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A Ready-Reference Guide to the
Effective Use of the English Language

DICTIONARY
OF
Contemporary
American
Usage

An all-new, practical dictionary of
word preferences, grammar, style,
punctuation, idioms, etc., based
on modern linguistic scholarship

By BERGEN EVANS
and CORNELIA EVANS

UP-TO-DATE COMPLETE AUTHORITATIVE

**A
DICTIONARY OF
CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
USAGE**

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Galahad Books • New York City

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This edition published in the United States of American in 1981 by
Galahad Books
95 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10016
By arrangement with Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-81149
ISBN: 0-88365-566-7
Printed in the United States of America.

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P R E F A C E

When we speak or write we want to be understood and respected. We want to convey our meaning and we want to do it in a way that will command admiration. To accomplish these ends we must know the meanings of words, their specific meanings and their connotations, implications and overtones, and we must know how to combine words effectively into sentences.

A dictionary can help us to understand the meaning of a word. But the only way to understand a word fully is to see it in use in as many contexts as possible. This means that anyone who wants to improve his vocabulary must read a great deal and must make sure that he understands what he reads. There is no short cut to this kind of knowledge. If a man thinks that *noisome* and *noisy* are synonyms, if he uses *focus* and *nexus* interchangeably, if he sees no difference between *refute* and *deny* and if he assumes that *disinterested* means *uninterested*, he will not say what he means. Indeed, he may even say the exact opposite of what he means.

Respectable English is a much simpler matter. It means the kind of English that is used by the most respected people, the sort of English that will make readers or listeners regard you as an educated person.

Doubts about what is respectable English and what is not usually involve questions of grammar. There are some grammatical constructions, such as *that there dog* and *he ain't come yet*, that are perfectly intelligible but are not standard English. Such expressions are used by people who are not

interested in "book learning." They are not used by educated people and hence are regarded as "incorrect" and serve as the mark of a class. There is nothing wrong about using them, but in a country such as ours where for a generation almost everybody has had at least a high school education or its equivalent few people are willing to use expressions that are not generally approved as "correct."

A man usually thinks about his work in the language that his co-workers use. Turns of speech that may have been natural to a statistician when he was a boy on a farm simply do not come to his mind when he is talking about statistics. Anybody whose work requires intellectual training—and this includes everybody whose work involves any amount of writing—speaks standard English naturally and inevitably, with possibly a few insignificant variations.

But many people who speak well write ungrammatical sentences. There seems to be some demon that numbs their fingers when they take hold of a pen, a specter called "grammar" which they know they never understood in school and which rises to fill them with paralyzing uncertainty whenever they stop to think.

The only way to exorcise this demon is to state some of the fundamental facts of language. And one of the most fundamental is that language changes constantly. People living in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century do not speak the English of Chaucer or of Shakespeare. They don't even speak the English of

Woodrow Wilson. The meanings of words change and the ways in which words are used in sentences change. *Silly* once meant "holy," *fond* meant "foolish," *beam* meant "tree" and *tree* meant "beam," and so on through many thousands of words. The pronoun *you* could once be used with a singular verb form, as in *Was you ever in Baltimore?* Today we must say *were you*. The word *news* could once be used as a plural, as in *These news were suddenly spread throughout the city*. Today we must treat it as a singular and say *This news was spread*.

Since language changes this much, no one can say how a word "ought" to be used. The best that anyone can do is to say how it *is* being used, and this is what a grammar should tell us. It should give us information on what is currently accepted as good English, bringing together as many details as possible under a few general rules or principles, so that it will be easier for us to remember them.

The older grammars, by some one of which almost every adult today was bewildered in his school days, were very full of the spirit of what "ought" to be done and drew the sanction of their "oughts" from logic rather than from what people actually said. Thus in such a sentence as *There is an apple and a pear in the basket* most school grammars up until a generation ago would have said that one "ought" to use *are* and not *is*. And the schoolchildren (some of whom later became schoolteachers) docilely accepted the pronouncement. However the child would have heard the minister, the doctor, and even the schoolteacher out of school, say *is*, and since he couldn't bring himself to say that the book was wrong in school or these eminent people wrong out of school, he would probably conclude that he didn't "understand" grammar. Unfortunate as that conclusion might have been, it was at least intelligent and preferable to attempting all the rest of his life to speak and write in the unreal manner recommended by the textbook.

The first grammars published in English were not intended to teach English but to get a child ready for the study of Latin. They were simplified Latin grammars with English illustrations. Of course they were incomprehensible, though they probably made Latin easier when the child got to it. Later, when Latin was no longer an important part of education, the schools continued to use books of this kind on the theory that they taught "superior" English, that is, English that resembled Latin.

But the rules of Latin grammar require constructions that are absurd and affected in English, totally unsubstantiated by English usage. And they often condemn constructions that the greatest writers of English use freely. The common man, even the common educated man, has had no desire to be "superior" in some mysterious way and these Latin rules have had very little effect on the way English is actually used by educated adults. But the rules have had this effect, that millions of adults believe that what seems natural to them is probably wrong.

