

# CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE

Frederick T. Wood

Revised by R.H. Flavell and L.M. Flavell



*'BEGGING THE QUESTION'*

PAPERMAC

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# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is a practical one: to provide an easy work of reference for those who wish to write good English. The entries deal with points of grammar, punctuation, style, idiom, spelling and modern usage generally. As the focus of the book is on good written English, pronunciation has not been dealt with.

Given the wide range of the book's subject matter, it is obviously impossible to be comprehensive. Indeed, there is no attempt to be so, for a comprehensive treatment of grammar would turn this handbook into a fully-fledged grammar book, and a comprehensive treatment of vocabulary would turn it into a dictionary. The entries have been selected in the light of the difficulty they offer to the learner. The selection has been made on the basis of the author's and revisers' considerable teaching experience in England and overseas, on the basis of reference to many other authorities' publications on usage, and on the basis of the mistakes actually made in a wide variety of written sources. We are also very grateful to the friends who have passed on to us common confusions of their pupils or who have commented on parts of the manuscript. The entries, then, come from a wide range of sources, but they can never hope to be complete. Further suggestions will always be welcomed.

It is worth pointing out that a work of this nature is necessarily prescriptive. The aim is to give guidance as to what is accepted as good written English by educated users of the language. Our task was not that of the linguist – simply to record what people do – but rather to give a faithful account of what people consider standard written English to be. The question of standard is important since the labels 'correct' and 'incorrect' only make sense in relation to a norm. What is Standard English? To find out, you might look up the entry **Standard English** where we have narrowly defined it as prose (not verse); it is neutral in style (not very formal or informal); it is non-specialist in subject matter (to avoid the technical vocabularies of law, engineering, etc); it is contemporary (not the standards of earlier

## Introduction

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years); it is educated usage (the work of careful writers, thoughtful about the language they use).

Having said that, we must admit there must still remain a grey area as to what constitutes Standard English. Language, in all its aspects, is permanently changing and it always has done so. A usage which is informal to one generation, to be used primarily in speech with one's friends, may well become accepted Standard English to the next, to be used in all written contexts. Furthermore, it is amazing how the experts themselves differ in their opinion as to what is good English and what is not. In England there is no body which conveniently decides on the acceptability of a word, as does the Academie Française in France, so it has been left to the judgement of the revisers to provide answers in these difficult areas of changing usage and divided opinions. Fortunately, only a relatively small number of entries are in this class!

On the trials of a reviser, we can do no better than quote Sir Bruce Fraser who was responsible for the revision of the classic *Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers:

This tempts me into moralising about the duty of anyone who writes about the use of English for the general practitioner. He must, as I see it, have the courage of his convictions, but must not express them too dogmatically on points which fairly admit of a different opinion. He must avoid pedantry, and must also recognise that what seems obviously right to one man seems pedantic to another. He must offer resistance to undesirable innovations, but must not assume that every innovation is sure to be undesirable. He must respect the genius of the language, which includes a wonderful capacity for change. All this requires personal judgment, and every man's judgment is fallible.

As one small illustration of the difficulties, we use *judgement*, yet Fraser prefers *judgment*!

In another respect we share Fraser's problems as a reviser. Dr Wood had strong views on English usage and did not hesitate to make them plain by using labels such as 'vulgarism' and 'uneducated usage'. We are aware of the different value accorded to varieties of English today, yet felt we wanted to retain something of the forthright nature of Dr Wood's views. Consequently we have at times left in some of his strongly-worded opinions where they warn the reader that people might frown upon such a usage in writing.

An effort has been made to keep the explanations and comments as

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simple as possible, without the obscure technical vocabulary of grammarians. Whether the learner speaks English as his mother-tongue, as a second language or as a foreign language, it seems reasonable to assume a knowledge of basic grammatical terminology (traditional terms, rather than modern linguistic terms, have been retained as they are widely known and used throughout the world). Less known items receive their own explanation, listed alphabetically in the body of the work (eg *euphony*, *tautology*).

