SIMON HEFFER

'Heffer is a fine writer with a noble aim.' Liam Stebbing, *Irish Times*

Simply English

An A to Z of Avoidable Errors

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About the Book

In his best-selling *Strictly English* Simon Heffer explained how to write and speak our language well. In *Simply English* he offers an entertaining and supremely useful A–Z guide to frequent errors, common misunderstandings and stylistic howlers. What is the difference between amend and emend, between imply and infer, and between uninterested and disinterested? When should one put owing to rather than due to? Why should the temptation to write actually, basically or at this moment in time always be strenuously resisted? How does one use an apostrophe correctly, ensure that one understands what alibi really means, and avoid the perils of the double negative?

With articles on everything from punctuation to tabloid English to adverbs and adjectives, *Simply English* is the essential companion for anyone who cares about the language and wants to use it correctly.

About the Author

Simon Heffer was born in 1960. He read English at Cambridge and took a PhD in modern history at that university. His previous books include: *Moral Desperado: A Life of Thomas Carlyle*, *The Reinvention of England*, *Strictly English*, *A Short History of Power* and *High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain*. In a career of nearly thirty years in Fleet Street, he has written for and held senior positions on the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Spectator*.

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To Martin Edmunds

Quantam meruit

Introduction

In 2009 Nigel Wilcockson of Random House asked me to write a book on correct grammar and the use of English, and why they matter. He had been alerted to some emails circulating on the Internet that I had written to colleagues at the *Daily Telegraph*, for which I then worked as Associate Editor, drawing attention to mistakes they had made in their copy, to the annoyance of the paper's readers. The result, *Strictly English*, appeared the following year. It dealt thematically with the main issues in written and spoken English, and its aim was to improve the writing style of anyone who read it closely and carefully.

This book is a much expanded variant of that work. In an A to Z format, it seeks to act as a dictionary-style reference book for those with specific questions about the use of English. *Simply English* does not supersede *Strictly English*: it complements it. Although there is some common material, *Simply English* itemises what *Strictly English*, in an extended essay, explains at length – and more. One should illuminate the other. Perhaps someone wishes to know the difference between *perpetrate* and *perpetuate*; or how to use *anticipate* correctly; or how to avoid misusing *prevaricate*; or when to deploy an adverb; or how to write to a bishop; or what a subjunctive is and when to unleash one; or what an accusative is. The answers to these, and many other questions, will be found in this book, and can be easily located under their respective entries in the alphabetical format. A word or phrase printed in small CAPITAL LETTERS in an individual entry signifies that that word or phrase has its own entry.

However, the book is not simply *Strictly English* placed in alphabetical order. This is because in the four years between writing the two books I and Mr Wilcockson noticed many new solecisms and catachreses whether in print or in speech. Also, many people who had read *Strictly English* were kind enough to write to me – some in great detail – about their own irritations with the abuse of English, and alerted me to horrors of which I had hitherto been unaware, or insufficiently aware. I am very grateful to them. As a consequence, this A to Z is a more extensive, heavily revised alphabetical version of *Strictly English*. I am far from sure that every act of violence done to the English language is recorded in the pages that follow; but the most frequent and the most likely are, as are the means of avoiding them, and many more than were recorded in the original work.

Since *Strictly English* was published it has spawned other such books, whose relative merits it is hardly my place to judge. This, like the considerable sales of *Strictly English* in both hard and soft covers, indicated some interesting points about those who speak English. First, a very large number of people feel they were taught the language inadequately, and that after decades of speaking and writing it would like to have a more precise idea of what they are doing, and whether they are doing it correctly. Second, as I suggested in *Strictly English*, many people feel that for better or worse we live in a society where we may be judged not by how we sound when we speak – accents are irrelevant – but by how well we put a sentence together grammatically, and how careful our choice of words is. Third, they feel that acquiring such a skill is useful not just for them, but for those still passing through a schools system that does not always place a premium upon the teaching of correct English in, shall we say, the way that the French school system puts one upon the teaching of correct French. (I had a French teacher who was a native speaker, and who rebuked me severely for not deploying a subjunctive when the context

demanded it, as any child in a French school would be expected to do.) Fourth, to judge from the number of books on English usage now in print, the public also finds the subject of what words really mean and how grammar should be used rather fascinating – which it is – or people at least want to take a second opinion on the matter.

