

The
Random House
Dictionary for
WRITERS
AND
READERS

Dictionary for **WRITERS
AND
READERS**

David Grambs

*To the memory of my father,
George Lorenzo Grambs, and
for my mother,
Myrtle Jane Wood Grambs*

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Introduction

The Random House Dictionary for Writers and Readers is a different kind of literary dictionary. Its focus is not so much literature, literary history, and belles lettres as it is the nuts and bolts of writing itself. Although many of the words defined are old, their use—or usefulness—today is emphasized. Besides including many terms not found in scholastic literary handbooks and even unabridged American and British dictionaries, the book differs from other literary references in two respects.

First, it is single-mindedly a glossary of terms related to prose and the devices of everyday speech, and hence does not include the numerous poetry (prosody) and classical drama terms commonly saturating other literary handbooks. Nor is this another lexicon of authors, works, or literary characters and periods with a history-of-English-literature slant. My intent has all along been simply to gather in one place words about words, terms of interest to the working writer and to any person who reads with a critical eye and likes to discuss the graces, tricks, and fine points involved in using the English language.

Second, it is a gallimaufry not only of traditional literary terms (allegory, metonymy, onomatopoeia, and the like) but also of hundreds of others related to language and writing: from journalism, linguistics, book reviewing, logic (and illogic), grammar, rhetoric, political speechwriting, editing and publishing, and to some extent advertising. (The highly technical terminology of phonetics is for the most part excluded, and this is not a book about graphology.) *The Random House Dictionary for Writers and Readers* also includes numerous distinctively British expressions and literary Latin and French borrowings as well as useful terms coined by writers and linguists that appear in no other dictionary.

This would seem to be an opportune time for publication of a lexicon focused on the craft of writing. Interest by Americans in the state of the language, and not a little concern about the way it is used, has perhaps never been greater than it is nowadays. If there was a groundbreaker for this period of fascination with words and writing, it was probably Edwin Newman's popular *Strictly Speaking*, a wry report on our native tongue's slippage published

in the early 1970s and followed quickly by Newman's equally entertaining *A Civil Tongue*. Since then our bookstores seem always to be chock-full of books appealing to word and language lovers. Many newspapers now carry syndicated columns dealing with nettlesome usage questions—and replying to highly opinionated and nettled readers. If this is not the Age of William Safire, it is the Age of Concern About Our National Literacy. This book adds to the stream. But in being a kind of diagnostic reference (and, I hope, one always enjoyable to leaf through), it adds something usefully new and different.

Many terms here were found by hunting through dictionaries from A to Z, literally page by page: systematically chance discoveries. At other times I searched hopefully, quixotically: Is there a word for this literary mannerism, for that type of phrasing? Is there one for this journalistic device so often encountered in daily newspapers, for that rhetorical trick used by politicians?

The findings of such quests, I discovered, sometimes lay not in any dictionary but in the throwaway but often inspired coinages of lively writers and linguists. Lexicographers tend to frown upon so-called nonce words, those sometime coinages not fully accepted or legitimized by usage. This book unfrowningly welcomes to its pages numerous, and not always gravely serious, coinages pertaining to facets of writing (each identified as "——'s term for . . ."). I hope these will be useful, if not eternal—in most cases denoting something not denoted by any other term. Such coinages remind us that our language—and our language about language—can always profit from new terms that fill a specific need.

Pronunciations have been supplied where they seemed appropriate—that is, for words for which common sense might not be a safe bet. As other dictionaries show, this is a realm of many variants and of differing opinions (notably with Latin terms and in view of often differing British pronunciation), and I have been deliberately selective and simple here. For some of the more unfamiliar entries, a line or two about derivation has been added.

Two other decisions were made regarding format: not to number different meanings of a term and not to interpolate into definitions such labels as "rare," "obsolete," "archaic," and "slang." I am a little distrustful of lexical numbering and subnumbering, and would find my own numbers equally questionable. Labels, like numbered definitions, can certainly be helpful to a reader, but they can also be presumptuous, soon dated—or self-evident. It goes without saying (or labeling) that many of the words and phrases in

this book are uncommon, a mite difficult, and not a part of everyday speech.

Two other features are central to the book's format, namely, illustrative quotations and twenty-four supplements, or "special entries," on different verbal topics separate from the general, alphabetical lexicon.

