

"Move over, Edwin Newman and William Safire."

—UPI on J.N. Hook

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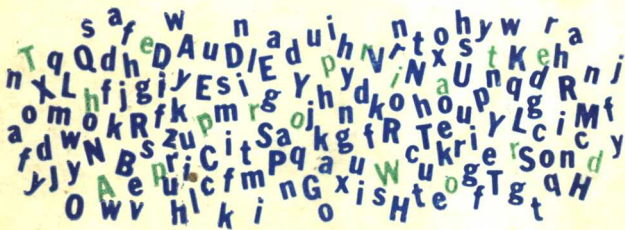
THE

Finding the Best Way

APPROPRIATE

to Say What You Mean

WORD



A circular arrangement of various letters and small words in different colors (green, blue, black) scattered around the perimeter of a circle.

J.N.HOOK

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THE APPROPRIATE WORD

*Finding the Best Way to Say
What You Mean*

J. N. HOOK



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INTRODUCTION

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"Is this the appropriate word?" is a question not often fully articulated, but writers may need to answer it one or more times in almost any sentence. The question is not new, although the answers change somewhat with each generation. Joseph Conrad and Gustave Flaubert spent hours searching for the exact word, Elizabeth Barrett Browning put pyramids of possible alternatives in her margins, and many literate people remember Mark Twain's often-quoted statement that the difference between the right word and the almost-right word is as great as that between lightning and the lightning bug.

As professional authors, these nineteenth-century writers had effective ways to find the words that were appropriate for their times, their topics, and their readers. *The Appropriate Word* is intended to help today's people who write, especially nonprofessionals, in making many of their choices. A reference tool alongside a dictionary and a thesaurus, it should be of help to office workers, students, beginning or would-be authors, and anyone else who hopes to write clear, effective, and concise modern English that fits the circumstances.

FF and SWE

Books on English usage typically tell their readers, "This is right, but that is wrong. Say this, but don't say that."

The Appropriate Word is different. It says:

- There are no absolutes in language. What is standard in this century may have been taboo in the past or may become nonstandard in the future.
- A word may be "right" in some circumstances but not necessarily in others. Some of the words that are quite satisfactory at home or at a party or a bar may be less suitable in other places and with other people.

I use repeatedly in this book the letters FF (for "family and friends") to represent the casual, unplanned, carefree, and frequently slangy

expressions that most Americans employ most of the time in conversing with or writing to people they know well or other people with backgrounds similar to their own.

I use SWE to refer to "standard written English." Some people call SWE "edited writing" instead, because its usages are similar to those found in such well-edited newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor* or such magazines as the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*.

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FF must not be equated with "wrong." The idea that every word or phrase is right or wrong was long ago repudiated by linguists. "Levels of usage" superseded "rightness" and "wrongness," but even that concept suggests superior levels and inferior levels. The contention in this book is that most words are appropriate in both formal and informal contexts but that at this time, late in the twentieth century, some words and expressions are appropriate in informal family-friends contexts but are regarded as less appropriate or inappropriate in relatively formal writing (as well as speaking). A word used in an inappropriate context is a weed.

A weed is defined by some botanists as "a plant out of place." A weed is not right or wrong, but is inappropriately located, perhaps in the middle of your manicured bluegrass lawn. A word, similarly, sometimes appears in an inappropriate place. As a word, it is not right or wrong, but in its location it may be suitable or unsuitable, appropriate or inappropriate.

For example, one of my college undergraduates, praising Emily Dickinson, said that she was "an exceptionable woman." *Exceptionable* doesn't belong in that context, because it means "objectionable," and my student was in no way objecting to or taking exception to that great American poet. He meant, of course, that she was *exceptional*, defined as "unusual, extraordinary, possessing unexpected or uncommon attributes." The student's *exceptionable* is a perfectly good word, definitely not wrong, but it was a weed in his sentence. This book will assist in the continuing and many-fronted fight against such weeds.

