

IV

Words and Expressions Commonly Misused

MANY of the words and expressions listed here are not so much bad English as bad style, the commonplaces of careless writing. As illustrated under *Feature*, the proper correction is likely to be not the replacement of one word or set of words by another but the replacement of vague generality by definite statement.

The shape of our language is not rigid; in questions of usage we have no lawgiver whose word is final. Students whose curiosity is aroused by the interpretations that follow, or whose doubts are raised, will wish to pursue their investigations further. Books useful in such pursuits are *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition; *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*; *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, Third Edition, edited by R. W. Burchfield; *Modern American Usage: A Guide* by Wilson Follett and Erik Wensberg; and *The Careful Writer* by Theodore M. Bernstein.

Aggravate. Irritate. The first means "to add to" an already troublesome or vexing matter or condition. The second means "to vex" or "to annoy" or "to chafe."

All right. Idiomatic in familiar speech as a detached phrase in the sense “Agreed,” or “Go ahead,” or “O.K.” Properly written as two words—*all right*.

Allude. Do not confuse with *elude*. You *allude* to a book; you *elude* a pursuer. Note, too, that *allude* is not synonymous with *refer*. An allusion is an indirect mention, a reference is a specific one.

Allusion. Easily confused with *illusion*. The first means “an indirect reference”; the second means “an unreal image” or “a false impression.”

Alternate. Alternative. The words are not always interchangeable as nouns or adjectives. The first means every other one in a series; the second, one of two possibilities. As the other one of a series of two, an *alternate* may stand for “a substitute,” but an *alternative*, although used in a similar sense, connotes a matter of choice that is never present with *alternate*.

As the flooded road left them no alternative, they took the alternate route.

Among. Between. When more than two things or persons are involved, *among* is usually called for: “The money was divided among the four players.” When, however, more than two are involved but each is considered individually, *between* is preferred: “an agreement between the six heirs.”

And/or. A device, or shortcut, that damages a sentence and often leads to confusion or ambiguity.

First of all, would an honor system successfully cut down on the amount of stealing and/or cheating?	First of all, would an honor system reduce the incidence of stealing or cheating or both?
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Anticipate. Use *expect* in the sense of simple expectation.

I anticipated that he would look older.	I expected that he would look older.
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My brother anticipated the upturn in the market.	My brother expected the upturn in the market.
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In the second example, the word *anticipated* is ambiguous. It could mean simply that the brother believed the upturn would occur, or it could mean that he acted in advance of the expected upturn—by buying stock, perhaps.

Anybody. In the sense of “any person,” not to be written as two words. *Any body* means “any corpse,” or “any human form,” or “any group.” The rule holds equally for *everybody*, *nobody*, and *somebody*.

Anyone. In the sense of “anybody,” written as one word. *Any one* means “any single person” or “any single thing.”

As good or better than. Expressions of this type should be corrected by rearranging the sentences.

My opinion is as good or better than his.	My opinion is as good as his, or better (if not better).
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As to whether. *Whether* is sufficient.

As yet. *Yet* nearly always is as good, if not better.

No agreement has been reached as yet.	No agreement has yet been reached.
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The chief exception is at the beginning of a sentence, where *yet* means something different.

Yet (<i>or</i> despite everything) he has not succeeded.	As yet (<i>or</i> so far) he has not succeeded.
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Being. Not appropriate after *regard...as*.

He is regarded as being the best dancer in the club.	He is regarded as the best dancer in the club.
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But. Unnecessary after *doubt* and *help*.

I have no doubt but that	I have no doubt that
He could not help but see	He could not help seeing

that	that
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The too-frequent use of *but* as a conjunction leads to the fault discussed under Rule 18. A loose sentence formed with *but* can usually be converted into a periodic sentence formed with *although*.

Particularly awkward is one *but* closely following another, thus making a contrast to a contrast, or a reservation to a reservation. This is easily corrected by rearrangement.

Our country had vast resources but seemed almost wholly unprepared for war. But within a year it had created an army of four million.	Our country seemed almost wholly unprepared for war, but it had vast resources. Within a year it had created an army of four million.
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Can. Means “am (is, are) able.” Not to be used as a substitute for *may*.

