

Some common solecisms

Acronym: this is a word, like radar or NATO, not a set of initials, like the BBC or the IMF.

Aetiology is the **science of causation**, or **an inquiry into something's origins**. **Etiolate** is to **make** or **become pale for lack of light**.

Aggression is an unattractive quality, so do not call a **keen** salesman an aggressive one (unless his foot is in the door or beyond).

Agony column: when Sherlock Holmes perused this, it was a **personal column**, not letters to an **agony aunt**.

Agree: things are agreed **on**, **to** or **about**, not just agreed.

Aggravate means **make worse**, not **irritate** or **annoy**.

Alibi: an **alibi** is the proven fact of being elsewhere, not a false explanation.

Alternate, as an adjective, means **every other**.

Alternative: strictly, this is one of two, not one of three, four, five or more (which may be **options**).

Among and **between**. Some sticklers insist that, where division is involved, **among** should be used where three or more are concerned, **between** where only two are concerned. (So **The plum jobs were shared among the Socialists, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats, while the president and the vice-president divided the cash between themselves.**) This distinction is unnecessary. But take care with **between**. **To fall between two stools**, however painful, is grammatically acceptable; **to fall between the cracks** is to challenge the laws of physics.

Anarchy means the **complete absence of law or government**. It may be harmonious or chaotic.

Anticipate does not mean **expect**. Jack and Jill expected to marry; if they anticipated marriage, only Jill might find herself expectant.

Apostasy and **heresy**. If you abandon your religion, you commit **apostasy**. If that religion is the prevailing one in your community,

and your beliefs are contrary to its orthodoxy you commit **heresy**.

Appeal is intransitive nowadays (except in America), so appeal **against decisions**.

Appraise means **set a price on**. **Apprise** means **inform**.

Assassinate is, properly, the term used not just for any old killing, but for the murder of a prominent person, usually for a political purpose.

Autarchy means absolute sovereignty. **Autarky** means self-sufficiency.

Beg the question means neither **raise the question**, **invite the question** nor **evade the answer**. To **beg the question** is to adopt an argument whose conclusion depends upon assuming the truth of the very conclusion the argument is designed to produce. **All governments should promote free trade because otherwise protectionism will increase. This begs the question.**

Bellwether. This is the leading sheep of a flock, on whose neck a bell is hung. It is nothing to do with climate, prevailing winds or the like.

Between: see **Among and between**.

Blooded means **pedigreed** or **initiated**. **Bloodied** means **wounded**.

Bon vivant, not **bon viveur**.

Both...and: a preposition placed after **both** should be repeated after **and**. Thus, **both to right and to left**; but **to both right and left** is all right.

Brokerage is what a stockbroking firm does, not what it is.

Canute's exercise on the seashore was designed to persuade his courtiers of what he knew to be true but they doubted, ie, that he was not omnipotent. Don't imply he was surprised to get his feet wet.

Cartel. A cartel is a group that restricts supply in order to drive up prices. Do not use it to describe any old syndicate or association of producers—especially of drugs.

Cassandra's predictions were correct but not believed.

Catalyst: this is something that speeds up a chemical reaction while itself remaining unchanged. Do not confuse it with one of the agents.

Centred on, not **around** or **in**.

Charge: if you **charge** intransitively, do so as a bull, cavalry officer or somesuch, not as an **accuser** (so avoid **The standard of writing was abysmal, he charged**).

Circumstances stand around a thing, so it is **in**, not **under**, them.

Coiffed, not **coiffured**

Collapse is not transitive. You may collapse, but you may not collapse something.

Compare: A is compared **with** B when you draw attention to the difference. A is compared **to** B only when you want to stress their similarity. ("**Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?**")

Compound does not mean **make worse**. It may mean **combine** or, intransitively, it may mean to **agree or come to terms**. To **compound a felony** means to **agree for a consideration not to prosecute**.

Comprise means is **composed of**. **The Democratic coalition comprises women, workers, blacks and Jews. Women make up** (not **comprise**) **three-fifths of the Democratic coalition**. Alternatively, **Three-fifths of the Democratic coalition is composed of women**.

