The Right Word at the Right Time

A GUIDE TO
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND HOW TO USE IT

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Acknowledgments

Principal contributors

EDITOR
John Ellison Kahn, MA, DPhil

CONSULTANT EDITOR
Robert Ilson, MA, PhD
Associate Director of The Survey of English Usage, and Honorary Research Fellow, University College London

The publishers also thank the following people for their valuable contributions to this book:

Nicolette Jones, MA

Loreto Todd, MA, PhD
Senior Lecturer, School of English, University of Leeds

Faye Carney, MA

Sylvia Chalker, MA

Jenny Cheshire, BA, PhD
Lecturer in Linguistics, Birkbeck College, University of London

Derek Davy
Professor of English, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

John Dodgson, MA, FSA
Reader in English, University College London

Stanley Ellis, MA, FIL
Honorary Fellow, School of English, University of Leeds

Peter Hawkins, MA, MPhil, PhD
Lecturer in Linguistics, Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh

Frederick Jones, MA, PhD
Lecturer in English, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone

Bernard Lott, OBE, MA, PhD
formerly Controller, English Language Teaching, the British Council

Geoffrey Lucy

Mary Penrith, MA, MLitt

Alan R. Thomas
Reader in Linguistics, University College of North Wales, Bangor

J.C. Wells, MA, PhD
Reader in Phonetics, University College London

Janet Whitcut, MA

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Using the right word

WHY BOTHER WITH THE RIGHT WORD? 'People understand me well enough' is the typical response of the uncaring speaker to any criticism of his usage — that is, of the way he talks or writes.

But do people understand such a speaker well enough? And even if they do, what is their impression of him or of anyone who speaks and writes in a sloppy, careless way? Much the same, probably, as their impression of someone who is sloppily dressed. Using the right word at the right time is rather like wearing appropriate clothing for the occasion: it is a courtesy to others, and a favour to yourself — a matter of presenting yourself well in the eyes of the world.

The comparison goes further than that: just as dressing appropriately can help you to feel more confident and to act more effectively, so speaking and writing appropriately can help you to reach clearer decisions and persuade others to agree with you. Sloppy language makes for muddled thinking:

> The English language ... becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.
>
> – George Orwell,
> 'Politics and the English Language'

Respecting words

IF YOU HAVE THIS BOOK, you care about English. Not everybody does: standards are distressingly low in many schools, in much of broadcasting and the press, and in much of public life — so much so that many educationalists are even urging a return to traditional grammar lessons in the school curriculum.

Certainly correct grammar is important, and many common grammatical errors or disputes are discussed in this book — ✕ *between you and I*; ? *She ran faster than me*, ? *to boldly go*, and so on. But good English is more than a matter of grammar, or the combination

of words. It involves too a respect for individual words — the use of the right word at the right time . . . the correct meaning, for instance, of *enormity* (which does not mean the same as *enormousness*) and *fortuitously* (which does not mean the same as *fortunately*).

This book discusses hundreds of such snares in our vocabulary and problems of English usage. How should you deal with the different senses that attach to *decimate* or *billion*? What is the difference between *alternately* and *alternatively*? Should a proposal be described as *practical* or as *practicable*? How acceptable is it to use *hopefully* to mean 'I hope'? Can *to aggravate* be legitimately used in the same way as *to irritate*?

Disrespect for words is all too easy to find — in the use of clichés and vogue words, such as *meaningful dialogue* instead of *serious discussions*, and in the misuse or confusion of other terms: *flaunt* for *flout*, *disinterested* for *uninterested*, *Frankenstein* for *Frankenstein's monster*, *infer* for *imply*, *mitigate against* for *militate against*.

Passing judgment

NOT ALL USAGE PROBLEMS are as clear-cut as these, of course. Sometimes the dispute is finely balanced — the pronunciation of *controversy*, for instance, or the need for *whom*, or the difference between *further* and *farther*. But you will always find here a clear discussion of the dispute, airing the arguments on both sides, referring to the history of the language, quoting modern examples, and suggesting a solution.

Sometimes the judgment is a decisive one: no matter how weighty the tradition of disapproval might be, an expression will be given the seal of approval if it deserves one; and no matter how popular an expression may be, it will be condemned if it deserves to be. But it is not enough just to condemn a usage: you will always find an acceptable alternative proposed here — even if it takes the form of a recommendation to avoid the impasse altogether, and to approach your intended meaning by another route.

Many changes in meaning and usage cannot be resisted, no matter how undesirable they may appear to be. Dr Johnson struck the right note in the introduction to his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): 'It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure.'

Not all changes are undesirable, however; yet the welcome given to them is still sometimes qualified by caution. Consider again the modern use of *hopefully*. The case against it is weak, and there are in fact good linguistic reasons for tolerating it. And yet . . . people of the old school

do object to it and might well be distracted from what you are saying, or be prejudiced against your line of reasoning, if you use such an 'objectionable' formation. The same holds true for some long-established usages, such as the 'split infinitive', that are traditionally considered 'wrong'.

Unless you are spoiling for a fight over usage, you should consider submitting to the sensitivities of your audience or readers. There is no point in stubbornly acting on your belief that *hopefully* is a legitimate aid to communication if, through parading it, you simply provoke an interruption and thereby impede communication.

