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# english for journalists





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# English for Journalists

*English for Journalists* has established itself in newsrooms the world over as an invaluable guide to the basics of English and to those aspects of writing, such as reporting speech, house style and jargon, which are specific to the language of journalism. Written in a highly accessible and engaging style, *English for Journalists* covers the fundamentals of grammar, spelling, punctuation and journalistic writing, with all points illustrated through a series of concise and illuminating examples. The book features practical, easy-to-follow advice with examples of common mistakes and problem words.

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**Wynford Hicks** has worked as a reporter, subeditor, feature writer, editor and editorial consultant in magazines, newspapers and books, and as a teacher of journalism specialising in the use of English, subediting and writing styles. He is the author of *Quite Literally*.

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# English for Journalists

## Thirtieth Anniversary Edition

FIFTH EDITION

Wynford Hicks with Gavin Allen

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# Introduction: how this book began

*English for Journalists* has a history. In the first edition I thanked the Wolverhampton *Express and Star* for permission to use material from *A Journalist's Guide to the Use of English* by Ted Bottomley and Anthony Loftus, first published in 1971 and long out of print. That book had begun as an in-company training manual for subeditors.

In fact there would have been little incentive to write *EfJ* if the *Guide* had remained in print. It covered the basics pretty well, giving clear advice and putting such things as grammar and punctuation into a journalistic context. It also had useful things to say about style. For several years, when I was teaching periodical journalism at (what was then) the London College of Printing, I ordered bulk copies of the *Guide* direct from the publishers and sold them on to students.

But with the *Guide* no longer available, and encouraged by various people, including Philip Marsh, the founder of PMA Training, I put together the first edition of this book in 1993. I would like to thank all those friends and colleagues who have since made constructive comments and provided useful examples of usage to be followed or avoided – even if some of them remain unaware of how useful they have been.

Wynford Hicks
November 2022

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# 1
# English today

The first edition of this book gave some simple advice: 'Write for your reader; use a clear form of English, avoiding jargon, slang, pomposity, academic complexity, obscurity …'

It pointed out that modern English has a rich and varied history and it noted: 'The strongest influence on the way we speak and write is undoubtedly American. In the global village of satellites and computers it is in American rather than English that nation speaks unto nation.' Thirty years later, in a media world where the technology changes every five minutes, that looks like an understatement.

Above all, though, there's social media (or as some people, notably the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, prefer to call it, anti-social media) which has grown rapidly and is increasingly dominant in everyday life. For many, particularly young, people it has replaced the traditional 'legacy media' of newspapers, TV and radio. Crucially, social media is interactive, allowing users to be originators of material as well as consumers.

Since texting requires basic literacy, the news isn't all bad. A study reported by the *Daily Mail* 'found no evidence that a child's development in written language was disrupted by using text abbreviations'. On the contrary, there seemed to be a positive relationship between texting and the ability to read and spell. This could be because texters needed to understand sound structures and syllables in words.

But owners and users of social media are accused of all sorts of crimes, including spreading disinformation, invasion of privacy, displays of hostile tribal (aka mob) behaviour, the bullying of individuals ending in their acute misery, psychological trauma – even suicide. The idealistic hopes and dreams that launched social media are a thing of the past. As three American

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academics* have put it, social media 'is no longer an emerging technology imbued with the possibility of fostering social change by giving voice to small groups; it has instead become a tool of the powerful used to dominate, harass and coerce [the] vulnerable'. At the same time it's clear that journalists cannot afford to ignore social media – which is why this edition of *English for Journalists* includes a chapter offering some suggestions on how to use it in a positive way.

## 'Britishisms'

Some say the American–British exchange is a two-way process. Indeed there have been complaints from academic linguists in the United States that British idioms are becoming too popular over there. The late Geoffrey Nunberg of the University of California at Berkeley was once quoted as saying: '*Spot on* – it's just ludicrous. You are just impersonating an Englishman when you say *spot on*. *Will do* – I hear that from Americans. That should be put into quarantine.'

Other 'Britishisms' that have been recorded are: *sell-by date*, *go missing* and *chat up*. Just as James Bond and the Beatles invaded the United States in the 1960s, Harry Potter has been waving his magic wand there since 1998 so *ginger* has become a fashionable American word to describe red hair. It slipped through the ruthless American editing process of the Harry Potter books that made every *dustbin* a *trashcan*, every *jumper* a *sweater* and every *torch* a *flashlight*. Even the title of the first one, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, was considered too difficult for young American readers, who had to have *philosopher* changed to *sorcerer*.

When she had the necessary clout JK Rowling had the original title restored. But the American editions of the books as a whole still include extensive translations of 'Britishisms' (the lists are easily found on the internet).

## American spelling ...

The trend on the internet is clear: American spellings are more common as software defaults to the American form and often fails to recognise the British one. As one poster replied after having their *furore* 'corrected' to *furor:* 'I

* Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfus and Brian Friedberg in *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

know! I originally had *furore* but the American spell-check built into Chrome suggested *furor*, which appears to be their term for the same thing.'

British journalists working for media in general rather than employed by a single outlet used to call themselves freelances; now they tend to be 'freelancers'.

Except among extra-careful writers the British distinction between licence/practice as nouns and license/practise as verbs is getting lost (the Americans prefer *license* with an *s* for both noun and verb and *practice* with a *c* for both noun and verb). Election information for the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society produced by the (British) Electoral Reform Services Ltd had *license* with an s used as a noun in the small print. Many British people follow American practice when they write informally.

On -ise/-ize there is no clear pattern. American practice favours -ize while in Britain the trend has been away from it. The *Times*, which used to be the only national newspaper loyal to -ize, abandoned it in 1992 while in the same year the Geneva-based International Labour Organisation went the other way and adopted -ize, thus changing the spelling of its own name. The European Union prefers -ise.

Several American variants, such as airplane (for aeroplane), program (for programme) and fetus (for foetus), are increasingly common in British English – see p66.

Another increasingly common variant – dwarves for dwarfs – which may or may not look American certainly isn't: Walt Disney's 1937 film had the title *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In fact it was the learned Oxford academic JRR Tolkien, whose first fantasy book, *The Hobbit*, also came out in 1937, who is particularly responsible for the popularisation of 'dwarves'. He called it 'a piece of private bad grammar', claiming to have adopted it to distance his fantasy world from the real one. So the 'dwarves' spelling should be restricted to fantasy, keeping elves company.

### ... grammar...

A traditional difference between British and American grammar is in the use of prepositions. For example, American kids get to be *on* the team if selected whereas British children are *in* it. Americans usually play *on* weekends whereas the British play *at* weekends. If there's no football/soccer field available Americans have to play *on* the street whereas the British play *in* the street …

But now in the UK American usage is increasingly dominant. Google the phrase 'word on the street' and what do you get? *Word on the Street*, an English language teaching programme co-produced by the BBC and the British Council. Over on ITV the script for that posh historical soap about the upper classes and their underlings *Downton Abbey* was said to include a London jazz club 'on' as opposed to 'in' Greek Street, Soho.

Popular usage is one thing but in formal grammar there isn't much difference between the two versions of English – at least as far as recommendations are concerned. In *That or Which, and Why* (Routledge, 2007) Evan Jenkins, a columnist on language for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, made a number of points familiar to British readers. He acknowledged that the British are more relaxed than the Americans about the traditional that/which rule (see p27) and concluded:

> The that/which rule is arbitrary and overly subtle and ought to be done away with. It is without intrinsic sense, but as long as large numbers of teachers and editors insist on it, we do well to understand it.

## ... and punctuation

In punctuation there are some noticeable differences. Here are a few examples: in the US full points are much more common after titles such as Dr and Mr; the full point after a single quoted word is always inside the quote marks, eg *The soloist was 'brilliant.'* (as opposed to *The soloist was 'brilliant'.*); in the date the month comes before the day, usually with a comma, eg *October 10, 2022* (as opposed to *10 October 2022*); and the colon is used for time instead of the full point, eg *10:30* (as opposed to *10.30*).

## Fragments

As writing in general – and journalism in particular – has become increasingly informal and colloquial, there is confusion about the most fundamental point of all. What's a sentence – and does it matter?

The first edition of *English for Journalists* followed *A Journalist's Guide* and said: 'A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought.' The second edition (1998) added a dictionary definition – 'a piece of writing or speech between two full stops or equivalent pauses' – and stressed that a single word could be a sentence.

The *Guide's* original discussion of sentences advised that incomplete ones (fragments) should be used 'very sparingly and in the right place' since journalists should avoid writing like 'the chatty columnist'.

But good columnists have always had a big influence on the way newcomers aspired to write. For 30 years or so from 1935 the *Daily Mirror's* Bill Connor (Cassandra) broke many of the 'rules' of writing that were being drummed into the heads of schoolchildren, certainly the silly ban on 'and' to start sentences – but above all the one about sentences needing a subject and a verb:

> I suppose I was mortally afraid of Mr Beulah for the best part of five years.
> Dead scared.
> And especially so at this, the third week in September ...

Other iconoclastic columnists celebrated for their style were Connor's successor at the *Mirror*, Keith Waterhouse (who later moved to the *Mail*), and Bernard Levin, who was famous for his long and complex (but beautifully constructed) sentences. Levin once returned to his berth at the *Times* after some time away with a 'sentence' of three words: 'And another thing.'

So the fragment is nothing new. But now it's everywhere – for example in a feature on 'our paedophile culture' in the *London Review of Books:* 'At the BBC these people became like gods. Even the weird ones. Even the ones who everybody could tell were deranged …'

So is there a problem? Not in principle, not any more. But there are still some points worth making – see p45.

## Meaning

It may irritate some people to hear British politicians describe themselves as 'stepping up to the plate in the upcoming elections' where once they might have gone out to bat in the forthcoming ones but the meaning of most Americanisms is clear. Most but not all: what does 'you're batting zero for two' mean, for example? And why is the phrase 'a red-headed stepchild' used as an insult?*

Meaning is key here. The ground floor in Britain is the first floor in the US; to bathe in the US is to have a bath in Britain (traditional Britons bathe in the

* 1. You've had two goes at something and failed twice (like stepping up to the plate it's from baseball). 2. According to the most convincing account, this is the child of a (male) Irish immigrant labourer in New York and a woman who goes on to marry someone else.

sea in bathing suits); homely means friendly or kindly in Britain, plain or even ugly in the US. 'I'm not on the homely side' could mean 'I'm pretty hot really'. So it's not something to be confused about when writing or reading an online dating profile.

Even the best educated and most sophisticated people are under extreme pressure to keep up. Mary Beard (Cambridge classics professor, *Times Literary Supplement* columnist and TV historian) once ended her blog on a carol concert by asking: 'What actually does "no crib for a bed" mean?' The replies she got were generally scornful. One of the more polite ones was: 'I remember thinking about this when I was about five and working it out for myself.'*

## 'You're welcome'

Another way of looking at British versus American is through the eyes of foreigners. What do the French or the Chinese make of these two versions of English? Do they spot the differences?

Books and leaflets aimed at French speakers learning English have traditionally used visual clichés like the union jack, rain and Big Ben to make the British connection explicit. A French-published booklet (*L'anglais correct*, First Editions, Paris, 2012) had a front cover showing a bowler-hatted Briton offering his umbrella to a rather wet woman who, quite correctly, says: 'Thank you!'

Bowler hat then seems to spoil the whole thing by replying: *'You're welcome.'* This is an imported American expression. Traditionally there wasn't a stock British response to 'Thank you'. In the old days you could say any one of several friendly things – don't mention it, it's my pleasure, you've earned it, I hope you enjoy it (or, as one of my relatives used to say when he'd given me, aged eight or so, a half-crown, 'Don't spend it all on beer'). Or you could just smile and say nothing at all. It wasn't considered rude then – and among older people it isn't rude now.

But *'You're welcome'* has become a standard response to 'Thank you' worldwide, the equivalent of *de nada* or *de rien*, and it surely makes sense for people learning English to use it (though they may well hear actual Londoners say all sorts of other things instead from 'No worries' or 'No probs' to 'Cheers').

So the French authors of *L'anglais correct* have not made a *faux pas* here: instead they have usefully demonstrated how widespread the Americanisation of

* The carol referred to, 'Away in a Manger' (1885), is from the US where a crib was already a child's bed rather than another word for manger (animal feeding trough).

British English has become. In fact, they have done this throughout their booklet without trying to sound American, using all sorts of expressions that originated on the other side of the Atlantic: you're *kidding* (joking); invited her *for* (to) dinner; be *mad at* (angry with); the last *cookie* (biscuit); be *right back* (back soon) …

Incidentally, 'You're welcome' as a routine expression may have come to Britain from the US but its origins are certainly English. The (American) language expert Barry Popik has even found an example in Shakespeare:

> LODORICO: Madam, good night; I humbly thank your ladyship.
> DESDEMONA: Your honour is most welcome.
>
> (*Othello*, act 4, scene 3)

## The 'baby boom' myth

The most striking example of the Americanisation of Britain and our local dialect is the prevalence of the 'baby boom' cliché on this side of the Atlantic. A baby boomer, according to the US census bureau, is a person – that is to say, an American – who was born between 1946 and 1964 (though other sources say the boom started earlier). And there was in fact a huge increase in the birth rate in the US which lasted from the end of the second world war to the 1960s. But in Britain there wasn't – or rather there *was* a brief peak in births around 1946–7, followed by a decline; and then another peak in the 1960s.

Collectively the media have never doubted that there was a postwar baby boom in Britain coinciding with the American one: newspapers, magazines, books, TV and radio have all taken it for granted. The Tory ex-minister David Willetts, now in the House of Lords, once wrote a polemic attacking 'the boomers' and called it *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – and Why They Should Give it Back* (Atlantic, 2010).

Two British journalists, both born in 1945, have broken ranks and insisted on quoting the facts, which don't support the argument. The late Ian Jack once wrote in the *Guardian* that 'baby boomer' was 'a term borrowed from America and quite wrongly applied to the postwar pattern of British birth rates'. He pointed out: 'Not until 1975 were as few babies born as in 1945; more British babies were born between 1956 and 1966 than in the so-called boomer decade of 1945 to 1955.' Nobody was paying attention, though, even in Jack's own office. The *Guardian* sub responsible for his column gave it the headline 'We baby boomers blame ourselves for this mess …'

On the other hand, Gavin Weightman was able to headline his own piece 'The myth of the baby boomers' because he published it himself online as a blog. He wrote:

> Born in 1945 I am, according to the popular accounts currently in circulation, a 'baby boomer'. My contention is that I am not. The year I was born was not a bumper year for babies. Nor was 1948, or 49, or 50, or 51, or 52, or 53, or 54, or 55, or 56 …

Whatever else the 'baby boomer' debate is about it is predicated on the notion that there was, after the end of the last war, a sustained rise in births which produced a population bulge. This is certainly what happened in North America between 1945 and 1964. It did not happen here.

But – another but – the myth of the 'British baby boom' is so widely believed that it would be pointless in routine journalism to insist on contradicting it. As the newspaperman in the film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* cynically put it: 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.' And the line before that quote? 'This is the West, sir' – somewhere that prefers the cliché to the truth.

There is also a problem with the extension of generational labelling, eg to the so-called 'silent generation', said to precede the baby boomers. Comically, this categorisation includes both the original American rock 'n' rollers like Little Richard (1932) and Elvis Presley (1935) and their British successors, John Lennon of the Beatles (1940) and Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones (1943) … silent, you said?

But there are signs of academic and commonsense resistance to the whole business of classifying people by generations. The *Observer* columnist Catherine Bennett quoted* a study by three American psychologists which compared the trendy doctrine of 'generationalism' to the women's magazine enthusiasm for 'astrology'. As the study said, being a millennial or a snowflake or belonging to generation X, Y or Z says as much about you as whether you're an Aries or a Pisces.

## Homegrown clichés

The British don't need to import clichés – we've got plenty of our own. And the most irritating ones are irritating because they're either routine misuse of language or simple nonsense. King Canute and the curate's egg (see p133) are

* 14 November 2021, referring to *Generationalism*, St Louis University, USA, May 2018.

old faithfuls mentioned in early editions of this book; Philip Larkin's 'Sexual intercourse began in 1963 …' is relatively new.

According to Larkin, sex is said to have started between the end of the ban on DH Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the Beatles first LP (*Please Please Me*). I suppose it's technically possible since the LP, recorded in February, was released on 22 March 1963. But the ban on the book was effectively over before the 1960s even began, because the liberalising law (the Obscene Publications Act) came into force in August 1959.

So the dates – unlike the rhymes – don't really work: 'nineteen sixty-three' (rather than, say, 1961) is there because it rhymes with 'late for me' and 'first LP'.

It's worth remembering that Larkin, when he wrote the poem 'Annus Mirabilis' in 1967, was a middle-aged man for whom sexual intercourse had in fact begun way back in 1945. And his intention in the poem was certainly not to provide a facile intro for a generation of lazy journalists.

## Political correctness, gender and race

The term 'political correctness' is often used by linguistic conservatives to rubbish attempts by radicals to sanitise language. But it didn't start out that way: it was originally an ironic expression used by the American new left in the 1960s and 1970s, as in 'We could stop at McDonald's down the road if you're hungry … but it wouldn't be *politically correct*'. This example is quoted by the academic linguist Deborah Cameron in her book *Verbal Hygiene* (Routledge, 2012); she emphasises that the expression was understood by insiders as a joke at their own expense.

Another term that has shifted in meaning is 'gender', which for most English speakers has lost its association with grammar and become a polite synonym for sex. As Cameron says: 'You hear people inquiring about the gender of animals.' But she emphasises that for the feminists who 'did most to put the word into circulation, gender was a technical term which took its meaning from a contrast with sex'. The intended contrast was between the biological (sex) and the social (gender), which was related to the feminist claim that many traditional differences between men and women were social rather than biological in origin.

The distinction between sex and gender has now become an important aspect of the discussion/debate/conflict over 'transgenderism': a transgender (trans)

person is defined as someone whose self-chosen gender identity or expression does not correspond with their birth sex.

Feminism is responsible for numerous attempts to sanitise the language. Obvious examples are avoiding male nouns like chairman and male pronouns (eg he, him) in stories where both sexes/genders are involved. In the first case 'chair' is now generally accepted; in the second a knowledge of English grammar and usage helps avoid awkward alternatives such as the repeated use of 'he or she'. Nobody is compelled to land themselves with contrived sentences like 'If somebody calls, ask *him or her* to wait'. As the distinguished lexicographer Robert Burchfield has pointed out: 'Over the centuries writers of standing have used they, their and them with reference to a singular pronoun or noun …' Writers of standing – and so too ordinary users of the English language.

Curiously – perversely, you might think – some writers have rejected the commonsense solution of using 'they' when the sex/gender of the person is not specified, preferring the 'he or she' formula or, even worse, insisting on writing 'she' regardless of the context. The (female) writer Lionel Shriver once lambasted a male writer, James Rickards, who did precisely this in what she called his 'otherwise excellent' book *Currency Wars*. In her commentary she complained that the 'she' pronoun was used constantly in a context where not a single person was female. As she put it, 'the writer's grammatical brown-nosing backfires. It serves only to highlight the fact that, despite...trendy style guidelines, his professional world is overwhelmingly male.'* So 'they' it should have been.

'They' is also a convenient and appropriate alternative pronoun to both 'he' and 'she' for people who are transgender; as a word already in frequent everyday use it is preferable to made-up words that can only stop the reader mid-sentence with a jerk. So unless it's your intention to disconcert, the best advice is to stick with 'they'.

Misogyny, which once simply meant 'hatred of women', has over the past half-century or so changed its meaning; or rather it has acquired an alternative meaning similar to sexism. This was highlighted by the so-called Misogyny Speech by the then Australian prime minister Julia Gillard in 2012. Time and again in her powerful verbal assault on her political opponent Tony Abbott, the leader of the opposition, Gillard bracketed the two words 'sexism' and 'misogyny'; at no point did she distinguish between them.

After the speech, which had an immediate impact and has continued to resonate ever since, Sue Butler, the editor of the Australian *Macquarie Dictionary*,

* 'Grammar and Genitals' in *Standpoint*, 26 November 2013.

said its definition of 'misogyny' would be expanded to reflect this change in usage: 'Since the 1980s misogyny has come to be used as a synonym for sexism, a synonym with bite, but nevertheless with the meaning of entrenched prejudice against women rather than pathological hatred.'

In a commentary that followed the speech and Butler's comment, Deborah Cameron said that the two words 'are not exact synonyms, because *sexism* has also changed its meaning over time'. Whereas sexism had once meant institutionalised prejudice or discrimination against women, it had gradually acquired the broader meaning of any such prejudice or discrimination: logically men could now be the victims of sexism – hence the need for the word *misogyny* to identify prejudice and discrimination against women, which incidentally was far worse.

Cameron also made the point that replacing the word sexism by misogyny was 'part of a larger shift in the language we use to label prejudice and discrimination'. Whereas once we had made do with plain words like racism, sexism and ageism we now tended to use longer ones with a clinical origin like homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia.

This change comes at a cost. A casual remark that might once have been labelled merely as 'anti-gay' or 'anti-Muslim' – a joke in bad taste, thoughtless banter – suddenly gets labelled as 'homophobia' or 'Islamophobia' – irrational fear and loathing of the other. Thus the offence is magnified by linguistic inflation. In general, long, complex words, particularly from Latin and Greek, sound more impressive than short Anglo-Saxon ones and can be given a twist or a spin. So 'holocaust' can be pushed beyond its primary meaning. 'Paedophilia', which originally meant sex with children, is now used to cover sex with young people above the age of puberty but below the legal age of consent.

Black Americans can/should be called African Americans. That is the current convention – but nothing in life is simple, particularly not in racial politics. In December 2012 Tim Scott, a right-wing Republican from Charleston, South Carolina, became the first 'African American' in more than a century to be appointed to the US Senate. But because of his conservative views there was controversy about what to call him.

The (London) *Times* reported the Reverend Joseph Darby, a prominent black local leader, as saying: 'I would acknowledge the fact that he was the first senator of colour. I would not really consider him to be the first African-American senator.' This was because 'his mindset does not really reflect the African Americans in South Carolina'. So 'African American' can't be a simple synonym for 'black' after all, whereas 'person of colour' can be.

But should *black* now be *Black*, as is widespread in the United States in the wake of the 2020 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the Black Lives Matter protest movement? In Britain liberal publications such as the *Guardian* and the *London Review of Books* have followed suit, but not, as yet, the rest of the mainstream media.

One point that keeps cropping up when the question is debated in newsrooms is consistency: if *Black* then why not *White*? Most American media have decided for *Black* and against *White* but two exceptions are the National Association of Black Journalists ('Whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race then it should be capitalized, such as Black community, Brown community, White community') and the *Chicago Manual of Style* in an online update: 'We now prefer to write Black with a capital B when it refers to racial and ethnic identity … as a matter of editorial consistency White and similar terms may also be capitalized.'

The African-American example quoted above illustrates a fundamental truth about language: the meaning of a word is its use. In itself a word means neither one thing nor the other, so different people who use it can mean different things by it. This makes it difficult to insist that a particular usage or interpretation is the only possible one: context and intention matter.

## Insults reclaimed

In politics there is a long history of the reclaimed insult, as with the 'Whigs' and 'Tories' of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British politics. The original 'Whigs' were Scottish cattle rustlers and horse thieves while the original 'Tories' were Irish Catholic outlaws and bandits. In both cases members of the insulted party adopted the label they were given. Similarly, in the 1960s when a Tory MP called German demonstrators in Grosvenor Square 'foreign scum', the response from British protesters was: 'We are all foreign scum', which became a celebrated poster.

The word 'Yid', which in Yiddish has no derogatory meaning, has often been used as a term of abuse by anti-semites. In Britain it has for decades been directed at supporters of Tottenham Hotspur, many of whom were Jewish. The Spurs fans' response has been to reclaim the insult and declare themselves 'Yiddos' – guilty as charged – in spite of supercilious criticism from outside.

## Swearing and taboo

From cases of alleged racist abuse it's clear that in certain contexts swearing is routine and accepted by the participants while racist words are not. Giving evidence in court a black British footballer, Anton Ferdinand, once said that being called 'a cunt' was fine. 'But when someone brings your colour into it, it takes it to another level and it's very hurtful.'

In Australia the white cricketer Darren Lehmann received a five-match ban in 2003 for calling the Sri Lankans 'black cunts'. His offence was not the abusive and sexist C word but the use of the word 'black' as an insult.

Of course, most newspapers don't print these swear words but semi-hide them with asterisks. The paradox is that the swear words are acceptable to some people whereas black (used abusively), which *can* be printed, is taboo.

## Proven (and other pomposities)

As the G*uardian* style guide warns: 'Proven is not the normal past tense of prove but a term in Scottish law ("not proven") and in certain English idioms (used adjectivally), eg "proven record".'

But 'proven' creeps in everywhere: a G*uardian* Saturday book review section included this example from the Australian writer Thomas Keneally: '… the book might have proven to be highly accessible …' And on the same day the columnist Jonathan Freedland wrote: 'Any new idea or policy proposal … must be proven compatible with what those long-dead politicians of the late 18th century set down …'

With proven used as part of a verb go (or should go) all sorts of other pomposities, such as 'suffice it to say' (often reduced to illiteracy by the omission of 'it'); 'beg the question' (when used to mean raise the question); 'whilst' and 'amongst' as literary variants on while and among; 'anticipate' to mean expect; 'address' to mean answer; 'accrue' to mean 'acquire'; 'critique' to mean criticise; 'decimate' to mean kill or destroy; 'demise' to mean death; 'dilemma' to mean problem (on a posh problem page like the *Observer*'s); 'infer' to mean imply; 'reference' to mean 'refer to' …

## House style

House style includes everything from policy on important issues like 'political correctness', gender and race to detail – whether to use single or double

quotes, when to use italics and whether to prefer 'spelt' or 'spelled'. Published and internet style guides also provide a useful commentary on changing English usage.

For example, both the *Times* and the *Economist* disagree with the *Guardian* on accents. They both say we should keep accents, eg on café, cliché and communiqué, when they make a crucial difference to pronunciation. The *Times* is pretty prescriptive about none, which 'almost always takes the singular verb', while the *Economist* is more relaxed: none 'usually takes a singular verb'. But the *Guardian*, which once insisted on it, says: 'It is a (very persistent) myth that "none" has to take a singular verb.'

By contrast, on 'like' and 'such as', it is the *Economist* that takes the liberal position. Whereas the *Guardian* and the *Times* still disapprove, the *Economist* bites the bullet and says: '*Authorities like Fowler and Gowers* is an acceptable alternative to *authorities such as Fowler and Gowers*.'

In this edition of *English for Journalists*, as in previous ones, I have included a style guide. In some cases there isn't much to choose between the different options. But the argument for consistency is very simple: variation that has no point is distracting; adopting a consistent approach in matters of detail shows courtesy to the reader and helps them get your message.

# 2
# Grammar: the rules

As in previous editions of this book, this key chapter summarises the essential rules and conventions of traditional grammar that a journalist needs to know. This is an important pragmatic point for a writer who originates copy and a crucial one for a subeditor who checks and corrects it. But a single chapter cannot possibly answer all the grammatical questions that might arise, particularly since there have been huge changes recently in the academic treatment of English, above all in university departments of linguistics. Rather than extend the treatment of grammar here, I recommend reference to an up-to-date practical guide, *English Grammar: The Basics* by Michael McCarthy, also published by Routledge.

I have to add, however, that some of the proposed innovations in the terminology and analysis of English have been rejected as impractical – and worse – not just by journalists but by writers in general, translators and teachers, particularly of English as a second language. It remains to be seen how useful and generally accepted the 'new' grammar turns out to be (see Appendix 2: The 'fronted adverbial' muddle, p178).

## The parts of speech

Traditionally, there are eight parts of speech: noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection, with the article ('a/an' or 'the') now often added to the list instead of being considered an adjective. There are various possible subdivisions: verbs can be 'auxiliary'; pronouns can be 'demonstrative' and 'possessive'. Numerals can be included as a separate category.

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## Article

'The' is the definite article; 'a' or 'an' is the indefinite article. 'An' replaces 'a' before a vowel (an owl), unless the vowel is sounded as a consonant (a use), and before a silent h (an hour).

## Noun

Nouns are the names of people and things. They are either ordinary nouns called *common* (thing, chair) or special nouns called *proper* ('George', 'Tuesday'). Proper nouns often take a capital letter.

*Abstract* common nouns refer to qualities ('beauty', 'honesty'), emotions ('anger', 'pity') or states ('friendship', 'childhood').

In general nouns are *singular* ('thing', 'man') or *plural* ('things', 'men'). But some nouns are the same in the singular and the plural ('aircraft', 'sheep') and some are used only in the plural ('scissors', 'trousers'). Nouns that refer to collections of people and things ('the cabinet', 'the team') are known as *collective* nouns.

## Pronoun

Pronouns stand for nouns and are often used to avoid repetition. They can be:

*personal* (**I, you, him**)
*possessive* (**mine, yours, his**)
*reflexive/intensive* (**myself, yourself, himself**)
*relative/interrogative* (**who, whose, whom**)
*indefinite* (**anybody, none, each**)
*demonstrative* (**this, that, these** and **those** are the four demonstrative pronouns)

The noun that a pronoun stands for is called its *antecedent*.

Pronouns, unlike nouns, often change their form according to the role they play in a sentence: 'I' becomes 'me'; 'you' becomes 'yours'. This role of a noun or pronoun is called *case*. Following the Latin model, grammarians used to talk about such things as the nominative, dative and genitive cases. But this is needlessly complicated: the key distinction is between the *subjective* case ('I') and the *objective* case ('me').

## Verb

Verbs express action or a state of being or becoming ('doing word' is therefore an over-simplification). They can be *finite* because they have a subject ('he thinks') or *non-finite* because they do not ('to think'). The tense of a verb shows whether it refers to the past, the present or the future. Tenses are formed in two ways: either by inflecting (changing the form of) the verb ('he *thought*') or by adding an auxiliary verb ('he *will* think') or both ('he *has thought*'). Verbs can be *active* ('he thinks') or *passive* ('it was thought').

### *Finite verbs*

Mood: finite verbs can be

*indicative*, either statement ('he thinks') or question ('does he think?')
*conditional* ('I would think')
*subjunctive* ('if he were to think')
*imperative* ('go on, think!')

### *Indicative tenses*

There are three basic times (present, past, future) and three basic actions (simple, continuing, completed). Thus there are nine basic tenses:

| | *Simple* | *Continuing* | *Completed* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Present | I see | I am seeing | I have seen |
| Past | I saw | I was seeing | I had seen |
| Future | I will see | I will be seeing | I will have seen |

Three other tenses show a mixture of continuing and completed action:

Present: I have been seeing
Past: I had been seeing
Future: I will have been seeing

Traditional grammar distinguishes between the first person singular ('I'), the second person singular ('thou'), the third person singular ('he/she'), the first person plural ('we'), the second person plural ('you') and the third person plural ('they'). But modern English has dispensed with the second person singular ('thou' is archaic), and in most verbs only the third person singular differs from the standard form:

I see
He/she sees
We see
You see
They see

In both future and conditional tenses 'will'/'would' is now the standard form, except in certain questions. In the past, it was considered correct to use 'shall' after I/we for the plain future ('We shall be late') while 'will' was reserved for emphasis ('We *will* catch this train'); and 'will' after he/she/you/they ('He will be late') while 'shall' was reserved for emphasis ('He *shall* catch this train'). An example of this is the English version of Marshal Pétain's first world war slogan *They shall not pass* (revived by the Republicans in the Spanish civil war).

'Shall' is still used after I/we in questions that make some kind of offer or suggestion ('Shall I phone for a taxi?'), though not in straightforward ones that ask for information ('Will we get a drink at the press launch?').

### *Conditional tenses*

There are two conditional tenses, the present and the past, both formed by the addition of would ('I would think', 'I would have thought').

### *Subjunctive tenses*

The verb forms for the subjunctive mood are much the same as for the indicative. But there are two exceptions.

The third person singular, present tense, changes as follows:

'She *has* faith' becomes 'If she *have* faith'.
'He *finds*' becomes 'Should he *find*'.

The verb 'to be' changes as follows:

PRESENT

| *Indicative* | *Subjunctive (if)* |
|---|---|
| I am | I be |
| He/she is | He/she be |
| You are | You be |
| hey are | They be |

PAST

| *Indicative* | *Subjunctive (if)* |
|---|---|
| I was | I were |
| He/she was | He/she were |

'We were', 'you were' and 'they were' remain unchanged.

### Non-finite verbs

There are three types of non-finite verb:

1 *the infinitive* (**see/to see**)
2 *the present participle or gerund* (**seeing**)
3 *the past participle* (**seen**)

The infinitive usually, but not always, has 'to' before it. 'I want to see' and 'I can't see' are both examples of the infinitive.

The participles are used to make up the basic tenses (see above).

The participles are also used as adjectives ('a far-seeing statesman', 'an unseen passage') and in phrases ('seeing him in the street, I stopped for a chat'). Here, although the subject of 'seeing' is not stated, it is implied: the person doing the seeing is 'I'.

The gerund has the same -ing form as the present participle but is a verb-noun ('seeing is believing'). As a noun, a gerund would be expected to take the possessive ('I was worried by *his* leaving early'), and this is recommended, but the informal alternative, 'I was worried by *him* leaving early', is common and accepted.

## Adjective

An adjective describes a noun or pronoun.

*Demonstrative* adjectives ('this', 'that', 'these', 'those') identify a noun ('this car', 'these potatoes'). When used without a noun they become pronouns ('this is my car').

*Possessive* adjectives ('my', 'your', 'our') show ownership ('my car').

Most other adjectives are *absolute adjectives* ('final', 'perfect') or *adjectives of degree*.

Adjectives of degree are either:

*positive*, used of a thing ('hot', 'complicated')
*comparative*, used to compare one thing with another ('hotter', 'more complicated')
*superlative*, used to compare a thing with two or more others ('hottest', 'most complicated')

## Adverb

An adverb usually describes a verb, adjective or other adverb:

He sees *clearly* [adverb describes verb].
It was a *newly* minted coin [adverb describes adjective].
He sees *very* clearly [adverb describes adverb].

Some adverbs are used to add a comment or link sentences; they are called *sentence adverbs* or *conjunctive adverbs* and are usually marked off by commas:

*Sadly*, he died.
Life is expensive. Death, *however*, is cheap.

Note that 'however' can also be used as an ordinary adverb:

*However* good you may be at punctuation, you will still make mistakes.

## Preposition

A preposition is a word that links its object with a preceding word or phrase:

It's a case *of* mumps.
We're going to Blackpool.

When the object of a preposition is a pronoun it must be in the objective case. Thus:

*of* me
*to* her
*for* him
*by* us
*with* them

## Conjunction

A conjunction is a word that:

1 links two similar parts of speech
fit *and* well
slowly *but* surely

2 links two sentences whether or not they are separated by a full stop
You may come. *O*r you may go.
You may come *or* you may go.

3 links main clauses with subordinate clauses and phrases
I will *if* you will.
I will go *as* a clown.

## Interjection

An interjection is a short exclamation that is outside the main sentence. It either stands alone or is linked to the sentence by a comma:

*Alas*! Woe is me!
*Hello*, how are you?

## Sentences

A sentence is traditionally described as a group of words expressing a complete thought. It has a *subject*, the person or thing being discussed, and a *verb*, expressing action or a state of being (and it may have other elements such as an object):

| *Subject* | *Verb* |
|---|---|
| The man | sees. |

Sometimes the subject is understood rather than stated:

The old man lay down. And died.

In the second sentence 'he' is understood.

There is also a looser definition of a sentence:

> … a piece of writing or speech between two full stops or equivalent pauses
> (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993)

Sadly, this attempted catch-all fails to include the first sentence in a piece.

But a single word can certainly be a sentence:

Agreed.
Indeed.

The first of these consists of a verb with the subject implied; the second can mean the same thing. In each case what makes the word a sentence is that it expresses a complete thought. So the definition we started with holds – with two minor revisions:

A sentence is *a word or group of words* expressing a complete thought and ending with a full stop or equivalent pause.

## Transitive verbs and objects

A sentence may have an *object*, the person or thing that receives the action of the verb. This kind of verb is called *transitive*:

| *Subject* | *Verb* | *Object* |
|---|---|---|
| The man | sees | the sun. |

An object may be *direct* or *indirect*:

| *Subject* | *Verb* | *direct object* | *indirect object* |
|---|---|---|---|
| The man | gives | the dog | to his son. |
| *Subject* | *Verb* | *indirect object* | *direct object* |
| The man | gives | the dog | a bone. |

'To' is sometimes, but not always, included with an indirect object.

