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Revised
GRE®



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GRE® Flash Cards: 500 Essential Words

Written by Jennifer Dziura
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abate

(verb)

uh-BAYT

Also *abatement* (noun)

Definition: Reduce, diminish

Usage: Her stress over spending so much money on a house **abated** when the real estate broker told her about the property's 15 year tax **abatement**.

Related Words: Tax **abatement** is used in the same way as tax “relief”—that is, a partial discount. *Subside* is another word for lessening (a storm could **abate** or *subside*).

More Info: **Abate** comes from an Old French word for “beat, cast down” that also gives us *batter* (beat severely) and *abattoir* (slaughterhouse).

abdicate

(verb)

AB-di-cayt

Also *abdication* (noun)

Definition: Formally give up the throne (or some other power or responsibility)

Usage: King Edward VIII of England famously **abdicated** the throne in order to marry an American divorcée. / Parents can be charged with neglect for **abdicating** their responsibilities towards their children.

Related Words: Don't confuse **abdicate** with *dethrone* and *depose*, which refer to forcing a leader from power. **Abdication** is voluntary.

More Info: **Abdicate** comes from the root “ab” (away) and “dic/dict” (proclaim), the latter of which also appears in *dictator*, *dictionary*, *dictate*, *dictum*, and *indict*.

aberrant

(adj)

AB-er-int

Also *aberration* (noun)

Definition: Abnormal, deviant

Usage: The teen’s **aberrant** behavior made his family suspect that he was using drugs. / Losing rather than gaining weight over the holidays is certainly an **aberration**.

Related Words: *Anomaly* (deviation from the norm, inconsistency), *Outlier* (a person on the fringe; a data point that lies outside the main pattern of data)

More Info: The prefix “ab” means “away”—in this case, away from what’s normal.

abhor

(verb)

ab-HORE

Definition: Detest, regard with disgust

Usage: “Go out with you?” she replied. “I **abhor** you! I would rather stab myself with a rusty bread knife than be your girlfriend!”

Related Words: *Loathe*, *Abominate* (synonyms), *Antipathy* (instinctive repugnance or aversion)

More Info: The prefix “ab” means “away”—if you **abhor** (or *abominate*) something, you want to get as far away from it as possible.

abjure

(verb)

ab-JOOR

Definition: Give up, renounce; repudiate, recant, or shun (especially formally or under oath)

Usage: To become a citizen of the United States, you must **abjure** loyalty to the nation of your birth. / Since enrolling in that nutrition class, she has **abjured** sugar and saturated fats.

Related Words: *Forswear* (reject or renounce under oath; swear falsely in court), *Eschew* (shun, avoid, abstain from)

More Info: **Abjure** can be used in the same way as *renounce*. You *renounce* worldly pleasures, a religion or family member, membership in a group, etc. It can also be used in the same way as *repudiate*, which is more often used with ideas, as in “Galileo *repudiated* the belief that the Sun revolves around the Earth.”

abrasive

(adj)

uh-BRAY-siv

Also *abrade* (verb)

Definition: Rough, suitable for grinding or polishing (such as sandpaper); causing irritation or annoyance

Usage: Could the inside of this mascot costume be any more **abrasive**? It's rubbing my skin raw! I have some seriously **abrasive** remarks for whoever designed this thing.

Related Words: *Caustic* (capable of burning or corroding; extremely critical or sarcastic), *Excoriate* (to rub the skin off of; to criticize very harshly)

More Info: Like *caustic* and *excoriate*, **abrasive** can be used literally or metaphorically. You scrub a dirty pan with something *abrasive*, such as steel wool. Harsh criticism is *abrasive*, like being scrubbed with steel wool.

abridge

(verb)

uh-BRIDGE

Also *abridged* (adj)

Definition: Reduce or lessen; shorten by omitting parts throughout while retaining the main idea

Usage: Our romantic vacation was **abridged** when the babysitter called to say that the kids were sick and we should come home. / Audio books are almost always **abridged**, since few people want to listen to a 200-hour book.

Related Words: *Truncate* (shorten by cutting off a part)

Memory Trick: When you **abridge** a book, you cut out sections from all over (hopefully without being too obvious)—that is, you create *a bridge* from the last part you kept in to the next part you kept in, so people don't notice the missing bits. An **abridged** book still tells the whole story; a *truncated* book is missing the ending!

abstain

(verb)

ab-STAIN

Also *abstemious* (adj.)

Definition: Hold back, refrain (especially from something bad or unhealthy); decline to vote

Usage: The church board voted on whether to hold an **abstinence** rally to encourage young people not to become sexually active; while most members voted in favor, one voted against and two **abstained**, with one **abstainer** commenting that, as far as she knew, the church's teens were pretty **abstemious** already.

Related Words: *Temperance* (moderation, holding back), *Teetotaler* (a person who abstains from alcohol), *Forbear* (hold back or abstain from)

More Info: **Abstain** is usually followed by “from” (vegetarians *forbear* meat or **abstain from** meat).

acme

(noun)

ACK-mee

Definition: Summit, peak, highest point

Usage: The **acme** of my vacation was when I finally climbed to the **acme** of the mountain and enjoyed the gorgeous vista.

Related Words: *Summit*, *Pinnacle* (synonyms), *Apex* (vertex, tip, point), *Apogee* (high point, point at which the moon is furthest from the Earth)

More Info: **Acme**, *Summit*, *Pinnacle*, and *Apex* are all popular names for businesses: Apex Locksmith, Pinnacle Home Security, etc. (**Acme** is especially popular, since it occurs early in the phone book).

activism

(noun)

ACK-ti-vizm

Also *activist* (noun)

Definition: The practice of pursuing political or other goals through vigorous action, often including protests and demonstrations

Usage: Lindsay's parents had a hard time accepting that, after incurring \$100,000 in student loans, their daughter had decided to enter the low-paying field of environmental **activism**.

Related Words: *Advocacy* (pleading for, recommending), *Champion* (one who defends or supports, as a cause)

More Info: *Activism* is often considered noble, but *judicial activism*—going beyond interpreting existing laws to actually using court decisions to create new public policies—is often controversial.

adhere

(verb)

ad-HERE

Definition: Stick (to), such as with glue, or to a plan or belief

Usage: I have a message board that **adheres to** my refrigerator with magnets; on it, I've written some affirmations to help me **adhere to** my diet plan.

Related Words: *Abide by* (follow, conform to), *Cohere* (become united, hold together as part of the same mass)

More Info: Use **adhere** for attaching two different kinds of things together, and *cohere* for things of the same kind (good cookie dough *coheres* instead of crumbles).

admonish

(verb)

ad-MAHN-ish

Also *admonition* (noun)

Definition: Mildly scold; caution, advise, or remind to do something

Usage: She was an exacting boss who *upbraided* an employee for jamming the copier, yet she merely **admonished** her five-year-old for the same offense.

Related Words: *Reprove, upbraid, reprimand,* and *rebuke* are all harsher forms of criticism than **admonish**.

More Info: You can also **admonish** someone to do something, as in “The GRE instructor admonished her students to study vocabulary every day.”

adverse

(adj)

AD-verss

Also *adversity* (noun)

Definition: Opposing, harmful

Usage: Pioneer women persevered despite **adverse** circumstances, even when fording a river—baby in one arm, leading a horse with the other—against an **adverse** current.

Related Words: *Antagonistic* (hostile, acting in opposition)

More Info: **Adverse** appears in “adverse criticism,” although that expression is a bit redundant.

Adverse is also related to *adversary* (an opponent, foe).

advocate

(verb, noun)

AD-voh-kayt (v), AD-voh-kit (n)

Definition: Speak or argue in favor of (verb); a person who pleads for a cause or on behalf of another person (noun)

Usage: I cannot possibly vote for a candidate who **advocates** oil drilling in federally protected nature preserves. / Children often have **advocates** appointed to represent them in court.

Related Words: *Proponents, Exponents, or Champions* are all people who advocate for a cause.

More Info: **Advocate** contains the root “voc,” meaning “to call.” This root also appears in *vocal, invoke*, etc.

aesthetic

(adj, noun)

ess-THEH-tick

Also *aesthete* (noun)

Definition: Concerning the appreciation of beauty or good taste, pertaining to the science of what is beautiful (adj); a sense of beauty and taste of a particular time and place (noun)

Usage: The twins were so different—one possessed a truly baroque **aesthetic**, preferring golden, gilded decor. The other lived in a world of pure logic, untouched by any **aesthetic** sense whatsoever; art did not move him, his house was bare, and he married his wife solely because she was a master of calculus.

More Info: The meaning of **aesthetic** can range from the academic study of beauty (**aesthetics**) to performing manicures, the work of an *aesthetician*. Don't confuse **aesthetic** with *ascetic* (pertaining to a simple, austere life with no luxuries, such as that of a monk; a person who leads such a life).

affable

(adj)

AFF-uh-bull

Also *affability* (noun)

Definition: Warm and friendly, pleasant, approachable

Usage: The professional wrestler played at belligerence in the ring, but in real life, he was quite an **affable** fellow—sociable, easy-going, and always ready to lend a hand.

Related Words: *Amiable*, *Cordial*, and *Genial* are synonyms.

More Info: The opposite of **affable** could be *standoffish*, *discourteous*, or *distant*.

affectation

(noun)

aff-eck-TAY-shun

Also *affected* (adj)

Definition: Fake behavior (such as in speech or dress) adopted to give a certain impression

Usage: I'm annoyed whenever Americans move to England and suddenly start speaking with an **affected** British accent; such **affectations**, when practiced by celebrities, are only likely to alienate their fans.

Related Words: *Artifice* (trickery, especially as part of a strategy)

More Info: In slang, some people call **affected** behavior “being a poser” (or *poseur*).

aggrandize

(verb)

uh-GRAND-ize

Also *self-aggrandizing* (adj)

Definition: Make greater; exaggerate

Usage: I can't stand when my coworker **aggrandizes** her role in our group projects. / Stop it with your constant **self-aggrandizing**—we don't care how many automobiles you own!

Related Words: *Augment* (to make larger)

More Info: An opposite of **self-aggrandizing** could be *self-deprecating* or *self-effacing*.

aggregate

(verb, adj)

AG-gruh-gayt (v), AG-gruh-git (n)

Definition: Gather together, amount to (verb); constituting a whole made up of constituent parts (adj)

Usage: While some of the company's divisions did better than others, **in aggregate**, we made a profit. / Concrete is created when crushed rock or glass is **aggregated** with cement; **in aggregate**, concrete is stronger than cement alone.

Related Words: *Agglomerate* (collect into a mass), *Consolidate* (unite, combine, firm up—you can *consolidate* loans or *consolidate* power)

More Info: **Aggregate** can be used in the same sense as a *gross* amount. *Gross* or **aggregate** sales are the total amount from all sources.

alacrity

(noun)

uh-LACK-rit-tee

Definition: Cheerful or speedy willingness

Usage: Any boss wants an employee to respond with **alacrity** to his or her requests, handling them promptly and with enthusiasm.

Related Words: *Brisk* (speedy, energetic, vigorous), *Sprightly* (lively, full of spirit)

More Info: **Alacrity** has an adjective form, **alacritous**, but phrases like “full of alacrity” or “with **alacrity**” are much more common.

alienate

(verb)

AY-lee-en-ayt

Also *inalienable* (adj)

Definition: Cause to become unfriendly, hostile, or distant

Usage: The talk-show host was trying to help, but only **alienated** her viewers when she suggested that they cope with a tough economy by checking themselves into a spa.

Related Words: *Disaffect* (cause to lose affection or loyalty), *Estrange* (make hostile or indifferent —“He hasn’t spoken to his *estranged* son in a decade.”)

More Info: In law, **alienate** means to transfer property to another owner. An **inalienable** right is one that you cannot give away or sell (for instance, it is not possible for a person to sell himself into slavery).

alleviate

(verb)

uh-LEE-vee-ayt

Definition: Lessen, make easier to endure

Usage: The stimulus package has **alleviated** the pangs of the Great Recession, but times are still tough.

Related Words: *Assuage* (alleviate, satisfy, or pacify—“assuage someone’s fears”), *Ameliorate* (make better), *Extenuate* (to make seem less serious—“His crime was extenuated by his mental illness”), *Palliate* (to alleviate or extenuate)

More Info: The over-the-counter painkiller “Alleve” was undoubtedly named with the word **alleviate** in mind.

ambiguous

(adj)

am-BIG-yoo-uss

Definition: Not clear, hard to understand, open to having several meanings or interpretations

Usage: The meaning of this ancient text is **ambiguous**—either we are missing some cultural context, or else the writer actually wanted to be mysterious.

Related Words: *Equivocal* (allowing for several different meanings; undecided or having mixed feelings), *Opaque* (hard to understand; dull or stupid; literally, not allowing light to pass through)

More Info: The prefix “ambi-“ means “both” or “all.” Don’t confuse **ambiguous** with *ambivalent*, which means “having mixed feelings, undecided.” People are *ambivalent*; writing, speech, and other forms of communication are **ambiguous**.

ambivalent

(adj)

am-BIV-uh-lent

Also *ambivalence* (noun)

Definition: Uncertain; unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once

Usage: I've been accepted to two amazing graduate programs, one inexpensive and close to home, and one in a big, exciting city. I'm **ambivalent**—I don't know how I'm going to decide. / When I asked you if you thought we'd get married some day, your **ambivalence** hurt my feelings.

Related Words: *Equivocal* (allowing for several different meanings; undecided or having mixed feelings), *Vacillate* (waver in decision or opinion, be indecisive)

More Info: The prefix “ambi-“ means “both” or “all” and also occurs in *ambiance* and *ambidextrous*. Don't confuse **ambivalent** with *ambiguous*, which means “vague, open to multiple meanings.”

analogous

(adj)

uh-NAL-uh-guss

Definition: Comparable, corresponding in some particular way (making a good *analogy*)

Usage: In the U.S., whenever opponents of a war want to suggest that the war is unwinnable, they point out all the ways in which the war is **analogous** to the Vietnam War.

Related Words: *Tantamount* (equivalent, as in “What he did is *tantamount to* murder.”)

anarchy

(noun)

ANN-ark-ee

Also *anarchism* (noun), *anarchist* (noun)

Definition: Absence of law or government; chaos, disorder

Usage: Once the dictator was assassinated, the country fell into total **anarchy**, as none of the opposition groups were strong enough to seize power.

More Info: *Anarchism* can sometimes mean the political philosophy that the absence of all direct government is ideal and that voluntary associations of individuals would be able to govern themselves.

anoint

(verb)

uh-NOINT

Also *anointed* (adj)

Definition: Rub or sprinkle oil on; make sacred, such as by a ceremony that includes applying oil to someone

Usage: After Principal Smitters raised test scores over 60% at her school, it was only a matter of time before she was **anointed** superintendent by a fawning school board.

More Info: **Anoint** shares a root with *ointment*, an oily substance added to the skin. **Anointing** occurs repeatedly in the Bible; in that time, people rubbed oil on themselves medicinally and for refreshment, and as a means of showing hospitality to guests.

anomaly

(noun)

uh-NOM-ah-lee

Also *anomalous* (adj)

Definition: Deviation from what is common; inconsistency

Usage: While the cosmetics division of this company has many female executives, it is an **anomaly**—in the rest of the company, sadly, only 4% of management positions are filled by women.

Related Words: *Aberration* (departing from normal; mental irregularity or deviation in morality)

More Info: The word “**anomaly**” sometimes pops up in discussions of the supernatural. The show X-Files was about the investigation of **anomalies**.

antagonize

(verb)

an-TAG-uh-nize

Also *antagonistic* (adj)

Definition: Make hostile or unfriendly

Usage: “Josie! Stop **antagonizing** your little brother! Give him back that firetruck and tell him you’re sorry for pulling his hair!”

Related Words: *Provoke* (anger, enrage, stir up, incite to action)

More Info: When discussing literature or films, the *protagonist* is the main character and the *antagonist* is the main adversary (The Joker is Batman’s **antagonist**).

antipathy

(noun)

an-TIP-uh-thee

Definition: Deep dislike, aversion, or repugnance, sometimes without reason

Usage: As an environmentalist, Mr. Subramanian had nothing but **antipathy** for the mining company drilling in and polluting his hometown.

Related Words: *Loathing* (strong aversion, dislike, or disgust)

More Info: Don't confuse **antipathy** with *apathy*, which means "indifference, not caring." **Antipathy** is the opposite of *sympathy* (note that the root "path" means "feeling").

apathy

(noun)

APP-uh-thee

Also *apathetic* (adj)

Definition: Not caring; absence of feeling; lack of interest or concern

Usage: Many parents of teenagers are concerned by their indolent teens’ **apathy** about the future. Few teens are totally **apathetic**, however—many get quite excited about video games, flirting, or trips to the mall.

Related Words: *Indifferent* (apathetic or impartial), *Lukewarm* (moderately warm; having little enthusiasm)

More Info: Don’t confuse **apathy** with *antipathy*, which means “deep dislike, aversion, or repugnance.”

apocryphal

(adj)

uh-POCK-riff-ull

Also *Apocrypha* (noun)

Definition: Of questionable authenticity; false

Usage: I'm sorry, but this putative letter from George Washington that you found at a garage sale is clearly **apocryphal**—it is riddled with anachronisms (for instance, Washington was long dead by the time silent films were invented), and also, Washington most certainly didn't refer to Martha Washington as “hey baby.”

Related Words: *Ersatz* (artificial, synthetic, serving as a substitute), *Faux* (fake, imitation, as in “faux fur”), *Specious* (pleasing to the eye but deceptive)

More Info: The word “**Apocrypha**” often refers to books that have been rejected for inclusion in (various versions of) the Bible, either due to dubious authenticity or because the Church considered them useful, but not divinely inspired. Obviously, different authorities disagree about what exactly is included in the **Apocrypha**.

appease

(verb)

uh-PEEZ

Definition: Pacify, satisfy, relieve; concede to belligerent demands, sometimes at the expense of principles

Usage: My mother is so angry she wasn't the first person we called when the baby was born—I'm hoping to **appease** her by spending Christmas at her house this year.

Related Words: *Placate*, *Mollify*, and *Assuage* are near-synonyms

More Info: “**Appeasement**” is commonly associated with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy towards Germany between 1937–1939—as it turned out, giving the Sudetenland to Hitler didn't actually create “Peace in Our Time.” Today, **appeasement** is associated with cowardice and giving in to bullies.

appreciable

(adj)

uh-PREESH-yuh-bull

Definition: Enough to be perceived, considerable

Usage: She ruefully concluded that the “Pot Pie Diet” was a scam and had made no **appreciable** difference in her appearance—after four weeks, she had lost three-quarters of a pound.

Related Words: A near-antonym is *Negligible*—both words can refer to small amounts, but an **appreciable** amount or difference is large enough to matter, and a *negligible* amount or difference is so small it can safely be ignored.

arbitrary

(adj)

AR-bi-trayr-ee

Definition: Based entirely on one's discretion; capricious, unreasonable, or having no basis

Usage: The judge's rulings were truly **arbitrary**—one defendant got community service for stealing a television, and another got three years for the same crime. / It doesn't really matter which brand of baking soda you buy—just **arbitrarily** pick one so we can get out of this grocery store before dinnertime.

More Info: **Arbitrary** looks a lot like *arbiter* for good reason—originally, something **arbitrary** was something that was uncertain because it depended on an *arbiter*'s decision. As indicated by the definition above, **arbitrary** can be neutral or negative.

arcane

(adj)

ar-CANE

Also *arcanum* (noun)

Definition: Known or understood by only a few; obscure, secret

Usage: To win at Jeopardy, you must be full of **arcane** knowledge. / The wizard’s shop was full of **arcana**, from Latin-to-Ancient Greek dictionaries to entire books on magic spells relating only to elephants.

Related Words: *Esoteric, Abstruse*

More Info: **Arcane** comes from the Latin “arca,” for “box”—**arcana** is information that is metaphorically shut up in a box.

archaic

(adj)

ar-CAY-ick

Also *archaism* (noun)

Definition: Characteristic of an earlier period, ancient, primitive

Usage: The school's **archaic** computer system predated even floppy disks—it stored records on tape drives! / Sometimes, when you look a word up in the dictionary, certain definitions are marked “**archaic**”—unless you are a Shakespeare scholar, you can safely ignore those **archaisms**.

Related Words: *Obsolete* (out of date, no longer used), *Antediluvian* (extremely old, before the Biblical flood)

More Info: “**Archaic**” is especially used to describe language common to an older time but rare today, such as “thou” or “forsooth.” If a word appears in a dictionary with “**archaic**” next to a secondary meaning, that meaning is unlikely to be tested on the GRE.

arduous

(adj)

AR-dyoo-uss

Definition: Very difficult, strenuous; severe, hard to endure

Usage: The **arduous** hike up rocky terrain was all worth it once the hikers reached the summit. / It was an **arduous** winter on the prairie; the family barely survived.

Related Words: *Grueling* (very difficult and exhausting)

More Info: Don't confuse **arduous** with *ardor*, which means passion.

articulate

(adj, verb)

ar-TICK-yoo-lit (adj), ar-TICK-yoo-layt (v)

Definition: Using language in a clear, fluent way (adj); speak distinctly or give clarity to an idea (verb)

Usage: She's so **articulate** that I'm sure she'll make a good lawyer. / The group voted on who would be the best spokesperson, able to **articulate** their needs to the panel.

Related Words: *Eloquent* (speaking in a fluent, powerful, appropriate way)

More Info: As an adjective, the last syllable is pronounced "lit." As a verb, it is pronounced "late."

artifact

(noun)

AR-ti-fact

Definition: Any object made by humans, especially those from an earlier time, such as those excavated by archaeologists

Usage: The archaeologists dug up countless **artifacts**, from simple pottery shards and coins to complex written tablets. / The girl's room was full of the **artifacts** of modern teenage life: Justin Bieber posters, *Twilight* books, and a laptop open to Facebook.

More Info: **Artifact** contains the same root (“fact,” meaning “to make”) as in *factory* and *manufacture*.

artless

(adj)

ART-less

Definition: Free of deceit or craftiness, natural, genuine; lacking skill or knowledge, crude, uncultured

Usage: Children can be so **artless** that, when you try to explain war to them, they say things like, “But isn’t that mean?”/ His **artless** attempt at negotiating a raise began with “I need more money, please” and ended with “Okay, sorry I asked.”

Related Words: *Guileless, Ingenuous* (synonyms)

More Info: Don’t think of **artless** as a lack of art—think of it as a lack of *artifice*, or artificiality. **Artless** can be either positive (free of deceit) or negative (lacking skill).

ascertain

(verb)

ass-er-TAYN

Definition: Find out with certainty

Usage: Hopefully, the investigation will allow us to **ascertain** who is at fault here.

Related Words: *Discern* (perceive or recognize; tell two or more things apart), *Descry* (discover, see by looking carefully)

More Info: **Ascertain** is easy to remember—it means “make certain” and has the word “certain” contained inside it.

ascetic

(adj, noun)

uh-SET-ick

Also *asceticism* (noun)

Definition: abstinent or austere in lifestyle (adj); a person who leads an austere and simple life without material pleasures, esp. someone who does this for religious reasons

Usage: **Ascetics** such as monks actually take vows of poverty. / The graduate student lived an **ascetic** existence, her apartment containing only a futon couch and a single bowl and set of chopsticks, which she used to eat ramen noodles every night.

Related Words: *Hermit* or *Anchorite* (person who lives away from society, esp. for religious reasons), *Recluse* (person who lives in solitude)

More Info: Don't confuse **ascetic** with *aesthetic*, which means “pertaining to beauty or good taste.”

assuage

(verb)

uh-SWAY-zh

Definition: Make milder, relieve; soothe, pacify, or calm

Usage: After losing a million-dollar account, he tried to **assuage** his furious boss by pointing out that he was close to winning a new account worth at least as much.

Related Words: *Placate*, *Mollify*, and *Appease* are near-synonyms

More Info: **Assuage** shares a Latin root (meaning “sweet”) with *suave*, which today means smoothly agreeable or polite.

audacious

(adj)

aw-DAY-shuss

Definition: Very bold or brave, often in a rude or reckless way; extremely original

Usage: He **audaciously** asked for a raise after working at the company for less than two months!

Related Words: *Insolent* (bold in a rude way), *Brazen* (shameless, contemptuously bold)

More Info: Barack Obama wrote a book called *The Audacity of Hope*. The title suggests that Americans should be bold enough to have hope even in bad circumstances. **Audacious** can be good (**audacious** explorers) or bad, as in the employee in the sentence above.

augment

(verb)

awg-MENT

Definition: Make larger

Usage: If you memorize the definitions on all of these flashcards, you will have notably **augmented** your vocabulary!

Related Words: *Aggrandize* (make greater; exaggerate)

More Info: **Augment** shares a root (“augere,” to increase) with *august*, meaning “majestic, inspiring reverence.”

austere

(adj)

aw-STEER

Also *austerity* (noun)

Definition: Severe in manner or appearance; very self-disciplined, ascetic; without luxury or ease; sober or serious

Usage: Her design sense was so minimalist as to be **austere**; all-white walls, hard, wooden furniture, not a single picture, throw pillow, or cozy comfort anywhere. / The graduation speaker delivered an **austere** message: the economy is bad, and academic success alone isn't enough to succeed in the job market.

Related Words: *Ascetic* (pertaining to a simple, austere life with no luxuries, such as that of a monk; a person who leads such a life)

autonomous

(adj)

aw-TAH-nuh-muss

Also *autonomy* (noun)

Definition: Self-governing, independent

Usage: As leader of an **autonomous** region, the newly-elected president was received as a peer by some world leaders, although he was not entitled to send a representative to the United Nations. / It is normal for young people to desire greater **autonomy** as they grow up.

Related Words: *Fiat* (dictate or authoritative order, as in “The king rules *by fiat*.”), *Hegemony* (domination, authority; influence by one country over others socially, culturally, economically, etc.)

More Info: An **autonomous** region, such as Iraqi Kurdistan, is independent, but not considered its own country.

aver

(verb)

uh-VER

Definition: Declare or affirm with confidence

Usage: “Despite your insistence that ethics are completely situational,” said the philosophy professor, “I **aver** that the existence of natural rights inevitably leads to certain immutable ethical boundaries.”

More Info: **Aver** contains the root “ver” (truth), which also appears in *verify*, *veracious*, and *verisimilitude*.

avid

(adj)

AV-id

Also *avidity* (noun)

Definition: Enthusiastic, dedicated, passionate; excessively desirous

Usage: An **avid** cyclist, she was on her bike every weekend, and even bought the same bike that Lance Armstrong last used in the Tour de France. / **Avid** of power, the young Senator compromised every principle to gain the support—and money—of large corporations.

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

balk

(verb)

BALK

Definition: Refuse to proceed or to do something

Usage: At the company retreat, he reluctantly agreed to participate in the ropes course, but **balked** at walking over hot coals as a “trust exercise.”

Related Words: *Demur* (show reluctance or object, especially for moral reasons, as in, “His colleagues wanted him to tell the client that their sales would double, but he *demurred*.”)

More Info: **Balk** comes from a word for a beam or ridge—when a horse or mule **balks**, it stops short and refuses to proceed. Occasionally, **balk** is used as a noun for an impediment, much like a beam or ridge, or a defeat.

base

(adj)

BASE

Definition: Morally low, mean, dishonorable; of little or no value; crude and unrefined; counterfeit

Usage: His philanthropy was underlied by truly **base** motives—he not only craved the fawning publicity his donations brought, but he was actually funneling drug money through the Children’s Defense Fund! / The supposed “gold bricks” were really **base** metals covered in a very thin layer of real gold.

Related Words: *Debase* (lower or reduce in quality or dignity)

belie

(verb)

bih-LIE

Definition: Contradict or misrepresent

Usage: The actress’s public persona as a perky “girl next door” **belied** her private penchant for abusing her assistants and demanding that her trailer be filled with ridiculous luxury goods. / The data **belie** the accepted theory—either we’ve made a mistake, or we have an amazing new discovery on our hands!

More Info: This word is extremely common in GRE questions that ask you to select the missing word for a blank, as **belie** allows a sentence to “change directions,” as in the example above.

benign

(adj)

bih-NINE

Also *benignant* (adj)

Definition: Harmless; favorable; kindly, gentle, or beneficial; not cancerous

Usage: He was relieved when the biopsy results came back, informing him that the growth was **benign**. / He's a **benign** fellow. I'm sure having him assigned to your team at work will be perfectly pleasant, without changing the way you do things.

Related Words: *Innocuous* (harmless, inoffensive)

More Info: **Benign** contains the root “bene,” meaning “good.” Its antonym is **malign** (“mal” means “bad”), which as an adjective means “evil, harmful, or malicious” (as a verb, it can also mean “slander or defame”). The variant **benignant** is used the same way as **benign**.

bogus

(adj)

BOH-guss

Definition: Fake, fraudulent

Usage: The back of this bodybuilding magazine is just full of ads for **bogus** products—this one promises 22-inch biceps just from wearing magnetic armbands!

Related Words: *Spurious* and *Sham* are synonyms

More Info: **Bogus** is of American origin, originally a device for making counterfeit money. “**Bogus!**” was also a slang term of the ‘80s (prominent in the 1989 film *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*), meaning “bad” or “unfair.” On the GRE, however, **bogus** means fake.

bolster

(verb)

BOHL-ster

Definition: Strengthen or support

Usage: The general requested reinforcements to **bolster** the defensive line set up at the border. / Many people use alcohol to **bolster** their confidence before approaching an attractive person in a bar.

Related Words: *Buttress* means a support against a building but can also be a verb meaning “strengthen or support.” *Fortify* is most associated with protecting against military attack but also means “strengthen or support.”

More Info: **Bolster** comes from an Old Norse noun for a long, supportive pillow, and can still mean this. **Bolster** has additional meanings in sailing, metalworking, and other fields, but in every case a **bolster** is some kind of specialized support.

boor

(noun)

BOO-er

Also *boorish* (adj)

Definition: Rude, ill-mannered, or insensitive person; a peasant or country bumpkin

Usage: Milton was such a **boor** that, when Jane brought him home to meet her parents, he laughed at their garden gnome and made fun of everyone's hairstyles in old family photos. "Don't be so **boorish**!" said his mortified girlfriend.

Related Words: *Churl* is a synonym and can also be used in its adjective form, *churlish*. *Bumpkin*, *Yokel*, and *Rustic* are all words for an awkward, uncultured, simple person, generally from the country.

More Info: **Boor** is from a German word for farmer that also gives us the "Boers" in South Africa.

buffer

(noun)

BUFF-er

Definition: Something that shields, protects, absorbs shock, or cushions

Usage: During the colonial era, England wanted Georgia as a **buffer** between its original colonies and Spanish Florida. / A railroad car has a **buffer** (similar to a *bumper* on a car) to absorb shock in case of contact with other cars. / When Joel came out to his family, he used his mother as a **buffer**—he knew she would be supportive, so he allowed her to relay the news to everyone else, and to relay their responses back to him.

More Info: A **buffer** can also be a device for polishing (cars, fingernails, etc.).

bureaucracy

(noun)

byur-ROCK-cruh-see

Also *bureaucratic* (adj), *bureaucrat* (noun)

Definition: Government characterized by many bureaus and petty administrators or by excessive, seemingly meaningless requirements

Usage: Some nations have a worse reputation for **bureaucracy** than others—in order to get a visa, he had to file papers with four different agencies, wait for hours in three different waiting rooms, and, weeks later, follow up with some petty **bureaucrat** who complained that the original application should've been filed in triplicate.

More Info: There is nothing wrong with **bureaus** (the Federal **Bureau** of Investigation, for instance), but **bureaucracy** takes the idea much too far. While, technically, **bureaucracy** can simply mean a form of government by **bureaus**, it is virtually always used in the negative sense of excessive “red tape.”

burgeon

(verb)

BER-juhn

Definition: Grow or flourish rapidly; put forth buds or shoots (of a plant)

Usage: The dictator was concerned about the people's **burgeoning** discontent and redoubled his personal security. / Spending an hour a day on vocabulary studies will soon cause your lexicon to **burgeon**.

More Info: From Old French “burjon,” a shoot or bud. *Mushroom* is used in a similar metaphorical way, meaning “to spread out in all directions,” as a mushroom grows.

buttress

(verb, noun)

BUTT-ress

Definition: Support or encourage (verb); a support or prop, esp. projecting from and supporting the wall of a building (noun)

Usage: A self-defense class really helped to **buttress** Elaine's confidence. / David used his Ph.D. as a **buttress** against criticism. "I have a doctorate," he would say. "I just don't think you can understand."

Related Words: *Bolster* originally was a type of pillow and now is also a verb meaning "support or strengthen." *Fortify* is most associated with protecting against military attack but also means "strengthen or support."

bygone

(adj, noun)

BYE-gahn

Definition: Past, former (adj); that which is in the past (usually plural noun)

Usage: At the nursing home, the time to reminisce about **bygone** days was pretty much all the time. / It's tempting to spend our whole high school reunion talking about **bygones**, but instead, let's toast to the future!

