

# The Word Hawk

by Bob Johnson

## Confused, Misused, Abused, and Underused Words

Alice had no idea what “Latitude” was, or “Longitude” either, but thought they were nice grand words to say.

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

In the course of a day’s work, we editors see errors or imprecisions that we come to think of almost as old friends—we know we’ll hear from them again in a day or two. They often consist of two or three words that are easily confused because of similar spellings or meanings. We earmark the words and their alter egos as especially troublesome and commonplace and stay watchful for them—such bugbears as *affect/effect*, *ensure/insure*, *lie/lay/laid/lain*. The following other suspicious characters are on my watch list.

**aggravate, irritate, annoy:** *Aggravate* means to worsen an existing condition; *irritate* implies that a condition is new. People do not aggravate other people, they only irritate or annoy them.

**allude, refer:** *Allude* brings to the hearer’s or reader’s mind a subject that is not mentioned directly but implied (see *imply*, *infer* below); *refer* cites the subject. The first anticipates the second: Once you have referred to something, it is too late to allude to it.

**as, since, because:** I have seen many expressions using *as* and *since* that caused confusion when describing cause and effect. The problem arises from the possible temporal interpretations of the first two. The ambiguity can be especially vexing to new learners of English. *We left the reception as it began to rain*—was it an outdoor reception, or were the departure and the rain related only in their simultaneity? The only one of these words that lacks dual temporal and causative senses is *because*.

**awhile, a while:** The distinction is between the adverb *awhile* and the article-plus-noun *a while*. Because it is an adverb, *awhile* may not be introduced by a preposition. Thus the following are correct: *rest awhile*; *rest for a while*. *Rest for awhile* is incorrect.

**complement, compliment:** *Complement* as both verb and noun conveys the sense of completing something, as the first six letters (*comple-*) reveal. *Compliment* means to comment favorably on someone or something.

**different from, different than, different to:** In the United States, the first is considered preferable when the writer is comparing two or more attributes or quantities that are “dissimilar in form, quality, amount, or nature” (*American Heritage Dictionary, 4th Edition*). British English often goes with *different than* or *different to* in such cases. I do not say that the former of these two is wrong, only sometimes jarring to my American ear. Going to the root verb makes me hear them differently. A potato can differ *from* a rutabaga, but it cannot differ *than* or differ *to* it. *Different than* is fine in such sentences as *The desert is different in California than in Arizona*.

**disc, disk:** *Disc* is used when referring to optical media (*a compact-disc recording*); *disk* refers to magnetic media (*the hard-disk surface*).

**disinterested, uninterested:** *Disinterested* denotes objectivity. A disinterested person is uninvolved and has no stake in the outcome. *Uninterested* denotes apathy or boredom. A panel of jurors should be simultaneously interested in the proceedings but disinterested in their outcome.

**flammable, inflammable, nonflammable:** Confusion exists between the first two. Both *flammable* and *inflammable* describe objects that can combust; *nonflammable* means noncombustible.

**furthermore, moreover, additionally, in addition:** I include these because it seems to me that the first two yeomanly adverbs are falling into disuse in favor of the last two.

**healthy, healthful:** *Healthy* denotes the degree of health of a living thing, whereas *healthful* means “conducive or supportive of good health”. *Healthful eating habits make a person healthy*.

**imply, infer:** One is the transmitter, the other is the receiver. These two oblique communication processes cause great confusion, not just person to person, but with human relations generally. Person A speaks to Person B. Person A *implies* some meaning—signifies it obliquely but does not state it outright; Person B *infers* something—that is, deduces or assumes a meaning, correct or incorrect—from what A said (or did not say). *Although my Cockney accent might imply that I am uneducated, people should not infer from it that I am uninformed—I won on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”.* (See **allude, refer** above.)

**most, majority, plurality:** In formal writing, *majority* should be reserved for contexts wherein the writer is discussing something countable—the *majority of the cancers were benign*. *The majority of the report dealt with basal-cell carcinomas* would not be correct. The writer should use *the greater part of the report* or *most of the report* instead. Of *plurality*, the *New Oxford American Dictionary* says, “A plurality is the largest number among three or more.” Of 100 votes, if Washington wins 35, Adams wins 33, and Jefferson wins 32, Washington wins a plurality (35%) but not a majority (over 50%) of the total cast.

**man, mankind, humankind (noun); man, staff (verb):** Careful distinction should be observed to avoid any gender bias in these terms. When referring to the human race as a whole, *humankind* is to be preferred over *man* or *mankind*; as a verb, use *staff* instead of *man* (*staffing the office* rather than *manning the office*). Sometimes *man* cannot be avoided, especially in a citation or historical context (see the Chuckle of the Month).

**may, might:** It *might* (there’s the latter word in action) be splitting hairs to perceive much of a difference between these two. However, my experience leads me to believe that *might* expresses a slightly smaller degree of likelihood than *may*.

**principal, principle:** Very often confused. As an adjective, *principal* means “first”, “chief”, “main”. As a noun, *principal* means the director of a school, a character in a stage production, or someone acting without an agent in a business or other transaction. A *principle* is a law or precept.

**reluctant, reticent:** Subject to increasing confusion in recent years. *Reluctant* and *reticent* do not share the same breadth of meaning. *Reticent* signifies a natural reserve or shielding of thoughts and feelings; *reluctant* denotes an unwillingness to act in a specific way or participate in social interaction generally.

**sarcastic, sardonic:** Many people regard these two words as bearing the same meaning, but the former connotes a harsher tone than the latter. *Sarcastic* originates from the Latin for “flesh-cutting”. The Visual Thesaurus defines *sardonic* as “disdainfully or ironically humorous; scornful and mocking”.

**table, American English (AmE); table, British English (BrE):** I include this here only because it is hard to find two words in the two main streams of modern English that differ more widely in their meaning. In AmE usage, *table* means to postpone a subject or a discussion to a later time. The BrE meaning is to bring up for immediate discussion.

**vaccination, immunization, inoculation (beware misspelling):** Distinction is to be made among a medium (vaccine), a process (inoculation), and a result (immunity).

**while, whereas, although:** Because it can mean both *whereas* and *during*, *while* suffers from the same ambiguity problems as *as* and *since*. When there is a possibility of confusion, use *whereas* or *although*.

**Request for Ideas.** Please send me your ideas for worthwhile subjects for this column. Do you have any questions that you’ve always wanted answered? Any pet peeves that you encounter in your editing? Any style debates that seem endless? I can’t promise that I know all the answers, but I have a doctorate in commiseration, and someone else might be able to help if I can’t. If you don’t want your name used, tell me—I won’t use it without your explicit permission. Contact me at [TheWordHawk@gmail.com](mailto:TheWordHawk@gmail.com).

**Chuckle of the Month.** Attributed to Mark Twain: “There is only one way to find out if a man is honest—ask him. If he says ‘yes’, you know he’s a liar.”