

**THE
OXFORD MINIGUIDE
TO
ENGLISH USAGE**

**Compiled by
E. S. C. WEINER**



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PREFACE

THE *Oxford Miniguide to English Usage* is a completely new work of reference. It is intended for anyone who needs simple and direct guidance about the formation and use of English words—about spelling, pronunciation, meanings, and grammar—and who cannot claim any specialist training in these subjects.

This book is designed to answer the questions about English usage that ordinary people are constantly asking; it covers the known areas of difficulty and controversy, leaving aside the parts of the English language that cause most native speakers no trouble. Typical examples of the subjects covered are: whether to write *forego* or *forgo*, *Jones'* or *Joneses'*, *enrolment* or *enrollment*; where to place the stress in words like *contribute*, *controversy*, *nomenclature*, *subsidence*; the correct use of *data*, *media*, and *strata*; the difference between *deprecate* and *depreciate*, *imply* and *infer*, *militate* and *mitigate*; whether to say *different from* or *different than*; and when *shall* should be used rather than *will*. Clear and simple recommendations are given, highlighting correct and acceptable standard British English. Only the minimum knowledge of grammatical terminology is assumed (a glossary of all the terms employed is included), and technical symbols are entirely dispensed with.

This book differs from all other small usage

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guides in using a large number of examples drawn from the works of well-known twentieth-century writers to illustrate good usage. There are three appendices, dealing with punctuation, the perils of modish vocabulary, and some overseas varieties of English. Distinctive features of American English are pointed out wherever possible in the main body of the book. There are two indexes, one covering all the subjects discussed, and the other giving the location of each of the 4,400 words and phrases mentioned in the book.

This work is based largely on the archives, experience, and resources of the Oxford English Dictionary Department of the Oxford University Press, and has the authority of the Oxford family of dictionaries behind its recommendations. I should like to record my gratitude to my colleagues in the Dictionary Department for their help and support. I am grateful in particular to the Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries, Dr Robert Burchfield, CBE, Miss J. M. Hawkins, and Dr R. E. Allen for their guidance, criticisms, and suggestions; Mr A. J. Augarde, Miss E. M. Knowles, and Mr J. A. Simpson for their numerous contributions; and Mrs P. Lawton and Miss K. C. E. Vines for typing and re-typing sections of the text. Outside the Department I am grateful to Mrs M. Y. Offord for her contributions, to Mrs A. Whear for compiling the Word Index, and to Mr H. E. Boyce for his assistance with proof-reading.

E. S. C. W.

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INTRODUCTION

It is one thing to use language; it is quite another to understand how it works.

(Anthony Burgess, *Joysprick*)

ENGLISH usage is a subject as wide as the English language itself. By far the greater part of usage, however, raises no controversies and poses no problems for native speakers of English, just because it *is* their natural idiom. But there are certain limited areas—particular sounds, spellings, words, and constructions—about which there arises uncertainty, difficulty, or disagreement. The proper aim of a usage guide is to resolve these problems, rather than describe the whole of current usage.

The *Oxford Miniguide to English Usage* has this aim. Within the limits just indicated, it offers guidance in as clear, concise, and systematic a manner as possible. In effecting its aims it makes use of five special features, explained below.

1. *Layout*. In the *Miniguide* the subject of usage is divided into four fields: *word formation*, *pronunciation*, *vocabulary*, and *grammar*. Each field is covered by a separate section of the book, and each of the four sections has its own alphabetical arrangement of entries. Each entry is headed by its title in **bold type**. All the words that share a particular kind of spelling, sound, or construction

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can therefore be treated together. This makes for both economy and comprehensiveness of treatment. Note that Section II is in two parts: A deals with the pronunciation of particular letters, or groups of letters, while B is an alphabetical list of words whose pronunciation gives trouble.

