

# **BETTER ENGLISH THAN YOURS**

## **A Little Guide to Good English and All That**

**Roger Dickinson-Brown**

*What? Sorry? I don't understand.  
Could you repeat that?  
Now I understand even less. Ah! At last I get you.  
You mean, Acis, that it's cold outside. Why didn't you say, "It's cold outside"?  
You want to tell me it's raining or snowing? Say "It's raining, it's snowing."  
You find me looking well, and want to say so; say "You're looking well."  
"But", you answer, "that is dull and obvious. Anyone could say the same thing."  
It doesn't matter, Acis. Is it so bad to be understood when you speak,  
and to speak like everyone else?  
Something is missing, Acis, in you and the other fancy-talkers –  
you don't realise it, and this will surprise you, but what's missing is intelligence.  
And that's not all: there is something else in you,  
which is the idea that you are more intelligent than other people.  
That is the source of your pompous gobbledygook, of your confused sentences  
and your grand words that make no sense.*

- La Bruyère

My title may require explanation or apology. Consider the alternatives: Fowler's huge, nearly definitive work, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, like other books with comparable titles, is too imposing to be a model for this humble handbook, and I cannot very well steal *The King's English* (as Amis himself did), because that delightful book is too recent and too British, and I remain, more or less, too American. *The President's English* leaves something to be desired..

So *Better English Than Yours* it is: a brief guide meant to instruct, amuse and, maybe, help you write better than you do, to draw your attention to things to worry about and, no less important, to things not to.

Why another book of this sort? Well, for a start, language changes, and its evolution requires appropriate encouragement or opposition. And then, each of us knows at least a little better than our predecessors, who tended, unlike us, to be pedantic. Fowler sometimes gives more than you want, though his is still the best genuine reference work. Kingsley Amis' book is entertaining, perceptive and memorable, but also desultory, capriciously personal and given to analyses which the author himself admits are sometimes pointless and uninteresting: *The King's English* is less a practical guide than an occasion to hold forth. (I have, nonetheless, *emulated* the wit in that book, and recently reread it: Amis has outwitted me.) *The Economist*, like many other newspapers, publishes a *Style Guide*, most useful for journalists. Strunk and White has been revised too often, is not as reliable as it should be, and is perhaps too well-known; Follet's *Modern American Usage* is better.

There are many other manuals and guides of every sort, and some of them, already forgotten or still remembered, are very good. Maybe the best argument for a worthwhile new one is that none ever answers all the same questions, or has the final word: you need different opinions. There are arguments here that will not be found elsewhere; see especially **Clichés**, **Germanic-Latin**, **Originality** and **Plain style**, as well as comments on the influence of Romanticism, *passim*. Although meant to be lucid, brief, memorable, true and when possible enjoyable, the few pages of this guide will go the way of all paper, or all electrons. In the meantime perhaps they will find a little place in the light of the reader's eye.

*Better English Than Yours* should be useful on almost any occasion involving language, but the advice here is intended especially for what the French call *le langage châtié*: language more careful, though not necessarily more elevated, than typical everyday speech; little will thus be said of pronunciation. And since the typical reader not only confuses or ignores but also loathes grammatical terms (I am no exception), most of them will also be excluded. They are not strictly necessary here and, if not clearly understood, worse than useless.

Someone once said that a gentleman (or lady) has many different styles of language: formal, informal, written, spoken, local, familiar ... – everything depends on *whom you're talking to*, and in what circumstances, because human relations are, so to speak, not physical but chemical interactions. It is difficult to imagine better advice. When all the guidelines have been set, when the rules have been established and absorbed, relax, adapt to the context and use your English reflexively – or, at least, try to and seem to. Reasonable prescription and proscription are necessary parts of any culture, but the main themes here are good habits and easy clarity.

One last detail. Any book of this sort, even Fowler's, is a selection of topics considered more important than others, though it is always of course possible to take advantage of this selectivity, as I have done, in order to avoid displays of the author's ignorance, or his inability to explain something clearly. As you skip through this little guide, if it begins to bore you, you may enjoy counting the number of times the author breaks his own and other people's rules.

**Affect / effect** *To affect is to influence, to modify: The morphine affected his behavior. It is also to seem, consciously and artificially: His sorrow at the funeral was affected. To effect is to carry out, to put into practice: We must effect five changes if we are to succeed. To carry out is often preferable.*

**Aggravate, exasperate, irritate** *To aggravate is to make worse: the drought aggravated their poverty. To exasperate is to annoy: His stupidity exasperated her. To irritate is to cause a physiological reaction: Those liquids may irritate the skin. Metaphorical use of irritate (Her stupidity irritated him) is not recommended.*

**Aggressive / offensive** These words and their derivatives are best reserved for war, sports and nastiness, not used to mean *vigorous* or *energetic*.

**Alibi** is a Latin word meaning *elsewhere*. It is not an *excuse*, but rather proof or an argument that you were somewhere else at the time.

**All of**, when not followed by a pronoun (*all of you/them ...*), can often be improved by simplifying to *all*: “*all of my love*” becomes “*all my love*”, “*all of the money*” “*all the money*”, etc. See also **Outside of, off of** and **inside of**.

**Alright** is not a word. The expression – the exact synonym of OK – is *all right*.

**Alternative** (noun) If you must sink or swim, you do not have two alternatives, but one. You have two possibilities.

**Although / though** Fowler correctly observes that there is not much difference between these two words; Amis adds that *although* is a little more formal, and I will add that your choice may be influenced by the rhythm of your sentence. (*Though* is also slightly more flexible: only it, for example, can be put at the end of a phrase.)

**Among / between** The distinction can become complicated, but in general say *between* two, and *among* three or more. You can't very well sit among two charming ladies, and you shouldn't hesitate between three colors.

**And** Can a correct sentence begin with *and*? And why not?

**And/or** The contraction *and/or* is said to be ugly, but it is useful, and does little harm.

**Apostrophes** are never correctly used for the plural: even writing the *80's* and the *90's* is just bad English; write the *80s* and the *90s*. For the possessive of singular words ending in *s*, add *'s*: *Kingsley Amis's book*. Plural words ending with *s* take a simple apostrophe: *her sons' wives*.

**Archaisms** Some people love to sprinkle their sentences with antiquated literary words – or such they imagine them to be: *albeit, ere, methinks, well-nigh, oft* and so on. It's part of the rich and varied art of over-dressing (see the epigraph of this work, and **Genteelisms**).