In analyzing the language the old-fashioned textbooks use concepts, or terms, that are valid when applied to Latin but are almost meaningless when applied to an uninflected language such as modern English. The difference between a noun and an adjective, or between an adjective and an adverb, for example, is plain in Latin but not in English. No grammar can explain these differences in English without becoming too involved for an elementary student. Instead of explaining them, therefore, the authors often write as if no explanation were needed, as if the differences were obvious to all but the dullest. And most of us succumb to this. We get tired of feeling stupid and decide, for instance, that an adverb ends in *-ly*, such as *really*, and an adjective doesn't, such as *real*. This leads us to feel uneasy at *Swing low, sweet chariot*, to wonder how road commissioners can be so illiterate as to urge us to *drive slow*, and to get all hot and bothered in fifty useless ways. The child who leaves school knowing

that he doesn't know the difference between an adjective and an adverb is unusually strong minded and lucky.

For the last fifty years, however, certain grammarians have been making a scientific study of English. They have been finding out how English is really used by different groups of people, instead of theorizing about how it might be used or dogmatizing about how it ought to be used. The investigations of these men have shown us which grammatical forms are used by educated people and which are not. They make it possible to define and analyze what is standard speech and what is not.

They show us that standard English allows a certain amount of variation. That is, there is often more than one acceptable way of using the same words. The most obvious variations are geographical. Some words are used differently in different parts of the country, but each use is respectable in its own locality. Some variations are peculiar to a trade or profession (such as the medical use of *indicate*). These are as respectable as the group that uses them but they are likely to be unintelligible to the general public. When they are used solely to mark a difference, to give an esoteric flavor, they constitute a jargon.

There are also differences between formal and informal English. Formal English is solemn and precise. It dots all the i's and crosses all the t's. Informal or colloquial English is more sprightly and leaves more to the imagination. Forty years ago it was considered courteous to use formal English in speaking to strangers, implying they were solemn and important people. Today it is considered more flattering to address strangers as if they were one's intimate friends. This is a polite lie, of course; but it is today's good manners. Modern usage encourages informality wherever possible and reserves formality for very few occasions.

This dictionary is intended as a reference book on current English in the United States. It is designed for people who speak standard English but are uncertain about

some details. It attempts to list the questions that most people ask, or should ask, about what is now good practice and to give the best answers available. It also contains a full discussion of English grammar, a discussion which does not assume that the student can already read and write Latin.

If any reader wants to make a systematic study of English grammar he should begin with the entry *parts of speech* and follow through all the cross references. Some of these may prove difficult, but no one needs to study it who is not interested. One can use good English without understanding the principles behind it just as one can drive a car without understanding mechanics.

The individual word entries do not assume that the reader is interested in grammatical principles. They assume that he wants the answer to a specific question in the least possible time. The information in them has been drawn chiefly from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the seven-volume English grammar of Otto Jespersen, and the works of Charles Fries. This has been supplemented by information from *A Dictionary of American English*, edited by Sir William Craigie and James Hulbert, *A Dictionary of Americanisms*, by Mitford M. Mathews, *The American Language*, with its two supplements, by H. L. Mencken, and *The American College Dictionary*. Further information has been drawn from articles appearing in *American Speech* over the past twenty years and from the writings of George O. Curme, John Lesslie Hall, Robert A. Hall, Jr., Sterling A. Leonard, Albert H. Marckwardt, Robert C. Pooley, Thomas Pyles, and others. Some of the statements concerning differences in British and American usage are based on the writings of H. W. Fowler, Eric Partridge, Sir Alan Herbert, Ivor Brown, Sir Ernest Gowers and H. W. Horwill.

The authors want to thank George Ellison, Sarah Bekker, Bernice Levin, Irene Le Compte and James K. Robinson for help in assembling and organizing this material. They also want to thank Esther Sheldon for

many helpful comments, Jess Stein and Leonore C. Hauck for the contributions they made in editing this work, and Joseph M. Bernstein for his thoughtful proof-reading.

Throughout the book the authors have tried to present the facts about current usage fairly and accurately. They are aware that there is more than one kind of English. As children, living in the north of England, they spoke a dialect that was in many ways nearer to the English of Chaucer than to that of the *New York Times*. They have, therefore, a personal affection for forms that are older than our current literary forms. As adults they have both had occasion, over many years, to read a great deal of manuscript English, the unedited writings of college students and adults working in various professions. They are therefore

familiar with current tendencies in English. They hope that this wide acquaintance with the language has kept them from giving too much weight to their personal preferences. But they have a personal bias, and this should be stated clearly. The authors are prejudiced in favor of literary forms. They prefer the forms used by the great writers of English to forms found only in technical journals. This means that if they list a non-literary form as acceptable there is conclusive evidence that it is accepted. But they may have listed some forms as questionable that are standard in some areas or professions. The reader must decide these things for himself. To anyone who has a serious interest in the language that he hears and uses, the authors would like to say, in the words of Socrates, "Agree with me if I seem to speak the truth."

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To Aunt Cornella

A

a and **an** are two forms of the same word. The form *an* is used before a vowel sound, as in *an umbrella*, *an honest man*. The form *a* is used before a consonant sound, as in *a European*, *a one-horse town*, *a historical novel*, *a hotel*. The form *a* should be used before an *h* that is pronounced, as in *history* and *hotel*. Formerly these *h* sounds were not pronounced and *an historical novel*, *an hotel*, were as natural as *an honorable man*, *an hour*, *an heiress*. This is no longer true and these archaic *an*'s, familiar from English literature, should not be repeated in modern writing.

