

LONGMAN

GUIDE TO ENGLISH USAGE

Sidney Greenbaum

Janet Whitcut

Introduction by Randolph Quirk

Longman 

LONGMAN

**GUIDE TO
ENGLISH
USAGE**

Sidney Greenbaum

Janet Whitcut

Introduction by Randolph Quirk

Longman 

Longman Group UK Limited,
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow,
Essex CM20 2JE, England
and Associated Companies throughout the world

© Longman Group UK Limited 1988
All rights reserved; 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 Publishers.

First published 1988

Set in Harris Intertype Times

Produced by Longman Group (FE) Ltd.,
Printed in Singapore

ISBN 0-582-55619-8

Publisher

Della Summers

Lexicographers

Brian O'Kill, Susan Engineer

Editor

Stephen Crowdy

INTRODUCTION

by Randolph Quirk

None of us can afford to be complacent about our command of English. For most of the time, of course, there is no problem: we are dealing with family and friends on everyday affairs; and what is more, we are usually talking to them, not writing. It is in ordinary talk to ordinary people on ordinary matters that we are most at home, linguistically and otherwise. And fortunately, this is the situation that accounts for the overwhelming majority of our needs in the use of English.

Problems arise as soon as the context is somewhat out of the ordinary. We suddenly need to address a cousin about the death of her husband; or we are writing to our employer to explain temporary absence; composing the minutes of a particularly delicate committee meeting; even just drafting an announcement to pin on the club noticeboard. This is when we may — or should — pause and wonder about idiom, good usage, the most appropriate way of putting things. There is the risk of sounding too casual, too colloquial, too flippant. There is the converse risk of seeming ponderous, distant, pompous, unnatural; of using an expression which, instead of striking a resonant note, falls flat as a hackneyed cliché.

It is true that pausing so as to express ourselves better has its own dangers. We may break the flow of our thought, lose spontaneity and warmth. Educational fashion of the twentieth century has often seemed to encourage 'free expression' at the expense of correctness or elegance of composition: even to have a somewhat contemptuous disregard for traditional conventions. This has been excused as a healthy reaction from a heavy-handed mode of teaching which is alleged to have insisted on correctness of expression in relative disregard of content. This was the absurd extreme that Francis Bacon ridiculed as 'Pygmalion's frenzy', when people 'hunt more after words than ... weight of matter'. Clearly, matter matters more. Since correctness was sometimes taught rather mechanically as though all that counted was the inflexible application of some crude rules of thumb, a reaction was to be expected and indeed welcomed. It coincided, moreover, with the increasing interest of academic linguists in speech as opposed to writing, in the

natural free flow of dialectally various language as opposed to the traditionally recognized standard form of language associated with the official organs of state. In consequence of this interest, it even came to be felt (and sometimes said) that any form of a language was as 'good' or 'correct' as any other form, irrespective of purpose or occasion.

It is widely believed that the reaction against teaching to a strict standard is responsible for a decline in the general quality of writing. Whether in fact there has been such a decline (and what, if so, has caused it) cannot be regarded as other than speculative and controversial. What is certain is that very many people indeed feel uneasy about their own usage and the usage around them. University professors of English receive a steady stream of serious inquiries on these matters from people in all walks of life: accountants, local government officers, teachers, clergymen, bank managers, secretaries, journalists, broadcasters, trade union officials, doctors. A recent selection from my own postbag: What is the difference between *what* and *which* in questions like 'What/which is the best way to cook rice?' Should we compare something *to* or *with* something else? Should one write 'The time is past' or 'The time is passed'? Please tell me if it is all right (?alright) to say 'I didn't know he was that rich', 'Every patient should note the time of their next appointment', 'She hopes to completely finish', 'Aren't I ...?', 'They are deciding who to elect', 'The firm we wrote to', 'I will do my best', 'As regards to your inquiry', 'Thinking over your idea, here is a proposal'. Since we can say 'out of the window', why does my husband object to 'off of the window-ledge'? When I am asked to state my name, should I write 'Mr John Smith' ('Miss Joan Smith') or just 'John Smith' ('Joan Smith')? How is the word *amateur* (or *privacy*) pronounced? Is it 'The garment shrunk' or 'The garment shrank'? 'Half of our customers prefer' or '...prefers'? Should I write 'managing director' (or 'head teacher') with an initial capital?