## Intransitive verbs

If nothing receives the action of the verb it is intransitive:

| *Subject* | *Verb* |
|---|---|
| The man | walks. |

Intransitive verbs are often followed by something to extend their meaning but this is not called an object:

The man walks slowly [adverb].
The man walks to work [adverbial phrase].

## Active and passive verbs

A transitive verb is in the *active voice*. It can also be turned round so that it is in the *passive voice*:

*Active*
The man sees the sun.

*Passive*
The sun is seen by the man.

Be careful when you combine the passive with a participle:

The workers were penalised by sending them back.

is incorrect because the subject of both main verb (stated) and participle (implied) must be the same. Instead write either:

They penalised the workers by sending them back.

*or*:

The workers were penalised by being sent back.

## Inactive verbs and complements

If a verb expresses not action but a state of being it is inactive and takes a *complement*.

| *Subject* | *Verb* | *Complement* |
|---|---|---|
| The man | is | ill. |
| He | feels | a fool. |

Some verbs can be either transitive or inactive:

He feels ill [complement].
He feels the cloth [object].

Whereas both direct and indirect objects are in the objective case, complements, like their subjects, are traditionally in the subjective case:

I see him [object].
I am he [complement].

But the common form 'It's me' (rather than 'It is I') is now accepted by almost everybody.

## Agreement of the verb

The verb must agree with its subject in person and number:

I give.

*but*:

He gives [person].
Spelling is important.

*but*:

Spelling and grammar are important [number].

1 Note that words joined to a single subject by a preposition do not affect the verb:

Spelling, with grammar, is important.

2 If two subjects are linked by 'either, or' or 'neither, nor' the verb agrees with the nearer subject:

Neither the news editor nor any of her reporters have received the call.

3 If one subject is affirmative and the other negative the verb agrees with the affirmative one:

The chief sub, not her deputies, was at lunch.

4 The verb in a defining clause agrees with its nearer antecedent:

She was one of the best subs that have ever worked here.

5 Nouns that are plural in form but singular in meaning take a singular verb:

News is what the reader wants to know.
Thirty pages is a lot of copy.
Law and order was a plus for New Labour

In the last example 'law and order' takes a singular verb because it is a routine combination. If we separate the two elements we need a plural verb:

'Law' and 'order' are both nouns.

6 The word 'number' is treated as singular when it is a figure but as plural when it means 'a few':

A number is stamped on each computer.

*but*:

A number of computers are needed.

7 Singular pronouns such as 'everyone' take a singular verb. 'None' can be either singular or plural:

Are there any bananas? No, there are none.
Is there any beer? No, there is none.

8 Collective nouns take either a singular or a plural verb according to sense:

The team is small [it has few players].

*but*:

The team are small [its players are not tall].
The cabinet is determined [it is seen as a single body].

*but*:

The cabinet are discussing [it takes at least two to discuss].
The cabinet is divided [it must be seen as one before it can be divided].

*but*:

The cabinet are agreed [it takes more than one to agree].

It's a mistake to mix the two forms. Don't write:

The cabinet is divided but they are discussing ...

Many house-style guides insist on organisations being treated as singular.

## Sentence structure

A sentence with only one verb is a *simple* sentence:

The man sees the sun.

A sentence with two or more main verbs is a *compound* sentence:

The man sees the sun and he closes his eyes.

A sentence with one or more main verbs and one or more subsidiary verbs is a *complex* sentence:

> The man who sees the sun closes his eyes.

## Clauses

A clause is a group of words including a subject and a verb forming part of a sentence. A compound sentence has two or more main clauses; a complex sentence has at least one main clause and at least one subordinate clause. In the previous example, the main clause is 'The man closes his eyes' and the subordinate clause is 'who sees the sun'.

There is an important distinction between clauses that define and those that do not. Commas help to make this distinction clear:

> The man who sees the sun closes his eyes
> [in general a man who sees the sun will close his eyes].

> The man, who sees the sun, closes his eyes
> [this particular man, having seen the sun, closes his eyes].

## That and which

According to traditional grammar 'that' should be used in defining clauses referring to things:

> This is the house that Jack built
> [clause defines the house].

Whereas 'which' should be used in non-defining clauses:

> Fred's house, which was built in 1937, is up for sale
> [clause does not restrict, adds incidental information].

With people, on the other hand, either 'that' or 'who'/'whom' is used to define:

> This is the man that/who sold them the house.

Whereas 'who'/'whom' must be used in non-defining clauses since 'which' is not used of people:

> Fred, who was born in 1937, sold them the house.

'Which' is increasingly accepted as an alternative to 'that' for defining clauses:

> This is the house which Fred bought.

But 'that' is not recommended for non-defining clauses. Avoid:

Fred's house, that was built in 1937, is up for sale.

## Phrases

A phrase is a group of words without a verb forming part of a sentence. An adjectival phrase must be related to the correct noun or pronoun.

A readable book, it has a good index.

*Correct*: the phrase 'a readable book' describes the subject 'it'.

A readable book, its value is enhanced by a good index.

*Incorrect*: the phrase 'a readable book' cannot describe the subject 'its value'.

Like Belfast, Beirut has known civil war.

*Correct*: the phrase 'like Belfast' describes the subject 'Beirut'.

Unlike Belfast, bomb blasts no longer echo across the city.

*Incorrect*: the phrase 'unlike Belfast' cannot describe the subject 'bomb blasts'.

This mistake is called the dangling modifier (see p29). A particularly common example of it is the dangling, floating or hanging participle:

Walking across the road, he was run over by a car.

*Correct*: the phrase 'walking across the road' describes the subject 'he'.

Walking across the road, a car ran him over.

*Incorrect*: the phrase 'walking across the road' cannot describe the subject 'a car'.

# 3
# Grammar: 10 common mistakes

One of the most embarrassing letters ever to appear in a national paper was published by the *Guardian* in 2012 under the heading

> MIGHT IS RIGHT AND A SUBEDITOR MAY BE WRONG.

It was from the atheist academic and writer Richard Dawkins:

> 'If the public head of Sheffield police had been accountable to voters we may have avoided the 23 years of cover-ups,' says a subheading (Comment, 14 September). Simon Jenkins surely knows the difference between 'may' and 'might'. Subeditors jealously guard their privilege of writing headlines (as I've often found to my cost) but if they can't learn their own language what is the use of them? Why not let authors write their own headlines?

For more examples of one of the most common mistakes made in journalism, see *May for might*, p34. There are nine others.

## 1 The dangling modifier

> A renowned and stylish beauty, her photograph appeared in magazines throughout the world. (obituary)
> Literally a room for wine, the cobblestone city is littered with these convivial boltholes. (travel caption)
> The composer of *Lord of the Dance*, his life was a musical journey in search of an unconventional God. (obit heading)

But the beauty isn't the photograph; the room isn't the city; the composer isn't the life.

> Like many vicarage children life was peripatetic. (diary)
> Like lots of his contemporaries, Kerouac and Burroughs were on his bookshelves. (feature)

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> There is usually something lingering about a Catholic formation even if, like James Joyce, it later turns to passionate hostility. (feature)

No, life is not like children and a Catholic formation is not like Joyce. In the second example readers might be misled into thinking he had 'lots of his contemporaries' on his bookshelves.

## The floating participle (a particular case of the dangling modifier)

If participles float, identity may be mistaken:

> After nearly burning down the house by leaving an empty pot on the stove, the sisters arranged for a neighbour to bring Ruth her dinner every evening. (feature)

But it was Ruth, not the sisters, who nearly burnt the house down.

> Not long afterwards, having returned from a hunting trip to nearby Donegal, an IRA unit tried to sledgehammer their way through the front door of their home. (feature)

But it wasn't the IRA who went on the hunting trip.

> After making his debut in the Millennium Stadium defeat, Williams watched the hooker play for Glasgow and phoned him to say that the scrum was not good enough. (feature)

But Williams was the coach: it was the hooker who made his debut at the Millennium Stadium.

> 'I know this makes me sound like a security guard,' he explained. 'But having tried to defend her interests in the past, she says she'd be happier with me present.' (feature)

But it was he, not she, who had tried to defend her interests in the past.

'Born' in features and obituaries is a warning sign – it doesn't always mean what it says:

> Born in Singapore, her Singaporean-Chinese mother divorced her father ... when she was three. (feature)
> Born Bettye, in Peoria, her mother had edited a local newspaper's women's page before becoming a housewife. (obit)

Then there are the amusing ones – purchases that pop out, books that write etc:

> Popping out to the local sandwich shop last week, their purchases were handed to them in sponsored bags. (feature)

As well as writing about obelisks, mummies, papyrus and Chinese ideograms, his books dealt with codes and code-breaking ... (book review)

But having won that battle decisively, the ground has dramatically shifted. (column)

Buried deep in Queensland, Australia, her experiences as Connery's wife seem a million miles away. Having wed at the fresh-faced start of their careers, their marriage quickly dissolved into one long, mistrustful squabble. (feature)

## 2 Number disagreement

### 2a Verb clash

Half work in the media and the other half is waiting to perform. (feature)

It's not often that the international press takes an interest in our politics, but they are now. (column)

### 2b Noun/pronoun clash

The decline of the grey nurse shark is exacerbated by the fact that it takes them up to 10 years to reach full maturity. (picture caption)

### 2c Pronoun clash

They are the only major party to have increased its vote over the past eight years ... (feature)

### 2d Pronoun/verb clash

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of their Dover-Calais route, SeaFrance Ferries has created 10 special Easter breaks ... (news story)

Of course the Bangladesh team clings to their Test status eagerly. (feature)

The jury is still considering their verdicts in the case of White ... (news story)

The top brass at the British Navy has decided their ships need to be run along the lines of medium-sized companies. (feature)

### 2e Singular verb for plural

As terrorism and violence has ended, common problems such as crime and skills shortages have loomed. (feature)

It is a tribute to the wit of the creators of *Little Britain* that its dystopian characters and Swiftian satire has struck a popular chord. (leader)

They recall the Lawrence inquiry when the racism and incompetence they took for granted was laid bare before an astonished public. (feature)

The materials and technology used in aircraft design over the past 10 years has improved rapidly ... (letter)

Lynne Truss, author of the bestselling *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, told the *Times Educational Supplement*: 'Correct punctuation and spelling does have a bearing on people's success in life...' (news story)

### 2f Plural verb for singular

Jill Kelly, a former porn star who runs her own production company, said: 'Anyone who continues to shoot at this point are complete idiots.' (feature)

Bertrand Russell claimed that one of his literary models were the Baedeker Guides, for their unambiguous clarity. (feature)

Suddenly I was under the most monstrous attack and everything I valued – my home life, my future, my finances – were being relentlessly threatened. (feature)

The yearly flurry of scandal, mischief-making, gossip and bitchiness that surrounds the Booker or the Turner prize have become their lifeblood. (feature)

Elsewhere everything from Janet Jackson's breast to bloggers on the hunt for scalps in both press and broadcasting have shaken the media's confidence. (feature)

## 3 Fewer and less

The more common mistake is 'less' for 'fewer':

The issues go to the heart of the more-aid-and-less-questions formula for the continent's recovery. (feature)

Less than 20% of people have access to toilet facilities. (fact box)

This has been the subject of no less than three manifesto commitments. (feature)

Tropicana offers no less than 13 different types of fresh orange juice to its American customers. (feature)

Children who muck in with the cows and the pigs have less allergies than town kids. (feature)

But fewer should not be used for measurement of quantity:

Mrs Miller won a payoff of £5m for fewer than three years of marriage. (news story)

But with 68 millilitres fewer in the pack, consumer groups fear the price will remain the same – short-changing customers. (news story)

## 4 Tenses out of sequence

Kevin Pietersen fell for a wonderful 71, as Australia restrict England at Edgbaston. (website picture caption)

It should be either 'fell' and 'restricted' or 'falls' and 'restrict'.

Those who have toiled to earn their riches should be allowed to spend them as they chose. (column)

'Chose' should be 'choose'.

He was in constant pain so he took too many pills and drunk far too much. (feature)

'Drunk' should be 'drank'.

He would happily downsize, quit London, find other work of some kind and leave me to do the childcare as long as he can still find time to paint. (column)

'Can' should be 'could'.

But it would have been a lot more fun if it was a bit more stupid. (book review)

'Was' should be 'had been'.

### Subjunctive failure

The mayor, Alan Rose, suggested that Edinburgh-born Gill, who calls himself a London 'refugee', sticks to the cities. (feature)

The crucial thing is that the Lib Dems are not scared into ditching the essence of their politics. (feature)

I once met her in difficult circumstances, when she was successfully insisting that a piece about her contained no mention of her son by HG Wells ... (literary column)

Use 'should' to make the meaning clear: 'should stick', 'should not be scared', 'should contain'.

## 5 May for might

If Jean-Paul Sartre were alive, which he isn't, and he gave advice, which he didn't, he may well have shed light on the correct use of the mobile phone. (feature)

Hoggard may never have become a cricketer if not for the late Phil Carrick. (fact box)

However, the centre elected to pass to Grewcock outside him when he may have scored himself. (rugby match report)

'The second incident may not have occurred if something had been done about the first.' (feature)

The Israeli security establishment came to believe that the Jewish state may not have survived without the relationship with the Afrikaners. (feature)

The fact is, Oaten may well have got away with it. (feature)

The fact was, he didn't, so 'may' should have been 'might', as it should in all these examples.

## 6 One and you

It was as if one's own internal contradictions were being conveniently staged for you. (feature)

Just because the peak of a mountain is obscured by the weather, or the feebleness of one's own vision, it doesn't mean that you can't make a good guess that it is still bloody high up. (book review)

[This book] makes one happily suspect that all you have to do to think like a philosopher is, well, think. (book review)

One may have had no doubts that Berlin had a fine, discriminating mind; after reading even a few of his letters you realise that a good sign of a discriminating mind is that it knows how to be playful ... (book review)

When you edit a page, a section or even a whole newspaper you are essentially guessing – or using your judgment much as one might in a spot-the-ball competition. (feature)

Unless you want to sound formal, avoid 'one'; never mix 'one' and 'you'.

## 7 Saying it twice

Those charged with designing new cruise ships and skyscrapers share a common bond. (column)

If a bond is shared it is held in common.

Both Resolution and the Law Society have drawn up separate blueprints for reform. (news story)

'Separate' repeats 'both'.

In the early nineteenth century they combined both of these. (feature)

'Both' is redundant again.

The press will have to self-censor itself. (feature)

'Self-' is redundant.

Sampson's purview is restricted solely to British institutions. (feature)

Cut 'solely'.

The main reason is due to the ever-growing problem of light pollution at night. (reader's letter)

Cut 'due to'.

Yet opinion polls show overwhelming support for the right to die in both Catholic and Protestant pews alike. (feature)

'Alike' repeats 'both'.

## 8 Whom for who

The party is being offered a peach in the petite form of Betsy, whom the *Daily Mail* decided was 'probably the most glamorous of the Tory leadership contenders' wives'. (feature)

Begin, whom MI6 believed was backed by the Soviet Union, planned to send five terrorist cells to Britain. (news story)

> The sexual health charity Brook says taking away the right to confidential sexual health advice would be 'disastrous' for many teenagers, whom it argues will simply avoid asking for contraception or pregnancy advice ... (news story)
>
> Richard Cazaly (whom police now accept stabbed Abigail Witchalls) ... (news story)

In all these examples 'whom' should be 'who': the writer should use the subjective not the objective case.

## 9 Pronoun abuse: I and me etc

> Hope you can advise me on a problem which is causing a difference of opinion between my husband and I. (letter to gardening page)

'I' should be 'me'.

> As soon as we find him, he asks Adams and I to chat while he takes his pictures. (feature)

'I' should be 'me'.

> But I have seen him sitting at the dinner table, with we three, frozen-faced children, shouting at our mother ... (feature)

'We' should be 'us'.

> Me and my house are not as glossy as once they were. (column)

'Me' should be 'I' (and come after my house, though that is etiquette not grammar).

> Us twirlies are people in possession of concessionary bus passes. (column)

'Us' should be 'we'.

> [Hilary] Armstrong complained that 'the trouble with people like you is you are so clever with words that us up north can't answer back'. (news feature)

'Us' should be 'we'.

Here again in these examples the confusion is between subjective and objective. 'I' and 'we' are subjective; 'me' and 'us' are objective, following both verbs and prepositions.

## 10 And which etc

'That' followed by 'and which' is awkward, confusing and ungrammatical. Often it seems to be variation for its own sake:

> They introduced levels of comfort and sophistication to the west that had not been seen before, and which were not seen again for hundreds of years ... (feature)
>
> A book that can be recommended by *Men's Health* – for whatever reason – and which can still insert such ideas into people's heads has to be welcomed. (book review)

In both cases the second clause is clearly similar to the first: there is no need to repeat 'that' but 'which' is both redundant and confusing in suggesting that the second clause has a different grammatical function from the first.

In other examples there may be a grammatical difference between the 'that' and the 'which' clause:

> Myth-making is a subject that fascinates Cornwell, and which he has explored before. (feature)
>
> Gold bought his first bass sax from Rollini, a battered instrument that had fallen out of a car, and which he had to spend a fortune on putting right. (feature)

But the more the second clause differs from the first, the stronger the argument for making it a separate point rather than tacking it on:

> Myth-making is a subject that fascinates Cornwell; he has often explored it before.
>
> Gold bought his first bass sax from Rollini, a battered instrument that had fallen out of a car, and (he) had to spend a fortune on putting it right.

The same treatment would improve this clumsy sentence:

> But it was *Hitler's War*, published in 1977, that was to gain him his greatest notoriety and in which he challenged the accepted historical version of the Holocaust. (feature)

Possibly worse than 'that and which' is 'which and who' – applied to the same noun:

> What this begins to suggest is that groups which are stigmatised, and who as a consequence do not have access to power, are most likely to become the victims of serial killers. (feature)

Another mistake is 'and who/which/where' without a 'who/which/where' in the first place:

> Martin Miller, founder of the famous Miller's antiques guides and who now makes gin ... (feature)
>
> A country governed by a former Coke executive and where more Coca-Cola products are consumed per capita than anywhere else in the world. (news story)

These examples are not hard to rewrite:

> Martin Miller, who founded the famous Miller's antiques guides and (who) now makes gin ...
>
> A country governed by a former Coke executive where more Coca-Cola products are consumed ...

# 4
# Grammar: problems and confusions

Grammar, syntax, usage, style – the terms are often confused. One person's grammatical howler is a simple matter of style for somebody else. This chapter covers common problems and confusions under the heading of 'grammar' – but not all the entries feature 'mistakes'.

## A and an

Words with a silent 'h' such as 'honest' take 'an' instead of 'a':

> an honest man

Unless your style book insists, don't use 'an' before such words as 'hotel', 'historian' and 'horrific', as in:

> It was an horrific example of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. (feature)

## Absolute adjectives

Don't misuse absolute adjectives such as:

absolute
basic
complete
empty
essential
fatal
final
full
ideal
impossible
obvious
perfect
pure
ultimate
unique

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A thing is either perfect or less than perfect. It can't be 'more perfect' or 'most perfect'. It is similarly ludicrous to write 'more fatal' or 'more unique'.

## After

'After' should mean what it says, that is 'later in time'; it should not be used as here:

> Bird flu has claimed its fifth human victim in three weeks after a 35-year-old woman died of the virus in southern Vietnam, officials said yesterday. (news story)

Flu claimed its fifth victim when, not after, the woman died.

## And and but

See *Conjunctions to start sentences*, p42.

## And which etc

See p37.

## Any

Like 'none' (see p48) 'any' can take either a singular or a plural verb. So there is nothing wrong with:

> Have any of the players turned up yet?

## As

Be careful with 'as'. It has all sorts of uses including 'at the same time as'. It doesn't work here:

> Two arrested as pensioner is beaten to death in home. (news headline)

The arrests came a day after the attack, so 'as' should clearly be 'after'.

## As and than

In comparisons 'as good' needs another 'as', just as 'better' needs 'than'. In this example the writer has used 'than' instead of 'as':

> Children whose parents smoke are one and a half times as likely to become asthmatic than those with non-smoking parents. (feature)

Often the second 'as' gets left out as in these three examples:

> The conditions under which young people from ethnic minorities are living in France are as bad, if not worse than those that black people suffered in Detroit in the 1960s and Brixton in the 1980s. (leader)

To correct this, put 'as' after 'bad' and a comma after 'than'. Or if the result sounds stilted, why not just say 'as bad as'?

> If the show goes ahead the list will be every bit – if not more – impressive than its British counterparts. (leader)

This is difficult to correct – better stop and start again.

> It is as bad or worse than 1976. (feature)

This one is easy: 'It is as bad as 1976, if not worse.'

## Between

'Between' is most often used to show a relationship between two people or things. But it can be used for more than two as in:

> Lille is between Paris, Brussels and London.

It shouldn't be used instead of 'after' as here:

> During an interview for a magazine a decade and a half ago, I noted that Frayn, eating olives at the kitchen table, crossed to the sink to wash and dry his fingers between each light-green oval. (feature)

Replace 'between each light-green oval' by 'after each one'.

'Between' should be followed by 'and', not as in these three examples by 'or':

> Given the choice between Charles or an elected head of state, only 55% want him to be king. (feature)
>
> They will be making a choice between far more than just 'IDS', the ramrod-straight shadow defence secretary, or Ken, the beer-swilling and blokeish ex-chancellor and QC. (feature)
>
> ... future women incumbents when they have to choose between this showy form of servitude or being depicted as unfashionably meek. (column)

'Between' should not be followed by a dash. Instead of 'between 1914–18', write either 'in 1914–18' or 'between 1914 and 1918'.

## Bored (of)

Although 'bored of' is increasingly common it is better to stick with 'bored with'.

## Both

See *Saying it twice*, p35.

## Centre around, in, on

See *Prepositions: the pitfalls*, p50.

## Compare like with like

Be careful to compare like with like. In the following example a problem is not a city:

> Thankfully, Scotland's gun problem has not yet reached the same scale as London, Manchester or Dublin.

## Compare to and with

Use 'with' for routine comparisons – like with like, last year's figures with this year's. Use 'to' when the comparison itself makes a point as in:

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

## Comprise (of)

'Comprise' does not take 'of'; the confusion is with 'consist of'. 'Is comprised of' is just as bad.

## Conjunctions to start sentences

There is no problem with the use of 'and' and 'but' to start sentences. Whatever your English teacher may have said to the contrary, this isn't a grammatical mistake.

Nor is it bad grammar to write:

Because the food was awful they walked out.

But it is usually stronger to put the 'what' before the 'why':

They walked out because the food was awful.

See also *Fragments*, p45.

## Dangling modifier

See p29.

## Different from, than, to

'From' is the preferred preposition after 'different' but 'different to' is now commonly accepted in Britain; 'different than' has an American flavour.

## Double negative

In modern standard English the double negative asserts the positive rather than emphasising the negative. Thus:

I don't know nothing.

can mean that the speaker knows something rather than nothing:

I don't 'know nothing'.

But in many people's speech it means the opposite. So beware of using the double negative in copy since it may be misunderstood.

## Due to

'Due' is an adjective and is also used in adjectival phrases:

The rent is *due*.
The cancellation is *due to bad weather*.

Strict grammarians – and many house-style guides – say that 'due to' may not be used to introduce an adverbial phrase; that what follows is a mistake:

The train was cancelled *due to bad weather*.

So the best advice, whatever the railway companies may say, is: don't do it.

## Equally

See *Saying it twice*, p35.

## Fed up (of)

Like 'bored', 'fed up' should be followed by 'with' not 'of'.

## Few

Some nouns are only used as plurals or have a particular meaning in the plural. A story can have a 'moral', for example, but a person can't: they can only have 'morals' (ethical principles and conduct). So the following is wrong because 'few' suggests that 'morals' can be singular.

> Jack Shaftoe is magnificent, a swashbuckling hero with a foul mouth and few morals. (feature)

## Fewer and less

See p32.

## Floating participle

See p30.

## Following

'Following' (originally a participle) is often used by journalists as a preposition to mean either 'after' or 'because of', as in:

> Following the rain the sun came out (after).
> The M4 is still closed following a pile-up (because of).

But it can be ambiguous as in:

> Following the success of New Labour in Britain, the French left hopes to do well in the elections.

Is there really a connection here or is the journalist trying to link two unrelated events in the reader's mind?

Be clear: instead of 'following' use either 'after' or 'because of'.

## For you and I

See *Pronoun abuse*, p36.

## Fragments

Try to avoid using words like 'while', 'because' and 'although' to start sentences that turn out to be subordinate clauses, left hanging in the air as in:

> Isabel Spearman agrees that 'there is definitely a move away from diamonds on men's watches'. Although, she adds, they still sell well in Chester. (feature)
>
> Sex took over and obscenity became the new shocker. Although Muslims, it has to be said, don't go a bundle on either. (feature)

In both these examples the 'although' clause is logically part of the previous sentence. Of course you could call this bad punctuation rather than bad grammar. If you replace the full stop after 'shocker' with a comma and run the sentence on, the problem disappears.

Or you could play the flexibility card ('we reinvent and redefine our own language at will,' as the academic linguists might say) and declare 'although' to be a word like 'but' and 'and' – a conjunction that can be used to link two main clauses.

But the problem, as so often with the 'usage sanctifies change' argument, is that the word 'although' will not suddenly stop being used to introduce subordinate clauses: one usage will not replace the other. If one of your sentences begins with an 'although' the more conservative reader will expect it to introduce a subordinate clause, while others may be in two minds about how it will end. (This may not matter very much in academic discourse but it certainly does in journalism.)

Two things can make it harder to make sense of this kind of fragment. The first is a paragraph break before the conjunction:

> But the film also reminds us that his times are not our times.
>
> Because Kinsey lived in an age that could be straightforwardly optimistic about the rewards offered by sexual frankness. (feature)

The second is extending the fragment by what could be seen as its main clause:

> We need to wake up to the fact that we're going to have to educate people – put it as part of the curriculum or provide parenting classes outside school. Because the children aren't happy, nobody's happy with this. (feature)

The reader expects the 'because' clause to be logically related to what follows: nobody is happy because the children aren't happy. But that isn't what the speaker means.

When there's both a paragraph break before the conjunction and extra material after the fragment, the reader is made to work even harder:

> Lee wasn't a lager lout or a work-shy layabout. He was a conscientious, ambitious boy with a loving family; and his needless tragedy is a warning to us all.
>
> Because drink has become our culture, it's an integral part of everyday life. (column)

As is pointed out in Chapter 1 the fragment is here to stay, but here are a few points to remember:

1 Fragments work particularly well as answers to questions, as in: *'So is there a problem here? Not necessarily.'*
2 Keep these non-sentences even shorter than your sentences, so that the reader can quickly see where they're going.
3 Remember that fragments may seem out of place in more formal writing.

## From/to

'From' should be followed by 'to'. Do not write 'from 1939–45'. Write either 'in 1939–45' or 'from 1939 to 1945'.

## The 'fronted adverbial' muddle

See p178.

## Hopefully

Expressions such as 'hopefully' and 'generally speaking' are increasingly accepted in everyday journalism.

But avoid imprecision. In 'Generally speaking, grammar is important' and 'Hopefully, your punctuation will improve' the speaker/writer expresses an opinion, but it is not clear who shares it. Where it is important to be precise, it's better to write:

*I* hope your punctuation will improve.

*or*:

Let *us* hope your punctuation will improve.

## Lay and lie

Do not confuse 'lay' and 'lie'. 'Lay' is a transitive verb and so takes an object; 'lie' is an intransitive verb and does not:

Chickens *lay* eggs.
Waiters *lay* the table.
Soldiers *lay down* their arms.

*but*:

A sun-worshipper *lies down* on the beach.

## Like and such as

Traditionally, 'like' makes a comparison whereas 'such as' introduces examples:

Fruit trees, like flowers, need water.
Fruit trees such as the plum and the cherry need pruning.

'Like' is now commonly used to introduce examples instead of 'such as':

Fruit trees like the plum and the cherry need pruning.

But if there is any risk of confusion, stick to 'such as'. Also, remember that commas are essential with 'like' when a comparison is being made.

## May for might

See p34.

## Meet

Do not use 'with' (still less 'up with') when 'meet' means 'come face to face with' (a person):

> Fred met Joan at the station.

Use 'with' when 'meet' means 'chance to experience' as in:

> He met with an accident.

## Myself

The pronoun 'myself' has two uses.

> I sub myself.

is either reflexive, meaning:

> I sub my own copy.

or intensive – that is, it emphasises:

> I too am a subeditor.

Don't use 'myself' instead of 'me' in such sentences as:

> They asked Fred and me to work on the story.

## None

'None' can take either a singular or a plural verb. In the examples that follow the plural would have been better:

> Our so-called representatives spat on the efforts that some of our foremost lawyers, scholars and parliamentarians had made to try to prevent the destruction of our most basic rights to justice. None of them is fit to run this country. (reader's letter)
>
> Almost none of them said she was happy and excited at being sexually mature. (feature)
>
> None of the characters is what they seem and fresh conspiracies are revealed at every turn. (book review)
>
> None of the killers has yet been brought to justice for their crimes. (book review)

## No question/argument

Be careful with these phrases. A TV producer once wrote to the *Observer* to complain that he had been quoted as saying:

> The four are outspoken and there is no question we encouraged them to play up for the camera.

As he went on:

> What does this damaging ambiguity mean – that we did or that we didn't?

To convey the TV producer's meaning the quote should have read:

> There *was* no question *of our encouraging* them ...

In the following examples 'there is no question/argument' looks as though it has the positive meaning 'there is no doubt/it is certain':

> Bill T Jones claims that he has mellowed with age, but there's no question that the trajectory of his 20-year career has been heavily fuelled by anger. (feature)
> There is no argument that Cliff's Eurovision classic, 'Congratulations', is the most irritating single of all time. (feature)
> There is no question that Dyke transformed the way the BBC felt about itself. (feature)

A simple improvement would be to write: 'It is clear/certain …'

Or you could cut out the phrase altogether: 'Dyke transformed the way the BBC felt about itself.'

The following is worse than confusing – it is just nonsense (instead of 'argue' the verb should be 'dispute'):

> No one would argue that alcohol lowers inhibitions ... (feature)

## Number disagreement

See p31.

## One and you

See p34.

## One word not two

Some hyphenated or separate pairs of words gradually become fused. Examples are 'forever', 'onto', 'subeditor', 'underway' and 'wicketkeeper'.

## Only

Be careful with 'only': putting this word in the wrong place can affect the meaning of a sentence.

'I'm only here for the beer' is unlikely to be misunderstood, but what is meant by 'He only eats here on Tuesdays'? That on Tuesdays he refrains from drinking? Or that he eats here only on Tuesdays?

To be clear, put 'only' directly before the word or phrase it refers to.

## Prepositions: the pitfalls

The most common mistake is to use the wrong preposition or to use one where it is not necessary. Here are some examples of commonly misused prepositions:

absent *from* (not *of*)
acquiesce *in* (not *to*)
affinity *between*, *with* (not *to*, *for*)
agree *on* (a point), *to* (a proposal), *with* (a person or opinion)
alien *from* (not *to*)
arise *from* (not out *of*)
bored: see p42
capacity *for* (not *of*)
centre *on/in* (not *around*)
compare: see p42
comprise: see p42
consider: no preposition (do not use *as*)
correspond *with* (a person), *to* (a thing)
credit *with* (not *for*)
die *of* (not *from*)
differ *from* (*in* comparisons, not *to* or than), *with* (a person when disagreeing)
different: see p43
dissent *from* (not *to*)
distaste *for* (not *of*)

fed up: see p44
glad *at* (a piece of news), *of* (a possession)
impatient *for* (a thing), *with* (a person)
independent *of* (not *from*)
indifferent *to*
martyr *for* (a cause), *to* (a disease)
meet: see p48
oblivious *of* (not *from* or *to*)
part *from* (a person), *with* (a thing)
prefer *to* (not than or rather than)
prevail against (a thing), *on* (a person)
prevent *from*
protest *at/against*
reconcile to (a thing), *with* (a person)
taste *of* (food), *for* (the arts and other things)

The American 'on' for 'the street', 'the team' etc is becoming increasingly common:

> The peculiar case of the law lords, the plutocrat, his 'Harvey Nichols wife' and the 'man on the street' (feature heading)

But stick to 'in' unless there is some point in the Americanism.

Most compound prepositions are an abomination. Avoid such expressions as:

in connection with
in regard to
in relation to

## Prepositions to end sentences

Ending a sentence with a preposition may sometimes be bad style but it is not bad grammar. As Winston Churchill was popularly said to have written (commenting on a clumsy sentence by a pedantic civil servant which avoided a prepositional ending): 'This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.'

So, where your ear tells you that a preposition can go at the end of the sentence, put it there.

## Saying it twice

See p35; see also *Redundant words*, p128.

## Since

Be careful with 'since' which can mean both 'because' and 'from the time that'. The following sentence is at best confusing, at worst nonsensical:

> They were prone to illness since they were children.

It is intended to mean:

> They have/had been prone to illness since they were children.

## Split infinitive

'To boldly go' is traditionally called a split infinitive: the infinitive ('to go') is split by an adverb ('boldly'). Modern grammarians have disputed this, arguing that the preposition 'to' does not form part of the infinitive, which therefore cannot be split. Others have pointed out that new verbs can be formed in English by putting an adverb before an existing verb ('to under-take', 'to over-throw') and that new expressions are formed in exactly the same way: 'to sexu-ally harass', 'to verbally abuse'. Whatever else it is, a 'split infinitive' is not a grammatical mistake.

But a problem remains, partly because many writers and readers think there is one. Consider the following:

> It is illegal deliberately to help someone to die. (column)
> In several European countries it is a crime publicly to deny that the Holocaust ever took place. (feature)
> He began actively to dislike me. (feature)

These are clear cases of split-infinitive avoidance: the writer doesn't want to put the adverb after 'to' and has made a simple sentence sound awkward.

Then there are cases of what seems like compulsive splitting:

> 'Older people tend to really cook their vegetables well, and if they overcook cauliflower they won't be getting those nutrients,' she said. (news story)

'Really' here belongs with 'well'.

> To not have 'OJ' on the breakfast table is seen as something akin to a breach of human rights in the US. (feature)
> It is pettifogging to not use the word art to describe the cave paintings of Ice Age Europe. (feature)

What's wrong with the natural-sounding 'not to have/not to use'? After all, Hamlet didn't say 'To be or to not be'.

In deciding whether or not to put an adverb after 'to', ask yourself:

1 Is the adverb superfluous? Often it contributes nothing to the sense.
2 Would the adverb be better somewhere else in the sentence?
3 Would the sentence sound better rewritten?

If the answer to these questions is no, carry on 'splitting'.

## Subjunctive failure

See p33.

## Suffice (it) to say

'Suffice to say' is both pompous and incorrect because 'it' is left out. (The expression means 'let it be enough to say'.) So the following are nonsense:

> Suffice to say that she is unlikely to apologise. (feature)
> (he's not 16st any more, suffice to say) (feature)

## Superlatives

Don't use the superlative where you should use the comparative. For example, you can't have 'the least of two evils' or 'the best of two games' or 'the eldest of two brothers'. So the following are wrong:

> Who has the best command of the English language – Hay writers or *Guardian* journalists? (standfirst)

'Best' should be 'better'.

> Brown has the hardest job. He has to pretend that he agrees with Blair on virtually everything. (feature)

'Hardest' should be 'harder'.

Do not use a double superlative such as 'most fondest' or 'least worst'.

If you qualify a superlative, as in 'the world's second longest river', be careful. The sentence 'The Amazon is the world's second longest river after the Nile'

needs at least a comma after 'river' (brackets are better). Otherwise it means that the Amazon is the world's *third* longest river.

To put it another way, without a comma it would be more exact to write:

> The Amazon is the world's longest river after the Nile.

### Tenses out of sequence

See p33.

### That and which

See p27.

### They, their, them

There is no problem with using 'they', 'their' and 'them' to refer to a singular pronoun or noun as in:

> If anybody comes, tell them to wait.

Prefer this usage to 'he or she', 'he/she' etc.

### Try to/and

After 'try' use the infinitive form not a conjunction. Try to write 'try *to* write' not 'try *and* write'.

### Whether

'Whether' should not be followed by 'if' as in:

> This technical decision is the key signal of whether it's 'business as usual' or if Tony Blair is finally ready to start handing out the kind of medicine needed if Kyoto is to mean anything. (feature)

### Which and that

See p27.