A, *an*, and *any* are all derived from the same source. *A* (or *an*) is called the indefinite article. Actually, it is used to indicate a definite but unspecified individual, as in *a man in our town*, *a library book*. In this sense the individual may represent the type, or the entire class, as in *a cat has nine lives*. When we wish to refer indefinitely to a single person or thing we say *any*, as in *any man in our town*, *any library book*. *A* may also be used to mean *one*, as in *wait a minute* and *in a day or two*. In its first sense, *a* may be used before the word *one*, as in *we did not find a one*. This is acceptable English whenever there is good reason to stress the idea of oneness. But some people consider the construction improper, or unreasonable, and claim that it is better to say *a single one*. It is hard to see why it should be wrong to express the idea of unity twice (*a, one*) and right to do so three times (*a, single, one*).

The word *a* (or *an*) stands before other qualifying words, as in *a very large sum of money*, except words or phrases which indicate an extreme degree of something. These are adverbial phrases and precede the word *a*, as in *so very large a sum of money* and *too small a sum of money*.

abandoned; depraved; vicious. An *abandoned* person—when the word is used with moral implications—is one who has given himself up, without further concern for his reputation or welfare, to immoral courses, one hopelessly sunk in wickedness and the indulgence of his appetites (*an abandoned woman*, *hardened in sin*). It usually suggests a passive acceptance of immorality (*Is he so abandoned as to feel no shame at such an accusation?*). A *depraved* person is one so dis-

torted in character, so vitiated, debased, and corrupt that he seeks out evil (*These dens are the haunts of the worst and most depraved men in the city*). When applied to character, as it often is, it again suggests a wilful corruption, springing from a distorted or perverted nature (*Only a depraved taste could regard these daubs as art*). A *vicious* person is addicted to vice, malignant and aggressive in his wickedness, violent and dangerous (*Drunkenness does not make men vicious, but it shows those who are to be so*).

abbreviations are shortened or contracted forms of words or phrases, used as a symbol of the whole. They are designed for the eye as acronyms are designed for the ear. In written language the abbreviation has always been valuable, for scribes must save time and space whether they write on papyrus, paper or stone. The most famous abbreviation of antiquity, perhaps of all time, was SPQR—*Senatus Populusque Romanus*—the great insigne of Rome.

In general, a reader coming across an abbreviation visualizes or sounds the whole word represented by it, as in *Dr. Co.*, *mfg.*, *cf.*, *pres.* and so on. Many abbreviations, however, have been taken over into speech, probably, as a rule, when the original word or phrase was cumbersome, as in *C.O.*, *DP*, *IQ*, *S.R.O.*, *R.S.V.P.*, *G.A.R.*, *D.A.R.*, and the like. This tendency to enunciate the abbreviation, rather than the full word or phrase for which it stands, is increasing. College students talk of *math*, *lit*, *poly sci* and *econ* courses without any feeling of being breezy or slangy. What was once the province of vulgar speech and the literary domain of such writers as Ring Lardner and S. J. Perelman now freely serves the popular press where the full forms of *V.I.P.*, *M.C.* (often written *emcee*), *G.I.*, and scores of other abbreviations would now seem very strange.

Some names and terms are so unpronounceable that abbreviations are always used in both writing and speaking. Indeed the original forms, so far as the general public is concerned, are completely unknown: *DDT* for dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane, *ACTH* for adrenocorticotrophic hormone, *KLM* for the Dutch airline Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij voor Nederland en Kolonien N.V.

Probably the commonest type of abbreviation today, and one that seems to be growing ever more common, consists of the initials of the words of a name or a phrase: *PTA, R.F.D., r.p.m., p.o.w.* The government and the army have contributed many of these new abbreviations. There is no general rule, but there is a tendency, which in time may establish a rule, to omit periods in the names of government agencies but to include them in other cases. This would at least allow us to distinguish *AAA* (Agricultural Adjustment Administration) from *A.A.A.* (American Automobile Association).

Another common form of abbreviation is the shortening of words: *capt., diam., treas.* In many instances the shortened forms have been taken over into the vernacular and occasionally even into standard usage. *Ad*, especially for a short advertisement (as *a want ad*), must now be accepted as standard, as also must *vet* for *veterinary*, though it is still colloquial for *veteran* except in certain combined forms like *Amvets. Co-op* is now so universally employed that it would be pedantic to insist on *co-operative*.

Some abbreviations are formed by contraction: *supt., patd., atty.* or by the retention of only the key consonants: *blvd., hdqrs., tsp.*

Latin phrases are frequently abbreviated, and in the same ways that English words and phrases are abbreviated. Some appear only as initials: *c., e.g. Q.E.D.*, by the way, is always capitalized. Some are shortened: *id., et al., cet. par., aet.* Some are contracted: *cf., pxt.* *Vox pop* is an example of a shortened Latin phrase that has crept into common English speech. *Ad libitum* ("at pleasure," that is, at the discretion of the performer) was originally primarily applied to music. As an abbreviation—*ad lib.*—it moved over into the drama, took on broader connotations and is now accepted as a noun, verb, or adjective.

Here are some abbreviations which fall outside the ordinary patterns:

G.I.—The initials of a phrase ("government issue") which have taken on a meaning different from the original term but wryly related to it.

AI—Strictly speaking not an abbreviation, since it is not a shortening of anything but simply a symbol.

IOU—A phrase put in terms of initials, although they are not literally the initials of the words they represent. This is one abbreviation which is based on sound rather than on sight.

