

Common Errors in English Usage



abject

“Abject” is always negative—it means “hopeless,” not “extreme.” You can’t experience “abject joy” unless you’re being deliberately paradoxical.

about

“This isn’t about you.” What a great rebuke! But conservatives sniff at this sort of abstract use of “about,” as in “I’m all about good taste” or “successful truffle-making is about temperature control”; so it’s better to avoid it in very formal English.

absorbtion/absorption

Although it’s “absorbed” and “absorbing,” the correct spelling of the noun is “absorption.”

accede/exceed

If you drive too fast, you exceed the speed limit. “Accede” is a much rarer word meaning “give in, agree.”

accent marks

In what follows, “accent mark” will be used in a loose sense to include all diacritical marks that guide pronunciation. Operating systems and programs differ in how they produce accent marks, but it’s worth learning how yours works. Writing them in by hand afterwards looks amateurish.

Words adopted from foreign languages sometimes carry their accent marks with them, as in “fiancé,” “protégé,” and “cliché.” As words become more at home in English, they tend to shed the marks: “café” is often spelled “cafe.” Unfortunately, “résumé” seems to be losing its marks one at a time (*see under* “vitae/vita”).

Many computer users have not learned their systems well enough to understand how to produce the desired accent and often insert an apostrophe ['] or foot mark ['] after the accented letter instead: “cafe’.” This is both ugly and incorrect. The same error is commonly seen on storefront signs.

So far we’ve used examples containing *acute* (right-leaning) accent marks. French and Italian (but not Spanish) words often contain *grave* (left-leaning) accent marks; in Italian it’s a *caffè*. It is important not to substitute one kind of accent for the other.

The *diaeresis* over a letter signifies that it is to be pronounced as a separate syllable: “Noël” and “naïve” are sometimes spelled with a diaeresis, for instance. The *umlaut*, which looks identical, modifies the sound of a vowel, as in German *Fräulein*, where the accent mark changes the “ow” sound of *Frau* (woman) to “froy” (girl). Rock groups like “Blue Öyster Cult” scatter umlauts about nonsensically to create an exotic look.

Spanish words not completely assimilated into English like *piñata* and *niño* retain the *tilde*, which tells you that an “N” is to be pronounced with a “Y” sound after it.

In English-language publications accent marks are often discarded, but the acute and grave accents are the ones most often retained.

accept/except

If you offer me Godiva chocolates I will gladly accept them—except for the candied violet ones. Just remember that the “X” in “except” excludes things—they tend to stand out, be different. In contrast, just look at those two cozy “C’s” snuggling up together. Very accepting. And be careful; when typing “except” it often comes out “expect.”

access/get access to

“Access” is one of many nouns that’s been turned into a verb in recent years. Conservatives object to phrases like, “You can access your account online.” Substitute “use,” “reach,” or “get access to” if you want to please them.

accessory

There’s an “ack” sound at the beginning of this word, though some mispronounce it as if the two “C’s” were to be sounded the same as the two “SS’s.”

accidentally/accidentally

You can remember this one by remembering how to spell “accidental.” There are quite a few words with “-ally” suffixes (like “incidentally”), which are not to be confused with words that have “-ly” suffixes (like “independently”). “Incidental” is a word, but “independental” is not.

according to/per

See “per/according to.”

acronyms and apostrophes

One unusual modern use of the apostrophe is in plural acronyms, like “ICBM’s,” “NGO’s,” and “CD’s.” Since this pattern violates the rule that apostrophes are not used before an “S” indicating a plural, many people object to it. It is also perfectly legitimate to write “CDs,” etc. Likewise for “50s.” But the use of apostrophes with initialisms like “learn your ABC’s” and “mind your P’s and Q’s” is now so universal as to be acceptable in almost any context.

Note that “acronym” was used originally only to label pronounceable abbreviations like “NATO,” but is now generally applied to all sorts of initialisms. Be aware that some people consider this extended definition of “acronym” to be an error.

See also “apostrophes.”

acrost/accrossed/across

In some dialects, “acrost” is a common misspelling of “across.” Also, the chicken may have *crossed* the road, but did so by walking *across* it.

actual fact/actually

“In actual fact” is an unnecessarily complicated way of saying “actually.”

adapt/adopt

You can adopt a child or a custom or a law; in these cases you are making the object of the adoption your own, accepting it. If you adapt something, however, you are changing it.

add/ad

“Advertisement” is abbreviated “ad,” not “add.”

added bonus

See “redundancies.”

adieu/ado

See “without further adieu/without further ado.”

administer/minister

You can minister to someone by administering first aid. Note how the “ad” in “administer” resembles “aid” in order to remember the correct form of the latter phrase. “Minister” as a verb always requires “to” following it.

adopt/adapt

See “adapt/adopt.”

adultry/adultery

“Adultery” is often misspelled “adultry,” as if it were something every adult should *try*. This spelling error is likely to get you snickered at. The term does not refer to all sorts of illicit sex: at least one of the partners involved has to be married for the relationship to be adulterous.

advance/advanced

When you hear about something in advance, earlier than other people, you get *advance* notice or information. “Advanced” means

“complex, sophisticated” and doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the revealing of secrets.

adverse/averse

The word “adverse” turns up most frequently in the phrase “adverse circumstances,” meaning difficult circumstances, circumstances which act as an adversary; but people often confuse this word with “averse,” a much rarer word, meaning having a strong feeling against, or aversion toward.

advice/advise

“Advice” is the noun, “advise” the verb. When Miss Manners advises people, she gives them advice.

adviser/advisor

“Adviser” and “advisor” are equally fine spellings. There is no distinction between them.

affect/effect

There are four distinct words here. When “affect” is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is a verb meaning “have an influence on”: “The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act.” A much rarer meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning “emotion.” In this case the word is used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists—people who normally know how to spell it. The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: “effect.” This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: “When I left the stove on, the effect was that the house filled with smoke.” When you affect a situation, you have an effect on it. The less common one is a verb meaning “to create”: “I’m trying to effect a change in the way we purchase widgets.” No wonder people are confused. Hey, nobody ever said English was logical: just memorize it and get on with your life.

affluence/effluence

Wealth brings affluence; sewage is effluence.

agreeance/agreement

When you agree with someone you are in agreement.

ahold/hold

In formal English you just “get hold” of something or somebody.

