

# Million-Dollar WORDS

More Than 1,000 Words to  
Make You Sound Like A Million Bucks

**Seth Godin and Margery Mandell**

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# A

- abdabs                      So nervous, you jitter and quake. One hopes that diamond cutters, professional golfers and brain surgeons don't suffer from the abdabs. Pronounce it AB-DABS.
- abject                      Extremely humiliated or debased; the bottom of the barrel. The word is most often used in conjunction with either "failure" or "poverty." The migrant farmers in Woody Guthrie songs lived in abject poverty.
- ablution                      A ritual cleansing. This can literally be a bath, or, more commonly, a spiritual purification. Vestal virgins probably engage in this kind of activity since they have a lot of time on their hands. Say AB- LOO-SHUN.

*abnegate / abstemious*

abnegate	To deny oneself something (usually something a little more serious than giving up chocolate cake). You can abnegate the religion you were born into, for example. Pronounce it AB-NEGG-ATE.
abrogate	To formally annul or cancel, as in a contract or a treaty, rather than a promise. Often misused to mean "breach" or "violate" – when you hear the word used that way, jump in and explain the subtle yet important distinction. "He abrogated the agreement by ripping up the contract and refusing to accept any more shipments of pineapples." Distinguish this from breaching the agreement by accepting the shipments, but refusing to pay for them.
absolution	A release from guilt, sin or sentence. More than just forgiveness, absolution implies a kind of freedom from moral responsibility. To be on the safe side, it's best to avoid acts that require absolution, since it might not be offered. Say AB-SO-LOO-SHUN.
abstemious	Originally defined as taking food and drink in moderation, now expanded to mean temperance in all things. Those who drink deeply from the cup of

*abstruse / acrimony*

	life are hardly abstemious. Pronounced AB-STEEM-EE-US.
abstruse	Complicated; difficult to comprehend. Like the theory of relativity, atonal music or the philosophers you pretended to understand in college. The next best thing to understanding Hegel would be to describe him as abstruse and move on.
acerbic	Harsh; severe; biting. Commonly used to mean sarcastic, the actual meaning is stronger. A truly acerbic wit can draw blood. Don Rickles isn't acerbic. He's too nice. It's pronounced ASS-ER-BIK.
acolyte	An attendant, assistant or novice. Not a slave, but a follower. Disciples follow a leader – acolytes empty her ashtray. A brilliant professor or an innovative employer will often attract acolytes. Pronounced AK-O-LITE.
acrimony	Biting sharpness or bitterness. It's used to describe words, attitude or disposition, not food. Old coffee is bitter; hostile divorces lead to acrimony between partners, and vice versa.

*acuminate / aesthete*

- acuminate**            Sharpened or tapered to a point—can be used as an adjective or verb. A candle or a sword is acuminate. The next time you need to sharpen your pencil during the SATs, raise your hand and explain that your #2 needs to be acuminate. Pronounced AH-KYOU'MIN-ATE.
- adduce**              To offer a series of facts that will help the recipient prove something. Therefore, you can adduce someone to deduce a conclusion. "Talented salesman that I am, I adduced the customer to my way of thinking by demonstrating how effective the Elektra was at picking up dust."
- adventitious**      Added accidentally, casually or from an outside source. Buying a house in winter and discovering that in spring, the property is filled with tulips and lilies is adventitious. On the other hand, being the one millionth customer at a dealership and winning a brand new Corvette is serendipitous. (See *serendipitous*.) It's pronounced AD-VEN-TISH-US.
- aesthete**            A lover of beauty. Sort of an athlete of the arts. If you belong to PBS, have a membership at the local

art museum and drive a 1964 Lotus, you are both wealthy and an aesthete. Though it can be spelled esthete, the snootier spelling is aesthete. Pronounced ESS-THEET.