When *Strictly English* was reviewed the responses fell into two camps. Professional writers, who from a tradesman's point of view saw exactly what I sought to achieve, noticed the book with flattering respect. However, when academics in linguistics departments of certain universities reviewed it there was outrage. Nowhere in Britain operates closed shops in the way that academia does, and some of these people were manifestly upset that a mere professional writer should enter this field. In addition to the impenetrable and often specious scholarly papers some academics publish on their subject, they moonlight as writers of supposedly popular works in which they patronise the public about aspects of the English language; I suspect they have been deeply annoyed by the rash of rather more practical books on the subject that started with *Strictly English* and was followed by a small torrent of other such works by people they would regard as amateurs. They were, to judge from some of the reviews, especially upset that the book took a prescriptive view, because they appear to have deep political views on this matter. For many of them – and I paraphrase only slightly – I was interfering with the right of self-expression by individuals that is part of the organic growth and change of our language. I am afraid I violently disagreed with them on several counts, and I still do.

It is all very well to tell a young person that he or she can be creative with the English language, while academic linguists sit back and revel in the patois that results. However, if that young person applies for a job, or writes a personal statement when seeking a place in higher education (other, perhaps, than in a linguistics department),

he or she may well suffer consequences from being partly illiterate, whether because of poor spelling, poor grammar or a misunderstanding of what a simple monosyllable such as *flaunt* actually means. Or, attending an interview, that young person may be disadvantaged by inarticulacy, or by mangling sentences or misusing words in front of someone who lacks those faults. This will be true especially in commercial contexts, for no one wishes his business to be represented to the public by people who struggle with their first language. From the comfort of a nicely endowed chair at a university it is easy to engage in the theoretical exercise of rubbishing attempts to keep English straight. It is small comfort to the victims of that ideology, some of whom will find themselves employed in callings beneath their potential as a consequence of the propagation of such idiotic ideas. At literary festivals, when I spoke about *Strictly English,* many who bought the book told me they were buying it for children or grandchildren, and I entirely understood why.

We can leave the politically motivated theorists in their ghetto, however, though it is important to know about them, and about how their motives do not coincide with a British strain of self-improvement that dates back to Samuel Smiles and beyond, and which the great grammarians of a century ago – notably the Fowler brothers – identified in their own landmark works. For the avoidance of doubt I must specify my own creeds. I am well aware that words have in some cases changed their meanings steadily over the centuries, and that change and progress necessitate the introduction of new words into the language. However, since the *Oxford English Dictionary* (whose first edition was completed in 1928) effectively codified the language, I am bemused that we should be asked to tolerate someone saying ‘he has flaunted all the rules’ when but for a moment of ignorance they could just as easily say ‘he has flouted all the rules’. If a ready-made, perfectly accessible word did not exist,

matters would be different: but it does exist. Similarly, I am aware that grammar has changed over the centuries, not least to avoid ambiguities or enforce greater precision in expression. I am not, however, clear why we should endorse usages such as ‘he gave it to my husband and I’ or ‘you was right’. If you feel such things *are* acceptable, this book is probably not for you.

I am particularly grateful to those readers of *Strictly English* who took the trouble to write to me, some of whose points are found within. Miss Margot Corper was especially helpful. I must also thank Nigel Wilcockson, for applying his keen editorial eye to my manuscript; my agent Georgina Capel; and my wife Diana, for her constant support.

Simon Heffer
Great Leighs
17 November 2013

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The following works were especially useful to me in compiling this book and are frequently cited in it:

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The Complete Plain Words, by Sir Ernest Gowers (revised by Sir Bruce Fraser, Pelican, 1973)

Author’s Note

As in *Strictly English*, to avoid prolixity and tedium only the male gender is used in examples. As always used to be the case, the male should be taken to include the female whenever suitable.

