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# Usage

All this talk about good words and bad words brings us to a gray but important area called “usage.” What is good usage? What is good English? What newly minted words is it O.K. to use, and who is to be the judge? Is it O.K. to use “O.K.”?

Earlier I mentioned an incident of college students hassling the administration, and in the last chapter I described myself as a word freak. Here are two fairly recent arrivals. “Hassle” is both a verb and a noun, meaning to give somebody a hard time, or the act of being given a hard time, and anyone who has ever been hassled for not properly filling out Form 35-BX will agree that the word sounds exactly right. “Freak” means an enthusiast, and there’s no missing the aura of obsession that goes with calling someone a jazz freak, or a chess freak, or a sun freak, though it would probably be pushing my luck to describe a man who compulsively visits circus sideshows as a freak freak.

Anyway, I accept these two usages gladly. I don’t consider them slang, or put quotation marks around them to show that I’m mucking about in the argot of the youth culture and really know better. They’re good words and we need them But I won’t accept “notables” and “greats” and “upcoming” and many other newcomers. They are cheap words and we *don’t* need them.

Why is one word good and another word cheap? I can’t give you an answer, because usage has no fixed boundaries. Language is a fabric that changes from one week to another, adding new strands and dropping old ones, and even word freaks fight over what is allowable, often reaching their decision on a wholly subjective basis such as taste (“notables” is sleazy). Which still leaves the question of who our tastemakers are.

The question was confronted in the 1960s by the editors of a brand-new dictionary, *The American Heritage Dictionary*. They assembled a “Usage Panel” to help them appraise the new words and dubious constructions that had come knocking at the door. Which ones should be ushered in, which thrown out on their ear? The panel consisted of 104 men and women—mostly writers, poets, editors and teachers—who were known for caring about the language and trying to use it well. I was a member of the panel, and over the next few years I kept

getting questionnaires. Would I accept “finalize” and “escalate”? How did I feel about “It’s me”? Would I allow “like” to be used as a conjunction—like so many people do? How about “mighty,” as in “mighty fine”?

We were told that in the dictionary our opinions would be tabulated in a separate “Usage Note,” so that readers could see how we voted. The questionnaire also left room for any comments we might feel impelled to make—an opportunity the panelists seized avidly, as we found when the dictionary was published and our comments were released to the press. Passions ran high. “Good God, no! Never!” cried Barbara W. Tuchman, asked about the verb “to author.” Scholarship hath no fury like that of a language purist faced with sludge, and I shared Tuchman’s vow that “author” should never be authorized, just as I agreed with Lewis Mumford that the adverb “good” should be “left as the exclusive property of Ernest Hemingway.”

But guardians of usage are doing only half their job if they merely keep the language from becoming sloppy. Any dolt can rule that the suffix “wise,” as in “healthwise,” is doltwise, or that being “rather unique” is no more possible than being rather pregnant. The other half of the job is to help the language grow by welcoming any immigrant that will bring strength or color. Therefore I was glad that 97 percent of us voted to admit “dropout,” which is clean and vivid, but that only 47 percent would accept “senior citizen,” which is typical of the pudgy new intruders from the land of sociology, where an illegal alien is now an undocumented resident. I’m glad we accepted “escalate,” the kind of verbal contraption I generally dislike but which the Vietnam war endowed with a precise meaning, complete with overtones of blunder.

I’m glad we took into full membership all sorts of robust words that previous dictionaries derided as “colloquial”: adjectives like “rambunctious,” verbs like “trigger” and “rile,” nouns like “shambles” and “tycoon” and “trek,” the latter approved by 78 percent to mean any difficult trip, as in “the commuter’s daily trek to Manhattan.” Originally it was a Cape Dutch word applied to the Boers’ arduous journey by ox wagon. But our panel evidently felt that the Manhattan commuter’s daily trek is no less arduous.

Still, 22 percent were unwilling to let “trek” slip into general usage. That was the virtue of revealing how our panel voted—it put our opinions on display, and writers in doubt can conduct themselves accordingly. Thus our 95 percent vote against “myself,” as in “He invited Mary and myself to dinner,” a word condemned as “prissy,” “horrible” and “a genteelism,” ought to warn off anyone who doesn’t want to be prissy, horrible or genteel. As Red Smith put it, “‘Myself’ is the refuge of idiots taught early that ‘me’ is a dirty word.”