A lively approach

AS A BACKGROUND and supplement to these debates on good English usage, this book features articles defining and discussing the various parts of speech and the various punctuation marks; long articles on spelling and pronunciation; descriptions of the national varieties of English — American English, Australian English, South African English, Canadian English, and so on; articles on pidgins and creoles, on English dialects and the history of the language, on metaphors, slang, and jargon, on euphemisms, misquotations, and ambiguity.

The discussions of controversial usages are illustrated with a wealth of quotations — good and bad — drawn from current newspapers, magazines, books, and radio programmes. Where a quotation or example shows a misuse, it is clearly marked as wrong by means of a cross printed in red: ×. And if it is a doubtful or ill-advised usage, it is marked with a red question mark, ?, or double question mark: ??. Bear in mind that a mistake attributed to an author or journalist may not really be of his or her own making: in newspapers in particular, a writer's words might have been hurriedly recast by a sub-editor, or mis-set by the typesetter. And note too that the extracts quoted are usually printed in the standard spelling and pronunciation used in this book, even if the original text used different conventions.

English today is closer to being a World Language than any other language has been in history. It is the international language of science, of pilots and sea-captains, and frequently of diplomatic, sporting, and trade contacts. It is used, and even cherished, by untold millions whose mother tongue is quite different. This should be at once a source of pride to those whose mother tongue is English, and an inducement — perhaps even an obligation — to use the language well.

KEY TO RED SYMBOLS

? doubtful or informal usage — think twice before using this word or construction

?? inappropriate or nonstandard usage — avoid if possible in formal contexts

× incorrect usage — avoid

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

Pronunciations are printed between slash marks or diagonal lines: the pronunciation of *genuine*, for instance, is represented as /**jennew-in**/.

Note how stress is marked in words of more than one syllable: the stressed syllable is printed in **bold type** to distinguish it from unstressed syllables.

Where alternative pronunciations are given, these are sometimes represented simply by the syllables that vary: the pronunciation of *adversary*, for instance, is printed /**advər**-səri, -sri/.

Where a foreign sound cannot be perfectly expressed by any of the symbols listed below, an approximation to it is given wherever this is possible.

a, **a**	as in *trap* /trap/, *backhand* /**bak**-hand/
aa, **aa**	as in *calm* /kaam/, *father* /**faathər**/
air, **air**	as in *scarce* /skairss/, *parent* /**pair**-ənt/
ar, **ar**, aar, **aar**	as in *cart* /kart/, *party* /**par**ti/, *carnation* /kaar-**naysh**'n/, *sari* /**saa**ri/
aw, **aw**	as in *thought* /**thaw**t/, *daughter* /**daw**tər/
awr, **awr**	SEE or, **or**
ay, **ay**	as in *face* /fayss/, *native* /**nay**tiv/
b, bb	as in *stab* /stab/, *rubber* /**rub**bər/
ch	as in *church* /church/, *nature* /**nay**chər/
ck	SEE k
d, dd	as in *dead* /ded/, *ladder* /**lad**dər/
e, **e**	as in *ten* /ten/, *ready* /**red**di/
ee, **ee**	as in *meat* /meet/, *machine* /mə-**sheen**/
eer, **eer**	as in *fierce* /feerss/, *serious* /**seer**-i-əss/
er, **er**	as in *term* /term/, *defer* /**di-fer**/
ew, **ew**	as in *few* /few/, *music* /**mew**zik/
ewr, **ewr**	as in *pure* /pewr/, *curious* /**kewr**-i-əss/
ə	as in *about* /ə-**bowt**/, *cannon* /**kan**nən/
ər	as in *persist* /pər-**sist**/, *celery* /**sel**lər**i**/
f, ff	as in *sofa* /sōfə/, *suffer* /**suf**fər/
g, gg	as in *stag* /stag/, *giggle* /**gig**'l/
h	as in *hat* /hat/, *ahead* /ə-**hed**/
i, **i**	as in *grid* /grid/, *ticket* /**tik**it/
ī, **ī**	as in *price* /priss/, *mighty* /**mī**ti/
ir, **ir**	as in *fire* /fīr/, *tyrant* /**tīr**-ənt/
j	as in *judge* /juj/, *age* /ayj/
k, ck	as in *kick* /kik/, *pocket* /**pok**it/, *six* /siks/, *quite* /kwit/
l, ll	as in *fill* /fil/, *colour* /**kul**lər/
'l	as in *needle* /need'l/, *channel* /**chan**n'l/
m, mm	as in *man* /man/, *summer* /**sum**mər/
'm	as in *rhythm* /**rith**'m/, *blossom* /**bloss**'m/
n, nn	as in *fan* /fan/, *honour* /**on**nər/
'n	as in *sudden* /**sud**d'n/, *cotton* /**kott**'n/
ng	as in *tank* /tangk/, *finger* /**fing**-gəɪ/
o, **o**	as in *rod* /rod/, *stockpot* /**stok**-pot/
ō, **ō**	as in *goat* /gōt/, *dodo* /dō-dō/
o͝o, **o͝o**	as in *would* /wo͝od/, *pusher* /po͝oshər/
o͞o, **o͞o**	as in *shoe* /sho͞o/, *prudent* /**pro͞o**d'nt/
oor, **oor**	as in *poor* /poor/, *surely* /**shoor**li/
or, **or**, awr, **awr**	as in *north* /north/, *portion* /**por**-sh'n/, *swarm* /swawrm/, *warden* /**wawrd**'n/
ow, **ow**	as in *stout* /stowt/, *powder* /**pow**dər/
owr, **owr**	as in *sour* /sowr/, *dowry* /**dowr**-i/
oy, **oy**	as in *boy* /boy/, *poison* /**poy**z'n/
p, pp	as in *crop* /krop/, *pepper* /**pep**pər/
r, rr	as in *red* /red/, *terror* /**ter**rər/
s, ss	as in *list* /list/, *box* /boks/, *sauce* /sawss/, *fussy* /**fus**si/
sh	as in *ship* /ship/, *pressure* /**presh**ər/
t, tt	as in *state* /stayt/, *totter* /**tot**tər/
th	as in *thick* /thik/, *author* /**aw**thər/
<u>th</u>	as in *this* /<u>th</u>iss/, *mother* /**mu**<u>th</u>ər/
u, **u**	as in *cut* /kut/, *money* /**mun**ni/
v, vv	as in *valve* /valv/, *cover* /**kuv**vər/
w	as in *wet* /wet/, *away* /ə-**way**/
y	as in *yes* /yess/, *beyond* /bi-**yond**/
z, zz	as in *zoo* /zo͞o/, *scissors* /**siz**zərz/
<u>zh</u>	as in *vision* /**viz<u>h</u>**'n/, *pleasure* /**plez<u>h</u>**ər/

