double negatives

It is not true, as some assert, that double negatives are always wrong; but the pattern in formal speech and writing is that two negatives equal a mild positive: "He is a not untalented guitarist" means he has some talent. In informal speech, however, double negatives are intended as negatives: "He ain't got no talent" means he is a lousy musician. People are rarely confused about the meaning of either pattern, but you do need to take your audience into account when deciding which pattern to follow.

—"I just love these conversations, Derrick; they're never not without tedium."

—"And I am not lacking a certain absence of displeasure with them, either."

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hadn't have/hadn't

Many people throw in an extra "have" when they talk about things that might have happened otherwise: "If he hadn't have checked inside the truck first he wouldn't have realized that the floorboards were rusted out." This is often rendered "hadn't of" and pronounced "hadn'ta." In standard English, omit the second word: "If he hadn't checked inside the truck. . . ."

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there's

People often forget that "there's" is a contraction of "there is" and mistakenly say "there's three burrs caught in your hair" when they mean "there're" ("there are"). Use "there's" only when referring to one item. "There's" can also be a contraction of "there has," as in "There's been some mistake in this bill, clerk!"

Remember if you don't contract "there is" that it also can only be used with something singular following. It's not "There is many mistakes in this paper" but "there *are* many mistakes in this paper."

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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.

Specie of the gold variety: Often held by the wealthier ones of our species.

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Democrat Party/Democratic Party

Certain Republican members of Congress have played the childish game in recent years of referring to the opposition as the “Democrat Party,” hoping to imply that Democrats are not truly democratic. They succeed only in making themselves sound ignorant, and so will you if you imitate them. The name is “Democratic Party.”

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concerning/worrisome, troubling

People commonly say of things that are a cause for concern that they are “concerning”: “My boyfriend’s affection for his pet rattlesnake is concerning.” This is not standard English. There are many better words that mean the same thing including “worrisome,” “troubling,” and “alarming.”

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hold your peace/say your piece

Some folks imagine that since these expressions are opposites, the last word in each should be the same; but in fact they are unrelated expressions. “Hold your peace” means “maintain your silence,” and “say your piece” means literally “speak aloud a piece of writing” but is used to express the idea of making a statement.

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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.”

Conservatives prefer to reserve “latter” for the last-named of no more than two items.

When confronted with a choice between Serena’s sword ladder and a regular ladder, it would be wise to choose the latter.

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absorbtion/absorption

Although it's "absorbed" and "absorbing," the correct spelling of the noun is "absorption."

But note that scientists distinguish between "absorption" as the process of swallowing up or sucking in something and "adsorption" as the process by which something adheres to the surface of something else without being assimilated into it. Even technical writers often confuse these two.

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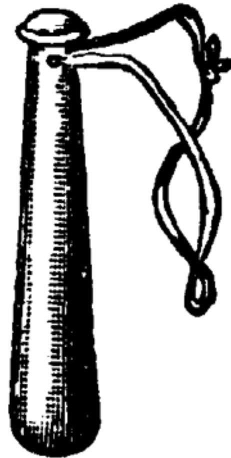
blunt/brunt

Some people mistakenly substitute the adjective "blunt" for the noun "brunt" in standard expressions like "bear the brunt." "Brunt" means "main force."



A blunt instrument may deliver the brunt of the blow.

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drastic/dramatic

“Drastic” means “severe” and generally has negative or frightening associations. 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 when people use phrases like “drastic improvement,” they mean “dramatic” instead.

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loath/loathe

"Loath" rhymes with "both" and is a rather formal adjective meaning "reluctant," whereas "loathe" rhymes with "clothe" and is a common verb meaning "dislike intensely." Kenji is loath to go to the conference at Kilauea because he loathes volcanos.

Why do they call him a naked mole rat?
Because he loathes clothes!

Daylight Saving Time Begins—March 14

March

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in lieu of/in light of

"In lieu of" (with "lieu" often misspelled) means "instead of" and should not be used in place of "in light of" in sentences like the following: "In light of the fact that Fred has just knocked the doughnuts on the floor, the meeting is adjourned."