On the other hand, only 66 percent of our panel rejected the verb “to contact,” once regarded as tacky, and only half opposed the split infinitive and the verbs “to fault” and “to bus.” So only 50 percent of your readers will fault you if you decide to voluntarily call your school board and to bus your children to another town. If you contact your school board you risk your reputation by

another 16 percent. Our apparent rule of thumb was stated by Theodore M. Bernstein, author of the excellent *The Careful Writer:* "We should apply the test of convenience. Does the word fill a real need? If it does, let's give it a franchise."

All of this confirms what lexicographers have always known: that the laws of usage are relative, bending with the taste of the lawmaker. One of our panelists, Katherine Anne Porter, called "O.K." a "detestable vulgarity" and claimed she had never spoken the word in her life, whereas I freely admit that I have spoken the word "O.K." "Most," as in "most everyone," was scorned as "cute farmer talk" by Isaac Asimov and embraced as a "good English idiom" by Virgil Thomson. "Regime," meaning any administration, as in "the Truman regime," drew the approval of most everyone on the panel, as did "dynasty." But they drew the wrath of Jacques Barzun, who said, "These are technical terms, you blasted non-historians!" Probably I gave my O.K. to "regime." Now, chided by Barzun for imprecision, I think it looks like journalese. One of the words *I* railed against was "personality," as in a "TV personality." But now I wonder if it isn't the only word for that vast swarm of people who are famous for being famous—and possibly nothing else. What did the Gabor sisters actually *do?*

In the end it comes down to what is "correct" usage. We have no king to establish the King's English; we only have the President's English, which we don't want. *Webster*, long a defender of the faith, muddied the waters in 1961 with its permissive Third Edition, which argued that almost anything goes as long as somebody uses it, noting that "ain't" is "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers."

Just where *Webster* cultivated those speakers I ain't sure. Nevertheless it's true that the spoken language is looser than the written language, and *The American Heritage Dictionary* properly put its question to us in both forms. Often we allowed an oral idiom that we forbade in print as too informal, fully realizing, however, that "the pen must at length comply with the tongue," as Samuel Johnson said, and that today's spoken garbage may be tomorrow's written gold. The growing acceptance of the split infinitive, or of the preposition at the end of a sentence, proves that formal syntax can't hold the fort forever against a speaker's more comfortable way of getting the same thing said—and it shouldn't. I think a sentence is a fine thing to put a preposition at the end of.

Our panel recognized that correctness can even vary within a word. We voted heavily against "cohort" as a synonym for "colleague," except when the tone was jocular. Thus a professor would not be among his cohorts at a faculty meeting, but they would abound at his college reunion, wearing funny hats. We rejected "too" as a synonym for "very," as in "His health is not too good." Whose health is? But we approved it in sardonic or humorous use, as in "He was not too happy when she ignored him."

These may seem like picayune distinctions. They're not. They are signals to the reader that you are sensitive to the shadings of usage. "Too" when substituted for "very" is clutter: "He didn't feel too much like going shopping."

But the wry example in the previous paragraph is worthy of Ring Lardner. It adds a tinge of sarcasm that otherwise wouldn't be there.

Luckily, a pattern emerged from the deliberations of our panel, and it offers a guideline that is still useful. We turned out to be liberal in accepting new words and phrases, but conservative in grammar.

It would be foolish to reject a word as perfect as "dropout," or to pretend that countless words and phrases are not entering the gates of correct usage every day, borne on the winds of science and technology, business and sports and social change: "outsource," "blog," "laptop," "mousepad," "geek," "boomer," "Google," "iPod," "hedge fund," "24/7," "multi-tasking," "slam dunk" and hundreds of others. Nor should we forget all the short words invented by the counterculture in the 1960s as a way of lashing back at the self-important verbiage of the Establishment: "trip," "rap," "crash," "trash," "funky," "split," "rip-off," "vibes," "downer," "bummer." If brevity is a prize, these were winners. The only trouble with accepting words that entered the language overnight is that they often leave just as abruptly. The "happenings" of the late 1960s no longer happen, "out of sight" is out of sight, and even "awesome" has begun to chill out. The writer who cares about usage must always know the quick from the dead.