**Arrogant / vain** An arrogant person does not care enough about what other people think. A vain person cares too much.

**As** See **Like / as**.

**As of yet** No one knows exactly what this gadget means. I remember serving on a university tenure committee many years back, when a distinguished English colleague led an attack on one of the mediocre people then “up for tenure.” My colleague referred, in order to strengthen and illustrate his argument, to the fact that the candidate had employed this mysterious, pseudo-respectable combination of syllables, full of ignorant social pretension. (The candidate was granted tenure nonetheless, because the committee was a committee of cowards, and because most of its members used the same expression.)

**As ... than** *He loves me as much as, if not more than, I love him. Rembrandt is as great or greater than Raphael.* These sentences are defective, because of the need to distinguish *as ... as* and *more ... than*, at least implicitly. Rephrase. One good solution is to leave the second part elliptical: *He loves me as much as I love him, if not more* (than I love him).

**As to, regarding,** and perhaps also *as for* and *concerning*, are better left to committees and business correspondence.

**Ashamed / embarrassed** If you are ashamed, either you should be, or the feeling is inappropriate; if you are embarrassed, perhaps only your sensitivity, your sense of decorum or your vanity has been troubled. Shame is part of the necessary repentance after sin. Embarrassment is what you'd feel if you farted in the presence of the Queen.

**Bacteria** are more dangerous, if they are of the evil variety, than a poor, single *bacterium* – unless of course the latter starts dividing.

**Because** See **Reason**.

**Better / best // worse / worst** The fact that Jane Austen (not to mention Shakespeare) ignored or neglected this distinction reminds us of how language changes – but we live in our century, not theirs: the *better / worse* of two, the *best / worst* of three or more. If a man has two children, he has no oldest child, and no youngest. He has an older child and a younger.

**Between** See **Among / between**.

**Biannual** ought to mean twice a year. **Biennial** still always means once every two years, but because people so often confuse *biannual*, it may be better to find other words.

**Bible**, with a capital B, when speaking of the Old and New Testaments; lower case when speaking figuratively, as in *the hiker's bible*, although this vulgarity might also be avoided.

**Both** and **each** are distinguishable only by tendency: the former, which is plural, emphasises concertation; the latter, singular, emphasises separation. They (both) died at the same time. Each (one) has been in prison. As in the example given here, eliminating the word *both* will often improve the sentence.

**Breakdown** is a noun; the verb is *to break down*. The distinction is important and useful because many English words follow the same rule: a single, compound noun (and adjective) splits into a verb. They got away in the getaway car. He gave us the go-ahead, so we went ahead. When you have grown up, you are a grownup.

**But** Can a correct sentence begin with *But*? Prohibition is unjustified. Occasionally beginning emphatic sentences with *But* and *And* enriches the palette of possible effects.

**Canon** This is not something that goes *Boom!* – which is a *cannon* – but, in addition to the word's musical and religious senses, a kind of standardised, “received” body of work, e.g., the poets and poems frequently found in anthologies: *It is a pity that Barnabe Googe is not in the canon, and that Poe is.*

**Cant** is the pompous, hypocritical, holier-than-thou spewing of fashionable virtues, and as such it is nothing new. One popular current form is often called Political Correctness, but cant is available in a wide range of colors and textures. Clichés are words used too often and automatically; cant should never be used at all. Champions of cant actually enjoy and sometimes even believe what they say.

**Capital letters** If you do not want your writing to look like an advertising brochure, minimise these. Except for a few obvious cases, including nationality, days of the week and months of the year, capitalisation is often unnecessary. Apart from proper names (North Carolina), *north* and *west*, for example, are perfectly correct, and also *summer* and *autumn*.

Capitalisation provides a fertile medium for nationalism – that “childhood disease,” as Einstein called it: “our own” senates, embassies, departments, ministries, etc., tend to be capitalised; those from other countries tend not to be.

**cf.** is an abbreviation of the Latin *confer*, which means *compare* or *compare with*, and no longer has much to do with the English word *confer*.

**Cheeses** and **wines**, two wonderful things that do not go together as well as many people think, are usually spelled in lower case: cheddar, sauternes. See also **Capital letters**.

**Classic / classical** As adjectives, *classic* often means something close to “typical” – a classic cognac, a classic case of syphilis – and *classical* ... well, *classical* describes something almost indefinable: the *grand tradition*, let us say, as in the expression *classical music*. Good luck.

**Clichés** Although epic poetry was once written in clichés, we are no longer epic. Our worst vocabulary misdemeanors are of two sorts: misuse (*infer* for *imply*, *like* for *as...*) and clichés. The latter are more evil. Nevertheless, when apposite, clichés can have their place: *During the longest boom in its history, the government of Cashmeinnia is introducing fiscal reforms, and the opposition is crying “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”* Most clichés, however, are like viruses: they come and go, never stop changing, and can be very, very contagious. There are so many that I cannot list them all here.

Clichés are frequently, but not always, stock adjectives automatically stuck to an innocent noun: a *great* evening, a *nice* day, an *awesome* film, an *ongoing*, *in-depth* study. They are overused words: *absolutely*, *arguably*, *basically*, *brilliant*, *globalisation*, *major* .... Often involving exaggeration, not inevitably harmful, clichés are nonetheless substitutes for thinking, and can put a reader into a coma. Your sentence will be more elegant and forceful without the decorative stereotype: *Angkor Wat is beautiful* instead of *exceptionally* or *extraordinarily* or *incredibly* beautiful.

Clichés are also like lice: once you have them, they are very hard to get rid of. Cf. **Cant**, **Jargon** and **Slang**.

**Colon** See **Punctuation**.

**Comma** See **Punctuation**.

**Complement / compliment** A complement *completes* something. A *compliment* is an expression of praise, respect or courtesy. Only spelling (or artificial pronunciation) distinguishes the two words.

**Conjunctions** See **Prepositions and conjunctions**.

**Continual / continuous** A pompous wife or a gossipy husband may well talk *continually*, but if she or he did so *continuously* there would be no time to eat or sleep.

**Cursing** See **Profanity, obscenity, swearing, cursing**.

**Dangling participles** These are clumsy or inelegant at best, and ridiculous at worst: “After being beaten for a long time, you will find that the egg whites begin to rise.”

**Dashes** See **Punctuation**.

**Data** is indeed a Latin plural, but there are now so few people around who master Latin that the word seems definitively singular.

**Delusion / illusion** *Delusions* are pathological. *Illusions* can be of any sort, happy or sad, and even voluntary. The murderer suffered from delusions of persecution. Some of us have illusions of a Golden Age when we were children, or of a time when the average citizen wrote good English. Watching a film, or reading a novel, we have (perhaps) an illusion of reality.

**Dictionaries** All careful writers frequently consult several, though they are often now on line. Certain choices depend on particular activities, but a general start should include some form of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for British English, and of the *Merriam-Webster* for American. Online, try the Free Dictionary, the CNRTL and Littré for French, the GDT for French-English technical vocabulary, and Whitaker for Latin-English.

