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GRE® Flash Cards: 500 Advanced Words

Written by Jennifer Dziura
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abase

(verb)

uh-BASE

Also *abased* (adj), *abasement* (noun)

Definition: Degrade or humble; to lower in rank, status, or esteem

Usage: After messing up at work, the man faced a thorough **abasement** from his boss; when he realized he had forgotten his own wedding anniversary, he further **abased** himself in front of his wife.

Related Words: *Defame* (attack the reputation of), *Belittle* (put down, disparage)

Memory Trick: **Abasement** means degradation or lowering of status—that is, **abasement** makes you feel like you should go hide in *a basement*.

abeyance

(noun)

uh-BAY-enss

Definition: Temporary suspension, inactivity

Usage: The baseball player's contract negotiations are in **abeyance** while doctors try to determine whether his injuries will heal in time for the season.

Related Words: *Hiatus* (break or gap in an activity), *Dormant* (inactive, resting), *Deferment* or *Deferral* (postponement)

More Info: **Abeyance** generally occurs in the expression “in **abeyance**.” Real estate is in **abeyance** when no one owns it or the owner is unknown.

abreast

(adj)

uh-BREST

Definition: Side-by-side. The more common “**abreast of**” means keeping up with, staying aware of, or remaining equal in progress with.

Usage: As the professor walked **abreast** down the street with her mentor, she was amazed that the old man, long since retired, still kept **abreast of** all the latest developments in neurobiology.

Related Words: *Conversant with* (familiar by use or study), *well versed in* (experienced, skilled)

More Info: You are *conversant with* a topic about which you know enough to have an intelligent conversation. *Well versed* is stronger, implying some expertise. Keeping *abreast of* a topic implies that you are continually updating your knowledge.

abscission

(noun)

ab-SIZZ-zhun

Definition: Cutting off; sudden termination; the separation of leaves, petals, or other parts from a plant or animal

Usage: The **abscission** of leaves from the trees is normal in fall. / An inflamed appendix calls for an immediate surgical **abscission**.

Related Words: *Ablation* (removal of growths, etc., by surgery or other mechanical means)

More Info: “Ab” means “away.” The “scissio” root in *abscission* means “cut” and is the same as in *scissors*, *excise* (*cut out or censor*), and *incision* (*cut into*).

abscond

(verb)

ab-SCOND

Definition: Depart suddenly and secretively

Usage: A robber **absconds** with stolen goods. People who eat in a restaurant and run out without paying—or criminals who jump bail—could also be said to be **absconding**.

Related Words: *Decamp* (to depart from camp, or to abscond)

More Info: “Ab” means “away” and the rest of **abscond** comes from a Latin word meaning “to put.”

abyss

(noun)

uh-BISS

Definition: A deep and vast space or cavity; anything profound or infinite

Usage: Walking a tightrope over an active volcano, the acrobat was terrified of falling into the **abyss**. / Now recovering, the patient remembered her experience with clinical depression as an **abyss** of hopelessness.

Related Words: *Chasm, Crevasse, Fissure, Gorge* are all words for deep openings in the earth, and can be used metaphorically (a *fissure* in a personal relationship, the *chasm* between cultures, etc.).

More Info: The 1989 classic science fiction movie *The Abyss* is about a diving team that encounters an underwater alien species.

accede

(verb)

ack-SEED

Also *accedence* (noun)

Definition: Agree, give consent; assume power (usually as “accede to”)

Usage: While the Englishman was a strong believer in democracy, he had to **accede** that watching Prince Charles someday **accede to** the throne would indeed be exciting.

Related Words: *Assent* also means agree or give in.

More Info: When Prince Charles **accedes to** the throne, he will be *succeeding* (taking power after) Queen Elizabeth.

accretion

(noun)

uh-CREE-shun

Also *accrue* (verb)

Definition: Gradual increase; an added part or addition

Usage: He was pleased by the **accretion** of money in his portfolio. / Some charitable funds keep the principal in their accounts untouched and use only the **accretion** for philanthropic purposes.

Related Words: *Augment* (grow larger), *Agglomerate* (form into a mass or cluster, join together)

More Info: Bank accounts **accrue** interest. Good deeds, ideally, **accrue** rewards.

acerbic

(adj)

uh-SER-bick

Definition: Sour; harsh or severe

Usage: Lemons are **acerbic**. Harsh comments are also **acerbic**, like putting lemon juice on a wound.

Related Words: *Caustic* (capable of burning or corroding; extremely critical or sarcastic), *Acrid* (sharp or biting, pungent), *Astringent* (biting, severe; a skin cleaning fluid that clears pores)

More Info: An **acerbic** taste is sour and an **acrid** taste is unpleasantly bitter, but when used metaphorically, both words mean harsh, critical.

acidulous

(adj)

uh-SID-joo-luss

Definition: Slightly acid or sour; sharp or caustic

Usage: Grapefruit juice is **acidulous**. / I'm skipping Thanksgiving this year just to avoid my mother's **acidulous** comments about what she thinks I ought to be doing with my life.

Related Words: *Acerbic* (sour, harsh or severe)

More Info: In Latin, “acidus” meant sour, so “acidulus,” a diminutive version, meant “slightly sour.”

acumen

(noun)

ACK-yoo-men

Definition: Keen, quick, accurate insight or judgment

Usage: His political **acumen** allowed him to bargain behind the scenes and get bills passed despite being in the minority party.

Related Words: *Perspicacity* (acuteness of perception)

More Info: **Acumen** comes from a Latin word for “needle”—hence the idea of being mentally “sharp.”

adulterate

(verb)

uh-DULL-ter-ayt

Definition: Make impure by adding inappropriate or inferior ingredients

Usage: Some bars **adulterate** top-shelf liquor by pouring cheaper brands into the more expensive brands' bottles.

Related Words: *Taint* (contaminate, corrupt), *Debase* (reduce in quality or dignity)

More Info: **Adulterate** is indeed related to *adultery* (cheating on one's spouse)—both come from a Latin word meaning “to defile.”

adumbrate

(verb)

AD-um-brayt or uh-DUM-brayt

Also *adumbration* (noun)

Definition: Give a rough outline of; foreshadow; reveal only partially; obscure

Usage: When I took on the lead role in the movie, I agreed not to give away the plot, but I suppose I could give a brief **adumbration** of the premise.

More Info: **Adumbrate** contains the root “umbra,” Latin for “shadow.” It may seem that “give an outline of” and “obscure” are opposites, but think of it this way—to **adumbrate** is to give a shadowy, vague picture of something, which could mean giving more information (if starting with nothing) or obscuring information (if starting with a clear picture) in order to reach that point.

aerie

(noun)

AIR-ee or EYE-ree

Definition: Dwelling or fortress built on a high place; the nest of a bird of prey, such as an eagle or hawk, built on a mountain or cliff

Usage: The billionaire smoked a cigar out his window and watched the riots in the streets below, safe in the **aerie** of his penthouse apartment.

Related Words: *Stronghold* (a well fortified place, especially the central place of a controversial group, as in “Police raided the smugglers’ *stronghold*.”)

More Info: **Aerie** may also be spelled *aery*, *eyrie*, or *eyry*. It shares an origin with “airy,” coming from a Latin word pertaining to an open field.

albeit

(conjunction)

al-BEE-it

Definition: Although, even though

Usage: The village leader was illiterate **albeit** highly intelligent. / The trip was exciting, **albeit** brief.

Related Words: *Notwithstanding* (in spite of, although, all the same—“*Notwithstanding* the video of his crime, he was acquitted on a technicality”)

More Info: **Albeit** is a shortening of “although it be.”

aloof

(adj)

uh-LOOF

Definition: Distant physically or emotionally; reserved; indifferent

Usage: Perceiving her parents as cold and **aloof**, the child was naturally drawn to her warm, genial aunt.

Related Words: *Detached* (impartial or aloof), *Standoffish* (cold, unfriendly)

More Info: A common stereotype is that dogs are *affable*, while cats are **aloof**.

amalgamate

(verb)

uh-MAL-guh-mayt

Definition: Blend, merge, or unite

Usage: The **Amalgamated** Transit Union is so called because it contains many local unions of bus operators, subway operators, baggage handlers, etc. / When turning her life story into a memoir, she **amalgamated** two important relatives into a single character, even **amalgamating** their names (Mary and Rose) into the character “Aunt Mary Rose.”

Related Words: *Agglomerate* (collect into a mass), *Aggregate* (gather together), *Commix* (mix together), *Conglomerate* (anything made up of different kinds of materials; blended; to bring together), *Consolidate* (unite or combine, such as companies or debts)

ameliorate

(verb)

uh-MEE-lee-or-ayt

Definition: Improve; make better or more bearable

Usage: If you spill water on your computer keyboard, you can **ameliorate** the damage by leaving the keyboard upside down to try—it may still be ruined, but that’s still the best chance you’ve got of saving it.

Related Words: *Mitigate*, *Palliate*, and *Alleviate* are near-synonyms, all of which could take the place of “**ameliorate**” in the sentence above.

More Info: **Ameliorate** occasionally appears as *meliorate* (an Old English version), meaning exactly the same thing.

amortize

(verb)

AM-or-tize

Definition: Gradually pay off a debt, or gradually write off an asset

Usage: A mortgage is a common form of **amortized** debt—spreading the payments out over as long as 30 years is not uncommon. / On his company balance sheet, Joe **amortized** the value of his patent, estimating that the patent’s value as an asset would decline steadily over the course of the year as competitors patented competing products.

More Info: **Amortize** contains the root “mort,” meaning death. **Amortization** is when a financial obligation dies a long, slow death.

anachronism

(noun)

uh-NACK-roh-nizm

Also *anachronistic* (adj)

Definition: Something that is not in its correct historical time; a mistake in chronology, such as by assigning a person or event to the wrong time period

Usage: The Queen of England is a bit of an **anachronism**, with her old-fashioned pillbox hats. / Did you catch the **anachronisms** in the latest action blockbuster set in ancient Greece? One of the characters was wearing a wristwatch with his toga!

More Info: The prefix “ana” means “against”, and “chron” means “time.” This is one word you can work out entirely with a knowledge of roots: **anachronistic** means “against time.”

analgesia

(noun)

an-al-JEE-zee-uh

Also *analgesic* (noun, adj)

Definition: Pain relief; inability to feel pain

Usage: While natural-birth advocates decline **analgesia** in childbirth, many women are very eager to take advantage of modern anesthesia. / A disease of the spinal cord can cause **analgesia**, which can be dangerous because the patient doesn't know when he has injured himself.

Related Words: *Anodyne* (pain relieving medicine or anything that relieves pain)

annul

(verb)

uh-NULL

Also *annulment* (noun)

Definition: Make void or null, cancel, abolish (usually of laws or other established rules)

Usage: Can we appreciate the art of a murderer? For many, the value of these paintings is **annulled** by the artist's crimes.

Related Words: *Nullify*, *Void* (synonyms); *Abort* (stop part way through, remain in an undeveloped state)

More Info: Most people associate “**annul**” with marriage—to get an **annulment** rather than a divorce, most states require that the marriage have been based on fraud, or that at least one person was not mentally competent to form a contract.

anodyne

(noun, adj)

ANN-uh-dine

Definition: Medicine that relieves pain (noun); soothing, relieving pain (adj)

Usage: While aspirin is a nice analgesic, the construction worker argued that, for sore and tired muscles, nothing beat the **anodyne** effects of a six-pack of beer.

Related Words: *Analgesic* (pain reliever)

More Info: In antiquated slang, a hangman’s noose was once (ironically) called an “**anodyne** necklace.”

antedate

(verb)

ANN-teh-dayt

Definition: Be older than, precede in time; assign to an earlier date

Usage: Dinosaurs **antedate** the first human beings by about 65 million years. / Jamal didn't get around to writing the "Best Vocabulary Words of 2010" blog post until January 3rd, 2011, but he **antedated** the post for December 31st so at least the infrequent readers wouldn't notice.

More Info: *Postdate* (antonym—"I will write this check now, but I'm *postdating* it for two weeks from now because I don't have the money in my account yet.")

antithetical

(adj)

an-tih-THET-ick-ull

Also *antithesis* (noun)

Definition: Directly opposed, opposite; involving *antithesis* (the rhetorical act of placing two phrases opposite one another for contrast, as in *Love me or hate me*)

Usage: Partying all night, every night, is **antithetical** to one's academic performance.

Related Words: *Deleterious* (harmful, unhealthful), *Counterproductive* (defeating the purpose; preventing the intended goal), *Inimical* (unfavorable, harmful)

More Info: **Antithesis** can be properly understood as “anti” and “thesis”—that is, being against the “thesis” (main point) of something else. The philosopher Hegel posed a method of achieving truth by which a thesis and its **antithesis** are resolved at a higher level of understanding, called *synthesis* (in normal speech, *synthesis* means combination into a unified entity).

apostate

(noun, adj)

uh-PAH-stayt or uh-PAH-stit

Also *apostasy* (noun)

Definition: Person who deserts a party, cause, religion, etc.

Usage: Many people considered “freedom fighters” by some are considered **apostates** by others; some women’s rights leaders in very conservative nations receive death threats from religious leaders who consider them **apostate**.

Related Words: *Recreant* (coward or deserter), *Perfidy* (faithlessness, treachery), *Heretic* (believer who disagrees with religious authorities; any nonconformist thinker), *Quisling* (person who betrays his country by aiding an invader), *Infidel* (unbeliever, person who does not accept a particular faith)

More Info: Don’t confuse **apostate** with *apostle*—the words are near-antonyms.

apostle

(noun)

uh-PAH-sull

Definition: Pioneer of a reform movement (originally, an early follower of Jesus)

Usage: In the 1980's, when low-fat diets were all the rage, Dr. Rubens became an **apostle** of the Mediterranean diet, high in healthy fats, and traveled the world proselytizing to groups of physicians and nutritionists.

Related Words: *Champion* (person who fights for a cause), *Expounder* (person who presents an idea in detail), *Paladin* (leading champion of a cause; trusted military leader)

More Info: When capitalized, “**Apostles**” usually refers to the original 12 disciples of Jesus. In lowercase, an “**apostle**” could be any major Christian missionary, or a spreader of a non-religious doctrine. Don't confuse **apostle** with *apostate*—the words are near-antonyms.

apposite

(adj)

APP-uh-zit or uh-PAH-zit

Definition: Highly appropriate, suitable, or relevant

Usage: He searched his brain for an **apposite** word to describe wealthy Americans' addiction to consumer goods, until he discovered the neologism "affluenza."

Related Words: *Apt* (appropriate, likely, disposed or prone, as in "Those who are *apt* to steal will receive an *apt* punishment"), *Condign* (appropriate, esp. as a punishment fits a crime)

apprise

(verb)

uh-PRIZE

Definition: Inform, give notice to

Usage: I can't believe you failed to **apprise** me that my child was biting the other children in his preschool class! If I had known, I could've addressed this issue before all the other parents threatened to sue!

More Info: If you know Spanish or French, this word might remind you of the verb *aprender* or *apprendre* for good reason—both mean “to learn.” Don't confuse **apprise** with *appraise*, which means “to evaluate or assess the value of,” as in “to have jewelry *appraised* before selling it at auction.”

approbation

(noun)

app-roh-BAY-shun

Definition: Praise or approval, especially formal approval

Usage: In her speech for class president, she won the **approbation** of her peers by promising not only to save the prom, but to raise enough money to make it free for everyone.

Related Words: *Imprimatur* (approval, a mark of approval, or especially a formal body's approval to publish a work)

Memory Trick: **Approbation** begins with the same five letters as its near-synonym *approval*.

appropriate

(verb)

uh-PROH-pree-ayt

Definition: Set aside or authorize (such as money) for a particular purpose; take for one's own use

Usage: The School Board **appropriated** money for new textbooks. / In putting together the perfect outfit for "Career Day" at her high school, Mackenzie **appropriated** her mother's stethoscope and her little brother's stuffed pig, making it clear to everyone that she wanted to be a veterinarian.

Related Words: *Arrogate* (claim or take presumptuously or without right)

More Info: The last syllable of the more common adjective "appropriate" is pronounced "it"; the last syllable of the verb **appropriate** is pronounced "ate."

arbiter

(noun)

AR-bit-er

Also *arbitrate* (verb)

Definition: Judge, umpire, person empowered to decide matters at hand

Usage: Professional mediators **arbitrate** disputes. / The principal said, “As the final **arbiter** of what is and is not appropriate in the classroom, I demand that you take down that poster of the rapper Ice-T and his scantily-clad wife Coco.”

Related Words: *Adjudicator* (judge or arbitrator, esp. a judge of a competition)

More Info: An *arbitrator* is officially appointed to settle a dispute; an **arbiter** is more someone whose opinion is valued, as in the expression “**arbiter** of good taste.”

ardent

(adj)

AR-dent

Also *ardor* (noun)

Definition: Very passionate, devoted, or enthusiastic

Usage: He was an **ardent** heavy metal lover and became offended anytime someone referred to Poison as a “hair band.” / They were so in love that not even meeting each other’s awful relatives could dampen their **ardor**.

Related Words: *Fervent*, *Fervid*, and *Perfervid* all mean “passionate, fiery, deeply enthusiastic” and come from a common root relating to heat.

More Info: Don’t confuse **ardor** with *arduous*, which means very difficult. **Ardor** comes from a Latin word meaning “to burn”, which we can think of here in the sense of “burning with passion.”

arrogate

(verb)

AIR-oh-gayt

Definition: Claim or take presumptuously or without the right to do so

Usage: In order to build the oil pipeline, the government **arrogated** the land of many small farmers who are still fighting for compensation. / The bride's mother **arrogated** the right to decide on the venue, the food, and even the wedding dress!

Related Words: The verb *Appropriate* has two meanings: set aside or authorize for a particular purpose; take for one's own use. The second meaning is a synonym for **arrogate**.

Memory Trick: To **arrogate** is to *arrogantly* take what doesn't belong to you.

ascribe

(verb)

uh-SCRIBE

Definition: Assign or credit to a certain cause or source

Usage: He **ascribed** his good grades to diligent studying. / The young boy **ascribed** to his imaginary friend all the powers he wished he had himself—being able to fly, having dozens of friends, and never having to eat his broccoli.

Related Words: *Impute* (attribute or ascribe)

More Info: **Ascribe** contains the root “scribe,” meaning “write.”

aseptic

(adj)

uh-SEP-tick or ay-SEP-tick

Also *septic* (adj), *sepsis* (noun)

Definition: Free from germs; lacking vitality, warmth, or emotion

Usage: It is very important to perform surgery in an **aseptic** environment, lest a patient contract **sepsis** (a systemic infection) and die. / Not only did Marlene dump Tom via email, but the email was so **aseptic** she might as well have been sending an interoffice memo. “That was ice cold,” said Tom.

More Info: A **septic** tank is a place under a house where sewage is stored. Since putting “a-“ before a word means “without,” it makes sense that, if **septic** means “infected or putrefying,” then **aseptic** would be the opposite.

asperity

(noun)

uh-SPARE-ih-tee

Definition: Rigor, severity; harshness or sharpness of tone; roughness of surface

Usage: Used to a more lax school environment, the freshman at military school was shocked by the **asperity** of punishments meted out for even the most minor offenses, as well as the **asperity** with which his drill sergeant bossed him around. / The **asperity** of her cheap, scratchy sweater made her wish she could afford cashmere.

More Info: **Asperity** describes a wide variety of unpleasant things: hardship, people speaking to us in an unnecessarily harsh way, or physical roughness.

aspersions

(noun)

uh-SPER-zhunz

Also *asperse* (verb)

Definition: Damaging remarks, defamation, slander

Usage: He could no longer work with his duplicitous business partner, who acted friendly to his face but then spewed **aspersions** about him behind his back. / If you **asperse** me one more time, I will sue you for libel!

Related Words: *Slander*, *Traduce*, and *Defame* all mean “to speak maliciously and falsely of”

More Info: **Aspersions** is often used in the phrase “to cast **aspersions**,” which has the sense of throwing or tossing insults or malicious lies about someone. One additional (rare) meaning of **aspersion** is “to sprinkle, such as for baptism.” So, it’s not a long leap to imagine spattering or sprinkling someone with insults.

assail

(verb)

uh-SAIL

Also *assailant* (noun)

Definition: Attack violently, assault

Usage: One strategy for winning in boxing is to simply **assail** your opponent with so many blows that he becomes disoriented. / The debate team **assailed** the opposition with more evidence than they could respond to.

Related Words: *Batter* (beat persistently or hard)

More Info: **Assail** simply means attack, so it can be used metaphorically the same way you would use *attack*, such as in “assailing one’s homework with great energy.”

assiduous

(adj)

uh-SID-joo-uss

Definition: Persevering, diligent, constant

Usage: Through **assiduous** effort over a substantial period of time, anyone can develop a prodigious vocabulary.

Related Words: *Sedulous, Tenacious*

More Info: **Assiduous** contains a variant of the root “sed,” meaning “to sit” (as in *sedated* or *sediment*). Think of **assiduous** as “sitting” in your chair until you finish your work.

attenuate

(verb)

uh-TEN-yoo-ayt

Definition: Weaken or thin out

Usage: When you pull a piece of bubblegum so it becomes long and thin, you are **attenuating** it. / Sadly, the day care center was so understaffed that the carers' efforts were **attenuated**, and many of the children barely received any attention at all.

More Info: When you **attenuate** something, it becomes *tenuous*, which means thin or weak (a *tenuous* argument).

attuned

(adj)

uh-TOON'd

Definition: In harmony; in sympathetic relationship

Usage: Research shows that new mothers are keenly **attuned** to their babies' cries; even those who were formerly heavy sleepers often find that they now wake up immediately when their babies need attention. / In the sixth week of Melanie's foreign study program, she finally **attuned** herself to life on a French farm.

More Info: **Attuned** is almost always followed by "to."

augury

(noun)

AWG-yer-ee

Also *augur* (noun)

Definition: Telling the future, such as through supernatural means

Usage: Value investors such as Warren Buffet (who attempt to buy shares in undervalued companies by analyzing the businesses themselves) consider others' attempts to "time the market" as mere **augury**, equivalent to trying to predict rain by reading tea leaves.

Related Words: *Prognosticate* and *Presage* also mean to tell the future.

More Info: An **augur** or *auspex* in ancient Rome interpreted omens (sometimes by reading bird entrails) to help guide the making of public decisions.

august

(adj)

AW-gust

Definition: Venerable, majestic; inspiring admiration

Usage: “I welcome you to this **august** institution, where Presidents and Nobel Prize winners have received the fruits of erudition,” said the university president (rather bombastically) to the new crop of first-year students.

Related Words: *Eminent* (prominent, distinguished, of high rank), *Venerable* (worthy of deep respect, hallowed, dignified), *Olympian* (majestic, superior, lofty)

More Info: Emperor Octavian, or Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (an heir to Julius Caesar) was given the name Caesar Augustus upon taking the throne in 27 B.C.

avarice

(noun)

AV-er-iss

Definition: Insatiable greed; a miserly desire to hoard wealth

Usage: It is hard to fathom the sheer **avarice** of a company that would fraudulently overcharge a struggling school system for new computers.

Related Words: *Cupidity* (avarice or other excessive desire), *Covetousness* (greed), *Rapacity* or *Rapaciousness* (greedy or grasping; living on prey)

axiom

(noun)

ACK-see-um

Also *axiomatic* (adj)

Definition: Self-evident truth requiring no proof; universally or generally accepted principle

Usage: Given the last decade of research into the brain—as well as our own experience trying to function while deprived of sleep or food—we must take as **axiomatic** that the brain is influenced by the body.

Related Words: *Maxim* (short statement of general truth, proverb), *Postulate* (self-evident proposition, such as in math)

More Info: When we say something is **axiomatic**, we mean that it *must* be true, in the way that $2+2$ must equal 4, or all squares must have four sides.

balloon

(verb)

buh-LOON

Definition: Swell or puff out; increase rapidly

Usage: During the dot-com bubble, the university's investments **ballooned** to three times their former value.

Related Words: *Distend* (swell, expand), *Turgid* or *Tumid* (swollen, inflated; or, metaphorically “inflated,” such as in overblown, pompous speech)

More Info: In finance, a **balloon** payment is a single payment at the end of a loan or mortgage term that is much larger than the other payments.

banal

(adj)

buh-NAL

Definition: Lacking freshness and originality; cliché

Usage: The drama professor despaired at reading another **banal** play from his uninspired students. “Oh look,” he said sarcastically, “yet another young person has decided to write a play about a young person breaking free of society’s constraints. Can you see me yawning?”

Related Words: *Hackneyed*, *Inane*, *Insidious* and *Trite* all mean “lacking freshness and originality, shallow”

More Info: **Banal** comes from the Old French “ban,” a word for compulsory feudal service—that is, something common to everyone. It’s not hard to see how the meaning of “common” could change to “old, stale, and boring” over time.

bane

(noun)

BAYN

Also *baneful* (adj)

Definition: Something that ruins or spoils

Usage: Mosquitoes are the **bane** of my existence! They just love me, and by “love” I mean ruin my summer! / The closure of the hospital could not have been more **baneful** to the already strained community.

Related Words: The opposite of **bane** is *boon*, a benefit or blessing. The words are often used together to ask a question, as in “The new regulations: **bane** or boon?”

More Info: **Bane** can also mean poison, usually as part of more specific names, like *wolfsbane* or *fleabane*. Don’t confuse **baneful** (destructive, ruinous) with *baleful*, which means threatening.

baying

(adj)

BAY-ing

Also *bay* (verb)

Definition: Howling in a deep way, like a dog or wolf

Usage: The lonely dog **bayed** all night. / The mob **bayed** for the so-called traitors to be put to death.

More Info: **Bay** comes from an Old French word meant to actually sound like the baying of an animal. In a related expression, when a person is “**at bay**” or “**brought to bay**,” that means that the person is in a captured position, powerless and unable to flee.

beneficent

(adj)

ben-EFF-iss-ent

Definition: Doing good

Usage: The billionaire had been a mean and stingy fellow, but after his death, his **beneficent** widow gave all his money to charity, even accompanying the donations with handwritten notes thanking the charities for all the good work they did.

Related Words: *Benevolent* (expressing goodwill, helping others or charity), *Eleemosynary* (charitable)

More Info: The Latin root “bene” means “good,” and “fic” means “making or producing.” The antonym of **beneficent** is *maleficent* (“mal” means “bad”).

bent

(noun)

BENT

Definition: Personal inclination or tendency

Usage: He had a pedantic **bent**—he was just naturally inclined to correct people’s grammar and otherwise act like an imperious schoolmaster. / Even a vow of silence couldn’t dampen the nun’s garrulous **bent**—even her prayers were verbose!

Related Words: *Predilection* (preference or inclination), *Propensity* (natural tendency or inclination)

More Info: In the expression “to the top of one’s **bent**,” the word **bent** has the meaning of “the limits of one’s endurance,” as in “Although he didn’t win, he ran the marathon to the top of his **bent**.”

besiege

(verb)

buh-SEED'j

Definition: Attack, overwhelm, crowd in on or surround

Usage: The regiment was **besieged** by attackers on all sides and finally surrendered. / I cannot go out this weekend—I am **besieged** by homework!

Related Words: *Harry* (harass or annoy), *Hound* (harass or pursue relentlessly, as if with hunting dogs), *Beleaguer* (surround, as with difficulties or attackers)

More Info: **Besiege** is equivalent to the expression “lay siege to” (although that expression is used more in the military sense and less in the metaphorical sense).

bevy

(noun)

BEV-ee

Definition: Group of birds or other animals that stay close together; any large group

Usage: The bar owner cringed when a **bevy** of women in plastic tiaras came in—“Another drunken bachelorette party,” he sighed.

Related Words: *Covey* (a group of birds, or any group), *Brood* (group of offspring born or hatched at the same time, esp. birds)

More Info: **Bevy** is most commonly associated with birds, and often used to describe groups of people who stick together like a flock of birds—it usually implies a not-very-serious opinion about the group in question.

bifurcate

(verb, adj)

BYE-fur-cayt

Definition: To fork into two branches or divide into two halves

Usage: The medical student carefully **bifurcated** the cadaver brain, separating it precisely into right and left hemispheres. / The **bifurcate** tree stood tall, its two massive branches reaching for the sky.

Related Words: *Cleave* (split or cut, as in a “meat cleaver”)

More Info: In math, a *midpoint* **bifurcates** a line segment. **Bifurcate** comes from the Latin “furca,” which also gives us “fork.”

bilk

(verb)

BILK

Definition: Cheat or defraud

Usage: The con artist **bilked** many elderly people out of their savings, promising to cure illnesses from diabetes to cancer with only 36 monthly payments of \$99.99—for which the victims received nothing but useless placebo pills.

Related Words: *Hoodwink*, *Swindle*, *Con*, and *Fleece* are all verbs for cheating others. *Fleece* is perhaps more severe, having the connotation of taking *everything* from the victim, the way one sheers all of the fleece from a sheep.

More Info: **Bilk** can also be a noun for the person who cheats others (“I hope that **bilk** goes to jail!”) More obscurely, **bilk** can mean to escape from, frustrate, or thwart. The word comes from the card game cribbage, where it means to play a card that keeps an opponent from scoring.

blight

(noun, verb)

BLITE

Definition: Disease that kills plants rapidly, or any cause of decay or destruction (noun); ruin or cause to wither (verb)

Usage: Many potato farmers have fallen into poverty as a result of **blight** killing their crops. / Gang violence is a **blight** on our school system, causing innocent students to fear even attending classes. / Violence has **blighted** our town.

Related Words: *Scourge* (punishment, disease, or disaster; a whip or lash), *Bane* (something that spoils or ruins, as in “Allergies are the *bane* of my life.”)

More Info: **Blight** is often used to describe unidentified plant diseases that mysteriously cause all the plants to wither—as such, it makes a good metaphor, as in “urban **blight**,” when everything decays and goes wrong at once.

blithe

(adj)

BLITHE

Definition: Joyous, merry; excessively carefree (so as to ignore more important concerns)

Usage: Delighted about making the cheerleading team, she **blithely** skipped across the street without looking, and just narrowly avoided being hit by a bus.

Related Words: *Jovial* (joyous, merry)

More Info: **Blithe** can be positive or negative—it's nice to be merry, but not so merry that we thoughtlessly trample over other people, disobey the rules, etc.

bombastic

(adj)

bom-BAST-ick

Also *bombast* (noun)

Definition: (Of speech or writing) far too showy or dramatic than is appropriate; pretentious

Usage: Professor Knutsen's friends joked that he became quite **bombastic** after a few drinks, once asking a woman in a bar, "Is your daddy an aesthete? Because you are the epitome of ineffable pulchritude." She replied, "I'm not impressed by your **bombast**."

Related Words: *Declamatory* (pompous, merely oratorical), *Magniloquent* and *Grandiloquent* (speaking in a lofty, grandiose style)

More Info: The origin of **bombastic** is related to the idea of being *inflated*, a metaphor that also comes into play with the related words *turgid* and *tumid*, synonyms that can mean literally inflated like a balloon, or using language much too fancy for the sentiment or occasion.

bonhomie

(noun)

bah-num-EE or BAH-num-ee

Definition: Friendliness, open and simple good heartedness

Usage: By the end of the summer, the campers were overflowing with **bonhomie**, vowing to remain Facebook friends forever.

Related Words: *Amity* (friendship, peaceful agreement)

More Info: **Bonhomie** is from French—*bon homme* means “good man.” In English, **bonhomie** is pronounced “bon-uh-MEE” or “BON-uh-mee” (somewhat ironically, there is no “homey” in **bonhomie**).

brandish

(verb)

BRAN-dish

Definition: Shake, wave, or flourish, as a weapon

Usage: The Renaissance Fair ended badly, with one drunken fellow **brandishing** a sword and refusing to leave the ladies’ dressing tent.

More Info: **Brandish** comes from the Germanic “brand,” or sword.

brook

(verb)

BROOK (rhymes with look)

Definition: Suffer or tolerate

Usage: “You will do your homework every night before you go anywhere, you will do your chores, and you will be home by 9 p.m. I will **brook** no disobeying of these rules, young man!”

Related Words: *Condone* (overlook or tacitly approve), *Countenance* (as a noun: face or facial expression; as a verb: approve or tolerate)

More Info: Of course, a **brook** is also a small, freshwater stream. The two “brooks” come from different origins entirely; **brook** as a verb comes from a Latin root meaning “enjoy.”

bucolic

(adj)

byoo-CALL-ick

Definition: Pertaining to shepherds; suggesting a peaceful and pleasant view of rural life

Usage: The play was set in a **bucolic** wonderland—while getting some shepherd’s robes for the lead actor was no problem, the stagehands had a hard time bringing in a flock of sheep.

Related Words: *Pastoral*, *Idyllic*, *Georgic*, and *Arcadian* are all words relating to a positive view of rural life and songs or poems on that theme

More Info: **Bucolic** comes from a Greek word for “ox.”

burnish

(verb)

BUR-nish

Definition: Polish, make smooth and lustrous

Usage: Mr. Hoffenstotter replaced all of the rustic wood doorknobs with newer models made of **burnished** steel. “So shiny,” said his delighted wife.

Related Words: *Gilded* means covered with a thin layer of gold (and thus looking like solid gold, but actually only superficially so) and is used as a metaphor for things that look better than they really are.

