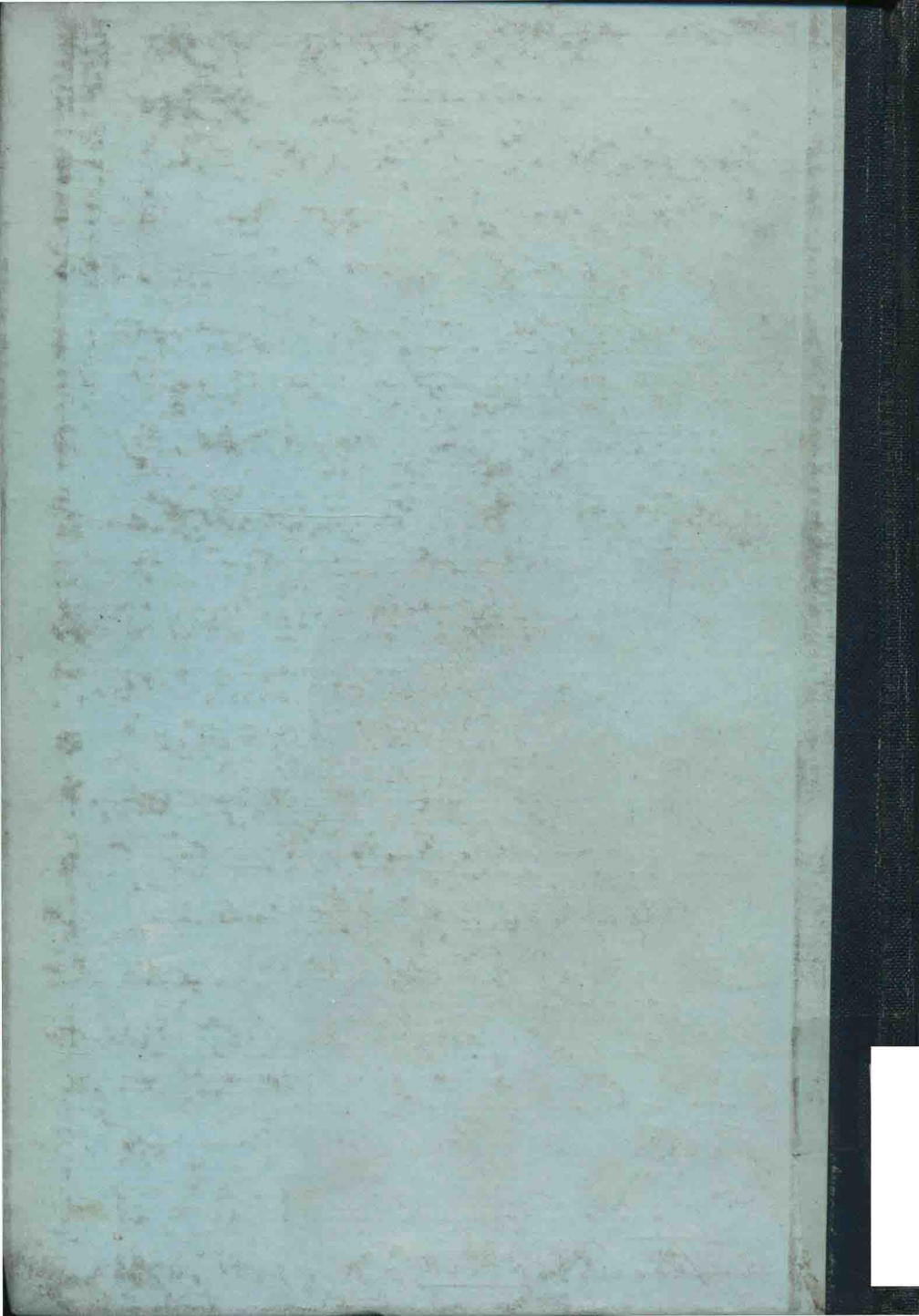


# WORD *Perfect*

**A dictionary  
of current  
English usage**

John O. E. Clark



WORLD PERFECT

A dictionary of current English words

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**HARRAP'S REFERENCE**

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*To Gill: for the title and the patience*

*Printed in Great Britain  
at the Bath Press, Avon*

## Preface

This book has evolved gradually from notes and observations made during nearly thirty years working as an editor and writer for various British and American publishers. Many of the "style sheets" encountered over those years have been silent sources of inspiration, and I remain indebted to them and their creators. The result is a guide to current English usage, arranged alphabetically to make it easy to look things up. It is intended to be of help to learners of English, to writers and to editors. But any editor who attempts to prepare such a guide is soon made embarrassingly aware of the adage that warns anybody living in a glass house of the danger of throwing stones. Nevertheless a senior editor can – and sometimes should – be uncompromisingly prescriptive; a publisher's house style should not be intended to address itself to the rights and wrongs of stylistic decisions so much as to establish editorial consistency.