**Dilemma**, as its etymology suggests, indicates a position between two equally unsatisfactory possibilities. It does not signify simply an unhappy situation. If you are desperately poor, you are not on the horns of a dilemma. If you must choose between murdering and being murdered, that is a dilemma.

**Disinterested / uninterested** These two different words are very often confused. If you are *uninterested* in this book, it bores you, and you will probably set it aside. An impartial judge is *disinterested* because she or he has no personal interest in the outcome of a lawsuit.

**Each** See **Both** and **each**.



**e.g.** is an abbreviation of the Latin *exempli gratia*, meaning *for example*. Not to be confused with **i.e.** (q.v.).

**Elegance** The original sense of this wonderful word is inseparable from *simplicity*. The only criterion by which Galileo's cosmology was recognised as right, and the Tychonic and geocentric systems wrong, was the simplicity of Galileo's. All three explanations accounted for every fact known at the time, but Galileo's was the most elegant (i.e., Occam's medieval razor). It seems to me that all good writing should be elegant, but it isn't, and many people would criticise my opinion as narrow and intolerant, since it more or less excludes the ornamental and the magnificent. This little manual is as elegant as I can make it. See also **Plain style**.

**Embarrassed** See **Ashamed / embarrassed**.

**Enormity** has nothing to do with *enormous*, and everything to do with *monstrous*, with great evil.

**et al.** is an abbreviation of the Latin *et alii/aliae/aliam*, meaning *and the others* (people or things).

**etc.** Neither this abbreviation nor its equivalent "and so on" is usefully repeated. Surely *etc.*, *etc.*, *etc.* beats a dead horse.

**Etymology** is often so tortuous and boring that it should be reserved for losing friends and readers.

**Euphemisms** are dangerous. You'll probably offend someone if you employ a euphemism, and offend someone else if you don't. These grotesque contortions are not the same thing as discreet, sensitive language. Some of them can be avoided, allowing you to write or speak in public the way reasonable, decent people do in private. An *under-developed* country can be called *poor*. If you are *between jobs* you can be *looking for work*, and a man who is *deceased* can perhaps be *dead*. But when it comes to race, sexuality and the other *isms*, God help you.

**Exaggeration** ought to be the unjustified intensification of language, and recognised as such, but it seems to have become the norm itself: people are not *distressed* but *traumatised*, an unhappy event is not *sad* but *tragic*, an *enthusiast* becomes an *addict*; *anger* turns into *fury* and *fear* is *paranoia*. Thus the rich precision of language – the right word in the right place – disappears. See also **Clichés**.

**Exasperate** See **Aggravate, exasperate, irritate**.

**Exceedingly / Excessively** *Exceedingly* means *surpassingly* – going beyond the usual limits: an exceedingly beautiful woman. *Excessive* means too much. My electricity bill is always excessive, but I've never seen an excessively beautiful woman.

**Exclamation point** See **Punctuation**.

**Farther, further**, etc. These words may seem interchangeable, but *farther* tends to refer to physical distance, *further* to abstractions. When in doubt, stay with *farther*.

**Female, male** Strictly speaking, *female* and *male* distinctions are better left to hamsters, guppies and comparable critters. But what then can we say? A lady senator? A woman senator? A senatrix? Student men? Men students? Any way you look at it, you lose. We often have, alas, nothing better than *a female senator, male students*. See also **Sex**.

**Fewer / less** *Fewer* is plural; *less* is singular. No one would say *I have fewer knife /child*, and it would be nice if no one ever said *I have less debts ....* *Less* is, however, used for routinely counted plural quantities in the comparative: *less than ten dollars* or *less than thirty-two degrees* but *fewer than six children* (degrees and dollars are routinely counted; children are not). In the absence of the comparative, follow the basic *fewer/plural, less/singular* rule.

**First(ly), second(ly), etc.** There are words that end with an unnecessary *ly*. You might start with these two.

**Flaunt, flout** *To flaunt* is to show off, ostentatiously: "*If you've got it, flaunt it,*" said the starlet. *To flout* is to spurn, disdain or contemn: *Some modern artists flout the basic principles of decency and common sense.*

**Foreign words** These of course have their place, but they easily become rather more occasions for pretension than for being understood – especially if you insist on accurate foreign pronunciation (or what you believe to be accurate), or choose a foreign word when there is an English equivalent. The purpose of speaking and writing is communication, not the demonstration of social superiority. Have mercy on your readers and your auditors.

**Frankenstein** It is strange to remember that the early Romantics were often enthusiastic amateur scientists, but finished by unanimously championing, as we, their descendants, still do, the warm heart and Emotion, opposed to the cold brain, Reason and science itself. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's monster (who was not called Frankenstein) and the monster's "creator" (who was) were of this early type: the poor manufactured creature was quite a kindly fellow until Society and its Rigid Conventions ruined him. The moral of this story is: Don't call the monster *Frankenstein*.

**Full stop** is the British word for a period at the end of a sentence. See **Punctuation**.

**Gender** See **They**.

**Genteelisms** (the term is Fowler's), thought by certain people to be "classy," are fancy words for simple things. In England they are often associated with the lesser middle classes' attempts to seem what they are not, to say *Pardon?* instead of *What?* and *odour* instead of *smell*, or *perspire* instead of *sweat*. But the disease spreads quickly to all sorts of speakers and writers who seem to feel instinctively that *feasible* is a more respectable word than *possible*, that *spouse* is loftier than *wife* or *husband*, and that it is more refined to be *deceased* than to be *dead*. Genteelisms are a bit like showing up at a barbecue in a tuxedo. There is no more effective way to avoid good thinking and writing.

**Germanic-Latin** This is one of the shibboleths of our times. It seems that everyone, from Churchill to Orwell, now cheers for the short, plain old-fashioned Germanic word. In the eighteenth century, fashion pointed the other way.

Let us consider. Fashion is, almost by definition, a form of exaggeration. The English language is roughly half Germanic, half Latinate. The Germanic half tends toward monosyllabic, concrete, everyday words, the Latinate half toward polysyllabic, abstract, "sophisticated" words. Shakespeare knew how to play one against the other:

... No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.

Although a good plain style does indeed favor simple, often Germanic words, such words are not always simpler or more common than the Latin ones, and still less always apposite. It would be worse than unfortunate to refuse the double heritage of English, as an hour spent with Samuel Johnson will demonstrate.

