
A Dictionary of Good English

A Guide to
Current Usage

S.G. McKaskill

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INTRODUCTION TO REVISED EDITION

This book is intended to help everybody who wants to speak or write good, clear English. The dictionary arrangement makes reference easy – to find out what a simile is, look under ‘simile’ – while the cross-references help in the search for more information. If the student wishes to check up on the use of quotation marks, he or she will be directed also to ‘**Direct, Indirect Speech**’ for more detail and further examples.

Some points of usage are repeated because of their importance and because a student may need to examine a problem more than once to understand it fully. Thus, the very important and frequently confused relationship between a subject and its verb is dealt with under ‘**Agreement**’, ‘**Collective Nouns**’ and ‘**Singular or Plural?**’

The *Dictionary* includes a number of exercises of varying difficulty, with reference in each case to the appropriate section. Students working on their own can therefore check their progress, with ‘**Common Errors**’ (answers provided) as an extra guide. Teachers will no doubt find the exercises useful for classwork.

The book is designed for teaching at various levels. The many examples and the exercises will be helpful at ‘O’ level, while the more detailed explanations will be of interest to students studying ‘A’ levels or BEC Higher or National Certificates. It is hoped, too, that more advanced students in universities and colleges will find the *Dictionary* a handy reference book for ‘brushing up’ their English usage. A discussion of style and clarity of expression is included as well as basic grammar and punctuation.

In the advice given, there is wide use of grammatical terminology, too often ignored today; the terms are explained and will help students in further reading. Similarly, there is a tendency towards ‘enlightened conservatism’, in that not only is the traditional and formal usage given, but also reference to what is not yet – and what is only just – acceptable. A distinction is made between what is appropriate to the spoken and to the written word, to the formal and the informal occasion.

The English language is a flexible, vivid instrument for the expression of ideas, and great writers have effectively broken most of the rules at one time or another. For most of us, knowledge and understanding of the rules form the basis of good writing, and the *Dictionary* is intended to help us all to become good – if not great – writers.

CONTENTS

	Page
• Introduction	1
• Study Guide	4
• Dictionary	5
• Exercises	134
• Common Errors	167

CONTENTS

	Page
• Introduction	1
• Study Guide	4
• Dictionary	5
• Exercises	134
• Common Errors	167

A DICTIONARY OF GOOD ENGLISH

course in grammar, and complete the exercises related to these sections. The section numbers in the righthand column allow quick identification of the exercises related to a particular section in the 'Dictionary'. The 'Study Guide' also directs attention to sections relevant to a basic course in functional grammar. After studying these foundation-building sections, the student can work progressively through the remaining exercises, referring to the relevant sections of the 'Dictionary' as he proceeds.

Some important points of usage are included in several sections to provide emphasis through spaced repetition. Thus the very important relationship between a subject and its verb is dealt with in a section headed **Agreement**, and given further attention under the headings, **Collective nouns** and **Singular or plural?**

All material that does not bear directly on the subject of good and correct English usage has been excluded. However, in the explanation of grammatical points it is impossible to avoid using certain technical terms and referring to some of the basic principles of grammar. Indeed, a knowledge of these terms is necessary for anyone who wishes to progress beyond the 'try-to-remember' stage in learning to use correct English. Terms used and principles referred to are explained, and every article should be intelligible to the reader either by itself or when read in conjunction with other articles to which cross-references are given.

Most of the material in the *Dictionary* is concerned with the quality of correctness. However, the term 'good English' implies other qualities—for example, breadth of vocabulary and discernment in the choice of words. Therefore, a number of items have been included to emphasize the need for care and discrimination in using words. These items deal with homonyms, synonyms, words expressing shades of a common meaning, and other words which may be confused.

No attempt has been made to provide 'instant', ready-made answers to the problems presented in the 'Exercises'. It is sounder educationally to require an effort on the part of the reader. But each section of the 'Dictionary' has been written to lead the inquirer almost infallibly to the correct answers.

A general conservatism characterizes the advice and information given. But it is, one hopes, an enlightened conservatism. Conventions that are now ignored by some writers of good standing are not recommended without some mention of the current trend, and terms or constructions that have only recently risen to respectability are given the nod of approval. But change in language must be controlled

INTRODUCTION

to ensure stability. A trend to anarchy in the use of language will help nobody—least of all the student striving for proficiency in the art of communication.

