

The Most Frequently Misused Words in the English Language

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

This episode is my comfort zone. If it wouldn't drive the listeners crazy, this would be the subject of every episode. We're talking about the most commonly misused words in the English language. As many of the insomniacs know, I was an English major, but I want to point out ahead of time that I didn't choose this topic...as always, the discord voted for this one, so to those of you who voted, be careful what you wish for, and to everyone else, join our free discord in the show notes and start voting so that I don't get to do this to you again. Anyway, I have a complicated love/hate relationship with words and the English language. When words are used correctly and tastefully by authors or even on social media I am delighted and when they're used incorrectly I want to Sparta-kick a dictionary. And for me emotionally, nothing is worse than when I personally make a grammatical

mistake myself. In the last episode, at one point I said that deadly nightshade could be used to "dilute" the pupils. Obviously I meant dilate. That's the kind of thing keeps me up at night. (You're supposed to catch those, BTW. You're my grammatical wingman.) And so this episode will actually be good for me because it's an opportunity to work on my vocabulary-related anger management, and also it's humbling. Turns out I make more than my share of grammatical errors, and so I learned a lot. For this episode I specifically tried to choose a good mix of grammar-mistakes that drive me crazy along with a bunch of errors that I wasn't aware I've been making myself. So we're going to learn together, and be humiliated together, and it'll be great. In fact it'll be terrific. Which is foreshadowing: terrific is a word that we all use incorrectly. Stay tuned.

Now before we sink too far down the grammar-Nazi rabbit hole, I want to acknowledge that language is fluid, and it's impossible to always use words "correctly." Because there's not actually a single correct and permanent and immutable definition of any word...language is constantly in flux, and the correct usage of a word is always the one that conveys the meaning you intended it to convey and that other people understand. Which will often vary based on geography, time, or culture. For instance, back in my youth, "no cap" meant someone wasn't wearing a hat. Now the word

cap refers to lying, or something, it's not entirely clear...I'm old. Also when I was a kid, capping referred to insults, capping on someone meant making fun of them. The word Queer is another great example...it initially meant strange or weird, it didn't have anything to do with sexuality, but over time it became an insult targeting gay people, indicating that their lifestyle choice was weird or wrong...and then in the 1980s activists began to reclaim the word, and now it's an acceptable term to refer to anyone who doesn't identify as cisgender or hetero. Words can even completely reverse their meanings over time. The aforementioned "Terrific," as you might have guessed by its resemblance to the word "terror," used to mean immensely frightening. But I doubt many people these days would describe running from a serial killer as a terrific experience. Five stars. My point is that times change, language changes, and we should be careful about shaming each other over vocabulary. And yes, one of my favorite words is hypocrisy, because I myself am a habitual vocabulary-shamer, but I'm trying to quit. And look, we all have to loosen up. Writers, academics and English majors can cling as tightly as we'd like to our dictionary definitions but the truth is that dictionaries and scholars don't determine the meaning of words, regular people do. When it comes to language, pop culture is more powerful than a PhD. And the word ironic is a great example of the power

of the people.

Despite what Alanis Morissette would have you believe, "Ironic" does not technically mean weirdly coincidental, or randomly unfortunate. As has been pointed out ad nauseum, rain on your wedding day is not ironic, it just sucks. (And I can confirm, it rained on my wedding day, but just a sprinkle. It wasn't a big deal and it certainly wasn't ironic, nor even unexpected, we got married in October and we knew the risks, and it all worked out perfectly in the end. Suck it, weather.) The word Ironic actually has at least three definitions, for three different scenarios...there's Socratic irony, dramatic irony, and then the one that we pretty much always mean when we use the word ironic, and that is situational irony. Now, situational irony by definition is "the reversal of what is expected or intended." In the last episode I mentioned the fact that a poison called belladonna is also used as an antidote to other poisons and I said that was ironic, and while I'm sure I've use the word incorrectly in the past, in that case I nailed it. The opposite of what you would expect a poison to do is to protect you from being poisoned. On the other hand, a traffic jam when you're already late... that's not ironic, that's unfortunate, and also completely predictable btw. Considering that you were already running late, the situation is more karmic than ironic. Leave earlier. So this begs the question: what WOULD be an ironic version of the Alanis

