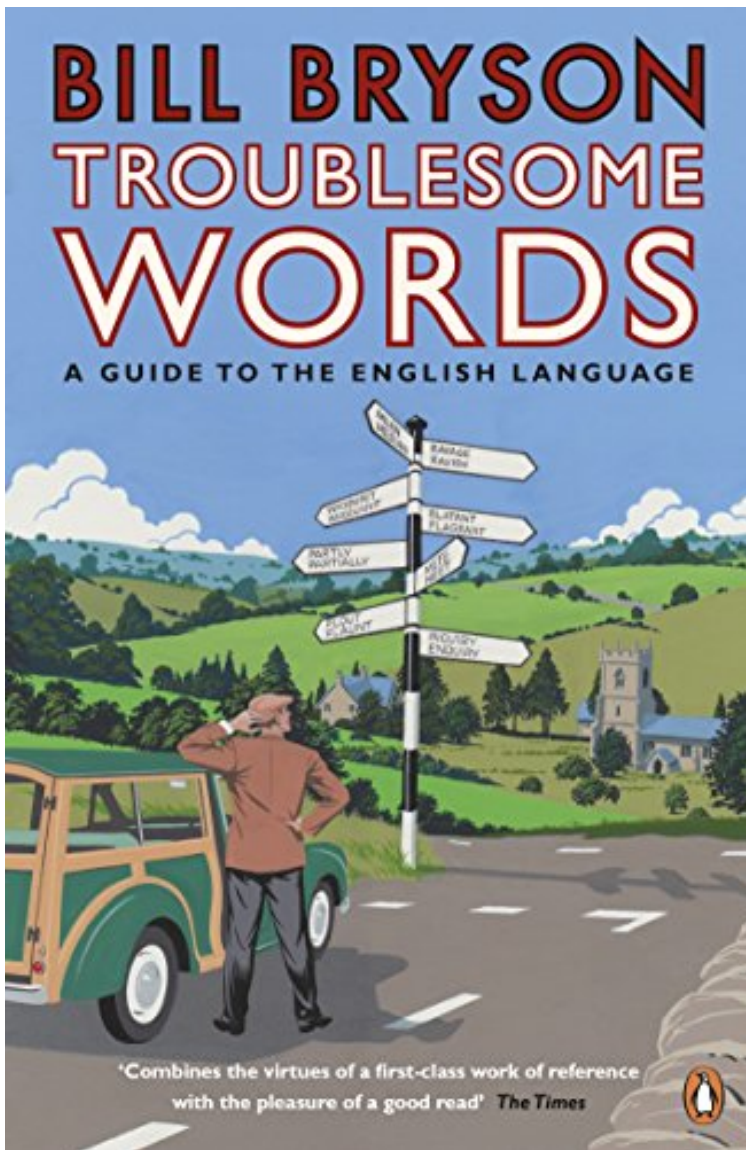


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Troublesome Words



Par Bill Bryson
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Troublesome Words is playful and riddlesome guide to the English language from the bestselling author of Notes from a Small Island and A Short History of Nearly Everything, Bill Bryson What is the difference between mean and median, blatant and flagrant, flout and flaunt? Is it whodunnit or whodunit? Do you know? Are you sure? With Troublesome Words, journalist and bestselling travel-writer Bill Bryson gives us a clear, concise and entertaining guide to the problems of English usage and spelling that has been an indispensable companion to those who work with the written word for over twenty years. So if you want to discover whether you should care about split infinitives, are cursed with an uncontrollable outbreak of commas or were wondering if that newsreader was right to say 'an historic day', this superb book

is the place to find out. **ExtraitAa, an.** Errors involving the indefinite articles *a* and *an* are almost certainly more often a consequence of haste and carelessness than of ignorance. They are especially common when numbers are involved, as here: "Cox will contribute 10 percent of the equity needed to build a \$80 million cable system" (Washington Post). Make it *an*. Occasionally the writer and editor together fail to note how an abbreviation is pronounced: "He was assisted initially by two officers from the sheriff's department and a FBI agent drafted in from the bureau's Cleveland office" (Chicago Tribune). When the first letter of an abbreviation is pronounced as a vowel, as in *FBI*, the preceding article should be *an*, not *a*.

