

Part 3: WRITE OR WRONG

3.1. A Pretty Good Guide to Hard Words

I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead.

—Tom Stoppard¹

• **a, an.** Use *an* before a vowel-sound or a silent *h*- (an *honorary* degree, *an hour* ago, *an NBA* player, *an eighty-year-old* man; and, in Oxbridge English, *an historical* event). Use *a* before a pronounced *h*- (*a hospital* bed, *a hotel*, *a horrible* person, *a history* lesson), and before a consonant sound even if it is spelled with a vowel (*a one-year* lease, *a united* front, *a eulogy*).

• An **academe**, by the definition of Ambrose Bierce, is “an ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught,” while an **academy** (from *academe*) is “a modern school where football is taught.”² But *academe*, *academia*, and *the academy* have lately come to be used interchangeably as general terms for the entire system of higher learning.

• To **accede** is to give assent, or to come into an office or dignity. To **exceed** is to go beyond. The fair maid *accedes* to her princely suitor’s wishes by accepting his hand in marriage. She *exceeds* his wishes by living happily ever after while teaching him aspects of marital bliss that he never dreamed of.

• To **accept** is to receive what is offered, or to take a statement or opinion as true. To **except** is to exclude. *Except* may also be used as a conjunction meaning *but* (marking exclusion). The sentence, “All accept that reindeer can fly” means that *Everyone believes they can fly*. The sentence, “All except that reindeer can fly” means, *All of the reindeer can fly except that one*.

• **Accurate** means errorless. **Precise** means exact or clearly delineated. The respective nouns are **accuracy** and **precision**. A statement may be *accurate* but not *precise*, or vice versa: “Bubba used to drink about a liter of whiskey a day” (accurate but not precise). “Bubba said he could drink two and a half liters and still drive” (precise but not accurate). “Bubba’s corpse registered a blood alcohol level of 0.31 percent” (accurate and precise).

- An **acronym** is a word formed from the initials or other parts of several words, such as ATM, CIA, NASCAR, NATO, NOW, radar, RAM, or snafu. An **abbreviation** is a shortened form of a word or phrase. “FBI” is an acronym, “F.B.I.” an abbreviation, and “the Feds,” slang. Acronyms do not require periods.

- An **acute** illness or problem is nasty but brief. Those which drag on are **chronic**.

- An **admissions** office or committee is responsible for deciding which applicants will be *admitted*. An **admission** may also be an instance of *admitting* a statement to be true, as when President Bill Clinton made the admission that he may have received a necktie from Monica Lewinsky. **Omission** denotes things, ideas, statements, or words deliberately or accidentally left out or undone. A “sin of commission,” according to the Church, is something you ought *not* to have done but did *anyway*, such as the priest’s molestation of a child. A “sin of omission,” is something you did *not* do but *ought* to have done, such as a bishop’s failure to intervene. An **emission** is something released from something else, such as pollutants erupting from a smokestack. If the president reports that “Some of the biggest sources of air pollution are the power plants, which send tons of *admissions* into our air,” *emissions* is the intended word.³ Only rarely do energy companies or ecclesiastical authorities make “admissions,” and never at all except when caught, so to speak, with their pants down.

- If you heard the report in **advance**, you had **advance** notice or information. Your BMW benefits from **advanced** technology. To receive an *advance* is either to be paid before you did the work, or to receive a sexual proposition before you did anything to encourage it. “Becoming advanced in age” is a wordy euphemism for *growing old*, at which point the word’s other meanings rarely come into play.

- **Adverse** means unfavorable or antagonistic. In a legal action, the **adverse** party is the other side. An **aversion** is a strong dislike for something. To be **averse** is to feel disinclined, or to wish to avoid. If our president says, “I’m not adverse to a camera,” he means that he is willing to be photographed, but seems to say that his face won’t harm the equipment.⁴

- **Advice** is a noun. **Advise** is verb. Give nice mice *advice* about lice. *Advise* wise guys about flies.

- To **affect** something is to have an **effect**: “The blackout *affected* [had an *effect* upon] the entire metropolitan area.” Used as a verb, to *effect* is to bring about a result (“The blackout *effected* a shutdown of the city center”), but its use as a verb is best avoided, to prevent confusion (use *cause* instead). To complicate matters still further, *affect* when used as a noun (AF-*fect*) means emotional response: “The autistic child showed no *affect* even when frightened.”