Related Words: *Erstwhile* (former), *Quondam* (former, sometime)

More Info: The expression "Let bygones be bygones" means to agree to let go of old disagreements.

cacophony

(noun)

cah-CAW-fuh-nee

Also *cacophonous* (adj)

Definition: Harsh, discordant, or meaningless mixture of sounds

Usage: The first day of elementary school marching band practice was nothing but **cacophony**, as students who hadn't learned to play their instruments at all nevertheless banged on or puffed air into them.

Related Words: *Din* (loud, confused noise), *Dissonance* (harsh, inharmonious sound), *Clamor* (noisy uproar, as from a crowd)

More Info: “Caco/kako/kaki” is the Greek root for “bad,” occurring in such obscure but useful words as *cacography* (bad spelling or handwriting) and *kakistocracy* (rule by evil people). “Eu” is the Greek root for “good” and occurs in the antonym to **cacophony**, *euphony*.

candid

(adj)

CAN-did

Also *candor* (noun)

Definition: Open, sincere, honest

Usage: Allow me to be **candid**: you do look rather portly in those pants, and I think you should wear something else. / You have been really secretive about where you've been going after work; we could use a little more **candor** in this relationship.

Related Words: *Frank* (direct, straightforward)

More Info: **Candid** photographs are photos “from life,” where the subjects are not posing. **Candid Camera** was a “hidden camera” style prank show that ran for decades.

canonical

(adj)

can-NON-ick-ull

Also “*the canon*” (noun)

Definition: Authorized, recognized; pertaining to **the canon**, or body of accepted rules, standards or artistic works

Usage: School boards often start controversies when replacing **canonical** books in the curriculum with modern literature; while many people think students should read works more relevant to their lives, others point out that *Moby Dick* is part of the **canon** for a reason.

More Info: **Canon** comes from a Greek word similar to “measuring rod” and which also gives us *cane*.

capricious

(adj)

cap-REE-shuss

Also *caprice* (noun)

Definition: Acting on impulse, erratic

Usage: The headmaster's punishments were **capricious**—break the rules one day, you get a warning; break them another day, you get expelled. / Who needs a plan? A date is more fun with a little **caprice**—let's just start driving and see what we find!

Related Words: *Whimsical* (fanciful, eccentric), *Lark* (merry adventure), *Mercurial* (changing moods), *Arbitrary* (based on one's discretion; capricious)

More Info: **Capricious** is generally (but not always) meant in a negative way, as acting on impulse is inappropriate in most contexts. *Whimsical* is a near-synonym, although generally used in a positive way, to describe using one's imagination.

cartography

(noun)

car-TAH-grah-fee

Definition: Mapmaking

Usage: The invention of better navigation tools had major effects on **cartography**—the more ships knew precisely where they were sailing, the better the world could be mapped.

More Info: From the French “*carte*,” map.

castigate

(verb)

CASS-tigg-ayt

Definition: Criticize severely; punish in order to correct

Usage: At the grocery store, the mother attracted stares when she **castigated**—rather than merely admonished—her child for throwing a box of instant oatmeal.

Related Words: *Excoriate* (berate severely; wear the skin off)

More Info: **Castigate** shares a root (meaning “pure”) with both “castrate” and the “caste system.” That should make it easy to remember that **castigation** is harsh indeed!

catalyst

(noun)

CAT-uh-list

Definition: Causer of change

Usage: The young manager was a **catalyst** at the stodgy old company—once he introduced employee laptops, telecommuting, and mobile workstations, even the most conventional of employees totally changed the way they worked. / Reaching 500 pounds on the scale was a **catalyst** for Marcus to really change his lifestyle.

More Info: In chemistry, a **catalyst** causes or accelerates a chemical reaction but is not, itself, affected (the opposite is an *inhibitor*). Metaphorically, a **catalyst** is a person or event that causes a reaction.

caustic

(adj)

CAW-stick

Definition: Capable of corroding metal or burning the skin; very critical or sarcastic

Usage: Wait, those chemicals are **caustic**! You need safety gloves and goggles before performing this experiment, or else you risk not only getting your skin burned off, but also some seriously **caustic** remarks from our chemistry teacher.

Related Words: *Acerbic* (sour; harsh or severe), *Acrid* (sharp or biting, pungent), *Astringent* (caustic, biting, severe; a skin cleaning fluid that clears pores), *Excoriate* (to rub the skin off of; to criticize very harshly)

censure

(noun, verb)

SEN-sher

Definition: Strong disapproval or official reprimand (noun); to issue such disapproval or reprimand (verb)

Usage: The Senator was **censured** by the Senate for campaign fund improprieties—in fact, he narrowly avoided being expelled from office.

Related Words: Don't confuse **censure** with *censor* (to delete objectionable portions of a work).

More Info: In 1834, Andrew Jackson became the only U.S. President to ever be **censured** by the Senate. Since 1789, nine Senators have been **censured**; this act of formal disapproval does not remove them from office.

chauvinism

(noun)

SHOW-vin-izm

Also *chauvinist* (noun), *chauvinistic* (adj)

Definition: Fanatical patriotism or blind enthusiasm for military glory; undue or biased devotion to any group, cause, etc.

Usage: He's such a **chauvinist** that he denies that any other nation could be better than ours at anything—he insists our wine is better than France's, our ski slopes are better than Norway's, and even that we grow more rice than China! Absurd.

Related Words: *Bigot* (obstinately prejudiced person), *Xenophobia* (fear of foreigners), *Jingoism* (extreme chauvinism plus warlike foreign policy)

More Info: Don't confuse **chauvinism** with sexism—a “male **chauvinist**” is just one kind. The original **chauvinist** was Nicholas Chauvin, a possibly fictional soldier wounded 17 times while serving in Napoleon's army (he really loved Napoleon).

chronological

(adj)

KRAH-noh-LODGE-ick-ull

Definition: Arranged in or relating to time order

Usage: Joey, I'm afraid you've done the assignment wrong—the point of making a timeline is to put the information in **chronological** order. You've made an alphabetical-order-line instead!

More Info: The root “chron,” for “time,” also occurs in *chronicle* (a historical account in time order), *chronic* (ongoing, usually of an illness), and *anachronism* (thing out of its own time period). *Chronometer* is just a fancy word for clock.

clamor

(verb)

CLAM-er

Definition: Noisy uproar or protest, as from a crowd; a loud, continuous noise

Usage: As soon as a scent of scandal emerged, the press was **clamoring** for details. / The mayor couldn't even make herself heard over the **clamor** of the protestors.

Related Words: *Hubbub* (loud noise, confusion), *Cacophany* (harsh, discordant, or meaningless mixture of sounds), *Din* (loud, confused noise), *Dissonance* (cacophony, harsh, inharmonious sound)

More Info: Don't confuse with *clamber*, which means to climb awkwardly or scramble. **Clamor** comes from an Anglo-French root meaning "cry out," a root that also gives us *claim*.

clinch

(verb)

KLIN-ch

Definition: Make final or settle conclusively; to fasten or hold together

Usage: When their best player was benched, the team fell behind, but once he was allowed back in the game, the team was able to **clinch** the win. / These two pieces have been **clinched** together with a clamp while the glue dries.

More Info: In sports, to **clinch** a championship is to gain so great a lead that it is impossible not to win. To **clinch** a contract is to lock it down. To **clinch** a nail is to flatten the part that sticks out—that is, to finish your work.

coalesce

(verb)

coh-uh-LESS

Definition: Come together, unite; fuse together

Usage: While at first everyone on the team was jockeying for power and recognition, eventually, the group **coalesced** and everyone was happy to share credit for a job well-done. / East and West Germany **coalesced** into a single country in 1990.

Related Words: *Agglomerate* (collect into a mass), *Aggregate* (gather together), *Consolidate* (unite, combine, firm up—you can *consolidate* loans or *consolidate* power)

More Info: A *coalition* is a group that has **coalesced** (at least in theory).

cogent

(adj)

COH-gent

Definition: Very convincing, logical

Usage: Studying logic is an excellent way to improve at formulating **cogent** arguments. / Nurses who work in the Alzheimer’s ward must develop skills for communicating with people who are often not **cogent**.

More Info: **Cogent** comes from two roots meaning “together” and “drive”—a **cogent** argument allows you to “drive” your listener to your conclusion. The resemblance of **cogent** to *cognition*, *cognitive*, *cogitation*, and *excogitate*—words about thinking—is merely a coincidence, but a helpful one.

commensurate

(adj)

kuh-MEN-sher-it

Definition: The same in size, extent, etc., equivalent; proportional

Usage: According to the course catalog, you may take Advanced Japanese following Japanese III or **commensurate** experience with the language.

Related Words: *Tantamount* (equivalent, as in “What he did is *tantamount to* murder.”)

More Info: The Latin “mensuratus” means “measure”—so **commensurate** means “measure together.”

complacent

(adj)

kuhm-PLAY-sent

Definition: Self-satisfied, smug; overly content (and therefore lazy, neglectful, or some other bad quality)

Usage: The coach gave a pep talk: “I know we’ve never won a championship before, but we do have an advantage over the six-time state champions we’re about to play—they have grown **complacent** with their success, and now they just assume they’ll win without having to sweat.”

More Info: Don’t confuse **complacent** with *complaisant*, which means “eager to please.”

complementary

(adj)

cahm-pleh-MENT-uh-ree

Definition: Completing; fitting together well; filling mutual needs

Usage: “That scarf really **complements** your outfit,” said Elle. “Thanks for the *compliment*,” said Danica. / The couple had **complementary** personalities—when Mark got overwhelmed with the details, Lee took care of everything, and when Lee got too introspective, Mark cheered him up with an insatiable zest for life.

More Info: **Complementary** angles (for instance, 35° and 55°) add to 90 degrees.

compliant

(adj)

kuhm-PLY-ent

Definition: Obeying, submissive; following the requirements

Usage: Those who are not **compliant** with the regulations will be put on probation and possibly expelled. / A **compliant** child, he never gave his parents any trouble.

Related Words: *Complaisant* and *Obliging* are words describing people who comply with eagerness.

concede

(verb)

cuhn-SEED

Also *concession* (noun)

Definition: Give in, admit, yield; acknowledge reluctantly; grant or give up (such as giving up land after losing a war)

Usage: The negotiations were pointless, with each side's representatives instructed by their home countries to make no **concessions** whatsoever. / Quebec was a French **concession** to Britain in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. / I suppose I will have to **concede** the argument now that you've looked up evidence on Wikipedia.

More Info: The Latin “cedere” means “yield, go, withdraw” and also gives us *cede* (to yield, especially to give up land after losing a war), *precede*, and *succeed*.

conciliatory

(adj)

kuhn-SILL-ee-uh-tore-ee

Definition: Reconciling, appeasing, attempting to make the peace

Usage: The hotel manager was horrified at how the guest had been treated, and approached him in a **conciliatory** manner, offering him numerous freebies and apologizing repeatedly.

Related Words: *Placate*, *Mollify*, *Appease*, *Pacify* and *Assuage* are all verbs for attempting to calm or make peace.

concur

(verb)

kuhn-KER

Definition: Approve, agree

Usage: John Locke wrote that justice is based on the social contract, and I **concur**—in fact, my latest book is all about contractual justice.

Related Words: *Assent* (approval, agreement)

More Info: **Concur** is related to *concurrent*, meaning “occurring at the same time or acting over the same area; coordinating actions,” as in “We recommend that you take calculus before college physics, but it is possible to take them *concurrently*.”

condone

(verb)

kuhn-DOHN

Definition: Overlook, tolerate, regard as harmless

Usage: While underage drinking is illegal, at many universities, it is tacitly **condoned** by administrations that neglect to enforce anti-drinking policies.

Related Words: *Brook* (suffer or tolerate), *Countenance* (as a noun: face or facial expression; as a verb: approve or tolerate)

More Info: **Condone** shares a root (meaning “give”) with *donate*. To **condone** is to give mild, sometimes tacit, approval.

confer

(verb)

kuhn-FER

Definition: Consult, compare views; bestow or give

Usage: A Ph.D. **confers** upon a person the right to be addressed as “Doctor” as well as eligibility to pursue tenure-track professorship. / Excuse me for a moment to make a call—I can’t buy this car until I **confer** with my spouse.

Related Words: *Vest* can mean “grant an authority or right,” as in “The ownership of 51% of the stock vests her with the right to make decisions for the company.”

connoisseur

(noun)

cah-nuh-SOOR

Definition: Expert, especially in the fine arts; person of educated, refined tastes

Usage: A chocolate **connoisseur**, Mom eschews grocery store brands and will only eat 80% -cocoa-or-higher artisanal chocolate that is less than a week old.

Related Words: *Epicure* (person with discriminating tastes, esp. regarding food and wine)

More Info: **Connoisseur** comes, through French, from the Latin “cognoscere,” meaning “to know,” which also gives us *cognition*.

console

(verb, noun)

cuhn-SOHL (v), *CAHN-sohl* (n)

Definition: Lessen the suffering or grief of (verb); a control panel, or small table or cabinet (noun)

Usage: I was unable to **console** Tina after she fell asleep at the **console** of her airplane and thereby failed her pilot's exam.

Related Words: *Succor* (comfort, provide relief)

More Info: As a verb, the word is pronounced "con-SOLE." As a noun, it's pronounced "CON-sole."

consolidate

(verb)

cuhn-SAH-lid-ayt

Definition: Unite, combine, solidify, make coherent

Usage: She **consolidated** her student loans so she would only have to make one payment per month. / As group leader, Muriel will **consolidate** all of our research into a single report.

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)

constrict

(verb)

kuhn-STRICT

Definition: Squeeze, compress; restrict the freedom of

Usage: The children strongly disliked being gussied up in **constrictive** clothing for a formal wedding.
/ Tourism is now allowed in North Korea, but tourists must stay with official tour groups, and their movements are heavily **constricted**.

Related Words: *Constringe* (cause to shrink)

More Info: A Boa **constrictor** is a snake that squeezes its prey to death.

construe

(verb)

kuhn-STROO

Definition: Interpret or translate

Usage: I don't know how you **construed** my comment as an insult. All I said was, "Wow, I never knew you could sing."

More Info: To *misconstrue* is to misunderstand or misinterpret.

contentious

(adj)

cuhn-TENT-chuss

Also *contend* (verb), *contention* (noun)

Definition: Controversial; prone to causing arguments, especially gratuitous or petty ones

Usage: The death penalty is a **contentious** issue. / My uncle is so **contentious** that every attempt I made to introduce an uncontroversial topic met with failure—he ranted and raved about the weather, trees, math, and my daughter’s enjoyment of oatmeal.

Related Words: *Disputatious* and *quarrelsome* are near-synonyms

More Info: A **contention** is simply a claim, often a thesis or statement that will then be backed up with reasons. To **contend** can be to argue or to vie for a prize, as in the famous quote from *On the Waterfront*: “I coulda been a **contender**.”

contextualize

(verb)

cuhn-TEKS-tchoo-ah-lize

Definition: Place in context, such as by giving the background or circumstances

Usage: Virginia Woolf’s feminism is hard to truly understand unless **contextualized** within the mores of the highly restrained, upper-class English society of her time.

More Info: **Context**, from the Latin, can simply be thought of as “the text that comes with.” The root “text” itself is the same in both “textbook” and “textile”—it means “weave,” just as we would weave either cloth or a story.

conundrum

(noun)

cah-NUHN-drum

Definition: Riddle, the answer to which involves a play on words; any mystery

Usage: A classic **conundrum** is “What’s black and white and red all over?” The answer, of course, is a newspaper. / How to count the entire population accurately—including those without fixed addresses—is a bit of a **conundrum**.

Related Words: *Enigma* (puzzle, mystery), *Paradox* (contradiction, or seeming contradiction that is actually true)

converge

(verb)

kuhn-VERGE

Definition: Move towards one another or towards a point; unite

Usage: I know we're driving to the wedding from different states, but our routes ought to **converge** when each of us hits I-95—maybe we could **converge** at a Cracker Barrel for lunch!

More Info: The antonym of **converge** is *diverge*.

conversant

(adj)

kuhn-VER-sint

Definition: Knowledgeable about or experienced with

Usage: For an opera singer, she is unusually **conversant** in physics—she just explained to everyone the purpose of the Large Hadron Collider.

Related Words: *Abreast* (keeping up with, staying aware of, or remaining equal in progress with)

More Info: **Conversant** does NOT mean talkative—it means having enough knowledge to be able to carry on an intelligent conversation about a topic.

conversely

(adverb)

kuhn-VER-slee

Definition: In an opposite way; on the other hand

Usage: I am not here to argue that lack of education causes poverty. **Conversely**, I am here to argue that poverty causes lack of education.

Related Words: The expression “to the contrary” is sometimes used in the same way as **conversely**.

More Info: In logic, the **converse** of a statement is a simple reversal, from “Bachelors are unmarried men” to “Unmarried men are bachelors.” The **converse** is not always true, such as in the case of “All schnauzers are dogs” and “All dogs are schnauzers.”

convoluted

(adj)

CAHN-vuh-loo-tid

Definition: Twisted; very complicated

Usage: Your argument is so **convoluted** that I'm not even able to understand it enough to start critiquing it. / To get from the hotel room to the pool requires following a **convoluted** path up two staircases and down two others—to get to someplace on the same floor we started on!

Related Words: *Tortuous* (twisting, not direct, deceitful), *Labyrinthine* (tortuous, resembling a labyrinth), *Byzantine* (complex or intricate; relating to the Byzantine Empire and its highly intricate art and architecture style)

copious

(adj)

COH-pee-uss

Definition: Plentiful, bountiful

Usage: Although she took **copious** notes in class, she found that she was missing a big picture that would have tied all the information together. / The fertile, **copious** land yielded a rich harvest.

Related Words: *Profuse* (giving or done in a free, abundant way)

More Info: **Copious** shares a root with *cornucopia*, a “horn of plenty” (the symbol of the American Thanksgiving holiday).

corroborate

(verb)

cuh-ROBB-er-ayt

Definition: Support, add evidence to

Usage: You're telling me you were thirty miles away riding a roller coaster when the school was vandalized? I have a hard time believing that—is there anyone who can **corroborate** your story?

Related Words: *Substantiate* and *verify* also mean to prove true or provide evidence in favor of.

More Info: **Corroborate** shares a Latin root (“robur,” for oak or strength) with **robust**.

cosmopolitan

(adj)

cahz-moh-PAH-lit-uhn

Also *cosmopolite* (noun)

Definition: Belonging to the entire world, at home globally; free from local or national prejudices or attachments

Usage: Trapped in a small town, he dreamed of a more **cosmopolitan** existence filled with world travel, exotic cuisine, and scintillating parties where he would meet famous authors and other **cosmopolites**.

Related Words: *Urbane* (elegant, sophisticated, suave; suitable to social life in major cities)

More Info: The magazine *Cosmopolitan* was originally named to evoke the image of a worldly, sophisticated woman. A “cosmopolitan” is also a cocktail popularized by the show *Sex and the City*. Most New Yorkers do not think that drinking “cosmos” is **cosmopolitan**.

countenance

(noun, verb)

COUNT-eh-nenss

Definition: Facial expression or face (noun); approve or tolerate (verb)

Usage: Her **countenance** said it all—the look on her face was pure terror. / I saw you cheating off my paper, and I can't **countenance** cheating—either you turn yourself in or I'll report you.

Related Words: *Brook* (suffer or tolerate), *Condone* (overlook or tacitly approve)

More Info: **Countenance** shares a root with *continence*, meaning “self control.” The use of **countenance** to mean “approve or tolerate” makes sense when you think about a similar expression: “I cannot *look you in the face* after what you did.” (We would usually say “I cannot face you” when the *speaker* is the guilty party).

counterintuitive

(adj)

count-er-in-TOO-it-iv

Definition: Against what one would intuitively expect

Usage: Although it seems **counterintuitive**, for some extreme dieters, eating more can actually help them to lose weight, since the body is reassured that it is not facing a period of prolonged starvation.

Related Words: *Paradoxical* (contradictory, or seemingly contradictory but actually true)

counterpoint

(noun)

COUNT-er-point

Definition: Contrasting item, opposite; a complement; the use of contrast or interplay in a work of art

Usage: The play's lighthearted, witty narrator provides a welcome **counterpoint** to the seriousness and grief expressed by the other characters. / The hot peppers work in **counterpoint** to an otherwise sweet dish.

Related Words: *Foil* (a character in a drama, or any entity, that contrasts with another, as in "Fortinbras is a foil to Hamlet in that each wishes to avenge his father's death, but Fortinbras acts decisively, which only serves to point out Hamlet's weakness.")

More Info: The humor publication *The Onion* is known for its amusing "Point/Counterpoint" articles in which two speakers disagree on a topic.

counterproductive

(adj)

count-er-proh-DUCK-tiv

Definition: Defeating the purpose; preventing the intended goal

Usage: The candidate’s attempt to win swing votes in Ohio was actually **counterproductive**—following his speech in Toledo, his poll numbers actually went *down* 5%.

Related Words: *Feckless* (ineffectual), *Bootless* (unsuccessful), *Inimical* (unfavorable, harmful, as in “Drinking unclean water is inimical to health.”)

covert

(adj)

COH-vert

Definition: Secret, veiled, undercover

Usage: The soldier trained to be part of **covert** operations, moving silently and remaining out of the enemy's sight.

Related Words: *Clandestine*, *Surreptitious*, and *Furtive* all mean secret, undercover.

crafty

(adj)

CRAFF-tee

Definition: Cunning, skillful in deception or underhanded schemes

Usage: A **crafty** play in basketball is the “head-fake”—moving the head in one direction slightly prior to running in the other direction, to try to get a tiny head start on a disoriented pursuer.

Related Words: *Cunning*, *Guileful*, and *Wily* are synonyms.

More Info: *Crafty* is connected to “arts and crafts” in the sense of being skilled. Of course, if you somehow used yarn to trick people, you’d be doubly **crafty**.

craven

(adj)

CRAY-ven

Definition: Very cowardly, lacking courage

Usage: The nervous soldier feared he would turn **craven** in his first firefight, but he actually acted quite bravely.

Related Words: *Timorous* (timid, fearful), *Pusillanimous* (cowardly), *Dastardly* (cowardly in a treacherous, sneaky way)

credibility

(noun)

credd-ih-BILL-it-ee

Definition: Believability, trustworthiness

Usage: Many famous “experts” with “Dr.” before their names are not medical doctors at all. Any television “doctor” who turns out to have a Ph.D. in botany, for instance, ought to suffer a serious drop in **credibility**.

More Info: The root “cred,” meaning “believe” also gives us *credit*, *creed*, *credo*, *incredulous*, *discredit*, and *accreditation*. Don’t confuse **credible** with *credulous*, meaning gullible. Finally, while we often use *incredible* to mean “great,” it really means “not believable.”

credulous

(adj)

CREDD-joo-luss

Definition: Gullible; prone to believing or trusting too easily or without enough evidence

Usage: “Did you know you can wash your ears by turning your head on its side in the shower and letting the water run straight through your head?” said the father to his five-year-old daughter. “I’ll try that!” said the **credulous** little girl.

More Info: The opposite of **credulous** is *incredulous*, which means skeptical. The root “cred,” meaning “believe” also gives us *credit*, *creed*, *credo*, *discredit*, and *accreditation*.

crescendo

(noun)

creh-SHEN-doh

Definition: Steady increase in force, intensity, or the loudness of a musical passage; a climactic moment or peak

Usage: Mrs. Higgins did love the symphony, but she was also coming down with a migraine—by the time the music reached its towering **crescendo**, her head was pounding. / The administration tried to ignore the protest, but finally had to address the issue when the demonstration reached a **crescendo**.

Related Words: *Ascension* (rising to the top), *Culminate* (reach a high point or final stage), *Surge* (strong forward movement, swelling wave)

More Info: **Crescendo** is originally a musical term; its antonym is *decrescendo*, although that word is less often used metaphorically.

culminate

(verb)

CULL-minn-ayt

Also *culmination* (noun)

Definition: Reach the highest point or final stage

Usage: A Ph.D. program generally **culminates** in a written dissertation and its defense to a committee.

Related Words: *Acme*, *Summit*, *Pinnacle*, and *Apex* are all words for a high point or peak.

Denouement means conclusion or ending, such as of a literary work, esp. one that “wraps up all the loose ends.”

cynical

(adj)

SIN-ick-ull

Definition: Thinking the worst of others' motivations; bitterly pessimistic

Usage: Shilpa was so **cynical** that even when her friends threw her a surprise party, she figured that they only did it so they wouldn't feel so guilty about all the mean things they must be saying behind her back.

Related Words: *Misanthrope* (hater of humankind)

More Info: The original Cynics were ancient Greek philosophers who held that self-control was the only virtue. They are rumored to have been quite contemptuous towards their philosophical opponents.

daunt

(verb)

DAWNT

Also *undaunted*, *dauntless* (adj)

Definition: Discourage, dishearten, lessen the courage of

Usage: Amazingly **undaunted** after his accident, Devon vowed to complete a marathon in his wheelchair. Not even a dented rim on mile 19 could **daunt** him—he **dauntlessly** completed the race anyway.

Related Words: *Cow* (intimidate, destroy the courage of)

More Info: **Daunt** shares a root with *domesticate*, “to tame.”

debase

(verb)

deh-BASE

Also *debased* (adj)

Definition: Degrade; lower in quality, value, rank, etc.; lower in moral quality

Usage: You have **debased** yourself by accepting bribes. / Members of the mainstream church argued that the fringe sect was practicing a **debased** version of the religion, twisting around its precepts and missing the point. / I can tell from the weight that this isn't pure gold, but rather some **debased** mixed metal.

Related Words: *Base* (morally low, of little value, crude or fake), *Adulterate* (make impure), *Debauch* (corrupt morally), *Vitiate* (ruin, make faulty, corrupt)

More Info: To “debase a currency” is to lower its value, such as by a government wishing to print more money for its own ends, thereby lowering the value of the money held by citizens.

debunk

(verb)

deh-BUNK

Definition: Expose, ridicule, or disprove false or exaggerated claims

Usage: Galileo spent his last years under house arrest for **debunking** the widely held idea that the Sun revolved around the Earth. / The show MythBusters **debunks** pseudoscientific claims.

More Info: **Debunk** is an Americanism, deriving from *bunkum*, an old-fashioned word for nonsense or meaningless talk.

decorous

(adj)

DECK-er-uss

Also *decorum* (noun)

Definition: Behaving with propriety and good taste; polite

Usage: Miss Etiquette writes an advice column about **decorum**. One writer asked, “What’s the most **decorous** way to tell guests exactly what I want for my wedding?” Miss Etiquette replied, “Young lady, there is no **decorous** way to solicit gifts, and even asking that question is entirely **indecorous** of you.”

Related Words: *Genteel* (aristocratic, elegant), *Seemly* (proper or attractive)

More Info: **Decorous** shares a root (meaning “beauty, grace”) with *decorate* and *decor* (interior furnishings).

deem

(verb)

DEEM

Definition: Judge; consider

Usage: “You can take the black belt exam when I **deem** you ready, and not a moment before,” said the karate instructor.

Related Words: *Assay* (examine, analyze, judge)

More Info: **Deem**, which shares an Old English root with *doom*, originally meant “to pronounce judgment”—in the 17th century, some judges were called “deemsters.”

deface

(verb)

deh-FACE

Definition: Vandalize, mar the appearance of

Usage: Ernest was charged with three counts of vandalism after being caught **defacing** a row of townhouses with spraypaint.

Related Words: *Depredate* (plunder, lay waste to), *Efface* (wipe out, erase)

More Info: To **deface** can also be “to mark a check or monetary instrument” in order to make it invalid (“She **defaced** the check so it couldn’t be cashed.”)

defamatory

(adj)

deh-FAM-uh-tore-ee

Also *defame* (verb)

Definition: Slanderous, injurious to someone's reputation

Usage: One interesting issue in free speech law is **defamation**. / The political blogs are filled with **defamatory** language; it seems anyone with a computer and an opinion can destroy a politician's reputation these days.

Related Words: *Slander* and *Traduce* also mean "to speak maliciously and falsely of." *Aspersions* are damaging remarks or defamatory speech.

Memory Trick: Someone who made up vicious lies about Lady Gaga's hit album would have **defamed** "The Fame."

default

(noun, verb)

DEE-fault (n), diff-FAULT (v)

Definition: Failure to act, neglect (noun); fail to fulfill an obligation, especially a financial one (verb)

Usage: The government is cracking down on for-profit colleges where a large percentage of the graduates cannot use their degrees to gain employment and end up **defaulting** on their student loans. / You must elect a new health plan by December 31st or by **default** you will be re-enrolled in the plan you selected last year.

More Info: In law, a “judgment by **default**” is when someone loses a case for failing to show up in court.

deference

(noun)

DEFF-er-enss

Also *defer* (verb)

Definition: Respectful submission; yielding to the authority or opinion of another

Usage: In many cultures, young people are expected to show **deference** to older people at all times. / I'm not an expert in databases—I'll **defer** to our programmers on that decision. / Ingrid **deferred** her college admissions for a year so she could travel the world.

deflect

(verb)

diff-FLECT

Definition: Cause to curve; turn aside, esp. from a straight course; avoid

Usage: The purpose of a shield is to **deflect** arrows or bullets from an enemy./ Every time he was asked a difficult question, Senator Warrington **deflected** by changing the topic, saying he'd answer later, or even—insincerely, it seemed—calling for a moment of prayer.

Related Words: *Avert* (prevent; turn away or aside, as in “The makeshift dam narrowly *averted* disaster” or “*Avert* your eyes—I’m changing my clothes!”)

deleterious

(adj)

dell-uh-TEER-ee-uss

Definition: Harmful, unhealthful

Usage: The Resident Assistant told the first-year students, “I think you will find not only that drugs are illegal and will result in expulsion, but also that drug abuse will have a **deleterious** effect on anyone’s grades.”

Related Words: *Pernicious* (very harmful, fatal), *Insalutary* or *Insalubrious* (unhealthful)

More Info: **Deleterious** shares a root (“destroy”) with *delete*.

delineate

(verb)

deh-LINN-ee-ayt

Definition: Mark the outline of; sketch; describe in detail

Usage: I do need the cash, but I'm not signing up for this psychological experiment unless you **delineate** what's going to happen.

Related Words: *Adumbrate* (give a rough outline of)

More Info: **Delineate**, of course, shares a root with *linear*.

denigrate

(verb)

DEN-igg-rayt

Definition: Belittle, attack the reputation of

Usage: Many jokes in the *Meet the Parents* trilogy come from Robert De Niro's character **denigrating** Ben Stiller's character for being a male nurse.

Related Words: *Disparage* is a synonym.

More Info: **Denigrate** comes from a Latin root meaning "to blacken."

denote

(verb)

deh-NOTE

Also *denotation* (noun)

Definition: Be a name or symbol for

Usage: The company's brand **denotes** quality; the marketing team has done a fantastic job of associating the company's image with fine service. / There's nothing in the **denotation** of "crotchety" (grumpy, having strong and irrational preferences) that indicates any particular group of people, but due to the expression "crotchety old man," the word connotes, for many people, an image of an especially unpleasant male senior citizen.

More Info: A **denotation** is the literal meaning of a word; a *connotation* is the feeling that accompanies that word. For instance, many special color words, such as "lilac" or "cerulean" have a positive *connotation*.

deride

(verb)

deh-RIDE

Definition: Mock, scoff at, laugh at contemptuously

Usage: The manager really thought that **deriding** his employees as “stupid” or “lazy” would motivate them to work harder; instead, it motivated them to constantly hide his office supplies as an act of revenge.

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

More Info: *Deride* contains the Latin root “ridere” for “laughter,” which also appears in *risible*, meaning “laughable.”

derivative

(adj)

deh-RIV-uh-tiv

Definition: Derived from something else; not original

Usage: The singer's first album was a disappointment, **derivative** of several hit albums from the previous year, as though a management team had simply picked out the elements from other popular songs that they thought would make the most money.

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

More Info: In finance, a **derivative** is a contract the value of which is *derived* from the value of underlying stocks, bonds, etc.

desiccate

(verb)

DESS-ick-ayt

Also *desiccated* (adj)

Definition: Thoroughly dried up, dehydrated

Usage: The key to maintaining odor-free shoes is to **desiccate** the insole by placing a drying agent, such as a small pouch of baking soda, inside the shoe between wears. / Beef jerky is a **desiccated** meat product.

Related Words: *Arid* means very dry, like a desert.

More Info: Also from the Latin “siccare” (dry), a *siccative* is a drying agent. The same root appears in the Spanish word for dry (*seco*) and in the name of the Italian dry sparkling wine *prosecco*.

detached

(adj)

dee-TATCH-t

Definition: Impartial, disinterested; unconcerned, distant, aloof

Usage: He found her **detached** demeanor inappropriate for a funeral. It's fine to politely ask how someone died, but it's not appropriate to coldly question a relative on the medical history of the deceased. / The divorce proceeding was full of anger and recriminations, but the judge was able to make a **detached** decision.

Related Words: *Standoffish* (cold, unfriendly)

More Info: A **detached** house is one that does not have a wall in common with another building.

deterrent

(noun)

dee-TER-int

Definition: Something that restrains or discourages

Usage: Some argue that the death penalty is a **deterrent** to crime—that is, the point is not just to punish the guilty, but to frighten other prospective criminals.