More Info: **Burnish** can also be used as a noun, meaning “luster or shine,” as in “the beautiful **burnish** of her hair” or “the **burnish** of an Ivy League university.”

calumny

(noun)

CAL-um-nee

Also *calumnious* (adj)

Definition: Malicious lie intended to hurt someone's reputation; the act of telling such lies

Usage: I've had enough of your **calumnious** accusations! Admit that you made up all those wicked things about me, or I will see you in court when I sue you for slander!

Related Words: *Slander* is a synonym. *Libel* is the written version of *slander*. *Traduce*, *Vilify*, and *Defame* are verbs meaning "to slander, to damage a person's reputation with lies."

canard

(noun)

kuh-NARD

Definition: Rumor, a false or baseless story

Usage: The idea that we only use 10% of our brains is a tired, old **canard**; actually, even the dumbest people use all of their brains.

More Info: **Canard** is simply the French word for “duck.” The **use** of “duck” to mean, essentially, “urban legend” may come from an old French expression “to half-sell a duck.” Sounds pretty sketchy! Just like a **canard**.

cardinal

(adj)

CAR-din-ull

Definition: Chief, most important

Usage: The **cardinal** rule of Fight Club is that you don't talk about Fight Club.

Related Words: *Principal* (first, highest in rank)

More Info: **Cardinal** can also mean an official in the Catholic church, a bright red bird, or a deep red color. **Cardinal** comes from a Latin word for “hinge”—as in, a thing which other things “hinge” or depend on.

catholic

(adj)

CATH-ull-ick

Definition: Universal, broad-minded

Usage: Some precursors to the Constitution (such as documents governing the colonies) enumerated the rights of male property holders only. The U.S. Constitution took a more **catholic** approach, declaring that “All men are created equal.” Today, policy writers would probably take **catholicism** a step further and write “All people.”

Related Words: *Liberal* (aside from the use of *Liberal* in American politics, *Liberal* means “favorable to reform; favorable to maximum possible individual freedom; free from prejudice, tolerant, open-minded”)

More Info: The **Catholic** Church, of course, goes by that name because it intends (as do many religions) to be universal.

chicanery

(noun)

shick-AYN-er-ee

Definition: Trickery, deception by knowingly false arguments

Usage: The defense lawyer's strategy for getting her client acquitted by knowingly misinterpreting words in an obscure precedent was nothing but **chicanery**. / Nice try, passing off last week's homework as this week's by changing the date at the top. I've had enough of your **chicanery**, young man!

Related Words: *Quibbling* (the use of ambiguous, petty, or irrelevant arguments, especially to evade the real issue), *Sophistry* (deliberately tricky argumentation)

More Info: **Chicanery** is from French, hence the pronunciation: shi-KAY-nuh-ry.

circumscribe

(verb)

SER-cuhm-scribe

Definition: Strictly limit a role, range of activity, or area; in math, to be constructed around so as to touch as many points as possible

Usage: Suki's parents **circumscribed** her after-school activities; she was permitted only to study and to join organizations directly related to academic subjects. / A square **circumscribed** in a circle has all four of its vertices on the circle's circumference. / Our land is **circumscribed** by hedges and fences.

More Info: "Circum" is the Latin root for "around," and "scribe" for "write." The "scribe/script" root also occurs in *proscribe* (prohibit) and *conscript* (draft into military service).

circumspect

(adj)

SER-cuhm-spect

Definition: Cautious, prudent; careful to consider the circumstances and consequences

Usage: Luann immediately forked over an initiation fee to become a vitamin distributor, but her more **circumspect** brother had a list of at least twenty questions he wanted answered before he would consider joining.

Related Words: *Staid* (restrained, prim, settled)

More Info: The root “circum” means “around” and “spect” means “see”—thus, **circumspect** people “look around” before acting, much as in the idiom “look before you leap.”

clamber

(verb)

CLAM-ber

Definition: Climb awkwardly or with difficulty, scramble

Usage: The hiker had spent the last hour plodding lethargically up the side of the mountain, but when she caught sight of the summit, she excitedly began to **clamber** up even the steepest inclines.

More Info: **Clamber** comes from the same root as *climb*. Don't confuse it with *clamor*, which means "noisy shouting or protest."

cloying

(adj)

CLOY-ing

Definition: Disgustingly or distastefully sweet

Usage: I do like visiting our grandmother, but I can't stand those **cloying** movies she watches—last time it was some heart-tugging story where an orphan saves a suffering pony. / I do like cake, but I find that honey-covered angel food cake positively **cloying**.

Related Words: *Treacly* and *Saccharine* are synonyms. *Maudlin* means “overly tearful and sentimental,” and might also possibly describe the orphan/pony movie described above.

coagulate

(verb)

coh-AGG-yoo-layt

Definition: Cause a liquid to become solid or semisolid

Usage: Hemophilia is a medical condition in which the blood doesn't **coagulate**, meaning that a hemophiliac can easily bleed to death from a small wound. / When making jam, use pectin to get the fruit to **coagulate**.

Related Words: *Curdle* also means “go from liquid to solid” but tends to be used to describe milk spoiling, or metaphorically, as in “Her scream made my blood curdle.” *Clot* has the same definition as well, and often describes blood (a blood *clot* in an artery can cause a heart attack). Some desserts involve *clotted* cream.

coda

(noun)

COH-duh

Definition: Final part of a musical composition; an ending, esp. one that sums up what has come before

Usage: “You play this middle section twice, then move to the **coda**,” the music teacher explained to the child. “The **coda** always comes last.” / Dropping my purse in a mud puddle right outside my own front door was a fine **coda** to a horrible evening.

Related Words: *Recapitulation* (summary or the act of summing up), *Précis* (summary or abstract)

More Info: **Coda** comes from the Latin “cauda,” meaning “tail.” (A *caudate* animal has a tail and an *acaudate* animal lacks one.)

coffer

(noun)

COFF-er

Definition: Chest for storing valuables; financial resources, a treasury

Usage: The dishonest employee called it “dipping into the company **coffers**,” but the arresting officer called it “embezzlement.” / Rather than rent a safety-deposit box, I keep my priceless antique coins in a **coffer** here at home.

Related Words: A *strongbox* is also a chest for storing valuables.

More Info: **Coffer** comes from the same root as “coffin,” another type of box. When used metaphorically, **coffers** is generally used in the plural.

collude

(verb)

cuh-LOOD

Also *collusion* (noun)

Definition: Conspire; cooperate for illegal or fraudulent purposes

Usage: After two competing software companies doubled their prices on the same day, leaving consumers no lower-priced alternative, the federal government investigated the companies for **collusion**.

Related Words: *Cabal* (a conspiratorial group)

compendium

(noun)

cuhm-PEN-dee-um

Also *compendious* (adj)

Definition: Concise but complete summary; a list or collection

Usage: I could hardly bring my whole collection of poetry books on vacation, so instead, I brought a lightweight poetry **compendium** containing a few selections each from thirty or so poets thought to represent various styles and eras. / This movie review is unusually **compendious**—although a scant 500 words, it tells every single thing that happens in the entire film.

Related Words: *Digest* (a periodical containing shortened versions of works published elsewhere), *Recapitulation* (summary or the act of summing up), *Précis* (summary or abstract)

complaisant

(adj)

kuhm-PLAY-sent

Definition: Eager to please; cheerfully complying

Usage: Coming from a more uptight corporate background, Chris found the soup kitchen volunteers remarkably **complaisant**—when he asked the greeters to sweep the floor and the cooks to wash dishes, everyone happily moved to their new positions.

More Info: Don't confuse **complaisant** with *complacent*, which means “smug, self-satisfied.”

confound

(verb)

kuhn-FOUND

Definition: Confuse, frustrate; mix up or make worse

Usage: He was positively **confounded** by a map that seemed to show “East Bethlehem” as being to the west of “West Bethlehem.” / He was already a little flummoxed in regards to differential equations, but reading an incorrectly-edited Wikipedia page on the topic only **confounded** the problem.

Related Words: *Baffled*, *Flummoxed*, and *Nonplussed* are all words for “confused.”

connote

(verb)

cuh-NOTE

Also *connotation* (adj)

Definition: Suggest or imply in addition to the precise, literal meaning

Usage: The word “titanic” simply means large or majestic, but because of the word’s association with the sunken ship, “titanic” has a negative **connotation** to many people.

Related Words: *Evoke* (call forth, esp. of feelings or imagination)

More Info: A *denotation* is the literal meaning of a word; a **connotation** is the feeling that accompanies that word.

contraries

(noun)

CAHN-trare-eez

Definition: Things that are opposing; either of two opposite things

Usage: The Machiavellian among us would say that ethics and expedience are **contraries**—at some point, one must win out over the other.

Related Words: *Counterpoint* (a contrasting element)

More Info: The expression **to the contrary** means “to the opposite effect of the thing we were just talking about, as in “Although you say the plan will please everyone, **to the contrary**, our biggest client has already informed us that they will find a new supplier if we proceed.”

contrite

(adj)

kuhn-TRITE

Definition: Remorseful; feeling sorry for one's offenses or sins

Usage: He would have punished his son more severely for breaking his car's windshield in a "rock throwing contest," but the boy seemed truly **contrite**.

Related Words: *Penitent* is a synonym. *Atone* means "to make amends for."

More Info: Interestingly, **contrite** comes from a Latin root meaning "to grind." Perhaps hating to admit we're wrong is truly universal.

contumacious

(adj)

cahn-tuh-MAY-shuss

Definition: Rebellious; stubbornly disobedient

Usage: The psychologist's book "Dealing With Your **Contumacious** Teenager" would have sold many more copies to parents of rude and rebellious youth if only people knew what "**contumacious**" meant.

Related Words: *Obstreperous*, *Recalcitrant*, and *Refractory* are synonyms

More Info: **Contumacious** and *contumely* are not as closely related as they sound: *contumely* means "contemptuous treatment or a humiliating insult."

convoke

(verb)

kuhn-VOHK

Definition: Call together, as to a meeting

Usage: The dean has **convoked** this gathering to discuss the Honor Code.

Related Words: *Convene* is a synonym

More Info: The root “voc/vok” in **convoke** means “to call” and also appears in words such as *vocal*, *invoke*, and *vocation*.

cosset

(verb)

CAH-set

Definition: Treat as a pet, pamper

Usage: The **cosseted** toddler was lovingly wrapped up in his snow gear, so much so that he could barely even move his arms enough to make his first snowball.

Related Words: *Coddle* (treat tenderly or indulgently)

More Info: As a noun, a **cosset** is a pet lamb or any pet. The root in **cosset** actually comes from a word meaning “to kiss.”

coterie

(noun)

COH-ter-ee

Definition: Close or exclusive group, clique

Usage: The pop star never traveled anywhere without a **coterie** of assistants and managers.

Related Words: *Cabal* (conspiracy, group of people who plot), *Entourage* (group of attendants)

More Info: In French, a *coterie* was a group of tenant farmers.

cupidity

(noun)

kyoo-PID-it-ee

Definition: Greed, great or excessive desire

Usage: The doctor's medical license was revoked after it was discovered that, out of sheer **cupidity**, he had diagnosed people with illnesses they didn't have and pocketed insurance money for performing procedures they didn't need.

Related Words: *Avarice* (insatiable greed), *Covetousness* (greed), *Rapacity* or *Rapaciousness* (greedy or grasping; living on prey)

curmudgeon

(noun)

cur-MUD-jun

Definition: Bad-tempered, difficult person; grouch

Usage: The college students' party was hampered by constant complaints from a **curmudgeonly** neighbor who insisted that making noise after 8pm was unreasonable, and called the police over a single beer can on his lawn.

Related Words: *Crotchety* (grouchy, picky, given to odd notions), *Cantankerous* (disagreeable, contentious), *Crank* (an unbalanced person who is fanatical about a private, generally petty cause)

More Info: **Curmudgeon**, like *crotchety*, is almost always used to describe old men (a fact that is perhaps unfair to old men).

declaim

(verb)

dih-CLAIM

Definition: Speak in an impassioned, pompous, or oratorical manner; give a formal speech

Usage: After a drink or two, Gabe will **declaim** all night about campaign finance reform—you won't be able to get a word in edgewise in between all his grandstanding and "expertise."

Related Words: *Grandstand* (perform showily as if to impress an audience)

More Info: Don't confuse with *disclaim*, which simply means "deny, repudiate."

declivity

(noun)

dih-CLIV-it-ee

Definition: Downward slope

Usage: Not just any **declivity** can serve as a wheelchair ramp—I'm pretty sure this thing is too steep to pass regulations.

Related Words: *Declination* (downward slope, deterioration, deviation from the norm, refusal)

More Info: The opposite of **declivity** is *acclivity*, an upward slope.

delimit

(verb)

dih-LIM-it

Definition: Fix, mark, or define the boundaries of

Usage: The role of an executive coach is **delimited** by our code of conduct—we may not counsel people for psychological conditions, for instance.

Related Words: *Demarcate* (mark the boundaries of, separate)

More Info: **Delimit** is one of those words where the “de” doesn’t seem to be doing much—the definition is pretty close to that of *limit*.

demagogue

(noun)

DEM-uh-gah'g

Definition: A leader who lies and gains power by arousing the passions and especially prejudices of the people

Usage: Political **demagogues** lie and twist the facts, depending more on their natural charisma and ability to determine exactly what their audience wants to hear than any actual understanding or perspicacity.

Related Words: A *Propagandist* or *Provocateur* influences the public in ways that are probably more emotional than logical.

More Info: The Greek root “demos,” for “people,” also appears in *democracy*, *demographics*, and *demotic* (populist, pertaining to the people).

demur

(verb)

dih-MUR

Definition: Show reluctance or object, especially for moral reasons

Usage: When asked to name her favorite professor in the department, she **demurred**—she was pretty sure that, if she said anything, it would come back to haunt her.

Related Words: *Balk* (refuse to proceed or to do something)

desultory

(adj)

DESS-ull-tor-ee

Definition: Lacking consistency or order, disconnected, sporadic; going off topic

Usage: Lulu said she'd been studying for the GRE for a year, but she had been doing so in only the most **desultory** way—a few vocab words here and there, then nothing for a month, and practice tests whenever she felt like it, which was rarely. / Don't mind my daughter—there's no need to let a toddler's **desultory** remarks pull an adult conversation off track.

More Info: **Desultory** comes from the Latin “desultor,” a circus rider who jumps from one horse to another.

diaphanous

(adj)

die-AFF-uh-nuss

Definition: Very sheer, fine, translucent

Usage: The wedding dress was a confection of **diaphanous** silk, made of at least ten layers of the thin fabric, each layer of which was so fine you could see through it.

Related Words: *Gossamer* (a fine, filmy cobweb, or a fine, light fabric)

More Info: **Diaphanous** generally describes fabric or the (beautiful, translucent) wings of certain insects.

dichotomy

(noun)

die-COT-uh-mee

Definition: Division into two parts or into two contradictory groups

Usage: There is a **dichotomy** in the sciences between theoretical or “pure” sciences such as physics and chemistry, and the life sciences, which often deal more with classifying than with theorizing.

Related Words: *Binary* (consisting of or involving two), *Duality* (a dual state, existence in two parts, as in “Descartes posited a *duality* between mind and body”)

More Info: **Dichotomy** comes from the Greek “dicha” (apart) and “tomos” (cutting).

dictum

(noun)

DICT-um

Definition: Formal or authoritative pronouncement; saying or proverb

Usage: “A stitch in time saves nine” is an old **dictum** meaning that it’s easier to solve a problem before it gets too big. / The king’s **dictum** stated that each feudal lord must provide a certain number of soldiers within three weeks’ time.

Related Words: *Maxim*, *Apothegm*, and *Adage* are all words for a proverb, saying, or truism

More Info: The root “dict” comes from “dicere” (to say) and also appears in *dictator*, *dictionary*, *indict* (connect to a crime), *malediction* (curse), *benediction* (blessing), and many others.

diffident

(adj)

DIFF-id-ent

Also *diffidence* (noun)

Definition: Lacking confidence, shy

Usage: Natasha was so **diffident** that she never believed her comments could be worth anything in class, even when she knew the answer.

Related Words: *Timorous* (fearful, timid), *Self-Effacing* (modest, downplaying one's own presence or accomplishments)

More Info: **Diffident** contains the root “fid,” for “trust,” also appearing in *fidelity*, *fiduciary*, and *infidel*. The connection is that a **diffident** person may be mistrustful of others, and thus shy.

diffuse

(verb, adj)

diff-YOOZ (v), diff-YOOSS (adj)

Definition: Spread widely, disseminate (verb); dispersed, widely spread out, or wordy and going off-topic (adj)

Usage: The spy attempted to root out the dissenters at the gala, but he was only able to detect a **diffuse** sense of discontent all around the room. / It will be very difficult to **diffuse** the power among the people when transitioning from autocracy to democracy.

More Info: A **diffuser** is a device that spreads air freshener or other scent by being plugged into an outlet. Don't confuse **diffuse** with *defuse*, to calm or put an end to (to “defuse a fight”).

dilate

(verb)

DIE-layt

Definition: To become wider or make wider, cause to expand; to speak or write at length, elaborate upon

Usage: The doctor gave her eye drops to make her pupils **dilate**. / These dinners at Professor Hwang's house usually run rather late—after the meal, he'll typically **dilate** on his latest research for at least an hour.

Related Words: *Expatiate* (to expand or elaborate on a topic, to explain in detail)

More Info: **Dilate** is used frequently in medicine—being a certain number of centimeters **dilated** is an important part of childbirth.

dilatory

(adj)

DILL-uh-tor-ee

Definition: Slow, late; procrastinating or stalling for time

Usage: Jack was supposed to start his presentation ten minutes ago and he isn't even here? I'm not surprised—he's a **dilatory** fellow.

Related Words: *Tardy* (late), *Temporize* (stall for time)

dilettante

(noun)

DILL-uh-tahnt

Definition: Person who takes up an art or activity for amusement only or in a superficial way

Usage: The “arts center” in the rich neighborhood was populated by **dilettantes**—a sculpture here, a bit of music appreciation there, two weeks of painting class until they got bored and quit.

Related Words: *Dabbler* is a synonym, although somewhat less negative (like *hobbyist*). As in, “Are you a poet?” “I wouldn’t call myself a poet—I just *dabble* in poetry.”

More Info: **Dilettante** comes from the Latin “delectare,” meaning “to delight” and also found in *delectable* and *delicious*.

dirge

(noun)

DERJ

Definition: A funeral or mourning song or poem

Usage: It was supposed to be a wedding march, but when the organist started playing, the reluctant bride thought the song sounded more like a **dirge** for her former, carefree life.

Related Words: *Lament* (express sorrow, mourn), *Requiem* (musical service or hymn for the dead), *Threnody* (poem or song of mourning), *Elegy* (song or poem of sorrow, esp. for a deceased person)

More Info: **Dirge** is simply a version of the first word (“Direct, O Lord, my God...”) from a Latin prayer cycle said in the Roman Catholic Church for a deceased person.

discomfiting

(adj)

diss-CUHM-fit-ing

Definition: Disconcerting, confusing, frustrating

Usage: His fiancée’s family *said* they were comfortable with the fact that he was of a different religion, but he found their constant probing about his beliefs quite **discomfiting**./ He hates telemarketers so much that he likes to **discomfit** them by asking them personal questions and suggesting he call them at their homes instead.

Related Words: *Abash* (destroy the confidence of, make ashamed, disconcert), *Disquiet* (disturb or cause anxiety to, as in “The anonymous phone message disquieted him.”)

More Info: **Discomfit** originally meant “defeat in battle” but today is closer to *disconcert*—possibly, over the years, people confused **discomfit** and *discomfort*, causing the shift in meaning.

discordant

(adj)

diss-CORD-uhnt

Also *discord* (noun)

Definition: Harsh or inharmonious in sound; disagreeing, incongruous

Usage: In a graduation ceremony full of hopeful and congratulatory speeches, the salutatorian's address about the terrible economy struck a **discordant** note.

Related Words: *Dissonance* (harsh, inharmonious sound; cacophony; disagreement)

More Info: The opposite of **discord** is *accord*. Just as **discord** can be either about sound or ideas, *accord* can mean agreement or harmony, as in the sound of a (well-played) *accordion*.

discrete

(adj)

diss-CREET

Definition: Separate, distinct, detached, existing as individual parts

Usage: Be sure to use quotation marks and citations as appropriate in your paper in order to keep your ideas **discrete** from those of the experts you are quoting. / The advertising agency pitched us not on one campaign, but on three **discrete** ideas.

More Info: Don't confuse **discrete** with *discreet*, which means "secretive, undercover."

disparage

(verb)

diss-PAIR-edge

Definition: Belittle, put down; bring shame upon, discredit

Usage: An *Ad Hominem* attack is a logical fallacy in which the arguer **disparages** his opponent rather than addressing the opponent's ideas. / Your shoplifting arrest has **disparaged** this family!

Related Words: *Denigrate* (belittle, attack the reputation of)

More Info: The root “par” means “equal” and appears in *peer* and *parity*, meaning “equivalence or equality,” as well as *disparate*, meaning “distinct, different.”

disparate

(adj)

DISS-puh-rit or diss-PAIR-it

Definition: Distinct, different

Usage: He chose the college for two **disparate** reasons: the strength of the computer science program, and the excellence of the hip-hop dance squad.

Related Words: *Divergent* (different, deviating), *Incommensurable* (not comparable, totally disproportionate)

More Info: The root “par” means “equal” and appears in *peer* and *parity*, meaning “equivalence or equality,” as well as *disparage*, meaning “belittle.”

dissemble

(verb)

diss-EM-bull

Definition: Mislead, conceal the truth, put on a false appearance of

Usage: Roxanne was used to **dissembling** in job interviews; when asked about the gap on her resume from 1999–2003, she would say, “Oh, I was out of the workforce fulfilling some obligations”—a somewhat misleading way to describe a prison stint. / He won so much money at pool halls by **dissembling** inexperience, pretending at first that he had no idea how to even hold a pool cue; once bets were placed, he handily defeated his opponents.

Related Words: *Disingenuous* (not genuine), *Prevaricating* (misleading or lying)

dissolution

(noun)

diss-uh-LOO-shun

Also *dissolute* (adj)

Definition: Dissolving, the state of having been dissolved; breaking bonds or breaking up of a group of people; death, disintegration; sinking into extreme hedonism, vice, and degradation

Usage: Raoul went from garden-variety hedonism to utter **dissolution**—his three-day drug benders cost him his job and may land him in jail. / Following the **dissolution** of the corporation and the liquidation of our assets, each investor will receive a cash payment proportional to his or her shareholding in the company.

Related Words: *Licentiousness* (excessive freedom, extreme hedonism), *Profligacy* (reckless extravagance, shameless behavior)

distaff

(adj, noun)

DISS-taff

Definition: Female, esp. relating to the maternal side of the family; women or women's work; a staff that holds wool or flax for spinning

Usage: In completing your medical history, please try to remember which illnesses occurred on the **distaff** side of your family. / Medical studies using all male study groups may produce results that cannot be replicated in **distaff** subjects.

More Info: If using a word related to spinning wool to mean “women” seems offensive, some would agree, although the word is generally not offensive when discussing science and medicine; the *NY Times* has recently referred to “distaff subjects” in a medical study.

distend

(verb)

diss-TEND

Also *distended* (adj)

Definition: Swell, expand, stretch, bloat

Usage: The emergency room doctor constantly saw people who came in with **distended** bellies, sure that they had appendicitis; usually, it was just gas.

Related Words: *Balloon* (swell or puff out), *Turgid* or *Tumid* (swollen, inflated; or, metaphorically “inflated,” such as in overblown, pompous speech)

dither

(verb, noun)

DIH-ther

Definition: Act indecisively (verb); a state of fear or trembling excitement

Usage: “Stop **dithering**,” said the mother to her daughter. “Pick which sweater you want so I can pay for it and we can get out of here.” / The haunted house brought the children to a **dither** from which it was difficult for their parents to calm them down.

Related Words: *Vacillate* and *Equivocate* also mean “act irresolutely,” or in common parlance, “flip-flop” in making a decision.

More Info: **Dither** may be related to *dodder*, meaning to shake or tremble, usually used in the sense of “a doddering old man.”

diurnal

(adj)

die-ER-null

Definition: Occurring every day; happening in the daytime (rather than at night)

Usage: While many Americans rarely have a sit-down family meal, in many other cultures, dining as a family is a **diurnal** affair. / Wall Street is a **diurnal** neighborhood—hectic in the day, but quiet once people pile on the rush hour trains to go home.

Related Words: *Quotidian* (daily; everyday, ordinary)

doctrinaire

(noun, adj)

doc-trin-AIR

Definition: Person who applies doctrine in an impractical or rigid and close-minded way (noun); merely theoretical, impractical, or fanatical about other people accepting one's ideas (adj)

Usage: The old science professor was so **doctrinaire** that he refused to even consider any evidence that flew in the face of his own research, and thereby failed to recognize when his graduate students made an exciting new discovery. / Don't be a **doctrinaire**—try actually considering the views of those you disagree with!

Related Words: *Dogmatic* (close-minded, expressing one's own opinions as though they were facts)

More Info: **Doctrinaire** is based on the word *doctrine*, meaning “official beliefs.” While *doctrine* can be good or bad, **doctrinaire** is always bad and denotes someone who has taken belief in a *doctrine* much too far.

doff

(verb)

DOFF

Definition: Take off (such as clothes), put aside; remove one's hat as a gesture

Usage: Before the spring break revelers could consider **doffing** their clothes, they saw the sign: "No skinny dipping." / In my grandfather's day, it was considered polite to **doff** your hat when a lady entered the room; to us today, lifting your hat a few inches off your head and then putting it right back seems to some like a silly way to show respect.

More Info: The opposite of **doff** is *don*, to put on. Interestingly, *don* came into being as a contraction of "do on."

dovetail

(verb)

DOVE-tail

Definition: Join or fit together

Usage: When the neuroscientist married an exercise physiologist, neither thought they'd end up working together, but when Dr. Marion Ansel received a grant to study how exercise improves brain function and Dr. Jim Ansel was assigned to her team, the two found that their careers **dovetailed** nicely.

Related Words: *Converge* (move towards one another or towards a point; unite)

More Info: In carpentry, a “**dovetail** joint” fits together in a precise way and resembles the shape of a dove's tail.

droll

(adj)

DROHL

Definition: Funny in an odd way

Usage: The play was a **droll** production—not laugh-out-loud hilarious, but funny especially because it was so strange. Who’s ever seen a fairy be mistaken for a block of cheese?

Related Words: *Waggish* (merry, roguish), *Risible* (laughable, related to laughing), *Jocular*, *Jocund*, or *Jocose* (jesting, jolly)

More Info: **Droll** comes from a Middle Dutch word for *imp*, a mischievous demon.

dupe

(noun, verb)

DOOP

Definition: Person who is easily fooled or used (noun); to fool or exploit (verb)

Usage: The dashing rogue used flattery and lies to **dupe** several old ladies out of their money. “I feel like a total **dupe**,” said Hazel Rosenbaum, 87. “I thought he and I were going to get married, but he really just wanted my Social Security checks.”

Related Words: *Hoodwink*, *Bilk*, *Swindle*, *Con*, and *Fleece* are all verbs for cheating others. *Fleece* is perhaps more severe, having the connotation of taking *everything* from the victim, the way one sheers all of the fleece from a sheep.

More Info: **Dupe** comes from Old French *duppe*, a bird known for being very stupid. **Dupe** can also be a short version of “duplicate,” although this meaning is somewhat informal and less likely on the GRE.

duplicity

(noun)

doo-PLISS-it-ee

Also *duplicitious* (adj)

Definition: Deceit, double-dealing, acting in two different ways for the purpose of deception

Usage: The campaign worker's **duplicity** finally came to light when it was discovered that, despite rising to a trusted position within the local Workers Party, he was actually a registered National Party member and was feeding information back to his cronies.

Related Words: *Dissembling* (misleading, concealing the truth, acting hypocritically), *Prevaricating* (misleading or lying), *Disingenuous* (not genuine)

More Info: *Duplicity* was a 2009 film starring Julia Roberts. It was about spies.

dyspeptic

(adj)

diss-PEP-tick

Definition: Grumpy, pessimistic, irritable; suffering from dyspepsia (indigestion)

Usage: The **dyspeptic** professor was so angered by a question from a student who hadn't done the homework that he actually stomped out of class.

Related Words: *Curmudgeon* (bad-tempered, difficult person), *Crotchety* (grouchy, picky, given to odd notions), *Cantankerous* (disagreeable, contentious), *Crank* (an unbalanced person who is fanatical about a private, generally petty cause)

More Info: **Dyspeptic** describes a physical condition but is often used metaphorically; indigestion does tend to make a person feel irritable. Similarly, *myopia* describes the physical condition of nearsightedness, but is often used metaphorically to mean “given to unwisely short-term thinking.”

ebullient

(adj)

ebb-OOL-yent

Definition: Very enthusiastic, lively, excited; bubbling as though being boiled

Usage: The children were so **ebullient** upon their arrival at Disneyworld that their parents, while happy to see them so excited, wished that there were a way to forcibly restrain them in case they took off running towards the rides.

Related Words: *Exuberant* (extremely, uninhibitedly enthusiastic or joyful; overflowing)

More Info: **Ebullient** comes from a Latin word for “boiling,” which comes from a word for “bubble.” An *ebulliometer* determines the boiling point of liquids.

echelon

(noun)

ESH-uh-lahn

Definition: A level, rank or grade; the people at that level

Usage: Obtaining a job on Wall Street doesn't guarantee access to the upper **echelon** of executives, where multi-million dollar bonuses are the norm. / I'm not sure I'm cut out to analyze poetry; I find it hard to dig beyond the most accessible **echelon** of meaning.

Related Words: *Stratum* (a layer, esp. one of a number of parallel layers, such as in sedimentary rock or the Earth's atmosphere; plural is *strata*, as in "Of all the *strata* of society, the middle class is the *stratum* hit hardest by the recession.")

More Info: The original meaning of **echelon** is a formation of troops or war vehicles so as to resemble steps; similarly, birds flying in such a pattern are flying **in echelon**.

edify

(verb)

ED-ih-fy

Also *edifying* (adj)

Definition: Uplift, enlighten, instruct or improve in a spiritual or moral way

Usage: Look, Son, I'm glad that you're reading, but I really wish you would read something more **edifying** than that magazine that gives tips for winning at violent video games.

More Info: **Edifying** isn't actually etymologically related to *edible*, but it's a good memory trick to think of something **edifying** as "food for the soul."

effigy

(noun)

EFF-ih-jee

Definition: Representation or image of a person, esp. a crude facsimile used to mock a hated person

Usage: The dictator was disturbed to look out the palace window and see himself being burned in **effigy**. “That paper mache dummy doesn’t even look like me!” he said.

More Info: A scarecrow is a common type of **effigy**, intended to scare birds away and keep them from eating crops. **Effigies** are often large or life-sized. The expression “burned in **effigy**” is sometimes used as hyperbole, as in “After the university president announced a major tuition hike, I thought the students were going to burn him in **effigy**.”

effrontery

(noun)

eff-RUN-ter-ee

Definition: Shameless boldness

Usage: Mr. Jackson thought his daughter’s boyfriend guilty of the worst **effrontery** when he asked for her hand in marriage—and, as soon as Mr. Jackson gave his blessing, followed up by asking for a job at Mr. Jackson’s company.

Related Words: *Audacious* (very bold or brave, often in a rude or reckless way; extremely original), *Insolent* (bold in a rude way), *Brazen* (shameless, contemptuously bold)

More Info: The “front” in **effrontery** means brow or forehead; the word comes from the idea of “putting forth one’s forehead,” in a sense similar to the use of “barefaced” in the expression “barefaced liar.”

egress

(verb, noun)

EE-gress

Definition: An exit or the action of exiting

Usage: It is against the fire code to put those boxes there—you can't block a primary or secondary **egress** from the building.

Related Words: *Outlet* can mean an exit or vent, or a means or expression or publication. “You can't grill in the house—there's no *outlet* for smoke! You obviously need an *outlet* for your frustrated desire to be a chef.”

More Info: **Egress** shares a root with *grade*, meaning “move or step.” Just as you exit fifth grade to enter sixth grade, or as the land grades into the sea, **egress** involves a shift in position. The opposite of **egress** is *ingress*, meaning “entering.”

elegy

(noun)

ELL-uh-jee

Definition: Song or poem of sorrow, esp. for a deceased person

Usage: While composing an **elegy** is certainly old fashioned, the poet felt that it was a fitting way for her to honor her father at his funeral.

Related Words: *Dirge* (a funeral or mourning song or poem), *Lament* (express sorrow, mourn), *Requiem* (musical service or hymn for the dead), *Threnody* (poem or song of mourning)

emaciate

(verb)

im-MAY-shee-ayt or im-MAY-see-ayt

Also *emaciated* (adj)

Definition: Make abnormally thin, cause to physically waste away

Usage: After fifty days floating on a raft at sea, he was quite **emaciated**—his family was elated that he was alive, but shocked to see a formerly 165-pound man looking skeletal at just 125 pounds.

Related Words: *Atrophy* (wasting away, degeneration, decline, esp. of a body part or organ, as in “Her leg muscles had *atrophied* while her leg was in a cast.”)

More Info: The word **emaciated** frequently appears in the news in discussions of whether fashion models are too thin.

encomium

(noun)

en-COH-mee-um

Definition: Warm, glowing praise, esp. a formal expression of praise

Usage: Just after all the **encomium** at his retirement party, he received a gold watch. / The first draft of your dissertation is little but **encomium** of the works of Christopher Marlowe, whereas I'm afraid that doctoral-level work requires a more nuanced and critical view.

