

Common Errors in English Usage

SECOND EDITION

Paul Brians

*Professor Emeritus of English,
Washington State University*



Wilsonville, Oregon

Dedication

For my wife, Paula Elliot. Her sharp editorial eye, sense of style and support have helped make this book what it is.

Publisher	Jim Leisy (james_leisy@wmjasco.com)
Acquisition Editor	Bill Hoffman
Production Editors	Tom Sumner Stephanie Welch

Printed in the U.S.A.

Names of all products herein are used for identification purposes only and are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of their respective owners. William, James & Co. makes no claim of ownership or corporate association with the products or companies that own them.

©2009 William, James & Co. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or transcribed, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, telepathic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed as follows:

Rights and Permissions
William, James & Co.
8536 SW St. Helens Drive, Suite D
Wilsonville, Oregon 97070

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available from the publisher.

Contents



Foreword	iv
by Mignon Fogarty, “Grammar Girl”	
Introduction	vi
Common Errors in English Usage:	
Alphabetical Listing	1
Category Listings	259
Commonly Confused Expressions	259
Of Foreign Origin	264
Grammar, Spelling & Style	266
Homonyms	268
Commonly Misspelled	270
Mangled Expressions	276
Inexact Words & Phrases	280
Pronunciation	282
Problem Prepositions	284
Redundancies	285
Commonly Misused Expressions	286
American English vs. British English	290
Misheard Expressions	290

Foreword



Like Paul Brians, I have taken the foolish step of issuing regular public commentary on English usage. In my experience, there's no better way to liven up a week (and raise your blood pressure) than to write 1000 words on a contentious usage point, release those words on the Web, and sift through the inevitable barrage of comments.

Unlike Brians and many of my other comrades, I do not hold a graduate degree in English, literature, or other such discipline. I merely find language fun and can't seem to restrain myself from sharing my weekly discoveries. Therefore, I stand on the shoulders of giants—an apt phrase despite its cliché status.

I rarely take a *Grammar Girl* podcast live without at least quadruple-checking my main thesis, and *Common Errors in English Usage* has quickly become one of my most valued fact-checking resources. In addition, I reach for *Common Errors* almost daily to find the answers to smaller questions, and in fact, I have already used the book multiple times while writing this foreword. Would Brians capitalize Web? (Yes.) Which way does the mark above the *e* in *cliché* lean? (Right.) And just out of curiosity, what is that mark called again? (An acute accent mark.)

Whereas I may yammer on about the exceptions to a rule (or supposed rule) and the nuances of dissenting arguments, Brians confidently takes a stand. Although he does quickly note when there is controversy, he never shies away from issuing an opinion, and that makes his book a valuable resource for anyone seeking quick, reliable answers.

He has a gift for writing a clear, concise, and yet entertaining entry: “Unless you are going to claim credit for accomplishments you had in previous incarnations, you should refer to your *vita*, not your *vitae*.” He strikes a sensible

balance between the prescriptive and descriptive extremes: “*Incentivize* is even more widely used [than *incent*], but strikes many people as an ugly substitute for *encourage*.” And he peppers his writing with helpful memory tricks: “Just remember that *X* in *except* excludes things—they tend to stand out, be different.” Brilliant!

When the corners of this book are worn off, the spine is broken, and the fuzzy edges are spiked with Post-it® notes marking your most used pages, don’t forget to write Brian a note of thanks. By distilling reams of rules and opinions into a usable, entertaining reference book, he’s made all our lives a little easier.

—*Mignon Fogarty*,
Grammar Girl
QuickAndDirtyTips.com

Introduction



Prescription vs. description

The concept of errors in English usage is a fuzzy one. Language experts like to distinguish between two opposed approaches to the subject: theoretically prescriptionists work from rigid rules and traditions and seek to impose their views of correctness on the writing and speaking public, while descriptionists simply note the prevailing patterns of writers and speakers and report their results without in any way judging them.

But in fact it is not so easy to distinguish between these two approaches to usage: all prescriptionists rely heavily on usage patterns to develop their prescriptions and are willing to make exceptions to general “rules”; and even the most laissez-faire descriptionist will admit that “hte” is a typographical error for “the,” that “Heineken remover” is based on a mishearing of “Heimlich maneuver,” and that “perverbial” is not just a variant spelling of “proverbial”—it’s a mistake.

Reserving judgment

Many teachers of composition feel that covering a paper with red ink just discourages and paralyzes students (in fact, I’ve found a standard pencil arouses much less anxiety than a red pen). The dominant philosophy of teaching students to write argues that only abundant practice can lead to improved writing. Errors naturally diminish as students read and write more.

This is very true. No list of errors—no matter how diligently memorized—can make you into a fine writer. Nothing beats lots of reading and writing. But the sad truth is that few students read or write much these days, and most of it is done in the anarchic setting of e-mail and chat rooms, where “correctness” is

scorned. It is not uncommon for students to make it all the way through school without having their writing thoroughly scrutinized and critiqued until they encounter disaster in the form of a picky professor, editor, or boss. Many businesses consider standard English usage a prime requirement for employment in responsible positions. Would-be schoolteachers are particularly harshly judged if their English is sub-par.

Linguistic discrimination

Much of the tension surrounding debates about usage has to do with concern for various groups—minorities and immigrants in particular—who often suffer discrimination as a result of their deviations from dominant language patterns. Prescriptionism is viewed by many language experts as the equivalent of imperialist tyranny, or to use the jargon of the moment, linguistic hegemony.

It's true that the dominant patterns in English can exclude some very lively and creative language, and that a good deal of wonderful poetry, fiction, and drama has been written in nonstandard dialects. But in almost every case writers who are able to effectively wield the dialect they grew up speaking have also mastered standard English. To take only one of many examples, Langston Hughes brilliantly played the lively Harlem dialect of his character Jesse B. Semple against his own persona's rather formal diction in a long series of classic columns for the *Chicago Defender*.

If you have no access to standard English, a dialect can trap you. If you apply for an executive position by saying "I heard t'other day you done got some jobs open," chances are good you'll be directed to try farther down the corporate hierarchy. It may be deplorable, but the fact is that our language is judged all the time by employers, friends, and potential dates. When some teachers evade the issue by declaring all dialects equal, they set their students up for bitter disappointment in the world outside school. By all means celebrate the variety of Englishes abounding in the world today—but everyone deserves to know what sorts of usage variations may cause them trouble.