A

A and **an** The indefinite articles, the most common words in the English language. *An* is used before almost all words beginning with a vowel, and before those beginning with a silent *h*. Therefore we say ‘a dog’ but ‘an armadillo’. The only exception comes with certain words beginning with *u*, when the first syllable is pronounced ‘you’: so we say ‘an understanding’ but ‘a unicorn’ or ‘a unique thought’. The use of articles before words beginning with *h* is usually straightforward – ‘an hour’, ‘an honourable exception’ but ‘a house’ and ‘a hammer’. Many people say, and write, ‘an historian’ or ‘an historic moment’ – in my view incorrectly – but it is not usual to hear ‘an history of the world’, because of the different way in which that noun is stressed. It is correct to write ‘a historian’ and ‘a historic moment’, just as it is to write ‘a history’. It used to be common among the educated classes to refer to ‘an hotel’, with the *h* silent in the French manner: but of late this has come to be considered an affectation, as ‘hotel’ is a properly anglicised word. Unlike indefinite articles in various European languages, ours do not change according to the gender of the noun, because in English nouns have no gender. The indefinite article can also have a rhetorical usage, as in the phrase ‘so notorious a crime will never be forgotten’, or ‘what kind of a man does such a thing?’ It is used in such cases for emphasis, but is rare in formal writing.

Abbreviation An abbreviation may either be the initial letters of a set of words, or a shortening of one specific word. BBC, QED and RSPCA are abbreviations, but so are

‘quote’ (for ‘quotation’), ‘mac’ (for ‘macintosh’) and ‘pub’ (for ‘public house’). These days, it looks typographically ugly to put full points in between the letters of an abbreviation, as was the fashion a century ago. Some frequent usages seem routinely to have full points, notably *i.e.* and *e.g.*, but in written English it would be better to write in full ‘that is’ or ‘for example’. See also ACRONYM.

Ablative This was one of the cases in classical languages (the others being the nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative and, in Latin, the locative) and was used with the prepositions *by*, *with* or *from*. In English the only recognised case other than the nominative is the accusative, for the object of an action, and with ‘WHOM’ being ignored by many writers, that might not last long.

Ablative absolute This was a construction in Latin of a noun and participle in the ablative case that schoolboys were taught to translate as ‘which dog having been kicked’ or ‘which book having been read’, a stylistic abomination in English.

Able Only sentient beings are *able*. To say that ‘this key may be able to open the door’ is wrong. A man may be able to open the door using the key, or the key may unlock the door.

-able/-ible Etymology dictates whether an adjective ends in either of these forms, the former tending to derive from medieval French, the latter from Latin. See individual examples such as ADMISSIBLE, and see ADJECTIVES, NEGATING.

Abolish For something to be abolished, it must exist, and its abolition usually entails its permanent absence. One occasionally sees usages such as ‘abolish weight gain by

following our diet', which is absurd, as the weight gain does not yet exist.

Aborigine and **Aboriginal** It used to be the case that *aborigine* was a noun used to describe the indigenous people of Australia and *aboriginal* was the adjective. In the age of political correctness it is now not so simple. 'Aborigine' is regarded as an anachronism, and the phrase that was widely used to replace it – 'indigenous people' – is now regarded as having been 'imposed' on the aboriginal people as a 'scientific' term that dehumanised those it described. In fact, the preferred phrase among politically correct Australians is 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', which is by most objective standards ludicrous. Tasmania, which is a law unto itself, still uses the term 'aborigine' and even 'blacks'. In practice, only an extremist will take offence at the usage 'aboriginal', which can be used in polite conversations and writing to describe the first Australians, though pedants may feel happier with 'aboriginal person'.

Abridgement should be spelt thus with two *e*'s. See ACKNOWLEDGEMENT and JUDGEMENT.

Absentee This is a correct usage to describe one who is not present, even though the rule is that nouns ending in *-ee* ought to describe someone to whom something happens (an employee is someone who is given employment; a refugee is someone who is given refuge). The logic of *absentee* is that it describes someone whom circumstances force to be absent. Many other nouns ending in *-ee* would be better off ending in *-er*: an escapee is really an escaper.

Absolutely This adverb has a legitimate usage, as in 'Louis XIV ruled absolutely', or 'I am absolutely [i.e. completely and utterly] opposed to capital punishment'. However, it is

also frequently used pointlessly to express agreement, which is a cliché: ‘Do you like Beethoven?’ ‘Absolutely!’ ‘Yes’ does the job just as well.

