

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.¹ 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.

¹ 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:

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