Although *Word Perfect* can therefore be regarded as primarily an editorial guide to English writing style, I have also tried to make it something more. I believe that for general purposes – that is, where visible authorship is not desirable – a good writing style is characterized by ease of access (what some people call readability). This is, in effect, the absence rather than presence of any noticeable style. In preparing material for this book I have tried to offer advice that encourages a writing or editing style that is unobtrusive yet acceptable to most readers of modern English. A basic assumption is that the chief object of the written or printed word is to communicate; anything that detracts from this purpose is consequently criticised or even deplored.

Despite this aim, sometimes the demands of the pedant or purist, on the one hand, and the vagaries of fashion, on the other, compete for precedence. Often the difficulty can be avoided or a fair judgement made by acknowledging the overriding importance of

## Preface

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usage – that ill-defined influence which breathes life into the language and ensures that it continues to evolve as a dynamic, vital thing.

With regard to one decision, however, I have remained fairly firmly traditional: this is with regard to the gradual Americanization of English. During my working experience I have probably produced as many books in American English as in the European kind, and have frequently translated from one to the other. With less awareness of the differences I might have been more inclined to advocate an amalgam. As it is, I believe that such an attempt produces more problems than solutions, and – more seriously and dangerously – makes students and practitioners of the language uncertain and confused. In terms of spelling and punctuation there is, certainly, a “mid-Atlantic” style that causes least offence to either side. But the important point is that it is a compromise, and nobody should believe that by making it all the problems have been solved.

For practising editors, this book also includes definitions and explanations of technical terms common in publishing, printing and papermaking. Within Europe there is a continuing move towards standardization, but again many of these standards have yet to find favour in North America. Nevertheless, the Americanization of the English language is undeniably proceeding apace. The dominant medium of mass communication is television, and in this medium American usage prevails. Apart from newspapers and magazines, most print either comes from or must also be sold in North America, and the commercial logic for a common style is inescapable. But until that common standard is clearly established, I contend that it is more valuable – because it is less confusing and therefore more practical – to have a “home base” to relate to. This is one thing I have tried to provide.

J.O.E.C., London 1987

# A

**A** (indefinite article) *See a or an.*

**Å** is the abbreviation of angstrom (a unit of length equal to one hundred millionth of a centimetre, used to measure interatomic distances and wavelengths of light).

**a/an** can be used to mean **per**, and is less formal. E.g.:

three times *per* week      three times *a* month

80 kilometres *per* hour      30 miles *an* hour

With imprecise numbers, *a* is preferred (e.g. "several times a year").

For *a/an* as indefinite articles, *see a or an.*

**a-/an-** *See negative prefixes.*

**abacus** (pl. abacuses).

**abate**, abatable, abatement, abater.

**abattoir** (= slaughter-house, which is preferred to the French euphemism).

**abbreviate**, abbreviator.

**abbreviations** As a general rule, abbreviations should be avoided in narrative text. Despite the list of exceptions described later, the most important fact to note is the formal difference between an abbreviation and a contraction (*see contractions*). A contraction ends with the final letter of the word when it is spelled in full; an abbreviation does not, and thus requires a full point. E.g.:

a.m.	d. (died)	Ho.	Q.C.
b. (born)	e.g.	ibid.	R.I.P.
c. (circa)	etc.	i.e.	Sq.
Co.	fig.	p.m.	u.c.
c.v.	fl. (flourished)	Prof.	Ven.

Unfortunately, there are very many exceptions.



## abbreviations

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1. Names, titles, honours and acronyms for organizations; the preferred modern style is without full points:

AA	FOC	MA	SOGAT
BA	FRCO	MBE	UNESCO
BBC	GLC	MP	UNICEF
BSc	GPO	NATO	UK
CH	HMS	OBE	USA
DD	HMSO	OM	USSR
DDT	ILEA	RAC	VC
EFTA	ITV	RAF	WRAC
EEC	KLM	QE2	YMCA

(Some publishers prefer to retain full points in B.A., B.Sc., M.A., etc.).

