

everyday

“Everyday” is a perfectly good adjective, as in “I’m most comfortable in my everyday clothes.” The problem comes when people turn the adverbial phrase “every day” into a single word. It is incorrect to write “I take a shower everyday.” It should be “I take a shower every day.”

New Year’s Day

January

1



2006

Sunday



*He wore his hat every day,
but it was no everyday hat.*

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.

January

2



2006

Monday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

gamut/gauntlet

To “run a gamut” or “run the gamut” is to go through the whole scale or spectrum of something. To “run the gauntlet” (also “gantlet”) is to run between two lines of people who are trying to beat you. And don’t confuse “gamut” with “gambit,” a play in chess, and by extension, a tricky maneuver of any kind.

January

3



2006

Tuesday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

impact

One (very large) group of people thinks that using “impact” as a verb is just nifty: “The announcement of yet another bug in the software will strongly impact the price of the company’s stock.” Another (very passionate) group of people thinks that “impact” should be used only as a noun and considers the first group to be barbarians. Although the first group may well be winning the usage struggle, you risk offending more people by using “impact” as a verb than you will by substituting more traditional words like “affect” or “influence.”

January	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
4	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2006	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Wednesday	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	29	30	31				

literally

Like “incredible,” “literally” has been so overused as a sort of vague intensifier that it is in danger of losing its literal meaning. It should be used to distinguish between a figurative and a literal meaning of a phrase. It should not be used as a synonym for “actually” or “really.” Don’t say of someone that he “literally blew up” unless he swallowed a stick of dynamite.

January

5



2006

Thursday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

mitigate against/militate against

“Mitigate” means “soften, make less harsh,” and has nothing to do with the expression “militate against,” which means “to conflict with.” “Mitigate” should never be used with “against.”

January

6



2006

Friday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

self-worth/self-esteem

To say that a person has a low sense of self-worth makes sense, though it's inelegant. But people commonly truncate the phrase, saying instead, "He has low self-worth." This would literally mean that he isn't worth much rather than that he has a low opinion of himself. "Self-esteem" sounds much more literate.

January	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
7/8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2006	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Saturday/Sunday	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	29	30	31				

women/woman

The singular “woman” probably gets mixed up with the plural “women” because although both are spelled with an “O” in the first syllable, only the pronunciation of the “O” really differentiates them. Just remember that this word is treated no differently than “man” (one person) and “men” (more than one person). A woman is a woman—never a women.

January

9



2006

Monday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

these ones/these

By itself, there's nothing wrong with the word "ones" as a plural: "surrounded by her loved ones." However, "this one" should not be pluralized to "these ones." Just say "these." The same pattern applies to "those."

January

10



2006

Tuesday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

safety deposit box/safe-deposit box

“Safety” is rarely pronounced very differently from “safe-D” so it is natural that many people suppose they are hearing the word at the beginning of this phrase, but the correct expression is in fact “safe-deposit box.”

January	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
11	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2006	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Wednesday	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	29	30	31				

single quotes

In standard American writing, the only use for single quotation marks is to designate a quotation within a quotation. Students are exposed by Penguin Books and other publishers to the British practice of using single quotes for normal quotations and become confused. Some strange folkloric process has convinced many people that while entire sentences and long phrases are surrounded by conventional double quotation marks, single words and short phrases take single quotation marks. “Wrong,” I insist.

January

12



2006

Thursday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

rack/wrack

If you are racked with pain or you feel nerve-racked, you are feeling as if you were being stretched on that medieval instrument of torture, the rack. You rack your brains when you stretch them vigorously to search out the truth like a torturer. “Wrack” has to do with ruinous accidents, so if the stock market is wracked by rumors of imminent recession, it’s wrecked.

January

13



2006

Friday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

onto/on to

“Onto” and “on to” are often interchangeable, but not always. Consider the effect created by wrongly using “onto” in the following sentence when “on to” is meant: “We’re having hors d’oeuvres in the garden, and for dinner moving onto the house.” If the “on” is part of an expression like “moving on,” it can’t be shoved together with a “to” that just happens to follow it.

January
14/15
2006
Saturday/Sunday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

historic/historical

The meaning of “historic” has been narrowed down to “famous in history.” One should not call a building, site, district, or event “historical.” Sites may be of historical interest if historians are interested in them, but not just because they are old. In America “historic” is grossly overused as a synonym for “older than my father’s day.”