- agelast A person who never laughs. Words like "dour" or "stern" are more temporary – reserve *agelast* for long-term sourpusses. Pronounced AH-GEHL-AST.
- agent provocateur A French expression describing a political spy who provokes people to perform an illegal action that will lead to their arrest. These characters are frequently seen in 1940s spy films. Third-world governments often use them to promote riots, thus giving an excuse for martial law. Say AGENT PROH-VAHK-OH-TYVR.
- agio The fee charged by money brokers for exchanging one foreign currency for another. Not to be confused with the Spanish word for "garlic," which is pronounced the same way. Pronounced AH-JEE-O.
- aglet The covering at the end of a shoelace. Of all the words for a-thing-that-should-have-a-name-but-you-

*agrypnia / aleatory*

can-never-remember-what-it-is, this is the easiest to use in conversation.

agrypnia                      Insomnia. The kind of word you stay awake trying to remember. Say AH-GRIP-NEE-AH.

ailurophilic                      Lover of cats; the opposite of ailurophobia. Admittedly, "cat lover" is a lot easier to say, but you can use *ailurophilic* when you don't want your dog to know how you feel. Pronounced EYE-LOOR-A-FILL-JCK.

ait                                      A favorite crossword-puzzle word. A small island in a river or lake, such as lie de la Cit£ in the Seine. Say ATE.

alacrity                              Cheerfulness; liveliness. Good news is usually delivered with great alacrity.

aleatory                              Uncertain; dependent on chance. Random, such as the throw of dice. Playing the lottery is an aleatory undertaking; playing blackjack is part aleatory, part skill. Say AYE-LEE-AH-TORY.



algorithm	A method for solving a mathematical problem. You can win or tie every game of tic tac toe by following a simple algorithm— start in the middle, then block any move made by your opponent. Say AL-GOH-RIH-THM.
alliaceous	Smelling or tasting of garlic or onions, such as one's breath after a great Italian meal. The alliaceous meal was delicious; her breath was not. It's pronounced AL-EE-AY-SHUSS.
alliteration	A poetic device in which words that begin with the same sound are strung together. "Helplessly hoping her harlequin hovers nearby-----" Score big points by identifying alliteration wherever you find it. Pronounced UH-LIT-ER-AY-SHUN.
amanuensis	A scribe; someone employed to take dictation or copy what another has written. John Milton's wife was his amanuensis; Milton dictated <i>Paradise Lost</i> to her. Many secretaries are amanuenses, but they prefer to be called administrative assistants. Say UH-MAN-YOO-EN-SLSS.

*ameliorate / anachronism*

**ameliorate** To make a bad situation better. When something is ameliorated, it's improved. Not usually used in a medical environment; better to refer to a political or social situation. Some say that World War II helped ameliorate the effects of the Depression. Say AM-EEL-YOR-ATE.

**amphigory** A nonsensical composition or parody, often made of sounds that imitate words and rhyme, or words that rhyme but have no logical meaning. An example is the writing of Dr. Seuss when he says about eating green eggs and ham: "Would you like them in a house? Would you like them with a mouse?" Pronounced AM-FI-GORE-EE.

**anachronism** A person or event erroneously placed in time.

Although it can be used either way, the word usually describes something from the past intruding upon the present in a contradictory or paradoxical way. Space people from the future would not usually be called an anachronism, but a person with a black-and-white TV and a gramophone would. Say AN-AK-CROH-NJSM.

analects	Selected extracts from the writings of one or more authors. Usually associated with Confucius, as in <i>The Analects of Confucius</i> , or with Mao – although the word is by no means limited to Asian writing.
ancillary	This word is often used to mean secondary, but it actually means supplementary, as in "the ancillary benefits to this job are its good location and the friendly staff." The word is pronounced AN-SILL- AR-EE.
anomaly	An unexpected result that deviates from the standard. A 40-degree day in the middle of a hot summer is an anomaly, as is a book on underwater gardening that makes it to the best-seller lists. Pronounced UH- NOM-UH-LEE.
anomie	The breakdown of norms, ethics and values in a person or in society. Graft, corruption and rioting are all signs of anomie. Pronounced AN-EH-MEE.
antediluvian	This word literally means "before the Biblical flood," but it's come to connote generally ancient or antiquated. Someone with very old-fashioned ideas might

*antepenultimate | aphasia*

jestingly be described as antediluvian. It's pronounced ANT-EE-DEL-OOV-EE-AN.

**antepenultimate** The third from the last in a series; the word or thing that precedes the second to last (or penultimate) and the last. A useful word when discussing a piece of writing, as in: "It says here in the antepenultimate paragraph . . ."

**anthropomorphism** Assignment of human-like attributes to inanimate objects or animals. People tend to anthropomorphise computers: "The computer gets upset when I type this." The word can be used to refer to fairy tales about singing trees and talking frogs.