Errors, confusions, and non-errors

Errors in usage are a lot like errors in table manners. There are tiny deviations from standard practice few people will notice or care about, like using your salad fork to eat a steak, or using "decimate" to mean "destroy." Saying "I got

Introduction

my dandruff up” rather than “my dander” is more like trying to stab chunks of sweet-and-sour pork with the sharpened end of a chopstick—likely to raise eyebrows. But it’s the equivalent of falling face-first into the mashed potatoes when some poor soul refers to a man as “circusized.”

An English usage guide is like that really close friend who dares to tell you that there’s some spinach stuck between your teeth.

And then there are people who insist you should never drink white wine with red meat; they’re like those who heap contempt on split infinitives. Humor them if you must, but most of us feel they’re dead wrong. Many linguistic bugaboos of this sort are included in this book so you can be reassured that not all the people who condemn your usage know what they’re talking about.

Standard and nonstandard English

Entries are not simply divided into “correct” and “erroneous.” The label “standard English” is frequently applied to patterns that sophisticated writers and speakers tend to use. This definition is to some extent circular: we consider them sophisticated partly because they use that kind of English. But standard English is what counts; it’s what your own usage may be compared with. It’s up to you to decide whether, after learning the dominant pattern, you want to blend in or use a different wording that appeals to you more. I had to rack my brains for a long time to understand the distinction some people make between “which” and “that,” but I finally decided that I didn’t give a fig about what they thought and generally ignore the distinction in my own writing. Guidelines for usage don’t have to be regarded as iron chains dragging you down. You can still choose your own style.

When a usage is labeled as belonging to a dialect, it may be regional, racial, or national. Rather than stigmatize any particular group, I don’t try to label these dialectal variations beyond indicating that they differ from standard usage. If you’re “down to home,” by all means greet your brother-in-law with “Look what the cat drug in!” But in writing your college admissions essay you’d be wiser to use “dragged” as in, “Although I love opera now, I was dragged to my first one protesting loudly.”

By no means the majority of the usages discussed in this book are dialectical, however. It also covers technical and business jargon, pretentious but mistaken coinages created by highly educated speakers, and usages that are common but offensive to certain communities.

A special problem is the differences between standard American usage and standard United Kingdom usage, which is also largely followed in Canada, Australia, and some other countries. This particular usage guide is aimed primarily at Americans, but often notes when patterns are different elsewhere.

Who says?

Because of current trends in English studies, the folks you find patrolling the usage beat are not likely to be trained linguists these days; and I'm no exception. I have a Ph.D. in comparative literature, not in English composition. But I love good writing and encourage it in my students. I first got the idea of writing about usage while studying the mangled language on restaurant menus, and you'll find several examples of that sort of thing in this book.

Common Errors in English Usage does not merely enshrine my personal preferences, however. I've consulted dictionaries and other usage manuals and consulted with colleagues more expert than myself. Web search engines have been a very handy tool for confirming the extent to which many errors have spread. Unlike the editors of some distinguished usage guides, I don't have a formal board of consultants; but I do have something that functions rather like one. This project began in 1997 as a Web site called "Common Errors in English" (<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors>), and since then it's earned many positive reviews, received numerous awards, and attracted close to 10 million visitors, thousands of whom have written to me with thanks or suggestions.

The Web site contains a list of "More Errors," many of which are too bizarre to be included here, but too entertaining to be omitted there. The Web site is also where you'll find an e-mail link if you want to write me.

If you think having a teacher criticize your writing is hard to bear, imagine being open to constant carping by the pickiest people in existence. Though I don't always agree with my correspondents, I've learned a lot from them. They've tipped me off to common errors that have escaped the notice of other usage guide authors and sometimes argued me out of my own prejudices against usages that turned out to be more standard than I had thought.

This book is thus the result of an ongoing conversation among people from all over the world and all walks of life who care about the language, and I owe those contributors a profound debt. Although "Common Errors in English" is not particularly aimed at non-native speakers, many correspondents struggling to learn English have found its explanations of the differences between seemingly similar words and phrases helpful.

Introduction

You may find certain words or phrases criticized here listed in dictionaries. Note carefully labels like *dial.* (dialectical), *nonstandard*, and *obsolete* before assuming that the dictionary is endorsing them. The primary job of a dictionary is to track how people actually use language. Dictionaries differ among themselves on how much guidance to usage they provide; but the goal of a usage guide like this is substantially different: to protect you against patterns regarded as nonstandard by substantial numbers of well-educated people.

What's different about this usage guide?

Common Errors in English Usage is unusual in a number of other ways besides having originated on the World Wide Web.

Because it concentrates on the most common errors, it's much shorter—and not incidentally, cheaper—than most, though I include some oddities that I consider especially interesting or which are simply pet peeves of mine.

This guide makes no pretense to exhaustively exploring complex topics, limiting itself to pointing out the most commonly encountered problems and giving hints for avoiding them, using a minimum of technical terminology. This is the equivalent of a first-aid manual, not of the *Physician's Desk Reference*.

It avoids discussing most common misspellings, leaving the correction of such slips to your spelling checker, concentrating instead on linguistic confusions your computer won't catch.

It discusses many casual, slangy forms that are beneath the notice of some of the more high-toned usage guides.

It incorporates up-to-date comments on words and phrases from the world of the Internet and from other technologies.

It provides illustrative examples written in the sort of English familiar to most people likely to use this book. When writing a book about common errors, it would be pointless to select learned examples a general audience would not relate to.

It also places the primary discussion of words and phrases alphabetically under their erroneous forms, so you don't need to know the correct forms to look them up. A cross-reference is given at the expected location to guide you if you do know the correct form.

It's written in a chatty, informal tone designed to take the edge off what could otherwise be an unpleasant barrage of criticism. It makes abundant use of the first- and second-person voice to create the effect of an informal chat rather than a pompous lecture.

And from time to time, it tries to entertain. People often write to tell me that they laugh as well as groan as they make their way through what I've written. I hope you find this book fun to read as well as informative.

A Note on the Second Edition

This edition of *Common Errors in English Usage* follows the great success of the first edition, which was published five years ago. In those five years I have continued to add to my stock of entries and tinker with the old ones. This new edition contains over 480 entirely new entries and over 150 revised ones, along with several new cartoons selected and captioned by Tom Sumner. Some of the revisions expand or clarify the old explanations, and in some cases I have simply changed my mind.

