

## Frequently misused English words

(mostly taken from Bill Bryson's *Troublesome Words* (1984, 1987))

### A

*adage* frequently, and unnecessarily, occurs with “old” in tow. An adage is by definition old.

*affect* vs. *effect* As a verb, *affect* means to influence (“Smoking may affect your health.”) or to adopt a pose or manner (“He affected ignorance.”). *Effect* as a verb means to accomplish, bring into existence (“Politicians seldom manage to effect real change.”)

*alternately* vs. *alternatively* *Alternately* means by turns (“The children watched as their teacher alternately skipped and danced down the corridor.”). *Alternatively* means offering a choice (“The journey may be made by road, or alternatively by rail.”).

*amazing* Currently overused as an all-purpose adjective of positive evaluation

*And* The belief that *and* should not be used to begin a sentence is without foundation. And that’s all there is to it. (Same goes for *or*, *but*, etc.).

*anxious* vs. *eager* *Anxious* means worried about future developments, experiencing anxiety. *Eager* means pleasantly excited, keen to do or experience something.

*a priori* vs. *prima facie* *Prima facie* means ‘at first sight’ or ‘on the surface of it,’ while *a priori* refers to conclusions drawn from assumptions rather than experience.

*awake(n)* vs. *wake (up)* Each of these verbs can be used both intransitively and transitively. *To awake(n)* is best reserved for the special abstract sense (‘become aware, enlivened, aroused’), since it has an poetic/archaic ring otherwise. There is morphological variation in both verbs’ paradigms, but current best practice is to stick to the following principal parts:  
*to awaken / has awakened / awoke* and *to wake (up) / has woken (up) / woke (up)*.

*auspicious* Beloved by public speakers (“On this auspicious occasion...”), the word does not simply mean special or memorable. It means propitious, promising, of good omen. *Auspice* is not to be confused with *aegis*: logically speaking, an effort can be undertaken “under the aegis of” a certain public authority or organization, but not under their “auspices.”

### B

*bait* vs. *bate* The phraseme runs “waiting, listening etc. with bated breath” (NOT “baited breath”).

*basically* The trouble with this word, basically, is that it is greatly overused and generally unnecessary, as here.

*begging the question* does not mean evading a straight answer, nor giving rise to a question. It means to use as a basis of proof something that itself needs proving.

*bellwether* is sometimes wrongly spelled *bellweather*. It has nothing to do with weather. *Wether* here is an old word for sheep. A bellwether is a sheep that has a bell hung from its neck, by which it leads the herd from one pasture to another. In general use, it means one that leads or shows the way.

*breach* vs. *breech* vs. *broach* Frequently confused. *Breach* describes an infraction or a gap. It should always suggest *break*, to which it is related (“a breach of international law”). *Breech* applies to the rear or lower portion of things (“a breech birth” or “pull up your breeches”). *To broach* means to pierce or open something (“to broach a new topic”).

## C

*cement* vs. *concrete* The two are not synonyms. Cement is merely a constituent (the adhesive part) of concrete, which also contains sand, gravel, and crushed rock.

*compare to* vs. *compare with* *Compare to* should be used to liken things, *compare with* to consider their similarities and differences. “He compared London to New York” means that he felt London to be similar to New York. “He compared London with New York” means that he assessed the two cities’ relative merits.

*compliment* vs. *complement* vs. *supplement* *Compliment* means to praise. *Complement* means to provide the missing half. *Supplement* means to fill out or make whole.

*comprise* vs. *consist of* vs. *be composed of* The three expressions are synonyms, and used according to the following template: “A comprises B and C.” but “A consists of B and C.” and “A is composed of B and C.”

*conserve* vs. *preserve* You conserve energy or other natural resources. You preserve food, corpses, carcasses, etc.

*contagious* vs. *infectious* Diseases spread by contact are contagious. Those spread by air or water are infectious.

*contemptible* vs. *contemptuous* *Contemptible* means deserving contempt. To be *contemptuous* means to bestow it.

*convince* vs. *persuade* You convince someone that he should believe, but persuade him to act.

