

The
HIGHLY SELECTIVE
DICTIONARY

FOR THE
EXTRAORDINARILY
LITERATE

Introduction by Richard Lederer
author of *Fractured English*

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Extraordinarily Literate and Amo, Amas, Amat and More*

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To Norma

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PREFACE

The Highly Selective Dictionary can be thought of as an antidote to the ongoing, poisonous effects wrought by the forces of linguistic darkness—aided by permissive lexicographers who blithely acquiesce to the depredations of unrestrained language butchers.

When these permissive lexicographers perceive that journalists and other voracious consumers of Canadian wood pulp are using an existing English word in a new sense, bingo! A new definition is added to an existing dictionary entry. And—you can count on it—the addition is noticed by the lexicographic competition and is copied widely.

With what result? The functionally illiterate take this new sense as acceptable, giving them license to say, “Well, it's in the dictionary, so it's OK to use.”

By contrast, *The Highly Selective Dictionary* is prescriptive, suggesting that its principal task is to define words carefully and conservatively, paying special attention to what the entry words usually mean and counseling readers not to fall for new meanings of entry words that have resulted from blunders by writers and the cooperation of permissive lexicographers.

This is not to say that new words cannot be used in writing and speaking. In fact, the English language has grown healthily over the years and is still growing at an ever-increasing rate. This is one of the reasons why English will continue to be the language of the entire world.

The Highly Selective Dictionary supplies spellings, pronunciations, and definitions for interesting words that make life rewarding for readers, writers, and public speakers. It enables users to learn the correct meanings of words they may not already know. It wastes no space on useless entries, offers a single pronunciation for most entries, and bites the bullet in pointing out confusions in the use of words.

A word must be said about the great amount of time lexicographers spend on defining common words—words whose meanings are widely known—time that could better be

spent on selecting and defining entry words that readers genuinely need. While definitions supplied for common words are often admirably and ingeniously constructed, the products of this enormous effort are hundreds, if not thousands, of useless entries that do nothing for most dictionary users.

A single example of a useless entry will make clear my impatience with lexicographers. Consider the noun *door*—and who does not know what a door is? Here are the first two definitions of *door* in the great *Webster's New International Dictionary* of 1934:

1. The movable frame or barrier of boards, or other material, usually turning on hinges or pivots or sliding, by which an entranceway into a house or apartment is closed and opened; also, a similar part of a piece of furniture, as in a cabinet or bookcase.
2. An opening in the wall of a house or of an apartment, by which to go in and out; an entranceway; a doorway.

Who does not admire the scholarship and thoroughness of the lexicographer who produced these definitions? And who does not admire the latest generation of lexicographers who go on producing such definitions to this day? But who can fail to wonder why so much effort should be expended to produce them?

Finally, who are the children, women, and men who do not know what a door is and would consult a dictionary to find out?

And would the definitions given above do them any good?

The Highly Selective Dictionary for the Extraordinarily Literate, by choosing to forgo such useless entries, facilitates the reader's search for useful entries. Gone is the clutter of never-consulted entries defining words everybody knows well. Consider, for example, the paper and ink and the countless hours of word processor time and human effort devoted to defining *a*, *an*, *and*, *daughter*, *exit*, *promise*, *sky*, *son*, *sun*, *trouble*, *unfit*, and *zoo*.

Most dictionaries produced by permissive lexicographers also are willing to countenance poor pronunciations that arise from mistakes made by ill-educated radio hosts, so-called television anchorpersons, and public figures—all of them unequipped to read aloud correctly.

One example will suffice to illustrate this problem. Consider the word *nuclear*, which is not included as an entry word in the present book because it is commonly understood. We have all heard it mistakenly pronounced as NOO-kye-ler instead of correctly as NOO-klee-er or NYOO-klee-er. Yet, following the principle of permissiveness, leading dictionaries sanction the mispronunciation, thereby giving solace to the bumbler—among them every member of our “nucyular navy” and most members of the U.S. Congress—who never fail to mispronounce *nuclear*.