Related Words: *Laudation* (praise, tribute), *Eulogy* (a speech of praise or written work of praise, esp. a speech given at a funeral), *Panegyric* (formal, lofty, or elaborate praise), *Paeon* (song of praise, triumph, or thanks)

endemic

(adj)

en-DEMM-ick

Definition: Native, local; natural, specific to, or confined to a particular place

Usage: Certain diseases—especially those that require a precise mix of environmental conditions and local plant and animal life to thrive—remain **endemic** to particular regions.

Related Words: The antonym of **endemic** is *pandemic*, “widespread, universal,” also generally of a disease or something bad.

More Info: **Endemic** contains the Greek “en” (in) and “demos” (people). Don’t confuse **endemic** with *epidemic*, which means “rapidly spreading” and is a near-synonym with *pandemic*.

engender

(verb)

en-JEN-der

Definition: Produce, give rise to, cause to exist; procreate

Usage: The television demagogue was blamed for **engendering** hate and divisiveness. / Having four wives helped the magnate **engender** 15 children.

Related Words: *Beget* (cause or produce; make children, esp. as a male parent, as in “John Adams, father of John Quincy Adams, was the first President to *beget* another President.”)

More Info: **Engender** shares a root with *generate*, *genus*, *gender*, *genocide* and many others—“gen” can mean “birth, produce, race.”

epicure

(noun)

EPP-ick-yoor

Also *epicurean* (adj)

Definition: Person with cultivated, refined tastes, esp. in food and wine

Usage: A true **epicure**, he served only the finest wines, and bragged about how the pancetta was imported from Italy and the Stilton cheese from the English countryside.

Related Words: *Connoisseur* (expert, especially in the fine arts; person of educated, refined tastes), *Discriminating* (judicious, discerning, having good insight)

More Info: The Epicureans were Greek philosophers who did indeed hold that human pleasure was the highest good, although they believed that a simple life was key to that pleasure. Don't confuse modern **epicures** with *hedonists*, or those devoted to pleasure—one way to think of the difference is that, if your parents are **epicures**, you probably grew up eating very well, but if your parents are *hedonists*, you probably don't want to know about it.

equanimity

(noun)

eck-wuh-NIM-it-ee or ee-kwuh-NIM-it-ee

Also *equanimous* (adj)

Definition: Composure, evenness of mind; mental or emotional stability, esp. under stress

Usage: As she had worked for many years in mental hospitals, her **equanimity** was unparalleled—you could throw a chair or a bowl of spaghetti at her and she would just say, “Settle down, now.”

Related Words: *Sangfroid* (calmness, self-possession, esp. under strain), *Aplomb* (self-possession, poise, total confidence even under stress), *Imperturbable* (not able to be upset or agitated, calm)

More Info: Don’t confuse *equitable* and *equity* with **equanimity** and **equanimous**; the first set is about equality, the second set about being even-tempered.

equivocate

(verb)

eck-WIV-uh-cayt

Definition: Use unclear language to deceive or avoid committing to a position

Usage: Not wanting to lose supporters, the politician **equivocated** on the issue, tossing out buzzwords related to each side while also claiming more study was needed.

Related Words: *Ambivalent* (uncertain; unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once), *Vacillate* and *Waffle* (waver, be indecisive), *Dither* (act irresolutely), *Hedge* (avoid commitment by leaving provisions for withdrawal or changing one's mind; protect a bet by also betting on the other side), *Palter* (talk insincerely; bargain or haggle), *Tergiversate* (repeatedly change one's opinions, equivocate)

More Info: The Latin origin of **equivocate** is obvious—think of it as being “equally vocal” for two or more positions.

ersatz

(adj)

ER-zats or er-ZATS

Definition: Artificial, synthetic; being an inferior substitute

Usage: I hate this health food restaurant! I do not want to eat some **ersatz** meatballs made of textured vegetable protein!

Related Words: *Apocryphal*, *Faux*, *Bogus* and *Specious* are all words for “fake or dubious.” *Factitious* can mean “made by humans” or “artificial, sham.”

More Info: **Ersatz** comes from German. *Ersatzbrot*, or “replacement bread” (made of the lowest quality ingredients sometimes mixed with sawdust) and *Ersatzkaffee* (a substitute made from grain) were served by the Germans to POWs during World War II.

erstwhile

(adj, adv)

ERST-while

Definition: Former, previous (adj); in the past, formerly (adv)

Usage: A novelist and **erstwhile** insurance salesman, he told us his story of the long road to literary success, before he was able to quit his day job.

Related Words: *Bygone* (past, former), *Quondam* (former, sometime)

More Info: **Erstwhile** is related to the Old English *ere*, which means “before.”

ethos

(noun)

EETH-ohss or EETH-ahss

Definition: The character, personality, or moral values specific to a person, group, time period, etc.

Usage: At the prep school, the young man happily settled into an **ethos** of hard work and rigorous athletic competition.

Related Words: *Disposition* (a person's general or natural mood; tendency), *Tenor* (general drift, course, or purpose, as in "the rebellious *tenor* of the rally"), *Penchant* and *Predilection* ("tendency, preference," as in a *penchant* for fast cars, a *predilection* to get angry easily)

More Info: **Ethos** is a Greek word meaning "custom or character," much as it does today.

euphemism

(noun)

YOO-fuh-mizm

Definition: Substitution of a mild, inoffensive, or indirect expression for one that is considered offensive or too direct

Usage: Many **euphemisms** surround death and disease; rather than “Joe died of cancer,” many people feel better saying “Joe’s suffering is finally over.” / When potty training their children, some parents use hilarious **euphemisms** for body parts.

More Info: The antonym of **euphemism** is *dysphemism*, an unnecessarily bad name for something. The internet division of the publishing company *dysphemistically* referred to the print magazine as the “dead tree edition.”

euphony

(noun)

YOO-fun-nee

Definition: Pleasing or sweet sound, especially as formed by a harmonious use of words

Usage: Poetry in translation can keep its meaning, but often loses the **euphony** the poet worked so laboriously to create.

Related Words: *Dulcet* (melodious, agreeable to the ear), *Mellifluous* (richly and smoothly flowing, as “a *mellifluous* voice”)

More Info: **Euphony** is simply a combination of two roots: “eu” for “good” and “phon” for “sound” (as in *telephone*, *phonics*, etc.) A *euphonium* is an instrument similar to a small tuba.

exigent

(adj)

ECK-sih-jent

Definition: Requiring immediate attention, action, or aid; excessively demanding

Usage: My boss said she would take me out to lunch and “mentor” me, but that idea always gets tossed aside in favor of more **exigent** matters.

Related Words: *Dire* (causing suffering or fear; ominous; urgent or desperate, as in “a *dire* emergency requiring immediate response”)

More Info: Don’t confuse **exigent** with *expedient*, which means either “suitable, proper” or “opportune; effective, often at the expense of ethics or other considerations,” as in “In the face of an **exigent** problem, the boss risked a serious lawsuit by doing what was *expedient* instead of what was right.”

exonerate

(verb)

egg-ZAH-ner-ayt

Definition: Clear from blame or accusation; free from a responsibility

Usage: When the defendant was **exonerated** after a long trial, his family wept for joy.

Related Words: *Exculpate* and *Vindicate* also mean “free from blame.”

More Info: **Exonerate** shares a root with *onerous* and *onus*, meaning “burden or obligation.” Since “ex” means “out,” **exonerate** can be thought of as removing a burden (generally, that of guilt).

expedient

(adj)

eck-SPEE-dee-unt

Definition: Suitable, proper; effective, often at the expense of ethics or other considerations

Usage: “I need this report by 2pm, and I don’t care what you have to do to make that happen,” said the boss. “I expect you to deal with it **expediently**.” / When invited to a wedding you cannot attend, it is **expedient** to send a gift.

Related Words: *Opportune* (suitable, convenient, occurring at an appropriate time)

More Info: Don’t confuse **expedient** with *exigent*, “requiring immediate attention, action, or aid.”

expurgate

(verb)

ECK-sper-gayt

Definition: Censor; remove objectionable or offensive parts

Usage: When the girl discovered that her ninth-grade class had been reading an **expurgated** version of *Romeo and Juliet*, she immediately checked the original out from the library so she could read all the “forbidden” parts.

Related Words: *Bowdlerize* (expurgate, abridge, or distort), *Expunge* (strike, eliminate, mark for deletion)

More Info: **Expurgate** shares a root with *purge*, *purgation*, and *purify*.

extemporaneous

(adj)

eck-stem-por-AY-nee-uss

Definition: Done without preparation (esp. of a speech), or with some preparation but no notes; improvised, done on the spur of the moment

Usage: The way the Public Affairs Forum works is that the moderator will announce a topic, and then anyone who wishes may speak **extemporaneously** on that topic for a few minutes—as you can imagine, our members are very well-read. / Lost in the jungle, the hikers fashioned an **extemporaneous** shelter from palm leaves.

Related Words: *Impromptu* (done with no or little preparation, esp. of musical or other performance), *Ad-lib* (improvise; something improvised)

More Info: *Extempore* is a variant with the same meaning. “Off-the-cuff” is an expression that means **extemporaneous**.

faction

(noun)

FACT-shun

Definition: Group or clique within a larger organization; party strife and dissension

Usage: The opposition movement was once large enough to have a chance at succeeding, but it has since broken into numerous, squabbling **factions**, each too small to have much impact. / The caucus began in a spirit of unity but now, sadly, is marked by **faction** and petty squabbles.

Related Words: *Partisan* (partial to a particular party, group, etc., esp. in a biased, emotional way), *Cabal* (a conspiratorial group)

More Info: **Faction** contains the root “fact,” meaning “make or do,” also appearing in *factory* and *factitious* (made up).

fallow

(adj)

FAL-oh

Definition: Left unplanted (of land); not in use

Usage: Crop yields were increased substantially when the villagers discovered that leaving a portion of their fields lie **fallow** allowed that unused part of the land to become renewed with minerals. / It is terribly important that we make college affordable for underprivileged students, lest great minds lie **fallow**, and the world never benefit from their genius.

Related Words: Another GRE word related to farming is *arable*, which means “able to be farmed, fertile,” as in “*arable* land.”

More Info: **Fallow** can mean “light yellowish-brown.” Although this seems like a color that an untended field might turn, this meaning of the word comes from a different origin.

fastidious

(adj)

fass-TIH-dee-uss

Definition: Excessively particular, difficult to please; painstaking, meticulous, requiring excessive attention to detail

Usage: Steve was a **fastidious** housekeeper, fluffing his couch pillows at least twice a day and never allowing the tiniest speck of dust to settle on any exposed surface.

Related Words: *Meticulous* (taking extreme care with details; fussy), *Exacting* (severe in making demands; requiring precise attention)

More Info: **Fastidious** comes from a Latin word for disgust. **Fastidious** people are easily disgusted by regular people's housekeeping, manners, work standards, etc.

fatuous

(adj)

FAT-choo-uss

Definition: Foolish, silly, esp. in a smug or complacent manner

Usage: Sadly, every philosophy class seems to have one person who responds to every discussion, from metaphysics to ethics, with the **fatuous** question, “But what if we don’t really exist?”

Related Words: *Inane* (lacking sense, silly; empty), *Waggish* (merry, roguish), *Risible* (laughable, related to laughing), *Jocular*, *Jocund*, or *Jocose* (jesting, jolly), *Droll* (funny in an odd way)

More Info: Don’t confuse **fatuous** with *facetious*, meaning “joking, humorous, esp. inappropriately.” *Facetious* people can be smartly sarcastic; **fatuous** people are dull and dim-witted. **Fatuous** comes from a word for gaping—as in, having one’s mouth hang open like a very stupid person.

fawn

(verb)

FAWN

Definition: Show affection or try to please in the manner of a dog; try to win favor through flattery and submissive behavior

Usage: Although he was only president of a chain of grocery stores, he was used to being **fawned** over like a king or rock star. “You are truly king of the low-priced produce world,” said the regional manager. “May I wash your car for you?”

Related Words: *Sycophant*, *Lackey*, *Toady*, and *Myrmidon* are all words for a person who **fawns**, such as the regional manager in the sentence above. The adjective *Obsequious* means **fawning**. The verb *Truckle* means to act subserviently and *Kowtow* means to **fawn**—or, literally, to bow until one’s forehead touches the floor.

fecund

(adj)

FEE-cuhnd or FECK-uhnd

Also *fecundity* (noun)

Definition: Fruitful, fertile; capable of abundantly producing offspring, vegetation, or creative or intellectual work

Usage: Rabbits are quite **fecund**; if you've got two, you'll soon have forty. / While some novelists seem to return to the same themes over and over, Bredlaw's **fecund** mind produced whole new universes for every story he wrote.

Related Words: *Prolific* is a synonym. *Teeming* means “full of things, abundantly filled,” as in “Rome was *teeming* with tourists.”

More Info: **Fecund**, unsurprisingly, shares a root with *fetus*.

felicitous

(adj)

fuh-LISS-it-uss

Definition: Admirably appropriate, very well-suited for the occasion; pleasant, fortunate, marked by happiness

Usage: “What a **felicitous** occasion!” said the new grandfather, arriving at the hospital with an “It’s a Girl!” balloon. The new father found the balloon remarkably **felicitous**, especially since the baby’s gender had been announced less than an hour ago.

Related Words: *Apt* is a synonym in its meaning of “exactly appropriate” (*Apt* can also mean “inclined, having a natural tendency” or “quick to learn”). *Fortuitous* means “happening by chance, accidental” and usually also has the meaning of “lucky.”

More Info: **Felicity** means happiness and can also be a woman’s name, as in the titular character of the televised drama *Felicity* (1998–2002).

fervid

(adj)

FER-vid

Definition: Very hot; heated in passion or enthusiasm

Usage: He is a **fervid** fan of Virginia Tech football, so much so that we've all gotten used to receiving "Go Hokies!" hats and shirts for every birthday.

Related Words: *Ardent* (very passionate), *Zealous* (full of fervor or dedicated enthusiasm for a cause, person, etc.)

More Info: Like **fervid**, *Fervent* and *Perfervid* also mean "passionate, fiery, deeply enthusiastic" and come from a common root relating to heat.

fetid

(adj)

FET-id or FEE-tid

Definition: Stinking; having an offensive smell

Usage: I hate doing your laundry—it’s always full of **fetid** gym socks.

Related Words: *Noisome* (disgusting, foul), *Noxious* (harmful to health; corrupting)

Memory Trick: **Fetid** looks a little like “feet”—smells like feet, too.

fledgling

(noun, adj)

FLEDGE-ling

Definition: A young bird that has just recently gotten its feathers, an inexperienced person (noun); new or inexperienced (adj)

Usage: The zoo's EagleCam will hopefully be able to catch the moment the **fledglings** fly out of the nest for the very first time! / The Society of Engineers is available for career day presentations in elementary schools, where we hope to encourage **fledgling** talents in the applied sciences.

Related Words: *Tyro* (beginner, novice)

More Info: The verb **fledge** means to nurture, as one would a young bird until it is ready to fly, or to cover with feathers or adorn.

florid

(adj)

FLOR-id

Definition: Reddish or rosy; flowery, showy, or excessively fancy

Usage: His writing was so **florid** that it was hard for modern readers to understand, and unintentionally humorous when they did. He once called a woman in a hoop skirt a “confection of gossamer-clad ephemerality, the bounty of her raiment ringing in my turgid heart like the tintinnabulation of so many church bells.”

Related Words: *Ruddy* (having reddish skin, in a manner indicating health), *Bombastic* (far too showy or dramatic than is appropriate; pretentious), *Turgid* and *Tumid* (inflated like a balloon, or using language much too fancy for the sentiment or occasion), *Declamatory* (pompous, merely oratorical), *Magniloquent* and *Grandiloquent* (speaking in a lofty, grandiose style), *Rococo* (ornate, florid)

More Info: **Florid**, of course, shares a root with *flower*.

flout

(verb)

FLOUT

Definition: Treat with disdain, contempt, or scorn (usually of rules)

Usage: He **flouted** the boarding school's curfew so blatantly that, on his way back from a party that lasted past midnight, he actually stopped by the headmaster's house to say hello to his daughter.

More Info: Don't confuse with *flaunt*, meaning "to show off or parade oneself in a conspicuous way."

Flout comes from Middle English "flouten," meaning "to play the flute." Apparently it was once possible to play the flute at someone in a jeering way.

fluke

(noun)

FLOO'k

Definition: Stroke of luck, something accidentally successful

Usage: It's amazing that I won the prize during halftime, but I guarantee you, it was just a **fluke** that I made that basket—if I tried a thousand more times, I'm sure I couldn't do it again.

Related Words: *Fortuitous* (accidental, lucky), *Windfall* (unexpected, sudden gain or good fortune, as in “The prize winner's *windfall* more than solved his mortgage problem.”)

More Info: A **fluke** can also be a flatworm (a “liver fluke”), type of fish, anchor blade, barbed arrowhead, or even a lobe of a whale's tail. What all of these objects have in common is being flat (the old Germanic root means flat). The origin of **fluke** as a “stroke of good luck” is unknown—having flukes parasitizing your liver, for instance, sounds incredibly unlucky.

forage

(verb)

FOR-idge

Definition: Wander in search of; rummage, hunt, make a raid

Usage: It's important to seal your trash cans tightly in this neighborhood, or else you'll get raccoons **foraging** for food in your backyard.

Related Words: *Plunder, pillage, ransack, depredate,* and *despoil* are words that match the meaning of raiding or looting, although **forage** is more often used in the gentler sense of poking around the forest looking for edible plants.

More Info: **Forage** shares an origin with *fodder*, meaning “food for livestock” and also used to mean raw material, or something low quality but abundant, as in “The novelist used all of her family arguments as *fodder* for her work.”

ford

(noun, verb)

FORD

Definition: Place where a river or similar body of water is shallow enough to walk or ride a vehicle across (noun); to cross at such a place (verb)

Usage: The pioneers made camp near the riverbank, waiting for the rains to die down and the river to become **fordable** again. A week later, the waters were shallow enough to **ford** the river with their entire caravan—horses, wagons, and all.

Related Words: *Traverse* (pass over, along, or through; go across)

More Info: It doesn't particularly look like it, but **ford** is related to Latin “portus,” meaning “port.”

forestall

(verb)

fore-STALL

Definition: Delay, hinder, prevent by taking action beforehand

Usage: Our research has been **forestalled** by a lack of funding; we're all just biding our time while we wait for the university to approve our grant proposal.

Related Words: *Waylay* (attack after lying in wait, intercept unexpectedly), *Obviate* (prevent, make unnecessary), *Preclude* (prevent, make impossible, exclude), *Stymie* (hinder, thwart)

More Info: “Fore” means “before” and *stall* means thwart, stop, or hinder, as in “She was *stalled* in traffic for hours.”

fortuitous

(adj)

for-TOO-it-uss

Definition: Happening by chance; lucky

Usage: It was amazingly **fortuitous** that the exclusive beach resort had a cancellation for exactly the weekend she had wanted to get married, allowing her to have the perfect wedding after all.

Related Words: *Fluke* (stroke of luck, something accidentally successful), *Inadvertent* (unintentional, characterized by a lack of attention)

More Info: **Fortuitous** shares a root with *fortune*. It usually carries both the sense of “happening accidentally” and “fortunate,” but can also mean happening by chance in a negative or neutral way.

fracas

(noun)

FRAY-cuss or FRACK-uss

Definition: Noisy disturbance or fight; brawl

Usage: Rugby is one of the most aggressive of sports—when the players rush to pile on top of the person with the ball, bones can easily be broken in the **fracas**.

Related Words: *Fray* (scuffle, brawl, heated dispute)

More Info: In French, “fracasser” is to shatter; in Italian, “fracassare” is to make an uproar. Those, and **fracas**, come from Latin “frangere” (to break), also appearing in *frangible*, or breakable.

fractious

(adj)

FRACK-chuss

Definition: Unruly, troublemaking; irritable

Usage: The Students for Progressive Action were a **fractious** bunch, always fighting with one another over exactly which progressive action should take priority.

Related Words: *Obstreperous* (unruly, noisy), *Refractory* (stubbornly disobedient), *Captious* (faultfinding, making a big deal of trivial faults)

More Info: The word *fraction* once meant “brawling, discord”—even today, a fraction (in math) is something that has been broken up. Don’t confuse **fractious** with *factious*, meaning “party strife, breaking into *factions* or cliques within a larger organization.”

frenetic

(adj)

fruh-NET-ick

Definition: Wildly excited, frantic, distracted

Usage: The advice in the expert's time management book struck many as unrealistic, as not everyone can handle the **frenetic** lifestyle the author espouses: getting up before dawn to begin work before spending quality time with the kids over breakfast, taking conference calls from the treadmill, etc.

Related Words: *Frenzied* (wildly excited; violently agitated)

More Info: The Greek “phren” meant “mind”; **frenetic** is related to the idea of an inflammation or disease of the brain.

fulminate

(verb)

FULL-min-ayt

Definition: Explode, detonate; attack verbally in a vehement, thunderous way

Usage: Please don't bring up anything related to gun control around my family, or my dad will **fulminate** for hours about the Second Amendment.

Related Words: To *rail against* or *rail at* is to issue a bitter denunciation of.

More Info: **Fulminate** comes from a Latin word for “hurl lightning.” When you **fulminate**, you are as angry as the Romans imagined Jupiter to be, hurling lightning bolts in your fury!

furtive

(adj)

FUR-tiv

Definition: Done secretly; stealthy, sly, shifty

Usage: As a spokesperson for a popular diet plan, the actress had to be quite **furtive** about eating junk food, even hiding her M&Ms in a breath mint container lest the paparazzi snap photos of the inside of her car.

Related Words: *Clandestine*, *Covert*, and *Surreptitious* all mean secret, undercover. **Furtive** contains the added sense of doing something wrong. For instance, the National Clandestine Service is part of the CIA, and military units regularly engage in *covert* operations. It is unlikely, though, that a government would ever use **furtive** in the name of its departments or operations, due to the word's negative associations. **Furtive**, in fact, comes from a Latin word for “thief.”

gambol

(verb)

GAM-bull

Definition: Frolic; skip or leap playfully

Usage: Watching the children **gambol** in the park like frisky little lambs, she wondered how they could have so much energy.

Related Words: *Caper* (gambol; or, a prank, trick, or carefree activity), *Cavort* (prance, make merry), *Lark* (merry adventure)

More Info: **Gambol** comes from the Latin “gamba,” a horse’s leg.

garner

(verb)

GAR-ner

Definition: Gather and store; amass, collect

Usage: The publisher sent copies of the soon-to-be-published manuscript to reviewers, hoping to **garner** acclaim and publicity for the book.

Related Words: *Accrue* (increase gradually), *Augment* (grow larger), *Agglomerate* (form into a mass or cluster, join together), *Aggregate* (gather together, amount to), *Consolidate* (unite, combine, firm up—you can *consolidate* loans or *consolidate* power)

More Info: Don't confuse **garner** with *garnish*, which means either to decorate (such as with a radish carved into a flower next to your sushi) or to take a portion off the top, as in, “After he lost a lawsuit and failed to pay, the judge ordered that his wages be **garnished** and the money sent directly from his employer towards his debts.” **Garner** comes from *granary*, a place to store grain.

gestation

(noun)

jess-TAY-shun

Also *gestate* (verb)

Definition: Pregnancy; the period from conception until birth of an animal or (metaphorically) of an idea or plan

Usage: The **gestation** period of an elephant is 22 months, more than twice as long as that of humans!

More Info: Just as you can *conceive* of an idea, you can also **gestate** metaphorically—“I had the idea for this novel in 2001. After letting it **gestate** for a decade, I finally got started writing.”

glacial

(adj)

GLAY-shull

Definition: Pertaining to glaciers; cold, icy, slow, unsympathetic

Usage: He had wanted to appear in the singing reality competition his whole young life, but he was not encouraged by the judges' **glacial** response to his audition. The awkward silence was excruciating as he waited for the stony-faced panel to say anything at all.

Related Words: *Frigid* (very cold, without human warmth or emotion), *Gelid* (icy)

More Info: A very obvious metaphor—glaciers are cold, slow, and (naturally) don't have feelings. A person who acts like a **glacier** is unpleasant indeed.

glower

(verb)

GLAH-wer

Definition: Stare in an angry, sullen way

Usage: He couldn't figure out why his girlfriend was **glowering** at him throughout dinner. "Oh," he finally realized, "Is it your birthday? Oh, and I forgot you hate seafood. Sorry about the fishsticks."

Related Words: *Lower* as a verb means "look angry, appear threatening." A person can *lower* (as in the girlfriend above), or, often, the sky *lowers* before a storm.

goad

(verb)

GOH'd

Definition: Urge on (as cattle) with a pointed or electrically charged stick; spur on, stimulate, encourage

Usage: He never forgave his friends for **goad**ing him into spray-painting the school with them. While the effect was temporarily hilarious, he lost a scholarship over the incident.

Related Words: *Prod* is a synonym (a “cattle prod” is also a pointed or electrified stick). *Cajole*, *Coax*, and *Wheedle* are all much gentler, meaning “artfully persuade, such as by flattery.”

More Info: In common language, **goad** means “to peer-pressure.”

gouge

(noun, verb)

GAH-oodge

Definition: Scooping or digging tool, like a chisel, or a hole made with such a tool (noun); cut or scoop out; force out a person's eye with one's thumb; swindle, extort money from (verb)

Usage: I was happy with this new video game console for a day or two, until I saw it advertised all over town for half the price and realized I'd been **gouged**. / He loves gory horror films, where people's eyes are **gouged** out and gross stuff like that.

Related Words: *Rout* (dig around, as with a snout; rummage; scoop out or gouge)

graft

(verb, noun)

GRAFT

Definition: Insert part of a plant into another plant, where it continues to grow; join living tissue (such as skin) to part of the body where it will continue to live and grow; attach as if by grafting (verb); the part so grafted (as in a **graft** of skin); the act of acquiring money or other benefits through illegal means, esp. by abusing one's power (noun)

Usage: The part of the book describing the financial crisis is good, but the “What You Can Do” section seems **grafted** on, almost as though written by a different author. / It's not cool for your boss to pressure you into buying Girl Scout cookies from his daughter. If she were selling something larger, we'd call that **graft**.

More Info: The “skin graft” sense of **graft** is related to the root “graph,” for a writing or carving tool. This root also appears in *graffiti*, *cartography* (mapmaking), *epigraph* (inscription on a building, statue, etc.), and even *cacography* (bad spelling or handwriting).

grandiloquent

(adj)

gran-DILL-oh-kwent

Definition: Relating to lofty speech, esp. to the point of being pompous, overblown, bombastic

Usage: After memorizing 1,000 vocabulary flashcards for the GRE, Derek couldn't help but become a little **grandiloquent**, declaring his desire to “abscond from my familial domicile and satisfy my penchant for erudition.” “You can do that later,” said his mother, “but now it's your turn to do the dishes.”

Related Words: *Magniloquent* (synonym), *Declamatory* (pompous, merely oratorical)

More Info: The root “loq” refers to speech; thus, **grandiloquent** has the sense of “grand speech.”

grandstand

(verb)

GRAND-stand

Definition: Perform showily in an attempt to impress onlookers

Usage: I was really passionate about the candidate when he spoke at our school, but now that I think about it, he was just **grandstanding**. I mean, who could disagree that young people are the future? And doing a cheer for the environment doesn't actually signify a commitment to change any public policies about it.

Related Words: *Declaim* (speak in an impassioned, pompous, or oratorical manner; give a formal speech)

More Info: As a noun, a **grandstand** is essentially “the bleachers,” so to **grandstand** is to perform as though for bleachers full of onlookers. In a memorable episode of *30 Rock*, Queen Latifah's character, a Senator, **grandstands** by making animated nonsense speeches in which she just shouts “America” and “the future” and “the troops” so passionately that everyone applauds.

grating

(adj)

GRAY-ting

Definition: Irritating; harsh or discordant (of a noise); scraping

Usage: Folding jeans at the mall finally became unbearable when her kindly old supervisor was replaced with a young woman whose **grating** tone made commands like “Fold faster and then clean up this display!” sound like nails on a chalkboard.

Related Words: *Rasping* is a synonym in all senses—irritating, relating to harsh noise, or scraping, as in “The bottom of the boat *rasped* the rocky ocean floor.” A person with a sore throat often has a *raspy* voice.

More Info: A **grate**, of course, can also be a frame of bars, such as to secure a window. A cheese **grater** shreds cheese. A **grating** voice is kind of like applying a cheese grater to your ears.

grievous

(adj)

GREE-vuss

Definition: Causing grief or suffering; very serious, grave; flagrant, outrageous

Usage: While people certainly do injure themselves on hot stoves, such burns rarely compare to the **grievous** injuries sustained by people who do not observe safety procedures with twelve-gallon deep fryers.

Related Words: *Dire* (causing suffering or fear; ominous; urgent or desperate, as in “a *dire* emergency requiring immediate response”)

More Info: “**Grievous** bodily harm” is a term in English law. General **Grievous** is a fictional villain in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.

grouse

(verb, noun)

GRAH-ooss

Definition: Complain or grumble (verb); a reason for complaint (noun)

Usage: By the end of the trip, everyone was annoyed by Lena’s **grouching**—the bus ride was too bumpy, the food was too spicy, the air conditioning was too dehydrating, etc.... / Don’t be offended, but I’ve got a **grouse** about the way you’re handling this project.

More Info: A **grouse** is also a type of bird, although this usage is of an unrelated origin. The “complain” meaning of **grouse** comes from the Old French “grouchier” and shares a root with *grudge*.

grovel

(verb)

GRAH-vull

Definition: Creep or crawl with one's face to the ground, prostrate oneself as a token of subservience, degrade or abase oneself

Usage: Most of the laid-off employees packed their things and left the building—only one was seen **groveling**, literally on his knees asking his boss not to fire him and even offering to wash the boss's car.

Related Words: *Sycophant*, *Lackey*, *Toady*, and *Myrmidon* are all words for a fawning person (colloquially, a “bootlicker”). *Truckle* means to act subserviently and *Kowtow* means to fawn—or, literally, to bow until one's forehead touches the floor. *Genuflect* also means bow, but often in a courtly way, such as a knight bowing to the king.

Memory Trick: When you kneel down to **grovel**, your knees get all scratched up from being in *gravel*.

halcyon

(adj)

HAL-see-un

Definition: Calm and peaceful, carefree; prosperous, successful, happy

Usage: Installing drywall wasn't the career he'd planned for—every day he reminisced about the **halcyon** days of his high school football career, when he was treated like a god, and he had not a care in the world other than the next big game.

Related Words: *Tranquil*, *Pacific*, and *Placid* also mean peaceful.

More Info: The **halcyon**, in classical mythology, was a bird whose nest floated on the sea and who could charm the waves into calmness.

hallmark

(noun)

HALL-mark

Definition: A mark of indication of quality, purity, genuineness, etc.; any distinguishing characteristic

Usage: Signature red soles are the **hallmark** of Christian Louboutin’s shoes. / Fast-paced rhymes, an angry tenor, and personal attacks on celebrities are **hallmarks** of Eminem’s music.

Related Words: An *earmark* is also any distinguishing mark, such as a mark on an animal’s ear to show ownership. *Earmark* can also be a verb meaning “allocate or set aside” (to *earmark* funds for a project). An *earmark* is neutral, but a **hallmark** generally has more positive connotations.

More Info: The Goldsmiths’ Company of London made gold and silver articles stamped with a mark. The company was located in Goldsmiths’ Hall—thus, a “hall mark.”

hand-wringing

(noun)

HAND-ring-ing

Definition: Grasping, squeezing, etc. of the hands as an expression of nervousness, guilt, etc.; extend debate over what to do about an issue

Usage: There has been much **hand-wringing** (or **wringing of hands**) over falling test scores, with so-called “experts” acting as if the world will end if students do 1% worse in math and science.

hapless

(adj)

HAP-less

Definition: Unlucky, unfortunate

Usage: Hiring this **hapless** new office manager was a mistake—he’s always losing and breaking things, as though bad luck simply follows wherever he goes.

Related Words: *Bootless* (useless), *Woebegone* (beset with woe—that is, grief or distress)

More Info: *Hap* is a very rare old word meaning “luck or lot.”

harangue

(noun, verb)

huh-RANG

Definition: Long, intense verbal attack, esp. when delivered publicly

Usage: Look, I'll clean the gutters when I get a free weekend—I don't need you to keep **haranguing** me about it.

Related Words: *Tirade*, *Diatribes*, and *Fulmination* are all words for bitter, angry speeches or attacks.

Memory Trick: What do you call a large ape who always yells at you? A *harangutan*! (That's the worst joke on all of these flashcards—we promise).

harrow

(noun, verb)

HAIR-oh

Also *harrowing* (adj)

Definition: Farming tool that breaks up soil (noun); painfully disturb or distress (verb)

Usage: Let's start our garden together—you **harrow**, and I'll follow behind you planting the seeds. / The bus ride across Siberia was a **harrowing** experience—the roads were all ice, and the ancient, barely heated vehicle seemed to be lacking both headlights and brakes.