Appropriateness, then, involves adapting language to circumstances and to the intended receivers of the message. Almost everyone does some adapting, usually without thinking about it. When Daddy tells a story to Karen and Jason, he uses different words and even somewhat different grammatical structures and sentence lengths from those he uses in talking with adult friends or in writing a report to be used in his business or profession. Mama talks differently to the children, her own mother, her husband, her close friends, her business associates, and the pediatrician, and she writes differently to an old college friend, now living in Europe, from the way she writes to the

seafood company that doesn't work hard enough to avoid killing dolphins, or to the congressional representative who perhaps can do something about it.

FF draws from the same vocabulary that SWE does, and countless FF sentences, addressed to family and friends, are identical to those employed in more formal contexts. Both FF and SWE are "good English" if they convey whatever information and emotion the writer or speaker intends. But FF is contrastable to SWE in these ways and perhaps in others:

- FF is ordinarily spontaneous, off-the-cuff, unplanned. We seldom think much about choice of words when we are conversing with a spouse, our children, or a good friend. We know that the words will come when we start chatting, and that if something is not clear, we'll be asked, "Whaddaya mean?"
- To the user of FF, language is just a tool, employed as unthinkingly as a spoon or a toothbrush. The FF speaker or writer seldom asks himself, "Is this word exact, completely clear, and in conformity with what Miss Snyder taught us in junior high school?" FF tends to be relaxed – linguistically and stylistically unconcerned.
- Because it is unplanned, FF is less meticulous than SWE. SWE generally differentiates, for instance, between *less* and *fewer*, *enemy* and *adversary*, or *disapprove* and *reject*, but most users of FF pay little attention to such distinctions.
- FF often exaggerates and exclaims. It may praise a small achievement as "Great!" or describe a merely unpleasant experience as "Horrible!"
- Some, but not all, users of FF either do not recall or do not obey teachers' admonitions not to use *ain't*, double negatives, *my mother she*, and other nonstandard forms such as those in "He done his work real good."
- FF usages are less consistent, less predictable, than those of SWE. Some FF users may say "I saw it" in one sentence but "I seen it" a little later.
- FF adopts innovative language, especially slang, more quickly than SWE does. As a synonym of *excellent*, FF in one decade may use *swell*; in another, *boss*; in another, *real cool*; and in still another, *ba-ad* or *wicked good*. But SWE may stay unswervingly with *excellent*. (It is true, though, that SWE eventually does accept a small percentage of originally slang words, especially if they are shorter, clearer, or more expressive than their synonyms. See the entry on MOB as an example.)
- FF more frequently than SWE uses words commonly regarded as profane or obscene. Some servicemen in two world wars were said – although certainly not accurately – to have vocabularies of only seven words, all of them at that time unprintable.

● FF tends to be more repetitive than SWE. It contains many redundancies, wasted words. It is sometimes succinct, but more often not. It may say "in the neighborhood of a hundred dollars" instead of "about a hundred dollars," or "a huge, big, immense building" instead of settling for a single adjective.

● The vocabulary of FF tends to be more limited than that of SWE. A person whose usual FF vocabulary may be only a few thousand words may use several times as many in business or professional work. Because of the greater meticulousness of SWE, its users take time to find the word that comes closest to conveying his precise meaning.

x ● FF is more varied than SWE. Its users range from near-inarticulateness to the edge of SWE. Some FF users are more slangy, profane, exclamatory, or hyperbolic than others. Some are less repetitive, more succinct, more versatile in word choice, more colorful, or more often observant of Miss Snyder's linguistic precepts than others.

A few people never need SWE at all. These are persons who have almost no contact with people other than those in their own limited environment and rarely need to communicate in writing. In fact, unless the job demands SWE, a whole week, a whole year, may be spent largely in FF contexts.

At least occasionally, however, most people do need to write letters to strangers, an explanation to the IRS, a memorandum or even a report to the boss. In an age when communication is increasingly called "the lifeblood of business and industry" and when the livelihoods of millions of Americans require considerable amounts of communication, a high degree of precision and consistency of word choice is desirable and often essential. This means SWE, not the FF that is appropriate mainly in contexts that are unlikely to penalize rather imprecise and inconsistent language.

Although SWE means "standard written English," its characteristics are present also in much spoken English, typically outside one's own intimate circles. SWE is especially likely in discussions of relatively serious subjects. If we are ever called on to address a convention of meteorologists, we will probably use SWE, but in talking about the weather with a chance acquaintance on the golf course, we use FF.