**antithetical** Something that is in direct opposition to something else is antithetical to it. The word has a larger meaning than just plain "opposite." Rich is the opposite of poor; booking a rap music group at a staid, elegant French restaurant would be antithetical to the restaurant's atmosphere.

**aphasia** Loss or impairment of speech, or of the power to understand written or spoken language. It's rare to

*aplomb | aposiopesis*

	find a permanent case in real life, but temporary aphasia is all around us. A great excuse when your boss catches you snoozing at a meeting; she'll be too stunned to look up the word. Say UH-FAY-ZHUH.
aplomb	Self-assurance, especially under duress. Not a fruit, but pronounced A-PLUM.
apocryphal	Of doubtful authenticity; practically a fable. Not like Paul Bunyan; more like Babe Ruth calling his home run. As we have lost our ability to believe real fables, many apocryphal stories have been created about heroes such as Kennedy and Hemingway.
apogee	Refers to the point in the orbit of the moon when the moon is furthest from the earth, but has come to refer to any figurative high point or climax, as in a career. Being elected President would be the apogee of a politician's career; failing to be re-elected would be the nadir. (See <i>nadir</i> .) Say APP-OH-;EE.
aposiopesis	Breaking off in the middle of a statement upon suddenly realizing that someone's feelings are hurt or about to be hurt. "The reason I didn't invite your

*apostasy / argot*

wife to the party is that everybody thinks she's...well, never mind." You may never find occasion to actually use the word, but it's nice to know there's a word for that particular gaffe or faux pas. (See *gaffe* and *faux pas*.) Pronounce it AP-UH-SEE-UH-PEE-SISS.

apostasy	Abandonment of one's religion, politics or principles. Not to be confused with <i>apostle</i> . St. Matthew was an apostle; Judas was an apostate.
apothegm	A pithy saying. Mark Twain specialized in them. So did Yogi Berra. Say it APP-O-THEM.
a priori	Proceeding from cause to effect; reasoning from a general law to a particular instance. This describes a deductive approach to a chain of reasoning. If the polar ice caps melted, your a priori conclusion would be the eventual flooding of coastal areas. A second meaning is "presumptive" or "conjectural" – based on theory or preconception rather than fact, as in an <i>a priori</i> conclusion. Pronounced AH PREE-OR-EE.
argot	Slang belonging to a specific group or class. When you know the argot of computers, you can talk with

the hackers in the MIS department. Pronounced AR-GOH.

- arriviste      Someone who has acquired success by dubious means and who insists on flaunting it. A contemporary example would be Ivan Boesky, John Gotti or even Jessica Hahn. Unless they go to jail, one generation's arrivistes are another's old money.
- arrogate      To claim for oneself without justification, such as Germany arrogating the Sudetenland prior to World War II. Can you arrogate the plum assignments from your rival co-worker?
- ascetic      Self-denying; austere. A hedonist loves pleasure; an ascetic shuns it. In Eastern culture, ascetics eschew (see *eschew*) anything not necessary to maintain life, thus taking them one step closer to nirvana. (See *nirvana*.) Pronounced UH-SETT-IK.
- assiduous      Persevering and careful. A good quality for scientific researchers or investigative reporters. The implication is that assiduous behavior brings with it thoroughness and even temper. Not necessarily true.

**g m e n t**

Describes two words in which the vowels rhyme but the consonants don't—such as *mama* and *dada*. Without *assonance*, you've got no other way to describe it!

To relieve or ease. Through good works, charity and good behavior, you can assuage your guilt about fudging your income tax report. But that probably won't save you from an audit. (See also *absolution*.) Pronounced ASS-WAGE.

Exhibiting traits of an ancestor or an earlier evolutionary form. Members of a mob can become atavistic and commit violent acts which, as individuals, they might shun. A smart way to say "barbaric."

To add on, in the sense of increasing in size or amount. A person augments his salary with a moonlighting job, or augments a collection of stamps by buying the valuable one with the upside-down airplane on it. You can also augment parts of your body, hence the term "breast augmentation surgery."



augur	To prophesy the future. When Boris Yeltsin took over the USSR, it did not augur well for the KGB. (Is this word ever used without "well" attached to it?) Pronounced <i>AWG-ER</i> .
autodidact	A person who teaches himself a subject, such as a foreign language or solid geometry. The word can also refer to a person who enjoys hearing himself talk even though few others do. Maybe it's because he's so smug for having taught himself something without the help of experts.
autolatry	Worship of the self. The next time you want to insult that narcissistic, self-involved egomaniac you know, tell him he engages in autolatry. Pronounce it <i>AWT- OL-AH'TREE</i> .
avatar	The incarnation or manifestation of a deity or an idea. An example is the burning bush or the Greek gods appearing in human form. Today, you could use the word to describe a project that embodied your ideas. The space program was JFK's avatar. No doubt <i>avatar</i> will end up being a make of car before long.