More Info: Shakespeare may have been the first to use **harrow** in a metaphorical way (“I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would **harrow** up thy soul”—Hamlet).

hedge

(verb)

HEDGE

Definition: Avoid commitment by leaving provisions for withdrawal or changing one's mind; protect a bet by also betting on the other side

Usage: While he coaxed and cajoled us all into seeing “the best movie ever,” he **hedged** once we were in the theater: “I don't know if you all like this sort of thing,” he said. “I mean, you can make up your own minds.” / When the professor called on him to take a stand on the issue, he **hedged** for fear of offending her: “Well, there are valid points on both sides,” he said.

Related Words: *Equivocate*, *Waffle*, *Vacillate*, and *Tergiversate* (waver, use unclear language to deceive or avoid committing), *Ambivalent* (unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once), *Palter* (talk insincerely; bargain or haggle)

More Info: A **hedge** fund is an investment fund that **hedges** risk with a variety of methods, such as short selling and derivatives.

hegemony

(noun)

huh-JEM-uh-nee or HEDGE-uh-moh-nee

Also *hegemon* (noun)

Definition: Domination, authority; influence by one country over others socially, culturally, economically, etc.

Usage: The discovery of oil by a previously poor nation disrupted the larger, richer nation's **hegemony** in the region—suddenly, the **hegemon** had a competitor.

Related Words: *Autonomous* (self-governing, independent), *Fiat* (dictate or authoritative order, as in “The king rules *by fiat*.”), *Sovereignty* (supreme power, autonomy)

hermetic

(adj)

her-MET-ick

Definition: Airtight, sealed, isolated; reclusive; pertaining to alchemy, occult

Usage: These packaged meals are **hermetically** sealed—they'll last years in storage, but once opened, you need to finish the contents within a couple of days. / While writing hundreds of vocabulary flashcards, the GRE instructor lived a **hermetic** lifestyle, her skin growing pallid and her social network drastically shrinking.

More Info: **Hermetic** comes from Hermes Trismegistus, a Greek/Egyptian god of magic and alchemy; he supposedly invented a magic airtight seal for containers.

hew

(verb)

HYOO

Definition: Strike, chop, or hack (as with an axe, sword. etc.); make or shape something (such as a statue) with a cutting tool

Usage: The pioneer had to **hew** his own way through the brush in order to proceed westward. / She preferred rustic furniture; her dining room chairs were little more than stumps roughly **hewn** into stools.

More Info: The past tense of **hew** is **hewn**, and the expression *roughly hewn* (or *rough-hewn*, or *rough hewed*) is often used to describe something that seems unfinished or looks as though it was “carved” with a heavy axe rather than more delicate tools. For instance, a manly-man movie star—someone like Russell Crowe—is a more roughly **hewn** than someone like Zac Efron.

hoary

(adj)

HOR-ee

Definition: Very old, gray or white as from old age

Usage: **Hoary** with age, his white beard making his age obvious even from the top of the bleachers, the old man surprised everyone when he was able to make a free throw. / Dad, I've heard your **hoary** old college fraternity stories a hundred times.

Related Words: *Grizzled* (graying), *Wizened* (withered or shriveled, as from age), *Antediluvian* (very old; literally, from before the Biblical flood)

homage

(noun)

HAH-midge

Definition: Honor or respect demonstrated publicly

Usage: This structure I built in the backyard is not just a skateboard ramp; it is an **homage** to my hero Tony Hawk. I have dubbed it the “Tony Hawk Rocks Western Pennsylvania Skateboard Ramp.” / I’m not *copying* Madonna’s song—I am referencing it in my own song as an **homage** to her work.

Related Words: *Tribute* (gift, testimonial, etc. as expression of esteem for someone; performance in someone’s honor, etc.; rent, tax, etc. paid by a subject to a lord)

More Info: Under the feudal system, a vassal was required to pay **homage** to his lord. The word probably comes from the word for “man” (French *homme*, Latin “homo”). The French origin is responsible for what is said by some as a silent “h” (hence “an **homage**”).

hoodwink

(verb)

HOOD-wink

Definition: Trick, deceive

Usage: Pretending to be the building's landlord, the shyster was able to **hoodwink** eleven people into paying deposits on a vacant apartment—of course, he absconded with the money, leaving the victims without their money or a place to live.

Related Words: *Bilk*, *Swindle*, *Con*, and *Fleece* are all verbs for cheating others. *Dupe* means “fool or exploit.” *Fleece* is perhaps more severe, having the connotation of taking *everything* from the victim, the way one sheers all of the fleece from a sheep.

More Info: **Hoodwink** comes from the idea of covering a person's eyes with a hood.

hotly

(adv)

HOT-lee

Definition: In an intense, fiery, or heated way

Usage: The issue of how evolution should be taught in schools was **hotly** disputed by members of the school board, religious leaders, and parent groups.

Related Words: *Heatedly* (synonym)

husband

(verb)

HUZZ-buhnd

Definition: Manage prudently, sparingly, or economically; conserve

Usage: As we are dealing with cutbacks, I am calling on you as the office manager to **husband** our resources, parceling out office supplies and buying new ones only when absolutely necessary.

Related Words: A *Steward* can be a household manager or a manager of food and drinks, such as on a train or plane; to *Steward* also means “conserve, use wisely.”

More Info: “Animal **husbandry**” is the practice of raising or breeding livestock.

iconoclast

(noun)

eye-CAH-noh-clast

Also *iconoclastic* (adj)

Definition: Attacker of cherished beliefs or institutions

Usage: A lifelong **iconoclast**, Ayn Rand wrote a controversial book entitled *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

Related Words: *Maverick* (lone dissenter, person who takes an independent stand), *Heterodox* (unorthodox)

More Info: The original **iconoclasts** were Eastern Orthodox or Protestant Christians who opposed the Catholic use of icons in worship. In extreme cases, they would physically smash icons in churches.

idolatry

(noun)

eye-DOLL-uh-tree

Definition: Idol worship; excessive or unthinking devotion or adoration

Usage: After a year in an education Ph.D. program, she'd had enough with the **idolatry** of Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences—"Gardner isn't a god," she would say, "and you simply can't learn calculus through movement or interpersonal skills."

Related Words: *Veneration* and *Reverence* refer to deep admiration and respect. *Apotheosis* is deification, the process of making someone into or like a god. *Lionization* is treating someone as a celebrity.

More Info: An **idol** (forbidden in many religions) is a representation of an object of worship.

idyllic

(adj)

eye-DILL-ick

Also *idyll* (noun)

Definition: Presenting a positive, peaceful view of rural life (as poetry or prose); pleasant in a natural, simple way

Usage: An action-packed vacation wasn't their style—for their honeymoon, they enjoyed a quiet **idyll** in a cabin in the woods, just watching the deer and enjoying nature.

Related Words: *Bucolic*, *Pastoral*, *Georgic*, and *Arcadian* are all words relating to a positive view of rural life and songs or poems on that theme.

More Info: As a noun, an **idyll** can be a poem on an **idyllic** theme, or a carefree or romantic span of time, such as one spent in peaceful nature.

ignoble

(adj)

ig-NOH-bull

Definition: Not noble; having mean, base, low motives; low quality

Usage: What you have done may not be illegal, but it surely is **ignoble**—people who don't read the user agreement surely do not expect that, by clicking "I Agree," they have signed up for a Jelly of the Month club!

Related Words: *Ignominious* (disgraceful, humiliating, contemptible)

More Info: The Latin "ig" is simply a variation on "in," meaning "not."

imbue

(verb)

im-BYOO

Definition: Permeate or saturate, as dye in a fabric; influence throughout

Usage: After shearing the sheep and spinning the yarn, the next step is to **imbue** the yarn with dye. / His poems are **imbued** with a sense of longing for a lost homeland.

Related Words: *Infuse*, *Suffuse*, and *Pervade* also mean “spread throughout.” *Inculcate* means to teach persistently, implant (an idea) in a person, as in “to *inculcate* morals in children.”

immutable

(adj)

im-MYOO-tuh-bull

Definition: Unchangeable

Usage: Studies of the brains of stroke patients have shown that our identities are not fixed and **immutable**; rather, physical injuries to the brain can drastically change our personalities.

Related Words: *Immalleable* (not moldable or adaptable)

More Info: **Immutable** shares a root (meaning “change”) with *mutation* and *transmute*.

impasse

(noun)

IM-pass

Definition: Position or road from which there is no escape; deadlock

Usage: If the union won't budge on its demands and the transit authority won't raise salaries, then we are at an **impasse**.

Related Words: *Standstill*, *gridlock*, *logjam*, *stalemate*, *standoff*, and *standstill* are all words for being stuck due to different people's opposing goals. Not surprisingly, all of these words are common in politics.

More Info: A physical **impasse**—a road that hits a dead end—can be called a *cul-de-sac*.

impassive

(adj)

im-PASS-iv

Definition: Not having or not showing physical feeling or emotion

Usage: Having been in and out of hospitals all his life, he accepted this latest diagnosis **impassively** —“Whatever happens, happens,” he said.

Related Words: *Stoic* (not having or showing feeling, esp. in response to suffering), *Inscrutable* (not able to be scrutinized, mysterious).

More Info: Note that **impassive** is NOT the antonym of *passive*, which means “inactive, not reacting.”

impecunious

(adj)

im-peck-YOO-nee-uss

Definition: Poor, without money

Usage: Having grown up with **impecunious** parents who could barely keep the electricity on in the house, she was now obsessed with wealth and security.

Related Words: *Penurious* (poor or stingy), *Indigent* (destitute), *Insolvent* (unable to meet one's financial obligations, bankrupt)

More Info: "Pecunia" is Latin for money and also appears in *pecuniary*, "relating to money."

imperious

(adj)

im-PEER-ee-uss

Definition: Commanding, domineering; acting like a high ranking person; urgent

Usage: Her friend were peeved by her **imperious** attitude and talked about her while she was in the ladies' room: "Who does she think she is, not only picking the bar and the meeting time but also telling us where to sit?"

Related Words: *Overbearing* is a synonym. *Autocratic* refers to absolute rule and *Despotic* and *Tyrannical* refer to the abuse of absolute rule.

More Info: The related *imperial* means "pertaining to an empire or emperor." **Imperious** behavior can be appropriate when practiced by an emperor, but generally, **imperious** just means arrogant and bossy.

impermeable

(adj)

im-PER-mee-uh-bull

Also *permeable* (adj)

Definition: Impassable, not allowing passage through (such as by a liquid)

Usage: A good raincoat is totally **impermeable** to water.

Related Words: *Impervious* (impenetrable, not able to be harmed or emotionally disturbed, as in “*impervious* to criticism”)

More Info: **Impermeable** contain the roots “in/im” (not) and “per” (through).

imperturbable

(adj)

im-per-TER-buh-bull

Definition: Calm, not able to be upset or agitated

Usage: Having seen pretty much everything, the kindergarten teacher was truly **imperturbable**: a morning containing a discipline problem, two bathroom accidents, one fight, and one temper tantrum didn't bother her in the least.

Related Words: *Impervious* (impenetrable, not able to be harmed or emotionally disturbed, as in “*impervious* to criticism”), *Stoic* (not having or showing feeling, esp. in response to suffering)

More Info: Of course, a person who can be upset is **perturbable** and has been **perturbed**. **Perturb** contains a root from the Latin “*turbare*” (to disturb); this root also appears in *turbulence* and *turbid* (muddy and choppy, as a turbulent body of water).

impervious

(adj)

im-PER-vee-uss

Definition: Impenetrable, not able to be harmed or emotionally disturbed

Usage: The problem with arrogant people is that they are **impervious** to criticism of their arrogance; anything you say to them just rolls right off.

Related Words: *Impermeable* (impassable, not allowing passage through), *Stoic* (not having or showing feeling, esp. in response to suffering)

More Info: **Impervious** contains the roots “in/im” (not), “per” (through), and “via” (road).

impetuous

(adj)

im-PET-choo-uss

Definition: Passionately impulsive, marked by sudden, hasty emotion; forceful, violent

Usage: Reflecting on her most recent breakup, Heather decided that next time she would like to date someone less **impetuous**; a man who quits his job on a whim and suggests moving together to Utah and raising llamas was just a little too impulsive for her tastes.

Related Words: *Rash* (hasty, lacking forethought or caution)

More Info: **Impetuous** is related to *impetus*, a moving force, motivation, or stimulus.

impious

(adj)

im-PIE-uss

Also *pious* (adj), *piety* (noun)

Definition: Not religious, lacking reverence, ungodly

Usage: In religious schools, **impious** behavior is generally prohibited.

Related Words: *Irreverent* (synonym), *Sacrilegious* (violating what is sacred) *Blasphemous* (impious behavior, esp. speech)

More Info: **Pious** (reverent) shares a root with *expiate* (to atone, ask to be forgiven of one's sins).

implacable

(adj)

im-PLACK-uh-bull

Also *placate* (verb), *placatory* (adj)

Definition: Not able to be appeased, calmed, or satisfied

Usage: After the dog groomer misunderstood and shaved the family Weimaraner totally bald, Mr. Garcia was **implacable**; neither an offer of a free gift certificate nor a complimentary doggie sweater would reduce his fury.

Related Words: *Inexorable* (unyielding, merciless, not moved by pleas)

More Info: **Implacable** means “not able to be **placated**.” Someone who can be **placated** is **placatory**.

imprecation

(noun)

im-preck-AY-shun

Definition: Curse; prayer for harm to come to someone

Usage: The haunted house features a "wicked witch" chanting **imprecations** at all who pass through.

Related Words: *Malediction* (synonym)

More Info: **Imprecation** proceeds from the Latin "precari" (pray). As a verb, **imprecate** means to curse or call down evil upon.

impugn

(verb)

im-PYOON

Definition: Attack the truth or integrity of

Usage: I hate to **impugn** the motives of the volunteers, but I think that some of them are here for personal gain, not to help.

Related Words: *Slander*, *Traduce*, and *Defame* all mean “to speak maliciously and falsely of.” (**Impugning**, in contrast, can sometimes help to uncover the truth).

More Info: **Impugn** comes from the Latin “pugnare” (to fight), which also gives us **pugnacious** (combative, belligerent).

impute

(verb)

im-PYOOT

Definition: Credit, attribute; lay blame or responsibility for (sometimes falsely)

Usage: The ineffectual CEO was nevertheless a master of public relations—he made sure that all successes were **imputed** to him, and all of the failures were **imputed** to others.

More Info: **Impute** proceeds from the Latin “putare” (consider), which also gives us *putative* (supposed, assumed).

incarnadine

(adj, noun)

in-CAR-nuh-dine or in-CAR-nuh-deen

Definition: Blood red or flesh-colored

Usage: The police took the body to the morgue; all that was left at the murder scene was an **incarnadine** stain on a pillow.

Related Words: *Vermilion* means bright red or reddish-orange; the word comes from the Latin for “little worm,” specifically the insect used for the dye.

More Info: **Incarnadine** shares a root (meaning “flesh”) with *carnal*, *carnage*, and *incarnate*. Don’t confuse with *Incarnate* (embodied, personified; put into concrete form, embody, take on a human body).

inconstancy

(noun)

in-CAHN-stun-see

Definition: Fickleness, unreliability; the state of changing without good reason

Usage: Old-fashioned poems often praised a lover's **constancy**; the poet would likely be shocked by any **inconstancy** from his lady, such as if she were receiving poems from other poets.

Related Words: *Continent* (characterized by restraint)

inculcate

(verb)

in-CULL-cayt or IN-cull-cayt

Definition: Teach persistently, implant (an idea) in a person

Usage: Parents spend years trying to **inculcate** morality in their children, constantly teaching and correcting them.

More Info: **Inculcate** comes from a Latin word for “tread,” which itself comes from a word for “heel.” Imagine actually stomping morals into your children!

indefatigable

(adj)

in-deh-FAT-ig-uh-bull

Also *defatigate* (verb)

Definition: Untiring, not able to become fatigued

Usage: The boxer was **indefatigable**; round after round, he never lost speed or energy, even after he had thoroughly **defatigated** his opponent.

Related Words: *Unflagging* (tireless), *Insuperable* and *Indomitable* (not able to be defeated)

More Info: The root word in **indefatigable** is *fatigue*, of course. To **defatigate** is to make tired.

indigence

(noun)

IN-dih-jenss

Also *indigent* (adj)

Definition: Extreme poverty

Usage: The city government has several agencies that provide shelter, food, and other assistance to the **indigent**.

Related Words: *Impecunious* (poor, without money), *Penurious* (poor or stingy), *Indigent* (destitute), *Insolvent* (unable to meet one's financial obligations, bankrupt)

More Info: Don't confuse with *indignant* (offended, angry at injustice).

indolent

(adj)

IN-duh-lent

Definition: Lazy, slothful

Usage: Having worked all his life, the CEO was constantly frustrated with his **indolent** son, who used his inherited wealth as an excuse to sunbathe and party.

Related Words: *Torpid, sluggish, idle, lethargic, loafing*, and *slack* are all related to laziness or slowness.

More Info: The Latin “dolere” means “suffer pain”—today, *dolor* means anguish or grief. **Indolent** arose from the idea of avoiding pain and now means laziness.

inert

(adj)

in-ERT

Definition: Inactive; having little or no power to move

Usage: “All of the missiles at the military museum are **inert**, Timmy,” said the tour guide, answering the question children always asked. “They’re not going to blow up.” / When she saw her father’s **inert** body on the floor, she thought the worst, but fortunately he was just practicing very slow yoga.

Related Words: *Latent, Dormant* (not active at this time)

inexorable

(adj)

in-ECK-ser-uh-bull

Definition: Relentless, unyielding; not moved by pleading

Usage: Many people fled Europe in the face of Hitler's **inexorable** march across the continent.

Related Words: *Unflagging* and *Indefatigable* (tireless), *Insuperable* and *Indomitable* (not able to be defeated)

More Info: **Inexorable** shares a root (“orare,” meaning “pray”) with *orator* (now a public speaker, but originally a worship leader). The sense here is that an **inexorable** force is pitiless and unmoved by prayers.

infallible

(adj)

in-FAL-ih-bull

Also *fallible* (adj), *fallacious* (adj)

Definition: Incapable of error; certain

Usage: No good scientist thinks he or she is **infallible**—it is fundamental to the scientific method that every theory is open to revision based on new evidence.

Related Words: *Unerring* (synonym)

More Info: L’Oreal has released a new line of lipstick called **Infallible**, which implies that the lipstick is immune from being logically incorrect. A better name might have been something like “Flawless.”

ingrate

(noun)

IN-grayt

Definition: Ungrateful person

Usage: You **ingrate**! I have slaved at this laundromat to pay for your college education, and you quit two weeks before graduation to become a Marxist revolutionary, and then you tell me I'm the enemy of the working class?

More Info: The “grate” in **ingrate** is of course related to *grateful*, but also *grace* and *ingratiate* (gain favor with, as by flattery).

ingratiate

(verb)

in-GRAY-shee-ayt

Definition: Make an effort to gain favor with

Usage: Ryan’s attempts to **ingratiate** himself with the boss were quite transparent—no one really believes that a 25 year old loves the same cigars, classic rock, and AARP crosswords as the 65 year old company president.

Related Words: *Fawn* (show affection or try to please in the manner of a dog; try to win favor through flattery and submissive behavior), *Sycophant*, *Lackey*, *Toady*, and *Myrmidon* are all words for a person who *fawns*.

More Info: The Latin root “gratia” means grace; **ingratiate** has the sense of the modern expression “to get into someone’s good graces.”

inimical

(adj)

in-IM-ick-ull

Definition: Hostile, adverse, harmful

Usage: Most people think that being shouted at in the freezing rain is **inimical** to learning; sadly, our boot camp instructor disagreed.

Related Words: *Conducive* is an antonym and is also used with the word “to.” Loud noise is **inimical to** studying, and a quiet environment is *conducive to* studying.

iniquity

(noun)

in-ICK-wit-ee

Definition: Injustice, wickedness, sin

Usage: The preacher's sermon about loving your neighbor was regarded by some as a welcome departure from his usual fiery homilies railing against **iniquity**. / **Iniquitous** corporations, such as those that spill oil into our oceans, must be punished.

Related Words: *Peccadillo* (small sin or fault)

More Info: Don't confuse with *inequity*, meaning "lack of equality, unfairness."

inordinate

(adj)

in-OR-din-it

Definition: Excessive, not within proper limits, unrestrained

Usage: Students taking online GRE practice tests at home often take an **inordinate** number of breaks—remember, on the real thing, you can’t stop just because you’re tired or hungry.

Related Words: *Gratuitous* (free; without cause or justification)

More Info: **Inordinate** contains a root for “order” and thus has the sense of “not orderly.”

inquest

(noun)

IN-kwest

Definition: Legal or judicial inquiry, especially before a jury and especially made by a coroner into the cause of someone's death; the results of such an inquiry

Usage: The family waited nervously for the results of the **inquest**, which finally returned a verdict of misadventure; that is, their grandfather had not been murdered, but rather died in a freak accident of his own doing.

More Info: **Inquest** is simply a form of the Latin word for “inquire.”

insensible

(adj)

in-SEN-sih-bull

Definition: Incapable of feeling; unconscious, unaware

Usage: Very intoxicated people can be **insensible** to pain, leading to serious problems as they injure themselves and don't realize it. / I cannot believe that, while I was **insensible** after the operation, you put funny hats on me and took pictures! You are **insensible** to shame!

Related Words: *Insensate* (inanimate, as an object; without sense or human feeling, cruel)

insinuate

(verb)

in-SIN-yoo-ayt

Definition: Hint, suggest slyly; introduce (an idea) into someone's mind in a subtle, artful way

Usage: "Where's your boyfriend? You didn't leave him home alone, did you?" asked Ming. "Are you **insinuating** something?" asked Helen. "If you have something to say, just say it."

Related Words: *Implicit* and *Tacit* (implied, unspoken)

More Info: **Insinuate** contains a root for "a curve, winding" that also exists in *sinew* and *sinus*.

Insinuate can also mean to introduce *yourself* (rather than an idea) in a stealthy, covert way, as in "By researching where the bosses would be and what kinds of things they liked to talk about, Fitz was able to **insinuate** himself into the company's leadership."

insipid

(adj)

in-SIP-id

Definition: Dull, stale, lacking taste or interest

Usage: This is a university level poetry class, and your **insipid** drivel just won't cut it here. "Things that are bad always make me sad"? Really? / The restaurant critic called the dish "**insipid**"—I did think it was bland, but I probably would've been more polite about it.

Related Words: *Banal, Hackneyed, Inane, Insidid* and *Trite* all mean "lacking freshness and originality, shallow."

More Info: The rare antonym **sipid** and the variant *sapid* mean "tasty, agreeably distinct." The root "sapere" (having taste) also means "be wise" and appears in *sage* and *sapient*, which both mean wise.

insular

(adj)

IN-sull-er or IN-syoo-ler

Definition: Pertaining to an island; detached, standing alone; narrow-minded, provincial

Usage: The young actress couldn't wait to escape the **insularity** of her small town, where life revolved around high school football and Taco Bell was considered exotic international cuisine.

Related Words: *Xenophobia* (fear of foreigners), *Illiberality* (narrow-mindedness, lack of generosity)

More Info: Word origins sometimes contain biases or old-fashioned ideas—for instance, the implication that people on islands are narrow-minded. A similar bias is implied in *provincial* and *parochial* (pertaining to a province or parish, respectively)—the idea is that people from “out there in the country” are not as sophisticated as city people, who have their own word, *urbane* (cosmopolitan, refined).

insurrection

(noun)

in-ser-ECK-shun

Definition: Rebellion or revolt against a government or similarly established authority

Usage: Due to frequent **insurrections**, the nation has had six governments in just five years. / The principal prepared for **insurrection** as she announced that all teachers were to spend the rest of the year exclusively preparing for standardized tests.

Related Words: *Junta* (small group ruling a country, esp. after a revolution), *Cabal* (a conspiratorial group), *Sedition* (incitement of dissent against a government; promoting rebellion by speech or writing)

More Info: **Insurrection** contains the root “surge” (rise up), also appearing in *resurgence* and *insurgent* (one who participates in an insurrection).

inter

(verb)

in-TER

Definition: Bury (a dead body) or place in a tomb

Usage: After the funeral, the body will be **interred** in the cemetery. / Occasionally, a criminal investigation requires **disinterring**, or *exhuming*, a body for autopsy; this can be upsetting to family members who have already buried their loved one.

More Info: **Inter** comes from “in” and “terra” (earth)—thus simply “to place in the earth.” The root for earth also appears in *terrestrial*, *terrarium*, *terrace*, *territory*, *Mediterranean*, and *extra-terrestrial*.

interplay

(noun)

IN-ter-play

Definition: Interaction, reciprocal relationship or influence

Usage: Bilingual readers will enjoy the **interplay** of English and Spanish in many of the poems in this anthology of the work of Mexican-American poets.

Related Words: *Converge* (move towards one another or towards a point; unite), *Dovetail* (join or fit together)

interregnum

(noun)

in-ter-REG-num

Definition: A time in between two reigns or regimes during which there is no ruler; a period during which government does not function; any period of freedom from authority or break or interruption in a series

Usage: When the king died with no heir, his ministers ruled in the **interregnum** as the nobles argued over which of the king's nephews should rule next. / In the **interregnum** between Madonna and Lady Gaga, there was no single female pop star who commanded such titanic audiences.

Related Words: *Interrex* (person holding supreme authority during an interregnum), *Hiatus* (break or gap in an activity), *Abeyance* (temporary suspension, inactivity)

More Info: The Latin root “reg” (kingship, rule) also occurs in *regal*, *regulate*, *regime*, *regiment*, *regicide* (killing a king), and *regale* (entertain, amuse).

intransigent

(adj)

in-TRAN-zih-jent

Definition: Refusing to compromise, inflexible, having extreme attitudes

Usage: “Even three detentions and a note home to your parents haven’t convinced you to behave yourself in class!” the teacher said to the **intransigent** child.

Related Words: *Intractable*, *Obdurate*, and *Obstreperous* are also used to describe people who are stubborn and hard to control.

More Info: **Intransigent** shares a root with *transaction*—as in, **intransigent** people will not likely agree to a reasonable *transaction*.

inundate

(verb)

IN-un-dayt

Definition: Flood, cover with water, overwhelm

Usage: As the city was **inundated** with water, the mayor feared that many evacuees would have nowhere to go. / I can't go out—I am **inundated** with homework!

Related Words: *Deluge* means to flood, or a flood itself, and is used metaphorically in the same way as **inundate** (*deluged* with work, a *deluge* of complaints). *Engulf* means “flow over and enclose, swallow up or submerge.” A storm *engulfing* an island would be even more severe than a storm **inundating** or *deluging* it.

inure

(verb)

in-YOOR

Definition: Toughen up; accustom or habituate to pain, hardship, etc.

Usage: Having had over a dozen surgeries before she was ten, spending months at a time in the hospital, she considered herself **inured** to pain and disappointment.

Related Words: *Stoic* (not having or showing feeling, esp. in response to suffering), *Hardy* (bold, brave, capable of withstanding hardship, fatigue, cold, etc.), *Fortitude* (strength in facing adversity), *Grit* (firmness of mind, esp. during hardship; courage)

invective

(noun)

in-VECK-tiv

Definition: Violent denunciation; accusations, insults, or verbal abuse

Usage: Although the money was good, she quit her job after nearly having a nervous breakdown from her boss's **invective**.

Related Words: *Vituperation* (synonym), *Censure* (strong disapproval or official reprimand), *Contumely* (contemptuous treatment or a humiliating insult), *Vitriol* (very caustic criticism)

More Info: **Invective** comes from a root for *attack* that also gives us *inveigh* (to protest strongly or attack with words).

inveigle

(verb)

in-VAY-gull

Definition: Entice, lure; get something by flattery, cleverness, or offering incentives

Usage: After Mrs. Kim found out that her son's friends had **inveigled** him into doing something stupid, she gave him a lecture on standing up to peer pressure.

Related Words: *Coax* and *cajole* are gentler versions—trying to get someone to do something through persuasion or flattery.

More Info: Don't confuse with *inveigh* (to protest strongly or attack with words).

investiture

(noun)

in-VEST-it-choor or in-VEST-it-cher

Definition: Investing; formally giving someone a right or title

Usage: The former dean had her academic robes dry cleaned in preparation for her **investiture** as university president.

Related Words: *Divest* (deprive or strip of a rank, title, etc., or of clothing or gear; to sell off holdings)

invidious

(adj)

in-VID-ee-uss

Definition: Hateful, offensive, injurious

Usage: School bullying has become a serious problem, with ongoing **invidious** behavior driving students to suicide.

Related Words: *Malicious* and *Malevolent* both mean “intending ill will towards another.”

More Info: **Invidious** comes from the Latin word for *envy*. Don’t confuse **invidious** with *insidious*, which means deceitful, tricky, intended to entrap or ensnare.

irascible

(adj)

ih-RASS-uh-bull or eye-RASS-uh-bull

Definition: Irritable, easily angered

Usage: “I spent my entire childhood tiptoeing around so as not to anger my **irascible** mother,” Joe told his therapist.

Related Words: *Dyspeptic* (grumpy, pessimistic, irritable), *Curmudgeon* (bad-tempered, difficult person), *Crotchety* (grouchy, picky, given to odd notions), *Cantankerous* (disagreeable, contentious)

More Info: **Irascible** shares a root with *irate* (angry) and *ire* (anger).

irresolute

(adj)

ih-REZ-uh-loot

Also *resolute* (adj)

Definition: Wavering, not sure how to proceed, not firm in one's decision-making

Usage: If we were voting on the bill this moment, we'd have enough votes to pass it. But many of our supporters are **irresolute**—we're worried that when lobbyists get to them, they'll quickly change their minds.

Related Words: *Ambivalent* (uncertain; unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once), *Equivocal* (allowing for several different meanings; undecided or having mixed feelings)

More Info: *Resolute* or *resolved* means “decided; firm in purpose.” A *resolution* can be a mutual agreement or a solution to a problem.

itinerant

(adj)

eye-TIN-uh-ruhnt or it-TIN-uh-ruhnt

Definition: Traveling from place to place, esp. as part of a job

Usage: In rural areas in the 1940s, it was common that a small town would lack its own doctor, instead being seen by an **itinerant** family physician who made rounds to many such towns.

Related Words: *Peripatetic* and *wayfaring* are synonyms. *Transient* also means moving around, but is more associated with homeless people or those on the fringe of society.

More Info: **Itinerant** shares a root with *itinerary*, a travel schedule.

itinerary

(noun)

eye-TIN-uh-rare-ee or it-TIN-uh-rare-ee

Definition: Travel schedule; detailed plan for a journey

Usage: Great, that was the Parthenon! What's next on our **itinerary**?

Related Words: *Agenda* is a similar but more general word that can be used metaphorically—a meeting usually has an *agenda*, a trip could have an *agenda* (goal or plan) for the day, and a person who wants something but isn't being direct about it is said to have an *agenda* or *hidden agenda*.

More Info: **Itinerary** shares a root with *itinerant* (traveling from place to place, esp. as part of a job). An **itinerary** can sometimes be a guidebook or a record of travel that has already happened.

jettison

(verb)

JET-iss-un

Definition: Discard, cast off; throw items overboard in order to lighten a ship in an emergency

Usage: We got so tired while hiking the Appalachian Trail that we **jettisoned** some of our fancy camping supplies just so we could drag ourselves to a place where we could get medical attention.

Related Words: Cargo **jettisoned** off a ship is called *jetsam*. Any bunch of discarded, worthless stuff can be called *flotsam and jetsam*.

More Info: **Jettison** comes from a root for “throw” that also gives us *jetty*, “a wharf, pier, or other structure that *juts* out into the water.”

jingoism

(noun)

JING-go-izm

Also *jingoist* (noun)

Definition: Excessive, loud patriotism and aggressive, warlike foreign policy

Usage: He is such a **jingoist** that he's always yelling at the TV, calling even the most conservative commentators "wimps" for failing to suggest that we simply nuke, burn, pillage, and otherwise extirpate our so-called "enemies."

Related Words: *Hawkish* (advocating war), *Chauvinism* (fanatical patriotism or blind enthusiasm for military glory; undue or biased devotion to any group, cause, etc.)

More Info: The opposite of a **jingoist** is a *pacifist* (someone opposed to war) or possibly a *cosmopolite* (someone who considers him or herself a citizen of the entire world).

juxtapose

(verb)

juck-stuh-POHZ

Also *juxtaposition* (noun)

Definition: Place side-by-side (either physically or in a metaphorical way, such as to make a comparison)

Usage: Making a decision between two engagement rings from two different stores was difficult, he noted—it would be much easier if he could **juxtapose** them and compare them directly.

Related Words: *Abreast* (side-by-side; metaphorically, “up to date with,” as in “keeping abreast of the news”), *Abut* (touch, border on, end at, as in *Their house abuts my property*).

kindle

(verb)

KIN-dull

Definition: Ignite, cause to begin burning; incite, arouse, inflame

Usage: It's hard to **kindle** a campfire when it's so damp out. / Although they were apart, the lovers' passion was only further **kindled** by the love letters they wrote to one another.

Related Words: *Incendiary* (starting fire; inflaming the senses or arousing rebellion)

More Info: *Kindling*, also called *tinder*, is material for lighting a fire (such as twigs or straw).

Amazon's *Kindle* e-book reader is probably so called because it (in theory) *ignites* a love of reading or knowledge.

kinetic

(adj)

kin-ET-ick

Definition: Pertaining to motion

Usage: Marisa told her mother what she had learned in science class: a ball sitting on a table has potential energy, but a ball falling towards the ground has **kinetic** energy.