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

More Info: As a military policy, **deterrence** is building military strength or ability to retaliate (especially by stockpiling nuclear weapons, as in the Cold War) sufficient to **deter** enemies from attacking.

diatribe

(noun)

DIE-uh-TRIBE

Definition: Bitter, abusive attack or criticism; rant

Usage: I'd stay out of the living room for awhile—Grandpa's on another one of his **diatribes** about how it's un-American to call a large coffee a "venti." You can hear him ranting from here!

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

didactic

(adj)

die-DACK-tick

Definition: Intended to instruct; teaching, or teaching a moral lesson

Usage: She might have been Teacher of the Year at work, but at home, her husband wished she would turn off her **didactic** personality. “Honey,” he said, “I really don’t need you to use everything as a learning opportunity.” / The child was disappointed when the storybook turned **didactic** in the end, with the teddy bears—and the reader—being admonished never to lie.

Related Words: *Pedagogical* (pertaining to teaching), *Pedantic* (showy about learning, excessively concerned with details, as in “He’s so pedantic he corrects his friends’ grammar.”)

More Info: **Didactic** can be positive or negative. Any teacher is **didactic**, but a person who is lecturing or moralizing in an unwanted manner can also be called **didactic**.

digress

(verb)

die-GRESS

Also *digression* (noun)

Definition: Go off-topic when speaking or writing

Usage: Grandpa **digressed** quite a bit while you were in the kitchen—he was telling us an old war story, but somehow now he’s ranting about how nobody celebrates Arbor Day anymore. That **digression** could take awhile.

Related Words: *Divagate* is a synonym. *Diffuse* as an adjective can mean off-topic (a *diffuse* speech).

din

(noun)

DIN

Definition: Loud, confused noise, esp. for a long period of time

Usage: This hotel was described as “near all the hot spots,” but I didn’t realize that I wouldn’t be able to sleep due to the all-night **din** from partygoers.

Related Words: *Cacophony* (harsh, discordant, or meaningless mixture of sounds), *Dissonance* (harsh, inharmonious sound), *Clamor* (noisy uproar, as from a crowd)

disabuse

(verb)

diss-ah-BYOOZ

Definition: Free someone from a mistake in thinking

Usage: Do you really believe that toilets flush one way in the Northern hemisphere and another way in the Southern? Any physicist would be happy to **disabuse** you of that silly notion.

More Info: **Disabuse** is almost always used in the pattern “to **disabuse** (person) of (idea).”

Memory Trick: When someone **disabuses** you of a belief, they both “dis” and “abuse” your false ideas.

discerning

(adj)

diss-ER-ning

Definition: Having good judgment or insight; able to distinguish mentally

Usage: In an age in which we are bombarded with advertising, it's important to be a **discerning** consumer. For instance, the term "all natural" is not federally regulated and doesn't have to mean anything at all, so a smart shopper still reads ingredients.

Related Words: *Keen*, *Perceptive*, and *Perspicacious* are all related to having good judgment or perception. *Descry* means to discover or see by looking carefully.

discredit

(adj)

diss-CREH-dit

Definition: Injure the reputation of, destroy credibility of or confidence in

Usage: Congresswoman Huffman’s opponent tried to use her friendship with a certain radical extremist to **discredit** her, even though the Congresswoman hadn’t seen this so-called “extremist” since sixth grade summer camp.

Related Words: *Slander*, *Traduce*, and *Defame* all mean “to speak maliciously and falsely of.” Note, however, that *slander* is always wrong (slandorous statements are, by definition, lies), whereas it is possible (and sometimes for the greater good) to **discredit** someone by exposing the truth about that person—for instance, a lying political candidate, or a fake “expert” giving damaging advice.

More Info: The root “cred” means “belief” and also appears in *credit*, *credible*, *creed*, *credo*, *credulous*, *incredulous*, and *accreditation*.

discrepancy

(noun)

diss-CREH-pen-see

Also *discrepant* (adj)

Definition: Difference or inconsistency

Usage: When there is a **discrepancy** between a store's receipts and the amount of money in the register, the cashier's behavior is generally called into question.

Related Words: *Incongruity* (standing out), *Discord* or *Discordance* (harshness or inharmoniousness; disagreement)

More Info: Unlike a mere *incongruity*, which could be as innocent as one guy with a mohawk at an otherwise straight-laced gathering, a **discrepancy** usually indicates that someone has done something wrong. A **discrepancy** in your medical records means someone has made a mistake; a **discrepancy** in your story means you're lying.

discriminating

(adj)

diss-CRIM-in-ay-ting

Definition: Judicious, discerning, having good judgment or insight

Usage: He is a man of **discriminating** tastes—all his suits are handmade in Italy, and I once saw him send back an entree when he complained that black truffle oil had been substituted for white. The chef was astounded. / You can tell a real Prada bag by the **discriminating** mark on the inside.

More Info: Many people automatically think of **discriminating** as bad, because they are thinking of racial discrimination. However, **discriminating** is simply telling things apart and can be an important skill—it is important to **discriminate** legitimate colleges from fraudulent diploma mills, for instance.

disingenuous

(adj)

diss-in-JEN-yoo-uss

Definition: Insincere, not genuine

Usage: Christine used the fact that her mother spoke limited English as an opportunity to be **disingenuous**. When her mother asked, “Will there be boys at this sleepover?” she replied “There won’t not be boys there!”

Related Words: *Dissembling* (misleading, concealing the truth, acting hypocritically), *Prevaricating* (misleading or lying)

More Info: **Disingenuous** appropriately describes misleading behavior that isn’t quite lying, like when you say “Let’s do the dishes!” when you really mean “Why don’t *you* do the dishes?” The opposite of **disingenuous** is *ingenuous*, or genuine.

disinterested

(adj)

diss-INT-uh-rest-id

Definition: Unbiased, impartial; not interested

Usage: Let's settle this argument once and for all! We'll get a **disinterested** observer to judge who can sing the highest note!

Related Words: *Dispassionate* (unbiased, not having a selfish or personal motivation), *Nonpartisan* (impartial, not controlled by a political party)

More Info: **Disinterested** and *uninterested* have a confusing history. Some insist that **disinterested** only means “unbiased” and *uninterested* only means “not interested, apathetic.” However, throughout history, both words have been used to denote both meanings, so you'll have to be guided by context in interpreting these words.

disjointed

(adj)

diss-JOIN-tid

Definition: Disconnected, not coherent, jerky; having the joints separated

Usage: The novel seemed **disjointed**, as though whole chunks of it were missing, or as though the author had tried to stitch together drafts of several different stories. / To begin the recipe, you'll need a whole chicken that has been **disjointed**.

More Info: In math, **disjointed** means having no common elements, as in “The set of all odd numbers and the set of all even numbers are **disjointed**.”

dismiss

(verb)

diss-MISS

Definition: Allow to disperse or leave; fire from a job; put aside or reject, especially after only a brief consideration

Usage: “Before I **dismiss** class,” said the teacher, “I want to remind you of the importance of **dismissing** biases in your research by ruling out or adjusting for factors other than the variable you are testing that may have led to your results.”

Related Words: *Discount* as a verb can mean “disregard, ignore, or downgrade so as to compensate for exaggeration.”

More Info: To **dismiss** an idea is generally to choose to ignore it without having considered it seriously.

dispassionate

(adj)

diss-PASH-shun-it

Definition: Unbiased, not having a selfish or personal motivation; calm, lacking emotion

Usage: The defendant tearfully described how much her young child needed her at home, but the judge, who **dispassionately** sentenced her to ten years for selling drugs, was unmoved.

Related Words: *Disinterested* (unbiased, impartial; not interested), *Nonpartisan* (impartial, not controlled by a political party)

More Info: **Dispassionate** could be positive or negative, depending on the context—a judge should be **dispassionate**, but if someone **dispassionately** broke up with you, you’d probably think that was pretty cold.

dispatch

(noun, verb)

DISS-patch (n), *diss-PATCH* (v)

Definition: Speed, promptness; send off or deal with in a speedy way

Usage: So, you want to be a bike messenger? I need messengers who approach every delivery with alacrity, care, and **dispatch**—if the customers wanted their packages to arrive slowly, they'd use the post office. / Acting with all possible **dispatch**, emergency services **dispatched** a rescue squad to the scene.

Related Words: *Expediency* (promoting a goal; advantageous, sometimes at the expense of morals or justice)

More Info: A **dispatch** can also be a report from a journalist or something delivered by messenger, or the act of sending a messenger. To **dispatch** a person can also mean to execute him or her—presumably, in a speedy manner.

disperse

(verb)

diss-PERSS

Definition: Scatter, spread widely, cause to vanish

Usage: Because the demonstrators didn't have a permit, the police showed up with megaphones, demanding loudly that the crowd **disperse**. / Get the hose so I can **disperse** the dirt on our driveway.

Related Words: *Disseminate* (scatter, spread about, broadcast), *Diffuse* (spread widely, disseminate; dispersed; or wordy and going off-topic)

More Info: Use **disperse** for something that spreads out and disappears (the crowd dispersed and went their separate ways); use *disseminate* for something that spreads out and remains significant (writers want to *disseminate* their ideas; *disseminating* seeds grows new plants).

disposition

(noun)

diss-puh-ZISH-un

Also *disposed* (adj)

Definition: A person's general or natural mood; tendency

Usage: She was possessed of a kind and helpful **disposition**—she wouldn't just help you move, she'd bring home-baked muffins to the affair. / I could really use some help in the kitchen, if you are so **disposed**.

Related Words: *Penchant* and *Predilection* mean “tendency, preference” (a *penchant* for fast cars, a *predilection* to get angry easily).

More Info: **Disposed** and **disposition** are slightly old-fashioned words and occur in old-fashioned expressions: “possessed of a _____ **disposition**” and “so **disposed**” (meaning “inclined towards the kind of activities I just mentioned”).

disquieting

(adj)

diss-QUIET-ing

Also *disquiet* (noun or verb)

Definition: Disturbing, causing anxiety

Usage: Mr. Peters' lack of emotion at his wife's death was **disquieting**—so much so, in fact, that even his own family began to suspect he'd had something to do with it. / He was deeply **disquieted** by the racism he encountered in his new neighborhood.

Related Words: *Discomfiting* (disconcerting, confusing, frustrating)

More Info: Think of **disquiet** not as the opposite of *quiet*, but more as an opposite to *quiescent*, meaning peaceful and calm.

disseminate

(verb)

diss-EM-in-ayt

Definition: Scatter, spread about, broadcast

Usage: Many plants use attractive fruits to **disseminate** their seeds—animals eat the fruit and excrete the seeds, allowing new plants to grow. / In the 1760s, revolutionary ideas were **disseminated** via pamphlets such as Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense.”

Related Words: *Disperse* (scatter, spread widely, cause to vanish), *Diffuse* (spread widely, disseminate; dispersed; or wordy and going off-topic)

More Info: **Disseminate** contains the Latin root for “seed.” Use **disperse** for something that spreads out and disappears (the crowd dispersed); use *disseminate* for something that spreads out and remains significant (writers *disseminate* ideas; *disseminating* seeds grows new plants).

dissent

(verb, noun)

diss-ENT

Definition: Disagree or take an opposing view, esp. in relation to a formal body such as a government, political party, or church; such a view

Usage: Judge Antonin Scalia cast the only **dissenting** vote, explaining in his written decision why he thought all the other justices had it wrong. / Not every country has a right to free speech (and thus to **dissent**), although nations that throw **dissenters** in jail are condemned by the international community at large.

Related Words: *Gainsay* (deny, refute, oppose), *Sedition* (incitement of dissent against a government; promoting rebellion by speech or writing)

More Info: The variant **dissidence** tends to be a strong, longstanding, determined practice of **dissenting**.

dissonance

(noun)

DISS-uh-nenss

Definition: Harsh, inharmonious sound; cacophony; disagreement

Usage: After allowing her sixth-grader's heavy metal band to practice in her living room, Mrs. Rosen decided she'd better get used to **dissonance**.

Related Words: *Din* (loud, confused noise), *Clamor* (noisy uproar, as from a crowd), *Hubbub* (loud noise, confusion)

More Info: An opposite to **dissonance** is *assonance*, primarily a poetry term, meaning sound resemblance or vowel rhyme. *Harmony* or *euphony*, meaning “good sound,” are more general antonyms.

distill

(verb)

diss-TILL

Definition: Purify; extract the essential elements of

Usage: While traveling in certain countries, it is important to only drink **distilled** water so you don't get sick. / Bob, it's not necessary to read your entire Powerpoint presentation to us—can you just **distill** it down to the main point?

Related Words: *Gist* and *Pith* can both be used to mean “essence, main idea,” as in, “This summary really **distills** the idea down to its *pith*, allowing me to get the *gist* without reading the whole book.”

More Info: Water is **distilled** through a process of vaporization and then condensation (when the water evaporates, impurities are left behind).

diverge

(verb)

die-VERGE

Also *divergent* (adj)

Definition: Differ, deviate; branch off or turn aside, as from a path

Usage: Go five miles until the old post office, then the road **diverges**—you want the branch that winds off to the left. / The high school sweethearts found that their paths **diverged** when they were accepted to different colleges.

Related Words: *Disparate* (divergent, different)

More Info: The antonym of **diverge** is *converge*.

divest

(verb)

die-VEST

Definition: Deprive or strip of a rank, title, etc., or of clothing or gear; to sell off holdings (opposite of *invest*)

Usage: When she found out that the most profitable stock in her portfolio was that of a company that tested products on animals, she immediately **divested** by telling her broker to sell the stock. / Once his deception was exposed, he was **divested** of his position on the Board.

Related Words: *Arrogate* (claim or take presumptuously or without right), *Appropriate* (as a verb, to set aside or authorize for a particular purpose; take for one's own use)

divine

(verb)

div-VINE

Definition: Discover through divination or supernatural means; perceive by insight

Usage: I've been poring over these quarterly reports all day, trying to **divine** whether I should buy or sell this stock.

Related Words: *Ascertain* (find out with certainty), *Perspicacity* (acuteness of perception)

More Info: Of course, **divine** is most commonly an adjective, meanly “of or like a god; heavenly.” I read online reviews of the spa to **divine** whether it would really be as **divine** an experience was advertised.

document

(verb)

DOCK-yoo-ment

Definition: Support with evidence, cite sources in a detailed way, create documentary evidence of

Usage: Journalists embedded with military units are able to **document** a war as it happens. / It's hard to deny her conclusion when her book is so well **documented**—she cites a relevant scientific study on practically every page.

Related Words: *Corroborate, substantiate* and *verify* can all mean to prove true or provide evidence in favor of.

More Info: Of course, **document** can also be a noun (a factual printed item); this card focuses on the less common definition.

dogma

(noun)

DOG-muh

Also *dogmatic* (adj)

Definition: A system of principles laid down by an authority; established belief

Usage: It is part of the **dogma** of modern education that there are multiple intelligences that are equally valuable; try to suggest that some people just aren't that smart, and you'll find yourself a pariah. / **Dogmatic** people will never change their minds, even in the face of evidence.

Related Words: *Doctrinaire* (person who applies doctrine in an impractical or close-minded way)

More Info: **Dogmatic** is always meant in a negative way. However, **dogma** can be meant in a neutral or positive way as well; when people refer to their church's **dogma**, they generally mean that they believe those tenets on the church's authority.

dormant

(adj)

DOR-muhnt

Definition: Asleep, inactive, on a break

Usage: Some famous writers' skills have lain **dormant** until quite late in life; Laura Ingalls Wilder didn't publish *Little House on the Prairie* until she was 65.

Related Words: *Abeyance* (temporary suspension, inactivity), *Hiatus* (break or gap in an activity), *Deferment* or *Deferral* (postponement)

More Info: If you speak Spanish or French, **dormant** will certainly remind you of the verb *dormir*, to sleep.

dubious

(adj)

DOO-bee-uss

Definition: Doubtful, questionable, suspect

Usage: This applicant’s resume is filled with **dubious** qualifications—this is a marketing position, and this resume is mostly about whitewater rafting.

Related Words: *Apocryphal* (of questionable authenticity, false), *Ersatz* (artificial, synthetic, serving as a substitute), *Faux* (fake, imitation, as in “faux fur”), *Specious* (pleasing to the eye but deceptive)

More Info: **Dubious** is related to the Latin word for “two,” perhaps in the sense of there being two explanations for something—the one presented, and the true one being hidden.

e.g.

(abbreviation for Latin “exempli gratia”)

ee-gee

Definition: For example, such as

Usage: He was positively traumatized by the romantic comedies his girlfriend made him watch (e.g., *He's Just Not That Into You*).

Related Words: *i.e.* is an abbreviation of Latin “id est,” or “that is” and means “that is to say, in other words,” as in “He finally nailed the lutz—i.e., a toepick-assisted figure skating jump with an entrance from the back outside edge.”

More Info: Use **e.g.** to introduce examples and *i.e.* to add a definition or clarification.

eccentric

(adj)

eck-SENT-ric

Definition: Peculiar, odd, deviating from the norm esp. in a whimsical way

Usage: The old woman was harmless but **eccentric**—not many senior citizens wear a train conductor's uniform and carry a boom box. / The **eccentricity** of a planet's orbit is the amount by which it deviates from a perfect circle; in general, comets are far more **eccentric** than known planets.

Related Words: *Idiosyncrasy* (a peculiarity specific to a particular person)

More Info: Some have observed that only the rich are called **eccentric**; regular people are just weird.

eclectic

(adj)

ick-CLECK-tick

Definition: Selecting the best of everything or from many diverse sources

Usage: **Eclectic** taste is helpful in being a DJ—crowds love to hear the latest hip-hop mixed with ‘80s classics and other unexpected genres of music. / The restaurant features an **eclectic** menu—if you don’t like artisanal pasta or steak frites, try the chow mein!

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* means “made up of diverse elements.” *Hodgepodge*, *Medley*, *Farrago*, *Potpourri*, *Pastiche* and *Olio* are all words for mixtures of diverse things.

More Info: The original **Eclectics** were Greek philosophers who chose what they thought were the best of other philosophers’ doctrines.

eclipse

(noun, verb)

ick-CLIPS

Definition: The obscuring of one thing by another, such as the sun by the moon or a person by a more famous or talented person (noun); to obscure, darken, make less important (verb)

Usage: During a solar **eclipse**, the moon **eclipses** the Sun. / Billy Ray Cyrus, who had a hit song, “Achy Breaky Heart,” in the ‘90s, has long since found his fame **eclipsed** by that of his daughter, Miley.

Related Words: *Occult* can mean “supernatural, mysterious, arcane,” but as a verb, can also mean “to hide from view or become hidden,” as in “The Pleiades, existing in deep sky, can be *occulted* by the moon when everything lines up just right” or “Other former members of NSYNC have felt their careers *occulted* (or **eclipsed**) by the stunning success of Justin Timberlake.”

efficacy

(noun)

EFF-ih-cuh-see

Definition: The quality of being able to produce the intended effect

Usage: Extensive trials will be necessary to determine whether the drug's **efficacy** outweighs the side effects. / I am having trouble cutting my steak with this butter knife; I'm going to ask the waiter for a more **efficacious** implement.

More Info: Don't confuse **efficacy** with *efficiency*. Something **efficacious** gets the job done; something *efficient* gets the job done without wasting time or effort. **Efficacy** is a variant on **efficacy** and is identical in meaning.

egalitarian

(adj)

ee-gal-it-TAIR-ee-uhn

Definition: Related to belief in the equality of all people, esp. in political, economic, or social spheres

Usage: After moving to a more liberal part of the country, the couple was pleased to have neighbors who shared their views of **egalitarian** marriage—for instance, men and women could be found in equal proportions downshifting to part-time work to make time for childcare.

More Info: **Egalitarian**, of course, contains a root for “equal,” but comes into English through French, which explains the spelling (*égal* is French for “equal”).

egregious

(adj)

igg-GREE-juss

Definition: Extraordinarily or conspicuously bad; glaring

Usage: Your conduct is an **egregious** violation of our Honor Code—not only did you steal your roommate’s paper off his computer and turn it in as your own, you also sold his work to a plagiarism website so other cheaters could purchase it!

Related Words: *Flagrant* (shamelessly bad or offensive, obvious, notorious)

More Info: **Egregious** shares a root with *gregarious* (sociable)—“greg” comes from a word for “herd, flock.” Think of **egregious** in the sense of standing out from the herd (in a bad way).

elated

(adj)

ee-LAY-tid

Definition: Very happy, in high spirits

Usage: I am **elated** that you flew my twin brother in from Australia to surprise me at my birthday party!

Related Words: *Ebullient* (very enthusiastic, lively, excited), *Blithe* (joyous, merry; excessively carefree), *Exultant* (joyful, celebratory)

elevate

(verb)

ELL-iv-ayt

Definition: 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

Usage: After a year getting coffee and making copies, he hoped to be promoted to a more **elevated** position suitable for a law school graduate. / Our goal here at Morality Publishing is not just to sell books, but to **elevate** our readers.

Related Words: *Lofty* (in a high position, esp. in character, spirit, or rank), *Edify* (uplift, enlighten, instruct or improve in a spiritual or moral way)

More Info: **Elevate** shares the root “lev” (coming from a word meaning “to raise” or “light in weight”) with *levitate*, *lever*, and *levity*, meaning “lightness of personality or behavior, lack of seriousness.”

elicit

(verb)

ee-LISS-it

Definition: Call forth, bring out, evoke

Usage: The touchdown **elicited** wild cheer from the crowd. / While the death of Ellen's elderly cat was indeed sad, Ellen's constant, mournful looks whenever anyone mentioned any animal at all were nothing but a play to **elicit** sympathy.

Related Words: *Educe* means "bring out, esp. something that has been dormant," as in "The speech therapist finally *educed* (or **elicited**) a complete sentence from a boy who had been previously labeled 'non-verbal.'"

More Info: Don't confuse with *illicit*, which is an adjective meaning "illegal."

eloquent

(adj)

ELL-oh-kwent

Definition: Marked by forceful, fluid, apt speech; expressive, emotionally moving

Usage: Wow, he's such an **eloquent** speaker, he could sell snow to Antarticans! / When Mom suggested that everyone might enjoy a museum instead of the beach, she was met with the children's **eloquent** looks of disgust.

Related Words: *Rhetorical* and *oratorical* are words related to the art of public speaking. While a lawyer needs good *rhetorical* skills, sometimes *rhetorical* and *oratorical* mean *only* related to style and effect, and lacking substance. **Eloquent**, however, is always positive—even in the latter sentence above, the **eloquent** looks of disgust are very effective in expressing the children's feelings.

More Info: The root “loq” means “speech” and also appears in *loquacious* (talkative) and *interlocutor* (participant in a dialogue; interrogator).

embellish

(verb)

em-BELL-ish

Definition: Decorate, add ornamentation; enhance (a story) with fictional or fanciful details

Usage: Every time she tells that story, she **embellishes** it quite a bit—at first, she was lost in the woods and then she was found. The part with the grizzly bear was added later. / The Christmas sweater was **embellished** with festive jingle bells!

Related Words: *Bedeck* means “adorn or deck out,” as in “The church was *bedecked* with flowers for the wedding.” This is essentially the same word as in the Christmas carol “*Deck* the Halls.”

More Info: **Embellish** contains a root for beauty, “bell,” as in “*belle* of the ball.” (This can be a quite confusing root, though, as “bell” can also mean “war,” as in *belligerent*, *bellicose*, *rebellion*. In Latin, “bellus” meant “dress up” and “bellum” meant war).

eminent

(adj)

EM-in-ent

Definition: Prominent, distinguished, of high rank

Usage: The undergraduate shocked everyone by asking the **eminent** old professor, “Really? What makes you such an expert?” / “Your **Eminence!**” said the bishop to the Pope, “Don’t forget this copy of your speech!”

Related Words: *Venerable* (worthy of deep respect, hallowed, dignified)

More Info: **Eminent** domain is the law allowing the government to appropriate private property, such as forcing people to move so a new highway can be built. And, while supposedly Marshall Mathers selected the pseudonym “Eminem” based on his initials (M&M), we like to think he was aware of the name’s strong resemblance to **eminent**.

empirical

(adj)

em-PEER-ick-ull

Definition: Coming from, based on, or able to be verified by experience or experimentation; not purely based on theory

Usage: The Ancient Greeks philosophized about the nature of matter (concluding, for instance, that everything was made of earth, water, air, and fire) without any **empirical** evidence—that is, the very idea of conducting experiments hadn't been invented yet. / People always knew **empirically** that when something is dropped, it falls to the ground; the theory of gravity later explained why.

More Info: In Ancient Greece, practitioners of medicine who relied on experience rather than theory were of the **Empiric** School; in contrast, the *Dogmatic* school followed the teachings of Hippocrates above all. In philosophy, *a priori* knowledge is that which can be deduced from logic alone, and *a posteriori* knowledge is **empirical**.

emulate

(verb)

EM-yoo-layt

Definition: Copy in an attempt to equal or be better than

Usage: The ardent *Star Trek* fan **emulated** Captain Kirk in every way possible—his brash and confident leadership might have gotten him somewhere, but the women he tried to impress weren't so impressed.

More Info: *Imitate* merely means to copy; **emulate** means to copy in a positive, admiring way. A word for “copy” that has a somewhat negative connotation is **ape** (based on the idea of a large primate trying to copy humans), as in “While he tried to **ape** Hemingway's style, the truth is, he simply wasn't a very good writer.”

enervate

(verb)

EN-er-vayt

Definition: Weaken, tire

Usage: After taking the SAT in the morning and playing in a soccer game in the afternoon, Trina was truly **enervated** before the prom even began. “You dance like a grandmother with osteoporosis,” said her date.

Related Words: *Sap* (weaken, undermine, destroy in an underhanded way), *Enfeeble* (weaken, make feeble)

More Info: The “e” in **enervate** is a variant of the prefix “ex” and means “out,” while “nerv” means “nerve, sinew.” Today, the word doesn’t exactly mean “remove the nerves from,” although that certainly does sound like something that would weaken a person.

enhance

(verb)

en-HANSS

Definition: Raise to a higher value, desirability, etc.

Usage: The cosmetics industry stays in business because so many people want to **enhance** their appearances.

Related Words: *Embellish* (decorate, add ornamentation), *Aggrandize* (make greater; exaggerate)

More Info: **Enhance** may come from the Old French “enhaucer,” meaning “to raise” and sharing an origin with *haughty*, or arrogant.

enigma

(noun)

en-IGG-muh

Definition: Puzzle, mystery, riddle; mysterious or contradictory person

Usage: The enormous rock sculptures in Stonehenge, England are truly an **enigma**—were they created as part of a religious observance, or in deference to a great ruler? We may never know.

Related Words: *Paradox* (contradiction, or seeming contradiction that is actually true), *Conundrum* (a riddle, the answer to which involves a play on words; any mystery)

More Info: **Enigma** comes from a Greek word for speaking in riddles, which itself comes from a word for “fable.”

entitlement

(noun)

en-TIE-tull-ment

Definition: Having the right to certain privileges; believing, sometimes without cause, that one deserves or has a right to certain privileges

Usage: Many bosses complain about young people’s sense of **entitlement**—raised on a steady diet of praise from parents and teachers, these young people are shocked to be expected to “pay their dues” at a new job.

More Info: **Entitlement** originally referred to investing a person with a title, as in “Charles Lennox was **entitled** Duke of Richmond in 1675.” An **entitlement** can also mean a government benefit, as in “Social Security payments and other **entitlements**.”

enumerate

(verb)

ee-NOO-mer-ayt

Definition: Count or list; specify one-by-one

Usage: The Bill of Rights **enumerates** the basic rights held by every citizen of the United States. / I don't have time to **enumerate** all the steps involved in baking a cake—just find a recipe on the internet!

Related Words: *Reckon* means “count” or “consider or regard as,” as in “The math teacher is *reckoned* the only person in the school who can *reckon* the number of primes under 500 in less than one minute.”

More Info: **Enumerable** means “countable,” not to be confused with *innumerable*, which means “numerous, a lot.”

ephemeral

(adj)

ee-FEM-er-ull

Definition: Lasting only a short time, fleeting

Usage: “Thank you for this jacket that says ‘Eugene’s Girl,’” said Marie, “but I fear that your love will prove to be **ephemeral**—over the last two years, I’ve seen four other girls in school with the same jacket. Do you buy them in six-packs?”

Related Words: *Evanescent* and *Fugacious* are synonyms. *Transient* can mean “lasting only a short time, temporary” or “staying only a short time,” or can be a noun referring to homeless people, temporary workers, or others who move often.

More Info: **Ephemeral** comes from a Greek word for “day.” It originally meant—and sometimes still means—lasting only one day.

equitable

(adj)

ECK-wit-uh-bull

Also *equity* (noun)

Definition: Fair, equal, just

Usage: As the university president was heavily biased towards the sciences, faculty in the liberal arts felt they had to fight to get an **equitable** share of funding for their departments.

Related Words: *Evenhanded* (fair, impartial), *Parity* (equality or equivalence)

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.

erratic

(adj)

er-RAT-ick

Definition: Inconsistent, wandering, having no fixed course

Usage: When someone engages in **erratic** behavior, family members often suspect drug use or mental illness. However, sometimes the person is just building a top-secret invention in the garage!

Related Words: *Desultory* (lacking consistency or order, disconnected, sporadic; going off topic)

More Info: **Erratic** shares a root with *error* and the verb *err*, which originally meant “to stray or wander”—that is, to be **erratic**—but now means “to make a mistake.”

erroneous

(adj)

er-ROH-nee-uss

Definition: Mistaken, in error; improper, morally incorrect

Usage: Hilda was completely unable to assemble her new desk chair after the instructions **erroneously** instructed her to screw the left armrest onto a small lever on the bottom of the seat.

Related Words: *Fallible* (liable to be in error, capable of making mistakes)

More Info: **Erroneous** contains the root “err,” from a word for “stray or wander.” The related word **errant** can mean “incorrect” but can also mean “journeying or roving adventurously,” as in a medieval “knight-errant.”

erudite

(adj)

AIR-yoo-dite

Also *erudition* (noun)

Definition: Scholarly, knowledgeable; possessing deep, often systematic, knowledge

Usage: Some have said that Americans dislike **erudite** leaders; while German leaders frequently have Ph.D.'s, even speaking a foreign language is considered pretentious by many American voters.

Related Words: *Learned* is a synonym. *Cerebral* can mean “intellectual, esp. as opposed to instinctual or emotional.” *Esoteric*, *recondite*, and *abstruse* all mean “pertaining to difficult or obscure knowledge; known to only a few.”

More Info: **Erudite** comes from the Latin “erudire,” meaning “to polish.”

eschew

(verb)

ess-CHOO

Definition: Shun, avoid, abstain from

Usage: As a vegan, he **eschewed** not only meat and dairy but also anything made of leather.

Related Words: *Abjure* (give up, renounce; repudiate, recant, or shun, especially formally or under oath), *Forswear* (reject or renounce under oath; swear falsely in court)

More Info: Pronounce this word just as it looks: “ess-CHEW.”

esoteric

(adj)

ess-oh-TAIR-ick

Definition: Understood by or intended for only a few; secret

Usage: In his first year of university-level physics, he felt he was merely memorizing information found in every textbook on the subject; by his fourth year, he spent his days poring over **esoteric** journal articles that few people had ever read or understood.

Related Words: *Arcane* and *Recondite* are synonyms.

More Info: The “eso” in **esoteric** means “in”—in this case, in the sense of “inside knowledge.” An antonym is *exoteric* (“exo” = out), as in that which is “common knowledge.”

estimable

(adj)

ESS-tim-uh-bull

Definition: Worthy of esteem, admirable; able to be estimated

Usage: As the first Black president of the Harvard Law Review, Barack Obama presented an **estimable** resume when he ran for President in 2008. / Riding a roller coaster is safer than driving on the highway, but there is still an **estimable** risk.

Related Words: *Calculable* is a synonym for **estimable** as “able to be estimated.”

More Info: *Inestimable* generally means “so large it cannot be estimated,” as in “The Rosetta Stone was of *inestimable* value to scholars of Egyptian history.”

eulogy

(noun)

YOU-luh-gee

Definition: Speech of praise or written work of praise, esp. a speech given at a funeral

Usage: While it was hard for Xing to write a **eulogy** for his friend, he was pleased to be able to tell others at the funeral some wonderful things about him that they hadn't known. / The review of the book was pure **eulogy**—usually, this publication runs more balanced articles.

Related Words: *Encomium* (warm, glowing praise, esp. a formal expression of praise), *Laudation* (praise, tribute), *Panegyric* (formal, lofty, or elaborate praise), *Paeon* (song of praise, triumph, or thanks)

More Info: “Eu” is a Greek root for “good,” and “log” or “logos” for “discourse.”

exacerbate

(verb)

egg-ZASS-er-bayt

Definition: Make worse (more violent, severe, etc.), inflame; irritate or embitter (a person)

Usage: Allowing your band to practice in our garage has greatly **exacerbated** my headache.