Confectionary: a sweet. **Confectionery:** sweets in general.

Contemporary: see **Current**.

Continuous describes something uninterrupted. **Continual** admits of a break. If your neighbours play loud music every night, it is a **continual** nuisance; it is not a **continuous** one unless the music is never turned off.

Contract: see **Subcontract**.

Convince. Don't **convince** people **to** do something. In that context

the word you want is **persuade**. **The prime minister was persuaded to call a June election; he was convinced of the wisdom of doing so only after he had won.**

Crescendo. This is not an acme, apogee, peak, summit or zenith but a **passage of increasing loudness**. You cannot therefore **build to a crescendo**.

Crisis. This is a decisive event or turning-point. Many of the economic and political troubles wrongly described as **crises** are really **persistent difficulties, sagas or affairs**.

Critique is a noun. If you want a verb, try **criticise**.

Current and **contemporary** mean **at that time**, not necessarily **at this time**. So a series of current prices from 1960 to 1970 will not be in **today's prices**, just as **contemporary art** in 1800 was not **modern art**. **Contemporary history** is a contradiction in terms.

Cusp. This is a pointed end or a horn of, eg, the moon, or the point at which two branches of a curve meet. So it is odd to write, say, "Japan is on the cusp of a recovery," unless you think that recovery is about to end.

Deal. Transitively, this means distribute: "He was dealt two aces, two kings and a six." Intransitively, **deal** means **engage in business**. Do not **deal** horses, weapons, drugs, etc; **deal in** them.

Decimate means to destroy a proportion (originally a tenth) of a group of people or things, not to destroy them all or nearly all.

Deliver is transitive. So if someone is to **deliver**, he must deliver **letters, babies or the goods**—whether **groceries** or **what he promised**.

Demographics: no, the word is **demography**.

Different from, not **to** or **than**.

Dilemma. This is not just any old awkwardness, it is one with horns, being, properly, a form of argument (the horned syllogism) in which you find yourself committed to accept one of two propositions each of which contradicts your original contention. Thus a dilemma offers the choice between two alternatives, each with equally nasty consequences.

Discreet means **circumspect** or **prudent**; **discrete** means

separate or **distinct**. Remember that "**Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.**" (Oscar Wilde)

Disinterested means **impartial**; **uninterested** means **bored**. ("**Disinterested curiosity is the lifeblood of civilisation.**" G.M. Trevelyan)

Due to: when used to mean **caused by**, it must follow a noun, as in **The cancellation, due to rain, of...** Do not write **It was cancelled due to rain**. If you mean **because of** and for some reason are reluctant to say it, you probably want **owing to**. **It was cancelled owing to rain** is all right.

Earnings: do not write **earnings** when you mean **profits** (try to say if they are **operating, gross, pre-tax** or **net**).

Effectively means **with effect**; if you mean **in effect**, say it. **The matter was effectively dealt with on Friday** means it was **done well** on Friday. **The matter was, in effect, dealt with on Friday** means it was **more or less attended to** on Friday. **Effectively leaderless** would do as a description of the demonstrators in East Germany in 1989 but not those in Tiananmen Square. The devaluation of the Slovak currency in 1993, described by some as **an effective 8%**, turned out to be a rather ineffective 8%.

Either...or. See **None**.

Enormity means a **crime, sin** or **monstrous wickedness**. It does not mean **immensity**.

Epicentre means that point on the earth's surface above the centre of an earthquake. To say that **Mr Putin was at the epicentre of the dispute** suggests that the argument took place underground.

Ex- (and **former**): be careful. A **Communist ex-member** has lost his seat; an **ex-Communist member** has lost his party.

Execute means **put to death by law**. Do not use it as a synonym for **murder**. An **extra-judicial execution** is a contradiction in terms.

Factoid: something that sounds like a fact, is thought by many to be a fact (perhaps because it is repeated so often), but is not in fact a fact.

Fellow: often unnecessary, especially before **countrymen** ("**Friends, Romans, fellow-countrymen**"?).

Fewer (not **less**) **than seven speeches, fewer than seven samurai**. Use **fewer**, not **less**, with numbers of individual items or people. **Less than £200, less than 700 tonnes of oil, less than a third**, because these are measured quantities or proportions, not individual items.