## Whom for who

See p35.

## With

Just as the preposition 'with' does not affect the verb in:

Spelling, with grammar, is important.

so it does not affect the subject in:

With her husband she faced the press.

Avoid:

With her husband they faced the press.

# 5
# Spelling

English spelling often defies logic. Why should we spell 'harass' with one 'r' and 'embarrass' with two? Why does 'mantelpiece' echo its Latin origin (*mantellum*, cloak) while 'mantle', the posh word for 'cloak', does not? Why does 'dependent' (the adjective) differ from 'dependant' (the noun)?

Whereas punctuation evolves, spelling does not. Whereas with grammar and punctuation you can sometimes argue a case for loose, colloquial usage, with spelling there is no way out. The word is either right or wrong – though some words are spelt in more than one way.

Nobody expects you to know how to spell all the words in the dictionary. The key thing is to avoid mistakes: learn to recognise the words you cannot spell and look them up. Use a spell-check system – but don't rely on it.

One of the comical consequences of reliance on spell-check is the increased number of homophone mistakes, as in this Sunday paper rugby report:

> It must be said that anyone who claims to have spotted the seeds of yesterday's glory sewn earlier in the autumn is talking twaddle.

'Seeds … sewn'? How did that get into the paper? I have with a heavy heart added 'sew' and 'sow' to the list of homophones on pp58–9.

## Words people get wrong

First, here's a list of words that many people can't spell. How about you?

abhorrence
accidentally
accommodation
acquiescence
admissible
annihilate
apartment
apostasy
asinine
asphyxiate
authoritative
auxiliary
barbecue
benefited

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blamable
braggadocio
bureaucracy

caribbean
clamouring
combated
connoisseur
consensus
convertible
corpuscle
corroborate
crucifixion

debatable
definitely
descendant
desiccated
destructible
diagrammatic
diarrhoea
dignitary
discernible
dispel
dissatisfaction
dysentery

ecstasy
effervescence
eligibility
embarrass
emissary
exaggerate
exhilaration
expatriate

fallacious
forty
fulfilling
funereal

gaseous
guttural

haemorrhage
harass
heinous
herbaceous
hiccup
hierarchy
humorist
humorous
hygiene
hysterical

ideologist
idiosyncrasy
impresario
indispensable
indissoluble
innocuous
innuendo
inoculate
instalment
intestacy
iridescence

jeopardise

kitchenette

liaison
licentious
linchpin
liquefy
loquacious

maintenance
manoeuvre
mantelpiece
mayonnaise
meanness
mediterranean
mellifluous
millennium
miniature
minuscule
miscellaneous
mischievous
moccasin

negotiate
nonchalant
noticeable

obeisance
occurred
omitted
oscillate

paraphernalia
pavilion
perspicacious
plummeted
predilection
privilege
profession
proprietary
pseudonym
publicly
pursue
pyrenees

rarefy
recommend
reconnaissance
referred
restaurateur
resuscitate
riveted

sacrilegious
separate
statutory
straitjacket
supersede

| | |
|---|---|
| targeted | vacillate |
| tranquillity | verruca |
| | veterinary |
| unforeseen | vociferous |
| unnecessary | |
| unparalleled | withhold |

## Confusions

(See also Chapter 10, *Words*)

One reason why people misspell some words is that they confuse them with other words.

There are three common kinds of confusion:

1 a word is confused with a shorter one that sounds the same

| | |
|---|---|
| coconut | cocoa |
| consensus | census |
| dispel | spell |
| fulfil | full/fill |
| minuscule | mini |
| playwright | write |
| supersede | cede |

2 a word is confused with a different one that sounds the same (homophone)

| | |
|---|---|
| altar | alter |
| aural | oral |
| bail | bale |
| bait | bate |
| born | borne |
| breach | breech |
| break | brake |
| cannon | canon |
| complement | compliment |
| cord | chord |
| counsel | council |
| curb | kerb |
| currant | current |
| deserts (runs away/what is deserved) | desserts (puddings) |

| | |
|---|---|
| draft | draught |
| discreet | discrete |
| expatriate | ex-patriot |
| faze | phase |
| forbear | forebear |
| forego | forgo |
| foreword | forward |
| formally | formerly |
| geezer | geyser |
| grisly | grizzly |
| hanger | hangar |
| horde | hoard |
| lead (the metal) | led (the past participle) |
| lightening | lightning |
| metal | mettle |
| principal | principle |
| raise | raze |
| review | revue |
| sew | sow |
| sight | site |
| stationary | stationery |
| storey | story |
| swat | swot |
| toe | tow |
| way | weigh |
| yoke | yolk |

3 a word used as one part of speech is confused with the same word used as another part of speech

| *Noun* | *Verb* |
|---|---|
| practice | practise, so also practising, practised |
| licence | license, so also licensing, licensed |
| envelope | envelop, so also enveloping, enveloped |

| *Noun* | *Adjective* |
|---|---|
| dependant | dependent |

In one of the pairs listed above the words are pronounced differently:

| *Noun* | *Verb* |
|---|---|
| envelope | envelop |

If you find it difficult to distinguish between the common pairs *practic(s)e* and *licenc(s)e*, note that *advic(s)e* changes its pronunciation as well as spelling and remember the three pairs together:

| *Noun* | *Verb* |
|---|---|
| advice | advise |
| practice | practise |
| licence | license |

or remember the sentence:

Doctors need a licence to practise.

In this case the noun ('c') comes before the verb ('s').

Also note the opposite problem: two words with the same spelling that are pronounced differently and have different meanings:

*INvalid* (as in chair)
*inVALID* (as in argument)

*desERTS* (runs away, what is deserved)
DES*erts* (sand)

*LE(A)D* (the metal, spelt 'lead' and pronounced 'led')
*LEAD* (the present tense of the verb, pronounced 'leed')

*reJECT* (verb)
RE*ject* (noun)

*proJECT* (verb)
PRO*ject* (noun)

## I before e

Most people know the so-called spelling rule 'i' before 'e' except after 'c'. This gives:

believe, niece, siege

and

ceiling, deceive, receive

But note exceptions such as:

caffeine, codeine, counterfeit, protein, seize

and, in the other direction:

species

## Plurals

1 Nouns ending in a consonant followed by 'y' take 'ies' in the plural:

| | |
|---|---|
| lady | ladies |
| penny | pennies |
| story | stories |

But proper nouns take the standard 's' in the plural:

the two Germanys
three Hail Marys
four Pennys in a class list

And nouns ending in a vowel followed by 'y' take the standard 's' in the plural:

| | |
|---|---|
| donkey | donkeys |
| monkey | monkeys |
| storey | storeys |

2 Most nouns ending in 'o' take the standard 's' but some common ones take 'es' in the plural:

buffaloes, cargoes, dingoes, dominoes, echoes, embargoes, goes, heroes, mangoes, negroes, noes, potatoes, tomatoes, tornadoes, torpedoes, vetoes, volcanoes

And some may be spelt either with 's' or 'es':

archipelago, banjo, grotto, halo, innuendo, memento, mosquito, motto, salvo

3 Nouns ending in 'f' usually take the standard 's' in the plural:

| | |
|---|---|
| dwarf | dwarfs |
| handkerchief | handkerchiefs |

But note:

| | |
|---|---|
| elf | elves |

In Tolkien's fantasy world dwarf becomes dwarves; handkerchieves is sometimes found.

4 Some nouns that come from Greek, Latin or modern languages keep their original plural form:

| | |
|---|---|
| addendum | addenda |
| alumna | alumnae |
| alumnus | alumni |
| bacillus | bacilli |
| chateau | chateaux |
| criterion | criteria |
| minimum | minima |
| phenomenon | phenomena |
| spectrum | spectra |

In some cases both the original plural form and an anglicised version are used:

| | |
|---|---|
| appendix | medium |
| appendices (used of books) | media (the press, etc) |
| appendixes (used of both books and the body) | mediums (spiritualism) |
| beau | memorandum |
| beaux | memoranda |
| beaus | memorandums |
| bureau | plateau |
| bureaux | plateaux |
| bureaus | plateaus |
| cactus | stadium |
| cacti | stadia |
| cactuses | stadiums |
| formula | syllabus |
| formulae (scientific) | syllabi |
| formulas (general use) | syllabuses |
| fungus | terminus |
| fungi | termini |
| funguses | terminuses |

| | |
|---|---|
| index | virtuoso |
| indices (mathematics) | virtuosi |
| indexes (books) | virtuosos |

Be careful of confusing the singular with the plural when the latter form is more common as with:

| | |
|---|---|
| graffito | graffiti |
| die | dice |
| stratum | strata |

The plural of 'wagon-lit' is 'wagons-lits', not as some British dictionaries insist 'wagons-lit' or 'wagon-lits'; the plural of 'court martial' is 'courts martial'.

But note that plurals such as 'agenda', 'data' and 'media' are often treated as though they were singular. Check your house style.

## Suffixes

1 One-syllable words with a short vowel and a single final consonant double it before a suffix that starts with a vowel.

| | |
|---|---|
| fat | fatten, fatter |
| run | runner, running |

2 So, too, do words with more than one syllable if the stress is on the final syllable.

| | |
|---|---|
| begin | beginning, beginner |
| refer | referred, referral |
| prefer | preferred but note *prefer*able (pronounced *pre*ferable) |

3 But one-syllable words with a long vowel or double vowel do not double the final consonant.

| | |
|---|---|
| seat | seated, seating |
| look | looking, looked |

4 Nor do words with more than one syllable if the stress is before the final syllable.

| | |
|---|---|
| *proffer* | proffering, proffered |
| *benefit* | benefiting, benefited |
| *leaflet* | leafleting, leafleter |

5 Exceptions to these rules include most words ending in '1':

| | |
|---|---|
| cavil | cavilling |
| devil | devilled (but *devilish*) |
| level | levelled |
| revel | reveller |
| travel | traveller |

*but*:

| | |
|---|---|
| parallel | paralleled |

and some words ending in 'p' or 's':

| | |
|---|---|
| worship | worshipped |
| bus | Buses |
| gas | gases |

while some words ending in 's' are optional:

| | |
|---|---|
| bias | biased or biassed |
| focus | focused or focussed |

House style determines whether the extra 's' is added.

6 Sometimes the stress changes when a noun is used as a verb:

| | |
|---|---|
| format | formative but for*mat*ted (in computer speak) |

Dictionaries generally give:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| combat | combatant | combative | combated |

But there is an argument for 'combatted' on the grounds that some people pronounce it that way. (You can, of course, avoid the problem altogether by using 'fight' as a verb instead of 'combat': it's one character shorter.)

7 Whether 'learn' becomes 'learnt' or 'learned', 'dream' becomes 'dreamt' or 'dreamed', is a matter of house style. But 'earn' can only become 'earned'.

8 Words ending in a silent 'e' keep it if the suffix begins with a consonant:

| | |
|---|---|
| safez | safety |
| same | sameness |

But note that there are common exceptions:

| | |
|---|---|
| due | duty |
| true | truly |
| awe | awful (but awesome) |
| wide | width |

And some words are optional:

acknowledgement, judg(e)ment

9 Words ending in a silent 'e' drop it if the suffix begins with a vowel:

| | |
|---|---|
| bake | baking |
| sane | sanity |

*but*:

| | |
|---|---|
| change | changeable |
| mile | mileage |

Note that 'y' here acts as a vowel:

| | |
|---|---|
| gore | gory |
| Ice | icy |

10 Sometimes keeping or losing the silent 'e' makes it possible to distinguish two words with different meanings:

| | |
|---|---|
| dying | (the death) |
| dyeing | (clothes) |
| linage | (payment by the line) |
| lineage | (descent) |
| singing | (musically) |
| singeing | (burning) |
| swinging | (from a tree) |
| swingeing | (heavy) |

## Agreement

A few words taken from French have an extra 'e' for the feminine form:

blond(e), brunet(te), confidant(e), debutant(e).

Note that in French an adjective agrees with its noun not the person the adjective refers to. Thus (since hair has no gender in English):

A blonde woman has blond hair.

This logical point is made in several house-style guides – but generally ignored.

'Chaperon(e)' is a curiosity. In French *chaperon* exists only as a masculine noun; in English the (false) feminine form 'chaperone' is far more common.

## American variants

Some 'American' variants have a respectable pedigree. 'Airplane' (like 'aircraft', 'airport' and the rest) is increasingly popular in British English in preference to the traditional, antiquated 'aeroplane', which seems to belong to an aerodrome. So is the etymologically correct 'fetus' – from the same root as 'effete' – instead of 'foetus'. 'Program' (rather than 'programme') was in fact the original English spelling – as with anagram, cryptogram, diagram, telegram – while 'programme' was a nineteenth-century French import. British publications increasingly prefer 'judgment' to 'judgement' for both personal opinion and legal ruling.

## Spelling mistakes

There are two kinds of published spelling mistakes nowadays: ones caused by over-reliance on spell-checkers (homophones) and ones caused by the failure to use spell-checkers (straightforward errors). The first can be amusing; the second are a sign of carelessness and contempt for the reader.

For some reason, the book-buying public seems to regard the *concensus* of a panel as more objectively reliable than a single identified critic. (feature)

Such a mutiny would have been *lead* from the top. (blog published in newspaper)

The dominant but *floored* ideologies of Marxist and Whig histories ... (feature)

'I feel all right, but I'm still smoking like a *trouper*.' (feature)

Some might say this passenger got more than his just *desserts*. (feature)

The House of Commons lives by the *principal* that all of its members are constrained by the same standing orders. (column)

He adopts a *course* Aussie accent. (feature)

One of the most important dates in the hunting *calender*. (feature)
He *parleyed* that into a governorship in the service of the Sikh king of the Punjab. (book review)
It isn't a cardinal or mortal sin, but a *venal* one. (column)
Russell Thomson, the British *counsel* in Alicante ... (feature)
I had been collecting these letters for more than a decade, *prying* them from Bellow's wives, friends, lovers ... (literary column)
During the 1990s there was quite *literary* no immigration policy in the country. (feature)
He forsakes the comforts of Strangers' Bar to *bathe* their baby, Donald. (feature)
Australia had the *moral* and the shape to hit back with a series of late attacks. (sports report)
My brother is a living textbook definition of Yorkshire stoney-facedness. (column)
Not everyone writes with such *forebearance*. (book review)
The Nazis regarded Von Stauffenberg's mentor George as one of the artistic and spiritual *forbears* of their movement. (feature)
If some, more upmarket, forms of prostitution are *permissable*, can we really expect to crack down effectively on the rest? (feature)
Mr Justice Clarke also ruled the evidence was *inadmissable*. (news report)
Mr Haylett whose complaint to *Tribune* elicited first a *humourous* correction. (diary item)
When I'm invited to dress *glamourously* I am naturally flattered. (column)
Johnny Grant, 82, serves as Hollywood's *honourary* mayor. (news report)
So where I was *cossetted* by four chefs and one superb restaurant boss, I was reduced to two chefs. (restaurant review)
*Rivetting* account of how Chess turned this new sound into a multimillion-dollar industry that changed the world. (book review)
Miller's reporting style was *appaling*. (column)
Lynch perhaps imagines that the same broad associative *license* extends to prose. (book review)
Some *idiosyncracy* of their digital instructions. (feature)
UK passenger *journies* to increase from 200 million to 500 million a year by 2030. (feature)
What would his ancestor make of the politicking and half-truths that are bread and butter to his *discendent*? (book review)

# 6
# Punctuation

The point of punctuation is to make writing easier to read. It is the counterpart of the pauses and inflections that help to make speech understandable. But it doesn't necessarily follow that everywhere you would pause in speech you should punctuate in writing. And sometimes the strength of a punctuation mark differs from the length of the equivalent pause in speech.

Ideally, punctuation should be based on sound logical principles. But don't try to force your punctuation practice into a format that defies current usage.

Punctuation practice is constantly changing. For example, sentences are shorter than they used to be so there are now more full stops in text. But in general there is less punctuation.

- Since sentences are shorter there are fewer intermediate stops such as commas.
- Full stops are no longer seen as necessary to mark abbreviations and contractions.
- In headlines, standfirsts and captions the final full stop is rare.
- Many publications no longer use capital letters for expressions such as the continent (of Europe) and the chancellor of the exchequer.
- Apostrophes are less common to mark plurals, as in 'dos and don'ts', which once had three apostrophes and now has only one.
- Some previously hyphenated words such as 'wicket-keeper' and 'e-mail' are often printed as single words.

## The four main stops

These are: the comma, the semicolon, the colon and the full stop. Of these the comma is the weakest and the full stop the strongest. The colon used to be seen

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as a stronger stop than the semicolon. Now the semicolon lies midway between a comma and a full stop while the colon has a series of specialist uses.

## Comma

1 Use the comma to separate a series of words of the same kind:

The reporter should always write clear, concise, accurate English.

But do not use the comma when a series of adjectives is cumulative:

He ordered a rich chocolate sponge cake.

2 Use the comma to separate a series of phrases of the same kind:

His writing was more refined, more intellectual, more Latinate, than Smith's.

3 Use a comma before 'and/or' at the end of a list where it is necessary for clarity and readability:

The menu was soup, fish and chips, and trifle.

But not where it isn't, as in:

The menu was soup, fish and trifle.

A 'serial' comma routinely inserted before 'and/or' in a list of things is also called an Oxford comma, because the Oxford University Press favours it. It is considered pointless and unnecessary by most British writers and publishers and is not recommended by Oxford University's own style guide.

4 Use the comma to mark off words that address somebody or something:

Come on, City.

5 Use the comma, where appropriate, to mark off words or phrases such as 'however', 'for example', 'in fact', 'of course':

However, with punctuation it pays to be careful.

6 Use the comma to mark off a word in parenthesis:

Born in Brixton, south London, he became prime minister.

7 Use the comma to mark off a phrase in parenthesis:

Norman Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was a bestseller.

Do not use the comma where the phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence:

> Norman Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead* was a bestseller.

Here commas would mean that Mailer had written only one novel.

Also note the difference between '*the prime minister, Rishi Sunak,*' and '*Rishi Sunak, the prime minister,*' (both parenthetical, so commas) and '*prime minister Rishi Sunak*' and 'the *Tory politician Rishi Sunak*' (not parenthetical, so no commas).

8 Use the comma to mark off a clause in parenthesis:

> The paper's subs, who were in their shirt sleeves, worked fast.

Do not use the comma where the clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence:

> The subs who were in their shirt sleeves worked fast; those who were wearing summer blouses worked even faster.

(See *Clauses*, p27.)

But note the example below, which is an exception to this rule:

> He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.

9 Use the comma where necessary to mark off an introductory phrase or clause:

> Because of the appalling weather, conditions for holidaymakers were described as 'intolerable'.

Where a phrase or clause that needs commas follows a conjunction such as 'but' or 'and', the first comma is now rare and could be thought pedantic:

> Fred tried to get up but (,) because he was tired and emotional, he failed.

10 Use the comma, where two sentences are joined by a conjunction, if you want to lengthen the pause:

> He wanted to leave the party, but his friend detained him.

Do not use the comma where the subject of the two sentences is the same:

> He wanted to leave but didn't.

Do not use the comma between sentences where there is no conjunction. Avoid:

He wanted to leave, his friend detained him.

But note the example below of a series of short sentences where the comma can be used:

I came, I saw, I conquered.

11 For the use of commas in quotes see Chapter 7, *Reporting speech*.

## Semicolon

1 Use the semicolon between sentences, with or without a conjunction, as a longer pause than a comma and a shorter one than a full stop:

The rumour was that the king was dead; the people believed it.

There will be an inquest, of course; but the matter will not end there.

2 Use the semicolon to separate longer items in a list, particularly if the items themselves need further punctuation by commas:

Punctuation marks include the full stop, which is the strongest stop; the semicolon, which is weaker; and the comma, which is weakest of all.

## Colon

1 Use the colon, in preference to the comma, to introduce full-sentence quotes:

He said: 'Punctuation is difficult.'

2 Use the colon to introduce lists:

All of them were dead: Bill, Jack, Ted and Willie.

3 Use the colon between two sentences where the second explains or justifies the first:

Keep your language uncluttered: it reads more easily.

4 Use the colon between two sentences to mark an antithesis:

Man proposes: God disposes.

5 Use the colon in a picture caption to connect the person or object in the picture with the rest of the caption:

Victorious: Napoleon

Napoleon: 'Victory is ours'

### Full stop (full point, period)

Use the full stop in text to mark the end of a sentence. You do not need to use full stops after headlines, standfirsts, captions and other forms of displayed type: remember that white space punctuates.

## The paragraph break

The paragraph break can be called the fifth main stop since it is one stage stronger than the full stop. As with other forms of punctuation its main purpose is to make reading easier. A new paragraph can signal a change of subject or give the reader a rest.

Journalism is inclined to use short pars partly because it is typeset in columns of a few words to the line (rather than across the page as in this book), so that a given number of words looks longer on the page. And journalists write knowing that they need to struggle to catch and keep the reader's attention.

The shorter the par the more it stands out.

Popular papers and magazines use shorter pars than upmarket publications because they fight harder for the reader's attention; and tabloids have shorter pars because they have narrower columns. News websites usually have shorter pars than newspapers, even when their columns are wider.

News stories are written in shorter pars than features because they are less of a read, more of a series of facts. They assume a reader in a hurry with a short attention span.

Commentators from outside journalism sometimes criticise its short pars for producing a jerky, disjointed effect. But they miss the point that in news writing this is part of the style.

A news intro in both tabloids and broadsheets is usually a stand-alone sentence written to give the gist of the story.

After the intro the story starts all over again and is told in greater detail, with each stage having a new par. When you have written your intro, the best guide to structuring a news story is to answer your reader's questions in the order you think they would ask them.

In many news stories disparate elements are brought together; each one needs its own par.

The reporter and the news sub are not expected to manipulate the material so that the copy gains an artificial smoothness. In news – as in life – there are often abrupt entrances and loose ends left lying around.

A feature, by contrast, should flow. Each par should be written to follow the one before so that the reader is seduced into continuing to read whatever their interest in the content. Thus a feature often has bridges linking one par with another and its pars are usually longer than those in news.

But the occasional short one can have a dramatic effect.

It is hard to give general advice about how long (or short) your pars should be. But:

- If your news intro goes beyond 25 words you should think again and try to rewrite it.
- In news a par that goes beyond three sentences/10 lines is likely to be too long.
- Don't quote two people in the same par: start a new one for the second quote.
- Never tack a new subject onto the end of a par.
- In features avoid a succession of short pars – unless you want to produce a jerky effect.

## Quotation marks (quote marks, quotes)

1 Use quote marks for direct speech: see Chapter 7, *Reporting speech*.
2 Use quote marks for extracts from written reports, following the same rules as for speech.
3 Use quote marks in a headline to show that an assertion is made by somebody in the story rather than by your publication: this can be vital in court stories.

4 Whether you use double or single quotes in text is a matter of house style, but in headlines always use single quotes.
5 For quotes within quotes use double inside single, and vice versa:

He said: 'I really meant to say, "I'm sorry." '
He said: "I really meant to say, 'I'm sorry.' "

Note that a comma rather than a colon introduces the second quote.

6 Quote marks are sometimes used for the titles of books, plays etc – check your house style.
7 Quote marks are sometimes used to emphasise or draw attention to particular words or phrases, to identify slang or technical expressions.

Do not do this unless it is essential for clarity. Avoid:

That double-glazing salesman is a 'cowboy'.

Either use slang because it fits the context or find another expression.

8 Whether you use single or double quote marks, be consistent. Do not use one form for quoting people and another for book titles and other uses.

## Parentheses

1 For a routine, weak parenthesis use commas (see p69).
2 To mark a strong but unemphatic parenthesis, usually to explain rather than comment, use round brackets (confusingly they are often called 'parentheses'):

National Union of Journalists (NUJ)
five miles (about eight kilometres)

Don't call a noisy meeting a shambles (the word means 'slaughterhouse').

When a parenthesis forms part of a sentence, the full stop comes after the second bracket (as here). (But when the whole sentence is a parenthesis, as here, the full stop comes before the second bracket.)

3 To mark a parenthesis added by the writer or editor to explain or comment, use square brackets:

The novelist writes: 'He [the main character] dies in the end.'

'The standard of your spelling and grammer [sic] is terrible.'

4 To mark a strong, emphatic parenthesis, usually to comment rather than explain, use dashes:

John Smith – the man's a fool – is staying here.

5 The mark that guides the reader to a footnote can be used in journalism.*

## Other marks

### Dash

1 Use dashes to mark a strong parenthesis (see above).
2 Use the dash, where appropriate, to introduce an explanation or to sum up:

Journalism has many forms – newspaper, periodical, broadcast, web.

Note that the colon here would do as well – the dash is less formal.

Print, broadcast, website – these are the main forms of journalism.

3 Use the dash to add emphasis or mark a surprise:

This is the point – there's no escaping it.

You'll never guess who wrote the story – Fred Bloggs.

4 Use the dash to mark a change of direction or interruption, particularly in speech:

'I suppose – but what's the use of supposing?'

'I suppose –' 'Why are you always supposing?'

5 Use either the em (long) dash or the en (short) dash, according to house style.
6 Do not confuse the dash with the hyphen (see below).

## Hyphen

1 Use the hyphen for figures written out:

ninety-nine

* But don't overdo it.

2 Use the hyphen, where appropriate, for compound words such as:

a titles:

vice-president

b prefix plus adjective:

extra-marital sex

Here the sex takes place outside marriage. By contrast 'extra marital sex' without a hyphen would suggest married couples working overtime.

c adjective plus adjective:

red-hot coals

The first adjective modifies the second.

d adverb plus adjective used before the noun:

a well-known fact

*but:*

The fact is well known.

There is no need for a hyphen after adverbs ending in '-ly' because their meaning is clear. Distinguish between:

a close-knit band of men

*and:*

a closely knit band of men

e adjective plus noun:

a black-cab driver

This refers to the driver of a black (licensed) taxi. By contrast 'black cab driver' suggests that the driver is black.

f noun plus noun:

a black cab-driver

This makes it clear that the driver, rather than the cab, is black.

g noun plus preposition plus noun:

mother-in-law

h verb plus preposition used as noun:

get-together

When used as a verb, the word does not take the hyphen:

We get together at a get-together.

i prefix plus proper noun or adjective:

pre-Christian

j prefix plus word to distinguish between meanings:

re-creation *(making something again)* recreation *(leisure)*

k two words that together make a clumsy or ugly juxtaposition:

supra-intestinal
Caithness-shire

3 Use the hyphen to mark word breaks at the ends of lines. Note:

a with unjustified setting (no right-hand margins) hyphens are less common
b avoid a succession of word breaks
c when you hyphenate, try to break words into their constituent parts
d avoid making unintentional words such as *anal-ysis*.

### Problem

Double compounds: should it be 'a New York-based writer', a 'New-York-based writer' or 'a New York based writer'?

*Solution:* Use the first formula unless there is a risk of misunderstanding; then turn the expression round to avoid using the hyphen.

## Apostrophe

1 Use the apostrophe to show that something is left out of a word:

don't
fo'c's'le

Do not use the apostrophe to show that a word has been shortened. Avoid:

thro', 'phone, the '60s

Either use the word in full ('through') or in its shortened form without the apostrophe ('phone').

2 Use the apostrophe to mark the possessive:

women's liberation, lamb's liver, for goodness' sake

Putting the apostrophe in the right place distinguishes singular from plural:

a dolls' house

assumes more than one doll

the doll's hairdo

does not.

3 The possessive use is extended to cover 'for' as well as 'of', as in 'children's books' (those written for children).
4 Use the apostrophe *where necessary* to make a plural clear:

Mind your p's and q's.

But not where typography does the job:

Mind your Ps and Qs/Mind your *ps* and *qs*.

Do not use the apostrophe for routine abbreviations in the plural. Particularly avoid the greengrocer's apostrophe:

Tom's £2.50

Instead of the price of tomatoes, it looks like Tom's pocket money.

## Apostrophe problems

1 Place names: King's Cross *but* Kings Norton.
2 Names of organisations: Harrods *but* Christie's.
3 The extra 's': Thomas' or Thomas's?

*Solutions:* in both place names and the titles of organisations the trend is for apostrophes to disappear rather than appear. For example, John o'Groats in the far north of Scotland was once 'John o'Groat's' (it referred to John of Groat/Grote's house). But it would be pedantic to insert the second apostrophe now. So follow usage and consult an up-to-date reference book.

With organisations the traditional advice is to follow their own style unless it is illiterate (for example, never write 'womens'). But in some cases following an

organisation's style turns out to be impossible since they can't be said to have one. In these cases the better bet is to include the apostrophe.

Subject to house style there could be a case for restoring an apostrophe when the organisation has dropped it. The football club which now styles itself 'Queens Park Rangers' took its name from Queen's Park in west London and could hardly complain if the apostrophe were restored to avoid confusion.

There's an even stronger case for restoring the extra 's' after an apostrophe when an organisation has dropped it in their promotional literature. This certainly applies to St Thomas's hospital in London which for some reason dropped its final 's' although Londoners continue to sound it. So also:

Marx's writings.

If there is no extra 's' in speech, do not add it.

Degas' art, Socrates' philosophy

are correct.

4 The double apostrophe:

Fred's book's title

*Solution:* avoid it where possible; prefer:

the title of Fred's book

5 The apostrophe with a title in quotes:

the point of 'Ode to Autumn's' imagery

*Solution:* avoid – either don't use quotes for titles or write:

the point of the imagery of 'Ode to Autumn'

## Question mark (query)

Use the query after a direct question:

Are you coming?
He asked: 'Are you coming?'

The query is inside the quote marks because the whole question is quoted:

Have you read 'Ode to Autumn'?

The query is outside the quote marks because the question is not part of the quote.

Why is everybody always picking on me?

Although the question may be rhetorical – no answer is expected – it still needs a query.

### Common query mistakes

1 Including a query in indirect speech:

He asked if I was coming?

2 Misplacing the query in direct quotes:

He asked: 'Are you coming'?

## Exclamation mark (screamer)

Use the screamer only when it is essential to mark an exclamation:

Ooh, I say!

Do not use the screamer to make comments, signal jokes or mark rhetorical questions.

## Dots (ellipsis, leader dots...)

1 Use three dots to show that something has been omitted, for example from a written quotation. But when you edit quotes in writing up an interview, there is no need to use the dots each time you omit a word.
2 Use three dots to mark a pause:

I suppose... but what's the use of supposing?

3 Use three dots to lead the reader from one headline to another when they are linked:

Not only...
... but also

4 Use dots in charts and tables to make them more readable.

### Slash (oblique /)

Use the slash in website addresses and to mean either, as in 'and/or'.

### Asterisk (*)

Use the asterisk (rarely) for footnotes and, in papers where this is style, to avoid printing a swear word in full – f*** (see *Four-letter words*, p123).

### Blob (bullet point •)

Use the blob either to emphasise items in a list or to mark that a separate story has been added to the main piece.

### Punctuation mistakes

How much damage is done to readability by bad punctuation? Try this from a cricket report:

> Kettles boiled Fred.

Baffling or what? The previous sentence reads:

> There was time for Flintoff to romp to 33 from 29 balls, belting his last ball into the Tavern Stand before charging in for his tea as if called by his mum.

And the sentence should read:

> 'Kettle's boiled, Fred.'

## Apostrophe

A common apostrophe mistake is to add an 's' before, instead of after, the apostrophe:

> This might make things a bit clearer in peoples' minds. (feature)
> Adultery would attract 10 points, rising to 18 if with the childrens' nanny. (humorous column)
> Sitting on the womens' committee... the Conservative Womens' National Council. (feature)
> The vast profits from selling bottled water are unlikely to be felt much at the waters' source. (feature)

Another one is to put the apostrophe before the final 's' of a word, rather than after it:

> Julia Robert's current Broadway performance... (feature)
> Any of Engel's homes... (feature)
> Sea bass at £14.95 and calve's liver and bacon at £12.95... (feature)

Sometimes the apostrophe shouldn't be there at all:

> But who's duty is it to get rid of the rubbish? (column)

## Comma

In the following examples the commas are wrong:

> The Nazi propagandist and anti-semite, David Irving... (column)

This suggests there is only one Nazi propagandist and anti-semite.

> He co-founded with Jose Angel Ezcurra the paper, *Triunfo* (Triumph). (obit)

This suggests there is only one paper.

> The feminist writer, Beatrix Campbell, has indicted a region. (feature)

This suggests there is only one feminist writer.

> President John Kennedy had appointed the labour educator, Esther Peterson, to head the Women's Bureau. (obit)

This suggests there is only one labour educator.

> Most major towns and cities have a resident drug emporium selling a selection of legal, mind-altering drugs. (news story)

Here the comma is wrong because the adjectives are cumulative: the mind-altering drugs are legal.

> Gail and Frank were like the only two sane people in that hideous town. (feature)

Like, used in this way, needs to be marked off by commas – or the meaning of the sentence is that Gail and Frank resemble the two sane people.

> This week he delivered another shock to his Republican base by appointing a Democrat and a Kennedy to boot as his chief of staff. (news story)

Commas – or dashes – are needed after 'Democrat' and 'boot'.

We tend to hide, not joke, about the number of units of alcohol we consume. (feature)

The second comma is in the wrong place: it should be after 'about' not 'joke'.

Trollope grew up in Reigate, Surrey, and books were a very basic, yet vivid part of her early life. (feature)

The comma after 'basic' requires another after 'vivid'.

Poppy and its more lucrative derivatives opium and heroin, grease every wheel of the local economy. (feature)

The comma after 'heroin' requires another after 'derivatives'.

When at the end of the first preview, the audience rose to their feet to acclaim Kate's performance, I was distracted by the producer. (feature)

The comma after 'preview' requires another after 'when'.

Beauties have a nicer time, better jobs, even babies prefer them. (feature)

The comma after 'jobs' should be a dash.

There were grassroots women's liberation groups inspired by civil rights, there was student activism, opposition to the Vietnam war, the mobilisation of women on welfare and rebellions in the black ghettos. (obit)

The comma after 'rights' should be a semicolon.

## Dash

She is 'certainly not political', according to her mother – and her husband's constituents – are quite happy that she isn't so. (feature)

The second dash suggests a false parenthesis: delete.

The Pope's time at the seminary between 1939–1941 has been shrouded in controversy because of his membership of the Hitler Youth. (news story)

'Between' should be followed by 'and', not a dash; and in the next example 'from' should be followed by 'to', not a dash:

I lived in Peshawar covering the war in Afghanistan from 1988–89... (feature)

## Hyphen

The most common mistake is to insert a hyphen after an -ly adverb when it can have no function:

> The study confirms that newly-wedded bliss is the happiest time. (news story)
> They should have been presented in a heavily-chased casket. (column)
> The Conservative opponent was left flapping around like a freshly-landed plaice. (news story)
> 'This is probably the most eagerly-anticipated World Cup of all time.' (feature)

The *Collins Dictionary* (2003) makes this mistake in its entry for 'pharming':

> the practice of rearing or growing genetically-modified animals or plants in order to develop pharmaceutical products

In the following cases the hyphen also has no function and should be removed:

> The extraordinary growth of the women's-liberation movement... (obit)
> He has only recently returned to the first-team. (news story)
> He had the humanity to look sternly into the middle-distance when lives were lost. (feature)

By contrast, in the following cases, a hyphen is necessary:

> In the last five years there has been an increased acceptance of the need to formally risk assess school trips. (feature)

'Risk-assess' would make the sense clearer.

> Big Brother has suggested they try some animal role play exercises. (feature)

'Role-play' would be better.

> Milk producing gland of cows etc (crossword clue)

A hyphen is needed after 'milk'.

> How police gay rights zealotry is threatening our freedom of speech (comment headline)

A hyphen is needed between 'gay' and 'rights'.

Headlines often present a particular problem because of their layout. In the following cases there should logically be hyphens after 'bus', 'accident' and 'gay' – but there can't be for visual reasons. *Solution:* rewrite the headline.

Driving lessons for bus
loving leader

Crackdown
on accident
claims ‘cowboys’

US bishop
takes on gay
sex critics

# 7
# Reporting speech

Reporting speech accurately and clearly is an essential journalistic skill. You must be able to handle both direct quotes and indirectly reported speech.

## Direct quotes

1 When you quote a person for the first time, introduce them before the quote:

John Smith, the leader of the council, said: 'Of course, I refuse to resign.'

Because the quote is a complete sentence, it is introduced by a colon and starts with a capital letter; the full stop comes before the second quote mark.