2. *Explanation.* The explanations given in each entry are intended to be simple and straightforward. Where the subject is inevitably slightly complicated, they begin by setting out familiar facts as a basis from which to untangle the complexities. The explanations take into account the approaches developed by modern linguistic analysis, but employ the traditional terms of grammar as much as possible. (A glossary of all grammatical terms used will be found on pp. xiii ff.) Technical symbols and abbreviations, and the phonetic alphabet, are not used at all.

3. *Exemplification.* Throughout Sections III and IV, and where appropriate elsewhere, example sentences are given to illustrate the point being discussed. The majority of these are real, rather than invented, examples. Many of them have been drawn from the works of some of the best twentieth-century writers (many equally good writers happen not to have been quoted). Even informal or sub-standard usage has been illustrated in this way; such examples frequently come from speeches put into the mouths of characters in novels, and hence no censure of the style of the

author is implied. The aim is to illustrate the varieties of usage and to display the best, thereby making it more memorable than a mere collection of lapses and solecisms would be able to do.

4. *Recommendation*. Recommendations are clearly set out. The blob ● is used in the most clear-cut cases where a warning, restriction, or prohibition is stated. The square □ is occasionally employed where no restriction needs to be enforced. The emphasis of the recommendations is on the degree of acceptability in standard English of a particular use, rather than on a dogmatic distinction of right and wrong. Much that is sometimes condemned as 'bad English' is better regarded as appropriate in informal contexts but inappropriate in formal ones. The appropriateness of usage to context is indicated by the fairly rough categories 'formal' and 'informal', 'standard', 'regional', and 'non-standard', 'jocular', and so on. Some of the ways in which American usage differs from British are pointed out.

5. *Reference*. Ease of access to the entry sought by the user is a priority of the *Miniguide*. The division into four sections, explained above, means that (roughly speaking) only a quarter of the total range of pages need be looked through in order to find a particular entry. But this should rarely be necessary, since there are two indexes: a *subject index* in which every subject covered by the *Miniguide* can be found (and this includes all

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endings, prefixes, and spellings), and a *word index* in which every word cited can be found. Within each section there are many cross-references to other entries; these are indicated by **bold type** and followed by the page number if necessary.

In addition to the four main sections described at 1 above, the *Miniguide* has three *appendices*: I is an outline of the principles of punctuation; II lists some of the clichés and overworked diction most widely disliked at present; and III gives a brief description of the characteristics of the five major overseas varieties of English.

Concise as it is, the *Miniguide* may be found by individual users to cover some ground that is already familiar and some that they consider it unnecessary to know about. It is impossible for an entry (especially in the field of grammar) not to include more facts than are strictly part of the question which the entry is designed to answer. Language is a closely woven, seamless fabric, not a set of building blocks or pigeon-holes, capable of independent treatment; hence there are bound to be some redundancies and some overlap between different entries. Moreover, every user has a different degree of knowledge and interest. It is the compiler's hope, however, that all will be instructed and enriched by any incidental gains in understanding of the language that the use of this *Miniguide* may afford.

GRAMMATICAL TERMS USED IN THIS BOOK

WHERE an example is partly in italics and partly in roman type, it is the words in roman that exemplify the term being defined.

absolute used independently of its customary grammatical relationship or construction, e.g. Weather permitting, *I will come*.

acronym a word formed from the initial letters of other words, e.g. *NATO*.

active applied to a verb whose subject is also the source of the action of the verb, e.g. *We saw him*; opposite of **passive**.

adjective a word that names an attribute, used to describe a noun or pronoun, e.g. small *child*, *it is small*.

adverb a word that modifies an adjective, verb, or another adverb, expressing a relation of place, time, circumstance, manner, cause, degree, etc., e.g. *gently, accordingly, now, here, why*.

agent noun a noun denoting the doer of an action, e.g. *builder*.

agent suffix a suffix added to a verb to form an agent noun, e.g. *-er*.

agree to have the same grammatical number, gender, case, or person as another word.

analogy the formation of a word, derivative, or construction in imitation of an existing word or pattern.

