

Verbal Atrocities

Introduction

This small supplement to the syllabus is not original to me; the problem is that I no longer know who wrote it or where I originally obtained it. It is a very helpful reminder about some of the common errors in writing and how to correct them. I would like to give credit to someone for this work, but, alas, I'm not sure who that would be. I have modified the formatting slightly from the original version and changed some of the examples to suit my own taste.

A, AN

- “He’s such an humble man.”

Use *a*, not *an*, before words that begin with consonant sounds, including *one* (W sound), *union* (Y sound), and *history*. Say “an hour,” “an *F*,” or “an NFL team”; but “a *C*,” “a WHL team,” and “a humble man” (according to the preferred pronunciation of humble).

A.D.

- “Most of the distinctive teachings of the Catholic Church didn’t really emerge until after the fourth century A.D.”

A.D. means “in the year of our Lord,” so it can’t properly refer to a century. Say “the fourth century after Christ,” or where confusion is impossible, simply “the fourth century.”

- “Constantine died in 337 A.D.”

Make it, “Constantine died A.D. 337.” To make any sense, *A.D.* must precede the year, and the preposition in is built into its meaning.

(*See also B.C.*)

ABBREVIATIONS

Avoid writing *thru*, *tho*, and other abbreviated forms of words. A few abbreviations, such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *A.M.*, *P.M.*, *A.D.*, and *B.C.* are acceptable in formal writing. Most, however, are not.

ACTUALLY

- “The bicycle chain actually came off and locked up the wheel.”

Don’t use *actually* or *actual* superfluously as intensifiers. Actual means “real, genuine,” as opposed to “apparent, seeming.” It should not be misapplied as a tool to try to squeeze greater intensity out of another word or phrase.

(*see also REAL/REALLY.*)

ADDITION

See *IN ADDITION*.

ADVERSE/AVERSE

- “I was adverse to most of his suggestions.”

No, you were *averse* to most of his suggestions. *Adverse* means “detrimental” as in “an adverse effect.” *Averse* means “having an aversion to,” or “strongly disinclined.”

AFFECT/EFFECT

- “The message effected me deeply.”

Affect is the word you want here. *Effect*, usually a noun, can also be a verb—but it means “to bring about,” or “accomplish,” as in “The drug usually effects an immediate cure.”

AHOLD

- “I grabbed ahold of the rope.”

There is no such word as *ahold*. The expression is redundant in this example anyway. Say, “I grabbed the rope,” or “I took hold of the rope.”

ALL OF

- “All of the students were told to have their rooms inspected before leaving.”

All does not need an *of* unless it comes before a pronoun. It should be “all the students...,” but “all of us,” or “all of them.”

ALL TOGETHER/ALTOGETHER

- “They were altogether on the tour before half of the group split off.”

All together is the proper expression here. *IT* means “in a group.” *Altogether* means “wholly, thoroughly,” as in “That was altogether unnecessary.”

ALLUSION

An *allusion* is an indirect citation of something; a *reference* is more specific. The two words are not synonymous.

Don't confuse *allusion* with *illusion*, or *allude* with *elude*.

ALRIGHT

- “That’s alright with me.”

That may be alright with you, but it is not all right according to the best dictionaries. *All right* is always two words.

ALUMNUS/ALUMNA/ALUMNAE/ALUMNI

- “She claims she is an alumnus of The Master’s College.”

I don’t believe her. Any graduate of TMC would know she is an *alumna*. A male graduate is an *alumnus*; multiple male graduates are *alumni*; and multiple female graduates are *alumnae*. A group of men and women graduates may be properly called *alumni*.
(See also *FIANCE/FIANCE’E*)

AND/OR

- “Bring cutoffs and/or a swimming suit.”

And/or is an expression invented by lawyers to avoid ambiguity in legal writing. In any other writing is out of place and sloppy. Usually *or* is fine by itself.

ANYPLACE

Despite what inferior dictionaries say, *anyplace* is not an acceptable word yet. *Anywhere* is a perfectly good word, and you can use it anywhere you are tempted to say *anyplace*.