We may have snickered when Dwight D. Eisenhower regularly mispronounced this word, and marveled at Jimmy Carter's struggles to pronounce the word correctly. Though most speakers do not aspire to high office, they can learn to speak better than most politicians.

Unfortunately, many people regard their favorite dictionary as a linguistic bible, to be accepted unquestioningly and used—along with the *Guinness Book of World Records*—in settling barroom bets. With this awesome responsibility implicitly bestowed on lexicographers, dictionaries will in time take more courageous stands on what they will sanction and what they will not.

And they may begin to overcome those who combine daily to beat our language down to a state of complete mush. Until they do, we will continue to lose good word after good word to the forces of darkness, ultimately bowing to the dictum of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty: “When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

Eugene Ehrlich

PRONUNCIATION NOTES

The pronunciation of American English words follows few hard-and-fast rules and varies from region to region. In pronouncing the entry words of this highly selective dictionary, the editor has considered all the pronunciations given in standard sources and then tried to select the most common pronunciations. Notwithstanding, some of the pronunciations supplied indulge the editor's own preferences.

Each pronunciation is shown in parentheses just after the entry word, and the pronunciation is followed by the part of speech of the entry word. In almost all cases, only one pronunciation is given, although one of the entry words, **joust**, is given three pronunciations. When two pronunciations are considered to be equally desirable, they are connected by *or*.

For the convenience of the reader, pronunciations of the entry words employ a respelling scheme that is readily interpretable rather than the International Phonetic Alphabet, which many people find difficult to interpret.

Fully stressed syllables are shown in capital letters. Syllables that receive secondary stress are shown in small capital letters. Unstressed syllables are shown in lower case letters, as are pronunciations of words of one syllable. Three examples will suffice:

hangnail (HANG-NAYL) *noun*

infer (in-FUR) *verb*

stick (stik) *noun*

One exception to respelling is the use of the schwa (e), which is defined as an indistinct vowel sound, as in the second syllable of **single** (SING-gel) or in the last two syllables of **incredible** (in-KRED-e-bel).

Another exception to respelling is the use of *i*, *I*, and *I* to indicate a long vowel sound, as in **my** (m*i*), **finite** (FI-n*I*t), and **diagnostic** (Di-eg-NOS-tik).

A few additional examples will suffice to show the ease with which the supplied pronunciations can be interpreted:

abstemious (ab-STEE-mee-es) *adjective*

accede (ak-SEED) *verb*

adduce (e-DOOS) *verb*

adscititious (AD-si-TISH-es) *adjective*

Two other representations of sounds depart from straightforward respelling.

As will be seen in the chart supplied below, *n* indicates an n that is only partially pronounced, as in many words of French origin.

Again, *th* is used to make the initial sound of the word “this,” which is given as *this*, and to pronounce “rather,” which is given as RATH-er. In pronouncing “thin” and “both,” the sound of th is not italicized.