These are real issues for real people. And rightly so. It is right that we should think before we write — and if possible before we speak too. It is right that we should care about and take pride in the way we express ourselves. This is not to inhibit full and free expression; this is not to lose spontaneity, authenticity, and the important sincerity we communicate simultaneously. Rather, by training ourselves in sensitivity and delicacy of expression, carefully adjusted to subject, occasion, and addressee, we actually enhance our ability to express our thoughts and desires more fully and freely. The feeling of being tongue-tied through self-consciousness is speedily overcome when we realize that being actively conscious of the language we use not merely helps us to adjust

what we are saying to the particular addressees we have in mind, but also enables us to release the full range of linguistic expression we might have thought was beyond us. We achieve an added richness and precision of language.

We need constantly to remind ourselves that it is a characteristic of human language to present its users with a wide range of words and of ways in which these words can be combined into sentences. This wealth of choice serves two purposes. It enables us to make new observations and to give any such observation the form that is appropriate to the particular occasion. For the first, we need to go on increasing and adjusting our 'word-power' throughout our lives, becoming more practised in using complicated phrase and sentence structures which will put across our ideas and proposals with precision and clarity. For the second, we must go on increasing our 'repertoire' of alternative formulations so as to be able to fit what we have to communicate to particular situations and addressees.

And in both respects we need to be responsive to the demands and conventions of good usage.

Now, however much we might wish that the rules of good usage were simple, they are not, nor can they ever be. Standards are different in different periods of *time*; in different *places*; and on different *occasions*. Let me illustrate each of these in turn.

First, *time*. In the nineteenth century it was quite common for educated people to say 'It don't signify' and 'She dresses well, don't she?' Characters in Dickens can use *an't* or *ain't* for 'isn't' without any hint that such forms are other than fully acceptable. By contrast, most people would have found it strange (and many incorrect) to read expressions like 'She prefers her woollen gloves to her fur *ones*', 'They happened to *be having* a meal there', 'He *was sent* a note about it'. Many would still at that time prefer 'Their new house *is building*' to 'Their new house *is being built*', 'Her parties *are* grown tedious' to 'Her parties *have* grown tedious'. Parents were commonly addressed as 'Mama' and 'Papa' (both accented on the second syllable); the verb *oblige* was regarded by many as being correctly pronounced only when it rhymed with *siege*; and *gynaecology* (always then so spelled in Britain) began with the same consonant sound as *join*. And of course some changes take place within a decade or so. It is only since about 1970 that the preference has grown for stressing the second syllable instead of the first in words like *despicable* and *hospitable*; that we have come to expect that *billion* means 'a thousand million'; and that women can be conveniently addressed with the title *Ms*.

Secondly, while the present book is written from a British standpoint,

we must never forget that there are different standards in different places. Even with comparable education and social position, a present-day New Yorker and a present-day Londoner can find themselves using forms of English which are equally correct but which are quite distinct: in vocabulary, in grammar, in pronunciation (especially), and (even) in spelling. In other words, there are rules and norms for American English which are independent of the corresponding rules and norms for British English. All of these are stamped on the way our New Yorker would write and speak the sentence, 'They have gotten a new automobile the same color as their last'. A Londoner may, but a New Yorker will not, add the final *done* in 'She asked him to feed the dog and he has done'. In *Foreign Affairs* (1984), by the American professor Alison Lurie, we find a comment on the British Library Reading Room in summer 'when all the tourists ... come out and ... the staff (perhaps understandably) is harassed and grumpy'; perfectly correct for American usage, but in British English *are* would have been preferred. People who are chiefly versed in British English are puzzled if an American airline pilot announces to passengers: 'We shall be in the air momentarily'. In American English the adverb can mean 'in a moment'; in British English only 'for a moment'. But each usage, in its place, is perfectly correct. What is correctly *aluminum* in the USA is correctly *aluminium* in the UK.

Thirdly, different standards for different occasions. The same person may apologize for non-participation as follows:

(a) Pressure of other work, ladies and gentlemen, must regrettably preclude my pursuing the subject further on this occasion.

(b) Daddy's just a weeny bit too busy to read any more to his Jennykins tonight, poppet.

It would be as absurd to regard either of these as in itself more 'correct' than the other as it would be to regard both as equally correct for either of these two sharply different occasions. Indeed, both (a) and (b) readily suggest modified versions that might be more appropriate (and hence more correct). If the child were rather older than the toddler to whom (b) is addressed, the language would be appropriately adjusted:

(b') I'm afraid I'm a bit too busy tonight, Jennifer.