AS TO

- “There was no question as to his motives.”

As to is a pet phrase with amateur writers. Say *about*.

AUDIENCE

- “The fire drew a large audience.”

An *audience* is a group of listeners, such as would come to a speech or a concert. A fire, like a football game, draws *spectators*—unless of course it is a noisy fire.

AUTHOR

- “In addition to those accomplishments he has authored three books.”

Author is a noun, not a verb, and those whose activity it describes ought to be aware of that. Say *write*.

B.C.

B.C. means “before Christ,” and unlike *A.D.*, should follow the number of the year: “in 34 *B.C.*”
(*See also A.D.*)

BRITISH CITIZEN

- “The participants were all British citizens”

British persons are *subjects*, not citizens.

CENTER AROUND

- “Our discussions centered around his habit of leaving early.”

Something can *center on*, *center in*, *revolve around*, or *cluster around*; but trying to *center around* is like a dog chasing his tail.

CHAIR

- “Herb Underwood chaired the committee.”

Regardless of how many times you hear it on the radio or see it in the newspaper, *chair*, like *author*, is not a verb.

CLICHES

Use clichés sparingly. They can be useful to convey a certain meaning (such as in use *sparingly*), but used too frequently they become a crutch. A work laden with clichés is a conspicuous disclosure of a lazy writer (I could have said “dead giveaway,” but I didn’t). A manuscript recently reviewed for publication contained the following clichés in the space of a chapter or two:

- *adopt a policy*
- *bored to tears*
- *can’t judge a book by its cover*
- *covered a lot of ground*
- *didn’t set well with him*
- *food for thought*
- *the truth of the matter*
- *to say the least*
- *wanted it so bad I could taste it*
- *worn to a frazzle*
- *wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole*

We need to be careful to avoid using such clichés that have meaning to us but not to those who may not be familiar with the evangelical subculture. Try to avoid expressions like:

- *ask Jesus into your heart*
- *the Lord told me*
- *sharing time*
- *unspoken prayer request*

- *it blessed my heart*

Born again is just one example of a biblical term that has lost its meaning by becoming a cliché.

When should you use clichés? Only when any attempt to avoid them would sound clunky. You will find that your ability to use words well will ~~grow by leaps and bounds~~ (oops!) develop as you learn to express yourself without clichés.

COMPARATIVE ADJECTIVES

- “You’ll find them in the better department stores.”
- “A group of older people on a foliage tour had stopped at that restaurant, so we weren’t served for almost an hour.”

Don’t use comparative adjectives when you’re not making a true comparison. In the examples above, say “exclusive department stores,” and “elderly people.”

COMPARE

To show the differences between two things, you compare them *to* each other, to show their similarities, you compare them *with* each other.

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

- “The majority were not interested in their proposal.”
- “The couple was leaving for their honeymoon.”

Questions of how to treat collective nouns are not always easy. Both *majority* and *couple* above may be either plural or singular—depending on what you mean.

The question to ask yourself is whether you are referring to the individuals or to the group as a unit. If you are speaking of the individuals, treat the collective noun as a plural; if you are speaking of the unit, treat it as singular.

Be careful to avoid the mistake of the second example above. If you decide to make it singular (verb “was”), stick with your decision when you get to the pronoun. In the second example above, the verb should be plural. (The couple *were* leaving on their honeymoon.)

COMPRISE

- “The little group was comprised of Sam, Albert, Rufus, and Mike.”

Comprise is a synonym for *include*. The whole comprises the parts, not the parts the whole. Change *was comprised of* to *comprised* in the above example. The writer is confusing *comprise* with *compose*. They do not mean the same thing. Be careful with *comprise*; it is almost always used incorrectly.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

The commonest trademark of careless writing, the dangling modifier can be a participial phrase, appositive phrase, adjectival clause, or simple adjective. It usually appears at the beginning or end of a sentence.