To describe SWE in part, we need only to turn upside down what has already been said about FF. SWE is usually:

- somewhat planned, seldom just spontaneous; it is thoughtful in regard to language, considering it an instrument that can be finely tuned to help a writer attain whatever his or her purpose may be.
- fairly careful in word choice.
- seldom exclamatory or hyperbolic.

- in general accord with conventional modern standards (although today less constrained than before by rules that now seem artificial, such as most of those about split infinitives and *shall vs. will*).
- consistent in choice of verb forms, pronoun cases, and the like.
- not more than moderately slangy, or in some contexts not at all.
- unlikely to be profane or obscene (except possibly in direct quotations).
- not wasteful of words, not repetitious except when repetition serves a purpose.
- furnished with a sizable vocabulary from which may be selected the words that most accurately convey intended information, ideas, or emotion from writer to reader.
- less extreme in its variations than FF, although its users are certainly not like peas in a pod. They differ especially in degree of formality, with some almost always preferring a light touch, and others most often serious without being stiff. They also shift gears as necessitated by context and purpose; for instance, a lawyer may be constrained to use legalese in official documents but may try to talk in layman's terms to his clients.

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It can be argued that a no-man's-land exists between FF and SWE, a shaded area that cannot be categorized. I accept this argument and so occasionally use such terms as "informal SWE" or "marginally SWE" or "moving toward SWE."

An occasional entry in this book uses the acronym SANE, perhaps, as in this short example:

appear on the scene, arrive on the scene SANE says, "Delete three words in each."

SANE is an imaginary organization, the Society for the Avoidance of Needless Effort. It especially dislikes writing, typing, or speaking more words than are needed and forcing readers or listeners to read or listen to more words than they must. SWE generally follows SANE's precepts, but sometimes I have felt the need to suggest a change that I consider mere common sense. Then I say, in effect, "SANE recommends . . ."

Toward More Natural Expression

English language usages change slowly but constantly, as any reader of Chaucer, Shakespeare, or even a nineteenth-century author can easily see. Perhaps the greatest change in this century has been a move away from stiffness, long sentences, and greater-than-necessary formality. On average, today's SWE is less formal than that of 1940 or even 1960 or 1970, although a few circumstances demanding considerable formality still exist.

xii Modern American usage reflects lifestyles that in this century have steadily become less structured, more relaxed. A writer in the nineteenth century at least figuratively donned his Prince Albert coat before dipping his pen into the inkwell. Today's writer is likely to sit in shirt-sleeves in front of the word processor.

Modern good writing, such as that in the best-edited magazines and newspapers, is characterized by relatively short sentences and paragraphs, lively verbs, an occasionally surprising noun or adjective, and especially a lack of starchiness. It reflects the influence of journalism but not journalistic excesses; it combines the lively styles of good reporters with the care and verbal precision of literary craftsmen.

By no means, then, have all the usage bars been let down. "Anything goes" has not become the rule governing SWE. The lowest common denominator, the language of the high school dropout, has not taken over. Today's even moderately careful users of SWE do not write, for instance, "had took" or "Me and her wasn't to blame nohow," nor do most of them confuse *apex* and *nadir* or *bisect* and *dissect*. They still adhere to a degree of orthodoxy, as is suggested by the fact that each year they spend millions of dollars on word processors or typewriters that alert them to spelling misdemeanors or provide lists of synonyms to remind them of choices that may be available. But in their writing, despite this leaning toward orthodoxy, they try to avoid stodginess, stiffness, and any hint of being old-fashioned.

Not only journalists and authors and editors of magazine articles have become less rigid. So have many of the people who write or dictate the correspondence coming from the nation's multitudinous places of business. Writers of business letters, for example, long ago stopped saying things like "Yours of the tenth inst. rec'd and contents noted. . . . Yr. obedient servant." Symptomatic of the trend are most of the articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Nation's Business*, *Forbes*, or probably any other widely read business publication.

Even scholarly writing has become less stiff. Paul Halmos is one of the world's leading researchers in mathematics and the editor of the prestigious *American Mathematical Monthly*. He tells of an early article

of his that while in draft stage was criticized by a colleague for its occasional use of contractions, such as *isn't* rather than *is not*. At that time the use of contractions, as well as almost any other hint of informality, was taboo in scholarly writing. Halmos ignored the criticism, his article was published, and two years later it was awarded the coveted Chauvenet Prize for mathematical exposition.