More Info: **Kinetic** contains a root for motion that appears in many other words that you don't need to memorize, but now can easily puzzle out—*kinesthetic* learners prefer to learn through physical activity. Patients with *dyskenesia* have trouble with movement. You could major in *kinesiology* in preparation for being a coach or gym teacher.

knell

(noun, verb)

NELL

Definition: The sound made by a bell for a funeral, or any sad sound or signal of a failure, death, ending, etc. (noun); to make such a sound (verb)

Usage: The Senate minority leader's speech was a death **knell** for the bill; all hope of bipartisan cooperation was lost.

Related Words: *Dirge* (A funeral or mourning song or poem), *Requiem* (musical service or hymn for the dead), *Threnody* (poem or song of mourning), *Elegy* (song or poem of sorrow, esp. for a deceased person)

More Info: Don't confuse **knell** with *knoll*, a small hill (as in the "grassy knoll" supposedly involved in JFK's assassination).

lachrymose

(adj)

LACK-ruh-mohss

Definition: Tearful, mournful

Usage: Accustomed to **lachrymose** occasions, the funeral home kept boxes of tissues near every seat.

Related Words: *Maudlin* (overly tearful and sentimental), *Lament* (express sorrow, mourn)

More Info: Interestingly, *lacrimation* is the medical condition of making too many tears.

larceny

(noun)

LAR-sen-ee

Definition: Theft

Usage: The department store employs a security officer whose job it is to prevent **larceny**.

Related Words: To *purloin* is to steal. To *pilfer* or *filch* is also to steal, but generally of something small (*I filched these awesome coffee mugs from the local diner*).

More Info: In legal terms, **larceny** refers to a particular type of theft—the thief must physically carry away the stolen item. No one but lawyers cares about this distinction.

largess or largesse

(noun)

lar-ZHESS or lar-JESS

Definition: Generosity, the giving of money or gifts (esp. with the implication that the giver is a bit superior to the recipient)

Usage: While I did attend a tony private school, my parents were actually quite poor—I was at that school through the **largesse** of my grandfather.

Related Words: *Magnanimity*, *munificence*, and *openhandedness* all mean generosity.

More Info: **Largesse** certainly does come from the idea of *largeness* (of spirit). The word is from French (thus the extra “e” in some spellings).

latent

(adj)

LAY-tent

Definition: Potential; existing but not visible or active

Usage: Certain experts believe that some people have a genetic propensity for addiction; however, if such a person never comes into contact with drugs, the propensity for addiction can remain **latent** for life.

Related Words: *Dormant* (not active at this time), *Inert* (inactive; having little or no power to move), *Hiatus* (break or gap in an activity)

laudable

(adj)

LAW-duh-bull

Also *laud* (verb)

Definition: Worthy of praise

Usage: When a major discount mart fired several employees for subduing a gunman, most people considered the action a **laudable** act of heroism, but the discount chain fired the employees for “violating company policies.” Nevertheless, the mayor **lauded** the former employees in a medal-granting ceremony.

Related Words: *Encomium* (warm, glowing praise, esp. a formal expression of praise), *Panegyric* (formal, lofty, or elaborate praise), *Paeon* (song of praise, triumph, or thanks)

More Info: **Laud** shares a root with *applaud* and *plaudits* (applause, approval).

lax

(adj)

LACKS

Definition: Not strict; careless, loose, slack

Usage: My parents were really **lax** about homework—they never checked to see if I did it or not. Sadly, this legacy of **laxity** is not serving me well while studying for the GRE.

Related Words: *Slack* (loose, negligent, or lazy, as in *a slack rope* or *He is slack in his duties*).

More Info: **Lax** comes from a Latin word for “loose” that also gives us *laxative*.

leery

(adj)

LEER-ee

Definition: Suspicious or wary

Usage: You should be **leery** of any business opportunity that requires a startup fee and a “sponsor”—you might find yourself sucked into a scam.

Related Words: *Chary* (cautious, wary, or timid). There is a big overlap between *leery* and *chary*, although a person could be habitually *chary* (such as in being shy), whereas a person is generally **leery** of something specific (and sketchy!).

More Info: **Leery** is almost always followed by *of*. Relatedly, to *leer* is to look in an intense, creepy way, such as with lustful or malicious intent. You should be **leery** of anyone who *leers* at you.

legerdemain

(noun)

led-jer-deh-MAYN

Definition: Slight-of-hand (magic as performed by a magician); trickery or deception

Usage: The child was astounded when her uncle pulled out a quarter from behind her ear. Of course, she hadn't actually lost a quarter there; it was just a bit of **legerdemain** from an amateur magician.

Related Words: *Prestidigitation* is a synonym and *thaumaturgy* is the working of miracles. To *conjure* is to produce by magic or call up a spirit or memory.

More Info: **Legerdemain** comes from Middle French, meaning *light of hand*. The modern French word for hand is *main*, which is related to the root in the English *manual* (relating to hands, as in *manual labor*) and *manumit* (free from slavery, untie the hands).

lethargic

(adj)

leth-AR-jick

Definition: Lazy, drowsy, or sluggish

Usage: I do love the Golden Corral's reasonably priced buffet, but I feel so **lethargic** after I eat my weight in mac-and-cheese and hand-carved turkey.

Related Words: *Torpid, sluggish, idle, indolent, loafing*, and *slack* are all related to laziness or slowness.

More Info: In Greek mythology, the River Lethe was the river of forgetfulness or oblivion. It flowed through the underworld, and the dead were required to drink from it in order to forget their earthly lives.

licentious

(adj)

lie-SENT-shuss

Definition: Sexually unrestrained; immoral; ignoring the rules

Usage: The **licentious** behavior Joe was accustomed to practicing at the local strip club was enough to get him thrown out of a nice restaurant and fired from his new job.

Related Words: *Hedonistic* and *sybaritic* mean “pleasure-seeking.” *Debauched* (excessively indulging in sensual pleasures) is worse and is closer to **licentious**.

More Info: **Licentious** shares a root with “license.” *License* is not just used in the sense of “driver’s license” but can also mean “breaking the rules” or “exceptional freedom,” as in “The **licentious** celebrity thinks he has license to do anything he wants, an attitude that landed him in court after his assistant sued him for harassment.”

limpid

(adj)

LIMP-id

Definition: Clear, transparent; completely calm

Usage: Hawaii was amazing! The water was crystal clear—so **limpid** that when you were scuba diving, you could see ahead for what seemed like miles! / After two years meditating in religious seclusion, he had a totally **limpid** attitude, affected by nothing from the outside world.

Related Words: *Pellucid* (translucent, clear, easy to understand)

lionize

(verb)

LIE-un-ize

Definition: Treat like a celebrity

Usage: Being a chef has long been a prestigious profession, but it is only in the last decade or so that “celebrity chefs” have been **lionized** and given their own television shows.

Related Words: *Apotheosis* (elevation to the status of a god; perfect example or embodiment)

More Info: **Lionize** does come from *lion*, the animal—in the 16th century, lions were kept in the Tower of London as a tourist attraction. To **lionize** is to make a person into a spectacle of great interest.

lissome

(adj)

LISS-um

Definition: Flexible, supple, agile

Usage: The actress exercised and stretched every day, but was ultimately told by the casting director that she wasn't **lissome** enough to play a ballet dancer. The actress had to agree—"I walk like an ogre," she said.

Related Words: *Nimble* (moving quickly and lightly; alert)

More Info: *Lithe* (limber, flexible) is a synonym—in fact, **lissome** originated as a variant of *lithesome*.

listless

(adj)

LIST-less

Definition: Spiritless, lacking interest or energy

Usage: “I’m bored, Mom,” said the **listless** child. “Can I have a cookie? Can we go to the park? Let’s play a game. There’s nothing to do!”

Related Words: *Indifferent* (not caring, having no interest), *Apathy* (not caring; absence of feeling; lack of interest or concern)

More Info: Why doesn’t **listless** mean “not having a list?” Turns out the root isn’t *list* so much as *lust*—to be **listless** is to lack a “lust for life.”

livid

(adj)

LIV-id

Definition: Furiously angry, enraged

Usage: Diane was **livid** when she discovered that her daughter had borrowed her wedding dress to wear to an ‘80s party. “I have never been angrier in my life,” she said.

Related Words: *Irascible* means easily angered and the related *irate* means angry (*ire* is anger).

More Info: Originally from a French word for a bluish color, **livid** has the sense of turning blue from rage (although Americans would say that we turn purple with rage—same idea). **Livid** can also mean bruised or “black-and-blue,” or even turning pale (from sickness) or red (from anger)—but whatever **livid** is, it’s never good.

lugubrious

(adj)

luh-GOO-bree-uss or luh-GYOO-bree-uss

Definition: Mournful, gloomy (sometimes in an exaggerated way)

Usage: Helen was having a good time at the Irish pub until the Traditional Music Hour started, and the **lugubrious** tunes made her cry into her Guinness.

Related Words: *Lachrymose* (tearful, mournful), *Maudlin* (overly tearful and sentimental), *Lament* (express sorrow, mourn)

lumber

(verb)

LUM-ber

Definition: Walk in a heavy or clumsy way, sometimes due to being weighed down

Usage: Alicia was a model and was accustomed to walking everywhere as though on a catwalk, so she was quite displeased when she broke her leg and had to **lumber** around in a cast, thumping the ground everywhere she went.

Related Words: To *trudge* or *plod* is to walk or move in a laborious, difficult, or slow manner. A child might *trudge* reluctantly to school. A boring movie might *plod* along. A heavy, inflexible person might **lumber** around.

luminous

(adj)

LOO-min-uss

Also *luminary* (noun)

Definition: Shining, radiant, well-lit; brilliant or enlightening

Usage: Use our new light-reflecting shimmer blush for a **luminous** complexion! / We are conferring this honorary degree on the author in appreciation for sharing his **luminous** intellect with the world. He is truly a **luminary**.

Related Words: *Lustrous*, *effulgent*, and *refulgent* also mean shining.

More Info: **Luminous** comes from the root “luc” for “light,” which also occurs in *translucent*, *lucubrate* (work or study, originally by candlelight), *elucidate* (make clear, explain), and *lucid* and *pellucid* (clear). A *luminary* is a person who inspires others (or “lights up” the world).

lurid

(adj)

LOOR-id

Definition: Gruesome or excessively vivid; sensational, shocking, unrestrained

Usage: I do like to keep up with what celebrities are doing, but that tabloid is just too **lurid** for me—just look at the cover: “Worst Cellulite in Hollywood” and “Exclusive Crash Photos.” Truly horrible.

Related Words: *Gratuitous* can mean free or voluntary (a *gratuity* is a tip in a restaurant), but the other meaning of *gratuitous* is “without cause or justification; uncalled for.” *Gratuitous* sex and violence in the movies is that which doesn’t add to the plot—it’s just there because some people like to look at things that are **lurid**.

machination or machinations

(noun, usually plural)

mack-in-AY-shun or mash-in-AY-shun

Definition: Crafty schemes or plots

Usage: It's cute to think that teen idols became famous because their talent was simply so great that the music industry reached out to them, but usually, any teen idol is the product of intense coaching and parental **machinations**.

Related Words: *Collude* (conspire; cooperate for illegal or fraudulent purposes), *Cabal* (a conspiratorial group)

More Info: The verb form *machinate* has the same meaning (to *machinate* to overthrow the government). It's just a coincidence that **machinations** looks a little like Machiavelli, but *machinating* is quite Machiavellian!

maelstrom

(noun)

MAYL-strum

Definition: Violent whirlpool; any chaotic, turbulent situation

Usage: The Smiths lost their houseboat in a **maelstrom**, but were at least thankful that they weren't on the boat at the time and thus escaped the violent storm at sea. / After having been homeschooled her whole life, the first week of college was a **maelstrom** of social events, orientations, and business.

Related Words: *Tumult* (a commotion, uprising, riot, or violent outburst), *Din* (loud, confused noise), *Clamor* (noisy uproar, as from a crowd), *Hubbub* (loud noise, confusion)

More Info: The unusual spelling of **maelstrom** is due to its Dutch origins.

magnanimous

(adj)

mag-NAN-im-uss

Also *magnanimity* (noun)

Definition: High-minded, noble, lofty; generous in forgiving others, free of resentment

Usage: The twins were so different from one another—while Andrea was petty and vengeful and would hold a grudge for years, Marina was quite **magnanimous**, easily forgiving insults or slights, and simply rising above the petty bickering and cliquish behavior of our high school.

More Info: The Latin “magnus” means “great” and gives us *magniloquent* (talking in an overly grand way), *magnify*, and many others. Think of **magnanimous** as meaning having a great spirit or a big heart.

magnate

(noun)

MAG-nayt or MAG-nit

Definition: Very important or influential person, esp. in business

Usage: Many students pursue MBAs in hopes of becoming wealthy and powerful **magnates**; some students never quite make it there, instead spending their careers staring at spreadsheets and taking orders from **magnates**.

Related Words: *Scion* (descendent, heir—often used to describe the son of a rich, powerful man), *Baron* (originally a British noble, but now used to describe a powerful businessperson, as in an *oil baron* or the *robber barons* of American history)

More Info: The Latin “magnus” means “great” and gives us *magniloquent* (talking in an overly grand way), *magnanimous* (high-minded, noble, forgiving), *magnify*, and many others.

malediction

(noun)

mal-eh-DICT-shun

Definition: A curse

Usage: Sheila thought the fortune-teller was her friend, but when she didn't pay her bill, the fortune teller cast a hex on her, a **malediction** intended to cause terrible things to befall her.

Related Words: *Imprecation* is a synonym. *Execration* can mean a curse or cursing, but can also mean insulting or slandering. All three words can be used in the plural or not, with the same meaning—for instance, *He was such a bitter person it seemed that only execration (or execrations) ever escaped his lips.*

More Info: *Mal* means “bad,” of course. The root “dict” comes from “dicere” (to say) and also appears in *dictator*, *dictionary*, and *indict* (connect to a crime), as well as in **malediction**'s antonym, *benediction* (blessing).

malingering

(verb)

muh-LING-gur

Also *malingerer* (noun)

Definition: Pretend to be sick, esp. to get out of work, duties, etc.

Usage: Joey was sick in class on Monday and was sent to the school nurse to sleep it off. The next day, having realized that illness was a good way to get out of class, Joey said his stomach hurt and spent the afternoon in the nurse's office. By Wednesday, though, the nurse accused him of **malinger**ing and sent him back to class.

Related Words: To *shirk* is to evade your duties or try to get out of doing something. To *skulk* is to hide for a bad reason, such as avoiding work (or waiting to attack someone, etc.)

More Info: “Mal” means “bad,” and although **maling**er doesn't actually come from *linger* (stick around, stay due to not wanting to leave), the idea of *sticking around in a bad way* (like **maling**erer Joey, above) is a good way to remember **maling**er.

manifest

(verb, adj)

MAN-if-est

Also *manifestation* (noun)

Definition: Obvious, apparent, perceptible to the eye (adj); to show, make clear, or prove (verb)

Usage: My superstitious aunt claims that she saw a **manifestation** of our deceased grandfather, who appeared during a thunderstorm to warn us all about our cousin's fiance. / Lupus is difficult to diagnose, but sometimes **manifests** as muscular weakness or joint pain.

More Info: As a noun, a **manifest** is a list of people or goods aboard a plane, ship, train, etc. A **manifestation** is often when something “under the surface” breaks out or becomes apparent: *The protest was a **manifestation** of a long-brewing discontent.*

mannered

(adj)

MAN-erd

Definition: Having a particular manner, esp. an artificial one

Usage: Although he grew up in rural Ohio, sometime before he got his own makeover show on television he adopted a **mannered** way of speaking, as though he had grown up in some very odd corner of Victorian England.

Related Words: *Affectation* (fake behavior, such as in speech or dress, adopted to give a certain impression)

More Info: **Mannered** is often part of compound words, such as *ill-mannered*, which just means having bad manners.

mar

(verb)

MAR

Definition: Damage, spoil, ruin

Usage: The interior designer's secret was to buy furnishings and fixtures that had been **marred** on the shop floor and therefore were sold at steep discounts; she would then fix the defects herself or add additional aging effects to the pieces.

Related Words: *Vitiate* (spoil, weaken, or corrupt), *Deface* (disfigure, mar the surface of)

martinet

(noun)

mar-tin-ET

Definition: Person who adheres to rules extremely closely; strict disciplinarian

Usage: It was no fun growing up with a military officer for a dad. He was such a **martinet** he once made me do twenty pushups for being one minute late to bed—even though the reason I was late was that I wanted to kiss him goodnight.

Related Words: *Doctrinaire* (person who applies doctrine in an impractical or rigid and close-minded way), *Jingoism* (excessive, loud patriotism and aggressive, warlike foreign policy), *Hawkish* (advocating war), *Chauvinism* (fanatical patriotism or blind enthusiasm for military glory; undue or biased devotion to any group, cause, etc.)

More Info: After the general Jean Martinet, a French drillmaster.

maudlin

(adj)

MAWD-lin

Definition: Excessively sentimental, showing sadness or some other emotion in a foolish or silly way

Usage: I had no idea the film was going to be a **maudlin** affair in which the male lead dies and the female lead has his baby, who then also dies. Half the theater was weeping, and the other half was just shaking their heads at how badly written the movie was.

Related Words: *Cloying*, *treacly* and *saccharine* all mean “disgustingly or distastefully sweet” (as in some television shows marketed to little girls, for example).

More Info: **Maudlin** can also mean acting foolishly emotional due to drunkenness.

maxim

(noun)

MACK-sim

Definition: A general truth or fundamental principle, esp. expressed as a proverb or saying

Usage: My favorite **maxim** is “Seize the day!” How much would it cost to get that on a tattoo? How much more for “Curiosity killed the cat”?

Related Words: *Dictum*, *Apothegm*, and *Adage* are all words for a proverb, saying, or truism. A *saw* is also a maxim and often appears as “an old *saw*.” *Platitude* is more negative, meaning a clichéd or trite statement.

More Info: **Maxim** shares a root with *maximum*; the idea is that a **maxim** is an expression of the “biggest,” most fundamental truth.

mendicant

(noun)

MEN-dih-cuhnt

Definition: Beggar, or religious follower who lives by begging

Usage: Having joined a **mendicant** order, the friar had vowed not to own property, and instead to subsist on the donations of the faithful.

Related Words: *Pauper* (very poor person), *Alms* (money or other donations given as charity)

More Info: **Mendicant** comes from a root for “defect, fault” that also gives us *mend* and *amendment*, which relate to fixing faults. The original sense was that **mendicants** were beggars who had physical disabilities.

meretricious

(adj)

mair-uh-TRISH-uss

Definition: Attractive in a vulgar or flashy way, tawdry; deceptive

Usage: The singer performed her concert draped in what looked from far away like precious jewels. Up close, though, the fan could see that the accessories were just **meretricious** plastic, glittery junk, like what little girls buy at the mall.

Related Words: *Showy* means showing off and could be good or bad (a *showy* car). *Garish* refers to something much too bright, vivid, or fancy (makeup that looks okay in a nightclub looks *garish* in the office). *Gaudy* items stand out in a cheap, tasteless, or overly colorful way (wearing too much big jewelry looks *gaudy*).

More Info: **Meretricious** comes from a word for “prostitute.” The definition “deceptive” is related to the idea of something looking better than it really is. Keep in mind that all of these word origins are based on very old-fashioned ideas, some of them as old as the Romans.

metaphysical

(adj)

met-uh-FIZZ-ick-ull

Also metaphysics (noun)

Definition: Concerned with abstract thought, related to metaphysics (branch of philosophy concerned with explaining the nature of being and of the world); very subtle or abstruse

Usage: My poetry class has all kinds. In contrast to Gary's poetry about dogs and horses, Neil's poetry is very **metaphysical**, exploring the relation of mortal humans to a timeless universe. It's a little over Gary's head.

Related Words: *Ontology* is part of metaphysics and is concerned with the investigation of the basic categories of being and their relation to one another.

More Info: **Metaphysics** is much older than science—to the Greeks, all inquiry was “philosophy.” Today, of course, science does a lot of the explaining of the world, so **metaphysics** can be understood as a *non-empirical* study of those topics. *Empirical* means “based on experience or experimentation; not purely based on theory.”

milieu

(noun)

mill-YUH

Definition: Environment, atmosphere; the environmental setting in which something happens or develops

Usage: Becoming a priest in the anything-goes **milieu** of the 1960s gave Father Bryant an interesting perspective on two contrasting philosophies. / After the fall of the Soviet Union, a **milieu** of crushing poverty, yet hopeful aspiration, existed in the former satellite state.

Related Words: *Zeitgeist* (the “spirit of an age,” the cultural or intellectual mood of a time period), *Ethos* (the character, personality, or moral values specific to a person, group, time period, etc.)

More Info: **Milieu** comes from a French word for “middle.” A **milieu** is certainly something you’re in the middle of.

militate

(verb)

MILL-it-ayt

Definition: Have a great effect, weigh heavily (often as **militate** against)

Usage: While his resume was stellar, his speech impediment **militated** against his performance in job interviews.

Related Words: *Inimical* (hostile, adverse or harmful—something that **militates** against your success would be *inimical to* your success)

More Info: Of course, **militate** is related to the military; it used to mean to fight for a side or belief. Today, it's more circumstances that **militate** (rather than people).

mired

(adj)

MY-erd

Definition: Stuck, entangled (in something, like a swamp or muddy area), soiled

Usage: **Mired** in her predecessor's mess and mistakes, the new CEO found it difficult to take the company in a new direction.

Related Words: *Morass* and *quagmire* are also words (often used metaphorically) for soft, swampy ground that a person can sink into. The Vietnam War was famously called a *quagmire*.

More Info: The expression *muck and mire* means, literally, “animal waste and mud” and is used in the sense, “The federal prosecutor spent weeks wading through the *muck and mire* of the scandal—every uncovered document showed that the corruption was deeper and worse than previously thought.” To *muck up* is to mess up or get dirty, and to *muck about* or *around* is to waste time.

mirth

(noun)

MERTH

Definition: Jollity, merriment; amusement or laughter

Usage: Nothing could beat the **mirth** of the office holiday party—once everyone had heard how fat their bonuses would be, the delighted staff formed a conga line and drank and danced the night away.

Related Words: *Gaiety* is a synonym.

Memory Trick: The slang term *mirthquake* (circa 1928) means an explosive outburst of laughter. Of course, *mirthquake* won't be on the GRE, but it might help you remember **mirth**!

misanthrope or misanthropist

(noun)

MISS-un-throhp / miss-AN-thruh-pist

Definition: Hater of humankind

Usage: He is such a **misanthrope** that when some Girl Scouts going door-to-door asked if he'd like to sponsor a hungry child overseas, he replied, "The fewer people in the world, the better," and shut the door in their faces!

Related Words: Antonym *Philanthropist* literally means "lover of humankind," although in modern English it refers to someone who donates money to charity.

More Info: "Anthro" means "man" (in the sense of "humankind") and also gives us *anthropology*, *androgens* (male hormones, such as used in steroids), and *androgynous* (having both male and female qualities).

missive

(noun)

MISS-iv

Definition: Letter, written message

Usage: While Don was overseas fighting in World War II, he lived for the **missives** from the wife he had left behind.

More Info: The Latin “mittere” (to send) also gives us *transmit*, *remit*, and *mission*.

modicum

(noun)

MOD-ick-um

Definition: A little bit or limited quantity

Usage: In her first five years in Hollywood, she experienced only a **modicum** of success as an actress, appearing twice in commercials and once as a waitress on *Desperate Housewives*.

Related Words: An *iota*, *mite*, or *tad* of something is also a small amount (as in, *If you had one iota of decency, you would have come to the funeral*, or *I had the tailor shorten the sleeves just a tad*).

More Info: **Modicum** shares a root with *moderate*.

modish

(adj)

MOH-dish

Definition: Stylish, contemporary

Usage: While some sculptors sought to make their work universal and timeless, Dania sculpted **modish** creations that captured the pop cultural zeitgeist—for instance, a sculpture of Rihanna with an umbrella, or a three-foot high representation of the latest Alexander McQueen heels.

Related Words: *In vogue* is a synonym.

More Info: In the U.S., “*a la mode*” generally means “with ice cream” (pie *a la mode*), but it really means “in fashion” (in French and also in English). Perhaps ice cream was once a big fad.

molt

(verb)

MOLT

Definition: Shed or cast off, esp. to regularly shed skin, feathers, etc. (as a snake)

Usage: Wow, the special effects in that movie were really cool! The actress grew scales all over her body and then **molted**, leaving behind a scaly skin covering shaped like an entire woman, and then she looked like herself again.

Related Words: To *slough* or *shed* is also to lose an outer coating; for instance, some people exfoliate their skin to *slough off* dead skin cells.

More Info: **Molt** shares a root (“change”) with *mutate* and *mutable*.

monastic

(adj)

muh-NAST-ick

Definition: Relating to or resembling a monastery (where monks or nuns live), esp. by being quiet, secluded, contemplative, strict, and/or lacking luxuries

Usage: Christine decided that the only way she was going to finish her Ph.D. was to live a **monastic** lifestyle: she broke up with her boyfriend, cancelled her cable service, left the house only when necessary, and ultimately had a draft of her dissertation a few months later.

Related Words: *Austere* (severe in manner or appearance; very self-disciplined, ascetic; without luxury or ease; sober or serious), *Ascetic* (abstinent or austere in lifestyle or a person who lives such a lifestyle), *Hermit* or *Anchorite* (person who lives away from society, esp. for religious reasons), *Recluse* (person who lives in solitude)

morose

(adj)

muh-ROHSS

Definition: Gloomy, sullen

Usage: She had always been a happy child, but once she hit high school and decided to become a goth, she adopted a **morose** attitude to match her all-black clothing.

More Info: **Morose** sounds a bit like **morbid**, which means “mentally unhealthy, diseased, gruesome.” If you’re depressed, you’re **morose**; if you enjoy looking at photos of crime scenes, we’d say you have a **morbid** interest.

multifarious

(adj)

mull-tif-AYR-ee-uss

Definition: Diverse, having a lot of variety

Usage: Last year's jewelry line was all metal and neutrals, but this year's presents a **multifarious** array of brilliant colors.

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* (different in type, incongruous; composed of different types of elements)

munificent

(adj)

myoo-NIF-iss-ent

Definition: Generous, giving liberally

Usage: The elderly titan of industry was notoriously miserly, sometimes called “the cheapest man alive.” But his wife was quite **munificent**, and after his death, she used his fortune to support numerous charities and to buy a house for their longtime maid.

Related Words: *Magnanimous* (high-minded; generous in forgiving others), *Philanthropic* (giving money to charity, providing assistance to others)

More Info: **Munificent** shares a root (“give”) with *remuneration*, meaning repayment or compensation.

myopic

(adj)

my-AH-pick

Also *myopia* (noun)

Definition: Near-sighted; lacking long-term thinking, short-sighted

Usage: To raise prices in a time of crisis is both wrong and deeply **myopic**—our profits would go up in the short term, but our customers’ resentment would simmer for decades. / Myron’s **myopia** is so strong that he cannot be helped by contact lenses and has to wear the heavy glasses he has worn for decades.

Related Words: *Improvident* (not providing for the future)

More Info: The “op” in **myopia** comes from a Latin root for “eye” and also appears in *optometrist*, *optical*, and *ocular*.

nadir

(noun)

NAY-der or NAY-deer

Definition: Lowest point

Usage: It was only when Ming reached her absolute **nadir**—what her recovery program called “rock bottom”—that she admitted she had a problem and checked herself into rehab.

Related Words: The opposite of the **nadir** is the *zenith*, or highest point. Both words are terms from astronomy, referring to points directly below and above the observer on an imaginary sphere on which celestial bodies appear to be projected. On the GRE, these words will be used metaphorically—the **nadir** of one’s struggles, the *zenith* (or *acme*, *pinnacle*, or *summit*) of one’s success.

More Info: Finally, a GRE word from Arabic! **Nadir** comes through Latin from the Arabic *nazir*, “opposite to”—here, the **nadir** is opposite the *zenith*.

neologism

(noun)

nee-AH-luh-jizm

Definition: New word or phrase (or a new meaning applied to an existing word or phrase)

Usage: You won't find "fauxhawk" in the dictionary—it's a **neologism** that describes a fake mohawk (*faux* means *fake* and is pronounced "foe") created by sculpting the hair into a mohawk-like crest without actually shaving the sides.

More Info: The root "log/loq" refers to speech and also occurs in *eloquent*, *logic*, *loquacious* (talkative) and *interlocutor* (participant in a dialogue; interrogator).

neophyte

(noun)

NEE-uh-fight

Definition: Beginner, novice; person newly converted to a religion

Usage: It was totally outrageous of our law firm to send a **neophyte** into the courtroom to defend our case against a team of experienced attorneys.

Related Words: *Tyro* (beginner)

More Info: **Neophyte** shares a root (“planted”) with *phytoplankton* and many other science words. A religious **neophyte** is someone in whom a faith has been newly “planted.”

nettle

(verb)

NET-ull

Definition: Irritate, sting, or annoy

Usage: His first year in college, my little brother failed *gym*. How is that even possible? I always remind him about it just to **nettle** him. Of course, he usually strikes back by reminding me of that time I crashed an amusement park's go-cart.

Related Words: *Irk* and *vex* also mean to irritate or annoy.

More Info: Literally, **nettles** are a stinging plant.

noisome

(adj)

NOY-sum

Definition: Offensive, disgusting; harmful

Usage: Everyone knows that smoking is deadly, but even “herbal” cigarettes are a **noisome** habit—and **noisome** to your health!

Related Words: *Deleterious* means harmful, *Baneful* means very harmful or fatal, and *Noxious* means harmful or morally corrupting. *Fetid* means smelly.

More Info: **Noisome** isn’t really about noise! (The word shares a root with “annoy”). The GRE is not above trying to trick you into picking **noisome** when you really need a word for “noisy” (like *cacophonous* or *dissonant*).

nominal

(adj)

NAH-min-ull

Definition: Trivial, so small as to be unimportant; in name only, so-called

Usage: A notary public will certify a document for a **nominal** fee, usually under \$3. / The country has a **nominal** president, but his detractors say he's just a puppet leader for the more powerful countries providing foreign aid.

Related Words: *Putative* (supposed or reputed)

More Info: **Nominal** originally meant “pertaining to names/nouns.” The same root is found in *misnomer* (an inappropriate name).

nontrivial

(adj)

non-TRIV-ee-ull

Definition: Important or big enough to matter

Usage: The chief of staff told the assembled doctors, “We all make mistakes. But this mistake was **nontrivial**, and there is going to be an investigation.”

Related Words: *Trivial*, of course, means “too small to matter,” and has the synonyms *trifling* and *nugatory*. *Trivia* (as in the questions on Jeopardy) is called that because the questions are about small facts and details—that is, you never go on a trivia show and get asked about a **nontrivial** topic, like the meaning of life.

normative

(adj)

NOR-muh-tiv

Definition: Implying or attempting to establish a norm; expressing value judgments or telling people what to do (rather than merely describing that which is happening)

Usage: The reason we are not understanding each other in this argument about grammar is that you are arguing **normatively**, telling me how people *should* talk, and I am simply reporting and analyzing how people *actually* talk.

Related Words: *Prescriptive* is a synonym (a *prescriptive* take on nutrition would tell people how to eat, just as a doctor's *prescription* also tells you what to do).

Memory Trick: Something **normative** is trying to make everyone be *normal*.

obdurate

(adj)

AHB-der-it or AHB-jer-it

Definition: Stubborn, hardhearted, hardened in wrongdoing

Usage: The first mate reported that there was some fuzzy shape on the horizon, but the captain insisted that the instruments showed no such object, and **obdurately** sailed straight ahead—right into an iceberg. / This **obdurate** criminal should never be let out on parole—he simply cannot be reformed.

Related Words: *Flinty, glacial, stony, and callous* can have the meaning of being emotionally “hard” or cold. *Reprobate* and *unregenerate* can refer to people who are hardened evildoers.

More Info: “Ob” means “against” and the rest of the word is derived from the Latin “durare” (hard), which also gives us *durable* and *endure*. **Obdurate** people are hardened against feelings, persuasion, or conscience.

oblique

(adj)

oh-BLEEK or uh-BLEEK

Definition: Slanting or sloping; indirect, misleading, or evasive

Usage: After the fifteenth **oblique** reference that Bella made to George or George made to Bella, everyone in the office figured out that they were dating. / The serial killer loved to talk to interrogators, but gave only **oblique** answers that were useless in finding the bodies.

More Info: In math, **oblique** lines are neither parallel nor perpendicular. Your **obliques** are the abdominal muscles (along the sides) that run at a slant. In botany, an **oblique** leaf has unequal sides. You should now be prepared to interpret **oblique** in any strange context—it's slanting, or metaphorically "slanting"!

occlude

(verb)

uh-CLOOD

Definition: Stop up, close, shut in or shut off

Usage: This drain guard is here to make sure nothing (like silverware) ends up **occluding** your garbage disposal. / Don't eat that enormous wad of gum! I'm no doctor, but what if it **occludes** your intestines or something?

Related Words: *Occult* (to hide, to shut off from view)

More Info: **Occlude** shares a root (shut, close) with *close*, *cage*, and *claustrophobia*.

opine

(verb)

oh-PINE

Definition: Express an opinion

Usage: After all was said and done, he **opined** that he wished he had never tried to sail around the world in a canoe, and he was sorry that the rescue effort was so expensive.