PRONUNCIATION KEY

a as in **act**, **hat**, **carry**

ah as in **balm**, **calm**, **father**

ahr as in **far**, **jar**, **darling**

air as in **fairy**, **scare**, **declare**

aw as in **audit**, **walk**, **gawk**, **saw**

ay as in **age**, **bay**, **heinous**

b as in **bake**, **babble**, **boob**

ch as in **choose**, **church**, **preach**

d as in **dare**, **fuddled**, **mud**

e as in **empty**, **led**, **berry**

ee as in **ease**, **either**, **meat**, **see**

eer as in **ear**, **erie**, **pier**, **sneer**

f as in **fin**, **daffy**, **belief**

g as in **gust**, **bargain**, **hog**

h as in **hair**, **hot**, **huddle**

hw as in **where**, **whet**, any**where**

i as in **in**, **hit**, **women**, **twist**

i as in **bite**, **light**, **pie**, **spy**

i as in **colonize**, **synchronize**

I as in **mighty**, **lightning**, **surprise**

j as in **gin**, **just**, **judge**, **garbage**

k as in **kerchief**, **spoken**, **rack**

l as in **lag**, **ladle**, **sell**

m as in **many**, **common**, **madam**

n as in **note**, **knee**, **manner**, **napkin**

n as in **dénouement**, **frisson**, **soupçon**

ng as in **hunger**, **swinging**, **bring**

o as in **opportune**, **hot**, **crop**

oh as in **oppose**, **most**, **toast**, **sew**

oo as in **oodles**, **pool**, **ruler**

oor as in **poor**, **tour**, **sure**

or as in **aural**, **border**, **mortal**

ow as in **owl**, **oust**, **house**, **allow**

oy as in **oil**, **join**, **boy**

p as in **print**, **paper**, **sleep**

r as in **rash**, **tarry**, **poor**

s as in **cent**, **scent**, **lessen**

sh as in **sugar**, **shush**, **cash**

t as in **talk**, **utter**, **heat**

th as in **think**, **wrath**, **loath**

th as in **then**, **bother**, **loathe**

u as in **ugly**, **mutter**, **come**

ur as in **urge**, **her**, **fir**, **saboteur**

uu as in **brook**, **full**, **woman**

v as in **very**, **every**, **brave**

w as in **well**, **awash**, **allow**

y as in **yet**, **abeyance**, **useful**

z as in **zap**, **gazebo**, **tease**

zhas in **pleasure**, **vision**, **persiflage**

Note: Headwords that are considered still to be foreign terms are given in italics.

INTRODUCTION

During the early years of space exploration, NASA scientist Wernher von Braun gave many speeches on the wonders and promises of rocketry and spaceflight. After one of his luncheon talks, von Braun found himself clinking cocktail glasses with an adoring woman from the audience.

“Dr. von Braun,” the woman gushed, “I just loved your speech, and I found it of absolutely infinitesimal value!”

“Well then,” von Braun gulped, “I guess I'll have to publish the text posthumously.”

“Oh yes!” the woman came right back. “And the sooner the better!”

Now there was someone who needed to gain greater control over her word choices. But, given the power that words confer on our lives, don't we all wish to acquire a richer vocabulary? Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once declared, “Language is the skin of living thought.” Just as your skin encloses your body, so does your vocabulary bound your mental life.

It's a matter of simple mathematics: The more words you know, the more choices you can make; the more choices you can make, the more accurate, vivid, and varied your speaking and writing will be. “All words,” observed Henry Ward Beecher, “are pegs to hang ideas on.” Other things being equal, the larger your stock of word pegs, the closer you will come to finding the exact word that fits precisely the thought you want to express in speech or writing.

Ever since Adam assigned names to all the animals, we human beings have managed to come up with labels for almost everything on this planet—and beyond. The more of these names you acquire (and all of the italicized words that follow repose in this book), the more concise will be your expression. Why should you wheeze through a dozen words—“the act of throwing a thing or person out of a window”—when you can capture the act in a single noun: *defenestration*? Why scrawl out “a place real or imaginary where living conditions are considered to be as bad as possible,” when you can capture the concept with eight little letters: *dystopia*?

Wouldn't it be convenient if our language possessed a *discrete* and *discreet* word to denote the excessive development of fat on the buttocks? It does: *steatopygia*. Doesn't your heart leap up when it beholds the *effulgent* word *lambent*, at your service to describe the soft radiance of light or flame playing on a surface?

English is the most cheerfully democratic and hospitable language in the history of humankind. English has acquired the most abundant of all word stocks—616,500 entries officially enshrined in the Oxford English Dictionary, our fattest unabridged lexicon. That's an extraordinary number, considering that German owns about 185,000, so our English language boasts almost four times the number of words as the second-place language. Then come Russian at 130,000 and French at 100,000.