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animate denoting a living being.

antecedent a noun or phrase to which a relative pronoun refers back.

antepenultimate last but two.

antonym a word of contrary meaning to another.

apposition the placing of a word, especially a noun, syntactically parallel to another, e.g. *William the Conqueror*.

article *a/an* (indefinite article) or *the* (definite article).

attributive designating a noun, adjective, or phrase expressing an attribute, characteristically preceding the word it qualifies, e.g. *old* in *the old dog*; opposite of **predicative**.

auxiliary verb a verb used in forming tenses, moods, and voices of other verbs.

case the form (**subjective**, **objective**, or **possessive**) of a noun or pronoun, expressing relation to some other word.

clause a distinct part of a sentence including a **subject** (sometimes by implication) and **predicate**.

collective noun a singular noun denoting many individuals; see p. 237.

collocation an expression consisting of two (or more) words frequently juxtaposed, especially adjective + noun.

comparative the form of an adjective or adverb expressing a higher degree of a quality, e.g. *braver*, *worse*.

comparison the differentiation of the **comparative**

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and **superlative** degrees from the positive (basic) form of an adjective or adverb.

complement a word or words necessary to complete a grammatical construction: the complement of a clause, e.g. *John is* (a) thoughtful (man), *Solitude makes John* thoughtful; of an adjective, e.g. *John is glad* of your help; of a preposition, e.g. *I thought of John*.

compound preposition a preposition made up of more than one word, e.g. *with regard to*.

concord agreement between words in gender, number, or person, e.g. *the girl who is here, you who are alive, Those men work*.

conditional designating (1) a clause which expresses a condition, or (2) a mood of the verb used in the consequential clause of a conditional sentence, e.g. (1) *If he had come*, (2) *I should have seen him*.

consonant (1) a speech sound in which breath is at least partly obstructed, combining with a **vowel** to form a syllable; (2) a letter usually used to represent (1); e.g. *ewe* is written with vowel + consonant + vowel, but is pronounced as consonant (y) + vowel (oo).

co-ordination the linking of two or more parts of a compound sentence that are equal in importance, e.g. *Adam delved and Eve span*.

correlative co-ordination co-ordination by means of pairs of corresponding words regularly used together, e.g. *either . . . or*.

countable designating a noun that refers in

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the singular to one and in the plural to more than one, and can be qualified by *a, one, every*, etc. and *many, two, three*, etc.; opposite of **mass (noun)**.

diminutive denoting a word describing a small, liked, or despised specimen of the thing denoted by the corresponding root word, e.g. *ringlet, Johnny, princeling*.

diphthong: see **digraph**, p. 168.

direct object the **object** that expresses the primary object of the action of the verb, e.g. *He sent a present to his son*.

disyllabic having two syllables.

double passive: see p. 246.

elide to omit by **elision**.

elision the omission of a vowel or syllable in pronouncing, e.g. *let's*.

ellipsis the omission from a sentence of words needed to complete a construction or sense.

elliptical involving **ellipsis**.

feminine the gender proper to female beings.

finite designating (part of) a verb limited by person and number, e.g. *I am, He comes*.

formal designating the type of English used publicly for some serious purpose, either in writing or in public speeches.

future the tense of a verb referring to an event yet to happen: **simple future**, e.g. *I shall go*; **future in the past**, referring to an event that was yet to happen at a time prior to the time of speaking, e.g. *He said he would go*.

gerund the part of the verb which can be used like a noun, ending in *-ing*, e.g. *What is the use of my scolding him?*

govern (said of a verb or preposition) to have (a noun or pronoun, or a case) dependent on it.

group possessive: see p. 251.

hard designating a letter, chiefly *c* or *g*, that indicates a guttural sound, as in *cot* or *got*.

if-clause a clause introduced by *if*.

imperative the mood of a verb expressing command, e.g. *Come here!*

inanimate opposite of **animate**.

indirect object the person or thing affected by the action of the verb but not primarily acted upon, e.g. *I gave him the book*.

infinitive the basic form of a verb that does not indicate a particular tense or number or person; the **to-infinitive**, used with preceding *to*, e.g. *I want to know*; the **bare infinitive**, without preceding *to*, e.g. *Help me pack*.

inflexion a part of a word, usually a suffix, that expresses grammatical relationship, such as number, person, tense, etc.

informal designating the type of English used in private conversation, personal letters, and popular public communication.

intransitive designating a verb that does not take a direct object, e.g. *I must think*.

intrusive r: see p. 96.

linking r: see p. 96.