STUDY GUIDE

Subject	Sections
NOUN	220, 231, 11, 14, 15, 18, 70, 110, 186, 199, 211, 222, 238, 240, 282, 290, 308.
PRONOUN	249, 30, 33, 41, 59, 115, 116, 121, 131, 157, 160, 183, 188, 209, 210, 214, 215, 225, 241, 267, 301, 326, 329, 330, 331, 340.
VERB	318, 231, 9, 14, 15, 16, 18, 31, 35, 41, 55, 57, 102, 104, 113, 125, 148, 150, 154, 156, 168, 173, 189, 190, 191, 197, 200, 206, 221, 230, 234, 244, 259, 263, 279, 280, 282, 287, 291, 300, 322, 324.
ADJECTIVE	10, 231, 1, 3, 13, 25, 42, 49, 76, 88, 89, 92, 102, 114, 120, 123, 130, 135, 138, 140, 151, 161, 167, 170, 172, 176, 179, 185, 198, 213, 224, 241, 242, 266, 303, 316, 330.
ADVERB	12, 231, 13, 23, 24, 36, 111, 155, 192, 212, 226, 252.
PREPOSITION	246, 231, 17, 27, 48, 50, 75, 79, 91, 105, 132, 137, 144, 145, 169, 195, 295.
CONJUNCTION	85, 28, 45, 46, 48, 56, 90, 122, 166, 216, 218, 273.
SENTENCES	276, 277, 26, 64, 68, 93, 128, 129, 153, 184, 205, 237, 250, 264, 292, 293, 299, 307, 314.
PUNCTUATION	251, 34, 58, 72, 74, 94, 103, 133, 147, 163, 177, 181, 182, 240, 255, 258, 275.
SPELLING	286, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22, 48, 51, 61, 77, 82, 88, 98, 92, 100, 101, 123, 127, 158, 162, 182, 197, 236, 238, 244, 247, 259, 263, 270, 271, 274, 289, 304, 309, 332, 341.
STYLE	2, 6, 26, 42, 47, 64, 66, 68, 71, 73, 128, 129, 143, 153, 175, 184, 205, 211, 213, 264, 276, 278, 281, 283, 292, 293, 298, 299, 314, 342.

The section 'Common Errors' (page 167) provides a ready means of testing a student's ability to use correct English, thereby indicating the use he should make of this Study Guide.

DICTIONARY

A

1 A, An (the indefinite article)

(i) The general rule is that 'an' is used instead of 'a' before a vowel or a silent 'h', *for example, an orange, an hour, an honour.*

(ii) If the vowel has the sound of 'w' or 'y', use 'a', *for example, a European tour, a one-sided match, a united effort.*

(iii) 'An' may be used before a sounded 'h' in an unaccented syllable, *for example, an heretical doctrine, an historic event, an habitual criminal.* This rule is not universally followed today, *for example, 'a hotel' is often preferred to 'an hotel' which is considered old-fashioned.*

(iv) Sometimes the choice of 'a' or 'an' depends on whether we pronounce the names of the letters, or the words in full, *for example, an R.A.F. plane, a Royal Air Force plane.*

(v) The article 'a' is used with the positive degree of the adjective in expressions such as 'as big a slice', 'as wise a man'. But it should not be used with the comparative; thus it should be omitted from 'no bigger a slice' and 'no wiser a man', *for example, He has as big a slice as I have, There is no wiser man alive today.*

2 Abbreviations

A. The following abbreviations are in common use:

A.D. = in the year of our Lord (Latin: *anno Domini*)

ad lib. = at pleasure (Lat. *ad libitum*)

a.m. = before noon (Lat. *ante meridiem*)

anon. = anonymous, author not known

ca. or c. = about or approximately when referring to dates (Lat. *circa*)

cf. = compare (Lat. *confer*)

c/o = care of

c.o.d. = cash on delivery

ed. = editor, edited, edition

e.g. = for example (Lat. *exempli gratia*)

et al. = and others, other things or writers (Lat. *et alia* for things; *et alii* for persons)

etc. = and the rest (Lat. *et cetera*)