Related Words: *Aggravate* is a synonym.

More Info: **Exacerbate** shares a root with *acerbic*, meaning “sour; harsh or severe.” The prefix “ex” means “out” but can also have the meaning of “thoroughly” or “utterly.” To *acerbate* is to make more *acerbic*; to **exacerbate** is to make utterly *acerbic*.

exacting

(adj)

egg-ZACK-ting

Definition: Very severe in making demands; requiring precise attention

Usage: The boxing coach was **exacting**, analyzing Joey's footwork down to the millimeter and forcing him to repeat movements hundreds of times until they were correct.

Related Words: *Meticulous* (taking extreme care with details; fussy), *Fastidious* (excessively particular, hard to please)

More Info: *Exaction* is a word for extortion, or demanding money under threat. To **exact** as a verb can mean to extort money, or simply to demand, as in "to **exact** obedience from the soldiers."

exculpate

(verb)

ECK-skull-payt

Also *exculpatory* (adj)

Definition: Clear from guilt or blame

Usage: The security camera footage showing Mr. Murphy to have been in a casino the entire night turned out to be just the evidence needed to **exculpate** him of robbing a bank fifty miles away.

Related Words: *Vindicate* and *Exonerate* are synonyms.

More Info: “Ex” in this context means “out” and “culp” (as in *culprit* and *culpable*) means “blame.”

Exculpate has a very rare antonym, *inculpate*, meaning “charge with fault, incriminate.”

exhaustive

(adj)

egg-ZAW-stiv

Definition: Comprehensive, thorough, exhausting a topic or subject, accounting for all possibilities; draining, tending to exhaust

Usage: The *Standard Book of British Birds* provides an **exhaustive** treatment of the subject—you will find that not a single British bird has been omitted. / The rebels finally surrendered after an **exhaustive** siege that left them without ammunition or even food.

Related Words: *Thoroughgoing* (thorough, complete; zealous), *Omnibus* (including or providing for many items)

explicit

(adj)

eck-SPLISS-it

Definition: Direct, clear, fully revealed; clearly depicting sex or nudity

Usage: The goal of my motivational talk is to make **explicit** the connection between staying in school and avoiding a life of crime.

Related Words: *Unequivocal* (clear, having only one possible meaning), *Explicate* (make clear)

More Info: The antonym of **explicit** is *implicit* or *tacit*, meaning “hinted at, implied.”

exponent

(noun)

eck-SPOH-nent

Definition: Person who expounds or explains; champion, advocate, or representative

Usage: An **exponent** of clean fuel, he petitioned the state government to commit to replacing conventional energy with solar and wind energy where possible.

Related Words: *Proponent* (person who proposes or argues in favor of something)

More Info: Of course, an **exponent** is also the number to which another number is raised. Both senses of the word come from the verb *expound*, meaning “interpret, explain, state in detail.” In a sense, an **exponent** on a number *expounds* upon that number by telling us how many times the number is to be multiplied by itself.

extraneous

(adj)

eck-STRAY-nee-uss

Definition: Irrelevant; foreign, coming from without, not belonging

Usage: This essay would be stronger if you removed **extraneous** information; this paragraph about the author's life doesn't happen to be relevant to your thesis. / Maize, which originated in the New World, is **extraneous** to Europe.

Related Words: *Superfluous* (extra, unnecessary, excessive)

More Info: In Latin, “extra” means “outside of.” The “coming from without” meaning of **extraneous** can also be expressed with *extrinsic*, the antonym of which is *intrinsic*.

extrapolate

(verb)

eck-STRAP-oh-layt

Definition: Conjecture about an unknown by projecting information about something known; predict by projecting past experience

Usage: No, I've never been to Bryn Mawr, but I've visited several small, private women's colleges in the Northeast, so I think I can **extrapolate**.

More Info: In math and science, to **extrapolate** is to infer values in an unobserved interval from values in an observed interval. For instance, from the points (1, 4) and (3, 8), you could extrapolate the point (5, 12), since it would be on the same line. The antonym of **extrapolate** is *interpolate*, to estimate between two known values, such as by using (1, 4) and (3, 8) to assume (2, 6). *Interpolate* can also mean "insert words or foreign material into a text or conversation."

facetious

(adj)

fuh-SEE-shuss

Definition: Joking, humorous, esp. inappropriately; not serious, concerned with frivolous things

Usage: When I said, “Sure, you can take anything in my house as a souvenir of this study session,” I was being **facetious**! I would like my nightgown back now. / He’s a **facetious** person—I doubt he will take your offer of a spiritual quest very seriously.

Related Words: *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 **facetious** with *fatuous*, meaning “foolish, silly, inane.” **Facetious** people can be smartly sarcastic; *fatuous* people are dull and dim-witted. **Facetious** comes from a Latin word for clever; *fatuous* comes from a word for gaping—as in, having one’s mouth hang open like a very stupid person.

facilitate

(verb)

fuh-SILL-it-tayt

Definition: Make easier, help the progress of

Usage: A good meeting **facilitator** lets everyone be heard while still keeping the meeting focused. / As a midwife, my goal is simply to **facilitate** a natural process.

More Info: Speakers of Spanish and French will certainly recognize **facilitate**'s similarity with “*facil*” or “*facile*,” meaning “easy.” Interestingly, though, the word *facile* in English can be negative, meaning “shallow or superficial”—that is, a little *too* easy.

fallacious

(adj)

fuh-LAY-shuss

Also *fallacy* (noun)

Definition: Containing a fallacy, or mistake in logic; logically unsound; deceptive

Usage: The formal study of logic can enable a student to more easily identify **fallacious** reasoning and, furthermore, to point out its **fallacies**.

Related Words: That which is **fallacious** definitely embodies a logical mistake, while that which is *fallible* is capable of being wrong (but may not actually be).

More Info: Among the logical **fallacies** are the *Ad Hominem Attack* (attacking the person rather than the argument) and the *Post Hoc fallacy* (confusing correlation with causation).

fanatical

(adj)

fuh-NAT-ick-ull

Also *fanatic* (noun)

Definition: Excessively devoted, enthusiastic, or zealous in an uncritical way

Usage: We avoid our neighbors—they're **fanatics** who can't go five minutes without trying to convert you to their beliefs. / Mrs. Becker was **fanatical** about grammar, once deducting fifteen points from a student's paper for a misused semicolon—and it was a physics class!

Related Words: *Ardent* (very passionate), *Zealous* (full of fervor or dedicated enthusiasm for a cause, person, etc.). Also *Fervent*, *Fervid*, and *Perfervid* all mean “passionate, fiery, deeply enthusiastic.”

fanciful

(adj)

FAN-sih-ful

Definition: Whimsical, capricious; imaginary; freely imaginative rather than based on reason or reality

Usage: The play was set in a **fanciful** version of New York City, one where all the cab drivers spoke perfect English and the Statue of Liberty seemed to be in the middle of the island.

Related Words: *Whimsical* (fanciful, eccentric) is a near-synonym. *Capricious* (acting on impulse, erratic) is also close, but is sometimes used negatively.

fathom

(verb)

FA-thum

Definition: Measure the depth of (usually of water) as with a sounding line; penetrate and discover the meaning of, understand

Usage: I cannot even remotely **fathom** how you interpreted an invitation to sleep on my couch as permission to take my car on a six-hour joyride!

Related Words: *Sound* and *Plumb* (used as verbs) are synonyms.

More Info: A sounding line or plumb line is a length of rope with a weight at the bottom; dropping it into water will allow the weight to sink and water to be measured in **fathoms** (six-foot increments —**fathom** comes from a word for outstretched arms, which on an adult male tend to measure about six feet).

feasible

(adj)

FEE-zih-bull

Definition: Possible; logical or likely; suitable

Usage: Your plan to promote our product launch with a parade is just not **feasible**—we don't have the money or enough time to get the permits.

Related Words: *Plausible* (credible, having the appearance of truth), *Viable* (able to live or develop; capable of success, practicable, workable)

More Info: **Feasible** shares a root (“do, make”) with *factory*, *factitious*, and *laissez-faire*.

fidelity

(noun)

fid-DELL-it-ee

Definition: Faithfulness, loyalty; strict observance of duty; accuracy in reproducing a sound or image

Usage: Wedding vows typically include a promise of **fidelity**—such as by “forsaking all others as long as I may live.”

Related Words: *Constancy* (loyalty, the state of being unwavering)

More Info: **Fidelity** contains the root “fid,” for “trust,” also appearing in *diffident*, *fiduciary*, *infidel*, and Fidel Castro’s name.

figurative

(adj)

FIG-yer-uh-tiv

Definition: Metaphorical, based on figures of speech; containing many figures of speech (as fancy-sounding writing); related to portraying human or animal figures

Usage: The painter was renowned for his **figurative** art, including many portraits—he had been known to say that abstract artists were just people who had never learned to draw. / Highly **figurative** language can be difficult for English language learners—for instance, to “throw the baby out with the bath water” refers to being too hasty and unwisely getting rid of the good with the bad.

Related Words: The opposite of **figurative** is *literal*, although in regular speech, people often use *literal* to mean *figurative*. People who say *I was literally ready to kill someone* rarely mean that, which is why we are not alarmed when they say that. We understand that they are really speaking **figuratively**.

finesse

(noun, verb)

fin-NESS

Definition: Extreme delicacy, subtlety, or diplomacy in handling a sensitive situation or in a performance or skill (noun); use tact or diplomacy; employ a deceptive strategy (verb)

Usage: After the prince deeply insulted his hosts, the diplomat was able to **finesse** the situation, playing it off as a translation error and getting the negotiations back on track.

Related Words: *Tact* (sensitivity to what is proper and inoffensive)

More Info: **Finesse** is also a brand of shampoo. The commercials typically feature a person getting into—and then out of—a tough situation. The slogan is “Sometimes you need a little **finesse**, sometimes you need a lot.”

flag

(verb)

FLAG

Definition: Get tired, lose enthusiasm; hang limply or droop

Usage: Our grandmother is so physically fit that she was ready to make the rounds of the entire amusement park again after lunch, while most of us were **flagging** and just wanted to sit.

Related Words: *Enervate* (weaken, tire)

More Info: One way to think of the “get tired” meaning of **flag** is to think of how a flag waving in the breeze droops and hangs when the wind stops. Of course, **flag** as a verb can also mean “to hail or wave down,” as in “**flag** a taxi,” or “to mark,” as in “**flag** a page of a book with a sticky note.”

fleeting

(adj)

FLEE-ting

Definition: Passing quickly, transitory

Usage: I had assumed our summer romance would be **fleeting**, so I was very surprised when you proposed marriage!

Related Words: *Ephemeral*, *Evanescent* and *Fugacious* are synonyms. *Fugitive* is best known as meaning “running from the law,” but can also mean **fleeting**.

More Info: A **fleet** is a group of ships controlled together. The connection is the root word, “to float”—a **fleet** of boats floats on the water, and a **fleeting** romance, for instance, is one that simply seems to float away.

foment

(verb)

FOH-ment or FAH-ment

Definition: Incite, instigate, stir up, promote the growth of; apply medicated liquid to a body part

Usage: The revolutionary group was quietly **fomenting** a rebellion, galvanizing student radicals, leading unions in revolutionary songs, and anonymously pasting incendiary posters in every quarter of the city.

Related Words: *Rouse* (wake up; incite, stir up)

More Info: Abigail Adams famously told her husband John Adams that, if left out of the Constitution, ladies would “**foment** a rebellion.” **Foment** comes from a Latin word for a poultice or hot compress. The similar-sound *ferment* (to undergo fermentation as in yogurt, kimchi, etc., such as by a yeast or bacterium) can also be used to mean “excite or agitate”—you can **foment** or *ferment* a rebellion.

foreshadow

(verb)

for-SHAD-oh

Also *foreshadowing* (noun)

Definition: Indicate or suggest beforehand, presage

Usage: You didn't know this was a horror movie? I thought it was pretty clear that the children's ghost story around the campfire was meant to **foreshadow** the horrible things that would happen to them years later as teenagers at a motel in the middle of the woods.

Related Words: *Prefigure* is a synonym. *Forerun* means run before or foreshadow. *Harbinger* and *Herald* mean a person or thing that indicates what is to come (*Herald* can also mean “messenger,” including about something in the past). *Portentous* and *Ominous* can mean “giving a bad sign about the future” (*portentous* can also mean “very significant, exciting wonder and awe”).

More Info: “Fore” means “before”—**foreshadow** literally comes from the idea that an object's shadow sometimes arrives before the object does.

forfeit

(verb)

FOR-fit

Also *forfeiture* (noun)

Definition: Surrender or lose as a result of an error, crime, or failure to fulfill an obligation

Usage: “The rules are clear,” said the umpire. “This is a co-ed league, and if your team doesn’t have at least three women, you **forfeit**. Sorry, everybody, no game today!” / If you are found guilty of defrauding this casino, the **forfeiture** of your winnings will be only the first of the consequences coming your way.

More Info: **Forfeit** comes from the Middle English “forfet,” for “crime” (people often have to give up, or **forfeit**, rights or property as punishment for a crime). A **forfeit**, as a noun, simply means the property, right, etc. that was **forfeited**.

fortify

(verb)

FOR-tih-fy

Definition: Strengthen, invigorate, encourage

Usage: The white bread found in American grocery stores has been stripped of all the nutrients naturally found in wheat, and then artificially **fortified** with vitamins and minerals. / The general called for reinforcements to **fortify** the defenses around the capital.

Related Words: *Bolster* (strengthen or support), *Buttress* (a support against a building; to strengthen or support), *Galvanize* (stimulate with electric current; excite, stimulate to action)

More Info: **Fortify** shares a root (meaning “strong”) with *fortress* and *fortitude* (strength in facing adversity).

fringe

(noun, adj)

FRIN'j

Definition: On the margin, periphery (adj); the people in a group who hold the most extreme views (noun)

Usage: In America, reincarnation is a **fringe** belief, but in primarily Hindu countries, the belief is quite mainstream. / Stacey and Mark liked to say they lived on the **fringe** of the big city, but really they had just moved to the suburbs.

Related Words: *Penumbra* (partial shadow in an eclipse; outer area, periphery)

More Info: **Fringe** is also, of course, a clothing decoration of hanging cords, strings, etc. (as worn by cowboys or hippies). The connection is that fringe is on the *border or edge* of clothes, just as **fringe** ideas are on the border or edge of society.

frugal

(adj)

FROO-gull

Also *frugality* (noun)

Definition: Economical, thrifty, not wasteful with money; inexpensive

Usage: It wasn't terribly surprising when Lea—who was so **frugal** in restaurants that she always drank water, ate salad, and requested a separate check—said she had never tried lobster.

Related Words: *Provident* (showing foresight, providing for the future, frugal), *Stinting* (frugal, acting sparingly or with restraint)

More Info: **Frugal** comes from the Latin word for “fruit.” By the way, don't confuse these two adjectives: *economical* means not spending too much money; *economic* means pertaining to the science of economics.

futile

(adj)

FYOO-tull or FYOO-tile

Definition: Producing no useful result, ineffective; trivial or unimportant

Usage: She spent months trying to coax Fluffy to fetch and sit, but it was **futile** —cats just can't be trained to perform tricks.

Related Words: *Bootless* (useless), *Otiose* (lazy, idle; ineffective or useless)

More Info: **Futile** comes from a Latin word for “pouring out easily,” as in a water jug that is full of unfortunate cracks or holes.

gainsay

(verb)

gayn-SAY

Definition: Declare false, deny; oppose

Usage: The professor is quite doctrinaire—she’s been known to lower the grade of any student who dares **gainsay** her.

Related Words: *Dissent* (disagree or take an opposing view, esp. in relation to a formal body such as a government)

More Info: In Old English, “gain” actually meant “against,” although most other words formed from this word part are now obsolete (as in “gainclap,” a counterstroke, such as in battle).

garrulous

(adj)

GAIR-ull-uss

Definition: Talkative, wordy, rambling

Usage: Uncle Bill is so **garrulous** that our dinner conversation lasted three hours—and the only person who said more than ten words was Uncle Bill.

Related Words: *Prolix*, *Verbose*, and *Loquacious* all mean talkative or wordy. **Garrulous** adds the sense of going off-topic or being tiresome. For instance, a very long-winded but informative academic paper would be *prolix* or *verbose*, but not **garrulous**.

gauche

(adj)

GOH'sh

Definition: Tactless, lacking social grace, awkward, crude

Usage: It is terribly **gauche** to put ketchup on your steak and then talk with your mouth full as you eat it. That's the last time I ever bring *you* to a nice place.

Related Words: *Boorish* (rude, ill-mannered, insensitive), *Meretricious* (attractive in a vulgar way, specious), *Uncouth* (having bad manners, awkward)

More Info: Sadly, nearly all cultures are biased against left-handed people. **Gauche** is simply the French word for left (similarly, the word *sinister* comes from the Latin word for left). The French word for right gives us the English word *adroit*, which means “skilled.”

gawky

(adj)

GAW-kee

Definition: Physically awkward (esp. of a tall, skinny person, often used to describe teenagers)

Usage: As a teenager, she thought of herself as **gawky** and often slouched so as not to seem so much taller than her peers; of course, now that she's a supermodel, no one thinks of her as **gawky** at all.

Related Words: *Coltish* (playful, wild; resembling a young horse, esp. having disproportionately long legs), *Ungainly* (awkward, ungraceful)

More Info: To *gawk* is to stare at something in a blatant, often surprised way. The origin of **gawk** is related to an old word for left, or left-handed.

germane

(adj)

jer-MANE

Definition: Relevant and appropriate, on-topic

Usage: This is a business meeting, not a social club—let's keep our comments **germane** to the issue of the new campaign.

Related Words: *Pertinent* (relevant), *Akin* (related by blood; analogous or similar)

Memory Trick: When four of the Jackson 5 would get off track, it was always *Jermaine* who would direct the conversation back to the topic at hand.

gist

(noun)

JIST

Definition: Main idea, essence

Usage: I didn't read the whole book, but I read enough to get the **gist**.

Related Words: *Pith* (central part, essence), *Precis* (summary of the essentials of a text)

More Info: If you read enough to get the *pith* of something, you really deeply understand it to the core; if you read enough to get the **gist**, you probably just skimmed, and might need to go back later to get more detail.

glib

(adj)

GLIB

Definition: Fluent and easy in a way that suggests superficiality or insincerity

Usage: She was the worst teacher he had ever encountered, giving **glib** responses to every question. “Can you help me with this algebra problem?” he asked. “Oh, just solve for x,” she said, and walked away.

Related Words: *Flippant* (disrespectfully casual or light in manner), *Impertinent* (inappropriately bold), *Saucy* (disrespectful or irrepressible, esp. in an entertaining way)

More Info: **Glib** comes from a Germanic root for “slippery.” A **glib** comment “slips” right out of your mouth—when you should have spent more time thinking up something more meaningful.

goosebumps

(noun)

GOOSE-bumps

Definition: The “bumps” created by hairs standing up on the skin in response to cold, fear, etc.

Usage: That detective novel is hard to put down! I’ve got **goosebumps** just waiting to find out what happens next! / You’ve got **goosebumps**—why don’t you borrow my jacket?

More Info: When a goose’s feathers are plucked, bumps are left behind on the skin. “Goose flesh” or “goose pimples” are expressions that mean the same thing (**goosebumps**, however, is more often used metaphorically and has appeared in official GRE materials).

gradation

(noun)

gray-DAY-shun

Also *grade* (verb)

Definition: A progression, a process taking place gradually, in stages; one of these stages

Usage: The hill's **gradation** was so gradual that even those on crutches were able to enjoy the nature trail. / The short story's language **graded** from the vernacular to the erudite so gradually that you practically didn't realize until the end that the speaker had become educated almost before your eyes.

More Info: A **grade** is a step, stage, or rank, as in **grades** on papers, school years ("sixth grade"), or "Grade A" milk.

gregarious

(adj)

greh-GAIR-ee-uss

Definition: Sociable, pertaining to a flock or crowd

Usage: “We need to be a little more productive and a little less **gregarious**,” said the chemistry teacher when he saw that the two-person lab groups had devolved into clusters of five and six students standing around talking and laughing.

Related Words: *Genial, Congenial, Convivial* are all words for sociable, friendly.

More Info: Don’t confuse with *garrulous*, which means “talkative.” If it helps, think of a guy named *Greg* who’s the life of the party and a guy named *Gary* who never shuts up.

guile

(noun)

GUY-ull

Also *guileless* (adj)

Definition: Clever deceit, cunning, craftiness

Usage: The game of poker is all about **guile**, manipulating your own body language and patter to lead other players to erroneous conclusions about the cards you're holding.

Related Words: *Duplicity* (deceit, double-dealing, acting in two different ways for the purpose of deception), *Wily* (crafty, cunning)

More Info: *Beguile* can mean to trick or mislead, but can also mean to charm or bewitch—that is, to trick in a pleasant, sometimes flirtatious way.

hackneyed

(adj)

HACK-need

Definition: So commonplace as to be stale; not fresh or original

Usage: This screenplay is so **hackneyed**—the leading lady has a quirky, artsy job in the city and has a minor problem early in the movie from which the male lead rescues her, and they get together but then break up due to a misunderstanding, and then they end up together anyway, all while the female lead’s “sassy” friend gives advice. Ugh. I’ll bet they’re auditioning Jennifer Aniston right now.

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

More Info: Hackney in London was once out in the countryside and was a place from which you could rent a horse, leading to the sense of an overworked, broken-down horse, and consequently to someone, such as a writer, who works for hire and has few fresh ideas left.

hardy

(adj)

HAR-dee

Definition: Bold, brave, capable of withstanding hardship, fatigue, cold, etc.

Usage: While the entire family enjoyed the trip to South America, only the **hardier** members even attempted to hike to the top of Ecuador’s tallest volcano.

Related Words: *Robust* (strong, vigorous, full-bodied), *Hale* (vigorous, healthy)

More Info: **Hardy**, unsurprisingly, comes from “harden,” in the sense of “make brave.” Hardy is also an English last name; the adventurous Hardy Boys are the heroes of a series of young adult novels popular since their debut in 1927.

haven

(noun)

HAY-ven

Definition: Harbor or port; refuge, safe place

Usage: The relief workers set up the camp as a **haven** from persecution.

Related Words: *Succor* (relief, aid), *Asylum* (refuge or sanctuary; refuge granted by a country to a foreigner persecuted in her or her own country). *Asylum* was once used to mean a care facility for the mentally ill, orphans, etc., but this usage is generally considered insensitive today.

hearken

(verb)

HAR-ken

Also *hark* (verb)

Definition: Listen, pay attention to

Usage: “**Hearken**, students!” said the old-fashioned music teacher. “We are going to practice ‘**Hark**, the Herald Angels Sing.’” / The simple lifestyle and anachronistic dress of the Amish **hearken** back to an earlier era.

More Info: **Hark** is a variant of **hearken** and has the same meaning. The expression **hearken back** or **hark back** is much more common in modern usage than **hearken** alone, and means to turn back to something earlier or return to a source.

hedonist

(noun)

HEE-dun-ist

Also *hedonism* (noun), *hedonistic* (adj)

Definition: Person devoted to pleasure

Usage: A vacation is a fine time to practice **hedonism**, letting your troubles go and pursuing massages and cocktails as though it's your life mission.

Related Words: *Sybarite* (synonym). *Voluptuary* is also very similar, but adds the idea of seeking luxury. *Licentious* (sexually unrestrained; immoral; ignoring the rules), *Libertine* (morally or sexually unrestrained person; freethinker)

More Info: The original Hedonists were Greek philosophers who held that pleasure is the highest moral good, so whatever policy causes the most pleasure (and least pain) to the most people is the most moral policy.

heterogeneous

(adj)

het-er-oh-JEE-nee-uss

Definition: Different in type, incongruous; composed of different types of elements

Usage: Rather than build the wall with plain brick, we used a **heterogeneous** mixture of stones—they are not only different colors, but a variety of sizes as well.

Related Words: *Homogeneous* (of the same kind) is the opposite of **heterogeneous**.

More Info: The Latin root “gen” means “birth, produce, race” and appears in *generate*, *genus*, *gender*, *genocide*. “Hetero” means “different” and appears in *heterodox* (unorthodox).

hierarchy

(noun)

HIGH-er-ar-kee

Definition: A ranked series; a classification of people according to rank, ability, etc.; a ruling body

Usage: The activist, accustomed to groups ruled by consensus, was quite surprised to find that the Eco-Action Coalition was led by a strict **hierarchy**—members followed orders from district leaders, district leaders from regional leaders, and regional leaders from the national head.

Related Words: *Echelon* (a level, rank or grade; the people at that level), *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: A **hierarchy** was originally a ranked division of angels.

hodgepodge

(noun)

HAHJ-pahj

Definition: Mixture of different kinds of things, jumble

Usage: The comedian's book wasn't a proper memoir, but more a **hodgepodge** of old bits, personal stories that went nowhere, random political opinions, and childhood photos.

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* means “made up of diverse elements.” *Medley*, *Farrago*, *Potpourri*, *Pastiche* and *Olio* are all words for mixtures of diverse things.

More Info: **Hodgepodge** comes from *hotchpotch*, a stew of meat and vegetables.

homogeneous

(adj)

hoh-moh-JEE-nee-uss

Definition: Of the same kind; uniform throughout

Usage: While Sweden seems to have solved many of its social ills, critics point out that Sweden's largely **homogeneous** population doesn't present the challenges extant in a more diverse nation with many cultures and languages.

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* (different in type, incongruous; composed of different types of elements) is the antonym of **homogeneous**.

More Info: The Latin root "gen" means "birth, produce, race" and appears in *generate*, *genus*, *gender*, *genocide*. "Homo" means "same" and appears in the biology term *homologous* (having the same relation or structure, as in human arms and bat wings).

hyberbole

(noun)

high-PER-boh-lee

Definition: Deliberate exaggeration for effect

Usage: Oh, come on. Saying “That movie was so bad it made me puke” was surely **hyperbole**. I strongly doubt that you actually vomited during or following *The Back-Up Plan*.

Related Words: *Overstatement* is similar in meaning.

More Info: **Hyperbole** shares a root (meaning “throw”) with *ballistics*—think of it as throwing your statement quite a bit past the mark.

idiosyncrasy

(noun)

id-dee-oh-SINK-rah-see

Also *idiosyncratic* (adj)

Definition: Characteristic or habit peculiar to an individual; peculiar quality, quirk

Usage: Sometimes, the richer people get, the more **idiosyncratic** they become. After he made his first billion, he began traveling with a pet iguana, sleeping in an oxygen chamber, and, oddly, speaking with a slight Dutch accent.

Related Words: *Eccentric* (peculiar, odd, deviating from the norm esp. in a whimsical way)

More Info: The root “idio” means “referring to one person, peculiar” (an *idiolect* is a speech pattern spoken by only one person).

illiberality

(noun)

il-lib-er-AL-ih-tee

Also *illiberal* (adj)

Definition: Narrow-mindedness, bigotry; strictness or lack of generosity

Usage: Students protested the **illiberality** of an admissions policy that made no allowances for those from disadvantaged areas or backgrounds who may not have had access to advanced classes and tutors.

Related Words: *Chauvinism* (fanatical patriotism or blind enthusiasm for military glory; undue or biased devotion to any group, cause, etc.), *Bigot* (obstinately prejudiced person), *Xenophobia* (fear of foreigners), *Jingoism* (extreme chauvinism plus warlike foreign policy), *Insular* (pertaining to an island; isolated; illiberal)

More Info: **Illiberal** can also mean lacking a liberal arts education (as a person), or not requiring such an education (as a profession).

imminent

(adj)

IMM-in-ent

Definition: Ready to occur, impending

Usage: In the face of **imminent** war, the nation looked to FDR for reassurance. / Everyone was excited and nervous; Madonna's arrival was **imminent**!

Related Words: **Imminent** can carry the sense of something bad on the horizon, but can also just mean "about to happen." *Ominous* means "giving a bad sign about the future." *Portentous* can mean "ominous" or simply "very significant, exciting wonder and awe."

More Info: Don't confuse **imminent** with *eminent*, which means "highly respected."

impair

(verb)

im-PAIR

Definition: Make worse, weaken

Usage: Playing in a rock band without earplugs will almost certainly **impair** your hearing over time.

Related Words: *Exacerbate* and *Aggravate* (make worse or irritate), *Mar* (damage, spoil, deface), *Vitiate* (ruin, corrupt)

impartial

(adj)

im-PAR-shull

Definition: Unbiased, fair

Usage: Judge Gonzales removed himself from the case because, having a personal connection to the school where the shooting took place, he did not think he could be appropriately **impartial**.

Related Words: *Disinterested*, *Dispassionate*, and *Nonpartisan* are all related to being fair and not having a bias or personal stake.

More Info: The root for “part” appears in *partisan*, *partial*, and *party*—just as a member of a political *party* is rooting for his own side, someone who is *partial* is on the side of only *part* of the group, not everyone equally.

impede

(verb)

im-PEED

Definition: Hold back, obstruct the progress of

Usage: I didn't realize business school would be entirely group work—sadly, there's always at least one person in every group who **impedes** the group's progress more than helps it.

Related Words: *Hinder* and *Hamper* are synonyms.

More Info: **Impede** contains the root “ped” (feet), also occurring in *pedestrian*, *pedal*. **Impede** thus has the sense of shackling the feet, preventing movement.

implication

(noun)

im-plick-CAY-shun

Definition: Act of implying or that which is implied; close connection, esp. in an incriminating way

Usage: When the boss said, “Times are tight around here, I just think you should know,” the **implication** was that maybe we should start looking for new jobs. / She **implicated** her boyfriend in the robbery after less than 20 minutes of interrogation.

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

implicit

(adj)

im-PLISS-it

Definition: Implied, not stated directly; involved in the very essence of something, unquestionable

Usage: He didn't have to be told to resign; it was **implicit** in his not getting the promotion that he had no future at the company. / I enjoy ice climbing with my father because, in such a dangerous situation, it's important to have a partner you trust **implicitly**.

Related Words: *Tacit* also means implied, unspoken.

More Info: The antonym of **implicit** is *explicit* (direct, clear, fully revealed, or clearly depicting sex or nudity).

implode

(verb)

im-PLOHD

Definition: Burst inward

Usage: The startup struggled for years before it simply **imploded**—the management team broke into factions, all the clients were scared off, and employees who hadn't been paid in weeks began taking the office computers home with them in retribution.

More Info: **Implode** is, of course, the opposite of *explode*.

inadvertent

(adj)

in-ad-VER-tent

Also *inadvertently* (adv)

Definition: Unintentional; characterized by a lack of attention, careless

Usage: In attempting to perfect his science project, he **inadvertently** blew a fuse and plunged his family's home into darkness.

Related Words: *Fortuitous* (happening by chance; lucky), *Fluke* (stroke of luck, something accidentally successful)

More Info: To *advert* is to turn attention to (as in an *advertisement*). Thus, **inadvertent** indicates a lack of attention paid.

inasmuch

(adv)

in-az-MUCH

Definition: In like manner, considering that (contraction of “in as much,” generally followed by “as”)

Usage: **Inasmuch as** you missed my birthday party to do the Walk for the Cure, I am not angry at all. Good for you for doing that! / Normally, a student would graduate in four years, but **inasmuch as** you failed several courses in your first two semesters, that will now be impossible for you.

Related Words: *Whereas* (while on the contrary, considering that)

incendiary

(adj)

in-SEND-ee-air-ee

Definition: Setting on fire, pertaining to arson; arousing strife, rebellion, etc.; “inflaming” the senses

Usage: The college suspended him for creating an **incendiary** website, encouraging sit-ins and protests, but the ACLU defended his right to freedom of speech. / It is illegal to bring **incendiaries** on a plane—there are many good reasons why you may not have a stick of dynamite in your carry-on.

Related Words: *Kindle* (ignite, cause to begin burning; incite, arouse, inflame), *Rouse* or *Foment* (incite, stir up)

More Info: The root “candere” (“to shine”) also appears in *candle*, *incense*, and *incensed* (furious, “on fire” with anger).

incentive

(noun)

in-SENT-iv

Also *incentivize* (verb)

Definition: Something that encourages greater action or effort, such as a reward

Usage: A controversial program in a failing school system uses cash payments as an **incentive** for students to stay in school.

Related Words: *Inducement* (motive for action, incentive)

inchoate

(adj)

in-COH-it

Definition: Just begun, undeveloped, unorganized

Usage: The first few weeks of language class went well, but her **inchoate** French was all but useless when she found herself at an academic conference in Quebec.

Related Words: *Nascent* and *Incipient* mean “just beginning to exist, or in a very early stage of development.” **Inchoate** has more of a sense of vagueness. An **inchoate** idea for a novel probably means you don’t know where to start writing; a *nascent* project, although just beginning, might be right on track.

More Info: **Inchoate** comes from the Latin “cohum,” a strap attached to an ox’s yoke; the sense here is “to begin work.”

incipient

(adj)

in-SIP-ee-ent

Definition: Just beginning; in a very early stage

Usage: The movie producer was devastated when, due to legal trouble over the screenplay, the **incipient** project was crushed before it had even begun shooting.