### 2. Measurements and units:

bhp	gm	lb (pound)	mm
cc	km	m (metre)	mph
cm	kg	mg	oz
ft	l (litre)	min	sec

(Note that the abbreviations of these measurements are both singular and plural; *see also* **units**).

### 3. Miscellaneous:

AD BC (set in small capitals)

N S E W NNE SSW (*see also* **compass directions**)

MS PS

CAT-scan L-dopa Rh +

#### General notes:

The abbreviations e.g. and i.e. should be avoided in running narrative text (but are usually allowable in parentheses, tables, and so on).

Use uranium-235, carbon-14, etc. for first mention but U-235, C-14 thereafter (do not use an initial capital letter for spelled out names of chemical elements).

In astronomical works, Messier numbers (M) are set with no space before the catalogue number (e.g. M32, M109).

New General Catalogue numbers (NGC), however, do have a space (e.g. NGC 54, NGC 7332).

Note mph (miles per hour) but km/h (kilometres per hour).

S. Giorgio (S. = San) but Sta Maria (Sta = Santa) and Ste Juliette (Ste = Sainte) for names of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese or French saints. The abbreviation S for the English word Saint has the plural SS (= Saints).

Abbreviations of British county names should be avoided and used only as a last resort when pressed for space in captions (*see* **counties**). Similar advice applies to the names of American (USA) states (*see* **US states**). Similarly, avoid using abbreviations of American states. Avoid abbreviations of months and days of the week but, if necessary (e.g. in tabular matter), use:

Jan Feb March Apr May June July Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec  
Sun Mon Tues Wed Thurs Fri Sat (all without full points).

Do not use ' and ' ' as abbreviations of foot (feet) and inch(es), although these symbols are correct for minutes and seconds of arc.

Plurals of abbreviations:

BA's MA's MP's O-Levels (not BA's etc.)

p. (page) pp. (pages)

f. (folio or following page) ff. (folios etc.)

v. (verse) vv. (verses)

w. (word) ww. (words)

MS. (manuscript) MSS (manuscripts)

sp. (singular species) spp. (plural species)

This Dictionary includes abbreviations of common weights and measures, and other abbreviations commonly encountered in publishing. *See also* **contractions**.

**abet**, abetting, abettor.

**abide** is archaic when it is used to mean *wait for*, and is colloquial for *live, remain, stay, endure* or *tolerate*, any of which is preferred.

**Abide by** (= adhere to, conform) is acceptable usage; e.g. "A good sportsman abides by the rules of the game". The past tense and participle of the former is *abode*, of the latter is *abided by*.

**ability** = power to do or skill in doing something;

## **-ability and -ibility**

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**capability** = **capacity** (non-technical) = capability or the inborn power of a person to learn something, or of a thing to do something. E.g.:

"He has outstanding ability as an editor, but his capacity for biology is negligible."

**-ability and -ibility** are the endings of nouns formed from adjectives ending in **-able** or **-ible**. The usual spelling difficulty is *a* or *i*? For a list, see **-able and -ible**.

***ab initio*** (italics) = from the beginning; this Latin form should be avoided.

**abjure** = to renounce an oath, repudiate, recant; **adjure** = to charge on-oath, appeal in a solemn way. E.g.:

"He must abjure Roman Catholicism before joining the sect."

"I adjured him to think twice before joining the sect."

**able**, like **competent**, takes an infinitive (e.g. "She was able to go", "He was competent to do it"); **capable** takes *of* and a gerund (e.g. "It was capable of moving quickly").

**-able and -ible** One of the most vexatious problems in English spelling occurs when verbs (and some nouns) are converted into adjectives by adding the suffix **-able** or **-ible**. There are some general rules, but unfortunately there are also many exceptions (for this reason, many such adjectives are included in this Dictionary).

1. Words ending in a *y* preceded by a vowel retain the *y*; e.g. *buyable, deployable, layable, payable*.
2. Words ending in a *y* preceded by a consonant have an *i* for the *y*; e.g. *deniable, dutiable, justifiable, variable* (exception *flyable*).
3. Words ending in a silent *e* usually drop the *e*; e.g. *solvable, usable*.
4. Words ending in an *e* retain the *e* if it is necessary as an aid to pronunciation; e.g. *blameable, chargeable, gaugeable, likeable, noticeable, pronounceable, rateable, replaceable, tuneable*.
5. Words ending in *-ee* usually retain both *es*; e.g. *agreeable*.