ain’t/am not/isn’t/aren’t

“Ain’t” has a long and vital history as a substitute for “isn’t,” “aren’t,” and so on. It was originally formed from a contraction of “am not” and is still commonly used in that sense. Even though it has been universally condemned as the classic “mistake” in English, everyone uses it occasionally as part of a joking phrase or to convey a down-to-earth quality. But if you always use it instead of the more “proper” contractions you’re sure to be branded as uneducated.

all

Put this word where it belongs in the sentence. In negative statements, don’t write, “All the pictures didn’t show her dimples” when you mean, “The pictures didn’t all show her dimples.”

all goes well/augurs well

Some folks who don’t understand the word “augur” (to foretell based on omens) try to make sense of the common phrase “augurs well” by mangling it into “all goes well.” “Augurs well” is synonymous with “bodes well.”

all of the sudden/all of a sudden

Use “a,” not “the,” in this phrase.

all ready/already

“All ready” is a phrase meaning “completely prepared,” as in, “As soon as I put my coat on, I’ll be all ready.” “Already,” however, is an adverb used to describe something that has happened before a certain time, as in, “What do you mean you’d rather stay home? I’ve already got my coat on.”

all right/alright

See “alright/all right.”

all the farther/as far as

In some American dialects it is not uncommon to hear sentences such as “Abilene is all the farther the rustlers got before the posse caught up with them.” The strangely constructed expression “all the farther” should be replaced with the much more straightforward “as far as.”

all together/altogether

See “altogether/all together.”

alleged

Journalists write that a person is *alleged* to have committed a crime to avoid labeling the person a criminal before a trial or confession has definitively established guilt (though it’s redundant and senseless to refer to “an alleged suspect”). It’s mainly a device for avoiding libel lawsuits. After the trial, it’s safe to call the convicted murderer a murderer. And it insults the victim to speak of an “alleged robbery” unless there is real doubt that the crime actually took place.

allegory

See “parallel/symbol.”

alliterate/illiterate

Pairs of words with the same initial sound *alliterate*, like “wild and wooly.” Those who can’t read are *illiterate*.

alls/all

“Alls I know is . . .” may result from anticipating the “S” in “is,” but the standard expression is “All I know is. . . .”

allude/elude

You can allude (refer) to your daughter’s membership in the honor society when boasting about her, but a criminal tries to elude (escape) captivity. There is no such word as “illude.”

allude/refer

To allude to something is to refer to it indirectly, by suggestion. If you are being direct and unambiguous, you are referring to the subject rather than alluding to it.

allusion/illusion

An allusion is a reference, something you allude to: “Her allusion to flowers reminded me that Valentine’s Day was coming.” In that English paper, don’t write “literary illusions” when you mean “allusions.” A mirage, hallucination, or a magic trick is an illusion. (Doesn’t being fooled just make you *ill*?)

almost

Like “only,” “almost” must come immediately before the word or phrase it modifies: “She almost gave a million dollars to the museum” means something quite different from, “She gave almost a million dollars to the museum.” Right? So you shouldn’t write, “There was almost a riotous reaction when the will was read” when what you mean is, “There was an almost riotous reaction.”

almost always/most always

See “most always/almost always.”

alot/a lot

Perhaps this common spelling error began because there does exist in English a word spelled “alot” which is a verb meaning to apportion or grant. The correct form, with “a” and “lot” separated by a space, is not often encountered in print because formal writers usually use other expressions such as “a great deal,” “often,” etc. If you can’t remember the rule, just remind yourself that just as you wouldn’t write “alittle” you shouldn’t write “alot.”

already/all ready

See “all ready/already.”

alright/all right

The correct form of this phrase has become so rare in the popular press that many readers have probably never noticed that it is actually

two words. But if you want to avoid irritating traditionalists you'd better tell them that you feel "all right" rather than "alright."

altar/alter

An altar is that platform at the front of a church or in a temple; to alter something is to change it.

alterior/ulterior

When you have a concealed reason for doing something, it's an *ulterior* motive.

alternate/alternative

Although U.K. authorities disapprove, in U.S. usage, "alternate" is frequently an adjective, substituted for the older "alternative": "an alternate route." "Alternate" can also be a noun; a substitute delegate is, for instance, called an "alternate." But when you're speaking of "every other" as in "our club meets on alternate Tuesdays," you can't substitute "alternative."

altogether/all together

"Altogether" is an adverb meaning "completely" or "entirely." For example: "When he first saw the examination questions, he was altogether baffled." "All together," in contrast, is a phrase meaning "in a group." For example: "The wedding guests were gathered all together in the garden."

alumnus/alumni

We used to have "alumnus" (male singular), "alumni" (male plural), "alumna" (female singular), and "alumnae" (female plural); but the latter two are now popular only among older female graduates, with the first two terms becoming unisex. However, it is still important to distinguish between one alumnus and a stadium full of alumni. Never say, "I am an alumni," if you don't want to cast discredit on your school. Many avoid the whole problem by resorting to the informal abbreviation "alum."

Alzheimer's disease

See "old-timer's disease/Alzheimer's disease."

am not/isn't/aren't/ain't

See “ain't/am not/isn't/aren't.”

amature/amateur

Most of the words we've borrowed from the French that have retained their “-eur” endings are pretty sophisticated, like “restaurateur” (notice, no “n”) and “auteur” (in film criticism), but “amateur” attracts amateurish spelling.

ambiguous/ambivalent

Even though the prefix “ambi-” means “both,” “ambiguous” has come to mean “unclear, undefined,” while “ambivalent” means “torn between two opposing feelings or views.” If your attitude cannot be defined into two polarized alternatives, then you're ambiguous, not ambivalent.

ambivalent/indifferent

If you feel pulled in two directions about some issue, you're ambivalent about it; but if you have no particular feelings about it, you're indifferent.

American

Many Canadians and Latin Americans are understandably irritated when U.S. citizens refer to themselves simply as “Americans.” Canadians (and only Canadians) use the term “North American” to include themselves in a two-member group with their neighbor to the south, though geographers usually include Mexico in North America. When addressing an international audience composed largely of people from the Americas, it is wise to consider their sensitivities.

However, it is pointless to try to ban this usage in all contexts. Outside of the Americas, “American” is universally understood to refer to things relating to the U.S. There is no good substitute. Brazilians, Argentineans, and Canadians all have unique terms to refer to themselves. None of them refer routinely to themselves as “Americans” outside of contexts like the “Organization of American States.” Frank Lloyd Wright promoted “Usonian,” but it never caught on. For better or worse, “American” is standard English for “citizen or resident of the United States of America.”

amongst/among

Although “amongst” has not aged nearly as badly as “whilst,” it is still less common in standard speech than “among.”

amoral/immoral

“Amoral” is a rather technical word meaning “unrelated to morality.” When you mean to denounce someone’s behavior, call it “immoral.”

amount/number

This is a vast subject. I will try to limit the number of words I expend on it so as not to use up too great an amount of space. The confusion between the two categories of words relating to amount and number is so pervasive that those of us who still distinguish between them constitute an endangered species; but if you want to avoid our ire, learn the difference. Amount words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; number words to things that can be counted.

