

**Dictionary of  
Problem Words  
and Expressions**

**Harry Shaw**

# **Dictionary of Problem Words and Expressions**

**Harry Shaw**

**McGraw-Hill Book Company**

New York	St. Louis	San Francisco
Auckland	Mexico	São Paulo
Düsseldorf	Montreal	Singapore
Johannesburg	New Delhi	Sydney
Kuala Lumpur	Panama	Tokyo
London	Paris	Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shaw, Harry, date

Dictionary of problem words and expressions.

**SUMMARY:** A brief guide to more effective writing and speaking accompanies an alphabetical arrangement of problem words and expressions which are described, discussed, and illustrated with examples of actual usage.

1. English language—Usage. 2. English language—Idioms, corrections, errors. [1. English language—Usage. 2. English language—Idioms, corrections, errors] I. Title.

PE1460.S5158 428'.3 74-13722

ISBN 0-07-056489-2

Copyright © 1975 by McGraw-Hill, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

234567890

MUBP

784321098765

## To the Reader

This book is designed to alert you to faulty speech and writing habits you may have acquired and to confirm and strengthen you in good ones. To these ends, *Dictionary of Problem Words and Expressions* singles out, defines, explains, and illustrates some 1,500 of the most common mistakes in word use made by speakers and writers of our language. Also, it suggests that every speaker and writer can use his language with increasing ease, flexibility, assurance, and accuracy if he will rid himself of outmoded notions about "grammar" and "correctness."

The author of a book with these aims owes some explanation of the convictions that led to its writing.

First, I believe with Thomas Mann that "Speech is civilization itself." Many changes are going on in American society that tend to make the life of each of us more and more impersonal. Computers and other machines now perform work that once was done by people. From birth to death, we are assigned numbers that try to transform us into cogs in a machine. Throughout the country, television and radio use the same programs and commercial messages. People tend to dress alike, eat alike, often even think alike. But in one activity, at least, people differ: they rarely *speakee* alike.

Millions of other people may share our ideas, but the words we use and the way we say them differ in many ways. The speech and writing habits of everyone have been formed by individual influences: family, locale, friends, acquaintances, schooling, travel, housing, and occupation. Each of us has his own dialect: the choice, use, and pronunciation of words called an *idiolect*. Individuality has been preserved in speech more than in any other activity of our lives solely because speech is a more integral and more individual aspect of our outward personalities than any other.

Many scholars have argued that speech is the characteristic of man that most clearly and powerfully distinguishes him from other animals. Other scholars feel that not speech alone but language in general (which includes writing) should bear this distinction. Still others have insisted that the ability to communicate, rather than solely language or speech, is man's most distinguishing characteristic.

A good case can be made for speech, however, as man's clearest distinction among hominids and all mammals. Actually, both people and

animals can and do communicate in nonverbal ways. Apparently, animals issue and receive messages: bees send instructions for locating nectar; dogs bark differently at friends and strangers; birds emit warnings when a cat or other marauder appears. With people, gestures and facial expressions communicate ideas and states of mind even when no words are spoken. Music can also communicate feelings and emotions without words. Even smoke signals convey thoughts.

Almost everyone would agree, however, that nonverbal methods of communication are inadequate makeshifts in comparison with language itself.

*Second*, I believe that the way you talk tells more about you than any other activity of your life. What you say and how you say it are more revealing of your intelligence, personality, and character than the ways you dress, eat, walk, read, or make your living. Knowing how to read and write is a significant accomplishment for everyone, but neither reading nor writing is an *essential* part of anyone's actual existence. Communicating with others through some sort of speech signals *is* essential.

Everyone perusing this book obviously can read and certainly can communicate with others. Most people spend many school years learning to read, but few of us have ever paid real attention to learning how to speak and write. In infancy we learned to speak, have talked ever since, and now assume that talking is as simple and as natural as breathing. It isn't.