**He / him // I / me**, etc. Common sense, or reflection, or slow reading should solve problems here, but there is a good trick my father taught me many years ago: since the difficulty usually arises in doubles – e.g., *He gave the cash to John and I*, or *They recognised you and he at the concert* – split the doubles, keeping only the second term. No one would say *He gave the cash to I*, or *They recognised he*. "*Who wants to help me?*" "*Not I,*" said the pig is correct, because the pig is not saying *me don't want to* but *I don't want to*. Years ago, Marilyn Monroe appeared on a television program with Jack Benny. She played the role of the breathy, dumb blonde, and said "I never realised so many people admired you and I" – to which Benny replied, "Neither did me."

If *to be* is the principle verb, you have a tough choice. "*It is I / It was she* who stole the money" is the only correct form. *I, he, they*, etc. for the subject of the verb; *me, him, them*, etc. for the object – and *to be* never takes an object: "Pickled herring disgusts me – *Me too*" is perfectly logical. But

if you don't say *It's me* / *It was her*, you'll be taken for a prig, or for someone who doesn't speak good English.

**Hopefully** There's nothing wrong with this word if you do not use it to mean *I hope that ....* In the same way, never say *Thankfully ...* if you mean *Fortunately ....* Please.

**However** Is it permissible to put this word (or *nevertheless*, or *nonetheless*) at the beginning of a sentence? Put it anywhere that feels comfortable. However, if you begin of a sentence with it, follow with a comma.

**Hung / hanged** You *hung* around street corners when you were young and have fashionably *hung* your diploma (up) on the wall in the loo. You've often *hung up* on those dreadful people who phone you at home in order to sell you something you don't want. But your great-great-grandfather was *hanged* for stealing horses.

**Hyphens** If a phrase functions as an adjective (i.e., it is placed before the noun), then it takes hyphens: *a fifty-dollar cigar*; *a pink-and-white tulip* – although such constructions are often better avoided. If the same words are used after the noun and verb (i.e., not as a compound adjective), there should be no hyphen: *the cigar costs fifty dollars*; *the tulip is pink and white*. An adverb ending in *ly* takes no hyphen: *a badly written letter*, but adverbs without *ly* require one: *a well-prepared murder*, *a hard-won victory*.

**i.e.**, the abbreviation of the Latin *id est*, means simply *that is*, or *that is to say*. Commonly used, but there's not much advantage over the English. Often confused with **e.g.**

**I / me** See **He / him** // **I / me**.

**ib.** or **ibid.** is an abbreviation of the Latin word *ibidem*, meaning *in the same place*, as “in the book or article already cited.”

**Illusion** See **Delusion** / **illusion**.

**Impact** is not a verb, except for teeth: his impacted tooth *affected* his speech.

**Imply / infer** *To imply* is to hint at, to insinuate, to suggest implicitly; it can be sneaky. *To infer*, often misused for *imply*, is to draw a conclusion. *She didn't actually say so, but she implied that she was unhappy in her new job. When I heard screams, gunfire and police sirens, I inferred that there was some sort of trouble.*

**In excess of** Amis calls this alternative to *over* or *more than* “a fussy piece of pseudo-accuracy which contributes nothing but length and a fraudulent scientific glow.” Enough said.

**Inchoate** has virtually nothing to do with chaos or incoherence. Like the word *incipient*, it means *in the initial, undeveloped state, or early stages*.

**Incredibly** does not mean *extremely, wonderfully or amazingly*. If this explanation is incredible, you don't believe it.

**Inside of** See **Outside of, off of and inside of**.

**Insidious / invidious** Insidious means “subtly dangerous”: *The slow, insidious propagation of rules and regulations is stifling our freedom*. Invidious means “causing ill-will”, or giving offense: *He compared my poem invidiously with all the great poems he could quote*.

**Into, onto and upon** In spite of what Amis says, these “doubled” prepositions indicate movement from one place to another, and are in fact necessary if that is what is meant: *jump on the table* is not the same as *jump onto the table*. After you have poured your whisky *into* the glass, the whisky is *in* the glass. Once you have stepped *onto* the boat, you are *on* it. These disyllabic prepositions should not be confused with *in to* (they came in to say hello), *up on* (the swallows are up on that high wire), etc.

**Irony** The word, like its derivatives, is so often abused that it may be preferable to abandon it except in the most carefully controlled contexts.

**Irritate** See **Aggravate, exasperate, irritate**.

**-ise or -ize?** Civilisation tends to be British, and civilization American. The latter is historically and etymologically preferable, but since a certain number of words *must* be spelled with an *s* – compromise, despise, disguise, exercise, improvise, supervise and surprise, among others – it is perhaps more practical to use *s* for the whole caboodle. Capsize and synthesize are exceptions.

**Issue** The transformation of this useful term into a gratuitous duplicate of *problem* is too silly for comment, except as an occasion to emphasise the importance of respect for the meanings of words. Use a dictionary.

**It's** Need I remind my readers that *it's* means only *it is* and *it has*, and nothing else? Probably not, because if they were that far gone they would not be looking through this book. But remember that systematic rereading is one of the first duties of any careful writer.

**Jargon**, properly speaking, is language used by specialists to designate things the rest of us know little or nothing about. It has its place, as long as it is not being employed to intimidate or impress, and is not a word that the reader will simply not understand. *Jargon* also sometimes means pretentious gobbledegook.

**Jejune** has nothing to do with the French word *jeune*, and nothing to do with puerility. It means dull, uninteresting. The word is almost always misused.

**Judg(e)mental / value judg(e)ment** These contraptions manage to combine cliché and cant. Almost any judgement involves values, which are neither sins nor crimes.

**Latin-Germanic** See **Germanic-Latin**.

**Latter / last** The *latter* of the two long epigrams cited; the *last* of the three murderers. See also **Better / best**.

**Legalese** The language employed by legislators, judges and lawyers in legislation, contracts and other legal documents is not meant to be elegant. It is meant to “cover” every possibility, and although it is always ugly and repetitive, and even sometimes impenetrable, legalese often achieves what it has set out to do. See also the **Plain English Movement**.

**Levels** The lumpenintelligentsia of our times – the specialists, the experts, the professors, the critics, the reviewers and the tank-thinkers – have frequent recourse to *levels*: something is true on one level, but not on another level. It is a sort of extension of the old abuse of the word *ironic*, and a fine way to impress people without saying much. Better adapted to carpentry and quantum physics than to artistic criticism, descending like the Circles of Dante’s *Inferno*, *levels* often take the place of clear thinking.

**Liberal** is a confusing word in English. It has different and even opposite senses in different countries, and is better avoided.

**Lie / lay** The confusion here is almost universal and ought to be laughable, since correct understanding of one mistaken form can imply even more sexual activity than most of us manage, but the error is so common that almost no one gets the joke.

*To lie* is irregular: *to lie, lay, lain*. *To lie* (often employed with the word “down”) is not a transitive verb: you cannot lie someone or something, nor can you lie down someone or something. You can only lie (down).