Absolutes This is a group of adjectives that do not admit of degree but describe an absolute state, such as *dead*, or *alive*: a person is either one or the other. One point about these adjectives is that they do not have COMPARATIVES or SUPERLATIVES, because if they did the superlatives or comparatives would be illogical. When two people are *dead,* one cannot be ‘more dead’ than the other, and if three are dead one cannot be ‘the deadest’. One of the most common misuses in this respect is *fuller*. If something is *full*, something else cannot be ‘more full’ than it. Similarly, if there are three full things, one cannot be ‘the fullest’. The same principle applies to *empty.* Other words that convey absolute meanings include *wet*, *dry*, *black*, *round*, *square*, *whole*, *unique*, *safe*, *chief*, *final* and *absolute* itself. No word ending in *-less* can have a comparative or superlative, for reasons of logic. If someone is *harmless*, another cannot be ‘more harmless’, for the limits of innocuousness have already been reached by the first person and cannot, therefore, be exceeded. For particular problems with negating certain absolutes, see ALWAYS, EVERYWHERE, NONE and NEVER.

Abstract language This describes things that cannot be experienced by use of the five senses. These are sometimes by nature vague, and some writers or speakers deploy abstract language to create distance by obscuring clarity. If a firm is about to go broke it is better to say so than to resort to an abstract usage such as ‘the position is serious’ or ‘the situation is difficult’. Not all abstract nouns cloud meaning but some, like the two just cited, are made for obfuscation. Unless one is a politician making a speech in which the concealment of embarrassing facts is essential,

clarity should always be the prime consideration in use of language.

One cannot always do entirely without abstract nouns: but the fewer abstracts, the better. Another such is ‘these things are reminders of . . .’ when one could without impairing the sense write ‘these remind us’; ‘things’ is also all too often a word with no point to it. Nouns (notably, again, abstract ones) in verbose constructions also sometimes take the place of simple adjectives. The writer who says ‘there is too little justice in the world’ would better say ‘the world is too unjust’.

Sir Ernest Gowers, in *Plain Words*, was also strict about abstract nouns such as *position* and *situation* being used to remove clarity from statements, and he was right to be so. A desire for euphemism seems to trigger both usages. To describe someone who is seriously ill, say so, not that ‘the situation is serious’. If a company is broke, say so, not that ‘its position is serious’. In each example, the abstract nouns create distance; they are used to divorce the reality from the entity. No serious writer, unless briefed to deceive, should seek to do that. These terms are used sometimes where there is no attempt at euphemism. ‘I am writing to enquire about your situation’ can be paraphrased as ‘What are you doing?’ just as ‘Could you inform me as to your position on this matter?’ is ‘What do you think about it?’

Otto Jespersen, writing in his *Philosophy of Grammar*, demonstrated for other reasons the difference between the sentences ‘I doubt the doctor’s cleverness’ and ‘I doubt that the doctor is clever’. One can See immediately that the former is euphemistic, the second more direct to the point of being insulting. While being rude is not always going to be the intention of a writer, avoiding the abstract wherever possible will always lead to the writer’s communicating his meaning more directly.

Abuse and **misuse** *Abuse* tends to be intentional whereas *misuse* is unintentional or accidental. A politician accused of abuse of his position has behaved with deliberate impropriety. Someone accused of misuse of a vacuum cleaner has, out of stupidity, used it to clear up a fluid spillage rather than simply to sweep a dry carpet. Drug abuse is the taking of a substance that may have a prescribed purpose, such as cocaine for pain relief, and to take it deliberately for stimulatory or mind-altering purposes. Drug misuse is to take a cold remedy in the hope it will ease your arthritis.

Abuse, terms of These range from the gentle and almost affectionate to the deeply offensive, and in the way that many words change their meanings according to social considerations over the course of decades or centuries, so especially do these. There were few worse slights in Elizabethan England than to call a man ‘naughty’, a term now used only for mischievous children. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS has had a profound influence on the use of such words, though they have never had a place in formal writing except in reported speech. Terms of racial abuse that were deemed merely vulgar a few decades ago could well now lead to one who utters them being brought before a court of law for inciting hatred. Similarly, terms that were routinely used in the mid-twentieth century to describe forms of disability – *cripple*, *spastic* and *mongol*, for example – are now regarded as cruel and have acquired widely accepted euphemisms. This happened not least because of the use of the medical terms as terms of abuse for those who were not thus afflicted. Certain words, such as *imbecile* or *cretin*, would never now be used to describe those with the medical conditions that were once described using these terms. However, they remain current in describing able people who behave stupidly. If one must use a term of abuse, it is always worth remembering that preceding it with an

adjective is usually either tautological, or overkill: such as with ‘stupid idiot’.

