reach an attractive bunch of grapes because he imagined they were probably sour anyway. You express sour grapes when you put down something you can't get: "winning the lottery is just a big headache anyway." The phrase is misused in all sorts of ways by people who don't know the original story and imagine it means something more general like "bitterness" or "resentment."

SOWCOW/SALCHOW

There's a fancy turning jump in ice skating named after Swedish figure skater Ulrich Salchow; but every Winter Olympics millions of people think they hear the commentators saying "sowcow" and that's how they proceed to misspell it.

SPACES AFTER A PERIOD

In the old days of typewriters using only monospaced fonts in which a period occupied as much horizontal space as any other letter, it was standard to double-space after each one to clearly separate out each sentence from the following one. However, when justified, variable-width type is set for printing it has always been standard to use only one space between sentences. Modern computers produce type that is more like print, and most modern styles call for only one space after a period. This is especially important if you are preparing a text for publication which will be laid out from your electronic copy. If you find it difficult to adopt the one-space pattern, when you are finished writing you can do a global search-and-replace to find all double spaces and replace them with single spaces.

SPADED/SPAYED

If you have neutered your dog, you've spayed it; save the spading until it dies.

SPECIALLY/ESPECIALLY

In most contexts "specially" is more common than "especially," but when you mean "particularly" "especially" works better: "I am not especially excited about inheriting my grandmother's neurotic Siamese cat." "Especial" in the place of "special" is very formal and rather old-fashioned.

SPECIE/SPECIES

In both the original Latin and in English "species" is the spelling of both the singular and plural forms. Amphiprion ocellaris is one species of clownfish. Many species of fish are endangered by overfishing.

Specie is a technical term referring to the physical form of money, particularly coins.

SPICKET/SPIGOT

A faucet is a "spigot," not a "spicket."

SPICY

"Spicy" has two different meanings: intensely flavored and peppery. Someone who asks for food that is not spicy intending to avoid only pepper may get bland, flavorless food instead. It's good to be specific about what you dislike. South Asian cooks asked to avoid pepper have been known to omit only seed pepper and use a free hand with chopped green or red chilies. If you are such a cook, be aware that timid American diners mean by "pepper" all biting, hot spices and they will probably not enjoy chili peppers or large amounts of ginger, though they may love cardamom, cumin, coriander, cinnamon, etc.

When you see the word "chilli" on an Indian menu, the spelling being used is that of the British.

SPAN/SPUN

Don't say "the demon span her head around." The past tense of "spin" in this sense is "spun."

SPARE OF THE MOMENT/SPUR OF THE MOMENT

You don't see people wearing spurs much any more, which may explain why some are vague about the significance of metaphorical spurs. Anything that prompts you to do something can be a spur to action. We say of people that are prompted in this way that they are "spurred on" by fear, ambition, greed, or some other cause.

So a momentary impulse which causes you to act without advance planning can result in a decision made "on the spur of the moment."

Then there is the expression "spare moment": "Sorry, Honey, when I was getting the kids ready for school I couldn't spare a moment to clean up

the mess the dog made in the kitchen."

This latter pattern seems to lead some people to mistakenly imagine that the expression is "on the spare of the moment."

SPIRITUALISM/SPIRITUALITY

The most common meaning of "spiritualism" is belief in the possibility of communication with the spirits of the dead.

A better term for other religious beliefs and activities is "spirituality," as in "I'm going to the ashram to explore my spirituality."

SPOKE/SAID

Novice writers of fictional dialogue sometimes become wary of repeating "said" too often, resulting in odd constructions like this: "'You've got gravy on your shirt,' she spoke."

You can speak a language or speak with someone, but you can't speak a speech.

If you get tired of "said" you could have your characters whisper, shout, hiss, or grumble; but you shouldn't be afraid of having them simply say things. It won't bore your readers; they won't even notice.

SPREE

It used to be that a spree was mainly understood as a wild drinking carouse, with the emphasis on spontaneity and abandon. Then it was used metaphorically, as in a "shopping spree."

American journalists began to write of "killing sprees" by murderers recklessly killing people at random ("spree" fits so nicely in headlines).

But they go too far when they refer to terrorist bombing sprees. Targeted, purposeful acts like these lack the element of spontaneity and disorder that characterize a spree. Do they mean perhaps a "spate"?

STAID/STAYED

"Staid" is an adjective often used to label somebody who is rather stodgy and dull, a stick-in-the mud." But in modern English the past tense of the verb "stay" is "stayed": "I stayed at the office late hoping to impress my boss."

STAND/STANCE

When you courageously resist opposing forces, you take--or make--a stand. The metaphor is a military one, with the defending forces refusing to flee from the attacker. Your stance, on the other hand, is just your position--literal or figurative--which may not be particularly

militant. A golfer wanting to improve her drives may adopt a different stance, or your stance on cojack may be that it doesn't belong on a gourmet cheese platter; but if you organize a group to force the neighbors to get rid of the hippo they've tethered in their front yard, you're taking a stand.

STATES/COUNTRIES

Citizens of the United States, where states are smaller subdivisions of the country, are sometimes surprised to see "states" referring instead to foreign countries. Note that the US Department of State deals with foreign affairs, not those of US states. Clearly distinguish these two uses of "state" in your writing.

STATIONARY/STATIONERY

When something is standing still, it's stationary. That piece of paper you write a letter on is stationery. Let the "E" in "stationery" remind you of "envelope."

STINT/STENT

When the time to work comes, you've got to do your stint; but the medical device installed to keep an artery open is a "stent." Even people in the medical profession who should know better often use "stint" when they mean "stent."

STEREO

"Stereo" refers properly to a means of reproducing sound in two or more discrete channels to create a solid, apparently three-dimensional sound. Because in the early days only fanciers of high fidelity (or hi-fi) equipment could afford stereophonic sound, "stereo" came to be used as a substitute for "high fidelity," and even "record player." Stereo equipment (for instance a cheap portable cassette player) is not necessarily high fidelity equipment. Visual technology creating a sense of depth by using two different lenses can also use the root "stereo" as in "stereoscope."

STOMP/STAMP

"Stomp" is colloquial, casual. A professional wrestler stomps his opponent. In more formal contexts "stamp" is preferred. But you will probably not be able to stamp out the spread of "stomp."

STRAIGHT/STRAIT

If something is not crooked or curved it's straight.

If it is a narrow passageway beween two bodies of water, it's a strait. Place names like "Bering Strait" are almost always spelled "strait."

STRAIGHTJACKET/STRAITJACKET

The old word "strait" ("narrow, tight") has survived only as a noun in geography referring to a narrow body of water ("the Bering Strait") and in a few adjectival uses such as "straitjacket" (a narrowly confining garment) and "strait-laced" (literally laced up tightly, but usually meaning narrow-minded). Its unfamiliarity causes many people to mistakenly substitute the more common "straight."

STATUE OF LIMITATIONS/STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS

What would a statue of limitations look like? A cop stopping traffic? The Venus de Milo? Her missing arms would definitely limit her ability to scratch what itches. The legal phrase limiting the period after which an offense can no longer be prosecuted is the statute (law) of limitations.

STEEP LEARNING CURVE

The phrase "steep learning curve" to describe a difficult-to-master skill is mathematical nonsense. If the horizontal axis of the graph represents time, then the vertical axis is probably supposed to represent effort expended. If a task begins by being very difficult and continues being so for a long time, then the curve would begin high above the zero point on the vertical axis and descend very gradually, producing a shallow learning curve, not a steep one.

Most people imagine a steep learning curve as describing a sharply inclined slope beginning at zero; but logically that sort of curve would describe a task that begins by being very easy and which rapidly becomes harder and harder--not what people mean. The confusion is caused by people's tendency to think of the curve as if it were a hill to be climbed.

An alternative way of understanding this phrase would be to imagine that the vertical axis represents degree of mastery; but in that case a difficult task would begin at zero and rise very slowly over time--again a shallow curve, not a steep one.

The problem is that most people's interpretation begins with the vertical axis measuring mastery achieved (zero to begin with), but as they move along the horizontal axis in time they unconsciously switch to its opposite: remaining mastery needed (a lot, right away). This makes no sense. The line needs to stand for the same variable along its whole length to make a sensible chart.

There's little hope of abolishing this ubiquitous bit of pretentious jargon, but you should avoid using it around mathematically sophisticated people.

STOCK AND TRADE/STOCK IN TRADE

In this context, "trade" means "business." The items a business trades in are its stock in trade. Metaphorically, the stuff needed by people to carry on their activities can also be called their stock in trade: "Bushy eyebrows, cigars, and quips were Groucho's stock in trade." This

expression has nothing to do with trading stock, as on a stock exchange, and it should not be transformed into "stock and trade."

STRESS ON/FEEL STRESS

"Stress on" is commonly misused used to mean "to experience stress" as in "I'm stressing on the term paper I have to do." Still informal, but better, is "I'm stressed about. . . ." In a more formal context you could express the same idea by saying "I'm anxious about. . . ."

It is perfectly fine, however, to say that you place stress on something, with "stress" being a noun rather than a verb.

STRICKEN/STRUCK

Most of the time the past participle of "strike" is "struck." The exceptions are that you can be stricken with guilt, a misfortune, a wound or a disease; and a passage in a document can be stricken out. The rest of the time, stick with "struck."

STRONG SUITE/STRONG SUIT

"Strong suit" is an expression derived from card-playing, in which hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades are the suits. When you put your best foot forward your play your strong suit.

SUBMITTAL/SUBMISSION

"Submittal" is the act of submitting; it should not be used to describe the thing being submitted, as in "clip a five-dollar bill to your submittal and it will receive our earliest attention." In almost all cases "submission" is clearer and more traditional than "submittal."

SUBSTANCE-FREE

An administrator at our university once announced that his goal was a "substance-free" campus, which I suppose fit in with the fad of the period for "virtual education." What he really meant was, of course, a campus free of illegal drugs and alcohol, designated "controlled substances" in the law. This is a very silly expression, but if he'd just said "sober and straight" he would have sounded too censorious. How about "drug- and alcohol-free"?

SUBSTITUTE WITH/SUBSTITUTE FOR

You can substitute pecans for the walnuts in a brownie recipe, but many people mistakenly say "substitute with" instead, perhaps influenced by the related expression "replace with." it's always "substitute for."

SUFFER WITH/SUFFER FROM

Although technical medical usage sometimes differs, in normal speech we say that a person suffers from a disease rather than suffering with it.

SUIT/SUITE

Your bedroom suite consists of the bed, the nightstand, and whatever other furniture goes with it. Your pajamas would be your bedroom suit.

SULKING/SKULKING

That guy sneaking furtively around the neighborhood is skulking around; that teenager brooding in his bedroom because he got grounded is sulking. "Sulking around" is not a traditional phrase.

SUMMARY/SUMMERY

When the weather is warm and summery and you don't feel like spending a lot of time reading that long report from the restructuring committee, just read the summary.

SUPED UP/SOUPED UP

The car you've souped up may be super, but it's not "suped up."

SUPERCEDE/SUPERSEDE

"Supersede," meaning to replace, originally meant "to sit higher" than, from Latin sedere, "to sit." In the 18th century, rich people were often carried about as they sat in sedan chairs. Don't be misled by the fact that this word rhymes with words having quite different roots, such as "intercede."

SUPPOSABLY, SUPPOSINGLY, SUPPOSIVELY/SUPPOSEDLY

"Supposedly" is the standard form. "Supposably" can be used only when the meaning is "capable of being supposed," and then only in the US You won't get into trouble if you stick with "supposedly."

SUPPOSE TO/SUPPOSED TO

Because the D and the T are blended into a single consonant when this phrase is pronounced, many writers are unaware that the D is even present and omit it in writing. You're supposed to get this one right if you want to earn the respect of your readers. See also "use to."

SUPREMIST/SUPREMICIST

A neo-Nazi is a white supremacist, not "supremist."

SUSPECT/SUSPICIOUS

If your boss thinks you may have dipped into petty cash to pay your gambling debts, you may be suspect (or "a suspect"). But if you think somebody else did it, you are suspicious of them. Confusingly, if the police suspect you of a crime, you can be described as a "suspicious person" and if you constantly suspect others of crimes, you can also be

called "suspicious."

But "suspect" is not so flexible. A suspect is a person somebody is suspicious of, never the person who is doing the suspecting. It never makes sense to say "I am suspect that. . . ."

SURFING THE INTERNET

"Channel-surfing" developed as an ironic term to denote the very unathletic activity of randomly changing channels on a television set with a remote control. Its only similarity to surfboarding on real surf has to do with the esthetic of "going with the flow." The Internet could be a fearsomely difficult place to navigate until the World Wide Web was invented; casual clicking on Web links was naturally quickly compared to channel-surfing, so the expression "surfing the Web" was a natural extension of the earlier expression. But the Web is only one aspect of the Internet, and you label yourself as terminally uncool if you say "surfing the Internet." (Cool people say "Net" anyway.) It makes no sense to refer to targeted, purposeful searches for information as "surfing"; for that reason I call my classes on Internet research techniques "scuba-diving the Internet."

However, Jean Armour Polly, who claims to have originated the phrase "surfing the Internet" in 1992, maintains that she intended it to have exactly the connotations it now has. See her page on the history of the term: (http://www.netmom.com/about/surfing_main.htm).

SWAM/SWUM

The regular past tense of "swim" is "swam": "I swam to the island." However, when the word is preceded by a helping verb, it changes to "swum": "I've swum to the island every day." The "'ve" stands for "have," a helping verb.

TABLE

In the UK if you table an issue you place it on the table for discussion; but in the US the phrase means the opposite: you indefinitely postpone discussing the issue.

TAD BIT/TAD, BIT

A "tad" was originally a small boy, but this word evolved into the expression "a tad" meaning "very small" or "very slightly": "The movie was a tad long for my taste."

Some people combine this with the equivalent expression "a bit" and say "a tad bit." This is redundant. Just say "a bit" or "a tad."