2 Subject to house style you can use 'says' instead of 'said':

John Smith, the leader of the council, says: 'I refuse to resign.'

3 Subject to house style you can use the short form 'council leader':

Council leader John Smith says: 'I refuse to resign.'

But note:

a the style works best when the description is short, say, up to three words: 'company managing director John Smith' is acceptable; 'company chairman and managing director John Smith' is probably too long
b since the style is supposed to be short and snappy, avoid prepositions such as 'of': 'leader of the council John Smith' is clumsy
c since the short description functions as a title, it does not combine well with a real title: 'council leader Dr John Smith' should be avoided.

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4 Later in the story variation is possible. Either:

He said: 'I have done nothing wrong.'

*or*:

'I have done nothing wrong,' he said.

Because the quote is a complete sentence, the comma comes before the second quote mark, replacing the full stop in the original.

5 Where the quote is longer than a sentence, put 'he said' either before the quote or after the first complete sentence, not at the end of the quote:

'I'm baffled by the accusations,' he said. 'In fact, I can't see what all the fuss is about.'

6 In features, but not in news, you may break the sentence for effect:

'I'm baffled,' he said, shaking his head, 'by the accusations.'

7 Where a quote continues for more than a paragraph, repeat the quote marks before each new quoted paragraph:

'I'm baffled by the accusations,' he said. 'In fact, I can't see what all the fuss is about.

'I really don't know what to do about the terrible mess I seem to be in.'

There is no closing quote mark after the word 'about'.

8 In general avoid inverting 'Smith' and 'said', as in:

Said Smith: 'I will never resign.'

An acceptable use of inversion is where 'Smith' follows the quote and in turn is followed by an explanatory phrase or clause:

'I will never resign,' said Smith, who has been leader of the council for 10 years.

9 You may want to quote a particular word or phrase:

He described himself as 'really baffled'.

Note that here, because the quote is not a complete sentence, the full stop comes after the quote mark.

A word of warning: don't litter your copy with bitty quotes; in general try to quote complete sentences.

10 For quotes within quotes use double quote marks inside single and vice versa:

He said: 'I really meant to say, "I'm sorry." '

He said: "I really meant to say, 'I'm sorry.' "

Note that in both cases a comma rather than a colon introduces the second, enclosed quote.

11 Use a new paragraph when you quote a person for the first time.

## Reported speech

1 The traditional way of reporting speech indirectly is to move most tenses one stage back. Thus the direct quote 'I support electoral reform' becomes:

He said he supported electoral reform.

'I have always supported electoral reform' becomes:

He said he had always supported electoral reform.

'I will always support electoral reform' becomes:

He said he would always support electoral reform.

With the simple past there is usually no change. 'I supported electoral reform until I became leader of the party' becomes:

He said he supported electoral reform until he became leader of the party.

(But it is possible to put 'had' before 'supported' for clarity/ emphasis.)

This traditional style has the clear advantage that succeeding paragraphs in the appropriate tense are clearly identified as reported speech:

He said he started supporting electoral reform as a student and did so until he became leader of the party.
Whatever anybody else said, he was still committed to change.

2 Always follow the correct sequence of tenses: 'is/has' becomes 'was/had'; 'will' becomes 'would' and 'may' becomes 'might' with other necessary changes. So:

She said: 'I will/may begin writing a diary tomorrow' becomes

She said she would/might begin writing a diary the following day.

Similarly, 'yesterday' becomes 'the previous day'; 'next week' becomes 'the following week'; 'last week' becomes 'the previous week' and so on.

3 Journalists increasingly use 'he says' instead of 'he said' for reported speech, even in news stories. Thus 'I support electoral reform' becomes:

He says he supports electoral reform.

'I supported electoral reform until I became leader of the party' becomes:

He says he supported electoral reform until he became leader of the party.

Subject to house style you can use this form – but remember that 'he said' must be used in reporting set-piece events such as speeches, public meetings, courts and tribunals.

4 An advantage of 'he says' over 'he said' is that there is no difficulty in distinguishing between the present 'I support electoral reform' and the past 'I supported electoral reform': the tense remains the same in reported speech. But if you have to use 'he said', it is better to be clear and clumsy than ambiguous. So, where there is the risk of misunderstanding, write:

He said he supports electoral reform.

5 Unless there is a good reason, do not mix your tenses. Do not write 'he said' in one sentence and 'he thinks' in the next.

6 Do not write: 'Speaking at the meeting the speaker said …' Instead write:

The speaker told the meeting ...

7 Do not follow the fashion of always leaving 'that' out. Leave it out where the subject remains the same:

He says he supports electoral reform.

Where the subject changes 'that' is optional:

He says (that) his opponent supports electoral reform.

But leave 'that' in after words such as 'claims' and 'admits' that have another meaning. Avoid:

He claims the prize of electoral reform is worth fighting for.

8 Also, be careful with punctuation. As it stands, the sentence 'John Smith admitted Fred Brown wanted to hit him and did so' could mean several different things:

a John Smith admitted that Fred Brown wanted to hit him and that he did so.
b John Smith, admitted Fred Brown, wanted to hit him and did so.
c John Smith admitted [let in] Fred Brown, wanted to hit him – and did so.

## General points

1 In general, where speakers say things that are nonsensical, obscure or ambiguous, report their words indirectly, telling the reader what they intended to say. For example, do not use 'refute' to mean 'deny' since many people think that to refute an argument is to show that it is false. So if a director says 'I refute your claim that my company is corrupt', write:

The director denied that his company was corrupt.

2 Do not be afraid of repeating 'he says' or 'he said' in your story. The reader is far more likely to be irritated by awkward variants such as 'commented', 'remarked' and 'stated'. Above all, be careful with 'claimed', 'asserted' (negative) and 'pointed out', 'explained' (positive). Use them only where they are accurate and appropriate. To say that a speaker 'claimed' something is to cast doubt on it; to say that they 'pointed it out' is an endorsement: it implies it was actually there. When in doubt always use a neutral word that avoids expressing an opinion.

3 Avoid adverbs such as 'wryly' to signal jokes. Do not write:

John Smith describes himself wryly as a plain man in a million.

If the joke is good enough, the reader will not need to be nudged; if it is not, the nudging makes the joke fall flatter.

# 8
# Style

Style differs from grammar in that it cannot be quantified: it has no precise rules. Style is concerned not so much with the mechanics of language as with the way the writer uses it to play on the sensations of the reader. Style adds impact to writing, strengthens the contact with the reader and heightens their awareness. This is true even though the reader may be unaware of what is happening and unable to analyse the techniques used.

To be effective, a journalist must develop a style that has four principal attributes: suitability, simplicity, precision and poise.

Some journalists – broadsheet sports writers, for example – strain too hard for effect and/or try to pack too much into their sentences. Here is an example of what not to do:

> In the summer, as Liverpool tried to navigate a fractious transfer window with their newly poached recruitment specialists on gardening leave, a decision was made ... (feature)

Not suitable, not simple, not precise and not much poise. How do you navigate a window? See *Metaphor* (p95) How can a window, even a transfer window, be 'fractious' (ready to quarrel, cross)? And why complicate the reference to 'recruitment specialists' with poaching and gardening? I think the meaning is that Liverpool had no 'recruitment specialists' available (because theirs had been poached by another club) so why not just say 'without recruitment specialists'?

## Suitability

The way a story is written must match the subject, the mood and pace of the events described and, above all, the needs of the reader. The style must arouse their interest and maintain it throughout. It must also present the facts or

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arguments in a way that enables the reader to understand them quickly and easily. For example:

1 If the subject is serious, treat it seriously.
2 If the subject is light, treat it lightly – for example, use a delayed-drop intro or a punning headline.
3 Whatever the subject, do not needlessly offend the reader. Thus, where a story concerns eccentric beliefs or practices, avoid cynicism and facetiousness.
4 Where a story concerns events that have action and movement, the style should suggest pace. Write tersely; avoid superfluous adjectives and adverbs; use direct, active verbs; construct crisp, taut sentences.
5 Where a story concerns a sequence of events, a straightforward narrative style may be the best bet. If you use one event to create impact in the intro, remember to repeat the reference in its proper time context. Also, make sure your tenses are consistent.
6 Where a story concerns stark, horrific events, avoid the temptation to overwrite. The events themselves will provide all the impact you need.
7 Whatever the story, don't rhapsodise. Remember that understatement is usually more effective than overstatement.

## Simplicity

Be direct: get to the point. For example:

1 Prefer the short, Anglo-Saxon word to the long, Latinate one.
2 Prefer the concrete statement to the abstract one.
3 Prefer the direct statement to any form of circumlocution.
4 Avoid words or phrases that merely sound good.
5 Avoid pomposity at all costs.
6 In general, use transitive verbs in the active voice:

Jones told the meeting he was resigning.

7 Choose adjectives with care and don't use too many. Avoid tautology: 'a *new* innovation'.
8 Be even more sparing with adverbs.
9 In general, prefer the short sentence to the long one, particularly in the intro.
10 Avoid over-complex sentences full of subordinate clauses and phrases.

## Precision

Precision is vital to the journalist, above all in news reporting. To be precise you need to know exactly what words mean. Study words and their meanings and never use a word you are not sure about. Read Chapter 10, *Words*, carefully and then refer to it when necessary.

You must also master the principles of grammar to ensure that you express your meaning clearly and accurately. Read the chapters on grammar carefully and then refer to them when necessary.

As a writer, don't leave it to the sub to spot inaccuracy or ambiguity. Read your own copy and ask: 'Do I mean what I say and have I said what I mean?' Often the honest answer will be: 'No.'

If you pass that self-imposed test, ask: 'So what?' Often you will find that the story does not go far enough in saying what happens next. Remember that the reader needs to know precisely what is happening.

As a sub, always check when you rewrite that you haven't introduced new errors into the copy. And be careful when you write news headlines to fit. If your first effort is the wrong length, you will try to substitute one word for another. But a synonym must be exact or it may change the meaning of the headline. Always ask yourself finally: 'Does the headline tell the story?' If the answer is 'No', it will need further rewriting.

Also, be careful with verbs where the active and passive take the same form:

PEER OWED £20,000

This is ambiguous: was he owed the money or did he owe it?

## Poise

Poise is the essence of style: it gives writing balance, ease of manner and lack of strain. Individual words should fit the context. Sentences should be a pleasure to read because they are balanced and rhythmical. Paragraphs should be written to convey the writer's meaning and leave the reader in no doubt that they have grasped it.

With the best prose the reader remains unconscious of technique: they simply enjoy reading the passage. The hard work should all be done by the writer (with a bit of polish by the sub).

Study the section on stylistic devices that follows. Practise using them where appropriate. But, above all, look for good models in journalism and writing generally. If a piece of prose excites you, study it, analyse it – even imitate it. Don't be too proud to copy other writers' tricks.

## Stylistic devices

Most of the stylistic devices that follow are called tropes or figures of speech. There is no reason why you should learn the names of the more obscure ones, such as synecdoche or metonymy. We take both of these for granted. What could be more natural than to say 'All hands on deck' (synecdoche) or 'He is a lover of the bottle' (metonymy)? But it is worth remembering that they are figures of speech.

### Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of an initial sound in words that follow each other:

> Sing a song of sixpence

Use in light-hearted stories, particularly in headlines; not in serious stories.

### Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound in words that follow each other:

> The cat sat on my lap.

Use in light-hearted stories, particularly in headlines; not in serious stories.

### Graveyard (also black, gallows, sick) humour

This is making jokes about such things as injury, disease, disability and death. It is an understandable reaction by journalists (also police officers, soldiers, doctors, nurses and others) to the hard facts of life and death.

Enjoy the jokes but don't let them get into print. The headline 'Hot under the cholera' once appeared over a story about an epidemic. This is also an example of the compulsive pun.

## Hyperbole

Hyperbole is extravagant and obvious exaggeration:

> a million thanks

Of all figures of speech, hyperbole is the most used – and abused – by journalists. Handle with care.

## Irony

Irony is either making a point in words that mean literally the opposite or a condition in which a person seems mocked by fate or the facts.

A story about a woman who survives a car crash, borrows a mobile phone and telephones her husband to report her survival – only to be knocked down and killed a moment later – is an example of irony.

In this example telling the story is enough: we do not need to be reminded that it is irony.

Use the word 'irony' sparingly. In particular, avoid the adverb 'ironically', which is usually a lazy way of trying to make a surprise sound more significant than it is.

## Litotes

Litotes is the opposite of hyperbole. It is understatement, especially assertion by negation of the contrary. Instead of 'Rome is a great city':

> Rome is no mean city.

## Metaphor

Metaphor is calling something by the name of what it resembles:

> To suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ...

Frequent repetition of metaphors turns them into clichés (see Chapter 10, *Words*). Careless use of metaphors can lead to the mixed metaphor, an expression in which two or more metaphors are confused:

> to take arms against a sea of troubles

(you wouldn't use *weapons* to fight the *waves*)

The fact that Shakespeare did it is no defence: Hamlet was mad. So avoid the mixed metaphor at all costs since it has the opposite effect of that intended. Instead of making your prose vivid it produces the effect of absurdity.

## Metonymy

Metonymy is replacing the name of something by the name of a related thing:

> He is a lover of the bottle [instead of drink].

## Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is using words whose sound helps to suggest the meaning:

> He has a hacking cough.

## Oxymoron

Oxymoron is combining contradictory terms to form an expressive phrase:

> He shows cruel kindness.

## Pun

A pun is a play on words alike or nearly alike in sound but different in meaning:

> ALL THE FAX ABOUT NEW TECHNOLOGY

The pun is overused by headline-writers who can't break the habit. *Never* use a pun over a serious story.

A subtler form of word play recycles an old meaning:

> ARE YOU A VIRGIN ABOUT OLIVE OIL?

## Repetition

Repetition on purpose emphasises:

> O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

In general, prefer repetition to variation.

## Rhetoric

Rhetoric is a general term for the art of using language to persuade or impress others. Note particularly the rhetorical question that journalists aim at their readers:

> Have you ever been to China?

Use in chatty features, but rarely elsewhere.

## Simile

Simile is likening something to something else:

> My love is like a red, red rose ...

Frequent repetition of similes turns them into clichés (see Chapter 10, *Words*) – avoid this like the plague.

## Synecdoche

Synecdoche is using the part for the whole or the whole for the part:

> All hands on deck.

## Variation

Variation is using a different word or phrase to describe something in order to avoid repetition and/or to add colour to the copy. When done to impress/excess it is called 'elegant variation':

> Instead of talking about a *spade* I shall from now on refer to a *horticultural implement.*

This kind of variation is a bad idea because what results is at least strained and sometimes ludicrous.

More common is the variation that tries to avoid repetition:

> *Northern Ireland* has a higher rate of unemployment than at any other time in the *province's* history.

Before using this kind of variation ask yourself the following questions:

1 Would a pronoun do as well? In the example above 'its' could easily replace 'the province's'.

2 Is the variation word/phrase an exact equivalent? (Here the province of Ulster has three counties in the Irish Republic.)
3 Is the variation necessary or could you avoid it by rewriting the sentence?
4 Would repetition have as much impact as variation?

The need to repeat or vary words is often a clue to bad structure. For example, where an intro doubles back on itself, it should be rewritten. Where you are tempted to use 'however' because you have just used 'but', you are making the reader work too hard.

# 9
# Social media

*Gavin Allen*

## Introduction

Why are we, as journalists, using social media? Traditional delivery methods for news content are failing or their audiences shrinking in size. The global market for content is growing. Social media is both a globalised and a localised content-delivery system that fits our customers' current lifestyles. In short, our audience is on Social so we need to be too.

In spite of the criticisms, social media isn't going anywhere – in fact, it's growing. Three years ago had anyone heard of TikTok? Now that's not just the title of a very well-known social platform but shorthand for a certain type of content.

Language is a signifier. Let's say we have a story about Harry Styles' new album. The words used to describe Styles – 'ex-boy bander', 'generational pan-sexual crush', 'sub-Bowie copycat', 'dreamboat' – tell the reader who the writer is and what the publication is like. They show the writer's viewpoint from an age or cultural perspective. Is this a writer for *Mojo* magazine, *Pitchfork* or *Popbitch*? In the Social age you can remove an article from the context of its website and tweet it across the world to someone who has no idea what that publication represents. But the style – the vocabulary – usually gives away the perspective.

On social media, if you are canny, you can use a wider variety of vocabulary in separate posts or across various platforms to share that piece of content with different demographics. But you have to understand at the outset that you are signifying to the audience with the language that you use on Social.

The words, phrases or sentences you use to describe a story in a social media post – often called 'sells' – do not alter the content of the article in any way. The article remains hermetically sealed. You may choose to use a quote or clip from that piece of content to help 'sell' the story on Social but the journalism must remain unmolested.

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It's key that you don't misrepresent the content in a 'sell'. Using language on Social to draw in a target audience of, say, TikTokers is no good if the article is then an impenetrable user manual on bridge design intended for senior architects.

Social is also a very trendy place. Those trends are sometimes driven by the platform's algorithms and sometimes by users. Being aware of trends can help you to access those audiences. What does that mean for journalists? Let's consider the birth rate of Social platforms for a moment.

## Social media platforms: a timeline

Mastodon 2002
Myspace 2003
LinkedIn 2003
Facebook 2004
Reddit 2005
Twitter 2006
WhatsApp 2009
Pinterest 2010
Insta 2010
Snapchat 2011
Vine 2012
TikTok 2016
Gab 2016
Parler 2018

That's a lot of trends and algorithms to stay on top of. Others could be added. Are Discord, Twitch and YouTube social media platforms? Do we need to concern ourselves with international platforms such as WeChat, Weibo or VK?

The list shows a burst of Social platform creation in 2002–12 though new births have slowed down since then with the last major addition being TikTok in 2016. Not included are the platforms that didn't succeed well enough to break through to the mainstream and the ones that never quite got off the ground in the first place. But more are coming. Some may already be here. Look at Donald Trump's attempts to build his own social media platform, TRUTH Social. It hasn't caught fire yet but might a 2024 presidential election campaign, successful or otherwise, change that? A social platform can exist for a while before it catches fire – Mastodon has heritage and enjoyed a rise in visibility in the wake of Elon Musk's Twitter takeover – or it can burn very brightly immediately and have the shelf-life of an ageing banana in a hot supermarket.

What I aim to do here is to help you understand that to work on a platform you need to understand the wider conventions, trends and tones of that platform. Each one is different.

A social media platform gains traction in what is now a very busy marketplace because it offers the audience a different user experience from other platforms. It could be shortform video (TikTok) v longer form video (YouTube). It could be link-sharing functionality (Facebook) v brand-driven content (Instagram). They all have their own trends.

Chasing trends can be a high-effort and low-return approach. That's why journalists should generally strive to make quality journalism first and then use Social knowhow to disseminate it more widely.

It may be that you have a social media team in your office whose job it is to do all of this for you – but it may also be that you don't have Social specialists and the responsibility falls on you, the individual journalist. In that case, using all the Social platforms to gain knowhow is a huge task. So here are some broad ways in which you can stay on the right side of the line.

Almost all of what you have read so far in this book, and will read subsequently, remains true. Good writing is good writing, regardless of what platform it is on. However, writing for Social is different in some very important ways.

Among other things, you need to speak the language of social media as well as broadsheet, tabloid or BBC 'impartiality'. We live in a world where sentences have become emojis. Social media posts can be three words, 'Oh My God' – or even three letters, 'OMG'. Knowing how and when to deploy that type of language is important.

In your career as a journalist you will likely write formal editorial copy for your publication and informal Facebook posts on the same day, maybe even at the same time.

It may help you to consider writing for social media as a journalist as advertising. Doing it well gets you positive attention. Doing it badly brings damage to the brand you are trying to promote. Brand damage brings loss of trust in the product and reduces professional standing, either for your publication or for you as a journalist – maybe both. Let's look at an example of it going wrong. This whopper of an error comes from Burger King.

On 8 March 2021 – International Women's Day – while trying to highlight a training programme designed to give more opportunities to female chefs, Burger King thought it was being clever with the following tweet: 'Women belong in the kitchen.'

That tweet was the first in a thread. The second provided context for the statement, explaining the training programme – but people don't always look at the second tweet in a thread, or the third or fourth. When one tweet is so deliberately infuriating to so many people, why would they seek Burger King's 'justification' for seemingly peddling sexist old tropes? And it was deliberate. This was an advertising campaign. It was designed to grab attention and it did – but it was the wrong attention. The same ad campaign ran in print publications too but in print the context ran on the same full-page ad: readers didn't see the first element in isolation.

This is an example of how the exact same language can be used on Social and in print but the differences in those delivery mechanisms can create a completely avoidable firestorm. The language displayed and landed differently on Twitter because it was broken down into bite-size parts. A lack of understanding of the subtle differences between Social and print was the issue as much as the words.

I'm not saying that you can't make mistakes. You can and you will because Twitter has no edit function (yet)* and autocorrect remains the enemy of news-breakers with excited fingers. Without subeditors we're all a few characters away from furore.

Here's a simple trick to help time-strapped, content-saddled, opinion-spewing journalists from making errors. Before you press 'send' on any social media post ask yourself one question: *Do I need to post this?* If the answer is yes, ask a follow-up question: *Do I need to post this asap?* Figure 9.1 shows a flow chart that may help you to think about posting priorities.

## The style guide still applies

Is it 'Us Brits' or 'We British' on Social? Well, that depends on your style guide. Everything you know about journalism isn't defenestrated just because you are writing on Social.

Here is a general principle I will repeat: if in doubt, be conservative.

The BBC's social media guidance states:

> All BBC activity on social media, whether it is 'official' BBC use or the personal use by BBC staff, is subject to the Editorial Guidelines and editorial oversight in the same way that our on-platform content is.

* At the time of writing – and in Elon Musk's Twitter everything could change tomorrow – an edit function is currently available to Twitter Blue subscribers. However, given the relatively low numbers of subscribers to the paid-for service so far, the vast majority of Twitter users still have no edit function.

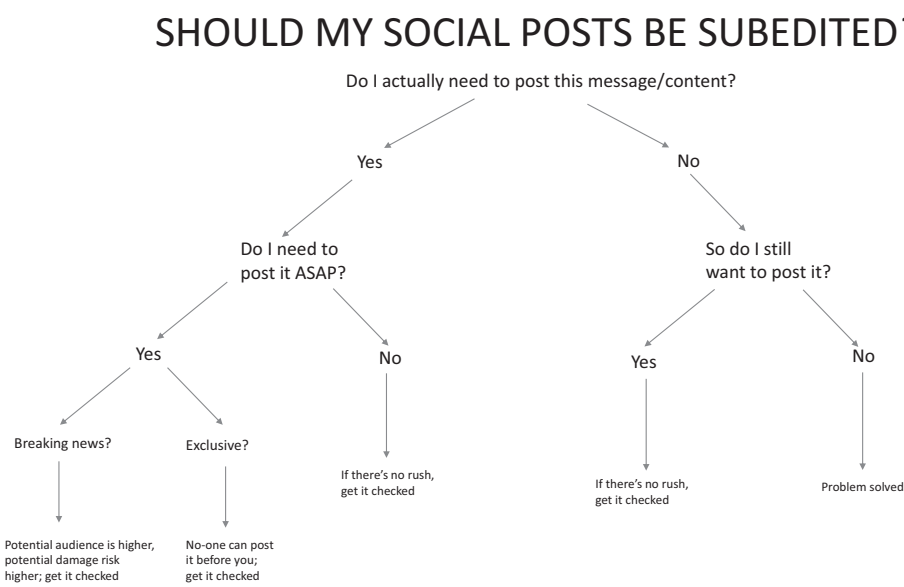



Figure 9.1 Should my social posts be sub-edited? Flowchart

BBC spaces on social media should reflect the same values and audience expectations as their on-platform brands.

The *Guardian*'s social media guidelines are similar: 'Ask yourself if you would be happy for senior editors or line managers to read your post. If not, don't post it.' They stress: 'Tone is important. Always treat people on social media with the respect and professionalism you would apply offline, even if you disagree with them, and try to avoid public arguments on social media.'

It's worth rereading the points on 'Suitability' in this book's chapter on 'Style' because they chime here, albeit with some caveats.

'If a subject is light, treat it lightly.' Sometimes on Social you may wish to give a light story a deadpan jokey sell – but I'd rarely do that when posting in your publication's official capacity. You are a journalist not a comedian. You don't need to try to be funny. Don't be Burger King.

'Whatever the subject, do not needlessly offend the reader.' This warns us not to belittle people or beliefs. However, on Social journalists always risk being called out for using a term that may be offensive to one group of people though accepted by another (see the debate about pronouns). Language is always changing. On Social you need to be proactive about updating your style guide so as to be aware of unwittingly judgmental, prejudicial or outdated words: they can cause firestorms. And it's not just a local danger. Remember that Social is a worldwide talking shop full of niche groups.

Also note the Keith Waterhouse quote on the use of tabloidese (p117 in the 'Words' chapter). People don't use those tabloid words in real life. Social media is about making real-life connections in everyday language – about getting journalism down from its elitist high horse and having conversations with readers in the language they use. You are not restricted by length of headline online, though tweets have finite character numbers. You are not a newspaper constrained by headline space. The need for such shorthand vanishes.

## Writing in a personal capacity v writing on behalf of the product

As a general rule, if you are posting on your own personal account, speak in your own voice. If you are posting from an official branded publication account, use the voice of the publication's everyday copy. When I talk about the 'voice' of a publication here, I do not mean the leader column: that would be too formal.

You need to check your publication's social media guidelines. For example, the *Guardian*'s guidelines allow staff to post on Social in a personal capacity, with some sensible caveats, as it sees the benefits of personal profiles for disseminating content and drawing in readers: 'Personal social media accounts are personal and we do not own them, and you are responsible for what you post on social media; but working for GNM, in whatever capacity, comes with responsibilities on social media.'

The BBC, on the other hand, effectively judges any Social posts by staff as its official output. A hypothetical quip about the Tory leader intended purely as humour and not in any way to demonstrate political partiality could be used as a stick to beat the BBC by its many critics, so the parts are not allowed to undermine the whole. The BBC does not recognise a difference between personal and professional should an error/issue occur, as the two following points make clear:

> We should take particular care about maintaining our impartiality on social media, both in our professional and personal activities.
>
> BBC staff should avoid bringing the BBC into disrepute through their actions on social media.

## Reporting speech

Using a quote to 'sell' a story on social is a great tactic, but make sure you retain consistency of style and standards.

Look at this example from @LBCNews on Twitter.

> "The north of England has been betrayed!"
> Sir Keir Starmer says 'you can't believe a word the Prime Minister says' after it was announced the Leeds leg of HS2 has been scrapped.

Single and double quote marks are both used to frame direct quotes. Why the inconsistent style? You wouldn't do this online or in print, so why is it OK on Twitter? It isn't.

## Images/juxtaposition

Visual elements are key to Social engagement. Just as printed publications need to be aware of juxtaposition issues with images and headlines, so too does social media content. Images are the key engagement point on social media posts. Ensuring you have strong, original and relevant images to use on a Social post is vital, and so is the context in which they appear.

## Don't deviate when you abbreviate

Know your BTW and TIL from your FML. Don't use abbreviations or acronyms you don't know the meaning of – and if you aren't sure of their meaning then either look them up (why isn't there yet a dictionary for Social abbreviations?) or just avoid using them.

You wouldn't, I hope, use a word you didn't know the meaning of in an article, so don't do it on Social where you are far more likely to be called to account for it by readers.

## To emoji or not to emoji

Emojis are light-hearted things. They belong on light-hearted stories. They are a way to catch the reader's eyes in busy timelines. Don't 'smiley face' a death.

But *please* know what the emoji that you are using means. Many emojis have a secondary meaning on Social: for example, the widely used aubergine is not suitable for a story about fruit and veg.

## Slang

This depends on the audience. Does your publication use colloquial language in its everyday copy? If so, fine. If not, there are still areas where it might work.

Consider that you may be posting content in a members-only Facebook group relating to a specific or niche topic. That audience is more likely to understand relevant niche vocabulary.

The audience remains your guiding light. Will they understand what you are saying in the context you are providing?

## Swearing

Just because young people use social media doesn't mean you should swear at them. It doesn't make you cool or relevant in their eyes. It likely devalues your brand's value. Stick to your style guide. If your style is to use swearing where relevant – such as in direct quotes – then stick to that. Don't try too hard to follow how you perceive a demographic to speak.

## Americanisms/international words

Does your story mention an English 'pavement'? Do you think it has relevance beyond the UK? Perhaps it's a viral video funny of a man tripping over a 'kerb' that will make people in any language laugh. You can change the terminology used (eg to 'sidewalk curb') in a social media post to cater for US audience searches without touching the article itself. This is an opportunity presented by Twitter's willingness to accept multiple posts on the same subject, whereas Facebook's algorithm doesn't like multiple posts of the same content. So again, knowing the platform's specifics and the opportunities they offer can help dictate your vocabulary decision-making.

## Twitter threads

As per the opening Burger King example, it's plausible that someone at some stage may claim that one message in a thread might be viewed out of context and that readers did not see the balanced total of a thread. This may be unlikely but it is a potential problem. Even if a journalist publishes an entire thread in one go, as opposed to piecemeal across a day, it could be problematic, particularly where court reporting is concerned. The fact that a reader reads one post in a thread doesn't mean they will read all the posts in that thread. This issue has not yet – to my knowledge and the knowledge of the media law expert I consulted – been tested in the legal arena.

## Social video subtitles

People often watch video content on public transport with the volume turned off. Journalists need to combat the 'silent scrolling' phenomenon and to do that we add subtitles or closed captions to our video content to draw in those readers. These subtitles need to adhere to all the same rules as any other copy in terms of style, tone and accuracy.

Subtitles on videos need to mirror the direct speech of contributors as closely as possible or it becomes confusing for the viewer. Once you make a disconnect between 'watching' and 'reading', the viewer becomes unsure of which they should prioritise.

Freemium software such as Otter, Liro or Headliner will automate audio transcriptions in text if required. However, while automated transcriptions are getting pretty good with verbatim accuracy levels, you *must* watch the video alongside the captions and check word-for-word transcription. Don't let an automated transcription error derail your work. It's not the software's fault for mis-transcribing: it's the journalist's fault for not checking.

## General rules/pitfalls

### 1 Don't write anything on social you wouldn't write for the product

Here is a tweet from @bbcweather:

> The Met Office have issued a RED weather warning for STRONG WINDS in parts DEVON, CORNWALL and SOUTHWALES
>
> Significant disruption expected with a risk to life and property

If we ignore for a moment the missing word ('in parts *of* DEVON'), would you expect to see a BBC article with CAPITAL LETTERS screaming random words at you? (What is being emphasised here? Is it place names, colours, weather types, what?) There also needs to be a space between 'South' and 'Wales' with correct capitalisation. Oh, and full stops. If you are writing in sentences with paragraph breaks then you would punctuate as expected. (NB: you probably shouldn't be doing this for your publication's Social – it's too long.)

All in all, this is a bad tweet with multiple errors.

I'm not going to pretend that the 12.1k people who saw this post are going to stop consuming the BBC weather forecast on Twitter as a result of it – the trust is in the quality of the forecast more than the quality of the tweet – but does it help or hurt the BBC's reputation?

## 2 Add value, briefly

With most CMS systems there is built-in functionality ensuring that when you share a URL on Social a 'display card' is created, comprising an image, headline and clickable link. This means that your readers can already see the article's headline. What you want to do with your 'sell' is to add value or context to that story.

A three-word tweet sell, from *Politico*'s Dan Bloom, tells the reader in three words, 'Full interview here', that the article is an in-depth interview, whereas the partial headline displayed by the card, 'Rail union leader says blackouts …', focuses on the key news line. This is very simple but effective.

The format for posting varies with the platform but the principle of 'adding value, briefly' remains.

## 3 Don't waste readers' time by repeating the article headline

Here is an example of a Facebook post from the *Daily Telegraph*. The automated headline produced by the 'card' when pasting the article's URL into Facebook reads:

> You're more likely to overspend when using mobile payments like Apple Pay.

The person who created the post has taken the time to accompany that with a 21-word 'sell' and a credit card emoji, which reads:

> People who use Apple Pay and other mobile payment systems are a third more likely to overspend, a study has found.

The problem here is that it simply says the same as the headline on the auto-generated display card in a less succinct way – the automated headline is only 12 words.

The reader wants brevity and speed of information. Why make someone read something twice? Why waste the opportunity to provide another angle or way in for the reader?

### 4 Retain context, accuracy and clarity

Writers work with editors to ensure their copy is accurate. However, in some news organisations, social media output is far less strictly subbed than print copy and that can lead to other types of errors. Let's take an example from the *Manchester Evening News* Twitter account @MENnewsdesk:

> Gemma Atkinson melts hearts with sweet post about missing fiancé Gorka Marquez

This tweet is just 12 words and it repeats exactly the automated card headline, ignoring the opportunity to add handles for those people to aid audience capture. But the more important issue is that a key word has been left out, whether in error or for the sake of brevity. It's the word 'her', so the tweet suggests that Gorka Marquez was 'missing' – as in kidnapped or similar.

In this instance the 'sell' is exactly the same as headline, so the fault really lies with the person who wrote the original headline as that has created the 'card', but the Social poster has repeated the error.

### 5 You don't always need a 'sell'

When West Ham footballer Kurt Zouma admitted animal welfare charges in a high-profile court case, the *Guardian*'s Social team trusted their readers on two points:

1. They don't approve of cruelty to animals so don't need to be told to tut loudly at Zouma.
2. They will provide their own opinions/judgments in the comments underneath.

As a result the Social team simply didn't use 'sell' text, relying instead on the automated card headline, and that was a good decision.

This is a court story with potential legal implications. While a guilty plea at a magistrates' court isn't likely to hit contempt problems, in other court cases that may be different. Let the subbed and legaled headline speak for itself on court case copy. Don't force 'sells' which might get you into trouble.

## What happens if I make a mistake?

Social posts are generally not problematic, but when they are, it can be stressful.

If the error is a legal one – perhaps you accidentally tweeted 'guilty' rather than 'not guilty' (it happens) – then keep a record of your error. How swiftly you took action when the publication was alerted to a mistake can have a bearing on the severity of your punishment in any subsequent judgment. Screen-grabs are your friend here. Use the Snip Tool on a PC, or 'CTRL + Print Screen' or even just take a photo of it with your phone. Whatever your method, having a clear paper trail of the error and its rectification will show professionalism in the event of a complaint from any affected party and hopefully offer some mitigation.

The *Guardian*'s Social policy reminds journalists of this: 'Be aware of contempt of court issues if you are tweeting about an active case.'

Away from legal issues, where errors may be less serious, in the first instance remember you can edit Facebook/Insta posts (but not – largely – Twitter). Can you simply correct the post?

How you handle a Social fail depends on how serious it is. If it's an important error of taste or judgment, just delete the offending post from the platform and apologise on that same platform, though be aware that an apology may draw more attention to your error than the error itself. It doesn't matter how many likes, comments, views or engagements the original/deleted post has – just delete it. The post may have gathered so many engagements in the first place precisely because of the error: people may be laughing at you.

Screen-grab your error. I had a habit at the *Mirror* of screen-grabbing any errors that had the potential to come back to haunt us. I'd paste the grabs into an email, write brief notes about the error and its correction, and send it to myself to keep in a specific email basket. The vast majority of the time I didn't need those emails, but on the odd occasions that I did, I was very glad to have them.

Breaking news situations are a key time to pay extra attention. I know some newsdesks are under more pressure than others to be first in order to rack up the traffic. But when we raise the speed of what we do, we also raise the risk of errors. This is when you *need* to double-check Social posts on that story – particularly Twitter, which most often cannot be edited. There's no point getting the URL out there first only for the post to need to be removed shortly afterwards.

The *Guardian*'s Social policy is to delete and explain:

> In breaking news situations accuracy is crucial … Sometimes mistakes or misjudgments happen – inaccurate information is posted or opinions are aired which in hindsight are ill-considered. If you make a mistake or repost inaccurate information, delete the post with errors to prevent it spreading further, and make a new post explaining what has happened. Use common sense and think twice before you post.

## App alerts

While app alerts are not 'social media' the errors made in them tend to follow roughly the same patterns, but instead of them being passive – left on a platform for readers to find – you are actively sending your error to the reader. The chances are you can't recall/delete an offending alert so the same advice applies: correct it *asap*. Remember, one app alert covers up another. You can hide the error with a second message.