FOREIGN PRONUNCIATIONS

<u>kh</u>	as in Scottish *loch*/lo<u>kh</u>/, Arabic *Khalid* /**<u>kh</u>aa**-lid/, or German *Achtung* /**ak<u>h</u>**-to͞ong/
aN, ON	as in French *Saint-Saëns* /**saN-sonss**/ — the N indicates that the preceding vowel is nasalised.

A

a, an 1. Is it wrong to say *an hotel*? Not really wrong — but not recommended any longer, particularly in writing.

The general rule is this: it is pronunciation, not spelling, that governs the choice between *a* and *an*. Words beginning with a consonant-sound take *a*; words beginning with a vowel-sound take *an*; words beginning with the 'glides' or 'weak' consonants — /h/, /w/, and /y/ — take *a*. So: *an umbrella* but *a unit* and *a eucalyptus tree*; *a £1 note* but *an only child*, *a young child*, and *a weak child*; *a haircut* but *an honour*. And since the standard pronunciation of *hotel* today requires an audible *h*-sound (though it is often dropped in the speech of the lower and upper classes), the preferred form is *a hotel*.

The fact remains that it is not easy to say *a hotel* out loud. In rapid speech, the *h* is so weak that it seems quite natural to say *an hotel*, *an habitual liar*, and so on. And this is often transferred to writing:

> Two entertaining talks by John Pemble, an historian, on Radio 3 'reflected' ... on the tuberculous British abroad in the nineteenth century.
>
> – Paul Ferris, *The Observer*

> Harrison agreed to publish the book and was then let into the secret — which she, like Gottlieb, has kept for an heroic 2½ years.
>
> – Claire Tomalin, *The Sunday Times*

Note how different things are, however, when it comes to × *an hostel*, × *an horrible liar*, and so on. Clearly these sound impossibly awkward today, though, as old texts show, they used to be standard:

> It was a curious little green box on four wheels, ... drawn by an immense brown horse, displaying great symmetry of bone. An hostler stood near, holding by the bridle another immense horse.
>
> – Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837)

The *h* of *hostler* was probably pronounced very faintly by Dickens, if at all. Today, however, this use of *an* is unacceptable: the *h*-sound is now too prominent, even in rapid speech, since *hostel* and *horrible* are stressed in the first syllable. In *hotel* and *habitual* the first syllable is unaccented and the *h*-sound much softer accordingly, so *an* is less awkward here.

The rule applies to abbreviations too: pronunciation, not spelling, determines the use of *a* or *an*. So a standard written sentence might be: *I saw an MP reading a MS* — **an** *MP* because *MP* is intended to be pronounced **/em-pee/**; and **a** *MS* because *MS* is intended to be read as *manuscript*. But if you intended *MP* to be read as *Member of Parliament* (or *Military Policeman* or *Mounted Policeman*), then you would write *a MP*. In the following quotation, the writer must have intended *SF* to be read as *Science Fiction*, rather than as **/ess eff/**:

> I remember a SF story, too, that set up another speculation: a bunch of people equipped with a time machine ...
>
> – Katharine Whitehorn, *The Observer*

Interestingly enough, the original form of the indefinite article, in Old English, was *an*, meaning 'one'. (Compare *un* and *ein* in modern French and German.) It was only later, in Middle English, that *an* began to be reduced to *a* before consonants.