In the second sentence above, it would have been improper to write “the amount of words” because words are discrete entities that can be counted, or numbered.

Here is a handy chart to distinguish the two categories of words:

amount	number
quantity	number
little	few
less	fewer
much	many

You can eat fewer cookies, but you drink less milk. If you ate too many cookies, people would probably think you’ve had too much dessert. If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use number words. Even a substance that is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn’t drink too much wine, but you should also avoid drinking too many glasses of wine. Note that here you are counting glasses. They can be numbered.

The most common mistake of this kind is to refer to an “amount” of people instead of a “number” of people. Just to confuse things, “more” can be used either way: you can eat more cookies and drink more milk.

amuse/bemuse

See “‘bemuse/amuse.’”

analog/analogue

See “‘lite’ spelling.”

analogy

See “parallel/symbol.”

anchors away/anchors aweigh

Anchors are “weighed” by being gathered up on chains. The correct expression is “anchors aweigh.”

and also/and, also

“And also” is redundant; say just “and” or “also.”

and plus

See “redundancies.”

anecdote/antidote

A humorist relates “anecdotes.” The doctor prescribes “antidotes” for children who have swallowed poison. Laughter may be the best medicine, but that’s no reason to confuse these two with each other.

angel/angle

People who want to write about winged beings from Heaven often miscall them “angles.” A triangle has three angles. The Heavenly Host is made of angels. Just remember the adjectival form: “angelic.” If you pronounce it aloud you’ll be reminded that the “E” comes before the “L.”

annihilate

See “decimate/annihilate, slaughter, etc.”

anticlimatic/anticlimactic

This word has to do with climaxes, not climate, so the word is “anticlimactic.”

antidote/anecdote

See “anecdote/antidote.”

antisocial/asocial

See “asocial/antisocial.”

anxious/eager

Most people use “anxious” interchangeably with “eager,” but its original meaning had to do with worrying, being full of anxiety. Perfectly correct phrases like “anxious to please” obscure the nervous tension implicit in this word and lead people to say less correct things like, “I’m anxious for Christmas morning to come so I can open my presents.” Traditionalists frown on anxiety-free anxiousness. Say instead you are eager for or looking forward to a happy event.

any

Instead of saying, “He was the worst of any of the dancers,” say, “He was the worst of the dancers.”

anymore/any more

In the first place, the traditional (though now uncommon) spelling is as two words: “any more” as in “We do not sell bananas any more.” In the second place, it should not be used at the beginning of a sentence as a synonym for “nowadays.” In certain dialects of English it is common to utter phrases like, “Anymore you have to grow your own if you want really ripe tomatoes,” but this is guaranteed to jolt listeners who aren’t used to it. Even if they can’t quite figure out what’s wrong, they’ll feel that your speech is vaguely clunky and awkward. “Any more” always needs to be used as part of an expression of negation except in questions like, “Do you have any more bananas?” Now you won’t make that mistake any more, will you?

anytime/any time

Though it is often compressed into a single word by analogy with “anywhere” and similar words, “any time” is traditionally a two-word phrase.

anyways/anyway

“Anyways” at the beginning of a sentence usually indicates that the speaker has resumed a narrative thread: “Anyways, I told Matilda that guy was a lazy bum before she ever married him.” It also occurs at the end of phrases and sentences, meaning “in any case”: “He wasn’t all that good-looking anyways.” A slightly less rustic quality can be imparted to these sentences by substituting the more formal “anyway.” Neither expression is a good idea in formal written English. The two-word phrase “any way” has many legitimate uses, however: “Is there any way to prevent the impending disaster?”

apart/a part

Paradoxically, the one-word form implies separation while the two-word form implies union. Feuding roommates decide to live *apart*. Their time together may be *a part* of their lives they will remember with some bitterness.

apostrophes

First let’s all join in a hearty curse of the grammarians who inserted the wretched apostrophe into possessives in the first place. It was all a mistake. Our ancestors used to write “Johns hat” meaning “the hat of John” without the slightest ambiguity. However, sometime in the Renaissance certain scholars decided that the simple “s” of possession must have been formed out of a contraction of the more “proper” “John his hat.” Since in English we mark contractions with an apostrophe, they did so, and we were stuck with the stupid “John’s hat.” Their error can be a handy reminder though: if you’re not sure whether a noun ending in “s” should be followed by an apostrophe, ask yourself whether you could plausibly substitute “his” or “her” for the “s.”

The exception to this pattern is personal pronouns indicating possession like “his,” “hers,” and “its.” *For more on this point, see “its/it’s.”*

Get this straight once and for all: when the “s” is added to a word simply to make it a plural, no apostrophe is used (except in expressions where letters or numerals are treated like words, like “mind your P’s and Q’s” and “learn your ABC’s”).

Apostrophes are also used to indicate omitted letters in real contractions: “do not” becomes “don’t.”

Why can’t we all agree to do away with the wretched apostrophe? Because its two uses—contraction and possession—have people so thoroughly confused that they are always putting in apostrophes where they don’t belong, in simple plurals (“cucumber’s for sale”) and family names when they are referred to collectively (“the Smith’s”).

The practice of putting improper apostrophes in family names on signs in front yards is an endless source of confusion. “The Brown’s” is just plain wrong. (If you wanted to suggest “the Browns’ residence” you would have to write “Browns’,” with the apostrophe *after* the “S,” which is there to indicate a plural number, not as an indication of possession.) If you simply want to indicate that a family named Brown lives here, the sign out front should read simply “The Browns.” When a name ends in an “S” you need to add an “ES” to make it plural: “the Adamses.”

No apostrophes for simple plural names or names ending in “S,” OK? I get irritated when people address me as “Mr. Brian’s.” What about when plural names are used to indicate possession? “The Browns’ cat” is standard (the second “S” is “understood”), though some prefer “the Browns’s cat.” The pattern is the same with names ending in “S”: “the Adamses’ cat” or—theoretically—“the Adamses’s cat,” though that would be mighty awkward.

It is not uncommon to see the “S” wrongly apostrophized even in verbs, as in the mistaken “He complain’s a lot.”

