

Wrong words make you look silly

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 8 min read

Do not use the WRONG WORD

It's easy to mix up words and use the wrong word. Even long-time experienced journalists (like me) do it occasionally. But if you're a freelancer starting out, you must not cause a bad impression by using the wrong word. Get out your dictionary, use your WordGenius disk, and use the internet, and work out the right word. Some examples:

ageing

This word is meaningless. To describe a person as "ageing", such as "the ageing movie star?", is silly. Everyone is ageing. The moment a baby is born, he/she is ageing at exactly the same rate as you are ageing. Every hour, everyone ages one hour. Just give the person's age - that's enough.

accident

crash

Accident implies that no one was to blame and the incident was unavoidable. But usually a road crash has an explanation (incompetence, idiocy, inattention, road conditions, mechanical). Don't call it an accident unless it really was an accident.

alumnae, alumna

alumni, alumnus

Alumnae are female graduates and alumna is the singular noun.

Alumni are male graduates, alumnus is the singular noun.

ambassador

high commissioner

attache

An ambassador is a diplomatic agent of the highest rank who represents his or her country's interests in another country.

A high commissioner is the chief representative of a sovereign member of the Commonwealth of Nations in the country of another sovereign member, usually equivalent in rank to an ambassador, as the Australian High Commissioner in London. (An attache is someone on the staff of an embassy.)

aspirational

inspirational

Politicians talk about "aspirational Australians". An aspirational person is someone who aspires to lofty, ambitious or worthwhile heights, such as being aspirational about two kids, a happy family, a decent job, home ownership and meaningful retirement. An inspirational person, or book, or belief system, influences us to better thoughts, feelings and goals.

coconut juice coconut milk

Coconut juice is the watery liquid that comes out when you crack the shell.

Coconut milk is the thick white liquid that can be squeezed from the white flesh.

constantly stopping

frequently stopping

If you say a vehicle is "constantly stopping" then it has stopped and never moves. But if you mean it is "frequently stopping" (like a garbage truck), then say so.

every day

everyday

Every day (two words) means every single day of the week or of the year or of all time . . . whatever.

Everyday (one word) means common, commonplace, middle-of-the-road, mundane or trivial.

biweekly

semiweekly

NEVER USE THESE WORDS. A biweekly event occurs every two weeks and a semiweekly event occurs twice a week. But different dictionaries give different definitions, or both. There's no general agreement, so don't EVER use these words. Write "every two weeks" or "fortnightly" or "twice weekly".

bimonthly

semimonthly

NEVER USE THESE WORDS. A bimonthly event occurs every two months and a semimonthly event occurs twice a month. But again, different dictionaries give different definitions, or both. There's no general agreement, so don't EVER use these words. Write "every two weeks" or "fortnightly" or "twice monthly".

bail

bale

Bail is (in criminal proceedings) the release of a prisoner from legal custody into the custody of persons acting as sureties, undertaking to produce the prisoner to the court at a later date or forfeit the security.

Bale is a large bundle or package prepared for storage or transportation, especially one closely compressed and secured by cords, wires or hoops.

die / dice

Die is the singular of dice. A pair of die, called dice, are two small (six-sided) cubes of plastic, ivory, bone, or wood, marked on each side with a different number of spots (1 to 6), used in games of chance (or gambling).

disinterested

uninterested

Disinterested: unbiased by personal involvement, or not influenced by selfish motives. Disinterest is required of a jury member. Uninterested: having no feeling of interest, being indifferent, not personally concerned.

uncontroversial

noncontroversial

They both mean the same: unlikely to arouse controversy.

handsome cab

hanson cab

The correct name is hansom cab. It's a two-wheeled horse-drawn covered carriage with the driver's seat above and behind the passengers.

hippopotamuses

hippopotami

Most dictionaries say either is correct. I think using the "i" at the end is bit show-off and snobbish. Make up your own mind.

graduand

graduate

A graduand has qualified for a degree, but has not yet had it conferred.

A graduate has received a degree on completing a course at university or college.

trooper

trouper

Trooper means a male or female soldier in a cavalry regiment (riding horses).

A trouper is in actor in theatrical company, even a veteran actor, or a person who shows great devotion to the job or loyalty to a firm or organisation.

unkempt/kempt kept/unkept

Unkempt means having the hair not combed or cared for, being in an uncared-for neglected, or untidy state or people who are crude, coarse, or unpolished. Kempt means combed, well-groomed, personally clean. Kept and unkept have total different meanings and refer to maintaining and grooming.

laundry shoot

laundry chute

Laundry shoot: no such thing. Laundry chute is a narrow passage from a bedroom to a downstairs laundry to save you walking to the laundry.

your

you're

Your . . . you know what "your" means. You're is the contraction of "you are". So "your" and "you're" sound the same but have totally different meanings. Mix them up and you make a goose of yourself. Journalists are not allowed to mix up "your" and "you're". Make this error and you look unprofessional.

there

their

they're

Don't mix them up. Your editor will think you're a dill if you can't tell the difference between these words that all SOUND the same, but have entirely different meanings. Work it out, and don't get it wrong, please.