abbreviations, contractions, acronyms. Abbreviation is the general term used to describe any shortened word. Contractions and acronyms are types of abbreviation. A contraction is a word that has been squeezed in the middle, so to speak, but has retained one or more of its opening and closing letters, as with *Mr.* for *Mister* and *can't* for *cannot*. An acronym is a word formed from the initial letter or letters of a group of words, as with *radar* for *radio detecting and ranging*, and *NATO* for *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Abbreviations that are not pronounced as words (*IBM*, *ABC*, *NFL*) are not acronyms; they are just abbreviations. Whether to write *NATO* or *Nato* is normally a matter of preference or house style. American publications tend to capitalize all the letters of abbreviations, even when they are pronounced as words. In Britain, generally the convention is to capitalize only the initial letter when the abbreviation is pronounced as a word and is reasonably well known. Thus most British publications would write *Aids* and *Nato* (but probably not *Seato*). For abbreviations of all types, try to avoid an appearance of clutter and intrusiveness. Rather than make repeated reference to "the *IGLCO*" or "*NOOSCAM*," it is nearly always better to refer to the abbreviated party as "the committee," "the institute," or whatever other word is appropriate. Finally, for the benefit of travelers who may have wondered why the British so often dispense with periods on the ends of abbreviations (writing *Mr.*, *Dr.*, and *St* where Americans would write *Mr.*, *Dr.*, and *St.*), it's helpful to know that the convention in Britain is to include a period when the abbreviation stops in the midst of a word (as with *Capt.* and *Prof.*, for instance) but to leave off the period when the last letter of the abbreviation is the last letter of the full word—that is, when it is a contraction.

accessible. Not -able. accommodate. One of the most misspelled of all words. Note **-mm-**. **accompanist.** Not **-iest**. **acidulous, assiduous.** *Acidulous* means tart or acid. *Assiduous* means diligent. **acolyte.** Not **-ite**. **acoustics.** As a science, the word is singular ("*Acoustics* was his line of work"). As a collection of properties, it is plural ("*The acoustics* in the auditorium were not good"). **acronyms.** See abbreviations, contractions, acronyms. **activity.** Often a sign of prolixity, as here: "The warnings followed a week of earthquake activity throughout the region" (*Independent*). Just make it "a week of earthquakes." **acute, chronic.** These two are sometimes confused, which is a little odd, as their meanings are sharply opposed. *Chronic* pertains to lingering conditions, ones that are not easily overcome. *Acute* refers to those that come to a sudden crisis and require immediate attention. People in the Third World may suffer from a chronic shortage of food. In a bad year, their plight may become acute.

a.d. anno Domini (Lat.), "in the year of the Lord." *a.d.* should be written before the year (*a.d. 25*) but after the century (fourth century *a.d.*) and is usually set in small caps. See also *anno domini* and *b.c.* **adage.** Even the most careful users of English frequently, but unnecessarily, refer to an "old adage." An adage is by definition old. **adapter, adaptor.** The first is one who adapts (as in a book for theatrical presentation); the second is the device for making appliances work abroad and so on. **adjective pileup.** Many journalists, in an otherwise commendable attempt to pack as much information as possible into a confined space, often resort to the practice of piling adjectives in front of the subject, as in this *London Times* headline: "Police rape claim woman in court." Apart from questions of inelegance, such headlines can be confusing, to say the least. A hurried reader, expecting a normal subject-verb-object construction, could at first conclude that the police have raped a claim-woman in court before the implausibility of that notion makes him go back and read the headline again. Readers should never be required to retrace their steps, however short the journey. Although the practice is most common in headlines, it sometimes crops up in text, as here: "The new carburetor could result in an up to 35 percent improvement in gas mileage" (*Des Moines Register*). The ungainliness here could instantly be eliminated by making it "an improvement in mileage of up to 35 percent."

administer. Not administrate. **admit to** is nearly always wrong, as in these examples: "The Rev. Jesse Jackson had just admitted to fathering a child with an adoring staffer" (*Baltimore Sun*); "Pretoria admits to raid against Angola" (*Guardian* headline); "Botha admits to errors on Machel cash" (*Independent* headline). Delete *to* in each case. You admit a misdeed, you do not admit to it. **advance planning** is common but always redundant. All planning must be done in advance. **adverse, averse.** Occasionally confused. *Averse* means reluctant or disinclined (think of aversion). *Adverse* means hostile and antagonistic (think of adversary). **aerate.** Just two syllables. Not **aerate**. **affect,**

effect. As a verb, affect means to influence ("Smoking may affect your health") or to adopt a pose or manner ("She affected ignorance"). Effect as a verb means to accomplish ("The prisoners effected an escape"). As a noun, the word needed is almost always effect (as in "personal effects" or "the damaging effects of war").