- “Only six weeks old, her mother had abandoned her.”

The adjectival phrase at the beginning of that sentence obviously is trying to modify “her,” but it attaches itself syntactically to the subject of the sentence, “mother.” The mother, however, was very likely older than six weeks when the abandonment took place.

The best way to avoid dangles is to be aware of the subject of the sentence. A dangler is usually the result of trying to modify an idea or pronoun that is not the subject. Here are some more examples. In them the dangling phrase is italicized, and the subject of the sentence is in all capital letters.

- “*While jogging in the park*, a DOG bit him.” (dangling participle)
- “*An excellent seamstress*, her SERVICES are widely sought. (dangling appositive phrase)
- “*Although ready when the time finally came to go*, the AWESOMENESS of his task caused him to fear what was ahead.” (dangling adjectival clause)
- “*Alert, excited but exhausted*, his CLOTHES were soaked with perspiration.” (dangling adjectives)
- “The job OFFER is my first good one *since graduating from college two years ago*.” (dangling participle)

DIFFERENT THAN

- “New York is different than Chicago.”

Different always goes with *from*, not *than*. *Than* works with comparative adjectives (better than, older than, or greater than)—but not with *different*.

- “Your hair is different than it was yesterday.”

That sentence is subtler than the first example, because simply changing the *than* to a *from* will not solve the problem. You can repair the sentence by putting in a specific comparative adjective instead of *different*: “Your hair is shorter than yesterday.” Otherwise, make it, “Your hair is different from the way it was yesterday.”

DISINTERESTED

Disinterested means *impartial*; *uninterested* means not interested. They are not interchangeable.

DRUNK

Drunk is not a noun; *drunkard* is. *Drunk* is an adjective, but when used attributively (before the word it modifies) it should be *drunken*. Say “*drunken bum*” and “*drunken driving*,” but “She got *drunk*.”

DUE TO

- “He fell due to the ice on the sidewalk.”

Due to is an expression that is always best avoided. The only way to use it correctly is to make it modify a noun: “His fall was due to the ice.” Remember that *due* is an adjective and must modify a noun. Try to use *because of* instead of *due to*.

ELUDE

(See *ALLUSION*)

ENTHUSE

- “I am enthused about this afternoon’s meeting.”

Enthused is not a legitimate participle, because there’s no such verb as *enthuse*. The sentence should say, “I am *enthusiastic*...”

ETC.

- “As a missionary, he established schools, etc. all over central Africa.”

Etc. is usually a sign that the writer is lazy. All it tells the reader is that the author felt he should add other items to the list, but he couldn’t think of them. What are “schools, etc.”? Hospitals? Leper colonies? Nurseries? If there are other items to add to the list, name them. If not, just say “schools.” And if you have to use *et cetera* in formal writing, spell it out.

(see also *ABBREVIATIONS*)

FARTHER/FURTHER

- “He went farther in his pursuit of learning than most men do.”

If you’re not speaking of a measurable distance, use *further*. “He went further in his pursuit of learning...” but “He ran *farther* than I.”

FEWER/LESS

- “We can’t go if there are less than nine of us.”

Fewer refers to number, *less* to amount. It should be “fewer than nine of us,” but “less than half.”

FIANCE/FIANCE’E

- “His fiancé had to go home for her aunt’s funeral.”

No, *he* is her *fiancé*. *She* is his *fiancée*. The gender distinctions imported from French, and though there is no difference in pronunciation of the two terms, be sure you keep them straight in writing.

(See also *ALUMNUS/ALUMNA/ALUMNAE/ALUMNI*.)

FIRSTLY

Don't introduce paragraphs of sentences with "Firstly," "Secondly," "Thirdly," and so on. What will you do with "Eleventhly," or "Two hundred seventeenthly"? First, second, third, and similar forms function as adverbs without adding *-ly*.

FOR AWHILE

- "He was away for awhile on vacation."

Awhile is an equivalent expression of *for a while*. It should never be preceded by *a for*; the *for* is built in.