Care less. The dismissive “I couldn’t care less” is often used with the shortened “not” mistakenly (and mysteriously) omitted: “I could care less.” The error destroys the meaning of the sentence and is careless indeed.

Case. Often unnecessary.

In many cases, the rooms lacked air conditioning.	Many of the rooms lacked air conditioning.
It has rarely been the case that any mistake has been made.	Few mistakes have been made.

Certainly. Used indiscriminately by some speakers, much as others use *very*, in an attempt to intensify any and every statement. A mannerism of this kind, bad in speech, is even worse in writing.

Character. Often simply redundant, used from a mere habit of wordiness.

acts of a hostile character hostile acts

Claim (verb). With object-noun, means “lay claim to.” May be used with a dependent clause if this sense is clearly intended: “She claimed that she was the sole heir.” (But even here *claimed to be* would be better.) Not to be used as a substitute for *declare, maintain, or charge*.

He claimed he knew how.	He declared he knew how.
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Clever. Note that the word means one thing when applied to people, another when applied to horses. A clever horse is a good-natured one, not an ingenious one.

Compare. To *compare to* is to point out or imply resemblances between objects regarded as essentially of a different order; to *compare with* is mainly to point out differences between objects regarded as essentially of the same order. Thus, life has been *compared to* a pilgrimage, *to* a drama, *to* a battle; Congress may be *compared with* the British Parliament. Paris has been *compared to* ancient Athens; it may be *compared with* modern London.

Comprise. Literally, “embrace”: A zoo comprises mammals, reptiles, and birds (because it “embraces,” or “includes,” them). But animals do not comprise (“embrace”) a zoo—they constitute a zoo.

Consider. Not followed by *as* when it means “believe to be.”

I consider him as competent.	I consider him competent.
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When *considered* means “examined” or “discussed,” it is followed by *as*:

The lecturer considered Eisenhower first as soldier and second as administrator.

Contact. As a transitive verb, the word is vague and self-important. Do not *contact* people; get in touch with them, look them up, phone them, find them, or meet them.

Cope. An intransitive verb used with *with*. In formal writing, one doesn't "cope," one "copes with" something or somebody.

I knew they'd cope. (jocular)	I knew they would cope with the situation.
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Currently. In the sense of *now* with a verb in the present tense, *currently* is usually redundant; emphasis is better achieved through a more precise reference to time.

We are currently reviewing your application.	We are at this moment reviewing your application.
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Data. Like *strata*, *phenomena*, and *media*, *data* is a plural and is best used with a plural verb. The word, however, is slowly gaining acceptance as a singular.

The data is misleading.	These data are misleading.
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Different than. Here logic supports established usage: one thing differs *from* another, hence, *different from*. Or, *other than*, *unlike*.

Disinterested. Means "impartial." Do not confuse it with *uninterested*, which means "not interested in."

Let a disinterested person judge our dispute. (an impartial person)

This man is obviously uninterested in our dispute. (couldn't care less)

Divided into. Not to be misused for *composed of*. The line is sometimes difficult to draw; doubtless plays are divided into acts, but poems are composed of stanzas. An apple, halved, is divided into sections, but an apple is composed of seeds, flesh, and skin.

Due to. Loosely used for *through*, *because of*, or *owing to*, in adverbial phrases.

He lost the first game due to carelessness.	He lost the first game because of carelessness.
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In correct use, synonymous with *attributable to*: “The accident was due to bad weather”; “losses due to preventable fires.”

Each and every one. Pitchman’s jargon. Avoid, except in dialogue.

It should be a lesson to each and every one of us.	It should be a lesson to every one of us (to us all).
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Effect. As a noun, means “result”; as a verb, means “to bring about,” “to accomplish” (not to be confused with *affect*, which means “to influence”).

As a noun, often loosely used in perfunctory writing about fashions, music, painting, and other arts: “a Southwestern effect”; “effects in pale green”; “very delicate effects”; “subtle effects”; “a charming effect was produced.” The writer who has a definite meaning to express will not take refuge in such vagueness.

Enormity. Use only in the sense of “monstrous wickedness.” Misleading, if not wrong, when used to express bigness.

