

## Words and Expressions Best Avoided

In any form of communication consistency of language is generally crucial. On the one hand, written English tends to eschew words which might seem pompous, archaic, obscure, or in any way unnatural.<sup>1</sup> However, the use of colloquialisms is the error more frequently met with. Here is a list of words and phrases which are widely felt to be colloquialisms and thus inappropriate for much "serious" writing, unless there is a specific reason to use them.

### 1. a bit

Use instead **slightly, to some (small) degree, somewhat, rather, noticeably, perceptibly, tangibly, palpably, marginally** etc.

### 2. a couple of

Use instead **a few, a number of, several** etc.

### 3. a lot of, lots of

Use instead **many, a large (a very considerable) number of, a mass of, numerous, countless, a whole range (variety) of, all manner of, a wealth of** etc. Cf. p. 152.

### 4. ...and so on

This expression needs to be paraphrased, as in the following sentence:

One must preserve old churches, city walls, burghers' houses, hospices **and such buildings.** (*Instead of:* and so on.)

Another possible way of avoiding **and so on** is **etc.**, although it is often felt to be highly informal.

<sup>1</sup> Examples of this category are *spouse* for "husband" or "wife", *sibling* for "brother" or "sister", and the word *creature* to describe any human being. Cf. also *youth*, below, p. 173.

### 5. like

This word is often overused or misused, like in the present sentence (better would be "*as* in the present sentence"). Cf. also the following sentence:

They must be encouraged by certain privileges, **such as** tax-concessions, advertising etc.

instead of the clumsy

...**like** tax-concessions, advertising etc.

### 6. maybe

This word is more common in American than in British English. In British English **perhaps** is preferable.

### 7. nice, nasty

These words are acceptable only in informal contexts.

### 8. pretty (= fairly)

Only in colloquial and extremely informal contexts.

### 9. funny (= strange, queer)

Only in colloquial and extremely informal contexts. When there is any danger of ambiguity, the word is best avoided.

### 10. kids (= children, youngsters)

This word is extremely colloquial.

11. Short forms such as **isn't, aren't** etc. are also to be avoided. In conversation, letters to friends, and informal writing generally they are, of course, quite acceptable and often preferable.

Certain patterns are available for avoiding short forms:

- They have **no** money (*instead of:* don't have...).
- The book **fails to** provide advice (*instead of:* doesn't provide...).
- They **have ceased to** identify with the system (*instead of:* don't... any longer).
- This is important, but he **omits to** mention it (*instead of:* doesn't mention it).
- They have **no such** customs (*instead of:* don't have such...).

12. Except in informal contexts the pronoun **you** meaning **one** must be avoided, as in

When you go jogging every day, you feel fitter.

Use **one** or else a paraphrase. Thus in this particular instance it is possible to write:

When *one* goes jogging every day, *one* feels fitter.

Often a passive construction is possible: thus instead of the sentence

The solving of this problem is more difficult than *you (one)* might suppose.

it is possible to write:

The solving of this problem is more difficult than *might be supposed*.

In fact, writing **one** is often merely the lesser of two evils, since in contemporary British English it is widely felt to be somewhat unnatural.

### 13. get

This is the most overused verb in the English language. It is generally good to avoid it wherever it is possible to do so without sounding unnatural.

#### Suggested Exercises (45):

In each of the following sentences the verb *to get* is used rather colloquially. Find a more appropriate equivalent.

1. She gradually got tired of this existence.
2. That is how he got to this conclusion.
3. He must get rid of the mistakes in his English.
4. Do not get discouraged by his forbidding manner.
5. It is easy to get confused when one looks at this problem.
6. They first got acquainted at a dinner party.
7. When the weather got worse the mountaineers were forced to make camp.
8. The scientists got very excited over this discovery.
9. For his years of hard work he finally got his reward.
10. The reader soon gets lost amidst this profusion of material.
11. They soon got irritated with her.
12. That student has got an excellent command of the language.
13. He's got a heart condition.