One such error from Wales Online saw the following app alert text:

> Live: Gas leak shits major route into Cardiff

It was swiftly followed by:

> CORRECTION: Gas leak shuts major route into Cardiff

Note in this example that the 'CORRECTION' alert covered up the first alert containing the error.

However, if the error is light-hearted and causing harmless mirth on a light-hearted story, don't be afraid to keep the post up, interact with the comments: own it. This is one of the ways to develop personality and goodwill. Turn a bad moment into a good one.

One example, which caused much hilarity among football fans in 2022, saw the BBC explaining and owning an issue. They revealed that someone being trained on an internal web system had accidentally published a line on the breaking news ticker which read:

> Manchester United are rubbish

On Instagram the BBC used a 'horrified face' emoji and an explanation of how it happened as well as an apology to Man U fans, while also posting the URL for the explanation story in their Insta bio. This is also an example of how a problem can surface on social media but not because of anything the social media poster did.

Social users love to jump on an error made on one platform (here it was TV), drag it onto other platforms (here, Twitter, Facebook and Insta) and your organisation ends up trending on social media through no fault of the social media team.

If you as a journalist or media organisation are trending, it is more likely than not for bad reasons rather than good. You'd rather not make the error in the first place obviously but once the error has been made there are ways to deal with it that may reflect well on you.

In this instance, the BBC turned Schadenfreude into Social traffic. That's proactive defence when on the back foot.

## Getting called out/firestorms

Other people's screen-grabs are now an occupational hazard for journalists. Sometimes it will be the dear old general public who are questioning your work; at other times, other journalists.

In the following exchange Australian media commentator Caroline Di Russo calls out ABC News journalist Matt Bevan over a personal 'joke' that she believes breaches the impartiality expected of his professional organisation. He goes on to delete the original tweet and apologise.

> **Tweet from @MatthewBevan (7.01 AM on 05/01/22):**
>
> Every meal Djokovic eats while in Australia:
>
> Waiter: Here you go Novak and by the way, there's no spit in this one.
> Djokovic: Pardon? Did you say Spit?
> Waiter: No, no, no! I said 'no spit'! You're all good! There's no spit in it! Enjoy your meal! With zero spit!
>
> **Retweet with comment from Caroline Di Russo (@CaroDiRusso) on 2.25am, January 5, 2022:**
>
> Disappointing to see senior @ABCaustralia journalists fail to lead by example, and instead, act with utter disdain for the recent social media directive.
>
> This doesn't demonstrate the impartiality expected of a senior journalist.
>
> Not good enough
>
> @MatthewBevan
>
> #auspol #theirabc
>
> **Bevan's follow-up tweet at 2:47am on January 5, 2022:**
>
> *I deleted a tweet I posted earlier today which was a joke about the reception Novak Djokovic might get at the Australian Open. It was in poor taste, so I got rid of it. My apologies, it wasn't up to my own standard of tweets. Happy new year, all.*

Bevan's response was to remove the tweet and apologise. He could have made the argument that he was tweeting in a personal capacity, not a professional one, but his employer's social media policy is clear on this.

It states:

> The ABC Code of Conduct requires workers to be conscious of their responsibility to protect the ABC's reputation, independence, impartiality and integrity where personal use of social media may intersect with their professional life... personal use of social media is not without risk. Misjudgments and indiscretions can have consequences for workers and the ABC.

Bevan was clearly trying to be funny, but if the audience doesn't like the joke and heckles you, there's no merit in arguing the toss about a sense of humour when you're potentially in breach of company policy.

The argument itself tends to become a popcorn emoji moment on Twitter. More tweets back and forth between the arguing parties increases the number of eyes on the error. You take the small spat to a larger audience. What does it achieve? When you see media people taking part in Twitter spats it's often the attention the row generates that they're seeking in order to grow their profile.

If you don't want that kind of attention then swallow the ego. Don't try to prove yourself right. Delete the post, apologise for it and then shut up. Don't prolong the fire by fanning its flames. Remove the oxygen and douse the fire.

## Abuse

A key issue that arises here is what to do if you make an error and receive personal abuse as a result. Your publication should have a policy for dealing with this so engage the help provided. Do not try to deal with the abuse alone because you feel guilty about making an error and do not want to draw your boss's attention to it. Tell your line manager. Get help.

If your organisation has no policy or process for dealing with these sorts of issues then you can see the guides below for some help.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/protecting-journalists-online-abuse-guide-newsrooms
https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/how-should-journalists-and-newsrooms-approach-online-abuse-/s2/a762012/
https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/women-workers/article/new-guidelines-for-journalists-who-face-online-harassment-and-abuse.html
https://www.journalism.co.uk/news-commentary/-when-i-revisit-that-thread-of-abuse-it-still-makes-me-question-my-worth-/s6/a910226/

## How to approach the main social platforms

If you are a total beginner at Social posting and are wondering how to approach the task, here is a very brief guide to the tone/feel of the main platforms. (For more detail on Social posting, see *Writing for Journalists*, fourth edition, Chapter 5, Writing for the Web.)*

### Facebook

**Tone:** Emotional, familiar, friendly

**Tip:** Use the @ symbol to engage wider audiences. If you are posting a story about the BBC including an @ to its official Facebook page (@bbc) will increase its chances of being seen by some of the BBC's 2.7million followers.

### Twitter

**Tone:** Newsy, witty, communal

**Tip:** Don't repeat the headline as your 'sell'. When you post a URL, Twitter automatically brings up a 'card' displaying your headline and associated image. Add value to your tweet by deleting that headline and creating a new 'sell'. Also, use @ symbols to increase audience.

### Instagram

**Tone:** Bright, commercial, young

**Tip:** Write longer 'sells'. Insta is a very visual platform but the captions that run alongside those images are much longer than on Facebook or Twitter. Use fuller extracts from the article to draw readers in and leave them wanting more.

### TikTok

**Tone:** Youthful, colourful, lively

**Tip:** TikTok is the youngest of all the platforms. It is purely a shortform video platform so focus on really short captions and relevant subtitles to supplement your visuals.

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* Routledge, 2022.

### WhatsApp

**Tone:** Engaged, personalised, informed

**Tip:** Write less. WhatsApp broadcast lists are a very direct way of engaging with readers. Just posting the link without a wider 'sell' so the reader sees only the display card works well enough here.

### YouTube

**Tone:** Informative, detailed, explanatory

**Tip:** A long-form video platform. Many people use YouTube as a learning environment so journalistic deep-dives work well here. Remember captions to combat 'silent scrolling'.

### LinkedIn

**Tone:** Business-like, professional

**Tip:** Primarily used for industry networking and sharing professional accomplishments. Potential employers are a big audience here so keep it very straight and relatively formal.

### Which social media platform has the most users worldwide?

Facebook: 2.9 billion
YouTube: 2.6 billion
WhatsApp: 2 billion
Insta: 1.5 billion
TikTok: 1 billion
Snapchat: 557 million
Telegram: 550 million
Pinterest: 444 million
Twitter: 436 million
Reddit 430 million

• LinkedIn (which isn't on this list) has north of 800m users according to the same reporting source. What's important here is not exact audience size but platform ranking.

*Source*: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report

# 10
# Words

Precision and effectiveness in writing depend on the careful use of language. Learn to recognise the words and phrases that will convey your meaning exactly and vividly to the reader. Reject any word or phrase that is flabby and worn out. Avoid journalese, which one dictionary (*Chambers*) succinctly defines as 'the jargon of bad journalism'.

The development of word power comes only with practice. Besides sensitivity to language it demands an inquiring mind and a careful attitude. Avoid careless mistakes and also be concerned about quality, taking professional pride in your skill as a writer.

This attitude cannot be taught, only caught. But it is worth pointing out common pitfalls.

Here are some examples of badly chosen words from Sunday newspaper football coverage:

> ...Obertan charged down the wing, skipped past a *troublingly reticent* Sagna and crossed low.
> I reckon that the sacking of Sean O'Driscoll was *more egregious* than the sacking of Henning Berg, although both were *probably* wrong decisions.
> ...finally, with stoppage time about to *commence* ...
> ...profiting from an *errant* attempt to clear ...

In the first example *reticent* (see p124) is bad but *troublingly* makes it worse: who exactly is being troubled here?

In the second *more egregious* (also see p124) looks like a posh way of saying 'far worse' and *probably* undermines the strength of the comparison.

In the third *commence* is pompous for 'begin' or 'start'.

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And in the last does *errant* mean a simple missed kick or something more like 'quixotic'?

## Exaggeration

Many errors occur because the journalist overstates the case in an effort to achieve impact: this is perhaps journalism's most common fault. It is this striving for effect that makes every rescuer 'a hero', every disturbance a 'fracas', every confusion a 'chaos' and every fire an 'inferno' (the word means hell).

Here the advice must be: never use a word whose meaning you are unsure about; always check the dictionary definition and derivation of an unfamiliar word.

## Tabloidese

The search for a short word to use in a headline has created a specialised subs' vocabulary that, on some papers, turns every investigation into a 'probe', every attempt into a 'bid' and every disagreement into a 'row'. It would be perverse to object to the use of these words in headlines, although a succession of them reads like parody. A sub who writes:

> VICE VICAR TELLS ALL IN PROBE BID ROW

is clearly overdoing it.

The real problem comes when this essentially made-up language creeps into the text. Such words as 'rap', 'slam' and 'axe' litter the pages of the tabloids. As Keith Waterhouse once pointed out, the objection to these words is that people don't use them in everyday speech.

> Why, if these words are now so common, are they not in common use? Why do we not hear housewives at bus-stops saying … 'Did I tell you about young Fred being rapped after he slammed his boss? He thinks he's going to be axed'?
>
> (Keith Waterhouse, *Waterhouse on Newspaper Style*, Viking, 1989, pp229–30)

So think hard before using the following words in text:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| aid | (help) | ban | (prohibit, exclude) |
| aim | (intend) | bar | (exclude) |
| alert | (tell) | battle | (dispute) |
| axe | (sack) | bid | (try, attempt) |

blast (criticise)
blaze (fire)
blitz (drive)
blow (disappointment)
blunder (mistake)
bombshell (unexpected event)
boob (mistake, breast)
boost (encourage, increase)
boot out (expel)
brand (describe)
bungle (mistake)

call (propose)
chief (leader)
clampdown (control)
clash (dispute)
condemn (criticise)
crackdown (control)
crusade (campaign)
curb (restrict)
curse (bad luck)

dash (hurry)
deal (agreement, arrangement)
don (put on)
drama (event)
dramatic (unusual)
dub (describe)
dump (sack)
dwell (live)

epic (very unusual)

face (expect)
feud (quarrel)
fury (anger)

grab (take)

headache (problem)
hike (increase)
hit out (criticise)
hurdle (difficulty)

Inferno (fire)

jinx (bad luck)

kick out (expel)

launch (start)
loom (threaten)

mercy (relief)

oust (replace)
outrage (anger)

peace (end to dispute)
plan (proposal)
pledge (promise)
plunge (fall)
poised (ready)
probe (inquiry)

quit (resign)
quiz (question)

race (hurry)
rally (support)
rap (tell off)
rebel (person disagreeing)
riddle (mystery)
rock (shock)
romp (sex, have sex)
row (dispute)
rumpus (dispute)

scrap (cancel)
set to (likely to)
shake-up (reform)
shock (surprise)
shun (avoid)
slam (criticise)
slap (impose)
slash (reduce)

| | |
|---|---|
| snag | (difficulty) |
| snub | (fail to attend) |
| soar | (increase) |
| storm out | (resign) |
| swoop | (raid) |
| threat | (possibility) |
| unveil | (announce) |
| vice | (sex) |
| vigil | (patrol) |
| vow | (promise) |
| war | (rivalry) |

## Posh words

Posh, pompous, pretentious words are the opposite of tabloidese: they show the writer putting on collar and tie to impress. Many posh words used in journalism are also examples of circumlocution (long-winded and roundabout writing) or euphemism (using a mild-sounding alternative word to avoid giving offence). In general, prefer plain words to posh ones. For example, avoid:

| | |
|---|---|
| a large proportion of | (much of) |
| accede to | (allow, grant) |
| accommodate | (hold) |
| accordingly | (so) |
| additionally | (also) |
| address | (face, approach) |
| adjacent to | (near, next to) |
| ameliorate | (improve) |
| amidst | (amid) |
| amongst | (among) |
| approximately | (about) |
| ascertain | (learn) |
| assist/ance | (help) |
| at an early date | (soon) |
| at present/at the present time | (now) |
| attempt | (try) |
| beverage | (drink) |
| commence | (begin, start) |
| concept | (idea) |
| concerning | (about) |
| construct | (build, make) |
| converse | (talk) |
| customary | (usual) |
| deceased | (dead) |
| demise | (death) |
| demonstrate | (show) |
| dentures | (false teeth) |
| despite | (although) |
| discontinue | (stop) |
| dispatch | (send) |
| donate | (give) |
| draw to the attention of | (point out) |
| dwell | (live) |
| edifice | (building) |
| endeavour | (try) |
| eventuate | (happen) |
| evince | (show) |
| exceedingly | (very) |
| expedite | (hurry) |
| extremely | (very) |
| facilitate | (ease, help) |
| finalise | (complete) |

following (after)
frequently (often)

give rise to (cause)

implement (carry out)
in addition (also)
in addition to (as well as)
in attendance (present)
in conjunction with (and)
in consequence of (because)
indicate (show, point, point out, say, imply)
in excess of (more than)
inform (tell)
initiate (begin, start)
in order to (to)
inquire (ask)
in short supply (scarce)
in spite of the fact that (although)
in the course of (during)
in the event of (if)
in the neighbourhood/vicinity of (near)
in the region of (about)
in view of the (since)

less expensive (cheaper)
locate (find)
location (place)

made good their escape (escaped)
manufacture (make)
missive (letter)

necessitate (compel)
nevertheless (but)
nonetheless (but)

objective (aim)
of the order of (about)
on the part of (by)
owing to the fact that (because)

pass away/over/to the other side (die)
personnel (workers)
previous (earlier)
prior to (before)
proceed (go)
purchase (buy)

regarding (about)
remunerate (pay)
require (need)
residence (home)
resuscitate (revive)

somewhat (rather)
subsequently (later)
sufficient (enough)

terminate (end)
to date (so far)
transportation (transport)

upon (on)
utilise (use)

venue (place)

was of the opinion that (thought)
when and if (if)
was suffering from (had)
whilst (while)
with the exception of (except)

The word 'dwell' contrives to be both tabloidese and posh: a double reason for not using it. The word 'indicate' is a particular trap: does it mean show, point, point out, say or imply? If it's precision you want, avoid 'indicate' altogether. Envelopes are addressed, and golf balls, but not problems – except by the pretentious.

## Vogue words

Some (usually long) words become fashionable. Suddenly they are everywhere – used with meaningless frequency by journalists who are keen to be considered smart or who are too idle to develop their own vocabulary.

Using a phrase such as 'the eponymous protagonist' to describe Hamlet is almost always a sign of showing off. So take care with the following:

agenda
ambience
ambivalent
archetypal
axiomatic

cachet
catalyst
charisma
conceptual
coterie

dichotomy
dilemma

egregious
emotive
empathy
eponymous
escalate
exponential

iconic
insulate

meaningful
meritocracy
milieu
mores

parameter
pragmatism
protagonist
purposive
replete

seminal
symbiosis
syndrome

technocrat

vertiginous
viable
vicarious

If you are tempted to use one of these words ask yourself:

1 Is it the exact word you need?
2 Is there an alternative that would be as accurate – and more comprehensible?
3 If not, can the word be understood from its context, or does it need some qualification to help the reader? (If it does then perhaps it is not the right word.)

## Jargon

Jargon is specialised vocabulary, familiar to the members of a group, trade or profession. If you write for a newspaper or general magazine you should try to translate jargon into ordinary English whenever you can. If you write for a

specialist magazine there is a stronger case for leaving some terms as they are, but make sure that the reader will understand them.

A common source of jargon is scientific, medical, government and legal handouts. Avoid such examples of officialese as:

| | |
|---|---|
| ambulatory patient | (one that has been allowed up) |
| domiciliary unit | (home) |
| hospitalised | (sent/admitted to hospital) |

There are also ugly words in industry, but you cannot always avoid them.

'Containerisation', for example, has a precise meaning and is difficult to translate.

'Redundancy' may appear to be a euphemism for sacking – but there is a big difference between the two terms. A person made redundant will not be replaced: their job has been abolished. A person sacked is likely to be replaced.

'Packing' is not the same as 'packaging'; 'marketing' is not the same as 'selling'; 'targeting' may be an ugly word but it is what sales and marketing people say they do when they set out to identify and capture a market. So use these terms where necessary in context but do not use them in general stories.

The computer industry has spawned its own ugly terminology – answerback, boot up, end-user, formatted, throughput, input, hardware, software. It is apt for that industry since it conveys particular, precise meanings to those who work with computers.

But journalists (except those on computer magazines) should avoid such terms as 'throughput'. We already have words to describe these ideas. They may be less trendy but they are at least as clear as computer jargon and certainly more elegant.

## Slang

'Write as you speak' can be good general advice. Better by far the vigour and freshness of the spoken word than the dull formality of the official report or the business letter.

But be careful with slang, which could be called the jargon of the street. Similar arguments apply here. Will the reader understand it? Is it ugly? Has the word become accepted?

And does it fit the context? You would not use slang in reporting the death of the local mayor – but you might well use jazz slang in writing a colour piece on Dizzy Gillespie's funeral.

Be particularly careful with rhyming slang, which can be euphemistic:

| | |
|---|---|
| berk | (Berkeley Hunt – cunt) |
| bottle | (and glass – arse) |
| bristols | (Bristol Cities – titties) |
| cobblers | (cobblers' awls – balls) |

## Euphemism

In general, avoid euphemism: call a spade a spade. 'Manhood' is a comical way of referring to the penis and 'sleeping with' a prostitute unlikely.

## Four-letter words ...

…including of course swear words with more than four letters. Should you use them in copy? And if so, should they be printed in full or muffled by asterisks?

Essentially this is a matter of editorial policy and style. When in doubt, check with your editor or department head. It's worth noting that there are far more swear words than there used to be – in journalism as in ordinary conversation. But also that tabloids are more likely than broadsheets to pretend to protect their readers' sensibilities by using asterisks.

## Words with two possible meanings

With some words the problem is that they mean different things to different people. To a historian, for example, a 'chauvinist' could be an aggressive patriot, a flag-waver, while to most other people a chauvinist is somebody who puts women down.

Below are some examples of words that can cause confusion. So use them with care – if in doubt, find an alternative.

Note: in most cases the first meaning given is the earlier, 'correct' one, even though the later, looser one may now be more common. (See also *Confusing pairs*, below.)

| | |
|---|---|
| **accrue:** | 1 accumulate over time; 2 acquire |
| **aggravate:** | 1 make worse; 2 annoy |
| **alibi:** | 1 evidence that the accused was elsewhere when a crime was being committed; 2 excuse |
| **anticipate:** | 1 use, spend, deal with in advance; 2 expect |
| **arguably:** | 1 possibly; 2 probably |
| **celibate:** | 1 unmarried; 2 abstaining from sex |
| **chauvinist:** | 1 absurdly nationalistic; 2 sexist |
| **chronic:** | 1 lingering, recurrent; 2 very bad, severe |
| **cleave:** | 1 split; 2 stick |
| **cohort:** | 1 large group of people (originally a Latin equivalent of battalion); 2 individual colleague or assistant |
| **contemporary:** | 1 belonging to the same time; 2 modern |
| **decimate:** | 1 kill one in ten; 2 kill or destroy large numbers |
| **dilemma:** | 1 choice between two equally unwelcome possibilities; 2 awkward problem |
| **egregious:** | 1 distinguished; 2 notorious |
| **fulsome:** | 1 excessive; 2 copious |
| **gay:** | 1 light-hearted; 2 homosexual |
| **geriatric:** | 1 relating to care of the old; 2 old |
| **pristine:** | 1 original, former; 2 new, fresh, pure |
| **protagonist:** | 1 chief actor; 2 any participant |
| **refute:** | 1 show to be false; 2 contradict, deny |
| **regularly:** | 1 at regular intervals; 2 often |
| **reticent:** | 1 reserved, reluctant to speak; 2 reluctant to act in general |
| **scan:** | 1 examine closely; 2 glance at (also of verse to conform to rules of metre) |
| **shambles:** | 1 slaughterhouse; 2 confusion |

## Confusing pairs

There are many pairs of words in English that sound similar and are often confused. The pitfall here is not that the two words are thought to have the same meaning but that the unwary writer uses one by mistake for the other – and thus produces an entirely different meaning. In some cases (such as the trio 'assure/ensure/insure') each word has gradually acquired its own distinct meaning: they all mean 'make sure' but in different ways.

See also Chapter 5, *Spelling*, for pairs of words that sound identical and are often confused.

**abrogate** (abolish)
a**rrogate** (claim presumptuously)

**affect** (influence, adopt)
**effect** (as verb, accomplish)

**appraise** (determine the value of)
**apprise** (inform)

**assure** (give confidence to)
**ensure** (make happen)
**insure** (arrange insurance)

**barbaric** (crude, uncivilised)
**barbarous** (cruel)

**careen** (tilt, turn over)
**career** (rush wildly)

**censor** (prevent publication)
**censure** (criticise harshly)

**chafe** (make sore)
**chaff** (tease)

**complacent** (smug)
**complaisant** (obliging)

**comprehensive** (exhaustive)
**comprehensible** (intelligible)

**contemptible** (deserving contempt)
**contemptuous** (showing contempt)

**continual** (recurring with breaks)
**continuous** (without a break)

**credible** (believable)
**credulous** (believing too easily)

**defective** (damaged)
**deficient** (short of)

**definite** (precise)
**definitive** (conclusive)

**deprecate** (argue or protest against)
**depreciate** (fall in value)

**derisive** (showing contempt)
**derisory** (deserving contempt)

**disinterested** (impartial)
**uninterested** (bored)

**economic** (of economics, enough to give a good return)
**economical** (thrifty)

**elemental** (basic)
**elementary** (simple)

**eligible** (suitable)
**illegible** (unclear)

**equable** (steady)
**equitable** (fair)

**evolve** (develop)
**devolve** (hand down)

**evince** (show)
**evoke** (draw out)

**exhaustive** (comprehensive)
**exhausted** (tired)

**exigent** (urgent)
**exiguous** (scanty)

**explicit** (stated in detail)
**implicit** (implied)

**farther** (used of distance only)
**further** (used of quantity and distance)

**flaunt** (display ostentatiously)
**flout** (treat with contempt)

**forceful** (energetic)
**forcible** (done by force)

**fortuitous** (accidental)
**fortunate** (lucky)

**historic** (famous in history)
**historical** (belonging to history)

**imply** (suggest)
**infer** (deduce)

**inchoate** (rudimentary)
**incoherent** (disjointed)

**ingenious** (cleverly contrived)
**ingenuous** (frank)

**intense** (extreme)
**intensive** (concentrated)

**loath/loth** (unwilling)
**loathe** (detest)

**luxuriant** (profuse)
**luxurious** (opulent)

**masterful** (dominating)
**masterly** (skilful)

**militate** (contend)
**mitigate** (soften)

**oral** (spoken)
**verbal** (of words, written or spoken)

**ordinance** (decree)
**ordnance** (arrangement, usually military)

**partly** (in part)
**partially** (incompletely)

**politic** (prudent)
**political** (of politics)

**practical** (opposite of theoretical)
**practicable** (capable of being done)

**prescribe** (lay down)
**proscribe** (prohibit)

**prevaricate** (evade the truth)
**procrastinate** (defer action)

**prostate** (gland)
**prostrate** (lying)

**ravage** (lay waste)
**ravish** (seize)

**reluctant** (unwilling)
**reticent** (reluctant to speak)

| | |
|---|---|
| **repel** | (offend) |
| **repulse** | (drive back) |
| **sensual** | (physical, gratifying to the body) |
| **sensuous** | (affecting or appealing to the senses, especially by beauty or delicacy) |
| **swat** | (hit) |
| **swot** | (study hard) |
| **systematic** | (done according to a system or method, eg by using step-by-step instructions) |
| **systemic** | (system-wide or deeply engrained in a system) |
| **titillate** | (tease, arouse) |
| **titivate** | (smarten) |
| **tortuous** | (winding) |
| **torturous** | (causing torture) |
| **venal** | (corruptible) |
| **venial** | (excusable) |

## Redundant words

Many words used are superfluous, for example adjectives (‘*true* facts’), prepositions (‘fill *up* a bottle’) or phrases (‘for *the month of* January’). Often a writer feels the need to add a redundant word or phrase because they do not know the meaning of a particular word. Never do this. Always check what a word means, then decide whether your reader will understand it – without the redundant addition. Here are some examples to avoid:

appreciate *in value*
*chief* protagonist
*close* scrutiny
*completely* surround
comprise *of*
consensus *of opinion*
cut *back*
*free* gift
*general* consensus
in *actual* fact
revert *back*
*temporary* respite

*total* annihilation
*self*-confessed

Many redundant expressions trip off the tongue – or can be found in legal documents. But in copy avoid:

aid and abet
each and every
first and foremost
(without) let or hindrance
neat and tidy
null and void
ways and means

See also *Saying it twice*, p35.

## Non-existent words

By all means make up a word if the context demands it. But avoid making up non-existent words by mistake. Do not run together words that belong apart or add syllables to words that do not need them. For example use:

a lot *not* alot
dissociate *not* disassociate
preventive *not* preventative
recur *not* reoccur

'Alright' is now all right in some publications – as always, check your house style. Also note: 'adaptation' *not* 'adaption'.

## Empty words

Some words are, simply, empty. 'Simply' used like this is one of them. So is 'basically'. They tend to be used in speech as an alternative to 'er' to give the speaker thinking time. Avoid them in writing unless in quoting somebody you wish to give the impression that they are empty headed. For example:

at the end of the day
basically
by and large

currently
I mean
meaningful
simply
you know
well

## Americanisms

American is not a foreign language but a dialect (or series of dialects) of English. And to it we owe much of the vigour of modern English prose. Without writers such as Hemingway our language would be a tired, anaemic thing. American expressions are everywhere. Some enrich the language by saying something previously unsaid or by providing a direct or vivid alternative to the ordinary British expression. The American 'muffler', for example, is a more precise word for 'silencer'.

Others are ugly, clumsy and pointless. Then there are those that make sense to Americans – but if they mean anything at all in Britain, mean something else.

And the position is constantly changing. Yesterday's Americanism, like yesterday's slang, can turn into today's standard English.

Thus British children are now 'raised' rather than 'brought up': the American expression is shorter, more direct – no problem. But British adults still ask for a 'rise' in salary rather than a 'raise' and a headline here about 'vets' (meaning army veterans) prompted a reader's letter protesting that 'vets' were animal doctors.

There is a problem with the use of the French word 'entrée' in restaurant reviewing and food journalism generally. In north America it usually refers to the main course of a meal whereas in France it's universally used for the first course. (The word primarily means 'entry' or 'entrance'.)

So be careful in your use of American imports. Above all, avoid those that turn a noun into a verb when a perfectly good verb already exists or lengthen an expression without adding to it. For example, avoid:

| | |
|---|---|
| to consult with | (for) (to consult) |
| to gift | (to give) |
| to loan | (to lend) |
| transportation | (transport) |
| utilisation | (use) |

## Clichés

Everybody who advises on writing in general and journalism in particular says you must avoid clichés. And you must certainly try to avoid the hilarious/embarrassing ones listed below. But a certain amount of formula-writing, in both structure and vocabulary, is inevitable in routine journalism, whether it is a news story or a piece of instructional copy. A worse fault is to try so hard to be original that you end up sounding pretentious.

And there is of course a worse mistake than using a cliché: misusing one. Do not write 'He is as deaf as a doornail' or 'She is as dead as a post'. Avoid mixing two clichés together. Do not write: 'I am full of nothing but praise.' This runs together into a nonsensical cocktail the two stock phrases 'I am full of (praise)' and 'I have nothing but (praise)'.

Some common expressions are routinely misused. For example, 'to beg the question' does not technically mean 'to raise the question' but to avoid the question and so to use as the basis of proof something that itself needs proving. It means arguing in a circle.

A leading question in law is a question put in such a way as to suggest the desired answer. It is helpful rather than hostile.

'The exception proves the rule' means that the exception tests the rule (from the original meaning of 'prove', which also gives us the page proof and that other phrase 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'), and in law that the making of an exception proves that the rule holds *in cases not excepted*. Thus a notice saying 'Today students may leave early' implies that they usually have to stay late.

The expression cannot mean that an exception to the rule makes it valid.

If you find these definitions difficult to follow – or remember – the best advice may be to avoid the expressions altogether.

If you do use a cliché, don't apologise for doing so by using another one. The following expressions are all lame apologies:

> to coin a phrase
> as the saying goes/as the old joke has it
> the proverbial ... (avoid this even if a proverb is quoted).

The *Times* online style guide has listed the following clichés, saying they should be 'resisted strongly in almost every context':

> backlash, basically, beleaguered, blueprint, bombshell, bonanza, brainchild, chaos, charisma, clampdown, consensus, crackdown, crisis, crunch, drama/

> dramatic, escalate, facelift, gunned down, hopefully, ironically, legendary, major, massive, mega-, nightmare, prestigious, quantum leap, reportedly, shambles, shock, shoot-out, situation, trauma/traumatic, unique.

Curiously, only two of these words, 'major' and 'massive', also crop up in the *Guardian's* equivalent list of 'overused words and phrases to be avoided'. The others are:

> back burner, boost (massive or otherwise), bouquets and brickbats, but hey …, drop-dead gorgeous, insisted, luvvies, political correctness, politically correct, PC, raft of measures, special, to die for, upsurge (surge will do).

The *Guardian* style guide also quotes a survey by the Plain English Campaign which found that the most irritating phrase in the language was 'at the end of the day', followed by (in order of annoyance):

> at this moment in time, like (as in, like, this), with all due respect, to be perfectly honest with you, touch base, I hear what you're saying, going forward, absolutely, blue-sky thinking.

Other words and phrases that upset people included:

> 24/7, ballpark figure, bottom line, diamond geezer, it's not rocket science, ongoing, prioritise, pushing the envelope, singing from the same hymn sheet, thinking outside the box.

Every area of journalism has its own set of clichés to be avoided by careful writers and subs. Here, for example, is a list once published by the *Times Literary Supplement*:

1. mordant wit
2. If (so-and-so) didn't, exist, it/he/she would have to be invented
3. rich tapestry
4. … a hilarious and searing indictment of Britain today
5. smorgasbord (of ideas)
6. consummate (as in 'consummate skill')
7. surfing (metaphorically)
8. eponymous (as in 'the eponymous hero')
9. feisty
10. in spite of (or perhaps because of) etc
11. he/she writes like an angel
12. this curate's egg (of a book)
13. peppered with
14. baggy monster (of a novel)
15. … but (such-and-such) looks like carelessness

16 these are mere cavils, minor quibbles, etc
17 (such-and-such/so-and-so) is that rare thing, a …
18 made me laugh out loud, couldn't put it down (etc)
19 having said that … arguably … (etc)
20 … reminds one of Martin Amis.

## Misquotations and factual mistakes

Journalists should know what they are talking about. And when they quote, whether it is the people they interview or the books they read, they should quote accurately. For example, it isn't 'a little knowledge' that is said to be a dangerous thing but 'a little learning'. So also:

> Nor all, that *glisters* [not 'glitters'], gold.
> To gild refined gold, to *paint* the lily [not 'to gild the lily'].
> Till death *us do* [not 'do us'] part.
> Water, water everywhere *nor any* [not 'and not a'] drop to drink.
> The 'mother of Parliaments' is not the House of Commons but England. And Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* never says: 'Play it again, Sam.'

As Bill Bryson has pointed out, the ship whose crew famously disappeared was the *Mary*, not Marie, *Celeste* and Hobson's choice (the horse by the stable door) is not a difficult one but no choice at all.

Frankenstein was not the monster in Mary Shelley's novel but the monster's creator.

Billy the Kid was not left-handed. That belief arose because a famous photograph of him was reversed when it was reproduced, making it look as though he wore his holster on the left.

The curate's egg, which first appeared in a *Punch* cartoon, was bad (and thus inedible) but the curate was reluctant to say so explicitly; hence his reply: 'parts of it are excellent'. So calling a book or anything else a curate's egg shows and causes confusion: is it all bad or not?

And finally journalists almost always get the King Canute story wrong. When he told the tide to stop coming in he was not arrogantly expecting it to obey him; by contrast he was showing his courtiers that he was not omnipotent.

Here, as everywhere, the moral is: if you want to be sure, look it up in a reliable reference source.

## Mistakes

'Accrue' is confused with 'acquire':

> Nearly a year after Hanan Saleh Matrud's death, her family have accrued a small pile of documents that tell of a young girl's life hardly lived. (news story)

'Address' is a vogue word, here used instead of 'answer':

> This was also a race which went a long way towards addressing those critics of formula one who claim that the sport offers insufficient genuine overtaking on the circuit. (motor-racing report)

'Akimbo' technically refers to arms, not legs, being wide apart:

> After years of keeping us legs akimbo in the lithotomy position, our rulers now want us to jump down and push. (feature)

'Altercation' is verbal, not physical:

> Lehmann let Spurs equalise in stoppage time when he became involved in an altercation [in fact a shove] with Robbie Keane, who converted the penalty.

'Anticipate' is a pompous way of saying 'expect' (here used for variation):

> Jenson Button did not expect to be battling for second place in the German grand prix any more than he anticipated having to drive one-handed for the last 20 laps ... (motor-racing report)

'Careen' is confused with 'career':

> Howard careens off again, first to a pub, then to Carlene's wake. (book review)

'Chronic' can be confusing if used to mean very bad:

> It was just such bad television, such a chronic mistiming of mood and emphasis. (TV review)

'Coin' means 'invent' – but it can't mean that here:

> To coin one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's best-known and over-used lines: 'Hasta la vista, baby.' (news story)

'Coruscate' (sparkle) is confused with 'excoriate' (criticise severely):

> Jonathon Porritt mounts a coruscating attack on the UK environment movement for its lack of effectiveness. (feature)

'Decimate' (originally kill one in ten, nowadays often destroy) conveys confusion rather than clarity:

> After the more-than-decimating visits of King Death, minds did change, in subtle but inwardly seismic ways. (book review)
> Whales used to appear in the Thames reasonably often in the days before industrial whaling decimated their populations. (feature)
> The cattle and camel-herding communities who live there are too poor to buy food in the marketplace when their herds are decimated by drought. (news story)
> The Soviets did not shuffle populations for the same reasons as the Nazis ... there is a subtle difference between decimation and annihilation. (book review)
> [New Labour] swept into office with one of the grandest majorities of all time. Its weary old Tory predecessor was decimated. (feature)

'Demise', a pompous word for death, shouldn't be used for 'fall', still less 'decline':

> In all the excitement over Mr Tony Blair's demise, the one I feel sorry for is Alan Milburn. (diary)

'Dilemma' only has point as a word when it means something more than problem (difficult choice between two courses of action); as an alternative to 'problem' it is just pretentious:

> 'Where did I leave the car keys? [etc] ...' All these dilemmas will be familiar to anyone over 50. (column)

'Discern' is confused with 'distinguish':

> This movie fails to discern between those who murder innocent civilians in their sleep and those who hunt down the murderers. (feature)

'Disinterest(ed)' is confused with 'lack of interest, uninterested':

> Hunched in a chair in his publicist's office, he talks for a bit and then peters out, averting his eyes and sinking into himself with flinty disinterest. (feature)

'Diurnal' is not, like 'quotidian', a literary alternative to 'daily'; it means by day rather than by night (the opposite of 'nocturnal'), whereas here the writer intends 'daily':

> We are asked to believe that the Queen Vic pub, East End boozer of diurnal punch-ups, holds Diwali celebrations. (feature)

'Divest (yourself)' is 'undress, free, get rid', not 'express':

> He later divested himself of various antediluvian views about women, homosexuals and Ulster. (feature)

'Egregious' (outstanding) can be confusing because it is usually negative, though sometimes positive:

> The shooting of Menezes, wrongly mistaken for a suicide bomber at Stockwell tube station, a disaster that seems more egregious with every newly leaked detail. (feature)
> Banville is, as I observe him, an egregiously modest writer. (feature)

'Enhance' is a positive word, here confused with 'aggravate' (make worse):

> To do otherwise is to risk enhancing the injury. (feature)

'Equitable' is confused with 'equable':

> 'One of the demands of leadership is keeping your head and, I hope, your equitable temperament.' (feature)

'Eschew' is a literary word for 'avoid, shun' – it doesn't mean 'oppose':

> Perhaps some of the Labour electorate eschew both Blair and Brown as prime minister. (reader's letter)

'Forcibly' means 'by physical force' – did Mrs T literally handbag Ken?