Academic writing All tribes develop their own jargon, and members speak or write to each other in that argot as a mark of their shared exclusivity. A notable example of this is how some academics write in learned journals where they publish the results of their research. Some, especially those in scientific or pseudo-scientific disciplines, can be nearly incomprehensible to outsiders. This is not because the outsiders are necessarily stupid, it is because the academics feel they have to write in a certain stilted, formulaic way or forfeit being taken seriously by their peers. Undergraduates often imitate aspects of this style in order to gain credibility with those who mark their essays. Such language should not be allowed to seep out into normal communications. If you find yourself ‘positing’ anything other than in a learned journal, it is best to stop immediately. A random example of near-incomprehensible (to a layman) academic writing can be found in Carol Bacchi’s 2012 paper ‘Why Study Problemizations? Making Politics Visible’, which includes this paragraph:

> As an alternative, governmentality studies detail the heterogeneous strategic relations that go into the making of specific ‘states’, opening up spaces for intervention and movement. For example, the poststructuralist scholar, Rowse (2009), describes nation-states as methods for assembling power relations. Such a reconceptualization provides an opening to problematize ‘sovereignty in world politics as well as in research practice itself’ (de Goede, 2006: p. 5). This recommended shift from static entities to strategic relations promises to open up a whole new field for comparative politics.

Academics, writing to or addressing It is correct to address professional teachers as ‘Professor’ if they hold a chair or are emeritus/emerita, or as ‘Dr’ if they have a doctorate and wish to be so addressed. Certain other people working in non-academic posts but in, for example, research

institutes or some other form of learned work and who hold doctorates may also wish to be known by their doctoral title as an indication of their qualification to undertake such work. If either a professor or doctor holds another honour conferring a title, then their academic title precedes it: so one would write ‘Professor Lord Smith’, ‘Professor Sir John Smith’, or ‘Dr Sir John Smith’.

Accept and except If one *accepts* something one takes or receives something offered willingly (*OED*); or one agrees to a proposal, of marriage or of some other significant nature; or one reconciles oneself to the assumption of a particular role by a third party; or to learn to tolerate an uncomfortable or disagreeable set of circumstances. So it is correct to say ‘he accepted the gift’, ‘she accepted his offer to join the board’, ‘Smith became accepted as the leading advocate of the reform’, and ‘in time, the public came to accept the austerity measures’. *Except* has a number of related meanings, according to the *OED*, but none of them entitles it to be confused with *accept*, though the *OED* records such confusion as first having occurred in the fourteenth century. *Except* means to exclude (and to make a point of saying you have excluded) someone or something from something else, as in ‘John was excepted from being received by the Queen’. Its usage signifying ‘to object to something’ is archaic other than in the usage ‘he took exception to her remarks’.

Access is a noun and not a verb. ‘Can I access your website?’ is a solecism: either say ‘Can I gain access?’ or ‘Can I see?’ If the access is literal rather than metaphorical, use *enter*: not ‘Can I access the premises?’ but ‘Can I enter the premises?’

Accrue This means to accumulate over a period of time, and it is most often seen in a financial context, such as

‘interest accrued on the investments over the years’. It is an intransitive verb, sometimes wrongly used as a transitive in sentences such as ‘the account will accrue interest’. It is better to say ‘the account will earn interest’.

Accurate is an incomparable adjective, or an ABSOLUTE.