More time, opportunities, money, and friendships are lost through careless, slovenly, inaccurate speech (and writing) than through any other activity of people's lives. Because no one can speak perfectly (any more than he can read perfectly), this condition will persist. And yet everyone can learn to speak and write with greater confidence, fewer errors, and more genuine communication if he will only study his habits and give the problem of communication with others the attention it fully deserves.

*Third*, in every speaking situation, one's aim should be to use only words and phrases that are appropriate, fit, suitable, and proper. The appropriateness of language is determined by the subject being discussed, the place where talk is taking place, and the identity and relationship of speaker and listener. Each of us employs a different level of usage depending upon whether we are speaking or writing, upon our audience or readers, and upon the kind of occasion involved.

The words we use in talking with the person working at the desk next to us may not be appropriate when we are conversing with a member of our family, with a company official, or with a minister, rabbi, or priest. A word or phrase in correct or suitable usage a decade ago may now be outmoded. An expression appropriate in one section of the country may be unclear and therefore ineffective in another locality. Technical expressions used before a specialized group of listeners may be inappropriate in general conversation.

The best course to follow is to try to choose and use words and expressions that are normally employed by reputable speakers in all

sections of the country at the present time. That is, diction is effective and appropriate when it is in *national*, *present*, and *reputable* use. Any word or expression is correct if it meets these three standards; it may also be effective (appropriate although not "correct") if it does not meet these standards but is used for a particular purpose in a particular situation.

Among cultural levels of speech may be included illiteracies, narrowly local dialects, ungrammatical speech, slovenly vocabulary and construction, and an excessive resort to slang, shoptalk, and even profanity and obscenity. On a higher level is the language spoken by cultured people over wide areas; such speech is clear, relatively concise, and grammatically correct. In general, these two levels may be referred to as *substandard* and *standard*, with the latter category divided into *informal standard* and *formal standard*.

*Functional* varieties of speech may loosely be grouped in two classes, *familiar* and *formal*. Included in functional varieties of speech independent of cultural levels are colloquialisms. Such expressions exist in varying degrees of formality: familiar conversation, private correspondence, formal conversation, public worship, platform speech, and so forth.

For every occasion when one needs to speak formally, a hundred or a thousand situations involve informal talk. Here the aim should be to speak naturally and easily, with as much interest and animation as one can summon up. No matter how important what one has to say is, and no matter how interested one is in saying that something, he should try to choose words to fit the occasion. In doing so, he should strive to avoid such roadblocks to effective communication as illiteracies, improprieties, grammatical errors, excessive slang, unidiomatic expressions, wordiness, and triteness.

*Fourth*, the belief that "anything goes" in the use of language can be embarrassing and costly. Speech and writing that communicate are one thing; speech and writing that do so clearly, interestingly, and effectively are something else. Literacy and competency are different matters. Naturalness and ease in speaking and writing are worthwhile goals, but casualness, ignorance, and lack of concern are destructive attitudes in reaching for them. Certain language standards are important. The credo of the author is that expressed by Theodore M. Bernstein of *The New York Times* in *Watch Your Language*:

To be sure, the English language is a changing and growing thing. All its users have, of course, a perceptible effect upon it. But in changing and growing it needs no contrived help from chitchat columnists or advertising writers or comic-strip artists or television speakers. It will evolve nicely by itself. If anything, it requires protection from influences that try to push it too fast. There is need, not for those who would halt its progress altogether, but for those who can keep a gentle foot on the brake and a guiding hand on the steering wheel. . . .

During the long years of study and preparation that this book required I have been helped by many persons. Oblique but nonetheless hearty thanks

should go to hundreds of students at New York University and Columbia University whose talk and papers revealed the need for a book such as this. Colleagues in the editorial offices of six magazine and book publishers have suggested, sometimes inadvertently, scores of items that are included.

Without aid from many scholars, teachers, linguists, and lexicographers this book would be far less accurate and thorough than hopefully it is. I am especially indebted to H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and to the unabridged edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*.