*avocado | avuncular*

avocado                      Of course you know what an avocado is. But did you know that it is one of the few words derived from the Aztec? The original meaning is "testicle," so now you have something interesting to say when you're offered guacamole. (The Aztecs thought the avocado was an aphrodisiac.) Also worth noting: You can keep your guacamole from turning brown by placing an avocado pit in it.

avuncular                    Like an uncle; kind. Here's the hard part – what do you call someone who's like an aunt? Avauntular? Regardless, try to be avuncular to all of the children you meet.

# B

- babbitt** A reference to the eponymous (see *eponymous*) title of Sinclair Lewis's best-known novel, the word has come to mean a person who blindly conforms to middle-class standards. Until recently, a male babbitt always drove a four-door American car, belonged to the Lions club, wore a dark suit and went to church every Sunday.
- babelize** To make something confused or incomprehensible—derived from the biblical Tower of Babel. If you earn an advanced degree in your ability to babelize, you can be certain of a job at the IRS.
- bacchanal** A drunken, riotous orgy, or anyone who parties in the style of the Roman god Bacchus. You can refer to party revelers as bacchanals or to the party itself as a bacchanal. No place for abstemious (see *abstemious*) people. Pronounced BAHK-AH-NAL.

*badinage / baleful*

badinage	Playful, teasing banter, the kind of conversation that makes English drawing-room comedy so much fun to watch, even though there's no action. Best done by Tracy and Hepburn. Pronounced <i>BAH-DEH-NAHJ</i> .
Baedeker	A publisher of very good travel books. The word has come to describe any complete travel guide. Pronounced BAY-DIK-ER.
bagatelle	An unimportant trifle. (Not a loaf of French bread.) It's best used to describe a knickknack or a small good deed.
bailiwick	In one's area of interest or authority; the word derives from the area in which a bailiff, a minor court officer, presides. When the V.P. of Sales starts walking around the factory, complain that she's stepping into your bailiwick. Say it BALE-EE-WIK.
baleful	Extremely harmful; pernicious. Often confused with <i>doleful</i> , which means sad. The children in Keane paintings have doleful expressions; Roy Cohn's approach to his fellow human beings was baleful. It's pronounced BAIL-FULL.

- balletomane A ballet-lover, who for some reason is not called a balletophile. While we're on the topic, if a female ballet star is called a ballerina, why don't they call Barishnykov a ballerino? (Just wondering.) Pronounced BAH-LET-EH-MANE.
- baluster One of the series of pillars that supports a banister along a staircase. (Now you don't have to call it a *thingee* any longer!)
- balustrade A banister plus all the balusters (see above) that hold up the banister. Pronounced BAL-UH-STRAYDE.
- barm Another word for the froth or head on a glass of beer. As in: "On a hot day, there's nothing like an ice cold beer with a good barm."
- bas-relief A sculpture or carved work in which projecting parts stand out slightly from their surrounding surface. When touring European cities for the first time, you may use this word about 400 times a day to describe carved doors, walls, pedestals, graves and a host of other ruins. If you're going to use the word, make sure you pronounce it correctly: BAH REE-LEAF.

*bathos / bavardage*

bathos	A fall from the sublime to the commonplace; often used to describe the plot of a play, a movie or a piece of fiction which tells how the mighty have fallen. Pronounced BAY-THOSS, the word should be distinguished from pathos (see pathos), which means evoking genuine pity or compassion.
battologize	To write or repeat words or phrases over and over and over and over, again and again and again and again. It's pronounced BAT-OLL-OH-JIZE.
bauhaus	Not a place to put Fido at night. A school of architecture and design developed in Germany in 1918, which emphasized the functional aspect of objects over their form. The style is typified by the box-like buildings of Mies Van der Rohe, who was famous for his aesthetic theory that "less is more." Say <i>BOW-HOUSE</i> .
bavardage	Foolish or nonsensical talk with a touch of light banter. Friends might engage in bavardage by hurling meaningless insults at one another – without hurting anyone's feelings. It's similar to badinage (see <i>badinage</i> ) but has a more playful tone. In modern