Related Words: *Nascent* (synonym), *Inchoate* (just begun, undeveloped, unorganized)

More Info: The “in” here means “on,” and the remainder of the word shares a root with *capable*.

incongruous

(adj)

in-CON-groo-uss

Definition: Out of place, inappropriate, not harmonious

Usage: Among the student artwork posted in the halls, Angelina's submission was **incongruous**, a dark, gruesome, and even worldly work amidst the happy family portraits and other childish drawings.

Related Words: *Heterogeneous* (different in type, incongruous), *Conspicuous* (standing out)

More Info: **Incongruous** is, of course, related to *congruent*, as in “congruent triangles” (those that are identical).

inconsequential

(adj)

in-con-seck-WENCH-ull

Definition: Insignificant, unimportant; illogical

Usage: You wrote a bestselling book and got a stellar review in the *New York Times*—whatever your cousin has to say about it is simply **inconsequential**. / Given that your entire essay is about Hamlet’s relationship with his mother, your thesis that Hamlet’s relationship with Laertes drives the plot is **inconsequential**—that is, it does not follow as a consequence of the evidence you’ve provided.

Related Words: *Negligible*, *Null*, and *Nil* mean “nothing, or too insignificant to matter.”

incorporate

(verb)

in-CORE-per-ayt

Definition: Combine, unite; form a legal corporation; embody, give physical form to

Usage: When a business **incorporates**, it becomes a separate legal entity—for instance, the business can declare bankruptcy without the owners doing so. / Local legend has it that ghosts can **incorporate** on one night of the year and walk among the living.

Related Words: *Incarnate* (embodied, personified; put into concrete form, embody, take on a human body)

More Info: **Incorporate** contains the Latin “corpus” (body), also found in *corpse* (dead body), *corpulent* (fat), and even “Marine Corps.”

indeterminate

(adj)

in-dee-TER-min-it

Definition: Not fixed or determined, indefinite; vague

Usage: The results of the drug trial were **indeterminate**; further trials will be needed to ascertain whether the drug can be released. / The lottery can have an **indeterminate** number of winners—the prize is simply divided among them.

Related Words: *Ambiguous* (not clear, hard to understand, open to having several meanings or interpretations)

indifferent

(adj)

in-DIFF-er-ent

Definition: Not caring, having no interest; unbiased, impartial

Usage: Do whatever you want—I'm **indifferent**. I won't even notice.

Related Words: *Apathy* (not caring; absence of feeling; lack of interest or concern)

More Info: The presence of “different” in **indifferent** comes from the sense of “not differing, neither good nor bad.”

inform

(verb)

in-FORM

Definition: Inspire, animate; give substance, essence, or context to; be the characteristic quality of

Usage: Her work as an art historian is **informed** by a background in drama; where others see a static tableau, she sees a protagonist, a conflict, a denouement. / Marjorie's desire to work in forensics is **informed** by a family history in the police department.

More Info: Of course **inform** most commonly means “impart knowledge to”; thus, many students are confused when they see the word used in other ways on the GRE.

ingenuous

(adj)

in-JEN-yoo-uss

Definition: Genuine, sincere, not holding back; naive

Usage: Multi-level marketing scams prey on the **ingenuous**, those who really think there's someone out there who just wants to help them get rich.

Related Words: *Guileless* and *Artless* are near-synonyms. An *Ingenue* is a young—presumably innocent—actress or other female performer.

More Info: The “gen” in **ingenuous** is the same root as in *genuine*, and the two words are very similar in meaning. Don't misread **ingenuous** as *ingenious*, which means “brilliant” (an *ingenious* idea).

ingrained

(adj)

in-GRAY-nd

Definition: Deep-rooted, forming part of the very essence; worked into the fiber

Usage: Religious observance had been **ingrained** in him since birth; he could not remember a time when he didn't pray five times a day.

Related Words: *Inculcate* (teach persistently, implant [an idea] in a person)

More Info: The “grain” root is related to using plant parts for dye; something **ingrained** is suffused into the very fiber, like dye.

inherent

(adj)

in-HAIR-ent

Definition: Existing as a permanent, essential quality; intrinsic

Usage: New research seems to support the idea that humans have an **inherent** sense of justice—even babies become upset at puppet shows depicting unfairness, and are gratified at seeing the “bad” puppets punished.

Related Words: *Innate* (inborn)

innocuous

(adj)

in-NOCK-yoo-uss

Definition: Harmless, inoffensive

Usage: While it's quite acrid in here, fortunately the fumes that come from our factory are completely **innocuous**—you don't need a face mask unless you'd like one.

Related Words: *Benign* (harmless, favorable)

More Info: The rare word **nocuous** means “harmful.” **Innocuous** can also have the sense of “boring, insignificant,” as in something so harmless as to lack interest.

intelligible

(adj)

in-TELL-ih-juh-bull

Definition: Able to be understood, clear

Usage: You are doing a disservice to all music by listening through those horrible speakers! None of the lyrics are even **intelligible**! I'll bet you have no idea what this song is even about!

Related Words: *Legible* applies to handwriting and means “able to be read.” **Intelligible** can be used for speech, writing, or ideas. *Lucid* means clear and applies to people as well as ideas. As in, “After brain surgery, it will take awhile for the anesthesia to wear off and for her to become *lucid*. Then we can test whether her handwriting is **intelligible**, which will help pinpoint any loss of functioning.”

intractable

(adj)

in-TRACT-uh-bull

Definition: Difficult to control, manage, or manipulate; hard to cure; stubborn

Usage: That student is positively **intractable**! Last week, we talked about the importance of staying in your seat during the lesson—this week, she not only got up mid-class, but she actually scrambled on top of a bookcase and refused to come down! / Back injuries often result in **intractable** pain; despite treatment, patients never feel fully cured.

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

More Info: The antonym of **intractable** is *tractable*, meaning “compliant.” The root “tract” means “manage or handle” (and originally “drag about”) and also appears in *tractor*, *distract*, *retract*, and, of course, *tract* (a stretch of land).

intrepid

(adj)

in-TREPP-id

Definition: Fearless, brave, enduring in the face of adversity

Usage: **Intrepid** explorers Lewis and Clark led the first U.S. expedition to the West Coast, facing bitter winters and rough terrain.

Related Words: *Hardy* (bold, brave, capable of withstanding hardship, fatigue, cold, etc.), *Fortitude* (strength in facing adversity), *Grit* (firmness of mind, esp. during hardship; courage)

More Info: The antonym **trepid** means frightened and **trepidation** means fear or alarm. The USS Intrepid is a decommissioned Naval aircraft carrier docked in NYC as a museum. As a rule, if it's the name of a ship, it's probably something good (even the Titanic was meant to be positive—"titanic" means very large).

intrinsic

(adj)

in-TRIN-zick

Definition: Belonging to the essential nature of a thing

Usage: Despite all this high-tech safety equipment, skydiving is an **intrinsically** dangerous proposition. / Communication is **intrinsic** to a healthy relationship.

Related Words: *Innate* (inborn), *Inherent* (existing as a permanent, essential quality; intrinsic)

More Info: The antonym *extrinsic* means “not forming part of a thing, extraneous, coming from the outside.” **Intrinsic** motivation is wanting to do something due to interest in the task itself; *extrinsic* motivation is wanting to do something for a reward, to earn a grade, to avoid punishment, etc.

jargon

(noun)

JAR-gun

Definition: Vocabulary specific to a group or occupation; convoluted or unintelligible language

Usage: The information my doctor gave me was so full of medical **jargon** I couldn't understand it at all! I'm going to look on the Internet for something written for regular people.

Related Words: *Argot* and *Cant* also refer to specialized vocabularies (more often used to describe the underworld—lawyers have *jargon*, mobsters have *argot* or *cant*.) *Cant* can also mean lofty but insincere talk (e.g., pageant queens talking about world peace). A *lexicon* is a dictionary or specialized vocabulary.

More Info: **Jargon** comes from a Latin root for “chatter” that also gives us *gargle* and *gargoyle*. Vague business-talk (“It is a best practice to synergize our efficiencies”) is often called **jargon**.

jocular

(adj)

JOCK-yoo-ler

Definition: Joking or given to joking all the time; jolly, playful

Usage: He's certainly a **jocular** fellow—if we were friends, I'm sure I'd find his antics amusing, but as his professor, I do wish he'd contribute some serious comments to the class discussion instead of his constant stream of **jocular** comments.

Related Words: *Jocund* and *jocose* come from the same root and mean the same thing. *Waggish* (merry, roguish), *Risible* (laughable, related to laughing), *Droll* (funny in an odd way)

judicious

(adj)

joo-DISH-uss

Definition: Using good judgment; wise, sensible

Usage: In his will, the old titan of industry left little to his hard-partying younger son, and left the bulk of his estate to the more **judicious** older son, with instructions that the older son see that the rest of the family was taken care of.

Related Words: *Prudent* (wise, careful in providing for the future), *Circumspect* (cautious, careful to consider the circumstances and consequences)

More Info: The related *judicial* means “relating to judges, courtrooms, justice, etc.” While a **judicious** person is wise, a *judicial* attitude would probably be cold, impartial, detached.

juncture

(noun)

JUNK-tcher

Definition: Critical point in time, such as a crisis or a time when a decision is necessary; a place where two things are joined together

Usage: We are at a critical **juncture** in the history of this organization: either we can remain a nonprofit, or we can register as a political action committee and try to expand our influence. / The little canoe started to sink when it split at the **juncture** between the old wood and the new material used to repair it.

Related Words: *Dovetail* (join or fit together), *Diverge* (differ, deviate; branch off or turn aside, as from a path)

More Info: *Junction* is the act of joining, or a place where two things meet, esp. railroad lines or roads. A **juncture** is more the actual line where two things join, and a *junction* is the place where they come together. *Junction* often occurs in place names.

keen

(adj)

KEEN

Definition: Sharp, piercing; very perceptive or mentally sharp; intense (of a feeling)

Usage: Dogs have a **keen** sense of smell. / As homecoming queen, she had experienced the envy of others, but their jealousy only grew more **keen** when she was selected for a small role in a movie.

Related Words: *Acumen* (keen, quick, accurate insight or judgment), *Astute* (shrewd, very perceptive), *Perspicacity* (acuteness of perception)

More Info: **Keen** comes from the same root as “can” (to be able)—if there’s a job to do, a **keen** person *can* probably get it done!

kudos

(noun)

KOO-dohss

Definition: Praise, honor, congratulations

Usage: “**Kudos** on your amazing GRE score!” said the teacher. / While the critics weren’t impressed, the play received plentiful **kudos** from the audience.

Related Words: *Plaudits* (applause, approval), *Laudation* (praise), *Panegyric* (formal, lofty, or elaborate praise), *Paeon* (song of praise, triumph, or thanks)

lackluster

(adj)

LACK-luss-ter

Definition: Not shiny; dull, mediocre; lacking brilliance or vitality

Usage: Many young people today are so accustomed to being praised by parents and adults that they are shocked when a **lackluster** effort in the workplace receives the indifference or mild disapproval it deserves.

Related Words: *Pedestrian* and *prosaic* mean commonplace, dull, or lacking imagination. *Quotidian* means daily or commonplace, as daily things tend to be! *Middling* comes from the idea of being in the “middle” and means medium, average, or mediocre.

More Info: This is an easy word—something **lackluster** literally *lacks luster*. *Lustrous* means shining (*This shampoo will add luster to your hair!*).

laconic

(adj)

luh-CON-ick

Definition: Using few words, concise

Usage: The boss was famously **laconic**; after allowing his employees to present their new plan for an entire hour, he finally responded, “Confirmed.”

Related Words: *Reticent* and *Taciturn* (not talking much) are often used to describe shy people and do not have the sense of “getting the point across efficiently” that **laconic** does. *Pithy*, however, takes this idea even further—it means getting the point across in just a few, cleverly-chosen words.

More Info: **Laconic** comes from the Greek place named Laconia, the region in which Sparta (which of course gives us *spartan*) was located. A famous story has an invading general threatening, “If I enter Laconia, I will raze Sparta to the ground.” The Spartans **laconically** replied, “If.”

lament

(verb, noun)

luh-MENT

Also *lamentable* (adj)

Definition: Mourn; express grief, sorrow, or regret (verb); an expression of grief, esp. as a song or poem (noun)

Usage: Silda said she couldn't make it to the party—she's still **lamenting** the death of her cat. In fact, she wrote a poem: "A **Lament** On the Topic of Buttons McFlufferton." **Lamentably**, Silda is a very bad poet.

Related Words: To *bewail* is to lament, while to *bemoan* can be to express grief or simply disapproval (to *bemoan* one's fate). The two words, of course, come from *wail* and *moan*. *Lachrymose* means tearful or mournful. A person might get *lachrymose* over a **lamentable** situation.

lampoon

(noun, verb)

lam-POON

Definition: A harsh satire (noun); ridicule or satirize (verb)

Usage: “As a Democrat,” said Bob, “I can’t say I appreciated watching that comedian in the Obama mask **lampoon** the State of the Union address.”

Related Words: To *satirize* is to use ridicule, sarcasm, etc. as a form of criticism. *Parody* is similar but often not as harsh—the key difference is that a *parody* is actually a copy (the *Scary Movie* series parodies the horror genre).

More Info: *Lampoon* comes from a French word for *to lap up*—as in, to guzzle beer, which is what you’d probably be doing while watching a **lampoon**.

landmark

(noun, adj)

LAND-mark

Definition: Object (such as a building) that stands out and can be used to navigate by; a very important place, event, etc.

Usage: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a **landmark** in the battle for equality. / In Lebanon, many roads are unmarked, and people navigate by **landmarks**—for instance, “third house down from the water tower.”

Related Words: A *watershed* is literally a division between two water drainage areas; a *watershed* or *watershed moment* is the point of a very important decision or shift.

languid

(adj)

LANG-wid

Also *languor* (noun)

Definition: Drooping from exhaustion, sluggish, slow; lacking in spirit

Usage: We signed up for a fitness boot camp, but after a single hour of exercise in the heat, we all felt so overcome with **anguor** that we refused to go on. Turns out the reason we need a fitness boot camp in the first place is that we're pretty **anguid** people.

Related Words: *Torpid* and *slothful* mean slow and lazy. *Indolent* means habitually lazy, such as a person who chooses never to work. *Lassitude* is weariness or lack of caring.

More Info: Don't confuse **anguor** with *langur*, a type of monkey. *Languorous* is a more pleasant version of **anguid**, suggesting dreamy relaxation.

lassitude

(noun)

LASS-it-tood

Definition: Tiredness, weariness; lazy indifference

Usage: It's so difficult to get anything done in the dead heat of August! I can't seem to shake my **lassitude** enough to get out of this hammock, much less study for the GRE.

Related Words: *Languid* (drooping from exhaustion, sluggish, slow; lacking in spirit). *Torpid* and *slothful* mean slow and lazy. *Indolent* means habitually lazy, such as a person who chooses never to work.

laudable

(adj)

LAW-dib-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).

lavish

(adj, verb)

LAVV-ish

Definition: Abundant or giving in abundance; marked by excess (adj); give very generously (verb)

Usage: Anita wanted to live as she imagined Beyonce lived, and ran up huge credit card bills pursuing a **lavish** lifestyle she could scarcely afford. / Although her rich banker boyfriend **lavished** gifts on her, she didn't want to be with someone she didn't really love.

Related Words: *Posh* (luxurious, elegant), *Tony* (aristocratic)

More Info: From Middle French *lavasse*, a downpour of rain. To **lavish** someone with gifts is to “rain down” upon that person with gifts.

layperson

(noun)

LAY-per-son

Also *laity* (noun), *lay* (adj)

Definition: a person who is not a member of the clergy or not a member of a particular profession (such as medicine, law, etc.)

Usage: The actress Jenny McCarthy has written a book about autism. While her experience as a parent is interesting to anyone in a similar situation, it's still important to remember that McCarthy is a **layperson**, not a doctor.

More Info: A **layperson** is literally a member of a church who is not a minister or priest. The *laity* is the church's membership (not including the clergy), or a group of people outside a particular profession. *Lay* can be an adjective meaning "pertaining to regular people," as in a *lay* version of a medical text.

levity

(noun)

LEVY-it-tee

Definition: Lightness (of mind, spirit, or mood) or lack of seriousness, sometimes in an inappropriate way

Usage: My late uncle Bill loved practical jokes and absolutely would have approved of the iPod mix my aunt played at the wake, which added a little **levity** by segueing from “Amazing Grace” to the party anthem “Let’s Get It Started.”

More Info: **Levity** comes from a Latin word for “lightness,” which also gives us *elevator*, *lever*, *leaven* (to cause bread to rise) and *levitate* (to cause to float, such as in a magic show).

levy

(verb, noun)

LEVY-ee

Definition: Collect tax from, wage war on, or enlist for military service; (verb); act of collecting tax or amount owed, or the drafting of troops into military service (noun)

Usage: When England **levied** yet another tax on the colonists, the colonists were pushed one further step towards **levying** war. Soon, the worried British began to **levy** troops.

Related Words: Do not confuse **levy** with *levee* (a slope or wall along a waterway, designed to stop flooding).

More Info: **Levy** has many definitions that seem somewhat unrelated; however, the root means “raise” or “lightness” (as in *lever*, *elevate*), so you can think of *raising* money through taxes, *raising* an army by drafting soldiers, or using that army to wage war.

liberal

(adj, noun)

LIBB-er-ull

Definition: Favorable to progress or reform; believing in maximum possible individual freedom; tolerant, open-minded; generous (adj); a person with such beliefs or practices (noun)

Usage: Split pea soup benefits from a **liberal** application of pepper. / **Liberal** reformers in Egypt pushed for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

Related Words: “**Liberal**” in modern American politics isn’t quite the same as the dictionary definition. For instance, **liberal** Democrats tend to favor social programs that require a larger government to administer, while some conservatives say that **liberalism** means having the smallest government possible in order to maximize freedom. For the GRE, **liberal** means generous, freely-flowing, open-minded, or pertaining to values like freedom of speech.

libertine

(noun)

LIBB-er-teen

Definition: Morally or sexually unrestrained person; freethinker (regarding religion)

Usage: A famed **libertine**, the sitcom star was constantly in the news for cavorting with women of dubious occupations and overdosing on drugs often enough to regularly hold up production of his popular television show.

Related Words: *Hedonists*, *sybarites*, and *voluptuaries* are people devoted to pleasure. *Debauchery* is excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures.

More Info: **Libertine** certainly is related to “liberty”—think of a **libertine** as someone who has a little too much liberty. You can also use **libertine** as an adjective (as in **libertine** attitudes).

likewise

(adverb)

LIKE-wize

Definition: Also, in addition to; similarly, in the same way

Usage: Chip was baffled by all the silverware set before him, so when his host began eating salad with the smallest, leftmost fork, Chip did **likewise**.

Related Words: *Moreover* (in addition to what has been said, for instance “His actions cost us the job; *moreover*, he seriously offended our client).”

More Info: In conversation, **likewise** can mean “Me, too.” When someone says “Nice to meet you,” you could say, “Likewise.”

log

(verb, noun)

LAHG

Definition: Keep a record of, write down; travel for or at a certain distance or speed (verb); a written record (noun)

Usage: Lawyers who bill by the hour have to be sure to **log** all the time they spend on every client's case. / You cannot get your pilot's license until you have **logged** 40 hours of flight time.

Related Words: *Chronicle* (a historical account in time order)

More Info: Of course, a **log** is a piece of a tree, and to **log** can also mean to cut down trees (what *loggers* do).

loquacious

(adj)

loh-KWAY-shuss

Definition: Talkative, wordy

Usage: The **loquacious** professor spoke at a million miles an hour and *still* regularly talked past the scheduled end time of the class.

Related Words: *Prolix* and *Verbose* are synonyms. *Magniloquent* and *Grandiloquent* mean speaking in a lofty, grandiose style.

More Info: The root “loq” means “speech” and also appears in *eloquent* and *interlocutor* (participant in a dialogue; interrogator).

lucid

(adj)

LOO-sid

Definition: Clear, easy to understand; rational, sane

Usage: After surgery, it'll take at least an hour until she's **lucid**—it's nothing to worry about, but patients sometimes talk complete nonsense until the anesthesia wears off and their speech becomes **lucid**.

Related Words: *Lucid* can mean literally clear, but often means metaphorically clear or clearheaded—a *lucid* argument, a *lucid* person. The similar *pellucid* usually means literally transparent, as in *pellucid waters*.

More Info: The root “luc” for “light” also occurs in *translucent*, *luminous*, *luminary*, *lucubrate* (work or study, originally by candlelight), and *elucidate* (make clear, explain).

lull

(noun, verb)

LULL

Definition: Soothe or cause to fall asleep (as in a *lullaby*); quiet down; make to feel secure, sometimes falsely (verb); a period of calm or quiet (noun)

Usage: Tisha always tried to be polite—if she had to slip out of class to use the bathroom, she waited for a **lull** in the action so as not to attract too much attention. / Grandma’s singing **lulled** the baby to sleep—much as, in her work as a spy during World War II, Grandma used her beauty and charm to **lull** foreign dignitaries into giving up their secrets.

Related Words: *Slack* usually means loose, negligent, or lazy, but a *slack* can also be a calm spot in the water or a period of quiet or suspended activity. The holidays represent a **lull** or *slack* in work at many companies.

makeshift

(noun, adj)

MAKE-shift

Definition: A temporary, often improvised, substitute (noun); improvised for temporary use (adj)

Usage: Lost in the woods for over 24 hours, the children were eventually found sleeping under a **makeshift** tent made from branches and old plastic bags. / I don't have a ladder, but I can stack up some boxes as a **makeshift**.

More Info: The expressions “thrown together” or “slapped together” express a similar idea of “making do” with the resources on hand. To “jury rig” something is to assemble it quickly with whatever materials you have available.

malleable

(adj)

MAL-ee-uh-bull

Definition: Able to be bent, shaped, or adapted

Usage: The more **malleable** the material, the easier it is to bend into jewelry—and the easier it is to damage that jewelry. / My mother is a little too **malleable**—she said she liked all the things her first husband liked, and now she says she likes all the things her second husband likes.

Related Words: *Tractable*, *pliable*, and *plastic* can also mean physically bendable, or metaphorically bendable, as in “easily influenced or shaped by others.” *Mutable* means changeable.

More Info: **Malleable** comes from a Latin word for “hammer” and thus shares a root with *mallet*.

maverick

(noun)

MAV-er-ick

Definition: Rebel, individualist, dissenter

Usage: Most cop movies feature heroes who are **maverick** police officers, breaking all the rules, blowing things up, and getting their guns confiscated by the chief—but ultimately saving the day.

Related Words: “Lone wolf” and “loose cannon” are expressions with similar meanings (although “loose cannon” implies that the person might do something crazy or dangerous).

More Info: Samuel Maverick was an American pioneer who didn’t brand (that is, show ownership by marking with a hot iron) his calves. In ranching lingo, a **maverick** is still an unbranded animal. Just as a **maverick** calf doesn’t bear a mark of ownership, a political **maverick** doesn’t belong to any party.

mendacious

(adj)

men-DAY-shuss

Also *mendacity* (noun)

Definition: Lying, habitually dishonest

Usage: She was so **mendacious** that, when she broke the television, she blamed it on her little brother, even though he was in a wheelchair and could hardly have tipped over a piece of furniture. Her **mendacity** knows no bounds!

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

More Info: **Mendacious** comes from a root for “defect, fault” that also gives us *mend* and *amendment*, which relate to fixing faults.

mercurial

(adj)

mer-CURE-ee-ull

Definition: Quickly and unpredictably changing moods; fickle, flighty

Usage: It's tough being married to someone so **mercurial**. I do pretty much the same thing every day—some days, she thinks I'm great, and other days, the exact same behaviors make her inexplicably angry.

Related Words: *Erratic* (inconsistent, wandering, having no fixed course)

More Info: **Mercurial** comes from the idea that people born under the planet Mercury are quick but volatile.

metamorphosis

(noun)

met-uh-MORE-fuh-siss

Also *metamorphose* (verb)

Definition: A complete change or transformation (in biology, a change such as a caterpillar becoming a pupa and then a butterfly)

Usage: Many reality show competitions are based on the idea of a contestant undergoing a **metamorphosis**, such as through dieting, exercise, life coaching, rehab, or plastic surgery—or all of the above.

More Info: “Meta” means “change” and “morph” means “shape” (*morphology* is the branch of biology dealing with form and structure of organisms). When people use “morph” as a short form of **metamorphose** (“Mighty Morphin Power Rangers”), they have actually used the wrong part of the word; the television heroes should be the Mighty Meta Power Rangers.

meticulous

(adj)

meh-TICK-yoo-luss

Definition: Taking extreme care in regards to details; precise, fussy

Usage: As a surgeon, of course Mom needs to be highly **meticulous** in her work—she gets things right down to a fraction of a millimeter. But this also means that when it's her night to cook, she's sometimes a little *too meticulous*—no one really needs a meatloaf to be sculpted into an absolutely perfect rectangular prism.

Related Words: *Finicky* or *Fastidious* (excessively particular, hard to please), *Exacting* (very severe in making demands; requiring precise attention)

mitigate

(verb)

MITT-igg-ayt

Definition: Make less severe; lessen or moderate (damage, grief, pain, etc.)

Usage: Sadly, his illness could not be cured, but the nurses made every effort to **mitigate** the symptoms.

Related Words: *Ameliorate*, *Palliate*, and *Alleviate* are near-synonyms, all of which could take the place of **mitigate** in the sentence above.

More Info: *Exacerbate* and *aggravate* are antonyms, referring to making something worse.

modest

(adj)

MAH-dest

Definition: Humble; simple rather than showy; decent (esp. “covering up” in terms of dress); small, limited

Usage: The reporter was surprised that the celebrity lived in such a **modest** house, one that looked just like every other plain, two-story house on the block. / Her first job out of college was a rude awakening—her **modest** salary was barely enough for rent, much less going out and having fun.

Related Words: *Paltry* (extremely small or worthless, insultingly small—in terms of money, often “a *paltry* sum”)

More Info: Many students know **modest** as in “a **modest** outfit” (one that doesn’t show too much) and are confused by references to “**modest** beginnings”—a person from a **modest** or *humble* background grew up poor (or relatively poor).

mollify

(verb)

MAH-lih-fy

Definition: Calm or soothe (an angry person); lessen or soften

Usage: The cellular company’s billing practices were so infuriating to customers that the customer service representatives spent every workday **mollifying** angry customers.

Related Words: *Appease*, *Placate*, and *Assuage* are near-synonyms.

More Info: **Mollify** shares a root (“soften”) with *emollient*, an ointment or lotion.

monotony

(noun)

muh-NOT-uh-nee

Definition: Sameness or repetitiousness to the point of being boring; lack of variation, uniformity, esp. repetition in sound

Usage: The **monotony** of working on a factory assembly line made her feel as though she would go insane from boredom.

Related Words: *Tedium* (that which is tiresome due to being too long, dull, or slow, as in *The plot moved at a tedious pace*).

More Info: **Monotone** comes from Latin parts for “one tone,” like a dial tone on an old-fashioned phone, or a very boring public speaker. Now, we can use **monotony** for things other than sound—for instance, studying vocabulary can get a little **monotonous** if you don’t make an effort to keep it interesting by writing your own fun sentences, practicing with friends, and thinking about the gloriousness of a high GRE score.

moreover

(adverb)

more-OH-ver

Definition: Besides; in addition to what was just stated

Usage: You are fired. **Moreover**, the police are coming to arrest you for theft.

Related Words: *Furthermore* is a synonym. Both words can be used to begin a new independent clause after a semicolon, as in, *We need additional studies to confirm our results; furthermore, we need funding for those studies.*

mores

(noun)

MORE-ayz

Definition: Customs, manners, or morals of a particular group

Usage: An American in Saudi Arabia should study the culture beforehand so as to avoid violating deeply conservative cultural **mores**.

Related Words: *Ethos* (the character, personality, or moral values specific to a person, group, time period, etc.)

More Info: Pronounce this word as two syllables (rhymes with “more ways”).

mundane

(adj)

mun-DAYN

Definition: Common, ordinary, everyday

Usage: Dominique had been excited to visit France for the first time, but she was soon disappointed at how **mundane** the stay with her relatives was: they shopped at the market, cooked dinner, chatted with one another, and occasionally went shopping.

Related Words: *Quotidian* can simply mean daily, or can have the more negative meaning of **mundane**.

More Info: **Mundane** comes from a root for “world” (the same root that gives us the Spanish *el mundo* and French *le monde*), the idea being that “earthly” things are below spiritual things.

naïve

(adj)

nye-EEV

Also *naivety* or *naivete* (noun)

Definition: Simple and unsophisticated, unsuspecting, lacking worldly experience and critical judgment

Usage: I was a little **naïve** during the hiring process—the HR rep asked for my acceptable salary range, and I answered honestly. Of course I got an offer for the very lowest number in the range! Now I know I should have tried to get a number from her first, or named a higher number so I could negotiate down.

Related Words: *Dupe* (person who is easily fooled or used, or to fool or exploit), *Sap* (person easily taken advantage of), *Credulous* (gullible)

More Info: *Naïvete* (or naïveté) looks strange because it's French; it just means *naïveness*. Other strange spellings also pop up in regards to this word: *naïf*, *naïfness*, *naïfly*—all the same word. As a noun, a *naïf* or **naïve** is simply a **naïve** person.

nascent

(adj)

NA-sent or NAY-sent

Definition: Coming into existence, still developing

Usage: The violin teacher was always very encouraging with children. All children sound terrible the first couple of years, so she offered plenty of praise to encourage **nascent** talents.

Related Words: *Inchoate* and *incipient* also mean just beginning, not yet completed, although *inchoate* can also have the sense of chaotic or disordered.

More Info: **Nascent** contains a Latin root (“born”) that also occurs in *prenatal* and *neonate* (a newborn baby).

negate

(verb)

neh-GAYT

Definition: Deny or refute; make void or cause to be ineffective

Usage: Darling, if you add “I promise to try to work things out for at least a couple of weeks before giving up” to our wedding vows, it would kind of **negate** the part where you promise to love, honor, and cherish me “until death do us part.” / The debate coach reminded the students that they had to **negate** each one of their opponents’ major points in order to win.

Related Words: *Nullify* is to make void or invalid. *Sap*, *Enfeeble*, and *Undermine* all mean “weaken” and thus are not as strong as **negate** or *nullify*.

More Info: Of course, **negate** is the same word we use in math, as in “To **negate** both sides of the equation, multiply through by -1.”

net

(adj, verb)

NET

Definition: Remaining after expenses or other factors have been deducted; ultimate (adj); to bring in as profit, or to catch as in a net (verb)

Usage: In one day of trading, my portfolio went up \$10,000 and down \$8,000, for a **net** gain of \$2,000. / All those weeks of working weekends and playing golf with the boss ought to **net** her a promotion.

Related Words: The opposite of **net** is *gross*. Your *gross* income is what your company pays you, and your **net** income is what you actually get to take home. If you sell merchandise, all the money you collect is the *gross*, but very little of that (or even none of it) may be profit—you have to subtract expenses to calculate the **net**.

More Info: A related idea is *tare*. If you go to a pay-by-the-pound salad bar and get your salad in a heavy dish, the person weighing the salad will often deduct the *tare*—the weight of the dish—prior to calculating what you pay.

nevertheless or nonetheless

(adverb)

NEV-er-the-less or NUN-the-less

Definition: However, even so, despite that

Usage: While losing the P&G account was a serious blow, we **nevertheless** were able to achieve a new sales goal this month due to the tireless efforts of the sales team in bringing in three new clients. / I really can't stand working with you. **Nonetheless**, we're stuck on this project together and we're going to have to get along.

Related Words: *Notwithstanding* means “in spite of” or “all the same,” as in “The ballerina kept dancing, **notwithstanding** her injuries.”

notoriety

(noun)

noh-ter-RY-et-ee

Also *notorious* (adj)

Definition: Ill fame; the state of being well-known for a disgraceful reason

Usage: Bill was **notorious** for being late to everything—after awhile, his friends just stopped inviting him to the movies. / Some countries ban convicted criminals from capitalizing on their **notoriety** by writing books from prison or selling rights to movies about their lives.

Related Words: *Infamous* is a synonym for **notorious**.

More Info: Not only did rapper The Notorious B.I.G. adopt the word **notorious** for his name, actress Tori Spelling has starred in a reality show entitled “So NoTORIous.” We guess it’s cool to be famous in a bad way?

novel

(adj)

NAH-vull

Definition: New, fresh, original

Usage: You can make your writing better by eliminating clichés and replacing those clichés with more **novel** turns of speech. / Smoked salmon on a pizza? That’s certainly a **novel** idea.

Related Words: There are many more words for old, stale, overused ideas or writing lacking in **novelty**; *trite*, *insipid*, *banal*, and *hackneyed* are all antonyms of **novel**.

More Info: **Novel** is related to the French *nouvelle*, “new.” The meaning of **novel** as a book-length work of fiction comes from the idea of a “new story.”

nuance

(noun)

NOO-ahnss

Definition: A subtle difference in tone, meaning, expression, etc.