While there are more English words, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy, relatively few are in actual circulation. The average English speaker possesses a vocabulary of 10,000 to 20,000 words but actively uses only a small fraction, the others being recognition or recall vocabulary. A literate adult may recognize 60,000 or more words, the most learned among us 100,000. Just as we human beings use only one-tenth of our brain power, the most articulate verbivore interacts with only one-sixth of our English word hoard and actually employs only one-sixth of that.

Sadly then, many of us miss out on the sheer euphony and sesquipedalian playfulness of thousands of English words. Simply read aloud and listen to the tintinnabulation of the more ear-rinsing entries you are about to encounter: *absquatulate, anthrophagous, bumptious, concatenation, crapulous, dipsomaniac, eleemosynary, gallimaufry, glossolalia, ineluctable, legerdemain, lubricious, nugatory, peccadillo, persiflage, pinguid, plangent, pusillanimous, redolent, soporific, ululate.*

One of the happiest features of possessing a capacious vocabulary is the opportunity to insult your enemies with impunity. While the madding crowd gets mad with exhausted epithets such as “You rotten pig” and “You dirty bum,” you can *acerbate, deprecate, derogate, and excoriate* your *nemesis* with a battalion of laser-precise *pejoratives*. You can brand him or her a *grandiloquent popinjay, venal pettifogger, nefarious miscreant, flagitious recidivist, sententious blatherskite, mawkish ditherer, arrant peculator, irascible misanthrope, hubristic narcissist, feckless sycophant, vituperative virago, vapid yahoo, eructative panjandrum, saturnine misanthrope, antediluvian troglodyte, maudlin poetaster, splenetic termagant, pernicious quidnunc, rancorous anchorite, perfidious mountebank, or irascible curmudgeon.*

When you were a child learning to speak, you seized each new word as if it were a shiny toy. This is how you learned your language, and this is how you can expand your vocabulary. As you keep company and build friendships with the words in *The Highly Selective Dictionary*, start using them in conversation. Encourage your children to be *beneficent* and *empathic* in their relationships. Explain to Tabby that she shouldn't be so *obdurate* about trying the latest feline cuisine. Remind yourself what an *exemplary*

nonpareil, indefatigable autodidact, and benignant thaumaturge you are for expanding your word hoard so *perspicaciously*. Make vocabulary growth a lifelong pursuit. In the process, you will expand your thoughts and your feelings, your speaking, your reading, and your writing—everything that makes up you.

RICHARD LEDERER,
author of *Fractured English*

A

abecedarian (AY-bee-see-DAIR-ee-en) *noun*

1. a beginner in any field of learning.
2. a person who is learning the letters of the alphabet.

abjure (ab-JUUR) *verb*

1. repudiate, profess to abandon.
2. renounce under oath or with great solemnity.

Some speakers and writers confuse the verbs **abjure** and **adjure**. While such confusion can readily be seen to stem from the close similarity of the spellings of the two words, it may also be related to the fact that both words are relatively uncommon. Notwithstanding, careful writers and speakers use the words correctly: **abjure** means *repudiate, renounce*, and **adjure** means *request earnestly and charge or command under oath or threat of penalty*. Two examples of their proper use may help: (1) “My attorney advised me to **abjure** any further action that could be construed as harassment of my ex-wife.” (2) “The judge testily **adjured** the witness to speak before the jury only in response to questions put to her by the attorneys.” Clear enough?

Related words: **abjuration** (AB-je-RAY-shen) and **abjurer** (ab-JUUR-er) *both nouns*, **abjuratory** (ab-JUUR-e-TOR-ee) *adjective*.

abnegate (AB-ni-gayt) *verb*

renounce, relinquish, surrender, or deny oneself (a convenience, a right, etc.).