Enthuse. An annoying verb growing out of the noun *enthusiasm*. Not recommended.

She was enthused about her new car.	She was enthusiastic about her new car.
She enthused about her new car.	She talked enthusiastically (expressed enthusiasm) about her new car.

Etc. Literally, “and other things”; sometimes loosely used to mean “and other persons.” The phrase is equivalent to *and the rest, and so forth*, and hence is not to be used if one of these would be insufficient—that is, if the reader would be left in doubt as to any important particulars. Least open to objection when it represents the last terms of a list

already given almost in full, or immaterial words at the end of a quotation.

At the end of a list introduced by *such as*, *for example*, or any similar expression, *etc.* is incorrect. In formal writing, *etc.* is a misfit. An item important enough to call for *etc.* is probably important enough to be named.

Fact. Use this word only of matters capable of direct verification, not of matters of judgment. That a particular event happened on a given date and that lead melts at a certain temperature are facts. But such conclusions as that Napoleon was the greatest of modern generals or that the climate of California is delightful, however defensible they may be, are not properly called facts.

Facility. Why must jails, hospitals, and schools suddenly become “facilities”?

Parents complained bitterly about the fire hazard in the wooden facility.	Parents complained bitterly about the fire hazard in the wooden schoolhouse.
He has been appointed warden of the new facility.	He has been appointed warden of the new prison.

Factor. A hackneyed word; the expressions of which it is a part can usually be replaced by something more direct and idiomatic.

Her superior training was the great factor in her winning the match.	She won the match by being better trained.
Air power is becoming an increasingly important factor in deciding battles.	Air power is playing a larger and larger part in deciding battles.

Farther. Further. The two words are commonly interchanged, but there is a distinction worth observing: *farther* serves best as a distance word, *further* as a time or quantity word. You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*.

Feature. Another hackneyed word; like *factor*, it usually adds nothing to the sentence in which it occurs.

A feature of the entertainment especially worthy of mention was the singing of Allison Jones.	(Better use the same number of words to tell what Allison Jones sang and how she sang it.)
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As a verb, in the sense of “offer as a special attraction,” it is to be avoided.

Finalize. A pompous, ambiguous verb. (See Chapter V, Reminder 21.)

Fix. Colloquial in America for *arrange, prepare, mend*. The usage is well established. But bear in mind that this verb is from *figere*: “to make firm,” “to place definitely.” These are the preferred meanings of the word.

Flammable. An oddity, chiefly useful in saving lives. The common word meaning “combustible” is *inflammable*. But some people are thrown off by the *in-* and think *inflammable* means “not combustible.” For this reason, trucks carrying gasoline or explosives are now marked FLAMMABLE. Unless you are operating such a truck and hence are concerned with the safety of children and illiterates, use *inflammable*.

Folk. A collective noun, equivalent to *people*. Use the singular form only. *Folks*, in the sense of “parents,” “family,” “those present,” is colloquial and too folksy for formal writing.

Her folks arrived by the afternoon train.	Her father and mother arrived by the afternoon train.
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Fortuitous. Limited to what happens by chance. Not to be used for *fortunate* or *lucky*.

Get. The colloquial *have got* for *have* should not be used in writing. The preferable form of the participle is *got*, not *gotten*.

He has not got any sense.	He has no sense.
They returned without having gotten any.	They returned without having got any.

Gratuitous. Means “unearned,” or “unwarranted.”

The insult seemed gratuitous. (undeserved)

He is a man who. A common type of redundant expression; see Rule 17.

He is a man who is very ambitious.	He is very ambitious.
Vermont is a state that attracts visitors because of its winter sports.	Vermont attracts visitors because of its winter sports.

Hopefully. This once-useful adverb meaning “with hope” has been distorted and is now widely used to mean “I hope” or “it is to be hoped.” Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, “Hopefully I’ll leave on the noon plane” is to talk nonsense. Do you mean you’ll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you’ll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven’t said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.

However. Avoid starting a sentence with *however* when the meaning is “nevertheless.” The word usually serves better when not in first position.