*To lay* is almost but not quite regular: *to lay, laid, laid*. It is *always* transitive. You must lay something (or, for the sexual bit, someone). Pigs don’t lay eggs, but chickens do. He laid the smoking gun on his wife’s tombstone, and then lay down to die. After he has been laid in his grave, he will lie there a long time.

The problem, of course, is that one of the past forms of *to lie* is the same as the present and infinitive form of the verb *to lay*. If you've been confusing these verbs in the past, which is statistically probable, then you're going to have to work on the distinction.

**Like / as** This should be easy: *like* is dominated, or “followed,” by a noun, *as* by a verb: He looks *like a monkey*. She treated him *like a criminal*. They arrived early, *as requested*. He returned her letters, *as (he had) promised*. The distinction should be simple, and is never, perhaps, a problem for what might be called a good ear, but it isn't easy to explain briefly, because of the indefinite nature of the word “dominated”: *He answered truthfully, as an honest man will*. *As* dominates not the noun “(honest) man” but the verb “will (answer)” – and that is not obvious (without the auxiliary *will* in this sentence, *as* would become *like*). It will help if you know what a grammatical conjunction is: *like* is not a conjunction.

And then there is the exceptional case of *as* meaning “in the capacity of”: *As president, I would like to begin with this observation .... She acted as our guide throughout the operation*.

*Like* can be treacherous in other ways. Don't use it for *as if* or confuse it with *such as*. Even *likely* can be tricky. As this is meant to be a *Little Guide to Good English*, I will now send you to Fowler, and wish you luck.

**Literal(ly)** does not mean “very” or “extremely.” It means that the word that follows *really happened*. If you're literally starving, you'd better get medical help fast. If you literally die laughing, well, that's not funny. May you rest in peace.

**Literature** Abuse of this word, like the existence of certain slang words and expressions, has its *raison d'être*. If the term *literature* is meant to be literary – that is, pertaining to poetry, novels, theater plays and the like – then what do we call the mass of non-literary books, reviews, magazines and articles created for commercial, technical or other purposes? What we call it now is *literature*, as in “scientific literature.” No one has yet come up with a good alternative.

**Located** and its derivatives are often unnecessary: a bar located in Chicago is a bar in Chicago.

**Magnum** Be it full of wine or a .44, a magnum is big, and can wipe you out. A magnum of wine is currently considered a double bottle, i.e., 1.5 litres.

**May / might** I do not know how to explain clearly all the differences between these two words, which no doubt means I do not completely understand and sometimes misuse them. It is tempting to say that they are interchangeable in the present and future: what is the difference between *She might be dying* and *She may be dying*? I see none or almost none, but apparently only *may* is correct. Even in simplified explanation, the distinction can be confusing. *May* is probably safer in the present/future, *might* in the past (preterite): *The lady is saying, right now, that if we don't*

*promote her she may feel obliged to resign becomes Yesterday she insisted that she might feel obliged to resign.* And in the past there is often a difference of sense: *The president may have been shot* (= I do not know if he was or not) versus *The president might have been shot* (if his bodyguards had not intervened). There is also apparently a subjunctive *might*, but I have never been able to follow anyone's explanation of it.

Adding insult to my ignorance, Kingsley Amis, hearing a journalist say *This climbdown could signal another Tory defeat*, wanted to shriek, "*Might, you numbskull, might!*" Glad memories of an afternoon's drinking and chatting with him are forever compromised.

*May* is of course also a polite way of asking for or (less commonly) granting permission; on a few occasions this can be ambiguous: *The children may pick the flowers.*

**Media** This, like non-literary **literature** (q.v.), is a good example of a half-baked, necessary word. In the first place, is it singular or, as in Latin, plural? (Go for plural.) More important, what exactly does it mean? Newspapers / radio / cinema / television all together? And popular music too? And the internet as well? Should we prefer the expression *mass media*, and save medium / media for its traditional sense? People seem to feel a need for some such word – that's how words are born – and *media* appears to be it.

**Metaphor** and **simile** George Orwell once proposed six rules to avoid "ugly and inaccurate written English." The first, difficult to follow, is "never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print." I cannot, alas, agree with the great man here. I would say, rather, that except for the occasional inspired figure of speech, never use metaphors or similes at all if you can get the job done with plain words already waiting in the dictionary. If you must be figurative, a standard, routine, immediately comprehensible metaphor will be preferable to a belabored original one. See also **Originality**.

**Might** See **May** / **might**.

**Mitigate** To mitigate means to make less severe, less harsh: to mitigate pain, anger or punishment. *To mitigate against* is the result of an abortive search for the expression *to militate against*.

**Moral** / **morale** *Moral* (accent on the first syllable) is an adjective having to do with good and bad actions – with *morality*. It is also a noun meaning the point of a story or fable: *The moral of the story is, if you trust God and are lucky, everything will go well.* *Morale* (accent on the second syllable) has to do with the high or low spirits of a group: *Because they had lost six battles and not been paid in a year, the morale of the soldiers was very low.*



**None**, like *majority*, *minority* and a few similar words. can be either singular or plural. *They were all notified, but none (of them) have come to the funeral* is correct and even preferable.

**Obscenity** See **Profanity, obscenity, swearing, cursing.**

**Off of** See **Outside of, off of** and **inside of.**

**Offensive** See **Aggressive / offensive.**

**Only** Fowler is not only wrong on this subject, but inconsistent with himself, or so it seems to me. As a grammarian who often attacks pedants, perhaps to be sure he will not be taken for one himself, he tells us not to be fussy, and that *everybody understands*. But there is a difference between *I only saw 24 blackbirds* and *I saw only 24 blackbirds*. If you only saw them, you're not going to be able to put them into a pie. And the very *raison d'être* of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is clear, elegant language. After all, if I write *Who did you see?* or *The biggest of the two*, you also know what I mean.

**Onto** See **Into, onto** and **upon.**

**Originality** is an obsession of our times. Not only is every artist expected to be Original (although Austen and Bach were not extremely innovative), but everything else, from food to science, is also thought to be better if it's fresh and new. Now, it is certainly true that writing composed exclusively of the most hackneyed clichés is not likely to be fascinating. But in order to be effectively original you need something original to say. If that is not so, or only slightly so, then your English should probably be unoriginal, or only slightly original. Anything else is dishonest, disingenuous or affected. It will not do to seek out desperately some ground-breaking version in order to become more interesting or artistic. Not everything can be unprecedented.