Related words: **abnegation** (AB-ni-GAY-shen) and **self-abnegation**, meaning self-denial, *both nouns*.

abominate (e-BOM-e-NAYT) *verb*

1. abhor; regard with loathing.
2. dislike strongly.

Related words: **abomination** (e-BOM-i-NAY-shen) *noun*, **abominable** (e-BOM-e-ne-bel) *adjective*, **abominably** *adverb*.

abortive (e-BOR-tiv) *adjective*

unsuccessful, fruitless.

Related words: **abortively** *adverb*, **abortiveness** *noun*.

absquatulate (ab-SKWOCH-e-layt) *verb*

1. flee; make off.
2. abscond.

Related words: **absquatulater** (ab-SKWOCH-e-LAY-ter) and **absquatulation** (ab-SKWOCH-e-LAY-shen) *nouns*.

abstemious (ab-STEE-mee-es) *adjective*

moderate, sparing, not self-indulgent in food and drink.

Related words: **abstemiously** *adverb*, **abstemiousness** *noun*.

accede (ak-SEED) *verb*

1. agree, give assent, conform.
2. enter upon an office.

Related words: **accedence** and **acceder** *both nouns*.

accouter (e-KOO-ter) *verb*

attire, equip, outfit; generally seen as **accoutered**, its past participle.

Related word: **accouterment** (e-KOO-ter-ment) *noun*.

accumbent (e-KUM-bent) *adjective*

reclining, recumbent.

Related word: **accumbency** *noun*.

acerbity (e-SUR-bi-tee) *noun*

sharpness of speech or manner.

Related words: **acerb** (e-SURB) and **acerbic** *both adjectives*, **acerbate** (AS-er-BAYT) *verb*.

Achates (e-KAY-teez) *noun*

a faithful companion, bosom friend; in the *Aeneid*, Achates was the faithful companion of Aeneas.

Acheron (AK-e-ron) *noun*

the river in Hades over which Charon (KAIR-en) ferried the souls of the dead, thus hell—called the infernal regions—itsself.

adduce (e-DOOS) *verb*

allege or cite as evidence or proof in argument.

Related words: **adduceable** and **adducible** *adjectives*, **adducer** *noun*.

adjure (e-JUUR) *verb*

See **abjure**.

Adonis (e-DON-is) *noun*

1. a handsome young man.
2. in classical mythology, a beautiful youth beloved by Aphrodite and killed by a boar while hunting.

adoptive (e-DOP-tiv) *adjective*

acquired or related through adoption.

Some speakers and writers use **adopted** as a synonym for **adoptive**, thus producing incongruous phrases such as “My adopted parents,” implying that *I adopted my parents*. It is preferable to use the phrase “My adoptive parents,” which makes it clear that *my natural parents had given me up for adoption*.

Related word: **adoptively** *adverb*.

adscititious (AD-si-TISH-es) *adjective*

1. supplemental, additional.
2. derived or added from an external source.

Related word: **adscititiously** *adverb*.

adumbrate (a-DUM-brayt) *verb*

1. foreshadow, prefigure.
2. overshadow.
3. shade, obscure.

Related words: **adumbrative** (a-DUM-bre-tiv) *adjective*, **adumbratively** *adverb*.

adverse (ad-VURS or AD-vurs) *adjective*

1. antagonistic in effect or purpose; hostile.
2. opposite, opposing, unfavorable.

Many speakers and writers confuse the adjectives **adverse** and **averse**. **Averse** means *feeling disinclined or opposed*, as in “I soon found she was **averse** to my every suggestion, and I knew I would soon be looking for a new job.” Thus, resolve to be **averse** to the mistake of shielding young children from every **adverse** experience they may possibly encounter.

Related words: **adversely** (ad-VURS-lee) *adverb*, **adversity** (ad-VUR-si-tee) and **adverseness** (ad-VURS-nis) *both nouns*.

advert (ad-VURT) *verb*

1. refer to in speech or writing.
2. comment.

aegis (EE-jis) *noun*

sponsorship or protection.

affect (AF-ekt) *noun*

in psychiatry, an observed or expressed emotional response.