The roads were almost impassable. However, we at	The roads were almost impassable. At last, however,
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last succeeded in reaching camp.	we succeeded in reaching camp.
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When *however* comes first, it means “in whatever way” or “to whatever extent.”

However you advise him, he will probably do as he thinks best.

However discouraging the prospect, they never lost heart.

Illusion. See *allusion*.

Imply. Infer. Not interchangeable. Something implied is something suggested or indicated, though not expressed. Something inferred is something deduced from evidence at hand.

Farming implies early rising.

Since she was a farmer, we inferred that she got up early.

Importantly. Avoid by rephrasing.

More importantly, he paid for the damages.	What’s more, he paid for the damages.
With the breeze freshening, he altered course to pass inside the island. More importantly, as things turned out, he tucked in a reef.	With the breeze freshening, he altered course to pass inside the island. More important, as things turned out, he tucked in a reef.

In regard to. Often wrongly written *in regards to*. But *as regards* is correct, and means the same thing.

In the last analysis. A bankrupt expression.

Inside of. Inside. The *of* following *inside* is correct in the adverbial meaning “in less than.” In other meanings, *of* is unnecessary.

Inside of five minutes I’ll be inside the bank.

Insightful. The word is a suspicious overstatement for “perceptive.” If it is to be used at all, it should be used for instances of remarkably penetrating vision. Usually, it crops up merely to inflate the commonplace.

That was an insightful remark you made.	That was a perceptive remark you made.
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In terms of. A piece of padding usually best omitted.

The job was unattractive in terms of salary.	The salary made the job unattractive.
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Interesting. An unconvincing word; avoid it as a means of introduction. Instead of announcing that what you are about to tell is interesting, make it so.

An interesting story is told of	(Tell the story without preamble.)
In connection with the forthcoming visit of Mr. B. to America, it is interesting to recall that he	Mr. B., who will soon visit America

Also to be avoided in introduction is the word *funny*. Nothing becomes funny by being labeled so.

Irregardless. Should be *regardless*. The error results from failure to see the negative in *-less* and from a desire to get it in as a prefix, suggested by such words as *irregular*, *irresponsible*, and, perhaps especially, *irrespective*.

-ize. Do not coin verbs by adding this tempting suffix. Many good and useful verbs do end in *-ize*: *summarize*, *fraternize*, *harmonize*, *fertilize*. But there is a growing list of abominations: *containerize*, *prioritize*, *finalize*, to name three. Be suspicious of *-ize*; let your ear and your eye guide you. Never tack *-ize* onto a noun to create a verb. Usually you will discover that a useful verb already exists. Why say “utilize” when there is the simple, unpretentious word *use*?

Kind of. Except in familiar style, not to be used as a substitute for *rather* or *something like*. Restrict it to its literal sense: “Amber is a kind of fossil resin”; “I dislike that kind of publicity.” The same holds true for *sort of*.

Lay. A transitive verb. Except in slang (“Let it lay”), do not misuse it for the intransitive verb *lie*. The hen, or the play, *lays* an egg; the llama *lies* down. The playwright went home and *lay* down.

lie, lay, lain, lying

lay, laid, laid, laying

Leave. Not to be misused for *let*.

Leave it stand the way it is.	Let it stand the way it is.
Leave go of that rope!	Let go of that rope!

Less. Should not be misused for *fewer*.

They had less workers than in the previous campaign.	They had fewer workers than in the previous campaign.
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Less refers to quantity, *fewer* to number. “His troubles are less than mine” means “His troubles are not so great as mine.” “His troubles are fewer than mine” means “His troubles are not so numerous as mine.”

Like. Not to be used for the conjunction *as*. *Like* governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is *as*.

We spent the evening like in the old days.	We spent the evening as in the old days.
Chloë smells good, like a baby should.	Chloë smells good, as a baby should.

The use of *like* for *as* has its defenders; they argue that any usage that achieves currency becomes valid automatically. This, they say, is the way the language is formed. It is and it isn't. An expression sometimes merely enjoys a vogue,

much as an article of apparel does. *Like* has long been widely misused by the illiterate; lately it has been taken up by the knowing and the well-informed, who find it catchy, or liberating, and who use it as though they were slumming. If every word or device that achieved currency were immediately authenticated, simply on the ground of popularity, the language would be as chaotic as a ball game with no foul lines. For the student, perhaps the most useful thing to know about *like* is that most carefully edited publications regard its use before phrases and clauses as simple error.