Individuals to whom I am particularly indebted include the late Professors Paul Roberts of California and Havilah Babcock of South Carolina. In years past, the conversation and writings of these gifted teachers have helped me immeasurably in my approach to language. I also express gratitude to a longtime friend and colleague, Professor George S. Wykoff of Purdue University. Hesitantly, I mention the name of Theodore M. Bernstein once again. His lively, fact-packed, and solid work (especially *Watch Your Language*, *The Careful Writer*, and *Miss Thistlebottom's Hobgoblins*) has played a prominent part in my thinking about speech and writing. I have never met Mr. Bernstein, but his work suggests that he is eminently worth knowing.

Finally, I acknowledge the encouragement and support of McGraw-Hill officials and editors, especially Leonard Josephson, who suggested this book, Mrs. Tobia Worth, who has made many wise editorial suggestions, and Daniel N. Fischel, their chief and, I claim with pride, my one-time prize student.

H.S.

## You and the Way You Talk and Write

Two basic problems underlie and precede everything this book tries to offer about the use and abuse of words and expressions. This *Dictionary* cannot solve either, but it can bring them to your attention.

First, little value resides in studying words unless one has something worthwhile to say and some interest and purpose in saying that something, whatever it is. Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked "A word is the skin of a living thought." If one's thought is nonexistent or valueless, so will be the word itself.

Reading, listening, seeing, experiencing, and, above all, thinking are the methods by which one insures having something to say. The book in your hands provides thousands of suggestions, none of which deals directly with this fundamental problem. But it can, and does, suggest at the outset that with rare exceptions, people tend to talk more and say less than they should. After all, speech is only the faculty or power of speaking. The ability to talk and write is one thing; thoughts and emotions are another. Spinoza once wrote that mankind would be happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak; that "men govern nothing with more difficulty than their tongues." John Ruskin wrote: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds can talk for one who can think." It was a wise person who remarked at a meeting that it was better for him to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all possible doubt. Think first, talk second.

Next, it is important to form a suitable attitude toward writing and speaking. Despite the comments that appear throughout the *Dictionary*, one should not think of these processes as a complicated series of do's and don't's, a long list of prohibitions, taboos, and thou-shalt-not's. The American language is a flexible medium. One should consider it the most important method he has for communicating clearly and interestingly with and to others. What possible activity could be more meaningful?

The author whose work you most enjoy is possibly not the greatest stylist of all time. He may repeatedly violate many of the recommendations set forth in following pages. Not by the niceties of his style but by his drive, imagination, and animation he gets, and holds, your fascinated attention. Similarly, the person with whom you most enjoy talking may make many so-called mistakes in grammar and may frequently confuse one word with another. But he uses his tongue interestingly and forcefully, however many "errors" he may make while doing so.

In short, using words and expressions effectively depends not on "correctness" alone but on having something of value to communicate and doing so with ease and assurance.

It is true, however, that in our society few people fail to realize the importance of using good English. The late Will Rogers was never more humorous than when he remarked, "A lot of people who don't say *ain't*,

ain't eatin'." Most of us, however, are properly concerned when others react unfavorably to mistakes we make in expressing ourselves. We understand that our use of language represents a significant form of behavior.

By learning basic good usage one can concentrate on what he wishes to communicate and stop worrying about detailed methods of doing so. Freed from restraint and anxiety, he can reveal his thoughts to others in the natural, easy way he should speak and write our language but all too often does not.

This book will help you to improve your use of language by emphasis upon those common errors, and only those, which hinder communication and impede thought. As you study the entries that follow, keep these four "commandments" in mind:

**Be concise.** Most statements of any kind are wordy. All of us repeat an idea in identical or similar words and then say it again. Talk should not be cryptic and mysteriously abrupt, but it should be economical. Make it snappy!

**Be original.** It's impossible for anyone to conceive of a wholly new idea or to express an old one in fresh, original diction. And yet the greatest single error in speaking and writing is the use of trite, worn-out expressions that have lost their first vigor, picturesqueness, and appeal. Avoid clichés. Don't be a rubber stamp.