*beau geste / bel-esprit*

	parlance, "dissing," but without malice. Pronounce the word BAH-VAR-DAJ-
beau geste	Literally a "pretty gesture," an act that is meaningless, but looks good or has the effect of generosity or conciliation. An example is sending flowers to the host after a dinner party. Pronounced <i>BOJHEST</i> .
beaver	Besides the busy little animal that builds dams, this word also describes the piece of a suit of armor that is jointed below the ears and protects the mouth and chin.
bedizen	To vulgarly dress or gaudily accessorize; too many bangles and beads. Pronounced BIH-DYE-ZEN.
beldam	An ugly, old woman. Not to be confused with <i>bedlam</i> , which means "confusion."
bel-	A verbal, witty, intellectually lively person; the person at the party who's telling an amusing little story to a circle of delighted hangers-on. The personality shy people covet. Pronounce the word BELL-ESS-PREE.

*bellwether / bibelot*

bellwether	The leader of the pack; the one everyone else follows. Contrary to popular belief, the word has nothing to do with the weather—which is why it is so frequently misspelled. It does, however, have something to do with bells, since the word comes from the male sheep which leads the flock and usually wears a bell around his neck.
benighted	Ignorant; not so much stupid, but backward. People who are benighted are also a bit pathetic, such as the street urchins in Dickens's novels who, neglected by society, can neither read nor write.
benthos	The animals and plants, snails, anemones and such that live at the bottom of the sea. Not much of a stretch to use the term to vilify the telephone operator who just cut you off.
betime	Early, soon; often misused to mean "sometimes." "I will be there betimes" means "I'll see you soon."
s	A small decorative object that is prized for its beauty or rarity; the kind of porcelain figurine or little brass



*biblioclast I biggin*

	pot that decorates a coffeetable or bookcase. Better than a knickknack. Pronounced BIB-LO.
biblioclast	A person who destroys books; the word can also be used to describe people who break the bindings of paperbacks and keep their place by folding down the corners of pages. Biblioclasts are despised by <i>bibliophages</i> , people with a passion for reading.
bibulous	Given to drinking alcohol, but not necessarily an alcoholic; for example, the person at the table who orders wine or beer when everyone else has ordered a soda. It's pronounced <i>BIB-YOU-LUSS</i> .
bifurcate	To split into two parts or branches; to fork. Though you can say that a road is bifurcated, and you can certainly bifurcate a crab before you eat it, the word is most often used to describe ideas or concepts. Pronounced BYE-FUR-KATE.
biggin	The perforated basket that contains the grounds in a coffeepot. The word can probably be stretched to mean the plastic holder where you put the paper filter in a Mr. Coffee.

*bildungsroman / bisextile*

bildungsroman	Literally, a novel of education—a coming-of-age story. J.D. Salinger's novel <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> is a classic example.
billet-doux	A love letter. Take a minute to send one today— you'll be amazed at the difference it makes in your relationship. It's pronounced <i>BILL-AY DOO</i> .
biotic	Having to do with life, in a scientific sense. You can be worried about the ecology, the rainforests, the ozone layer or the biotic activity in the Pacific Northwest. People on macrobiotic diets apparently believe that they are getting enormous amounts of life, which is odd, given that they eat almost nothing and weigh even less.
bir!	A nifty way to say "logrolling." Standing on a log while it revolves under you. Or, stretching a little, what a gerbil does in one of those exercise wheels: "Henry! Come watch the little gerbil bir!"
bisextile	A good deal more mundane than <i>bisexual</i> , this word refers to events that fall on February 29, the extra day of a leap year. If you have a bisextile birthday, you'll

*bivouac | bluestocking*

age only 25 years each century. Pronounced BYE-SEX- TLLL. You may not use this word often, but when you do, you'll feel great.