TAKE A DIFFERENT TACT/TAKE A DIFFERENT TACK

This expression has nothing to do with tactfulness and everything to do with sailing, in which it is a direction taken as one tacks--abruptly turns--a boat. To "take a different tack" is to try another approach.

TAKEN BACK/TAKEN ABACK

When you're startled by something, you're taken aback by it. When you're reminded of something from your past, you're taken back to that time.

TWO TO TANGLE/TWO TO TANGO

A 1952 song popularized the phrase "it takes two to tango"; and it was quickly applied to everything that required two parties, from romance to fighting. Later, people baffled by hearing the phrase used of conflicts imagined that the proper word must be "tangle." Perhaps if they had thought of the fierce choreography of Parisian apache dancing they would not have been so confused. "It takes two to tangle" will seem the normal phrase to some people, a clever variation to a few, and an embarrassing mistake to many people you might want to impress.

TATTLE-TAIL/TATTLE-TALE

Somebody who reveals secrets--tattling, telling tales--is a tattle-tale, often spelled as one word: "tattletale."

TAUGHT/TAUT

Students are taught, ropes are pulled taut.

TAUNT/TAUT/TOUT

I am told that medical personnel often mistakenly refer to a patient's abdomen as "taunt" rather than the correct "taut." "Taunt" ("tease" or "mock") can be a verb or noun, but never an adjective. "Taut" means "tight, distended," and is always an adjective.

Don't confuse "taunt" with "tout," which means "promote," as in "Senator Bilgewater has been touted as a Presidential candidate." You tout somebody you admire and taunt someone that you don't.

TENANT/TENET

These two words come from the same Latin root, "tenere," meaning "to hold"; but they have very different meanings. "Tenet" is the rarer of the two, meaning a belief that a person holds: "Avoiding pork is a tenet of the Muslim faith." In contrast, the person leasing an apartment from you is your tenant. (She holds the lease.)

TENDER HOOKS/TENTERHOOKS

A "tenter" is a canvas-stretcher, and to be "on tenterhooks" means to be as tense with anticipation as a canvas stretched on one.

TENTATIVE

Often all-too-tentatively pronounced "tennative." Sound all three "T's."

THAN/THEN

When comparing one thing with another you may find that one is more appealing "than" another. "Than" is the word you want when doing comparisons. But if you are talking about time, choose "then": "First you separate the eggs; then you beat the whites." Alexis is smarter than I, not "then I."

THANKS GOD

I suppose if you wanted to express your gratitude directly to the deity you might appropriately say "Thanks, God, for helping our team win the big game." More appropriate is something more formal, like "Thank you, God." In any case, the general expression when it's not specifically meant as a prayer is not "thanks God," but "thank God." Not "Thanks God Emily hit a homer in this last inning," but "thank God" she did.

THANKYOU/THANK YOU, THANK-YOU

When you are grateful to someone, tell them "thank you." Thanks are often called "thank-yous," and you can write "thank-you notes." But the expression should never be written as a single unhyphenated word.

THAT/THAN

People surprisingly often write "that" when they mean "than" in various standard phrases. Examples: "harder that I thought," "better safe that sorry," and "closer that they appear." In all these cases, "that" should be "than."

THAT/WHICH

I must confess that I do not myself observe the distinction between "that" and "which." Furthermore, there is little evidence that this distinction is or has ever been regularly made in past centuries by careful writers of English. However, a small but impassioned group of authorities has urged the distinction; so here is the information you will need to pacify them.

If you are defining something by distinguishing it from a larger class of which it is a member, use "that": "I chose the lettuce that had the fewest wilted leaves." When the general class is not being limited or defined in some way, then "which" is appropriate: "He made an iceberg lettuce Caesar salad, which didn't taste right." Note that "which" is normally preceded by a comma, but "that" is not.

THAT KIND/THAT KIND OF

Although expressions like "that kind thing" are common in some dialects, standard English requires "of" in this kind of phrase.

THE BOTH OF THEM/BOTH OF THEM

You can say "the two of them," as in "the two of them make an

interesting couple"; but normally "the" is not used before "both," as in "both of them have purple hair."

THEIRSELVES/THEMSELVES

There is no such word as "theirselves" (and you certainly can't spell it "theirselfs" or "thierselves"); it's "themselves." And there is no correct singular form of this non-word; instead of "theirself" use "himself" or "herself."

THEM/THOSE

One use of "them" for "those" has become a standard catch phrase: "how do you like them apples?" This is deliberate dialectical humor. But "I like them little canapes with the shrimp on top" is gauche; say instead "I like those little canapes."

THEORY

In ordinary speech, a theory is just a speculation. The police inspector in a Miss Marple mystery always has a theory about who committed the murder which turns out to be wrong.

But in science the word "theory" plays a very different role. What most of us call "theories" are termed "hypotheses" until enough evidence has been accumulated to validate them and allow them to assume the status of theories: scientifically acceptable explanations of phenomena. Examples: the theory of gravity, the wave theory of light, chaos theory.

Foes of evolutionary science often insist that the theory of evolution is invalid because it is "only a theory." This merely demonstrates their lack of knowledge of scientific usage and hence will not impress any scientifically literate person.

THEREFOR/THEREFORE

The form without a final "E" is an archaic bit of legal terminology meaning "for." The word most people want is "therefore."

THERE'S

People often forget that "there's" is a contraction of "there is" and mistakenly say "there's three burrs caught in your hair" when they mean "there're" ("there are"). Use "there's" only when referring to one item.

Remember if you don't contract "there is" that it also can only be used with something singular following. It's not "There is many mistakes in this paper" but "there are many mistakes in this paper."

See also "THERE'S."

THESE ARE THEM/THESE ARE THEY

Although only the pickiest listeners will cringe when you say "these are

them," the traditionally correct phrase is "these are they," because "they" is the predicate nominative of "these." However, if people around you seem more comfortable with "it's me" than "it's I," you might as well stick with "these are them."

THESE KIND/THIS KIND

In a sentence like "I love this kind of chocolates," "this" modifies "kind" (singular) and not "chocolates" (plural), so it would be incorrect to change it to "I love these kind of chocolates." Only if "kind" itself is pluralized into "kinds" should "this" shift to "these": "You keep making these kinds of mistakes!"

THESE ONES/THESE

By itself, there's nothing wrong with the word "ones" as a plural: "surrounded by her loved ones." However, "this one" should not be pluralized to "these ones." Just say "these." The same pattern applies to "those."

THEY/THEIR (SINGULAR)

Using the plural pronoun to refer to a single person of unspecified gender is an old and honorable pattern in English, not a newfangled bit of degeneracy or a politically correct plot to avoid sexism (though it often serves the latter purpose). People who insist that "Everyone has brought his own lunch" is the only correct form do not reflect the usage of centuries of fine writers. A good general rule is that only when the singular noun does not specify an individual can it be replaced plausibly with a plural pronoun: "Everybody" is a good example. We know that "everybody" is singular because we say "everybody is here, " not "everybody are here" yet we tend to think of "everybody" as a group of individuals, so we usually say "everybody brought their own grievances to the bargaining table." "Anybody" is treated similarly.

However, in many written sentences the use of singular "their" and "they" creates an irritating clash even when it passes unnoticed in speech. It is wise to shun this popular pattern in formal writing. Often expressions can be pluralized to make the "they" or "their" indisputably proper: "All of them have brought their own lunches." "People" can often be substituted for "each." Americans seldom avail themselves of the otherwise very handy British "one" to avoid specifying gender because it sounds to our ears rather pretentious: "One's hound should retrieve only one's own grouse." If you decide to try "one," don't switch to "they" in mid-sentence: "One has to be careful about how they speak" sounds absurd because the word "one" so emphatically calls attention to its singleness. The British also quite sensibly treat collective bodies like governmental units and corporations as plural ("Parliament have approved their agenda") whereas Americans insist on treating them as singular.

THEY'RE/THEIR/THERE

Many people are so spooked by apostrophes that a word like "they're" seems to them as if it might mean almost anything. In fact, it's always a contraction of "they are." If you've written "they're," ask yourself whether you can substitute "they are." If not, you've made a mistake. "Their" is a possessive pronoun like "her" or "our": "They eat their hotdogs with sauerkraut." Everything else is "there." "There goes the ball, out of the park! See it? Right there! There aren't very many home runs like that." "Thier" is a common misspelling, but you can avoid it by remembering that "they" and "their" begin with the same three letters. Another hint: "there" has "here" buried inside it to remind you it refers to place, while "their" has "heir" buried in it to remind you that it has to do with possession.

THINK ON/THINK ABOUT

An archaic form that persists in some dialects is seen in statements like "I'll think on it" when most people would say "I'll think about it."

THOUGH/THOUGHT/THROUGH

Although most of us know the differences between these words people often type one of them when they mean another. Spelling checkers won't catch this sort of slip, so look out for it.

THREW/THROUGH

"Threw" is the past tense of the verb "throw": "The pitcher threw a curve ball." "Through" is never a verb: "The ball came through my living room window." Unless your sentence involves someone throwing something--even figuratively, as in "she threw out the idea casually"--the word you want is "through."

THRONE/THROWN

A throne is that chair a king sits on, at least until he gets thrown out of office.

THROUGH A MIRROR, DARKLY/IN A MIRROR, DARKLY

Here's an error with a very distinguished heritage.

When in 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul tries to express the imperfection of mortal understanding, he compares our earthly vision to the dim and wavery view reflected by a typical Roman-era polished bronze mirror. Unfortunately, the classic King James translation rendered his metaphor rather confusingly as "For now we see through a glass, darkly." By the time of the Renaissance, mirrors were made of glass and so it was natural for the translators to call the mirror a "glass," though by so doing they obscured Paul's point. Why they should have used "through" rather than the more logical "in" is unclear; but it has made many people think that the image is of looking through some kind of magical glass mirror like that in Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass."

Although most other translations use more accurate phrasing ("as in a mirror," "a blurred image in a mirror," etc.), the King James is so influential that its misleading rendering of the verse is overwhelmingly more popular than the more accurate ones. It's not really an error to quote the KJV, but if you use the image, don't make the mistake of suggesting it has to do with a dirty window rather than a dim mirror.

THROWS OF PASSION/THROES OF PASSION

A dying person's final agony can be called "death throes." The only other common use for this word is "throes of passion." Throws are wrestling moves or those little blankets you drape on the furniture.

THUSFAR/THUS FAR

Some common phrases get fused in people's minds into single words. The phrase "thus far" is frequently misspelled "thusfar." Hardly anybody writes "sofar" instead of "so far"--just treat "thus far" in the same way.

THUSLY/THUS

"Thusly" has been around for a long time, but it is widely viewed as nonstandard. It's safer to go with plain old "thus."

TIC/TICK

The word for a spasmodic twitch or habitual quirk of speech or behavior is spelled the French way: "tic." You may have to worry about Lyme disease if you get a bite from a tick on your face, but that spasm in your left cheek whenever the teacher calls on you is a facial tic.

TIMBER/TIMBRE

You can build a house out of timber, but that quality which distinguishes the sound produced by one instrument or voice from others is timbre, usually pronounced "TAM-bruh," so the common expression is "vocal timbre."

TIME PERIOD

The only kinds of periods meant by people who use this phrase are periods of time, so it's a redundancy. Simply say "time" or "period."

TIMES SMALLER

Mathematically literate folks object to expressions like "my paycheck is three times smaller than it used to be" because "times" indicates multiplication and should logically apply only to increases in size. Say "one third as large" instead.

TIRIMISU/TIRAMISU

Tiramisu is Italian for "pick me up", and is the name of a popular

modern Italian dessert, commonly mispelled as tirimisu, which gives it a slightly Japanese air. The Japanese love tiramisu; but although they sometimes make it with green tea rather than coffee this misspelling isn't their fault.

TO/TOO/TWO

People seldom mix "two" up with the other two; it obviously belongs with words that also begin with TW, like "twice" and "twenty" that involve the number 2. But the other two are confused all the time. Just remember that the only meanings of "too" are "also" ("I want some ice cream too") and "in excess" ("Your walkman is playing too loudly.") Note that extra O. It should remind you that this word has to do with adding more on to something. "To" is the proper spelling for all the other uses.

TO HOME/AT HOME

In some dialects people say "I stayed to home to wait for the mail," but in standard English the expression is "stayed at home."

TO THE MANOR BORN/TO THE MANNER BORN

Hamlet complains of the drunken carousing at Elsinore to his friend Horatio, who asks "Is it a custom?" Hamlet replies that it is and adds, "but to my mind,--though I am native here and to the manner born,--it is a custom more honour'd in the breach than the observance."

"As if to the manner born" is used to praise someone's skill: "Reginald drives the Maserati as if to the manner born" (as if he were born with that skill).

"To the Manor Born" was the punning title of a popular BBC comedy, which greatly increased the number of people who mistakenly supposed the original expression had something to do with being born on a manor. Perhaps because of the poetically inverted word order in "manner born" the expression tends to occur in rather snooty contexts. Nevertheless, the correct expression is "to the manner born."

TO WHERE/SO MUCH THAT, TO THE POINT THAT

Complains Fred, "Mac kept borrowing my tools to where I couldn't finish fixing the front porch." This sort of use of "to where" to mean "so much that" or "to the point that" is not standard English. The meaning is more about when than where.

TODAY'S DAY AND AGE/THIS DAY AND AGE

The traditional expression is "in this day and age," meaning "right at this moment and during a considerable stretch of time around this moment." "Today's day" is redundant: "today" already has "day" in it.

TODAY'S MODERN SOCIETY/TODAY

People seeking to be up-to-the-minute often indulge in such redundancies

as "in today's modern society" or "in the modern society of today." This is empty arm-waving which says nothing more than "now" or "today." A reasonable substitute is "contemporary society." Such phrases are usually indulged in by people with a weak grasp of history to substitute for such more precise expressions as "for the past five years" or "this month." See "since the beginning of time."

TOLLED/TOLD

Some people imagine that the expression should be "all tolled" as if items were being ticked off to the tolling of a bell, or involved the paying of a toll; but in fact this goes back to an old meaning of "tell": "to count." You could "tell over" your beads if you were counting them in a rosary. "All told" means "all counted."