2 ABBREVIATIONS (*continued*)

- et seq. = and that which follows (Lat. *et sequentia*)
ff. = and the following pages or verses
ibid. = the same, that is, the same reference or page (Lat. *ibidem*)
idem = the same, that is, same work and page as in previous footnote
i.e. = that is (Lat. *id est*)
infra = below when referring to text following
inst. = of the present month (Lat. *instant*)
loc. cit. = in the place already mentioned (Lat. *loco citato*)
MS. = manuscript
N.B. = note well, take notice (Lat. *nota bene*)
op. cit. = the work or book already mentioned (Lat. *opere citato*)
p., pp. = page, pages, for example, p. 29, pp. 84-93
p.a. = by the year (Lat. *per annum*)
passim = here and there, scattered among different pages
p.m. = after noon (Lat. *post meridiem*)
pro tem. = for the time being (Lat. *pro tempore*)
prox. = next month (Lat. *proximo*)
P.S. = postscript (Lat. *post scriptum* = written after)
q.v. = which see, directing the reader to a reference (Lat. *quod vide*)
R.S.V.P. = Please reply (French: *Repondez s'il vous plait.*)
[sic] = thus, placed after a quoted word or phrase containing an error which was in the original
stet = used to restore an item which has been struck out or deleted (Lat. *stet* = let it stand)
supra = above when referring to text
ult. = last month (Lat. *ultimo*)
viz. = namely (Lat. *videlicet*)
B. (i) Most abbreviations and contractions in writing are made in three ways:
(a) **by curtailing a word**, that is by giving the beginning of the word then writing a full stop, *for example, Feb. (February), log. (logarithm), anon. (anonymous), Co. (Company), Capt. (Captain), etc. (et cetera), Ed. (Editor), adv. (adverb), Eliz. (Elizabeth).*
(b) **by dropping part of the middle of a word**, while retaining the beginning and the last letter of the word. It is recommended that in abbreviations of this type the stop be omitted to let the reader know that the first and last letters given are those of the complete word, *for example, Ltd (Limited), do (ditto), Messrs*

(*Messieurs*), **maths** (*mathematics*), **logs** (*logarithms*), **bdg** (*building*), **Fr** (*Father*), **dept** (*department*), **hr** (*hour*), **Sgt** (*Sergeant*).

Some writers favour the use of a stop after abbreviations of this type on the ground of consistency, but weight of opinion now favours omission of the stop.

- (c) **by writing the initial letter, followed by other letters which may suggest the general sound.** In these cases the full stop is used, indicating that the end of the word is missing, *for example*, **cm.** (*centimetre*), **kg.** (*kilogram*), **ml.** (*millilitre*).

(ii) Another group of shortened words presents a difficulty. It includes words which originated as abbreviations but have come to be accepted as words, and names, in their own right, *for example*, *zoo, pram, phone, pub, taxi, bus, Fred, Tom, Betty*. No stop is required after such words.

But in some cases people will argue whether this independent status has been reached, *for example*, *exam, prefab, fridge, script, bra, vet, polio*. When doubt persists this suggests that the abbreviated form is not widely accepted as a word in its own right and that a stop should be used. However many writers faced with such a debatable point of usage will simply omit the stop.

(iii) No stop is used

(a) after ordinal numbers, *for example*, *1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.*

(b) in the possessive form of an abbreviation, *for example*, *Smith and Co's products*.

(iv) In punctuating initials, a full stop is placed after each letter that stands for a full word, *for example*, *J. B. Smith; R. S. V. P.; O. H. M. S.; TV. (television); MS. (manuscript)*.

The practice is increasing of omitting stops in the case of organizations which are generally known by the initials, and in cases where the initials are pronounced as a word, *for example*, *GPO; BBC; UNESCO; UNO; radar*.

(v) In certain contractions the apostrophe is used in place of omitted letters, *for example*, *isn't, can't, wouldn't, it's (it is)*.

(vi) In formal writing, including the addressing of envelopes, the full forms should be used, *for example*, *Collins Street (not St.); Brighton Road (not Rd)*. In the case of titles, usage is inconsistent; most writers refer to **Professor** Jones, but **Dr** Jones.

3 ABNORMAL, SUBNORMAL

(vii) Writers of taste do not use certain abbreviations, *for example, Scarboro', altho', nightie, hankie, an invite (invitation), an ad., flu, Jap.*

3 Abnormal, Subnormal

The Latin prefix 'ab' means 'from' or 'off', so 'abnormal' means simply 'not normal'.

Examples: Those strange growths on the plum tree are abnormal.

It is abnormal for a child to be born with six fingers on one hand.

The prefix 'sub' means 'under'. 'Subnormal' means 'below normal standard, less than normal'.

Example: The Smiths have a son who is mentally subnormal.

4 Above

In place of 'the above comment', it is better to write, 'the comment already made'. Or the comment may be repeated in summary form, beginning, 'My remarks concerning . . .', or 'The foregoing remarks concerning . . .'

