Chapter 11: Language & Style – Words

In this, the second chapter on Language & Style, we look at the words you use to tell your story. We see how important spelling is and how to avoid confusing your readers or listeners with the words you choose. We also list some words which are better than others, words you should avoid and some words which are commonly misused – together with the correct forms. In the following two chapters in this section we will look at grammar and at translations.

So far, we have been looking at some general principles governing the way we write for understanding. We now look in more detail at words themselves - which words or phrases help understanding and which do not. We will give you separate sections for common errors. However, our word lists will not be complete. You must use your common sense when using words not on our lists.

Spelling

Languages are in a constant state of change. English, as the world's most widely used language, changes faster than most. Spelling is an area in which this change is most noticeable. There are two standards in spelling - Commonwealth English and American English. Which spelling you choose will depend on usage in your country. Most media organisations decide on a particular alternative and stick to it. Here are some examples of alternative spellings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMONWEALTH</th>
<th>AMERICAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>colour</td>
<td>color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organise</td>
<td>organize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through</td>
<td>thru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defence</td>
<td>defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jewellery</td>
<td>jewelry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jargon

Jargon is specialised language concerned with a particular subject, culture or profession. It is not usually found in the everyday speech of your ordinary reader or listener. Typical of jargon are such things as medical or technical terms, understood by small groups of specialists in their own fields. For example, a coronary thrombosis to a doctor is commonly called a heart attack by the layman. Computer scientists speak of accessing data when ordinary people talk about getting information.

There is an obvious need for such technical terms in context, such as the doctor's surgery or the computer room. Unfortunately, jargon words tend to spill over into the media. This is partly because journalists want to impress readers or listeners by their knowledge and partly because journalists do not understand what they have been told. Bad journalists find it easier to pass on the problem to their audience by simply repeating the difficult words which they have been given and don't understand. You should first ask the person concerned to explain what they mean in simpler terms.

This is especially obvious in reporting on government and the public service. Officials often hide behind their own jargon, using it as a wall to keep the public away from their secrets. A Papua New Guinea Minister for Minerals, speaking about foreign shareholders in a big mine, was quoted as saying:

"...they were invited to participate in the development of that mineral resource and they are obligated to honour their agreement to participate."

Put into simple English, this means:
They agreed to take part in mining and must stick to that agreement.

Notice that we have had to take the sentence out of direct quotes. You cannot drastically alter the words a person says and leave your readers or listeners believing that they were a direct quote. It is much better to use reported speech that people can understand than use quotes which they cannot.

The message is clear. **If you do not understand what you are writing, do not write it.** If you have a good knowledge of language, you can translate jargon yourself. If you have any doubts, go back to the people who gave you the information and ask them: "What does it mean in plain English?"

Having said that, there are times when you have to use technical or otherwise difficult terms. In such cases, you should provide an explanation for your reader or listener. This need not be complicated. In the following example, we use the term de facto and explain it within the natural structure of the story:

The immigration service says it will no longer recognise de facto relationships in issuing visas. Officials say that in future, they will only give joint entry permits to couples who are married. Men and women living together in de facto relationships will have to apply separately.

Always try to explain abstract jargon in concrete terms; that is, translate ideas into what they mean in the day-to-day lives of your readers or listeners. This is important in areas such as economics and government. For example, a ten percent annual rate of inflation means for most people that the dollar in the pocket a year ago now buys only 90 cents-worth of goods. An increase in the basic tax rate means that workers will get less money in their pay packet.

Public servants often take ordinary words and alter their use, making them difficult for people to understand. For example, they talk about *sighting a document* when they really mean they saw it. To sight something usually means suddenly seeing it from a distance. To complicate matters further, there is also a verb to cite a document, which means to quote from it. To a radio listener, "sight" and "cite" both sound the same. There are numerous examples of misuse which you should avoid whenever possible.

The following is a list of jargon words and phrases. Alongside each there is an example of a good alternative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jargon Term</th>
<th>Alternative Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>absence of</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accommodate</td>
<td>hold or seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accommodation</td>
<td>housing or room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjacent to</td>
<td>near</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affluent</td>
<td>rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great deal of</td>
<td>a lot of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahead of schedule</td>
<td>early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>along the lines of</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anticipate</td>
<td>expect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approximately</td>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ascertain</td>
<td>find out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as of that time</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assistance</td>
<td>help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at an early date</td>
<td>soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attempt</td>
<td>try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at that moment in time</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the present time</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at this moment in time</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behind schedule</td>
<td>late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beverage</td>
<td>drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by means of</td>
<td>by/using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cause injuries to</td>
<td>injure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commence, commencement</td>
<td>start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compel</td>
<td>force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
concerning
constructed of
currently
deceased
demonstrate
despite the fact that
discontinue
dispatched
donate
due to the fact that
encounter
eventuate
exceedingly
facilitate
filled to capacity
gained entrance to
gathered together
give approval to
give consideration to
give rise to
hospitalised
hospital
to implement
in addition
in advance of
in attendance
in consequence of
inform
in isolation
initiate
in light of the fact
in many cases
in order to
inquire
in regard to
in spite of
in spite of the fact that
in the course of
in the direction of
in the event of
in the vicinity of
is suffering from
made good their escape
manufacture
materialise
measure up to
meet with
necessitate
an objective
on the occasion of
on the part of
participate
passed away
pay tribute to
persons/personnel
place under arrest
to possess
to possess prior to
proceed
purchase
regarding