See also “acronyms and apostrophes” and “’50s.”

appraise/apprise

When you estimate the value of something, you appraise it. When you inform people of a situation, you apprise them of it.

apropos/appropriate

“Apropos” (anglicized from the French phrase *à propos*) means relevant, connected with what has gone before; it should not be used as an all-purpose substitute for “appropriate.” It would be inappropriate, for example, to say, “Your tuxedo was perfectly apropos for the opera gala.”

aren't/ain't/am not/isn't

See “ain't/am not/isn't/aren't.”

artic/arctic

Although some brand names have incorporated this popular error, remember that the Arctic Circle is an arc. By the way, Ralph Vaughan Williams called his suite drawn from the score of the film *Scott of the Antarctic* the *Sinfonia Antartica*, but that's Italian, not English.

artical/article

The correct spelling is “article.”

as far as/all the farther

See “all the farther/as far as.”

as far as/as far as . . . is concerned

Originally people used to say things like “As far as music is concerned, I especially love Baroque opera.” Recently they have begun to drop the “is concerned” part of the phrase. Perhaps this shift was influenced by confusion with a similar phrase, “as for.” “As for money, I don't have any,” is fine; “As far as money, I don't have any,” is clumsy.

as follow/as follows

“My birthday requests are as follows.” This standard phrase doesn't change number when the items to follow grow from one to many. It's never correct to say “as follow.”

as if/like

See “like/as if.”

as of yet/yet

“As of yet” is a windy and pretentious substitute for plain old English “yet” or “as yet,” an unjustified extension of the pattern in sentences like “as of Friday the 27th of May.”

as per/in accordance with

“Enclosed is the shipment of #2 toggle bolts as per your order of June 14” writes the businessman, unaware that not only is the “as”

redundant, he is sounding very old-fashioned and pretentious. The meaning is “in accordance with,” or “in response to the request made”; but it is better to avoid these cumbersome substitutes altogether: “Enclosed is the shipment of bolts you ordered June 14.”

ashfault/asphalt

“Ashfault” is a common misspelling of “asphalt.”

Asian/Asiatic/Oriental

See “Oriental/Asiatic/Asian.”

asocial/antisocial

Someone who doesn’t enjoy socializing at parties might be described as either “asocial” or “antisocial”; but “asocial” is too mild a term to describe someone who commits an antisocial act like planting a bomb. “Asocial” suggests indifference to or separation from society, whereas “antisocial” more often suggests active hostility toward society.

aspect/respect

When used to refer to different elements of or perspectives on a thing or idea, these words are closely related, but not interchangeable. It’s “in all respects,” not “in all aspects.” Similarly, one can say “in some respects” but not “in some aspects.” One says “in this respect,” not “in this aspect.” One looks at all “aspects” of an issue, not at all “respects.”

assumably/presumably

The correct word is “presumably.”

assure/ensure/insure

To “assure” a person of something is to make him or her confident of it. According to Associated Press style, to “ensure” that something happens is to make certain that it does, and to “insure” is to issue an insurance policy. Other authorities, however, consider “ensure” and “insure” interchangeable. To please conservatives, make the distinction. However, it is worth noting that in older usage these spellings were not clearly distinguished.

European “life assurance” companies take the position that all policy-holders are mortal and someone will definitely collect, thus assuring heirs of some income. American companies tend to go with “insurance” for coverage of life as well as of fire, theft, etc.

asterick/asterisk

Some people not only spell this word without its second “S,” they say it that way too. It comes from Greek *asteriskos*: “little star.” Tisk, tisk, remember the “-isk”; “asterick” is icky.

at home/to home

See “to home/at home.”

athiest/atheist

An atheist is the opposite of a theist. *Theos* is Greek for “god.” Make sure the “TH” is followed immediately by an “E.”

athlete

Tired of people stereotyping you as a dummy just because you’re a jock? One way to impress them is to pronounce “athlete” properly, with just two syllables, as “ATH-leet” instead of using the common mispronunciation “ATH-uh-leet.”

ATM machine/ATM

“ATM” means “Automated Teller Machine,” so if you say “ATM machine” you are really saying “Automated Teller Machine machine.”

augur/auger

An “augur” was an ancient Roman prophet, and as a verb the word means “foretell”—“their love augurs well for a successful marriage.” Don’t mix this word up with “auger,” a tool for boring holes.

See also “all goes well/augurs well.”

aural/oral

“Aural” has to do with things you hear, “oral” with things you say, or relating to your mouth.

averse/adverse

See “adverse/averse.”

avocation/vocation

Your “avocation” is just your hobby; don’t mix it up with your job: your “vocation.”

awhile/a while

When “awhile” is spelled as a single word, it is an adverb meaning “for a time” (“stay awhile”); but when “while” is the object of a prepositional phrase, like “Lend me your monkey wrench for a while,” the “while” must be separated from the “a.” (But if the preposition “for” were lacking in this sentence, “awhile” could be used in this way: “Lend me your monkey wrench awhile.”)

ax/ask

The dialectical pronunciation of “ask” as “ax” suggests to most people that the speaker has a substandard education and is to be avoided in formal speaking situations.

axel/axle

The center of a wheel is its axle. An axel is a tricky jump in figure skating named after Axel Paulson.



backslash/slash

This is a slash: /. Because the top of it leans forward, it is sometimes called a “forward slash.” This is a backslash: \. Notice the way it leans back, distinguishing it from the regular slash.

Slashes are often used to indicate directories and subdirectories in computer systems such as Unix and in World Wide Web addresses. Unfortunately, many people, assuming “backslash” is some sort of technical term for the regular slash, use the term incorrectly, which risks confusing those who know enough to distinguish between the two but not enough to realize that Web addresses never contain

backward/backwards

backslashes. Substituting one for the other makes the address inoperable.

backward/backwards

As an adverb, either word will do: “put the shirt on backward” or “put the shirt on backwards.” However, as an adjective, only “backward” will do: “a backward glance.” When in doubt, use “backward.”

bad/badly

“I feel bad” is standard English, as in “This t-shirt smells bad” (not “badly”). “I feel badly” is an incorrect hyper-correction by people who think they know better than the masses. People who are happy can correctly say they feel good, but if they say they feel well, we know they mean to say they’re healthy. However, you may impress your beloved more if you say “I need you really badly” rather than the less correct “I need you real bad.”

baited breath/bated breath

Although the odor of the chocolate truffle you just ate may be irresistible bait to your beloved, the proper expression is “bated breath.” “Bated” here means “held, abated.” You do something with “bated breath” when you’re so tense you’re holding your breath.