This noun, which has made its way into the general vocabulary of many educated people, is included here for two reasons. By far the more important reason is that the noun **affect**, when seen in print, may confuse some readers, who are familiar primarily with the verb **affect**, which is pronounced e-FEKT and has such meanings as *produce an effect in, impress the mind, touch or move, and pretend or assume artificially*. In addition, the verbs **affect** and **effect**—the latter word is primarily used as a noun—are often confused by careless speakers and writers. If you doubt that any published writers fall victim to this confusion, consider that many current books, as well as a great number of today's newspapers, go to press with little, if any, editing. So you must take special care to use **affect** and **effect** correctly in your writing.

affinity (e-FIN-i-tee) *noun, plural affinities*

1. a resemblance, connection, inherent agreement.
2. a natural or instinctive mutual attraction.

afflatus (e-FLAY-tes) *noun*

1. inspiration.
2. divine impulse.

agape (AH-gah-pay) *noun, plural agapae or agapai* both pronounced AH-gah-pi
brotherly, unselfish love (contrasted with erotic love).

agent provocateur (AY-jent pre-VOK-e-TUR), *plural agents provocateurs* (AY-jents pre-VOK-e-TUR)

an agent hired to detect suspected persons by inciting them to commit self-incriminating acts.

aggravate (AG-re-VAYT) *verb*

increase the gravity of (an offense, illness, problem, and the like); worsen.

Many speakers and writers use **aggravate** to mean *annoy* or *irritate*, as in “The child's incessant questioning aggravated his grandmother” and in “Don't aggravate me.” They also use **aggravation** to mean *annoyance*, as in “I've had all the aggravation I can

take.” So prevalent have these two meanings become that most dictionaries now show them as acceptable, but usually mark these usages as colloquial. The signal for good writers is clear: If you wish to speak and write well, stay away from **aggravate** meaning *irritate* and **aggravation** meaning *annoyance*. Reserve **aggravate** for *worsen*, **aggravation** for *worsening*.

Related words: **aggravative** (AG-re-VAY-tiv) *adjective*, **aggravator** *noun*.

agrestic (e-GRES-tik) *adjective*

1. unpolished, awkward, uncouth.
2. rustic, rural.

aide-mémoire (AYD-mem-WAHR) *noun*, plural **aide-mémoire** (AYDZ-mem-WAHR)

a document, usually a memorandum, written as an aid to the memory, especially in diplomacy.

akimbo (e-KIM-boh) *adverb*

of the arms, with hands on hips and elbows bent outward.

aleatory (AY-lee-e-TOR-ee) *adjective*

1. depending on luck or chance.
2. especially in law, dependent on uncertain contingencies.
3. done at random, unpredictable.

Related word: **aleatoric** (AY-lee-e-TOR-ik) *adjective*.

allocution (AL-e-KYOO-shen) *noun*

a formal address, especially one that is hortatory in nature.

allude (e-LOOD) *verb*

refer indirectly, covertly, or casually (to something assumed to be known).

So many speakers and writers use **allude** when they should use **refer**, which means *direct attention to by naming*, that **allude** is on the list of endangered words. For anyone who wishes to use the language carefully, **allude** for **refer** is a no-no. Example: “She **alluded** to her husband's obesity by loudly asking all the physicians at dinner whether they thought overeating was really bad for one's health.” “‘If you intend to **refer** to your husband's proclivities,’ replied the host, ‘I think you ought to pay for a consultation.’” Why abandon a word that has a useful, distinctive meaning? (See also **refer**.)

Related words: **allusion** (e-LOO-zhen) *noun*, **allusive** (e-LOO-siv) *adjective*, **allusively** *adverb*.

alopecia (AL-e-PEE-she) *noun*