

partake/participate

“Partake” looks like it might mean “take part,” and that’s how many people mistakenly use it where they should say “participate.” The main modern meaning of “partake” is “consume,” especially in relation to food. One can partake of the refreshments at a party, but one can also partake of Twinkies at home alone, without any thought of sharing.

So don’t ask people to “partake” in a planning process when you mean to ask them to participate.



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“I’m afraid I don’t know whether we’ll be partaking of Twinkies at the party; I did not participate in the planning.”

resignate/resonate

When an idea gives you good vibes it resonates with you: “His call for better schools resonates with the voters.” Not *resignates*—*resonates*.

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invite/invitation

“Invite” (accent on the second syllable) is perfectly standard as a verb: “Invite me to the birthday party and I’ll jump out of the cake.”

But “invite” (accent on the first syllable) as a noun meaning “invitation” is less acceptable: “I got an invite to my ex-wife’s wedding.” Though this form has become extremely popular, even in fairly formal contexts, it is safer to use the traditional “invitation.”

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daylight savings time/daylight saving time

The official term is “daylight saving time,”
not “savings time.”



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Setting the clock forward in style.

paramount/tantamount

“Paramount” means “best,” “top.” Think of Paramount Pictures’ trademark of a majestic mountain peak encircled with stars.

“Tantamount” means “equivalent.”

“The committee’s paramount concern is to get at the truth; your continued insistence that you don’t remember any of the meetings you attended is tantamount to a confession of incompetence.”

However much he might have wanted to give the whole thing up for lost and go away, this was hardly possible at the present moment; it would have been tantamount to an open admission that the accusations that had been brought against him were justified, and that he really had been guilty of defaming Sonya Semyonovna’s character.

—*Crime and Punishment*,
Fyodor Dostoyevsky

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retrospective/retroactive

“Retrospective” has to do with looking back, as is shown by the similarity of its middle syllable to words like “spectacles.” A retrospective exhibit looks back at the earlier work of an artist.

“Retroactive,” on the other hand, refers to actions, and is about making a current change applicable to the past, especially in law. Retroactive punishment is generally considered unjust. For instance, the city council can’t pass an ordinance retroactively punishing you for having sung off-key in the karaoke bar on Main Street last Saturday night.

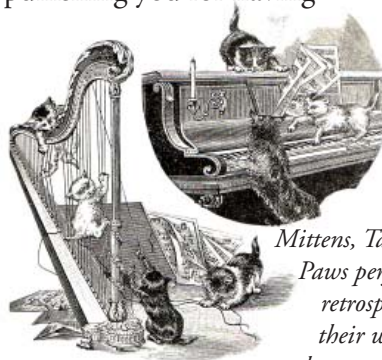
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Mittens, Tabby, and Paws performed a retrospective of their works for harp and piano.

specie/species

In both the original Latin and in English “species” is the spelling of both the singular and plural forms. Amphiprion ocellaris is one species of clownfish. Many species of fish are endangered by overfishing.

Specie is a technical term referring to the physical form of money, particularly coins.

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chalk-full/chock-full, chuck-full

Originally a person or thing stuffed to the point of choking was “choke-full.” In modern speech this expression has become “chock-full,” or in less formal American English, “chuck-full.” Chalk has nothing to do with it.

Miss Riley's hand was often full of chalk; her mind was always chock-full of information.



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framework/groundwork

You lay groundwork; you erect,
build, or construct a framework.

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him, her/he, she

There is a group of personal pronouns to be used as subjects in a sentence, including “he,” “she,” “I,” and “we.” Then there is a separate group of object pronouns, including “him,” “her,” “me,” and “us.” The problem is that the folks who tend to mix up the two sets often don’t find the subject/object distinction clear or helpful and say things like, “Her and me went to the movies.”

A simple test is to substitute “us” for “her and me.” Would you say, “Us went to the movies”? Obviously not, so when “we” is broken into the two persons involved it becomes “She and I went to the movies.”

But you would say, “The murder scene scared us,” so it’s correct to say, “The murder scene scared her and me.”

If you aren’t involved, use “they” and “them” as test words instead of “us” and “we.” “They won the lottery” becomes “He and she won the lottery,” and “the check was mailed to them” becomes “The check was mailed to him and her.”

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zeroscape/xeriscape

If you nuke your front lawn I suppose you might call it a “zeroscape,” but the term for an arid-climate garden requiring little or no watering is “xeriscape” (-xeri is a Greek root meaning “dry”).



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Burdened by the heaviness of the water can he would carry for hours on his back, Gerald promised himself to one day get into xeriscape gardening.

mixed-up media

Mixed media can be great; mixed-up media not so much.

Books are published, movies and musical recordings released, and plays and TV shows premiered.

Movies are shown, plays staged, and TV shows broadcast.