Similarly, if the addressees were rather closer associates than those implied by (a), a somewhat less distant and formal apology would naturally suggest itself to the practised speaker who had developed a properly wide repertoire of language appropriate to specific occasions.

In a ceremonious resolution at a board meeting, it might be appropriate to state:

She will henceforth be styled Deputy Director.

But in a report of the same resolution in the firm's house journal, it might be equally justifiable to write one of the following:

She will be called Deputy Director in future.

From now on, her title will be Deputy Director.

It is not merely correct but obligatory in air traffic control by VHF to say 'Speak slower': but one would not approve such an instruction in a speech therapy manual.

A correct form is one that is felt to be acceptable at the relevant period, in the relevant place, and on the relevant occasion. This means that there cannot be a single standard by which an expression must be correct in all places, on all occasions, and at all periods of history. It does not of course mean that 'anything goes'. We are usually faced with a choice between expressions, any of which would be admirable in certain circumstances, but one of which is best for the particular occasion with which we are concerned. And there are some constructions which for practical purposes we can say are admirable in no circumstance at all. If we wish to claim that Mr Smith declined to support us, it would be universally regarded as incorrect grammar to state that 'Mr Smith would not give us no help'. In a long sentence, the best of us can all too easily get lost and fail to make a subject agree with a verb:

The area in most countries that my friends and I are keen on choosing for our holidays are those that are furthest from big towns.

Or we may slip into other types of mismatch:

It was their intention to experiment with plants of different species in this heavy clay soil and of ultimately discovering one that flourished.

The two parts of this sentence linked by *and* should be grammatically parallel ('to experiment ... and ultimately discover'), just as they should have been in the following sentence, found in a *Daily Telegraph* news item:

They were unable to assess whether the world's climate was becoming hotter or cooler, and that it was premature to call a ministerial conference ...

But such errors are not usually resolved satisfactorily by merely correcting the grammar: they betray the need for somewhat more

radical revision. Thus it is likely that the writer about clay soil should have been distinguishing between the *intention* to experiment and the *hope* of discovering. Again, correcting the *Daily Telegraph* item to read 'assess whether the world's climate was becoming hotter ... and *whether* it was premature' is only a superficial improvement. The writer probably used the improper *that* because a different verb should have been used for the second clause:

They were unable to *assess whether* the world's climate was becoming hotter or cooler, and they *considered that* it was premature to call a ministerial conference.

Indeed, it is rare to find errors where single-word emendation is completely satisfying. Take for instance the blatant 'hypercorrection' in the following quotation from the *Radio Times*:

Those of us who can face the wettest Sunday with equanimity still shower bitter judgment on he who warned us.

Altering *he* to *him* achieves technical correctness, but it is precisely because this 'sounds wrong' that the writer has fallen into error: better not to use a pronoun at all here, and write 'on the person who'.

It is commonplace to notice errors that are equally absolute in the usage of those for whom English is not their native language: indeed, these are especially noticeable since they are often not the kind of errors made by native speakers. In consequence, while we are quick to recognize such errors (and are usually able — just as quickly — to offer the correct alternative) we find it difficult to explain the rule that has been broken. For example 'I am in London since six months' (instead of 'I have been in London for six months' or 'I came to London six months ago'); 'He went out to buy washing powder or so' (instead of '... or something'); 'I am knowing your sister very well' (for 'I know ...').

Sometimes, however, the foreign speaker's error is in a more subtle area of usage such that, if we do not ourselves appreciate the range of usage among native speakers, we may misunderstand the meaning intended. Thus, we are used to *quite* being whole-hearted in 'Her sonata is quite superb' (*ie* if anything *better* than 'superb') but only half-hearted in 'Her sonata is quite good' (*ie* rather *less* than 'good'). However, in 'They were quite satisfied', a difference of context and intonation will allow either interpretation. By contrast, in negative expressions only the 'whole-hearted' sense is possible in correct English, so when we read a foreign critic's comment

Her sonata was broadcast last week, but she was not quite pleased with the way it was played

we cannot know whether the writer should have used *satisfied* instead of *pleased* (thus giving the 'whole-hearted' meaning: 'She was not entirely satisfied with the playing — though it was very good') or whether the writer was carrying over the 'half-hearted' meaning into a negative clause where it is disallowed (in other words intending to say 'She was rather displeased with the playing'). Now that more than half of the people who use English in the world have not learned it as their first language, it is necessary for us all, if we are to grasp and sympathetically react to communications, to be watchful of the deviations from our own norms that may proceed from native and foreign users of English alike. In an English-language newspaper published in the Orient, there was a report of an interview with 'a few of the do-gooders in public service'. These included nurses and prison officers, and it gradually became apparent that the journalist was using *do-gooders* in a straightforward literal sense, 'those who do good', with none of the pejorative overtones of naivety and ineffectiveness associated with the expression by native-English speakers.