> This precious London land was sold to the community for peanuts the day before Ken Livingstone was forcibly removed from County Hall by Mrs Thatcher in 1986. (feature)

'Fulsome' can be confusing because it is either positive ('abundant, full') or negative ('over-abundant, excessive'):

> The speaker at the memorial meeting will be suitably fulsome about our virtues and discreet about our vices. (column)

'Gender' and 'sex' can be useful alternatives as words ('gender' now usually means sexual difference); they should not be used in the same sentence to mean the same thing:

> People who are determined to get the gender of baby they want can often find a doctor to perform an abortion on a foetus of the wrong sex, illegal though it is. (feature)

'Genocide' (the killing of an ethnic group) is a powerful word that should be kept for people:

> Off northern Scotland, birds and fish are suffering from the near genocide of the sand-eels they eat, taken by netsmen for fishmeal. (feature)

'Heyday' exists only in the singular – 'the heyday':

> The 1970s, remember, were one of the heydays of British playwriting. (feature)

'Historical' is confused with 'historic':

> The only way forward is for these two ancient rivals to find a historical compromise. (feature)

'Hospitalise' is an ugly way of saying 'in hospital' or 'beaten up':

> He would, though, still have been hospitalised at the time of a leadership contest. (feature)
> Children being hospitalised by school bullies, presumably for being a bit different. (feature)

'Inchoate(ly)' is confused with 'incoherent(ly)':

> The film-maker maunders about inchoately in the documentary, showing a 'different' slice of life. (feature)
> I tried to ignore a certain inchoate emotion that I couldn't quite place. It was a vague emotion, fuzzy but not warm. (feature)

'Infer' is confused with 'imply':

> In fact, said Lord Deedes in the *Daily Telegraph*, [*Private Eye's* Dear Bill] column was politically useful. 'It made it difficult to seriously infer that Denis had the smallest influence on his wife's policies.' (feature)

'Liaison' means relationship not 'encounter':

> The killer was enjoying sexual liaisons with someone other than his wife. (feature)

'Literally' can only be used to say that a metaphorical phrase is not, in fact, a metaphor:

> Spinoza was born in the prosperous city of Amsterdam in 1632, literally in the middle of Holland's golden age. (feature)

This doesn't work because 'in the middle of Holland's golden age' can only mean what it says. (The writer wants something like 'plumb'.)

> He was quite literally a man at the end of his physical and mental tether. (feature)

A 'tether' is what an animal is tied to – it can only be used metaphorically of people.

> Spitting is not in itself a violent act. It is rather a quite literally visceral means of expressing extreme contempt. (feature)

The 'viscera' is the guts – vomiting is literally visceral but spitting can't be.

> The Prince of Wales's private pilgrimage last week to Mount Athos, the Orthodox Church's most sacred site, was almost literally a trip into the past. (feature)

'Quite' is a pointless emphasis for 'literally' and 'almost' doesn't work either – something is either literally true or it isn't.

'Masterful' is confused with 'masterly':

> Julie Myerson on a masterful debut (standfirst)

'Peruse' is a pompous word for read, now creeping in elsewhere:

> As anyone who has perused Paris boutiques will know, shopping in the French capital can be a bittersweet experience. (diary)

'Pristine', which once meant original, is now a vogue word for unspoilt, in good condition:

> Once mown and rolled further, [the playing surface at Lord's] promises to be pristine at the start, with good pace and even bounce. (cricket report)

'Raze' means demolish so 'to the ground' is unnecessary:

> Three houses were razed to the ground and 22 people died. (news story)

'Rebuff' is a vogue word for deny:

> Claims that the Foreign Secretary panicked about the accession of eastern European countries to the European Union in the spring have also been rebuffed. (news story)

'Recreant' does exist as a word but it's archaic and means cowardly; here the writer probably intends 'miscreant' (scoundrel):

> Motley-Wilcock and her six colleagues [private investigators] deal with the messy and emotional world of failing relationships, small businesses with a recreant in their midst and middle-aged women targeted by debonair but ruthless conmen. (feature)

'Refute', which has the technical meaning of disprove (a claim or argument), is often used instead of 'deny':

> Levy refutes that Santini left for football reasons. (feature)

That is clumsy but clear. In the next example does 'refute' mean reject or demolish the case for?

> At the Labour conference in 1978, Jim Callaghan explicitly refuted demand management as a way of maintaining high employment. (feature)

'Registry' (office) is a common mistake for 'register':

> In registry offices all over the land, lesbian and gay partners will, at last, gain legal recognition. (feature)

'Rehearse' is a trendy but silly alternative to 'discuss':

> Questions of sexuality are endlessly rehearsed behind the closed doors of the seminar group. (feature)

'Replete' is confused with 'complete':

> Book-lovers in Gosport, Hampshire, are grumbling at being turfed out of their library to make way for a refurb to create a Discovery Centre replete with coffee shop, crèche and a 'performance space'. (news story)

'Reticent' is confused with 'reluctant':

> Following his exposure, Behring, however, may be more reticent to return. (news story)

'Rife' means prevalent so it can't be used of the community:

> The community wrestles with poverty and is rife with drugs and gangs. (feature)

'Seeing' is a curious euphemism for having sex with (and 'falling' pregnant is not much better):

> I was seeing the father of my 18-month-old baby for three months before I fell pregnant. (problem page)

'Syndrome' (cluster of medical symptoms) is a silly, pretentious word for a single problem or defect:

> What always drove Jane Fonda, of course, was the need to be seen as strenuously perfect. This is not an uncommon syndrome. (feature)

'Tortuous' (winding) is confused with 'torturous' (painful):

> David's records included tortuous personal video-diary footage: 'If you're not me, you really shouldn't be watching this.' (feature)

'Ubiquitous' (to be found everywhere) is an absolute adjective and so can't be qualified:

> Britain's most ubiquitous psychiatrist was yesterday at the centre of a plagiarism row. (news story)

'Trustee' is confused with 'trusty':

> Barry Sheerman (if he was ever a prisoner, he'd be a trustee, bringing the governor his wine and cigars) praised her for being 'clear and cool'. (feature)

'Unique' is an absolute adjective and 'uniquely' an absolute adverb; neither can be qualified:

> He asserts that Britain, not quite uniquely, is in the grip of a New Labour political class that has little understanding of the meaning of truth and scant regard for it anyway. (book review)

Also, what is the point of 'not quite uniquely' here? Surely only one country, Britain, was run by New Labour.

'Verbal', which can mean either related to words (verbal reasoning) or spoken (verbal agreement), can be confusing:

> What strikes me most is the inarticulacy of LeRoy's speech ... And while there is no reason for authors to be verbally articulate, I cannot find the pulse here. (feature)

# 11
# Foreign words

There are many foreign words and phrases in current English. As the world's most flexible and widely used language, English constantly adopts new words from elsewhere. In particular, the flow of words from French has not stopped since the Norman invasion.

Many words and phrases taken from Greek and Latin are still used by some people. But fewer and fewer readers are familiar with this vocabulary, so there is a strong case for finding English equivalents.

Use words of foreign origin accurately but not pretentiously, always asking yourself: 'Will my reader understand this?' To put it another way, do not litter your copy with words that would need to be italicised because they are unfamiliar. In general, if a word needs italics, translate it into English.

But if you do use foreign words to spice up your copy, be accurate.

- Do not follow the *Daily Mail* subeditor who headlined a story about a French mayor trying to resist the English invasion of his town:

  ALLEZ LES ANGLAIS!

Instead of what was meant ('English, go away', which would have been 'Allez-vous-en'), this says the opposite: 'Go on.'

- The French word *embonpoint* is not in fact a euphemism for an ample bosom but an everyday word for portliness à la Hercule Poirot. Which makes utter nonsense of this clever-sounding sentence in a *Guardian* sports report:

  The current version of Buster Mathis boasts not just a Michelinman waist but an *embonpoint* that would give him a better shot at starring in the next Wonderbra poster than winning a boxing title.

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- The *Spectator* columnist Taki accidentally labelled himself anti-semitic by misusing the term *soi-disant* – he thought it meant 'so-called' when in fact it translates as 'self-styled'.
- When the Tory politician Alan Clark used the phrase 'economical with the actualité' (as a variant on the original 'economical with the truth') he was making a pretentious blunder: *actualité* means 'topicality' or 'current events'. But this has not stopped the phrase being repeated: it sounds impressive.

Be careful with translations, for example *assister à*, which means to be present at, not to help in, and *célibataire* which means unmarried – thus a *mère célibataire* is an unmarried mother not one abstaining from sex. English and French have many *faux amis* – two words that sound similar but have different meanings. So never guess the meaning of a French word.

Try not to mix the foreign and the English. Say either 'a year' or 'per annum' not 'per year'. (But 'miles per hour/mph' and 'miles per gallon/mpg' are sanctioned by usage.)

If your house style includes accents, make sure that you use them consistently. For example, 'paté' and 'emigré' are howlers: they should be *pâté* and *émigré*. (Perversely, the *Guardian*, for some reason, permits paté.) And watch your spelling of foreign words: *de rigueur* includes the letter 'u' twice; *restaurateur* has no 'n'; *bête noire* has an 'e' at the end of the second word whereas *film noir* doesn't.

Note that French words change their spelling in the feminine and the plural: the adjective *bas* (low) becomes *basse* when used with a feminine noun; most nouns and adjectives take 's' in the plural. (For the plurals of foreign words see Chapter 5, *Spelling*, p62.)

Below is a selection of foreign words and phrases in current English, followed by some examples of common classical references. Use both lists with care – when in doubt, always translate into English.

**ab initio:** from the beginning (Latin)
**actualité:** topicality or current events, *not* truth (French)
**AD/anno domini:** in the year of the Lord (Latin)
**addendum/a:** something to be added, eg to a book (Latin)
**ad hoc:** for this special purpose (Latin), so also adhocery, adhocism, the use of ad hoc measures
**ad hominem:** personal, used of an argument that attacks the character of an opponent rather than their argument (Latin: 'to the man')
**ad infinitum:** endlessly (Latin)

**ad lib(itum):** without restraint, impromptu (Latin: 'according to pleasure')
**ad nauseam:** to a sickening extent (Latin)
**aegis:** protection (Greek)
**affidavit:** written declaration on oath (Latin)
**aficionado:** fan, originally of bullfighting (Spanish)
**à fond:** thoroughly, in depth (French)
**a fortiori:** with stronger reason (Latin)
**agent provocateur:** person who leads others into committing unlawful acts (French)
**agitprop:** political propaganda (Russian)
**aide-mémoire:** reminder, written summary (French)
**à la:** in the style of – a short form of 'à la mode de': 'à la Hercule Poirot' (French)
**à la carte:** with the freedom to pick and choose (French)
**à la mode:** fashionable (French); in French cookery (of beef) stewed in wine; in American, served with ice-cream
**à la mode de:** in the style of (French)
**alfresco:** in the open air (Italian)
**alibi:** evidence that the accused was elsewhere when a crime was being committed (Latin)
**alma mater:** particular school or university to its students (Latin: 'bounteous mother')
**alpha and omega:** beginning and end (Greek alphabet)
**am/ante meridiem:** in the morning (Latin)
**alumna(ae):** former female pupil or student (Latin)
**alumnus(i):** former male pupil or student (Latin)
**amanuensis:** literary assistant, especially one who writes to dictation or copies from manuscripts (Latin)
**amen:** so be it, agreed (Hebrew)
**amour propre:** self-esteem, vanity (French)
**anathema:** deeply offensive (Greek)
**ancien régime:** the old system (French: that before the 1789 revolution)
**angst:** anxiety of a general kind (German)
**annus horribilis:** horrible year (Latin)
**annus mirabilis:** wonderful year (Latin)
**Anschluss:** take-over, eg of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 (German: 'union')
**ante:** fixed stake in poker (Latin: 'before'), hence up/raise the ante – increase costs, demands, etc
**ante-bellum:** before the war (Latin), particularly used of the American civil war
**antipasto:** first course (Italian: 'before food')
**aperçu:** insight (French: 'noticed')
**apéritif:** drink before a meal (French)
**apogee:** highest point (Greek)

**à point:** just right (French)
**a posteriori:** (of reasoning) from effect to cause (Latin)
**apparatchik:** member of party machine, originally apparat of Communist Party (Russian)
**après-ski:** fun and games after skiing (French)
**a priori:** (of reasoning) from cause to effect (Latin)
**apropos (of):** to the point (French), also used in the opposite sense to mean 'incidentally'
**arriviste:** ambitious, self-seeking person (French)
**à trois:** see *ménage*
**au contraire:** on the contrary (French)
**au courant:** well-informed, up-to-date (French)
**au fait (with):** well informed, expert (in) (French)
**au fond:** fundamentally (French)
**au naturel:** cooked plainly or served without dressing (French)
**au pair:** foreign girl who does light domestic work in exchange for room and board (French:'on equal terms')
**au secours:** help! (French)
**autres temps, autres moeurs:** customs change with the times (French)
**avant-garde:** trend-setting artists, writers, etc (French)
**avant la lettre:** before the definition was invented (French)
**ave:** hail (Latin)
**bain-marie:** pot of boiling water in which another pot is placed to cook slowly (French)
**bête noire:** bugbear (French)
**bien pensant:** right-thinking (French)
**billet-doux:** love letter (French)
**bint:** derogatory word for girl (Arabic: 'daughter')
**blasé:** indifferent to pleasure through familiarity (French)
**blitz:** sudden strong attack (German: 'lightning'), hence the blitzkrieg attack on Poland in 1939
**blond(e):** fair-haired (French) – see also *Agreement*, pp65–6
**bona fide:** genuine (Latin: 'in good faith'), hence bona fides: genuineness, proof of trustworthiness – *note* bona fides is singular
**bonhomie:** genial manner (French)
**bon mot:** witty saying (French)
**bonne-bouche:** tasty morsel (French)
**bon vivant:** person who enjoys life, particularly good food (French), not 'bon viveur'
**boudoir:** woman's small private room (French)
**bra/brassière:** women's undergarment to support the breasts (French) *but* in modern French une brassière is a baby's vest – a bra is 'un soutien-gorge'

**branché:** switched on, trendy (French)
**bric-à-brac:** odd items of furniture, ornaments, etc (French)
**brunet(te):** dark-haired (French) – see also *Agreement*, pp65–6
**ca/circa:** about (Latin)
**canard:** false report, hoax (French)
**carpe diem:** enjoy the present moment (Latin: 'seize the day')
**carte blanche:** freedom to do as one thinks (French: 'blank page')
**casus belli:** act or situation seen to justify war (Latin)
**caveat:** warning (Latin)
**caveat emptor:** let the buyer beware (Latin)
**(un) certain age:** no longer young (French)
**ceteris paribus:** other things being equal (Latin)
**cf/confer:** compare (Latin)
**(à) chacun son goût:** everyone to their own taste (French), not 'chacun à son goût'
**chaperon(e):** older person supervising girl or unmarried woman (French) – see also *Agreement*, pp65–6
**chargé d'affaires:** senior diplomat, eg ambassador's deputy (French)
**château:** French castle, large country house or wine property; now so familiar it has lost the circumflex (^) in English
**châtelaine:** mistress of chateau (French)
**chef d'oeuvre:** masterpiece (French)
**chutzpah:** effrontery, impudence (Yiddish)
**cliché:** hackneyed phrase or idea (French: 'printing plate')
**cogito ergo sum:** I think, therefore I am – starting point in philosophy of Descartes (Latin)
**comme il faut:** proper (French)
**compos mentis:** sane (Latin)
**confidant(e):** person to confide in (French) – see also *Agreement*, pp65–6
**cons:** see *pros and cons*
**contra:** against (Latin)
**contretemps:** hitch, quarrel (French)
**coquette:** flirt (French)
**cordon bleu:** (cook) of the highest excellence (French: 'blue ribbon')
**cordon sanitaire:** isolating barrier (French)
**corpus delicti:** evidence of a crime, eg corpse (Latin)
**corrigenda:** corrections (Latin)
**cortège:** funeral procession (French)
**cosi fan tutte:** what all women do (Italian)
**couchette:** railway sleeping berth that is convertible by day into ordinary seat (French)
**coup d'état:** sudden overthrow of government especially by force (French)
**coup de foudre:** love at first sight (French: 'thunderbolt')

**coup de grâce:** death blow (French: 'mercy blow')
**coup de main:** surprise attack (French) *but* in modern French 'un coup de main' is a helping hand
**(la) crème de la crème:** the elite (French)
**cri de coeur:** cry from the heart (French)
**crime passionel:** crime, eg murder, caused by sexual passion (French)
**crise de conscience:** crisis of conscience (French)
**cui bono?:** who stands to gain? (Latin)
**cul-de-sac:** dead end, blind alley (French: 'bottom of the sack') *but* in modern French 'voie sans issu' or 'impasse' is far more common – 'cul' is seen as coarse
**culottes:** divided skirt (French) *but* in modern French 'une culotte' (singular) is a pair of panties/underpants
**curettage:** surgical scraping to remove tissue or growth (French)
**CV/curriculum vitae:** biographical summary (Latin)
**danse macabre:** dance of death (French)
**débâcle:** sudden disastrous collapse (French); in English, no accents.
**débutant(e):** beginner (French); in English, no accent – see also *Agreement*, pp65–6
**déclassé:** reduced in social standing (French)
**décolletage:** a low neckline (French)
**décolleté:** low cut, wearing a low-cut dress (French)
**de facto:** in fact, actual (Latin)
**dégagé:** free from constraint, politically uncommitted (French)
**De Glanville:** like most French surnames starting with 'de', when anglicised it begins 'De'
**de haut en bas:** condescending (French)
**déjà vu:** feeling that something similar has been experienced before (French)
**de jure:** by right (Latin)
**de mortuis nil nisi bonum:** say nothing but good of the dead (Latin)
**dénouement:** resolution of plot (French)
**Deo volente:** God willing (Latin)
**de rigueur:** strictly necessary (French)
**derrière:** euphemism for buttocks (French)
**déshabillé:** partly dressed, not undressed (French)
**détente:** easing of tension between countries (French)
**de trop:** not wanted, in the way (French: 'excessive')
**deus ex machina:** contrived solution of plot difficulty in fiction (Latin: 'god from the machinery')
**dictum:** saying (Latin)
**digestif:** alcoholic drink after a meal (French)
**dishabille:** anglicised version of déshabillé – see above
**divorcé(e):** divorced person (French) – but prefer the anglicised 'divorcee' for both men and women

**do/ditto:** the same thing (Italian)
**dolce far niente:** sweet idleness (Italian)
**(la) dolce vita:** life of luxury (Italian:'sweet life')
**doppelgänger:** ghostly double (German: 'double goer')
**double entente:** word or phrase with two meanings, one usually indecent (French); 'double entendre' is franglais
**dreich:** dreary (Scottish)
**droit du seigneur/jus primae noctis:** feudal lord's alleged right to have sex with a vassal's bride on the wedding night (French/Latin)
**dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:** it is sweet and glorious to die for one's country – Horace (Latin)
**dum spiro, spero:** while I breathe, I hope (Latin)
**éclat:** ostentatious brilliance (French); no accent in English
**effluvium:** offensive smell (Latin)
**eg/exempli gratia:** for example (Latin: 'by way of example')
**élan:** zest and vigour (French); no accent in English
**embarrass de richesses:** over-abundance of pleasures or resources (French)
**embonpoint:** stoutness, portliness (French: 'in good form') *not* 'ample bosom'
**éminence grise:** power behind the throne (French: 'grey eminence'); no accent in English
**en bloc:** all at the same time (French)
**en masse:** all together (French)
**entente cordiale:** friendly understanding, eg between Britain and France in 1904 (French)
**entrée:** first course in a meal all over the world except in north America where it is the main course; also entry/entrance in other contexts (French)
**ergo:** therefore (Latin)
**erratum/a:** error(s) in writing or printing (Latin)
**ersatz:** substitute, fake (German)
**esprit de l'escalier:** a witty remark after the opportunity for making it has gone (French)
**et al/alii, aliae, alia:** and others (Latin)
**etc/et cetera:** and the rest, and so on (Latin)
**ex cathedra:** with authority (Latin: 'from the chair of office')
**ex gratia:** as a favour, not from obligation (Latin)
**ex officio:** because of a person's official position (Latin)
**ex parte:** from one side only (Latin)
**ex post facto:** retrospective (Latin)
**factotum:** servant who does all kinds of work (Latin)
**fait accompli:** a thing already done, and so irreversible (French)
**fakir:** religious beggar or ascetic in India (Arabic)
**fatwa(h):** Muslim sentence of death (Arabic)

**faute de mieux:** for want of anything better (French)
**faux amis:** two similar words from different languages that have different meanings – eg the French 'veste' is not a vest but a jacket (French: 'false friends')
**faux pas:** embarrassing blunder (French: 'false step')
**felo de se:** suicide (Anglo-Latin: 'felon of himself')
**femme fatale:** dangerous and irresistibly attractive woman (French)
**festina lente:** more haste, less speed (Latin)
**festschrift:** celebratory publication (German)
**fid def/fidei defensor:** defender of the faith (Latin)
**floreat:** may it flourish (Latin)
**folie de grandeur:** delusions of importance (French)
**frisson:** shiver, thrill (French)
**furore:** uproar (Latin), not furor
**Gastarbeiter:** migrant worker (German: 'guest worker')
**gaucho:** South American cowboy; hence 'gauchos', women's knee-length trousers (Spanish)
**gaudeamus:** let us rejoice (Latin)
**gemütlich:** cosy (German)
**gestalt:** organised whole or unit (German)
**Gesundheit:** good health – to a person who has sneezed (German)
**glasnost:** Soviet policy of openness launched by Mikhail Gorbachev (Russian)
**Götterdämmerung:** twilight of the gods (German)
**goy:** Gentile (Hebrew)
**grand guignol:** horror drama – from Grand Guignol, a Paris theatre specialising in horror
**gringo:** Spanish-American for English speaker
**gulag:** labour camp for political prisoners – from Solzhenitsyn's book *The Gulag Archipelago* (Russian)
**habeas corpus:** writ requiring that a person be brought before a judge or into court (Latin:'have the body')
**habitué:** inhabitant or frequent visitor (French)
**hara-kiri:** ritual suicide (Japanese)
**hoi polloi:** derogatory term for the masses (Greek); since 'hoi' means 'the', 'the' in front of 'hoi' is redundant
**honoris causa:** as a mark of esteem (Latin)
**hors de combat:** out of action (French:'out of the fight')
**hors d'oeuvre:** first course (French: 'outside the work')
**ibid(em):** in the same place (Latin)
**idée fixe:** obsession (French)
**ie/id est:** that is to say (Latin)

**imbroglio:** tangled situation (Italian)
**impasse:** deadlock (French) – see also *cul-de-sac*
**imprimatur:** licence to print a book (Latin: 'let it be printed')
**in absentia:** in one's absence (Latin)
**inamorata(o):** the beloved (Latin)
**in camera:** in secret, in a judge's private chambers (Latin: 'in the chamber')
**incognito:** unknown, in disguise (Italian)
**in extremis:** at the point of death, in very great difficulties (Latin)
**in flagrante delicto:** caught in the act (Latin: 'while the crime is burning')
**infra dig/dignitatem:** beneath one's dignity (Latin)
**ingénue:** innocent, naive young woman, especially on the stage (French: 'ingenuous')
**in loco parentis:** in place of a parent (Latin)
**in memoriam:** in memory of (Latin)
**in petto:** in secret (Italian)
**in situ:** in its present or original place (Latin)
**inter alia:** among other things (Latin)
**interim:** the meantime, provisional (Latin)
**interregnum:** period between two reigns (Latin)
**Intifada:** Palestinian uprising (1987) and continued resistance to Israeli occupation (Arabic)
**in toto:** entirely (Latin)
**in utero:** in the womb (Latin)
**in vino veritas:** truth is told under the influence of alcohol (Latin: 'in wine is truth')
**in vitro:** in the test tube (Latin)
**in vivo:** in the living organism (Latin)
**iota:** very small amount (smallest letter in Greek alphabet)
**ipse dixit:** dogmatic statement (Latin: 'he himself said it')
**ipso facto:** by that very fact (Latin)
**jawohl:** yes, indeed (German)
**jeu d'esprit:** witticism (French)
**jeunesse dorée:** fashionable, rich young people (French)
**jus primae noctis:** see *droit du seigneur*
**kamikaze:** suicide attack, originally by Japanese airforce (Japanese: 'divine wind')
**laissez/laisser-faire:** policy of non-interference (French)
**laudator temporis acti:** person living in the past (Latin: 'praiser of past times')
**Lebensraum:** living space, Nazi justification for German expansion (German)
**leitmotiv/f:** recurring theme (German)
**lèse-majesté:** treason, affront to dignity (French)
**liaison:** relationship (eg sexual, military) not individual encounter (French)

**lingua franca:** common language used by the people of an area where several languages are spoken (Italian:'Frankish language')
**loc cit/loco citato:** in the place just quoted (Latin)
**locum (tenens):** deputy, substitute (Latin)
**locus classicus:** best-known or most authoritative example (Latin)
**macho:** aggressively male, hence machismo, the cult of this (Spanish)
**magnum opus:** great work (Latin)
**mañana:** tomorrow, in the indefinite future (Spanish)
**mandamus:** writ from higher court (Latin: 'we command')
**manqué:** having failed, as in 'poet manqué' (French)
**maquis:** French guerrilla resistance movement
**mea culpa:** through my own fault (Latin)
**mélange:** mixture (French)
**memento mori:** reminder of death (Latin)
**ménage à trois:** household of three people, each one having a sexual relationship with at least one of the others (French)
**mens rea:** criminal intent (Latin)
**mens sana in corpore sano:** a healthy mind in a healthy body (Latin)
**mésalliance:** marriage with a social inferior (French)
**métier:** trade (French)
**métissage:** interbreeding (French)
**mirabile dictu:** wonderful to relate (Latin)
**MO/modus operandi:** way of working, eg by criminal (Latin)
**modus vivendi:** arrangement, compromise (Latin: 'way of living')
**monstre sacré:** powerful and eccentric public figure (French)
**mot juste:** exact word (French)
**mutatis mutandis:** with necessary changes (Latin)
**nb/nota bene:** take notice (Latin)
**né(e):** originally named (French: 'born')
**négligé:** woman's loose, flimsy dressing gown (French)
**nem con/nemine contradicente:** without opposition (Latin)
**ne plus ultra:** the ultimate (Latin)
**nihil obstat:** permission to print (Latin: 'nothing hinders')
**nil desperandum:** never despair – Horace (Latin)
**nirvana:** blissful state (Sanskrit)
**nisi:** to take effect unless (Latin)
**noblesse oblige:** rank imposes obligations (French)
**noli me tangere:** don't touch me (Latin)
**nolle prosequi:** suspension of legal action (Latin)
**nom de plume:** pen name, pseudonym (French) *but* the modern French phrase is 'nom de guerre'

**non compos mentis:** not of sound mind (Latin)
**non sequitur:** conclusion that does not follow from premise(s), disconnected remark (Latin)
**nostrum:** favourite remedy (Latin: 'our own')
**nouveau riche:** person with newly acquired wealth but lacking in refinement (French)
**obiter dictum/a:** cursory remark(s) (Latin)
**objet d'art:** small article with artistic value (French)
**omerta:** the Mafia code of honour compelling silence (Italian dialect)
**omnibus:** widely comprehensive, origin of 'bus' – large public road vehicle (Latin)
**on dit:** item of gossip, hearsay (French)
**op cit/opere citato:** in the same book as was mentioned before (Latin)
**outré:** excessive, eccentric (French), *but* in French it means 'scandalised'
**pa/per annum:** a year (Latin)
**pace:** with due deference – used in disagreeing with somebody (Latin)
**paean:** hymn of praise (Latin)
**papabile:** (of a prospective pope) electable (Italian)
**paparazzo/i:** snatch photographer(s) of famous people (Italian)
**par excellence:** more than all others (French)
**pari passu:** at an equal rate of progress, simultaneously and equally (Latin)
**parti pris:** bias, prejudice (French)
**passé:** past its sell-by date (French)
**passim:** throughout (Latin)
**pax vobiscum:** peace be with you (Latin)
**peccavi:** I have sinned (Latin)
**per ardua ad astra:** through a steep climb to the stars (Latin)
**per capita:** a head (Latin), as in '£5 a head'
**per cent:** for each hundred (Latin)
**per contra:** by contrast (Latin)
**per diem:** a day (Latin)
**perestroika:** restructuring of political and economic system in the Soviet Union of the 1980s
**per se:** in itself (Latin)
**persona (non) grata:** acceptable (or not), especially to foreign government (Latin)
**petitio principii:** begging the question (Latin)
**pièce de résistance:** the showpiece, especially in a meal (French)
**pied-à-terre:** second home, usually in city or town (French)
**pis aller:** makeshift (French)
**placet:** permission is given (Latin)

**plebs:** the common people, derogatory (Latin)
**pm/post meridiem:** afternoon (Latin)
**poste restante:** post office department where mail is kept until collected (French)
**post hoc ergo propter hoc:** fallacious argument that A causes B because it is followed by B (Latin)
**post-partum:** after childbirth (Latin)
**pourboire:** tip (French)
**pour encourager les autres:** as an example to others (French)
**pp/per pro/per procurationem:** by proxy, on behalf of (Latin)
**précis:** summary (French)
**prima facie:** at first sight (Latin)
**primus inter pares:** first among equals (Latin)
**pro bono (publico):** for the public good, particularly used of lawyers working as unpaid volunteers (Latin)
**pro-forma:** (of an account) official form for completion (Latin)
**pro patria:** for one's country (Latin)
**pro rata:** in proportion (Latin)
**pros and cons:** arguments for and against (Latin)
**protégé(e):** person under someone's patronage (French)
**pro tem(pore):** for the time being (Latin)
**qed/quod erat demonstrandum:** which was to be demonstrated, proved (Latin)
**qua:** in the capacity of (Latin)
**quid pro quo:** something given, taken, offered for something else (Latin)
**(on the) qui vive:** on the alert (French sentry's challenge: 'long live who?')
**quondam:** former (Latin)
**quorum:** fixed number of members necessary for a valid meeting (Latin)
**qv/quod vide:** which see (Latin)
**raison d'être:** reason for existence (French)
**realpolitik:** practical politics (German)
**réchauffé:** reheated, rehashed (French)
**recherché:** rare or exotic (French)
**recto:** front or right-hand page of book (Latin)
**reductio ad absurdum:** demonstrating the falsity of a proposition by showing that its logical extension is absurd (Latin)
**repêchage:** extra heat in sporting event giving those eliminated a second chance to go on to the final (French: 'fishing out again')
**requiem:** Catholic mass, dirge for the dead (Latin)
**rigor mortis:** stiffening of the body after death (Latin)
**RIP/requiescat in pace:** may he/she rest in peace (Latin)
**rite de passage:** ceremony marking a new stage in a person's life (French)
**roué:** dissolute (old) man (French:'broken on the wheel')

**samizdat:** underground literature, originally in Soviet Union (Russian)
**sans:** without (French)
**savoir-faire:** knowhow (French)
**savoir-vivre:** knowing how to live (French)
**Schadenfreude:** malicious delight in another's misfortune (German)
**sd/sine die:** indefinitely (Latin)
**semper fidelis:** always faithful (Latin)
**seq(uens):** following (Latin)
**seriatim:** in succession (Latin)
**shmatte:** rag, shabby garment (Yiddish)
**sic:** written here as in the original – used to mark mistakes in quotations (Latin: 'so, thus')
**sine qua non:** essential condition (Latin)
**smörgåsbord:** buffet meal of various dishes (Swedish)
**soi-disant:** self-styled, not so-called (French)
**soigné(e):** well-groomed (French)
**sotto voce:** in an undertone or aside (Italian)
**status quo (ante):** existing state of things (before change) (Latin)
**stet:** cancel correction (Latin: 'let it stand')
**stumm/shtoom:** silent (Yiddish from German)
**Sturm und Drang:** highly emotional eighteenth-century German literary movement (storm and stress)
**sub judice:** under judicial consideration, so not able to be discussed (Latin)
**subpoena:** writ commanding attendance (Latin: 'under penalty')
**sub rosa:** in secrecy, in confidence (Latin: 'under the rose', a symbol of secrecy)
**succès d'estime:** critical, as opposed to popular, success (French)
**sui generis:** the only one of its kind (Latin)
**supra:** above (Latin)
**table d'hôte:** fixed price meal (French)
**tabula rasa:** clean slate (Latin: 'scraped tablet')
**Te Deum:** hymn of praise and thanksgiving (Latin)
**terra firma:** dry land or the ground, as opposed to water or sky, originally the mainland as opposed to islands (Latin: 'solid earth')
**terra incognita:** unknown or unexplored region (Latin)
**tête-à-tête:** one-to-one, in private (French)
**touché:** hit acknowledged, in argument as in fencing (French)
**tour de force:** outstanding performance (French)
**tour d'horizon:** broad general survey (French)
**trahison des clercs:** betrayal of standards by intellectuals (French)
**tricoteuse:** French Revolutionary woman who knitted beneath the guillotine (French: 'knitter')
**troika:** team of three (Russian)

**Übermensch:** superman (German)
**ubi supra:** where mentioned above (Latin)
**uhuru:** freedom, national independence (Swahili)
**ujamaa:** kibbutz-type village community in Tanzania (Swahili)
**ult(imo):** in the last month (Latin)
**ultra vires:** beyond one's powers (Latin)
**v/vide infra/supra:** see (below/above) (Latin)
**v/vs/versus:** against (Latin)
**vade-mecum:** pocket reference book (Latin: 'go with me')
**vale:** farewell (Latin)
**verbatim:** word for word (Latin)
**verboten:** forbidden (German)
**verb sap/verbum sapienti sat est:** no further explanation needed (Latin: 'a word is enough for the wise')
**verkramp:** narrow-minded, illiberal in apartheid South Africa (Afrikaans)
**verlig:** enlightened, liberal in apartheid South Africa (Afrikaans)
**vice anglais:** corporal punishment for sexual gratification, sodomy (French: 'English vice')
**victor ludorum:** school champion on sports day (Latin)
**vieux jeu:** old hat (French: 'old game')
**virgo intacta:** virgin (Latin)
**vis-à-vis:** in relation to (French: 'face-to-face')
**viva (voce):** oral exam (Latin)
**vivat:** long live (Latin)
**viz/videlicet:** namely (Latin)
**vo/verso:** back or left-hand page of book (Latin)
**volenti non fit injuria:** no injury is done to a consenting party (Latin)
**volte-face:** complete change of attitude (French)
**voortrekker:** Boer pioneer in South Africa (Afrikaans)
**voulu:** contrived in English (but not in French)
**vox pop(uli):** public opinion, street interview (Latin: 'voice of the people')
**wagon-lit:** sleeping car (French)
**wunderkind:** child prodigy (German)
**zeitgeist:** spirit of the age (German)

## Common classical references

All the examples below might be found in an upmarket newspaper such as the *Observer* or a weekly review such as the *Spectator*. Some, such as 'aphrodisiac', 'cynic', 'erotic' and 'platonic', are everyday expressions. The problem, as always, is in deciding which ones your reader will recognise and not stumble over.

Whereas most are traditional, one or two have acquired new meanings. As sport has become increasingly dominated by money – 'professional' in its worst sense – 'corinthian' is more and more a word of praise for the true amateur. 'Trojan horse' now suggests a covert computer virus as well as a political fifth columnist.

