

Overused and Discouraged Words and Phrases

Peter Occil

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To improve English usage, reduce monotony, and enrich English vocabulary in writing and speech, I have compiled these two lists on what not to say and what to say better. Many items in these tables were inspired by Emilio Bernal Labrada, “Good usage prevents abuse”, 2018.

The lists could also be useful as a handout to Literacy students from ninth grade and up, or to suggest alternatives to overused and discouraged words for younger students. For my other suggestions on Literacy instruction, see “**Suggestions for Instructional Materials**”¹.

This is an open-source document; see its **source code**². You can send comments on this document on the **GitHub issues page**³.

1 Overused Words

| Instead of just saying... | Try saying... | Notes |
|--|--|------------------------|
| Also, ... | in addition, furthermore, moreover, further, plus, to add to that, on top of that, what is more, apart from that | |
| almost all | most all, nearly all, all but a few | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| another [number] (e.g., <i>another five</i>) | an additional [number], [number] additional, a further [number], [number] more, [number] extra, an extra [number] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| bad actor | malicious actor, malevolent actor, wrongdoer, evildoer, baddie, malfeasant | |
| cause | lead to, produce, provoke, engender, beget, bring on, bring about, produce, result in | Verb. |
| check out | discover, uncover, learn more about, find out about, see for yourself | |
| focus on | touch on, concentrate on, center on, emphasize, put/lay emphasis on, put/lay weight on, put/lay an accent on, deal mostly with, prioritize, concern, be anchored on, be devoted to | |
| focused on (e.g., <i>a book (that is) focused on a topic</i>) | about, dedicated to, devoted to, dealing with, treating of, relating to, involving, concentrated on, concerning, anchored on | |

¹<https://peteroupc.github.io/insmat.html>

²<https://github.com/peteroupc/peteroupc.github.io/raw/master/usage.md>

³<https://github.com/peteroupc/peteroupc.github.io/issues>

| Instead of just saying... | Try saying... | Notes |
|--|--|--|
| good | nice, fine, swell, decent, lovely, admirable, pleasing, pleasant | Words of positive sentiment. |
| great | very good, fantastic, terrific, remarkable, magnificent, excellent, splendid, wonderful, superb | Words of very positive sentiment. |
| happen | occur, manifest, produce itself, present itself, take place, unfold, come to pass. | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| including [something] | [something] among them, among them [something], above all [something], [something] included, especially [something], even [something], inclusive of [something]. | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| <i>an event</i> leaves [someone] dead | <i>an event</i> kills [someone] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| <i>an event</i> leaves many (people) dead | <i>an event</i> kills many; <i>an event</i> [synonym for <i>causes</i>] many deaths | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| <i>an event</i> leaves [someone] injured | <i>an event</i> injures [someone] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| <i>an event</i> leaves many (people) injured | <i>an event</i> injures many; <i>an event</i> [synonym for <i>causes</i>] many injuries | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| little house | housie, housette, houselet, minihouse | Diminutive. |
| Note that... | Observe that..., Notably..., Notice that..., Take note that..., It should be noted that..., It bears noting that..., It is worth noting that, It bears mentioning that..., It should be mentioned that..., Keep in mind that..., We point out that..., [leave out] | |
| keep people safe online | keep users safe online, keep Internet users safe, keep internauts safe, protect users online | |
| jury member | juror | Suggested by E. Bernal. |
| many people | many | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people living in [territory] | residents of [territory], inhabitants of [territory] | Also consider gentile nouns; e.g.: <i>people living in Italy</i> → <i>Italians</i> . |
| (the) professors | the faculty, professorship, professor corps, professor body, body of professors | |
| say | declare, affirm, express, state, make (it) known, mention, comment, remark. <i>Depending on context</i> : opine, note, share, affirm, argue, contend, highlight, emphasize, underscore, add, explain, conclude, reply, respond, answer, signal, indicate, point out, maintain, acknowledge, admit. | Spanish and French press articles tend to employ numerous synonyms for this word. |
| sit down with | interview, join ... for an interview, meet, consult with, exchange views with, talk with, converse with, chat with | Suggested by E. Bernal. |

| Instead of just saying... | Try saying... | Notes |
|---|---|------------------------|
| [someone] says (that)... | According to [someone], ...In the words of [someone], ...In [someone]'s words, ...Per [someone], ...As [someone] [synonym for <i>says</i>], ...[someone] [synonym for <i>says</i>] that... | |
| [someone] says (that)... | In [someone]'s opinion, ...In the opinion of [someone], ...In [someone]'s view, ...In [someone]'s eyes, ...For [someone], ...As [someone] believes, ...As [someone] sees it, ...In [someone]'s belief, ...[someone] believes that...[someone] opines that...[someone] considers that... | Expressing an opinion. |
| [someone] says (that) [something] is... | [someone] considers [something] (as)...[someone] labels [something] (as)...[someone] finds [something]...[someone] calls [something]...[someone] qualifies [something] as...[something] is ... to [someone]for [someone], [something] is... | |
| [someone] was identified as [name]. | [someone] went by the name of [name].[someone] was named [name].[someone], [name], ... | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| [someone], identified as [name], ... | [someone], going by the name of [name], ...[someone], named [name], ...[someone], [name], ... | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| (the) teachers | teachership, teacher corps, teacher body, body of teachers | |
| use | employ, utilize, make use of | Verb. |
| what's happening | what's going on, what's occurring, what's [synonym for <i>happening</i>]. | Inspired by E. Bernal. |

Another technique to try is to rewrite a text to avoid overused words as much as possible.