2. One common way of dealing with the difficulty of saying *a hotel* is to pronounce *a* as /ay/ rather than /ə/ — the way you might pronounce the *the* of *the hotel* as /thee/ rather than /thə/. This is a fair compromise in this particular case, but the pronunciation /ay/, like /thee/, when used before full consonants, attracts a great deal of criticism. With one exception, the pronunciation of *a lamp* as × /ay lamp/ is nonstandard. In British English it is considered overdeliberate and prissy, or else vulgar — just one step away from pronouncing it /hay lamp/.

. The exception is when *a* is being used emphatically, as a contrast to some other word:

> You said *a* lamp, not *the* lamp.
> I asked for *a* lamp, not for *150* lamps!

Here the strong pronunciation /ay/ is acceptable.

American English is rather more tolerant of the pronunciation /ay/ — it is in fairly common use

there to indicate deliberation, hesitation, or emphasis, as in Bob Dylan's line 'Like /ay/ rolling stone'.

3. A single *a* or *an* can sometimes be used to refer to several linked singular nouns:

> Whether it takes a minute, hour, or day, I'll do it gladly.
> In his time, he's been an explorer, bricklayer, dustman, and schoolteacher.

Strictly speaking, of course, *a* cannot be correctly applied to *hour* in the first example — *hour* takes *an*. Similarly, *an* in the second example is inappropriate for *bricklayer, dustman,* and *schoolteacher*. Pedants would therefore urge the insertion of the 'correct' article: *a minute, an hour, or a day*. This is quite unnecessary, however: convention allows the 'correct' form to be understood, rather as **a** *timely entrance* is understood as **an** *entrance that is timely*.

Where it might be appropriate, however, to insert the article before each noun is where the various items are considered independently rather than together:

> A policeman and a criminal will obviously interpret things differently.
>
> a stone, a leaf, an unfound door (a motif in Thomas Wolfe's novel *Look Homeward, Angel*)
>
> A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree — the more they're beaten, the better they be.
>
> A random scattering of objects surrounded the corpse — a brick, a broken radio set, an umbrella, a pressure cooker . . . perhaps one of them had been used to bludgeon the unfortunate man to death.
>
> A book of verses underneath the bough,
> A jug of wine, a loaf of bread — and thou
> Beside me . . .
>
> – Edward Fitzgerald,
> *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1879)

And the *a* or *an* must be reinserted if the list of items is interrupted by any item (a plural noun or a mass noun) that does not take either *a* or *an*. In fact, it is best to use *a* or *an* wherever possible if any of the items marks an exception by not taking an indefinite article:

> For this recipe you need a carrot, an onion, a tomato, beef-stock, a large potato, three leeks, a cooking apple, a patient soul, and a lot of luck.

4. The positioning of *a* or *an* in a sentence, and even its presence there, are not always straightforward matters. The indefinite article usually comes before both the adjective and the noun: *a sweet smile, an inviting smile* . . . but: *such a smile, so sweet a smile, what an inviting smile, many an inviting smile, how sweet a smile, too sweet a smile.*

(Note that some of these constructions are now rather old-fashioned: *many a sweet smile* would today usually be expressed instead by *many sweet smiles* or *a lot of sweet smiles.*)

There is a temptation to follow this inverted pattern in similar constructions where it is not in fact appropriate to do so:

> × Have you ever seen more inviting a smile?
> × That's not sufficiently sweet a smile.

These should read:

> Have you ever seen a more inviting smile?
> That's not a sufficiently sweet smile.

Sometimes *a* or *an* is not simply wrongly positioned but wrongly included in the first place — notably when the adjective *no* is used in the sentence to qualify the noun: *no* then means 'not a', so the inclusion of an explicit *a* is redundant:

> × No more inviting a smile had he ever seen than the one the mermaid now directed towards him.

The *a* should be omitted. If the sentence is restructured, you can see more easily that the *a* is unnecessary: *No smile more inviting had he ever seen* . . .

Sometimes the *a* or *an* is optional — before idiomatic pairs or lists of nouns, for a start:

> All you need is (a) needle and thread.
> We shall provide (a) table and chairs, but you must bring your own cutlery.
>
> He's not one of those priests who arrive with (a) bell, book, and candle whenever summoned.

The *a* or *an* is also optional after *as*:

> He is more famous as (a) poet than as (a) novelist.

And *a* or *an* is also optional when the noun is in apposition to a person's name (that is, when it simply stands after the name, to expand or explain it, and has the same grammatical role in the sentence):

> ? Mrs Sylvia Wilkins, (an) avid amateur astronomer from Glasgow, reports a sighting of an unidentified comet.

?(A) Nicaraguan diplomat Nico Yepes has won the pools in three different countries.

In these last examples, the omission of *a* or *an* would be slightly dubious perhaps — common enough in journalism, but probably considered informal elsewhere.

5. When the first word of a book, play, film, or the like is *A*, it is — with the full sanction of convention — often dropped to make the sentence flow more smoothly:

> There's an excellent *Midsummer Night's Dream* on at the Alhambra.
> Robert Bolt's *Man for All Seasons* converted easily to the screen.

abbreviations In private and informal writings, people abbreviate words and names in any way they find useful and understandable.