FOLKS

- "His folks were both taller than six feet."

In formal usage, *folks* is not a word. *Folk* is already plural with an *s*. If you mean parents, say parents.

FROM WHENCE

- "No one knew from whence he came."

Whence means "from where." It never needs a *from* in front of it. The same is true of *hence*, which means "from here."

GOTTEN

- "He had not gotten his tax statement in the mail yet."

Got is still the preferred past participle of *get* according to the dictionary. The example should say, "He had not got his tax statement..."

GREY

Gray is the preferred American spelling of the color. There are several words in *British English* that are spelled differently than *American English* (color and colour are examples). Using British spelling may make an American writer seem more profound and scholarly, but it is generally just annoying.

GROOM

- "The bride and groom left for parts unknown."

A man getting married is a *bridegroom*. A man who works with horses is a *groom*. Unless this is a racetrack scandal, the writer probably means the bride and *bridegroom*.

IF...THEN

- “If you accept the premise, then you must take it to its logical conclusion.”

If you have used an *if*, you probably don’t need a *then*.

IF AND WHEN

- “If and when they show up, I will pay them what I owe them.”

Delete the *and when* every time you find yourself using the redundancy.

ILLUSION

See *ALLUSION*

IN ADDITION

- “In addition, we want you to keep a record of your hours.”

Don’t use in *addition* or *additionally* where also will suffice.

IN ORDER TO

- “He stood up on the bridge in order to get a better view.”

Usually *in order* is unnecessary with the infinitive. Always delete it if you can.

INFER

- “When I said that, I did not mean to infer that I thought you were dishonest.”

Maybe not, but you certainly *implied* it and thus I *inferred* that you were a borderline illiterate. To infer something is to not deduce it from what someone has said. To imply something is to suggest it strongly but not specifically.

INTENSIVE PRONOUNS

- “It is people like yourself who create the problem.”

Don’t use the intensive pronouns yourself, myself, ourselves, and so on, when a simple pronoun will do. Make it “people like you.”

IRREGARDLESS

- “He continued to make the same mistake, irregardless of how many times we corrected him.”

Frustrating, isn’t it? Regardless of how persistently you correct some people, they continue to believe that irregardless is a word. It isn’t. But irrespective is, and it is probably the very word you are groping for.

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING

- “It goes without saying that we should pay our taxes.”

Then why say it?

LITERALLY (also HONESTLY)

- “I felt so humiliated I literally died.”

You did not literally die, or you would not be telling me about it. Literally is not a word to use whenever you need to emphasize something. It literally means what it says. Many people also use *honestly* as an intensifier. Whenever I see this I honestly just think the person is usually dishonest.

MEANINGFUL

- “I felt we had an extremely meaningful time together.”

What did your time together mean? Meaningful is usually meaningless. It has become a buzz word.

NAUSEOUS

- “After riding the roller coaster, I was nauseous.”

You may indeed have been nauseous, but you are probably trying to say that you were nauseated. Nauseous means “causing nausea,” and nauseated means that you feel like throwing up.

NOT...NOR

- “I was not tired, bored, nor cranky after the long flight.”

Change *nor* to *or*. *Nor* goes with neither, and *or* goes with not.

NOT ONLY...BUT ALSO

- “He not only swam the English Channel both ways but ran fifty-two miles from London to Brighton in eight hours.”

Not only...but also are correlative conjunctions. That means they work in pairs. The *but* is necessary with the not (not you but me), and the also or its equivalent is needed to go with the only (not only you, but also me). You can say as well, in addition to, too, or any other equivalent if also, but you must say something to be parallel with the only. Add *as well* to boot to the end of the sentence above.

NOT TOO

- “Frank was not too happy about the situation.”

Not too is not very good. If you must use this tired old expression the proper form would be *none too happy*.

OFF OF

- “Get down off of your high horse.”