Line. Along these lines. *Line* in the sense of “course of procedure, conduct, thought” is allowable but has been so overworked, particularly in the phrase *along these lines*, that a writer who aims at freshness or originality had better discard it entirely.

Mr. B. also spoke along the same lines.	Mr. B. also spoke to the same effect.
She is studying along the line of French literature.	She is studying French literature.

Literal. Literally. Often incorrectly used in support of exaggeration or violent metaphor.

a literal flood of abuse	a flood of abuse
literally dead with fatigue	almost dead with fatigue

Loan. A noun. As a verb, prefer *lend*.

Lend me your ears.
the loan of your ears

Meaningful. A bankrupt adjective. Choose another, or rephrase.

His was a meaningful contribution.	His contribution counted heavily.
We are instituting many	We are improving the

meaningful changes in the curriculum.	curriculum in many ways.
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Memento. Often incorrectly written *momento*.

Most. Not to be used for *almost* in formal composition.

most everybody	almost everybody
most all the time	almost all the time

Nature. Often simply redundant, used like *character*.

acts of a hostile nature	hostile acts
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Nature should be avoided in such vague expressions as “a lover of nature,” “poems about nature.” Unless more specific statements follow, the reader cannot tell whether the poems have to do with natural scenery, rural life, the sunset, the untracked wilderness, or the habits of squirrels.

Nauseous. Nauseated. The first means “sickening to contemplate”; the second means “sick at the stomach.” Do not, therefore, say, “I feel nauseous,” unless you are sure you have that effect on others.

Nice. A shaggy, all-purpose word, to be used sparingly in formal composition. “I had a nice time.” “It was nice weather.” “She was so nice to her mother.” The meanings are indistinct. *Nice* is most useful in the sense of “precise” or “delicate”: “a nice distinction.”

Nor. Often used wrongly for *or* after negative expressions.

He cannot eat nor sleep.	He cannot eat or sleep. He can neither eat nor sleep. He cannot eat nor can he sleep.
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Noun used as verb. Many nouns have lately been pressed into service as verbs. Not all are bad, but all are suspect.

Be prepared for kisses when you gift your girlfriend with this merry scent.	Be prepared for kisses when you give your girlfriend this merry scent.
The candidate hosted a dinner for fifty of her workers.	The candidate gave a dinner for fifty of her workers.
The meeting was chaired by Mr. Oglethorp.	Mr. Oglethorp was chair of the meeting.
She headquarters in Newark.	She has headquarters in Newark.
The theater troupe debuted last fall.	The theatre troupe made its debut last fall.

Offputting. Ongoing. Newfound adjectives, to be avoided because they are inexact and clumsy. *Ongoing* is a mix of “continuing” and “active” and is usually superfluous.

He devoted all his spare time to the ongoing program for aid to the elderly.	He devoted all his spare time to the program for aid to the elderly.
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Offputting might mean “objectionable,” “disconcerting,” “distasteful.” Select instead a word whose meaning is clear. As a simple test, transform the participles to verbs. It is possible to *upset* something. But to *offput*? To *ongo*?

One. In the sense of “a person,” not to be followed by *his* or *her*.

One must watch his step.	One must watch one’s step. (You must watch your step.)
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One of the most. Avoid this feeble formula. “One of the most exciting developments of modern science is...”; “Switzerland is one of the most beautiful countries of Europe.” There is nothing wrong with the grammar; the formula is simply threadbare.

-oriented. A clumsy, pretentious device, much in vogue. Find a better way of indicating orientation or alignment or direction.

It was a manufacturing	It was a company chiefly concerned with manufacturing.
Many of the skits are situation	Many of the skits rely on situation.

Partially. Not always interchangeable with *partly*. Best used in the sense of “to a certain degree,” when speaking of a condition or state: “I’m partially resigned to it.” *Partly* carries the idea of a part as distinct from the whole—usually a physical object.