• To **aggravate** is to make worse. To **annoy** is to bother, provoke, or exasperate. To confuse the two words may *annoy* some purists, but it will not *aggravate* them.

• **Aggression** denotes the act or practice of initiating hostilities or of launching an invasion, an organized **assault**. On a personal level, both *aggression* and *assault* may signify hostile speech or destructive behavior. An **affront** is an open insult, deliberately offensive. These terms are always negative. If the president opines that “we need a full affront on an energy crisis that is real in California and looms for other parts of our country,” his intended meaning may be, “We need to resolve California’s energy crisis before it spreads.”⁵ CEOs may like the sound of “an aggressive” sales rep or advertising campaign, but for the rest of the English-speaking world the word implies *belligerent*, *obnoxious*, and *pushy*. *Assault* the enemy if you must, but do not “assault” a problem, your colleagues, or your dinner.

• An **alibi** is not a lie or an excuse. It is one’s proof of having been somewhere else than at the scene of the crime.

• To **allege** is to make an assertion, most often by way of accusation, without giving proof that it is true. An **allegation** may be true or false until proved one way or the other. In a legal context, to *allege* is to give statements in evidence that may still be rebutted or contested.

• **All right** means unharmed or entirely correct. In colloquial speech and informal writing, *all right* is widely used to mean “okay” or “Hey, why not?” *Alright*, though gaining some currency in America, will strike fastidious readers as an ignorant misspelling.

• To **allude** is to refer to something indirectly or covertly. To **refer** implies direct mention or citation. The distinction is useful. The two words should not be confused. (See also **elude**, **elusive**.)

• **A lot of** is a three-word phrase commonly used (and greatly overused) to mean *much* or *many*. Its original sense has been lost (*a lot* [i.e., a batch] of dye, of silk). The fused spelling, “*alot*,” though never correct, is forgivable when used to mean *very much*, without the *of*: “I like you alot.” Where possible, use *many* for countable items, and *much* or *a lot of* for an uncounted quantity (*many candidates*, *many donors*, *a lot of money*, *much jubilation*). Still better is to drop *a lot*, and to be specific. For “Cher’s new motorcycle cost a lot of money,” try: “Cher paid \$18,000 for her new motorcycle.” If you have *a lot of* problems, you have **myriad** troubles, not “a myriad *of*” them. If you have only *two* problems, you have a **couple of** them. (No one can have “a couple problems,” although an aspiring adulterer may have “a couple problem.”)

- **Already** means previously. **All ready** means “completely ready” or “everyone [is] ready”: “We *already* ate lunch but we’re *all ready* to eat again.”

- Take him to the **altar** and he’s yours forever, to have, to hold, and to **alter**.

- **Alternate**, used as a noun, denotes a substitute or second choice. As an adjective, it means “every other.” To *alternate* is to occur by turns, first one, then the other. **Alternative**, as a noun, is one of precisely *two* options, plans, or possibilities. To speak of finding “a different alternative” is superfluous, as there is never more than one. When our president says “that the babies out of wedlock is a very difficult chore” and that “I believe we ought to say there is *a different alternative than* the culture that is proposed by people like Miss Wolf in society,” the intended phrase is “*an alternative to* Miss Wolf’s proposed culture.”⁶ Used as an adjective, *alternative* describes a person, place, thing, or idea that remains a second choice, or a situation allowing only one of two possibilities. If Mr. Smith, a bigamist, *alternates* between spouses, living with wife no. 1 in January, March, and May, and with her *alternate* in the *alternate* months, the second wife is an *alternative* to the first, and vice versa. If Mr. Smith prefers wife number 2, then wife number 1 is his *alternate*.”

- **Altogether** means thoroughly, entirely, taken as a whole. **All together** is everyone in a group. “In the *all together*” is slang for exhibiting all of your body parts at the same time and is best avoided, at least in mixed company.

- An **ambiguous** statement, or *double entendre* (or a triple or quadruple pun, if you’re Shakespeare), is a double meaning in the text, whether intended by the author, or discovered by the reader, or both. A **vague** statement is merely imprecise or unclear.

- If you are **ambivalent**, you have mixed feelings. If you’re **indifferent**, you have no preference either way. Though **ambiguity** usually denotes double meaning, a cross-dressed man or bearded lady may be described as *sexually ambiguous*. **Ambidextrous** means only that you are good with either hand, or dextrous in a *ménage à trois*.