In general, the entries of the first edition have been simplified and often abbreviated. Other changes have also been made. Much older material has been removed and a large number of new entries have been inserted. Some deal with points of grammar; most deal with problems of vocabulary, punctuation and style. The format is clearer, and cross-references are much more extensive. Many are for quick reference (Is it *focused* or *focussed*?), with a cross reference to the general principle involved. These innovations make the book easier to refer to. There are also a lot of illustrative quotations from newspapers, etc. Some of these come from the *This English* column of the *New Statesman*, who have kindly allowed them to be used here. American usage has also received comment wherever it seemed appropriate, although the emphasis is on British English.

In short, our aim has been to provide a source of interest and even amusement for the browser, a practical tool for the learner to help him with his studies and a handy source of reference for anyone in need.

We hope this book will serve you well.

Roger and Linda Flavell

### Abbreviations used

COD	The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English
DNB	The Dictionary of National Biography
LDOCE	The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
OALDCE	The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English
OED	The Oxford English Dictionary
TLS	The Times Literary Supplement

# a

## AD

See dates 5.

## a-an

(indefinite article)

**1 General rule** Use *a* before consonants: *a tree, a flower, a hotel*, etc. Use *an* before vowels: *an article, an ear, an iron*, and unsounded *h*: *an hour, an heir*. The only members of this last class are, in fact, *heir, honest, honorary, honorarium, honour, hour* and their derivatives.

**2** The terms 'vowel' and 'consonant' are phonetic: they refer to sounds, not letters (see **vowel**). Words which have the initial letters *u* or *eu* pronounced like an initial *y* do not begin with a vowel sound and take *a*: *a university, a unit, a European*. The same principle applies to *a one-man business*, where the initial sound is *w*.

**3** An initial *h* is silent when it is followed by an unstressed syllable. Compare *a heretic, an heretical opinion*.

**4** Whether *a* or *an* is used before initials depends on how the initial is pronounced. *A, E, F, H, I, L, M, N, O, R, S* and *X* all begin with a vowel sound: hence *an LEA school, an MA, an MP* but *a BBC production, a BA, a PhD*, etc.

## abbreviations

**1 Punctuation** English is in a state of change with respect to punctuation. The new style is simpler and more informal. The general trend is to reduce as much as possible the use of punctuation marks with abbreviations. Some people, however, like to retain a more formal style. It is a matter of taste and the choice is yours, but once you have adopted a particular style, you must be consistent. In the following notes, it is made clear where punctuation marks *must* be used by all writers, whatever their style. Similarly, it is indicated where some writers may still prefer to use them, though others may not.

### 2 Full stop

**a** When the abbreviation consists of capitals, the full stop *may* be omitted: *MP, TV, BA, PTO*. If a stop is used, it is placed after a letter that stands for a complete word, hence *M.P., B.A., P.T.O.* but *TV*.

In the same way, stops *may* be omitted with points of the compass:

## aborigines

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*NW, SE, E* or *NW, SE., E.* and with London postal districts: *SW10, WC1* or *S.W.10, W.C.1*. Because of the widespread use of postcodes in recent years, it is now usual to omit the full stops: *WC1H 0AL, SW1A 2BN*.

**b** Stops are usually omitted in acronyms: *UNESCO, SALT, OPEC*.

**c** A full stop *may* follow a person's initials: *F T Wood* or *F. T. Wood, Messrs T J Jones & Co* or *Messrs T. J. Jones & Co*.

**d** **Omission of stops** If the abbreviation ends with the last letter of the word, it is now common practice to omit the stop: *Mr, Mrs, Dr, Maths*. Some publishing houses omit all full stops when punctuating abbreviations. The *OALDCE* follows this policy. However, Simeon Potter in his book *Changing English* still includes the stop if the last letter of the abbreviation is not the last letter of the word. The student must decide for himself whether to write *eg, Prof, ref, Jan* or *e.g., Prof., ref., Jan*.

**e** The abbreviations *1st, 2nd, 3rd*, etc should never be followed by a full stop.

**3 Apostrophe** It *must* be used to indicate the omission of letters from a word: *o'clock, can't, isn't*. Care should be taken to place the apostrophe correctly in contracted forms. In *could not*, the *o* is omitted and replaced by an apostrophe, and the contracted form is therefore *couldn't*. If there are two omissions in a word, only the second is normally indicated: *shall not = shan't*.