This older meaning of "tell" is the reason that people who count money out behind bank windows are called "tellers."

TOOKEN/TOOK/TAKEN

"Hey, Tricia! Ted couldn't find his parrot so he's tooken your toucan to show and tell!" "Tooken" is a non-standard form of "taken."

In fact, there are two past-tense forms of "take" which shouldn't be mixed up with each other. For the simple past you need "took": "Beau took a course in acoustics." But if a helping verb precedes it, the word you need is "taken": "he has taken some other courses too."

TOUNGE/TONGUE

"Tounge" is a common misspelling of "tongue."

TONGUE AND CHEEK/TONGUE IN CHEEK

When people want to show they are kidding or have just knowingly uttered a falsehood, they stick their tongues in their cheeks, so it's "tongue in cheek," not "tongue and cheek."

TOE-HEADED/TOW-HEADED

Light-colored rope is called "tow" and someone with very blond hair is called a "tow-head." Tow-headed children are cute, but a toe-headed one would be seriously deformed.

TORTUROUS/TORTUOUS

A path with a confusing proliferation of turns is tortuous (from a French root meaning "twisted"). But "torturous" (meaning painful or unpleasant, like torture) is very frequently confused with it. So often has "tortuous logic" (tangled, twisted logic) been misspelled as "torturous logic" that it has given rise to a now independent form with its own meaning, "tortured logic." Few people object to the latter; but if you want to describe your slow progress along a twisting path, the word you want is "tortuous."

TOW THE LINE/TOE THE LINE

"Toe the line" has to do with lining your toes up on a precise mark, not with pulling on a rope.

However if you have to take your kids along when you visit friends, you have them not "in toe," but "in tow."

TOWARD/TOWARDS

These two words are interchangeable, but "toward" is more common in the US and "towards" in the UK

TRACK HOME/TRACT HOME

Commuters from a tract home may well feel that they are engaged in a rat race, but that does not justify them in describing their housing development as a "track." "Tract" here means an area of land on which cheap and uniform houses have been built. Incidentally, note that the phrase is "digestive tract," not "digestive track."

TRADEGY/TRAGEDY

Not only do people often misspell "tragedy" as "tradegy," they mispronounce it that way too. Just remember that the adjective is "tragic" to recall that it's the G that comes after the A.

TRAGEDY/TRAVESTY

"Travesty" has farcical connotations; it's actually related to "transvestite." A disaster that could be described as a farce or a degraded imitation may be called a travesty: "The trial--since the defense lawyer slept through most of it--was a travesty of justice." A tragedy is an altogether more serious matter.

TRITE AND TRUE/TRIED AND TRUE

Ideas that are trite may well be true; but the expression is "tried and true": ideas that have been tried and turned out to be valid.

TROOP/TROUPE

A group of performers is a troupe. Any other group of people, military or otherwise, is a troop. A police officer, member of a mounted military group or similar person is a trooper, but a gung-ho worker is a real trouper.

Troops are always groups, despite the current vogue among journalists of saying things like "two troops were wounded in the battle" when they mean "two soldiers." "Two troops" would be two groups of soldiers, not two individuals.

TOUCH BASES/TOUCH BASE

Although in baseball a home-run hitter has to touch all four bases while whizzing past, when you propose to linger with someone long enough to compare notes, you do all your chatting at a single base. The expression is "let's touch base."

TRANSITION

People in business, politics, and education love to turn nouns into verbs; but many of their transformations irritate a good number of listeners. High on the list of disliked terms is "transition" as a verb: "Over the next month we are going to transition our payroll system from cash to pizza discount coupons." You can say "make the transition," but often plain "change" works fine.

TRY AND/TRY TO

Although "try and" is common in colloquial speech and will usually pass unremarked there, in writing try to remember to use "try to" instead of "try and."

TUSSLED/TOUSLED

Even if your hair gets messed up in a tussle with a friend, it gets tousled, not tussled.

UFO

"UFO" stands for "Unidentified Flying Object," so if you're sure that silvery disk is an alien spacecraft, there's no point in calling it a "UFO." I love the sign I once saw in a Seattle bookstore labeling the alien-invasion section: "Incorrectly Identified Flying Objects."

UGLY AMERICAN

The term "ugly American"--used to describe boorish people from the US insensitive to those in other countries--bothers fans of the 1958 novel The Ugly American, whose title character was actually sensitive and thoughtful--he just looked ugly. The popularizers of this phrase hadn't read the book, and judged its message too quickly by its title.

THE UKRAINE/UKRAINE

Some country names are preceded by an article--like "The United States" and "La France"--but most are not. Sometimes it depends on what language you are speaking: in English we call the latter country simply "France" and "La Republica Argentina" is just "Argentina" although in the nineteenth century the British often referred to it as "The Argentine."

When the region formerly known as "The Ukraine" split off from the old Soviet Union, it declared its preference for dropping the article, and the country is now properly called simply "Ukraine."

UNCONSCIENCE/UNCONSCIOUS

Do people confuse the unconscious with conscience because the stuff fermenting in one's unconscious is often stuff that bothers one's conscience? Whatever the cause, there is no such word as "unconscience." And while we're on the subject, "subconscious" is not used in Freudian psychology; it implies something that is merely not consciously thought of, rather than something that is suppressed. The term is, however, used by Jungians.

UNDER THE GUISE THAT/UNDER THE GUISE OF

Phishing e-mails try to extract valuable information from you so they can rob you under the guise of protecting your online security. They are disguising their theft as protection. There are other related phrases, mostly ending in "that," such as "under the pretext that" and "with the excuse that"; but "under the guise" requires "of," usually followed by a gerund ending in "-ing."

UNDER WEIGH/UNDER WAY

The original expression for getting a boat moving has nothing to do with weighing anchor and is "getting under way," but so many sophisticated writers get this wrong that you're not likely to get into trouble if you imitate them.

When "underway" is used elsewhere as an adjective or adverb, by far the most common spelling is as a single word, as in "our plans are underway"; though some authorities argue that the adverbial form should be spelled as two words: "under way."

UNDERESTIMATED

Enthusiastic sportscasters often say of a surprisingly talented team that "they cannot be underestimated" when what they mean is "they should not be underestimated."

UNDERLINING/UNDERLYING

You can stress points by underlining them, but it's "underlying" in expressions like "underlying story," "underlying motive," and "underlying principle."

UNDERMIND/UNDERMINED

Some people believe in a mystical overmind, but not even they believe in an "undermind." The word is "undermined." If you dig under a castle wall to prepare to breach its defenses, you are undermining it, digging a mine under it. The metaphor applies to all sorts of weakening of opposing positions, most often in arguments.

UNDO/UNDUE

The verb "undo" is the opposite of "do." You undo your typing errors on a computer or undo your shoelaces to go wading.

The adjective "undue" is the opposite of "due" and means "unwarranted" or "improper." It is used in phrases like "undue influence," "undue burdens," and "undue expense."

UNDOUBTABLY/UNDOUBTEDLY

Doubtless the spelling of "presumably" influences the misspelling "undoubtably." The word is "undoubtedly." When something is undoubtedly true, it is undoubted.

UNKEPT/UNKEMPT

"Unkempt" is an old version of "uncombed." The standard expression for a sloppy-looking person is not "unkept," but "unkempt."

UNREST

Journalists often use this mild term to describe all manner of civil disorders, but it's silly to call mayhem or chaos merely "unrest" when there are bullets flying about and bodies lying in the streets.

UNTHAW/THAW

"Unthaw" is another illogical negative. Use "thaw."

UNTRACKED/ON TRACK

When things begin running smoothly and successfully, they get "on track." Some people oddly substitute "untracked" for this expression, perhaps thinking that to be "tracked" is to be stuck in a rut.

UPMOST/UTMOST

"Upmost" can mean "uppermost," referring to something on top. But usually this word is a mistake for "utmost," meaning "most extreme." "Utmost" is related to words like "utter," as in "The birthday party was utter chaos."

UPTO/UP TO

Not upto alot lately? You might use some of your spare time memorizing the fact that "up to" is a two-word phrase, as is "a lot."

URINE ANALYSIS/URINALYSIS

The technical term for the test you use to kick the druggies off the team is not "urine analysis" but "urinalysis."

USE/USAGE

"Use" and "usage" overlap somewhat, but they are not entirely synonymous. Many people treat "usage" as if it were just a fancier form

of "use" in phrases like "make usage of," where "make use of" is the standard expression. As a rule of thumb, if either "use" or "usage" seems appropriate, go with "use."

USE TO/USED TO

Because the D and the T are blended into a single consonant when this phrase is pronounced, many writers are unaware that the D is even present and omit it in writing. See also "suppose to."

USED TO COULD/USED TO BE ABLE

"I used to could lift a hay-bale with my teeth," says Jeb, meaning "I used to be able to."

UTILIZE/USE

The best use for "utilize" is to mean "make use of": "Ryan utilized his laptop in the library mainly as a pillow to rest his head on." In most contexts, "use" is simpler and clearer. Many readers consider "utilize" pretentious.

VAGUE REFERENCE

Vague reference is a common problem in sentences where "this," "it," "which" or other such words don't refer back to any one specific word or phrase, but a whole situation. "I hitchhiked back to town, got picked up by an alien spacecraft and was subjected to humiliating medical experiments, which is why I didn't get my paper done on time." In conversation this sort of thing goes unnoticed, but more care needs to be taken in writing. There are lots of ways to reorganize this sentence to avoid the vague reference. You could begin the sentence with "because" and replace "which is why" with "so," for instance.

Sometimes the referent is only understood and not directly expressed at all: "Changing your oil regularly is important, which is one reason your engine burned up." The "which" refers to an implied failure to change oil regularly, but doesn't actually refer back to any of the specific words used earlier in the sentence.

Sometimes there is no logical referent: "In the book it says that Shakespeare was in love with some 'dark lady'." This is a casual way of using "it" that is not acceptable in formal written English. Write instead "Arthur O. Williams says in The Sonnets that Shakespeare. . . ."

A reference may be ambiguous because it's not clear which of two referents is meant: "Most women are attracted to guys with a good sense of humor unless they are into practical jokes." Does "they" refer to "women" or "guys"? It would be clearer if the sentence said "Most women are attracted to guys with a good sense of humor, though not usually to practical jokers."

VAIN/VANE/VEIN

When you have vanity you are conceited: you are vain. "You're so vain you probably think this song is about you." This spelling can also mean "futile," as in "All my love's in vain" (fruitless). Note that when Ecclesiastes says that "all is vanity" it doesn't mean that everything is conceited, but that everything is pointless.

A vane is a blade designed to move or be moved by gases or liquid, like a weathervane.

A vein is a slender thread of something, like blood in a body or gold in a mine. It can also be a line of thought, as in "After describing his dog's habit of chewing on the sofa, Carlos went on in the same vein for several minutes."

VARIOUS/SEVERAL

Many people say "she heard from various of the committee members that they wanted to cancel the next meeting." "Several of the committee members" would be better.

VARY/VERY

"Vary" means "to change." Don't substitute it for "very" in phrases like "very nice" or "very happy."

VEIL OF TEARS/VALE OF TEARS

The expression "vale of tears" goes back to pious sentiments that consider life on earth to be a series of sorrows to be left behind when we go on to a better world in Heaven. It conjures up an image of a suffering traveler laboring through a valley ("vale") of troubles and sorrow. "Veil of tears" is poetic sounding, but it's a mistake.

VENDOR

Some writers are turning "vendor" into a verb meaning "to sell," writing things like, "he was vendoring comic books on eBay." Since "vend" is already a verb meaning "sell" and "vendor" is normally a noun, this sounds very odd to many readers.

Other people use forms of the word mean "to be certified as a vendor": "Persons wishing to be vendored must complete the appropriate form." This process is also referred to as "vendorization."

This pattern is probably inspired by the widespread use of "vendor" to label suppliers on commercial Web sites. Instead of thinking of vendors as mere merchants, dealers, or sellers, some special quality is being attributed to them.

None of this is standard English.

VERB TENSE

If the situation being described is an ongoing or current one, the present tense is needed, even in a past-tense context: "Last week she admitted that she is really a brunette" (not "was").

Pairs of verbs that go together logically have to be kept in the same tense. Incorrect: "Patricia described her trip to China and writes that the Great Wall really impressed her." Since "described" is in the past tense, and the writing contains her descriptions, "writes" should be "wrote."

Lots of people get into trouble with sentences that describe a hypothetical situation in the past: "If he would have packed his own suitcase, he would have noticed that the cat was in it." That first "would have" should be a simple "had": "If he had packed his own suitcase he would have noticed that the cat was in it." Also "The game would have been more fun if we had [not "would have"] won." This sort of construction consists of two parts: a hypothetical cause in the past and its logical effect. The hypothetical cause needs to be put into the past tense: "had." Only the effect is made conditional: "would have." Note that in the second example above the effect is referred to before the cause.

Students summarizing the plot of a play, movie, or novel are often unfamiliar with the tradition of doing so in the present tense: "Hester embroiders an " A" on her dress." Think of the events in a piece of fiction as happening whenever you read them--they exist in an eternal present even if they are narrated in the past tense. Even those who are familiar with this pattern get tripped up when they begin to discuss the historical or biographical context of a work, properly using the past tense, and forget to shift back to the present when they return to plot summary. Here's how it's done correctly: "Mark Twain's days on the Mississippi were long past when he wrote Huckleberry Finn; but Huck's love for life on the river clearly reflects his youthful experience as a steamboat pilot." The verb "reflects" is in the present tense. Often the author's activity in writing is rendered in the present tense as well: "Twain depicts Pap as a disgusting drunk." What about when you are comparing events that occur at two different times in the same narrative? You still have to stick to the present: "Tom puts Jim through a lot of unnecessary misery before telling him that he is free." Just remember when you go from English to your history class that you have to shift back to the past tense for narrating historical events: "Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo."

VERBAGE/VERBIAGE

"Verbiage" is an insulting term usually meant to disparage needlessly wordy prose. Don't use it to mean simply "wording." There is no such word as "verbage."