**achilles heel:** a person's weakness – the Greek demi-god Achilles was invulnerable except in the heel
**acropolis:** citadel, especially that of Athens
**Adonis:** handsome youth – Aphrodite loved him
**Aeneid:** Latin epic poem by Virgil; its hero is Aeneas
**Amazon:** strong, tall, warlike woman – in Greek mythology the Amazons cut off their right breasts to improve their archery
**ambrosia:** the food and drink of the Greek gods – it gave them everlasting youth and beauty
**aphrodisiac:** something that arouses sexual desire – from Aphrodite
**Aphrodite:** beautiful woman, the Greek goddess of love
**Apollo:** handsome youth, the Greek sun god; hence 'Apollonian', serene, rational (opposite of Dionysian)
**Arcadia:** mountainous district in Greece where people lived a simple rural life with much music and dancing
**Argonaut:** adventurer – from the Greeks who sailed with Jason in the Argos in search of the golden fleece
**Athene (also Athena):** Greek goddess of wisdom; hence Athens, the city, and Athenaeum, a temple of Athene, so a place of learning
**Atlas:** strong man – the Titan who held up the pillars of the universe
**Augean stables:** something rotten or corrupt, somewhere in need of a good clean – Hercules did the trick by diverting the river Alpheus through the stables
**Augustan age (of literature):** classical, refined – taken from that of the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar and applied to eighteenth-century England
**Bacchus:** Roman god of wine – hence bacchanals, drunken revels, etc
**Cadmus:** see *dragon's teeth*
**Caesar:** autocrat – from the first Roman emperor, Julius Caesar
**caesarian section:** delivery of a child by cutting through the abdomen – Julius Caesar was said to have been born this way
**Caesar's wife:** someone who must be above suspicion
**Cassandra:** daughter of Priam, King of Troy; she had the gift of prophecy but not the knack of making people believe her; hence 'a prophet of doom who is not heeded' (and a celebrated *Daily Mirror* columnist)
**centaur:** mythical creature, half-man half-horse
**Cerberus:** the monster that guarded the entrance to Hades
**Charybdis:** see *Scylla*

**chimerical:** imaginary, fanciful – from the chimera, a fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail
**Circe:** beautiful sorcerer; hence Circean
**corinthian:** from Corinth in Greece – in architecture and literary style over-elaborate but in sport showing the spirit of the true amateur: playing the game for its own sake
**cornucopia:** horn of plenty – a goat's horn overflowing with flowers, fruit and corn
**Croesus:** King of Lydia and fabulously rich
**cross the Rubicon:** see *Rubicon*
**Cupid:** Roman god of love, depicted as a naked boy with wings, bow and arrow; hence Cupid's bow, the upper lip shaped like an archery double bow, and Cupid's dart, the power of love
**Cyclops:** giant with one eye in the middle of his forehead
**cynic:** a public pessimist about human motives – from the Cynics, a sect of philosophers founded by Antisthenes of Athens
**Daedelus:** the Greek artist who constructed the Cretan labyrinth and made wings for his son Icarus and himself
**Damocles:** was taught the insecurity of happiness by sitting through a feast with a sword hanging over his head – from a single hair
**Delphic:** difficult to interpret like the oracle of Delphi
**Diogenic:** cynical, like the Cynic philosopher Diogenes
**Dionysian:** sensual, abandoned – from Dionysus, the Greek god of wine (opposite of Apollonian)
**draconian:** extremely severe like the laws of Draco of Athens
**dragon's teeth:** the teeth of the dragon killed by Cadmus, the founder of Thebes; he sowed them and they turned into armed men who fought among themselves until only five were left
**Elysian fields (champs élysées):** any delightful place – from Elysium, the home of the blessed after death
**Epicurean:** person devoted to sensual enjoyment – from Epicurus, the Greek philosopher
**Eros:** Greek god of love; hence erotic, etc
**Fabian tactics:** delaying, cautious – from the Roman general Fabius Cunctator, who saved Rome by wearing down the Carthaginian general Hannibal; hence 'the Fabian Society', formed to encourage the gradual spread of socialist ideas
**golden fleece:** see *Argonaut*
**Gordian knot:** intricate knot tied by Gordius, King of Phrygia, and cut by Alexander the Great
**Gorgon:** one of three female monsters; hence 'an ugly or formidable woman'
**Greek gifts:** given with intent to harm

**Greek god:** beautiful man
**Hades:** the Greek underworld, roamed by the souls of the dead
**halcyon days:** a time of peace and happiness – from halcyon, the kingfisher, once supposed to make a floating nest on the sea, thus calming it
**harpy:** rapacious monster, part-woman part-bird; hence a greedy, cruel woman
**Heracles:** Greek form of Hercules
**Hercules:** hero of superhuman strength who had to complete the 12 labours; hence herculean, etc
**Hermes:** Greek god of herdsmen, arts, theft and eloquence, the messenger of the gods; also identified with the Egyptian god Thoth, founder of alchemy, astrology, etc
**hermetic:** completely sealed – from Hermes, the Greek name for Thoth
**Hippocratic oath:** doctor's promise to follow medical code of ethics, first drawn up by the Greek physician Hippocrates
**Homeric:** refers to Homer, the Greek epic poet said to have written the Iliad and the Odyssey
**hubris:** arrogance such as to invite disaster – from Greek tragedy
**Icarus:** rashly ambitious person – Icarus, son of Daedalus, flew so high that the sun melted the wax with which his wings were fastened and he fell to his death
**Iliad:** Greek epic poem, ascribed to Homer, describing the climax of the siege of Troy
**Janus:** Roman two-faced god
**Jason:** see *Argonaut*
**Jove:** another name for Jupiter; hence the archaic 'by Jove'
**junoesque:** large, buxom and beautiful – from Juno, the wife of Jupiter
**Jupiter:** chief Roman god; the largest planet
**labyrinth:** maze – the Cretan labyrinth was constructed by Daedalus to contain the Minotaur, a bull-headed monster
**laconic:** terse – from Laconia, whose capital was Sparta
**Lethe:** river of the underworld causing oblivion to those who drank from it
**lotus-eater:** indolent lover of luxury, one of a people described by Homer as eating the fruit of the lotus and living in a state of dreamy forgetfulness
**Lucullan:** (of a banquet) in the lavish style of the Roman Lucullus
**Marathon:** scene of a Greek victory over the Persians, from where a messenger ran to Athens to report the good news; thus a long-distance race or other test of endurance
**Mars:** Roman god of war; the planet next after earth in terms of distance from the sun
**Medusa:** best known of the three Gorgons, whose head, with snakes for hair, turned observers to stone; hence medusa, the jellyfish

**Mercury:** Roman god of merchandise, theft and eloquence, the messenger of the gods, and the planet nearest the sun; hence mercurial, lively, volatile (also related to the metal mercury)
**Midas:** King of Phrygia whose touch turned everything to gold
**Mount Olympus:** see *Olympus*
**Muse:** one of the nine daughters of Zeus; thus poetic inspiration
**Myrmidon:** one of a tribe of warriors who accompanied Achilles to Troy
**narcissism:** self-obsession – from the Greek youth Narkissos who pined away for love of his own image
**nectar:** the drink of the gods
**Nemesis:** the Greek goddess of retribution
**Neptune:** the Roman sea god and a remote planet of the solar system
**nymph:** semi-divine spirit inhabiting woods, rivers, etc; beautiful young woman; hence 'nymphet', a sexually attractive and precocious girl, and 'nymphomania' (of women), insatiable sexual desire
**Odyssey:** Greek epic poem, ascribed to Homer, describing the wanderings of Odysseus (Ulysses) after the Trojan War; so any long wandering
**Oedipus:** king of Thebes who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother; hence 'Oedipus complex', describing a son's hostility to his father and intense love of his mother
**Olympia:** place where the original Olympic games were held
**Olympiad:** originally the period of four years between Olympic games; now a celebration of the modern games or other international contest
**Olympian:** godlike person; competitor in games
**Olympic games (Olympics):** international athletic and other contests held every four years since 1896, a revival of the original Greek games
**Olympus:** mountain where the Greek gods lived, heaven
**Orphean:** melodious – from the musician Orpheus whose lyre-playing could move inanimate objects
**Pan:** Greek god of pastures, flocks and woods, worshipped in Arcadia, fond of music
**Pandora:** the first woman, who opened a box she was given, releasing all the ills of human life
**Pantheon:** temple of all the gods; complete mythology
**Parnassus:** Greek mountain sacred to Apollo and the Muses
**Parthenon:** temple of Athene on the Acropolis in Athens
**Parthian shot:** arrow fired on the turn by Parthian warrior; hence 'parting shot'
**Pegasus:** winged horse that sprang from Medusa's blood; hence 'a flight of inspiration or genius'
**Periclean:** of the Athenian golden age of Pericles
**Phaedra complex:** difficult relationship between step-parent and son/daughter – from Phaedra who killed herself after being rejected by her stepson

**Philippics:** three orations by Demosthenes of Athens against Philip of Macedon
**platonic:** refers to the philosophy of Plato, particularly the idea of love between souls without sexual feeling
**Poseidon:** the Greek sea god
**Priapus:** Greek and Roman god of procreation; hence priapic (of men), obsessed with sex
**Prometheus:** he stole fire from heaven so Zeus chained him to a rock
**protean:** assuming different shapes and sizes – from the Greek sea god Proteus
**pyrrhic victory:** one achieved at too great a cost as by Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, over the Romans
**Rubicon:** a stream that marked the boundary between Julius Caesar's province of Cisalpine Gaul and Italy – when he crossed it he effectively declared war on Rome; hence 'to cross the Rubicon' is to take a decisive, irrevocable step
**Sapphic:** refers to the Greek woman poet Sappho of Lesbos who was said to be homosexual
**Saturn:** Roman god of agriculture, whose festival in December, the Saturnalia, was the occasion for unrestrained merrymaking; and the planet that was believed to induce a melancholy temperament – hence saturnine, gloomy
**satyr:** Greek god of the woodlands with tail and long ears, depicted by the Romans as part-goat; a lecherous man
**Scylla and Charybdis:** two monsters that occupied the two sides of the Straits of Messina between Italy and Sicily; hence 'between Scylla and Charybdis' means a perilous route in which avoiding one danger brings the traveller closer to the other
**siren:** fascinating woman, bewitching singer – from the sirens, sea nymphs whose seductive songs lured sailors to their deaths; hence 'a warning signal'
**Sisyphean:** refers to Sisyphus, King of Corinth, who was condemned to roll a stone up a hill – as it neared the top it would roll down again; hence a laborious and futile task
**Socratic:** refers to the philosophy and teaching method of the philosopher Socrates – based on asking a series of simple questions
**sophistry:** specious or fallacious reasoning – from the sophists who taught in Greece
**sop to Cerberus:** the drugged food given to Cerberus to enable Aeneas to enter Hades; hence something to appease, a bribe
**Spartacist:** follower of Spartacus who led a slave revolt against Rome; hence German communist in the 1918 revolution
**spartan:** tough, austere, militaristic – from the Greek city of Sparta
**sphinx:** monster in Greek mythology with the head of a woman and the body of a lion, which asked travellers riddles – then strangled those that could not solve them; also Egyptian stone figure, particularly the huge enigmatic-looking one near the pyramids at Giza; hence 'a mysterious person or thing'

**stentorian:** loud, powerful (voice) – from Stentor, a Greek herald in the Iliad
**stoic(al):** indifferent to pleasure or pain – from the Stoics of Athens
**Stygian:** black, gloomy – from the Styx, one of the rivers of Hades
**sword of Damocles:** see *Damocles*
**Sybarite:** lover of luxury – from Sybaris, a Greek city in ancient Italy
**Thebes:** name of the capital of both ancient Boeotia in Greece and Upper Egypt
**thespian:** jocular word for actor – from Thespis, the founder of Greek tragedy
**Titan:** one of a family of giants, the offspring of Uranus (heaven) and Gaea (earth); hence a person of great strength; also the sun god
**triumvirate:** rule by three men – originally of Rome by Pompey, Crassus and Caesar
**Trojan:** solid, dependable, courageous person – from the citizens of Troy
**Trojan horse:** huge wooden horse in which the Greeks hid to enter the city of Troy; hence fifth columnist and computer program that by subterfuge breaches the security of a system in order to damage it
**Ulysses:** Latin name for Greek hero Odysseus
**Venus:** Roman goddess of love and the most brilliant planet
**vestal:** refers to Roman goddess Vesta; vestal virgins kept the sacred fire burning on her altar
**wooden horse:** see *Trojan horse*
**zephyr:** west wind, especially as personified as a god; soft, gentle breeze
**Zeus:** the greatest of the Greek gods

## Mistakes

> We can't supply our troops in Iraq with working radios or a legal causus belli. (column)

'Causus' should be 'casus'.

> Anyone who denies that the British class system is the most complex and unfathomable in the world will need to establish from John why a fibbing Fettes alumni has produced such a diametrically opposite reaction in him. (column)

'Alumni' (plural) should be 'alumnus' (singular)

> This was the 1960s, remember, and rebels with or without a cause were de jour for a good few of us. (feature)

'De jour' is baffling – neither French nor recognised franglais. Should it be 'de rigueur'?

> 'It reminded me of the wonderful films noir ...' (column)

'Noir' should be 'noirs' (to agree with films).

> The Burberry check had become the ultimate symbol of nouveau rich naff. (feature)

'Rich' (English) should be 'riche' (French).

> When it opened in 1992, my play Oleanna was a *succes de scandal*, a handy French phrase meaning everyone was so enraged by it that everyone had to see it. (feature by playwright David Mamet)

The handy French phrase is in fact 'succes de scandale' (scandal being English).

> It is considered de classe to make distinctions within low-brow culture. (column)

'De classé' should be 'déclassé'.

> If the woman could make pigeon fois gras ... (column)

'Fois' (time) should be 'foie' (liver).

> Couples were squabbling over whether to have moules marinieres with garlic butter ... (feature)

'Marinieres' should be 'marinière' (short for 'à la marinière').

> There are 14 English restaurants in the world top 50, the same number as provided by those self-appointed custodians of haute and bas cuisine, France and Italy, put together. (feature)

'Bas' should be 'basse' (to agree with cuisine, as haute does).

> Too high, if you believe what Hutton himself is said to have told confidantes. (feature)

Why 'confidantes' not 'confidants'? Does Hutton speak only to women?

> A former technical college awarded full university status in 1966, Aston was the surprise debutante in the Top 20 of this year's Guardian university league tables. (feature)

'Debutante' should be 'debutant' since universities are not feminine.

> As well as entree-sized salads, McDonalds introduced all white meat Chicken McNuggets ... (feature)

This, written in New York but published in a London newspaper, will be misunderstood by many readers whose 'entrée' is their first, not their main, course.

> According to the Old Testament, on the other hand, anyone who so much as glimpses a parent *en déshabillé* should promptly be stoned to death. (book review)

The writer wants 'en deshabillé' to mean naked but in French it means partly dressed.

> A wife whose 'rack', as certain Americans are pleased to call an *embonpoint*, he refers to openly as 'the franchise'. 'At age 34, her breasts still had market value ... ' (book review)

So we're talking about a woman's breasts. But the English reviewer shoots himself in the foot by objecting to 'rack' and 'franchise' in the name of 'embonpoint', a pretentious misuse (it means a fat tummy).

# 12
# Figures

Figures are a minefield for journalists. Some find simple arithmetic difficult. Others, having grasped the point of a story involving figures, seem determined to inflict every minor detail on the reader. Journalists often exaggerate the importance of anything to do with figures and fail to apply their critical faculties to claims based on them.

What cannot be overstated is the need for journalists to be numerate as well as literate. Figures, after all, are facts expressed in numerical terms. If you cannot understand percentages, how can you expect to write an accurate story about them?

If, in 2021, 20 per cent of British people go to the cinema at least once, and in 2022, 25 per cent go, that is *not* an increase of 5 per cent. It is an increase of a quarter of the original figure – that is, an increase of 25 per cent.

Here I have deliberately gone back a stage from the percentage to the fraction to make the point easier to understand. When writing a story, though, you should not mix different ways of expressing figures – percentages and fractions, say – to make the copy more interesting to read. The effect will be confusion.

Percentages and probabilities can be very misleading in health stories. Say that out of 100 men in their 50s with normal cholesterol, four will be expected to have a heart attack, whereas out of 100 men of the same age with high cholesterol, six will be expected to have a heart attack. That's either two more than four, so an increase of 50 per cent, or it's two more out of 100, so an increase of 2 per cent – either a dramatic increase or a modest one. It makes more sense to communicate risk by using normal numbers than percentages.

If a typical basket of goods costs £1 in year one, £1.10 a year later and £1.20 a year after that, then a retail price index of 100 in year one will be 110 in year two and 120 in year three. The index has risen by ten points in both years.

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This is how changes in stock market indexes, where the goods in the basket are shares, are usually reported.

Changes in retail prices tend to be reported in terms of percentage change. For the basket in our example the index has risen by 10 per cent from year one to year two, but the increase from year two to year three is a little under 9.1 per cent – the result of dividing 10p (the increase in price) by £1.10 (the price at the start of the year) and then multiplying by 100. The percentage increase in retail prices is one measure of inflation.

Note that although prices have risen in both years of the example – and by exactly the same cash amount – the rate of inflation has *fallen* in the second year.

Always remember that figures can be interpreted in different ways. Suppose that a survey appears to show that one road accident in four is alcohol-related. In following up the story it may be worth considering the point that – apparently – three accidents in four are *not* alcohol-related.

Be sceptical about polls. Before writing a story based on an opinion poll, ask yourself what the questions asked really mean.

All polls based on a sample are subject to what statisticians call a margin of error and other people might call variability in their results. If a poll is repeated, the results will be different each time, even if not a single person changes their views.

In a typical political poll where the real answer is that half the population take a particular view, impeccable pollsters will find that most of the time their results show the figure to be between 47 per cent and 53 per cent with a tendency towards the 50 mark. Thus two polls taken a month apart could report a 6 per cent difference without anybody changing their mind. Similarly, two polls showing a figure of 50 per cent could be describing populations where the true figures were 47 and 53 per cent.

So it makes little sense for journalists to make big stories out of small changes in what the polls are showing.

Even perfectly managed polls will sometimes produce results that lie outside the typical 3 per cent margin of error. This is not an accident: it is exactly what statistics expects. Results like these are often called 'rogue polls'. It is when you get a rogue poll – crying out for sensational treatment because the results are so dramatic – that you need to be most cautious.

Percentage swing is the number of people in 100 changing sides. If 7 per cent of the population switch from party A to party B, the swing is 7 per cent to party B. Party B's vote goes up 7 per cent and party A's down 7 per cent, so the gap

between the parties changes by 14 per cent. That's why it takes only a 7 per cent swing to overturn a 14 per cent majority.

Take care with averages. An average tends to be somewhere in the middle of a set of figures. It is not news to write:

> Almost 50 per cent of British people have shorter than average holidays.

So too with the IQ scale whose midpoint is 100 – about half of us must have an IQ score lower than 100.

Avoid such technical terms as 'mean', 'median' and 'percentile' unless you are writing for a technical journal.

In general, percentages are harder to cope with than fractions – and fractions are harder than whole numbers. So wherever possible say 'one person in 10' rather than '10 per cent' or 'one tenth'.

With money prefer whole figures to decimals – £900,000 not £0.9m – but prefer decimals to fractions. In English decimals take a full point: 12.5. And, except in technical journals, figures greater than 999 take commas: 1,000.

In the house style of most publications figures start at 10 – but avoid mixing figures and words: write '9–10 people' not 'nine–10'.

Never start a sentence – still less a paragraph – with a figure since it looks ugly and creates typographical problems. So instead of:

> '14 people died when …'

write:

> 'Fourteen people died when …'

Don't solve the problem by writing:

> 'About 14 people died when …'

Indeed always avoid approximating precise figures as in:

> About 43.3 per cent'/'Around 123 people'

And don't use such phrases as 'a substantial number', 'a significant minority', 'a large proportion', 'a high percentage of the population': they are empty words pretending to be impressive and/or precise.

Get dates right. 'Between' must be followed by 'and'; 'from' by 'to'. Do not write 'between 1914–18' or 'from 1914–1918'. Instead write either 'in 1914–18'

or 'between 1914 and 1918' or 'from 1914 to 1918'. That makes it possible to write:

> German rearmament took place between 1914–18 and 1939–45.

Should it be first/firstly, second/secondly? The shorter form is preferable but there is nothing wrong with the longer form – check your house style.

The British billion was once worth a million million. Now, as in the United States, it is worth only a thousand million.

Figures are hard to read. Do not litter your copy with them – unless you are writing for a technical journal. Even there, consider taking most of the figures out of the copy and putting them in a box or table.

Finally, do use a calculator to check figures – don't take other people's arithmetic on trust.

# Appendix 1
# Style guide

**a** (not an) historian, hotel etc (but **an** heir, honour etc)

**abbreviations**: units of measure to be abbreviated and set close-up: a 30m drop, 120kph, a 5kg hammer. But not distances and sums of money: he fell 20 metres; it cost £1 million

- Most organisations should be written out in full when first mentioned (the World Health Organisation), then abbreviated (the WHO) but note: the BBC, the IRA. Abbreviations do not take a full point. see also *acronyms*

**accents**: keep accents on words of French origin to distinguish résumé from resume, pâté from pate etc
**achilles heel/tendon** (no cap or apostrophe)
**acknowledgement** (not acknowledgment)
**acronyms**: some abbreviations are spoken and written as words with initial cap: Nato, Aids
**adaptation** (not adaption)
**addenda** is the plural of addendum
**adrenalin** (not adrenaline)
**adviser** (not advisor) but **advisory**
**affect** (to influence) is confused with **effect** (to accomplish)
**ageing** (not aging)
**agendas** is the plural of agenda
**aggravate**: use to mean make worse, not annoy
**aircraft/airplane** (not aeroplane)
**alibi**: use to mean being elsewhere, not excuse
**all right** (not alright)
**Americanisms**: write in British English (lift not elevator, pavement not sidewalk, envisage not envision) but modern British

children are raised more often than brought up and usually play with toy trucks rather than lorries

**amid** (not amidst)

**amok** (not amuck)

**among** (not amongst)

**ampersand (&)**: use only in company names

**anticipate**: make use of in advance/expect – avoid

**apostrophes**: words like men, women and children are plural so the apostrophe goes before the s: children's. In names of places and organisations, follow their practice unless it is obviously illiterate: so write Harrods, Sainsbury's but never womens or womens'. Add an extra s after the apostrophe only if it is sounded: St Thomas's but Pythagoras'

**appendixes** is the plural of appendix (both in books and in the body)

**approx(imately)**: prefer **about**

**arguably**: prefer possibly/probably

**around**: prefer **about**

**artist** (not artiste)

**assure** (to give confidence to) is confused with **ensure** (to make happen) and **insure** (to arrange insurance)

**bail** (court, cricket)/**bail out** (company, water from boat)

**bale** (straw)/**bale out** (of airplane)

**balk** (not baulk)

**barbecue** (not barbeque or bar-b-q: prefer bbq)

**beaus** is the plural of beau (meaning boyfriend)

**beg the question**: now often used to mean raise the question – avoid

**benefited** (not benefitted)

**biased** (not biassed)

**block** (not bloc)

**blond(e)**: women are blonde(s); men are blond; women and men have blond hair

**bogey** (one over par at golf)/**bogie** (railway trolley)/**bogy** (goblin)

**bored**: use by/with (not of)

**Brit**: avoid except in quotes

**bureaus** is the plural of bureau (desk) but **bureaux** is the plural of bureau (office)

**burnt** (not burned)

**bused/busing** (not bussed/bussing)

**Canute (King)**: *see* **clichés**

**canvas** (paint)/**canvass** (for votes)

**CAPS/lower case**: if in doubt, prefer lower case – second world war, prime minister
**capsize** is an exception to the -ise rule
**caviar** (not caviare)
**celibate**: nowadays means abstaining from sex more often than it means unmarried but a Catholic priest's vow of celibacy refers to marriage
**censor** (prevent publication) is confused with **censure** (criticise)
**centre**: use in/on (not around/round)
**chateau(x)**: the circumflex is no longer necessary
**chauvinist**: absurdly nationalistic/sexist – use with care
**chronic**: use to mean recurrent, not 'very bad'
**clichés**: try to avoid using them. Never use the ones that people generally get wrong, eg the curate's egg, Frankenstein, Hobson's choice and King Canute
**cohort**: group of people/individual colleague – avoid
**collective nouns** take either singular or plural verbs (the team is/are) but don't change suddenly from one to the other
**combat** (verb)/**combated/ing** (not combatted/ing) – but use only in quotes: otherwise use fight/fought/fighting
**commence**: use **begin** or **start**
**compare to** (for something completely different – Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?) is confused with **compare with** (like with like – last year's figures with this year's)
**conjunctions** can start sentences. And this is an example. But don't overdo it.

- If you start a sentence with a conjunction like because or while, make it a complete sentence with a main clause.

**connection** (not connexion)
**contemporary**: belonging to the same time/modern – use with care
**continual** (recurring with breaks) is confused with **continuous** (without a break)
**courtesy titles**: don't use Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms, Mme, Mlle. Call people John Smith or Marie Duval the first time you refer to them, then John/Marie or Smith/Duval according to context
**criteria** is the plural of criterion
**curate's egg**: *see* **clichés**
**currently**: use **now**
**cut** (noun – not cutback) but to cut back (verb)

**cuttings** (press – not clippings)
**data**: use as both singular (not datum) and plural
**dates**: 20 March 1942 (no th or commas); the 1960s (no apostrophe)

- Don't combine from or between with a dash: write from 1940 to 1945, between 1940 and 1945 or 1940–45, not from 1940–45 or between 1940–1945

**debacle**: no accent
**decimate**: kill 1 in 10/destroy large numbers/annihilate – avoid
**deserts** (runs away, sandy places, what is deserved) is confused with **desserts** (puddings)
**détente**: include accent
**dexterous** (not dextrous)
**dicy** (not dicey)
**dice**: use as both singular (not die) and plural
**differ/different**: use from/to (not than)
**dike** (not dyke)
**dilemma**: use to mean awkward choice between two, not problem
**discomfit**: avoid
**discreet** (prudent) is confused with **discrete** (separate)
**disfranchise** (not disenfranchise)
**disinterested**: impartial/bored – avoid
**disk** for computers
**disc** for everything else
**dispatch** (not despatch)
**dissociate** (not disassociate)
**dos and don'ts**: only one apostrophe
**dotcom** (not dot-com, dot.com)
**double negatives**: except in quotes avoid both the comic-colloquial (I don't know nothing about it) and the pompous (I am not unmindful of your wishes)
**draft** (sketch, money order)/**draught** (beer, depth for ships)
**dreamt** (not dreamed)
**due to**: should follow a noun or pronoun as in 'The cancellation was due to bad weather'. Instead of 'The train was cancelled due to bad weather' write 'The train was cancelled because of bad weather'
**duffel** (not duffle)
**dwarfs** (not dwarves) is the plural of dwarf, except in Tolkien's fantasy world

**dying** (a death)/**dyeing** (a jumper)
**economic** (about economics)/**economical** (thrifty)
**effect**: *see* **affect**
**eg**: comma before but not after; no full stops
**egregious**: distinguished/notorious – avoid
**email** (not e-mail)
**encyclopedia** (not encyclopaedia)
**ensure**: *see* **assure**
**envisage** (not envision)
**etc**: no commas, no full stop
**expatriate** (not ex-patriot – unless they've stopped loving their country)
**fed up**: with (not of)
**fetus** (not foetus)
**fewer/less**: if there are fewer trees there will be less wood
**figures**: *see* **numbers**
**flaunt** (display) is confused with **flout** (treat with contempt)
**focused/focusing** (not focussed/focussing)
**folk**, meaning people, also has the plural form folks; for the possessive use folks' (old folks' home)
**following**: if you mean after, use after
**forbear** (abstain)/**forebear** (ancestor)
**forceful** (energetic) is confused with **forcible** (done by force)
**forego** (go before)/**forgo** (do without)
**format**(verb)/**formatted/formatting**: use only for computers
**formulas** is the plural of formula
**franglais**: avoid misuses of French in English (eg embonpoint, which does not mean ample bosom but fat tummy)
**Frankenstein**: *see* **clichés**
**freelance** (not freelancer)
**further** (not farther, even for distance)
**gaff** (hook to catch a fish, room or flat)/**gaffe** (blunder)
**gay**: use to mean homosexual, not light-hearted
**geezer** (bloke)/**geyser** (spring)
**geriatric**: use to mean relating to care of the old, not old
**graffiti** is the plural of graffito
**grey** (not gray)
**grisly** (horrible)/**grizzly** (kind of bear)
**handkerchiefs** is the plural of handkerchief
**hangar** (shed)/**hanger** (for clothes)

**hello** (not hallo, hullo)
**hiccup** (not hiccough)
**historic** (famous)/**historical** (about history)
**hi-tech** (not high-tech)
**hoard** (hidden stock)/**horde** (multitude)
**Hobson's choice**: *see* **clichés**
**hoi polloi, plebs** etc: don't use these derogatory expressions, except ironically
**holy** (sacred)/**holey** (full of holes)
**hurrah** (not hooray) but Hooray Henry
**hyphens**: use them to make meaning clear: extra-marital sex; a black-cab driver/black cab-driver; a close-knit group. Do not use after -ly adverbs: instead prefer a closely knit group. When you hyphenate to mark word breaks, avoid a succession of hyphens and break words into their constituent parts. Avoid unintentional words, eg anal-ysis
**I/me**: prefer 'Fred and I were there' to 'Fred and me were there'; 'It's me' to 'It is I'; 'between you and me' to 'between you and I'
**ie**: comma before but not after; no full stops
**imply** (suggest) is confused with **infer** (deduce)
**inchoate**: unformed/incoherent – avoid
**infer**: *see* **imply**
**infinitives** may be preceded by adverbs if necessary (It's difficult to really get to know somebody) but always ask yourself whether the adverb is necessary
**initials**: use people's first names unless they are publicly known by their initials; then set them in caps without full points or spaces: PD James. But note: ee cummings; kd lang
**inquire/y** (not enquire/y)
**install/installation/instalment**
**instil/instillation/instilment**
**insure**: *see* **assure**
**-ise** (not -ize) in words like **realise** and **apologise,** but not **capsize**
**italics**: use for the titles of newspapers, periodicals, books, plays, films, one-off broadcasts, serials and series. In newspaper titles 'The' stays in roman type, lower case, with the town or city of publication included for clarity: in a London publication the *Times* but the New York *Times*, the Portsmouth *News*, etc. In periodical titles 'The' stays in roman type, lower case: the

*Economist*, the *Journalist*. All other titles are given in full: *The Merchant of Venice*

- Also use italics *rarely* (rather than caps or screamers) for emphasis

**jail** (not gaol)
**jargon**: try to translate technical terms into English
**jewellery** (not jewelry)
**judgment** (not judgement)
**laisser-faire** (not laissez-faire)
**lay/lie**: lay the table and lie on the floor
**leapt** (not leaped)
**learnt** (not learned) as verb; use learned (meaning knowledgeable) as adjective
**lend, to** not to loan
**less**: *see* **fewer**
**leukemia** (not leukaemia)
**lie**: *see* **lay**
**like**: distinguish between the following:

1 like used to compare: Fruit trees are like flowers: they need water. Where appropriate, use commas to mark a parenthesis: Fruit trees, like flowers, need water.
2 like used instead of such as – don't use commas: Fruit trees like the cherry need pruning.
3 like used as a pause word in colloquial quotes (nowhere else) – do use commas: 'I'm, like, a singer'. (The speaker means they are a singer: take the commas away and it becomes a comparison.)

**likeable** (not likable)
**linage** (payment by the line)/**lineage** (ancestry)
**linchpin** (not lynchpin)
**lovable** (not loveable)
**mantel/mantelpiece** (above the fireplace)/**mantle** (cloak)
**marijuana** (not marihuana)
**masterful** (dominating) is confused with **masterly** (skilful)
**may/might**: 'First aid may have saved him' means that he may be alive. To show that we know he's dead, it must be: 'First aid might have saved him.'
**me**: *see* **I**

**media** is the plural of medium meaning radio or the press, but it can also be singular, as in 'The media is dominated by Oxbridge'
**medieval** (not mediaeval)
**mediums** is the plural of medium meaning spiritualist
**metal** (such as gold)/**mettle** (courage)
**meter** (gauge)/**metre** (measure)
**might**: *see* **may**
**mileage** (not milage)
**militate** (contend) is confused with **mitigate** (soften)
**movable** (not moveable except in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*)
**Muslim** (not Moslem)
**naivety** (not naiveté)
**no one**: not no-one
**none** takes either a singular or a plural verb; the plural often sounds more natural: 'None of our problems have been solved'
**nosy** (not nosey)
**numbers**: one to nine are written as words and figures start at 10; but 9–10, not nine–10

- Percentages are always in figures: 6.5 per cent; 1 per cent
- Figures above 999 take commas: 1,760
- Decimals take a full point: 17.6

**OK** (not okay)
**only** should go as near as possible to the word or phrase it refers to: 'She arrived only last week. But we can live with 'I'm only here for the beer'
**orientate** (not orient)
**paediatrician/paedophile** (not pediatrician/pedophile)
**participles**: when dangling, watch your participles. This is the commonest mistake in modern journalism. 'Born in Brixton, his father was a trapeze artist.' Who?
**pedaller** (cyclist)/**pedlar** (hawker)/**peddler** (drug dealer)
**people** is mainly used as the plural of person (the people's champion) but it is also used as a singular noun to mean nation; then its plural is peoples (possessive: peoples')
**phenomena** is the plural of phenomenon
**phoney** (not phony)
**plebs**: *see* **hoi polloi**
**prepositions** can end sentences – what else are you thinking of?

**prescribe** (lay down) is confused with **proscribe** (prohibit)
**pressurise** (not pressure) as verb
**prevaricate** (evade the truth) is confused with **procrastinate** (defer action)
**preventive** (not preventative)
**pricy** (not pricey)
**principal** (main or head)/**principle** (basis)
**pristine**: original/new – avoid
**processor** (not processer)
**procrastinate**: *see* **prevaricate**
**program** for computers, **programme** for everything else
**proscribe**: *see* **prescribe**
**protagonist**: chief actor/any person or character/person in favour – don't use
**protester** (not protestor)
**proven**: use as adjective (a proven liar) but not as verb: he was **proved** (not proven) wrong
**queries** (question marks): include after rhetorical questions
**quotes**: in text use single quotes with double inside single; in headlines use single quotes

- Please don't start stories with quotes
- Introduce full-sentence quotes with a colon not a comma
- Edit quotes when necessary (a) to shorten (b) to clarify (c) to remove bad grammar, but *never* change the meaning

**realise** (not realize)
**rebut**: deny, argue against, show to be false – avoid
**redundancy/repetition/saying it twice/tautology**: whatever you call it don't write 'They were both talking to each other'
**refute**: deny, show to be false – avoid
**register** (not registry) **office** for marriage
**regularly**: use to mean at regular intervals, not as a synonym for often
**relative/relation** (for family): use either – but not both close together
**religion**: use caps for Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic (not Roman Catholic), Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant etc

- Give Anglican clerics their courtesy title the first time you refer to them: the Rev John/Mary Smith. Then call them John/Mary or Smith according to context; never call anyone the Rev Smith

**repetition**: see **redundancy**

**reticent**: use to mean reluctant to speak, not reluctant to act
**review** (critical notice)/**revue** (theatrical show)
**rise** (in prices – not hike)
**saying it twice**: *see* **redundancy**
**screamers** (!!!): avoid if possible
**sensual** (physically gratifying) is confused with **sensuous** (affecting the senses)
**singing** (a song)/**singeing** (a beard)
**smelt** (not smelled)
**smidgen** (not smidgeon)
**spelling**: use British not American spelling

- For words not given in this style guide follow Chambers, using the first spelling given

**spelt** (not spelled)
**spicy** (not spicey)
**spoilt** (not spoiled)
**stadiums** is the plural of stadium
**story** (tale)/**storey** (in building)
**straitjacket** (not straightjacket)
**sufficient**: use enough
**swap** (not swop)
**swathe** (not swath)
**swinging** (from a tree)/**swingeing** (savage)
**tautology**: *see* **redundancy**
**they** is better than he/she, he or she used alternately where the sex of the person is not specified: Anyone can come if they want to
**tortuous** (difficult) is confused with **torturous** (like torture)
**trade** (not trades) **union** but **Trades Union Congress**
**trade names**: unless a trade name is important to the story, always use an equivalent term, eg vacuum cleaner for Hoover, ball-point pen for Biro, photocopier for Xerox
**transatlantic** (not transAtlantic)
**tsar** (not czar)
**T-shirt** (not tee-shirt)
**tyre** (not tire)
**UK** without the 'the' ('I'm going back to UK tomorrow') is expat jargon: avoid except in quotes
**verbal**: use to mean spoken (as in verbal agreement)

**wagon** (not waggon)
**wagons-lits** is the plural of wagon-lit
**waiver** (renunciation)/**waver** (vacillate)
**while** (not whilst)
**whisky** (not whiskey – unless Irish or American is specified)
**who/whom**: use either 'Whom did you invite?' or 'Who did you invite?' Never write 'Whom did you say was there?'