There is no crime in being unoriginal. Many a time my grandmother took me through her garden, showing me her vegetables and flowers. There was nothing novel in what she said, but it was wonderful, and I learned many things that I still remember. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, like medieval and early Renaissance painting, is so little original that it is often difficult or impossible to tell one fine work from another. Shakespeare based almost all his plays on other people's stories, although of course he used them in his own way. Nonetheless, he does not seem to have been obsessed, like us, with Originality.

**Outside of, off of** and **inside of** are remarkably well replaced by *outside*, *off* and *inside*.

**Participles** See **Dangling participles.**

**Pause** In language, there are at least two or three types of pause. One is occasioned by the reader's reflection. It may or may not be provoked by an actual rhythmic pause in the sentence, and is often a sign that the author is doing his job. Another kind of pause requires the reader to reread in order to understand, and is usually a sign that the author is not doing his job.

**Periods** See **Punctuation**.

**Phenomenon** One phenomenon, two phenomena. The Greek forms are still applied.

**Plain English Movement** For several generations there have been, in the English-speaking world and beyond, various movements, manuals and laws meant to quell governmental / political jargon and gobbledygook, and install simple, precise and concise language in its place. I have noticed no improvement and do not expect any, because the aforesaid gobbledygook is not incompetent but rather a form of accomplished writing, meant to obfuscate, to intimidate, and to say a minimum in a maximum of complicated words and syntax. As such, it is very effective, and achieves its purposes. See also **Legalese**.

**Plain style** In its simplest form this great, perpetual and universal style is the alternative to the lofty epic and to the flowery, ornate manner of many a precious Sonnet to a Beautiful Lady. The plain style is the style we read in Cicero's letters, the style, often conversational, of much of Catullus and Martial, of the finest poems of Ben Jonson, and of the prose of the great Dr. Johnson (in and out of Boswell's biography). In the visual arts, it is the style of Rembrandt, and of Dürer's watercolors. The original sense of the word implies *elegance* (q.v.), which is the clearest and simplest statement of complete truth. *Plain* is the opposite of *fancy*, and often associated with truth, as in the expression *the plain truth*. An honest, forthright man is sometimes called *a plain dealer*, as opposed to *a fancy talker*. Another advantage of a good plain style is English that is often immediately clear: you do not need to reread in order to understand. (Because of certain associations with money, *plain* is sometimes used to mean crude, poor or ugly, and *fancy* to connote luxury. Both senses are indeed compatible, but in the pure sense of the words, an elegant dress must be plain; it cannot be fancy.)

**Prepositions and conjunctions** (the ending of phrases with) The famous sentence attributed to Churchill – “This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put” – laid this particular snobbish shibboleth in its grave. The Germanic part of English can not only permit the ending of a sentence with a preposition, but sometimes requires it.

**Prior to** is a swanky way to say *before*.

**Priority** A priority is number one on the list. You cannot have several priorities, unless you just have trouble making up your mind.

**Profanity, obscenity, swearing, cursing** (There is no generally accepted, single term for “bad words” but, as Fowler sometimes says, *you know what I mean.*)

It is an illustration of our literally godless society that, for a long time now, taking the Lord’s name in vain has been far less offensive than “explicit” sexual terms: after all, if you do not believe in Heaven, Hell and God, there is small reason to be offended by the curse *Damn you!* There still are, of course, good Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc., and indeed these people do not take the name of God in vain. The others, whose heart is in Hollywood, seem to have replaced God with fucking – they *feel* that the latter word is “stronger.” But I am perhaps beside the point. You are not consulting this book in order to read a sermon, but simply to improve your English. Since we think in language, that is already a great deal.

Should you speak or write these words? Which words? With whom? Say *shit*, or ludicrously dot out *f..k you*? Social contexts and conventions evolve constantly, of course, though not always as much as we think (when Clark Gable created a tiny scandal with “I don’t give a damn!” in the film *Gone with the Wind*, it was not because his fans did not hear and use similar expressions every day; it was because he said what he said in public).

I can do no better here than quote the advice already given in the Preface: a gentleman has a number of different ways of speaking, and even of pronouncing his words. Adapt to the circumstances – but when in doubt it may be wise to refrain from something you could regret. You may even consider that respect for the feelings of others is a fundamental element of courtesy.

One last observation: over the many long and wonderful years I spent with my grandmother, I heard her use a “bad word” only twice. On each occasion there was extraordinary force in the word. Now such words are banalised, and they have lost their power.

**Pronunciation** Since this little manual deals mostly with the written language, nothing will be said here about pronunciation, except this: the word is not pronunciation.

**Punctuation** is a vast and complex art, indispensable to good writing but mastered by few. I will limit myself here to some useful general rules, neglecting many exceptions and details. If very few even skillful and talented writers achieve genuine proficiency, that is because punctuation is neither easy nor simple.

Most of the time, except for enumeration, any pair of punctuation marks (including the final period, and imagining that each sentence begins with invisible punctuation) should enclose a phrase which could be removed from the main sentence. Thus *These songs, and lots of others like them are all-time favorites* is missing a comma after the word *them*, and it is possible to remove the first segment of the following sentence: *Although he promised not to, he belched continually*

during the Ambassador's dinner. The same principle creates a distinction: *He burned the books which he hates* (an inferior version of *He burned the books that he hates*) is not at all the same thing as *He burned the books, which he hates*.

Exclamation points, once used for routine exclamations – *Good morning, Elizabeth!* – are now unfashionable. Except for chess, factorials and other technical uses, they are best limited to strong emotional interjections: *She's dead? My God!* Consecutive exclamation points are the literary kiss of death.

Bold and italic letters should be avoided except where they are necessary, as in specialised works like this one. Semicolons join two *independent* clauses which are so closely related that you do not want separate sentences. What follows a colon flows from what preceded it. Dashes are reserved for interjections: two if within the sentence, only one at the end. Sentences and paragraphs, like skirts, should be long enough to be decent – and, of course, a classic sentence will contain at least a subject and a verb: a single word, such as *Absolutely, Never* or *Gold*, cannot form a complete sentence (much less a paragraph), or should do so only exceptionally. Colons and dashes should be used less often than I use them.

**q.v.** (plural qq.v.) is abbreviated Latin for *quod vide*, “which see” – a cross reference directing you to consult the book, article or entry already indicated in the work you have in hand.

**Quote**, in correct English, is a verb. The noun is *quotation*. The distinction is so rarely respected that it may be called an endangered species.

**Raise / rear** Animals, like hands, are *raised*. However ill-behaved they may seem to you, children are (badly or well-)*reared*.

**Real** My five-year-old nephew looked through the glass of his mother's oven at the Thanksgiving turkey and asked if the turkey was real. “Yes, Sasha,” said my sister, “the turkey is real.” “Then”, said Sasha, “it's alive.” “No,” said his mother, “the turkey's not alive, it's dead.” The boy looked at the turkey for a long time. “When that turkey gets real again,” he said, “it's going to be hot.”