VERACIOUS/VORACIOUS

If you are extremely hungry, you may have a "voracious" appetite (think of the O as an open mouth, ready to devour anything). "Veracious" is an unusual word meaning "truthful, honest" (think about the E in "verify").

A truthful person has "veracity." "Voracity," meaning "extreme appetite" is a rare word you are unlikely to have a use for; "voraciousness" is more common.

VERSE/PLAY AGAINST

Some young people use "verse" as a verb meaning "to play against," as in "I'll verse you at basketball after school." Computer gamers are particularly fond of virtual opponents versing each other. Presumably this bit of slang derives from the word "versus," but it's not standard English and is likely to confuse outsiders.

VERSES/VERSUS

The "vs." in a law case like "Brown vs. The Board of Education" stands for Latin versus (meaning "against"). Don't confuse it with the word for lines of poetry--"verses"--when describing other conflicts, like the upcoming football game featuring Oakesdale versus Pinewood.

Note that in formal legal contexts the usual abbreviation is usually just "v.", as in "Brown v. The Board of Education."

VERY UNIQUE/UNIQUE

"Unique" singles out one of a kind. That "un" at the beginning is a form of "one." A thing is unique (the only one of its kind) or it is not. Something may be almost unique (there are very few like it), but nothing is "very unique."

VICIOUS/VISCOUS CIRCLE/CYCLE

The term "vicious circle" was invented by logicians to describe a form of fallacious circular argument in which each term of the argument draws on the other: "Democracy is the best form of government because democratic elections produce the best governments." The phrase has been extended in popular usage to all kinds of self-exacerbating processes such as this: poor people often find themselves borrowing money to pay off their debts, but in the process create even more onerous debts which in their turn will need to be financed by further borrowing. Sensing vaguely that such destructive spirals are not closed loops, people have transmuted "vicious circle" into "vicious cycle." The problem with this perfectly logical change is that a lot of people know what the original "correct" phrase was and are likely to scorn users of the new one. They go beyond scorn to contempt however toward those poor souls who render the phrase as "viscous cycle." Don't use this expression unless you are discussing a Harley-Davidson in dire need of an oil change.

VIDEO/FILM

Many of us can remember when portable transistorized radios were ignorantly called "transistors." We have a tendency to abbreviate the names of various sorts of electronic technology (see "stereo" and "satellite"), often in the process confusing the medium with the content. Video is the electronic reproduction of images, and applies to

broadcast and cable television, prerecorded videocassette recordings (made on a videocassette recorder, or VCR), and related technologies. MTV appropriated this broad term for a very narrow meaning: "videotaped productions of visual material meant to accompany popular music recordings." This is now what most people mean when they speak of "a video," unless they are "renting a video," in which case they mean a videocassette or DVD recording of a film. One also hears people referring to theatrical films that they happened to have viewed in videotaped reproduction as "videos." This is simply wrong. A film is a film (or movie), whether it is projected on a screen from 35 or 70 mm film or broadcast via the NTSC, SECAM or PAL standard. Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane" is not now and never will be a "video."

VINEGARETTE/VINAIGRETTE

Naive diners and restaurant workers alike commonly mispronounce the classic French dressing called "vinaigrette" as if it were "vinegarette." To be more sophisticated, say "vin-uh-GRETT" (the first syllable rhymes with "seen").

VINTAGE POINT/VANTAGE POINT

The spot from which you have a good view is a vantage point.

VIRII/VIRUSES

Hackers like to use "virii" as the plural form of "virus," but Latin scholars object that this invented term does not follow standard patterns in that language, and that there is already a perfectly good plural in English: "viruses."

VITAE/VITA

Unless you are going to claim credit for accomplishments in previous incarnations, you should refer to your "vita," not your "vitae." All kidding aside, the "ae" in "vitae" supposedly indicates the genitive rather than the plural; but the derivation of "vita" from "curriculum vitae" is purely speculative (see the Oxford English Dictionary), and "vitae" on its own makes no sense grammatically.

"Resume," by the way, is a French word with both "Es" accented, and literally means "summary." In English one often sees it without the accents, or with only the second accent, neither of which is a serious error. But if you're trying to show how multilingual you are, remember the first accent.

VIOLA/VOILA

A viola is a flower or a musical instrument. The expression which means "behold!" is "voila." It comes from a French expression literally meaning "look there!" In French it is spelled with a grave accent over the A, but when it was adopted into English, it lost its accent. Such barbarous misspellings as "vwala" are even worse, caused by the reluctance of English speakers to believe that "OI" can represent the

sound "wah," as it usually does in French.

VOLUMN/VOLUME

There are a few unusual words in English when ending in "MN" in which the "N" is silent, such as "hymn" and "column," but "volume" is not one of them.

VOLUMPTUOUS/VOLUPTUOUS

Given the current mania for slim, taut bodies, it is understandable--if amusing--that some folks should confuse voluptuousness with lumpiness. In fact, "voluptuous" is derived from Latin "voluptas," which refers to sensual pleasure and not to shape at all. A voluptuous body is a luxurious body.

WAIL/WHALE

One informal meaning of "whale" is "to beat." Huck Finn says of Pap that "He used to always whale me when he was sober."

Although the vocalist in a band may wail a song, the drummer whales on the drums; and lead guitarists when they thrash their instruments wildly whale on them.

Although this usage dates back to the 18th century and used to be common in Britain and America, it is now confined mostly to the US, and even there people often mistakenly use "wail" for this meaning.

WAIT ON/WAIT FOR

In some dialects it's common to say that you're waiting on people or events when in standard English we would say you're waiting for them. Waiters wait on people, so it's all right to say "I'm tired of waiting on you hand and foot"; but you shouldn't say "I'm waiting on you down here at the police station; bring the bail money so I can come home."

WALK THE TALK/WALK THE WALK

Aristotle's followers are said to have discussed philosophy while walking about with him--hence their name: "peripatetics." I suppose they could be have been said to "walk the talk."

For the rest of us, the saying is "if you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk"--a modern version of old sayings like "actions speak louder than words" and "practice what you preach." Another early form of the expression was "walk it like you talk it."

Many people now condense this to "walk the talk," which makes a sort of sense (act on your speech), but strikes those who are more familiar with the original form as confused.

WANDER/WONDER

If you idly travel around, you wander. If you realize you're lost, you wonder where you are.

WARMONGERER/WARMONGER

"Monger" is a very old word for "dealer." An ironmonger sells metal or hardware, and a fishmonger sells fish. Warmongers do not literally sell wars, but they advocate and promote them. For some reason lots of people tack an unneeded extra "-er" onto the end of this word. Why would you say "mongerer" when you don't say "dealerer"?

WARY/WEARY/LEERY

People sometimes write "weary" (tired) when they mean "wary" (cautious) which is a close synonym with "leery" which in the psychedelic era was often misspelled "leary"; but since Timothy Leary faded from public consciousness, the correct spelling has prevailed.

WARRANTEE/WARRANTY

Confused by the spelling of "guarantee," people often misspell the related word "warrantee" rather than the correct "warranty." "Warrantee" is a rare legal term that means "the person to whom a warrant is made." Although "guarantee" can be a verb ("we guarantee your satisfaction"), "warranty" is not. The rarely used verb form is "to warrant."

WAS/WERE

In phrases beginning with "there" many people overlook the need to choose a plural or singular form of the verb "to be" depending on what follows. "There were several good-looking guys at the party" [plural]; "unfortunately one of them was my husband" [singular].

WASH

In my mother's Oklahoma dialect, "wash" was pronounced "warsh," and I was embarrassed to discover in school that the inclusion of the superfluous "R" sound was considered ignorant. This has made me all the more sensitive now that I live in Washington to the mispronunciation "Warshington." Some people tell you that after you "warsh" you should "wrench" ("rinse").

WAX

An unusual use of the word "wax" is "to change manner of speaking," as in "she waxed eloquent on the charms of New Jersey" or "he waxed poetic on virtues of tube amplifiers." These expressions mean that she became eloquent and he became poetic. It is an error to say instead "she waxed eloquently" or " he waxed poetically."

WAY/FAR, MUCH MORE

Young people frequently use phrases like "way better" to mean "far

better" or "very much better." In formal writing, it would be gauche to say that Impressionism is "way more popular" than Cubism instead of "much more popular."

WAYS/WAY

In some dialects it's common to say "you've got a ways to go before you've saved enough to buy a Miata," but in standard English it's "a way to go."

WEAK/WEEK

People often absentmindedly write "last weak" or "next weak." Less often they write "I feel week." These mistakes will not be caught by a spelling checker.

"Weak" is the opposite of "strong." A week is made up of seven days.

WEATHER/WETHER/WHETHER

The climate is made up of "weather"; whether it is nice out depends on whether it is raining or not. A wether is just a castrated sheep.

WEINER/WIENER

The Vienna sausage from the city the Austrians call Wien inspired the American hot dog, or wiener. Americans aren't used to the European pronunciation of IE as "ee" and often misspell the word as "weiner."

WENSDAY/WEDNESDAY

Wednesday was named after the Germanic god "Woden" (or "Wotan"). Almost no one pronounces this word's middle syllable distinctly, but it's important to remember the correct spelling in writing.

WENT/GONE

The past participle of "go" is "gone" so it's not "I should have went to the party" but "I should have gone to the party."

WE'RE/WERE

"We're" is a contraction of the phrase "we are": the apostrophe stands for the omitted letter A. "Were" is simply a plural past-tense form of the verb "are." To talk about something happening now or in the future, use "we're"; but to talk about something in the past, use "were." If you can't substitute "we are" for the word you've written, omit the apostrophe.

"We were going to go to the party as a prince and princess, but Derek cut himself shaving, so we're going instead as a female werewolf and her victim."

WERE/WHERE

Sloppy typists frequently leave the "H" out of "where." Spelling checkers do not catch this sort of error, of course, so look for it as you proofread.

WET YOUR APPETITE/WHET YOUR APPETITE

It is natural to think that something mouth-watering "wets your appetite," but actually the expression is "whet your appetite"--sharpen your appetite, as a whetstone sharpens a knife.

WHACKY/WACKY

Although the original spelling of this word meaning "crazy" was "whacky," the current dominant spelling is "wacky." If you use the older form, some readers will think you've made a spelling error.

WHAT/THAT

In some dialects it is common to substitute "what" for "that," as in "You should dance with him what brought you." This is not standard usage.

WHEAT/WHOLE WHEAT

Waiters routinely ask "Wheat or white?" when bread is ordered, but the white bread is also made of wheat. The correct term is "whole wheat," in which the whole grain, including the bran and germ, has been used to make the flour. "Whole wheat" does not necessarily imply that no white flour has been used in the bread; most whole wheat breads incorporate some white flour.

WHEELBARREL/WHEELBARROW

One very old meaning of the word "barrow" is an open container for carrying people or goods. The earliest barrows were carried by two people holding handles on either end. Add a wheel to one end and you have a wheelbarrow which can be handled by a single person. The word is also sometimes applied to two-wheeled versions.

The word has nothing to do with barrels.

WHENEVER/WHEN

"Whenever" has two main functions. It can refer to repeated events: "Whenever I put the baby down for a nap the phone rings and wakes her up." Or it can refer to events of whose date or time you are uncertain: "Whenever it was that I first wore my new cashmere sweater, I remember the baby spit up on it." In some dialects (notably in Northern Ireland and Texas) it is common to substitute "whenever" for "when" in statements about specific events occurring only once and whose date is known: "Whenever we got married, John was so nervous he dropped the ring down my decolletage." This is nonstandard. If an event is unique and its

date or time known, use "when."

WHEREABOUTS ARE/WHEREABOUTS IS

Despite the deceptive "S" on the end of the word, "whereabouts" is normally singular, not plural. "The whereabouts of the stolen diamond is unknown." Only if you were simultaneously referring to two or more persons having separate whereabouts would the word be plural, and you are quite unlikely to want to do so.

WHERE IT'S AT

This slang expression gained widespread currency in the sixties as a hip way of stating that the speaker understood the essential truth of a situation: "I know where it's at." Or more commonly: "You don't know where it's at." It is still heard from time to time with that meaning, but the user risks being labeled as a quaint old Boomer. However, standard usage never accepted the literal sense of the phrase. Don't say, "I put my purse down and now I don't know where it's at" unless you want to be regarded as uneducated. "Where it is" will do fine; the "at" is redundant.

WHEREFORE

When Juliet says "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" she means "Why do you have to be Romeo--why couldn't you have a name belonging to some family my folks are friendly with?" She is not asking where Romeo is. So if you misuse the word in sentences like "Wherefore art thou, Stevie Wonder?" (you wish he'd make another great album like he used to), you make yourself sound illiterate rather than sophisticated.

WHETHER/WHETHER OR NOT

"Whether" works fine on its own in most contexts: "I wonder whether I forgot to turn off the stove?" But when you mean "regardless of whether" it has to be followed by "or not" somewhere in the sentence: "We need to leave for the airport in five minutes whether you've found your teddy bear or not."

See also "if/whether."

WHILST/WHILE

Although "whilst" is a perfectly good traditional synonym of "while," in American usage it is considered pretentious and old-fashioned.

WHIM AND A PRAYER

A 1943 hit song depicted a bomber pilot just barely managing to bring his shot-up plane back to base, "comin' in on a wing and a prayer" (lyrics by Harold Adamson, music by Jimmy McHugh). Some people who don't get the allusion mangle this expression as "a whim and a prayer." Whimsicality and fervent prayerfulness don't go together.

WHIMP/WIMP

The original and still by far the most common spelling of this common bit of slang meaning "weakling, coward," is "wimp." If you use the much less common "whimp" instead people may regard you as a little wimpy.

WHOA IS ME/WOE IS ME

"Whoa" is what you tell a horse to get it to stop, extended in casual speech to an interjection meant to make someone pause to think in the middle of a conversation--sometimes misspelled "woah." The standard woeful lament is "Woe is me."

WHIP CREAM/WHIPPED CREAM

You whip cream until it becomes whipped cream; and that's what you should write on the menu.

