



**queue**

If you're standing in a queue you'll have plenty of time to ponder the unusual spelling of this word. Remember, it contains two "U's."



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**mantle/mantel**

Though they stem from the same word, a “mantle” today is usually a cloak, while the shelf over a fireplace is most often spelled “mantel.”

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**2/3**



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**forceful/forcible/forced**

These words sometimes overlap, but generally “forceful” means “powerful” (“He imposed his forceful personality on the lions”), while “forcible” must be used instead to describe the use of force (“The burglar made a forcible entry into the apartment”). “Forced” is often used for the latter purpose, but some prefer to reserve this word to describe something that is done or decided upon as a result of outside causes without necessarily being violent: “a forced landing,” “a forced smile,” or “forced labor.”

Labor Day

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**one of the (singular)**

In phrases like “pistachio is one of the few flavors that appeals to me,” use the singular form for the verb “appeals” because its subject is “one,” not “flavors.”



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**prone/supine**

“Prone” (face down) is often confused with “supine” (face up). “Prostrate” technically also means “face down,” but is most often used to mean simply “devastate.”

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**beckon call/beck and call**

This is a fine example of what linguists call “popular etymology.” People don’t understand the origins of a word or expression and make one up based on what seems logical to them. “Beck” is just an old, shortened version of “beckon.” If you are at people’s beck and call it means they can summon you whenever they want: either by gesture (beck) or speech (call).

September  
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Thursday



*Mother and father were  
always at his beck and call.*



**dyeing/dying**

If you are using dye to change your favorite t-shirt from white to blue you are *dyeing* it; but if you don't breathe for so long that your face turns blue, you may be *dying*.

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**flair/flare**

“Flair” is conspicuous talent: “She has a flair for organization.” “Flare” is either a noun meaning “flame” or a verb meaning “to blaze with light” or “to burst into anger.”

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**ground zero**

“Ground zero” refers to the point at the center of the impact of a nuclear bomb, so it is improper to talk about “building from ground zero” as if it were a place of new beginnings. You can start from scratch, or begin at zero, but if you’re at ground zero, you’re at the end. The metaphorical extension of this term to the site of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers is, however, perfectly legitimate.

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**hairbrained/harebrained**

Although “hairbrained” is common, the original word, “harebrained,” means “silly as a hare (rabbit)” and is preferred in writing.

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**bad/badly**

“I feel bad” is standard English, as in “This t-shirt smells bad” (not “badly”). “I feel badly” is an incorrect hyper-correction by people who think they know better than the masses. People who are happy can correctly say they feel good, but if they say they feel well, we know they mean to say they’re healthy. However, you may impress your beloved more if you say “I need you really badly” rather than the less correct “I need you real bad.”

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**interesting**

The second syllable is normally silent in “interesting.” It’s nonstandard to go out of your way to pronounce the “ter,” and definitely substandard to say “innareesting.”

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**gaurd/guard**

Too bad the Elizabethan “guard” won out over the earlier, French-derived spelling “garde,” but the word was never spelled “gaurd.” The standard spelling is related to Italian and Spanish “guarda,” pronounced “GWAR-da.”

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**lead/led**

When you're hit over the head, the instrument could be a *lead* pipe. But when it's a verb, "lead" is the present and "led" is the past tense. The problem is that the past tense is pronounced exactly like the above-mentioned plumbing material, so people confuse the two. ("Plumb," by the way, comes from a word meaning "lead.") In a sentence like "She led us to the scene of the crime," always use the three-letter spelling.

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### lay/lie

You lay down the book you've been reading, but you lie down when you go to bed. In the present tense, if the subject is acting on some other object, it's "lay." If the subject is lying down, then it's "lie." This distinction is often not made in informal speech, partly because in the past tense the words sound much more alike: "He lay down for a nap," but "He laid down the law." If the subject is already at rest, you might "let it lie."