Words, even rare or difficult literary words, get lifeblood not from their mere presence in dictionaries but from actual usage in speech and writing. From the outset I felt that illustrative quotations from contemporary or recent writing were indispensable to the readability and richness of *The Random House Dictionary for Writers and Readers*; that is, quotations demonstrating (in almost all cases) an actual use of the term in question by a novelist, essayist, critic, journalist, or linguist. I wanted a broad, varied mix of modern citations, whether single sentences or brief passages, not only from scholars and grammarians but also from contemporary American and British fiction writers, and of course from journalists and book reviewers as well.

Not all entries are accompanied by quotations, but many of them are, and they come from both sides of the Atlantic. Thousands were collected, and final choices were often difficult, not to say agonizing. The citations help to bring some uncommon literary words to life and remind readers that these words not only can be profitably used but in fact are employed more than might be thought.

The special entry supplements cover areas of language-related nomenclature that, so far as I know, have received little attention in other language reference books, topics that invite, however cursorily, some measure of special treatment. A number of these special entries are thesauruslike addenda—lists of authorial adjectives, prose-descriptive adjectives, and publishing's ubiquitous blurb adjectives, for example—more usefully presented collectively. Others are meant as introductions to certain aspects of the English language, from the sly devices of propaganda and advertising to the lingo of word-gamers and the confusions of mixed metaphors. Two of the special entries, on fair use and libel, offer basic guidance on legal questions related to writing, and another provides a rather diverting "Fog Index" formula for assessing prose readability or density.

Even a reference meant to be comprehensive must be selective. No matter how rich and complete one tries to make a collection like this, there will always be regretted exclusions and lapses—

otherwise known as glaring omissions. Hundreds of "possibles" never made it into the final manuscript. Early in the project I expected to formulate an infallible rule of thumb regarding which term did and which did not belong between these two covers, but such a surefire axiom always eluded me. Lingerin uncertainties about such yes-or-no rulings can be distressing, as can a sinking feeling that irresistible words will never stop turning up and a dictionary never finished. But deadlines, fortunately, have their purpose, and after a point there can be no more second thoughts, only second editions.

For a lexicographer it's heartening to recall that even Dr. Johnson tendered prefatory apologies regarding his dictionary. Like his, *The Random House Dictionary for Writers and Readers* "was written with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academick bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow." In my case, that is to say, without being Dr. Johnson, while holding down a full-time office job, and with a bit of phthisis at deadline time.

All in all, my most ardent hope is that you find this dictionary not merely helpful and reliable but also downright inviting to page through. And that it enhances—as merely discovering new terms can do—your awareness of the many subtleties in and motives behind writing both good and bad.

Pronunciation Key

add	lôrd	chest	
rāte	oil	get	
cāre	pōol	joy	
fāther	tōok	kiln	œ <i>French</i> jeu,
bend	doubt	sing	soeur
ēve	cup	ship	ü <i>French</i> tu,
sit	būrn	thick	<i>German</i> über
ice	{ among	you	kh <i>German</i> ich
hot	{ hasten	zh: pleasure	ʌ <i>French</i> son,
cōde	{ possible		vin
	{ melon		
	{ focus		

Parentheses around a symbol, as in *new* [n(y)ōō], mean that the sound may be pronounced or left out.

A single prime mark, ', follows syllables that are given a primary or strong stress. A double mark, ", follows syllables given a secondary or lighter stress.

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Part I

THE RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY FOR WRITERS AND READERS

A

abbreviation *n.* The shortening of a word or phrase or use of only a few of its letters to represent the whole expression, whether by contraction, omission, use of initial letters only, or symbols; shortened or shorthand form of a word or phrase. *Adj.* abbreviated; *v.* abbreviate.

"Yellow Peril" Hadley swept through the school with the speed of a flu epidemic, and it must be said to his credit that Brinker took it well enough except when, in its inevitable abbreviation, people sometimes called him "Yellow" instead of "Peril."

—John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*

abecedarian *adj.* Pertaining to the alphabet, or alphabetically arranged; rudimentary; elementary. *N.* abecedarian.

Sisson's Synonyms, published by Prentice-Hall, and compiled by A. F. Sissons, is a contender in the abecedarian ranks. . . .

—Israel Shenker, *Harmless Drudges*

ab initio [*ab i-nish' ē-ō*] From the beginning: from the very start or outset.