In print and formal writing, rules are needed for the thousands of possible abbreviated forms, to avoid confusion and prevent overuse. The first rule is: When in doubt, spell it out. This applies to all general writing such as fiction, history, news, and formal letters. Only a handful of extremely well-known abbreviations tend to be used in such texts — *a.m.*, *M.P.*, *Mrs.*, *St.* (= Saint, as in *St. John*), or *U.S.A.*, but probably not *e.g.*, *lb.*, *Mt.*, *St.* (= street), *SW*, or *U.K.* In technical and business writing, however, abbreviations are heavily used, and provide an invaluable space-saving service.

1. Abbreviations are often identified by full stops:

> M.A. (*M*aster of *A*rts)
> a.m. (*a*nte *m*eridiem)
> T.S. Eliot (*T*homas *S*tearns *E*liot)

There is wide variation in practice, however. For example, the 1984 London telephone directory includes both *B & E Contractors* and *B. & E. Hardware*.

The tendency to leave out full stops is particularly strong in abbreviations that consist entirely of capital letters: *BBC*, *MA*, *TLS*, *NNW*. This tendency is less strong with the abbreviations of people's names: *T S Eliot* is less likely than *T.S. Eliot*.

Only if the capital letter stands for a complete word can it take a full stop: *TB* (tuberculosis), *TV* (television), and *MS* (manuscript) therefore cannot take a full stop. And full stops tend to be omitted in acronyms (see 6. c. below) such as *UNICEF* or *NATO*.

2. When an abbreviation ends with the last letter of the word abbreviated, British English often considers it a 'contraction' (see below) rather than a true abbreviation, and writes it without a full stop (*Dr*, *Mr*, *Jr*). American English is far more likely to use a full stop (*Dr.*, *Mr.*, *Jr.*) — this is still quite acceptable in British English, of course, though less and less common.

The distinction is a controversial one, however. It seems rather odd to find *Dr* ('contraction' — no stop) and *Prof.* (abbreviation — hence full stop) in a single text or even sentence; similarly *Lat.* (abbreviation of *Latin*) and *Gk* (contraction of *Greek*), or *Pvt.* (abbreviation of *private*) and *Sgt* (contraction of *Sergeant*). And what of *Col/Col.* (Colonel) and *Lieut/Lieut.* or *Lt/Lt.* — are they contractions or abbreviations; do they omit the stop or take it? Finally, the occasional glaring exception: *ms*, for *manuscript*, is almost never seen with a full stop after it, though according to the 'rule' it ought to have one.

3. For consistency's sake then (or perhaps more often through ignorance), the recommended distinction is more and more being disregarded, in British English at least, in favour of the blanket omission of the full stop after abbreviations. The effect is certainly streamlined, as the following extracts make clear:

> See now, for instance, the approach adopted in *SA Wire Co (Pty) Ltd* v *Durban Wire & Plastics (Pty) Ltd* 1968 (2) SA 777 (D) at 781, cited by Hosten and others (n 25 above) 241.
> ... R W M Dias *Jurisprudence* 4 ed (1976) ch 7 pp 218 – 45 ...
> Gramsci op cit 321 – 43. Cf Maureen Cain 'Optimism, Law and the State: A Plea for the Possibility of Politics' in C M Campbell and C J Schuyt (eds) *European Yearbook in Law and Sociology* (1974) 26.
>
> – footnotes,
> *The South African Law Journal*

4. *plurals and possessives.* A few single-letter abbreviations indicate their plural form by simply doubling the letter: the full stop, if it is used at all, is placed after the second of these letters. So, the word *page* can be abbreviated as *p.* or *p*, and *pages* accordingly becomes *pp.* (with a stop after the second *p*) or *pp* (without any stop at all).

A few abbreviations undergo fairly drastic changes when cast in the plural, notably *Mr*, which becomes *Messrs*, from French *Messieurs* (obviously it could not be spelt as *Mrs*).

For the most part, a simple *s* is added to the abbreviation: *five backbench MPs/M.P.s*; do not be tempted to insert a needless apostrophe here — *M.P.'s* is the possessive, not the plural. Note

that if the abbreviation contains more than one full stop, the full stops are unaffected by the addition of the *s* — *five M.P.s*; *three successive l.b.w.s* — but if the abbreviation has only a single, final full stop, this shifts its position and follows the *s*: *a message for Capts. Kane and Hilson.* (For more details, see PLURALS.)

Scientific terms tend to retain the singular form when the plural sense is intended: *one kg*; *four kg*, and so on. (See section 6.d.i below.)

The possessive is formed by the simple addition of *-'s* or *-s'*: *the PM's latest proposal* (or *P.M.'s*); *the J.P.s' conference*, and so on.

See also A, AN 1.

5. Note that if an assertion ends with an abbreviation, and that abbreviation ends with a full stop, no more full stops are needed:

She works for the B.B.C.
She works for the BBC.

In other words, an assertion should end with only one full stop, even if it is the full stop of an abbreviation.

6. Several types of construction resemble abbreviations but have rather different punctuation rules:

a. *contractions — can't, mustn't, shan't*, and so on: these take an apostrophe to represent the missing letter/s. Note, however, that *shan't* has only one apostrophe, whereas it should really have two. Take care to place the apostrophe in the correct position — it corresponds to the missing letter, not to the syllable break: *shouldn't*, not × *should'nt*.