6. **-ible** is the suffix on certain words of Latin origin, and these have to be learned. Examples include:

accessible	destructible	indelible	reprehensible
adducible	digestible	intelligible	repressible
admissible	dirigible	irascible	reproducible
audible	discernible	legible	resistible
avertible	dismissible	miscible	responsible
collapsible	divisible	negligible	reversible
combustible	edible	ostensible	revertible
compatible	eligible	perceptible	risible
comprehensible	exhaustible	perfectible	seducible
contemptible	expressible	permissible	sensible
contractible	extensible	persuasible	susceptible
controvertible	fallible	plausible	tangible
convertible	feasible	possible	transmissible
corrigible	fencible	prehensible	vendible
corruptible	flexible	producible	vincible
credible	forcible	reducible	visible
deducible	fusible	reflectible	
deductible	gullible	remissible	
defensible	includible	rendible	

and their opposites (*inaccessible, inadmissible, and so on*).

**ablution(s)** = the act of washing oneself; it should be reserved for religious contexts and not used as a pompous way of describing a simple routine act.

**abnormal** = any difference from normal; **subnormal** = below normal; **supranormal** = above the normal.

**abode** is precious for **house** or **home**, either of which is preferred.

**abolish, abolishable, abolishment, abolition, abolitionist.** *Abolishment* and *abolition* (preferred) both = doing away with or ending something, usually of official or legal status. An *abolitionist* was someone who believed in the abolition of slavery.

**aboriginal** (adj. and noun, sing.; pl. *aborigines*) = an original

## Aboriginal words

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inhabitant of a country; but Australian Aborigines (initial capital letters).

**Aboriginal words** See **Australia and New Zealand**.

**about**, applied to dates, can be represented by *c.* (the abbreviation of *circa*). See also **around**.

**above/below** Do not write "... as described above (or below)"; write instead "... as described earlier (or later) in this article." But *above/below* is correct in captions. *Above* or *below* should not be used to mean *more than* or *less than* when referring to specific quantities (e.g. write "more than 20km" or "less than 3cm"); but "above/below zero, boiling point, etc." is correct. **Above** = *at/on a higher level* can be synonymous with *over* (e.g. "above the window", "over the window"), just as **below** (= *at/on a lower level*) can mean *under*.

**abridge**, **abridgement** (preferred to **abridgment**).

**abcess**

**absence** = state of being not present, not existing, missing;

**lack** = shortage, deficiency, insufficiency. E.g.:

"We could not continue **because** of the absence of materials."

"We could not finish **because** of lack of time."

**absent**, **absentee**, **absence**.

**absinthe** is the liqueur flavoured with the wormwood plant **absinth**.

**absolutely** = unconditionally, separately; it should not be used as an intensifier. E.g.:

in "The text is absolutely perfect" delete *absolutely*;

in "She was absolutely overcome" substitute *completely* for *absolutely*.

"His co-operation is guarantee absolutely" is correct usage.

**absorption** = the taking up of one substance within the structure of

## accents and diacritical marks

another (like water into a sponge); **adsorption** = the taking up of a gas or vapour on the surface of a solid (as gases into charcoal). The corresponding verbs are *absorb* and *adsorb*, with *absorbent* and *adsorbent* as adjectives and nouns (not absorbant).

**abstain** = to go/do without, to refrain from doing something;  
**abstinent** describes someone who abstains (i.e. has none);  
**abstemious** describes someone who eats or drinks sparingly, who is not overindulgent (i.e. has some, but not too much). Thus *abstention* is having none, whereas *abstemiousness* (or in its strict meaning *temperance*) is having some but in moderation.

**abstemious** See **abstain**.

**abstinent** See **abstain**.

**abuse** (verb) = use wrongly (usually something that is abstract);  
**misuse** = use incorrectly (usually something that is visible or tangible). E.g.:

"He abused his authority by using his official car to go shopping".  
"He so misused his car that it soon needed a new clutch."

**abut**, **abutment**, **abutting**, **abuttal**.

**abyss** = deep trench or cavity, deep ocean; **abyssal** = relating to the ocean depths; **abysmal** = relating to an abyss, bottomless, extremely low in merit/quality/interest.

**AC** is the abbreviation of alternating current.

**acanthus** (pl. **acanthuses**).

**accelerate**, **accelerator**.

**accents and diacritical marks** All accents and diacritical marks should be unambiguously marked in the text, by hand if they cannot be typed. Common accents include acute (é), cedilla (ç), circumflex (ê), grave (è), tilde (ñ) and umlaut (ü). In certain languages there are means of avoiding accents. In French only,

## accentuate

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capital letters do not (have to) have accents. In German only, vowels with an umlaut (") can be spelled as vowel + e; e.g. *über* = *ueber*, *schön* = *schoen*. In Danish and Norwegian only, *d* can be spelled *aa*; e.g. Århus = Aarhus. These rules should not be transferred to other languages. *See also foreign words and phrases.*

**accentuate** = make prominent, throw into relief, draw attention to; it does not mean *worsen* or *increase*. E.g.:

"The continuing bad weather accentuated the sale of umbrellas" is incorrect.