about/on
made of
now
dead
show
although
stop
sent
give
because
meet
happen
very
help
full
got in
met
approve
consider
cause
put in hospital
to do/carry out
also
before
there
because of
tell
alone
start
because
often
to
ask
about
despite
escaped
make
happen/appear
fit/reach
meet
force/need
an aim
when
by
take part
died
thank/praise
people/workers/staff
arrest
to have
before
go
buy
about
render assistance to residence shortfall in supply submitted his resignation subsequently sufficient sustained injuries take action on the issue terminate take into consideration transmit urban centres utilise valued at voice disapproval of was of the opinion that whole of with reference to with the exception of help home shortage resigned later enough was hurt act end consider send cities or towns use worth object to thought/said all about except

**Unnecessary words**

People frequently put in extra words or phrases which do not add to understanding. As a journalist you should judge which words help your reader or listener and which only make the sentence longer. For example, people write about waiting for a period of two years. The phrase a period of is unnecessary; you should simply say waiting for two years.

Another common fault, particularly in the spoken word, is to add adjectives or adverbs to nouns or verbs which should not have them. In grammar, this is called redundancy. It usually happens where the noun or verb is an absolute; that is, where something either is or is not, with no half measures. It is clearly wrong to describe a woman as very pregnant. A woman is either pregnant or she is not; there is a definite moment when she becomes pregnant. If the very is being used to indicate that she has been pregnant for several months, it is best to give exact details saying, for example, the woman is eight months pregnant.

It is equally wrong to describe a person as utterly dead. There is a moment at which life stops; people are either dead or they are alive, they cannot be slightly dead or rather dead. They may be nearing death, but that is a different and quite acceptable phrase.

The following is a list of unnecessary words and redundant phrases. Get rid of the words in italics:

- absolute perfection
- absolutely necessary
- accidentally stumble
- acute crisis
- adequate enough
- advance planning
- a distance of two metres
- all-time record
- a number of examples
- a period of two years
- appear on the scene
- ask the question
- assemble together
- at a later date
- attach together
- best ever
- hot water heater
- in a week’s time
- joined together
- just recently
- last of all
- link together
- may possibly
- meet together
- merge together
- necessary requirement
- never at any time
- new beginning
- new innovation
- new record
- original source
- other alternative
These are phrases which have been used so often in such a variety of situations that they have lost most of their meaning and force. They become boring to regular readers or listeners and should be avoided.

Journalists in older English-speaking countries such as Britain and the United States are usually taught to avoid clichés. There are two problems facing young journalists in developing countries in the use of clichés. One is that clichés often depend on aspects of a culture specific to certain countries. To describe something which happens very slowly, a British person might say *at a snail’s pace*, whereas an American would say *as slow as molasses in January* (a reference to the way that sticky liquids like molasses are harder to pour in cold weather). The American cliché might not be understood by many British people, who call molasses *treacle*. It would be meaningless to people living south of the Equator, for whom January is a hot month - and for people in the tropics who have no experience of cold seasons.

Journalists should be able to recognise clichés which develop in the language of their own country. If, for example, everyone talks about things or people being as fat as a buffalo, this becomes a cliché. The good journalist will find an alternative which is more accurate or more lively.

The second problem with clichés is that phrases which have become boring in one country may seem fresh and powerful in another. Again, it is your responsibility as a journalist to recognise which phrases are fresh and meaningful, which are stale and meaningless.

We will give you a list of phrases which have become clichés in most of the developed English-speaking nations. It is for you to decide which are clichés in your country:

- a bee in his bonnet
- all walks of life
- all-out effort
- innocent as a newborn baby
- in no uncertain terms
- laid to rest

**Clichés**

blazing inferno
broad daylight
coment to the effect that
completely untrue
connect together
continue in existence
continue on
co-operate together
definite decision
during the course of
each and every
entirely new
estimated at about
ever since
exactly identical
exactly the same as
face up to
few in number
filter out
follow after
for a period of
future prospect
gather together
general public
honest truth

past history
postpone until later
promoted to the rank of
quite empty
quite unique
raise up
repeat again
returned back
share out
sink down
small in size
still continue
strangled to death
temporarily suspended
total extinction
totally destroy
totally unnecessary
true facts
unite together
usual custom
violent explosion
whether or not
widow of the late
win out
worst ever
Troublesome words