barb wire/bob wire/barbed wire

In some parts of the country this prickly stuff is commonly called “barb wire” or even “bob wire.” When writing for a general audience, stick with the standard “barbed wire.”

bare/bear

There are actually three words here. The simple one is the big growly creature (unless you prefer the Winnie-the-Pooh type). Hardly anyone past the age of 10 gets that one wrong. The problem is the other two. Stevedores bear burdens on their backs and mothers bear children. Both mean “carry” (in the case of mothers, the meaning has been extended from carrying the child during pregnancy to actually giving birth). But strippers bare their bodies—sometimes bare-naked. The confusion between this latter verb and “bear” creates many uninten-

tionally amusing sentences; so if you want to entertain your readers while convincing them that you are a dolt, by all means mix them up. “Bear with me,” the standard expression, is a request for forbearance or patience. “Bare with me” would be an invitation to undress. “Bare” has an adjectival form: “The pioneers stripped the forest bare.”



No one wondered what she had said; it was, “Bear with me.”

based around/based on

“Based around” has become a common but illogical substitute for the traditional expression “based on.”

basicly/basically

There are “-ly” words and “-ally” words, and you basically just have to memorize which is which. But “basically” is very much overused and is often better avoided in favor of such expressions as “essentially,” “fundamentally,” or “at heart.”

bated breath/baited breath

See “baited breath/bated breath.”

bazaar/bizarre

A “bazaar” is a market where miscellaneous goods are sold. “Bizarre,” in contrast, is an adjective meaning “strange, weird.” Let all those “As” in “bazaar” remind you that this is a Persian word denoting traditional markets.

bear/bare

See “bare/bear.”

beaurocracy/bureaucracy

The French *bureaucrats* from whom we get this word worked at their *bureaus* (desks, spelled *bureaux* in French) in what came to be known as *bureaucracies*.

because/due to the fact that

See “due to the fact that/because.”

because/since

See “since/because.”

beckon call/beck and call

This is a fine example of what linguists call “popular etymology.” People don’t understand the origins of a word or expression and make one up based on what seems logical to them. “Beck” is just an old, shortened version of “beckon.” If you are at people’s beck and call it means they can summon you whenever they want: either by gesture (beck) or speech (call).

beginning a sentence with a conjunction

See “conjunction, beginning a sentence with a.”

begs the question

An argument that improperly assumes as true the very point the speaker is trying to argue for is said in formal logic to “beg the question.” Here is an example of a question-begging argument: “This painting is trash because it is obviously worthless.” The speaker is simply asserting the worthlessness of the work, not presenting any evidence to demonstrate that this is in fact the case. Since we never

use “begs” with this odd meaning (“to improperly take for granted”) in any other phrase, many people mistakenly suppose the phrase implies something quite different: that the argument demands that a question about it be asked—*raises* the question. If you’re not comfortable with formal terms of logic, it’s best to stay away from this phrase, or risk embarrassing yourself.

behaviors/behavior

“Behavior” has always referred to patterns of action, including multiple actions, and did not have separate singular and plural forms until social scientists created them. Unless you are writing in psychology, sociology, anthropology, or a related field, it is better to avoid the use of “behaviors” in your writing.

See also “peoples.”

bemuse/amuse

When you bemuse someone, you confuse them, and not necessarily in an entertaining way. Don’t confuse this word with “amuse.”



It was an act that left the audience both bemused and amused.

beside/besides

“Besides” can mean “in addition to” as in “besides the puppy chow, Spot scarfed up the filet mignon I was going to serve for dinner.” “Beside,” in contrast, usually means “next to.” “I sat beside Cheryl all evening, but she kept talking to Jerry instead.” Using “beside” for “besides” won’t usually get you in trouble, but using “besides” when you mean “next to” will.

better

When Chuck says, “I better get my research started; the paper’s due tomorrow,” he means “I *had* better,” abbreviated in speech to “I’d better.” The same pattern is followed for “he’d better,” “she’d better,” and “they’d better.”

between

“Between 1939 to 1945” is obviously incorrect to most people—it should be “between 1939 and 1945”—but the error is not so obvious when it is written thus: “between 1939–1949.” In this case, the “between” should be dropped altogether. Also incorrect are expressions like “there were between 15 to 20 people at the party.” This should read “between 15 and 20 people.”

Some people argue that “between” should only be used with two items, “among” with more. The “-tween” in “between” is clearly linked to the number two; but, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, “In all senses, between has, from its earliest appearance, been extended to more than two.” We’re talking about Anglo-Saxon here—early. Pedants have labored to enforce “among” when there are three or more objects under discussion, but largely in vain. Even the pickiest speaker does not naturally say, “A treaty has been negotiated among England, France, and Germany.”

between you and I/between you and me

“Between you and me” is preferred in standard English.
See also “me/I/myself.”

beyond the pail/beyond the pale

In medieval Ireland, the area around Dublin was within the limit of English law, everything outside being considered as wild, dangerous

territory. The boundary was marked by a fence called the “Pale” (compare with “palisade”). The expression “beyond the pale” came to mean “bizarre, beyond proper limits”; but people who don’t understand the phrase often alter the last word to “pail.”

bias/biased

A person who is influenced by a bias is *biased*. The expression is not “they’re bias,” but “they’re biased.” Also, many people say someone is “biased toward” something or someone when they mean biased *against*. To have a bias toward something is to be biased in its favor.

See also “prejudice/prejudiced.”

Bible

Whether you are referring to the Jewish Bible (the Torah plus the Prophets and the Writings), the Protestant Bible (the Jewish Bible plus the New Testament), or the Catholic Bible (which contains everything in the Jewish and Protestant Bibles plus several other books and passages mostly written in Greek in its Old Testament), the word “Bible” must be capitalized. Even when used generically, as in, “The *Qur’an* is the Bible of the Muslims,” the word is usually capitalized. Just remember that it is the title of a book, and book titles are normally capitalized. An oddity in English usage is, however, that “Bible” and the names of the various parts of the Bible are not italicized or placed between quotation marks. “Biblical” may be capitalized or not, as you choose (or as your editor chooses).