Morissette traffic jam scenario? Well let's say you were running late and you hit a traffic jam, so you panicked and you took a random exit and stumbled upon a shortcut that resulted in you getting to work early...that would be ironic. A traffic jam that resulted in a faster commute time is a perfect example of situation irony, because it's the exact opposite of what would be expected. I found some quotes from an article in which a writer for the College Humor website took the time to convert all of Alanis Morissette's non-ironic situations into circumstances that they believed would qualify as ironic, like I just did. And what's truly ironic is that an author who wrote an article correcting someone else's misinterpretation of ironic also misinterpreted the word irony. That is exactly the opposite of what you would expect. So here's one of their examples.

"An old man turned ninety-eight. He won the lottery and died the next day...of chronic emphysema from inhalation of the latex particles scratched off decades' worth of lottery tickets." That's...less musical. It's also not the exact opposite of what you would have expected to happen. It seems more like a crazy coincidence, just another thing that sucks. So I'll offer a more by-the-book version of an ironic lottery scenario: you mentioned on one episode that there are people who have won the lottery and then gone completely bankrupt by becoming the target of scams or

investing unwisely and ultimately they ended up completely broke...well, going broke as a result of winning the lottery is definitely ironic. But in defense of College Humor, winning the lottery and immediately passing away as a result of death by lottery ticket... in my opinion that *should* be ironic, whether it officially qualifies or not. Or at least, we need a word for whatever that is, and I think you could say that as a society we've decided that the correct word is "ironic." There's often a point at which humans collectively and unconsciously agree that a word is going to mean something other than what the dictionary says it means, and eventually the dictionary has to take the hint or be rendered irrelevant. And that's the case with the word ironic. In fact, the editors of the Merriam Webster dictionary are already throwing in the white towel, having stated, "The word irony has come to be applied to events that are merely curious or coincidental, and while some feel this is an incorrect use of the word, it is merely a new one." So the word ironic now officially means exactly what Alanis Morissette was relentlessly mocked for believing it meant...which is kind of ironic. BTW, I also found a bunch of examples of real-life irony; one of my favorites, and this is true: the McDonald's employee health website used to have an entire section that cautioned against eating fast food from places like McDonalds. Which makes sense from a logistical and strategic perspective—you probably want your workers to continue to be

able to be mobile and capable of McDonaldsing...burgering?—but when you have a company warning its workers not to indulge in that company's product because they know those projects are dangerous and low-quality—which is the opposite of what you would expect from corporate guidance—well that's ironic by any definition.

The next commonly misused word is my absolute number one grammatical pet peeve. Literally. That's the word: literally. You can't go half a day without hearing someone saying with a straight face and no sense of shame, "I'm so hungry I could literally eat a horse." And...no. You could *metaphorically* eat a horse. Unless you are literally an alligator; otherwise you would literally vomit and die if you ate an entire horse.

"Literally" does not apply if you are exaggerating...it means the opposite of exaggeration; it means: this thing I'm saying is true, no exaggeration. For example, I literally clench my teeth when people use the word literally wrong. But again, and this is just amazing, if you look up the definition of literally in [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) you will now find a second, so-called "informal" definition.

Definition 2: "Used for emphasis or to express strong feeling while not being literally true."

The second definition uses the word itself in its correct form to advocate for an incorrect usage. I shouldn't be surprised in 2022, but if you needed

any proof that we live in bizarro world...

What does the word

"Meretricious" mean to you? I had always assumed it meant having merit, being worthy of praise. A meretricious argument. Very much no. Definition one: "apparently attractive but having in reality no value or integrity." Like a Kardashian. "Tawdrily and falsely attractive"

Definition 2 "Of or relating to a prostitute." So don't tell people that their work is meretricious. The word that actually means what we thought that one means (I do not think these words mean what I thought they meant) is meritorious. Your work is meritorious, not whorish. Presumably.

