



The  
Facts On File  
Dictionary of  
**Troublesome  
Words**

Bill Bryson



# **The Facts On File Dictionary of Troublesome Words**

By Bill Bryson



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## **The Facts On File Dictionary of Troublesome Words**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This book might more accurately, if less convincingly, have been called *A Guide to Everything in English Usage That the Author Wasn't Entirely Clear About Until Quite Recently*. Much of what follows is the product of questions encountered during the course of daily newspaper work: should it be 'fewer than 10 per cent of voters' or 'less than 10 per cent'? Does someone have 'more money than her' or 'than she'?

The answers to such questions are not always easily found. Seeking the guidance of colleagues is, I discovered, dangerous: raise almost any point of usage with two journalists and you will almost certainly get two confident, but entirely contradictory, answers. Traditional reference works are often little more helpful because they so frequently assume from the reader a familiarity with the intricacies of grammar that is – in my case, at any rate – generous. Once you have said that in correlative conjunctions in the subjunctive mood there should be parity between the protasis and apodosis, you have said about all there is to say on the matter. But you have also, I think, left most of us as confused as before. I have therefore tried in this book to use technical terms as sparingly as possible (but have included a glossary at the end for those that do appear).

For most of us the rules of English grammar are at best a dimly remembered thing. But even for those who make the rules, grammatical correctitude sometimes proves easier to urge than to achieve. Among the errors cited in this book are a number committed by some of the leading authorities of this century. If men such as Fowler and Bernstein and Quirk and Howard cannot always get their English right, is it reasonable to expect the rest of us to?

The point is one that has not escaped the notice of many structural linguists, some of whom regard the conventions of English usage as intrusive and anachronistic and elitist, the domain of pedants and old men. In *American Tongue and Cheek*, Jim Quinn, a sympathizer, savages those who publish 'private lists of language peeves. Professional busybodies and righters of imaginary wrongs, they are the Sunday visitors of language, dropping in weekly on the local poor to make sure that everything is up to their own idea of standard ...' (cited by William Safire in *What's The Good Word?*).



## *Introduction*

There is no doubt something in what these critics say. Usage authorities can be maddeningly resistant to change, if not actively obstructive. Many of our most seemingly unobjectionable words – precarious, intensify, freakish, mob, banter, brash – had to fight long battles, often lasting a century or more, to gain acceptance. Throughout the nineteenth century reliable was opposed on the dubious grounds that any adjective *springing from* rely ought to be *reliable*. Laughable, it was insisted, should be laugh-at-able.

Even now, many good writers scrupulously avoid hopefully and instead write the more cumbersome 'it is hoped' to satisfy an obscure point of grammar, which, I suspect, many of them could not elucidate. Prestigious is still widely avoided in Britain in deference to its nineteenth-century definition, and there remains a large body of users who would, to employ Fowler's words, sooner eat peas with a knife than split an infinitive. Those who sniff decay in every shift of sense or alteration of usage do the language no service. Too often for such people the notion of good English has less to do with expressing ideas clearly than with making words conform to some arbitrary pattern.

But at the same time, anything that helps to bring order to a language as unruly and idiosyncratic as English is almost by definition a good thing. Even the most ardent structuralist would concede that there must be at least some conventions of usage. Otherwise we might as well spell fish (as George Bernard Shaw once wryly suggested) as ghoti: 'gh' as in tough, 'o' as in women, and 'ti' as in motion. By the most modest extension it should be evident that clarity is better served if we agree to preserve a distinction between *its* and *it's*, between 'I lay down the law' and 'I lie down to sleep', between *imply* and *infer*, *forego* and *forgo*, *flout* and *flaunt*, *anticipate* and *expect* and countless others.

No one, least of all me, has the right to tell you how to organize your words, and there is scarcely an entry in the pages that follow that you may not wish to disregard sometimes and no doubt a few that you may decide to scorn for ever. The purpose of this book is to try to provide a simple guide to the more perplexing or contentious issues of standard written English – or what the American authority John Simon, in an unguarded moment, called the normative grapholect. If you wish to say 'between you and I' or use *fulsome* in the sense of *lavish*, you are entirely within your rights and can certainly find ample supporting precedents among many distinguished writers. But you may also find it useful to know that such usages are at

variance with that eccentric, ever-shifting corpus known as Good English.