Technically recordings get deleted (from catalogs) or withdrawn rather than going out of print like books (which may also be remaindered: sold at discount, or worse—pulped). However, there is a strong tendency to use “out of print” for all kinds of media: CDs, DVDs, etc. Movies and stage shows close or end their runs, but only stage shows fold.

Saint Patrick's Day

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Iraq

Want to sound like a good old boy who doesn't give a hoot what foreigners think? Say "EYE-rack." But if you want to sound knowledgeable, say "ear-ROCK." Politicians who know better sometimes adopt the popular mispronunciation in order to sound more folksy and down to earth.

Similarly in standard English, Iran is not pronounced "eye-RAN" but "ear-RON."

On a related matter, the first syllable of "Italian" is pronounced just like the first syllable in "Italy," with an "it" sound. "Eye-talian" sounds distinctly uneducated.

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plural possessives

When writing about jointly owned objects, people often fret about where to place apostrophes. The standard pattern is to treat the two partners as a single unit—a couple, and put an apostrophe only after the last name: “John and Jane’s villa,” “Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.” Add more owners and you still use only one apostrophe: “Bob and Ted and Carol and Alice’s party.”

But if each person owns his or her own item, then each owner gets an apostrophe: “John’s and Jane’s cars” (each of them separately owns a car).



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gyp/cheat

Gypsies complain that “gyp” (“cheat”) reflects bias; but the word is so well entrenched and its origin so obscure to most users that there is little hope of eliminating it from standard use any time soon.

Note that the people commonly called “Gypsies” strongly prefer the name *Rom* (plural form *Roma* or *Romanies*).

Spring Begins

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organic

The word “organic” is used in all sorts of contexts, often in a highly metaphorical manner; the subject here is its use in the phrase “organic foods” in claims of superior healthfulness. Various jurisdictions have various standards for “organic” food, but generally the label is applied to foods that have been grown without artificial chemicals or pesticides. Literally, of course, the term is a redundancy: all food is composed of organic chemicals (complex chemicals containing carbon). There is no such thing as an inorganic food (unless you count water as a food). Natural fertilizers and pesticides may or may not be superior to artificial ones, but the proper distinction is not between organic and inorganic. Many nitrogen-fixing plants like peas do a great job of fertilizing the soil with plain old inorganic atmospheric nitrogen.

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spree

It used to be that a spree was mainly understood as a wild drinking carouse, with the emphasis on spontaneity and abandon. Then it was used metaphorically, as in a “shopping spree.”

American journalists began to write of “killing sprees” by murderers recklessly killing people at random (“spree” fits so nicely in headlines).

But they go too far when they refer to terrorist bombing sprees. Targeted, purposeful acts like these lack the element of spontaneity and disorder that characterize a spree. Do they mean perhaps a spate?

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Crackerjacks/Cracker Jack

Crackerjack is an old slang expression meaning excellent, and the official name of the popcorn confection is also singular: “Cracker Jack.” People don’t pluralize its rival Poppycock as Poppycocks, but they seem to think of the individual popped kernels as the jacks. A similarly named candy is Good and Plenty. All three have descriptive names describing qualities and shouldn’t be pluralized. A way to remember this: in “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” “Cracker Jack” rhymes with “back.”

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lessen/lesson

Although not many people try to teach someone a “lessen,” many people try to “lesson” their risks by taking precautions.

“Lessen” is something you do—a verb—and means to make smaller.

“Lesson” is a noun, something you learn or teach. Remember this lesson and it will lessen your chances of making a mistake.

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Tut, man, one fire burns out another's burning,
One pain is lessened by another's anguish.

—*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

satellite

Originally a satellite was a follower. Astronomers applied the term to smaller bodies orbiting about planets, like our moon. Then we began launching artificial satellites. Since few people were familiar with the term in its technical meaning, the adjective “artificial” was quickly dropped in popular usage. So far so bad. Then television began to be broadcast via satellite. Much if not all television now wends its way through a satellite at some point, but in the popular imagination only broadcasts received at the viewing site via a dish antenna aimed at a satellite qualify to be called “satellite television.” Thus we see motel signs boasting:

AIR CONDITIONING, SATELLITE

People say things like, “The fight’s going to be shown

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on satellite.” The word has become a pathetic fragment of its former self. The technologically literate speaker will avoid these slovenly abbreviations.

use/usage

“Use” and “usage” overlap somewhat, but they are not entirely synonymous. Many people treat “usage” as if it were just a fancier form of “use” in phrases like “make usage of,” where “make use of” is the standard expression. As a rule of thumb, if either “use” or “usage” seems appropriate, go with “use.”



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*“No, I don’t object to
your usage, I object to
your use of ‘usage.’”*

within/among

“Within” means literally “inside of,” but when you want to compare similarities or differences between things you may need “among” instead. It’s not “There are some entertaining movies within the current releases,” but “among the current releases.” But you can use “within” by rewriting the sentence to lump the movies together into a single entity: “There are some entertaining movies within the current batch of releases.” A batch is a single thing, and the individual films that make it up are within it.

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