Related Words: *Expatiate* (to expand or elaborate on a topic, to explain in detail), *Excogitate* (think through in detail)

opprobrium

(noun)

uh-PROH-bree-um

Also *opprobrious* (adj)

Definition: Disgrace and disapproval that result from outrageously shameful actions

Usage: Some young starlets seem to think a DUI offense isn't such a big deal, but drunk driving deserves **opprobrium**—driving under the influence maims and kills innocent people every year.

Related Words: *Infamy* (very bad reputation; strong condemnation by the public), *Notorious* (well known for a disgraceful reason), *Obloquy* (shame, disapproval, or verbal abuse esp. by the public or a group)

orotund

(adj)

OR-uh-tund

Definition: Full, rich, and clear (of the voice or speaking); pompous, bombastic

Usage: The actor James Earl Jones has long been sought after for voiceover work as well as acting jobs because of his dignified, **orotund** voice.

Related Words: *Sonorous* (giving out a deep, rich, loud sound), *Dulcet* (melodious, agreeable to the ear), *Mellifluous* (richly and smoothly flowing, as “a *mellifluous* voice”), *Stentorian* (loud)

More Info: *Rotund* simply means rounded—when applied to a person, it’s a somewhat more polite word than “fat.” The connection is the idea of “roundness”—**orotund** comes from the idea of speaking with a rounded mouth.

ossify

(verb)

AH-sif-fy

Definition: Become bone or become hard like bone; become inflexible in attitudes, opinions, etc.

Usage: I remember having many broad-ranging discussions with him back in college, but since then, his opinions have **ossified**—sadly, he is now the most close-minded person I know.

Related Words: *Doctrinaire* (person who applies doctrine in an impractical or rigid and close-minded way), *Dogmatic* (close-minded, expressing one's own opinions as though they were facts)

More Info: **Ossify** shares a Latin root (“bone”) with *osseous* (bony), *osteoporosis* (condition in which the bones become fragile), and *ossuary* (place for bones of the dead, such as a cemetery or urn).

ostensible or ostensive

(adj)

ah-STEN-sih-bull / ah-STEN-siv

Definition: Professed, evident, or pretended; outwardly appearing in a certain way

Usage: **Ostensibly**, she came to volunteer out of the goodness of her heart. However, I think she's really here because she has a crush on one of the other volunteers. / He's an **ostensive** candidate for the job, but we need to check these references before we move further.

Related Words: *Putative* (supposed or reputed), *Nominal* (trivial; in name only, so-called)

More Info: The Latin “ostendere” means “to show” and also occurs in *ostentatious*, meaning “showing off.”

ostentatious

(adj)

AH-sten-TAY-shuss

Definition: Pretentious, boastful showiness

Usage: Her **ostentatious** clothing is simply not appropriate in a business environment—in fact, nothing emblazoned with 2,000 Swarovski crystals is.

Related Words: *Showy* means showing off and could be good or bad (a *showy* car). *Garish* refers to something much too bright, vivid, or fancy (makeup that looks okay in a nightclub looks *garish* in the office). *Gaudy* items stand out in a cheap, tasteless, or overly colorful way (wearing too much big jewelry looks *gaudy*).

More Info: The Latin “ostendere” means “to show” and also occurs in *ostensible/ostensive*, meaning “professed, evident, or pretended; outwardly appearing in a certain way.”

overwrought

(adj)

oh-ver-RAHT

Definition: Overly nervous, agitated, or excited; too ornate, elaborate, or fussy; overdone

Usage: By the time her boyfriend met her in the park, she was **overwrought**, thinking he must have chosen a public place so he could break up with her—turned out, he had just invited her to a picnic. / Accustomed to more spare American churches, Father Smith found the churches of South America a bit **overwrought**, with enormous, flowery, gold altars and gold-plating on everything imaginable.

Related Words: *Florid* (reddish or rosy; flowery, showy, or excessively fancy—often, *florid writing*), *Rococo* (ornate, florid)

More Info: *Wrought* simply means “worked, made.” With metals, it means “made from hammering or beating.” *Wrought-iron* furniture is simply made from iron. Something *finely wrought* is made with care and attention to detail.

palatial

(adj)

puh-LAY-shull

Definition: Suitable for or resembling a palace, magnificent

Usage: After a career spent in budget hotels, she was thrilled when the client put her up in a **palatial** room at a five-star hotel. She raided the minibar and then promptly fell asleep on the 600-thread-count duvet.

Related Words: *Olympian* (suitable for the gods; majestic, aloof), *Statelily* (majestic; very elegant, dignified, or imposing)

palliate

(verb)

PAL-ee-ayt

Also *palliative* (adj)

Definition: Make less serious or severe; relieve symptoms of an illness

Usage: The doctors said it would be pointless to subject Uncle Al to continued treatments when there was no hope of a cure, so we gave consent for him to be transferred to the **palliative** care wing where he would be made as comfortable as possible in his final weeks or months.

Related Words: *Ameliorate*, *Mitigate*, *Alleviate*, and *Extenuate* also refer to lessening something bad without eliminating it.

More Info: **Palliate** comes from the Latin “pallium,” a cloak, which covers up. To **palliate** a crime is to try to make it seem not as bad, such as by introducing *extenuating* circumstances.

pallid

(adj)

PAL-id

also *pallor* (noun)

Definition: Abnormally pale (as skin); lacking color or vitality

Usage: When Eric left the office mid-day, we knew from the **pallor** that had overtaken him that he really was getting sick. / We need this blog to really hit hard against the special interest groups ruining our country, and your **pallid** writing isn't doing it—you're going to bore people to death with this wimpy prose.

Related Words: *Wan* (abnormally pale), *Sallow* (sickly-yellow in color)

panache

(noun)

puh-NASH

Definition: Flair, style, swagger; a flamboyant or grand way of acting

Usage: Not only did he quit, but he did so with **panache**, actually delivering a Powerpoint presentation that we thought would be about the budget, but which turned out to be quite obscene. He then pulled out a flask, guzzled its contents, and walked out. That guy's kind of a legend.

Related Words: *Verve* (vigor, spirit, liveliness)

More Info: In French, a **panache** is literally a tuft of feathers, such as you might display on a (rather ostentatious) hat. The figurative use of **panache** dates from the tale of Cyrano de Bergerac (played by Gerard Depardieu in 1990's *Cyrano de Bergerac*) and is often associated with him.

panegyric

(noun)

pan-uh-JEER-ick or pan-uh-JIRE-ick

Definition: Formal or lofty expression of praise

Usage: Lincoln enthusiasts were excited that a new biography was to be published, and many hoped that new light would be cast on certain controversies. However, the book was pure **panegyric**—nothing but heroic tales, uncritically presented.

Related Words: *Encomium* (warm, glowing praise, esp. a formal expression of praise), *Laudation* (praise, tribute), *Eulogy* (a speech of praise or written work of praise, esp. a speech given at a funeral), *Paeon* (song of praise, triumph, or thanks)

More Info: **Panegyric** contains the root “pan” (“all”), indicating a speech given in public, to all.

panoply

(noun)

PAN-uh-plee

Definition: Splendid, wide-ranging, impressive display or array

Usage: Our old cafeteria had only premade salads, but the new cafeteria has a salad bar with a **panoply** of toppings.

More Info: **Panoply** contains the root “pan” (“all”) as well as a root for weapons. A **panoply** was originally a full suit of armor and can still be military regalia or something that covers and protects (The sergeant arrived in full **panoply**).

paragon

(noun)

PAIR-uh-gahn

Definition: Model of excellence, perfect example

Usage: Unlike his sister, he was a **paragon** of responsibility, taking in her three children when she went to jail, and even switching jobs so he could be there to pick them up from school.

Related Words: *Prototype* (original model serving as the basis for future copies or versions), *Paradigm* (model or pattern; worldview, set of shared assumptions, values, etc.), *Exemplar* (example, item that is representative or typical, something worthy of imitation), *Epitome* (perfect example, brief summary)

More Info: A **paragon** is also a large, perfect diamond or pearl. **Paragon** is often used in the expression “**paragon** of virtue.”

pare

(verb)

PAIR

Definition: Peel or cut off the outer layer (such as peeling fruit with a knife), reduce or trim as if cutting off the outer parts

Usage: We need to **pare down** our budget if we're going to survive on unemployment for awhile. / She simplified her life by **paring** commitments from her schedule.

Related Words: *Truncate* (shorten by cutting off a part), *Abridge* (reduce or lessen; shorten by omitting parts throughout while retaining the main idea)

More Info: **Pare** shares a root (“make ready, produce, bring forth”) with *prepare* and with various medical words related to childbirth, such as *postpartum*.

parley

(noun, verb)

PAR-lee

Definition: Discussion, negotiation, esp. between enemies (noun); to have such a discussion (verb)

Usage: The industry trade show is our chance to **parley** with our competitors. We do go out for drinks together, but really, we're just hoping someone slips up and tells us about their new product line.

Related Words: *Armistice* (truce, mutual agreement to temporarily stop fighting)

More Info: French speakers will note **parley**'s similarity to the French verb *parler*. The same root ("speech") also occurs in the English *parable*, *parlance*, and *parliament*.

parry

(verb)

PAIR-ee

Definition: Deflect or avoid (esp. a blow or attack); skillfully evade (a question)

Usage: When asked by a reporter if rumors of his infidelity were true, the candidate **parried**, answering that he had always supported legislation bolstering the sanctity of marriage.

Related Words: *Riposte* is also a fencing term that has made it into common use. When an opponent thrusts (with a sword), your move to defend yourself is a **parry**; then, the short thrust you make back in retaliation is a *riposte*. Outside of fencing, a *riposte* is a witty comeback or swift reply.

More Info: **Parry** shares a root (“make ready, produce, bring forth”) with *prepare*, although this root came through Italian and French to mean “to ward off, defend.”

pastiche

(noun)

past-EESH

Definition: Mix of incongruous parts; artistic work imitating the work of other artists, often satirically

Usage: The slickly-produced boy band's first album was deeply unimaginative, just a **pastiche** of every other boy band album ever produced.

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* means “made up of diverse elements.” *Hodgepodge*, *Medley*, *Farrago*, *Potpourri*, *Pastiche* and *Olio* are all words for mixtures of diverse things. *Eclectic* means “selecting the best of everything or from many diverse sources” and thus is more positive than **pastiche**, which indicates a sort of thrown-together mess of other people's work.

More Info: From the Italian *pasticcio*, something made by mixing borrowed elements from other sources. *Pasticcio* is also a pasta dish—the idea being “a mess” or scramble of pasta.

pathogenic

(adj)

path-uh-JEN-ick

Definition: Capable of producing disease

Usage: Many common and legal food additives are **pathogenic**, known to lead to diabetes or even cancer.

More Info: “Pathos” means “disease” (as in *pathological*, “diseased”) and “gen” means “producing” (as in *generate*).

pedant

(noun)

PED-int

Also *pedantic* (adj)

Definition: Person who pays excessive attention to book learning and rules, or who uses his or her learning to show off

Usage: I hate when **pedants** interrupt you to correct your grammar, especially if what you're saying is important—and in my opinion, almost anything is more important than **pedantic** quibbles over whether it's okay to end a sentence with a preposition.

Related Words: *Didactic* means “intended to instruct; teaching, or teaching a moral lesson.” This is a perfectly positive quality for a teacher, but could be annoying coming from a peer. *Fastidious* means “excessively particular, hard to please.”

More Info: “Ped” means “child,” as in *pediatrician*. A **pedant** was once a schoolmaster; now it's someone who acts like a schoolmaster in inappropriate situations.

peddle

(verb)

PED-ull

Definition: Travel around while selling; sell illegally; give out or disseminate

Usage: After an unsuccessful year spent **peddling** cutlery door-to-door, he turned to **peddling** drugs, thus landing himself in jail. / “I don’t want these people **peddling** lies to our children,” said Mrs. Hoffman, protesting an event in which fringe political candidates were invited to speak to kids.

Related Words: A *peddler* or *vendor* sells things, as does a *fishmonger*, *ironmonger*, etc. (although a *scandalmonger* doesn’t so much sell scandals as promote them).

pejorative

(adj, noun)

pih-JOR-uh-tiv

Definition: Disparaging, derogatory, belittling (adj); a name or word that is disparaging (noun)

Usage: I'm open to constructive criticism, but I think my supervisor's remarks are inappropriately **pejorative**—it's never okay to call an employee a “sniveling dullard.” / Although these insults wouldn't be understood by most, “poetaster” and “mathematicaster” are **pejoratives** for minor, incompetent poets and mathematicians, respectively.

Related Words: *Vituperate* and *revile* mean to verbally abuse or speak very badly of.

pellucid

(adj)

puh-LOO-sid

Definition: Transparent, translucent; clear, easy to understand

Usage: He decided that the cove's **pellucid** waters were an excellent place to teach his daughter to swim, reasoning that, if she started to sink, he would easily be able to see where she was.

Related Words: *Lucid* can mean literally clear, but often means metaphorically clear or clearheaded—a *lucid* argument, a *lucid* person. *Pellucid* usually means literally transparent, as above. *Limpid* means clear, transparent, or completely calm.

More Info: The prefix “pel” or “per” means “through” and often doesn't change the meaning of the other root parts that much (for instance, *fervid* means *passionate* and *perfervid* means really passionate). You can think of the pel/per prefix as similar to the English expression “through and through.”

penitent

(adj, noun)

PEN-it-ent

Also *penitence* (noun)

Definition: Regretful, feeling remorse for one's sins or misdeeds (adj); a person who feels this way (noun)

Usage: After being “separated” from the college for plagiarism, she wrote a letter to the Dean expressing her deep regret and **penitence** and hoping to be readmitted.

Related Words: *Contrite* and *Remorseful* are synonyms. To *atone* or *make amends* is to try to make up for having done something wrong.

More Info: **Penitent** shares a root with *penitentiary* (“prison”) and *penal* (“relating to punishment”).

penumbra

(noun)

pen-UM-bruh

Definition: Outer part of a shadow from an eclipse; any surrounding region, fringe, periphery; any area where something “sort of” exists

Usage: The Constitution doesn’t specifically mention a right to privacy, but some experts consider this to exist in the **penumbra** of the Constitution, as a guarantee of privacy is needed in order to exercise the rights that are enumerated. / The rent in Chicago was too high, so they moved to a suburb in the **penumbra** of the city.

Related Words: *Hinterland* (remote or undeveloped area)

penury

(noun)

PEN-yer-ee

Definition: Extreme poverty or scarcity

Usage: The young model married an elderly billionaire thinking she'd be set for life, but she ended up living in **penury** after her husband died and his middle-aged children held up the probate case for years, keeping her from receiving any money whatsoever.

Related Words: *Destitution* is a synonym. *Indigent* (destitute), *Insolvent* (unable to meet one's financial obligations, bankrupt)

per se

(adverb)

per SAY

Definition: Intrinsically; by itself; in itself

Usage: The policy isn't sexist, *per se*, but it has had a disproportionate impact on women that deserves further study.

More Info: From Latin, often written in italics. *Per se* is often used to indicate that while something isn't naturally or the same as something else, it still has the same effect.

peregrinate

(verb)

PAIR-uh-grin-ayt

Definition: Travel from place to place, esp. on foot

Usage: After college, he took a year off to **peregrinate** across the country, visiting friends and seeing the forty-odd states he had never before had the chance to see.

Related Words: *Itinerant*, *peripatetic* and *wayfaring* are all similar. *Transient* also means moving around, but is more associated with homeless people or those on the fringe of society (whereas *itinerant* is more associated with people who travel for a job).

More Info: Relatedly, the *peregrine falcon* is a roving or migrating bird.

perennial

(adj)

per-EN-ee-ull

Definition: Lasting through the years or indefinitely, enduring; recurring

Usage: Fighting over the bathroom is a **perennial** problem in our house—there are eight of us, and we’re homeschooled, so we’re all pretty much always here.

More Info: **Perennial** plants last more than one year, as opposed to *annuals*, which must be replanted every year. “Per” means “through” and the “ennial” part of the word is really just a variant on “annual,” so **perennial** literally means “through the years.”

perfunctory

(adj)

per-FUNK-tuh-ree

Definition: Done superficially, without much care, or merely as routine

Usage: She did a really **perfunctory** job on this Powerpoint. Sure, it has a dozen slides, but most of them just say things like “Sales—Ways to Improve” in Times New Roman on a white background. Maybe she’s planning to fill in the details later.

Related Words: *Cursory* (quick and superficial, as in *a cursory glance at the report*)

More Info: “Per” means “through” and the rest of **perfunctory** comes from the same place as “function”—think of **perfunctory** as trying to get *through* performing a *function* as quickly as possible.

peripatetic

(adj)

pair-uh-puh-TET-ick

Definition: Journeying from place to place; traveling on foot

Usage: He quit his office job to become a **peripatetic** musician, traveling from town to town playing in bars and sleeping on couches.

Related Words: *Itinerant* and *wayfaring* are synonyms. *Peregrinate* is a verb for being **peripatetic**. *Transient* also means moving around, but is more associated with homeless people or those on the fringe of society (whereas *itinerant* is more associated with people who travel for a job).

More Info: “Peri” means around (as in *perimeter*) and the rest comes from a Latin word meaning “to walk.” **Peripatetic** was originally associated with Aristotle’s school of philosophers, who would walk while teaching.

pernicious

(adj)

per-NISH-uss

Definition: Very harmful or destructive, deadly

Usage: Bullying has a **pernicious** effect on the learning environment, keeping victims too intimidated to speak up and also silencing others who fear that they could be next.

Related Words: *Baneful* is a synonym. *Baleful* is similar, but relates more to the idea of evil. *Deleterious* means harmful or unhealthful.

More Info: “Per” means “through” in the sense of “completely.” The rest of the word shares a root (for “harmful”) with *noxious* (harmful or morally corrupting).

perspicacious

(adj)

per-spih-CAY-shuss

Definition: Having penetrating insight or good discernment

Usage: A good detective is shrewd and **perspicacious**, judging when someone is lying, noticing things the rest of us would ignore, and making connections that allow an investigation to move forward.

Related Words: *Keen* (sharp, piercing; very perceptive or mentally sharp; intense), *Acumen* (keen, quick, accurate insight or judgment), *Astute* (shrewd, very perceptive)

More Info: “Per” means “through” and “spic/spec” means “look” (as in *spectacles*, *spectate*, *etc.*)

Perspicacious is really just the adjective form of *perspective*—as in, having a really good perspective.

phalanx

(noun)

FAY-lanks or FAL-anks

Definition: Formation of soldiers carrying shields close together for defense; any very close group of people

Usage: To even enter the embassy, the diplomats had to make their way through a **phalanx** of protestors.

Related Words: The expression “rank and file” (or just “ranks” of people) is also a military term referring to an orderly formation of soldiers in rows and columns.

More Info: The plural *phalanges* refers to the bones in the hands and feet, which fit together closely, like soldiers in a **phalanx**.

philistine

(noun)

FILL-ist-eeen

Definition: Person deficient in or hostile to culture

Usage: Her date was very handsome, but she decided he was an absolute **philistine** when he said that documentaries were “boring” and that the “Best Picture” Oscar should go to *Resident Evil: Afterlife 3D*.

Related Words: *Boor* or *Churl* (rude, ill-mannered, or insensitive person; a peasant or country bumpkin), *Lowbrow* (not intellectual or cultivated, as in *She preferred art films, but her boyfriend preferred lowbrow comedies with lots of vomit jokes*).

More Info: The original Philistines were simply the people of Philistia; they warred with the Israelites and are referred to negatively in the Bible. Thus, their name has come to mean *barbarians*.

phlegmatic

(adj)

fleg-MAT-ick

Definition: Apathetic, sluggish, not easily excited or made emotional

Usage: A **phlegmatic** child, he declined to participate in the youth soccer league. He preferred to stay at home, mostly sitting outside poking at dirt with a stick, and occasionally stopping for naptime.

Related Words: *Indolent, Torpid, Sluggish, Idle, Lethargic, Loafing, and Slack* are all related to laziness or slowness.

More Info: The ancient Greeks thought that people were ruled by the “four humors”: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. A person with too much phlegm would be **phlegmatic**; a person with too much bile would be *bilious* (bitter, mean), and a person ruled by blood would be *sanguine* (cheerful).

platitude

(noun)

PLAT-it-ood

Definition: A shallow, overused statement; cliché

Usage: Everyone who knew my mother knows she was an atheist, so I can't imagine why people at her funeral would think we'd enjoy their soppy **platitudes** about Mom's "being in a better place now."

Related Words: *Banal, Hackneyed, Inane, Insipid and Trite* all mean "lacking freshness and originality, shallow."

More Info: **Platitude** shares a root ("flat") with *plate* and *plateau*. A **platitude** is a "flat," stale remark.

plebian or plebeian

(adj)

plih-BEE-un

Definition: Of the common people

Usage: I toured a luxury apartment building and I laughed when I saw that the apartments had luxurious walk-in closets and whirlpool bathtubs—but hilariously tiny ovens. Because, of course, the wealthy would never do something so **plebian** as cook their own food.

Related Words: *Demotic* (same root as *democracy*) is a more neutral word for “pertaining to the people.” **Plebian** is negative, often used in a joking way—“Oh, sorry to interrupt your studying of that opera libretto—I didn’t mean to imply that you’d do something so **plebian** as watch hockey with us.” *Populist* is generally meant in a positive way, as in championing the rights and interests of regular people.

More Info: The term *plebe*, used to describe the incoming class at a military school, is a variant of **plebian**.

plethora

(noun)

PLETH-uh-ruh

Definition: Excess; excessive amount

Usage: She had a **plethora** of excuses, but there is simply no justification for arriving to class drunk.

Related Words: *Surfeit* or *surplus* (excess, overabundance)

More Info: The 1986 comedy *¡Three Amigos!* popularized the word **plethora**—if want to remember the word **plethora** for life, look up “**plethora** of piñatas” on YouTube.

plucky

(adj)

PLUCK-ee

Definition: Brave, spirited

Usage: Feminist critics have commented that today's romantic comedies tend to feature passive, helpless female leads, whereas the romantic comedies of the 1940s featured **plucky** heroines who took the lead in cleverly solving problems. / While the police hit a dead end, a band of **plucky** children was able to find the stolen bicycle.

More Info: **Plucky** (along with synonym *spunky*) is a rather “cute” word for *courageous*. It is appropriate for children and for people dealing with fairly minor situations in a bold, clever way. Some find it sexist when applied to adult women in professional or otherwise serious situations; it is almost never applied to men. **Plucky** would be very inappropriate to describe a soldier in battle, a hero of the Civil Rights movement, etc. Use a word like *courageous* or *intrepid* instead.

plutocracy

(noun)

ploo-TAH-cruh-see

Definition: Rule by the wealthy

Usage: There have always been rich and poor people, of course, but some argue that the U.S. is becoming a **plutocracy**, with the richest 10% controlling two-thirds of the nation's wealth and nearly half of our Congressional representatives being millionaires.

Related Words: A **plutocracy** might also be an *oligarchy* (rule by only a few).

More Info: In Greek mythology, Pluto (also known as Hades) was god of the underworld, and Plutus was god of wealth. Things got a bit confused over the years, as people used “Plutus” to mean “Pluto” as a way to make things sound a little more positive.

polemic

(noun)

puh-LEM-ick

Definition: Controversial argument, esp. one attacking a specific idea

Usage: Laura Kipnis' 2003 book *Against Love: A **Polemic*** has been called “shocking” and “scathing.” Perhaps Kipnis used the word **polemic** in the title to indicate that she's making an extreme argument as a means of starting a debate. After all, who's really *against love*?

More Info: **Polemic** comes from a Greek root for “war.”

politic

(adj)

PAH-lit-ick

Definition: Shrewd, pragmatic; tactful or diplomatic

Usage: Celebrities have to watch what they say, as even an offhand comment can end up splashed across the covers of magazines. When the starlet was asked what she thought of her ex-husband marrying the swimsuit model he left her for, she gave the **politic** reply, “I wish both of them the best.”

Related Words: *Expedient* (suitable, proper; effective, often at the expense of ethics or other considerations)

More Info: The expression “the body **politic**” means the citizens of a particular government, considered as a group.

polyglot

(noun)

PAH-lee-glaht

Definition: Speaking or composed of many languages (of a person, book, etc.); a person who knows several languages

Usage: New York’s public service announcements often take the form of **polyglot** posters in the subway, suggesting in six languages that readers give up their seats for pregnant women or those with disabilities.

More Info: “Poly” means “many” (*polygamy, polynomial*) and “glot” means “tongue” (*glottal, epiglottis*).

posit

(verb)

PAH-zit

Definition: Presume, suggest, put forward (an idea)

Usage: For thousands of years, philosophers have thought of the self as a unified entity, but neuroscientists today **posit** the existence of a modular brain—a self that is a mix of different brain parts, with no central “coordinator.”

Related Words: *Postulate* is a synonym. *Assert* and *contend* are stronger words for putting forth an idea as true. To **posit** is sometimes as weak as merely introducing an idea for discussion, rather than making a strong argument for it.

More Info: We *pose* a question, but we **posit** an idea.

prattle

(verb)

PRAT-ull

Definition: Talk in an idle, simple-minded, meaningless, or foolish way; chatter, babble

Usage: It was infuriating to listen to the boss **prattle** on about some new restaurant in town when everyone was just waiting to find out if they'd been laid off.

Related Words: *Prate* is a synonym—actually, both words are variants of the same Middle Dutch word.

precipitate

(verb)

prih-SIP-it-ayt

Definition: Cause to happen suddenly or prematurely; fling, plunge, or hurl down

Usage: Mr. and Mrs. Rosen had been considering a move to Florida for years, but the sudden destruction of their house in a hurricane **precipitated** their decision to finally make the move. / “Stay away from the *precipice*!” said the mother to her child. “I wouldn’t want my darling son to be **precipitated** to his doom!”

Related Words: *Catalyst* (causer of change)

More Info: *Precipitation* is rain, snow, or hail—water that, of course, comes down from the sky. *Precipitous* sometimes means “pertaining to a *precipice* (such as a cliff),” as in *a precipitous mountain face*, and sometimes means “hasty.”

précis

(noun)

PRAY-see

Definition: Concise summary, abstract

Usage: Just as scientific journals publish abstracts of their articles online (and then charge for access to the full version), the entrepreneur decided to publish a **précis** of her whitepaper online, while charging for access to the full version.

Related Words: *Digest* (a periodical containing shortened versions of works published elsewhere), *Recapitulation* (summary or the act of summing up), *Compendium* (concise but complete summary; a list or collection)

More Info: Related to the word *precise* and coming from French, **précis** has the sense of efficiently (and *precisely*) expressing the essentials.

predilection

(noun)

preh-dill-ECT-shun

Definition: Preference, tendency or favorability towards

Usage: She has completed teacher training allowing her to teach grades K–6, but she discovered that she really has a **predilection** for teaching kindergarten.

Related Words: *Penchant, Propensity, Proclivity, and Bent* are all words for a preference or inclination (*he has an arrogant bent about him, and a propensity to offend others*).

prescient

(adj)

PRESH-int or PRESH-ee-unt

Also *prescience* (noun)

Definition: Having foreknowledge or foresight, seeing the future

Usage: Mariposa swears she's **prescient**—she thinks she sees the future in her dreams. / The science fiction novel, published in 1955, was strangely **prescient**—it pictures the year 2000 as having no flying cars, but a communication system known as the “interconnect,” used largely for online shopping and wasting time.

Related Words: To *Prognosticate* or *Augur* is to tell the future. *Prophetic* means “relating to prophesy, predicting, ominous.”

More Info: Of course the “science” in **prescience** is the same as in the word *science* and *omniscience* (all knowingness)—the root means “to know.” **Prescience** is to know in advance, either supernaturally, or just by having good judgment.

preternatural

(adj)

pree-ter-NAT-cher-ull

Definition: Supernatural, exceptional

Usage: While Tiger Woods has been mired in scandal, his **preternatural** golfing talent is still undeniable. / Dad was convinced that the house was haunted, but I doubted that the strange sounds were due to **preternatural** causes—as it turned out, we had a raccoon in the basement.

Related Words: *Occult* can mean “supernatural, mysterious, arcane.”

More Info: From Latin—literally, “beyond nature.”

prevaricate

(verb)

preh-VAIR-ick-ayt

Definition: Stray from the truth, mislead, lie

Usage: Maryanne had been shoplifting—when her mother asked where her new clothes had come from, she **prevaricated**, vaguely suggesting that a rich friend had bought them for her.

Related Words: *Dissembling* (misleading, concealing the truth, acting hypocritically), *Disingenuous* (insincere, not genuine), *Equivocate* (use unclear language to deceive or avoid committing to a position)

More Info: As you can see, we have many words in English that mean something just short of lying—probably because there are many situations in which we need to point out a lie, but want to do so as politely or discreetly as we can; all of the above words are less blunt than *lie*.

primacy

(noun)

PRY-muh-see

Definition: The state of being first or most important

Usage: The conservative Senator argued that the very fabric of society depended on the **primacy** of the family, and that legislation was needed to shore up the institution of marriage.

Related Words: *Preeminence* (superiority, the state of being more distinguished or noteworthy)

More Info: The root in **primacy** means “first” and also appears in *prime*, *primal*, and *primate* (interestingly, a *primate* is both a church bishop and the order of animals including humans, apes, and monkeys).

proclivity

(noun)

pruh-CLIV-it-ee

Definition: Inclination, natural tendency

Usage: After his therapist pointed out that he had a natural **proclivity** to judge people prematurely, he tried to work on that by imagining things from the other person's point of view.

Related Words: *Predilection*, *Propensity*, *Penchant*, and *Bent* are all words for a preference or inclination (*He has an arrogant bent about him, and a propensity to offend others*). *Predisposed* (having an inclination or tendency beforehand; susceptible)

More Info: **Proclivity** shares a Latin root ("slope") with *incline*, *decline*, *declivity*, *inclination*, etc.

prolix

(adj)

proh-LICKS or PROH-licks

Also *prolixity* (noun)

Definition: Excessively long and wordy (of a person, piece of writing, etc.)

Usage: My mother is incredibly verbose. She'll tell a boring, **prolix** story for five whole minutes, and at the end, it turns out that the point was that she got a fifty cent discount on a box of spaghetti at the store.

Related Words: *Loquacious* and *Verbose* are synonyms.

More Info: “Pro” means “forth” and “lix” comes from the Latin for “liquid.” Words just “pour” right out of a **prolix** person.

propagate

(verb)

PRAH-puh-gayt

Definition: Reproduce, spread, increase

Usage: Hackers can take down a large computer system in days or even minutes as a virus **propagates** and infects all of the machines on a network.

Related Words: *Proliferate* (increase or spread rapidly or excessively)

More Info: **Propagate** is originally about plants and is still often used regarding plants—many types of plants can be **propagated** from cuttings (that is, a small piece cut from a mature plant can grow into a new plant).

propensity

(noun)

pruh-PEN-sit-ee

Definition: Natural inclination or tendency

Usage: He was an introvert with a **propensity** for solitary brooding, and thus was considered a bit strange or unfriendly by the others in his dorm.

Related Words: *Predilection*, *Proclivity*, *Penchant*, and *Bent* are all words for a preference or inclination (*He has an affable bent about him, and a proclivity for striking up conversations with strangers*).

More Info: Like its synonym *penchant*, this word shares a root (meaning “lean”) with *pendulum* and *penchant*. A **propensity** is a “leaning” towards something.

prophetic

(adj)

pruh-FET-ick

Definition: Relating to prophesy, predicting, ominous

Usage: While most of the country was consumed with irrational optimism about the economy, this particular journalist possessed an almost **prophetic** pessimism—not only did she predict the crash, she even predicted the month it actually happened.

Related Words: *Prescient* (having foreknowledge or foresight, seeing the future), *Prognosticate* or *Augur* (tell the future)

propitiate

(verb)

proh-PISH-ee-ayt

Definition: Attempt to reconcile with, satisfy, or reduce the animosity of (a person who is angry, offended, etc.)

Usage: The ancient Greeks would often attempt to **propitiate** angry gods by sacrificing animals to them.

Related Words: *Placate*, *Appease*, *Mollify*, *Conciliate*, and *Assuage* are near-synonyms.

More Info: The Romans had something called a “propitiatorim,” or “place of atonement”—presumably, one would be **propitiating** the gods.

propitious

(adj)

proh-PISH-uss

Definition: Favorable, giving good signs for the future, likely to work out; kind or forgiving

Usage: After having to postpone the game earlier in the week due to rain, the officials were pleased to see the **propitious** weather forecast. “We’ll get this game in after all,” one of them exclaimed.

Related Words: *Auspicious* (looking as though success is likely), *Opportune* (suitable, convenient, occurring at an appropriate time)

Memory Trick: It’s a bit confusing that *propitiate* means “attempt to reconcile with, satisfy, or reduce the animosity of.” Perhaps it would help to imagine that the gods have already been *propitiated* (the Romans were fond of sacrificing animals to gain the gods’ favor), and therefore an endeavor is **propitious**, or likely to be successful.

providential

(adj)

prah-vid-ENT-chull

Definition: Lucky, fortunate, or relating to divine care (the idea that a deity has helped or cared for a person)

Usage: Every time their religious sister ran out of money, help always arrived! She viewed this as God's **providential** hand, but her family members viewed it as their always having to bail her out, and it was getting annoying.