The log was partially submerged.	The log was partly submerged.
She was partially in and partially out.	She was partly in and partly out. She was part in, part out.

Participle for verbal noun.

There was little prospect of the Senate accepting even this compromise.	There was little prospect of the Senate’s accepting even this compromise.
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In the lefthand column, *accepting* is a present participle; in the righthand column, it is a verbal noun (gerund). The construction shown in the lefthand column is occasionally found, and has its defenders. Yet it is easy to see that the second sentence has to do not with a prospect of the Senate but with a prospect of accepting.

Any sentence in which the use of the possessive is awkward or impossible should of course be recast.

In the event of a reconsideration of the whole matter’s becoming necessary	If it should become necessary to reconsider the whole matter
There was great dissatisfaction with the decision of the arbitrators	There was great dissatisfaction with the arbitrators’ decision in favor of

being favorable to the company.	the company.
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People. A word with many meanings. (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, Third Edition, gives nine.) *The people* is a political term, not to be confused with *the public*. From the people comes political support or opposition; from the public comes artistic appreciation or commercial patronage.

The word *people* is best not used with words of number, in place of *persons*. If of “six people” five went away, how many people would be left? Answer: one people.

Personalize. A pretentious word, often carrying bad advice. Do not *personalize* your prose; simply make it good and keep it clean. See Chapter V, Reminder 1.

a highly personalized affair	a highly personal affair
Personalize your stationery.	Design a letterhead.

Personally. Often unnecessary.

Personally, I thought it was a good book.	I thought it a good book.
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Possess. Often used because to the writer it sounds more impressive than *have* or *own*. Such usage is not incorrect but is to be guarded against.

She possessed great courage.	She had great courage (was very brave).
He was the fortunate possessor of	He was lucky enough to own

Presently. Has two meanings: “in a short while” and “currently.” Because of this ambiguity it is best restricted to the first meaning: “She’ll be here presently” (“soon,” or “in a short time”).

Prestigious. Often an adjective of last resort. It’s in the dictionary, but that doesn’t mean you have to use it.

Refer. See *allude*.

Regretful. Sometimes carelessly used for *regrettable*: “The mixup was due to a regretful breakdown in communications.”

Relate. Not to be used intransitively to suggest rapport.

I relate well to Janet.	Janet and I see things the same way. Janet and I have a lot in common.
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Respective. Respectively. These words may usually be omitted with advantage.

Works of fiction are listed under the names of their respective authors.	Works of fiction are listed under the names of their authors.
The mile run and the two-mile run were won by Jones and Cummings respectively.	The mile run was won by Jones, the two-mile run by Cummings.

Secondly, thirdly, etc. Unless you are prepared to begin with *firstly* and defend it (which will be difficult), do not prettify numbers with *-ly*. Modern usage prefers *second*, *third*, and so on.

Shall. Will. In formal writing, the future tense requires *shall* for the first person, *will* for the second and third. The formula to express the speaker’s belief regarding a future action or state is *I shall*; *I will* expresses determination or consent. A swimmer in distress cries, “I shall drown; no one will save me!” A suicide puts it the other way: “I will drown; no one shall save me!” In relaxed speech, however, the words *shall* and *will* are seldom used precisely; our ear guides us or fails to guide us, as the case may be, and we are quite likely to drown when we want to survive and survive when we want to drown.

So. Avoid, in writing, the use of *so* as an intensifier: “so good”; “so warm”; “so delightful.”

Sort of. See *kind of*.

Split infinitive. There is precedent from the fourteenth century down for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive it governs, but the construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.

to diligently inquire to inquire diligently

For another side to the split infinitive, see Chapter V, Reminder 14.

State. Not to be used as a mere substitute for *say*, *remark*. Restrict it to the sense of “express fully or clearly”: “He refused to state his objections.”

Student body. Nine times out of ten a needless and awkward expression, meaning no more than the simple word *students*.

a member of the student body	a student
popular with the student body	liked by the students

Than. Any sentence with *than* (to express comparison) should be examined to make sure no essential words are missing.

I’m probably closer to my mother than my father. (Ambiguous.)	I’m probably closer to my mother than to my father. I’m probably closer to my mother than my father is.
It looked more like a cormorant than a heron.	It looked more like a cormorant than like a heron.