**Be specific.** Much of our speech is indefinite, not clearly expressed, uncertain in meaning. Even when we have a fairly good idea of what we wish to say, we don't seek out those exact and concrete words that would convey what we have in mind. Try to use words that have precise meaning. Don't be vague.

**Vary the approach.** The sole requirement of effective speech and writing is that they should communicate. The choice and use of words should vary from situation to situation, from person to person. At times, one's speech and writing should be racy and pungent; at other times, deliberate and formal. Communication should be appropriate. Shift gears.

Put another way, a major fault in writing and speaking is using too many words, many of which are not so much "wrong" as stale and worn-out from overuse. These major faults of wordiness and triteness (along with allied problems that largely contribute to them) are briefly mentioned in the pages that follow.

## Wordiness

Nearly everyone uses more words than he needs. In rapid-fire talk, in the give-and-take of conversation, each of us is likely to repeat himself and to use words that are meaningless or unnecessary. (When writing, we have a chance to go over our work and remove the verbiage.) Truly effective speech is economical, but using enough words to cover the subject and not too many is a standard of perfection unattainable by ordinary mortals. But

if one can grasp and keep in mind a few suggestions, his speech and writing will become more concise and consequently more interesting and appealing.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius says:

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,  
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,  
I will be brief.

In this context, *wit* means "understanding" or "wisdom." Actually, Polonius was a garrulous, tiresome bore, but what he said is that being brief and to the point is the best way to convey real thought. Conciseness alone does not guarantee good writing and speaking, but it is difficult for someone to speak or write forcefully and entertainingly when he is using four words where one would be sufficient.

The golden rule contains 11 words. The Ten Commandments are expressed in 75 words. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address consists of 267 words.

Three suggestions may be helpful:

*First*, never use two or more words where one will serve. It is better to refer to "the chance of war" than to say "in the regrettable eventuality of a failure of the deterrence policy." A speaker was once asked whether certain rules should be observed. Instead of replying yes, he remarked, "The implementation of sanctions will inevitably eventuate in repercussions." A foreman suggested that an assistant give instructions to workers "very precisely and carefully." He might better have said, "Give precise instructions." A recent governmental pamphlet contained this sentence: "Endemic insect populations cause little-realized amounts of damage to forage and timber." The meaning? "Native insects harm trees and grass more than we realize."

### Eliminating Wordiness

#### REDUCE THESE

a certain length of time  
advance planning  
after the conclusion of  
am (is, are) going to  
are (am) of the opinion  
as a result of  
at the present time  
before long  
both alike  
by means of  
by the time  
come in contact with  
destroyed by fire

#### TO THESE

a certain time  
planning  
after  
shall, will  
believe  
because  
now  
soon  
alike  
by  
when  
meet  
burned

**REDUCE THESE**

due to the fact that  
 during the time that  
 for the amount of  
 in accordance with  
 inasmuch as  
 in case  
 in connection with  
 in lieu of  
 in order to  
 in regard to  
 insofar as  
 in the event that  
 in the month of May  
 in this day and age  
 in view of the fact that  
 it has come to our attention that

it is interesting to note that

I would appreciate it if  
 long in size  
 of an indefinite nature  
 of great importance  
 on a timely basis  
 on condition that  
 one of the purposes (reasons)  
 prior to  
 provided that  
 the length of 5 yards  
 the necessary funds  
 under date of July 5  
 with the exception of

**TO THESE**

due to, since  
 while  
 for  
 by  
 since  
 if  
 with  
 instead  
 to  
 about  
 because, since, as  
 if  
 in May  
 today  
 since  
 (begin with the word following  
*that*)  
 (begin with the word following  
*that*)  
 please  
 long  
 indefinite  
 important  
 fast  
 if  
 one purpose (reason)  
 before  
 if  
 5 yards (or 5 yards long)  
 money  
 of July 5  
 except

*Second*, avoid overusing *there is*, *there are*, etc. Usually, *there* beginnings are superfluous words, adding nothing. The words *there are* can be removed from the following sentence with no loss in meaning or force: "In this building *there are* five elevators awaiting inspection." Better: "In this building five elevators await inspection."