Most of the entries that follow are illustrated with questionable usages from leading British and American newspapers and magazines. I should perhaps hasten to point out that the frequency with which some publications are cited has less to do with the quality of their production than with my own reading habits. *The Times* of London easily appears more often than any other publication, but then it is my job to read *The Times*.

I have also not hesitated to cite errors committed by the authorities themselves. It is, of course, manifestly ungrateful of me to draw attention to the occasional lapses of those on whom I have so unashamedly relied for almost all that I know. My intention in so doing was not to embarrass or challenge them, but simply to show how easily such errors are made, and I hope they will be taken in that light.

It is to those authorities – most especially to Theodore Bernstein, Philip Howard, Sir Ernest Gowers and the incomparable H. W. Fowler – that I am most indebted. I am also deeply grateful to my wife, Cynthia, for her infinite patience; to Donald McFarlan and my father, W. E. Bryson, for their advice and encouragement; to Alan Howe of *The Times* and, not least, to Keith Taylor, who was given the thankless task of editing the manuscript. To all of them, thank you.



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## A Note on Presentation

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To impose a consistent system of presentation in a work of this sort can result in the pages of the book being littered with italics, quotation marks or other typographical devices. Bearing this in mind, I have employed a system that I hope will be easy on the reader's eye as well as easy to follow.

Within each entry, the entry word and any other similarly derived or closely connected words are italicized only when the sense would seem to require it. Other words and phrases – synonyms, antonyms, correct/incorrect alternatives, etc. – are set within quotation marks, but again only when the sense requires it. In both cases, where there is no ambiguity, no typographical device is used to distinguish the word.



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## ◻ A ◻

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**a, an.** Do you say a hotel or an hotel? A historian or an historian? The convention is to use *a* before an aspirated 'h' (a house, a hotel, a historian) and *an* before a silent 'h'. In this second category there are only four words: hour, heir, honour (US honor) and honest, and their derivatives. Some British authorities allow *an* before hotel and historian, but almost all prefer *a*.

Errors involving *a* and *an* are no doubt more often a consequence of carelessness than of ignorance. They are particularly common when they precede a number, as here: 'Cox will contribute 10 percent of the equity needed to build a \$80 million cable system' (*Washington Post*). Make it *an*. Similarly, *a* is unnecessary in the following sentence and should be deleted: 'With a 140 second-hand wide-bodied jets on the market, the enthusiasm to buy anything soon evaporated' (*Sunday Times*).

**abdicate, abrogate, abjure, adjure, arrogate, derogate.** All six of these words have been confused in a startling variety of ways. Abdicate, the least troublesome of the six, means to renounce or relinquish. Abrogate means to abolish or annul. Abjure means to abstain from, or to reject or retract. Adjure means to command, direct or appeal to earnestly. Arrogate (a close relation of *arrogance*) means to appropriate presumptuously or to assume without right. And derogate (think of *derogatory*) means to belittle.

Those, very baldly, are the meanings. It may help you a little if you remember that the prefix *ab-* indicates 'away from' and *ad-* 'towards'. It might help the rest of us even more, however, if you were to remember that all of these words (with the possible exception of abdicate) have a number of shorter, more readily understood and generally less pretentious synonyms.

**abjure.** See ABDICATE, ABROGATE, ABJURE, ADJURE, ARROGATE, DEROGATE.

**abrogate.** See ABDICATE, ABROGATE, ABJURE, ADJURE, ARROGATE, DEROGATE.

*accrue*

**accrue** does not mean simply to increase in size, but rather to be added to bit by bit. A balloon, for instance, cannot accrue. Except in its legal and financial senses, the word is better avoided.

**acoustics.** As a science, the word is singular ('Acoustics was his line of work'). As a collection of properties, it is plural ('The acoustics in the auditorium were not good').

**acute, chronic.** These two are sometimes confused, which is a little puzzling since their meanings are sharply opposed. *Chronic* pertains to lingering conditions, ones that are not easily overcome. *Acute* refers to those that come to a sudden crisis and require immediate attention. People in the Third World may suffer from a chronic shortage of food. In a bad year, their plight may become acute.

**adage** frequently, and unnecessarily, appears with 'old' in tow. An adage is by definition old.

**adjure.** See ABDICATE, ABROGATE, ABJURE, ADJURE, ARROGATE, DEROGATE.

**admit to** is always wrong, as here: 'Pretoria admits to raid against Angola' (*Guardian* headline). Delete *to*. You admit a misdeed, you do not admit to it.