Thanking you in advance. This sounds as if the writer meant, “It will not be worth my while to write to you again.” In making your request, write “Will you please,” or “I shall be obliged.” Then, later, if you feel moved to do so, or if the circumstances call for it, write a letter of acknowledgment.

That. Which. *That* is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun, *which* the nondefining, or nonrestrictive. (See Rule 3.)

The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage. (Tells which one.)

The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage. (Adds a fact about the only mower in question.)

The use of *which* for *that* is common in written and spoken language (“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass.”). Occasionally *which* seems preferable to *that*, as in the sentence from the Bible. But it would be a convenience to all if these two pronouns were used with precision. Careful writers, watchful for small conveniences, go *which*-hunting, remove the defining *whiches*, and by so doing improve their work.

The foreseeable future. A cliché, and a fuzzy one. How much of the future is foreseeable? Ten minutes? Ten years? Any of it? By whom is it foreseeable? Seers? Experts? Everybody?

The truth is....The fact is.... A bad beginning for a sentence. If you feel you are possessed of the truth, or of the fact, simply state it. Do not give it advance billing.

They. He or She. Do not use *they* when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each*, *each one*, *everybody*, *every one*, *many a man*. Use the singular pronoun.

Every one of us knows they are fallible.	Every one of us knows he is fallible.
Everyone in the community,	Everyone in the community,

whether they are a member of the Association or not, is invited to attend.	whether he is a member of the Association or not, is invited to attend.
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A similar fault is the use of the plural pronoun with the antecedent *anybody*, *somebody*, *someone*, the intention being either to avoid the awkward *he or she* or to avoid committing oneself to one or the other. Some bashful speakers even say, "A friend of mine told me that they...."

The use of *he* as a pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. Currently, however, many writers find the use of the generic *he* or *his* to rename indefinite antecedents limiting or offensive. Substituting *he or she* in its place is the logical thing to do if it works. But it often doesn't work, if only because repetition makes it sound boring or silly.

Consider these strategies to avoid an awkward overuse of *he or she* or an unintentional emphasis on the masculine:

Use the plural rather than the singular.

The writer must address his readers' concerns.	Writers must address their readers' concerns.
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Eliminate the pronoun altogether.

The writer must address his readers' concerns.	The writer must address readers' concerns.
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Substitute the second person for the third person.

The writer must address his readers' concerns.	As a writer, you must address your readers' concerns.
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No one need fear to use *he* if common sense supports it. If you think *she* is a handy substitute for *he*, try it and see what happens. Alternatively, put all controversial nouns in the plural and avoid the choice of sex altogether, although you may find your prose sounding general and diffuse as a result.

This. The pronoun *this*, referring to the complete sense of a preceding sentence or clause, can't always carry the load and so may produce an imprecise statement.

Visiting dignitaries watched yesterday as ground was broken for the new high-energy physics laboratory with a blowout safety wall. This is the first visible evidence of the university's plans for modernization and expansion.	Visiting dignitaries watched yesterday as ground was broken for the new high-energy physics laboratory with a blowout safety wall. The ceremony afforded the first visible evidence of the university's plans for modernization and expansion.
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In the lefthand example above, *this* does not immediately make clear what the first visible evidence is.

Thrust. This showy noun, suggestive of power, hinting of sex, is the darling of executives, politicians, and speechwriters. Use it sparingly. Save it for specific application.

Our reorganization plan has a tremendous thrust.	The piston has a five-inch thrust.
The thrust of his letter was that he was working more hours than he'd bargained for.	The point he made in his letter was that he was working more hours than he'd bargained for.

Tortuous. Torturous. A winding road is *tortuous*, a painful ordeal is *torturous*. Both words carry the idea of "twist," the twist having been a form of torture.

Transpire. Not to be used in the sense of "happen," "come to pass." Many writers so use it (usually when groping toward imagined elegance), but their usage finds little support in the Latin "breathe across or through." It is correct, however, in the sense of "become known." "Eventually, the grim account of his villainy transpired" (literally, "leaked through or out").