Accusative case This is the case in classical and certain modern languages which a pronoun or noun adopts when it is the object of a verb: for example, the noun ‘bone’ in the phrase ‘the dog ate the bone’. In English, nouns do not decline, but pronouns do, and give evidence of the accusative case as distinct from the nominative. The inflected accusative pronouns in English are *me*, *him*, *her*, *us* and *them*. *You* does not inflect. In the phrases ‘Give the book to me’, ‘the child found him’, ‘John saw her’, ‘show it to us’ and ‘Mary missed them’ the pronouns are all accusatives (the nominatives would be *I*, *he*, *she*, *we* and *they* respectively). There is also the accusative relative pronoun WHOM – ‘the teacher to whom I spoke’ or ‘the woman whom I shall marry’ – that has largely fallen into disuse, but which remains a mark of educated and formal speech. Accusative pronouns are essential after a PREPOSITION – one would never write or say ‘give it to I’ or ‘it came from they’ unless one were completely illiterate or speaking in dialect in a work of fiction. Nor is the widespread disregard of *whom* to be applauded. That so many people now would write or say ‘the prime minister is a politician who I despise’ can hardly be represented as evidence of progress. Some people would be tempted to write ‘I was afraid of she who must be obeyed’, believing ‘she who must be obeyed’ cannot be altered. But it can, and it must be. The preposition *of* must take the accusative, and so it has to be ‘I was afraid of her who must be obeyed.’

A common mistake with prepositions occurs when there are two objects: some speakers or writers remember to put

the first in the accusative, but then ignore the second. Few would consider it acceptable to say ‘she gave it to I’, yet some find little difficulty in saying ‘she gave it to my husband and I’. Perhaps the Queen is to blame for the popularity of that solecism, despite Her Majesty’s own faultless grammar and her usage of ‘my husband and I’ only when they are the subject of the sentence. One often hears or reads ‘between you and I’ which must be ‘between you and me’.

Another frequently missing accusative occurs after *than*. Even quite educated people write or say ‘she is older than I’ or ‘you are a better man than I’ or ‘I have lived here longer than he’. It should be ‘me’ in the first two and ‘him’ in the last. We should take as our authority for this the peerless grammarian C. T. Onions, who wrote in his *Modern English Syntax* that ‘than, when introducing a contracted comparative clause has (at least from early Modern English times) been treated as a preposition and has been followed by an accusative.’ To reinforce Onions’s point, one would never write ‘a woman than who I was much taller’, but ‘than whom’. It is, of course, correct to write or say ‘she is older than I am’, and so on: but if the verb *to be* is absent, the pronoun must be accusative. As Onions says, there is half a millennium of precedent for such a thing, and any other usage – such as ‘older than I’ – is, in his view, ‘pedantic’. He also justified the use of the accusative after *as* or *so* if the verb *to be* was absent: ‘she is not as [or ‘so’] tall as I am’ is fine, but it should be ‘she is not as [or ‘so’] tall as me’. An accusative is also needed after *such as* – it should be ‘a fool such as me’, not ‘a fool such as I’. The more demotic use ‘a fool like me’ at least has a correct accusative, though the idiom is slang.

The verb *to be*, as in Latin, should never take the accusative in formal writing, though it frequently does in demotic speech. ‘It’s me’ or ‘I’m her’ are accepted usages. It may sound impossibly precious and pompous to say ‘it is

I’ or ‘I am she’, but it is correct, and should still be used in formal writing or speech. The direct object of a verb must always be in the accusative. A sentence such as ‘I was appalled to find only one woman, and she a foreigner, who understood English grammar’ is wrong: it must be ‘and her a foreigner’, for that clause remains an object of ‘find’.

Achingly It is tempting to ignore entirely what Eric Partridge called ‘vogue words’, on the grounds that they are usually meaningless and, as such, soon become exhausted and pass out of fashion. *Achingly* is a typical example: by the time you read this there will be, and indeed will have been, others. Early in the twenty-first century it was considered, for a short time, witty and expressive to describe something as ‘achingly modern’ or ‘achingly chic’. Happily, boredom soon set in, and the moment passed. However, it is useful as an example of how unthinking use of a novelty term becomes tedious and marks the speaker or writer out as being thoughtless about the use of English.

Acknowledgement should be spelt thus, with two *e*’s. See also ABRIDGEMENT and JUDGEMENT.

Acquiesce does not mean to approve. It means to agree to do something with some reluctance. ‘Several ministers acquiesced in the Prime Minister’s plans to legalise same-sex marriage’ means that they supported him in order to preserve their careers, not because they agreed with the policy.