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loan-word a word adopted by one language from another.

main clause the principal clause of a sentence.

masculine the gender proper to male beings.

mass noun a noun that refers to something regarded as grammatically indivisible, treated only as singular, and never qualified by *those*, *many*, *two*, *three*, etc.; opposite of **countable noun**.

modal relating to the **mood** of a verb; used to express mood.

mood form of a verb serving to indicate whether it is to express fact, command, permission, wish, etc.

monosyllabic having one syllable.

nominal designating a phrase or clause that is used like a noun, e.g. *What you need is a drink*.

nonce-word a word coined for one occasion.

non-finite designating (a part of) a verb not limited by person and number, e.g. the infinitive, gerund, or participle.

non-restrictive: see p. 281.

noun a word used to denote a person, place, or thing.

noun phrase a phrase functioning within the sentence as a noun, e.g. *The one over there is mine*.

object a noun or its equivalent governed by an active transitive verb, e.g. *I will take that one*.

objective the case of a pronoun typically used when the pronoun is the object of a verb or governed by a preposition, e.g. *me*, *him*.

paradigm the complete pattern of inflexion of a noun, verb, etc.

participle the part of a verb used like an adjective but retaining some verbal qualities (tense and government of an object) and also used to form compound verb forms: the **present participle** ends in *-ing*, the **past participle** of regular verbs in *-ed*, e.g. *While doing her work she had kept the baby amused.*

passive designating a form of the verb by which the verbal action is attributed to the person or thing to whom it is actually directed (i.e. the logical object is the grammatical subject), e.g. *He was seen by us*; opposite of **active**.

past a tense expressing past action or state, e.g. *I arrived yesterday.*

past perfect a tense expressing action already completed prior to the time of speaking, e.g. *I had arrived by then.*

pejorative disparaging, depreciatory.

penultimate last but one.

perfect a tense denoting completed action or action viewed in relation to the present; e.g. *I have finished now*; **perfect infinitive**, e.g. *He seems to have finished now.*

periphrasis a roundabout way of expressing something.

person one of the three classes of personal pronouns or verb-forms, denoting the person speaking (**first person**), the person spoken to (**second person**), and the person or thing spoken about (**third person**).

phrasal verb an expression consisting of a verb and

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an adverb (and preposition), e.g. *break down*, *look forward to*.

phrase a group of words without a predicate, functioning like an adjective, adverb, or noun.

plural denoting more than one.

polysyllabic having more than one syllable.

possessive the case of a noun or a pronoun indicating possession, e.g. *John's*; **possessive pronoun**, e.g. *my*, *his*.

predicate the part of a clause consisting of what is said of the subject, including verb + complement or object.

predicative designating (especially) an adjective that forms part or the whole of the predicate, e.g. *The dog is old*.

prefix a verbal element placed at the beginning of a word to qualify its meaning, e.g. *ex-*, *non-*.

preposition a word governing a noun or pronoun, expressing the relation of the latter to other words, e.g. *seated at the table*.

prepositional phrase a phrase consisting of a preposition and its complement, e.g. *I am surprised at your reaction*.

present a tense expressing action now going on or habitually performed in past and future, e.g. *He commutes daily*.

pronoun a word used instead of a noun to designate (without naming) a person or thing already known or indefinite, e.g. *I*, *you*, *he*, etc., *anyone*, *something*, etc.

proper name a name used to designate an individual person, animal, town, ship, etc.