In his autobiographical *I Want to Be a Mathematician*, published in 1985 by the Mathematical Association of America, Halmos expressed this belief about writing, a point of view increasingly accepted by scholars in many disciplines:

Expository writing must not be sloppy in either content or form and, of course, it must not be misleading; it must be dignified, correct, and clear. Within these guidelines, however, expository writing should be written in a clear, colloquial style, it should be evocative in the same sense in which poetry is, and it should not be stuffy, but friendly and informal. The purpose of writing is to communicate, and style is a tool for communication. It should be chosen so as to put the reader at his ease and make the subject seem as easy to him as it already is to the author.

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Halmos was not the first to make such a plea. During most of the first half of this century, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, which prints articles by literary scholars, was almost invariably dull and stodgy, sometimes described as "a thin trickle of text and a river of footnotes." Its authors tended to display polysyllables and Latinate prose, and even though many of them were no doubt likable and good-natured, seldom did a trace of their amiability show up in their weighty *PMLA* articles.

Then in the 1940s along came an eminent Milton scholar, William Riley Parker. He was *MLA* secretary and *PMLA* editor. Like Halmos, Parker realized that scholarly accuracy and dignified writing were not incompatible with readability, a moderate degree of informality, and at least a touch of friendliness. He described in detail the expository qualities that he would insist on, and because of his prestige and that of the journal, he was able to get them – although some struggles did occur. Scholarly writing as a whole has become much more readable because of the work of such people as Halmos and Parker, and its contributions to human knowledge have not decreased in amount or significance.

Much more widely read than scholarly journals are many of the hundreds of popular magazines that fill today's newsstands. I once made a quick comparison of articles in a modern *Harper's* and an issue of a century earlier. Modern sentences average about half the length of the older ones, each word is much more likely to have six or eight

letters rather than ten or twelve, even fairly technical subjects are treated so that almost any interested layman can understand them, and the words flow. Most published authors, such as those who write for today's best magazines, are not afraid to show that they are human beings, even making use of occasional wit and humor.

The Entries

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The number of entries in *The Appropriate Word* is over 2,300, not counting cross-references. The total number of words treated (since many of the entries deal with two or more words) is close to 4,000.

How were the terms chosen? Admittedly, I had to be both selective and subjective. The book could have been much fatter; some readers may moan about what they consider unforgivable omissions. From varied sources I chose terms that reflected wordiness or misinformation or provoked uncertainty. These sources were many thousands of pages of college student writing, freshman themes through doctoral dissertations; local newspapers bought during my frequent travels, papers ranging from the weekly *Corn Belt Sentinel* to most of the nation's metropolitan dailies and their bloated Sunday editions; TV commentators and sports announcers, whose attempts at liveliness and cleverness vary in success. My wife and I for years have read regularly the *New York Times* and a semirural Illini or Hoosier daily. Large numbers of books from the past couple of decades make our bookshelves sag. We subscribe to some forty magazines (not always the same ones), including the *New Yorker*, the quite different *New York*, and the *Atlantic*, through *Newsweek*, *Good Housekeeping*, hobby magazines, *Arizona Highways*, an occasional West Coast periodical, and *Harrowsmith* (a delightful New England journal of rural life). To see what many other people read, we now and then buy tabloids and other periodicals, some of which we find it judicious to hide in the shopping cart under a box of cornflakes.

And in our travels in fifty states, my wife and I like to listen to people talk. Some might call us shameless eavesdroppers. We enjoy the many dialects, and we tuck away in our minds and sometimes on paper countless instances of words and constructions that occur in speaking but only rarely, if ever, in *House Beautiful*, for instance.

In writing about each term that I selected, how did I decide whether it was FF or SWE, or both (as is not unusual)? How did I decide that a word or expression was formal, informal, slangy, stiff, old-fashioned, wordy, or something else? I recalled, with my wife's help, its customary environment(s), noting whether it thrives in a lively breeze or in calm air, what its neighbors are like, how high-class its

surroundings are (the languages of corner bars and of ritzy hotel bars differ considerably), whether it sometimes seems discordant in a given context. My wife and I try to be constantly alert to what is happening in the language, noting words or usages new to us, and other words or usages that seem to be getting established or dropping out of sight.