See also AIN'T; CONTRACTIONS OF VERBS.

b. *clipped forms of words — flu, phone, Tom, fo'c's'le*, and so on: few of these are spelt with an apostrophe nowadays — *fo'c's'le* (for *forecastle*) and *bo's'n* (for *boatswain*) are extreme examples. *Cello* used to be spelt with an apostrophe in front of it, the full form being *violoncello*, but this would seem pedantic today. And to spell *flu* as *'flu* is not only pedantic but inconsistent, since there are missing letters after as well as before the contracted form, and an apostrophe might be expected at the end too.

Cello is today quite at home in even the most formal contexts — so too are *bus, chips, cinema, cox, curio, perm, pram, taxi*, and *zoo*, so much so that many people are scarcely aware of the fuller forms (*omnibus, chipped potatoes, cinematograph, coxswain, curiosity, permanent wave, perambulator, taximeter cabriolet*, and *zoological gardens*).

Flu is slightly less formal, but still perfectly suited to most ordinary contexts: similarly *bike, disco, exam, fan* (in the sense of 'enthusiastic supporter' — from *fanatic*), *fridge, gym, phone, photo, pop music* (from *popular music*), *pub, quad, recap* (from *recapitulate*), *vet* (from *veterinary surgeon*), and so on.

Some clipped forms are fairly informal still — *telly* and *ref*, for example; also *ad* (for *advertisement*), *bookie* (*bookmaker*), *deli* (*delicatessen*), *gent, info* (*information*), *mike* (*microphone*), *prelims* (*preliminaries*), *prof* (*professor*), *wellies* (*Wellington boots*), and so on.

All varieties — from the most formal and assimilated to the most slangy — tend to be spelt without any apostrophe.

See also APOSTROPHE 3, 4.

c. *acronyms* — these are strings of letters or syllables that are pronounced as if they spelt a complete word. *U.N.* or *UN* is an abbreviation, whereas *UNESCO* (/yōō-neskō/) and *Comintern* (/kommin-tern/) are acronyms — the former from initial letters, the latter from the initial syllables of *Com*munist *Intern*ational. Syllable acronyms such as *Comintern* (or *Benelux*) are never written with full stops, and letter acronyms such as *UNESCO* (*Fiat, NAAFI, NATO, OPEC, Wrens*, and so on) almost never have full stops either nowadays. Acronyms denoting common objects — such as *radar* (*ra*dio *d*etection *a*nd *r*anging) and *scuba* (*s*elf-contained *u*nderwater *b*reathing *a*pparatus) — are by now fully accepted as common nouns, and of course take no full stops.

d. *scientific terms.* i. *weights and measures.* The full stop is seldom used here — *kg*, without the stop, stands for *kilogram/s*; *cwt* for *hundredweight*; *ft* for *foot* or *feet*; *amp* for *ampere/s*; *yd* for *yard*. The standard abbreviation of *yards* should be *yds*, though in fact *? yds.* with the full stop seems to be just as common. The abbreviation of *miles per hour* seems equally acceptable without and with full stops — *mph* and *m.p.h.*

Note that *lb* stands for *pound* or *pounds*: the form *? lbs* represents an undesirable mix of the English plural-ending *-s* and the Latin *libra* (singular) or *librae* (plural).

ii. *chemical symbols* — such as *Ca* (calcium) and *Fe* (iron). These never have full stops, whether of the *Ca* type, reflecting the current English term *calcium*, or of the *Fe* type reflecting the Latin word for 'iron', *ferrum*.

abjure, adjure, conjure These three fairly uncommon verbs may cause problems, *abjure* and *adjure* being so similar in sound and spelling, and *adjure* and *conjure* being confusingly close in meaning.

Abjure comes via Middle English and Old French from Latin *abjurare*, 'to deny on oath', from *ab-*, 'away' + *jurare*, 'to swear'. *To abjure* means 'to renounce or repudiate or abstain from, as if under oath': *He has a history of alcoholism, but is reformed and now abjures drink.* As the prefix *ab-* suggests, the word refers to staying *away* from something.

Adjure comes via Middle English from the Latin *adjurare*, 'to swear to', from *ad-*, 'to' + *jurare*, 'to swear'. Like *abjure* the word contains the sense of 'as if by an oath', but this time the solemnity of the act is directed towards something or someone else rather than away from oneself. *To adjure* means 'to command or entreat earnestly, as if under an oath'. The *ad-* element in the word suggests the meaning 'to appeal *to*':

> He need not have adjured me to keep up my spirits, which were as high as possible ... I was, as it were, really new-born.
>
> – William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890)

Abjure and *adjure* are both stressed on the second syllable. *Conjure* is usually stressed on the first, though in the first sense given below it should be pronounced /kən-**joor**/ — but rarely is, except in American English.

The word comes through Old and Middle English from Medieval Latin *conjurare*, 'to invoke with oaths or incantations' — in Latin, it meant 'to swear together, conspire', from *com-*, 'together' + *jurare*, 'to swear'. *To conjure* can mean 'to call upon or entreat solemnly, especially by an oath', which brings it very near to the meaning of *adjure*. The difference is perhaps that *conjuration* of someone carries the implication of 'conspiracy', of urging him to follow one's own example: *He conjured his friend to join him in voting with the reformers.*

A related meaning of the verb *to conjure* is 'to summon (especially a devil or spirit) by incantation or by magic'.