Those who wish to be sensitive to the Jewish authorship of the Jewish Bible may wish to use “Hebrew Bible” and “Christian Scriptures” instead of the traditionally Christian nomenclature: “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” Modern Jewish scholars sometimes use the Hebrew acronym “Tanakh” to refer to their Bible, but this term is not generally understood by others.

biweekly/semiweekly

Technically, a biweekly meeting occurs every two weeks and a semiweekly one occurs twice a week; but so few people get this straight that your club is liable to disintegrate unless you avoid these words in the newsletter and stick with “every other week” or “twice

weekly.” The same is true of “bimonthly” and “semimonthly,” though “biennial” and “semiannual” are less often confused with each other.

bizarre/bazaar

See “bazaar/bizarre.”

blatant

The classic meaning of “blatant” is “noisily conspicuous,” but it has long been extended to any objectionable obviousness. A person engaging in blatant behavior is usually behaving in a highly objectionable manner, being brazen. Unfortunately, many people nowadays think that “blatant” simply means “obvious” and use it in a positive sense, as in “Kim wrote a blatantly brilliant paper.” Use “blatant” or “blatantly” only when you think the people you are talking about should be ashamed of themselves.

boatload/buttload

See “buttload/boatload.”

bob wire

See “barb wire/bob wire/barbed wire.”

bonafied/bona fide

Bona fide is a Latin phrase meaning “in good faith,” most often used to mean “genuine” today. It is often misspelled as if it were the past tense of an imaginary verb: “bonify.”

bored of/bored with

It’s “bored with.”

born out of/born of

Write “My love of dance was born of my viewing old Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire movies,” not “born out of.” The latter expression is probably substituted because of confusion with the expression “borne out” as in “My concerns about having another office party were borne out when Mr. Peabody spilled his beer into the fax machine.” The only correct (if antiquated) use of “born out of” is in the phrase “born out of wedlock.”

borrow/loan

In some dialects it is common to substitute “borrow” for “loan” or “lend,” as in “Borrow me that hammer of yours, will you, Jeb?” In standard English the person providing an item can loan it; but the person receiving it borrows it.

See also “lend/loan.”

both/each

There are times when it is important to use “each” instead of “both.” Few people will be confused if you say, “I gave both of the boys a baseball glove,” meaning “I gave both of the boys baseball gloves” because it is unlikely that two boys would be expected to share one glove; but you risk confusion if you say, “I gave both of the boys \$50.” It is possible to construe this sentence as meaning that the boys shared the same \$50 gift. “I gave each of the boys \$50” is clearer.

boughten/bought

“Bought” is the past tense of “buy,” not “boughten.” “Store-bought,” a colloquial expression for “not home-made,” is already not formal English; but it is not improved by being turned into “store-boughten.”

bound/heading

See “heading/bound.”

bourgeois

In the original French, a *bourgeois* was merely a free inhabitant of a *bourg*, or town. Through a natural evolution it became the label for members of the property-owning class, then of the middle class. As an adjective it is used with contempt by bohemians and Marxists to label conservatives whose views are not sufficiently revolutionary. The class made up of bourgeois (which is both the singular and the plural form) is the bourgeoisie. Shaky spellers are prone to leave out the “E” from the middle because “eo” is not a natural combination in English; but these words have remarkably enough retained their French pronunciation: “boorzh-WAH” and “boorzh-WAH-zee.” The feminine form, *bourgeoise*, is rarely encountered in English.

bouyant/buoyant

Buoys are buoyant. In the older pronunciation of “buoy” as “bwoy” this unusual spelling made more sense. Now that the pronunciation has shifted to “boy” we have to keep reminding ourselves that the “U” comes before the “O.”

bran new/brand new

The scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* (the book), was given “bran-new” brains composed literally of bran; but for everyone else the expression should be “brand new.”

brand names

Popular usage frequently converts brand names into generic ones, with the generic name falling into disuse. Few people call gelatin dessert mix anything other than “Jell-O,” which helps to explain why it’s hard to find Nabisco’s Royal Gelatin on the grocery shelves. All facial tissues are “Kleenex” to the masses, all photocopies “Xeroxes.” Such commercial fame is, however, a two-edged sword: sales may be lost as well as gained from such over-familiarity. Few people care whether their “Frisbee” is the genuine Wham-O brand original or an imitation. Some of these terms lack staying power: “Hoover” used to be synonymous with “vacuum cleaner,” and the brand name was even transmuted into a verb: “to Hoover” (these uses are still common in the U.K.). Most of the time this sort of thing is fairly harmless, but if you are a motel operator offering a different brand of whirlpool bath in your rooms, better not call it a “Jacuzzi.”

brang/brung/brought

In some dialects the past tense of “bring” is “brang” and “brung” is the past participle; but in standard English both are “brought.”

breach/breech

Substitute a “K” for the “CH” in “breach” to remind you that the word has to do with breakage: you can breach (break through) a dam or breach (violate the terms of) a contract. As a noun, a breach is something broken off or open, as in a breach in a military line during combat.

“Breech,” however, refers to rear ends, as in “breeches” (slang spelling “britches”). Thus “breech cloth,” “breech birth,” or “breech-loading gun.”

“Once more into the breach, dear friends,” means “let’s fill up the gap in the line of battle,” not “let’s reach into our pants again.”

breath/breathe

When you need to breathe, you take a breath. “Breathe” is the verb, “breath” the noun.

bring/take

When you are viewing the movement of something from the point of arrival, use “bring.” “When you come to the potluck, please bring a green salad.” Viewing things from the point of departure, you should use “take”: “When you go to the potluck, take a bottle of wine.”

brought/brung/brang

See “brang/brung/brought.”

build off of/build on

You build on your earlier achievements, you don’t build off of them.

buoyant/bouyant

See “buoyant/bouyant.”

burn/burned

See “-ed/-t.”

butt naked/buck naked

The standard expression is “buck naked,” and the contemporary “butt naked” is an error that will get you laughed at in some circles. However, it might be just as well if the new form were to triumph. Originally a “buck” was a dandy, a pretentious, overdressed show-off of a man. Condescendingly applied in the U.S. to Native Americans and black slaves, it quickly acquired negative connotations. To the historically aware speaker, “buck naked” conjures up stereotypical

buttload/boatload

images of naked “savages” or—worse—slaves laboring naked on plantations. Consider using the alternative expression “stark naked.”

buttload/boatload

The original expression (meaning “a lot”), both more polite and more logical, is “boatload.”

by/’bye/buy

These are probably confused with each other more often through haste than through actual ignorance, but “by” is the common preposition in phrases like “you should know by now.” It can also serve a number of other functions, but the main point here is not to confuse “by” with the other two spellings: “bye” is an abbreviated form of “goodbye” (preferably with an apostrophe before it to indicate the missing syllable), and “buy” is the verb meaning “purchase.” “Buy” can also be a noun, as in “that was a great buy.” The term for the position of a competitor who advances to the next level of a tournament without playing is a “bye.” All others are “by.”

by accident/on accident

See “on accident/by accident.”

by in large/by and large

The expression is “by and large.” Some also write erroneously “by enlarge.”