My wife, more conservative than I, often tempers my premature enthusiasm for some of the more eccentric coinages and innovative, or at least uncommon, usages. She also begs me not to call *imply* and *infer* interchangeable in *SWE*, even though a few respected publications treat them as though they are. And she implores me never to get what she calls "too permissive" about *unique*. Precision, she says, is important, even though the *New York Times* and other reputable publications are sometimes imprecise. The language is weakened, she believes, when it loses a needed word for which there is no exact synonym. This is what happens, for instance, when *unique*, which means "pertaining to the only one of its kind," is used to mean merely "unusual," because the language then has no remaining short, clear way to say "the only one of its kind." My wife's reasoning is sometimes very convincing. It shows up in a few entries in which I say, in effect, "*SWE* does so and so, but it would make more sense to do it this other way. *SANE* recommends . . ."

Abbreviations Used in Entries

FF: family and friends

SANE: Society for the Avoidance of Needless Effort (a fictitious organization)

SWE: standard written English

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A

a, an/per Purists of the sort who have asserted that *television* is a bad coinage because it combines Greek and Latin roots and thus is horribly miscegenetic have also said that *per*, from Latin, should not be used as a companion for words from Anglo-Saxon. SWE discards such reasoning as nonsense. Countless comparable mixtures exist in English and other languages. In the sense of "for each" or "by each," *per* and *a* (or *an*) are usually interchangeable: "a dollar per (or *a*) gallon." *Per* is especially likely in scientific contexts. Sometimes *a* may cause some odd-sounding sentences that *per* does not. "Output a man" is harder to understand than "output per man." Bernstein found this delightful example: "Belgium is rated third, with a yield a cow a year of 3,760 kilograms of milk." SWE would prefer ". . . an annual yield of 3,760 kilograms of milk per cow."

a/some "Some man told us how to get to Staunton" is FF. SWE: "A man . . ."

abandoned/depraved/vicious Each suggests immorality, but of different sorts. The *abandoned* person indulges frequently in "sin" and is not repentant. The *depraved* person actively searches for unusual sexual experiences and goes to extremes in use of alcohol or other drugs. The *vicious* person tries to hurt others, but the most likely victim of the abandoned or depraved person is himself.

abdicate/abrogate To *abdicate* is to relinquish formally, to give up: "Edward VIII abdicated the throne." To *abrogate* is to nullify or cancel: "Spain abrogated the treaty."

ability (verb with) SWE uses *ability* plus an infinitive rather than *ability* plus *of* plus an *-ing* form: "ability to speak" rather than "ability of speaking."

ability/capacity 1. *Ability* and *capacity* both refer to qualities enabling a person to accomplish something, and sometimes may be used interchangeably. With reference to performing a specific act, however, *ability* is more likely: "ability to solve problems," ". . . to jump high." *Capacity* is a little more general and is more likely to be inborn rather than developed: "mental capacity," "capacity for painstaking research." One definition of the word is "ability to contain."
2. SWE tries to avoid the pompousness of sentences such as "In what capacity does he work?" It prefers "What kind of work does he do?" or "Precisely what is his job?"

abjure/adjure To *abjure* is to swear off, to renounce, to recant sol-

For meanings of abbreviations and full names of references, see page xvi.

A slash mark separating headwords indicates that they are contrasted. A comma between them indicates treatment as a unit. Capital letters signify a short general article rather than one on specific words.

emly: "Her husband abjured drinking and gambling." To *adjure* is to command solemnly or to beg earnestly: "My father adjured me to stay out of bars."

able For the most part, only animate beings have ability; inanimate things in general are not "able" in the usual sense of the word: "We were able to hear the ocean waves from our cottage," or "From our cottage the ocean waves could be heard," but not "From our cottage the ocean waves were able to be heard." The restriction to animate beings is usually not applied to complex or "intelligent" machines, electronic gear, and so on: "My car is able to smooth out many of the bumps." "My computer is able to produce elaborate graphics."