WHISKY/WHISKEY

Scots prefer the spelling "whisky"; Americans follow instead the Irish spelling, so Kentucky bourbon is "whiskey."

WHO'S/WHOSE

This is one of those cases where it is important to remember that possessive pronouns never take apostrophes, even though possessive nouns do (see it's/its). "Who's" always and forever means only "who is," as in "Who's that guy with the droopy mustache?" or "who has," as in "Who's been eating my porridge?" "Whose" is the possessive form of "who" and is used as follows: "Whose dirty socks are these on the breakfast table?"

WHO/WHOM

"Whom" has been dying an agonizing death for decades--you'll notice there are no Whoms in Dr. Seuss's Whoville. Many people never use the word in speech at all. However, in formal writing, critical readers still expect it to be used when appropriate. The distinction between "who" and "whom" is basically simple: "who" is the subject form of this pronoun and "whom" is the object form. "Who was wearing that awful dress at the Academy Awards banquet?" is correct because "who" is the subject of the sentence. "The MC was so startled by the neckline that he forgot to whom he was supposed to give the Oscar" is correct because "whom" is the object of the preposition "to." So far so good.

Now consider this sort of question: "Who are you staring at?" Although strictly speaking the pronoun should be "whom," nobody who wants to be taken seriously would use it in this case, though it is the object of the preposition "at". (Bothered by ending the sentence with a preposition? See my "Non-Errors" section.) "Whom" is very rarely used even by careful speakers as the first word in a question, and many authorities have now conceded the point.

There is another sort of question in which "whom" appears later in the sentence: "I wonder whom he bribed to get the contract?" This may seem at first similar to the previous example, but here "whom" is not the subject of any verb in the sentence; rather it is part of the noun clause which itself is the object of the verb "wonder." Here an old gender-biased but effective test for "whom" can be used. Try rewriting the sentence using "he" or "him." Clearly "He bribed he" is incorrect; you would say "he bribed him." Where "him" is the proper word in the paraphrased sentence, use "whom."

Instances in which the direct object appears at the beginning of a sentence are tricky because we are used to having subjects in that position and are strongly tempted to use "who": "Whomever Susan admired most was likely to get the job." (Test: "She admired him." Right?)

Where things get really messy is in statements in which the object or subject status of the pronoun is not immediately obvious. Example: "The police gave tickets to whoever had parked in front of the fire hydrant." The object of the preposition "to" is the entire noun clause, "whoever had parked in front of the fire hydrant," but "whoever" is the subject of that clause, the subject of the verb "had parked." Here's a case where the temptation to use "whomever" should be resisted.

Confused? Just try the "he or him" test, and if it's still not clear, go with "who." You'll bother fewer people and have a fair chance of being right.

WHOLE-HARDILY/WHOLEHEARTEDLY

If you want to convey your hearty congratulations to someone, you do so not "whole-hardily" but "wholeheartedly"--with your whole heart.

A WHOLE 'NOTHER/A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

It is one thing to use the expression "a whole 'nother" as a consciously slangy phrase suggesting rustic charm and a completely different matter to use it mistakenly. The "A" at the beginning of the phrase is the common article "a" but is here treated as if it were simultaneously the first letter of "another," interrupted by "whole."

WHO'S EVER/WHOEVER'S

In speech people sometimes try to treat the word "whoever" as two words when it's used in the possessive form: "Whose-ever delicious plums those were in the refrigerator, I ate them." Occasionally it's even misspelled as "whoseever." The standard form is "whoever's," as in "Whoever's plums those were. . . ."

WILE AWAY/WHILE AWAY

"Waiting for my physical at the doctor's office, I whiled away the time reading the dessert recipes in an old copy of Gourmet magazine." The expression "while away the time" is the only surviving context for a very old use of "while" as a verb meaning "to spend time." Many people

substitute "wile," but to wile people is to lure or trick them into doing something--quite different from simply idling away the time. Even though dictionaries accept "wile away" as an alternative, it makes more sense to stick with the original expression.

-WISE

In political and business jargon it is common to append "-wise" to nouns to create novel adverbs: "Revenue-wise, last quarter was a disaster." Critics of language are united in objecting to this pattern, and it is often used in fiction to satirize less than eloquent speakers.

WITHIN/AMONG

"Within" means literally "inside of," but when you want to compare similarities or differences between things you may need "among" instead. It's not "There are some entertaining movies within the current releases," but "among the current releases." But you can use "within" by rewriting the sentence to lump the movies together into a single entity: "There are some entertaining movies within the current batch of releases." A batch is a single thing, and the individual films that make it up are within it.

WOMAN/WOMEN

The singular "woman" probably gets mixed up with the plural "women" because although both are spelled with an O in the first syllable, only the pronunciation of the O really differentiates them. Just remember that this word is treated no differently than "man" (one person) and "men" (more than one person). A woman is a woman--never a women.

WONT/WON'T

People often leave the apostrophe out of "won't," meaning "will not." "Wont" is a completely different and rarely used word meaning "habitual custom." Perhaps people are reluctant to believe this is aq contraction because it doesn't make obvious sense like "cannot" being contracted to "can't." The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that "won't" is a contraction of a nonstandard form: "woll not."

WORLD WIDE WEB

"World Wide Web" is a name that needs to be capitalized, like "Internet." It is made up of Web pages and Web sites (or, less formally, Websites).

WORSE COMES TO WORSE/WORST COMES TO WORST

The traditional idiom is "if worst comes to worst." The modern variation "worse comes to worst" is a little more logical. "Worse comes to worse" is just a mistake.

WOULD HAVE/HAD

The standard way to talk about something in the past that's different from what really happened is to use "had," as in "The robber wished he had given the bank clerk a fake when she asked for his ID card." People often say instead "wished he would have," but this pattern is not acceptable in standard written English.

WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE/WOULD HAVE LIKED

"She would liked to have had another glass of champagne" should be "she would have liked to have another glass. . . ."

WRANGLE/WANGLE

If you deviously manage to obtain something you wangle it: "I wangled an invitation to Jessica's party by hinting that I would be inviting her to our house on the lake this summer." But if you argue with someone, you wrangle with them: "Once I got to the party, Jessica's attitude irritated me so much that we wound up wrangling constantly during it." Of course cowboys wrangle cattle, and specialists wrangle other animal species in films.

WRAPPED/RAPT

When you get deeply involved in a project, you may say you're wrapped up in it; but if you are entranced or enraptured by something you are "rapt," not "wrapped." The word means "carried away" and is used in expressions like "listening with rapt attention," "rapt expression," and "rapt in conversation."

WRECKLESS/RECKLESS

This word has nothing to do with creating the potential for a wreck. Rather it involves not reckoning carefully all the hazards involved in an action. The correct spelling is therefore "reckless."

WRITE ME

Many UK English speakers and some American authorities object strongly to the common American expression "write me," insisting that the correct expression is "write to me." But "write me" is so common in US English that I think few Americans will judge you harshly for using it. After all, we say "call me"--why not "write me"? But if you're an American trying to please foreigners or particularly picky readers, you might keep the "write me" phobia in mind.

If you disagree, please don't write me.

WRITTING/WRITING

One of the comments English teachers dread to see on their evaluations is "The professor really helped me improve my writting." When "-ing" is added to a word which ends in a short vowel followed only by a single consonant, that consonant is normally doubled, but "write" has a silent E on the end to ensure the long I sound in the word. Doubling the T in

this case would make the word rhyme with "flitting."

WONDERKIND/WUNDERKIND

We borrowed the term "wunderkind," meaning "child prodigy," from the Germans. We don't capitalize it the way they do, but we use the same spelling. When writing in English, don't half-translate it as "wonderkind."

YA'LL/Y'ALL

"How y'all doin'?" If you are rendering this common Southernism in print, be careful where you place the apostrophe, which stands for the second and third letters in "you." Note that "y'all" stands for "you all" and is properly a plural form, though many southern speakers treat it as a singular form and resort to "all y'all" for the plural.

YE/THE

Those who study the history of English know that the word often misread as "ye" in Middle English is good old "the" spelled with an unfamiliar character called a "thorn" which looks vaguely like a "Y" but which is pronounced "TH." So all those quaint shop names beginning "Ye Olde" are based on a confusion: people never said "ye" to mean "the." However, if you'd rather be cute than historically accurate, go ahead. Very few people will know any better.

YEA/YEAH/YAY

"Yea" is a very old-fashioned formal way of saying "yes," used mainly in voting. It's the opposite of--and rhymes with--"nay." When you want to write the common casual version of "yes," the correct spelling is "yeah" (sounds like "yeh"). When the third grade teacher announced a class trip to the zoo, we all yelled "yay!" (the opposite of "boo"!). That was back when I was only yay big.

YING AND YANG/YIN AND YANG

The pair of female and male terms in Chinese thought consists of "yin and yang," not "ying and yang."

YOKE/YOLK

The yellow center of an egg is its yolk. The link that holds two oxen together is a yoke; they are yoked.

YOU CAN'T HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO/YOU CAN'T EAT YOUR CAKE AND HAVE IT TOO

The most popular form of this saying--"You can't have your cake and eat it too"-- confuses many people because they mistakenly suppose the word "have" means "eat," as in "Have a piece of cake for dessert." A more logical version of this saying is "You can't eat your cake and have it too," meaning that if you eat your cake you won't have it any more. The

point is that if you eat your cake right now you won't have it to eat later. "Have" means "possess" in this context, not "eat."

YOUR/YOU

"I appreciate your cleaning the toilet" is more formal than "I appreciate you cleaning the toilet."

YOUR/YOU'RE

"You're" is always a contraction of "you are." If you've written "you're," try substituting "you are." If it doesn't work, the word you want is "your." Your writing will improve if you're careful about this.

If someone thanks you, write back "you're welcome" for "you are welcome."

YOUR GUYS'S/YOUR

Many languages have separate singular and plural forms for the second person (ways of saying "you"), but standard English does not. "You" can be addressed to an individual or a whole room full of people.

In casual speech, Americans have evolved the slangy expression "you guys" to function as a second-person plural, formerly used of males only but now extended to both sexes; but this is not appropriate in formal contexts. Diners in fine restaurants are often irritated by clueless waiters who ask "Can I get you guys anything?"

The problem is much more serious when extended to the possessive: "You guys's dessert will be ready in a minute." Some people even create a double possessive by saying "your guys's dessert. . . ." This is extremely clumsy. When dealing with people you don't know intimately, it's best to stick with "you" and "your" no matter how many people you're addressing.

YOURSELF

In formal English it's safest to use "yourself" only after having earlier in the same sentence used "you." When the British reply to a query like "How are you?" with "Fine, and yourself?" they are actually pointing back to the "you" in the query.

It used to be common to address someone in British English as "Your good self" and some people have continued this tradition by creating the word "goodself," common especially in South Asia; but this is nonstandard.

YOUSE/YOU

The plural form of "you" pronounced as "youse" is heard mainly in satire on the speech of folks from Brooklyn. It's not standard English, since "you" can be either singular or plural without any change in spelling or pronunciation.

YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THING COMING/YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THINK COMING

Here's a case in which eagerness to avoid error leads to error. The original expression is the last part of a deliberately ungrammatical joke: "If that's what you think, you've got another think coming."

ZEROSCAPE/XERISCAPE

If you nuke your front lawn I suppose you might call it a "zeroscape," but the term for an arid-climate garden requiring little or no watering is "xeriscape" (-xeri is a Greek root meaning "dry").

ZERO-SUM GAIN/ZERO-SUM GAME

The concept of a zero-sum game was developed first in game theory: what one side gains the other loses. When applied to economics it is often contrasted with a "win-win" situation in which both sides can make gains without anyone losing. People who are unaware of the phrase's origins often mistakenly substitute "gain" for "game."

ZOOLOGY

Both O's in "zoo" are needed to create the "oo" sound in this word; but the same is not true of words like "zoology" and "zoologist." Here each O has its own sound: "oh" followed by "ah." The first two syllables rhyme with "boa."

Then there is a whole class of technical words like "zooplankton" where both O's are pronounced "oh," though the second "oh" is pronounced so weakly it comes out more like "uh" But if you need to speak such words, you probably know how to pronounce them already.

NON-ERRORS: (Those usages people keep telling you are wrong but which are actually standard in English.)

Split infinitives

For the hyper-critical, "to boldly go where no man has gone before" should be " to go boldly. . . ." It is good to be aware that inserting one or more words between "to" and a verb is not strictly speaking an error, and is often more expressive and graceful than moving the intervening words elsewhere; but so many people are offended by split infinitives that it is better to avoid them except when the alternatives sound strained and awkward.

Ending a sentence with a preposition

A fine example of an artificial "rule" which ignores standard usage. The famous witticism usually attributed to Winston Churchill makes the point well: "This is the sort of pedantry up with which I cannot put."

See "The American Heritage Book of English Usage" at

http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/050.html. Jack Lynch has some sensible comments on this issue:
http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/p.html#prepend.

The saying attributed to Winston Churchill rejecting the rule against ending a sentence with a preposition must be among the most frequently mutated witticisms ever. I have received many notes from correspondents claiming to know what the "original saying" was, but none of them cites an authoritative source.

The alt.english.usage FAQ states that the story originated with an anecdote in Sir Ernest Gowers' Plain Words (1948). Supposedly an editor had clumsily rearranged one of Churchill's sentences to avoid ending it in a preposition, and the Prime Minister, very proud of his style, scribbled this note in reply: "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put." The American Heritage Book of English Usage agrees.

The FAQ goes on to say that the Oxford Companion to the English Language (no edition cited) states that the original was "This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put." To me this sounds more likely, and eagerness to avoid the offensive word "bloody" would help to explain the proliferation of variations.

A quick search of the Internet turned up an astonishing number. In this era of copy-and-paste it's truly unusual to find such rich variety. The narrative context varies too: sometimes the person rebuked by Churchill is a correspondent, a speech editor, a bureaucrat, or an audience member at a speech and sometimes it is a man, sometimes a woman, and sometimes even a young student. Sometimes Churchill writes a note, sometimes he scribbles the note on the corrected manuscript, and often he is said to have spoken the rebuke aloud. The text concerned was variously a book manuscript, a speech, an article, or a government document.