14. They get much financial support from the local authorities.
15. The pantomime got some good reviews.
16. She got very upset when she heard the news.
17. Getting knowledge involves much effort.
18. She got a good education.
19. After spending many days in bed she finally got better.
20. They have long since got used to each other.
21. Soon he had got rid of his only serious rival.
22. This car has got many good features.
23. In the course of transport the vase got smashed.

These are just a few of the colloquialisms that should be guarded against, unless the specific aim of the writer is to approach the spoken language. Other words and phrases should be avoided because they are felt to be clumsy. A few of them are listed below:

### 14. Split infinitives

Many English-speakers are sensitive to these. Such a sentence as

The author attempts *to once and for all disprove* their theories.

would be simply unacceptable. It would be necessary to correct it to

*...to disprove their theories once and for all.*

Even such a sentence as

The book is likely *to rapidly gain* acceptance as a standard work.

would strike many as inelegant. Better would be:

The book is likely *to gain acceptance very rapidly* as a standard work.

or:

The book is likely *to gain rapid acceptance* as a standard work.

Very often, however, avoiding a split infinitive results in obscurity or awkwardness. In that case, it can be used without hesitation.

15. Strings of Saxon genitives are to be avoided. Thus, write "the

daughter of the writer's acquaintance", instead of "the writer's acquaintance's daughter."

#### 16. I, my

These words should not be used too frequently, except where they are to be expected (autobiography, speeches etc.).

Least of all should they occur in academic writing, where they can be generally replaced by phrases such as *the present author (writer, reviewer)* etc., or by impersonal constructions such as *as we will see, as will be argued below, it would seem that, it is tempting to suggest that, one may conclude that, it may be safely concluded that, in conclusion* etc.

There is also the expression *arguably*, meaning "this is my opinion and, if I wanted to, I could easily provide evidence or arguments in support of it...". *Arguably* generally goes in mid-position:

Sometimes a government can forfeit all moral right to rule. This is *arguably* the case with John Major's government.

N.B. The phrase "according to me" in the sense of "in my opinion" does not exist.

#### 17. there is, there are...

These phrases are often overused or used in a clumsy manner, as in the following sentences:

*There are* various subcultures.

Within a few years *there were* more and more differences among the various punk groups.

Better would be to recast the sentences:

Various subcultures *exist*.

More and more differences *emerged*...

#### 18. very much

This phrase tends to be used in a very clumsy manner. Very often it is better to use *enormously, a great deal* or even *very considerably*. But a complete paraphrase may well be best of all. Thus a sentence like

*They contributed* to European culture *very much*.

can be replaced with:

*They made an enormous contribution* to European culture.

#### 19. youth

This word has three meanings:

- a. the opposite of "old age".
- b. a word for "teenage boy", especially in newspaper- or radio-contexts.
- c. "young people" collectively. In this last meaning the word very often sounds stilted, as in the sentence, "In the opinion of Baroness Thatcher British youth are in need of firm moral guidance". Generally it is preferable to use *young people, teenagers* etc. (For other such words, cf. above, p. 168, n. 1.)

#### 20. therefore

This word tends to be used when *accordingly, as a result, consequently, hence, thus, this is why* etc. are better.

#### 21. cruel

This word is often used wrongly, as in the following sentences:

Skinheads are often very *cruel*.

War is a *cruel* way of solving problems.

Better would be the words *brutal, vicious, savage, sadistic* etc.

#### 22. all over the world

This phrase is such a terrible cliché that it is often best avoided. Use *universally, everywhere you look, anywhere (everywhere) in the world, the whole world over, world-wide* etc.

#### 23. others'

Better to write "the attention *of others*" than "*others'* attention".

#### 24. it is widely known that...

Use *it is widely realised that, it is common knowledge that...*

#### 25. as it soon appeared

Use *it soon emerged that, it soon turned out that...*

#### 26. what follows

This expression is wrong if it is intended to mean "because of this" or "it follows that...".

#### 27. it is so because...

Write *this is because...*