*Third*, avoid adding words to an idea already expressed. When meaning is expressed or implied in a particular word or phrase, repeating the idea in additional words adds nothing but verbiage. Common examples of this fault are using *again* with verbs beginning with *re-*; using *more* or *most* with adjectives and adverbs ending in *-er* and *-est*; and using *more* or *most* with such absolute-meaning adjectives as *unique*, *round*, *square*, and *equal*.

A list of sixty representative wordy expressions follows:

absolutely essential	many in number
around about that time	meet up with
audible to the ear	more angrier
back up	more better
bisect in two	more older
call up on the phone	more paramount
choose up	more perfect
Christmas Eve evening	more perpendicular
combine together	most unique
completely unanimous	most unkindest
complete monopoly	necessary essential
connect up with	necessary need
consensus of opinion	old adage
cooperate together	personal friend
cover over	recur again
descend down	reduce down
each and every one	repeat again
endorse on the back	resume again
entirely eliminated	return back
extreme prime importance	revert back to
few (many) in number	rise up
final end (outcome)	round in form
first beginnings	separate out
four-cornered square	(a) short half-hour
from whence	small in size
important essentials	sunset in the west
individual person	talented genius
join together	this afternoon at 4 P.M.
long length	this morning at 8 A.M.
loquacious talker	visible to the eye

Brevity is more than "the soul of wit": it is well-nigh impossible. Even so, care and thought will eliminate many useless, time-wasting, space-consuming words and expressions that constitute one of the major problems in communicating with others.

## Triteness

Triteness, sometimes referred to as the use of hackneyed language or clichés, applies to words and expressions that are worn out from overuse.

The words *triteness*, *hackneyed language*, and *cliché* have origins that illuminate their meaning: *triteness* comes from the Latin word *tritius*, the past participle of a verb meaning "to rub," "to wear out." *Hackneyed* is derived from the idea of a horse, or carriage (*hackney coach*), let out for hire, devoted to common use, and consequently exhausted in service.

*Cliché* comes from the French word *clicher*, meaning "to stereotype," "to cast from a mold."

Trite expressions resemble slang in that both are stereotyped manners of thought and expression. Clichés may be stampings from common speech, outworn phrases, or overworked quotations. Usually they express sound ideas (or ideas considered sound) and are always couched in memorable phrasing. (If they were not sensible and stylistically appealing, they would never have been used so much as to become stale.) The problem with clichés is not that they are inexpressive but that they have been overused and misused to the point of weariness and ineffectiveness.

People with whom we often talk may bore us precisely because we know in advance the words and phrases they are going to use. What they say and how they say that something have become "molds" of thought and expression, constantly repeated. It should be kept in mind, too, that expressions which seem fresh and original to us may be clichés to those who have read and listened more than we have.

In daily speech, in letters, and in all kinds of writing except that which is most formal and carefully written and rewritten, everyone is certain to use clichés. This is understandable: trite expressions are familiar, often apt, and always expressive. For instance, if one wishes to describe a recent bout with insomnia and his inability to get needed rest, he might mention his longing to "sleep the sleep of the just." The phrase is colorful and even appropriate, but it is jaded from overuse. Charles Dickens may have thought so when, in *Night Walks*, he needed to convey this same idea. He discarded the cliché and came up with the memorable phrase "As restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed." An anonymous writer used no hackneyed expression in describing the tumult of thoughts that kept him awake; he referred to the emotions coursing through his mind as being "restless as willows in a windstorm."

Trite expressions cannot be eliminated from our speech and writing, but their quantity can be reduced and, who knows, perhaps occasionally something substituted effective enough eventually to become a cliché itself.