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backup/back up

To “back up” is an activity; “back up your computer regularly”; “back up the truck to the garden plot and unload the compost.”

A “backup” is a thing: “keep your backup copies in a safe place.” Other examples: a traffic backup, sewage backup, backup plan, backup forces.

Older writers often hyphenated this latter form (“back-up”), but this is now rare.

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invested interest/vested interest

If you have a personal stake in something which causes you to be biased toward it, you have a vested interest in it. People discussing financial investment sometimes pun on this phrase by writing “invested interest,” but most of the time when you see the latter spelling, it’s just a mistake.

Saint Patrick’s Day

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notorious

"Notorious" means famous in a bad way, as in "Nero was notorious for giving long recitals of his tedious poetry." Occasionally writers deliberately use it in a positive sense to suggest irony or wit, but this is a very feeble and tired device. Nothing admirable should be called "notorious."

The same goes for "notoriety," which also indicates a bad reputation.

Freddie and Frankie Frog—
notorious for their lager binges.

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prostate/prostrate

The gland men have is called the "prostate." "Prostrate" is an adjective meaning "lying face downward."

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sail/sale/sell

These simple and familiar words are surprisingly often confused in writing. You sail a boat which has a sail of canvas. You sell your old fondue pot at a yard sale.

Spring Begins

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practice/practise

In the United Kingdom, “practice” is the noun, “practise” the verb; but in the US the spelling “practice” is commonly used for both, though the distinction is sometimes observed. “Practise” as a noun is, however, always wrong in both places: a doctor always has a “practice,” never a “practise.”

How does the aspiring duo get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! And how do they get to Albert Hall? Practise!

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-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.

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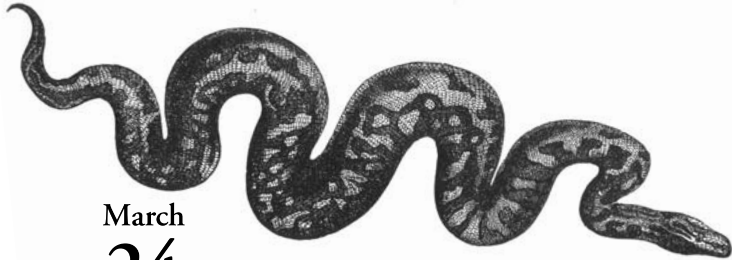
accurate/precise

In ordinary usage, "accurate" and "precise" are often used as rough synonyms, but scientists like to distinguish between them. Someone could say that a snake is over a meter long and be accurate (the snake really does exceed one meter in length), but that is not a precise measurement. To be precise, the measurement would have to be more exact: the snake is 1.23 meters long. The same distinction applies in scientific contexts to the related words "accuracy" and "precision."



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To be accurate, you should run when you see the python; to be precise, you should run 100 meters away from the python.

excrable/execrable

When you execrate (detest) something, you find it execrable. The second syllable is not often clearly pronounced, but that's no excuse for leaving it out when you spell the word.

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croissant

The fanciful legend which attributes the creation of the croissant to Christian bakers celebrating a 17th-century victory over the Turks is widely recounted but almost certainly untrue, since there is no trace of the pastry until a century later. Although its form was probably not influenced by the Islamic crescent, the word *croissant* most definitely is French for "crescent." Pastries formed from the same dough into different shapes should not be called "croissants." If a customer in your bakery asks for a *pain au chocolat* ("PAN oh-show-co-LA"), reach for that rectangular pastry usually mislabeled in the US a "chocolate croissant."

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embaress/embarrass

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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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."

—"I told Ms. Roberts I'd really like the job. Do you think my language skills will impact her decision?"

—"Yes . . . I'm afraid so."

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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.

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gull/gall

"How could you have the nerve, the chutzpah, the effrontery, the unmitigated *gall* to claim you didn't cheat because it was your girlfriend who copied from the Web when she wrote your paper for you?"

This sense of "gall" has nothing to do with seabirds, so don't say "How could you have the gull."

Alfie the albatross: He had the gall to call himself a gull.

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