There is a euphemistic use of abbreviation—in such expressions as *g.d.* and *s.o.b.*—which seeks to make certain phrases not ordinarily used in polite conversation less offensive. To some ears, however, the abbreviation is an added offense, heaping timidity or affected gentility on indecency or profanity.

The ultimate in abbreviation—the abbreviation of an abbreviation—is furnished by *CSCN/CHSA* which is an abbreviation of *COMSUBCOMNELM/COMHEDSUPACT* which is an abbreviation of *Commander, Subordinate Command, U. S. Naval Forces East-*

ern Atlantic and Mediterranean, Commander, Headquarters Support Activities.

abdomen. See *belly*.

aberration means wandering from the usual way or from the normal course. There are various technical uses of the word in biology, optics, and other sciences, but the most common popular use is in the phrase *an aberration of the mind*, where it means a departure from a sound mental state. It does not mean mere absent-mindedness. It should always be used with a qualifying adjective or prepositional phrase descriptive of the nature of the aberration.

abhor. See *hate*.

abide. The past tense is *abided* or *abode*. The participle is also *abided* or *abode*.

Abode is preferred to *abided* when the word means dwelled, as in *he abode in Boston almost all of his life*. When the word is used in its broader meaning *abided* is preferred, as in *he abided by his promise*. But both forms can be used in both senses.

Abide is heavyweight for *remain* or *stay*. It is properly used in the great hymn "Abide With Me." It is no lighter when used in the sense of *live* or *dwell*. In all of these uses it retains an obsolescent, medieval quality.

This very quality, however, gives the note of solemnity that certain occasions deserve. When it means to stand by a person, or one's word, or to await the consequences of some momentous act (*Abide the event. Others abide the question; Thou art free*), the very quality which makes it improper for lesser uses makes it valuable. Nations *abide* by the terms of a treaty.

The use of the phrase *can't abide* to express dislike (*I can't abide that man!*) is commonly disparaged. But it has force and flavor. Its use to describe situations, or more often persons, that are intolerable and not to be endured strikes the proper note of vehemence that certain old English words and words associated with Scripture convey.

ability; capacity. *Ability* is the power to do, *capacity* is the power to receive. Ability can be acquired; capacity is innate. Ability is improved by exercise; capacity requires no exercise. A pump has an ability to pump a certain amount of fluid. A tank has the capacity to hold a certain amount. A boxer has the ability to hit, the capacity to take punishment.

abject apology. When Milton spoke of the fallen angels rolling in the fires of hell *thick bestrown, abject and lost*, he was using *abject* in its original sense of cast out or rejected. In the hackneyed phrase *an abject apology* it is not the apology that is abject but the one who is making the apology. But since there is something contemptible in one who abases himself too much, a feeling perhaps that he is sacrificing his dignity in the hope of escaping a possible punishment, *abject* in this phrase, as it reflects on the one apologizing, has come to have a connotation of despicable. It is an over-worked phrase and should be used sparingly.

abject poverty is poverty so severe or so prolonged that the sufferer from it feels cast

out from human society. Here, again, there is a feeling that human dignity has been impaired and there is something slightly despicable in the excess of humility exhibited. *Dire poverty* (from the Latin *dirus*, terrible) is poverty so extreme that it is terrible to behold.

Both phrases have been weakened by repetition and should be used only when they convey the exact meaning that the speaker or writer desires to express.

abjure and adjure belong, with *quiddities* and *quill-lets*, to the solemnity of the legal brief and the juridical charge. *Abjure*, virtually undigested from the Latin *abjurare*, means to solemnly forswear, to renounce, to repudiate. The prefix *ab-* (as in *absent*, *abdicate*, etc.) negates an oath that has been sworn.

Conversely, the prefix *ad-* affirms the act of swearing (as it affirms ministration in *administration* and monition in *admonition*) in *adjure*, which means to command solemnly, under oath or the threat of a curse.

Neither word is to be used lightly, and it is paramount that their similarity of sound should not confuse their completely opposite meanings.

ablative case. The ablative is a Latin case used principally to show that a noun or pronoun stands in some qualifying relation to the verb. In modern English the ablative relationships are shown principally by prepositions. Old English did not have an ablative and for this reason the word is not used in English grammars as often as the other Latin case names.

ablution; washing. *Ablutions* are performed in a church; *washing* is done in a sink or bathroom. *Ablution* now refers exclusively to the use of water for cleansing in religious rites, the ceremonial bathing of the body or the rinsing of sacred vessels. To describe anyone's washing of his hands and face as *performing his ablutions* is to be ponderously jocular and slightly sacrilegious.

Keats, in the last poem that he wrote, used the word correctly when he spoke of *the moving waters at their priestlike task/ Of pure ablution round earth's human shores*.

abnormal; subnormal; supernormal. *Abnormal*, in the strictest sense, denotes any deviation from the normal. *An abnormally pretty girl* or *an abnormally pleasant day* would certainly be understood. In general, however, the deviation is towards imperfection. *Abnormal driving conditions* will not mean exceptional visibility but, rather, fog, ice, irregular pavement or something of that sort. *Abnormal behavior* may be exceptional, but it is never exemplary. College courses in *Abnormal Psychology* devote little time to the exceptionally brilliant or the unusually happy.