But it would be wrong to think that uncertainty over usage is especially prevalent among non-natives or indeed that particular lexical or grammatical errors point to the linguistic origin of the writer. In a report on an air disaster inquiry, a native English-speaking journalist wrote in the *Daily Mail* that the pilot 'took the brunt of the blame'. This is an idiom where the expectation is raised that whoever bears the brunt of something actually *feels* it, consciously: but in the case of the air disaster in question, the pilot was one of those who had been killed.

Again, it was a native English-speaking writer who formed the following sentence in *The Times*:

We need, not to return to the last century, but progress to integrating more people into a balanced agrarian life.

So also the journalist who wrote the following in the *Daily Mail*:

The official skated round the report on the way companies broke sanctions by swapping supplies. Instead, he spoke of the worsening situation ...

And it was a British judge who was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* as having said that the accused man

had made the attack 'in the sort of situation that someone else might have simply left the room and slammed the door'.

Nor is it only the cold clarity of print that can reveal our embarrassing slips. When Ms Libby Purves said on BBC radio 'Pauline is nodding her

head vociferously', and Ms Angela Rippon said in a television programme 'That's something that makes it not only unique but very special indeed', it was hearers, not readers, who reacted.

In this book, the authors offer expert guidance on points of English where any of us can feel uncertainty, where any of us can go wrong. One general message cannot be overstated: we must think before we write — not just think of how we are to express ourselves, but think first of what exactly it is that we wish to express. Take for example the matter of negotiating to buy a house. If we write to the owner or the agent that we are going to 'take things a stage further', or 'explore the issue a little', or 'continue to investigate the matter', we say very little, and this may well mean that we have not decided what it is we want to say. If we are at the stage of *thinking* in the muffled way these phrases suggest, we are not at the stage of communicating at all; we have not yet expressed to *ourselves* what we mean. This must be the first discipline. Thereafter comes the discipline of selecting the right language: a discipline that must persist beyond first draft to the all-important revisions leading to the final draft.

And the right language will primarily be the clear language and the consistent language. Let me give just one illustration of the latter. English — especially British English — offers us the choice of saying 'The committee is' or 'The committee are'; 'The committee which' or 'The committee who'. In the former we are concerned with the committee as a single institution, in the latter with the committee as a collection of individual people. It often matters a great deal which of these to choose, as we seek to influence our addressee's orientation towards our own. Having chosen, we must then be consistent, since it matters perhaps even more that we should not wrench our addressee from thinking of the body as an impersonal institution at one moment to thinking of a group of individuals at the next:

The committee, who have been arguing bitterly among themselves, was dissolved at the last meeting of the cabinet.

In a recent article on church affairs in *The Times*, there was just such an unfortunate switch:

It was the Vatican *who* originally insisted on one uniform English version, and *which* set up an international committee ...

Thinking before we write is not just a matter of clarifying ourselves to ourselves, but of putting ourselves in our addressees' position. How will it sound to *them*? What will *they* understand from what I have written? It is not enough for the author to know what is meant:

The Council ruled that taxis only pick up passengers at the rear of the Town Hall.

It probably did not dawn on the writer of this sentence that — without any wilful intent to misinterpret — a reader could understand it in any of several sharply different ways. But just as destructive as ambiguity is the diversion of an addressee's attention by an unintentional absurdity or double entendre. In a Sussex newspaper it was reported that

A burglar at the Berwick Inn forced a fruit machine to steal £40.

In an American Sunday paper, a thoughtless failure to anticipate a misreading resulted in the following:

Buckingham Palace said that 22-year-old Prince Andrew, son of Queen Elizabeth and a Navy helicopter pilot, would sail with the *Invincible*.

As we have seen with '(bear) the brunt', clichés and idioms are often used vaguely or improperly, and a writer in *The Times* some years ago made a trap for himself with the phrase *cock a snook*. If we take the phrase 'sign a cheque', this can be made into a noun expression by putting the object in front, 'cheque-signing', and we can do this without hesitation or error as part of our knowledge of the language. But an idiom like *cock a snook* is more opaque than *sign a cheque* and the *Times* writer failed to make the analogous grammatical change in converting to a noun expression, thus achieving a doubly unfortunate effect:

Terrorists have never before carried out such blatant cock-snooking against the security forces.