Fief, not **fiefdom**.

Finally: do not use **finally** when you mean **at last**. **Richard Burton finally marries Liz Taylor** would have been all right second time round but not first.

Firm. Accountants', consultants', lawyers' and other partnerships are **firms**, not companies. Huge enterprises, like GE, GM, Ford, Microsoft and so on, should, by contrast, normally, be called **companies**, though such outfits can sometimes be called **firms** for variety.

Flaunt means **display**; **flout** means **disdain**. If you flout this distinction, you will flaunt your ignorance.

Forgo means **do without**; it forgoes the e. **Forego** means **go before**. A **foregone conclusion** is one that is predetermined; a **forgone conclusion** is non-existent.

Former: see **Ex-**.

Frankenstein was not a monster, but its creator.

Free is an adjective or an adverb, so you cannot have or do anything **for free**. Either you have **it free** or you have it **for nothing**.

Fund is a technical term, meaning to convert floating debt into more or less permanent debt at fixed interest. Do not use it if you mean to **finance** or to **pay for**.

Garner means **store**, not **gather**.

Gender is a word to be applied to grammar, not people. If someone is female, that is her **sex**, not her **gender**. (The gender of *Mädchen*, the German word for girl, is neuter, as is *Weib*, a wife or woman.)

Generation: take care. You can be a second-generation Frenchman, but if you are a second-generation immigrant that

means you have left the country your parents came to.

Get: an adaptable verb, but it has its limits. A man does not **get** sacked or promoted, he is sacked or promoted.

Good in parts is what the curate said about an egg that was wholly bad. He was trying to be polite.

Gourmet means **epicure**; **gourmand** means **greedy-guts**.

Halve is a transitive verb, so deficits can double but not **halve**. They must **be halved** or **fall by half**.

Haver means to **talk nonsense**, not **dither**, **swither** or **waver**.

Healthy: if you think something is **desirable** or **good**, say so. Do not call it **healthy**.

Heresy: see **Apostasy**.

Hoards: few secreted treasures (**hoards**) are multitudes on the move (**hordes**).

Hobson's choice is not **the lesser of two evils**; it is **no choice at all**.

Homogeneous means **of the same kind or nature**.

Homogenous means **similar because of common descent**.

Homosexual: since this word comes from the Greek word *homos* (same), not the Latin word *homo* (man), it applies as much to women as to men. It is therefore as daft to write **homosexuals and lesbians** as to write **people and women**.

Hopefully: by all means begin an article hopefully, but never write **Hopefully, it will be finished by Wednesday**. Try **With luck, if all goes well, it is hoped that...**

Hypothermia is what kills old folk in winter. If you say it is **hyperthermia**, that means they have been carried off by heat stroke.

Ilk means **same**, so **of that ilk** means **of the place of the same name as the family**, not **of that kind**. Best avoided.

Immolate means to **sacrifice**, not to **burn**.

Inchoate means **not fully developed** or **at an early stage**, not **incoherent** or **chaotic**.

Investigations of, not **into**.

Key: keys may be **major** or **minor**, but not **low**. Few of the decisions, people, industries described as **key** are truly **indispensable**, and fewer still **open locks**.

Lag. If you **lag** transitively, you lag a pipe or a loft. Anything failing to keep up with a front-runner, rate of growth, fourth-quarter profit or whatever is **lagging behind it**.

Like governs nouns and pronouns, not verbs and clauses. So **as in America** not **like in America**. But **authorities like Fowler and Gowers** is a perfectly acceptable alternative to **authorities such as Fowler and Gowers**.

Masterful means **imperious**. **Masterly** means **skilled**.

May and **might** are not always interchangeable, and you may want **may** more often than you think. If in doubt, try **may** first. You need **might** in the past tense. **I may go to Leeds later** becomes, in the past, **I might have gone to Leeds later**. And in indirect past speech it becomes **I said I might go to Leeds later**. Conditional sentences using the subjunctive also need **might**. Thus **If I were to go to Leeds, I might have to stand all the way**. This could be rephrased **If I go to Leeds, I may have to stand all the way**. Conditional sentences stating something contrary to fact, however, need **might**: **If pigs had wings, birds might raise their eyebrows**.