As always, I am deeply grateful to the thousands of readers who have written to me, many of them offering ideas and suggestions which have found their way into this edition.

If you enjoy *Common Errors in English Usage*, look on the publisher's Web site (www.wmjasco.com) for the annual daily boxed calendars containing entries from the book. They make great gifts.

—P.B.

Common Errors in English Usage



a/an

If the word following begins with a vowel sound, the word you want is “an”: “Have an apple, Adam.” If the word following begins with a consonant, but begins with a vowel sound, you still need “an”: “An X-ray will show whether there’s a worm in it.” It is nonstandard and often considered sloppy speech to utter an “uh” sound in such cases.

When the following word definitely begins with a consonant sound, you need “a”: “A snake told me apples enhance mental abilities.”

Note that the letter *Y* can be either a vowel or a consonant. Although it is sounded as a vowel in words like “pretty,” at the beginning of words it is usually sounded as a consonant, as in “a yolk.”

Words beginning with the letter *U* which start with a *Y* consonant sound like “university” and “utensil” also take an “a”: “a university” and “a utensil.” But when an initial *U* has a vowel sound, the word is preceded by “an”: it’s “an umpire,” “an umbrella,” and “an understanding.”

See also “historic: an historic vs. a historic.”

A.D.

“A.D.” does not mean “after death,” as many people suppose. “B.C.” stands for the English phrase “before Christ,” but “A.D.” stands confusingly for a Latin phrase: *anno domini* (“in the year of the Lord”—the year Jesus was born). If the calendar actually changed with Jesus’ death, then what would we do with the years during which he lived? Since Jesus was probably actually born around 6 B.C. or so, the connection of the calendar with him can be misleading.

Many Biblical scholars, historians, and archeologists prefer the less sectarian designations “before the Common Era” (B.C.E.) and “the Common Era” (C.E.).

All of these abbreviations can also be spelled without their periods.

a historic/an historic

See “historic: an historic vs. a historic.”

a lot/alot

See “alot/a lot.”

abject

abject

“Abject” is always negative—it means “hopeless,” not “extreme.” You can’t experience “abject joy” unless you’re being deliberately paradoxical.

able to

People are able to do things, but things are not able to be done: you should not say, “the budget shortfall was able to be solved by selling brownies.”

about

“This isn’t about you.” What a great rebuke! But conservatives sniff at this sort of abstract use of “about,” as in “I’m all about good taste” or “successful truffle-making is about temperature control”; so it’s better to avoid it in very formal English.

absorbtion/absorption

Although it’s “absorbed” and “absorbing,” the correct spelling of the noun is “absorption.”

But note that scientists distinguish between “absorption” as the process of swallowing up or sucking in something and “adsorption” as the process by which something adheres to the surface of something else without being assimilated into it. Even technical writers often confuse these two.

abstruse/obtuse

Most people first encounter “obtuse” in geometry class, where it labels an angle of more than 90 degrees. Imagine what sort of blunt arrowhead that kind of angle would make and you will understand why it also has a figurative meaning of “dull, stupid.” But people often mix the word up with “abstruse,” which means “difficult to understand.”

When you mean to criticize something for being needlessly complex or baffling, the word you need is not “obtuse,” but “abstruse.”

academia

Although some academics are undoubtedly nuts, the usual English-language pronunciation of “academia” does not rhyme with “macadamia.” The third syllable is pronounced “deem.” Just say “academe” and add “ee-yuh.”

However, there’s an interesting possibility if you go with “ack-uh-DAME-ee-yuh”: although some people will sneer at your lack of



Even at the Women’s Barbell Academy it is not pronounced “ack-uh-DAME-ee-yuh.”

sophistication, others will assume you're using the Latin pronunciation and being learned.

accede/exceed

If you drive too fast, you exceed the speed limit. "Accede" is a much rarer word meaning "give in, agree."

accent marks

In what follows, "accent mark" will be used in a loose sense to include all diacritical marks that guide pronunciation. Operating systems and programs differ in how they produce accent marks, but it's worth learning how yours works. Writing them in by hand afterwards looks amateurish.

Words adopted from foreign languages sometimes carry their accent marks with them, as in "fiancé," "protégé," and "cliché." As words become more at home in English, they tend to shed the marks: "Café" is often spelled "cafe." Unfortunately, "résumé" seems to be losing its marks one at a time (*see also* "vitae/vita").

Many computer users have not learned their systems well enough to understand how to produce the desired accent and often insert an apostrophe (curled) or foot mark (straight) after the accented letter instead: "café" or "cafe'." This is both ugly and incorrect. The same error is commonly seen on storefront signs.

So far we've used examples containing acute (right-leaning) accent marks. French and Italian (but not Spanish) words often contain grave (left-leaning) accents; in Italian it's a *caffè*. It is important not to substitute one kind of accent for the other.

The diaeresis over a letter signifies that it is to be pronounced as a separate syllable: "noël" and "naïve" are sometimes spelled with a diaeresis, for instance. The umlaut, which looks identical, modifies the sound of a vowel, as in German *Fräulein* (girl), where the accent mark changes the "frow" sound of *Frau* (woman) to "froy." Rock groups like Blue Öyster Cult scattered umlauts about nonsensically to create an exotic look.

Spanish words not completely assimilated into English—like *piñata* and *niño*—retain the tilde, which tells you that an *N* is to be pronounced with a *Y* sound after it.