5 Absolutely

This word is often used for emphasis or to express finality. It is used unnecessarily in 'absolutely perfect', 'absolutely disastrous', and so on. Words such as 'perfect' and 'disastrous' convey meaning effectively, and the use of 'absolutely' adds nothing to their meanings.

6 Abstract language

The use of an abstract vocabulary is necessary when we are discussing certain subjects such as philosophy and aesthetics. But in most situations concrete language should be preferred. Good writers use a judicious mixture of the abstract and the concrete. It is the over-use, rather than the use, of abstract language that deserves criticism. Badly used, it says at great length what could have been said more effectively in fewer words.

Examples: Abstract: The construction of a complex of buildings and arenas for the staging of sporting events is under active consideration.

Concrete: The building of a sports centre is being considered.

Abstract: Every endeavour will be exerted to satisfy your requirements at the earliest date practicable.

Concrete: We shall fulfil your order as soon as possible

7 Acquaint

'Let me tell you the facts' is less pretentious than 'Let me **acquaint** you with the facts'.

8 Actual

In these sentences 'actual' and 'actually' serve no purpose and should be omitted.

*Examples: The **actual** truth is that . . .*

*The trouble **actually** is that he quarrels with everybody.*

9 Add up to

*Correct: These figures **add up to** one hundred.*

*Incorrect: What this **adds up to** is that we are in serious danger.*

'What this means is . . . ' is better in the second example.

10 Adjective

A. An adjective is often called a describing word. When used with a noun, an adjective describes, or qualifies, or adds information about, the thing named by the noun. Note the different 'picture' that results from a change of adjectives in these two sentences.

*Example: **Angry** natives called to the **terrified** sailors.*

***Excited** natives called to the **laughing** sailors.*

Adjectives are of three main types, but they all have the same function—qualifying a noun by telling what kind, how many, or which one. The three groups of adjectives are:

- (i) **descriptive** adjectives—a **blue** dress, a **Dutch** ship, a **sad** story, a **broken** bottle, the **crying** child, the water is **cold**, the sky is **cloudy**
- (ii) **limiting** adjectives—**three** eggs, the **last** chapter, his **second** attempt, **this** book, **those** books, **few** men, **little** hope, **my** hat, **their** car
- (iii) **interrogative** adjectives, used in asking questions—**What** bird is that? **Which** dress will you wear?

B. Common errors in the use of adjectives:

- (i) *The cars travelled very **slow** through the mud.* An adverb, 'slowly', is required instead of the adjective.
- (ii) *John is the **tallest** of the two brothers.* To compare two things, use the comparative degree. *John is the **taller** of the two brothers.*
- (iii) *A tiger is **more fiercer** than a jackal.* 'Fiercer' means more fierce; omit 'more' to avoid a double comparison.
- (iv) *The shark is **more dangerous** than any creature in the sea.* This comparison makes sense if it is changed to 'any **other** creature'; otherwise it really says that sharks are more dangerous than sharks.

11 ADMISSION, ADMITTANCE

(v) *I had a terrific holiday last Easter.* Find a more descriptive adjective to describe the holiday.

(vi) *Put them books on the table.* 'Them' is a pronoun; the adjective 'those' is required here.

(vii) *He gave me the biggest half of the pie.* A pie has two halves of equal size. Say 'the **bigger** portion' (of two), or 'the **biggest** portion' (if there are more than two).

(viii) *He read the three first verses of the poem.* There is only one first verse; say '**first three** verses'.

(ix) *The then Prime Minister promised to reduce taxation.* 'Then' is an adverb; it should not be used as an adjective before a noun. 'The Prime Minister **at that time** . . .', or 'The Prime Minister **of the day** . . .', are acceptable alternatives.

(See also **Adverb and adjective** and **Comparison of adjectives**.)

11 Admission, Admittance

'Admit' has two meanings—'confess' and 'allow to enter'. When 'admit' means 'confess', the corresponding noun is 'admission'.

Example: His admission of guilt did not surprise me.

When 'admit' means 'allow to enter', the corresponding noun is again 'admission' in most cases. However, in a more formal or official context, 'admittance' is often used.

Examples: The admission charge is 50p.

No admittance without a permit.

12 Adverb

A. Adverbs modify or limit the meaning of verbs and other parts of speech. Most adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding '-ly'.

Examples:

Adjectives: *happy, neat, quiet*

Adverbs: *happily, neatly, quietly*

Exceptions are adverbs 'well' and 'fast' corresponding to adjectives 'good' and 'fast'.