Like the words *unique* and *dead*, *real* admits no degrees. A thing is real, or it is not. One day you will be dead. There is no need to emphasise that you will be *completely* dead. In the same way, nothing is *very* real. (Even without degrees, *real* is often dispensable: *After three divorces apiece, they found real happiness. They found happiness* does the trick all by itself.)

The use of *real* as an adverb (*She's real pretty*), replacing a cliché with a grammatical error, is beneath comment.

**Reason** and **because** don't normally go together: *the reason was because ...* is illiterate English. The same is true of *reason* and *due to*.

**Refute** does not mean *deny*. To refute is to disprove: if you are accused of fraud and deny it, perhaps you are guilty, and lying. If you refute the accusation, you prove that it is false.

**Reverend** is an adjective applied to a variety of persons to whom we owe or pretend some degree of reverence. It does not mean *parson* and is not a noun.

**Sacrilegious**, not sacreligious, in spite of appearances.

**Sanction** comes from the Latin *sanctio*, a law, which after all either forbids or requires. Noun and verb have contradictory meanings in English: (*to take*) *action against*, especially in international relations, or *to approve / approval*. Unless the context makes the sense clear, avoid the word.

**Scot, Scotch, Scottish** Not long ago the word *Scotch* was said to be reserved for the whisky; people were *Scots* or *Scotsmen*, the adjective was *Scottish*. Few rules are less often respected – or, for that matter, arbitrary (nonetheless, you're not likely to drink a glass of Scottish). It might be added that Scotland is not the same country as England, though each is part of Great Britain.

**Semicolon** See **Punctuation**.

**Sex** This word once indicated nothing more than the difference between male and female. Now it designates an activity, a pastime, almost a hobby and certainly an act, replacing old expressions like *to do the deed of darkness* and *make the beast with two backs*. Sex is now something you can *have*. See also **Female, male** and **They**.

**Sexism** See **They**.

**Shall** The complicated British use of this form of the future tense left American shores long ago, and good riddance. When you speak in the future tense, say *will*. Even the British are coming over now. *Shall* remains in use for first-person proposals: *Shall we finish the bottle?*

**Should** In American English, this word is not the first-person (or whatever) form of the conditional: not *I shouldn't think so* but *I wouldn't think so*. *Should* is, at least approximately, the conditional form of *must / to have to*: He really should lose weight. See also **shall**.

**sic** A Latin word meaning “such” or “so,” *sic* is often used in parentheses just after something you are quoting, to signify *I know it sounds incredibly stupid, but that is literally what he wrote* or *It's not my mistake, it's his*. Easily overused, *sic* should generally be reserved for spelling or grammar mistakes – and even they, if you are feeling merciful, can often safely be corrected.

**Simile** See **Metaphor** and **simile**.

**Slang** There are at least three types of slang: one useful, one silly and a third perhaps indifferent. A friend of mine who lives in New York City had children who were *street-wise*: they knew, at a tender age, how to walk along the city sidewalks alone, make no “eye-contact” with the wrong sorts of people, and even to spot them from a distance and cross the street in order to avoid them. I know no other word that describes that particular skill. This kind of slang provides a word which is lacking in standard English.

A second kind of slang exists to identify members of a group, and to exclude everybody else. This may involve extreme crassness, as in replacing the adverb *very* with the buzzword *fucking*, currently beloved of Hollywood films and teenagers, or something less crass but just as silly, such as *awesome* (formerly *great*) for *impressive*, *remarkable* or simply *pleasant*. This second kind of slang means “you’re part of our group if you talk that way, and not if you don’t.” Trying to use it without really knowing how invites ridicule.

The third kind of slang is often called **jargon** (q.v.), which usually means either specialists’ code language, or highfalutin gobbledygook.

**Snob** This animal exists in distinct breeds. The sub-species most often recognised insists on petty rules, on being correct, and probably also on knowing or being better than others, but is now usually found only in zoos and museums.

A much more flourishing breed piously repeats the clichés or truisms heard on television, seen in newspapers, rehashed in university courses: *Racism, sexism and fascism are evil. My friends are terribly important to me. Everyone needs self-confidence. You can do anything if you believe. Art must be fresh and original. Every young artist must begin by finding her own unique individual style. The planet is being destroyed by X, Y or Z.* What this sort of snob says is true or not, but always flaunted. See also **clichés**.

Then there is the anti-snob. Pouncing as I was getting out the dessert plates, a dinner guest once proudly announced to everyone that he would happily eat his raspberry tart in a dish used to serve sardines in oil. I don’t think I have ever heard anything more snobbish.

Snobbery is an art. A good snob may perfectly well know that he or she understands or appreciates certain things better than most people, or has better taste. A bad snob may or may not have similar aptitudes, but feels more human than other people because of them.

**Split infinives** Fowler insists that only the worst of pedants respects this pointless rule. No doubt he is right to vehemently insist, but I prefer to resist vehemently, just as, long after the

introduction of stainless steel, I still tear lettuce for a salad, and never cut it. Surely there should be a little corner in the world for mindless conservatives. We're God's children, too.

**Stationary** means *immobile*. **Stationery** is writing paper.

**Style** Among Orwell's six rules for plain English: "Never use a long word where a short one will do" (I am inclined to say "Never use a complicated or rare word where a simple one will do," but I'm quibbling). He also said "If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out." Assuming you don't end up with a pretentiously simplistic style like Hemingway's, this is excellent advice.

Any list of the diseases of tongue and pen should include *Business-speak*, *Committeespeak*, *Academese*, bureaucratic language and what Orwell called *political prose* (which may now be associated with Political Correctness), as well as excessive or inappropriate use of euphemisms and jargon (qq.v.). See also **Elegance**, **Clichés** and **Plain style**.

**Swearing** See **Profanity**, **obscenity**, **swearing**, **cursing**.

**Tautologies** There are many: equal justice, final conclusion, future plans, general consensus (of which both Kingsley Amis and I have been guilty), join together, main protagonist, safe haven, the two twins, unproven rumor, variety of different things .... The problem can often be solved by removing the qualifier.

**Thankfully** (at the beginning of a sentence) Oh please, don't. See **Hopefully**.

**That / which** *That*, sometimes optional, introduces information indispensable to the main phrase: *The steak (that) you ordered is ready. The poem that won the prize is rubbish.* Frequently set off in commas, *which* introduces supplementary, optional information, which could grammatically be removed from the sentence (as in this very sentence): *The books, which were not the ones I ordered, arrived last week.*

*I hate the books that we studied in school* is not the same thing as *I hate the books[,] which we studied in school*. In the first sentence, the object of hatred is (all?) the books we studied in school. In the second sentence, the hatred is apparently limited to *some* books, which (by the way) we studied in school.