Do not write **George Bush might believe in education, but he thinks the people of Greece are Grecians**. It should be **George Bush may believe in education, but he thinks the people of Greece are Grecians**. Only if you are putting forward a hypothesis that may or may not be true are **may** and **might** interchangeable. Thus **If George Bush studies hard, he may (or might) learn the difference between Greek and Grecian**.

Media: prefer **press and television** or, if the context allows it, just **press**. If you have to use the **media**, remember it is plural.

Mete: you may **mete out** punishment, but if it is to fit the crime it is **meet**.

Mitigates mollifies; **militates** does the opposite.

Monopoly. A **monopolist** is the sole seller; a sole buyer is a **monopsonist**.

Neither...nor. See **None**.

None usually takes a singular verb. So does **neither** (or **either**) **A nor (or) B**, unless B is plural, as in **Neither the Dutchman nor the Danes have done it**, where the verb agrees with the element closest to it. Similarly,

**“Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Or woods or steepy mountain yields.”**

(Christopher Marlowe)

Nor means **and not**, so should not be preceded by **and**.

Only. Put **only** as close as you can to the words it qualifies. Thus, **These animals mate only in June**. To say **They only mate in June** implies that in June they do nothing else.

Overwhelm means **submerge utterly, crush, bring to sudden ruin**. Majority votes, for example, seldom do any of these things. As for the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, although 90% of the population, they turned out to be an **overwhelmed majority**, not an **overwhelming one**, until NATO stepped in.

Oxymoron: an **oxymoron** is not an unintentional contradiction in terms but **a figure of speech in which contradictory terms are deliberately combined**, as in bitter-sweet, cruel kindness, sweet sorrow, etc.

Per caput is the Latin for per head. **Per capita** is the Latin for by heads; it is a term used by lawyers when distributing an inheritance among individuals, rather than among families (**per stirpes**). Unless the context demands this technical expression, never use either **per capita** or **per caput** but **per person**.

Per cent is not the same as a **percentage point**. Nothing can fall, or be devalued, by more than 100%. If something trebles, it increases by 200%. If a growth rate increases from 4% to 6%, the rate is two percentage points or 50% faster, not 2%.

Percolate means to pass **through**, not **up** or **down**.

Populace. This is a term for the **common people**, not a synonym

for the **population**.

Positive means **definitely laid down, beyond possibility of doubt, absolute, fully convinced** or **greater than zero**. It does not mean **good**. **It was a positive meeting** probably means **It was a good, or fruitful, meeting**.

Practicable means **feasible**. **Practical** means **useful**.

Presently means **soon**, not **at present**. ("**Presently Kip opened the door of the shed, and let out Jemima Puddle-Duck.**" Beatrix Potter)

Pressurise. This is what you want in an aircraft, but not in an argument or encounter where persuasion is being employed. The verb you want there is **press** (use **pressure** only as a noun).

Prevaricate means **evade the truth**; **procrastinate** means **delay**. ("**Procrastination—or punctuality, if you are Oscar Wilde—is the thief of time.**")

Pristine means **original** or **former**; it does not mean clean.

Propaganda (which is singular) means a **systematic effort to spread doctrine or opinions**. It is not a synonym for **lies**.

Protagonist means the **chief actor** or **combatant**. If you are referring to several people, they cannot all be protagonists.

Protest. By all means **protest your innocence**, or **your intention to write good English**, if you are making a declaration. But if you are making a complaint or objection, you must **protest at** or **against** it.

Real. Is it really necessary? When used to mean **after taking inflation into account**, it is legitimate. In other contexts (**Investors are showing real interest in the country, but Bolivians wonder if real prosperity will ever arrive**) it is often better left out.

Rebut means **repel** or **meet in argument**. **Refute**, which is stronger, means **disprove**. Neither should be used as a synonym for **deny**. ("**Shakespeare never has six lines together without a fault. Perhaps you may find seven: but this does not refute my general assertion.**" Samuel Johnson)

Report on, not **into**.