2 Discouraged Words

Emilio Bernal, in “Good usage prevents abuse”, wrote of his concerns about, among other things, the overuse of *people*, *persons*, *members*, *day*, and *happen*, as well as the unnecessary repetition of words (e.g., *He is someone who is reliable; She wants what she wants; It'll happen when it'll happen*). His work formed the basis of many of the suggestions in the following table.

| Don't say... | Say... | Notes |
|--|--|------------------------|
| after [something] happened, ... | after [something] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| alleged victim | likely victim | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| all day today | all day [if <i>today</i> is understood], from dawn to dusk (today), from sunrise to sunset (today) | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| basically | [leave out] | |
| before [something] happened, ... | before [something] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| blizzard conditions | blizzard | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| [adjective] day today (e.g., <i>nice day today</i>) | [adjective] day [if <i>today</i> is understood], it's [adjective] today | Inspired by E. Bernal. |

| Don't say... | Say... | Notes |
|--|---|--|
| dead people examples include but are not limited to | the dead examples are | Inspired by E. Bernal. The word “examples” already conveys the idea that the list is not all-inclusive. |
| family members | relatives, kin | ‘Relatives’ suggested by E. Bernal. |
| including but not limited to | including | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| injured people | the injured | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| is someone who is | is | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| is someone who is [adjective] (e.g., <i>is someone who is reliable</i>) | is [adjective]; is a(n) [adjective] one | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| is something that is | is | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| it is midnight tonight | it is midnight | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| least favorite | least desired | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| literally | absolutely, totally; [leave out]*** | |
| moment in time | moment | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| most favorite | favorite | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| myth (<i>when a story is not meant</i>) | falsehood, untruth | |
| [adjective] night tonight (e.g., <i>nice night tonight</i>) | [adjective] night [if <i>tonight</i> is understood], it's [adjective] tonight | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| [number] people/persons | [number] | Leave out <i>people</i> or <i>persons</i> if understood. |
| one way or another | either way; [leave out] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| one way or the other | either way; [leave out] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| other people | others | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people's identities | people's identity, every personal identity | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people's lives | life | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/persons being held/jailed | (the) detainees, the jailed. <i>In criminal cases:</i> (the) inmates, the prisoners. | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/persons know | it is known, it is generally known, it is commonly known, we know | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/persons complaining | (the) complainants | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/persons present/attending | (the) attendees | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/people think | it is thought, it is commonly thought, it is believed, the general belief is, we think, they believe, by popular belief | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| point in time | time, instant, moment | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| prevent [something] from happening | prevent [something] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| rain conditions, rainy conditions | rain. <i>Or as appropriate:</i> drizzle, showers, squalls, light rain, heavy rain, downpours. | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| (they) saved their lives | (they) were saved, (they) saved their life | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| (their) lives, deaths, lifetimes, healths, sakes, identities, futures | their life, death, lifetime, health, sake, identity, future | Inspired by E. Bernal. |

| Don't say... | Say... | Notes |
|--|---|---|
| This is [program]. | <i>To identify the program:</i> [program]; You are listening to [program]; You are tuned to [program]. <i>To present the program:</i> [program] starts now; We (now) welcome you to [program]; We (now) bring you [program]; Now starting [program]; Presenting [program]; We now present [program]; We now start [program]; It's time for [program]. | Identifications of TV and radio programs. Suggested by E. Bernal. |
| [time] before now [verb] whether or not (e.g., <i>know whether or not, determine whether or not</i>) | [time] ago [verb] whether** | Inspired by E. Bernal. Suggested by E. Bernal. |

Even here, it is worth trying to rewrite a text to avoid discouraged words to the greatest extent possible.

** Use “whether or not B” or “whether B or not” only to mean ‘both if B and if not’.

*** In formal writing, use *literally* only to mean ‘in the exact sense; not figuratively’.

3 To Improve English Usage Through Word Processing Apps...

What I would like to see is an open-source plugin for popular word-processing applications that finds overused and discouraged words and phrases in a document, such as those mentioned above, and suggests corresponding replacements. (A similar practice is found in Web browsers’ spell checkers.) For example, the plugin could look for instances of “sit down with”, underline them, and show suggestions such as “interview”, “consult with”, and so on in a menu when the phrase is right-clicked on.

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