aborning Used in SWE, though uncommon, for "getting started" or "while barely under way": "The strategy was yet aborning."

about (redundant) SWE omits *about* when the context makes it unnecessary, as in "She estimated that the task would take (about) ten or fifteen hours" (*estimated* implies "about").

about/around/round (adverb or preposition) *Around* or *round* emphasizes circularity more than *about* does. Thus "walked around (or round) the house" suggests a tour of the outer edges, but "walked about the house" suggests moving from one place to another but perhaps not following a circular path.

above (adjective, noun) With the meaning "mentioned above," *above* is SWE as an adjective but may seem stiff or awkward, as in "The above accusation was impossible to prove." SWE often rephrases, possibly as "The accusation referred to earlier . . ." *Above* as a noun is also SWE, although it suggests legalistic writing: "Two witnesses confirmed the above." In most SWE, "confirmed that statement" or something similar is likely.

above/more than SWE prefers *more than* in indicating time or measure: "more than five weeks," "more than a meter." *Above* more often suggests a physical location: "above the treetops."

abridged/unabridged An *abridged* dictionary, such as the various editions of *Webster's Collegiate*, is shortened from a full-length, *unabridged* one, such as *Webster III*. To *abridge* is to shorten or condense.

abrogate See ABDICATE/ABROGATE.

ABSOLUTE COMPARISONS See COMPARISON OF ABSOLUTES; PERFECT.

abstruse/obscure Something *abstruse* is difficult for most people to understand because it is complex or specialized. Most of us still consider Einstein's theory of relativity *abstruse*, but many scientists do understand it. Something *obscure* is perhaps not clearly understood by anyone at all. Alternatively, it may be expressed in an unclear way: "The causes of some diseases are still obscure." "Many explanations are obscure because badly written."

ABSTRACT AND GENERAL WORDS Although abstract and general words are often needed to avoid endless lists of concrete and specific

terms, many inexperienced writers use too many of them. To write effectively, one must make readers see, feel, hear, smell, and taste. *Oppression* brings forth no image, no pain, really no sensation except vague dislike and pity. But *sting of the lash* or *three years in a dank dungeon* makes readers see, feel, perhaps even hear. *Plant* draws little response, nor does *pretty flower* draw very much, but *purple petunia* evokes a colored picture and possibly the recollection of a pleasant odor. *Said* conveys only the idea that someone spoke, but *whispered* or *screamed* makes the speaker live.

The good poet and the experienced novelist and almost every other excellent writer think in concrete, specific terms. They have learned to observe, and they do not lack the power to abstract or to generalize. But because they want not merely to inform but also to portray and often to move, they generally express themselves concretely, specifically. They often use examples or metaphors to make an abstraction seem real. They frequently provide only what is needed for readers to draw their own conclusions. In doing so, they are likely to use specific language. Thus Shakespeare's King Lear, who has given his kingdom to his children and whose daughter Goneril has deprived him of most of his attendants, does not prate about "selfishness," or "unkindness," or "ingratitude." Instead Lear says, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" *Sharper, serpent's tooth, child* – all relatively concrete and specific, but Shakespeare made them shape for him the abstract thought he wished to convey.

academic As in "The question is only academic." The implication of such usage may be resented by university scholars who each year considerably increase human knowledge and some of whom are responsible, intentionally or not, for inventions and discoveries that increase human comfort, add to the food supply, and prolong human life. To equate *academic* with *trivial* is insulting. To equate it with *truth-seeking* is accurate. All truths are worth knowing: that is the center of academic belief. Most SWE writing, but not all, reflects this practice: if something is unimportant or trivial, say so, but don't call it academic.

accent/accenuate In the sense of "emphasize," often interchangeable, although one or the other may sound better in context. *Accenuate* is more common with abstractions: "Accenuate the positive" is a line from an old song," but "Accent the first syllable."

accept/except *Accept*, a verb, means "receive as satisfactory or at least passable": "She accepted her prize with a gracious little speech." *Except* is usually a preposition meaning "with the exception of": "None of the girls except Sue won a medal." *Except* may also be a verb for "to make an exception of": "Because of John's illness, the teacher excepted him from the requirement."

acceptive/receptive Someone willing to accept something may be called *acceptive*: "Today she was in an acceptive mood, believing