Martin Luther
King, Jr. Day

January

16



2006

Monday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

alliterate/illiterate

Pairs of words with the same initial sound *alliterate*, like “wild and wooly.”

Those who can't read are *illiterate*.



January

17



2006

Tuesday

*Ben Franklin: wild and wooly at times,
but definitely not illiterate.*

hippy/hippie

A long-haired '60s flower child was a “hippie.” “Hippy” is an adjective describing someone with wide hips. The “IE” is not caused by a “Y” changing to “IE” in the plural as in “puppy” and “puppies.” It is rather a dismissive diminutive, invented by older, more sophisticated hipsters looking down on the new kids as mere “hippies.” Confusing these two is definitely unhip.

January	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
18	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2006	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Wednesday	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	29	30	31				

incredible

The other day I heard a film reviewer praise a director because he created “incredible characters,” which would literally mean unbelievable characters. What the reviewer meant to say, of course, was precisely the opposite: characters so lifelike as to seem like real people. Intensifiers and superlatives tend to get worn down quickly through overuse and become almost meaningless, but it is wise to be aware of their root meanings so that you don’t unintentionally utter absurdities. “Fantastic” means “as in a fantasy,” just as “fabulous” means “as in a fable.” A “wonderful” sight should make you pause in wonder (awe). Some of these words are worn down beyond redemption, however. For instance, who now expects a “terrific” sight to terrify?

January

19



2006

Thursday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

masseuse/masseur

“Masseuse” is a strictly female term; Monsieur Philippe, who gives back rubs down at the men’s gym, is a *masseur*. Because of the unsavory associations that have gathered around the term “masseuse,” serious practitioners generally prefer to be called “massage therapists.”

January

20



2006

Friday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

-ic

In the Cold War era, anti-socialists often accused their enemies of being “socialistic,” by which they meant that although they were not actually socialists, some of their beliefs were like those of socialists. But the “-ic” suffix is recklessly used in all kinds of settings, often without understanding its implications. Karl Marx was not “socialistic”; he was actually socialist.

January
21/22



2006

Saturday/Sunday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

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.

January

23



2006

Monday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

either are/either is

As a subject, “either” is singular. It’s the opposite of “both” and refers to one at a time: “Either ketchup or mustard is good on a hot dog.” But if “either” is modifying a subject in an “either . . . or” phrase, then the number of the verb is determined by the number of the second noun: “Either the puppy or the twins seem to need my attention every other minute.”

January

24



2006

Tuesday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

for one /for one thing

People often say “for one” when they mean “for one thing”: “I really want to go to the movie. For one, Kevin Spacey is my favorite actor.” (One what?) The only time you should use “for one” by itself to give an example of something is when you have earlier mentioned a class to which the example belongs: “There are a lot of reasons I don’t want your old car. For one, there are squirrels living in the upholstery.” (One reason.)

January	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
25	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2006	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Wednesday	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	29	30	31				

couple/couple of

Instead of “She went with a couple sleazy guys before she met me,” write “a couple *of* guys” if you are trying to sound a bit more formal. Leaving the “of” out is a casual, slangy pattern.

January

26



2006

Thursday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

flak/flack

“Flak” is airman’s slang for shells being fired at you in the air, so to catch a lot of flak is to feel in danger of being shot down. However, most civilians these days have never heard of “flak,” so they use “flack” instead, which originally meant “salesman” or “huckster.” You need to worry about this only if you’re around old-time veterans.

January

27



2006

Friday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

reign/rein

A king or queen reigns, but you rein in a horse. The expression “to give rein” means to give in to an impulse as a spirited horse gives in to its impulse to gallop when you slacken the reins. Similarly, the correct expression is “free rein,” not “free reign.”

Chinese New Year—
January 29

January
28/29



2006

Saturday/Sunday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

jewelry

Often mispronounced “joolereee.” To remember the standard pronunciation, just say “jewel” and add “-ree” on the end.

The British spelling is much fancier: “jewellery.”



January

30



2006

Monday

*And we pronounce
this jewelry . . . marvelous!*

entitled/titled

Some people argue that you should say a book is “titled” such-and-such rather than “entitled.” But no less a writer than Chaucer is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as having used “entitled” in this sense, the very first meaning of the word listed by the OED. It may be a touch pretentious, but it’s not wrong.

January

31



2006

Tuesday

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				