Irregardless...does not exist. It's not a word. Please don't ever use it. It appears in some dictionaries because as we've established dictionaries are cowards and have no integrity and bow to the whims of the unwashed masses. I was ok with that in the previous examples but you have to draw a line. Adding two letters to a word for no reason without even altering the meaning is just mindless bureaucracy. It is not remotely meritorious, more meretricious.

"Disinterested" is super misleading. In any sane world disinterested should mean "not remotely interested," but in this topsy turvy clusterfuck of a universe it actually means impartial. Like, not invested. "To maintain

impartiality, we outsourced the drafting of the will to a disinterested party." But yet again the rules don't matter because of course the word has become synonymous with uninterested and I guess only English majors like me insist on correcting people who are just trying to go about their day while incorrectly expressing lack of interest. I can confirm that most people are uninterested in the correct definition of disinterested.

"Electrocute" very specifically means to kill via electricity. Its a mixture of the words electricity and execution. So no, you didn't electrocute yourself that one time by peeing on an electric fence, unless you are now a zombie with a crispy wang.

"Impeach" does not mean convict. It just means to bring charges against a holder of public office. This is a factoid that we all learn every 20 years when a president is impeached and then we all collectively forget until the next one. If you ask the average American for the definition of impeach five years from now I guarantee they will say that impeached means convicted. It's the cycle of impeachment.

Refute

I always thought that refute meant to disagree with or reject an argument. But it actually means that you've proved an argument or assertion to be wrong. If you say as we often do: "I do not think that word means what you

think it means," you haven't refuted the meaning of the word in question; on the other hand if you are proved correct via a Google search (one of the most satisfying experience on earth) you have successfully performed a refutation.

Fewer vs less

Here's another one that kind of irks me. Ever since I learned this, probably in college, I've started noticing it all the time. But to be fair I too spent years making this mistake. The words "fewer" and "less" are not interchangeable. "Fewer" is only used for items that can be counted. If I have 10 eggs and you have 11 eggs, I have fewer eggs than you. If there are no specific numbers involved and we're instead referring to an amount of something that can be measured, you would use "less" instead. You could say "That beach has less sand" or "that beach has fewer grains of sand." So a real world example from our lives: You have less red paint on your porch than I do, and I have fewer dogs in my house than you do. I've noticed we all kind of intuitively get this correct in certain situations. If I'm broke and you're not I have fewer dollars than you and less money, which sounds right...most people wouldn't say less I have dollars or fewer money. I have such few monies.

Nauseous

This is one that surprised me, and again it's humbling to know that I am intensely fallible. And also again this is

a situation in which dictionaries are waving the white flag. So congratulations, we did it people...our stubborn refusal to use a word correctly finally defeated the English language. Which means you cannot continue to do what you've always been doing, which is to use the word nauseous to indicate that you feel sick to your stomach rather than the correct and traditional definition which is actually "causing nausea." So back before we all fucked it up, it would be correct to say that a pile of vomit is nauseous. But it would also be correct to say that a person who is vomiting is nauseous because seeing a person vomit makes me want to vomit. So by any definition if you are throwing up you are nauseous, and nauseating.

Nonplussed

I hear or read this one at least once a month, and it always makes me grit my teeth. The reason so many people struggle with this word is that it feels misleading...the prefix indicates that it's the opposite of "plussed," but plussed isn't a word...however, if it *were* a word, it sounds like it might somehow be related to a word like fussed or mused or peeved or pissed, so most people just assume that nonplussed means the opposite of any of those things. So...unruffled. Not stressed, unaffected. Like, "Everyone else was freaking out but John was nonplussed." And that couldn't be less correct. Nonplussed means perplexed, confused. So not unruffled at all, very much ruffled. I think what annoys me

the most about nonplussed that it's typically is only busted out when people are trying to sound smart. And for some reason nothing annoys me more than people trying to sound smart by incorrectly using uncommon words. Revealing ignorance while trying to project intelligence and simultaneously massacring the English language in the process...pet peeve. And I'm sure I've done it before. See again: hypocrisy. But the funny thing about nonplussed is that it is used incorrectly so often that if you try to sound smart by using it correctly most people will actually think you're stupid because they've heard it used incorrectly so many times. There's just no winning with this word.