Reshuffle, resupply: **shuffle** and **supply** will do.

Scotch: to **scotch** means to **disable**, not to **destroy**. (“**We have scotched the snake, not killed it.**”) The people may also be **Scotch, Scots** or **Scottish**; choose as you like. **Scot-free** means free from payment of a fine (or punishment), not **free from Scotsmen**.

Second-biggest (third-oldest, fourth-wisest, fifth-commonest, etc): think before you write. **Apart from New York, a Bramley is the second-biggest apple in the world. Other than home-making and parenting, prostitution is the third-oldest profession. After Tom, Dick and Harriet, Henry I was the fourth-wisest fool in Christendom. Besides justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude, the fifth-commonest virtue of the Goths was punctuality.** None of these sentences should contain the ordinal (second- , third- , fourth- , fifth- , etc).

Sensual means **carnal** or **voluptuous**. **Sensuous** means pertaining to aesthetic appreciation, without any implication of lasciviousness.

Sequestered means **secluded**. **Sequestrated** means **confiscated** or **made bankrupt**.

Simon Pure is the real person (or thing), and has nothing to do with Caesar's wife or driven snow.

Soft is an adverb, as well as an adjective and a noun. **Softly** is also an adverb. You can speak softly and carry a big stick, but if you have a quiet voice you are **soft**—not softly—**spoken**.

Soi-disant means **self-styled**, not **so-called**.

Specific: a **specific** is a **medicine**, not a **detail**.

Stationary: still. **Stationery:** writing paper and so on.

Straight means **direct** or **uncurved**; **strait** means **narrow** or **tight**. The **strait-laced** tend to be **straight-faced**.

Subcontract. If you engage someone to do something, you are **contracting** the job to him; only if he then asks someone else to do it is the job **subcontracted**.

Systemic means **relating to a system or body as a whole**.

Systematic means **according to system, methodical** or **intentional**.

Target is a noun. If you are tempted to use it as a verb, try **aim** or **direct**. **Targeted** means **provided with a shield**.

Testament is a will, **testimony** evidence. It is **testimony to the poor teaching of English that journalists habitually write testament instead**.

Ticket, platform, manifesto. The **ticket** lists the names of the candidates for a particular party (so if you **split your ticket** you vote for, eg, a Republican for president and a Democrat for Congress). The **platform** is the statement of basic principles (**planks**) put forward by an American party, usually at its pre-election convention. It is thus akin to a British party's **manifesto**, which sets out its policies.

Times: take care. **Three times more than X** means **four times as much as X**.

To or **and**? **To try and end the killing** does not mean the same as **to try to end the killing**.

Transpire means **exhale**, not **happen, occur** or **turn out**.

Underprivileged. Since a privilege is a special favour or advantage, it is by definition not something to which everyone is entitled. So **underprivileged**, by implying the right to privileges for all, is not just ugly jargon but also nonsense.

Unlike should not be followed by **in**. Like **like, unlike** governs nouns and pronouns, not verbs and clauses.

Use and abuse: two words much used and abused. You **take** drugs, not **use** them (Does he use sugar?). And **drug abuse** is just **drug taking**, as is **substance abuse**, unless it is **glue sniffing** or **bun throwing**.

Venerable means **worthy of reverence**. It is not a synonym for **old**.

Verbal: every agreement, except the nod-and-wink variety, is **verbal**. If you mean one that was not written down, describe it as **oral**.

Viable means **capable of living**. Do not apply it to things like

railway lines. **Economically viable** means **profitable**.

Warn is transitive, so you must either **give warning** or **warn somebody**.

Which informs, **that** defines. **This is the house that Jack built.** But **This house, which Jack built, is now falling down.** Americans tend to be fussy about making a distinction between **which** and **that**. Good writers of British English are less fastidious. (“**We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.**”)

While is best used temporally. Do not use it in place of **although** or **whereas**.

Wrack is an old word meaning **vengeance, punishment** or **wreckage**. It can also be **seaweed**. It is not an instrument of torture or a receptacle for toast: that is **rack**. Hence **racked with pain, by war drought**, etc. **Rack** your brains—unless they be **wracked**.