*Which* is not a "classier" version of *that* – or, rather, given the desperate vulgarity of the word *classy*, that is precisely what it becomes when it is systematically preferred. See also **Which / what**.

**There is / are ... that** The expression is often superfluous: not *There are three bridges that must be destroyed* but *Three bridges must be destroyed*.

**Thesaurus** The Romantics, our immediate ancestors, bequeathed to us such an obsession with spontaneity that any mention of a thesaurus, a rhyming dictionary or perhaps even an ordinary dictionary can seem incompatible with Art. *Their* ancestors would have found such an attitude full of poppycock and horsefeathers, and been happy to take all the help they could get.

Roget's Thesaurus provides *similar* words for nuance, substitution or contradistinction. As far as I know, the only perfect synonyms in English are *OK* and *all right*.

**They** It would be nice to think that "gender equality" can be promoted in our civilisation without harming the language, but until someone comes up with an alternative we are condemned on one of three counts: *If anybody calls, tell him I'll be back soon*, which is supposed to be sexist because the anybody could be a woman, or ..., *tell her or him or him or her I'll be back soon*, which is clumsy, particularly when repeated, or ..., *tell them I'll be back soon*, which is ridiculous. Do your best to rephrase the sentence. See also **Female / male** and **Sex**.

**Though** See **Although / though**.

**Till** – whether your hand's in it or you're waiting till (or until) the boss looks away. Not *til* or *'til*.

**Titles** (of books, poems, newspapers, etc.) The rule is simple: the first word is always capitalised; so are all subsequent words except minor, monosyllabic articles, prepositions and most conjunctions: *The Saga of the Qin Dynasty*. The question of quotation marks, and bold and italic letters, is more complex, and seems to be evolving with the internet. See also **Capital letters**.

**To** In giving rough figures, think of what you are saying: there may be five to six hundred dollars' worth of food, and perhaps even five to six bottles of wine, but not five to six guests, unless you're eating them.

**Together with** *With* does the job well, all by itself.

**Ton / tonne** This is a ton of trouble. A short (U.S.) ton (2 000 pounds) is not the same as a long (British) ton (2 240 pounds), and neither is equal to a metric tonne (1 000 kilograms). If that isn't enough trouble for you, look into freight tons and displacement tons.

**Torturous** is better reserved for denoting or connoting torture; **tortuous** means *winding*, *twisting*, and sometimes *complicated*.

**Toward(s)** Two words, each with two pronunciations, give us four possibilities for the same thing. I prefer the simplest: the one-syllable pronunciation of *toward*.



**Tragic** This word originally denoted a particular kind of drama (reread Aristotle). Let it still be reserved for some sort of catastrophe, and not applied to every drunk who kills himself driving into a tree. That may or may not be sad, but it is not tragic.

**Try** *To try to write good English* is good English. *To try and write good English* can make sense, but rarely does.

**Underprivileged** If you think about it (which is not what people do with clichés), this is a ridiculous chunk of gobbledegook, meaning something like *under-favored* or *under-preferred*.

**Uninterested** See **Disinterested** / **uninterested**.

**Unique** See **Real**.

**Up** Many phrasal verbs, involving *up* or other prepositions, are necessary: *to back* is hardly the same thing as *to back up*. Others are unnecessary: there may be a slight difference between *to eat* and *to eat up*, but what is the difference between *to open* and *to open up*?

**Upon** See **Into**, **onto** and **upon**.

**Vain** See **Arrogant** / **vain**.

**Value judgment** See **Judg(e)mental** / **value judgment**.

**Very** often, sentences can be very much improved by eliminating the very unnecessary word *very*.

**Vital(ly)** More than 50 years ago, an undergraduate studying “Humanities” at university, I was chastised before the entire class for having written “of vital importance” in a paper on *The Faerie Queene*. I meant “of great importance”, and was guilty of preferring the fancier, more pretentious word. My name was not given that day, but I have not forgotten. *Vital* should be reserved for “pertaining to life”, as in the expression “the vital organs.”

**Was / Were** This is perhaps the most common of all mistakes in English. It is simply not true that one should always say or write *If I / she / he / it were*, never *If I / she was*, although many a writer who should know better makes precisely that mistake. *If I were* makes a hypothesis known to be, and to remain, untrue: *If I were a nineteenth-century geisha ... If she were the Queen of Sheba ....* It is also used for hypotheses about the future: *If she were to run for office next year....* The normal preterite *If I / it was* is correct if you are simply not sure of a fact in the past: *If he was in Chicago on the night of the murder, then he’s in big trouble.*

**What** See **Which / what**.

**Whisky** is made in Scotland; **whiskey** is made in Ireland, Canada and the United States.

**Which** See **That / Which** and **Which / what**.

**Which / what** Although drastic snobs have been known to say *which* for everything – Which is your favorite book? – the two words have separated usefully: *which* of a fixed number, *what* of an unlimited choice. *We drank four different wines; which (one) did you prefer? What is your favorite sonata?* See also **That / which**.

**Who / Whom** It should be simple: *who* is the subject, *whom* is the object. *Who gave what to whom? Jane gave money to John.* You have to be pretty slow to put *who* immediately after the usual preposition or conjunction (although there are exceptions, and torpor is not rare), but the problem is no doubt a trifle greater when *whom* takes no preposition (*Whom did you see?*) or takes a more distant one (*Whom were you talking to?*), and greater still with two verbs: *She is the person who everyone thinks will win the contest.* Ask yourself which verb could be put, subordinately, into parentheses: *She is the person who (everyone thinks) will win.* *Whom*, by the way, never occurs where a form of *to be* is the principal verb: *who's who*.

When in doubt, choose *who*, and go with the crowd. This nuance is disappearing on both sides of the Atlantic and perhaps even from the Indian sub-continent, where superior English sometimes prevails. Pity.

**Wine** See **Cheeses** and **wines**.

**Worse / worst** See **Better / best**.

**Xmas** is a barbarism. The word is Christmas.

## **Bibliography**

The complete and huge *Oxford English Dictionary* is best for British English and, no doubt, for English in general, in spite of the silly absence of illustrations. There are shorter versions. The best dictionary for American English is the unabridged, illustrated, bulky *Merriam-Webster's* (for correct usage, the old second edition), which is also available in shorter forms. Because, except for the OED, all or most of what you need is now easily available free online, I will give no proper bibliography here. Please refer to the Preface, and remember that Fowler's 1926 monument, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, remains the almost definitive and nearly exhaustive authority for the close study of particular questions; later editions were revised. See also the entry **Dictionaries**.