So we've talked about a bunch of individual words, now let's talk about some *combinations* of words that people misuse. Some commonly misused phrases idioms. And btw first mishearing and then misusing a word or phrase—there's a word for that. Do you know it? Egg-corn. It comes from the common mishearing of the word "acorn."

Saying "I could care less" means that you care at least some amount that is more than zero. "Couldn't care less" is the correct saying. You want to convey that it would be impossible for you to give less of a fuck about whatever that thing is. Like, for instance, correctly using idioms. Many people couldn't care less. None of this is important in the grand scheme.

I admit I would have gotten this next one wrong if I had ever written it down. "Shoo-in," like "That team is definitely going to win, they are a shoo-in for victory." It's not shoe like what you wear on your foot, it's shoo s-h-o-o as in to urge something in a particular direction, like shooing something away. It makes sense but I don't think I've ever seen it written.

Whetting your appetite has nothing to do with water. Why would you moisten your appetite? W-h-e-t is a word for sharpening or honing, like a whet stone aka a sharpening stone, and that's the type of whet this idiom is referring to.

The correct phrase is not "for all intensive purposes." That would just refer to purposes that are intensive. The correct idiom is "For all intents and purposes" meaning for all the reasons. It makes sense.

This next one...it makes sense and I *feel* like I knew this but there's a 60% chance that I have at some point written "peaked my interest" as p-e-a-k-e-d, like the tippy top of my interest when it's actually p-i-q-u-e-d meaning to awaken. Either seems to work when it comes to expressing the meaning of the phrase, honestly, but piqued with a q is the original idiom.

This next commonly misused phrase always bothered me because a popular band went ahead and doubled

down on the error and now I'd say roughly 100% of people get this wrong. But I knew the correct version, so I'm internally gloating. The original phrase was a version of, "If that's what you think, you've got another think coming." But then along comes Judas Priest and writes a song called you've got another thing coming, which doesn't really make any sense at all. We've all got other things coming, that's extreme vague. And the correct usage makes even more sense when you consider the fact British people often use the word think as a noun, like "I'll have a think on that" etc. So "think" is kind of a "thing," but a thing isn't necessarily a think. And the fact that British people should know better makes it even more egregious that a British band cemented the incorrect usage for all time.

Finally, a few quick ones: it's not a "doggy dog" world unless you're snoop dog. The phrase is "it's a dog EAT dog world," indicating that there's no loyalty and the world is a brutal and unforgiving place. Which is apparently best illustrated by canine cannibalism, rather than violent crime or the holocaust or something. I don't know, I don't write these.

Next...the popular side dish is not "cold slaw" even though it is served chilly. It's cole slaw. C-o-l-e. Because "Colis" is cabbage in Latin.

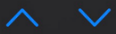
The original idiom for being nude is "buck naked," although I fully support

the use of butt naked. Because that's one of the area that matters most. If your butt is uncovered as far as I'm concerned you are buck naked so I feel like either are legit. The origin possible referred to buckskin, like deer hide? No one really knows.

Similarly you wouldn't want to say that you "nipped something in the butt" unless you're taking part in sex play. Otherwise use the correct phrase "Nipped it in the bud," as in the way you would clip a flower.

Finally, it might feel accurate to say that you're experiencing hunger pains but the original phrase is hunger pangs, p-a-n-g-s. Pangs is a medical term specifically referring to the cramping caused by hunger. Now you know.

And that's all I've got for this time. There are so many misused words and phrases that we couldn't get to, and I'm sure the insomniacs have their own pet peeves, and I want to hear them, so hit us up in the discord, tell us the ones you always used to get wrong or which of these surprised you and of course any that we didn't cover.



Midnight Facts for Insomniacs has a new review!

Podpage



Midnight Facts for Insomniacs has 1 new review!

What a nice surprise.



Addictive as addictive can be. The dude's laugh is annoying at times , (the co-host I believe)but definitely interesting fun and smart. Worth the following, I heard almost the whole collection in less than two weeks just on the drive to work and back.

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by Gino1111111 · United States of America · Aug 6, 2022



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