Affect as a noun has a narrow psychological meaning to do with emotional states (by way of which it is related to affection). affinity denotes a mutual relationship. Therefore, strictly speaking, one should not speak of someone or something having an affinity for another but should speak of an affinity with or between. When mutuality is not intended, sympathy would be a better word. But it should also be noted that a number of authorities and many dictionaries no longer insist on this distinction. affright. Note -ff-. Afrikaans, Afrikaners. The first is a language, the second a group of people. aggravate in the sense of exasperate has been with us at least since the early seventeenth century and has been opposed by grammarians for about as long. Strictly, aggravate means to make a bad situation worse. If you walk on a broken leg, you may aggravate the injury. People can never be aggravated, only circumstances. Fowler, who called objections to the looser usage a fetish, was no doubt right when he insisted the purists were fighting a battle that had already been lost, but equally there is no real reason to use aggravate when annoy will do. aggression, aggressiveness. "Aggression in U.S. pays off for Tilling Group" (Times headline). Aggression always denotes hostility, which was not intended here. The writer of the headline meant to suggest only that the company had taken a determined and enterprising approach to the American market. The word he wanted was aggressiveness, which can denote either hostility or merely boldness. aid and abet. A tautological gift from the legal profession. The two words together tell us nothing that either doesn't say on its own. The only distinction is that abet is normally reserved for contexts involving criminal intent. Thus it would be careless to speak of a benefactor abetting the construction of a church or youth club. Other redundant expressions dear to lawyers include null and void, ways and means, and without let or hindrance. AIDS is not correctly described as a disease. It is a medical condition. The term is short for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Air Line Pilots Association for the group that looks after the interests of American commercial pilots. airlines. "It is thought the company may also be in exploratory talks with another U.S. carrier, Alaskan Airlines" (Times). It's Alaska Airlines. "It was found only a few miles from where a Swiss Air jet crashed two years ago" (Boston Globe). It's Swissair. Perhaps because airlines so commonly merge or change their names, they are often wrongly designated in newspaper reporting. The following are among the more commonly troublesome: Aer Lingus Aerolineas Argentinas AeroMexico AeroPeru Air-India (note hyphen) AirTran Airlines (formerly ValuJet Airlines) Alaska Airlines All Nippon Airways (not -lines) Delta Air Lines (note Air Lines two words) Iberia Airlines (not Iberian) Icelandair Japan Airlines (Airlines one word, but JAL for the company's abbreviation) KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (normally just KLM) LanChile (one word, but formerly Lan Chile, two words) Sabena Belgian World Airlines (normally just Sabena) Scandinavian Airlines System (normally just SAS) SriLankan Airlines (formerly AirLanka; note one word on SriLankan) Swissair United Airlines (Airlines one word, but UAL for the company's abbreviation) US Airways (formerly USAir, one word) Virgin Atlantic Airways "Alas! poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio," is the correct version of the quotation from Hamlet, which is often wrongly, and somewhat mysteriously, rendered as "Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well." albumen, albumin. Albumen is the white of an egg; albumin is a protein within the albumen. Alfa-Romeo for the Italian make of automobile. Not Alpha-. alias, alibi. Both words derive from the Latin root alius (meaning "other"). Alias refers to an assumed name and pertains only to names. It would be incorrect to speak of an impostor passing himself off under the alias of being a doctor. Alibi is a much more contentious word. In legal parlance it refers to a plea by an accused person that she was elsewhere at the time she was alleged to have committed a crime. More commonly it is used to mean any excuse. Fowler called this latter usage mischievous and pretentious, and most authorities agree with him. But Bernstein, while conceding that the usage is a casualism, contends that no other word can quite convey the meaning of an excuse intended to transfer responsibility. Time will no doubt support him--many distinguished writers have used alibi in its more general, less fastidious sense--but for the moment, all that can be said is that in the sense of a general excuse, many authorities consider alibi unacceptable. allay, alleviate, assuage, relieve. Alleviate should suggest giving temporary relief without removing the underlying cause of a problem. It is close in meaning to ease, a fact obviously unknown to the writer of this sentence: "It will ease the transit squeeze, but will not alleviate it" (Chicago Tribune). Allay and assuage both mean to put to rest or to pacify and are most often applied to fears. Relieve is the more general term and covers all these meanings. all intents and purposes is colorless, redundant, and hackneyed. Almost any other expression would be an improvement. "He is, to all intents and purposes, king of the