- **Among, amongst** (see **between**).

- Use **amount** (or *little—*, or *much—*) for uncountable quantities. Use **number** (or *few—*, or *many—*) for what’s countable. Do not say “a large amount of people” unless, perhaps, when speaking of the carnage at the site of a plane crash.

- Reserve **analyzation** for chemists, mathematicians, and proctologists: **analysis** is the better word. When our president says that “This case has had full analyzation and has been looked at a lot,” he may mean, *I think someone already studied that.*⁷

- **And/or** is a form that denotes three selections: one, or the other, or both: “Jacob will marry Leah *and/or* Rachel.” Where possible, come to a decision. Then delete the distracting term, *and/or*, and recast the sentence: “Jacob will marry Leah first, then Rachel, retaining Leah as the alternate.”

- An **anecdote** is a short, pithy account of a funny or pointed incident. An **antidote** is a remedy or cure. When the president explains that “A tax cut is really one of the anecdotes to coming out of an economic illness,” *antidote* is the intended word.⁸

- An **antagonist** is an *adversary* or counterforce that *contends against* (the hero) or *counteracts* (a muscle, a chemical substance). A **protagonist** may or may not be the “good” guy, but he or she is always the “main contender” (the *proto-agonist*). To **antagonize** is not just to irritate but to make someone into an adversary.

- To **anticipate** is to take action in advance of an expected event. To **expect** an event is merely to suppose that it is coming. The distinction is a useful one and should be preserved. To *anticipate* an expected attack may be to strike first. An exam *expected* at end of term is *anticipated* only if you study for it. **Expectation** is not a synonym for *aspiration*. If our president says that America’s “common denominator” is that our “*expectations* rise above that which is expected,” *hopes* may be the intended word.⁹ If the president says, “I’m the master of low expectations,” he may mean, *I am good at making pessimistic forecasts*, or perhaps, *Of all the Bush politicians from whom you might expect zero achievement, I am the supreme example*.¹⁰

- **Anxious** means worried, nervous, fidgety. You are *anxious* to take an exam if the thought of it makes you nervous. If you mean **eager**, say so: “Mom is *eager* to take a vacation, though *anxious* to fly.”

- **Anymore**, in its negative or limiting sense, means (not) *any longer* or (not) *at this time*, or (not) *now*: “One cannot buy vinyl records anymore.” It does not mean *lately*. Such statements as “*Anymore* the traffic is getting worse,” or “*Anymore* a new microwave is expensive” do injury to the language. (If you cannot substitute “as used to be true” for “anymore,” you have used the word incorrectly.) *Any more* can also be a two-word phrase: “Are there **any more** cookies?” “I’m not *any more* tired now than I was hours ago.”

- Do it **any way** you like: the choice is yours. Or a sign may say, “Don’t do it,” and you do it **anyway**. **Anyway** at the beginning of a sentence (a device not to be used in formal prose) indicates that the speaker or story-teller has resumed a narrative thread after a digression or interruption: “Anyway, as I was saying...” *Anyways* is illiterate.

- **Apostasy** denotes an improved understanding of one's religion. **Heresy** denotes an opinion or belief not sanctioned by one's co-religionists. An **apostate** leaves the church and is condemned for his **unbelief**. A **heretic** stays on until she is reformed, excommunicated, or burned at the stake for her **misbelief**. An **apostle** is a first-century true believer on whose supposed authority the Church assumes the right to behave in such a fashion.

- To **appraise** is to assess, to set a value on. To **apprise** is to inform: "Ms. Davis of Century 21 *appraised* Mr. Kaczynski's backwoods property and *apprised* potential buyers of its colorful history."

- **Apropos** (in French, *à propos*, "to the purpose") means relevant, pertinent, connected with what has gone before. Rhymes with "Pop, go slow." If you mean "appropriate," write **appropriate**.

- **Apt** (see **prone**).

- An **ark** is a large, flat-bottomed boat, such as the one on which Noah is believed to have housed representatives of the Earth's ten million animal species for a year. An **arc** is a curved line or structure, such as the rainbow that the god Yahweh is said to have placed in the firmament as a sign that He would not again drown the entire planet.