Usage: People with certain cognitive disabilities cannot understand the **nuances** of non-literal speech. For instance, “You can come if you want to, but it’s really going to be mostly family” means that you shouldn’t try to come.

Related Words: Usually occurring in the plural, *nuances* has the synonym *subtleties*.

More Info: **Nuance** can be important in negotiating, social situations, and flirting. **Nuance** comes from a root for “cloud” and describes that which is “cloudy” in the sense of being hard to discern. Incidentally, *nubilous* means cloudy.

objective

(adj)

ahb-JECT-iv

Definition: Factual, related to reality or physical objects; not influenced by emotions, unbiased

Usage: You cannot be forced to testify against your spouse in a court of law—it's pretty impossible for anyone to be **objective** about the guilt or innocence of a spouse. / Some philosophers argue that things like “love” and “guilt” don't exist, and that only **objective** reality—that is, physical matter—is of consequence.

Related Words: *Impartial, Disinterested, Dispassionate, and Nonpartisan* are all related to being fair and not having a bias or personal stake.

More Info: The opposite of **objective** is *subjective* (taking place only in the mind, personal).

obsequious

(adj)

ahb-SEEK-wee-uss

Definition: Servile, very compliant, fawning

Usage: Sammy thought he could get ahead by being **obsequious**, but instead, his boss gave a promotion to someone he viewed as more of a peer; truthfully, he thought Sammy’s sucking up was pretty pathetic.

Related Words: *Sycophant*, *Lackey*, *Toady*, and *Myrmidon* are all words for an **obsequious** person (colloquially, a “bootlicker”). *Fawn* means to try to please in a submissive way, *Truckle* means to act subserviently and *Kowtow* means to fawn— or, literally, to bow until one’s forehead touches the floor.

More Info: The root “sequi” means “follow” and also appears in *sequel* and *sequence*.

obsolete

(adj)

ahb-suh-LEET

Also *obsolescence* (noun)

Definition: Out of date, no longer in use

Usage: She kept her old laptop so long that it was **obsolete**—she couldn't sell it on Craigslist, and the local elementary school didn't even want it as a donation. / When you look up a word in the dictionary and see “Archaic” next to a definition, that means that definition is **obsolete**—people don't use the word that way anymore, although you might want to know that meaning if you're reading old texts.

Related Words: *Antediluvian* (extremely old, before the Biblical flood)

More Info: “Planned **obsolescence**” is a business strategy of making products with a deliberately limited life so you'll have to buy new ones.

obstinate

(adj)

AHB-stinn-it

Definition: Stubborn or hard to control

Usage: It's difficult to get an **obstinate** child to eat food he doesn't want to eat. When Toby realized that his son would rather sit and starve than eat mahi-mahi, he gave in and made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Related Words: *Intractable* is a synonym. *Obdurate* (stubborn, hardhearted, hardened in wrongdoing) can mean **obstinate** but is often more negative.

More Info: From the Latin “stinare,” meaning “to stand.” **Obstinate** people certainly do stand their ground.

obviate

(verb)

AHB-vee-ayt

Definition: Prevent, eliminate, or make unnecessary

Usage: Adding protective heel taps to your dress shoes can **obviate** the need to take them to the shoe repair store later, once the heels have worn down.

Related Words: *Circumvent* (go around, avoid, bypass, such as *circumventing the rules*)

More Info: It can be confusing that **obviate** looks so much like *obvious* but doesn't seem related. The words do share a root, and the common meaning is that something that is “in the way” is *obvious*—and also takes some effort to avoid or **obviate**.

occult

(noun, adj, verb)

uh-CULT

Definition: The supernatural (noun); pertaining to magic, astrology, etc.; mysterious, secret or hidden (adj); to hide, to shut off from view (verb)

Usage: A group of religious parents demanded that a popular series of young adult vampire novels be banned in schools because it promoted the **occult**. / During a solar eclipse, the moon **occults** the sun and it is momentarily dark in the middle of the day.

Related Words: *Eclipse* (the obscuring of one thing by another, such as the sun by the moon or a person by a more famous or talented person, or to obscure, darken, make less important)

offhand

(adj)

OFF-hand

Definition: Casual, informal; done without preparation or forethought; rude in a short way, brusque

Usage: I was pretty happy with my salary until my coworker Deena mentioned **offhandedly** that she was thinking about buying a house now that she made six figures.

Related Words: *Extemporaneous* and *Impromptu* (done with no or little preparation), *Ad-lib* (to improvise; something improvised)

officious

(adj)

uh-FISH-uss

Definition: Excessively eager in giving unwanted advice or intruding where one is not wanted; meddlesome, pushy

Usage: Lisa's dinner parties are exhausting. She's an **officious** host who butts in and runs everyone's conversations, keeps an eye on what everyone is eating and makes sure you finish your vegetables, and even knocks on the bathroom door to make sure you're "okay in there."

Related Words: In common speech, most of us would call an **officious** person "nosy" or a "busybody."

offset

(verb, noun)

off-SET (v), *OFF-set* (n)

Definition: Counteract, compensate for (verb); a counterbalance (noun)

Usage: Property taxes did go up this year, but the hit to our finances was **offset** by a reduction in fees paid to our homeowners association.

More Info: Something **offset** is “set off” against something else, such as by acting as a counterweight. A **carbon offset** is a reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases that can be applied to compensate for emissions made someplace else. That is, a company that sends out a lot of carbon dioxide can compensate for polluting by financially supporting energy efficiency or wind turbine projects.

onerous

(adj)

ONN-er-uss

Definition: Burdensome, oppressive, hard to endure

Usage: Doctors are often faced with the **onerous** task of telling waiting families that their loved one has died.

Related Words: *Cumbersome* also means burdensome (or clumsy or unwieldy), but usually in a physical way, whereas **onerous** is generally metaphorical. *Arduous* means difficult.

More Info: **Onerous** comes from *onus*, a modern-day word meaning “burden,” and is often used in the expression “put the onus on” (The committee put the *onus* on Joe to get everything turned in on time).

opaque

(adj)

oh-PAYK

Definition: Not translucent; not allowing light, heat, etc. to pass through; dark, dull, unclear or stupid

Usage: The school dress code required **opaque** tights under skirts—the rules specified that sheer stockings were unacceptable. / Rena was tragically **opaque**—when her boyfriend said “I want to see other people,” she thought he meant he needed glasses.

Related Words: *Turbid* refers literally to water that is muddy and not clear because of stirred-up dirt or mud; metaphorically, it can mean obscured or confused, as in *turbid feelings*.

optimal or optimum

(adj)

AHP-tim-ull or AHP-tim-um

Also *optimize* (verb)

Definition: Best, most desirable or favorable

Usage: Many believe that the U.S. Constitution’s genius lies in its striking and **optimal** balance between freedom and order.

More Info: Since *prime* means “of first importance,” Transformers hero Optimus Prime’s name seems a bit redundant, but gets the message across—he’s best *and* first!

orthodox

(adj)

ORE-thoh-docks

Definition: Adhering to a traditional, established faith, or to anything customary or commonly accepted

Usage: I appreciate that the new dentist thinks that my oral health can be improved through yoga, but I really prefer a more **orthodox** approach to dental care.

Related Words: *Conventional* means traditional or customary. The opposite of **orthodox** is, of course, *unorthodox*—or its synonym, *heterodox*.

More Info: “Ortho” means “correct, true, straight” and also appears in *orthodontist*, *orthopedist*, etc. The root “doct/dox” means “opinion” or “teach, know” and occurs in *doctrine*, *doctor*, *paradox*, and *doctrinaire* (person who applies doctrine in an impractical or rigid and close-minded way).

oscillate

(verb)

AH-sill-ayt

Definition: Swing back and forth; waver, change one's mind

Usage: I wish we had air conditioning, but at least I replaced our old fan with this **oscillating** one that swings side to side and blows air on the whole room. / Stop **oscillating** and pick a restaurant! Seriously—Indian or Thai?

Related Words: *Equivocate* (use unclear language to deceive or avoid committing to a position), *Ambivalent* (uncertain; unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once), *Vacillate* and *Waffle* (waver, be indecisive), *Dither* (act irresolutely), *Tergiversate* (repeatedly change one's opinions, equivocate)

More Info: This word has a weird story—the Latin “oscillum” means “little face.” Masks of Bacchus, the god of wine, used to be hung in vineyards to **oscillate** in the breeze.

outstrip

(verb)

out-STRIP

Definition: Surpass, exceed; be larger or better than; leave behind

Usage: Our sales figures this quarter have **outstripped** those of any other quarter in the company's history.

Related Words: The expression “leave in the dust” has a similar meaning. *Supersede* means to replace or cause to be set aside (*iPods have superseded portable CD players*).

More Info: Other *out-* words can have the sense of “do better than”—for instance, *outweigh*, *outsell*, *outshine*. To *outpace* is to be faster than and to *outwit* or *outfox* is to be more clever than. Here's a weird one: to *outbrave* is to be more brave than.

overshadow

(verb)

oh-ver-SHAD-oh

Definition: Cast a shadow over, darken; dominate, make to seem less important

Usage: She was a straight-A student who excelled at field hockey, but she still felt **overshadowed** by her older sister, who won a national science competition for her work on cancer in mice, and also had time to become a pole vaulting champion and model who walked in Fashion Week.

Related Words: *Eclipse* (the obscuring of one thing by another, such as the sun by the moon or a person by a more famous or talented person, or to obscure, darken, make less important)

paradigm

(noun)

PAIR-uh-dime

Definition: Model or pattern; worldview, set of shared assumptions, values, etc.

Usage: Far from being atypically bawdy, this limerick is a **paradigm** of the form—nearly all of them rely on off-color jokes.

Related Words: *Prototype* (original model serving as the basis for future copies or versions), *Exemplar* (example, item that is representative or typical, something worthy of imitation)

More Info: “Para” means “beside.” **Paradigm** comes from two Greek word parts meaning “beside” and “show” and combined into the Greek “paradiegma” for “pattern or example.”

paradox

(noun)

PAIR-uh-docks

Definition: Contradiction, or seeming contradiction that is actually true

Usage: Kayla was always bothering the youth minister with her **paradoxes**, like “If God is all-powerful, can He make a burrito so big He can’t eat it?”

Related Words: *Conundrum* (a riddle, the answer to which involves a play on words; any mystery), *Enigma* (puzzle, mystery, riddle; mysterious or contradictory person)

More Info: The root “doct/dox” means “opinion” or “teach, know” and occurs in *doctrine*, *doctor*, and *doctrinaire* (person who applies doctrine in an impractical or rigid and close-minded way).

pariah

(noun)

puh-RYE-uh

Definition: Social outcast, untouchable

Usage: After the schoolteacher was fired for participating in what some called a “hate rally,” he became a **pariah** in his own town, glared at in the grocery store—even his longtime barber refused him a haircut.

More Info: This word comes from the Tamil language, spoken in India, and is related to the caste system and to the lowest group of people in it, the “untouchables” or **pariahs**.

partial

(adj)

PAR-shull

Definition: Biased, prejudiced, favoring one over others; having a special liking for something or someone (usually **partial to**)

Usage: Although I grew up in New York, I've always been **partial** to country music. / His lawyers are appealing on the grounds that the judge was **partial** to the plaintiff, even playing golf with the plaintiff during the trial.

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

More Info: Of course, **partial** can also mean “not complete.” The connection between the two meanings is that, if you are **partial** to pumpkin pie, for instance, you are “one-sided” about it.

partisan

(adj, noun)

PAR-tiss-un

Definition: Devoted to a particular group, cause, etc. (adj.); fervent supporter of a group, party, idea, etc.; guerilla fighter (noun)

Usage: It is unconscionable to engage in **partisan** politics in a time of crisis. People are trapped in the rubble of an earthquake, and you suggest that we vote for your tax bill in exchange for your voting for our relief bill?

Related Words: *Partial* (biased, prejudiced; having a special liking for something)

More Info: **Partisan** is related to the idea of a *party* (as in a political party). A party or other self-interested group can also be called a *faction*. *Partisanship* gone too far could be called *factionalism*. *Bipartisan* means pertaining to both parties (typically in a two-party system), and *nonpartisan* means unbiased or not affiliated with a party.

patent

(adj, noun)

PAT-ent

Definition: Obvious, apparent, plain to see (adj); a letter from a government guaranteeing an inventor the rights to his or her invention (noun)

Usage: Her resume was full of **patent** lies: anyone could check to see that she had never been president of UNICEF.

Related Words: *Blatant* means obvious or flagrant and is used to describe something bad (*blatantly disregarding the rules*).

More Info: **Patent** comes from a Latin root for “openness,” also appearing in *petal*. A “letter patent” was once an open letter, and this is the origin of “**patent**” as a record of idea ownership—if you have a **patent**, there is an “open letter” (**patent** for all to see) attesting that your invention belongs to you.

pathological

(adj)

path-oh-LODGE-ick-ull

Definition: Relating to or caused by disease; relating to compulsive bad behavior

Usage: She thought her skin darkening was simply a result of the sun, but it was actually **pathological**, the result of a serious disease. / I can't believe you stole from the Make a Wish Foundation—you're **pathological**!

More Info: “Pathos” means “disease.” **Pathological** often occurs as “**pathological** liar.” When **pathological** is used alone to describe a person, the meaning is that the person compulsively lies or hurts others.

patronizing

(adj)

PAY-truh-nize-ing

Also *patronize* (verb)

Definition: Condescending, having a superior manner, treating as an inferior

Usage: I'm not surprised that Professor McDougal used to teach kindergarten. His **patronizing** tone has been driving me crazy. Not only does he assume we can barely add or subtract, he also makes us put our heads down and have a moment of silence.

More Info: As a verb, **patronize** means to be a *patron* of—that is, to support with money. You can be a *patron* of the arts, and restaurants sometimes have signs thanking you for your *patronage*. This meaning is positive, while being **patronizing** is negative. What's the connection? This word (along with *patriotic*) comes from the Latin “pater,” for “father.” Even in Roman times, fathers had a certain stereotype—they give you money, but they also talk to you like you're a little kid.

paucity

(noun)

PAW-sit-ee

Definition: Scarcity, the state of being small in number

Usage: Our school has such a disgraceful **paucity** of textbooks that the students are sharing, and so cannot even count on being able to take the books home to do homework.

Related Words: *Dearth* (scarcity, lack)

More Info: **Paucity** is related to *pauper*, a very poor person.

peccadillo

(noun)

peck-uh-DILL-oh

Definition: Small sin or fault

Usage: I'm going to propose to Melinda tomorrow—sure, she has her **peccadillos**, like anyone, but she's the perfect woman for me.

More Info: “Pecado” is Spanish for “sin.” Adding “-illo” to a Spanish word indicates “small” (a *tomatillo* resembles a small tomato, for instance). Thus, **peccadillo** means “small sin.” English speakers pronounce the word like “armadillo,” although of course Spanish speakers would use a “y” sound for the double l.

pedestrian

(adj)

puh-DESS-tree-un

Definition: Ordinary, dull, commonplace

Usage: It was so amazing when you had us over to dinner and made that rack of lamb! I'm afraid neither of us is a professional chef like you are, though, so we hope you won't mind that we've made something more **pedestrian**: hot dogs and French fries.

Related Words: *Prosaic* means “relating to prose” or “ordinary, dull, commonplace”—the idea being that prose is not as exciting or noble as poetry.

More Info: Of course, a **pedestrian** is also someone who travels on foot (the root for “foot” also appears in *pedal*, *moped*, and *podiatrist*). The connection with “ordinary” is that a distinguished person would travel on horseback—only the common folk would travel on foot.

penchant

(noun)

PEN-chint

Definition: Liking or inclination (usually **penchant for**)

Usage: He seems like a mild-mannered accountant, but twice a year he jets off to Australia to satisfy his **penchant for** adventure sports.

Related Words: *Predilection*, *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*). *Partial* means biased, or having a special liking for something or someone.

More Info: From the French *penchant* (“leaning”) which comes from a Latin root that also gives us *pendulum*. A person with a **penchant** *leans* metaphorically in a certain direction.

perfidious

(adj)

per-FIDD-ee-uss

Definition: Disloyal, treacherous, violating one's trust

Usage: The **perfidious** soldier sold out his comrades, giving secrets to the enemy in exchange for money and protection.

Related Words: *Apostate* (person who deserts a party, cause, religion, etc.), *Recreant* (coward or deserter), *Quisling* (person who betrays his country by aiding an invader), *Infidel* (unbeliever, person who does not accept a particular faith)

More Info: **Perfidious** contains the root “fid,” for “trust,” also appearing in *diffident*, *fiduciary*, *infidel*, and Fidel Castro's name.

peripheral

(adj)

puh-RIFF-er-ull

Definition: Relating to or making up an outer boundary or region; not of primary importance, fringe

Usage: My main goal is to get into a good grad school. Whether it has good fitness facilities is really a **peripheral** concern.

Related Words: *Auxiliary* (helping or supporting the main thing)

More Info: “Peri” means “around.” **Peripheral** vision is what you can see “out of the corner of your eye.”

permeate

(verb)

PER-mee-ayt

Definition: Spread or penetrate throughout

Usage: Under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity began to **permeate** every sector of public life.

Related Words: *Pervade* is a synonym. Both words use the root “per” for “through.”

pervasive

(adj)

per-VAY-siv

Definition: Tending to spread throughout

Usage: Poverty is **pervasive** in our school system; 65% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Related Words: *Omnipresent* and *ubiquitous* mean existing everywhere.

philanthropy

(noun)

fill-ANN-thruh-pee

Definition: Efforts to improve the well-being of humankind, generally through giving money

Usage: Many wealthy people turn to **philanthropy** as a way to create social good, and many others turn to it as a way to hobnob with the rich and famous.

Related Words: *Altruism* (selflessness, concern for the welfare of others)

More Info: “Phil” means “love” (a *bibliophile* loves books) and “anthro” means “humankind.” A *misanthropist* is a hater of humankind.

phony

(adj)

FOH-nee

Definition: Fake, counterfeit; insincere, not genuine

Usage: Phony Louis Vuitton bags are easily purchased in Chinatown, but they are illegal—selling them can land a vendor in jail, and the counterfeit bags are often made with child labor. / She’s such a **phony** person, pretending to befriend people and then talking about them behind their backs.

Related Words: *Faux*, *apocryphal*, and *spurious* all mean fake or counterfeit. A **phony** person may possess various *affectations* (fake behavior, such as in speech or dress, adopted to give a certain impression).

pious

(adj)

PIE-uss

Also *piety* (noun)

Definition: Devout; religiously reverent and dutiful

Usage: Some matrimonial websites catering to conservative religious groups contain listings for young women that feature testimonials from the woman’s relatives about her **piety**. Naturally, only similarly **pious** suitors need apply.

More Info: **Pious** shares a root (“pure”) with *purity*, *puree*, and *purge*.

pith

(noun)

PITH

Definition: Core, essence; significance or weight

Usage: I can only stay at this meeting for a minute—can you get to the **pith** of the issue now, and discuss the details after I leave? / This presentation has no **pith**—there's no central point and nothing I didn't already know.

Related Words: *Gist* means main idea. To *distill* is to purify (as water) or extract the essential elements of (as an idea).

More Info: **Pith** is also the central part of a plant stem, feather, or hair. To **pith** cattle is to kill it by severing the spinal cord—that is, the central part. A *pith helmet* (worn in battle) is so called because it was originally made from the **pith** of the Bengal spongewood tree.

placate

(verb)

PLAY-cayt

Definition: Satisfy or calm down (an angry or dissatisfied person), esp. by conciliatory gestures

Usage: “It’s an interesting business model,” said the flower shop owner. “Outside of Valentine’s Day, our average customer uses our product to **placate** an angry partner.”

Related Words: *Appease*, *Mollify*, *Conciliate*, and *Assuage* are near-synonyms. *Implacable* means “not able to be placated.”

More Info: “Conciliatory gestures” (as in the definition above) could mean giving in, lowering oneself, compromising one’s principles, offering gifts or rebates, etc.

placid

(adj)

PLASS-id

Definition: Peaceful, calm, tranquil

Usage: Famed Spanish tenor Placido Domingo has an unusual name—literally, “Peaceful Sunday.” It’s certainly not a coincidence that Placido looks so much like **placid**.

Related Words: *Quiescent* (quiet, still)

More Info: The movie *Lake Placid* is about a lake containing a man-eating crocodile, which is really NOT **placid**. Lake Placid is a real place in New York, though, and seems to have been named with much the same thought in mind as the Pacific Ocean (*pacific* also means peaceful).

plastic

(adj)

PLASS-tick

Definition: Able to be shaped or formed; easily influenced

Usage: A young child’s mind is quite **plastic**, and exposure to violent movies and video games can have a much greater effect on children than they typically do on adults.

Related Words: *Tractable*, *pliable*, and *malleable* can also mean physically bendable, or metaphorically bendable, as in “easily influenced or shaped by others.” *Mutable* means changeable.

More Info: The word **plastic** is much older than the substance we call “plastic.” *Plastic surgery* is so called because it reshapes parts of the body, not because the substance plastic is involved.

plausible

(noun)

PLAW-zib-ull

Also *plausibility* (noun)

Definition: Believable; having the appearance of truth

Usage: When three doctors treating crash victims were suddenly stricken with what looked like the effects of nerve gas, hospital officials posited “hysteria” as the culprit—hardly a **plausible** explanation, as emergency room doctors are accustomed to seeing horrific things every day.

Related Words: *Credible* (believable), *Feasible* (possible; logical or likely; suitable), *Viable* (able to live or develop; capable of success, practicable, workable)

More Info: **Plausible** shares a Latin root (“approve”) with *applause* and *plaudits*.

plummet

(verb)

PLUM-it

Definition: Plunge, fall straight down

Usage: During the first 60 seconds or so of a skydive, the diver **plummets** towards Earth in freefall; then, he or she activates a parachute and floats down at what seems like a relatively leisurely pace.

More Info: As a noun, a **plummet** (or *plumb bob*) is a weight on the end of a cord. To *plumb* (or *sound*) the depths of a body of water is to drop a **plummet** (or sounding line) and see how much cord is used when the **plummet** hits the bottom, and therefore how deep the water is. When something **plummets**, the idea is that it is falling fast and straight down, as though it has been weighted.

polarized

(adj)

POH-ler-rize-d

Definition: Divided into sharply opposed groups

Usage: The school board was used to rationally discussing issues, but when it came to the teaching of evolution in schools, the board was **polarized**, immediately splitting into two camps, with the discussion devolving into a shouting match within minutes.

Related Words: *Faction* (group or clique within a larger organization), *Partisan* (partial to a particular party, group, etc., esp. in a biased, emotional way), *Cabal* (a conspiratorial group)

More Info: In science, **polarized** objects have positive electric charges in one area and negative electric charges in another.

ponderous

(adj)

PAHN-der-uss

Definition: Heavy; bulky and unwieldy; dull, labored

Usage: The book assigned by her professor was a **ponderous** tome, more a reference book than something you could read straight through. She was so bored she thought she would die.

Related Words: *Tedium* (that which is tiresome due to being too long, dull, or slow, as in *The plot moved at a tedious pace*)

More Info: To *ponder* is simply to contemplate or think deeply about. But **ponderous** means boring, difficult to make your way through. Both are based on the idea of “heaviness”—considering “heavy” ideas makes you a thoughtful person, but having to listen to a long, boring speech might seem like a heavy weight upon you.

posthumous

(adj)

PAHSS-chum-muss

Definition: Happening or continuing after death

Usage: Ernest Hemingway died in 1961. His novel *The Garden of Eden* was published **posthumously** in 1986.

More Info: “Post” means “after,” course. **Posthumous** also shares a root with *humus*—earth or soil, as in the kind a deceased person is buried in. (Not to be confused with *hummus*, the spread made from chickpeas). **Posthumous** often describes the publication of books, the granting of awards or military honors, or the birth of a child after the father’s death.

potentate

(noun)

POH-tent-ayt

Definition: Ruler, person of great power

Usage: 62-year-old Prince Charles has certainly waited long enough to become **potentate** of England; his mother, Elizabeth II, has been ruling for his entire life.

Related Words: *Sovereign* can be a noun meaning “monarch or supreme ruler,” or an adjective meaning “having supreme power, being above all others.”

More Info: **Potentate** shares a root (“power”) with *omnipotent* (all powerful), *impotent* (lacking power), and *despot* (ruler who uses power in a bad way).

pragmatic

(adj)

prag-MAT-ick

Definition: Practical; dealing with actual facts and reality

Usage: Megan and Dave were in love, but Megan decided to be **pragmatic**—she doubted they’d stay together through a four-year long distance relationship as they attended different colleges, so she figured they might as well end things now.

Related Words: *Politic* (shrewd, pragmatic; tactful or diplomatic), *Expedient* (suitable, proper; effective, often at the expense of ethics or other considerations)

More Info: A *pragmatic sanction* is a ruler’s declaration having the force of law. A ruler might issue a *pragmatic sanction* when the ideal situation isn’t possible, so one must be practical and “just get the job done.”

preamble

(noun)

PREE-am-bull

Definition: Introductory statement, preface

Usage: The **Preamble** to the Constitution is a brief introduction that begins, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...” / The unusual outfit the pop star wore to her first awards ceremony was a mere **preamble** to a career of full-blown crazy dressing.

Related Words: A *prologue* is an introductory part, usually of a work of literature.

More Info: **Preamble** literally means “walk before.” The root for “walk” is also found in *amble*, *ambulance*, *ambulatory*, and *circumambulate*.

precarious

(adj)

prick-CAIR-ee-uss

Definition: Unstable, insecure, dangerous

Usage: Recognizing that his position at the company was **precarious**, Sanjay requested that his bonus structure be formally written down as a contract, rather than dangled over him as a mere verbal promise.

Related Words: *Parlous* is a synonym.

precursor

(noun)

prick-KER-ser or PREE-ker-ser

Definition: Something that comes before, esp. something that also announces or suggests something on its way

Usage: We cannot ignore this warning sign—it is clearly a **precursor** of larger problems to come. / The new CEO decided to do things differently from his **precursors**.

Related Words: *Antedate* (be older than, precede in time; assign to an earlier date)

More Info: The “cursor” in **precursor** is the same as in *currency*—the root means “run.” A **precursor** can be thought of as a “before-runner,” or *forerunner* (a synonym).

predisposed

(adj)

pree-diss-POH-zd

Also *predisposition* (noun)

Definition: Having an inclination or tendency beforehand; susceptible

Usage: Some autoimmune disorders don't kill the patient directly, but rather make the patient **predisposed** to contracting other, potentially fatal illnesses. / His defense attorney argued that his abusive childhood **predisposed** him to a life of crime.

More Info: **Predisposed** certainly is related to the idea of being *disposed*. While *to dispose of* something is to throw it away, to *be disposed to* do something is to be inclined to or willing to do it. For instance, *He is disposed to be a good host*.

preempt or pre-empt

(verb)

pre-EMPT

Definition: Prevent; take the place of, supplant; take before someone else can

Usage: The speaker attempted to **preempt** an excessively long Q&A session by handing out a “Frequently Asked Questions” packet at the beginning of the seminar.

Related Words: *Obviate* (prevent, eliminate, or make unnecessary)

More Info: The “empt” part of **preempt** comes from a rare word for “purchase”—to **preempt** can also mean to settle on public land in order to establish the right to purchase that land before anyone else.

presumptive

(adj)

prizz-ZUMP-tiv

Definition: Based on inference or assumption; providing reasonable grounds for belief

Usage: The dictator's favorite nephew is the **presumptive** heir to power, but anything could happen. / He's the **presumptive** winner of the election—we haven't counted all the votes, but at this point it's almost mathematically impossible for the other guy to win.

Related Words: *Ostensible or ostensive* (professed, evident, or pretended; outwardly appearing in a certain way), *Putative* (supposed or reputed)

More Info: Don't confuse **presumptive** with *presumptuous*, meaning assuming in an arrogant way. *He's presumptively a nice guy, at least from what I've heard—my sister said he wasn't presumptuous at all.*

presumptuous

(adj)

prizz-ZUMP-choo-uss

Definition: Too bold or forward; going beyond that which is proper

Usage: I would never date that **presumptuous** jerk! I mean, I thought he was attractive until he walked up to me and said, “We should go out—I looked up your address on Google and I’ll pick you up at 8.” The nerve!

More Info: Don’t confuse **presumptuous** with *presumptive*, meaning “based on inference or assumption,” as in a *presumptive heir to the throne*.

pretentious

(adj)

prit-TENT-chuss

Definition: Claiming or demanding a position of importance or dignity, esp. when unjustified; showing off, creating a deceptive, false show of worth

Usage: Josie found her date's habit of constantly dropping French phrases into conversation to be incredibly **pretentious**, especially since he knew she didn't speak French. He sure did sound fancy, though.

Related Words: *Ostentatious* (pretentious, boastfully showy in order to impress others)

More Info: **Pretentious** shares an origin with *pretend* and *pretense* (pretending or making a false show of something).

principled

(adj)

PRIN-sip-ull-d

Definition: Having high moral standards

Usage: Donna was only an intern, but she was also quite **principled**—although she knew it would kill her shot at a full-time job, she was the one who alerted the authorities when asked to violate federal law via corrupt accounting practices.

Related Words: *Scrupulous* can mean **principled** (strictly following moral rules), or can mean precise, exact, careful about the details.

More Info: A *principle* is a moral rule. A *principal* is the head of a school, and *principal* as an adjective means first or most important (the money you owe on student loans, not including the interest, is the *principal*). Thus, you could say something like *My principal principle is never to lie*.

pristine

(adj)

priss-TEEN

Definition: In an original, pure state; uncorrupted

Usage: Having grown up in a rural area, Billy had been in plenty of forests where people regularly left beer cans and shotgun shells behind. So it truly took his breath away, after hiking hours through the Himalayas, to visit a **pristine** forest, seemingly untouched by humans.

Related Words: *Unadulterated* and *unsullied* are near-synonyms.

probity

(noun)

PROH-bit-ee

Definition: Honesty, integrity

Usage: After losing the last election when their candidate's string of mistresses came to light, this time, the party would only nominate a candidate whose **probity** was beyond any doubt.

Related Words: *Scrupulous* or *principled* (having high moral standards), *Veracious* (honest, true)

More Info: Normally we think of a “probe” as sort of medically unpleasant, but the real purpose of a *probe* is to get information—for instance, a government *probe* might investigate corruption, or *probe* for the truth.

prodigal

(adj)

PROD-dig-ull

Definition: Wasteful, extravagant; giving abundantly, lavish

Usage: If you're going to leave a trust fund for your children, you should raise them not to be **prodigal**, or they'll blow through all the cash the minute they get their hands on it. / The **prodigal** land produced larger crops than the people could even consume.

Related Words: *Profligate* (utterly immoral or extremely prodigal), *Wastrel* or *Spendthrift* (wasteful person)

More Info: In the Biblical story of the **prodigal** son, a son asks his dad if he can have his inheritance now, before the dad dies (rude!), then wastes everything on wild living and comes back all hungry and apologetic, begging for a job as a swineherd (the nice dad takes him back and kills a fattened calf for him). Don't confuse **prodigal** with *prodigy* (very gifted child).

prodigious

(adj)

pruh-DID-juss

Definition: Extraordinarily large, impressive, etc.

Usage: The Great Wall of China consists of a **prodigious** series of fortifications stretching over 5,000 miles! / If we don't double our sales with this new product, we will have to declare bankruptcy—we have a **prodigious** task ahead.

Related Words: **Prodigious** can be good or bad, but *Titanic* and *Olympian* specifically mean large or majestic in a manner suitable for the gods.

More Info: **Prodigious** shares an origin with *prodigy* (very gifted child).

profligate

(adj)

PRAH-fligg-it

Definition: Completely and shamelessly immoral, or extremely wasteful

Usage: The billionaire software developer was so disgusted with his **profligate** daughter's spending that he cut her off—she had bought champagne for an entire nightclub full of strangers one too many times.

Related Words: *Prodigal* (wasteful, extravagant), *Debauched* (corrupted morally), *Dissolution* (sinking into extreme hedonism, vice, and degradation)

profound

(adj)

proh-FOUND

Definition: Very insightful, penetrating deeply into a subject; pervasive, intense, “down to the very bottom”; at the very bottom

Usage: Certain fish that live in the dark, **profound** depths of the ocean have long since evolved to have sightless eyes. / He was **profoundly** disappointed when the project he had worked on for fifteen years failed.

More Info: Most people know **profound** in the sense “Whoa, that’s deep, man.” Fewer people know that you can have *profound grief* or be *profoundly corrupt*. In both cases, **profound** means “complete, all the way through.”

profuse

(adj)

proh-FYOOSS

Definition: Abundant, extravagant, giving or given freely

Usage: It didn't mean anything at all to me, giving my old microwave to the family next door, but the woman's **profuse** thanks made me think that maybe the family was having some financial troubles. / She came home on Valentine's Day to an apartment decorated with a **profusion** of flowers.