It must be a very high horse to require two prepositions to get you down. Say, “off your high horse.” Double prepositions are sometimes necessary, and some of them (onto, into, upon) have even become legitimate single words. Be sure you need the double preposition before you use it.

PASTORING

- “He is wonderful at pastoring his people.”

Although Bill Gates apparently does not think so, pastoring is a perfectly acceptable transitive verb. It means “to serve or act as a pastor.” Your spelling and grammar checking in MS Word will always highlight this as either a misspelling or improper usage. Don’t believe it! In formal or scholarly writing, this is the preferred word to use rather than “shepherding.” Pastors pastor people, shepherds shepherd sheep.

PLEONASM

Pleonasm is the use of more words than are necessary to convey the writer’s meaning. A pleonasm can, but does not necessarily, involve repetition. Some of the most common pleonasm are simply excess verbal baggage, saying nothing, but making your style sluggish and hard to read. The following phrases—aside from being overused—are almost always pleonastic. Substitute the words in parentheses, or delete them altogether:

- a great many (many)
- as far as I’m concerned
- because of the fact that (because)
- bring to a conclusion (conclude)
- had occasion to
- has a tendency to (tends to)
- I have always been of the opinion (I thought)
- in the even that (if)
- in the vicinity of (near)
- make contact with (call, write, or touch)
- of course
- on account of (because)
- one way or another
- or something along those lines
- made a statement that said (said)
- without a doubt

(See also *REDUNDANCY, TAUTOLOGY*)

PEOPLE

- “More than thirty-five thousand people attended the game.”

Use people when you're speaking of a group. Persons refer to individuals. It should be "thirty-five thousand persons," or "a large group of people."

POSSESSIVE WITH GERUND

- "I'm tired of him running up and down the stairs at that time of night."

Actually it is his running, not him that tires you out, so you should say that. Usually with a gerund (verbal noun) a possessive modifier is called for.

The situation arises in English far more than you may be aware of, and as an alert writer you need to look out for it, but there are some situations in which idiom will force you to do what cannot be grammatically justified. For example,

- "The day ended without anyone getting to take a break."

is correct grammar but poor idiom. Sometimes—rarely, but sometimes—it is better to follow the idiom than to hold stubbornly to rules of grammar.

PROVEN

- "They accept the theory before it has been proven correct."

The theory that proven is the past participle of prove has been proved incorrect.

RAVISHING

- "The fire was ravishing the building."

No, the fire was ravaging the building.

- "I haven't eaten since lunch, I am ravishing."

You are quite good-looking, but you probably mean you are ravenous. If you get confused about those words, look them up every time you come to them.

REAL/REALLY

- "What you said to her was real bad."

What you wrote was pretty bad, too. Really is the adverbial form of the adjective real.

- "It was a really beautiful day."

That is a proper of the adverb, but it adds nothing but excess weight to the expression. Don't use really for emphasis; it means "genuinely," as opposed to "apparently."

- "It was real"

This is now a common slang expression that not only communicates nothing in reality, it is also not a real sentence.

(See also ACTUALLY.)

REASON WHY

- “I’ll tell you the reason why.”

If you can tell me the reason people insist on using why after reason, please do. It is probably the commonest redundancy of all. Every time you use it, go back and mark out the why.

Another insidious redundancy related to reason is “the reason...is because.” The reason why I don’t like that is because it is not only redundant, but it also sounds goofy. Say, “the reason...is that.”

REDUNDANCY

Here are some common redundancies. Omit the italicized words.

- actual fact
- admit to
- advance planning
- already existing
- at the present time
- at this point in time
- because of the fact that
- biography of his life
- curiously enough
- in order to
- joined together
- one and the same
- past history
- personal friend
- Sahara desert
- seesaw back and forth
- self-confessed
- small in size
- start off
- strangled to death
- start off
- the fact that
- together with
- widow woman
- 6 A.M. this morning

(See also PLEONASM, TAUTOLOGY.)

SAID

- “‘I don’t see how you can justify a price hike,’ he expostulated.”