**4 Plurals** Some single-letter abbreviations double the letter in the plural: *pp.* or *pp* (pages), *vv.* or *vv* (verses), *ll.* or *ll* (lines).

Usually, however, the plural is formed by simply adding an *s*: *M.P.s* or *MPs, TV.s* or *TVs*. The second form is to be preferred. It is wrong to form the plural by adding *'s* to abbreviations: *MP's, TV's*. This may lead to confusion with the possessive.

**5 Possessive** The possessive of abbreviations is formed by adding *'s* or *s'*: *an MP's speech, both JPs' qualifications*.

## aborigines

The singular is *aboriginal* not *aborigine* or (worse still) *aboriginee*.

## about/on

These prepositions are used after a wide range of verbs and adjectives with the meaning of 'concerning, on the subject of'. *On* is more formal and refers usually to a thoughtful expression of views:

- He talked *about* his new lawnmower when he came to see us
- He talked *on* Evolution versus Creation to the invited guests.



It is not, therefore, appropriate to use *on* with colloquial verbs dealing with inconsequential daily events (*bicker, natter, moan*, etc).

The same difference is also found after nouns: *a tale about a frog and a donkey, a report on colonialism in Africa*.

Other less common formal alternatives for *about* and *on* are *of* and *concerning*. They are somewhat literary or formal:

- He told *of* fear and futility, yet healing and holiness
- There was a lengthy debate *concerning* the financial provisions of the Budget.

**above/over**

Both prepositions are used to express a vertical relationship between one thing and another: *There was a picture above/over the door*.

*Over* may suggest closeness, as in *The dog stood over the pups to protect them*.

*Above* tends to suggest 'on a higher level than': *The headland was above a beautiful sandy beach*.

Note: Similar general remarks apply to *below* and *under*, the converses of *above* and *over*.

It is pedantic to think that *above* should not be used before a noun: see the *above* quotation. It may also equally well be used as an adverb: see the quotation *above*. An alternative to the adjectival use is to write *above-mentioned*: see the *above-mentioned* quotation.

**abscess**

Note the *sc* in the spelling.

**absence**

See *lack/absence*.

**absorb**

This is often used incorrectly, as in.

- His work absorbs him completely. He doesn't notice time pass.

Where *absorb* is used in the sense of 'holding one's attention' it should be in the passive only, followed by the preposition *in*. The correct construction is *He is completely absorbed in his work . . . .*

*Absorbing work* is very interesting work which holds one's attention

*Absorbent* is the adjective from the other meaning of *absorb* (= 'to soak up'). A sponge is *absorbent*; it soaks up water.

**abstract language**

Sometimes objections are raised to the use of abstract terms.

However, if the abstract style is concise and clear, there seems no

objection to it; a change to the concrete may be a change for the worse:

The Chairman expressed his appreciation of the loyalty of the staff and the workpeople

is much to be preferred to:

. . . said he appreciated the way that the staff and the workpeople had been loyal,

and:

There is no denying the seriousness of the situation is no more objectionable than:

There is no denying that the situation is serious.

But of recent years there has grown up, especially in official documents and in journalism, a vague kind of style which uses circumlocutory abstractions which are clumsy in construction and which say rather ineffectively what could have been said much more clearly in far fewer words. This should certainly be avoided by anyone who wishes to write good English. Below are a few examples. A simplified version is given in brackets after each one.

What is the position with regard to the availability of a house? (*Is a house available?*)

There is no likelihood of an early finalisation of the plans. (*It is unlikely that the plans will be put into a final form for some time.*)

The implementation of the scheme would involve the expenditure of a large sum of money. (*It would be very costly to carry out the scheme.*)

The situation with regard to the export of cars has shown a slight improvement. (*Rather more cars have been exported.*)

In the eventuality of this being the case. (*If this is so.*)

In view of the fact that. (*As.*)

If the weather situation permits. (*If the weather permits or weather permitting.*)

(See also -ese.)