Subnormal denotes things below the average (*Subnormal intelligence is characteristic of morons. Hibernating animals have subnormal temperatures*). A chilly day in Florida or southern California is certain to be described as *subnormal*.

Supernormal is not often used—and just as well, for it is awkward. However, it could be

used to describe superior intelligence, superhuman capabilities, and supernatural occurrences. Certain visionaries may be said to have had supernormal powers of sight or hearing. It might be insisted that a fever is a supernormal temperature, but here *abnormal*, with its suggestion of an undesirable deviation, is used.

aboard (on board), to board and boarding were originally sea terms. In America, where the tradition of the sea and respect for its terms (except in the Navy where the insistent retention of nautical terms in land stations often seems absurd to the landlubber) was not as strong as it was in England, the term was transferred to railroad trains. Where our conductor calls "All aboard!" the English station-master says, "Take your seats, please!"

The airplane has taken over many nautical terms, and being welcomed aboard by the stewardess has a mildly adventurous sound without seeming affected. The wings and the motors have to be tersely designated and *port* and *starboard*, *inboard* and *outboard* seem natural and sensible. (It is a nice illustration of the development of language that although *motor* and *engine* are synonymous in popular usage, an *outboard motor* and an *outboard engine* are wholly different things.)

abode. An *abode* was formerly merely a waiting or an abiding (*Through his body his sword glode,/ Dead he fell, without abode*). Later it came to mean the place in which the abiding was done. Milton calls Paradise *Adam's abode*. The body was often called the abode of the spirit. But to apply the word today to an ordinary house is affectation or heavy jocularity. See *abide*.

abominate. This word may be followed by the *-ing* form of a verb, as in *I abominate dancing*, but not by an infinitive, as in *I abominate to dance*. The construction with the infinitive is not standard.

about. The basic meaning of *about* is around or circling. It may mean physically around, as in *there are spies about* and *he walked about the garden*, or it may mean approximately, as in *there are about a hundred people*. A compound verb including *about* is always weaker or vaguer than the original verb, as *I know him* and *I know about him*, *I had forgotten that* and *I had forgotten about that*. *About* may be followed by the *-ing* form of a verb, as in *he thought about leaving*, or by an infinitive, as in *he was about to leave*. When followed by an infinitive, *about* means on the point of.

The compound *at about*, as in *he arrived at about 3 o'clock*, is condemned by some grammarians on the grounds that it is redundant. This is not a reasonable claim. *At* is frequently followed by words showing degree, as in *at almost*, *at nearly*, *at exactly*, and there is no reason why *about* should not be used in the same way. *About* is used after a great many other prepositions, as in *for about an hour*, *in about a week*, *by about Christmas*, and the compound *at about* is sometimes required, as

in *they sold at about \$3 a share*. It is true that in expressions of time *about* can be used without a preposition, as in *he arrived about 3 o'clock*. But there is no reason why anyone should feel compelled to use it in this way. *At about 3 o'clock* is well established, reputable English.

above is used in written English to mean mentioned earlier, as in *the above examples*. Some grammarians object to *the above examples* on the grounds that *above* is an adverb and should not stand immediately before a noun. Such people have no objection to *the above-mentioned examples* or *the examples above*. And they should not object to *the above examples*. *Above* is accepted as an adjective by the best English scholars and writers. It is used in this way by Franklin, Hawthorne, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Quiller-Couch, H. W. Fowler, Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Murray, and by most of the grammarians who condemn it, when they are off their guard.

abrogate; arrogate. To *abrogate* is to annul summarily, to abolish authoritatively or formally (*The power which formed the laws may abrogate them*). The word cannot properly be applied to anything but established custom or usage. When Sir Nathaniel in *Love's Labour's Lost* beseeches Holofernes to *abrogate scurrility*, the use is probably intended to be humorous.

To *arrogate* is to claim presumptuously as a right some dignity or authority to which one is not entitled (*groups which arrogate to themselves the right to use coercion*).

abscissa. The plural is *abscissas* or *abscissae*.

absolute. When used as a grammatical term, *absolute* means grammatically independent. The word is applied to forms of speech that ordinarily are not independent, such as participles, adjectives, transitive verbs, and phrases. The words in small capitals are absolute in: *a HORSE! a HORSE! my KINGDOM for a horse and THIS SAID, he formed thee, ADAM!, thee, O MAN! DUST of the ground!*

Adjectives which name a "complete" quality, such as *perfect*, and *unique*, are sometimes called "absolutes." For a discussion of this, see *comparison of adjectives and adverbs*.

For a discussion of absolute phrases, see *participles*.

absolutely and **positively** are synonyms, containing the same degree of emphasis, interchangeable in any given case, and similarly abused. The meaning of wholly, unconditionally, and completely (*He is absolutely determined to go through with it. He is positively obsessed with the idea of death*) ought not be degraded into helping to form second-rate superlatives (*absolutely swell, positively magnificent*), or, by themselves, into becoming inflated substitutes for *yes*.

abstract nouns. Some grammarians distinguish between concrete and abstract nouns, defining concrete nouns as those that refer to physical things, such as *house, mud, child*, and abstract

nouns as those that refer to qualities which physical things may have but which do not exist by themselves, such as *redness, beauty, childhood*. This distinction raises interesting philosophical questions. How should one classify *heat*? or *the equator*? Fortunately, one does not have to answer these questions in order to use the words correctly because this distinction has no bearing on English grammar. An abstract noun is grammatically like any other noun. See *mass nouns*.