Some writers go to any extreme to avoid using said. There is nothing wrong with said; it concisely expresses the meaning, it is clear, and it usually is more accurate than some of the substitutions people use for it. Exclaimed, averred, grinned, enthused, bubbled, declared, asserted, smiled, croaked, suggested,

commented, and whispered are not synonyms for said. Some of them mean different things, and some of them mean nothing at all. Don't be afraid to use said, if that's what you mean. Accuracy is more important than variety. Besides, how can you grin a sentence?

SPLIT INFINITIVES

- “He decided to quickly pick up his belongings and leave.”

There is really no logical reason for avoiding placement of an adverb between the “to” and verb of an infinitive, but for centuries alert writers have tried not to split infinitives, and the practice is a sign of literacy. In the example above, “quickly” should come after “belongings” or “leave.”

- “They agreed to more than double their investments.”

In that example there is no way to avoid splitting the infinitive. Go ahead and split it confidently.

SUBJUNCTIVE

- “I asked if he were coming with us.”

Change *were* to *was*. The subjunctive mood in English is reserved for expressions of hypothetical situations or things contrary to fact, as in, “I wish I were you,” or “If he were still alive, he would know what to do.”

TAUTOLOGY

- “He was able to participate in activities most teenagers never get to participate in.”

Avoid the repetition of participate in. You could write, He was able to participate in activities most teenagers get to experience.” Or better, recast it completely to avoid wordiness: “He got to do things most teenagers don't.”

Tautology is the needless repetition of a word or idea. See REDUNDANCY for one form of tautology. Another, less obvious, form crosses the boundaries of sentences and even paragraphs:

- “We washed the car. After we washed the car we cleaned the garage.”

Most tautology is subtler than that. Comb your writing for repetitive ideas and expressions. (See also REDUNDANCY, PLEONASM.)

THAT/THIS

- “He had never seen an airplane. This explained his fears.”

Change “this” to “that.” This and that are not equivalent expressions. “This” means, “the thing at hand, or, the thing I am about to say.” “That” means, “the thing over there, or, what we have already mentioned.” The rule to remember is this: Use that instead of this when referring back to something. If you can use that and it still makes sense that is the proper choice. (You will rarely see writing that distinguishes properly between the two words, but we naturally make the distinction in spoken language.)

TORTUOUS

- “His imprisonment was a tortuous experience.”

His imprisonment was probably more torturous, unless he walked around in circles. Tortuous means “winding or circuitous” and is very useful in describing roads.

TOWARD

- “He ran towards the ice cream truck.”

Make it toward. Words with –ward suffixes (toward, forward, backward) do not need an s on the end.

TRY AND

Try to avoid saying try and when you mean try to.

TUMMY

- “You could do some exercises to firm your tummy.”

Belly is the word. If you insist on using a colloquial word instead of belly, the crude gut is preferable to the baby-talk girdle-commercial euphemism tummy. If you really hate belly that much, say midriff, or abdomen.

WHETHER OR NOT

- “I’m not sure whether I understand or not.”

Or not is usually unnecessary in such an expression. The only time you need or not with whether is if you are emphasizing the alternatives equally, as in “I will be there whether you come or not.”

WHICH

- “The word which is translated ‘charity’ would be better rendered ‘love.’”

Which, in that example, should be that. That is the correct relative pronoun for introducing restrictive clauses; which is the pronoun for introducing non-restrictive clauses. Which, used correctly, is always preceded by a comma.

Here are some examples of proper use:

- “The car that carried the ambassador was black.”
- “The ambassador’s car, which was black, came first in the procession.”

WHO

- “Who did you call to fix the plumbing?”

Who, of course, should be whom. To keep from being tricked by the word when it appears at the beginning of the sentence, mentally turn the work order around. Here whom is the object of call.

-WISE

- “That is not a good thing to do healthwise.”

Nor is it a good thing to do wordwise. Clockwise and otherwise are good words. Healthwise is not. I have stopped manufacturing words with –wise suffixes. I hope you will do likewise.