September  
**18**

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*You may lay your thoughts  
to rest before you lie down.*



**hoi polloi**

*Hoi polloi* is Greek for “the common people,” but it is often misused to mean “the upper class” (does “hoi” make speakers think of “high” or “hoity-toity?”). Some urge that since “hoi” is the article, “the hoi polloi” is redundant; but the general rule is that articles such as “the” and “a” in foreign language phrases cease to function as such in place names, brands, and catch phrases except for some of the most familiar ones in French and Spanish, where everyone recognizes “la”—for instance—as meaning “the.” “The El Niño” is redundant, but “the hoi polloi” is standard English.

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**embaress/embarass**

You can pronounce the last two syllables as two distinct words as a jog to memory, except that then the word may be misspelled “embareass,” which isn’t right either. You also have to remember the double “R” in “embarrass.”

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**cut and dry**

Many people mishear the standard expression meaning “set,” “not open to change,” as “cut and dry.” Although this form is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is definitely less common in sophisticated writing. The dominant modern usage is “cut and dried.” When used to modify a noun, it must be hyphenated: “cut-and-dried plan.”

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**-ed/-t**

You have *learnt* your lessons only in U.K.-influenced countries; you've *learned* them in the U.S. There are several common verbs that often have "T" endings in Britain which seem a little quaint and poetic in American English, where we prefer "-ed." Other examples: "dreamt/dreamed," "dwelt/dwelled," "leant/leaned," "leapt/leaped," and "spelt/spelled." However, the following alternatives are both common in the U.S.: "burned/burnt" and "kneeled/knelt."

Autumn Begins;  
Rosh Hashanah  
Begins at Sundown

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**formally/formerly**

These two are often mixed up in speech. If you are doing something in a formal manner, you are behaving formally; but if you previously behaved differently, you did so formerly.

Ramadan Begins—  
September 24

September  
**23/24**



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**prophecy/prophesy**

“Prophecy,” the noun (pronounced “PROF-a-see”), is a prediction. The verb “to prophesy” (pronounced “PROF-a-sigh”) means to predict something. When a prophet prophesies he or she utters prophecies.



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**veil of tears/vale of tears**

The expression “vale of tears” goes back to pious sentiments that consider life on earth to be a series of sorrows to be left behind when we go on to a better world in heaven. It conjures up an image of a suffering traveler laboring through a valley (“vale”) of troubles and sorrow. “Veil of tears” is poetic sounding, but it’s a mistake.



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**a whole 'nother/a completely different**

It is one thing to use the expression “a whole 'nother” as a consciously slangy phrase suggesting rustic charm and a completely different matter to use it mistakenly. The “A” at the beginning of the phrase is the common article “a” but is here treated as if it were simultaneously the first letter of “another,” interrupted by “whole.”

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**impertinent/irrelevant**

“Impertinent” looks as if it ought to mean the opposite of “pertinent,” and indeed it once did; but for centuries now its meaning in ordinary speech has been narrowed to “impudent,” specifically in regard to actions or speech toward someone regarded as socially superior. Only snobs and very old-fashioned people use “impertinent” correctly; most people would be well advised to forget it and use “irrelevant” instead to mean the opposite of “pertinent.”

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**precedence/precedents**

Although these words sound the same, they work differently. The pop star is given precedence over the factory worker at the entrance to the dance club. “Precedents” is just the plural of “precedent”: “If we let the kids adopt that rattlesnake as a pet and agree to let them take it for a walk in Death Valley, we’ll be setting some bad precedents.”

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**drastic**

“Drastic” means “severe” and is always negative. Drastic measures are not just extreme, they are likely to have harmful side effects. Don’t use this word or “drastically” in a positive or neutral sense. A drastic rise in temperature should be seen as downright dangerous, not just surprisingly large. Often people mean “dramatic” instead.

Yom Kippur Begins at  
Sundown—October 1  
September/October  
**30/1**  
2006  
Saturday/Sunday



*The audience found it dramatic,  
but to the critics their act was drastic.*