*country* vs. *nation* Strictly, *country* refers to the geographical characteristics of a place and *nation* to the political and social ones.

*criterion* vs. *criteria* *Criterion* is singular, *criteria* plural.

## C

*decimate* Literally, the word means to reduce by a tenth (from the ancient practice of punishing the mutinous or cowardly by killing every tenth man). By extension it may be used to describe the inflicting of heavy damage, but it should never be used to denote annihilation.

*deduce* vs. *deduct* Occasionally confused. *Deduce* means to make a conclusion on the basis of evidence. *Deduct* means to subtract.

*definite* There is no 'A' in *definite*!

*despite* vs. *in spite of* There is no distinction between the two.

*different from* vs. *other than* Best used in these combinations.

*disassemble* vs. *dissemble* *Dissemble* means to conceal. *Disassemble* means to take apart.

*discomfit* vs. *discomfort* *Discomfit* means to rout, overwhelm or completely disconcert (or alternatively to perplex and induce uneasiness). To *discomfort* means to make uncomfortable.

*Discreet* vs. *discrete* The first means circumspect, careful, showing good judgment. The second means separate or unattached.

*Disinterested* vs. *uninterested* A disinterested person is one who has no stake in the outcome of an event; an uninterested person is one who doesn't care.

## E

*economic* vs. *economical* If what you mean is cheap, thrifty, not expensive, use *economical*. For every other meaning use *economic*.

*effete* *Effete* does not mean affectedly intellectual or sophisticated, or effeminate and weak. It means exhausted and barren.

*egoism* vs. *egotism* The first pertains to the philosophical notion that a person can prove nothing beyond the existence of his own mind. If all you wish to suggest is inflated vanity or preoccupation with the self, use *egotism*.

*eke* *Eke* means to add to or supplement in a meager way. You eke out an original supply – but you do not eke out a result.

*electric* vs. *electrical* Often used interchangeably, though the former tends to refer to raw energy as a resource (the electric company, an electric discharge), while the latter describes artificial applications of electricity (electrical engineering, electrical circuits).

*evangelical* vs. *evangelistic*      *Evangelical* is better reserved for contexts strictly pertaining to the Christian gospel. If you need a word to describe militant zeal, use *evangelistic*. And if you need an equivalent for German *evangelisch* in the sense of the reformed Christian denominations, *protestant* is the best choice.

*exception proves the rule*      *Prove* here is a “fossil.” Originally *prove* meant to test. So this expression means that the exception puts the rule to the test.

## F

*farther* vs. *further*      *Farther* usually appears in contexts involving literal distance and *further* in contexts involving figurative distance.

*feasible* vs. *plausible*      *Feasible* means capable of being done. *Plausible* means conceivably possible.

*fever* vs. *temperature*      The former is the symptom of illness, though in colloquial English one often hears e.g. “I think he has a temperature.”

*fewer* vs. *less*      Use *less* with singular nouns and *fewer* with plural nouns.

*flaunt* vs. *flout*      To flaunt means to display ostentatiously, to show off. To flout means to treat (a rule) with contempt, to smugly disregard.

*flounder* vs. *founder*      To founder means to sink. To flounder means to flail helplessly.

*for all intents and purposes*      (NOT “for all intensive purposes”)

*forego* vs. *forgo*      *Forego* means to go before, to precede. To do without is to *forgo*.

*fulsome*      is one of the most frequently misused words in English. The sense that is usually accorded it – of being copious or lavish or unstinting – is almost the opposite of the word’s dictionary meaning. *Fulsome* is related to *foul* and means odious and overfull, offensively insincere. “Fulsome praise” isn’t a lavish tribute; it is unctuous and insincere toadying.

## G

*gambit*      A *gambit* is an opening move that involves some strategic sacrifice or concession. All gambits are opening moves, but not all opening moves are gambits.

*grisly* vs. *grizzly*      Occasionally confused. The first means horrifying or gruesome. The second means gray, especially gray-haired.

## H

*hale* vs. *hail*      *Hale* means robust and vigorous, or to drag or haul forcibly. *Hail* describes a greeting, a salute or a downpour.

