

sense/since

“Sense” is a verb meaning “feel” (“I sense you near me”) or a noun meaning “intelligence” (“have some common sense!"). Don't use it when you need the adverb “since” (“since you went away,” or “since you're up anyway, would you please let the cat out?”).

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quantum leap

The thing about quantum leaps is that they mark an abrupt change from one state to a distinctly different one, with no in-between transitional states being possible; but they are not large. In fact, in physics a quantum leap is one of the smallest sorts of changes worth talking about. Leave “quantum leap” to the subatomic physicists unless you know what you’re talking about.

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scan/skim

Those who insist that “scan” can never be a synonym of “skim” have lost the battle. It is true that the word originally meant “to scrutinize,” but it has now evolved into one of those unfortunate words with two opposite meanings: “to examine closely” (now rare) and “to glance at quickly” (much more common). It would be difficult to say which of these two meanings is more prominent in the computer-related usage to “scan a document.”

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taunt/taut/tout

I am told that medical personnel often mistakenly refer to a patient's abdomen as "taunt" rather than the correct "taut." "Taunt" ("tease" or "mock") can be a verb or noun, but never an adjective. "Taut" means "tight, distended," and is always an adjective. Don't confuse "taunt" with "tout," which means "promote," as in "Senator Bilgewater has been touted as a Presidential candidate." You tout somebody you admire and taunt someone that you don't.

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you've got mail/you have mail

Some object groundlessly to this perfectly correct common e-mail alert as a redundancy. The “have” contracted in phrases like this is merely an auxiliary verb indicating the present perfect tense, not an expression of possession. Compare: “You’ve sent the mail.”

May

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2006

Friday

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straightjacket/straitjacket

The old word “strait” (“narrow, tight”) has survived only as a noun in geography referring to a narrow body of water (“the Bering Strait”) and in a few adjectival uses such as “straitjacket” (a narrowly confining garment) and “strait-laced” (literally laced up tightly, but usually meaning narrow-minded). Its unfamiliarity causes many people to mistakenly substitute the more common “straight.”

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paralyzation/paralysis

Some people derive the noun “paralyzation” from the verb “paralyze,” but the proper term is “paralysis.”

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intensifiers

People are always looking for ways to emphasize how really, really special the subject under discussion is. (The use of “really” is one of the weakest and least effective of these.) A host of words have been worn down in this service to near-meaninglessness. It is good to remember the etymological roots of such words to avoid such absurdities as “fantastically realistic,” “absolutely relative,” and “incredibly convincing.” When you are tempted to use one of these vague intensifiers consider rewriting your prose to explain more precisely and vividly what you mean: “Fred’s cooking was incredibly bad” could be changed to “When I tasted Fred’s cooking I almost thought I was back in the middle-school cafeteria.”

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marshall/marshal

You may write “The Field Marshal marshalled his troops,” but you cannot spell his title with a double “L.” A marshal is always a marshal, never a marshall.

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Wednesday

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mic/mike

Until very recently the casual term for a microphone was “mike,” not “mic.” Young people now mostly imitate the technicians who prefer the shorter “mic” label on their soundboards, but it looks distinctly odd to those used to the traditional term. There are no other words in English in which “-ic” is pronounced to rhyme with “bike”—that’s the reason for the traditional “mike” spelling in the first place.

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oppress/repress

Dictators commonly oppress their citizens and repress dissent, but these words don't mean exactly the same thing. "Repress" just means "keep under control." Sometimes repression is a good thing: "During the job interview, repress the temptation to tell Mr. Brown that he has toilet paper stuck to his shoe." Oppression is always bad, and implies serious persecution.

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2006

Friday

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wash

In my mother's Oklahoma dialect, "wash" was pronounced "warsh," and I was embarrassed to discover in school that the inclusion of the superfluous "R" sound was considered ignorant. This has made me all the more sensitive now that I live in Washington to the mispronunciation "Warshington." Some people tell you that after you "warsh" you should "wrench" ("rinse").

Mother's Day—May 14

May
13/14



2006

Saturday/Sunday



*Washing and rinsing
in style, however you
pronounce it.*

oversee/overlook

When you *oversee* the preparation of dinner, you take control and manage the operation closely. But if you *overlook* the preparation of dinner you forget to prepare the meal entirely—better order pizza.