As for the area where our Usage Panel was conservative, we upheld most of the classic distinctions in grammar—"can" and "may," "fewer" and "less," "eldest" and "oldest," etc.—and decried the classic errors, insisting that "flout" still doesn't mean "flaunt," no matter how many writers flaunt their ignorance by flouting the rule, and that "fortuitous" still means "accidental," "disinterested" still means "impartial," and "infer" doesn't mean "imply." Here we were motivated by our love of the language's beautiful precision. Incorrect usage will lose you the readers you would most like to win. Know the difference between a "reference" and an "allusion," between "connive" and "conspire," between "compare with" and "compare to." If you must use "comprise," use it right. It means "include"; dinner comprises meat, potatoes, salad and dessert.

"I choose always the grammatical form unless it sounds affected," Marianne Moore explained, and that's finally where our panel took its stand. We were not pedants, so hung up on correctness that we didn't want the language to keep refreshing itself with phrases like "hung up." But that didn't mean we had to accept every atrocity that comes lumbering in.

Meanwhile the battle continues. Today I still receive ballots from *The American Heritage Dictionary* soliciting my opinion on new locutions: verbs like "definitize" ("Congress definitized a proposal"), nouns like "affordables," colloquialisms like "the bottom line" and strays like "into" ("He's into backgammon and she's into jogging").

It no longer takes a panel of experts to notice that jargon is flooding our daily life and language. President Carter signed an executive order directing that federal regulations be written "simply and clearly." President Clinton's attorney

general, Janet Reno, urged the nation's lawyers to replace "a lot of legalese" with "small, old words that all people understand"—words like "right" and "wrong" and "justice." Corporations have hired consultants to make their prose less opaque, and even the insurance industry is trying to rewrite its policies to tell us in less disastrous English what redress will be ours when disaster strikes. Whether these efforts will do much good I wouldn't want to bet. Still, there's comfort in the sight of so many watchdogs standing Canute-like on the beach, trying to hold back the tide. That's where all careful writers ought to be—looking at every new piece of flotsam that washes up and asking "Do we need it?"

I remember the first time somebody asked me, "How does that impact you?" I always thought "impact" was a noun, except in dentistry. Then I began to meet "de-impact," usually in connection with programs to de-impact the effects of some adversity. Nouns now turn overnight into verbs. We target goals and we access facts. Train conductors announce that the train won't platform. A sign on an airport door tells me that the door is alarmed. Companies are downsizing. It's part of an ongoing effort to grow the business. "Ongoing" is a jargon word whose main use is to raise morale. We face our daily job with more zest if the boss tells us it's an ongoing project; we give more willingly to institutions if they have targeted our funds for ongoing needs. Otherwise we might fall prey to disincentivization.

I could go on; I have enough examples to fill a book, but it's not a book I would want anyone to read. We're still left with the question: What is good usage? One helpful approach is to try to separate usage from jargon.

I would say, for example, that "prioritize" is jargon—a pompous new verb that sounds more important than "rank"—and that "bottom line" is usage, a metaphor borrowed from the world of bookkeeping that conveys an image we can picture. As every businessman knows, the bottom line is the one that matters. If someone says, "The bottom line is that we just can't work together," we know what he means. I don't much like the phrase, but the bottom line is that it's here to stay.

New usages also arrive with new political events. Just as Vietnam gave us "escalate," Watergate gave us a whole lexicon of words connoting obstruction and deceit, including "deep-six," "launder," "enemies list" and other "gate"-suffix scandals ("Irangate"). It's a fitting irony that under Richard Nixon "launder" became a dirty word. Today when we hear that someone laundered his funds to hide the origin of the money and the route it took, the word has a precise meaning. It's short, it's vivid, and we need it. I accept "launder" and "stonewall"; I don't accept "prioritize" and "disincentive."

I would suggest a similar guideline for separating good English from technical English. It's the difference between, say, "printout" and "input." A printout is a specific object that a computer emits. Before the advent of computers it wasn't needed; now it is. But it has stayed where it belongs. Not so with "input," which was coined to describe the information that's fed to a computer. Our input is

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sought on every subject, from diets to philosophical discourse ("I'd like your input on whether God really exists").

I don't want to give somebody my input and get his feedback, though I'd be glad to offer my ideas and hear what he thinks of them. Good usage, to me, consists of using good words if they already exist—as they almost always do—to express myself clearly and simply to someone else. You might say it's how I verbalize the interpersonal.