In English-language publications accent marks are often discarded, but the acute and grave accents are the ones most often retained.

accept/except

If you offer me Godiva chocolates I will gladly accept them—except for the candied violet ones. Just remember that the *X* in "except" excludes things—they tend to stand out, be different. In contrast, just look at those two cozy *C*s snuggling up together. Very accepting. And be careful; when typing "except" it often comes out "expect."

access/get access to

access/get access to

“Access” is one of many nouns that’s been turned into a verb in recent years. Conservatives object to phrases like, “You can access your account online.” Substitute “use,” “reach,” or “get access to” if you want to please them.

accessory

There’s an “ack” sound at the beginning of this word, though some mispronounce it as if the two *C*’s were to be sounded the same as the two *SS*’s.

accidentally/accidentally

You can remember this one by remembering how to spell “accidental.” There are quite a few words with “-ally” suffixes (like “incidentally”), which are not to be confused with words that have “-ly” suffixes (like “independently”). “Incidental” is a word, but “independental” is not.

according to/per

See “per/according to.”

accurate/precise

In ordinary usage, “accurate” and “precise” are often used as rough synonyms, but scientists like to distinguish between them. Someone could say that a snake is over a meter long and be accurate (the snake really does exceed one meter in length), but that is not a precise measurement. To be precise, the measurement would have to be more exact: the snake is 1.23 meters long. The same distinction applies in scientific contexts to the related words “accuracy” and “precision.”

acronyms and apostrophes

One unusual modern use of the apostrophe is in plural acronyms, like “ICBM’s,” “NGO’s,” and “CD’s.” Since this pattern violates the rule that apostrophes are not used before an *S* indicating a plural, many people object to it. It is also perfectly legitimate to write “CDs,” etc. Likewise for “50s.” But the use of apostrophes with initialisms like “learn your ABC’s” and “mind your P’s and Q’s” is now so universal as to be acceptable in almost any context.

Note that “acronym” was used originally only to label pronounceable abbreviations like “NATO,” but is now generally applied to all sorts of initialisms. Be aware that some people consider this extended definition of “acronym” to be an error.

See also “apostrophes.”

acrosst/acrossed/across

In some dialects, “acrosst” is a common misspelling of “across.” Also, the chicken may have *crossed* the road, but did so by walking *across* it.

actionable/doable

“Actionable” is a technical term referring to something that provides grounds for a legal action or lawsuit. People in the business world have begun using it as

a fancy synonym for “doable” or “feasible.” —*“In actual fact, I think I’m very well spoken.”*
This is both pretentious and confusing.

actual fact/actually
“In actual fact” is an unnecessarily complicated way of saying “actually.”



—*“Well, actually . . .”*

ad nauseum/ad nauseam

Seeing how often *ad nauseam* is misspelled makes some people want to throw up.

adapt/adopt

You can adopt a child or a custom or a law; in these cases you are making the object of the adoption your own, accepting it. If you adapt something, however, you are changing it.

add/ad

“Advertisement” is abbreviated “ad,” not “add.”

add/plus

See “plus/add.”



added bonus

See “redundancies.”

addicting/addictive

Do you find beer nuts

addicting or *addictive*? “Addicting” is a perfectly legitimate word, but much less common than “addictive,” and some people will scowl at you if you use it.

*The carousel, the calliope—
they both went on ad nauseam.*

adieu/ado

See “without further adieu/without further ado.”

administer/minister

You can minister to someone by administering first aid. Note how the “ad” in “administer” resembles “aid” in order to remember the correct form of the latter phrase. “Minister” as a verb always requires “to” following it.

administrate/administer

Although it is very popular with administrators and others, many people scorn “administrate” as an unnecessary substitute for the more common verb form “administer.”

adopt/adapt

adopt/adapt

See “adapt/adopt.”

adultry/adultery

“Adultery” is often misspelled “adultry,” as if it were something every adult should *try*. This spelling error is likely to get you snickered at. The term does not refer to all sorts of illicit sex: at least one of the partners involved has to be married for the relationship to be adulterous.

advance/advanced

When you hear about something in advance, earlier than other people, you get *advance* notice or information. “Advanced” means “complex,” “sophisticated” and doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the revealing of secrets.

adverse/averse

The word “adverse” turns up most frequently in the phrase “adverse circumstances,” meaning difficult circumstances, circumstances which act as an adversary; but people often confuse this word with “averse,” a much rarer word, meaning having a strong feeling against, or aversion toward.

advice/advise

“Advice” is the noun, “advise” the verb. When Miss Manners advises people, she gives them advice.

adviser/advisor

“Adviser” and “advisor” are equally fine spellings. There is no distinction between them.

advocate for/advocate

When they are acting as advocates for a cause, people often say they are “advocating for,” say, traffic safety. This is not as widely accepted as “campaigning for” or “working toward.” Saying you are “advocating for the blind” leaves a lot of listeners wondering what it is you advocate for them. If you can substitute “advocate” for “advocate for,” you should do so: “I advocate for higher pay for teachers” becomes “I advocate higher pay for teachers.”

aesthetic/ascetic

People often encounter these two words first in college, and may confuse one with the other although they have almost opposite connotations. “Aesthetic” (also spelled “esthetic”) has to do with beauty, whereas “ascetic” has to do with avoiding pleasure, including presumably the pleasure of looking at beautiful things.

St. Francis had an ascetic attitude toward life, whereas Oscar Wilde had an esthetic attitude toward life.

affect/effect

There are five distinct words here. When “affect” is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is usually a verb meaning “have an influence on”: “The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act.”

Occasionally a pretentious person is said to affect an artificial air of sophistication. Speaking with a borrowed French accent or ostentatiously wearing a large diamond ear stud might be an affectation. In this sort of context, “affect” means “to make a display of or deliberately cultivate.”

Another unusual meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning “emotion.” In this case the word is used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists—people who normally know how to spell it.

The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: “effect.” This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: “When I left the stove on, the *effect* was that the house filled with smoke.” When you *affect* a situation, you have an *effect* on it.

The less common is a verb meaning “to create”: “I’m trying to *effect* a change in the way we purchase widgets.” No wonder people are confused. Note especially that the proper expression is not “take affect” but “take effect”—become effective. Hey, nobody ever said English was logical: just memorize it and get on with your life.

The stuff in your purse? Your personal *effects*.

The stuff in movies? Sound effects and special effects.

affluence/effluence

Wealth brings affluence; sewage is effluence.

African-American

There have been several polite terms used in the US to refer to persons of African descent: “colored,” “negro,” “Black,” and “African-American.” “Colored” is definitely dated, though “people of color” is now widely used with a broader meaning, including anyone with non-European ancestry, sometimes even when their skin is not discernibly darker than that of a typical European. A few contemporary writers like to defy convention by referring to themselves as “negro.” “Black,” formerly a proudly assertive label claimed by young radicals in the 1960s, is now seen by some people as a racist insult. Some people insist on capitalizing “Black,” but others prefer “black.” The safest and most common neutral term is “African-American,” but Americans sometimes misuse it to label people of African descent living in other countries or even actual Africans. To qualify as an “African-American” you have to be an American.

afterwards/afterwords

Like “towards,” “forwards,” and “homewards,” “afterwards” ends with *-wards*.