Here is just a sample of the variations circulating on the Net:

1. That is a rule up with which I will not put. 2. This is the kind of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 3. This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 4. Not ending a sentence with a preposition is a bit of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 5. That is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put 6. This is insubordination, up with which I will not put!
7. This is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put.
8. This is the sort of thing up with which I will not put.
9. Madame, that is a rule up with which I shall not put.

One poor soul, unfamiliar with the word "arrant," came up with: "That is the sort of errant criticism up with which I will not put."

Then there are those who get it so scrambled it comes out backward:

1. Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put. 2. Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which we will not put. 3.From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put. 4. Please

understand that ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I shall not put.

I checked the indexes of a dozen Churchill biographies, but none of them had an entry for "prepositions."

Ben Zimmer has presented evidence on the alt.usage.english list that this story was not originally attributed to Churchill at all, but to an anonymous official in an article in "The Strand" magazine. Since Churchill often contributed to "The Strand," Zimmer argues, it would certainly have identified him if he had been the official in question. It is not clear how the anecdote came to be attributed to Churchill by Gowers, but it seems to have circulated independently earlier.

Beginning a sentence with a conjunction

It offends those who wish to confine English usage in a logical straitjacket that writers often begin sentences with "and" or "but." True, one should be aware that many such sentences would be improved by becoming clauses in compound sentences; but there are many effective and traditional uses for beginning sentences thus. One example is the reply to a previous assertion in a dialogue: "But, my dear Watson, the criminal obviously wore expensive boots or he would not have taken such pains to scrape them clean." Make it a rule to consider whether your conjunction would repose more naturally within the previous sentence or would lose in useful emphasis by being demoted from its position at the head of a new sentence.

Using "between" for only two, "among" for more

The "-tween" in "between" is clearly linked to the number two; but, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, "In all senses, between has, from its earliest appearance, been extended to more than two." We're talking about Anglo-Saxon here--early. Pedants have labored to enforce "among" when there are three or more objects under discussion, but largely in vain. Even the pickiest speaker does not naturally say, "A treaty has been negotiated among England, France, and Germany."

Over vs. more than.

Some people insist that "over" cannot be used to signify "more than," as in "Over a thousand baton-twirlers marched in the parade." "Over," they insist, always refers to something physically higher: say, the blimp hovering over the parade route. This absurd distinction ignores the role metaphor plays in language. If I write 1 on the blackboard and 10 beside it, 10 is still the "higher" number. "Over" has been used in the sense of "more than" for over a thousand years.

Feeling bad

"I feel bad" is standard English, as in "This t-shirt smells bad" (not "badly"). "I feel badly" is an incorrect hyper-correction by people who think they know better than the masses. People who are happy can correctly say they feel good, but if they say they feel well, we know

they mean to say they're healthy.

Forward vs. forwards

Although some style books prefer "forward" and "toward" to "forwards" and "towards," none of these forms is really incorrect, though the forms without the final "S" are perhaps a smidgen more formal. The spelling "foreword" applies exclusively to the introductory matter in a book.

Gender/sex

When discussing males and females, feminists wanting to remove references to sexuality from contexts which don't involve mating or reproduction revived an older meaning of "gender" which had come to refer in modern times chiefly to language, as a synonym for "sex" in phrases such as "Our goal is to achieve gender equality." Americans, always nervous about sex, eagerly embraced this usage, which is now standard. In some scholarly fields, "sex" is used to label biologically determined aspects of maleness and femaleness (reproduction, etc.) while "gender" refers to their socially determined aspects (behavior, attitudes, etc.); but in ordinary speech this distinction is not always maintained. It is disingenuous to pretend that people who use "gender" in the new senses are making an error, just as it is disingenuous to maintain that "Ms." means "manuscript" (that's "MS"). Nevertheless, I must admit I was startled to discover that the tag on my new trousers describes not only their size and color, but their "gender."

Using "who" for people, "that" for animals and inanimate objects.

In fact there are many instances in which the most conservative usage is to refer to a person using "that": "All the politicians that were at the party later denied even knowing the host" is actually somewhat more traditional than the more popular "politicians who." An aversion to "that" referring to human beings as somehow diminishing their humanity may be praiseworthily sensitive, but it cannot claim the authority of tradition. In some sentences, "that" is clearly preferable to "who": "She is the only person I know of that prefers whipped cream on her granola." In the following example, to exchange "that" for "who" would be absurd: "Who was it that said, 'A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle'?"*

*Commonly attributed to Gloria Steinem, but she attributes it to Irina Dunn.

"Since" cannot mean "because."

"Since" need not always refer to time. Since the 14th century, when it was often spelled "syn," it has also meant "seeing that" or "because."

Hopefully

This word has meant "it is to be hoped" for a very long time, and those who insist it can only mean "in a hopeful fashion" display more hopefulness than realism.

Momentarily

"The plane will be landing momentarily" says the flight attendant, and the grumpy grammarian in seat 36B thinks to himself, "So we're going to touch down for just a moment?" Everyone else thinks, "Just a moment now before we land." Back in the 1920s when this use of "momentarily" was first spreading on both sides of the Atlantic, one might have been accused of misusing the word; but by now it's listed without comment as one of the standard definitions in most dictionaries.

Lend vs. loan

"Loan me your hat" was just as correct everywhere as "lend me your ears" until the British made "lend" the preferred verb, relegating "loan" to the thing being lent. However, as in so many cases, Americans kept the older pattern, which in its turn has influenced modern British usage so that those insisting that "loan" can only be a noun are in the minority.

Scan vs. skim

Those who insist that "scan" can never be a synonym of "skim" have lost the battle. It is true that the word originally meant "to scrutinize," but it has now evolved into one of those unfortunate words with two opposite meanings: to examine closely (now rare) and to glance at quickly (much more common). It would be difficult to say which of these two meanings is more prominent in the computer-related usage, to "scan a document."

Regime vs. regimen

Some people insist that "regime" should be used only in reference to governments, and that people who say they are following a dietary regime should instead use "regimen"; but "regime" has been a synonym of "regimen" for over a century, and is widely accepted in that sense.

Near miss

It is futile to protest that "near miss" should be "near collision." This expression is a condensed version of something like "a miss that came very near to being a collision," and is similar to "narrow escape." Everyone knows what is meant by it and almost everyone uses it. It should be noted that the expression can also be used in the sense of almost succeeding in striking a desired target: "His Cointreau souffle was a near miss."

"None" singular vs. plural

Some people insist that since "none" is derived from "no one" it should always be singular: "none of us is having dessert." However, in standard usage, the word is most often treated as a plural. "None of us are having dessert" will do just fine.

Off of

For most Americans, the natural thing to say is "Climb down off of [pronounced " offa"] that horse, Tex, with your hands in the air;" but many UK authorities urge that the "of" should be omitted as redundant. Where British English reigns you may want to omit the "of" as superfluous, but common usage in the US has rendered "off of" so standard as to generally pass unnoticed, though some American authorities also discourage it in formal writing. But if "onto" makes sense, so does "off of." However, "off of" meaning "from" in phrases like "borrow five dollars off of Clarice" is definitely nonstandard.

Til/until

Since it looks like an abbreviation for "until," some people argue that this word should always be spelled "'til" (though not all insist on the apostrophe). However, "till" has regularly occurred as a spelling of this word for over 800 years and it's actually older than "until." It is perfectly good English.

"Teenage" vs. "teenaged"

Some people object that the word should be "teenaged," but unlike the still nonstandard "ice tea" and "stain glass," "teenage" is almost universally accepted now.

Don't use "reference" to mean "cite."

Nouns are often turned into verbs in English, and "reference" in the sense "to provide references or citations" has become so widespread that it's generally acceptable, though some teachers and editors still object.

unquote/endquote

Some people get upset at the common pattern by which speakers frame a quotation by saying "quote . . . unquote," insisting that the latter word should logically be "endquote"; but illogical as it may be, "unquote" has been used in this way for about a century, and "endquote" is nonstandard.

Persuade vs. convince

Some people like to distinguish between these two words by insisting that you persuade people until you have convinced them; but "persuade" as a synonym for "convince" goes back at least to the 16th century. It can mean both to attempt to convince and to succeed. It is no longer common to say things like "I am persuaded that you are an illiterate fool," but even this usage is not in itself wrong.

Normalcy vs. normality

The word "normalcy" had been around for more than half a century when President Warren G. Harding was assailed in the newspapers for having

used it in a 1921 speech. Some folks are still upset; but in the US "normalcy" is a perfectly normal--if uncommon--synonym for "normality."

Aggravate vs. irritate Some people claim that "aggravate" can only mean "make worse" and should not be used to mean "irritate"; but the latter has been a valid use of the word for four centuries, and "aggravation" means almost exclusively "irritation."

You shouldn't pronounce the "e" in "not my forte."

Some people insist that it's an error to pronounce the word "forte" in the expression "not my forte" as if French-derived "forte" were the same as the Italian musical term for "loud": "for-tay." But the original French expression is "pas mon fort," which not only has no "e" on the end to pronounce--it has a silent "t" as well. It's too bad that when we imported this phrase we mangled it so badly, but it's too late to do anything about it now. If you go around saying what sounds like "that's not my fort," people won't understand what you mean.

However, those who use the phrase to mean "not to my taste" ("Wagnerian opera is not my forte") are definitely mistaken. Your forte is what you're good at, not just stuff you like.

"Preventive" is the adjective, "preventative" the noun.

I must say I like the sound of this distinction, but in fact the two are interchangeable as both nouns and adjectives, though many prefer "preventive" as being shorter and simpler. "Preventative" used as an adjective dates back to the 17th century, as does "preventive" as a noun.

People are healthy; vegetables are healthful.

Logic and tradition are on the side of those who make this distinction, but I'm afraid phrases like "part of a healthy breakfast" have become so widespread that they are rarely perceived as erroneous except by the hyper-correct. On a related though slightly different subject, it is interesting to note that in English adjectives connected to sensations in the perceiver of an object or event are often transferred to the object or event itself. In the 19th century it was not uncommon to refer, for instance, to a "grateful shower of rain," and we still say "a gloomy landscape," "a cheerful sight" and "a happy coincidence."

Crops are raised; children are reared.

Old-fashioned writers insist that you raise crops and rear children; but in modern American English children are usually "raised."

Dinner is done; people are finished.

I pronounce this an antiquated distinction rarely observed in modern speech. Nobody really supposes the speaker is saying he or she has been roasted to a turn. In older usage people said, "I have done" to indicate they had completed an action. "I am done" is not really so very

different.

"You've got mail" should be "you have mail."

The "have" contracted in phrases like this is merely an auxiliary verb, not an expression of possession. It is not a redundancy. Compare: "You've sent the mail."

it's "cut the muster," not "cut the mustard."

This etymology seems plausible at first. Its proponents often trace it to the American Civil War. We do have the analogous expression "to pass muster," which probably first suggested this alternative; but although the origins of "cut the mustard" are somewhat obscure, the latter is definitely the form used in all sorts of writing throughout the twentieth century. Common sense would suggest that a person cutting a muster is not someone being selected as fit, but someone eliminating the unfit.

Here is the article on "cut the mustard" from the "faq" (frequently asked questions list) of the UseNet newsgroup alt.usage.english:

This expression meaning "to achieve the required standard" is first recorded in an O. Henry story of 1902: "So I looked around and found a proposition [a woman] that exactly cut the mustard."

It may come from a cowboy expression, "the proper mustard", meaning "the genuine thing", and a resulting use of "mustard" to denote the best of anything. O. Henry in Cabbages and Kings (1894) called mustard "the main attraction": "I'm not headlined in the bills, but I'm the mustard in the salad dressing, just the same." Figurative use of "mustard" as a positive superlative dates from 1659 in the phrase "keen as mustard", and use of "cut" to denote rank (as in "a cut above") dates from the 18th century.

Other theories are that it is a corruption of the military phrase "to pass muster" ("muster", from Latin "monstrare"="to show", means "to assemble (troops), as for inspection"); that it refers to the practice of adding vinegar to ground-up mustard seed to "cut" the bitter taste; that it literally means "cut mustard" as an example of a difficult task, mustard being a relatively tough crop that grows close to the ground; and that it literally means "cut mustard" as an example of an easy task (via the negative expression "can't even cut the mustard"), mustard being easier to cut at the table than butter.

The more-or-less synonymous expression "cut it" (as in "sorry, doesn't cut it") seems to be more recent and may derive from "cut the mustard".

it's "carrot on a stick," not "carrot or stick."

Authoritative dictionaries agree, the original expression refers to offering to reward a stubborn mule or donkey with a carrot or threatening to beat it with a stick and not to a carrot being dangled

from a stick.

The Usenet Newsgroup alt.usage.english has debated this expression several times. No one there presented definitive evidence, but dictionaries agree the proper expression is "the carrot or the stick".

One person on the Web mentions an old "Little Rascals" short in which an animal was tempted to forward motion by a carrot dangling from a stick. I think the image is much older than that, going back to old magazine cartoons (certainly older than the animated cartoons referred to by correspondents on alt.usage.english); but I'll bet that the cartoon idea stemmed from loose association with the original phrase "the carrot or the stick" rather than the other way around. An odd variant is the claim broadcast on National Public Radio March 21, 1999 that one Zebediah Smith originated this technique of motivating stubborn animals. This is almost certainly an urban legend.

Note that the people who argue for "carrot on a stick" never cite any documentable early use of the supposed "correct" expression. For the record, here's what the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary has to say on the subject: "carrot, sb. Add: 1. a. fig. [With allusion to the proverbial method of tempting a donkey to move by dangling a carrot before it.] An enticement, a promised or expected reward; freq. contrasted with "stick" (=punishment) as the alternative."

[Skipping references to uses as early as 1895 which refer only to the carrot so don't clear up the issue.]

"1948 Economist 11 Dec. 957/2 The material shrinking of rewards and lightening of penalties, the whittling away of stick and carrot. [Too bad the Economist's writer switched the order in the second part of this example, but the distinction is clear.]