Acronym An acronym is an abbreviation that constitutes a pronounceable word, such as Aids (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), Ofsted (the Office of Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) and Unicef (United Nations Children’s Fund). So BBC, QED and RSPCA are not acronyms but ABBREVIATIONS. It is usual to have an initial

capital letter for acronyms, but to write or print the rest of the word in lower case, though some military acronyms break this rule, such as SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) and UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force). For a good directory of acronyms, look on the Internet at www.acronymslist.com.

Active voice Verbs have two voices, the *active* and the *passive*. The *active* is the more straightforward and direct: 'The boy waved his bat in the air.' The *passive* voice does not change the sense, but alters the emphasis: 'The bat was waved in the air by the boy.' Use the active wherever possible, for the passive establishes a remoteness between the actor and the action. For that reason it is much beloved of politicians.

Actor Correctly, this word is used in the theatrical sense to describe a male of the species who performs in a drama. It is now widely used to describe a player of either gender. However, the Oscar ceremony, which takes place in Hollywood and therefore near the epicentre of POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, still makes awards to the best actress and the best supporting actress. The gender-specific term is inevitably more precise.

Actually has in large part become a CLICHÉ and, like most clichés, almost meaningless. There is little difference in effect between saying or writing 'I hadn't actually seen it' and saying 'I hadn't seen it'. Like many meaningless words, it has become a form of punctuation, something the mind tells the tongue or the pen to do automatically without engaging the normal processes of thought. Some people seem to be unable to resist starting most sentences with it – 'actually, I'm going to have a bath', or 'actually, let's have dinner'. It is just about permissible as a form of subtle contradiction, in speech – 'You were out with that woman

again!’ ‘Actually, I was taking my grandmother to church.’ However, such examples will rarely occur in formal writing. ‘In fact’, which is also a cliché now, may just be preferable if one has set up a thesis in writing but wishes to offer a contradiction to it. ‘However’ is usually the least tiresome way of doing this, as in: ‘She claimed we were late. However, her watch was fast.’ On the grounds that in good writing one should always cut out a word that is unnecessary, *actually* can often be dispensed with. Its bastard and even more verbose cousin, the fatuous phrase ‘in actual fact’, is something for which there is absolutely no excuse. See also FILLERS.

Address, forms of see under the individual headings ACADEMICS, ARMED FORCES, BARONESSES, BARONETS, BISHOPS, CLERGY, COUNTESSES, DR, DUKES AND DUCHESSES, EARLS, ESQUIRE, HONOURABLE, JUDICIARY, KNIGHTS, LETTERS, MILITARY TITLES, PEERS AND THEIR FAMILIES, QUEEN’S COUNSEL, REVEREND, ROYALTY.

Address, to This has acquired something of a vogue usage in recent years. It used to mean to write a destination for a letter on its envelope, to speak at a public meeting or to talk formally to another individual. It is now used to describe someone turning his or attention to almost anything, as in ‘he addressed the problem’, ‘she addressed the question of what to wear’ and ‘he addressed his pork pie’. The joke soon wears thin, as it does with all such vogue usages.

Adequate The dictionary defines two nuanced usages. One is to mean ‘fully satisfying what is required’, the other, a more modern development, means ‘satisfactory, but worthy of no stronger praise or recommendation’. In either usage no comparative or superlative makes sense, so avoid ‘very adequate’ or ‘most adequate’, unless trying to be archly humorous. ‘Adequate enough’ is a tautology.

Adjectives An adjective is a word that describes a NOUN. A man can be *big*, *small*, *tall*, *short*, *thin*, *fat*, *old*, *young* and so on – they are all adjectives. In addition to simple descriptive words such as these, adjectives may be manufactured out of verbs, as in ‘the living dead’, ‘a standing rebuke’ or ‘a running sore’. Indicating possession is also adjectival, as in ‘the school’s playing fields’, though in some such cases a noun can often be used as an adjective without the possessive – ‘the school playing field’, for example. In other contexts, the first of two consecutive nouns can often have the force of an adjective: such as ‘a fruit basket’, ‘a dinner jacket’, ‘a tractor driver’ or ‘running shoes’. Use of a noun and preposition may also be adjectival – ‘the road to London’ is ‘the London road’, and when one is awaiting ‘the train from Edinburgh’, one is awaiting ‘the Edinburgh train’. Whole phrases can be adjectival, as in ‘he had a came-over-with-the-Conqueror cast of mind’.