But *abstract* may also mean *more general, less specific*. In this sense *container* is more abstract than *barrel*, and *resources* more abstract than *money*. The more abstract a word is, the more objects it refers to and the less it tells us about them. The more specific a word is, the more information it conveys. It is very easy to use words that are too general. In fact, this is the most obvious characteristic of ineffective writing. A good writer fits his words as closely as possible to his meaning. He will use *container* only if he is talking about several kinds of containers. If he is talking about a barrel, he will call it *a barrel*.

A poor writer who would like to be better should ask himself constantly: Does what I have written cover more ground than I meant to cover? Writing with this question always in mind will do more to develop a respectable style than all the grammar books and vocabulary builders in the world.

abuse; invective; obloquy; scurrility; vituperation. These words convey various degrees of bitterness and roughness in verbal attack.

Abuse and *vituperation* are synonymous and mean coarse and insulting language, used, generally, in some private quarrel or attack. *Vituperation* has come to have a slight sense of greater fierceness in the reviling. This may be due, as V. H. Collins suggests, to the fact that the five syllables "convey the idea of a torrential flow" or it may be due to an echoic suggestion of *viper* in the sound of the word.

Invective may be vehement and violent and railing, but it may also, differing from *abuse*, be polished. Indeed, when it is *coarse* that adjective is usually employed to mark the fact. Some of the most elegant orations ever delivered have been invectives, though from less able speakers we are likely to have more spite than elegance.

Obloquy is censure or blame, or even abusive language, but it is public and general. It is condemnation by many people rather than an attack by one person (*They held their convictions in spite of obloquy*). *Abuse* causes anger and resentment; *obloquy* causes shame and disgrace.

Scurrility is abuse characterized by coarseness and jocularity. It is railing marked by indecency and couched in buffoonery.

The exact meaning of any one of these words is affected, of course, by one's point of view. Emerson probably felt himself abused when Swinburne referred to him as "a gap-

toothed and hoary ape . . . coryphæus of [a] Bulgarian tribe of auto-coprophagous baboons," but Swinburne insisted he was merely making a scientifically accurate description. What to the speaker may seem polished *invective* may strike the one spoken of as *vituperation* and even *scurrility*.

abysmal; abyss; abyssal. *Abyss* means a bottomless space. It was *below the thunders of the upper deep/ Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea* that Tennyson's Kraken slept. But science has now taken soundings and, in consequence, *abysmal* and *abyss* are relegated to figurative uses (*Her air of attentiveness conceals an abysmal ignorance*). *Abyss* is allowed in Milton's imaginary landscape of Chaos and other old-fashioned literary imaginings or, with *abysmal*, to describe the geography of the mind (*Despair opened an abyss before his mind's eye*).

Abyssal is a technical term used in descriptions of the ocean floor or of depths below three hundred fathoms. The steep descent from the continental shelf is also called the *abyss*.

Academe. If used seriously, *Academe* refers to Plato's Academy in ancient Athens. As a term for a place of instruction, *Academe* is a pomposity, as in Mary McCarthy's satirical novel of faculty life, *Groves of Academe*. So used, the word is self-destructive and can survive only in cynical uses. The best policy is to use *Academe* with historical accuracy or not at all.

accede. See *allow*.

accelerate and exhilarate are like two people who are unrelated but look alike and have become good friends. *Acceleration* means going faster; *exhilaration* means getting gladder (*Much of the exhilaration of driving is due to the acceleration of the car*).

The confusion between going faster and getting happier is one of the fundamental errors of our time and it is not surprising that it has extended to the words. But *exhilaration* is always a mental state, connoting a degree of excitement. *Acceleration* describes matter increasing the rapidity of its motion—though it is possible to conceive of a figurative, mental application of the word, such as *the acceleration of the learning process with practice*.

accent; accentual; accentuate. *Accent* is the characteristic of a vowel or a syllable, having to do with the degree or pattern of stress placed on it. When we say that a foreigner *speaks with an accent* we mean that he knows the words but that his speech is distinguishable because he does not use the same pattern of stresses that native speakers employ.

Like so many useful words, however, *accent* has been engulfed in its figurative extensions. Advertisements, especially of products designed for women, would be lost without the word in their own special application of it. Mascara *accents* the eyebrows, tight skirts *accent* the hips, and so on.

Accentuate is reserved in England, as Fowler notes, for the figurative sense of *accent* and

is so used by Americans who find the over-use of *accent* distasteful. Its use should be restricted, however, to the amenities, the trivia, and the esthetics of ordinary life. The prairies do not *accentuate the grandeur of the Rockies*, but it is permissible to *accentuate the color of the floral centerpiece with the whiteness of the table linen*.

Accentual is a technical word, reserved for the description of a rhythm or a pattern of stresses (*The accentual peculiarities of free verse lie in its apparent irregularities*).

accept; except. The essential confusion between *accept* and *except* is one of sound and where there is a doubt which is meant only the context can determine it. *Accept* means to receive willingly (*I accept your offer*). *Except* means to omit or exclude (*Brown was excepted from the list of those to be pardoned*).

acceptance; acceptance. *Acceptance*, a noun, means the act of accepting or of being accepted (*His acceptance of the gift found acceptance with his superiors*).