Let me give one final example to show that writing that is poor in one respect is likely to be poor in another. In an article on Roald Dahl, published in 1985, we find the question:

How does he account for the success of bad children's books, like Enid Blyton?

This is of course grammatically sloppy: Enid Blyton is not a book but an author. But worse if anything than the grammatical sloppiness is the communicative sloppiness. Just as in the positioning of the word *only* we must train ourselves to hear or read our message as though we were our own addressee, so also we must always be sure our addressee knows the authority for what we are saying. Who is the real speaking 'subject'? We come upon this as a relatively simple grammatical point with the unattached participle:

Returning from church this morning, two horses nearly ran into the car.

Here, improperly, we have not been told that *I* was returning from church. But in a more serious way, communicatively and indeed morally, a 'subject' is lacking in the above sentence about Dahl. There is a covert claim that 'Enid Blyton's books are bad' but no indication as to who is making the claim. And unlike the sentence about the horses, this one does not respond to common sense ('Horses don't go to church, so ...'). The context does not suggest that Roald Dahl himself has said that Blyton books are bad, and in fact the quoted sentence is the first to make reference to her or her work. So the reader is apparently encouraged to think that their badness is well-established as common knowledge. A well thought-out (and fair-minded) version of the question would therefore have been:

How does he account for the success of children's books, such as Enid Blyton's, which *in my opinion* (or *as many people think*) are bad?

Good usage, in short, is a matter of combining the rules of grammar and the acceptable meanings of words with an appreciation of our relationship with the addressee.

PREFACE

by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut

We have written this book as a practical guide to contemporary English usage. In it we offer clear recommendations in plain English to those who look for guidance on specific points of pronunciation, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar, and style. We hope that those who come to consult will stay to browse.

We address ourselves primarily to those wanting advice on standard British English. At the same time, many of our entries draw attention to differences between British English and American English. We believe that our readers will find this information interesting in its own right, but there are also practical reasons for referring to American usages in a guide to British usages. One obvious reason is that British speakers are constantly exposed to American speech and writing through the mass media and need to be warned against possible misunderstandings. Another is that many present American usages may eventually be adopted into British English, and some may be already entering the language of sections of the British population.

Most entries deal with specific words or expressions. We note that *accommodate* is spelled with two *c*'s, two *m*'s, and two *o*'s; that the accent is usually omitted in *régime*; that *indigestible* ends in *-ible* not *-able*; that both *jailer* and *jailor* are current spellings; that both *judgment* and *judgement* are permissible everywhere, but the first is the more usual American choice and the second is often a British preference. Our entries on pronunciation refer not only to individual sounds (*dour* rhymes with *tour*, not with *hour*), but also to the stress patterns of words (the noun *essay* is stressed on the first syllable, but the rare formal verb *essay* is stressed on the second syllable). Punctuation is mainly treated in entries on the individual punctuation marks, such as the comma and the dash, but there is also an entry ('run-on sentence, comma splice') that discusses two common types of punctuation errors as well as a long article on punctuation in general.

Numerous entries are concerned with questions of vocabulary. There are the confusibles: words that resemble each other in sound or spelling but differ in meaning (*homogeneous* and *homogenous*) and words that

are similar in meaning but are certainly not interchangeable (*artificial* and *synthetic*). Words and expressions are characterized stylistically: some are to be avoided or at least used with restraint because they are fashionable, overused in at least some meanings (*feedback*, *low profile*); some are clichés (*in this day and age*); some can seem rather pretentious in most contexts (*eventuate*) or are facetious (*nuptials*); others are euphemisms (*underachiever*) or genteelisms (*soiled* in *soiled laundry*); words may be formal (*interment* for *burial*) or informal (the verb *peeve*). Some entries refer to idiomatic combinations: One is *indifferent to* or *as to* (not *for*) something. There are warnings against excessive use of foreign expressions as well as against their incorrect use (*modus operandi*, *soi-disant*).

Entries on grammar deal with such matters as the forms of verbs (the past of *dive* is *dived*, but there is a common variant *dove* in American English), the plurals of nouns (the plural of *matrix* is *matrices* or *matrixes*), the choice of pronoun forms (when to use *I* and when to use *me*), and the rules for agreement between the subject and its verb. Entries on style draw on both vocabulary and grammar to discuss choices that affect such matters as verbosity and clarity.