“Afterwords” are sometimes the explanatory essays at the ends of books or speeches uttered at the end of plays or other works. They are made up of *words*.

aggravate vs. irritate

aggravate vs. irritate

Some people claim that “aggravate” can only mean “make worse” and should not be used to mean “irritate”; but the latter has been a valid use of the word for four centuries, and “aggravation” means almost exclusively “irritation.”

agnostic/atheist

Both agnostics and atheists are regularly criticized as illogical by people who don't understand the meaning of these terms. An agnostic is a person who believes that the existence of a god or gods cannot be proven or known. Agnosticism is a statement about the limits of human knowledge. It is an error to suppose that agnostics perpetually hesitate between faith and doubt: they are confident they cannot know the ultimate truth. Similarly, atheists believe there are no gods. Atheists need not be able to disprove the existence of gods to be consistent just as believers do not need to be able to prove that gods do exist in order to be regarded as religious. Both attitudes have to do with beliefs, not knowledge.

“Agnostic” is often used metaphorically of any refusal to make a judgment, usually on the basis of a lack of evidence; people can be agnostic about acupuncture, for instance, if they believe there is not enough evidence one way or another to decide its effectiveness.

agreeance/agreement

When you agree with someone you are in agreement.

ahold/hold

In standard English you just “get hold” of something or somebody.

aide/aid

In American English, an *aide* is a personal assistant (nurse's aide, presidential aide) but an inanimate object or process is always an *aid* (hearing aid, first aid).

ain't/am not/isn't/aren't

“Ain't” has a long and vital history as a substitute for “isn't,” “aren't,” and so on. It was originally formed from a contraction of “am not” and is still commonly used in that sense. Even though it has been universally condemned as the classic “mistake” in English, everyone uses it occasionally as part of a joking phrase or to convey a down-to-earth quality. But if you always use it instead of the more “proper” contractions you're sure to be branded as uneducated.

aisle/isle

An aisle is a narrow passageway, especially in a church or store; an isle is an island. Propose to the person you're stranded on a desert isle with and maybe you'll march down the aisle together after you're rescued.

all

Put this word where it belongs in the sentence. In negative statements, don't write, “All the pictures didn't show her dimples” when you mean, “The pictures didn't all show her dimples.”

all and all/all in all

“The dog got into the fried chicken, we forgot the sunscreen, and the kids started whining at the end, but all in all the picnic was a success.” “All in all” is a traditional phrase which can mean “all things considered,” “after all,” or “nevertheless.” People unfamiliar with the traditional wording often change it to “all and all,” but this is nonstandard.

all be it/albeit

“Albeit” is a single word meaning “although”: “Rani’s recipe called for a tablespoon of saffron, which made it very tasty, albeit rather expensive.” It should not be broken up into three separate words as “all be it,” just as “although” is not broken up into “all though.”

all for not/all for naught

“Naught” means “nothing,” and the phrase “all for naught” means “all for nothing.” This is often misspelled “all for not” and occasionally “all for knot.”

all goes well/augurs well

Some folks who don’t understand the word “augur” (to foretell based on omens) try to make sense of the common phrase “augurs well” by mangling it into “all goes well.” “Augurs well” is synonymous with “bodes well.”

all of the sudden/all of a sudden

An unexpected event happens not “all of *the* sudden” but “all of *a* sudden.”

all ready/already

“All ready” is a phrase meaning “completely prepared,” as in, “As soon as I put my coat on, I’ll be all ready.” “Already,” however, is an adverb used to describe something that has happened before a certain time, as in, “What do you mean you’d rather stay home? I’ve already got my coat on.”

all right/alright

See “alright/all right.”

all the farther/as far as

In some American dialects it is not uncommon to hear sentences such as “Abilene is all the farther the rustlers got before the posse caught up with them.” The strangely constructed expression “all the farther” should be replaced with the much more straightforward “as far as.”

all together/altogether

See “altogether/all together.”

alleged, allegedly

Seeking to avoid prejudging the facts in a crime and protect the rights of the accused, reporters sometimes over-use “alleged” and “allegedly.” If it is clear that someone has been robbed at gunpoint, it’s not necessary to describe it as

allegory

an alleged robbery nor the victim as an alleged victim. This practice insultingly casts doubt on the honesty of the victim and protects no one. An accused perpetrator is one whose guilt is not yet established, so it is redundant to speak of an “alleged accused.” If the perpetrator has not yet been identified, it’s pointless to speak of the search for an “alleged perpetrator.”

allegory

See “parallel/symbol.”

alliterate/illiterate

Pairs of words with the same initial sound *alliterate*, like “wild and wooly.” Those who can’t read are *illiterate*.

alls/all

“Alls I know is . . .” may result from anticipating the *S* in “is,” but the standard expression is “All I know is. . . .”

allude/elude

You can allude (refer) to your daughter’s membership in the honor society when boasting about her, but a criminal tries to elude (escape) captivity. There is no such word as “illude.”

allude/refer

To allude to something is to refer to it indirectly, by suggestion. If you are being direct and unambiguous, you are referring to the subject rather than alluding to it.

allusion/illusion

An allusion is a reference, something you allude to: “Her allusion to flowers reminded me that Valentine’s Day was coming.” In that English paper, don’t write “literary illusions” when you mean “allusions.” A mirage, hallucination, or magic trick is an illusion. (Doesn’t being fooled just make you *ill*?)

allusive/elusive/illusive

When the defense lawyer alludes to his client’s poor mother, he is being *allusive*. When the mole keeps eluding the traps you’ve set in the garden, it’s being *elusive*. We also speak of matters that are difficult to understand, identify, or remember as elusive. Illusions can be *illusive*, but we more often refer to them as *illusory*.

almost

Like “only,” “almost” must come immediately before the word or phrase it modifies: “She almost gave a million dollars to the museum” means something quite different from, “She gave almost a million dollars to the museum.” Right? So you shouldn’t write, “There was almost a riotous reaction when the will was read” when what you mean is, “There was an almost riotous reaction.”

almost always/most always

See “most always/almost always.”

along the same vein/in the same vein, along the same line

The expressions “in the same vein” and “along the same line” mean the same thing (“on the same subject”), but those who cross-pollinate them to create the hybrid “along the same vein” sound a little odd to those who are used to the standard expressions.

alot/a lot

Perhaps this common spelling error began because there does exist in English a word spelled “alot” which is a verb meaning to apportion or grant. The correct form, with “a” and “lot” separated by a space is perhaps not often encountered in print because formal writers usually use other expressions such as “a great deal,” “often,” etc.