Related Words: *Copious* (abundant, plentiful), *Lavish* (abundant or giving in abundance; marked by excess)

More Info: Here, "pro" means "forth" and "fuse" comes from the Latin "fundere," meaning "pour or melt." "Fuse" is also found in *fusion*, *suffuse*, *diffusion*, *transfusion*, and *effusive*.

prohibitive

(adj)

proh-HIBB-it-iv

Definition: Tending to forbid something, or serving to prevent something

Usage: I was admitted to NYU, but it was **prohibitively** expensive, so I ended up at state school instead. / My parents installed a high fence as a **prohibitive** barrier against the neighborhood hooligans.

Related Words: *Exorbitant* means excessive, especially by being outrageously expensive.

proliferate

(verb)

proh-LIFF-er-ayt

Also *prolific* (adj)

Definition: Increase or spread rapidly or excessively

Usage: The book alleged that terrorist cells are **proliferating** across the United States faster than law enforcement can keep up.

Related Words: **Prolific** means producing a lot of something – generally either offspring (rabbits are **prolific**) or creative work (*a **prolific** songwriter*).

More Info: A phrase associated with the Cold War was *nuclear proliferation*, the rapid buildup of nuclear weapons. **Proliferate** shares a Latin root (“offspring, progeny”) with *proletariat*, meaning the working class, manual laborers, or the poor.

prologue

(noun)

PROH-log

Definition: Introductory part to a book, play, etc.

Usage: The novel's **prologue** gives some historical background so the main story can be better understood in context.

Related Words: *Preamble* (introductory statement, preface—such as the *Preamble* to the Constitution)

More Info: An *epilogue* is a concluding portion added after a literary work. The “log” in **prologue** and *epilogue* is the same root (“logos,” for “discourse or speech”) as the “lect” in *lecture*, *lectern*, and *dialect*. Both **prologue** and *epilogue* can be used metaphorically—“If the blown tire was an unpleasant **prologue** to the evening, the food poisoning we came down with that night was an even worse *epilogue*.”

pronounced

(adj)

proh-NOUN-st

Definition: Distinct, strong, clearly indicated

Usage: Aunt Shirley claimed we would never know that her “secret recipe” for brownies involved lots of healthy vegetables, but the brownies had a **pronounced** asparagus flavor.

More Info: Of course, we *pronounce* a word, but *pronounce* can also mean *declare*, as in, *He pronounced the book the best thing he had ever read.*

propriety

(noun)

proh-PRY-it-ee

Definition: Conforming to good manners or appropriate behavior; justness

Usage: The parent questioned the **propriety** of the punishment meted out to her son—sitting in a corner all day seemed a little harsh for using the pencil sharpener at the wrong time. / Saying the accounting firm was complicit in “financial **impropriety**” was a rather polite way to refer to the fraud it committed against its investors.

Related Words: *Genteel* (aristocratic, elegant), *Seemly* (proper or attractive), *Decorous* (behaving with propriety and good taste; polite), *Mores* (customs, manners, or morals of a particular group)

More Info: This is an easy one to remember—it’s not a coincidence that **propriety** looks a lot like *proper*.

prosaic

(adj)

proh-ZAY-ick

Definition: Dull, ordinary

Usage: Finding his friends' bar mitzvahs at the local synagogue a bit **prosaic**, Justin instead asked his dad to rent out the local laser tag center.

Related Words: *Pedestrian* means commonplace, dull, or lacking imagination. *Quotidian* means daily or commonplace (as daily things tend to be). *Middling* comes from the idea of being in the “middle” and means medium, average, or mediocre. Something *lackluster* is unexciting. *Humdrum* means boring or dull.

More Info: **Prosaic** means “relating to prose” or “ordinary, dull, commonplace” —the idea being that prose is not as exciting or noble as poetry.

proscribe

(verb)

proh-SCRIBE

Definition: Prohibit, outlaw; denounce; exile or banish

Usage: Plagiarism is **proscribed** by every college's code of conduct.

Related Words: *Censure* (strong disapproval or official reprimand), *Circumscribe* (encircle or confine, set limits)

More Info: The “scribe” in **proscribe** means “write” (as in *script*, *scribble*, *scripture*, etc.) The sense is that to **proscribe** is to publish a record of someone's punishment—to condemn or sentence that person publicly. Don't confuse **proscribe** with *prescribe*, which means “order, set down as a rule” (like a doctor's *prescription*)—the two words are opposites!

prospective

(adj)

proh-SPECK-tiv

Definition: Potential, in the future

Usage: Everyone had a hard time correctly saying the name of the seminar, “Perspectives for **Prospective** Doctors.” Even the **prospective** doctors—college students hoping to be admitted to medical school—were a bit confused.

More Info: Don’t confuse with *perspective* (point of view). *Perspective* is a noun, which is a good clue that you want **prospective** in phrases like “**prospective** student” (usually a person applying to a college but not yet accepted).

prudent

(adj)

PROO-dent

Also *prudence* (noun)

Definition: Wise in practical matters, carefully providing for the future

Usage: Katie's friends blew all kinds of money on spring break, but Katie **prudently** kept to her usual spending habits: she'd drink one of whatever was least expensive, and then watch her friends get stupid while she checked her bank balances on her phone and dreamed about the day she'd have a full-time job and a 401K.

Related Words: *Circumspect* (cautious, prudent; careful to consider the circumstances and consequences), *Provident* (showing foresight, being frugal or careful to provide for the future, thinking ahead in a wise way)

More Info: The antonym is *imprudent*.

pugnacious

(adj)

pug-NAY-shuss

Definition: Inclined to fight, combative

Usage: Amy had hoped to avoid inviting Uncle Ed to the wedding, as he was a **pugnacious** fellow—and, sure enough, he managed to start a fistfight with the best man.

Related Words: *Belligerent*, *bellicose*, and *truculent* are synonyms.

More Info: *Pugilism* (boxing, fistfighting) and **pugnacious** come from the Latin “pugnus,” for “fist.”

qualified

(adj)

KWAH-lif-fide

Definition: Modified, limited, conditional on something else

Usage: The scientist gave her **qualified** endorsement to the book, pointing out that, while it posed a credible theory, more research was still needed before the theory could be applied.

Related Words: *Tentative* (done in order to test; uncertain), *Temper* (moderate, soften, tone down)

More Info: Of course, everyone knows **qualified** in the sense of *qualified for the job*. Use context to determine which meaning is intended. A **qualified** person is suitable or well-prepared for the job; a **qualified** statement or feeling is held back or limited.

quandary

(noun)

KWAN-duh-ree

Definition: Uncertainty or confusion about what to do, dilemma

Usage: He knew it sounded like the plot of a cheesy movie, but he really had accidentally asked two girls to the prom, and now he was in quite a **quandary**.

Related Words: *Mired* (stuck, entangled in a swamp or muddy area or a problem that is hard to get out of).

quibble

(verb)

KWIBB-ull

Definition: Make trivial arguments or criticisms, find faults in a petty way, esp. to evade something more important

Usage: Look, I am telling you some of the serious consequences of global warming, as predicted by the scientific establishment—I think you’re just **quibbling** to complain that I said “carbon monoxide” when I meant “carbon dioxide.”

Related Words: *Cavil* (synonym), *Carp* (constantly complain, fret, and find fault), *Peevish* (annoyed, in a bad mood, stubborn)

More Info: This word is often associated with lawyers.

quotidian

(adj)

kwoh-TIDD-ee-un

Definition: Daily; everyday, ordinary

Usage: He was so involved in his quest for spiritual enlightenment that he regularly forgot more **quotidian** concerns—sure, he meditated for six hours today, but he hasn't done laundry in weeks.

Related Words: *Mundane* is a synonym. *Pedestrian* and *prosaic* mean commonplace, dull, or lacking imagination. *Diurnal* means occurring every day or happening in the daytime.

ranks

(noun)

RANKS

Definition: Personnel; a group of people considered all together

Usage: Among the **ranks** of our alumni are two Senators and many famous authors.

More Info: Many people know the word *rank* as “a level or grade,” as in *A general has a higher rank than a sergeant*. The other use of **ranks** is also originally related to the military: the **ranks** or sometimes the *rank and file* means all the regular soldiers (not the officers). **Ranks** also refers to soldiers standing in a particular formation, so the expression *to break rank* means to rebel, disagree, or disrupt a situation in which everyone is doing the same thing, as in *The author broke rank with her colleagues in the field of personal development by suggesting that “positive thinking” may be doing more damage than good*.

reap

(verb)

REEP

Definition: Harvest, such as by cutting; gather; get as a result of one's effort

Usage: He worked night and day in the strange new country, never stopping to rest, for he knew he would **reap** his reward when his family greeted him as a hero for all the money he had sent back home.

Related Words: **Reap** and *sow* are used together or separately as metaphors related to farming, and specifically the idea that the seeds that you plant (or *sow*) determine what you will later harvest (or **reap**). A common expression is *You reap what you sow*.

More Info: The “Grim Reaper” is a fictional figure who uses a scythe (curved blade on a handle) to “cut down” lives as one would cut down grain.

recluse

(noun)

RECK-looss

Definition: Person who lives in seclusion

Usage: That show about “hoarders” featured a **recluse** who hadn’t left her house in six years.

Related Words: *Hermit* or *Anchorite* (person who lives away from society, esp. for religious reasons)

More Info: **Recluse** is generally more negative than *hermit*—it often refers to a person thought by others to be a bit crazy. **Recluse** shares a root (“claudere,” meaning “to close or shut”) with *secluded* and *exclusive*.

refute

(verb)

riff-FYOOT

Definition: Prove to be false

Usage: She's not a very valuable member of the debate team, actually—she loves making speeches, but she's not very good at **refuting** opponents' arguments.

Related Words: *Gainsay* (deny, refute, oppose), *Negate* (deny or refute; make void or cause to be ineffective)

More Info: An opposite of **refute** is *corroborate* (confirm).

relegate

(verb)

RELL-igg-ayt

Definition: Send or commit to an inferior place, rank, condition, etc.; exile, banish; assign (a task) to someone else

Usage: After the legal associate offended one of the partners, he found himself **relegated** to working on minor—even unwinnable—cases. / This protest is occurring because we refuse to be **relegated** to the fringes of society—we demand full inclusion!

More Info: **Relegate** shares a root (“send”) with *legate*, a deputy or emissary.

remedial

(adj)

rim-EE-dee-ull

Also *remediate* (verb)

Definition: Providing a remedy, curative; correcting a deficient skill

Usage: After harassment occurs in the workplace, it is important that the company take **remedial** action right away, warning or firing the offender as appropriate, and making sure the complainant's concerns are addressed. / For those who need **remedial** reading help, we offer a summer school program that aims to help students read at grade level.

Related Words: *Redress* (setting something right after a misdeed)

More Info: Something *irremediable* cannot be *remediated*.

render

(verb)

REN-der

Definition: Give, submit, surrender; translate; declare formally; cause to become

Usage: When you **render** your past due payments, we will turn your phone back on. / Only in her second year of Japanese, she was unable to **render** the classic poem into English. / The judge **rendered** a verdict that **rendered** us speechless.

More Info: From an Old French word for “give back.” This word has so many definitions because it is so general. You can even **render** fat (by melting it); many definitions of **render** have to do with changing the state of something.

replete

(adj)

rip-PLEET

Definition: Supplied in abundance, filled, gorged (used with *with*)

Usage: This essay is **replete** with errors—I don't think you even bothered to use spellcheck, much less carefully edit your work.

Related Words: *Surfeit, surplus, plethora* (excess, overabundance)

More Info: *Replete* shares a root (“plenus” for “full”) with *plenty* and *plenary* (entire, complete).

reproach

(noun, verb)

rip-PROH'ch

Definition: Blame, disgrace (noun); criticize, express disappointment in (verb)

Usage: I'm not really enjoying my foreign study program. My host mom **reproached** me in Spanish—it sounded really harsh, but I couldn't really understand her and I have no idea what I did wrong!

Related Words: *Admonish* means scold or mildly criticize. *Reprove*, *upbraid*, *reprimand*, *rebuke*, *excoriate*, and *castigate* are all words for criticizing or scolding more harshly.

More Info: The expression *beyond reproach* means “not able to be reproached”—due to being good or perfect.

repudiate

(verb)

rip-PYOO-dee-ayt

Definition: Reject, cast off, deny that something has authority

Usage: If you receive an erroneous notice from a collections agency, you have 30 days to **repudiate** the debt by mail. / As part of becoming an American citizen, Mr. Lee **repudiated** his former citizenship.

Related Words: *Recant* (withdraw, retract, or disavow something one has previously said, esp. formally)

requite

(verb)

rick-WHITE

Definition: Reciprocate, repay, or revenge

Usage: Ashley felt that her **unrequited** love for George would surely kill her. George barely noticed her—he cared about nothing but **requiting** his father’s death.

Related Words: *Redress* (setting something right after a misdeed; compensation or relief for injury or wrongdoing), *Recompense* (repay, reward, compensate)

More Info: Most people only know this word in the phrase *unrequited love*. But anything you can “get someone back for,” you can **requite**—kindness, murder, etc.

rescind

(verb)

riss-SIND

Definition: Annul, repeal, make void

Usage: The governor **rescinded** his proclamation making September 10th “Pastafarian Day” once someone told him it wasn’t a real religion.

Related Words: *Negate* (deny or refute; make void or cause to be ineffective), *Nullify* (make void or invalid)

resolution

(noun)

rezz-oh-LOO-shun

Definition: The quality of being firmly determined; resolving to do something; a formal judgment, esp. decided by a vote

Usage: The city government passed a **resolution** to support the new monorail. / A few setbacks did not dampen her **resolution** to complete her Ph.D.—equipped with her new prosthetic leg, she made her way back into the lab and continued her research.

Related Words: *Resolve* shares the meaning “the quality of being firmly determined” and would also work in the second sentence above.

More Info: Of course, a New Year’s **resolution** is a decision to do something or make a change. Most people aren’t *resolved* enough to keep their **resolutions** past January.

resolve

(verb, noun)

rizz-ZAHL'v

Definition: Find a solution to; firmly decide to do something; decide by formal vote (verb); firmness of purpose (noun)

Usage: She was **resolved** to find a marrow donor for her son, and led a stunningly successful drive to get people to sign up for a national donor registry. Even when no match was found for her son in the first year, her **resolve** was undampened.

Related Words: *Resolute* (firmly determined), *Unequivocal* (clear or decided), *Resolution* (the quality of being firmly determined; resolving to do something; a formal judgment, esp. decided by a vote)

More Info: To *lose your resolve* means to become unsure or to *lose your nerve*.

respectively

(adverb)

ree-SPECK-tiv-lee

Definition: In the order given

Usage: His poems “An Ode to the Blossoms of Sheffield” and “An Entreaty to Ladies All Too Prim” were written in 1756 and 1758, **respectively**.

More Info: **Respectively** is important in making the meaning clear in some sentences. *Lisa and John have a cat and a dog* sounds as though the couple jointly owns the pets, whereas *Lisa and John have a cat and a dog, respectively* makes it clear that the cat is Lisa’s and the dog is John’s.

restive

(adj)

REST-iv

Definition: Impatient or uneasy under the control of another; resisting being controlled

Usage: The company was purchased by a larger competitor, and the employees grew **restive** as the new bosses curtailed their freedoms and put a hold on their projects.

More Info: Don't confuse with *restless*, meaning "lacking rest" or "constantly moving." You grow **restive** while waiting for a boss to approve your project; when you can't sleep, you have a *restless* night.

reticent

(adj)

RET-iss-sent

Definition: Not talking much; private (of a person), restrained, reserved

Usage: She figured that, to rise to the top, it was best to be **reticent** about her personal life; thus, even her closest colleagues were left speculating at the water cooler about whether her growing belly actually indicated a pregnancy she simply declined to mention to anyone.

Related Words: *Laconic* (using few words, concise)

More Info: *Taciturn* also means not talking much. The Latin root “tacere” (to be silent) appears in both words.

retrospective

(adj, noun)

ret-truh-SPECK-tiv

Definition: Looking to the past or backward; applying to the past, retroactive (adj); an art exhibit of an artist's work over a long period of time (noun)

Usage: The proposed law is **retrospective**: anyone who violated the law before the law even existed can be prosecuted.

More Info: The expression *in retrospect* is often used to express what the speaker would have done or thought in the past if he knew what he knows now. *In retrospect, I should have realized that a Nigerian widow wouldn't want to leave me a million dollars for no reason, but at the time, I was very excited.*

reverent

(adj)

REV-er-ent

Definition: Feeling or expressing very deep respect and awe

Usage: Ayn Rand is a controversial figure, but critical views are not welcome at the local Objectivist Club meeting, where everyone expresses a **reverent** view of the author.

Related Words: *Pious* (devout; religiously reverent and dutiful)

More Info: This word comes from the same place as *reverend* (a minister, as in a church).

rhetoric

(noun)

RET-er-ick

Also *rhetorical* (adj)

Definition: The art or study of persuasion through speaking or writing; language that is elaborate or pretentious but actually empty, meaning little

Usage: The ancient Greeks used to study **rhetoric** as a major academic subject. Today, if you want to improve your **rhetorical** skills, you will probably have to hunt down a public speaking class or join Toastmasters. / The politician's blather is all **rhetoric** and no substance.

Related Words: *Oratorical* is a synonym. While a lawyer needs good **rhetorical** skills, sometimes **rhetorical** and *oratorical* mean *only* related to style and effect, and lacking substance.

More Info: A *rhetorical question* is one intended for effect, and not intended to be answered, as in "Are you stupid?"

rife

(adj)

RIFE

Definition: Happening frequently, abundant, currently being reported

Usage: Reports of financial corruption are **rife**.

Related Words: *Replete* (supplied in abundance, filled, gorged), *Ridden* (dominated or burdened by), *Teeming* (swarming, as in *teeming with people*)

More Info: From an Old Norse word for “river”—thus the idea of “flowing freely.”

rudimentary

(adj)

roo-dim-MENT-uh-ree

Definition: Elementary, relating to the basics; undeveloped, primitive

Usage: My knowledge of Chinese is quite **rudimentary**—I get the idea of characters and I can order food, but I really can't read this document you've just given me.

Related Words: *Inchoate* (just begun, undeveloped, unorganized), *Nascent* and *Incipient* (just beginning to exist, or in a very early stage of development)

More Info: **Rudimentary** shares a root with *rude*. *Rude* originally meant crude or unlearned—that is, lacking *rudiments* (first principles or early training).

rustic

(adj, noun)

RUSS-tick

Definition: Relating to country life, unsophisticated; primitive; made of rough wood (adj); a rural or uncultured person (noun)

Usage: For their honeymoon, they eschewed fancy hotels and instead chose a **rustic** cabin in the woods. / Grandpa was a true **rustic**—I was happy to have him visit, but not so happy to find him urinating outside in a bucket when we have several perfectly nice bathrooms.

Related Words: *Bumpkin* and *yokel* are also words for an awkward, uncultured, simple person, generally from the country.

sacrosanct

(adj)

SACK-roh-sank-t

Definition: Sacred, inviolable, not to be trespassed on or violated; above any criticism

Usage: In our house, family dinners were **sacrosanct**—if being in the school play meant you would miss dinner, then you just couldn't be in the school play.

More Info: From the root for “sacred” that also occurs in *sanctify* (make holy) and *sanctuary* (sacred place; refuge).

sagacious

(adj)

suh-GAY-shuss

Also *sage* (noun)

Definition: Wise; showing good judgment and foresight

Usage: It's important to choose a mentor who is not only successful, but also **sagacious**—plenty of people are successful through luck and have little insight about how to attack someone else's situation.

Related Words: *Sapient* (synonym), *Prudent* (wise in practical matters, carefully providing for the future), *Circumspect* (cautious, prudent; careful to consider the circumstances and consequences), *Perspicacious* (very perceptive, insightful)

More Info: A **sage** is a respected wise person. (*Sage* is also an herb).

salubrious

(adj)

suh-LOO-bree-uss

Definition: Healthful, promoting health

Usage: After spending her twenties smoking and drinking, Jessica recognized the necessity of adopting a more **salubrious** lifestyle, but found it difficult to cut back.

Related Words: *Salutary* is a synonym.

More Info: Spanish speakers probably recognized this one – it’s very similar to the Spanish “salud.”

sanction

(noun, verb)

SANK-shun

Definition: Permission or approval, something that gives support or authority to something else (noun); to allow, confirm, ratify (verb); OR a legal action by one or more countries against another country to get it to comply (noun); to place sanctions or penalties on (verb)

Usage: Professional boxers may only fight in **sanctioned** matches—fighting outside the ring is prohibited. / America’s **sanctions** on Cuba mean that it is illegal for Americans to do business with Cuban companies.

More Info: This word can be very confusing—its two definitions seem to be opposites. Allow and penalize? We have to use context to figure out the meaning —since the bad meaning (generally “sanctions,” plural) applies to international actions, most usages of **sanction** (regarding any other topic) mean “allow.” **Sanction** comes from the root for holy (also in *sanctuary*, *sanctify*, etc.). Imagine an ancient society in which the ruler is also the spiritual leader, and it’s easy to imagine how legal **sanctions** could be thought of as “holy.”

sanguine

(adj)

SANG-gwinn

Definition: Cheerfully optimistic, hopeful; reddish, ruddy (as in rosy-red cheeks indicating health or vitality)

Usage: She had three papers due in three days, but she maintained her typically **sanguine** attitude. “Things always just work out for me,” she said, happily.

Related Words: *Chipper* (cheerful, healthy and in good spirits)

More Info: Don’t confuse **sanguine** with *sanguinary*, which comes from the same root but means “bloodthirsty”! 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* (sluggish, gloomy); a person with too much bile would be *bilious* (bitter, mean); and a person ruled by blood would be **sanguine**.

sap

(noun, verb)

SAP

Definition: The inner fluid of a plant or any essential body fluid; energy, vitality; a person taken advantage of (noun); undermine, weaken, tire out (verb)

Usage: I really thought that if I clicked on that Facebook ad and entered all my information, I would get a free iPad to test and keep! I feel like such a **sap**. / In order to make maple syrup, you must drain **sap** from a sugar maple tree—they call this “**sapping**” the tree, which I can understand, because I feel pretty **sapped** doing it! Fortunately, it’s just a metaphor.

Related Words: *Enervate* (weaken, tire), *Enfeeble* (weaken, make feeble)

More Info: The meaning of **sap** as a gullible or simple person is thought to be related to calling someone a “sapskull”—the idea being that the person’s head is made of soft, sappy wood from the inside of a tree.

satiate or sate

(verb)

SAY-she-ayt or SAYT

Also *satiety* (noun)

Definition: To fully satisfy; to go beyond satisfying to the point of excess (possibly inducing disgust, tiredness, etc.)

Usage: I usually just eat a tiny salad or something while I'm at work, but since I had a half day off, I went to the Indian buffet and stayed for a whole hour! I've never been more **satiated** (or **sated**) in my life. / To maintain a healthy weight, stop eating before you reach the point of **satiety**.

Related Words: *Blasé* (bored from overindulgence), *Ennui* (feeling of weariness, boredom, etc. often caused by satiety)

saturate

(verb)

SATCH-er-ayt

Definition: Soak or imbue thoroughly; cause a substance to unite with the greatest possible amount of another substance

Usage: We got married on a rainy beach, and my dress was **saturated**. Although the pictures were a bit dark, the photographer was able to increase the **saturation** in Photoshop, making our wedding photos ultimately look quite vivid! / I simply cannot dissolve any more sugar into this iced tea—it's **saturated**!

More Info: **Saturate** comes from the root “satus,” (meaning “enough”), which also gives us *satisfy*, *satiate*, *sated*, etc.

savor

(verb)

SAY-ver

Also *savory* (adj)

Definition: Appreciate fully, taste or smell with pleasure

Usage: As a parent, it's important to take a step back and really **savor** the special moments—those children will grow up sooner than you think!

More Info: **Savory** means appetizing or enjoyable. It can refer to foods that are pungent, salty, etc. (any flavor but sweet) or to that which is morally respectable (a “dirty” joke could be called **unsavory**). Although these uses are rarer, you can also **savor** a food by adding flavor to it, or even use **savor** as a noun, as in “This soup has a wonderful **savor**.”

scant

(adj)

SKANT

Also *scanty* (adj)

Definition: Not enough or barely enough

Usage: The new intern was **scant** help at the conference—he disappeared all day to smoke and didn't seem to realize that he was there to assist his coworkers. / The soldiers were always on the verge of hunger, complaining about their **scanty** rations.

Related Words: A *modicum*, *scintilla*, *iota*, *mite*, or *tad* of something is a small amount. A *paucity* or *dearth* is scarcity or lack.

scathing

(adj)

SKAYTHE-ing

Also *unscathed* (adj)

Definition: Severe, injurious; bitterly harsh or critical (as a remark)

Usage: The school superintendant gave a **scathing** criticism of the education bill, calling it “an attack on our community’s children that will surely go down in infamy.” / How is it possible that she flew off her bicycle like that and walked away **unscathed**?

More Info: As you can see from the use of **unscathed** to mean “not physically injured,” **scathing** originally referred to physical injury and now generally refers to injurious comments. A word used in a similar metaphorical way is *excoriate*, which literally means “to rub the skin off of” but is more often used to mean “to criticize very harshly.”

secular

(adj)

SECK-yoo-ler

Definition: Not religious or holy; pertaining to worldly things

Usage: Forty years ago, American companies wished their employees “Merry Christmas”—even the employees who didn’t celebrate Christmas. Today, the **secular** “Happy Holidays” is common. / Western governments have grown increasingly **secular** over the last century; many have laws prohibiting religious expression from being sponsored by the government.

More Info: **Secular** doesn’t mean “atheist”—for instance, a devoutly religious person would describe a church as sacred or *sanctified* and a library as **secular**.

sedulous

(adj)

SEDD-joo-luss

Definition: Persevering, persistent, diligent in one's efforts

Usage: **Sedulous** effort is necessary to improve your GRE verbal score—you need to study vocab in a serious way, nearly every day.

Related Words: *Assiduous* is a synonym.

sentient

(adj)

SENT-shent

Definition: Conscious; experiencing sensation or perceiving with the senses

Usage: Tia became a vegan because she refused to eat any **sentient** creature. / Look at the mold in your fridge! Let it grow any more, it might become **sentient**!

Related Words: The antonym *insensate* can mean unconscious or inanimate, lacking reason (that is, “sense”), or “cold-blooded,” merciless, lacking warm human feelings. A rock, a very intoxicated person, and a murderer could all be described as *insensate*.

simultaneous

(adj)

syeh-mull-TAY-nee-uss

Definition: At the same time

Usage: It is rare in a duel that the two shooters draw their guns **simultaneously** and actually kill each other in an instant.

Related Words: *Synchronous* and *concurrent* are synonyms.

More Info: The root “simul” means “together” and also gives us *similar* and *simulcast*, meaning to broadcast **simultaneously**, such as on television and the Internet at the same time.

skeptic

(adj)

SKEPP-tick

Definition: Person inclined to doubting or questioning generally accepted beliefs

Usage: I wish you'd be more of a **skeptic**—I can't believe you spent money on a pet psychic so we can "talk" to our dearly departed shih tzu. / Descartes was a great **skeptic**, famously declaring that we cannot truly be sure of anything except our own existence—hence, "I think, therefore I am."

More Info: Don't confuse **skeptical** and *cynical* (thinking the worst of others' motivations; bitterly pessimistic). In a GRE Reading Comprehension passage, an author might be **skeptical** (a very appropriate attitude for a scientist, for instance), but would never be *cynical*.

skirt

(verb)

SKERT

Definition: Border, lie along the edge of, go around; evade

Usage: Melissa spent all of Thanksgiving **skirting** the issue of who she was dating and when she might get married and make her mother a grandmother. It was exhausting changing the subject two dozen times! / The creek **skirts** our property on the west, so it's easy to tell where our farm ends.

Related Words: *Circumvent* (go around, avoid, bypass, such as *circumventing the rules*)

More Info: This word is a metaphor related to the clothing item *skirt*, which passes around a person's body in a somewhat circular manner.

slack

(adj, verb, noun)

SLACK

Definition: Loose, negligent, lazy, weak (adj); neglect to do one's duties; loosen up, relax (verb); period of little work (noun)

Usage: As the product of **slack** parenting, I never learned good time management skills—Mom and Dad never checked my homework or made me go to bed at a certain time. / The holidays represent a lull or **slack** in work at many companies.

Related Words: *Lax* (not strict; careless, loose, slack), *Lull* (to calm, or a period of calm or quiet)

More Info: The slang phrase “slacking off” comes from the word **slack**. In more formal English, “He is slacking off” might be “He is **slacking** in his duties.”

slew

(noun)

SLOO

Definition: A large number or quantity

Usage: As soon as we switched software packages, we encountered a whole **slew** of problems.

Related Words: *Myriad* can also mean a very great number of something (probably bigger than a **slew**).

More Info: From the Irish “*sluagh*,” a crowd or army.

slight

(adj, verb, noun)

SLITE

Definition: Small, not very important, slender or delicate (adj); treat as though not very important; snub, ignore (verb); an act of treating in this way, a discourtesy (noun)

Usage: She was very sensitive, always holding a grudge against her coworkers for a variety of **slights**, both real and imagined. / Natalie Portman has always been **slight**, but she became even thinner to portray a ballerina in *Black Swan*. / I felt **slighted** when my husband told you about his promotion before he told me.

Related Words: *Nominal* (trivial, so small as to be unimportant; in name only, so-called), *Inconsequential* (insignificant, unimportant)

solicitous

(adj)

suh-LISS-sit-uss

Definition: Concerned or anxious (about another person), expressing care; eager or desirous; very careful

Usage: A **solicitous** host, Derek not only asked each person how he or she was doing, but asked by name about everyone's spouses and kids. / **Solicitous** of fame, she would do anything to get near celebrities.

More Info: Don't confuse **solicitous** with *soliciting*, which means selling, asking or entreating, or acting as a prostitute. Signs on homes and businesses that say "No Soliciting" are telling salespeople to stay away.

soporific

(adj, noun)

sah-per-RIFF-ick

Definition: Causing sleep; sleepy, drowsy (adj); something that causes sleep (noun)

Usage: I was excited to take a class with Professor Baria because I had enjoyed her books, but sadly, she is a better writer than speaker—her lectures are **soporific**. / I was so distressed after the crash that the doctor gave me a **soporific**—and, sure enough, I was able to think more clearly after sleeping.

Related Words: *Somnolent* is a synonym.

More Info: *Sopor* is a rare word meaning an abnormally deep sleep. A much more common word is the similar sounding *stupor*, meaning a state of numbness or not making sense (for instance, *a drunken stupor*).

sound

(verb)

SOUND

Definition: Measure the depth of (usually of water) as with a sounding line; penetrate and discover the meaning of, understand (usually as **sound the depths**)

Usage: The psychiatrist appointed by the court felt he would need more time to **sound the depths** of the defendant's tortured mind—clearly, she was mentally ill, but did she know on any level that what she was doing was wrong?

Related Words: *Fathom* and *Plumb* (used as verbs) are synonyms.

More Info: A **sounding** line or *plumb* line is a length of rope with a weight at the bottom; dropping it into water will allow the weight to sink and the depth of the water to be measured.

spartan

(adj)

SPAR-tin

Definition: Very disciplined and stern; frugal, living simply, austere; suggestive of the ancient Spartans

Usage: A young soldier in the **spartan** environment of boot camp can really long for a home-cooked meal or even just a comfortable couch to sit on. / Her apartment was so **spartan** that she couldn't even serve us both soup—she only had one bowl and one spoon. Instead, we sat in hard-backed chairs and drank water.

Related Words: *Ascetic* (pertaining to a simple life with no luxuries, such as that of a monk), *Austere* (severe in manner or appearance; very self-disciplined)

More Info: The Spartans (ancient Greeks from Sparta) were portrayed in the 2006 movie *300*, starring Gerard Butler. The movie isn't very historically accurate, but the Spartans certainly were fierce warriors known for their harsh training methods.

spate

(noun)

SPAYT

Definition: Sudden outpouring or rush; flood

Usage: After a brief **spate** of post-exam partying, Lola is ready for classes to begin again. / He was so furious that a **spate** of expletives just flew out of his mouth.

Related Words: *Inundate* and *deluge* are both words for flooding, also used metaphorically to mean an overwhelming influx of something (*inundated* with work, a *deluge* of complaints).

spearhead

(verb)

SPEER-hedd

Definition: Be the leader of

Usage: Lisa agreed to **spearhead** the “healthy office” initiative, and was instrumental in installing two treadmills and getting healthy food stocked in the vending machines.

Related Words: *Avant-garde* or *vanguard* originally referred to the soldiers at the front of an army, and now can mean anyone who innovates or is on the forefront (as in the expression “ahead of their time”).

More Info: A **spearhead** can, of course, be the sharp head of a spear. It can also be a person at the front of a military attack, or a leader of anything.

specious

(adj)

SPEE-shuss

Definition: Seemingly true but actually false; deceptively attractive

Usage: “All squares are rectangles, all candy bars are rectangles, therefore all squares are candy bars” is clearly a **specious** argument.