Acceptation has been restricted to questions of interpretation, principally the interpretation of words (*The original acceptation of "communism" as a political theory differs greatly from its present general acceptance*). More and more, however, *acceptance* tends to take the place of *acceptation* which is now, by some authorities, classified as an archaism.

access; accession. The difference between *access* and *accession* is largely the difference between the act as a possibility and its accomplishment. As Princess, Queen Elizabeth had access to the throne. Her accession followed upon her father's death.

While the opportunity or possibility of entering as it is expressed in *access* (See *access; excess*) remains flexible, *accession* is limited to the idea of entering into a higher rank or a new status, as in the accession of a territory to statehood or of a senator to the presidency.

access; excess. Confusion between *access* and *excess* is chiefly due to the similarity of their sound, but there is a band of meaning in which they overlap.

Access is a noun meaning an approach, a coming into, or the means by which entry is obtained. *Access* to a house is by way of the door. *Access* to a great man requires money or influence.

Excess means going out, the direct opposite of *access*. In the sense of going out of one's mind or beyond one's means, *excess* has come to mean immoderation (*He drinks to excess*); superfluity, in the sense of more than enough, overflowing (*Children are full of excess energy*); the extent to which one thing is more than another (*His appetite is in excess of his capacity*); it has also come to stand in a pejorative sense as a generic term for any immoral, licentious extravagances (Oscar Wilde's epigram: *Nothing succeeds like excess*).

Access is sometimes used for "a coming into" an emotional storm, a sudden outburst of

passion (*In an access of rage he stabbed his friend*). Here *excess* might be used, and some English authorities deny the correctness of *access* in this context. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* accepts it. Many distinguished English authors have so used it. And it is certainly sanctioned by American usage.

accessary and **accessory** are linguistic lovers, perpetually exchanging vowels. In American usage *accessary* is recognized only as a noun, but *accessory* is accepted as both noun and adjective. *Accessary* is limited, with us, chiefly to the legal significances of the word, though, even there, *accessory* can be used.

In law an *accessary* or *accessory* plays a minor part in a crime. An *accessory before the fact* is one who helped, or at least had knowledge of and did not hinder, the committing of a crime but was not present when the act was done; an *accessory after the fact* knowingly assists or conceals another who has committed a felony.

In common usage *accessory* means something added or attached for convenience or attractiveness and it emphasizes the subordinate nature of the contribution (*The accessory details of the building*). It is an interesting illustration of the confusion latent in the most common words that this word which is in daily use amongst us has different meanings for men and women. To most American women *accessories* means the portable or detachable additions to her costume—hat, bag, earrings, scarf, and so on. To most American men *accessories* means additions to the car—radio, heater, spotlight, and so on.

accident. See **mishap**.

accidents will happen. The suggestion, in many forms, that "time and chance happeneth to all" is common to all languages and where, as in *Ecclesiastes*, it is a sincere comment, the bitter fruit of observation and experience, it can have dignity and force.

But *accidents will happen*, apart from being a cliché, has an exasperating levity to it and a patronizing air of unfeeling consolation—especially if the almost inevitable "in the best-regulated families" is tacked on to it.

All clichés are tedious, but those that are used when real feeling is expected—as in consolation—are dangerous in that their cut-and-dried nature makes one suspect the sincerity of the emotion expressed. This may be unfair, for many worthy people express sincere feelings in clichés and quotations, pathetic in their inarticulateness and more pathetic in the likelihood of being misunderstood.

accommodation; accommodations. With the preposition *to*, *accommodation* is the act of adapting or being adapted to (*The accommodation of modern furniture to the human figure*).

The use of the word to designate lodgings or food and lodgings is expressed in American usage by the plural, *accommodations*, and in English usage by the singular, *accommodation*. Originally the English used *accommodation*. Othello demanded for his wife *such accommo-*

dation and besort as levels with her breeding. Later they used *accommodations*. Defoe, Boswell, and Jane Austen so used it. But they have now reverted to the singular, and the plural in this sense is unknown among them.

In America the plural is now universally used. One wires a hotel for accommodations when only a single room is desired. Pullman accommodations may be a roomette, a bedroom, or several sleeping sections thrown together. Hotels have "Accommodations Desks." **accompanist** has supplanted **accompanyist** in general preference as one who accompanies in the musical sense.

according; accordingly. *Accordingly* is the form used alone to qualify a verb, as in *he wrote accordingly*. The form *according* is required before *to*, as in *he wrote according to orders*. *According* may also be used to qualify a noun, as in *the according hearts of men*, and with *as* to introduce a clause, as in *according as it is understood or not*, but these last constructions are not often heard today.

accountable means responsible, liable. But since only a human agent can be called on to account for his actions (animal trials having ceased in the eighteenth century), the word can only be used to describe human liability (*The dog was responsible for tearing the coat and its owner was held accountable for the damage*).

accredit. See **credit**.

accrue. Although *accrue* has long carried the general sense of to happen or result as a natural growth, to arise in due course, to come or fall as an addition or increment, it is most safely used in a specifically legal context, meaning to become a present and enforceable right or demand (*Interest accrues at the rate of two percent per annum*). It is ostentatious and inaccurate to use *accrue* as a synonym for *result* or *happen* when there are no legal or financial implications, as in *It is unlikely that benefits will accrue from such a belligerent policy*.

accumulative has been replaced in almost all uses by *cumulative*, surviving only in the sense generally expressed by *acquisitive* (*His accumulative instinct led him to buy real estate*).

