

Overused and Discouraged Words and Phrases

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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, besides, to add to that, on top of that, what is more, apart from that, additionally | |
| almost all | most all, nearly all, all but a few | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| another [number] (for example, <i>another five</i>) | an additional [number], [number] additional, a further [number], [number] more, [number] extra, an extra [number] | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| award winner | awardee | |
| bad actor | malicious actor, malevolent actor, wrongdoer, evildoer, baddie, malfeasant, illegitimate actor | |
| bias (<i>in the sense of ‘subjective opinion’</i>) | prejudice, subjectivity, partiality | Similarly: <i>biased</i> → <i>prejudiced</i> . |
| cause | lead to, provoke, engender, occasion, beget, breed, bring on, bring about, give rise to, produce, result in | Verb. |
| check out | discover, uncover, learn more about, find out about, see for yourself, consult | In the sense of ‘discover’, rather than ‘register a book to borrow’ or ‘end a hotel stay’. |

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 |
|---|--|---|
| focus on | touch on, concentrate on, center on, emphasize, put/lay emphasis on, zoom in on, put/lay weight on, put/lay an accent on, deal mostly with, prioritize, concern, relate to, be anchored on, be devoted to, devote [itself] to, insist on, zero in on | |
| focused on (for example, <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, directed to, oriented on, aimed at | |
| 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, take place, unfold, come about, manifest, produce itself, present itself, 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]; <i>an event</i> puts [someone] to death | 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>] the death of many; <i>an event</i> puts many to death | 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..., Be aware that..., It is worth noting that, It bears mentioning that..., Keep in mind that..., We point out that..., [leave out] | |
| keep people safe online | keep users safe online, keep Internet users safe, keep internavts safe, protect users online | |
| jury member | juror | Suggested by E. Bernal. |
| many people member (<i>of an association, club, etc.</i>) | many adherent, individual. | Inspired by E. Bernal. E. Bernal wrote of his concerns about this word's overuse. |

| Instead of just saying... | Try saying... | Notes |
|--|--|--|
| people, persons | men and women, individuals, audience, public, population, anyone..., whoever..., [leave out]. <i>Informal</i> : folks. | More generally, a more specific term than <i>people</i> or <i>persons</i> is preferred. Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people living in [territory] | residents of [territory], inhabitants of [territory] | Also consider, for example: <i>people living in Italy</i> → <i>Italians</i> . |
| (the) professors | the faculty, professorship, professor corps, professor body, body of professors | |
| say | declare, affirm, assert, express, state, make (it) known, mention, comment, remark. <i>Depending on context</i> : opine, note, share, affirm, argue, contend, highlight, emphasize, underscore, add, explain, elaborate, conclude, reply, respond, answer, signal, indicate, point out, reveal, 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, speak with, talk with, converse with, chat with | Suggested by E. Bernal. |
| [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, ...In [someone]'s estimation, ...For [someone], ...As [someone] believes, ...As [someone] sees it, ...In [someone]'s belief, ...[someone] believes that...[someone] opines that...[someone] considers that...As [someone] puts it, ... | Expressing an opinion. |
| [someone] says (that) [something] is... | [someone] considers [something] (as)...[someone] labels [something] (as)...[someone] finds [something]...[someone] calls [something]...[someone] declares [something] (as)...[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. |
| [something] is used to [do something else] | [something] serves to [do something else]. | |

| Instead of just saying... | Try saying... | Notes |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| The fact that... | That... | Suggested by Tom Hitchner, UCLA, in an Advanced Placement Daily video. |
| The fact that <i>he appeared</i> | That <i>he appeared, His appearance, His appearing.</i> | Suggested by Tom Hitchner, UCLA, in an Advanced Placement Daily video. |
| (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 (for example, *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. |
| because of the fact that | because | Suggested by Tom Hitchner, UCLA, in an Advanced Placement Daily video. |
| blizzard conditions | blizzard | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| [adjective] day today (for example, <i>nice day today</i>) | [adjective] day [if <i>today</i> is understood], it's [adjective] today | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| dead people | the dead | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| due to the fact that | because | Suggested by Tom Hitchner, UCLA, in an Advanced Placement Daily video. |

| Don't say... | Say... | Notes |
|---|---|--|
| examples include but are not limited to | examples are | 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 individual people | including individuals | 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] (for example, <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 (<i>in the sense of ‘absolutely’</i>) | absolutely, totally, utterly, altogether, downright, completely, certainly; [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 (for example, <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, the audience, the attending public | Inspired by E. Bernal. |
| people/persons 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. |
| pregnant people | the pregnant, pregnant women | |
| 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. |

| Don't say... | Say... | Notes |
|---|--|--|
| (their) lives, deaths, lifetimes, healths, sakes, identities, futures This is [program]. | their life, death, lifetime, health, sake, identity, future <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]. | Inspired by E. Bernal. Identifications of TV and radio programs. Suggested by E. Bernal. |
| [time] before now until such time as [verb] whether or not (for example, <i>know whether or not</i> , <i>determine whether or not</i>) | [time] ago until [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 earlier, and suggests corresponding replacements. (A similar practice is found in Web browsers’ spell checkers and as a built-in feature in some closed source word-processing apps.) 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.

4 Derivations

Derivations of existing words, so underused a procedure in our language, can enrich the vocabulary of English.

An interesting exercise to try with students is to build—

- the feminine form of some words through suffixes. For example, -an becomes -anesse, -ian becomes -ienne, -ican becomes -ickenne or -icanesse: *Bostonian* becomes *Bostonienne*, *American* becomes *Americkenne* or *Americanesse*, *Puerto Rican* becomes *Puerto Ricanesse* etc., instead of resorting to adding *female* or *woman*.
- the diminutive form of some words through suffixes (for example: -ie, -ette, -kin, -let) or through prefixes (for example: mini-, micro-), without resorting to adding *little* or *small*.

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