A large number of words in the English language are misused. Often it is simply a matter of confusion between similar-sounding words. It is important that you use words correctly. For example, there is often confusion in radio and television between the word *diseased* (which means having a disease) and *deceased* (which means dead). In fact, the word *deceased* causes young reporters so many problems you should avoid using it altogether. Police reports often speak of *the deceased* when referring to a dead man or woman. A reporter who simply parroted a police statement about a fight between two men wrote the sentence:

*The deceased went up to the accused and hit him over the head with a stick.*

It is clearly nonsense to say that a dead man hit anybody over the head with a stick. Dead people do not do that. The sentence would have been much clearer if the reporter had used both men's...
names.
The following is a list of words which frequently cause problems, especially through misuse:

**affect**: is a verb meaning to have an influence on. Often confused with effect which is the noun. So we say: *The girl's headache affected her performance, but the noise had no effect on her.*

**all right**: is two words. Do not spell it *alright*.

**alternatives**: a choice between two things. If there are more than two, use *choices*.

**among**: used when there are more than two things. If there are two things, say *between*.

**anxious**: means to be *troubled* or *worried*. It is sometimes wrongly used to mean *eager*.

**beside**: means *at the side of*. **Besides** means *in addition to*.

**canvass**: means *to ask for something*. Do not confuse it with *canvas*, which is a cloth.

**charge**: there is often confusion between to charge *with* and to charge *for*. A person is charged *with* an offence (*the man was charged with murder*) People are charged *for* goods or services they receive (*he was charged $20 for his ticket*).

**chronic**: means long-lasting. When talking about illness, it is often confused with *acute*, which means *severe*. 
**continual**: means happening lots of times. Do not confuse with **continuous**, which means happening all the time without a break.

**council**: is a meeting. **Counsel** is advice. A **councillor** is an elected representative on a council. A **counsellor** is someone who gives advice. We also refer to lawyers in court cases as counsel, because they give legal advice.

**decimate**: literally it means to kill one in ten. Today it is used to describe heavy casualties. It does not mean **to destroy**.

**disappeared**: traditionally only ever used as an intransitive verb (i.e. without an object), as in "the rabbit disappeared". Now in some versions of English it is used as a transitive verb (i.e. with an object, usually human) to mean to intentionally make someone disappear, as in "the regime disappeared hundreds of dissidents", though this form is still unusual in British, Australian or American English.

**disinterested**: means not being directly affected by the issue one way or the other. Do not confuse with **uninterested**, which means lacking any kind of interest.

**hang**: a criminal is **hanged**, clothes are **hung**.

**immigrant**: a person who comes into the country to live permanently. It is confused with **emigrant**, who is a person who leaves his or her own country to live permanently in another country. An emigrant from one country becomes an immigrant into another.

**invaluable**: means of too much value to be priced. It is often wrongly used to mean without value.

**less**: confused with **fewer**. Less refers to quantity (less water, less flour, less fruit). Fewer refers to number (fewer boys, fewer coconuts).

**licence**: in Commonwealth English, this is the noun. To **license** is the verb.

**literally**: usually confused with **figuratively**. Literally means exact to the letter. If it happens literally, it happens exactly the way it is described. People speak of being "literally dead on my feet". If they were, they would be dead.

**loan**: is the noun. The verb is **to lend**.

**over**: means above. When talking about numbers, use **more than** (there were more than 50 people in the hall).

**practice**: is the noun. To **practise** is the verb.

**principal**: means the main one or the first. We speak of the principal instalment or the school principal. It is often confused with **principle**, which is a moral guideline.

**Scots**: these are people from Scotland, who are **Scottish**. Do not confuse it with the whisky called **Scotch**.

**stationary**: is an adjective meaning standing still. It is confused with **stationery**, a noun meaning writing materials.

**treble**: mean three times. Do not confuse with **triple**, which means three kinds. A treble chance gives you three chances of winning. A **triple jump** is an event involving three kinds of jumping action.
**Ukraine**: is the name of the country, not *the Ukraine*, which was a label used by the former Soviet Union to imply it was a region rather than an independent state.

**whisky**: Scotch whisky is spelled without an `e`. Irish and American *whiskey* is spelled with an `e`.

You can read more about troublesome words at the [Common Errors in English](https://examples.brianspang.com) website by Paul Brians. It is based on American English and contains hundreds of simple explanations of correct English usage.

**TO SUMMARISE:**

You must keep your language clear and simple so that your readers or listeners can understand.

Check any spellings you are unsure of; spelling is important.

Explain any new words whenever you use them.

Avoid jargon, unnecessary words and clichés.

Remember, if you do not understand a word you cannot expect your reader or listener to.