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2006
Monday

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mediocre

Although some dictionaries accept the meaning of this word as “medium” or “average,” in fact its connotations are almost always more negative. When something is distinctly not as good as it could be, it is mediocre. If you want to say that you are an average student, don’t proclaim yourself mediocre, or you’ll convey a worse impression of yourself than you intend.

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2006
Tuesday

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verbage/verbiage

“Verbiage” is an insulting term usually meant to disparage needlessly wordy prose. Don’t use it to mean simply “wording.” There is no such word as “verbage.”

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wheat/whole wheat

Waiters routinely ask, “Wheat or white?” when bread is ordered, but the white bread is also made of wheat. The correct term is “whole wheat,” in which the whole grain, including the bran and germ, has been used to make the flour. “Whole wheat” does not necessarily imply that no white flour has been used in the bread; most whole wheat breads incorporate some white flour.

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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”).

May

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2006

Friday

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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."

May
20/21



2006

Saturday/Sunday

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footnotes/endnotes

About the time that computers began to make the creation and printing of footnotes extremely simple and cheap, style manuals began to urge a shift away from them to *endnotes* printed at the ends of chapters or at the end of a book or paper rather than at the foot of the page. I happen to think this was a big mistake; but in any case, if you are using endnotes, don't call them "footnotes."

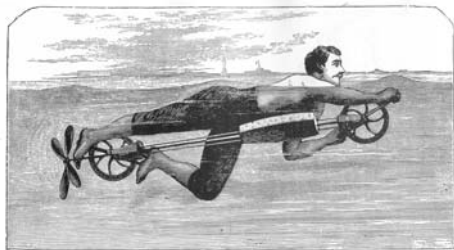
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flounder/founder

As a verb, “founder” means “to fill with water and sink.” It is also used metaphorically of various kinds of equally catastrophic failures. In contrast, to flounder is to thrash about in the water (like a flounder), struggling to stay alive. “Flounder” is also often used metaphorically to indicate various sorts of desperate struggle. If you’re sunk, you’ve foundered. If you’re still struggling, you’re floundering.

May
23

2006
Tuesday



*With his new invention, Albert
never floundered nor foundered.*

Islams/Muslims

Followers of Islam are called “Muslims,” not “Islams.” (Although the Associated Press still does not accept it, ‘Muslim’ is now widely preferred over the older and less phonetically accurate “Moslem.”)

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past time/pastime

An agreeable activity like knitting with which you pass the time is your pastime. Spell it as one word, with one “S” and one “T.”

May
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2006

Thursday

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realtor

For some reason, this word is often mispronounced as “real-a-ter” instead of the proper “ree-ul-ter.” Incidentally, realtors insist that this is a term originally trademarked by the National Association of Real Estate Boards (now renamed the National Association of Realtors), that it must be capitalized, and that all non-members of that association are mere “real estate associates.” Common usage, however, calls both “real estate agents,” despite their protests.

May

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2006

Friday

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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.”

May
27/28



2006

Saturday/Sunday

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later/latter

Except in the expression “latter-day” (modern), the word “latter” usually refers back to the last-mentioned of a set of alternatives. “We gave the kids a choice of a vacation in Paris, Rome, or Disney World. Of course the latter was their choice.” In other contexts not referring back to such a list, the word you want is “later.”

Memorial Day

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pawn off/palm off

Somebody defrauds you by using sleight of hand (literal or figurative) to “palm” the object you wanted and give you something inferior instead. The expression is not “to pawn off,” but “to palm off.”

May
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2006
Tuesday

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only

Writers often inadvertently create confusion by placing “only” incorrectly in a sentence. It should go immediately before the word or phrase it modifies. “I lost my only shirt” means that I had but one to begin with. “I lost only my shirt” means I didn’t lose anything else. “Only I lost my shirt” means that I was the only person in my group to lose a shirt. Strictly speaking, “I only lost my shirt” should mean I didn’t destroy it or have it stolen—I just lost it, but in common speech this is usually understood as being identical with “I lost only my shirt.” Scrutinize your uses of “only” to make sure you are not creating unwanted ambiguities.

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