"1954 J. A. C. Brown Social Psychol.of Industry i. 15 The tacit implication that . . . most men . . . are . . . solely motivated by fear or greed (a motive now described as " the carrot or the stick")

"1963 Listener 21 Feb. 321/2 Once Gomulka had thrown away the stick of collectivization, he was compelled to rely on the carrot of a price system favourable to the peasant."

The debate has been confused from time to time by imagining one stick from which the carrot is dangled and another kept in reserve as a whip; but I imagine that the original image in the minds of those who developed this expression was a donkey or mule laden with cargo rather than being ridden, with its master alternately holding a carrot in front of the animal's nose (by hand, not on a stick) and threatening it with a switch. Two sticks are too many to make for a neat expression.

For me, the clincher is that no one actually cites the form of the "original expression." In what imaginable context would it possibly be witty or memorable to say that someone or something had been motivated by a carrot on a stick? Why not an apple on a stick, or a bag of oats? Boring, right? Not something likely to pass into popular usage.

This saying belongs to the same general family as "you can draw more flies with honey than with vinegar." It is never used except when such contrast is implied.

This and other popular etymologies fit under the heading aptly called by the English "too clever by half."

People should say a book is titled such-and-such rather than "entitled."

No less a writer than Chaucer is cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as having used "entitled" in this sense, the very first meaning of the word listed by the OED. It may be a touch pretentious, but it's not wrong.

"Spitting image" should be "spit and image."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the earlier form was "spitten image," which may indeed have evolved from "spit and image." it's a crude figure of speech: someone else is enough like you to have been spat out by you, made of the very stuff of your body. In the early 20th century the spelling and pronunciation gradually shifted to the less logical "spitting image," which is now standard. it's too late to go back. There is no historical basis for the claim sometimes made that the original expression was "spirit and image."

"Lion's share" means all of something, not the larger part of something.

Even though the original meaning of this phrase reflected the idea that the lion can take whatever he wants--typically all of the slaughtered game, leaving nothing for anyone else--in modern usage the meaning has shifted to "the largest share." This makes great sense if you consider the way hyenas and vultures swarm over the leftovers from a typical lion's kill.

"Connoisseur" should be spelled "connaisseur."

When we borrowed this word from the French in the 18th century, it was spelled "connoisseur." Is it our fault the French later decided to shift the spelling of many OI words to the more phonetically accurate AI? Of those Francophone purists who insist we should follow their example I say, let 'em eat "bifteck."

OTHER COMMONLY MISSPELLED WORDS

Here is a list of some of the most commonly misspelled words in English which I consider not interesting enough to write up as separate entries. These are the correct spellings. Reading over the list probably won't improve your spelling much, but choosing a few which you find troublesome to write out correctly a few times may.

absence, abundance, accessible, accidentally, acclaim, accommodate,

accomplish, accordion, accumulate, achievement, acquaintance, across,
address, advertisement, aggravate, alleged, annual, apparent,
appearance, argument, atheist, athletics, attendance, auxiliary,
balloon, barbecue, barbiturate, bargain, basically, beggar, beginning,
believe, biscuit, bouillon, boundary, Britain, business, calendar,
camouflage, cantaloupe, cemetery, chagrined, challenge, characteristic,
changing, chief, cigarette, climbed, collectible, colonel, colossal,
column, coming, committee, commitment, comparative, competent,
completely, concede, conceive, condemn, condescend, conscientious,
consciousness, consistent, continuous, controlled, convenient, coolly,
corollary, correlate, correspondence, counselor, courteous, courtesy,
criticize, deceive, defendant, deferred, dependent, descend,
description, desirable, despair, desperate, develop, development,
difference, dilemma, dining, disappearance, disappoint, disastrous,
discipline, disease, dispensable, dissatisfied, doesn't, dominant,
drunkenness, easily, ecstasy, efficiency, eighth, either, eligible,
enemy, entirely, equipped, equivalent, especially, exaggerate, exceed,
excellence, excellent, exhaust, existence, expense, experience,
experiment, explanation, extremely, exuberance, fallacious, fallacy,
familiar, fascinate, fictitious, finally, financially, fluorescent,
forcibly, foreign, forfeit, formerly, forty, fourth, fulfill,
fundamentally, gauge, generally, genius, government, governor, grievous,
guarantee, guerrilla, guidance, handkerchief, happily, harass, height,
heinous, hemorrhage, heroes, hesitancy, hindrance, hoarse, hoping,
humorous, hypocrisy, hypocrite, ideally, idiosyncrasy, ignorance,
imaginary, immediately, implement, incidentally, incredible,
independence, independent, indicted, indispensable, inevitable,
influential, information, inoculate, insurance, intelligence, intercede,
interference, interrupt, introduce, irrelevant, irresistible, island,
jealousy, judicial, knowledge, laboratory, legitimate, leisure, length,
lenient, liaison, license, lieutenant, lightning, likelihood, likely,
longitude, loneliness, losing, lovely, luxury, magazine, maintain,
maintenance, manageable, maneuver, marriage, mathematics, medicine,
millennium, millionaire, miniature, minuscule, minutes, mischievous,
missile, misspelled, mortgage, mosquito, mosquitoes, murmur, muscle,
mysterious, narrative, naturally, necessary, necessity, neighbor,
neutron, ninety, ninth, noticeable, nowadays, nuisance, obedience,
obstacle, occasion, occasionally, occurred, occurrence, official,
omission, omit, omitted, opinion, opponent, opportunity, oppression,
optimism, ordinarily, origin, original, outrageous, overrun, panicky,
parallel, parliament, particularly, pavilion, peaceable, peculiar,
penetrate, perceive, performance, permanent, permissible, permitted,
perseverance, persistence, physical, physician, picnicking, piece,
pilgrimage, pitiful, planning, pleasant, portray, possess, possessive,
potato, potatoes, practically, prairie, preference, preferred,
prejudice, preparation, prescription, prevalent, primitive, privilege,
probably, procedure, proceed, professor, prominent, pronounce,
pronunciation, propaganda, psychology, publicly, pursue, quandary,
quarantine, questionnaire, quizzes, realistically, realize, really,
recede, receipt, receive, recognize, recommend, reference, referred,
relevant, relieving, religious, remembrance, reminiscence, renege,
repetition, representative, resemblance, reservoir, resistance,
restaurant, rheumatism, rhythm, rhythmical, roommate, sacrilegious,
sacrifice, safety, salary, satellite, scary, scenery, schedule, secede,

secretary, seize, sentence, separate, sergeant, several, shepherd, shining, similar, simile, simply, sincerely, skiing, soliloquy, sophomore, souvenir, specifically, specimen, sponsor, spontaneous, statistics, stopped, strategy, strength, strenuous, stubbornness, subordinate, subtle, succeed, success, succession, sufficient, supersede, suppress, surprise, surround, susceptible, suspicious, syllable, symmetrical, synonymous, tangible, technical, technique, temperature, tendency, themselves, theories, therefore, thorough, though, through, till, tomorrow, tournament, tourniquet, transferred, truly, twelfth, tyranny, unanimous, unnecessary, until, usage, usually, vacuum, valuable, vengeance, vigilant, village, villain, violence, visible, warrant, Wednesday, weird, wherever, wholly, yacht, yield, zoology

---

MORE ERRORS

People send me quite a few word confusions which don't seem worth writing up but which are nevertheless entertaining or interesting. I simply list a number of these below for your amusement.

What was said	What was meant
a stigmatism	astigmatism
abolishment	abolition
abraded	upbraided
acrosst	across
ad homonym	ad hominem
aerobic numbers	Arabic numbers
affidavid	affidavit
alphabeticalize	alphabetize
altercations	alterations
alterior	ulterior
ambliance	ambulance
anachronism	acronym
anchors away	anchors aweigh
anticlimatic	anticlimactic
aperpos	a propos

apples and organs	apples and oranges
arm's way	harm's way
artical	article
as a pose to	as opposed to
ashfault	asphalt
assessible	accessible
assumably	presumably
at leased	at least
balling out	bawling out
based around	based on
batteran eyelid	bat an eyelid
beautify a saint	beatify a saint
begs belief	beggars belief
besiege	beseech
beyond approach	beyond reproach
bids well	bids fair, bodes well
binded	bound
bled like a stuffed pig	bledlike a stuck pig
blessing in the sky	blessing in disguise
blindsighted	blindsided
a board of director	a member of a board of directors
boom to the economy	boon to the economy
bored of	bored with
bowl in a china shop	bull in a china shop
bran new	brand new
built off of	built on or upon
BVD player	DVD player

by in large or enlarge	by and large
Cadillac converter	catalytic converter
card shark	cardsharp
carport tunnel	carpal tunnel
case and point	case in point
cease and decease	cease and desist
cease the day	seize the day
cheap at half the price	cheap at twice the price
chalked full	chock-full
chester drawers	chest of drawers
chicken pops	chicken pox
chomp at the bit	champ at the bit
chow	ciao
circus sized	circumcised
clearified	clarified
collaborating evidence	corroborating evidence
component	opponent
conservative effort	concerted effort
conversate	converse
coronated	crowned
coronet	cornet
cortage	cortege
coruscating	excoriating
coup de gras	coup de grace
a couple guys	a couple of guys
cream de mint	creme de menthe
crimp my style	cramp my style

crossified	crucified
culvert sack	cul de sac
cumberbun	cummerbund
cut to the chaff	cut to the chase
darkest before the	darkest before the dawn storm
day in age	day and age
dead wringer	dead ringer
debockle	debacle
decidated	dedicated
deformation of character	defamation of character
deja vous	deja vu
Samuel R. Delaney	Samuel R. Delany
detrius	detritus
diabolically opposed	diametrically opposed
dialate	dilate
differ to	defer to
diswraught	distraught
doggy dog world	dog-eat-dog world
do to	due to
documentated	documented
down the pipe	down the pike
dresser draw	dresser drawer
drownded	drowned
drownding	drowning
drudged up	dredged up
dry reach	dry retch
electorial college	electoral college

end justifies the meaning	end justifies the means
enervate	energize
escape goat	scapegoat
esculate	escalate
exasperated	exacerbated
excape	escape
exhilarator	accelerator
expecially	especially
expeculation	speculation
expediate	expedite
exuberant price	exorbitant price
eyesaw	eyesore
fair to midland	fair to middling
far and few between	few and far between
fast majority	vast majority
fate accommpli	fait accompli
fathom a guess	hazard a guess
Federal Drug Administration	Food and Drug Administration
final throws	final throes
first come, first serve	first come, first served
flaw in the ointment	fly in the ointment
flustrated	frustrated
foilage	foliage
foul swoop	fell swoop
Franklin Delanor Roosevelt	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
frentic	fanatic or frenetic

gave me slack	gave me flak
genuses	genera
gentile manners	genteel manners
gentlelady	gentlewoman
glaucomole	glaucoma
glaze over	gloss over
gleam	glean
gone array	gone awry
got my dandruff up	got my dander up
grant it	granted
greatfruit	grapefruit
harbringer	harbinger
harps back	harks back
hare's breath	hair's breadth
heared	heard
heart-rendering	heart-rending
hearst	hearse
Heineken remover	Heimlich maneuver
here on end	here on in
high dungeon	high dudgeon
hobbiest	hobbyist
hold down the fort	hold the fort
howsomever	however
hurtles to overcome	hurdles to overcome
I seen	I saw or I've seen
ice tea	iced tea
ideallic	ideal or idyllic

if I don't say so	if I do say so
imbedded	embedded
impaling doom	impending doom
imput	input
in another words	in other words
in lieu of	in light of
in loo of	in lieu of
in mass	en masse
in sink	in synch
in tact	intact
in the same vane or vain	in the same vein
incredulous	incredible
indiscrepancy	discrepancy
insinnuendo	insinuation or innuendo
insuremountable	insurmountable
internally grateful	eternally grateful
International Workers of the World (IWW)	Industrial Workers of the World
intragul	integral
Issac	Isaac
it's beggars belief	it beggars belief
ivy tower	ivory tower
jack of all traits	jack of all trades
jaundra	genre
jest of the idea	gist of the idea
just assume	just as soon
kindly	kind of

kit gloves	kid gloves
Klu Klux Klan	Ku Klux Klan
lacksadaisical	lackadaisical
lamblasted, landblasted	lambasted
land up	end up, land
landlover	landlubber
lapse into a comma	lapse into a coma
larnyx	larynx
laxidaisical	lackadaisical
livelyhood	livelihood
love nuts	lug nuts
love one and other	love one another
low and behold	lo and behold
ludicrust	ludicrous
make head or tale	make head or tail
malice of forethought	malice aforethought
masonary	masonry
make ends meat	make ends meet
mean time	meantime
menestrate	menstruate
meter out justice	mete out justice
mix words	mince words
misconscrew	misconstrue
mister meaner	misdemeanor
momento	memento
muriel	mural
myocardial infraction	myocardial infarction

new leash on life	new lease on life
neck in neck	neck and neck
nitch	niche
no bars held	no holds barred
Nobel lariat	Nobel laureate
notary republic	notary public
odiferous	odoriferous
off my own back	off my own bat
oject d'art	objet d'art
on mass	en masse
on the same hand	on the other hand, by the same token
once and a while	once in a while
overhauls	overalls
overjealous	overzealous
pacific	specific
pain-staking	painstaking
pair of parenthesis	pair of parentheses
palatable feeling	palpable feeling
parody of virtue	paragon of virtue
part in parcel	part and parcel
pastorial	pastoral
patriarticle	patriarchal
peacemeal	piecemeal
pedastool	pedestal
pension	penchant
pentacle of his career	pinnacle of his career
peon of praise	paean of praise