The following list of more than 300 trite expressions will remind everyone of the problem and possibly cause some readers to resolve to strive even harder for freshness and originality in speaking and writing.

absence makes the heart grow	all things being equal
fonder	all wool and a yard wide
acid test	all work and no play
add insult to injury	apple of one's eye
age before beauty	apple-pie order
all in a lifetime	arms of Morpheus
all in all	as luck would have it
all is not gold that glitters	at one fell swoop
all sorts and conditions . . .	bark up the wrong tree

bated breath	consummation devoutly to be
bathed in tears	wished
battle of life	cradle of the deep
beard the lion in his den	crow to pick
beat a hasty retreat	cut a long story short
beggars description	cynosure of all eyes
best foot forward	daily repast
best-laid plans of mice and men	dead as a doornail
better late than never	dead giveaway
better to have loved and lost	deaf as a post
beyond the pale	depths of despair
bitter end	die is cast
blood is thicker than water	distance lends enchantment
blow off steam	dog days
blow one's horn	doomed to disappointment
blushing bride	down my alley
blush of shame	downy couch
bolt from the blue	draw the line
born with a silver spoon	dreamy expression
bosom of the family	drown one's sorrows
brave as a lion	drunk as a skunk
brawny arms	duck (fish) out of water
breathe a sigh of relief	dull thud
bright and early	each and every
bright future	ear to the ground
bright young countenance	eat, drink, and be merry
bring home the bacon	eat one's hat
briny deep	epoch-making
brown as a berry	et tu, Brute
budding genius	exception proves the rule
busy as a bee (beaver)	eyes like stars
butterflies in (my) stomach	eyes of the world
caught red-handed	face the music
checkered career	fair sex
cheer to the echo	far cry
cherchez la femme	fast and loose
chip off the old block	fat as a pig
clear as mud	fat's in the fire
coals to Newcastle	favor with a selection
cock-and-bull story	fearfully and wonderfully made
cold as ice	feathered choir
cold feet	feather in his (her) cap
cold sweat	feel one's oats
cool as a cucumber	festive board
common, or garden, variety	few and far between
conspicuous by his (her) absence	few well-chosen words

fight like a tiger  
 fill the bill  
 filthy lucre  
 fine and dandy  
 first and foremost  
 flash in the pan  
 flat as a pancake  
 flesh and blood  
 fly off the handle  
 fond farewell  
 (a) fool and his money  
 fools rush in . . .  
 free as the air  
 fresh as a daisy  
 garden (common) variety  
 gentle as a lamb  
 get one's number  
 get the sack  
 get the upper hand  
 get up on the wrong side . . .  
 get what I mean?  
 gild the lily  
 give hostages to fortune  
 glass of fashion  
 God's country  
 golden mean  
 (a) good time was had by all  
 goose hangs high  
 grain of salt  
 grand and glorious  
 graphic account (description)  
 greatness thrust upon . . .  
 green as grass  
 green with envy  
 Grim Reaper  
 grin like a Cheshire cat  
 hail-fellow well met  
 hale and hearty  
 hand-to-mouth  
 hapless victim  
 happy as a lark  
 happy pair  
 hard row to hoe  
 haughty stare  
 haul over the coals  
 head over heels

heartless wretch  
 heart of gold  
 hew to the line  
 high on the hog  
 hornet's nest (stir up a)  
 hot as a pistol  
 hungry as a bear  
 if the truth be told  
 inspiring sight  
 interesting to note  
 intestinal fortitude  
 in the last (final) analysis  
 in the long run  
 irons in the fire  
 irony of fate  
 it goes without saying  
 it stands to reason  
 jig is up  
 land-office business  
 last but not least  
 last straw  
 law unto himself (herself)  
 lead to the altar  
 lean and hungry look  
 lean over backward  
 leave in the lurch  
 left-handed compliment  
 let one's hair down  
 let the cat out of the bag  
 lick into shape  
 like a newborn babe  
 limp as a rag  
 little did I think  
 lock, stock, and barrel  
 mad as a wet hen  
 mad dash  
 make a clean breast of  
 make ends meet  
 make hay while the sun shines  
 make night hideous  
 make no bones  
 make things hum  
 mantle of snow  
 meets the eye  
 method in his madness  
 mind your p's and q's