#### accentuate

Here are two examples of misuse, both from *The Financial Times*:

The steel shortage has been *accentuated*, and will particularly hit the motor industry

In America cotton, hessian and paper share the important bagging market. With the first two in short supply, the trend towards paper sacks is *accentuated*.

This misuse has become very common in the last few years. *Accentuate* means 'to throw into relief or into prominence': *The microphone accentuates certain defects of intonation.* It does not mean 'to increase, aggravate, make more acute', and the several related meanings which modern usage (or abuse) gives it.

#### accessary/accessory

Note the spelling: double *c* and double *s* in both words.

*Accessary* is a legal word meaning 'a person who helps in something, especially a crime'. One becomes an *accessary* to a crime.

An *accessory* is an extra but not essential part of something:

- 'The bride's going-away outfit was a cream suit with brown accessories (brown hat, gloves and handbag)'
- The more expensive car comes with several accessories (a clock, a cigarette-lighter, a radio, etc).

The American spelling is *accessory* for both meanings.

#### accommodate

Note the spelling, double *c* and double *m*.

#### accord/accordance

Of one's own accord, not on one's own accord: *I did the work of my own accord* (meaning 'without being forced or asked').

When the sense is 'following out' or 'obeying' in accordance with is required:

- In accordance with* your instructions we have suspended work on the heating apparatus.

#### according

Followed by the preposition *to*.

- 1 Meaning 'on the authority of': *According to my newspaper, the Chancellor is going to increase taxes.*
- 2 Meaning 'in proportion to': *He earns between £550 and £620 a month, according to how much overtime he does.*
- 3 *According* cannot be used as an adverb: *We will find out what they need and act accordingly* – not *according*.

#### acknowledge

Note the *c* in the spelling.

#### acoustics

*The acoustics of the hall are not all that could be desired, our Acoustics is an important subject in the training of an architect.* In the first case, *acoustics* means the physical properties of the hall and takes a plural verb; in the second case, it is the study of the

## acquaint

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science which is in question, and the verb is therefore singular. (See also *mathematics* and *politics*.)

### acquaint

1 We acquaint a person *with* (not *of*) a fact. The expression, however, is best avoided, since it is usually no more than a piece of pretentious English for the simpler *inform*, *tell* or *let know*.

2 Note the *c* in the spelling. Similarly *acquaintance*, *acquit*, *acquiesce*, *acquire*.

3 Acquaint/acquit Here the wrong word is used:

They *acquainted* themselves creditably in both tests. (*The Times*)  
There is confusion of *acquaint* and *acquit*; the latter means 'conduct oneself'. Amend to *They acquitted themselves . . .*

### acquaintance/colleague/friend

An *acquaintance* is a person one simply knows; a *friend* is someone with whom one has a deeper relationship; a *colleague* is a person one works with.

See *colleague*.

### acquiesce

*Acquiesce* means 'to accept something without a protest'. Followed by the preposition *in*:

Although he would rather have made alternative arrangements, the Secretary of State *acquiesced in* the plans his host had made for him.

(See also *acquaint* for similar spellings.)

### acquit

See *acquaint* 3.

### acronym

See *abbreviations* 2b.

### act

See *bill/act*.

### add up to

*What it adds up to is . . .* A piece of modern jargon for *amounts to*, *comes to* or sometimes simply *means*. Allowable colloquially, but should not be used in serious writing.

### addicted

The sentence *He is addicted to drink* has perhaps given rise to the unidiomatic use of an infinitive after *addicted*. *To drink* is here not an infinitive, but a noun preceded by a preposition. *Addicted* is always followed by *to* plus a noun or a gerund: *addicted to drugs*,

*addicted to gambling, but not addicted to gamble.*

### adequate

**1 Adequate for** Where *adequate* is used immediately before a noun and means 'sufficient for the purpose', it is followed by *for*, not *to*:

They fortunately had *adequate* money *for* the cost of the journey.

**2 Adequate to** Where *adequate* is used as a complement after a verb and means 'with the necessary qualities', it is followed by *to*, not *for*:

He seems quite *adequate to* the task that faces him.