St John's Ambulance

It's NOT apostrophe-s. It's simply St John Ambulance.

sewerage

sewage

Sewerage: system of pipes, pumps and fittings, the hardware that carries sewage.

Sewage: the waste matter passing through the sewerage.

sought

sort

Sought is the past tense of "seek", but also means to be in demand. Sort means particularly a particular kind or species, as distinguished by the character or nature: to discover a new sort of mineral.

carbon dioxide

carbon monoxide

Carbon dioxide is colourless, odourless, incombustible gas called CO₂, used as dry ice, in fizzy drinks and fire-extinguishers. It's in the atmosphere and also comes from humans breathing out.

Carbon monoxide is a colourless, odourless, poisonous gas called CO, and burns with a blue flame. The gas is formed when carbon burns with insufficient air. And it comes out the exhaust pipes of motor vehicles.

marriage

wedding

Marriage and wedding are virtually interchangeable today. But to be 100% correct, you should write of marriage as the state of legal union that two people live in after a ceremony called a wedding.

meter

metre

In Australia, a meter measures something, such as a flow of water or electricity consumption.

A metre is the metric measurement of 100 centimetres (or about one yard in the old imperial measure).

mortgagee

mortgagor

A mortgagee is the bank (or person) to whom a property is mortgaged.

A mortgagor takes a loan and mortgages his/her home (or something else) to a bank. I've seen financial journalists who mix up these two words.

Labor / Labour / labour

Labor is the spelling of the Australian Labor Party. Labour is the spelling of the British Labour Party. Labour (small "l") is the spelling of labour as in manual work.

loch

lake

lock

In Scotland a loch is often a lake, but more often a loch is an arm of the sea. A lake is body of water (fresh or salt) of considerable size, surrounded by land. A lock can be an enclosed portion of a canal, river, etc. with gates at each end, for raising or lowering vessels from one level to another.

razed

NEVER: razed down

Houses, trees or whatever, when they're all flattened, such as in a cyclone, a fire, or a tsunami are simply razed, not razed down as "razed" already contains the concept that they went down.

relocation

translocation

Relocation means to move to a different place. But translocation is not the same as relocation. Translocation is a medical word meaning the rearrangement of a chromosome in which a segment is moved from one location to another.

elusive

illusive or illusory

Elusive means hard to catch.

Illusive and illusory are to do with being unreal or imaginary.

pore

pour

paw

To pore over something means to gaze earnestly or steadily at, or to read or study with steady attention or application, or to meditate on, or ponder intently.

To pour means to send (a fluid, or anything in loose particles) flowing or falling, as from a container or into, over, or on something.

Paw means the foot of an animal with nails or claws.

pass the mustard

cut the mustard

pass muster

Pass the mustard means what it says (pass the jar of mustard to me).

Cut the mustard is an American expression relating to success or failure ("He just couldn't cut the mustard", that is, he was never good enough).

Pass muster is a military expression relating to someone or something measuring up (or not) to expectations ("She was in the navy for five years, but could never pass muster").

red-headed

red-haired

No one has a red head. You cannot describe a human head as being any particular colour because a head consists of skin, hair, eyes, moles, scars, mouth, teeth, etc. However some people have what's generally called "red hair" and therefore they are "red-haired".

sort

sought

To sort is to arrange according to kind or class. Sought is the past tense and past of seek. Or, to be sought after, to be desired or in demand: he is much sought after as an entertainer.

Sydney

Symphony

Orchestra

It used to be known as the Sydney Symphony Orchestra but today its official name is simply the Sydney Symphony.

upload

download

Amongst computer-users, these words are often wrongly interchanged. To download is to transfer or copy (data) from one computer to another, or from a computer to a disk or peripheral device To upload is to transfer or copy (data) from a computer to a larger system, as from a personal computer to a network or mainframe computer.

filmed

videotaped

Newspaper and reports often say that so-and-so was "filmed" as though all recording of movement and sound is done on film. Today virtually no-one uses film and crimes and events are videotaped. Write the correct word videoed, taped or videotaped. Videoed is the most correct, as today many cameras don't use tape, but use hard-drives.

Thanks

Simon Townsend

These examples came from top student Joanna Baker:

choose / chose

accede / exceed

accept / except

adjacent / adjoining

affect / effect

all ready / already

all right / alright

altar / alter

canvas / canvass

council / counsel

desert / dessert

discreet / discrete

fulfil / fulfill

gaol / jail

illegal / illicit

licence / license

principal / principle

recount / re-count

sarcastic / sardonic

stationary / stationery

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