**accept**, acceptable, acceptor (but acceptor in law/chemistry/electronics), acceptance. **Accept** = to receive or take; **except** (verb) = to exclude.

**access**, accessory, accessary, accessible, accession.

*Access* = means of entry, act of approach; *accession* = attaining office, power or status, an increase, an addition. E.g.:

"A gap in the hedge provided access to the next field."

"The holiday was to celebrate the anniversary of the king's accession."

Both *accessary* and *accessory* can be noun or adjective. The former is an accomplice or helper; the latter is usually an additional (but non-essential) feature. E.g.:

"He was charged with being an accessary to murder."

"She ordered a radio as an accessory for her new car."

**accident**, accidental, accidentally (not *accidently*). **Accident** = an unforeseen (usually unfortunate) event; it should not be used to describe the outcome. E.g.:

"She could not draw because of an accident to her hand" should be "... because of an injury to her hand" or "... because she had an accident involving her hand."

**acclimatize**, acclimatization.

**accommodate**, accommodation.

**accompany** by another person or people; **accompany** with another thing or things. The noun (in music) is **accompanist**.

**accomplish** See **attain**.

**account**, **accountable**, **accountant**. When *accountable* is used to mean *responsible*, it should be applied only to a person or persons (e.g. "The officer is accountable for his actions"; the actions are not accountable). See also **responsible**.

**accredit** See **credit**.

**accrue** = accumulate gradually, increase piece by piece, happen to one's advantage; the word should not be used of any, particularly sudden, increase. The corresponding noun is *accrual*.

**accumulate**, **accumulator**, **accumulation**.

**acknowledge**, **acknowledgeable**, **acknowledgement** (preferred to **acknowledgment**).

**acme** = peak (of perfection); **acne** = pimply disorder of the face.

**acoustics**, the science, is singular (e.g. "Acoustics is the science of sound"); when used to describe the sound properties of, say, a concert hall, it is plural (e.g. "The acoustics of the Festival Hall are excellent").

**acquaint with** seldom means more than **tell** or **inform**.

**acquiesce(nce)** *in* (not *acquiesce(nce) to*).

**acquit**, **acquittance** (let off a debt), **acquittal** (found not guilty).

**acre**, **acreage**.

**acronym** = pronounceable word from the initials or opening letters of a name or phrase – not merely any set of (unpronounceable) initials, which constitute an abbreviation. Acronyms consisting of capital letters should be printed without full points and typeset



## acrophobia

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close up. Particularly in computer technology, phrases are sometimes selected so that they make memorable acronyms (such as ERNIE = *Electronic Random Number Indicating Equipment*). E.g.:

AIDS	( <i>autoimmune deficiency syndrome</i> )
EFTA	( <i>European Free Trade Association</i> )
EOKA	( <i>Ethnikē Organōsis Kyprion Agōniston</i> )
FORTTRAN	( <i>formula translation</i> )
NASA	( <i>National Aeronautical and Space Administration</i> )
SALT	( <i>Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty</i> )

Acronyms that have passed wholly into the language are treated as ordinary words (usually without an initial capital letter). E.g.:

bren (gun)	( <i>Brno and Enfield armouries</i> )
laser	( <i>light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation</i> )
qwerty	( <i>standard keyboard, named after the first six letters on it</i> )
rādar	( <i>radio direction-finding and ranging</i> )
sonar	( <i>sound navigation and ranging</i> )

See also **abbreviations**.

**acrophobia** = neurotic fear of heights; **agoraphobia** = neurotic fear of open spaces. These are terms in psychology relating to specific mental disorders, and should not be used of mere dislike of heights/open spaces.

**act** (noun) = law as passed (enacted) by Parliament; **bill** = proposed law submitted to Parliament for debate/approval.

## action-packed

**activate** = bring about, cause to act, inspire; **actuate** = start or use a mechanism (i.e. cause to act), motivate. E.g.:

"He actuated the series of switches that activated the rocket's firing sequence."

**active**, **activate**, **activation**, **activeness** (to be avoided), **activity** (preferred).