island" (Mail on Sunday) would be instantly made better by changing the central phrase to "in effect" or removing it altogether. If the phrase must be used at all, it can always be shorn of the last two words. "To all intents" says as much as "to all intents and purposes." all right. A sound case could be made for shortening all right to alright, as many informal users of English do already. Many other compounds beginning with all have been contracted without protest for centuries, among them already, almost, altogether, and even alone, which originally was all one. English, however, is a slow and fickle tongue, and alright continues to be looked on as illiterate and unacceptable, and consequently it ought never to appear in serious writing. All Souls College, Oxford. Not Souls'. all time. Many authorities object to this expression in constructions such as "She was almost certainly the greatest female sailor of all time" (Daily Telegraph) on the grounds that all time extends to the future as well as the past and we cannot possibly know what lies ahead. A no less pertinent consideration is that such assessments, as in the example just cited, are bound to be hopelessly subjective and therefore have no place in any measured argument. For a similar problem with futurity, see ever.allusion. "When the speaker happened to name Mr. Gladstone, the allusion was received with loud cheers" (cited by Fowler). The word is not, as many suppose, a more impressive synonym for reference. When you allude to something, you do not specifically mention it but leave it to the reader to deduce the subject. Thus it would be correct to write, "In an allusion to the President, he said, 'Some people make better oil men than politicians.'" The word is closer in meaning to implication or suggestion.altercation. "Three youths were injured in the altercation" (Chicago Tribune). No one suffers physical injury in an altercation. It is a heated exchange of words and nothing more.alumnae, alumni. "Parker joined the other Wellesley alumni in a round of sustained applause from the podium" (Boston Globe). Alumni is the masculine plural for a collection of college graduates. In the context of an all-female institution, as in the example just cited, the correct word is alumnae. The singular forms are respectively alumna (feminine) and alumnus (masculine).ambidextrous. Not -erous.ambiguous, equivocal. Both mean vague and open to more than one interpretation. But whereas an ambiguous statement may be vague by accident or by intent, an equivocal one is calculatedly unclear.amid, among. Among applies to things that can be separated and counted, amid to things that cannot. Rescuers might search among survivors but amid wreckage. See also between, among.amoral, immoral. Amoral describes matters in which questions of morality do not arise or are disregarded; immoral applies to things that are evil.Amtrak for the passenger railroad corporation. The company's formal designation is the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, but this is almost never used, even on first reference.and. The belief that and should not be used to begin a sentence is without foundation. And that's all there is to it.A thornier problem is seen here: "The group has interests in Germany, Australia, Japan and intends to expand into North America next year" (Times). This is what Fowler called a bastard enumeration and Bernstein, with more delicacy, called a series out of control. The defect is that the closing clause ("intends to expand into North America next year") does not belong to the series that precedes it. It is a separate thought. The sentence should read, "The group has interests in Germany, Australia, and Japan, and intends to expand into North America next year." (Note that the inclusion of a comma after Japan helps to signal that the series has ended and a new clause is beginning.)From the Hardcover edition.Revue de presseA worthwhile addition to any writers or editors reference library. Los Angeles Times[Bryson is] a world-class grammar maven. Michael Upchurch, Seattle TimesA usage book with a nice sense of differentiation.William Safire, New York Times MagazineBrysons erudition is evident and refreshing . . . a straightforward, concise, utilitarian guide.Publishers Weekly