Caesar/Cesar

See “Cesar/Caesar.”

callous/callused

Calling someone “callous” is a way of metaphorically suggesting a lack of feeling similar to that caused by calluses on the skin; but if you are speaking literally of the tough build-up on a person’s hand or foot, the word you need is “callused.”

calls for/predicts

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?

—Shakespeare: *Henry IV, Part 1*

Newspeople constantly joke that the weather service is to blame for the weather, so we shouldn't be surprised when they tell us that the forecast "calls for" rain when what they mean is that it "predicts" rain. Remember, wherever you live, the weather is uncalled for.

Calvary/cavalry

"Calvary," always capitalized, is the hill on which Jesus was crucified. It means "hill of skulls." Soldiers mounted on horseback are cavalry.

cannot/can not

These two spellings are largely interchangeable, but by far the most common is "cannot"; and you should probably use it except when you want to be emphatic: "No, you can *not* wash the dog in the Maytag."

See also "may/might."

canon/cannon

"Canon" used to be such a rare word that there was no temptation to confuse it with "cannon": a large piece of artillery. The debate over the literary canon (a list of officially-approved works) and the popularity of Pachelbel's *Canon* (an imitative musical form commonly called a round) have changed all that—confusion is rampant. Just remember that the big gun is a "cannon." All the rest are "canons." Note that there are metaphorical uses of "cannon" for objects shaped like large guns, such as a horse's "cannon bone."

capital/capitol

A "capitol" is always a building. Cities and all other uses are spelled with an "A" in the last syllable. Would it help to remember that Congress with an "O" meets in the Capitol with another "O"?

capitalization

Proper nouns (names of people and places: “Frederick,” “Paris”) and proper adjectives (“French,” “Biblical”) must be capitalized. Many people used to casual e-mail patterns have begun to omit capitals throughout their writing, even at the beginning of sentences when writing in more formal contexts. Unless your correspondent is someone that you know prefers the all-lower-case approach, to be taken seriously you should take the trouble to hit that Shift key when necessary. Particularly watch out for this sloppy habit in writing timed examinations. A teacher who has devoted 20 years to the study of Chinese art flinches when she sees her cherished subject demoted to “chinese.”

caramel/Carmel

Take Highway 1 south from Monterey to reach the charming seaside town of Carmel, of which Clint Eastwood was formerly mayor. Dissolve sugar in a little water and cook it down until the sugar turns brown to create caramel. A nationwide chain uses the illiterate spelling “Karmelkorn™,” which helps to perpetuate the confusion between these two words.

carat/caret/carrot/karat

“Carrots” are those crunchy orange vegetables Bugs Bunny is so fond of, but this spelling gets misused for less familiar words which are pronounced the same but have very different meanings. Precious stones like diamonds are weighed in carats. The same word is used to express the proportion of pure gold in an alloy, though in this usage it is sometimes spelled “karat” (hence the abbreviation “20K gold”). A caret is a proofreader’s mark showing where something needs to be inserted, shaped like a tiny pitched roof. It looks rather like a French circumflex, but is usually distinct from it on modern computer keyboards. Carets are extensively used in computer programming. Just remember, if you can’t eat it, it’s not a carrot.

card shark/cardsharp

Although he may behave like a shark, the slick, cheating card player is a “cardsharp.”



A cardsharp may also be a sharp dresser.

care less

See “could care less/could not care less.”

caret/carrot/karat/carat

See “carat/caret/carrot/karat.”

caring

Most people are comfortable referring to “caring parents,” but speaking of a “caring environment” is jargon, not acceptable in formal English. The environment may contain caring people, but it does not itself do the caring.

Carmel/caramel

See “caramel/Carmel.”

carrot/karat/carat/caret

See “carat/caret/carrot/karat.”

carrot on a stick/the carrot or the stick

Authoritative dictionaries agree—the expression refers to offering to reward a stubborn mule or donkey with a carrot or threatening to beat it with a stick and not to a carrot being dangled from a stick. For me, the clincher is that no one actually cites the form of the “original expression.” In what imaginable context would it possibly be witty or memorable to say that someone or something had been motivated by a carrot on a stick? Why not an apple on a stick, or a bag of oats? Boring, right? Not something likely to pass into popular usage. This saying belongs to the same general family as “You can draw more flies with honey than with vinegar.” It is never used except when such contrast is implied.

case and point/case in point

The example before us is a “case in point,” not “case and point.”

catalog/catalogue

See “‘lite’ spelling.”

catch-22/catch

People familiar with Joseph Heller’s novel are irritated when they see “catch-22” used to label any simple hitch or problem rather than this sort of circular dilemma: you can’t get published until you have an agent, and you can’t get an agent until you’ve been published. “There’s a catch” will do fine for most other situations.

catholic religion

See “religion.”

cavalry/Calvary

See “Calvary/cavalry.”

CD-ROM disc/CD-ROM disk/CD-ROM

“CD-ROM” stands for “compact disc, read-only memory,” so adding another “disc” or “disk” is redundant. The same goes for “DVD”—originally “Digital Video Disc”—even though some manufacturers now claim the initials stand for “Digital Versatile Disc.” Don’t say “give me that DVD disk,” just “give me that DVD.”

Cesar/Caesar

Did you know that the German *Kaiser* is derived from the Latin *Caesar*? The Germans kept the authentic hard “K” sound of the initial letter in the Latin word. We’re stuck with our illogical pronunciation, so we have to memorize the correct spelling. (The Russians messed up the pronunciation as thoroughly as the English, with their *Czar*.) Thousands of menus are littered with “Cesar salads” throughout America—named after the restaurateur Caesar Cardini, not the emperor (but they both spelled their names the same way). Julius Caesar’s family name was “Julius”; he made the name “Caesar” famous all by himself.

celibate/chaste

Believe it or not, you can be celibate without being chaste, and chaste without being celibate. A celibate person is merely unmarried, usually (but not always) because of a vow of celibacy. The traditional assumption is that such a person is not having sex with anyone, which leads many to confuse the word with “chaste,” denoting someone who does not have illicit sex. A woman could have wild sex twice a day with her lawful husband and technically still be chaste, though the word is more often used to imply a general abstemiousness from sex and sexuality. You can always amuse your readers by misspelling the latter word as “chased.”