missing the boat  
monarch of all he (she) surveys  
moot question  
more easily said than done  
Mother Nature  
motley crew (crowd)  
naked truth  
neat as a bandbox  
necessary evil  
needs no introduction  
never a dull moment  
nipped in the bud  
not to be sneezed at  
not worth a continental  
number is up  
of a high order  
Old Sol  
on the ball (stick)  
open-and-shut  
opportunity knocks but . . .  
out of sight, out of mind  
over a barrel  
ox in the ditch  
parental rooftree  
pay the piper (fiddler)  
penny for your thoughts  
pillar of society  
pillar to post  
play fast and loose  
play second fiddle  
play up to  
point with pride  
poor but honest  
pretty as a picture  
pretty kettle of fish  
pretty penny  
psychological moment  
pull one's leg  
pull the wool over . . .  
pull up stakes  
pure as the driven snow  
put a bug (flea) in one's ear  
put on the dog  
rack one's brains  
raining cats and dogs  
read the riot act

reckon without one's host  
red as a beet  
rendered a selection  
ring true  
rub the wrong way  
sadder but wiser  
sad to relate  
sail under false colors  
save for a rainy day  
seal one's fate  
seething mass  
self-made man  
sell like hot cakes  
set one's cap for  
set up shop  
seventh heaven  
show the white feather  
shuffle off this mortal coil  
sick and tired  
sight to behold  
sing like a bird  
sleep the sleep of the just  
snare and a delusion  
sow wild oats  
start the ball rolling  
steal one's thunder  
stick in the craw  
strong as an ox  
stubborn as a mule  
stuffed shirt  
take it easy  
teach the young idea  
tell it to the Marines  
tenterhooks (be on)  
terra firma  
that is to say  
throw in the sponge  
throw the book at  
time hangs heavy  
tired as a dog  
tit for tat  
too funny for words  
too many irons in the fire  
truth to tell  
turn over a new leaf  
view with alarm

wee small hours  
wet to the skin  
where ignorance is bliss  
wide-open spaces

without further ado  
wolf in sheep's clothing  
you can say that again  
your guess is as good as mine

## Troublesome Verbs

Insufficient knowledge of the principal parts of verbs causes many problems in speaking and writing. An English verb has three principal parts: *present tense* (or *present infinitive*), *past tense*, and *past participle*. A good way to recall the principal parts of a verb is to substitute those of any verb for the following:

I *run* today. (present tense)

I *ran* yesterday. (past tense)

I *have run* every day this week. (past participle)

The past tense and past participle of many verbs are formed by adding *-d* or *-ed* or *-t* to the present tense:

save, saved, saved

dream, dreamt (or dreamed), dreamt (or dreamed)

Such verbs are called *regular*, or *weak*, verbs.

Other verbs do not follow this pattern. Called *irregular*, or *strong*, verbs, they form the past tense and past participle in several ways. One group has a vowel change in the past tense, and in some instances in the past participle as well:

cling, clung, clung

fight, fought, fought

Some verbs in this group, in addition to the vowel change, add *-n* for the past participle:

wear, wore, worn

swear, swore, sworn

Another group changes in form completely in the past tense and past participle:

bind, bound, bound

stink, stank, stunk

A few verbs change the last consonant, but not the vowel:

have, had, had

Several verbs have the same form for all three principal parts:

quit, quit, quit

spread, spread, spread

Following is a list of 150 troublesome verbs that illustrate each of the methods of formation just mentioned.

PRESENT TENSE	PAST TENSE	PAST PARTICIPLE
arise	arose	arisen
ask	asked	asked
attack	attacked	attacked