When we say that an adverb modifies a verb, what is meant by 'modifying'? This really means 'clarifying'; an adverb clarifies the sense to be attached to the modified word. For example, the sentence, 'The girl danced' brings to the mind a rather vague picture. But when we add the adverb—'The girl danced clumsily' (or 'gracefully'), the picture comes to life because we have clarified the nature of the action.

(i) Adverbs denote time, go *now*; place, come *here*; manner, write *neatly*; degree, *He was almost exhausted*; order, *Firstly I wish to say* . . .

- (ii) Adverbs modify
- (a) verbs: *He worked **carefully**.*
 - (b) adjectives: *That is a **very** difficult problem.*
*My soup is **too** hot.*
 - (c) other adverbs: *He plays **extremely** well.*
*The car was travelling **quite** slowly.*
 - (d) prepositions: *The bus is **almost** at the terminus.*
- (iii) There are also interrogative adverbs, used to ask questions:
- When** did he arrive?*
 - How** did you come?*

(iv) The common words 'yes' and 'no' are adverbs—of affirmation and negation respectively.

B. Common errors in the use of adverbs:

- (i) *We travelled much **more faster** than the other cars.* As 'more faster' is a double comparison, omit 'more'.
- (ii) *The little boy spoke very **polite**.* Adverbs should not be confused with adjectives. An adverb, 'politely', not the adjective 'polite', is required to tell how the boy spoke.
- (iii) *The hunters **never saw no** lions.* There are two errors here. Avoid the double negative 'never...no' which gives an unintended affirmative meaning. Say 'didn't see any' instead of 'never saw no'.
*The hunters **didn't see any** lions.*
- (iv) *I was **that tired I couldn't hardly** keep awake.* Again there are two errors. The word 'that' is an adjective, but here we need an adverb of degree, 'so'. Avoid the double negative 'couldn't hardly'.
*I was **so tired that I could hardly** keep awake.*
- (v) *Mr Brown **only** died last Sunday.* The adverb 'only' must be placed with care. The meaning intended is that Mr Brown died only last Sunday. (See also **Only**.)

13 Adverb and adjective

- (i) Generally, an adjective qualifies a noun, as in *a **neat** writer, a **strong** swimmer, a **graceful** dancer*; and an adverb modifies a verb, as in *writes **neatly**, swims **strongly**, dances **gracefully**.*
- (ii) But sometimes the adjective form is used instead of the adverb. In some sentences, the forms 'new-mown hay' or 'new-laid eggs' have come to be accepted as alternatives to 'newly-mown hay' or 'newly-laid eggs'.

Examples: *I like the smell of **new-mown** hay.*

*I asked for a dozen **new-laid** eggs.*

*He is as innocent as a **new-born** babe.*

*The people are enjoying their **new-won** freedom.*

14 ADVICE, ADVISE

A newly-painted house may be much older than a new painted house.

(iii) The adjective is sometimes used with an adverbial function where formerly the adverb only was considered correct.

Examples: Don't speak so loud.

Still waters run deep.

14 Advice, Advise

Certain words ending in '-ce' and '-se' are the cause of many spelling errors.

The words 'advice', 'practice', and 'licence' are nouns.

Examples: I shall ask my lawyer for advice.

Practice is needed to improve your golf.

My licence is in my wallet.

The corresponding verbs are 'advise', 'practise', and 'license'.

Examples: I advise you to be careful.

You must practise to improve your golf.

The authorities refused to license him to drive a heavy vehicle.

A hint to help you remember: 'Ice' is a noun; the words 'advice', 'practice', and 'licence', ending in 'ce', are also nouns.

15 Affect, Effect

'Affect' is a verb, and 'effect' is the corresponding noun.

Examples: Does this dust affect your eyes?

What effect does this dust have on your eyes?

'Effect' is also used as a verb, meaning 'to bring about'.

Example: The new Principal hopes to effect a number of changes.

16 Aggravate

'Aggravate' means 'make worse'; it does not mean 'annoy'.

Examples: The loss of markets will aggravate our economic problems.

Cosmetics are likely to aggravate a skin complaint.

Nevertheless, 'aggravate' in the sense of 'exasperate' is used in colloquial English, and may become accepted in that sense.

17 Agree

We agree with a person, and to a plan or proposal.

Examples: I agree with you that the culprit should be punished.

I am sorry that I cannot agree to your proposal.

18 Agreement

There are certain rules concerning the agreement of one word with