Related Words: *Propitious* (favorable, giving good signs for the future, likely to work out; kind or forgiving), *Auspicious* (looking as though success is likely)

More Info: *Provident* means showing foresight, being frugal or careful to provide for the future, thinking ahead in a wise way. Often this quality is attributed to God (or nature), so *providence* sometimes simply means God or God's care.

proxy

(noun)

PRAHCK-see

Definition: Agent, substitute, person authorized to act on behalf of another

Usage: She was in the hospital, but certainly didn't want to miss voting on the proposal, so she sent a **proxy** to the board meeting to vote "yes."

Related Words: *Legate* or *Emissary* (agent or official person sent to represent someone else)

More Info: Often used in the expression *by proxy*, as in *voting by proxy*.

puerile

(adj)

PYOO-er-ull or PYOOR-ile

Definition: Juvenile, immature

Usage: The retiring film critic decried the **puerile** humor common in so many modern American movies, pointing out that the classic comedies of the '40s were so much smarter and less reliant on jokes about bodily functions.

Related Words: *Jejune* (dull, childish), *Sophomoric* (very immature, having poor judgment)

pugilism

(noun)

PYOO-juh-lizm

Also *pugilist* (noun)

Definition: boxing, fighting with the fists

Usage: **Pugilism** has been called “the sweet science” by some, but others feel that hitting other people in the head until they can’t get up isn’t much of a sport.

Related Words: *Belligerent*, *bellicose*, *truculent*, and *pugnacious* mean combative, inclined to fighting.

More Info: **Pugilism** and *pugnacious* come from the Latin “pugnus,” for “fist.”

puissance

(noun)

PWISS-unss or PYOO-iss-unss

Also *puissant* (adj)

Definition: Power, might

Usage: When people asked the twenty-five year old bride what had attracted her to her commanding, sixty year old CEO husband, she replied that she had always been drawn to **puissance**. That tended to end conversations as people went to go look up “**puissance**.”

More Info: **Puissant** comes through French from the same Latin root (“power”) as *omnipotent* (all powerful), *potentate* (ruler), and *impotent* (lacking power).

pulchritude

(noun)

PUHL-krih-tood

Definition: Physical beauty

Usage: Marilyn Monroe's mystique is based not only on her obvious **pulchritude**, but also on her mysterious death and likely dalliance with JFK.

Related Words: *Comeliness* is a synonym. *Aesthetic* (concerning the appreciation of beauty or good taste, pertaining to the science of what is beautiful)

Memory Trick: This word is so ugly sounding! Would you ever have guessed it meant *beauty*? Imagine a man telling a woman she is the *epitome of pulchritude*. Unless she has a very good vocabulary, it probably won't go very well.

pungent

(adj)

PUN-jent

Definition: Having a sharp taste or smell; biting, stimulating, sharp

Usage: The new assistant chef received some rather **pungent** criticism from the head chef for her idea to make feta cheese soup, which the customers found much too **pungent**.

Related Words: *Acerbic* (sour; harsh or severe), *Acrid* (sharp or biting, pungent), *Astringent* (caustic, biting, severe; a skin cleaning fluid that clears pores), *Caustic* (capable of corroding metal or burning the skin; very critical or sarcastic)

More Info: The Latin “pungere” means “to prick.”

pusillanimous

(adj)

pyoo-sill-AN-im-uss

Definition: Cowardly, timid

Usage: He was so **pusillanimous** that not only was he afraid to ask his boss for a raise, he was even afraid to tell the waitress that he didn't like sugar in his tea.

Related Words: *Craven* (cowardly)

More Info: What an interesting origin this word has—"pullus" was Latin for a young animal, and "pusillus" added the idea of being small and weak. The root "animus" (*animation*, etc.) means "spirit." Thus, a **pusillanimous** person has the spirit of a weak baby animal.

querulous

(adj)

KWAIR-ull-uss

Definition: Given to complaining, grumbling

Usage: Norma had been happy to be a grandmother, but was somewhat less happy when a **querulous** child was dropped off on her doorstep—“I don’t want to come inside,” “I don’t like sandwiches,” “It’s too cold in the bathroom.” Would the whining and moaning ever stop?

Related Words: *Carp* (constantly complain, fret, and find fault), *Petulant* (unreasonably irritable or sullen), *Peevish* (annoyed, in a bad mood, stubborn), *Cross* (angry, ill-humored)

More Info: **Querulous** shares a root with *quarrel*.

quiescent

(adj)

kwee-ESS-unt or kwy-ESS-unt

Definition: Quiet, still

Usage: After hours of moaning and shaking from his illness, the child finally exhausted himself and grew **quiescent**.

Related Words: *Placid* or *pacific* (peaceful, calm, tranquil)

quixotic

(adj)

kwick-SAH-tick

Definition: Extremely impractical but very romantic, chivalrous, or idealistic; impulsive

Usage: Prompted by a lesson their teacher devised for election year, the children shared what they would do if elected President. The plans were adorably **quixotic**, involving housing all the homeless in floating homes on the ocean, or teaching everyone to be nice to each other.

Related Words: *Rash* (too hasty, acting without considering the consequences)

More Info: From Cervantes' 1791 novel *Don Quixote*, about a romantic, impractical hero who becomes obsessed with books about chivalry (believing even the most ridiculous tales within the books) and famously attacks windmills he believes to be giants—hence the expression “tilting at windmills,” meaning fighting unwinnable battles or battles against imaginary foes.

raconteur

(noun)

rack-uhn-TOOR

Definition: Witty storyteller

Usage: Miguel was quite the **raconteur**—the laughing party guests naturally congregated in a cluster around him as he held court.

Related Words: A *bard* is a poet/storyteller—Shakespeare is often called “The Bard.” *Bard* also evokes images of a medieval poet traveling from town to town, accompanying himself on an instrument. A **raconteur** is more of a person who is fun at parties.

More Info: From the French verb for “recount,” or “tell.”

rarefied

(adj)

RARE-if-ide

Definition: Lofty, very high up or elevated (in a metaphorical way); exclusive, select; thin, pure, or less dense (as air at the top of a mountain)

Usage: Among the **rarefied** ranks of conference attendees, she counted two Nobel Prize Winners, a MacArthur Genius Grant winner, and Bill Gates—and that was just at one lunch table!

Related Words: *Elevate* (raise, lift up; lift the spirits of; move up to a higher rank or status or raise up to a higher spiritual or intellectual plane), *Lofty* (in a high position, esp. in character, spirit, or rank), *Edify* (uplift, enlighten, instruct or improve in a spiritual or moral way), *Winnow* (separate the good from the bad, or narrow down to just the best)

reactant

(noun)

ree-ACK-tint

Definition: Something that reacts; a substance that undergoes a change in a chemical reaction

Usage: The two men had been rivals since high school; when both were elected to the city council, they became **reactants** in the worsening deadlock of an already-polarized city government.

Related Words: *Catalyst* (causer of change—or, in chemistry, a substance that causes or accelerates a reaction but is not itself changed)

recalcitrant

(adj)

rih-CAL-sih-truhnt

Definition: Not obedient, resisting authority, hard to manage

Usage: As an aspiring kindergarten teacher, she had imagined days filled with giggles and singing songs about friendship—she was not prepared for a roomful of twenty **recalcitrant** children who wouldn't even sit down, much less learn the words to “Holding Hands Around the World.”

Related Words: *Intractable*, *Intransigent*, *Refractory*, and *Obstreperous* are also used to describe people who are stubborn and hard to control.

More Info: **Recalcitrant** comes from Latin roots meaning “to strike with the heels”—that is, to kick or kick back.

recant

(verb)

rih-CANT

Definition: Withdraw, retract, or disavow something one has previously said, esp. formally

Usage: For saying that the Sun and not the Earth was the center of the universe, Galileo was brought on trial for heresy, forced to **recant**, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. Of course, a forced **recantation** doesn't say much about whether the person really abjures his former views.

Related Words: *Repudiate* (reject, cast off, deny that something has authority)

More Info: The root “cant” (“sing”) is also found in *chant*, *cantor*, *incantation*, and *chanteuse* (female singer).

recapitulate

(verb)

ree-cah-PIT-chull-ayt

Definition: Summarize, repeat in a concise way

Usage: I'm sorry I had to leave your presentation to take a call—I only have a minute, but can you **recapitulate** what you're proposing?

Related Words: *Précis* (concise summary, abstract), *Digest* (a periodical containing shortened versions of works published elsewhere), *Compendium* (concise but complete summary; a list or collection)

More Info: Ever wonder where “recap” came from? Here you are! Don't confuse **recapitulate** with *capitulate*, which means “surrender, give in.”

recondite

(adj)

RECK-un-dite or rih-CAHN-dite

Definition: Not easily understood, hidden, dealing with an obscure topic

Usage: Professor Ryan's office is full of books, every single one of which is more than 400 years old, and many of them in ancient Greek. He deals in some seriously **recondite** information.

Related Words: *Arcane* and *Esoteric* are synonyms.

recrudescent

(adj)

ree-croo-DESS-ent

Also *recrudescence* (noun), *recrudesce* (verb)

Definition: Revival, breaking out into renewed activity

Usage: The **recrudescence** of his psoriasis came at the worst possible time. “Oh, great,” he said—now I’m going to be shedding skin flakes all over my new coworkers on the first day of work.

Related Words: *Renascent* (reviving, becoming active again), *Resurgent* (having a revival, renewing, rising or surging again)

More Info: **Recrudescent** shares a root (meaning “raw”) with *crudité*, vegetables served raw. It seems “raw” here is meant in the sense of “harsh, bloody,” and **recrudesce** is generally used for the reappearance of disease. (For something positive, *renaissance* might be a more appropriate word).

redound

(verb)

rih-DOUND

Definition: To have a good or bad effect, esp. as a result of a person's efforts or actions (usually used with *to*, *on*, or *upon*)

Usage: "Cramming" vocabulary words probably won't be very effective, but studying a little every day will **redound** to your success.

Related Words: *Reap* (harvest, get as a result of one's effort)

More Info: Don't confuse with *rebound*, to bounce back (as a basketball) or recover from illness.

redress

(noun, verb)

rih-DRESS

Definition: Setting something right after a misdeed, compensation or relief for injury or wrongdoing (noun); correct, set right, remedy (verb)

Usage: My client was an innocent victim of medical malpractice. As would anyone who had the wrong leg amputated in surgery, he is seeking financial **redress**.

Related Words: *Recompense* (repay, reward, compensate), *Requite* (reciprocate, repay, or revenge)

More Info: The expression “make amends” means to ask for forgiveness or **redress** one’s wrongs.

refractory

(adj)

rih-FRAC-tuh-ree

Definition: Stubbornly disobedient, hard to manage

Usage: No matter how much job training the city gives them, **refractory** ex-criminals are simply unemployable.

Related Words: *Intractable*, *Intransigent*, *Recalcitrant*, and *Obstreperous* are also used to describe people who are stubborn and hard to control.

refulgent

(adj)

rih-FULL-jent

Definition: Shining, radiant

Usage: Her new engagement ring was **refulgent**—she was so happy with it. I’ll bet she polished it every night.

Related Words: *Burnish* (polish, make smooth and lustrous), *Gilded* (covered with a thin layer of gold; superficially good)

More Info: *Effulgent* is a synonym. The rare word *subfulgent* means “only slightly shiny.”

rejoinder

(noun)

rih-JOIN-der

Definition: Response or reply, esp. a witty comeback

Usage: In retrospect, I could have come up with a better **rejoinder** than “I know you are, but what am I?” I always think of the perfect witty comeback hours after I actually needed it.

Related Words: *Riposte* is a fencing term that has made it into common use. When an opponent thrusts (with a sword), your retaliation is a *riposte*. Outside of fencing, a *riposte* is a witty comeback or swift reply.

rend

(verb)

REND

Definition: Tear violently, esp. to tear one's clothing or hair out of grief; pull apart, split, or tear away

Usage: Many figures in the Bible **rent** their clothing from grief at a loved one's death, an event that can surely **rend** one's heart as well.

More Info: As you can see, **rend** is an irregular verb; its past tense is *rent*.

repast

(noun, verb)

rih-PAST

Definition: A meal (noun); to eat or feast (verb)

Usage: After a light **repast** in a country inn, the men got back on their horses and rode away.

Related Words: *Comestibles* (food), *Gustatory* (pertaining to taste)

More Info: From a Latin root for feeding, also found in *pasture* (where farm animals eat).

repertorial

(adj)

reh-per-TOR-ee-ull

Definition: Pertaining to a repertory or repertoire, a stock of available things or a number of theatrical performances presented regularly or in sequence

Usage: One theater observer noted that **repertorial** community theater can tie together different plays for a repeat audience: seeing the same actor as Hamlet one night and Romeo another prompts interesting parallels between the two plays.

More Info: Don't confuse **repertorial** with *reportorial*, "characteristic of news reporters."

repose

(noun)

rih-POSE

Definition: The act or state of resting; peacefulness, tranquility; lying dead in a grave

Usage: Thousands of people lined up to see the prime minister's body lying in **repose** in the capital building. / After working the last two weekends, Myrna was perfectly happy spending her day off in **repose** in her living room armchair with a cup of tea and a good book.

Related Words: *Recumbent* (lying down, reclining, resting)

More Info: *Lying in repose* is when a deceased person is available for public viewing.

reprobate

(noun, adj)

REP-ruh-bayt

Definition: Disreputable, unprincipled, or damned person (noun); shameless, depraved (adj)

Usage: The police joked that they had so many mug shots of the old **reprobate** that they could assemble them into a photography book called, “Faces of Petty Crime, 1976–2011.”

Related Words: *Dissolution* (sinking into extreme hedonism, vice, and degradation), *Roué* (a dissolute, lustful man, often a womanizer)

More Info: In the original meaning, God would **reprobate** someone to hell. Today, a **reprobate** is a wrongdoer unlikely to change.

resurgent

(adj)

rih-SER-jent

Definition: Having a revival, renewing, rising or surging again

Usage: Burlesque has experienced a **resurgence** in the last decade, as young women dress in old-fashioned finery and perform routines appropriate for the vaudeville halls or nightclubs of previous decades.

Related Words: *Recrudescent* (revival, breaking out into renewed activity), *Renascent* (reviving, becoming active again)

revamp

(verb, noun)

ree-VAMP

Definition: Renovate, redo, revise (verb); a restructuring, upgrade, etc. (noun)

Usage: I had my whole room decorated in *Twilight: Eclipse* paraphernalia, so when *Breaking Dawn* came out, I had to **revamp** my decor.

Related Words: *Overhaul* (repair, investigate for repairs)

More Info: Vampire puns aside, a *vamp* is the upper front part of a shoe. To **revamp** was originally to get your shoes repaired.

ribald

(adj)

RIB-uld

Definition: Using or relating to obscene or vulgar humor

Usage: Nearly all limericks are based on **ribald** humor—hence, the constant rhymes with “Nantucket.” / The movie’s humor was so **ribald** that a PG-13 rating was assigned, and Joey’s mother covered up his eyes nearly every time a woman was on the screen.

Related Words: *Bawdy* (vulgar or lewd, esp. for humor), *Lewd* (obscene or excessively lustful, as in *a lewd gesture*)

ridden

(adj)

RID-un

Definition: Dominated or burdened by

Usage: The neighborhood was **ridden** with crime. / In this corruption-**ridden** nation, you simply have to pay bribes if you want anything to get done.

More Info: In the phrase *disease-ridden slum*, it's pretty obvious that the meaning is bad, but actually, adding *-ridden* to anything makes the meaning bad. If someone said *an equality-ridden society*, it sounds as though that person is actually against equality!

rift

(noun)

RIFT

Definition: A gap or fissure (such as in rock), a break in friendly relations

Usage: Olaf's Swedish family was offended when he married a Norwegian girl—so offended that it caused a **rift** that lasted for decades. / The hikers considered the **rift** in their path, wondering if it would be possible to leap across.

Related Words: *Crevasse* (deep fissure or crack), *Feud* (bitter quarrel generally lasting a long time), *Estranged* (alienated, as in *She hasn't spoken to her estranged father in years*).

More Info: Unsurprisingly, to **rift** as a verb is to split open, burst, etc.

rococo

(adj)

ruh-COH-coh

Definition: Very elaborate and ornate (in decorating or metaphorically, as in speech and writing); relating to a highly ornate style of art and architecture in 18th century France

Usage: Although Dot Von Derian was born in Ohio as Melissa Worshowski, she insisted on being called “Madame Von D,” and bought herself a mansion she furnished in the most **rococo** style imaginable—it was gilded cherubs and gold leafing as far as the eye could see.

Related Words: *Florid* (reddish or rosy; flowery, showy, or excessively fancy), *Byzantine* (very complicated; relating to the Byzantine Empire, esp. its ornate decorating style, full of gold and religious imagery)

More Info: Look up “**rococo**” on Google Image Search to get the picture (very gold, very fancy!)

rue

(noun, verb)

ROO

Definition: Regret, remorse (noun); to feel regret or remorse (verb)

Usage: Movie or cartoon villains sometimes say, “You’ll **rue** the day!” What they mean is, “I will make you regret that you did what you just did.” / The couple broke up in high school for a foolish reason, and each hastily married another person. Twenty years later, they were still full of endless **rue** over having lost each other.

Related Words: *Contrite* means remorseful for one’s wrongs. *Penitent* means remorseful for one’s sins, or a person who is remorseful.

More Info: **Rue** is also an acrid herb used in medicine. It is likely from this plant that the female name Rue derives (as in Rue McClanahan of *The Golden Girls*).

ruminate

(verb)

ROO-min-ayt

Definition: Turn over in the mind, reflect on; chew cud (as a cow)

Usage: Oh, I just don't know about that... let me **ruminate** on it for a few days and I'll get back to you.

More Info: A cow is a *ruminant*—it has four stomachs and has to digest its food in stages (and thus, very slowly).

salient

(adj)

SAY-lee-uhnt

Definition: Obvious, standing out; projecting, protruding, jutting out

Usage: The attack on our organization was mostly just partisan bickering, but it did have a few **salient** points that I think we should respond to. / The windowless prison's side wall had only one **salient** feature, a sculpture of the state bird jutting out from the building.

Related Words: *Jut* means to project (out from something) or stand outward or upward from the main thing, as in *I snagged my clothes on a nail jutting out from the wall*.

More Info: Don't confuse with *sapient*, meaning "wise, having good judgment."

sardonic

(adj)

sar-DAH-nick

Definition: Scornfully or ironically mocking, cynically derisive

Usage: A **sardonic** movie critic is one thing, but a **sardonic** film professor is another—I really wish Professor Dahl wouldn't sarcastically cut down his students the way he does cheesy horror films. / Dorothy Parker wrote **sardonically**, "If you want to know what God thinks about money, just look at the people he gave it to."

More Info: This origin seems too good to be true! **Sardonic** comes from Sardinia, the Italian island, which supposedly had a plant that could cause death by facial convulsions resembling mocking laughter.

savant

(noun)

sa-VAHNT

Definition: Learned person, scholar, someone admitted to membership in a scholarly field; a person with amazing mental abilities despite having a cognitive difference or disability

Usage: The TED conferences feature **savants** and newsmakers speaking on topics of great importance to the world. / Many people associate autism with being an “autistic **savant**,” but most people who have autism do not actually have the ability to mentally multiply a five digit number by a five digit number in five seconds, for instance.

More Info: Marilyn vos Savant, listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for “highest IQ,” wasn’t born “vos Savant,” but didn’t simply choose a clever penname either—her maternal grandparents were named “Savant” and “vos Savant.”

scintilla

(noun)

sin-TILL-uh

Definition: A tiny bit or trace

Usage: With not one **scintilla** of food in the house, the pioneer woman resorted to desperate means, boiling weeds and even shoe leather to feed her children.

Related Words: A *Modicum*, *Iota*, *Mite*, or *Tad* of something is also a small amount (as in, *If you had one iota of decency, you would have come to the funeral*, or *I had the tailor shorten the sleeves just a tad*). A *Vestige* is a leftover trace or remaining evidence of something that no longer exists.

More Info: **Scintilla** is Latin for “spark.” *Spark* can still be used metaphorically in a sentence where **scintilla** would also work—for instance, “I had not even a *spark* of an idea.”

scurvy

(adj)

SKER-vee

Definition: Contemptible, mean

Usage: Our neighbor is so **scurvy** that he deliberately broke my little brother's bicycle because, as he said, "You kids are too loud!"

Related Words: *Reprobate* (disreputable or unprincipled person)

More Info: Scurvy is also a disease caused by lack of vitamin C and resulting in anemia, bleeding gums, and other pretty horrible symptoms. **Scurvy** was common in sailors on long sea voyages in centuries past (before they figured out the cause and started taking lemons with them to sea).

searchingly

(adv)

SER-ching-lee

Also *searching* (adj)

Definition: In a searching or penetrating manner; while examining closely or probing for answers

Usage: “I’m fired?” said Ron, looking **searchingly** at his boss. “I thought I was like a son to you.” / Breaking up is hard to do, but the **searching** look of her brokenhearted soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend was just too much.

secrete

(verb)

sih-CREET

Definition: Produce and release a substance from a cell or gland of the body for a functional purpose

Usage: When threatened, skunks **secrete** an odor that humans consider horrible. / The late-night infomercial offered a pheromone perfume that promised to mimic the “attraction” hormones that humans **secrete** naturally.

Related Words: *Emit* means send, give forth, or issue—it could be used in either sentence above or in any of a wide variety of situations (a person *emits* a scream, a tower *emits* radio waves, etc.)

More Info: **Secrete** is related to “secret,” from a root meaning “to set apart.” To **secrete** a substance, of course, is to “set it apart” or release it from the body.

sedition

(noun)

sih-DISH-un

Definition: Inciting rebellion against a government, esp. speech or writing that does this

Usage: Amnesty International regularly fights for the release of political prisoners imprisoned for **sedition**. While inciting violence is illegal in most of the world, what is considered **sedition** under many restrictive governments is what Americans consider a normal exercise of freedom of speech—for instance, writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper criticizing the government's policies.

Related Words: *Incendiary* (starting fire; inflaming the senses or arousing rebellion)

semantic

(adj)

sih-MAN-tick

Definition: Relating to the different meanings of words or other symbols

Usage: Bob said plastic surgery should be covered under the health care plan and Marion said it shouldn't, but it turns out that their disagreement was purely **semantic**—what Bob meant was *reconstructive* surgery and what Marion meant was *cosmetic* surgery.

More Info: **Semantic** comes from a Greek root for “sign.” When an argument becomes muddled due to language confusion, or when an arguer appears to be redefining a word rather than making a real point, it is common to call the person's remarks “mere **semantics**” or to say, “You're just playing **semantics**.”

seraphic

(adj)

seh-RAFF-ick

Definition: Like an angel; serene, spiritually carried off or transported

Usage: The gospel choir looked **seraphic** in their shimmering white robes.

Related Words: *Cherubic* means like a *cherub*, an angel that resembles a chubby baby or child. *Cherubic* is generally used to describe chubby, rosy-cheeked babies. *Beatific* means showing celestial happiness, spiritual joy, etc.

More Info: A *seraph* (in Christian writings) is a celestial being—various definitions suggest that a *seraph* has six wings, or is depicted as the winged head of a child.

shard

(noun)

SHARD

Definition: Fragment of some brittle substance, esp. a sharp fragment of pottery, glass, etc.

Usage: Seeing her broken plate-glass window, Mrs. Chadhury bravely grabbed a **shard** of glass to defend herself against a possible burglar.

More Info: **Shard** is related to *shear*, a verb meaning “to cut” (also, scissors can be called *shears*).

sinecure

(noun)

SY-nih-kyoor or SIN-uh-kyoor

Definition: A job or position that pays while requiring little or no work

Usage: It's a wealthy university—it's sort of understood that professors who relocate to campus are rewarded with **sinecures** for their spouses, whether those spouses have any qualifications or not. / In medieval times, a **sinecure** was a paying position for a priest but without an attachment to a parish where he would actually have to show up and do anything.

More Info: From Latin “*beneficia sine cura*,” meaning “a church living without care (of souls).” That sounds pretty bad, but sometimes a **sinecure** is used for a good reason—for instance, a government might appoint someone (who already has a job) a title and salary for another job in order to allow that person expanded power to accomplish something.

skittish

(adj)

SKIT-ish

Definition: Shy, fickle, uncertain, or prone to act suddenly due to nervousness; lively in a restless or excessive way

Usage: After his first experience working with a **skittish** horse who nervously jerked around and ended up stepping on his foot, Ernest learned to wear steel-toed boots. / The band began with an audience of eighty college students but could see that they were **skittish**—there was a whole festival going on outside, and the student were ready to head for the door if the band wasn't that great.

Related Words: *Inconstancy* (fickleness, unreliability; the state of changing without good reason), *Mercurial* (quickly and unpredictably changing moods; fickle, flighty)

slake

(verb)

SLAYK

Definition: Satisfy (esp. thirst), cool, or refresh; make less active

Usage: Having been lost for hours, the weary hikers were more than willing to **slake** their thirst in a mountain stream. / The teacher's harsh, demanding attitude soon **slaked** the girls' enthusiasm for the ballet class.

Related Words: *Satiate* or *Sate* (to fully satisfy, or to go beyond satisfying to the point of excess)

More Info: **Slake** is related to *slack* (loose, negligent, lazy, weak)—if you **slake** your thirst, your thirst has weakened or gone away.

sobriquet

(noun)

SOH-brick-ay or soh-brick-AY

Definition: A nickname

Usage: James Brown, often referred to with the **sobriquet** “The Godfather of Soul,” scored numerous smash hits and was also known for his feverish dancing.

Related Words: An *epithet* can be a descriptive nickname or an “add-on” to a name—for instance, “Alexander the Great” is an *epithet* for Alexander III of Macedon. *Epithet* can also mean “insult”—a “racial epithet” is a slur and is always bad.

solecism

(noun)

SAH-liss-izm

Definition: Nonstandard use of grammar or words; mistake, esp. in etiquette

Usage: “I could care less” is a **solecism**—what the speaker really means to say is “I *couldn't* care less.” / Apparently, Libby had committed a **solecism** by asking a man if he wanted to dance. “In Lubbock, Texas,” said her friend, “we keep things traditional.”

Related Words: *Malapropism* (ludicrous mistake in word use), *Faux Pas* (social blunder)

More Info: **Solecism** comes from the place name Soloi—the ancient Greeks considered the people from that region to speak in a horrible, substandard dialect.

solidarity

(noun)

sah-lid-AIR-it-ee

Definition: Fellowship in interests, feelings, responsibilities, etc., such as among a group of people or among classes, nations, etc.

Usage: The governor attempted to outlaw collective bargaining by unions, but backed down once he was made aware of the union's **solidarity** with churches and community groups across the state.

More Info: The Polish trade union Solidarity (founded 1980) helped break out of Soviet control and bring about free elections in that country. Related to the word *solid*, think of **solidarity** as forming a *solid* front with your compatriots.

somatic

(adj)

soh-MAT-ick

Definition: Of the body

Usage: While some depression is caused by outside forces (the death of a loved one, for instance), many cases of depression have a **somatic** cause—for instance, postpartum depression can be related to hormones and physical changes associated with pregnancy and childbirth.

Related Words: *Psychosomatic* (involving both the mind and the body—for instance, a physical illness caused by mental stress)

squalid

(adj)

SKWAH-lid

Definition: Disgusting, filthy, foul, extremely neglected

Usage: Social Services removed the children from the home due to the **squalid** conditions, including rats running freely in the kitchen and spoiled food all over the house.

Related Words: *Sordid* can mean **squalid**, or morally **squalid**, as in “The recovered junkie told a *sordid* tale of his time on the streets, full of every type of degradation.”

squelch

(verb)

SKWEL'ch

Definition: Crush, squash; suppress or silence; walk through ooze or in wet shoes, making a smacking or sucking sound

Usage: The repressive government **squelched** the rebellion immediately. / Ew, I just **squelched** a slug in my bare feet!

Related Words: *Curb* (restrain, control, rein in, as in *Parliament attempted to curb the excesses of the monarchy*), *Quell* (forcibly suppress; quiet down)

More Info: This word is imitative in origin—that is, it comes from the sound that occurs when you step on something soft and squishy.

stasis

(noun)

STAY-siss

Definition: Equilibrium, a state of balance or inactivity, esp. caused by equal but opposing forces

Usage: Edie felt that her career was in **stasis**: her boss made it clear she wasn't getting promoted, but she also couldn't leave because of her health insurance situation.

Related Words: *Status Quo* (existing state or condition), *Stationary* (not moving), *Static* (fixed, not moving or changing, lacking vitality)

More Info: From the Greek for "standing still."

steeped

(adj)

STEEPT

Definition: Immersed (in), saturated (with)

Usage: A person **steeped in** classic literature probably thinks about almost everything in terms of old, famous books. / The Met's new campaign seeks to answer affirmatively the question of whether music lovers **steeped in** hip-hop and pop can learn to love opera.

More Info: To **steep** as a verb is to soak in liquid, infuse, or saturate. A teabag **steeps** in hot water. In French onion soup, a large crouton **steeps** in broth and becomes soft.

stentorian

(adj)

sten-TOR-ee-un

Definition: Very loud and powerful (generally of a human voice)

Usage: The substitute teacher had a hard time calling the rowdy class to order. He poked his head into the hallway and flagged down the football coach walking by, who shut down the chaos immediately with a **stentorian**, “Sit down and shut up!”

More Info: Stentor was a Greek herald (messenger) in the Trojan War. His voice is described in the *Iliad* as being as loud as the voices of fifty men!

stigma

(noun)

STIG-muh

Definition: Mark of disgrace, a figurative stain or mark on someone's reputation

Usage: In the 1950s, bearing a child out of wedlock was severely **stigmatized**, but today in many social circles, there is no **stigma** whatsoever to unmarried parents having a child.

Related Words: *Pariah* (social outcast, untouchable)

More Info: **Stigma** is sometimes used to mean *stigmata*, marks supernaturally appearing on hands and feet (of nuns, monks, etc.) and resembling the wounds of Christ. This happens to Patricia Arquette in the 1999 movie *Stigmata*. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the character Hester Prynne is **stigmatized** by having to wear the letter “A” on her chest (for “adultery”).

stint

(noun, verb)

STINT

Definition: Period of time spent doing something, or a specific, limited amount of work (noun); to be frugal, to get by on little (verb)

Usage: After a **stint** in combat, Jared was used to eating whatever he was given, and being sparing with the few condiments available. After watching him **stint** on ketchup, his wife said, “Honey, seriously, here you can use all you want!”

Related Words: *Miser*, *Cheapskate*, *Skinflint* (stingy person), *Frugal* (economical, thrifty, not wasteful with money)

More Info: The different meanings of **stint** are all related the idea of a limited quantity or period—to do one’s **stint** is to get an assigned job done (and no more than that), and to **stint on** something is to limit how much is used or given.

stipulate

(verb)

STIP-yuh-layt

Definition: Specify; make an open demand, esp. as a condition of agreement

Usage: Before taking the job, Owen **stipulated** in his contract that he would be able to leave early on Fridays to attend religious services.

Related Words: *Qualified* means “modified, limited, conditional on something else” (*qualified* optimism means the person is part optimistic and part unsure, perhaps waiting for more information). A person who says “Yes, *if* you do X” is giving *qualified* agreement by **stipulating** X.

stratagem

(noun)

STRAT-uh-jum

Definition: Military maneuver to deceive or surprise; crafty scheme

Usage: The party's **stratagem** was to dig up a scandal on their candidate's opponent, and then release the photos the day before the election, leaving the opponent no time to defend himself before voters took to the polls.

Related Words: *Ruse* and *Subterfuge* are synonyms. *Artifice* (trickery, especially as part of a strategy), *Finesse* (use tact or diplomacy; employ a deceptive strategy), *Duplicity* (deceit, double-dealing, acting in two different ways for the purpose of deception), *Wily* (crafty, cunning)

More Info: *Strategy* has generally positive connotations, but **stratagem** implies deception. The similar *scheme* often has negative connotations (a plot or scam).

stratum

(noun)

STRAY-tum or STRAT-um

Also *strata* (noun, plural of *stratum*)

Definition: One of many layers (such as in a rock formation or in the classes of a society)

Usage: From overhearing his rich and powerful passengers' conversations, the chauffeur grew to despise the upper **stratum** of society. / I love this dish—it's like a lasagna, but with **strata** made of bread, eggs, and pancetta! Oh, look at the menu—it's actually called a **strata**! That makes perfect sense.

Related Words: *Hierarchy* (a ranked series; a classification of people according to rank, ability, etc.; a ruling body), *Echelon* (a level, rank or grade; the people at that level)

More Info: A highly **stratified** society is one marked by inequality, or one in which people cannot easily move from layer to layer—that is, one where the poor stay poor and the rich stay rich.

strut

(noun)

STRUHT

Definition: A structural support or brace

Usage: Looking out the window of the small biplane, Maureen could see the **struts**, the vertical connectors between the lower and upper sets of wings.

Related Words: *Bolster* or *fortify* (strengthen or support), *Buttress* (a support against a building; to strengthen or support),

More Info: Of course, **strut** as a verb means to swagger or walk in a showy or pompous way, such as in a fashion show. Adam Lambert has a song called “Strut” (“Strut for me and show me what you’re working with”).

sublime

(adj)

sub-LIME

Definition: Lofty or elevated, inspiring reverence or awe; excellent, majestic; complete, utter

Usage: She loved visiting Gothic churches, which truly filled even a nonbeliever with a sense of the **sublime**. / It was **sublime** idiocy that caused him to invest all his money in the market without doing any research. / This dinner is **sublime**! I will leave a glowing review on Yelp!