Many entries provide generalizations on matters that are raised elsewhere in relation to individual words and expressions. For example, there are general entries on spelling and the plurals of nouns, as well as entries that explain and illustrate terms used in the book (*back-formation*, *cliché*, *pretentious*, *euphemism*). And a number of articles discuss such general topics as grammatical analysis, the parts of speech, dictionaries, the origins of words, change of meaning, and (under the entry 'vocabulary size') the number of words in English.

We are grateful to Brian O'Kill of Longman for his helpful comments on our work. In the course of our writing we have consulted many works of reference, including *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Longman) (of which one of us is a co-author). We have drawn on our considerable experience as writers and researchers: one of us is a grammarian and the other is a lexicographer. And we have brought to bear on the writing of this book our long and fruitful association with the Survey of English Usage at University College London.

Aa

a, an

1 Write **a** before words beginning with a consonant sound: *a bicycle, a house, a one*; and **an** before words beginning with a vowel sound: *an apple, an hour*. Words beginning with *eu* have an initial 'yoo' sound, and so do many words beginning with *u*; write *a European, a union*, but *an uncle*. The same rules apply before the names of letters and before groups of initials. Write **a** before B, C, D, G, J, K, P, Q, T, U, V, W, Y, Z: *a PhD, a BBC spokesman*. Write **an** before A, E, F, H, I, L, M, N, O, R, S, X: *an MP, an FBI agent*. Words beginning with *h* and an unstressed syllable formerly took **an**, but most people now prefer **a** here also: *a hotel, a historian*. If you choose **an** before these *h*-words, do not also pronounce the *h*.

2 **A** is often stressed in speech, with the pronunciation as in *ape*. This is particularly common in formal American discourse, but may arise when any speaker pauses to select the following word: *There's been a – slight confusion*. If one genuinely does not know what is coming next, one may then say **a** where **an** is required: *There's been a – embarrassing incident*. The stress should be avoided in the formal reading of prepared material.

3 **A** should be capitalized if it is the first word of a title: *Southey wrote 'A Vision of Judgment'*.

4 **A** is subject to inverted word order in a few constructions, particularly after *too* and *so*, but this tendency to INVERSION should not be allowed to get out of hand. *Too hard a task* is acceptable; *so hard a task* is formal, and may be better changed to *such a hard task*; while *even harder a task* is unnatural, and should certainly be changed to *an even harder task*.

a-, an-

This is a Greek prefix meaning 'not' or 'without', as in *atypical* or *anarchy*. Some scholars have objected to its use with words not of Greek origin; but *amoral* and *asexual* are now well established.

abaft

See ABEAM.

abbreviations

See ACRONYMS.

abeam, abaft, astern

Anything exactly on a line at right angles to a ship's keel at its midpoint is **abeam**. Anything behind this line, whether on board the ship or diagonally to left or right, is **abaft**. Anything directly behind the ship is **astern**. The first two words are used only, and the third chiefly, in the technical language of seamanship.

abetter, abettor

Abetter is the common spelling, **abettor** the legal one.

abide

The past tense **abode** is confined to the archaic sense of 'dwell' or 'stay'. Use **abided** for the modern sense of 'obey' or 'accept': *We abided by the rules.*

ability, capacity

The normal constructions are **ability** to do something, **capacity** for doing something. Some writers distinguish between **ability** as being acquired and **capacity** as being innate: *her ability to solve equations; his capacity for remembering facts*. However, the distinction between what is acquired and what is innate is often unclear.

abjure, adjure

Abjure means 'renounce': *to abjure one's religion*. **Adjure** is a formal word for 'command' or 'entreat': *She adjured them to deny any knowledge of the negotiations.*

able

The use of **able** with a passive infinitive, and particularly with a nonhuman subject (*able to be fried*), sounds awkward; perhaps because **able** suggests a skill or expertness more appropriate to a person who performs an action than to a person or thing that undergoes it. Instead, use *can* or *could* (*It can be fried*), or recast the sentence (*We'll be able to fry it*).

-able, -ible

These endings form adjectives meaning 'liable to, or able to, undergo something': *breakable; reliable*; or 'having a particular quality': *fashionable; comfortable*. When these adjectives are built up from native English words, the ending is always **-able**: *washable; get-at-*