accusative case. The accusative is a Latin case used principally to mark the object of a verb. In modern English this relationship is shown by position. See **object of a verb** and **objective pronouns**.

accuse. See **charge**.

accustom. This word may be followed by an infinitive, as in *I am not accustomed to lie*, or by the *-ing* form of a verb with the preposition *to*, as in *I am not accustomed to lying*. Both forms are standard.

acid test. Gold, chemically inactive, resists the action of acids that corrode other metals. *The acid test* was, therefore, a test calculated to distinguish gold from other substances such as iron or copper pyrites. As a term for a severe test, *the acid test* has become a cliché.

acknowledge. See **confess**.

acquaint. See **tell.**

acquaintanceship. The suffix *-ship* denotes a state, condition, or quality (as in *friendship* or *scholarship*), an office or profession (as in *professorship*), an art or skill (as in the new humorous word *gamesmanship*), something embodying a quality or state (as in *courtship*), or one entitled to a specified rank (as in his *lordship*).

Since the word *acquaintance* means not only one who is known to a certain degree (*He is an old acquaintance of mine*) but also the state of being acquainted (*The cultured man will have some acquaintance with mathematics*), the adding of the suffix to form *acquaintanceship* is totally unnecessary. It means nothing that *acquaintance* does not mean and probably came into existence as a false analogy to *friendship*, *fellowship*.

acquirement and **acquisition** are both nouns that designate things gained by the expenditure of effort or cash. But an *acquirement* is something that has been developed in a person—a faculty, a skill, a talent. An *acquisition*, on the other hand, is a material object bought, or obtained by some other means, by a person (*Petronius Arbiter's acquirements in taste qualified him to direct Nero's acquisitions of art treasures*).

Acquirement is acceptable in the singular and the plural (*acquirements*), although it is more frequently used in the plural, indicating a diversity of things which collectively make up a talent or faculty.

acronyms are acrostic words formed from the initial letters of other words, or from initial letters or syllables of the successive parts of a compound term, or from initial letters plus final letters of the final part of a compound term.

They serve the same purpose as abbreviations, but are primarily designed for speech and appeal more to the ear than to the eye. They are a form of word play. Some seem to be happy accidents—such as *WRENS*, from Women's Royal Naval Service. Others seem more self-conscious; they were obviously made up first and the compound term then derived from them. *WAVES* certainly seem to be chickens that came before the egg. The acronym suggests the sea effectively but it is hard to imagine that the coiners first thought of the long form, Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service. The name of the Women's Reserve of the United States Coast Guard Reserve, *SPAR*, is among the most ingenious of acronyms. It derives from the Coast Guard motto and its translation, "Semper Paratus—Always Ready," or perhaps simply from the first letter of the first word of the motto and the first three letters of the second word. In the case of *WASP* some liberties had to be taken to make the acronym from the phrase Women's Air Forces Service Pilots.

Among the most unfortunate of acronyms was *CINCUS* (pronounced "sink us") for the Commander in Chief of the United States

Navy. In the reorganization of the command of the Navy following Pearl Harbor it was dropped from use.

The acronym seems largely an outgrowth of World War II, though *WRENS* was coined in World War I. Out of the second conflict came such salty acronyms as *SNAFU* and *TARFU*, usually translated as "Situation Normal—All Fouled Up" and "Things Are Really Fouled Up." There were also technical acronyms such as the British *ASDIC* for Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee, and the American *SONAR* for SOUNd NAVigation Ranging. On both sides of the Atlantic there was *RADAR* for RADio Detecting And Ranging.

AWOL was an abbreviation in World War I and became an acronym in World War II. That is, in World War I it was pronounced as four letters; in World War II, it was pronounced as a word (ā'wôl). It is still military slang and not accepted as standard English, however.

There seems to be no generally applicable rule as to which abbreviations become acronyms and which do not. Pronounceability of the abbreviation is not the sole deciding factor, else why *NATO*, for instance, but not *OPA*? Some of the older abbreviations, such as *F.O.B.* and *G.A.R.*, are probably too established to be changed. Acronyms represent a new tendency in the language.

Certainly *unpronounceability* or uncertainty regarding pronunciation rules out some abbreviations as acronyms. Thus *Pan-Am* (for Pan-American Airways) is obvious, but *BOAC* (for British Overseas Airway Corporation) is not.

Commercial enterprises and products that have acronyms for names have an important advertising advantage over their less-easily-remembered competitors. *Alcoa* and *Nabisco* are two examples that come immediately to mind.

acropolis. The plural is *acropolises* or *acropoles*.
across; acrost. *Across* is the only acceptable form.

Although *acrost* is formed on the same pattern as *amongst* and *whilst*, both of which are acceptable it has never been literary English.

act; action. The distinction between these two words is difficult to define. Often they are completely synonymous (*His heroic act was long remembered. His heroic action was long remembered*), but there are many places where one would not be substituted for the other (*Rapid action is needed if we are to be saved. It was his act and he must accept the consequences*).

Fowler points out that *action* alone has the collective sense (*We must look to Congress for action in this crisis*) and that where there is doubt *action* tends to displace *act*. (As he says, we would now be inclined to speak not of the *Acts* of the Apostles but of their *Actions*). In the sense where the reference is to the nature of a deed or the characteristic of a deed (*An act of thoughtfulness; the act of*