*hanged* vs. *hung* People are hanged; pictures and the like are hung.

*healthy* vs. *healthful* Organisms are healthy; practices (diets etc.) are healthful.

*historic* vs. *historical* Something that makes history or is part of history is historic (“an historic occasion”). Something that is based on history or describes history is historical (“a historical novel”).

*hoard* vs. *horde* Sometimes confused. A hoard is an accumulation of valuables. *Horde* originally described nomadic tribes but now applies to any crowd, particularly to a thronging and disorganized one.

*hoi polloi* (Greek for ‘the many’) means the masses, the common populace and not the elite as is sometimes thought.

*hopefully* originally had only the sense ‘filled with/acting out of hope’ (“The children looked hopefully out the window.”). Later – possibly due to German/English language contact – an alternative modal sense synonymous with Ger. *hoffentlich* (expressing hope from the speaker’s point of view) was added. The latter usage in English is often spurned by purists and prescriptivists.

## I

*imply* vs. *infer* *Imply* means to suggest. *Infer* means to deduce.

*inchoate* means ‘incipient, undeveloped, just starting’ – not ‘disorderly or disorganized’

*ingenious* vs. *ingenuous* The first means clever, the second means frank, unsophisticated, naïve (in the manner of an ingenue).

*intense* vs. *intensive* *Intense* should describe things that are heavy or extreme or occur to a high degree (“intense sunlight”), while *intensive* implies a concentrated focus (“intensive care” or “intensive training”).

*inveigh* vs. *inveigle* Occasionally confused. The first means to speak strongly against. The second means to entice or cajole (mnemonic: *inveigle* rhymes with *finagle*).

*irony* vs. *sarcasm* *Irony* is the use of words to convey a contradiction between the literal and intended meanings. *Sarcasm* is very like irony except that it is more stinging.

*its* vs. *it’s* *Its* = possessive. *It’s* = contraction of ‘it is’

## J

*just deserts* NOT “just desserts” – the expression is not about a sweet course after a meal, but about someone getting what he justly deserves.

## K

*kith and kin* Your kin are your relatives. Your kith are your relatives and acquaintances. Both words have become archaic in standard English.

## L

*languid* vs. *limpid* Not to be confused. *Limpid* means clear, calm, untroubled (“a limpid stream”). It has nothing to do with being limp or listless – meanings that are covered by *languid*.

*lay* vs. *lie* Use them analogous to Ger. *legen* and *liegen*, respectively.

	<b>to lay</b> (transitive)	<b>to lie</b> (intransitive)
<b>Present:</b>	I lay the book on the table.	I lie down; I am lying down.
<b>Past:</b>	Yesterday I laid the book on the table.	Last night I lay down to sleep.
<b>Pres. perf.</b>	I have already laid the book on the table.	I have lain in bed all day.

*lectern* vs. *podium* Frequently confused. A lectern is the stand on which a speaker places his notes. A podium is the raised platform on which he and the lectern stand.

*literally* If you don't wish to be taken literally, don't use *literally*. The word means actually, not figuratively.

*livid* originally indicated a bluish, leaden shade of the sort associated with bruising. It has since been extended to mean furious and argumentative. But the word has nothing to do with redness, as is often assumed.

*lose* vs. *loose* The former is related to the loss of something, the latter is the opposite of *tight*.

*luxuriant* vs. *luxurious* Not interchangeable. *Luxuriant* indicates profuse growth (“luxuriant hair”). *Luxurious* means sumptuous and expensive (“a luxurious house”).

## M

*mean*, *median*, *average* The first and the last are synonyms (‘the sum of all values divided by the number of values’). The *median* is the middle number in a series of numbers arranged in order of magnitude.

*metal* vs. *mettle* *Metal* describes one of the basic elements. *Mettle* means courage or spirit.

*mischievous* NOT mischievious!

“*Music has charms to sooth a savage breast,*” runs the line from a play by William Congreve (NOT ‘a savage beast’)

## N

*nauseous* vs. *nauseated* Nowadays many English speakers use the former word exclusively, in the sense of ‘experiencing nausea.’ But some language pedants insist the earlier distinction should be preserved: *nauseous* meaning ‘causing nausea’ while *nauseated* would mean ‘suffering from the sensation of nausea.’