Celtic

Because the Boston Celtics basketball team pronounces its name as if it began with an “S,” Americans are prone to use this pronunciation of the word as it applies to the Bretons, Cornish, Welsh, Irish, and Scots; but the dominant pronunciation among sophisticated U.S. speakers is “KEL-tik.” Just remember: “Celts in kilts.”

Interestingly, the Scots themselves often use the “S” pronunciation, notably in referring to the soccer team: “Glasgow Celtic.”

cement/concrete

People in the building trades distinguish cement (the gray powder that comes in bags) from concrete (the combination of cement, water, sand, and gravel which becomes hard enough in your driveway to drive your car on). In contexts where technical precision matters, it’s probably better to speak of a “concrete sidewalk” rather than of a “cement sidewalk.”

center around/center on/revolve around

Two perfectly good expressions—“center on” and “revolve around”—get conflated in this nonsensical neologism. When a speaker says his address will “center around the topic of” whatever, my interest level plummets.

center of attraction/center of attention

“Center of attraction” makes perfect sense, but the standard phrase is “center of attention.”

cents

On a sign displaying a cost of 29 cents for something, the price can be written as “.29,” as “\$.29,” or as “29¢,” but don’t combine the two forms. “.29¢” makes no sense, and “\$.29¢” is worse.

century names

See “eighteen hundreds/nineteenth century.”

chai tea/chai

Chai is simply the word for “tea” in Hindi and several other Asian languages. Indians often brew their tea with lots of milk and spices (called *masala*—they call this drink *masala chai*); and that’s what most people in the West know as “chai.” Since everyone likely to be attracted by the word “chai” already knows it’s a tea-based drink, it’s both redundant and pointless to call the product “chai tea.”

chaise longue

When English speakers want to be elegant they commonly resort to French, often mangling it in the process. The *entrée*, the dish served before the *plat*, usurped the latter's position as main dish. And how in the world did French *lingerie* (originally meaning linen goods of all sorts, later narrowed to underwear only), pronounced—roughly—“LANZH-uh-ree” come to be English “LAWNZH-uh-ray”? *Quelle horreur!* *Chaise longue* (literally “long chair”), pronounced—roughly—“SHEZZ lohng” with a hard “G” on the end, became in English “SHAYZ long.” Many speakers, however, confuse French *chaise* with English “chase” and French *longue* with English “lounge” (understandable since the article in question is a sort of couch or lounge), resulting in the mispronunciation “chase lounge.” We may imagine the French as chasing each other around their lounges, but a *chaise* is just a chair.

champ at the bit/chomp at the bit

See “chomp at the bit/champ at the bit.”

chaste

See “celibate/chaste.”

cheap at half the price/cheap at twice the price

“Cheap at half the price” implies the price is too high. The only logical version of this common phrase is “cheap at twice the price.”

cheat/gyp

See “gyp/cheat.”

chemicals

Markets offering “organic” produce claim it has been raised “without chemicals.” News stories fret about “chemicals in our water supply.” This common error in usage indicates quite clearly the lamentable level of scientific literacy in our population. Everything on earth save a few stray subatomic particles and various kinds of energy (and—if you believe in it—pure spirit) is composed of chemicals. Pure water

consists of the chemical dihydrogen oxide. Vitamins and minerals are chemicals. In the broadest sense, even simple elements like nitrogen can be called chemicals. Writers who use this term sloppily contribute to the obfuscation of public debate over such serious issues as pollution and malnutrition.



"Guaranteed not to be free of chemicals!"

Chicano/Latino/Hispanic

"Chicano" means "Mexican-American," and not all the people denoted by this term like it. When speaking of people from various other Spanish-speaking countries, "Chicano" is an error for "Latino" or "Hispanic." Only "Hispanic" can include people with a Spanish as well as with a Latin American heritage; and only "Latino" could logically include Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, though that is rarely done.

chick/chic

Something fashionable can be labeled with the French adjective *chic*, but it is definitely not *chic* to spell the word "chick" or "sheek."

chomp at the bit/champ at the bit

“Champ at the bit” is the only common use of this old word meaning “gnash,” and it conjures up a restless horse chewing on its bit, eager to get underway. Its unfamiliarity makes some people mistakenly substitute the slangy “chomp.”

chunk/chuck

In casual conversation, you may get by with saying, “Chuck [throw] me that monkey wrench, will you?” But you will mark yourself as illiterate beyond mere casualness by saying instead, “Chunk me that wrench.” This is a fairly common substitution in some dialects of American English.

Church/church

Catholics routinely refer to their church as the Church, with a capital “C.” This irritates the members of other churches, but is standard usage. When “Church” stands by itself (that is, not as part of a name like “First Methodist Church”), capitalize it only to mean “Roman Catholic Church.”

See also “religion.”

cite/site/sight

You cite the author in an endnote; you visit a Web site or the site of the crime, and you sight your beloved running toward you in slow motion on the beach (a sight for sore eyes!).

cleanup/clean up

“Cleanup” is usually a noun: “the cleanup of the toxic waste site will cost billions of dollars.” “Clean” is a verb in the phrase “clean up”: “You can go to the mall after you clean up your room.”

cliché/clichéd

One often hears young people say, “That movie was so cliché!” “Cliché” is a noun, meaning an over-familiar phrase or image. A work containing clichés is clichéd.

click/clique

Students lamenting the division of their schools into snobbish factions often misspell “clique” as “click.” In the original French, *clique* was synonymous with *claque*—an organized group of supporters at a theatrical event who tried to prompt positive audience response by clapping enthusiastically.

climax/crescendo

See “climax/crescendo.”

close/clothes

Because the “TH” in “clothes” is seldom pronounced distinctly, it is often misspelled “close.” Just remember the “TH” in “clothing,” where it is obvious. Clothes are made of cloth. Rags can also be cloths (without an “E”).

close proximity/close/in proximity to

A redundancy: “in proximity to” means “close to.”

coarse/course

“Coarse” is always an adjective meaning “rough, crude.” Unfortunately, this spelling is often mistakenly used for a quite different word, “course,” which can be either a verb or a noun (with several different meanings).

coincidentally/ironically

See “ironically/coincidentally.”

collaborate/corroborate

People who work together on a project collaborate (share their labor); people who support your testimony as a witness corroborate (strengthen by confirming) it.

Colombia/Columbia

Although both are named after Columbus, the U.S. capital is the District of Columbia, whereas the South American country is Colombia.