Related Words: *Fallacious* (containing a fallacy, or mistake in logic; logically unsound; deceptive), *Dubious* (doubtful, questionable, suspect), *Meretricious* (attractive in a vulgar or flashy way, tawdry; deceptive)

More Info: **Specious** is related to the word *species*, from a Latin root having to do with appearances.

spectrum

(noun)

SPECK-trum

Definition: A broad range of nevertheless related qualities or ideas, esp. those that overlap to create a continuous series (as in a *color spectrum*, where each color blends into the next in a continuous way)

Usage: A test showed she was partially colorblind – she did see blues and greens, but was unable to perceive some other colors on the **spectrum**. / A “dialect continuum” is a **spectrum** of dialects of a language where speakers in different dialect groups can understand some, but not all, of the other groups—for instance, people in the west can understand people in the middle, and people in the middle can understand people in the east, but people in the west and the east cannot talk to one another.

Related Words: *Panoply* (splendid, wide-ranging, impressive display or array), *Scope* (extent or range, such as of knowledge, effectiveness, authority, etc.)

speculate

(verb)

SPECK-you-layt

Definition: Contemplate; make a guess or educated guess about; engage in a risky business transaction, gamble

Usage: During the Gold Rush, **speculators** bought up land, sometimes with borrowed funds, expecting to prospect the land for gold and get rich quickly. / She **speculated** that, in zero gravity, showers would have to exist as closed rooms in which a giant bubble of water formed, and a person got inside it.

More Info: **Speculate** comes from a root (“look at”) also found in *spectacle*, *spectator*, *inspect*, and many others. To **speculate** is to try to “see” into the future or a situation about which not much is known.

sporadic

(adj)

spore-AD-ick

Definition: Occasional, happening irregularly or in scattered locations

Usage: Her attendance was **sporadic** at best, so when she flounced into class after a two-session absence, she discovered that not only was everyone working on group projects, but that the professor hadn't even thought to assign her to a group.

Related Words: *Erratic* (inconsistent, wandering, having no fixed course), *Desultory* (lacking consistency or order, disconnected, sporadic; going off topic)

More Info: **Sporadic** is related to the idea of *spores*, reproductive structures that come off of plants, mushrooms, etc. and are spread, such as by the wind.

sportive

(adj)

SPORT-iv

Definition: Playful, merry, joking around, done “in sport” (rather than intended seriously)

Usage: After Will shot a ball entirely off the pool table, knocking a woman’s purse off a bar stool, his friends laughed hysterically and called him “purse-snatcher” all night, but he took it as **sportive** and bought the next round of drinks.

Related Words: *Jocular*, *jocose*, and *jocund* (joking or given to joking all the time; jolly, playful), *Waggish* (merry, roguish), *Risible* (laughable, related to laughing)

More Info: **Sportive** certainly is related to *sports* and occasionally means “pertaining to athletics.” Also related is the idea of being a “good sport,” which generally involves having a sense of humor about yourself. Something done “in sport” is meant playfully.

standing

(noun, adj)

STAND-ing

Definition: Status, rank, reputation (noun); existing indefinitely, not movable (adj)

Usage: As he had feared, his divorce greatly reduced his **standing** as a relationship expert. / I'm disappointed that you don't want to leave your current job, but I want you to know that you have a **standing** invitation—as long as I'm the boss, you have a job here anytime you want one. / While the U.S. has a **standing** army (that is, an army that is not disbanded in times of peace), Costa Rica's constitution actually forbids a **standing** military.

More Info: “Longstanding” and the expressions “of long standing” or “in good standing” are based on **standing**, as in *a longstanding friendship* or *an account in good standing* (generally an account for which all debts are paid).

stark

(adj)

STARK

Definition: Complete, total, utter; harsh or grim; extremely simple, severe, blunt, or plain

Usage: The designer's work is appreciated for its **stark** beauty, but most people prefer to live in a cozier, more welcoming home—the kind with carpets and pillows, for instance. / She is **stark** raving mad! / The **stark** reality is that we will have to begin burning our furniture for warmth if we are to survive.

Related Words: *Austere* (severe in manner or appearance; very self-disciplined, ascetic; without luxury or ease; sober or serious)

More Info: A common expression is “**stark** naked” (here, **stark** adds emphasis). In British slang, “starkers” (American: “streakers”) are people who run naked through a public place for amusement. In many cultures, such an act would be a **stark** violation of public decency.

static

(adj)

STAT-ick

Definition: Fixed, not moving or changing, lacking vitality

Usage: The anthropologist studied a society in the Amazon that had been deliberately **static** for hundreds of years—the fiercely proud people disdained change, and viewed all new ideas as inferior to the way of life they had always practiced.

Related Words: *Status Quo* (existing state or condition), *Stasis* (equilibrium, a state of balance or inactivity, esp. caused by equal but opposing forces), *Standing* (existing indefinitely, not movable, as in a *standing invitation*), *Stationary* (not moving)

More Info: The idea of television or radio **static** is obviously more recent—think of the fact that **static** keeps whatever you were watching or listening to from moving forward.

status quo

(noun)

STATT-uss or STAY-tuss QUOH

Definition: Existing state or condition

Usage: Many opposed the establishment of a needle-exchange program, but others reasoned that the plan would be an improvement on the **status quo**, in which disease spread rapidly through certain communities.

More Info: Latin for “state in which.”

stingy

(adj)

STINN-jee

Definition: Not generous with money, reluctant to spend or give

Usage: Billionaire industrialist J. Paul Getty was so famously **stingy** that he installed pay phones in his mansion for guests to use. When his grandson was kidnapped, he refused to pay ransom and only changed his mind when the kidnappers cut off the boy's ear. This famous cheapskate then demanded that his son (the boy's father) pay him back! What a miser.

Related Words: *Miser*, *Cheapskate*, *Skinflint* (stingy person), *Frugal* (economical, thrifty, not wasteful with money), *Stint* (to be frugal)

More Info: A “scrooge” is also a miserly person, especially a wealthy one, after the character of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

stoic or stoical

(adj, noun)

STOH-ick or STOH-ick-ull

Definition: Indifferent to pleasure or pain, enduring without complaint; person indifferent to pleasure or pain (noun)

Usage: Della was not only calm but positively **stoic**, thanking her family for driving her home from chemotherapy, and then simply never mentioning it until it was time to go again.

Related Words: *Impassive* (not having or not showing physical feeling or emotion), *Inscrutable* (not able to be scrutinized, mysterious), *Stolid* (showing little emotion)

More Info: The Stoics were ancient Greek philosophers who believed that self-control could overcome destructive emotions. They compared wicked, emotionally driven people to “a dog tied to a cart,” forced in all directions.

stolid

(adj)

STAH-lid

Definition: Unemotional, showing little emotion, not easily moved

Usage: Dad is so **stolid** that we can't get a rise out of him no matter what we do—Jody got a tattoo, Max declared himself a communist, and Helen won a Rhodes Scholarship. No response! Dad just nods and says “Alright, then.”

Related Words: *Impassive* (not having or not showing physical feeling or emotion), *Inscrutable* (not able to be scrutinized, mysterious)

More Info: **Stolid** has a lot of overlap with *stoic* (indifferent to pleasure or pain). *Stoic* is generally stronger and often related to enduring suffering.

stymie or stymy

(verb, noun)

STY-mee

Definition: Block, hinder, or thwart (verb); an obstacle (noun)

Usage: Sara feared that her learning disability would **stymie** her success in college, but the support services offered were excellent and she was fine academically; the thing that really **stymied** her college career was poor time management.

Related Words: *Impede, hamper* (hold back, obstruct the progress of)

More Info: This word originates from golf. In golf, a **stymie** is when an opponent's ball lies in the way of getting your own ball into the cup.

subjective

(adj)

sub-JECK-tiv

Definition: Existing in the mind or relating to one's own thoughts, opinions, emotions, etc.; personal, individual, based on feelings

Usage: Naturally, anyone's experience of a movie is **subjective**, and some will enjoy this picture despite its flaws; however, it is an objective fact that the cinematography is very bad. / We can give names to colors, but we can never quite convey the **subjective** experience of them—what if my “red” is different from your “red”?

More Info: The opposite of **subjective** is *objective* (factual, related to reality or physical objects; not influenced by emotions, unbiased)

subside

(verb)

sub-SIDE

Definition: Sink, settle down, become less active; return to a normal level

Usage: When her terror **subsided**, she realized that the house wasn't really haunted. / It is a chronic illness—symptoms will flare up and **subside** over one's lifetime.

Related Words: *Abate* (reduce, diminish)

More Info: From the Latin for “sink to the bottom,” **subside** is related to *sediment* (material at the bottom of a liquid) and *sedentary* (not moving around, as a person with an inactive lifestyle).

substantiate

(verb)

sub-STAN-chee-ayt

Definition: Support with evidence or proof; give a material existence to

Usage: You say you were at home when the crime occurred two towns over—is there anyone who can **substantiate** your claim? / Your business ideas are interesting, but you never **substantiate** them—you haven't put a single plan into action.

Related Words: *Corroborate* (support, add evidence to), *Verify* (prove true)

succeeding

(adj)

suck-SEED-ing

Definition: Coming after or following

Usage: After the sale of the company, you will receive 5% of the profits from the current year, and 1% in all **succeeding** years. / In 1797, George Washington was **succeeded** by John Adams.

Related Words: *Subsequent* is a synonym and often appears as the adverb *subsequently*, as in *He took the poison and subsequently fell into a coma.*

More Info: Relatedly, a *successor* is someone who comes after, usually in holding an office, as in *After losing his bid for reelection, the outgoing President handed over the White House to his successor.*

supersede

(verb)

soo-per-SEED

Definition: Replace, take the position of, cause to be disregarded as void or obsolete

Usage: Of course, electric washing machines **superseded** hand-powered ones many decades ago, but my great-grandmother used her hand-cranked washer until she died in the 1990s.

Related Words: *Supplant* (take the place of, displace, especially through sneaky tactics), *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: “Super” is Latin for “above, beyond” and appears in many words that have a sense of being literally or figuratively on top: *superficial*, *superimpose*, etc.

supplicate

(verb)

SUPP-lick-ayt

Definition: Pray humbly; ask, beg, or seek in a humble way

Usage: She had been estranged from her wealthy father for years, but when she needed money for her daughter's medical care, she **supplicated** the old man for assistance.

Related Words: *Entreat*, *Beseech*, and *Implore* are synonyms.

More Info: **Supplicate** is related to *supple* (pliant, flexible). To **supplicate** is to attempt to “soften” another person or get that person to “bend” to your request.

surfeit

(noun)

SURF-it

Definition: Excess, excessive amount, overindulgence

Usage: The soup kitchen would like to announce that it has a serious **surfeit** of those cans of jellied cranberries that no one seems to want, but it could still use at least ten Thanksgiving turkeys.

Related Words: *Replete with* (supplied in abundance, filled, gorged), *Glut*, *Surplus* and *Plethora* (excess, overabundance)

More Info: “Sur” means “over” and the rest of the word is related to the Latin “facere,” meaning “to make.” The literal meaning is *overproduce*.

surmise

(verb)

ser-MIZE

Definition: Guess, infer, think or make an opinion with incomplete information

Usage: Based on your rather sad attempt to figure out the tip on our restaurant bill, I would **surmise** that you actually have no idea how percents work.

Related Words: *Conjecture* (synonym), *Supposition* (assumption, hypothesis, something that has been supposed)

sycophant

(noun)

SICK-uh-fint

Definition: Servile flatterer, parasitic person who fawns in order to get ahead

Usage: Stop being such a **sycophant**. I don't need you to compliment my tie or get me coffee; I just need you to do your job without bothering me.

Related Words: *Lackey*, *Toady*, 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 and *Kowtow* means to fawn—or, literally, to bow until one's forehead touches the floor. In slang, we might call a **sycophant** a boot-licker, suck-up, etc.

synchronous

(adj)

SINK-run-nuss

Definition: Happening at the same time; occurring at the same rate and thus happening together repeatedly

Usage: The sound of that bell is a signal for the dancers to make perfectly **synchronous** entrances from opposite sides of the stage. / The two nearby churches have **synchronous** church bells—if you stand halfway between the buildings as the bells chime out the hour, it sounds really cool!

Related Words: *Simultaneous* and *contemporaneous* also mean occurring at the same time. *Contemporaneous* is appropriate for describing people in the same time period (*Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford had contemporaneous careers*).

More Info: The root “sym/syn” means “together” and also appears in *symbiosis*, *sympathy*, etc.

table

(verb)

TAY-bull

Definition: Lay aside to discuss later, often as a way to postpone discussion indefinitely

Usage: I see we're not going to agree on whether to scrap our entire curriculum and develop a new one, so let's **table** that discussion and move on to voting on the budget.

More Info: In American English, to **table** something means to postpone discussion of it until later, but in British English, to **table** a bill is the opposite—to submit it for consideration.

tacit

(adj)

TASS-it

Definition: Understood without being said; implied, not stated directly; silent

Usage: Her parents never told her she could smoke, but they gave their **tacit** consent when they didn't say anything about the obvious smell coming from her bedroom.

Related Words: *Implicit* (implied, not stated directly; involved in the very essence of something, unquestionable)

More Info: **Tacit** is related to *taciturn* (not talking much, reserved).

taciturn

(adj)

TASS-it-turn

Definition: Not talking much, reserved; silent, holding back in conversation

Usage: Because he felt self-conscious about his stutter, Mike had always been **taciturn**, but after some very good speech therapy, soon he was much more voluble.

Related Words: *Reticent* is a synonym. *Laconic* means “using few words, concise.”

More Info: **Taciturn** is related to *tacit* (understood without being said; implied, not stated directly; silent).

tangential

(adj)

tan-JEN-chull

Definition: Only slightly relevant, going off-topic

Usage: It's hard to get a quick answer out of Noah—ask him any question, and you'll get a wide range of **tangential** remarks before you can find a polite way to move on.

Related Words: *Penumbra* (outer part of a shadow from an eclipse; any surrounding region, fringe, periphery; any area where something “sort of” exists), *Digress* or *Divagate* (go off-topic when speaking or writing)

More Info: In math, a *tangent line* touches a curve and then continues on, forever—much like many people we wish would stop talking.

temperance

(noun)

TEMP-er-enss

Also *temper* (verb)

Definition: Moderation, self-control, esp. regarding alcohol or other desires or pleasures; total abstinence from alcohol

Usage: After the end of the Civil War, economic change led to an increase in alcohol problems and the birth of the **Temperance** Movement, which ultimately led to Prohibition. / Grandma is a model of **temperance**—she drinks red wine every night, but only the 1/3 of a glass that she read was conducive to preventing heart attacks.

Related Words: *Teetotaler* (person who doesn't drink alcohol at all), *Abstain* (hold back, refrain, esp. from something bad or unhealthy), *Sobriety* (temperance or the state of being sober; seriousness)

More Info: To *temper* is to moderate, soften, or tone down, or to make less intense. Something *untempered* is not controlled or moderated. Of course, *temper* as a noun means a person's state of mind or tendency to anger.

tenuous

(adj)

TEN-yoo-uss

Definition: Long and thin, slender; flimsy, having little substance

Usage: Your argument is quite **tenuous**—it depends on our accepting the results of a 1955 study published in an obscure medical journal not subject to peer review.

More Info: The related *attenuate* means “weaken or thin out” (for instance, a general who sends too few troops over too large an area has *attenuated* his army). The related *tensile* means “relating to tension” or “capable of being stretched.”

timely

(adj)

TIME-lee

Definition: Well-timed, happening at a suitable time

Usage: Your arrival is quite **timely**—we were just mulling over a question we’re sure you can answer! / His **timely** departure prevented him from having to do any work.

Related Words: *Opportune* can be a synonym for **timely**, or can mean “favorable, appropriate.”

More Info: While **timely** ends in –ly, it is NOT an adverb. You therefore cannot “do something **timely**”—you must instead “do it in a **timely** manner.”

timorous

(adj)

TIM-er-uss

Definition: Fearful, timid

Usage: An expression describing a **timorous** person is “quaking in his boots”—that is, a scared person would shake or shiver from fear.

Related Words: *Intrepid* means fearless and did, in fact, come from the rare word *trepid*, meaning fearful. *Craven* and *pusillanimous* mean cowardly.

tirade

(noun)

tie-RAYD

Definition: Bitter, abusive criticism or verbal attack

Usage: I hate that television show where that commentator goes on angry **tirades** about all the liberal conspiracies taking over America. Even my conservative friends find his ranting embarrassing.

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

torpor

(noun)

TORÉ-pore

Also *torpid* (adj)

Definition: Sluggishness, lethargy, or apathy; a period of inactivity

Usage: Sam had hoped to be able to play in the game after having his wisdom teeth out, but the anesthesia left him in such **torpor** that he obviously couldn't play soccer.

Related Words: *Listless* (spiritless, lacking interest or energy), *Inertia* (inactivity, lack of motion or progress), *Loafing* (idling away the time, lounging)

More Info: Don't confuse **torpid** with *turbid* (turbulent), *tepid* (lukewarm), or *turgid* or *tumid* (swollen, bombastic).

torrid

(adj)

TORRE-id

Definition: Very hot, parching, burning; passionate

Usage: They had a **torrid** love affair in the '80s, but split up because a royal was not permitted to marry a commoner. / The wandering refugees were in serious danger in the **torrid** Sahara.

Related Words: *Arid* (dry, parched, barren)

More Info: The “**torrid** zone” is the region of Earth between the tropics.

tractable

(adj)

TRACK-tib-ull

Definition: Easily controlled or managed, docile; easily shaped or molded

Usage: He's a **tractable** fellow—when I asked if we could see a different movie than the one we'd come to see, he shrugged and said “Cool.” / The clay had hardened overnight, but adding water made it **tractable** again.

Related Words: *Malleable*, *Pliable*, and *Plastic* can also mean physically bendable, or metaphorically bendable, as in “easily influenced or shaped by others.” *Mutable* means changeable. *Complaisant* means “obliging, eager to please.”

More Info: “Tract” in Latin means “manage, handle” and also occurs in *treat* and *tractor*.

transitory

(adj)

TRAN-zit-tore-ee

Definition: Temporary, short-lived, not lasting

Usage: While a few people marry their high school sweethearts, generally, our teenage years are full of **transitory** crushes.

Related Words: *Ephemeral*, *Evanescent* and *Fugacious* are synonyms. *Transient* can mean “lasting only a short time, temporary” or “staying only a short time,” or can be a noun referring to people who move from place to place.

trifling

(adj)

TRIFE-ling

Also *trifle* (noun)

Definition: Trivial, not very important; so small as to be unimportant; frivolous, shallow

Usage: Luis broke up with Cara because she was always obsessed with some **trifling** matter—he tried to talk about foreign aid dependency, and she changed the subject to what the actress Katie Holmes dressed her daughter Suri in for a shopping trip. / The young heiress was so wealthy that she considered the salary from her internship a mere **trifle**, and didn't even notice when her paycheck was days late.

Related Words: *Frivolous* (lacking seriousness, excessively carefree, as in *The judge dismissed the lawsuit as frivolous—you can't sue the government for failing to protect you from birds*). *Nugatory* also means “of little or no importance.”

trite

(adj)

TRITE

Definition: Lacking freshness and originality, lacking effectiveness due to overuse, cliché

Usage: The topic of your speech is “Children are the Future”? That’s pretty **trite**. Maybe you should think harder and come up with something original.

Related Words: *Banal*, *Hackneyed*, *Inane*, and *Insidid* all mean “lacking freshness and originality, shallow.” *Shopworn* also means this (or can also literally mean something marred from being handled in a store). *Bromide* and *Platitude* are nouns for a cliché or *shopworn* expression.

ubiquitous

(adj)

yoo-BICK-wit-uss

Definition: Existing everywhere at the same time

Usage: Thirty years ago, women would lie about coloring their hair, considering the admission embarrassing. Today, blatantly fake hair color—not to mention fake tans and unnaturally white teeth—are **ubiquitous**, not only on starlets, but even on the checkers at the local grocery store. / Maggie learned in Sunday school that God was **ubiquitous**, leading to the question nearly all children ask when they hear this: “Does that mean God sees me in the bathroom?”

Related Words: *Omnipresent* (synonym), *Pervasive* (tending to spread throughout)

undermine

(verb)

un-der-MINE

Definition: Weaken, cause to collapse by digging away at the foundation (of a building or an argument); injure or attack in a secretive or underhanded way

Usage: Rather than searching impartially for the truth, these pharmaceutical company “scientists” willfully ignored any evidence that **undermined** the conclusion they were being paid to produce. / You are nice to my face, but you are **undermining** me behind my back, suggesting to others in the office that I am making mistakes in my work and that you have been fixing them!

More Info: Don’t confuse with *undergird* (strengthen, add support) and *underscore* (emphasize). **Undermine** literally comes from the idea of “mining” underneath—certainly, mining under your house would be likely to make the house fall down.

underscore

(verb)

un-der-SCORE

Definition: Emphasize (or, literally, to underline text)

Usage: “You’re not going to mess with Joey anymore,” said Joey. His new bodyguards stepped forward threatening, as though to **underscore** Joey’s point.

Related Words: *Undergird* means strengthen, support.

More Info: **Underscore** literally can mean to underline, as in a word processing program—of course, we do this for emphasis. Don’t confuse **underscore** with the antonym *undermine*, “to weaken or remove the support for; to injure or attack in a sneaky way.”

unearth

(verb)

un-EARTH

Definition: Dig up, uncover, expose

Usage: The ACLU's Prison Project works tirelessly to **unearth** evidence from old cases that might exonerate innocent people who have spent years or even decades in prison. / The archaeologist **unearthed** what appears to be the world's oldest known gravesite, showing that the earliest humans cared for their deceased loved ones.

Related Words: *Debunk* (expose, ridicule, or disprove false or exaggerated claims), *Disabuse* (free someone from a mistake in thinking)

unequivocal

(adj)

un-ee-KWIH-vuh-cull

Definition: Unambiguous, clear, absolute; having only one possible meaning

Usage: Although Chuck denied he had a problem, his family was **unequivocal** in demanding that he check into rehab. Chuck knew there was no getting around it this time. / Mark equivocated, going back and forth on the issue, but his brother Ben was **unequivocal**—he knew what he wanted and went and got it.

Related Words: *Resolute* or *Unambivalent* (firmly determined), *Resolution* (the quality of being firmly determined; resolving to do something; a formal judgment, esp. decided by a vote), *Patent* (obvious, apparent, plain to see), *Explicit* (direct, clear, fully revealed)

More Info: The base word *equivocal* contains the roots for “equal” and “voice”—giving *equal voice* to all of the options would make it really hard to decide.

unprecedented

(adj)

un-PRESS-uh-den-ted

Definition: Never before known or seen, without having happened previously

Usage: When Nixon resigned, American bravado was at an all-time low—the resignation of a sitting President was disgraceful and **unprecedented**.

Related Words: *Novel* (new, fresh, original)

More Info: It's not hard to unpack this word—the base word *precedented* looks a lot like *precede*, “to come before.” If something is *unprecedented*, nothing has come before it. In law, a *precedent* is a ruling in a similar case that a judge would draw on or reference in writing a decision.

unseemly

(adj)

un-SEEM-lee

Definition: Improper, inappropriate, against the rules of taste or politeness

Usage: The activist really did want to get the candidate's support for the equal-rights measure, so she did what the candidate's aides asked—but she found it very **unseemly** that they suggested a specific dollar amount for the “donation” she was asked to make in order to get a meeting.

Related Words: *Indecorous* (synonym), *Boorish* or *Churlish* (rude, ill-mannered, insensitive), *Uncouth* (having bad manners, awkward), *Gauche* (tactless, lacking social grace, awkward, crude)

More Info: The antonym *seemly* means suitable, proper, appropriate, or even handsome.

vacillate

(verb)

VASS-ill-ayt

Definition: Waver in one's mind or opinions, be indecisive

Usage: In need of a good used car, I was **vacillating** between the Ford and the Hyundai until a recommendation from a friend helped me decide.

Related Words: *Equivocate* (use unclear language to deceive or avoid committing to a position), *Ambivalent* (uncertain; unable to decide, or wanting to do two contradictory things at once), *Waffle* (waver, be indecisive), *Dither* (act irresolutely), *Tergiversate* (repeatedly change one's opinions, equivocate)

Memory Trick: **Vacillate** sounds a bit like Vaseline. When you **vacillate**, your decisions are quite slippery, as though coated in petroleum jelly.

venerate

(verb)

VENN-er-ayt

Also *venerable* (adj)

Definition: Revere, regard with deep respect and awe

Usage: The boys were utterly crushed when the baseball player they **venerated** saw them waiting and refused to sign an autograph.

Related Words: *Revere* (feel or express very deep respect and awe)

More Info: Something **venerable** is worthy of great respect and admiration and is possessed of great dignity usually associated with age or longstanding. That is, you can **venerate** anything—Mariah Carey, for instance—but if you call her **venerable**, she might be a bit insulted that you think she’s old.

Venerable often appears in the phrase “**venerable** institution” (said of Harvard, for instance).

veracity

(noun)

ver-RASS-it-ee

Also *veracious* (adj)

Definition: Truthfulness, accuracy; habitual adherence to the truth

Usage: I question the **veracity** of your story—I just don't think you've been to outer space. / She was known for her **veracity** only because she had no choice—she was a terrible liar.

Related Words: *Probity* (honesty, integrity), *Verisimilitude* (having the appearance of truth), *Verity* (the quality of being true)

More Info: Don't confuse **veracious** (true) with *voracious* (hungry, ravenous).

verbose

(adj)

ver-BOH-ss

Definition: Wordy

Usage: Twitter’s 140 character limit really forces the **verbose** to go against their natural tendencies and instead write succinctly.

Related Words: *Loquacious*, *Prolix*, and *Voluble* mean “talkative, wordy.”

More Info: The Latin “verbum” means “word” and of course gives us *verb*, *verbal*, etc., and also *verbiage* (excess words or style of expressing something in words). A **verbose** person could stand to cut down on the *verbiage*.

viable

(adj)

VYE-uh-bull

Definition: Capable of living (or growing, developing, etc.); practical, workable

Usage: I have three screenplay ideas, but the studio head said only one was commercially **viable**. Apparently, it's important to have a human lead character and a satisfying ending. / Due to leaps forward in technology, premature babies are considered **viable** earlier and earlier—currently around 24 weeks.

Related Words: *Feasible* (possible; logical or likely; suitable), *Plausible* (credible, having the appearance of truth)

More Info: The Latin root for “life” (“vi”) gives us *vivid*, *survive*, *revive*, *vivacious*, and *convivial*. And also the Spanish word for “life” and thus the Ricky Martin classic, “Livin’ La Vida Loca.”

vintage

(adj, noun)

VIN-tij

Definition: Related to items of high quality from a previous era, old-fashioned, antique (adj); the wine of a particular year (noun)

Usage: He didn't want just any **vintage** Darth Vader action figure—he wanted a particular **vintage**, the 1978 telescoping lightsaber one. / She special-ordered her favorite **vintage** of the *Côtes du Rhône*, then turned to her George Clooney-lookalike husband and joked that she liked men of a certain **vintage** as well.

Related Words: *Retro* is an informal word used to describe the best of earlier times (often related to fashion, design, etc.)

More Info: **Vintage** originated in relation to wine, and the same root appears in *vine* and *vintner* (winemaker).

virtual

(adj)

VER-choo-ull

Definition: Existing only in the mind or by means of a computer network; existing in results or in essence but not officially or in name

Usage: The Tamagotchi is a handheld **virtual** pet made in Japan—you have to “care” for it by performing various actions with the device, but in the end, your “pet” still looks very much like a keychain.

Related Words: *Nominal* can mean “in name only” but not in fact. In this way, it is something of an opposite to **virtual**, which can mean *not* in name, but existing in reality (The abused maid was *nominally* a free person, but kept as a **virtual** slave). *De facto* means “in fact, actually” (but not in name, as in “Some allege that Edith Wilson was the de facto—or **virtual**—President after her husband Woodrow was incapacitated by a stroke”).

vituperate

(verb)

vye-TOO-per-ayt

Definition: Verbally abuse, rebuke or criticize harshly

Usage: All couples fight, but your girlfriend **vituperates** you so severely that I'm not sure she loves you at all. Verbal abuse is actually a pretty good reason to break up.

Related Words: *Pejorative* (disparaging, derogatory, belittling), *Reville* (verbally abuse or speak very badly of), *Berate* (scold angrily and at length)

More Info: **Vituperate** comes from the Latin root “vitium,” (“fault”), which also occurs in *vice* (sin, wickedness) and *vitiate* (ruin, corrupt). *Vice* (or *vitiating* your things) would be one reason for **vituperating** someone.

volatile

(adj)

VAH-luh-tile

Definition: Varying, inconstant, fleeting; tending to violence, explosive;

Usage: Following the sudden revolution, the political environment in the country was so **volatile** that anything could have started a riot. / Stock prices are by nature **volatile**—if you want a “safe and steady” investment, try mutual funds.

Related Words: *Inconstancy* (Fickleness, unreliability; the state of changing without good reason), *Erratic* (inconsistent, wandering, having no fixed course)

More Info: From chemistry: a **volatile** substance easily changes states, such as by evaporating.

warranted

(adj)

WAR-en-ted

Also *warrant* (verb, noun)

Definition: Justified, authorized (*warrant* can mean to justify or a justification, but can also mean to vouch for or guarantee)

Usage: The pundit's comments don't even **warrant** a response from our organization—they were mere name-calling, not suitable for public discourse. / Your criticism of Anne is **unwarranted**—as your assistant, she has done everything you've asked her to do. / He doesn't have his documents with him, but I'll **warrant** that he is indeed a certified forklift operator.

More Info: A **warrant** can, of course, be a legal justification (as in every cop movie ever)—such as permission given to police by a judge to enter and search a suspect's home.

wary

(adj)

WAIR-ee

Definition: Watchful, motivated by caution, on guard against danger

Usage: Be **wary** of anyone who tells you that “anyone” can get rich with some special plan or scheme.

Related Words: *Chary* is a synonym (there are very few rhyming synonyms in English!), *Leery* (suspicious or wary), *Vigilant* (keenly watchful or alert in order to guard against danger)

whereas

(conjunction)

wair-AZZ

Definition: While on the contrary, considering that

Usage: Mr. Katsoulas had always assumed his son would take over the family business, **whereas** his son had always assumed he would go away to college and never come back. / **Whereas** peppers and squash are technically fruits, they are typically considered vegetables for culinary purposes.

More Info: Legal statements often begin with **whereas**, as in “**Whereas** the plaintiff was living with the defendant, and **whereas** she had lent him her car...”

whimsical

(adj)

WIM-zick-ull

Definition: Marked or motivated by whims (odd, fanciful ideas); erratic, unpredictable

Usage: *Alice in Wonderland* is a famously **whimsical** story in which a little girl falls down a rabbit hole and finds a strange and at times absurd world. / She enjoyed a **whimsical** day at the seashore—no plan, just wandering around and making sand castles as the mood struck.

Related Words: *Capricious* (synonym), *Arbitrary* (based entirely on one's discretion; capricious, unreasonable, or having no basis), *Lark* (merry adventure), *Mercurial* (changing moods)

More Info: **Whimsical** is generally positive, but it depends on context—fanciful behavior that's fun on a date would not be so fun coming from your boss (*Do this! No, that! Let's have office yoga! Why aren't you working harder?*)

wily

(adj)

WHILE-ee

Also *wiles* (plural noun)

Definition: Crafty, cunning, characterized by tricks or artifice

Usage: The **wily** criminal stole eight laptops by simply walking into a branch of a large company, introducing himself as the laptop repairman, and waiting for people to hand him their computers. / She was quite offended when her coworker suggested that she use her “feminine **wiles**” to make the sale.

Related Words: *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)

More Info: “Feminine **wiles**” refers to artful or beguiling behavior that a typically attractive woman uses to get what she wants—which could be as innocent as a romance, or something more devious.

zeal

(noun)

ZEEL

Also *zealot* (noun)

Definition: Great fervor or enthusiasm for a cause, person, etc., tireless diligence in furthering that cause; passion, ardor

Usage: Whether you agree with their views or not, you have to admit that the employees of PETA have great **zeal** for animal rights—most work for less than \$25,000 a year, and often participate in protests that get them shouted at or even arrested.

Related Words: *Ardent* (very passionate), *Fanatical* (excessively devoted, enthusiastic, or zealous in an uncritical way). Also *Fervent*, *Fervid*, and *Perfervid* all mean “passionate, fiery, deeply enthusiastic.”

More Info: The original **Zealots** were a Jewish sect that fiercely resisted Roman rule.

zenith

(noun)

ZEE-nith

Definition: High point, culmination

Usage: At the **zenith** of her career, the actress could command \$5 million per film. Now, she is mostly seen in made-for-TV movies.

Related Words: *Acme*, *Summit*, *Pinnacle* (synonyms), *Apex* (vertex, tip, point), *Apogee* (high point, point at which the moon is furthest from the Earth)

More Info: The opposite of the **zenith** is the *nadir*, or lowest point. Both words are terms from astronomy, referring to points directly above and below 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** of one's success.