- **As** and **like** are a source of much confusion. Use *as* for that which happens or exists in the same way, and *like* for a similarity between two people, places, or things: "When I die, I want to go peacefully in my sleep, *as my grandfather did*, not screaming in terror *like his passengers*" (or: "*as his passengers did*"). If you are *as* hungry *as* a lion, you may eat *like* a lion. If you speak *as* an authority, you are one. If you speak *like* an authority, you're only faking it.

To make comparison, *like* is always to be followed by a noun (*like thunder, like tar, like strawberries, like sandpaper*). To use *like* as a conjunction is to risk sounding illiterate, at least to grammar pundits: "Pundits ridiculed my campaign speech, *like I expected*" (better to say "*as I expected*" or "*as usual*"). When a presidential candidate says, "There needs to be debates, *like we're going through*," he may mean, "There must be televised debates such as those we are having now."¹¹ If he says, "We must all hear the universal call to *like your neighbor just like you like to be liked yourself*," the second "like" should be an *as*.¹² Never is it necessary to say "like in" or "like on," nor ever correct to say, "like for example." Products at the department store are not "*like on TV*," but "*as seen on TV*" or "*like the ones seen on TV*."

For formal writing, it is best to avoid even such commonplace solecisms as "It looks like rain." Water from a drippy faucet may *look like rain*, but when an overcast sky threatens a storm, it *looks as if* it may rain. "Like I said" may, one day, become fully idiomatic. Until then, it's "as I said" (or "as I was saying"). Write and say "as in

London,” not “like in London” (or: “as in the 14th century,” “as in my previous example,” “as they do in China”).

As well as. To say that “Taylor Swift golfs *as well as* Tiger Woods” implies not only that Taylor Swift is a golfer but that she’s as good a golfer as Mr. Woods. Try: “Like Tiger Woods, Taylor Swift golfs, though not *as well.*” Avoid putting *as well as* at the beginning of a sentence. “*As well as* singing, Taylor golfs,” is a weird construction.

As can be followed by a conjunction (**as if**, **as when**) but take care not to saddle an *as* with unneeded prepositions. **As to** can usually be replaced by *about*. **So as to** can usually be replaced by *to*. **As of** often means *by* or *since*. It is never correct to say “**as of yet**,” which makes no sense. Try: “*As of* noon today, the hostage was still alive” or “The hostage is not *yet* slain,” but not: “*As of yet*, the hostage has not been slain.” The idiom will make no great difference to the hostage, but that is a weird way for the newscaster to have said it.

To write, “I could not finish the essay on time, *as* I had a headache,” will give your English teacher a headache as well. *As* is not a synonym of *because* or *while*; it is a conjunction, meaning *in the same manner*.

- Use an **augur** to predict if you will go to heaven when you die, or an **auger** to drill your way in.

- **Autarchy** means absolute sovereignty. **Autarky** indicates economic self-sufficiency. Don’t use either word unless you’re sure your audience knows the difference.

- **Average** (see **mean**).

- An **awesome** athlete or fireworks display or performance is **awe-inspiring**. An **awesome** enemy may be **awful** (terrible) or make you feel **awful** (unpleasant). A **fearsome** enemy makes you **fearful**. **Frightening** and **frightful** mean pretty much the same thing, although **frightful** is sometimes used figuratively, such as a “frightful liar” or your child’s “frightful grade report.” For informal writing, **awfully** can be used to mean *very*: “Rubber Ducky, I’m awfully fond of you.”

- **Awhile** (as an adverb) and **for a while** (three words) are synonymous, as in “Stay **awhile**” and “Stay **for a while**.” A **while** is an unspecified period of time, as in the phrase, “a while ago.”

- Wheels turn on an **axle**. The Earth turns on its **axis**. Skaters who can jump and turn like Axel Paulson can perform an **axel**—or a “triple axel” if they can turn three axels in one mighty leap.

- **Barbed** wire (see **duct** tape).

- **Basically** is an overused word: When the president says, “What I am against is quotas [because] they basically delineate based upon whatever,” the thought is unclear.¹³ From such sentences as “Basi-

cally, I grew up in Midland, Texas,” or “I basically hope to be more like my dad,” omit *basically*. Even when used correctly, the word can usually be deleted. The same goes for *essentially* and *totally*.