There are extended meanings of the verb: 'to perform magic tricks' (hence *conjurer)*, and 'to cause or effect as if by magic': *The argument seemed endless until Mary arrived and conjured away all the problems.* Similarly, the phrase *to conjure up* means, 'to bring into existence, as if by magic' — *He conjured up a feast at an hour's notice* — or 'to bring to the mind's eye, evoke': *Her speech conjured up a utopia of freedom, equality, and justice.*

The verbs *abjure* and *adjure* are fairly rare now, as is *conjure* in the senses of 'to entreat' or 'to summon'. It would be just as well, then, to consider other words instead, and at the same time avoid the risk of confusion: for *abjure*, the alternatives *renounce, give up, reject,* and *repudiate* are possible; for *adjure* — *implore, beg,* and *entreat*; and for conjure — *entreat*, or *summon, enlist*, and *call upon.*

about 1. In the sense of 'approximately', *about* is often used redundantly:

? The victim is a man of about 60 to 65.
? Damage was caused that is estimated to be about £60,000.
? I'll arrive at about 9 or 10.

About should ideally apply to only one figure: since a margin of error is implied by the word, an alternative figure is unnecessary. The first specimen sentence above seems, therefore, to be saying the same thing twice. In the second example, the word *estimated* indicates that the figure cited is only approximate: the *about* is redundant and should be omitted. In the third sentence, the phrase *at 9 or 10* is an idiomatic way of admitting uncertainty about the time of arrival: no additional indication is needed, and the *about* should accordingly be deleted. There is also some objection to the use of *about* with precise figures rather than round figures: it is odder to hear *? about 1528* than *about 1525.*

2. In the sense of 'approximately', *around* and *about* are equally acceptable, but *around* is more common in North American than in British English. The expression *round about* is chiefly British English: *I'll arrive round about 10 o'clock.* (See AROUND.)

3. Three constructions, all involving the word *about,* are fairly common in American English and are becoming more noticeable in British English. In their different ways, and to different degrees, they are undesirable additions to the language.

a. First, *about* in the sense of 'aiming at, intending to achieve':

> ? Historically, the Populist Party was about the redistribution of economic power.
>
> – Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (U.S.), *The New York Times*

The problem is that this is different from the older sense of *about,* 'dealing with, treating'. The Schlesinger example is unambiguous because only the newer sense is possible in it. But there can be ambiguity in a sentence such as *? Politics is about power.* Does this mean that politics is concerned with power as a subject of study — in the abstract, as it were — or that politics is concerned

with how to *achieve* power?

b. The extended form *what it's all about* has become a fashionable tag:

? Broadcasting? Broadcasting isn't a 'public service'. It's a business, like any other. It's there to make money. Money — that's what it's all about.

? Disappointed, the lovers fall out of love. Love has failed to give meaning to their lives and that, in a way, is what all the various concepts which are covered by the single word 'love' are about: a drive towards meaning.

– Eleanor Bron, 'Words', BBC Radio 3

This usage was no sooner established than it became a cliché, rather like *the name of the game*, which could replace *what it's all about* in the example above.

Although the current popularity of *what it's all about* seems to be due to American influence, the phrase itself was perhaps of British origin: it is found in the old nursery jingle 'Looby Loo', and is, more or less, the refrain of the song 'The Cokey-Cokey' (1942).

c. The phrase *not about to*, in the sense of 'unwilling to' or 'unlikely to', is not yet — fortunately — so widespread in British English:

? If I'd followed that suggestion, I would have had to mortgage my house a second time, and I was not about to do that.

The expression is not particularly elegant, and it duplicates quite unnecessarily the work of *unwilling to* or *unlikely to*. But the chief objection to it is its ambiguity. The established sense of *not about to do that* is 'not on the verge of doing that'. If the new sense gains a secure foothold in British English, then a sentence such as *She is not about to organise another conference* will become intolerably ambiguous, as it already is in American English. Resist this new usage, or we are in danger of losing the old one.

In fairness, it should be noted that the expression *not going to* probably underwent a similar development, and can indicate unwillingness as well as futurity: *I'm not going to say it*. In fact, the positive form *going to* can be used to indicate willingness or insistence — *I am going to resign* (though the positive form *about to* cannot really be used in this way).

The forms *will not* and *will* can similarly be used to express both futurity and (un)willingness — *I will not agree to it* — though here (as in many languages) the development was in the opposite direction: *will* began as a verb expressing willingness or determination, and only later came to be used to indicate the future.

● ***Recommendation*** Of these three new uses of *about* — listed above in ascending order of respectability — **b.** is a cliché, and, like all clichés, is best reserved for special effects, such as deliberate informality or irony. Use **a.** can lead to ambiguity, and should be allowed only with appropriate caution. Use **c.** can also lead to ambiguity, though this ambiguity is associated with a general, perhaps universal, development within certain verbs — combining a sense of willingness with a sense of futurity.

above The use of *above* as a noun — *as the above makes clear* — is common in legal, official, technical, or business writing, but is considered stilted in ordinary writing, and is best avoided there:

? The percipient reader will have observed the hand of Toomey in the above. The stress of invention is less arduous than the strain of word for word copying.