You shouldn’t write “alittle” either. It’s “a little.”



How much space should you allot for Farmer Howard’s shipment of hay? A lot!

aloud/allowed

If you think Grandma allowed the kids to eat too much ice cream, you’d better not say so aloud, or her feelings will be hurt. “Aloud” means “out loud” and refers to sounds (most often speech) that can be heard by others. But this word is often misused when people mean “allowed,” meaning “permitted.”

already/all ready

See “all ready/already.”

alright/all right

The correct form of this phrase has become so rare in the popular press that many readers have probably never noticed that it is actually two words. But if you want to avoid irritating traditionalists you’d better tell them that you feel “all right” rather than “alright.”

altar/alter

An altar is that platform at the front of a church or in a temple; to alter something is to change it.

alterior/ulterior

When you have a concealed reason for doing something, it’s an *ulterior* motive.

alternate/alternative

Although UK authorities disapprove, in US usage, “alternate” is frequently an adjective, substituted for the older “alternative”: “an alternate route.”

altogether/all together

“Alternate” can also be a noun; a substitute delegate is, for instance, called an “alternate.” But when you’re speaking of “every other” as in “our club meets on alternate Tuesdays,” you can’t substitute “alternative.”

altogether/all together

“Altogether” is an adverb meaning “completely,” “entirely.” For example: “When he first saw the examination questions, he was altogether baffled.” “All together,” in contrast, is a phrase meaning “in a group.” For example: “The wedding guests were gathered all together in the garden.” Undressed people are said in informal speech to be “in the altogether” (perhaps a shortening of the phrase “altogether naked”).

alumnus/alumni

We used to have “alumnus” (male singular), “alumni” (male plural), “alumna” (female singular), and “alumnae” (female plural); but the latter two are now popular only among older female graduates, with the first two terms becoming unisex. However, it is still important to distinguish between one alumnus and a stadium full of alumni. Never say, “I am an alumni,” if you don’t want to cast discredit on your school. Many avoid the whole problem by resorting to the informal abbreviation “alum.”

Alzheimer’s disease/old-timer’s disease

See “old-timer’s disease/Alzheimer’s disease.”

AM/PM

“AM” stands for the Latin phrase *Ante Meridiem*—which means “before noon”—and “PM” stands for *Post Meridiem*: “after noon.” Although digital clocks routinely label noon “12:00 PM” you should avoid this expression not only because it is incorrect, but because many people will imagine you are talking about midnight instead. The same goes for “12:00 AM.” Just say or write “noon” or “midnight” when you mean those precise times.

It is now rare to see periods placed after these abbreviations: “A.M.,” but in formal writing it is still preferable to capitalize them, though the lower-case “am” and “pm” are now so popular they are not likely to get you into trouble.

Occasionally computer programs encourage you to write “AM” and “PM” without a space before them, but others will misread your data if you omit the space. The nonstandard habit of omitting the space is spreading rapidly, and should be avoided in formal writing.

am not/isn’t/aren’t/ain’t

See “ain’t/am not/isn’t/aren’t.”

amature/amateur

Most of the words we’ve borrowed from the French that have retained their “-eur” endings are pretty sophisticated, like “restaurateur” (notice, no *N*) and “auteur” (in film criticism), but “amateur” attracts amateurish spelling.

ambiguous/ambivalent

Even though the prefix “ambi-” means “both,” “ambiguous” has come to mean “unclear, undefined,” while “ambivalent” means “torn between two opposing feelings or views.” If your attitude cannot be defined into two polarized alternatives, then you’re ambiguous, not ambivalent.

ambivalent/indifferent

If you feel pulled in two directions about some issue, you’re ambivalent about it; but if you have no particular feelings about it, you’re indifferent.

American

Some Canadians and more Latin Americans are understandably irritated when US citizens refer to themselves simply as “Americans.” Canadians (and only Canadians) use the term “North American” to include themselves in a two-member group with their neighbor to the south, though geographers usually include Mexico in North America. When addressing an international audience composed largely of people from the Americas, it is wise to consider their sensitivities.

However, it is pointless to try to ban this usage in all contexts. Outside of the Americas, “American” is universally understood to refer to things relating to the US. There is no good substitute. Brazilians, Argentineans, and Canadians all have unique terms to refer to themselves. None of them refer routinely to themselves as “Americans” outside of contexts like the “Organization of American States.” Frank Lloyd Wright promoted “Usonian,” but it never caught on. For better or worse, “American” is standard English for “citizen or resident of the United States of America.”

among/within

See “within/among.”

amongst/among

Although “amongst” has not aged nearly as badly as “whilst,” it is still less common in standard speech than “among.”

amoral/immoral

“Amoral” is a rather technical word meaning “unrelated to morality.” When you mean to denounce someone’s behavior, call it “immoral.”

amount/number

This is a vast subject. I will try to limit the *number* of words I expend on it so as not to use up too great an *amount* of space. The confusion between the two categories of words relating to amount and number is so pervasive that those of us who still distinguish between them constitute an endangered species; but if you want to avoid our ire, learn the difference. *Amount* words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; *number* to things that can be counted.

amphitheater/amphitheater

In the second sentence above, it would have been improper to write “the amount of words” because words are discrete entities that can be counted, or numbered.

Here is a handy chart to distinguish the two categories of words:

amount	number
quantity	number
little	few
less	fewer
much	many

You can eat *fewer* cookies, but you drink *less* milk. If you ate too *many* cookies, people would probably think you’ve had too *much* dessert. If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use *number* words. Even a substance that is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn’t drink too *much* wine, but you should also avoid drinking too *many* glasses of wine. Note that here you are *counting glasses*. They can be numbered.

The most common mistake of this kind is to refer to an “amount” of people instead of a “number” of people.

Just to confuse things, “more” can be used either way: you can eat more cookies *and* drink more milk.