**3 Other phrases** Since *adequate* means 'just sufficient', *adequate enough* is incorrect, as is *more adequate*. Logically, there is no objection to *more than adequate*:

The time you were allowed for the work should have been *more than adequate*,

but *more than enough* or *more than sufficient* is to be preferred.

### adherence/adhesion

*Adhesion* means 'sticking to' in the literal sense: the *adhesion* of a stamp to an envelope, or of flies to a fly-paper; *adherence* is 'sticking to' in the figurative sense, as *adherence* to a plan, to one's principles, etc.

The verbal counterpart of both is *adhere*: wallpaper *adheres* to the wall, and a person *adheres* to his plans.

*Adherence* gives the adjective *adherent*, and *adhesion* the adjective *adhesive* (as *adhesive tape*, *an adhesive plaster*). Both adjectives may be converted to nouns: *adhesives* (paste, gum, etc), a person's *adherents* (meaning 'supporters').

### adjacent

Note the unpronounced *d* in the spelling. Similarly *adjourn*.

### adjective or adverb?

See *adverb or adjective?*

### adjourn

Note the unpronounced *d* in the spelling. Similarly *adjacent*.

### admission/admittance

When *admit* means 'to confess', the noun is always *admission*: *the admission of one's guilt*; *the admission that one was to blame*. When it means 'to allow in' *admission* is also the more usual word:

*Admission one pound, Admission by ticket only. Admittance is more formal or official, and means 'right to enter': No admittance except on business.*

## admit

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### admit

**1 Admit/admit of** *Admit* may take a personal subject, and indeed usually does, but *admit of* (meaning 'to allow of, leave room for') cannot:

- I *admit* breaking the window.
  - She *admitted* having read the letter,
- but:

- The position *admits of* no delay.
- The regulations *admit of* no variation.

Wrong use: *I cannot admit of your doing that*; amend to *I cannot allow you to do that*. But *The regulations do not admit of your doing that* is perfectly good English.

### 2 Admit to

- In spite of all the evidence against him, he refused to *admit to* the allegation.

*Admit to* something that is charged against one (perhaps on the analogy of *confess to a crime*) is occasionally to be found in modern writing, but it is not yet fully established as idiomatic. The simple form *admit* is preferable. (See also *allow/allow of*.)

### admittance

See *admission/admittance*.

### adopted parents (father, mother)

Strictly speaking, the following is incorrect, though it is sometimes heard in speech, and occasionally seen in print: *The Reverend Joseph Evans, the adopted father of Peter Evans*. It is the child who is adopted by the parents, not vice versa. Substitute *adoptive parents (father, mother)*. *Adopted child, son, daughter* is, of course, correct.

### advance (noun)/advancement

*Advance* means 'progress' or 'going forward' (or sometimes coming on'): *the advance of an army, the advance of science, the advance of medical knowledge, the advance of old age*.

*Advancement* means 'promotion' or 'helping forward': *to seek advancement, to work for the advancement of a cause, the Royal Society for the Advancement of Science*. We say that with the *advance* (not the *advancement*) of winter the days grow shorter.

### adventitious/adventurous

*Adventitious* means 'coming by accident or by chance'. *Adventurous* means 'ready for adventure':

- The *adventurous* boy would have drowned but for the *adventitious* arrival of the life-boat.

**adverb or adjective?**

1 There are a number of adjectives which can have an adverbial function. Consider the following:

- Don't speak so *loud*  
 Speak a little *slower*  
 The bus will get you there as *quick* as the train  
 She sells her goods *cheap*  
 We got back *late/early/fast* yesterday.

These uses are quite idiomatic. In all cases except the last (where no corresponding adverb exists), however, it is permissible to use an adverb: *Don't speak so loudly*, etc.

2 Some verbs connected with the body's senses are commonly followed by an adjective rather than an adverb.

- That pie tastes *marvellous*  
 The rose smells *superb*  
 She looked *very pretty* on her wedding day.

3 Combinations such as *new-laid eggs*, *new-won freedom*, *a new-born baby* and *new-mown hay* are correctly adjective plus participle. Do not write *newly-laid eggs*, etc. (See also *quicker*, *hardly*, *high/highly*, *tight/tightly* and *different(ly)*.)