- **Basis**, another overused word, is rarely necessary. If it happens *on an annual basis*, it happens *annually* or *every year*. Use *basis* as a synonym for *grounds* or *foundation*, or not at all: “Fascism was really the basis for the New Deal” (Ronald Reagan).¹⁴ *Groundwork* is the foundation of a project, and denotes the *preliminary* activity; do not confuse it with *framework*, which denotes the structure. If our president speaks of “the framework—the groundwork—not framework—the groundwork to discuss a framework for peace, to lay the—all right,” he may mean that adversaries must lay the groundwork for peace before they can discuss a framework for peaceful relations.¹⁵

- **Bear** the pain or responsibility (He *bears*, he *bore*, he has *borne* the burden). To **bear** a child is to carry it in the womb until birth (The child is *borne* [carried] for nine months before being *born*, after which it may be *borne* in your arms or on your shoulders), until adolescence, when it must be *borne* (endured) with parental fortitude. To **bare** your shoulders or buttocks or soul is to expose it (*bare*, *bared*, *has bared*). “Bear with me” means *be patient*. “Bare with me” means something else.

- **Because** introduces a reason. It may be used in place of *since* or *for the reason that*. Begin a sentence with *because* if you wish (“*Because* of the blizzard, shops closed early”); or put the dependent clause second (“The shops closed early *because* of the blizzard”). Write a fragment, if you must, in reply to a question (“Why did shops close early? *Because* of the blizzard”). But do not write, “The reason is *because*”—which is a silly redundancy. “The reason why is *because*” is even worse, and may actually cause brain damage.

- To **better** is to improve or make better. To **embitter** is to make resentful. When our president urges the poor “to embetter” themselves, and promises to welcome “those faith-based programs for the embetterment of mankind,” **betterment**, not **embitterment**, is the intended word.¹⁶

- **Between** is used when linking two persons or things: *The next race will be between Jim’s rat and mine* (or: *between you and me*). It is never correct to say “between you and I.” A coin may fall through one crack or the other, but it cannot fall “*between* the cracks.” Nor can a thing be *between* itself. When our president boasts that “Border relations between Canada and Mexico have never been better,” he seems to imply the sudden disappearance of the 48 contiguous States.¹⁷ To say with our president that “It’s a struggle between good, and it’s a struggle between evil,” is like clapping with one hand.¹⁸ **Among** is used when at least three persons or things are involved:

- ¹ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1982), 53.
 - ² Ambrose Bierce, "Academe," *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary* (Athens: Univ. Georgia, 2000).
 - ³ George W. Bush, Earth Day, Wilmington, NY (22 April 2002), qtd. <http://www.thedubyareport.com/quotes.html>; quietly corrected *Federal Information and News Dispatch, Inc.* State Department (22 April 2002).
 - ⁴ George W. Bush, CNN (25 April 2001).
 - ⁵ George W. Bush, Press conference, Washington, D.C. (29 March 2001), qtd. *New York Times* (30 March 2001).
 - ⁶ George W. Bush, *Meet the Press*, NBC (21 Nov.1999).
 - ⁷ George W. Bush, Austin, Texas (22 June 2000), qtd. *Knight/Ridder News Service Transcript* (23 June 2000).
 - ⁸ George W. Bush, interview, *The Edge With Paula Zahn*, Fox News (18 Sep. 2000).
 - ⁹ George W. Bush, Los Angeles (27 Sep. 2000), qtd. *Herald Sun* (25 Feb. 2001).
 - ¹⁰ George W. Bush, aboard Air Force One (4 June 2003), qtd. *Washington Post* (5 June 2003).
 - ¹¹ George W. Bush, *Larry King Live*, CNN (16 Dec. 1999).
 - ¹² George W. Bush, qtd. *Financial Times* (14 Jan. 2000).
 - ¹³ George W. Bush, qtd. *San Francisco Chronicle* (21 Jan. 2000).
 - ¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, *Time* (1976), qtd. *New York Times* (24 July 1980).
 - ¹⁵ George W. Bush, Crawford, Texas (13 Aug. 2001), qtd. *FDCH Political Transcripts* (13 Aug. 2001).
 - ¹⁶ George W. Bush, Washington, D.C., qtd. *U.S. Newswire* (18 April 2002); Bush, Stockton, Calif., qtd. *FDCH Political Transcripts* (23 Aug. 2002)
 - ¹⁷ George W. Bush, qtd. *FDCH Political Transcripts* (24 Sep. 2001).
 - ¹⁸ George W. Bush to the Cattle Industry Convention, qtd. *FDCH Political Transcripts* (8 Feb. 2002).
- [Extract ends here]