Exceptions to the less/fewer pattern are references to units of time and money, which are usually treated as amounts: less than an hour, less than five dollars. Only when you are referring to specific coins or bills would you use fewer: “I have fewer than five state quarters to go to make my collection complete.”

amphitheater/amphitheater

The classy way to pronounce the first syllable of this word is “amf-,” but if you choose the more popular “amp-” remember that you still have to include the *H* after the *P* when spelling it. UK-standard writers spell it “amphitheatre,” of course.

amuse/bemuse

See “bemuse/amuse.”

an historic/a historic

See “historic: an historic vs. a historic.”

analog/analogue

See “‘lite’ spelling.”

analogy

See “parallel/symbol.”

ancestor/descendant

When Albus Dumbledore said that Lord Voldemort was “the last remaining ancestor of Salazar Slytherin,” more than one person noted that he had made a

serious verbal bumble; and in later printings of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* author J. K. Rowling corrected that to “last remaining descendant.” People surprisingly often confuse these two terms with each other. Your great-grandmother is your ancestor; you are her descendant.

anchors away/anchors aweigh

Anchors are “weighed” by being gathered up on chains. The correct expression is “anchors aweigh.”

and/or

The legal phrase “and/or,” indicating that you can either choose between two alternatives or choose both of them, has proved irresistible in other contexts and is now widely acceptable though it irritates some readers as jargon. However, you can logically use it only when you are discussing choices which may or may not both be done: “Bring chips and/or beer.” It’s very much overused where simple “or” would do, and it would be wrong to say, “you can get to the campus for this morning’s meeting on a bike and/or in a car.” Choosing one eliminates the possibility of the other, so this isn’t an and/or situation.

and also/and, also

“And also” is redundant; say just “and” or “also.”

and plus

See “redundancies.”

anecdote/antidote

A humorist relates “anecdotes.” The doctor prescribes “antidotes” for children who have swallowed poison. Laughter may be the best medicine, but that’s no reason to confuse these two with each other.

angel/angle

People who want to write about winged beings from Heaven often miscall them “angles.” A triangle has three angles. The Heavenly Host is made of angels. Just remember the adjectival form: “angelic.” If you pronounce it aloud you’ll be reminded that the *E* comes before the *L*.



*The angel came in
at an odd angle.*

annihilate

See “decimate/annihilate, slaughter, etc.”

another words/in other words

When you reword a statement, you can preface it by saying “in other words.” The phrase is not “another words.”

anticlimatic/anticlimactic

This word has to do with climaxes, not climate, so the word is “anticlimactic.”

antidote/anecdote

antidote/anecdote

See “anecdote/antidote.”

antihero

In literature, theater, and film an antihero is a central character who is not very admirable: weak, lazy, incompetent, or mean-spirited. However, antiheroes are rarely actually evil, and you should not use this word as a synonym for “villain” if you want to get a good grade on your English lit paper.

antisocial/asocial

See “asocial/antisocial.”

anxious/eager

Most people use “anxious” interchangeably with “eager,” but its original meaning had to do with worrying, being full of anxiety. Perfectly correct phrases like “anxious to please” obscure the nervous tension implicit in this word and lead people to say less correct things like, “I’m anxious for Christmas morning to come so I can open my presents.” Traditionalists frown on anxiety-free anxiousness. Say instead you are eager for or looking forward to a happy event.

any

Instead of saying, “He was the worst of any of the dancers,” say, “He was the worst of the dancers.”

any where/anywhere

“Anywhere,” like “somewhere” and “nowhere,” is always one word.

anymore/any more

In the first place, the traditional (though now uncommon) spelling is as two words: “any more” as in “We do not sell bananas any more.” In the second place, it should not be used at the beginning of a sentence as a synonym for “nowadays.” In certain dialects of English it is common to utter phrases like, “Anymore you have to grow your own if you want really ripe tomatoes,” but this is guaranteed to jolt listeners who aren’t used to it. Even if they can’t quite figure out what’s wrong, they’ll feel that your speech is vaguely clunky and awkward. “Any more” always needs to be used as part of an expression of negation except in questions like, “Do you have any more bananas?” Now you won’t make that mistake any more, will you?

anytime/any time

Though it is often compressed into a single word by analogy with “anywhere” and similar words, “any time” is traditionally a two-word phrase.

anyways/anyway

“Anyways” at the beginning of a sentence usually indicates that the speaker has resumed a narrative thread: “Anyways, I told Matilda that guy was a lazy bum

before she ever married him.” It also occurs at the end of phrases and sentences, meaning “in any case”: “He wasn’t all that good-looking anyways.” A slightly less rustic quality can be imparted to these sentences by substituting the more formal “anyway.” Neither expression is a good idea in formal written English. The two-word phrase “any way” has many legitimate uses, however: “Is there any way to prevent the impending disaster?”

apart/a part

Paradoxically, the one-word form implies separation while the two-word form implies union. Feuding roommates decide to live *apart*. Their time together may be *a part* of their lives they will remember with some bitterness.

apiece/a piece

When you mean “each” the expression is “apiece”: these pizzas are really cheap—only ten dollars apiece.” But when “piece” actually refers to a piece of something, the required two-word expression is “a piece”: “This pizza is really expensive—they sell it by the slice for ten dollars a piece.”

Despite misspellings in popular music, the expression is not “down the road apiece”; it’s “down the road a piece.”

apostrophes

First let’s all join in a hearty curse of the grammarians who inserted the wretched apostrophe into possessives in the first place. It was all a mistake. Our ancestors used to write “Johns hat” meaning “the hat of John” without the slightest ambiguity. However, some time in the Renaissance certain scholars decided that the simple *S* of possession must have been formed out of a contraction of the more “proper” “John his hat.” Since in English we mark contractions with an apostrophe, they did so, and we were stuck with the stupid “John’s hat.” Their error can be a handy reminder though: if you’re not sure whether a noun ending in *S* should be followed by an apostrophe, ask yourself whether you could plausibly substitute “his” or “her” for the *S*.

The exception to this pattern involves personal pronouns indicating possession like “his,” “hers,” and “its.” For more on this point, see “its/it’s.”

Get this straight once and for all: when the *S* is added to a word simply to make it a plural, no apostrophe is used (except in expressions where letters or numerals are treated like words, like “mind your P’s and Q’s” and “learn your ABC’s”).

Apostrophes are also used to indicate omitted letters in real contractions: “do not” becomes “don’t.”