**adverse, averse.** 'He is not adverse to an occasional brandy' (*Observer*). The word wanted here was *averse*, which means reluctant or disinclined (think of *aversion*). *Adverse* means hostile and antagonistic (think of *adversary*).

**aerate.** Two syllables. Not *aereate*.

**affect, effect.** As a verb, *affect* means to influence ('Smoking may affect your health') or to adopt a pose or manner ('He affected ignorance'). *Effect* as a verb means to accomplish ('The prisoners effected an escape'). As a noun, the word needed is almost always *effect* (as in 'personal effects' or 'the damaging effects of war'). *Affect* as a noun has a narrow psychological meaning to do with emotional states (by way of which it is related to *affection*).

It is worth noting that *affect* as a verb is usually bland and often almost meaningless. In 'The winter weather affected profits in the building division' (*The Times*) and 'The noise of the crowds affected his play' (*Daily Telegraph*), it is by no means clear whether the noise and weather helped or hindered or delayed or aggravated the profits and play. A more precise word can almost always be found.

**affinity** denotes a mutual relationship. Therefore, strictly speaking, one should not speak of someone or something having an affinity for another, but rather should speak of an affinity with or between. When mutuality is not intended, sympathy would be a better word. But it should also be noted that a number of authorities and many dictionaries no longer insist on this distinction.

**agenda.** Although a plural in Latin, *agenda* in English is singular. Its English plural is *agendas* (but see DATA).

**aggravate** in the sense of 'exasperate' has been with us at least since the early seventeenth century and has been opposed by grammarians for about as long. Strictly, *aggravate* means to make a bad situation worse. If you walk on a broken leg, you may aggravate the injury. People can never be aggravated, only circumstances. Fowler, who calls objections to the looser usage a fetish, is no doubt right when he says the purists are fighting a battle that was long ago lost. But equally there is no real reason to use *aggravate* when 'annoy' will do.

**aggression, aggressiveness.** 'Aggression in US pays off for Tilling Group' (*Times* headline). Aggression always denotes hostility, which was not intended here. The writer of the headline meant to suggest only that the company had taken a determined and enterprising approach to the American market. The word he wanted was *aggressiveness*, which can denote either hostility or merely boldness and assertiveness.

**aggressiveness.** See AGGRESSION, AGGRESSIVENESS.

**aid and abet.** A tautological gift from the legal profession. The two words together tell us nothing that either doesn't already say on its own. The only distinction is that *abet* is normally reserved for contexts involving criminal intent. Thus it would be unwise to speak of,



say, a benefactor abetting the construction of a church or youth club. Other redundant expressions dear to lawyers are 'null and void', 'ways and means' and 'without let or hindrance'.

**alias, alibi.** Both words derive from the Latin root *alius* (meaning 'other'). *Alias* refers to an assumed name and pertains only to names. It would be incorrect to speak of an impostor passing himself off under the alias of being a doctor.

*Alibi* is a much more contentious word. In legal parlance it refers to a plea by an accused person that he was elsewhere at the time he was alleged to have committed a crime. More commonly it is used to mean any excuse. Fowler calls this latter usage mischievous and pretentious, and most authorities agree with him. But Bernstein, while conceding that the usage is a casualism, contends that there is no other word that can quite convey the meaning of an excuse intended to transfer responsibility. Time will no doubt vindicate him – many distinguished writers have already used *alibi* in its more general, less fastidious sense – but for the moment all that can be said is that in the sense of a general excuse, many authorities consider *alibi* unacceptable.

**alibi.** See ALIAS, ALIBI.

**allay, alleviate, assuage, relieve.** *Alleviate* should suggest giving temporary relief without removing the underlying cause of a problem. It is close in meaning to 'ease', a fact obviously unknown to the writer of this sentence: 'It will ease the transit squeeze, but will not alleviate it' (*Chicago Tribune*). *Allay* and *assuage* both mean to put to rest or to pacify and are most often applied to fears. *Relieve* is the more general term and covers all these meanings.

**allegory.** See FABLE, PARABLE, ALLEGORY, MYTH.

**alleviate.** See ALLAY, ALLEVIATE, ASSUAGE, RELIEVE.

**all right.** A good case could be made for shortening *all right* to *alright*. Not only do most of us pronounce it as one word, but also there are very good precedents in *already*, *almost* and *altogether*, which were formed by contracting *all ready*, *all most* and *all together*, and even in *alone*, which was originally *all one*. In fact, many writers