## Appendix 2
# The 'fronted adverbial' muddle

During the Covid pandemic of 2020–22 many British parents were on lockdown duty as emergency teaching assistants, some of them confronted for the first time by the current grammar jargon of linguistics and primary-school English including expressions like 'modal verbs' and 'relative pronoun cohesion'. The journalists, translators and other professional writers among them expressed their confusion and frustration in print and online. For example, Eliane Glaser, a freelance and the mother of two primary school children, reported in *Prospect* magazine* that eight- and nine-year-olds were now expected to know all about 'noun phrases expanded by the addition of modifying adjectives, preposition phrases, fronted adverbials and determiners', adding: 'I don't even know what some of these terms mean and I've got a PhD in English.'

Of all these terms the 'fronted adverbial' has been a particular source of bafflement. According to the current national curriculum for Key Stage 2 children in year 4, aged 8–9: 'Pupils should be taught to develop their understanding of the concepts set out in English Appendix 2 by … using fronted adverbials … [and] … indicate grammatical and other features by using commas after fronted adverbials.'

So what's it all about? First, what's an 'adverbial' and what's the difference between it and an old-fashioned adverb? Bas Aarts, who is professor of English linguistics at University College London, has a blog called Grammarianism** in which he comments on the issues raised by the national curriculum and answers queries, particularly from teachers. He writes: 'adverb is a grammatical form label (more specifically, a word class label), whereas Adverbial is a grammatical function label (and hence spelled with a capital letter on this blog).'

* 'Present imperfect', April 2021.
** grammarism.wordpress.com.

So an adverb can be an 'adverbial' and so can a variety of phrases and clauses that have a similar function. I follow the logic of adopting a particular word to show this function but unfortunately the word 'adverbial' is also used in the terminology of traditional grammar as the adjective derived from the word 'adverb', for example in the expression 'adverbial phrase'. Confusion between the two uses is inevitable.* A further confusion is that some definitions of 'phrase' seem to include 'clauses', whereas in traditional grammar a clause has a verb and a phrase doesn't.

Aarts continues:

> What is a fronted Adverbial? This is simply an Adverbial that is placed at the start of a sentence, as in the following examples:
>
> Over the last few weeks, the train company has apologised several times for the delays.
>
> Last month, we went to the beach.
>
> Before the match finished, the stadium emptied.
>
> (Something to be aware of: the national curriculum insists that children write a comma after a fronted Adverbial.)

But what is the point of 'fronting'? Aarts explains: 'The italicised phases normally occur later in the sentence, so a question that arises here is this: "Why would we want to put Adverbials at the start of a sentence?" The answer is that fronted Adverbials highlight the phrases that have been placed initially, and hence they can be a useful device for writers to draw their readers' attention to this part of a sentence.'

So in rather clumsy and repetitious language we have the simple idea that what comes first has more impact than it would later in the sentence. But is this always true? Aren't some common initial words and phrases – last month, yesterday, on Sundays – the exact opposite of dramatic? Informative certainly but 'perfunctory' would surely be a more accurate term. And can't you also achieve impact in a sentence by a powerful ending? (Logically then, we would have to talk about 'backed adverbials' as well as fronted ones – and 'centred' adverbials too for the cases where they occur in mid-sentence.)

When a fairy story begins 'Once upon a time' that expression is merely a sign that what follows is in fact a fairy story, just as years ago young listeners to the

* See a lucid discussion of this and various other 'fronting' issues by Brian Richards, professor of education at the Institute of Education, in Affronted Adverbials, available at www.researchgate.net.

radio programme *Listen with Mother* settled down to the familiar words 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.'

And what about powerful endings to sentences? Here's the children's master story teller Roald Dahl early in his book about a friendly giant, The BFG: 'He was running so fast his black cloak was streaming out behind him like the wings of a bird.' And a line or two later: 'A wide river appeared in his path. He crossed it in one flying stride.' No doubt about where the impact is in these examples. So should the 8–9-year-olds be expected in an exercise to bring these phases forward to 'highlight' them, thus 'correcting' Roald Dahl? I think not.

Now consider two questions you might put to a boy or girl: 'What do you do on Saturdays?' and 'When do you play football?' The answer to the first might be 'I play football' or, more formally, 'On Saturdays I play football' and to the second 'On Saturdays' or, more formally, 'I play football on Saturdays'. Here the order of the words in the reply is determined not by a straining for effect but by deciding what the reader/listener wants/needs to know next. I think this logical principle is relevant both for those learning to write and for those writing (or rewriting) for publication. As the late, great wordsmith Clive James said of his first editorial job on the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'Apart from the invaluable parsing lessons at school, these months doing rewrites were probably the best practical training I ever received...writing is essentially a matter of saying things in the right order.'*

In his blog Bas Aarts does add to his main point about impact, saying that 'fronted Adverbials' also offer writers 'the opportunity to vary their sentence structures', and he cautions against over use of them, specifying 'box-ticking'. Alas, to judge from the various educational websites advising parents, it looks as though 'box-ticking' is very much the name of the game.

Here are some examples of sentences including 'adverbials' given by one prominent site** for primary-school parents:

We met by the train station.
He stood and waited under the clock.
The rabbit hopped as fast as it could.
She danced all night long.
He ate his breakfast before the sun came up.

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* *Unreliable Memoirs*, Jonathan Cape, 1980.

** www.theschoolrun.com, owned and run by 'mums working from home', whose 'resources are written by experienced primary school teachers'.

And the same sentences with the 'adverbials' fronted:

By the train station, we met.
Under the clock, he stood and waited.
As fast as it could, the rabbit hopped.
All night long, she danced.
Before the sun came up, he ate his breakfast.

Apart from 'box-ticking' what is the point of reversing the order of these sentences? As they stand they seem to make sense and sound natural. In fact, how can we decide whether it's a good idea or not to reverse the order of them unless we have a context, above all unless we know what comes immediately before the quoted sentence? Several of the rewritten examples (As fast as it could, the rabbit hopped.) sound distinctly odd, though one of them (By the train station, we met.) echoes the title of a literary masterpiece: *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, Elizabeth Smart's celebrated prose-poem novel. But in that example, you'll notice, the 'adverbial' introduces a dramatic statement, whereas the rewritten one above (By the train station, we met) is the epitome of bathos. Indeed you could argue that it illustrates as well as anything could that it's often a very bad idea to start a sentence with an 'adverbial'.

If all this begins to sound like academic jargon leading to pointless exercises, there is another serious criticism to be made – that is, of the instruction to introduce commas after 'fronting'. First, there is confusion about whether this is to be done in all cases or whether the pupil is expected to decide whether a comma is needed. The quote from the national curriculum seems to suggest that commas are obligatory – and Bas Aarts agrees. However, this is such a ludicrous idea that most people take refuge in some kind of contradictory-sounding compromise. Here's what www.theschoolrun.com says: 'A comma is normally used after an adverbial (but there are plenty of exceptions to this rule).'

But the real objection is that in English punctuation, as developed and adapted through the centuries, there is no such 'rule': it's an artificial academic invention. In fact let's go further: I don't think I'd employ as an editor somebody who wanted to put a comma after 'station' in the Smart title quoted above. We could digress for pages discussing the various ways in which commas should or shouldn't be used after 'adverbials', but that would be pointless and silly. It's enough to point out that in numerous straightforward examples accessible to children a comma is not in fact used after an 'adverbial'. Thus the sharp, observant, literate child is liable to see the classroom exercise not merely as box-ticking but as nonsense.

Earlier I quoted the familiar 'Once upon a time', a phrase that routinely introduces fairy stories. It's used in about a third of the examples anthologised in *The Fairy Tale Treasury*.*** In not a single one is there a comma after the word time. OK, that's only 50 or so years ago; perhaps there used to be a comma; perhaps once upon a time there was. Alas, no. A number of the stories in the Treasury were collected by Joseph Jacobs and originally published in 1890 as *English Folk Tales* – even in the 19th century there was no comma after time.

Also, did you spot all the 'fronted adverbials' in the previous paragraph? A negative expression like 'In not a single one' would never be followed by a comma (unless it was necessary to mark a parenthesis) but it does require the inversion of subject and verb ('is there' instead of 'there is'). Whereas sentence adverbs – hopefully used to show what the speaker/writer thinks (it won't rain, hopefully), as opposed to the ordinary use of the adverb in the expression 'to travel hopefully' (that is, the traveller is full of hope) – do need a comma to emphasise their function: to show that they are sentence adverbs rather than ordinary ones. And so on: interesting stuff – but for 8–9-year-olds starting to write?

It remains to be seen whether the 'fronted adverbial' and similar terminology spread out from academe into the mainstream. For now, as one *Times* reader commented in an online debate, writers and subs will be more concerned with whether a participle, say, is 'hanging' or 'dangling' than whether it's been 'fronted', appropriately or not.

*** Hamish Hamilton, 1972.

# Appendix 3
# Glossary of terms

Journalism is rich in jargon. Some of it comes from printing (book for magazine); or survives from the pre-computer age (spike for rejected copy); or is imported from the United States (clippings for cuttings). It is often punchy and graphic (ambush, bust, fireman). But if it crops up in copy (eg in stories about the media) the sub will usually have to change it (replace 'story' by 'report') or explain it (after 'chapel' insert 'office branch' in brackets). The obvious exception is in publications for journalists such as *Press Gazette* and the *Journalist*. Many thanks to Gavin Allen for help with updating the glossary.

**ABC**: Audit Bureau of Circulations – source of independently verified circulation figures
**ad**: advertisement
**add**: extra copy to add to existing story
**advance**: 1 text of speech or statement issued to journalists beforehand; 2 expenses paid before a trip
**advertorial**: advertisement presented as editorial
**agencies**: news agencies, eg Press Association and Reuters
**aggregator**: see *news aggregator*
**agony column**: regular advice given on personal problems sent in by readers; hence agony aunt
**ambush**: journalists lying in wait for unsuspecting, unwilling interviewee
**ampersand**: & – symbol for 'and'
**analytics**: assessing various metrics to monitor and improve performance of online content, using software eg Chartbeat, Google Analytics, Parse.ly, Omniture or bespoke in-house tools (see also metrics)
**angle**: particular approach to story, journalist's point of view in writing it
**art editor**: visual journalist responsible for design and layout of publication
**artwork**: illustrations (eg drawings, photographs) prepared for reproduction
**ascender**: the part of a lower-case letter (eg b and d) that sticks out above the x-height in a typeface

**attribution**: identifying the journalist's source of information or quote
**author's (corrections, marks)**: proof corrections by writer of story
**back number, issue**: previous issue of publication
**back of the book**: second part of magazine (after the centre spread)
**backbench, the**: senior newspaper journalists who make key production decisions
**backgrounder**: explanatory feature
**bad break**: clumsy hyphenation at the end of a line
**banner (headline)**: one in large type across front page
**basket**: where copy goes – once a physical basket, now a digital folder
**bastard measure**: type set to a width that is not standard for the page
**beard**: the space between a letter and the edge of the base on which it is designed
**beat**: American term for specialist area covered by reporter
**below the line**: the area of a web page underneath a completed piece of content where readers are able to comment
**bill(board)**: poster promoting edition of newspaper, usually highlighting main news story
**black**: duplicate of written story (from colour of carbon paper once used with typewriter)
**bleed**: (of an image) go beyond the type area to the edge of a page
**blind interview**: one where personal details, eg ethnicity, age or schooling, have been concealed, eg on CVs in job applications
**blob**: solid black circle used for display effect or to tabulate lists
**blob par**: extra paragraph introduced by blob
**blog**: personal website where people write and update their own articles
**blogosphere**: generalised term for blogs on the internet
**blown quote**: another term for pull quote
**blow up**: enlarge (part of) photograph
**blurb**: displayed material promoting contents of another page or future issue
**body copy**: the main text of a story, as opposed to page furniture
**body type**: the main typeface in which a story is set (as opposed to display)
**bold**: thick black type, used for emphasis
**book**: printer's (and so production journalist's) term for publication
**bounce rate**: metric showing how many people left a website after viewing just one page (a high percentage bounce rate is a negative indicator)
**bot**: 1 black on tone; 2 an automated social media account
**box**: copy enclosed by rules to give it emphasis and/or separate it from the main text
**breaker**: typographical device, eg crosshead, used to break up text on the page
**brief**: 1 short news item; 2 instruction to journalist on how to approach story
**bring up**: bring forward part of story to earlier position

**broadsheet**: large-format newspaper
**bromide**: photographic print
**browse (verb)**: look for information on the internet, using a web browser, eg Google Chrome
**bullet (point)**: another term for blob
**bureau**: office of news agency or newspaper office in foreign country
**business-to-business (b2b)**: magazine category covering a business area, profession, craft or trade
**bust**: (of a headline) be too long for the space available
**buy-up interview**: exclusive bought by publication
**byline**: writer's name as it appears in print at the beginning of a story
**c & lc**: capital and lower-case letters
**call out**: another term for pull quote
**calls (also check calls)**: routine phone calls made by reporters to organisations such as police and fire brigade to see if a story is breaking
**camera-ready**: (eg artwork) prepared for reproduction
**caps**: capital letters
**caption**: words used with a picture (usually underneath), identifying content where necessary
**caption story**: extension of picture caption into a self-contained story
**cast off**: estimate amount of printed matter copy would make
**casual**: journalist employed by the shift
**catch(line)**: short word (not printed) identifying different elements of a story in the editorial process
**centre**: set type with equal space on either side
**centre spread**: middle opening of tabloid or magazine
**chapel**: office branch of media union (the shop steward is the father, FoC, or mother, MoC, of the chapel)
**character**: unit of measurement for type including letters, figures, punctuation marks and spaces
**chat room**: interactive, often members-only, area of a website where visitors can talk to each other in real time, sometimes using pseudonyms
**churnalism**: voluminous news content marked by over-reliance on press releases, weak secondary sources or rehashing previous stories as opposed to original reporting
**chequebook journalism**: paying large sums for stories
**chief sub**: senior subeditor in charge of the others
**city desk**: financial section of British national newspaper (in the US the city desk covers home news)
**classified advertising**: small ads 'classified' by subject matter, grouped in a separate section

**clickbait**: luring the reader to click on a piece of exaggerated or inaccurate content using a misleading headline or image
**click through rate (CTR)**: metric showing how many people who see a story preview on a website or social media post click on the link to view it
**clippings/clips**: American term for cuttings
**close quotes**: end of section in direct quotes
**close up**: reduce space between lines, words or characters
**CMYK**: cyan, magenta, yellow and black, the process (basic printing) colours
**col**: column
**colour piece**: news story written as feature with emphasis on journalist's reactions
**colour sep(aration)s**: method by which the four process colours (CMYK) are separated from a colour original
**column**: 1 standard vertical division of page; 2 regular feature by journalist often encouraged to be opinionated and/or entertaining
**column rule**: light rule between columns of type
**comments**: messages that readers post below the line on a story or on social media
**compact**: upmarket newspaper in tabloid format
**concurrents**: web traffic metric recording how many people are reading a story at a particular moment (as opposed to overall hits)
**conference**: meeting of editorial staff to plan current/next issue
**consumer**: magazine category aimed at the general public or specialist groups (eg *Angling Times)*, including women's magazines and those of general interest
**contacts book**: journalist's list of contacts with details of phone, email etc
**contact sheet**: photographer's sheet of small prints
**content**: what is offered to the online reader, eg text story, video or image
**content management system (CMS)**: the application or software that runs a website
**contents bill**: *see* bill
**controlled circulation**: free distribution of specialist title to target readership by geography (free newspapers) or interest group (business-to-business magazines)
**cookie**: text file generated by the server of the website being visited allowing users' behaviour to be monitored
**copy**: text of story
**copyright**: right to reproduce original material
**copy taster**: *see* taster
**corr**: correspondent
**correction**: published statement correcting errors in story
**correspondent**: journalist covering specialist area, eg education
**coverlines**: selling copy on front cover

**Creative Commons Licence**: content, eg photographs, video or music, which is rights-free and can be used online without charge
**credit (line)**: name of photographer or illustrator as it appears in print next to their work
**Cromalins**: the Dupont system of glossy colour proofs
**crop**: cut (image) to size or for better effect
**crosshead**: line or lines, taken from the text, set bigger and bolder than the body type and inserted between paragraphs to liven up page
**crowdsourcing**: appeal to internet users to contribute to completion of a task, either fund-raising or collection of information
**cut**: shorten or delete copy
**cut-out**: illustration with background masked, painted or cut to make it stand out on the page
**cuts**: cuttings
**cuttings**: stories taken (originally cut) from newspapers and filed electronically under subject
**cuttings job**: story that is over-dependent on cuttings
**data journalism**: using computer software to analyse data as the basis for stories
**data visualisation**: visually conveying complex data by graphs and charts
**dateline**: place from which copy is filed
**deadline**: time that story (or any part of it) is due
**deck**: originally one of a series of headlines stacked on top of each other; now usually used to mean one line of a headline
**delayed drop**: device in news story of delaying important facts for effect, ie not including them in the intro
**delete**: remove
**descender**: the part of a lower-case letter (eg g and j) that sticks out below the x-height in a typeface
**desk**: newspaper department, eg picture desk
**deskman**: American term for male subeditor
**device**: the hardware/technology product used to read an article, eg desktop computer
**diary, the**: list of news events to be covered; hence an off-diary story is one originated by the reporter
**diary column**: gossip column
**digital signature**: using software to sign a document, eg DocuSign.Com
**direct input**: transmission of copy direct from the journalist's keyboard to the computer for typesetting (as opposed to the old system in which compositors retyped copy)
**direct visits**: number of people going directly to a website rather than via search engines, social media etc

**disclaimer**: statement explaining that a particular person or organisation was not the subject of a previously published story
**display ads**: ordinary (not 'classified') ads which appear throughout a publication
**display type**: type for headlines etc
**district reporter**: one covering a particular area away from the main office
**doorstepping**: reporters lying in wait for (usually) celebrities outside their homes
**double**: a story published twice in the same issue of a publication
**double-column**: (of text, headline, illustration) across two columns
**double (page) spread**: two facing pages in a magazine, whether advertising or editorial
**downtable subs**: those other than the chief sub and deputies
**drop cap, letter**: outsize initial capital letter used to start story or section; it drops down alongside the text which is indented to accommodate it
**drop quotes**: outsize quotes used to mark quoted matter
**dummy**: 1 pre-publication edition of new publication used to sell advertising and experiment editorially; 2 blank version of publication, eg to show quality and weight of paper; 3 complete set of page proofs
**edition**: version of newspaper printed for particular circulation area or time
**editor**: senior journalist responsible for publication or section
**editorial**: 1 leading article expressing editorial opinion; 2 content that is not advertising
**editor's conference**: main planning meeting for next issue
**em, en**: units of measurement for type – the width of the two letters m and n
**embargo**: time before which an organisation supplying material, eg by press release, does not want it published
**embedding**: 1 placing a journalist inside a military unit to facilitate war reporting; 2 inserting social media posts and hyperlinks in online stories
**ends**: the story ends here
**engagement rate**: a metric showing how many users who saw a content preview reacted by clicking the link, playing the video etc
**EPD**: electronic picture desk
**EPS file**: Encapsulated PostScript file
**exclusive**: claim by publication that it has a big story nobody else has
**exes**: journalists' out-of-pocket expenses
**ezine/webzine**: an online magazine without a print edition
**face**: type design
**facing matter**: (of advertising) opposite editorial
**facsimile**: exact reproduction, as with electronic transmission of pages
**feature**: article that goes beyond reporting of facts to explain and/or entertain; also used of any editorial material that is not news or listings; hence feature writer, features editor

**file**: transmit copy
**filler**: short news item to fill space
**fireman**: traditional term for reporter sent to trouble spot when story breaks
**fit**: (of copy etc) to occupy exactly the space available
**flannel panel**: magazine's address, contact information and list of staff
**flash**: brief urgent message from news agency
**flatplan**: page-by-page plan of issue
**flip**: (of picture) transpose left to right
**flush left or right**: (of type) having one consistent margin with the other ragged
**fold, the**: centre fold in a newspaper so that only the upper half of the paper ('above the fold') is visible at the point of sale
**folio**: page (number)
**follow up** (verb): take published story as the starting point for an update
**format**: 1 size, shape or style of publication or section; 2 computer instruction; hence to format
**fount**: (pronounced font and now often spelt that way): typeface
**free(sheet)**: free newspaper
**freebie**: something useful or pleasant, often a trip, supplied free to journalists
**freelance**: self-employed journalist who sells material to various outlets
**freelancer**: American term for freelance
**fudge**: another term for stop press
**full out**: (of type) not indented
**galley proof**: typeset proof not yet made up into a page
**gatefold**: an extra page which folds out from a magazine
**GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)**: the law governing data protection, privacy and security on the internet in Europe and the UK (pre-Brexit)
**ghost writer**: journalist writing on behalf of someone else, often by interviewing them; hence to ghost (eg a column)
**GIF (Graphics Interchange Format)**: type of file, usually a short animation or video clip used in social media
**gone** to **bed**: passed for press so too late for corrections
**grams per square metre (gsm; g/m2)**: the measure used to define the weight of paper
**graphics**: visual material
**grid**: design skeleton specifying (eg) number and width of column
**gutter**: space between two facing pages; can also be used of space between columns
**H & J**: (of copy on screen) hyphenated and justified, so in the form in which it will be typeset
**hack, hackette**: jocular terms for journalist
**hair space**: thinnest space between typeset letters

**half-tone**: illustration broken into dots of varying sizes
**handout**: printed material, eg press release, distributed to journalists
**hanging indent**: copy set with first line of each paragraph full out and subsequent ones indented
**hard copy**: copy on paper, eg printout, rather than screen
**head, heading**: headline
**heavy**: broadsheet newspaper
**heavy type**: thicker than standard
**hit**: slang term for a click on a story or website (see also page views/impressions)
**hold (over)**: keep material for future use
**hot metal**: old typesetting system in which type was cast from molten metal
**house ad**: publisher's advertisement in its own publication
**house journal**: publication for employees of a particular organisation
**house style**: the way a publication chooses to publish in matters of detail
**HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language)**: coding language that creates the structure of a web page; examples of individual elements ('tags') are <video> and <title>
**hyperlinks**: clickable elements in an article which open another piece of content
**imposition**: arrangement of pages for printing
**impressions (social)**: metric showing how many people scrolled past a post in a social media feed without interacting; a weak measure of quality
**imprint**: name and address of publisher and printer
**indent**: set copy several characters in from left-hand margin
**in-house**: inside a media organisation
**in pro**: in proportion (used of visual material to be reduced)
**input**: type copy into computer
**insert**: 1 extra copy to be included in existing story; 2 printed matter inserted in publication after printing and binding
**intranet**: private website belonging to an organisation
**intro**: first paragraph of news story or feature; also used (confusingly) in some magazine offices to mean standfirst
**IP (Internet Protocol) address**: a unique identifying number for any device (computer/phone) connected to the internet
**ISDN**: integrated services digital network – a means of transmitting editorial material between offices, to printers, etc
**italics**: italic (sloping) type
**jack-line**: another word for widow
**journo**: jocular term for journalist
**junk mail**: emails classified by a service provider as spam, ie unsolicited messages

**justified**: type set with consistent margins
**kern**: reduce the space between characters in typeset copy
**keywords**: words that people are most likely to type into a search engine
**kicker**: introductory part of caption or headline
**kill**: drop a story; hence kill fee for a freelance whose commissioned story is not used
**knocking copy**: story written with negative angle
**label**: (of headline) without a verb
**landscape**: horizontal picture
**layout**: arrangement of body type, headlines etc and illustrations on the page
**lead**: 1 main story on a page; 2 tip-off or idea for story (in the US a news story intro is called the lead)
**leader**: leading article expressing editorial opinion
**leader dots**: three dots used to punctuate
**leading (pronounced 'ledding')**: space between lines (originally made by inserting blank slugs of lead between lines of type)
**leg**: column of typeset copy
**legacy media**: traditional news outlets, eg the *Times* and BBC News, that pre-date the internet and still exist
**legal**: send material to be checked for legal problems, eg libel
**legal kill**: lawyer's instruction not to use
**lensman**: American term for male photographer
**letter spacing**: space between letters
**libel**: defamatory statement in permanent or broadcast form
**lift**: 1 use all or most of a story taken from one newspaper edition in the next; 2 steal a story from another media outlet and reproduce it with few changes
**ligature**: two or more joined letters
**light face**: type lighter than standard
**likes**: meaningless social media metric (people often 'like' articles without reading them)
**linage** (this spelling preferred to lineage): payment to freelances by the line; also refers to classified advertising without illustration
**line drawing**: drawing made up of black strokes
**listings**: lists of entertainment and other events with basic details
**literal**: typographical error
**lobby, the**: specialist group of political reporters covering parliament
**local corr**: local correspondent
**logo**: name, title or recognition word in particular design used on regular section or column; also used of magazine's front-page title
**lower case**: ordinary letters (not caps)
**make-up**: assembly of type and illustrations on the page ready for reproduction

**mark up (verb)**: specify the typeface, size and width in which copy is to be set
**mash-up**: combination of two disparate elements
**masking**: covering part of photograph for reproduction
**masthead**: publication's front-page title
**measure**: width of typesetting
**medium type**: between light and heavy
**meme**: piece of content, eg image or quote, which has spread by repetition and imitation, most often used for fun on social media but also for political messaging
**merchandising**: details of stockists and prices in consumer features
**metric**: something measurable, allowing publishers to record visits
**mf**: more copy follows
**microblogging**: short-form blogging, eg on Twitter
**model release**: contract signed by photographic model authorising use of pictures
**moderation**: monitoring comments to discover and remove inappropriate content or to interact with readers
**mono(chrome)**: printed in one colour, usually black
**more**: more copy follows
**mug shot**: photograph showing head (and sometimes shoulders)
**multi-media**: combination of, eg video, photos, audio, on a web page
**multi-platform**: content on, eg TV, radio, web and social media
**must**: copy that must appear, eg apology or correction
**mutton**: old name for an em
**neg**: photographic negative
**news agency**: supplier of news and features to media outlets
**news aggregator**: website that combines and/or curates content from third parties
**news desk**: organising centre of newsroom
**newsman**: American term for male reporter
**newsprint**: standard paper on which newspapers are printed
**newsroom**: news reporters' room
**nib**: news in brief – short news item
**night lawyer**: barrister who reads newspaper proofs for legal problems
**nose**: intro of story; hence to renose – rewrite intro
**NUJ**: National Union of Journalists
**nut**: old name for an en; hence nutted, type indented one en
**obit**: obituary
**off-diary**: *see* diary, the
**off-the-record**: statements made to a journalist on the understanding that they will not be reported directly or attributed

**online journalism**: journalism published on the internet
**on spec**: uncommissioned (material submitted by freelance)
**on-the-record**: statements made to a journalist that can be reported and attributed
**op-ed**: feature page facing the one with leading articles
**open quotes**: start of section in direct quotes
**organic traffic**: traffic that comes 'naturally' from search engines; *see* SEO
**originals**: photographs or other visual material for reproduction
**orphan**: first line of a paragraph at the foot of a page or column
**out take**: another term for pull quote
**overlay**: sheet of transparent paper laid over artwork with instructions on how to process it
**overline**: another word for strapline
**overmatter**: typeset material that does not fit the layout and must be cut
**overprint**: print over a previously printed background
**PA**: Press Association, Britain's national news agency
**package**: main feature plus sidebars
**page furniture**: displayed type, eg headlines, standfirsts and captions, used to project copy
**page plan**: editorial instructions for layout
**page proof**: proof of a made-up page
**page views/impressions**: metric recording how many people visit a web page; usually the key metric to quantify traffic
**pagination**: the number of pages in a publication; also a newspaper system's ability to make up pages
**panel**: another word for box
**paparazzo/i**: photographer(s) specialising in pursuing celebrities
**par, para**: paragraph
**partial quote**: short extract taken from a longer quote; can be misleading if qualifying context is removed
**paste-up**: page layout pasted into position
**patch**: specialist area covered by reporter
**pay-off**: final twist or flourish in the last paragraph of a story
**PDF (Portable Document Format)**: file used for documents that can't be changed by the reader
**peer-to-peer (P2P)**: network created by two equivalent computers interacting without a third party
**peg**: reason for publishing feature at a particular time
**photomontage**: illustration created by combining several photographs
**pic, pix**: press photograph(s)
**pica**: unit of type measurement

pick**-up (of photographs)**: those that already exist and can therefore be picked up by journalists covering a story
**picture desk**: organising centre of collection and editing of pictures
**piece**: article
**pixel**: the smallest possible element of colour in a web image (the name is a portmanteau of 'picture' and 'element')
**plate**: printing image carrier from which pages are printed
**point**: 1 full stop; 2 standard unit of type size
**pool**: group of reporters sharing information and releasing it to other media organisations
**pop-up**: clickable box that appears on a website asking the user to interact with it
**PostScript**: Adobe's page description language
**PR(O)**: public relations (officer); hence someone performing a public relations role
**press cuttings**: *see* cuttings
**press release**: written announcement or promotional material by organisation sent to media outlets and individual journalists
**profile**: portrait in words of individual or organisation
**proof**: printout of part or whole of page so it can be checked and corrected
**proofread**: check proofs; hence proofreader
**publisher**: 1 publishing company; 2 individual in magazine publishing company with overall responsibility for title or group of titles
**puff**: story promoting person or organisation
**pull**: proof; to pull is to take a proof
**pull (out) quote (blown quote, call out, out take)**: short extract from text set in larger type as part of page layout
**pullout**: separate section of publication that can be pulled out
**pyramid**: (usually inverted) conventional structure for news story with most important facts in intro
**query**: question mark
**queue**: collection of stories held in a computer
**quote**: verbatim quotation
**quotes**: quotation marks
**ragged**: (of type) with uneven margin
**raised cap**: outsize initial capital letter used to start story or section; it is raised above the text
**range left or right**: (of type) have one consistent margin with the other ragged
**referrer**: a website that links to a story: it refers readers to the story's originator; aggregators are also referrers
**register**: alignment of coloured inks on the printed page

**rejig**: rewrite copy, particularly in the light of later information
**renose**: rewrite intro of a story
**reporter**: gatherer and writer of news
**repro house**: company that processes colour pictures ready for printing
**retainer**: regular payment to local correspondent or freelance
**retouch**: alter photograph to emphasise particular feature
**Reuters**: international news agency
**reversed out**: (type) printed in white on black or tinted background
**reverse indent**: another term for hanging indent
**revise**: extra proof to check that corrections have been made
**rewrite**: write new version of story or section as opposed to subbing on copy
**ring-round**: story based on series of phone calls
**river**: white space running down a column of type, caused by space between words
**roman**: plain upright type
**rough**: sketch for layout
**round-up**: gathering of disparate elements for single story
**RSI**: repetitive strain injury, attributed to overuse and misuse of computer keyboard, mouse, etc
**rule**: line between columns or round illustrations
**run**: period of printing an edition or number of copies printed
**running foot**: title and issue date at the foot of the page
**running head**: title and issue date at the top of the page
**running story**: one that is constantly developing, over a newspaper's different editions or a number of days
**running turns**: pages with no paragraph breaks on first and last lines; also used of columns
**run on**: (of type) continue from one line, column or page to the next
**rush**: second most urgent message from news agency (after flash)
**sans (serif)**: plain type (*see* serif) – this is an example
**scaling** (of pictures): calculating depth
**schedule**: 1 list of jobs for (eg) reporters; 2 publication's printing programme
**scheme**: make a plan of page layout
**scoop**: jocular word for exclusive
**screamer**: exclamation mark
**screen**: the number of dots per square inch of a half-tone
**search engine**: a program, eg Google, that responds to a user's keywords by retrieving and displaying relevant material from its database
**section**: 1 separately folded part of newspaper; 2 complete printed sheet making up part of magazine

**sell**: 1 another word for standfirst, often used in women's magazines; 2 text accompanying a URL link post on social media to attract readers
**SEO (Search Engine Optimisation)**: increasing the chances of an article being well-ranked by a search engine for delivery to readers
**serif**: decorative addition to type – this is an example
**server**: a computer and/or software that hosts web pages or content
**set and hold**: typeset and keep for use later
**setting**: copy set in type
**shares**: readers re-posting publishers' content on their own channels; a stronger social media metric than likes
**shift**: daily stint worked by staff journalists and casuals
**shoot**: a photographic session
**shy**: (of headline) too short for the space available
**sidebar**: subsidiary story or other material placed next to main story, usually in bold
**sidehead**: subsidiary heading, set flush left
**sign-off**: writer's name as it appears in print at the end of a story
**sketch**: light-hearted account of events, especially parliamentary
**Skype**: online video-calling application
**slip**: newspaper edition for particular area or event
**small caps**: capital letters in smaller size of the same typeface
**snap**: early summary by news agency of important story to come
**snapper**: jocular term for press photographer
**snaps**: press photographs
**social network**: website or app allowing people to talk to each other and post or create content
**solid**: (of type) set without extra leading
**source (of traffic)**: place from which users arrive at a web page, eg a search engine
**spam**: see junk mail
**spike**: where rejected copy goes (originally a metal spike)
**splash**: newspaper's main front-page story
**splash sub**: subeditor responsible for tabloid's front page
**spoiler**: attempt by newspaper to reduce impact of rival's exclusive by publishing similar story
**spot colour**: second colour (after black) used in printing publication
**spread**: two facing pages
**s/s**: same size
**standfirst**: introductory matter accompanying headline, particularly used in features
**stet**: ignore deletion or correction (Latin for 'let it stand')

**stone**: bench where pages were made up; hence stone sub – subeditor who makes final corrections and cuts on page proofs
**stop press**: small area on back page of newspaper left blank for late news in days of hot metal
**story**: article, especially news report
**strap(line)**: subsidiary headline above main headline
**Street, the**: Fleet Street in London, where many newspapers once had their offices
**stringer**: local correspondent; freelance on contract to a news organisation
**style**: house style
**style book/sheet/guide**: where house style is recorded
**sub**: subeditor
**subhead**: subsidiary headline
**subtitle**: another word for standfirst
**tab(loid)**: popular small-format newspaper such as the *Sun*
**tagline**: explanatory note under headline
**take**: section of copy for setting
**take back**: (on proof) take words back to previous line
**take over**: (on proof) take words forward to next line
**taster**: production journalist who checks and selects copy; also coverline
**think piece**: feature written to show and provoke thought
**tie-in**: story connected with the one next to it
**tint**: shaded area on which type can be printed
**tip(-off)**: information supplied (and usually paid for) whether by freelance or member of the public
**titlepiece**: traditional term for name of magazine as it appears on the cover – now replaced by masthead and logo
**TOT**: triumph over tragedy, feature formula particularly popular in women's magazines
**tracking**: space between characters
**trade names**: product names (eg Hoover, Kleenex, Velcro)
**traffic**: the number of people accessing a website or story
**tranny**: transparency – photograph in film form
**trans(pose)**: reverse order
**turn**: part of story continued on a later page
**typeface**: a complete range of type in a particular style, eg Times New Roman
**typescale**: measuring rule for type
**typo**: typographical error
**typography**: craft of using type
**u/lc**: upper and lower case

**underscore**: underline
**unique users**: key metric recording the number of individual readers who click on a web page, as identified by their IP address
**unj(ustified)**: text set flush left, ragged right
**upper and lower case**: mixture of capitals and ordinary letters
**upper case**: capital letters
**vignette**: illustration whose edges gradually fade to nothing
**vlogger (video blogger)**: a blogger who uses video rather than text
**video journalist**: one who creates video packages for online or TV use, or sources and edits them for online use
**visitors**: the number of readers on a web page
**visits**: the number of times a reader visited a web page
**vox pop**: series of street interviews (Latin: *vox populi* – voice of the people)
**Web 2.0**: a term coined in 1999 to describe a step-change in internet functionality and usage, moving from static to interactive pages where content could more easily be generated by readers using social media
**Web 3/3.0**: a term coined in 2014 to promote the idea of a decentralised web with control wrested away from a small group of companies known as 'big tech'
**weight**: thickness or boldness of letters in a typeface
**white space**: area on page with no type or illustration
**widow**: single word or part of word at the end of a paragraph on a line by itself; originally the last line of a paragraph at the top of a page or column
**Wiki**: a digital bank of information, similar to an intranet, but one where anyone can edit the content
**wire**: a means of transmitting copy by electronic signal; hence wire room
**wob**: white on black – type reversed out
**wot**: white on tone
**x-height**: height of the lower-case letters of a typeface (excluding ascenders and descenders)
**Zoom**: a video-calling platform which boomed during the Covid pandemic

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