Why can’t we all agree to do away with the wretched apostrophe? Its two uses—contraction and possession—have people so thoroughly confused that they are always putting in apostrophes where they don’t belong, in simple plurals (“cucumber’s for sale”) and family names when they are referred to collectively (“the Smith’s”).

appaled/appalled

The practice of putting improper apostrophes in family names on signs in front yards is an endless source of confusion. “The Browns” is just plain wrong. (If you wanted to suggest “the residence of the Browns” you would have to write “Browns’,” with the apostrophe after the *S*, which is there to indicate a plural number, not as an indication of possession.) If you simply want to indicate that a family named Brown lives here, the sign out front should read simply “The Browns.” When a name ends in an *S* you need to add an *ES* to make it plural: “the Adamses.”

No apostrophes for simple plural names or names ending in *S*, OK? I get irritated when people address me as “Mr. Brian’s.” What about when plural names are used to indicate possession? “The Browns’ cat” is standard (the second *S* is “understood”), though some prefer “the Browns’s cat.” The pattern is the same with names ending in *S*: “the Adamses’ cat” or—theoretically—“the Adamses’s cat,” though that would be mighty awkward.

Apostrophes are also misplaced in common plural nouns on signs: “Restrooms are for customer’s use only.” Who is this privileged customer to deserve a private bathroom? The sign should read “for customers’ use.”

For ordinary nouns, the pattern for adding an apostrophe to express possession is straightforward. For singular nouns, add an apostrophe plus an *S*: “the duck’s bill.” If the singular noun happens to end in one *S* or even two, you still just add an apostrophe and an *S*: “the boss’s desk.”

For plural nouns which end in *S*, however, add only the apostrophe: “the ducks’ bills.” But if a plural noun does not end in *S*, then you follow the same pattern as for singular nouns by adding an apostrophe and an *S*: “the children’s menu.”

It is not uncommon to see the *S* wrongly apostrophized even in verbs, as in the mistaken “He complain’s a lot.”

See also “acronyms and apostrophes.”

appaled/appalled

Those of us named Paul are appalled at the misspelling of this word. No *U*, two *L*’s please. And it’s certainly not “uphauled”!

appraise/apprise

When you estimate the value of something, you appraise it. When you inform people of a situation, you apprise them of it.

apropos/appropriate

“Apropos,” (anglicized from the French phrase “à propos”) means relevant, connected with what has gone before; it should not be used as an all-purpose substitute for “appropriate.” It would be inappropriate, for example, to say “Your tuxedo was perfectly apropos for the opera gala.” Even though it’s not pronounced, be careful not to omit the final *S* in spelling “apropos.”

aren’t/ain’t/am not/isn’t

See “ain’t/am not/isn’t/aren’t.”

arthuritis/arthritus

If there were such a word as “arthuritis” it might mean the overwhelming desire to pull swords out of stones; but that ache in your joints is caused by “arthritus.”

“No, I do not want to watch that Dudley Moore movie again . . . you see, I have Arthur-itis.”



artic/arctic

Although some brand names have incorporated this popular error, remember that the Arctic Circle is an arc. By the way, Ralph Vaughan Williams called his suite drawn from the score of the film *Scott of the Antarctic* the *Sinfonia Antartica*, but that’s Italian, not English.

artical/article

The correct spelling is “article.”

artisanal/artesian

For the past half-century foodies have referred to foods and drinks made in small batches by hand using traditional methods as artisanal—made by artisans: workers in handicrafts. The term has also been extended to a wide variety of other handmade products. Dictionaries agree that the word should be pronounced “ARR-tizz-uh-nul” with the accent on the first syllable and the second syllable rhyming with “fizz.” Just say “artisan” and add “-ul.”

Diners and restaurant workers alike commonly confuse the pronunciation of its first three syllables with that of “artesian”—“arr-TEE-zhun”—which is an adjective to describe water which spurts out of the earth under natural pressure. In this word the accent falls on the second syllable, pronounced like “tea.” A spring such as this is called an “artesian spring” or “artesian well.”

If you hand-bottle water from a natural spring in your backyard I suppose you could call the result artisanal artesian water.

as best as/as best

You can try to be as good as you can be, but it’s not standard to say that you do something “as best as you can.” You need to eliminate the second “as” when “good” changes to “best.” You can try to do something as best you can. You can also do the best that you can (or even better, the best you can).

Unlike asbestos removal, “as best as” removal is easy, and you don’t have to wear a hazmat suit.

as far as/all the farther

See “all the farther/as far as.”

as far as/as far as . . . is concerned

as far as/as far as . . . is concerned

Originally people used to say things like “As far as music is concerned, I especially love Baroque opera.” Recently they have begun to drop the “is concerned” part of the phrase. Perhaps this shift was influenced by confusion with a similar phrase, “as for.” “As for money, I don’t have any,” is fine; “As far as money, I don’t have any,” is clumsy.

as follow/as follows

“My birthday requests are as follows.” This standard phrase doesn’t change number when the items to follow grow from one to many. It’s never correct to say “as follow.”

as if/like

See “like/as if.”

as of yet/yet

“As of yet” is a windy and pretentious substitute for plain old English “yet” or “as yet,” an unjustified extension of the pattern in sentences like “as of Friday the 27th of May.”

as per/in accordance with

“Enclosed is the shipment of #2 toggle bolts as per your order of June 14” writes the businessman, unaware that not only is the “as” redundant, he is sounding very old-fashioned and pretentious. The meaning is “in accordance with,” or “in response to the request made”; but it is better to avoid these cumbersome substitutes altogether: “Enclosed is the shipment of bolts you ordered June 14.”

as such

The expression “as such” has to refer to some status mentioned earlier. “The CEO was a former drill sergeant, and as such expected everyone to obey his orders instantly.” In this case “such” refers back to “former drill sergeant.” But often people only imply that which is referred to, as in “The CEO had a high opinion of himself and as such expected everyone to obey his orders instantly.” Here the “such” cannot logically refer back to “opinion.” Replace “as such” with “therefore.”

ascared/scared

The misspelling “ascared” is probably influenced by the spelling of the synonym “afraid,” but the standard English word is “scared.”

ascetic/aesthetic

See “aesthetic/ascetic.”

ascribe/subscribe

If you agree with a theory or belief, you *subscribe* to it, just as you subscribe to a magazine.