That rather angry declaration of at least some respect for books; that distinctly wistful desire to write a book himself (to "tell it how it really is"—as if the poverty of that phrase did not *ab initio* castrate the wish it implied!). . . .

—John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*

ab irato [*ab i-rā' tō*] From an angry man: hence, not reasonable and possibly not to be taken too seriously.

abjective *n.* Newspaper jargon for a published apologetic correction to a previous error.

Abject because such notices are invariably apologies; *objection* because they're printed only in response to complaints from the injured parties; and *adjective* because they are meant to modify the original news report's effect. It should be noted, however, that as they are usually limited to two or three lines of small print hidden in the back section of the publication, *abjectives* rarely modify anything.

—Joel Homer, *Jargon*

à bouche ouverte [*ā bōōsh ōō-vert*] With open mouth: eagerly or uncritically; gullibly

ab ovo [*ab ō'vō*] From the egg: from the very beginning, hence completely and in great detail; thoroughly or voluminously.

abracadabra *n.* Used as a magical word to forestall misfortune or effect a miracle: supposedly magical or curative incantation; overweening nonsense or jargon; gibberish.

The error of all such unhappy viewers with alarm is in assuming that there is enough magic in pedagogy to teach "correct" English to the plain people. There is, in fact, far too little; even the fearsome abracadabra of Teachers College, Columbia, will never suffice for the purpose.

—H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*

absit invidia verbo [*āb'sit in-wid'ē-ə wer'bō*] Let it be said without ill will: no offense intended.

absolute comparative See AGENCY COMPARATIVE.

absolute superlative See ABSOLUTE WORD.

absolute word A word that, extreme or categorical in meaning, in principle cannot be modified: specifically, an adjective or adverb not qualifiable by a "false" comparative or superlative, e.g., "unique," "simultaneous," "eternally," "infinite." Also ABSOLUTE SUPERLATIVE, FALSE COMPARATIVE, INCOMPARABLE, INCOMPARABLE ABSOLUTE.

Kael's . . . hyperenthusiasm has earned other critical comments. Some have said that her overuse of absolute superlatives is what one might expect from a critic unable to convince a reader by argument, allusion, or example; in short, her insensate praise reduces her reviews to meaninglessness.

—John English, *Criticizing the Critics*

abstract *n.* A text summarizing the matter or principal points of a book, article, record, or speech, esp. of an official or technical document; abbreviated or concentrated version; condensation. *N.* abstracter; *v.* abstract.

abstracted form A word affix or element of a familiar expression that is borrowed to form analogous words, to which it carries an evident meaning or connotation, e.g., the suffix "-gate" used to coin "Irangate" (from "Watergate") or "-aholic" (from "alcoholic") in "workaholic." See also BOOSTED COINAGE; PATTERNED FORM.

abstraction *n.* The mental separating of common attributes or qualities from distinct, individual objects or beings, or of concepts from particular exemplars; word denoting an idea or in-

tangible quality as opposed to something concrete. *Adj.* abstract; *adv.* abstractly.

York Harding might write in graphic abstractions about the Third Force, but this was what it came down to—this was It.

—Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

abstract language Writing that is generalized, theoretical, or impersonal, typically with long Latinate words and often passive constructions (contrasted with concrete language).

They don't hear—what worries a good many Americans when they get to work on discursive prose—that in a good many ways American-English is a significantly more abstract language than ours is. We say: "I want to book a seat." You say: "I want to make a reservation."

—C. P. Snow, in *Writing in America*

abusage *n.* Improper or ungrammatical word usage; careless or irresponsible language; solecism.

And it is around this fascinating vacuum that the American fetish for correctness, the agony over those droll Victorian antimacassars "usage" and "abusage," so resolutely assembles.

—Richard Lanham, *Style*

acceptation *n.* The generally accepted meaning of a word, phrase, sentence, or concept.

accidence *n.* The part of grammar concerning inflections.

accidental pun See UNCONSCIOUS PUN.

accismus See special entry RHETORIC TERMS, p. 402.

accordion sentence Harry Shaw's term for a weak, snowballing sentence that is a sequence of tagged-on subordinate clauses, with each successive clause much like a hasty afterthought, e.g., "This is the man who goes to the club that is near the club that I couldn't join." Also DECAPITABLE SENTENCE.

accusative See special entry GRAMMAR ADJECTIVES, p. 398.

achthronym [*ak'thrō·nim*] *n.* H. L. Mencken's term for an ethnic slur; ethnophaulism.