permiscuous	promiscuous
periphial	peripheral
perk up its ears	prick up its ears
perscription	prescription
Peruvian interest	prurient interest
perverbial	proverbial
phantom it	fathom it
pick fun	poke fun or pick on
pillow to post	pillar to post
pin a finger	pin the blame on, point a finger at
play it by year	play it by ear
plentitude	plenitude
poison ivory	poison ivy
portentious	portentous
poultrygeist	poltergeist
pratfall	pitfall
predominately	predominantly
prevaricate	procrastinate
prevert	pervert
prolong the inevitable	delay the inevitable
protagonist	proponent
punkin, pumkin	pumpkin
radical chick	radical chic
ramsack	ransack
ranking file	rank and file
readdress the balance	redress the balance
radioactive increase	retroactive increase

rebel rouser	rabble rouser
recreate the wheel	reinvent the wheel
repel	rappel
repungent	repugnant
rockweiler	rottweiler
roiling boil	rolling boil
rot or rod iron	wrought iron
rubble rousing	rabble rousing
run rapid	run rampant
seizure salad	Caesar salad
self of steam	self-esteem
self-defacing	self-effacing
sense of false security	false sense of security
sequences	sequins
shock ways	shockwaves
short sided	shortsighted
should've went	should have gone
shutter to think	shudder to think
similiar or simular	similar
six and a half of one, the other	six of one, a dozen of the other half a dozen of
skewer the results	skew the results
skiddish	skittish
sleep acnea	sleep apnea
slither of cake	sliver of cake
smashed potatoes	mashed potatoes
smoking mirrors	smoke and mirrors

smothered onions	smothered with onions
soak and wet	soaking wet
something or rather	something or other
somulent	somnolent
sorted past or story	sordid past or story
stain glass	stained glass
stainless teal	stainless steel
stolled	stole
strident	stringent
strum up support	drum up support
subsiding on	subsisting on
substantative	substantive
sufficive to say	it suffices to say
supremist	supremacist
tactile squad	tactical squad
techknowledgy	technology
terminity	temerity
thankyou	thank you
Theolonius Monk	Thelonious Monk
thread a fine line	tread a fine line
Tiajuna	Tijuana
tie me over	tide me over
times the number	multiply the number
tittering on the brink	teetering on the brink
to each's own	to each his own
took it for granite	took it for granted
trader to the cause	traitor to the cause

two sense worth	two cents' worth
turpentime	turpentine
tyrannical yolk	tyrannical yoke
udderly	utterly
unloosen	loosen
unchartered territory	uncharted territory
up and Adam	up and at 'em
upgraded	upbraided
Valentimes	Valentines
valevictorian	valedictorian
vaulted	vaunted
verbage	verbiage
very close veins	varicose veins
viadock	viaduct
visa versa	vice versa
vocal chords	vocal cords
voiceterous	boisterous
vunerable	vulnerable
wait ago	way to go
weary	wary
wheedle down	whittle down
whelp	welt
wideth	width
Wimbleton	Wimbledon
windshield factor	wind chill factor
witch	which
without further adieu	without further ado

whoa is me	woe is me
wolf in cheap clothing	wolf in sheep's clothing
world-renown	world-renowned
worldwind	whirlwind
worse case scenario	worst-case scenario
worth its weight in	worth its salt, or worth its weight in gold salt
worth wild	worthwhile

Commonly Made Suggestions

I am getting a tremendous amount of mail about this site. I enjoy the compliments, try to answer the queries, and ignore the occasional insult. (One wit wrote of my site: "I could care less!" Cute.) The volume of correspondence has exceeded my ability to respond to all of it; so please forgive me if you don't hear back from me. I do read your letters.

And although I appreciate good prose (with real capital letters), don't be afraid I'll nitpick your letter for writing flaws. I don't normally critique other people's writing unless I'm hired to.

I also receive many suggestions for additions. These are usually welcome, and I adopt many of them; but at least half my mail involves points I have already covered in one way or another. If you would be so kind, please go through the following checklist before writing me.

If your first encounter with my site was through a link to the list of errors, please go to the introductory page and read that first. If you are creating a link to my site, please link to that page at http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/; otherwise users will miss important introductory remarks. The ":8080" string found in some links is obsolete.

If you think a common error is missing from my list, use the Google Custom Search engine just above the alphabetical list of errors to search the site.

This is not a general English grammar site, nor am I a grammarian. I am a literature professor interested in English usage, some of which involves grammar. You will find a list of comprehensive English grammar and writing sites at the bottom of my list of errors under "Other Good Resources." These are the folks to ask for help with your writing.

This is not a site offering a tutorial service for people studying English. In my list of links on the main pages listing errors I include sites which do and which deal with resources for English as a second

language. Try one of them instead. I am not an ESL specialist and have a full-time job which does not involve online interactive teaching. I hope you find what I have written useful and I do answer occasional questions, but this site does not provide a detailed question-and-answer service.

Before you write to insist that some usage I recommend against is actually standard now, consider that although many dictionaries take it as their task to keep up with popular usage, my guide is meant to alert you to even very popular usage patterns that may get you into trouble with other people you encounter. No matter how many dictionaries say that "I could care less" is now a legitimate variant on the traditional "I couldn't care less," my job is to protect you from people who do not agree with this. Some dictionaries' approach is to tell the traditionalists to get over it. This is not likely to work. A usage guide's approach is to warn you that this usage may make you appear less well informed than the traditional one. What you do with the information is up to you, but at least you know that if you go with the new form you're taking a risk.

If you have checked thoroughly and still want to write me, please feel free; but be aware that I do not have time to deal with all my correspondence. "Common Errors" is not my main Web project, and I work on it only sporadically (sometimes not for many months at a stretch). To see what other sorts of things I spend my time on, check out my home page and the World Civilizations site I manage.

If you believe I have not sent you a response you deserve, consider these possibilities before deciding that I am deliberately not answering you: 1) I may be travelling and not doing e-mail, 2) your return address may be incorrect, causing my replies to you to "bounce" (if you rarely get replies to your e-mails, this is a good possibility), or 3) you have erred on the side of caution by blocking all incoming correspondence by people unknown to you.

One more important point: this is a hobby for me, and not my job. I do not have the time to deal with long, complex messages covering a multitude of points. Short, focused messages are most likely to be answered.

Before writing me, check the following list of commonly made suggestions.

Add "would of"

Look under "C" for "could of/should of/would of."

Add "intensive purposes."

"For all intensive purposes is listed under "F."

You shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition.

Nonsense. See the second item under "Non-Errors."

You should say "Write to me" rather than "Write me."

Some people following the British tradition object to this usage; it's standard in the US The expression probably evolved in analogy to expressions like "call me," "phone me" and "tell me." In the US, "write me" will do just fine in informal writing such as I use on this site.

The word is "pernickety," not "persnickety."

The original Scottish dialect form was indeed "pernickety," but Americans changed it to "persnickety" a century ago, and "pernickety" is generally unknown in the US The Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary calls "pernickety" obsolete, but judging from my correspondence, it's still in wide use across the Atlantic.

Americans have it all wrong, the correct usage is English (Canadian, Australian, etc.).

Read my page called "The President's English." Note that it was titled during the Clinton era, is just a joke referring to the phrase "the Queen's English," and has no connection with any particular president. And before writing to tell me that I should not claim that American English is THE international standard, go back and read again what I've written; I do not claim that.

A name which ends in an S needs an additional S after the apostrophe when it is made possessive, e.g., "Paul Brians's Page."

Some styles call for the extra S, some don't. I was forced by the publisher of my second book to follow this rule and I swore I would never do it again. I think it's ugly.

Please add [some particularly obscure word].

This site is concerned with common errors in English, not bizarre or esoteric ones, although I often enjoy reading about them. I admit to discussing some not-so-common errors if I find them amusing enough.

What is the correct spelling of _____?

Please try a dictionary first. The best on-line one is the WWWebster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster)

I was always taught X but all the authorities I've looked in say Y. What's happening to the English language?

It's changing--always has changed, and always will. When you reach the point that nobody seems to agree with your standard of usage any more, you may have simply been left behind. There is no ultimate authority in language--certainly not me--nor any measure of absolute "correctness." The best guide is the usage of literate and careful speakers and writers, and when they differ among themselves one has to make a choice

as to which one prefers. My goal is to keep my readers' writing and speech from being laughed at or groaned over by average literate people.

How can you possibly approve of _____? Your effrontery in caving in to this ignorant nonsense is appalling [ranting, raving, foaming at the mouth . . .]. It's odd how some people with high standards of correctness seem to have no notion of manners at all. You and I both know that I am not the most conservative of commentators on usage. If you want to make a logical case for a rule I don't accept, please do so politely.

You should add more information about this word; it has other meanings than the ones you discuss.

My goal is to keep the entries as compact as possible, focusing only on those aspects of the words discussed which lend themselves to error. The sort of detailed discussion an unabridged dictionary provides is inappropriate here.

Your list of terms would be easier to read if it were arranged in a bulleted list.

Indeed it was when I had it arranged that way; but the list was extremely difficult to navigate because when users returned to it from an individual page they had to scroll up or down a long distance to find where they had left off or wanted to go next. I could arrange the terms in a table, but since I am constantly adding to the list it would create an impossible amount of work for me. I have resisted inserting breaks after each item to promote compactness. It's a struggle to balance between legibility and navigational ease. I have made the list of terms alphabetical to make navigation a bit easier. Note that you can always download and print off the entire site as a single text document to peruse at your leisure. And remember that you can search any Web page, including my list of errors, with the "Find" command of your browser.

It would be easier to read through your site if you put navigational links on each page back to where the reader left off in the list of errors.

This site is designed for purposeful searches (use the Google Custom Search engine just above the alphabetical list of errors or just look down the list for the appropriate place in the alphabet) and casual browsing. Few people set out to read their way in order through all the entries. But if you want to do this, I have provided a separate version of the site all on one page which is much more suitable for this purpose and will keep you from having to click through over a thousand pages. Click on the link called "The whole site on one page" to go to http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.txt (this page).

Your site shows ugly gibberish wherever it should display quotation marks and apostrophes.

This site uses special codes to create properly curled quotation marks

and apostrophes, and real dashes. Some browsers ignore the code and render the curled marks as straight ones; but other, older ones display the code itself. There are two solutions: 1) upgrade to a more recent version of your favorite browser, or 2) use the all-text version of the site which lacks the problem characters.

Note that with thousands of instances to be changed I had to use automatic global search-and-replace routines to curl these marks, and sometimes they misfired. I've tried hard to find the errors that resulted (typically a right quotation mark and a space where an apostrophe should be), but whenever I think I've found the last one somebody points out another. Keep 'em coming: I do really want to get all of these fixed.

Why don't you say when you last updated your site?

You'll find the latest revision date at the bottom of the all-text version of the site (this page).

You should refer your readers to the on-line versions of Strunk and Fowler.

Because of copyright restrictions these are both very early editions (1918 and 1908!). If you're looking for confirmation of your views you may find solace, but the average reader has no way of knowing whether their advice still makes sense today. Would you use a 1908 dictionary to determine the meaning of a word now?

You left out one of my pet peeves!

I may simply not have gotten around to it yet, but remember to try the Search field before writing.

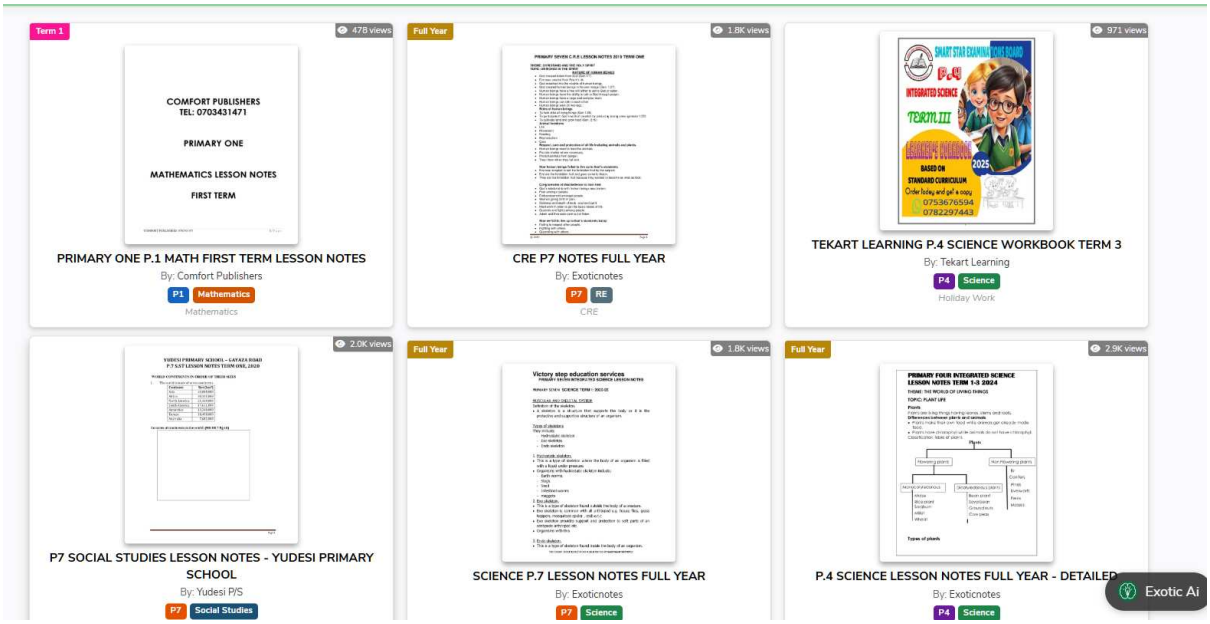
Still want to write?

My address is paulbrians@gmail.com. Please don't call me "Brian." My name is Paul Brians.

Paul Brians
Professor of English (retired)
Washington State University, Pullman

Version of July 26, 2008.

This document was downloaded from https://exoticnotes.com



Do you need more LESSON NOTES for Primary (All classes)?

Click
https://exoticnotes.com/notes/primary/

If you need LESSON NOTES for SCIENCE (P.1 – P.7)
Click
https://exoticnotes.com/notes/primary/science/

If you need LESSON NOTES for English (P.1 – P.7)
Click
https://exoticnotes.com/notes/primary/english/

If you need LESSON NOTES for Mathematics (P.1 – P.7)
Click
https://exoticnotes.com/notes/primary/mathematics/