*nemesis* A nemesis (from Nemesis, the Greek goddess of vengeance) is one who extracts retributive justice or is utterly unbeatable, and not merely a rival of long standing.

*noisome* has nothing to do with noise. It is related to *annoy* and means offensive or objectionable (esp. in relation to unpleasant smells)

## O

*obviously* vs. *of course* Nowadays the former is increasingly being used with the sense of the latter (“Obviously I’m sorry.”) *Obviously* should only be used to mean something is clearly evident to any observer.

*oral* vs. *verbal* *Oral* applies only to the spoken word, or other things related to the mouth. *Verbal* can apply to both spoken and written words.

## P

*palate* vs. *palette* vs. *pallet* *Palate* has to do with the mouth and taste. *Palette* is the board used by artists. *Pallet* is a mattress, a machine part or the wooden platforms on which freight is stood.

*partly* vs. *partially* Although they are often interchangeable, their meanings are slightly different. *Partially* means incompletely and *partly* means in part.

*peaceable* vs. *peaceful* *Peaceful* means tranquil and serene. *Peaceable* is a disposition toward the state of peacefulness.

*peruse* does not mean ‘to look over sth. idly.’ It means to read carefully.

*practical* vs. *practicable* *Practical* means ‘of, or useful in, practice.’ *Practicable* means capable of being put into practice.

*presumptive* vs. *presumptuous* *Presumptuous* means impudent and inclined to take liberties. *Presumptive* means giving grounds to presume.

*principal* vs. *principle* *Principle* means fundamental and is usually applied to fundamental beliefs or truths (“It’s not the money, it’s the principle.”). It is always a noun. *Principal* can be a noun meaning chief or of first importance or an adjective with the same meaning (“The principal reason for my going...” or “the principal parts of a verb”).

*Prodigal* does not mean wandering or given to running away, a sense sometimes wrongly inferred from the biblical story of the prodigal son. It means recklessly wasteful or extravagant.

*prophecy* vs. *prophecy*    The first is the noun, the second the verb.

*purposely* vs. *purposefully*    The first means intentionally, the second means with an objective in mind.

## Q

*quantum leap*    A quantum jump is not, as is often thought, a huge one. It is almost the opposite. It describes a significant but really rather small advance from one plane to another. If we use the analogy of a man standing at the foot of a stairway, if he made a quantum leap, he would not bound to the top, but would merely hop onto the first step.

## R

*rack* vs. *wrack*    *Wrack* means wreck and almost never appears except in the expression “wrack and ruin.” *Rack* means to put under strain. The expressions are “nerve-racking” and “to rack one’s brains.”

*regretfully* vs. *regrettably*    The first means with feelings of regret. The second means unfortunately.

## S

*sensual* vs. *sensuous*    The words are only broadly synonymous. *Sensual* applies to a person’s baser instincts as distinguished from reason. It should always hold connotations of sexual allure and lust. *Sensuous* suggests instead the idea of being alive to sensations. It should be used when there is no suggestion of sexual arousal. [Meanwhile, a corpus search will surely reveal no widespread compliance to these rules of thumb!]

*sleight of hand*    NOT “slight of hand”

*substitute* can only be followed by “for.” If you find yourself following the word with “by” or “with” or any other preposition, you should choose another word.

## T

*though* vs. *although*    The two are interchangeable except at the end of a sentence, where only *though* is correct.

*tortuous* vs. *torturous*    *Tortuous* means winding and circuitous. *Torturous* is the adjectival form of *torture* and describes the infliction of extreme pain.

## U

*use* vs. *usage*    *Usage* describes that which is habitual and customary (including language).



*use* vs. *utilize*                      In its strictest sense, *utilize* means to make the best use of something that wasn't intended for the job, or to make the most practical possible use of something. But in all other senses, *use* is better.

## **W**

who vs. whom                      *Whom* has been slowly falling out of use over the last few centuries. However, if used, it should only occur in object position (analogous to Ger. *wen*, *wem*).