– Anthony Burgess, *Earthly Powers*

? The problem with writing your autobiography is that you feel a reluctance to include puffs like the above.

– Veronica Lake (U.S.), *Veronica*

It might have been more appropriate to say simply *puffs of this kind* or *puffs like those just mentioned*.

Note that there is no equivalent noun use of *below*.

Both *above* and *below* are used in corresponding ways as adjectives and adverbs, and this use is quite acceptable. There is nothing wrong with saying, for instance, *puffs like those mentioned above*. Both *above* and *below* are freely used in this way throughout this book: *as all the above examples make clear*; *as all the examples above make clear*; *as all the examples listed above make clear*.

The use is slightly metaphorical: the example referred to as *the above example* may in fact occur at the foot of the previous column or page, and thus literally be *below*. (Similarly, a list referred to as *the list below* may appear at the top of the following column, and thus literally be *above*.) Nevertheless, the adjectives *above* and *below* cannot easily be replaced: *foregoing, aforementioned, previous, preceding, following*, and so on are all slightly stilted or misleading in their own way.

absolute adjectives See ADJECTIVES; UNIQUE; VERY.

abstemious, abstinent The adjective *abstemious* means 'sparing in the consumption of food and drink, not self-indulgent'. The word comes from the Latin *abstemius* from *ab-*, *abs-*, 'away from' + *temetum*, 'alcoholic drink'. *Abstinent* comes from a different Latin word, *abstinere*, 'to abstain', from *ab-*, *abs-*, 'away from', + *tenere*, 'to hold'. It means 'denying one's appetites completely; doing without'.

Abstinent differs from *abstemious* in two respects: first, it refers to all appetites and desires, whereas *abstemious* tends to refer only to food and drink, or even more specifically to alcoholic drink alone; secondly, *abstinent* suggests total self-denial, *abstemious* simply suggests moderation.

The noun derived from *abstemious* is *abstemiousness*; *abstinent* has two related nouns — *abstinence* and *abstention*. *Abstention*, unlike *abstinence*, has no suggestion of denying the appetites: it refers simply to refraining from something — a single act of abstaining (commonly, abstaining from voting). *Abstinence* suggests continuous abstaining (as from drink). In the Roman Catholic Church, *abstinence* has (or had) the special sense of 'going without certain specific foods on days of penitence'. So a Catholic might practise *abstinence* by occasional *abstention* from meat.

abstract nouns *Abstract nouns* refer to qualities, emotions, concepts, and relationships that cannot usually be perceived with our senses: *hopelessness*, *vacancy*, *rejection*, and *parenthood* (and the words *quality*, *emotion*, *concept*, and *relationship* themselves), as contrasted with *concrete nouns* such as *tortoise*, *bicycle*, *leather*, *parent* and *airport*. You need abstract nouns every now and again to communicate your ideas, but if you use too many of them, and particularly if you use too many long ones ending in *-ity*, *-ence*, *-ment*, *-ness*, and *-tion*, your language will become heavy and unreadable. It is usually neater and clearer to reformulate the sentence with a verb or adjective or concrete noun rather than rely on the abstract noun. If possible use *opaque* in preference to *opacity*, *sleepy* to *somnolence*, *achieve* to *achievement*, *distribute* to *distribution*, *the members* to *the membership*, *the leaders* to *the leadership*.

Such nouns as *basis*, *situation*, *conditions*, and *nature* can often be removed, to the advantage of the text. You could rephrase *work on a part-time basis* as *part-time work*; *They negotiated in a face-to-face situation* as *They negotiated face to face*; *the weather conditions* as *the weather*; *acts of a ceremonial nature* as *ceremonies*; and *have an alcohol problem* as *drink too much*.

Sociologists and academic writers tend to make extremely heavy use of abstract nouns. These might sound impressive, but often at the expense of elegance and clarity:

> If there really is a pattern of incompatibility and an incapacity for resolution of differences, then reconciliation is simply not an option.

How much clearer had the wording been:

> If you really are incompatible and cannot resolve your differences, you simply cannot live together again.

The following extract would have benefited from rephrasing:

> Some people, I know, will see that as an argument for bringing the IRA into the negotiating process.
>
> – Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Observer*

This could simply have read *for bringing the IRA into the negotiations* or *for negotiating with the IRA*.

See also JARGON.

acceptation This noun used to deputise for *acceptance* in many of its uses, but is now quite distinct from it. Its only common current sense is 'the usual or accepted meaning of a word or phrase (or the interpretation of an idea)': *I use the word 'code' in its usual acceptation*; *His acceptation of a warm welcome is a sullen 'Very well, come in then'*.

accessory, accessary Both these words are spelt with double *c* and double *s*. In American English, *accessory* is the only current form, and covers all the meanings; but in British English the different spellings are usually reserved for different meanings, though here too *accessary* is losing ground.

An *accessory* is a helper, willingly aiding or consenting in an activity, especially a criminal act. *Accessary before the fact* is a former legal term referring to a person who aids or encourages a crime but is not present when it is committed. *Accessary after the fact* is the former term referring to a person who is once again not present at the crime, but who helps the criminal after it has been committed. The phrase *accessary to* is