The English have fewer strangers within their gates, and hence their native armamentarium is smaller, and not a few of the achthronyms . . . they use come from the United States.

—H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*

acknowledgments See special entry PARTS OF A BOOK, p. 363.

A-copy *n.* Newspaper jargon for lazy, slipshod writing, esp. information from a public relations release passed off as news-writing. See also **CANNED COPY**.

à coups de dictionnaire [*ä cōō də dēk·syō·nâr*] With blows of a dictionary: with continual or incessant reference to the dictionary.

acrolect *n.* The most prestigious dialect in a creole, or mixed, language being closest to the standard international variety of the language (contrasted with basilect).

acronym *n.* A pronounceable word formed by initial letters or syllables from a series of words or compound term, e.g., "NATO," "radar." *Adj.* acronymic; *adv.* acronymically.

Honest acronyms emerge, either by pure chance or with a little discreet assistance, from genuinely preexisting phrases. Counterfeit acronyms, or retroacronyms, are formed by simply choosing some snappy or appropriate term and devising a phrase to which it can (falsely) be attributed.
—*Success With Words*

acrostic See special entry **WORD-GAME WORDS**, p. 394.

active title See special entry **BOOK PUBLISHING TERMS**, p. 361.

adage *n.* An often quoted saying.

The urge to be first with the facts on Wolfe appears to have reflected an authentic variation of the academic adage; for Halberstadt it was "scoop or perish." He may accomplish both.

—Eliot Fremont-Smith, *Village Voice*

adaptation See special entry **BOOK PUBLISHING TERMS**, p. 361.

ad baculum, a baculo [*ad bak'ōō·ləm*] To the rod: appealing to or suggesting the use of force to settle the question, as when Joseph Stalin remarked about the pope's role in international politics, "How many [military] divisions does the pope have?"

Nevertheless, the decline of the German universities since 1932 testifies to the dangerous power of an argument *ad baculum*, not merely over the specific victim, but over everybody in the vicinity.

—David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*

ad captandum benevolentiam [*ad kap·tan'dəm ben"ə·vō·len'tē·əm*] With intent to win goodwill or favor.

ad captandum vulgus [*ad kap·tan'dəm vul'gəs*] With intent to take in the public; designed to court the crowd emotionally, even if using unsound reasoning, non sequiturs, etc.

ad crumenam [*ad kroō·mā'nəm*] To the purse: appealing to greed or to the hearer's pocket.

addendum *n.* Something added or to be added, as a subsequent comment, note, or insertion; appended supplement. *Pl.* addenda.

The public is probably not deceived about the quality of most of these books. If the question of quality is brought up, the answer is likely to be: no, they are not "literature." But there is an unexpressed addendum: and perhaps they are all the better for not being imaginative, for not being literature—they are not literature, they are reality, and *in a time like this* what we need is reality in large doses.

—Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*

Addisonian termination The ending of a sentence with a preposition, as with "to," "of," or "with" (coined by critic Richard Hurd in reference to Joseph Addison).

adduce *v.* To bring up as a proof or an example; introduce for consideration or discussion; cite. *Adj.* adducible, adduceable.

... Sir Arthur Quiller Couch ("Q") ... adduced the whole body of English literature in order to maintain that American literature was a provincial appendage and that its most distinguished *littérateurs* proved the primacy of the English language by being well within the mainstream of the English of England.

—Alistair Cooke, in *On Mencken*

ad hoc [*ad hok*] To this matter: for this specific instance or purpose; in this case; immediate; provisional.

Polly's motivating force was love; she wanted a world in which everybody loved everybody else whether they liked it or not, but she set this overflowing feminine cup in motion with a thoroughly masculine arsenal of charts, graphs, quorums, task forces, ad hocs, tunnel vision, and lists. —Florence King, *When Sisterhood Was in Flower*

ad hominem [*ad hom'ə-nem*] To the man: appealing to the sentiments or prejudices of the hearer or listener, rather than to his or her reason or intelligence; disparaging a person's character rather than his or her arguments; personal rather than substantive or ideological.

The Boss knew all about the so-called fallacy of the *argumentum ad hominem*. "It may be a fallacy," he said, "but it is shore-God useful.