Try. Takes the infinitive: “try to mend it,” not “try and mend it.” Students of the language will argue that *try and* has won through and become idiom. Indeed it has, and it is relaxed and acceptable. But *try to* is precise, and when you are writing formal prose, try and write *try to*.

Type. Not a synonym for *kind of*. The examples below are common vulgarisms.

that type employee	that kind of employee
I dislike that type publicity.	I dislike that kind of publicity.
small, home-type hotels	small, homelike hotels
a new type plane	a plane of a new design (new kind)

Unique. Means “without like or equal.” Hence, there can be no degrees of uniqueness.

It was the most unique coffee maker on the market.	It was a unique coffee maker.
The balancing act was very unique.	The balancing act was unique.
Of all the spiders, the one that lives in a bubble under water is the most unique.	Among spiders, the one that lives in a bubble under water is unique.

Utilize. Prefer *use*.

I utilized the facilities.	I used the toilet.
He utilized the dishwasher.	He used the dishwasher.

Verbal. Sometimes means “word for word” and in this sense may refer to something expressed in writing. *Oral* (from Latin *-os*, “mouth”) limits the meaning to what is transmitted by speech. *Oral agreement* is more precise than *verbal agreement*.

Very. Use this word sparingly. Where emphasis is necessary, use words strong in themselves.

While. Avoid the indiscriminate use of this word for *and*, *but*, and *although*. Many writers use it frequently as a substitute for *and* or *but*, either from a mere desire to vary the connective or from doubt about which of the two connectives is more appropriate. In this use it is best replaced by a semicolon.

The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor, while the rest of the building is used for manufacturing.	The office and salesrooms are on the ground floor; the rest of the building is used for manufacturing.
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Its use as a virtual equivalent of *although* is allowable in sentences where this leads to no ambiguity or absurdity.

While I admire his energy, I wish it were employed in a better cause.

This is entirely correct, as shown by the paraphrase

I admire his energy; at the same time, I wish it were employed in a better cause.

Compare:

While the temperature reaches 90 or 95 degrees in the daytime, the nights are often chilly.

The paraphrase shows why the use of *while* is incorrect:

The temperature reaches 90 or 95 degrees in the daytime; at the same time the nights are often chilly.

In general, the writer will do well to use *while* only with strict literalness, in the sense of "during the time that."

-wise. Not to be used indiscriminately as a pseudosuffix: *taxwise*, *pricewise*, *marriage-wise*, *prose-wise*, *saltwater taffy-wise*. Chiefly useful when it means "in the manner of": *clockwise*. There is not a noun in the language to which *-wise* cannot be added if the spirit moves one to add it. The sober writer will abstain from the use of this wild additive.

Worth while. Overworked as a term of vague approval and (with *not*) of disapproval. Strictly applicable only to actions: “Is it worth while to telegraph?”

His books are not worth while.	His books are not worth reading (are not worth one’s while to read; do not repay reading).
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The adjective *worthwhile* (one word) is acceptable but emaciated. Use a stronger word.

a worthwhile project	a promising (useful, valuable, exciting) project
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Would. Commonly used to express habitual or repeated action. (“He would get up early and prepare his own breakfast before he went to work.”) But when the idea of habit or repetition is expressed, in such phrases as *once a year*, *every day*, *each Sunday*, the past tense, without *would*, is usually sufficient, and, from its brevity, more emphatic.

Once a year he would visit the old mansion.	Once a year he visited the old mansion.
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In narrative writing, always indicate the transition from the general to the particular—that is, from sentences that merely state a general habit to those that express the action of a specific day or period. Failure to indicate the change will cause confusion.

Townsend would get up early and prepare his own breakfast. If the day was cold, he filled the stove and had a warm fire burning before he left the house. On his way out to the garage, he noticed that there were footprints in the new-fallen snow on the porch.

The reader is lost, having received no signal that Townsend has changed from a mere man of habit to a man who has seen a particular thing on a particular day.

Townsend would get up early and prepare his own breakfast. If the day was cold, he filled the stove and had a warm fire burning before he left the house. One morning in January, on his way out to the garage, he noticed footprints in the new-fallen snow on the porch.