Adjectives should be used sparingly. Prose that is over-adjectival may be humorous or ironic: if it is neither, then it is often over-written. Adjectives clutter up prose and frequently detract from what is being said because they may harm clarity. They are popular with the tabloid press because they add a note of sensationalism to a story. They also suggest insufficient thought in the choice or deployment of the noun they are describing. Also, not all adjectives are equal. They fall into two classes: those that describe matters of fact and those that describe matters of perception or opinion. The former are far more necessary than the latter, and therefore less offensive and more excusable. Adjectives may be a statement of the obvious – ‘the *old* man’, ‘the *deep* river’, ‘the *cold* day’. However, when they are expressions of opinion it is their subjectivity that makes them dangerous. ‘The *stupid* child’ may be nothing of the sort. Nor may ‘the *plain* woman’ (beauty being in the eye of the beholder), or ‘the *sincere* man’.

Adjectives may often be avoided either because they are incipiently inaccurate, or because they add nothing to the meaning of the phrase, or because one chooses a noun with sufficient care to render them tautological or in some other way unnecessary. They do however exist, and far more in some sorts of writing than in others. It is well to be alert to their potency, their power to deceive, and to their dangers. Not the least of those dangers is that so many of them fail to inform the reader but instead distract him.

When adjectives are used to express opinions they should be carefully chosen to convey an exact degree of view. Otherwise, the user risks lapsing into hyperbole. If someone is *dull*, that is a perfectly good adjective with which to describe his condition. *Boring* would be an acceptable alternative. *Tiresome* is slightly stronger, because it suggests that the tedium of the person is becoming an irritant. *Stupid*, *thick*, *revolting* or *shocking* simply take the description into hyperbole.

At the risk of stating the obvious, if you are going to use an adjective, be sure to choose one that conveys exactly your meaning. Speakers or writers will exaggerate for effect, but it is not particularly helpful if one is striving for credibility. In normal prose it may be helpful to confine oneself to adjectives that are objective, and avoid those that are subjective. Also there is no point describing an idiot as ‘a *stupid* idiot’, or a hero as ‘a *courageous* hero’, because if the noun is being used accurately the adjective conveys no extra information. ‘An *established* convention’ or ‘an *earlier* precedent’ are similarly tautological, because a convention must be established and a precedent must have come earlier. Also, it is redundant to describe someone as ‘a *convicted* criminal’, because no one (under English law at least) is a criminal unless his criminality has been proved in a court of law by his being convicted of a crime. It is a mark of good style to choose a noun that is sufficiently expressive (and, of course, accurate) to convey the exact meaning

required without the need for an adjective. Keep to a minimum even adjectives that convey important factual information, to avoid clutter. And think carefully before using one that does not.

Also, some adjectives do not mean what popular (and incorrect) usage has led us to think they mean. See FULSOME and RARE AND SCARCE for examples.

Adjectives are the staple of the tabloid newspaper, where they give colour and allow easy reader engagement with news stories that for reasons of space must be short, and must convey the maximum information in the minimum space. Readers of such prose too easily acquire two habits. One is the promiscuous use of the adjective; the other is the use of emotive compound construction in which the adjective, often the past participle of a verb, is further larded with an adverb, as in '*heavily* veiled', '*devastatingly* beautiful', '*brutally* beaten' and so on. Such phrases are more damaging to good style than ordinary adjectives because so many of them now have the force of clichés.

Adjectives, as nouns Two examples of adjectives that have become nouns are *homosexual* and *classic*. The late Auberon Waugh took exception to the former, arguing that the noun should be 'homosexualist'. The adjectival usage as a noun is now so entrenched that to write 'a homosexual man' (or, for that matter, 'a lesbian woman' instead of *a lesbian*, or 'a heterosexual person' for *a heterosexual*) would start to smack of pedantry. On the subject of groups, several other words used to refer to them have become nouns – *blacks*, *whites*, *ethnics*, *gays*, *straights,* and so on. The last three have the status of slang, however. The English language is littered with adjectives that have become nouns, and whose usage raises no eyebrows – such as *essential*, *extra*, *regular*, *short* and *official*.