

Wensday/Wednesday

Wednesday was named after the Nordic god “Woden” (or “Wotan”). Almost no one pronounces this word’s middle syllable, but it’s important to remember the correct spelling in writing.

Ash Wednesday

March

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2006

Wednesday

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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."

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doggy dog world/dog-eat-dog world

The punning name of the popular rap star Snoop Doggy Dogg did a lot to spread this misspelling. The original image is of a cannibalistically competitive world in which people turn on each other, like dogs eating other dogs.



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2006

Friday

*But wouldn't it be nicer if it
really were a doggy dog world?*

fiscal/physical

In budget matters, it's the *fiscal* year, relating to *finances* with an "F." The middle syllable of "physical" is often omitted in pronunciation, making it sound like the unrelated word "fiscal." Sound that unaccented "I" distinctly.

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hone in/home in

You hone in on a target (the center of the target is “home”). “Honing” has to do with sharpening knives, not aim.

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from the beginning of time

Stephen Hawking writes about the beginning of time, but few other people do. People who write “from the beginning of time” or “since time began” are usually being lazy. Their grasp of history is vague, so they resort to these broad, sweeping phrases. Almost never is this usage literally accurate: people have not fallen in love since time began, for instance, because people arrived relatively late on the scene in the cosmic scheme of things. If you really don’t know the appropriate period from which your subject dates, you could substitute a less silly but still vague phrase such as “for many years,” or “for centuries.”

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hypocritical

“Hypocritical” has a narrow, very specific meaning. It describes behavior or speech that is intended to make one look better or more pious than one really is. It is often wrongly used to label people who are merely narrow-minded or genuinely pious. Do not confuse this word with “hypercritical,” which describes people who are picky.

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like/as if

“As if” is generally preferred in formal writing over “like” in sentences such as “The conductor looks as if he’s ready to begin the symphony.” But in colloquial speech, “like” prevails, and when recording expressions such as “He spends money like it’s going out of style,” it would be artificial to substitute “as if.” In expressions where the verb is implied rather than expressed, “like” is standard rather than “as”: “She took to gymnastics like a duck to water.”

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passed/past

If you are referring to time or distance, use “past”: “The team performed well in the past” and “The police car drove past the suspect’s house.” If you are referring to the action of passing, however, you need to use “passed”: “When John passed the gravy, he spilled it on his lap” and “The teacher was astonished that none of the students had passed the test.”

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spit and image/spitting image

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earlier form was “spitten image,” which may have evolved from “spit and image.” It’s a crude figure of speech: someone else is enough like you to have been spat out by you, made of the very stuff of your body. In the early 20th century the spelling and pronunciation gradually shifted to the less logical “spitting image,” which is now standard. It’s too late to go back. There is no historical basis for the claim sometimes made that the original expression was “spirit and image.”

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regard/regards

Business English is deadly enough without scrambling it. “As regards your downsizing plan . . .” is acceptable, if stiff. “In regard to” and “with regard to” are also correct. But “in regards to” is nonstandard. You can also convey the same idea with “in respect to” or “with respect to.”

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than/then

When comparing one thing with another you may find that one is more appealing “than” another.

“Than” is the word you want when doing comparisons. But if you are talking about time, choose “then”: “First you separate the eggs; then you beat the whites.” Alexis is smarter than I, not “then I.”

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weather/wether/whether

The climate is made up of “weather”; whether it is nice out depends on whether it is raining or not. A wether is just a castrated sheep.

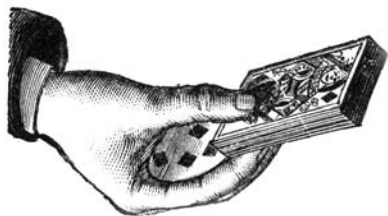
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2006
Wednesday

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slight of hand/sleight of hand

“Sleight” is an old word meaning “cleverness, skill,” and the proper expression is “sleight of hand.” It’s easy to understand why it’s confused with “slight” since the two words are pronounced in exactly the same way.



March
16
—
2006
Thursday

*His sleight-of-hand skills
were not slight.*

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.”

Saint Patrick's Day

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help the problem/help solve the problem

People say they want to help the problem of poverty when what they really mean is that they want to help solve the problem of poverty. Poverty flourishes without any extra help, thank you. I guess I know what a “suicide help line” is, but I’d rather it were a “suicide prevention help line.” I suppose it’s too late to ask people to rename alcoholism support groups as sobriety support groups, but it’s a shoddy use of language.

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18/19



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Saturday/Sunday

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contrasts/contrasts with

“With” must not be omitted in sentences like this: “Julia’s enthusiasm for rugby contrasts with Cheryl’s devotion to chess.”

Spring Begins

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semicolons

Think of the semicolon as erecting a little barrier with that dug-in comma under the dot; semicolons always imply separation rather than connection. A sentence made up of two distinct parts whose separation needs to be emphasized may do so with a semicolon: “Mary moved to Seattle; she was sick of getting sunburned in Los Angeles.” When a compound sentence contains commas within one or more of its clauses, you have to escalate to a semicolon to separate the clauses themselves: “It was a mild, deliciously warm spring day; and Mary decided to walk to the fair.”

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semicolons (concluded)

The other main use of semicolons is to separate one series of items from another—a series within a series, if you will: “The issues discussed by the board of directors were many: the loud, acrimonious complaints of the stockholders; the abrupt, devastating departure of the director; and the startling, humiliating discovery that he had absconded with half the company’s assets.” Any time the phrases that make up a series contain commas—for whatever reason—they need to be separated by semicolons.

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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.”

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much differently/very differently

Say, “We consistently vote very differently,”
not “much differently.” But you can say,
“My opinion doesn’t much differ from yours.”

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persecute/prosecute

When you persecute someone, you're treating them badly, whether they deserve it or not; but only legal officers can prosecute someone for a crime.

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25/26



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like for/like

I would like you to remember that saying, “I’d like for you to take out the garbage,” is not formal English. The “for” is unnecessary.

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pheasant/peasant

When I visited the former Soviet Union I was astonished to learn that farmworkers were still called “peasants” there. In English-speaking countries we tend to think of the term as belonging strictly to the feudal era. However you use it, don’t confuse it with “pheasant,” a favorite game bird. Use the sound of the beginning consonants to remind you of the difference: pheasants are food, peasants are people.

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2006

Tuesday

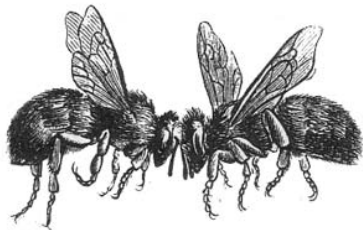
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probably

The two “B’s” in this word are particularly difficult to pronounce in sequence, so the word often comes out as “proibly” and is even occasionally misspelled that way. When even the last “B” disappears, the pronunciation “proolly” suggests drunken slurring or, at best, an attempt at humor.

March
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2006
Wednesday



*Together they could
pronounce “probably.”*

split infinitives

For the hyper-critical, “to boldly go where no man has gone before” should be “to go boldly. . . .” It is good to be aware that the insertion of one or more words between “to” and a verb is not strictly speaking an error, and is often more expressive and graceful than moving the intervening words elsewhere. But so many people are offended by split infinitives that it is better to avoid them except when the alternatives sound strained and awkward.

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recreate/reinvent

The expression “no need to reinvent the wheel” loses much of its wit when “recreate” is substituted for the original verb. While we’re at it, “recreate” does not mean “to engage in recreation.” If you play basketball, you may be exercising, but you’re not recreating.

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