Related Words: *Lofty* (in a high position, esp. in character, spirit, or rank), *Elevate* (Lift the spirits of; move up to a higher status or spiritual plane), *Edify* (uplift, enlighten), *Rarefied* (lofty, figuratively high up or elevated)

More Info: As you can see, **sublime** is usually positive, but sometimes it's used a bit ironically (**sublime** idiocy). The related *sublimate* means to suppress or make socially acceptable (*He sublimated his violent anger into stunning performances on the football field*)—that is, to make an ugly or immoral impulse more lofty.

subpoena

(verb, noun)

suh-PEE-nuh

Definition: A court order requiring a person to appear in court and give testimony

Usage: Lea was served with a **subpoena** requiring her to testify against her former colleague.

More Info: “*Sub poena*” is Latin for “under a penalty,” after the first words of a **subpoena**: “Under penalty of...” (meaning that, if the person does not comply, the specified punishment will be applied).

sully

(verb)

SULL-ee

Definition: Make dirty, stain, tarnish, defile

Usage: The Senator did win his campaign for re-election, but his reputation was **sullied** when he was photographed shaking hands with the tobacco executives who apparently bankrolled his campaign.

Related Words: *Adulterate* (make impure), *Debauch* (corrupt morally), *Vitiate* (ruin, make faulty, corrupt), *Debase* (degrade; lower in quality, value, rank, etc.; lower in moral quality)

supplant

(verb)

suh-PLANT

Definition: Take the place of, displace, especially through sneaky tactics

Usage: In the 1950s, many people took cod liver oil as a health supplement. Today, fish oil capsules and flaxseed oil have **supplanted** the smelly old standby our grandparents used. / He did achieve his dream of becoming CEO, but only after **supplanting** our previous CEO by wresting control while she was battling cancer.

Related Words: *Outstrip* (surpass, exceed; be larger or better than; leave behind), *Overshadow* (cast a shadow over, make to seem less important), *Supersede* (replace or cause to be set aside), *Eclipse* (obscure, darken, make less important)

More Info: From the Latin for “to trip up” (“*planta*” meant the sole of the foot).

supposition

(noun)

suh-puh-ZISH-un

Definition: Assumption, hypothesis, something that has been supposed

Usage: In order to test our **supposition** that customers will buy our product if they associate it with celebrities, let's send free samples to some popular young starlets, track mentions in the press, and see if our sales increase accordingly.

Related Words: *Conjecture* (educated guess, speculation, opinion formed with incomplete information)

surly

(adj)

SER-lee

Definition: Bad-tempered, hostile, unfriendly, or rude

Usage: This diner is terrible. My eggs are overcooked, and our **surly** waitress actually told me, “If you don’t like it, scram.”

Related Words: *Curmudgeon* (bad-tempered, difficult person; grouch), *Crotchety* (grouchy, picky, given to odd notions), *Cantankerous* (disagreeable, contentious), *Crank* (an unbalanced person who is fanatical about a private, generally petty cause)

More Info: **Surly** comes from “sir” and originally meant “lordly, acting like a nobleman.” Today’s meaning is surely still in line with the behavior of many noblemen towards their servants.

surrogate

(noun, adj)

SER-uh-git or SER-uh-gayt

Definition: Substitute, person who acts for another (noun); acting as a replacement (adj)

Usage: A study found that baby monkeys, once separated from their mothers, preferred a **surrogate** mother made of cloth to a less comforting, rigid monkey doll, even when induced with treats to change their behavior.

Related Words: *Proxy* (agent, substitute, person authorized to act on behalf of another)

More Info: A **surrogate** mother carries a child for another woman (generally, the child is not biologically related to the **surrogate**—the intended parent or egg donor supplies genetic material).

sybarite

(noun)

SIB-uh-rite

Definition: Person devoted to pleasure and luxury

Usage: The reality show about Beverly Hills “housewives” portrayed wealthy **sybarites** who actually seemed to be pursuing champagne and Pilates full-time.

Related Words: *Voluptuary* is a synonym. A *hedonist* is a pleasure-seeker.

More Info: From the Greek place name Sybaris—the original Sybarites were renowned for living in luxury.

symbiosis

(noun)

sim-bee-OH-siss or sim-bye-OH-siss

Also *symbiotic* (adj)

Definition: Mutually dependent relationship between two organisms, people, groups, etc.

Usage: In biology, one example of **symbiosis** is when a small creature feeds off bugs that live on a larger creature—thus protecting the larger creature from discomfort and possibly disease. / Although some celebrities complain about paparazzi, many have a **symbiotic** relationship with those same intrusive photographers – the paparazzi need to get paid, and the celebs need the photos to stay in the news.

More Info: The root “sym/syn” means “together” and also appears in *synchronized* and *sympathy*. “Bio” means “life.”

synoptic

(adj)

sin-OP-tick

Definition: Relating to a synopsis or summary; giving a general view

Usage: The movie studio had interns read screenplays and write up **synoptic** outlines for the executives to review.

Related Words: *Digest* (a periodical containing shortened versions of works published elsewhere), *Recapitulation* (summary or the act of summing up), *Précis* (summary or abstract), *Compendium* (concise but complete summary; a list or collection)

More Info: The root “sym/syn” means “together” and “op” comes from a Latin root for “eye” (*optometrist, optical, ocular, myopia*). Thus, **synoptic** literally means “see all together,” which is what a good summary allows you to do.

syntax

(adj)

SIN-tacks

Also *syntactical* (adj)

Definition: The rules governing grammar and how words join to make sentences (or how words and symbols join in writing computer code), the study of these rules, or any system or orderly arrangement

Usage: Now that my linguistics class is studying **syntax**, it makes a little more sense when my computer flashes “SYNTAX ERROR” at me. / Anyone learning a language is bound to make **syntactical** mistakes—even if he or she knows the appropriate vocabulary, it is still difficult to assemble the words perfectly.

More Info: The root “taxis” (arrangement) also gives us *taxonomy* (the science of classification, such as in biology).

tawdry

(adj)

TAW-dree

Definition: Gaudy, cheap or cheap-looking; indecent

Usage: Tara modeled her prom look after something she saw in a Pussycat Dolls video. Her mom didn't care for it, but her grandmother found it downright **tawdry**.

Related Words: *Showy* means showing off and could be good or bad (a *showy* car). *Garish* refers to something much too bright, vivid, or fancy (makeup that looks okay in a nightclub looks *garish* in the office). *Gaudy* items stand out in a cheap, tasteless, or overly colorful way (wearing too much big jewelry looks *gaudy*). *Meretricious* means attractive in a vulgar or flashy way, **tawdry**; deceptive.

More Info: This etymology is ridiculous—**tawdry** comes from a mispronunciation of “St. Audrey,” as in “St. Audrey's lace,” a lace necktie. The real St. Audrey died in 679 of throat cancer, supposedly because of her love of necklaces.

tendentious

(adj)

ten-DEN-chuss

Definition: Marked by a strong point of view, biased

Usage: It's hard to become absorbed in the world of a fantasy novel when the author is so **tendentious**—the planet of Xerxon is clearly meant to mimic the United States, and the author's politics intrude on the story on every page.

Related Words: *Partisan* (partial to a particular party, group, etc., esp. in a biased, emotional way), *Bigot* (obstinately prejudiced person)

More Info: A **tendentious** person is always *tending* towards some particular thing.

terrestrial

(adj)

tih-RESS-tree-ull

Definition: Relating to the Earth or to land; worldly

Usage: Mr. and Mrs. Daruza were certain they had seen a UFO, plus aliens running around in the night. What they really saw was an especially dense flock of birds in the air, and some mundane, **terrestrial** animals on the ground.

More Info: The root “terra” (Earth) also gives us *extra-terrestrial* (space alien), *terrarium* (closed container garden for plants and small animals), *terrine* (earthenware food dish), and *terra firma* (solid ground).

terse

(adj)

TERSS

Definition: Concise, brief and to the point (sometimes to the point of rudeness)

Usage: Hoping to talk to her doctor at length about her condition, she was disappointed to be treated so **tersely** by a doctor who simply renewed her prescription and disappeared.

Related Words: *Curt* and *brusque* also mean rudely abrupt or brief. (**Terse** is often negative, but doesn't have to be).

toady

(noun)

TOH-dee

Definition: Someone who flatters or acts in a servile manner for self-serving reasons

Usage: Look at that **toady**, sucking up and offering to do the boss's Christmas shopping for his kids. Gross.

Related Words: *Lackey*, *Sycophant*, and *Myrmidon* are synonyms. *Fawn* means to try to please in a submissive way. *Obsequious* means “servile, very compliant, fawning.” *Truckle* means to act subserviently.

More Info: **Toady** comes from “toad-eater,” after magicians' assistants who would eat supposedly poisonous toads so the magician could show off his ability to magically expel the poison. *Toadeat* used to mean “do any degrading thing for your boss,” but today you can use **toady** as a verb (or ***toady up to*** someone) for this purpose.

token

(noun, adj)

TOH-kin

Also *tokenism* (noun)

Definition: Sign, symbol, mark, badge; souvenir, memento; coin-like disk used as currency for subways, arcade games, etc.; sample, or person, thing, idea taken to represent an entire group (noun); of very little or merely symbolic value (adj)

Usage: I am starting to realize that this law firm hired me to be its **token** woman. There I am, smiling in all the ads—but I never actually get to work on important cases. / Hollywood movies are often guilty of **tokenism**—many have exactly one black character (the “**token** minority”), often present to give advice to the (usually white) main characters. / I am giving you this “Best Friends Forever” necklace as a **token** of our friendship.

Related Words: *By the same token* is an expression that means the speaker will then say something based on the same evidence he or she used for what was previously said. “As a libertarian, he wants to abolish the IRS. By the same **token**, he wants drugs legalized.”

tome

(noun)

TOHM

Definition: Large or scholarly book; one of the volumes in a set of several books

Usage: When she discovered that the books she needed for her paper were in the university's online system, she ended up lugging some truly impressive **tomes** back from the library—she actually had to stop and rest twice on the way home.

Related Words: A *magnum opus* is an author's greatest work (although it doesn't have to be large).

tortuous

(adj)

TOR-choo-uss

Definition: Twisting, winding, complex; devious, not straightforward

Usage: If I can follow your **tortuous** logic, you're saying that people who want the new law protecting the environment are actually *hurting* the environment because the majority of people deliberately do the opposite of laws? What? / The children found the **tortuous** path of the roller coaster both terrifying and exciting.

Related Words: *Convolut*ed (having many overlapping folds or coils, as certain kinds of seashells; intricate, complex)—also often used to describe “twisty” reasoning, as in the first sentence above.

More Info: Don't confuse with *torturous*, meaning relating to torture or the type of pain caused by torture.

transgression

(noun)

tranz-GRESH-un

Also *transgress* (verb)

Definition: Violation of a law, moral rule, order, etc.; sin

Usage: His **transgression** was so serious that his family disowned him: no one would be visiting him in prison.

Related Words: *Contravene* (violate, act counter to, oppose), *Err* (be mistaken, sin)

More Info: **Transgress**, from Latin, is literally “to step across,” similar to the expression “cross the line,” as in *You’ve really crossed the line this time*. The “line,” of course, is a rule, principle, etc.

travesty

(noun)

TRAV-est-ee

Definition: Exaggerated, debased, or grotesque imitation

Usage: That Saturday Night Live sketch was a pretty good **travesty** of the election scandal. / You call that a sales presentation? What you just did in front of our clients was a **travesty**! I can't believe you lost what was supposed to be an easy sale.

Related Words: *Farce* (a humorous play, or a mockery). *Burlesque* is a synonym (the original meaning related a mocking imitation or caricature used for ridicule).

More Info: The “tra” in “travesty” is the same as “trans,” meaning “across.” The “vest” means “clothing.” These two Latin roots came together in Italian to mean something like “disguise,” which is an important part of creating a satirical play, for instance.

treacherous

(adj)

TRETCH-er-uss

Also *treachery* (noun)

Definition: Betraying trust, not faithful or trustworthy; not dependable; dangerous or deceptive

Usage: Betraying one's country for money is the most base of acts—his **treachery** cost the lives of several soldiers whom he had pledged to fight alongside. / The small boat was capsized in the **treacherous** waters.

Related Words: *Perfidy* (disloyalty, treachery), *Apostate* (person who deserts a party, cause, religion, etc.), *Recreant* (coward or deserter), *Quisling* (person who betrays his country by aiding an invader)

More Info: From the Old French “*trechier*,” meaning “cheat or trick.”

trenchant

(adj)

TREN-chint

Definition: forceful or vigorous, effective, keen; caustic, sharp

Usage: The school’s **trenchant** new anti-truancy policy immediately increased class attendance by a noticeable margin. / Claudia would have gone on making excuses for hours had Juan not **trenchantly** stepped in and said, “You want to quit, right?” “Yes!” she said, quite relieved.

Related Words: *Keen* (sharp, piercing; very perceptive or mentally sharp)

More Info: **Trenchant** is related to *trench* (a ditch)—the connection is a root meaning “to cut” (either literally or figuratively). A **trenchant** remark can cut someone in the sense of hurting feelings, or can “cut through all the junk” to get to the point.

truculent

(adj)

TRUCK-yuh-lent

Definition: Fierce, cruel, savage; belligerent

Usage: That guy is too **truculent** to work in customer service—when the customers are already angry, the last thing this store needs is someone prone to blow up at any moment! / The honey badger is a **truculent** hunter—it can and will eat anything, and sometimes tortures its prey before eating it.

Related Words: *Belligerent*, *Bellicose*, and *Pugnacious* mean combative, inclined to fighting. *Sanguinary* means bloodthirsty. *Minatory* and *Baleful* mean menacing or threatening.

tumultuous

(adj)

tuh-MULT-choo-uss

Also *tumult* (noun)

Definition: Riotous, violently agitated, marked by disturbance or uproar; noisy, chaotic

Usage: Poland's **tumultuous** history includes a Nazi invasion, a period of Soviet rule, and, well before that, over 120 years during which it was partitioned by Russia, Prussia, and Austria and simply didn't exist. / She had been enjoying the game, but lost her hat, left earring, and keys in the **tumult** that resulted when fans went crazy over a referee's call.

Related Words: *Turbid* means relating to water that is choppy or has been stirred up (and thus "muddy" or "unclear, hard to understand") or can mean turbulent (and would be appropriate in the sentence above).

turgid

(adj)

TER-jid

Definition: Swollen, inflated; or, metaphorically “inflated,” such as in overblown, pompous speech

Usage: His prose was so **turgid** he used the phrase “synchronous repast” to mean a lunch break. / Jimmy carefully carried the **turgid** water balloons to the balcony, ready for a serious splash attack on members of the rival fraternity.

Related Words: *Tumid* (synonym), *Distend* (swell, expand), *Balloon* (swell or puff out; increase rapidly)

More Info: Don’t confuse **turgid** with *turbid* (turbulent), *tepid* (lukewarm), or *torpid* (sluggish).

turpitude

(noun)

TER-pit-ood

Definition: Depravity, baseness of character, corrupt or depraved acts

Usage: Worried about her grandson's **turpitude**—as evinced by his constant detentions and a three-day stay in a juvenile jail—Mrs. Worthington offered to pay for military school. / It's hard to fathom the kind of **turpitude** required to make a movie that could get banned in modern-day Europe! When I read the screenplay, I nearly threw up.

Related Words: *Base* (morally low, mean, dishonorable; of little or no value; crude and unrefined; counterfeit), *Debase* (lower or reduce in quality or dignity)

More Info: Often used in the phrase “moral **turpitude**,” a legal term that describes depraved behavior.

tyro

(noun)

TY-roh

Definition: Beginner

Usage: Kenneth felt called to work as a missionary, but he was really a **tyro** in the field, and was unprepared for many of the questions people asked him.

Related Words: *Novice* (synonym), *Neophyte* (beginner, novice; person newly converted to a religion), *Dilettante* (person who takes up an art or activity for amusement only or in a superficial way)

umbrage

(noun)

UM-bridge

Definition: Offense or annoyance (usually as *take umbrage*, meaning *become offended or annoyed*)

Usage: With thirty years' experience in the field and quite recent successes on a variety of projects, the executive understandably **took umbrage** when a coworker suggested that he was good to have around to remind others of "ancient history."

Related Words: *Pique* also means anger or irritate. Note that to *pique* (that is, stimulate) someone's interest is positive, but to *pique* a person is always bad.

unconscionable

(adj)

un-CAHN-shun-uh-bull

Definition: Not guided by conscience; morally wrong, unjust, unreasonable

Usage: It is **unconscionable** that you would deny your sister a bone marrow transplant knowing that you're the only person in the family who's a match.

Related Words: *Unscrupulous* or *unprincipled* also mean not guided by moral rules.

unsparing

(adj)

un-SPAIR-ing

Definition: Generous, lavish (as in not *sparing* any help or gifts to others); unmerciful, harsh (as in not *sparing* any criticism)

Usage: The mother was **unsparing** in praising her son—so he was in for quite a shock when his new teacher told him his work was substandard.

Related Words: *Acerbic, Acrid, Astringent, Caustic* are all words that literally have to do with bitterness, burning, corroding, etc., and can be metaphorically used to describe harshness (*unsparing condemnation, caustic condemnation, etc.*)

More Info: To *spare* can mean to treat with mercy, hold back, or refrain from doing (the kidnapper *spared* the victim's life, the father *spared* no expense on his daughter's Sweet Sixteen, etc.)

untempered

(adj)

un-TEM-perd

Definition: Not toned down; not moderated, controlled, or counterbalanced

Usage: The report was an **untempered** condemnation of the company's practices—the investigators didn't have a single good thing to say.

Related Words: *Qualified* means “modified, limited, conditional on something else” (*qualified* optimism means the person is part optimistic and part unsure, perhaps waiting for more information). Thus *unqualified* can mean **untempered**—that is, not limited or restrained. If your boss gives *unqualified* approval for your plan, you can do whatever you want.

More Info: To *temper* is to moderate, soften, or tone down, or to make less intense, esp. by mixing something good with something bad. Of course, *temper* as a noun means a person's state of mind or tendency to anger.

upbraid

(verb)

up-BRAID

Definition: Find fault with, criticize or scold severely

Usage: I'm not surprised they got divorced—you can't **upbraid** someone every time he forgets to put a water glass in the sink and then expect him to stick around.

Related Words: *Admonish* means scold or mildly criticize. *Reprove*, *Reproach*, *Reprimand*, *Rebuke*, *Excoriate*, and *Castigate* are all words for criticizing or scolding more harshly. *Censure* means strong disapproval or official reprimand.

More Info: **Upbraid** is related to *braid* (intertwined hair)—the root relates to twisting, darting, or being quick (such as in battle). The idea is that, when you **upbraid** someone, you bring up his or her faults quickly and sharply—almost as a weapon. Of course, now we're imagining braided hair twisting like a sneaky enemy.

usury

(noun)

YOO-zher-ee

Definition: Charging interest on a loan, esp. charging illegally high or excessive interest

Usage: I can't see how that payday lending place is even legal—a person borrowing \$100 will end up paying over \$150 interest in just a few months! Isn't that **usury**? I don't know how that place is skirting the law.

More Info: **Usury** is always bad. Whether it means simply charging interest or charging way too much depends on the time and place. In medieval times when all moneylending was illegal, **usury** meant any charging of interest; today, **usury** laws specify exactly how much interest it's allowable to charge.

vanguard

(noun)

VAN-gard

Definition: Leading units at the front of an army; leaders in a trend or movement, people on the “cutting edge;” the forefront of a trend or movement

Usage: While Google has won the search engine wars, in 1994, Yahoo was on the **vanguard** of search technology.

More Info: The *avant-garde* (French for *in front of the guard*) were the leading soldiers at the front of an army. **Vanguard** is derived from *avant-garde* and means the same thing. Metaphorically, the *avant-garde* (noun or adjective) or **vanguard** (noun) are innovators, those “ahead of their time.” Sometimes, the *avant-garde* seems a little crazy at first. For example, *She arrived at the mixer in a dress that was a little avant-garde for the otherwise conservative Yale Club—she would have looked more appropriate at an art gallery or Lady Gaga concert.*

variegated

(adj)

VAIR-ee-uh-gay-ted

Definition: Varied in color, having multicolored patches or spots; diverse

Usage: Unusually, the bridesmaids' dresses were boldly **variegated**, having many different colors. The bride reasoned that the dresses could be worn again —“Rainbow goes with anything!” she said. The bridesmaids privately agreed that they would never again wear those dresses as long as they lived.

Related Words: *Myriad* (innumerable, existing in abundance; diverse), *Heterogeneous* (different in type, incongruous; composed of different types of elements)

More Info: In biology, **variegation** refers to different colored zones in the leaves of plants. Of course, the “vari” part is the same as in *various*, so it shouldn't be hard to figure out a synonym like *varicolored*.

verdant

(adj)

VER-duhnt

Definition: Green, such as with vegetation, plants, grass, etc.; young and inexperienced

Usage: Having grown up in Ethiopia, Dabir loved the lushness of the **verdant** forests in rainy Oregon.
/ The first-year associate was a little too **verdant** to be assigned to the big case.

Related Words: *Primaver*al or *Vernal* (relating to the spring; fresh, youthful)

More Info: **Verdant** is, of course, related to the Spanish *verde* and French *vert* for “green.” The color green is also used figuratively—saying someone is “green” (much like a new spring plant) or “wet behind the ears” (a reference to just being born) means the person is inexperienced.

verisimilar

(adj)

ver-uh-SIM-ill-er

Definition: Having the appearance of truth, probable

Usage: It's a **verisimilar** story, sure, but where's the proof?

Related Words: *Feasible* (possible; logical or likely; suitable), *Plausible* (credible, having the appearance of truth)

More Info: The root “ver” means “true” and appears in *verify*, *veracious* (truthful), *aver* (claim, assert), and *verity* or *veracity* (truth).

vernal

(adj)

VER-null

Definition: Relating to the spring; fresh, youthful

Usage: Alma’s favorite part of gardening was the **vernal** reawakening that followed a frozen winter.

Related Words: *Primaver*al is a synonym. (The dish *pasta primavera* is full of vegetables—that is, “spring pasta”).

More Info: The *vernal equinox* is a moment in spring at which the Sun is directly over the equator; this is associated with a change of seasons.

vestige

(noun)

VEST-idge

Definition: Trace or sign of something that once existed

Usage: They hadn't officially broken up, but she felt their relationship was running on fumes—that only **vestiges** of their former affection remained.

Related Words: *Scintilla* (a tiny bit or trace), *Residue* (remainder, leftover part after something has been removed)

More Info: **Vestigial** features in biology are those left over from a previous stage of evolution—for instance, the hind limbs of whales and snakes, and the tailbone in humans. Thus, when a baby is born with a protruding tailbone, it is called a *vestigial tail* (as featured in the 2001 film *Shallow Hal*).

vex

(verb)

VECKS

Also *vexation* (noun)

Definition: Annoy or bother; puzzle or distress

Usage: “Don’t **vex** me,” said the nanny. “Behave, or I’ll tell your parents.” / She was totally **vexed** by the crossword clue—9 letters, starting with “b,” meaning “person whose socks are either scratchy or imbued with magical powers.” What?

Related Words: *Irk* (synonym), *Nettle* (irritate, sting, or annoy)

More Info: Related to *vehicle*, **vex** comes from a root for “to convey”—transportation wasn’t so smooth in Roman times, so imagine the **vexation** that might result from being pulled in a cart by horses over lots of rocks.

via

(preposition)

VY-uh or VEE-uh

Definition: Through, by means of, by way of (by a route that goes through or touches)

Usage: We will be flying to Russia **via** Frankfurt. / Many of the students at our college got here **via** special programs that assist low-income students in preparing for college.

Related Words: *Per* can also be used in this way. The most common use of *per* is “for each,” as in, “We will need one sandwich **per** child.” However, *per* may also mean “by means of” or “according to.” I have delivered the package *per* your instructions.

More Info: **Via** is Latin for “way, road, channel.” This root also appears in *viaduct*, a bridge or series of bridges, especially carrying a road or railway over water, a valley, etc.

vicissitude

(noun)

viss-ISS-it-ood

Definition: Changes or variations over time, esp. regular changes from one thing to another

Usage: While she scrubbed pots and pans, she pondered the **vicissitudes** of life —she once had a house full of servants, and now was a maid herself.

Related Words: *Vagaries* (unpredictable or erratic actions or occurrences, as in *the vagaries of the weather*)

vim

(noun)

VIM

Definition: Pep, enthusiasm, vitality, lively spirit

Usage: “I’m old, not dead!” said Grandpa Albert, full of **vim** and ready for his first bungee jump.

Related Words: *Vigor* (synonym), *Verve* (vigor, spirit, liveliness), *Sprightly* (vivacious, full of life)

More Info: **Vim** is usually heard in the expression “vim and vigor.” Like so many of these “two-part” expressions (*hale and hardy*, for instance), the two words are more or less synonyms, and thus the expression is a bit redundant.

virulent

(adj)

VEER-yuh-lent

Definition: Extremely infectious, poisonous, etc.; hateful, bitterly hostile

Usage: Racism is a **virulent** force that corrupts schools, workplaces, and the basic machinery of democracy. / Discipline in the classroom is one thing, but the teacher's **virulence** towards misbehaving students was enough to get her suspended from teaching.

Related Words: *Pervasive* (tending to spread throughout), *Pathogenic* (capable of producing disease)

More Info: The original meaning of the root “virus” was “poison” (what we call *viruses* weren't discovered until 1898).

viscid or viscous

(adj)

VISS-id / VISS-cuss

Definition: Thick, adhesive, or covered in something sticky

Usage: Ugh, what did you spill on this floor? It's too **viscous** to be absorbed by these paper towels. Is this hair conditioner? / Teaching a troop of Cub Scouts to make maple syrup means cleaning the **viscid** substance off uniforms, boys, and every other object those boys touch.

Related Words: *Adhere* (stick to, such as with glue, or to a plan or belief)

vitriol

(noun)

VIT-tree-ohl

Also *vitriolic* (adj)

Definition: Something highly caustic, such as criticism (literally, one of a number of chemicals including sulfuric acid)

Usage: After another embarrassing loss, the team's shortstop was full of **vitriol** for the coach who had led them to their worst season in history.

Related Words: *Caustic* (capable of burning or corroding; extremely critical or sarcastic), *Acrimony* (bitterness, animosity), *Contumely* (contemptuous treatment or a humiliating insult)

vociferous

(adj)

voh-SIFF-er-uss

Definition: Noisily crying out, as in protest

Usage: He has always been a **vociferous** opponent of the estate tax, appearing on numerous news programs to rail against “double taxation.”

Related Words: *Stentorian* (loud), *Clamor* (vociferous uproar, as from a crowd)

More Info: The root “voc” (from “vox”) means “voice” and also occurs in *vocal*, *equivocal*, and *vox populi* (the voice of the people).

voluble

(adj)

VAHL-yuh-bull

Definition: Easily fluent in regards to speech

Usage: The journalist’s new book is a **voluble** tome, covering three centuries of history with numerous flowing, almost conversational asides into the scientific discoveries and cultural advances of various time periods.

Related Words: *Loquacious*, *Prolix*, and *Verbose* mean “talkative, wordy.” *Glib* means “fluent in speaking” in a bad way that suggests superficiality or insincerity.

More Info: From the same root (“volve,” meaning “to roll”) as *revolve*—the words just “roll” right out of a **voluble** person.

wan

(adj)

WAHN

Definition: Unnaturally pale, or showing some other indication of sickness, unhappiness, etc.; weak, lacking forcefulness

Usage: Are you okay? You're looking **wan**. / Bryan's **wan** attempt at asking for a raise was easily brushed off by his boss.

Related Words: *Pallid* (abnormally pale, lacking color or vitality), *Sallow* (sickly-yellow in color)

More Info: A *wan smile* is a weak, forced smile that people use to pretend they're okay when they're not.

wanton

(adj)

WAHN-tuhn

Definition: Reckless, vicious, without regard for what is right; unjustifiable, deliberately done for no reason at all; sexually unrestrained or excessively luxurious

Usage: Kids do like to play pranks on Halloween, but driving an SUV into people's mailboxes isn't a prank—it's **wanton** destruction of property. / Many hip-hop videos depict a **wanton** lifestyle that is attractive to some, but unattainable (and possibly illegal). / During my grandmother's adolescence in Ireland, a girl might be sent off to a convent as punishment for "**wanton** ways," such as being alone with boys.

More Info: **Wanton** comes from two roots meaning "wanting" and "discipline." Here, *wanting* means *lacking* (as in, *I read the book and found it wanting*).

welter

(noun, verb)

WELL-ter

Definition: Confused mass or pile, jumble; confusion or turmoil (noun); roll around, wallow, toss about, writhe (verb)

Usage: It said “thrift store,” but inside it was just a **welter** of used clothing, draped everywhere and even lying in piles. / By the time the teacher broke up the fight, it was already pretty much over—the loser was **weltering** on the floor. / They struggled to keep the sailboat afloat on the **weltering** sea.

More Info: No one’s quite sure why a boxer weighing 140–147 pounds is a “welterweight,” but it might have something to do with what you might do if hit really hard by a boxer—**welter** on the ground.

whet

(verb)

WET

Definition: Stimulate, make keen or eager (esp. of an appetite)

Usage: Dinner will take another twenty minutes, but maybe this cheese plate can **whet** your appetite?

Related Words: To *quip* a person is to anger or annoy, but to *quip* one's interest, curiosity, etc., is to **whet** or stimulate that emotion.

More Info: To **whet** is literally to sharpen (a knife or cutting tool) using grinding or friction, such as on a *whetstone*, which can also be used metaphorically (Debate camp was a whetstone that sharpened the teenagers' critical faculties).

whitewash

(noun, verb)

WHITE-wash

Definition: A substance used to whiten walls, wood, etc. (noun); deception, covering up of wrongs, errors, misdeeds, etc. (verb)

Usage: The journalist accused the government of trying to **whitewash** the scandal, implying that the officials covered up the incident out of concern for national security rather than to protect themselves.

Related Words: *Gloss over*, *paper over*, and **whitewash** are all expressions for covering up a problem, insult, etc. rather than addressing it or fixing it. Because *gloss* is slippery (think of lip gloss), *gloss over* often has the sense of trying to smoothly and quickly move on to something else, as in “He made a snide remark about short people and then tried to *gloss over* it when he realized his 5’2” boss had overheard.”

winnow

(verb)

WIN-oh

Definition: Sift, analyze critically, separate the useful part from the worthless part

Usage: We got 120 resumes for one job—it's going to take me awhile just to **winnow** this down to a reasonable stack of people we want to interview.

Related Words: *Rarefy* (make more pure, more exclusive, or thinner and less dense—*rarefied air* at the top of a mountain or a *rarefied crowd* at an exclusive event)

More Info: Literally, **winnowing** is separating the edible part of wheat from the *chaff*, the outer husks. Relatedly, the expression “separate the wheat from the chaff” means to **winnow**, as in “The first week of our training program will really separate the wheat from the chaff—over 50% of recruits drop out in the first few days.”

winsome

(adj)

WIN-sum

Definition: Charming, engaging, esp. in a sweet and innocent way

Usage: It's hard for some to believe that Lindsay Lohan was once the **winsome** young starlet in *Freaky Friday*.

Related Words: *Ingenuous*, *Guileless*, and *Artless* are all related to being genuine and sincere (perhaps a bit naive). An *Ingénue* is a young—presumably innocent—actress or other female performer.

Memory Trick: Being **winsome** will help you “win some” friends.

wized

(adj)

WIZZ-end

Definition: Withered, shriveled

Usage: Fortunately, the **wizened** heads for sale at the Ecuadorian market weren't really shrunken heads—just souvenirs for tourists. / The **wizened** old man still possessed a remarkably sharp mind.

Related Words: *Hoary* (very old, gray or white as from old age), *Grizzled* (graying), *Antediluvian* (very old; literally, from before the Biblical flood), *Desiccated* (dried out)

xenophobia

(noun)

zen-noh-FOH-bee-uh or zee-noh-FOH-bee-uh

Also *xenophobic* (adj)

Definition: Fear or hatred of foreigners or that which is foreign

Usage: My mother's **xenophobia** is so great that she refuses to cross the border into Canada, and once told me that she'd rather die than try a mango because those foreign fruits are "sketchy."

Related Words: *Insular* (pertaining to an island; isolated; illiberal), *Chauvinism* (fanatical patriotism or blind enthusiasm for military glory; undue or biased devotion to any group, cause, etc.)

yoke

(noun, verb)

YOHK

Definition: A burden or something that oppresses; a frame for attaching animals (such as oxen) to each other and to a plow or other equipment to be pulled, or a bar across a person's shoulders to help carry buckets of water, etc. (noun); to unite together or to burden (verb)

Usage: The speaker argued that humanity had traded the **yoke** of servitude to kings and tyrants for the **yoke** of consumerism, which enslaves us just as much in the end.

More Info: The Bible exhorts followers to “be not unequally **yoked** together with unbelievers.” Here, **yoked** is a reference to marriage, which certainly unites (whether it burdens is a matter of opinion).