**adverse/averse**

*Adverse* means 'unfavourable, hostile': *adverse criticism*, *adverse weather conditions*, etc.

*Averse* means 'unwilling, opposed'. Followed by *to*: *The Government is not averse to raising the tax*.

**advice/advise**

*Advice* is the noun; *advise* the verb. For the general rule, see *practice/practise*.

**affect/effect**

The verb corresponding to the noun *effect* is *affect* ('to produce an effect upon'):

- The climate *affected* his health  
 The increased tariffs recently announced by the Australian government are bound to *affect* our exports to that country.

*Affect* also means 'to pretend to have or feel':

- She *affected* surprise  
 He *affected* a superior air.

## affinity

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*Effect*, when used as a verb, means 'to bring about', or 'to achieve': *to effect an escape, to effect a change*. The plural noun *effects* may mean 'results': The full *effects* of the measures have yet to be felt, or it may mean 'personal property or belongings', as in the expressions *one's household effects, one's personal effects*.

### affinity

There is an affinity *between* two things, or one has an affinity *with* (not *to*) the other. *Affinity for* is recognised in scientific language. One substance is said to have an affinity *for* another when it has a tendency to unite with it. Outside this rather specialised use, *an affinity for* is considered incorrect by some writers, but it is becoming progressively more common in modern English.

### afflict/inflict

*Afflict* is regularly found in the form *afflicted*, as the adjective or past participle. It is followed by the prepositions *with* or *by*, and it suggests a passive suffering from something:

- Mr Simmonds is *afflicted with* arthritis
- Her mother was sadly *afflicted by* the news of her ill health.

*Inflict* means 'to cause bodily or mental suffering, usually deliberately': *His attacker inflicted severe wounds on him*. The preposition is *on*.

### aforsaid

Except in the language of legal documents, an archaic word, which has a slightly absurd or humorous effect: *the aforsaid Mr Smith*. Do not use it in ordinary English. (Compare *said* and *above/over*.)

### after

On *after the manner or style of* and *named after*, see **named 2**.

### age

(verb) There is an increasing tendency to write *aging* rather than *ageing* as the present participle. See **spelling 4**.

### agenda

Through strictly a Latin plural (meaning 'things to be done'), in English this word is treated as a singular. Say *The agenda has not yet been drawn up*. Plural: *agendas*. (Compare **data**.)

### aggravate

Commonly misused in the sense of 'to annoy or irritate'

- Don't *aggravate* your aunt in that way
- It is very *aggravating* to be constantly interrupted when you are engaged on an important piece of work.



The mistake is a very old one. Jerry Cruncher, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it may be recalled, referred to his wife as 'an aggrawater'.

The only legitimate meaning is 'to make worse something that is already bad':

The measures designed to remedy the situation only *aggravated* it.

### aghast

Note the unpronounced *h* in the spelling.

### ago

*It is ten years ago since his father died.* This sentence illustrates a very common mistake. *Ago* normally takes the past tense; it refers to a point of time in the past, and reckons backwards from the present. It cannot, therefore, be combined with *since*, which reckons from a point of time in the past up to the present: *I have not seen him since last Christmas.* The alternative constructions are:

It was ten years ago that his father died

It is ten years since his father died

His father died ten years ago.

(See also *since*.)

### agree

**1 Agree with/agree to** To *agree with* a suggestion or a course of action is to regard it with approval; to *agree to* it is to give consent to it. Thus we may *agree to* something without *agreeing with* it:

He was forced to *agree to* the proposals, though he did not like them.

**2 Transitive use of agree** *The Inspector of Taxes has now agreed your claim for expenses.* This transitive use of *agree* has now become firmly established in accountancy, and it should not be criticised there. The accountants are entitled to use the idiom of their profession.

It is now also beginning to creep into the newspapers and into official announcements, where it is not recognised:

The committee have *agreed* wage increases for nurses and hospital staffs.

If they have accepted increases that were already proposed, then they have *agreed to* them; if they have discussed them with representatives of the nurses and the hospital staffs, and have