- bivouac            An encampment, used either as a noun or a verb. Soldiers bivouac a lot, as do characters in Hemingway novels. Say *BIV-OO-ACK*.
- blandish            To try to convince with flattering words; to cajole. One may blandish a child to get out of a swimming pool on a hot day. The word has nothing to do with being bland or boring.
- blowzy             Unkempt; messy. Hair out of place or an untucked shirt hanging out of a business suit qualify as blowzy. Can also mean "ruddy-faced and flushed." Rhymes with *lousy*.
- bluestocking      A woman who devotes herself to scholarly or literary pursuits but who is not necessarily formally educated. Think of the schoolteacher in all of those Clint Eastwood westerns. The expression comes from a group of 18th-century women who gathered in each other's houses to talk about books. Some of these

*boondoggle / bovine*

	women wore informal blue or gray wool stockings instead of black silk ones.
boondoggle	Though the word is now used to describe the kind of conventions that are held in tropical places to give employees a chance for some paid vacation time, the word literally means "busy work," meaningless tasks carried out laboriously to create the appearance of being busy.
bootless	Useless; fruitless; to no avail. Thus the line from Shakespeare's sonnet ". . . and trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries" does not refer to someone praying with his shoes off.
boulevardier	A man-about-town; the kind of guy who makes sure he's seen at the trendiest restaurants and the hippest clubs. The model/artist/fashion set. Pronounced BOOL-A 'VAR'DEER.
bovine	Scientists use this phrase to classify the family that includes buffalo, kudus, oxen and cows. Often used derogatorily to describe fat, lazy dullards who move

slowly and always seem to be chewing their cud.  
Pronounced BO-VINE.

- bowdlerize To edit a piece of writing by cutting out all the obscene parts. In certain Middle Eastern countries, some Western magazines are bowdlerized from cover to cover. The word derives from the name of Thomas Bowdler, who had the gall to issue an expurgated edition of the works of that well-known pornographer, William Shakespeare. Pronounced BOD-LEHR-ISE.
- bromide A trite or hackneyed remark or a boring person who speaks in meaningless platitudes. Political candidates, bad teachers and dull members of the clergy are famous for uttering (or being) bromides. Also used to describe a drink taken to relieve indigestion. Thus, depending on the intended meaning, a bromide can either soothe or turn one's stomach.
- bruin A bear. People who call their office "work-o-rama" and their friend Bill "the Billster!" probably refer to Yogi Bear as a "bruin." You can tell them that the

*brussels sprout / bumptious*

term comes from the Dutch word for "brown," and that Bern, Switzerland, is named after the Swiss word for bear.

brussels sprout Some people like this tiny cabbage-like vegetable.

Note that it is not *brussel* sprout, which is what less careful people might call it. A huge bowl of the stuff would thus be called *brussels sprouts*. Difficult to say quickly, but correct nonetheless.

bumptious

Overbearing or self-assertive to the point of being obnoxious; conceited bordering on arrogant. Salespeople in trendy, expensive shops can be bumptious. Pronounced *BUMP-SHUSS*.

cabal	<p>A group engaged in secret plotting against authority. A cabal might be a political faction that scorns the government, or a splinter group of employees dissatisfied with the head of their department. Often associated with witches. Pronounced KUH-BAHL.</p>
cache	<p>A hidden treasure. Not the kind found in chests under the sea but of more personal value, such as a cache of chocolates in a night-table drawer or a cache of sharpened pencils hidden from coworkers. For some reason, police always seem to find guns hidden in caches. Pronounced CASH.</p>
cachet	<p>A mark of distinction, a stamp of approval by a recognized authority. Could be the Levi's label or Louis Vuitton luggage. The word has come to describe a certain style which someone always seems to have. Pronounced CASH-AY or CASH-AY.</p>

*cachinate / caitiff*

cachinate	To laugh too loud or too hard. Much more than a giggle, and with a bit of unnatural excess, such as nervous laughter after hearing bad news. Good example of onomatopoeia (see <i>onomatopoeia</i> ). Pronounced CAK-IN-ATE.
cadence	A balanced, rhythmic flow or movement. You can talk about the cadence of a marching band, for example, or use the term figuratively, to describe art or a babbling brook. Pronounced KAY-DENSE.
cadre	A group of people who train others in an expanding organization. Often used in a military context: "Cadres of medical personnel were sent to the field hospitals." During the 1950s, Communists always seemed to be organized in cadres. Pronounced CAH-DRA.
caitiff	A despicable lowlife; a contemptible or cowardly person. Should be pronounced <i>CAY-TIFF</i> , probably through clenched teeth, with a sneer. Reserve the term for traitors and people who hurt others to further themselves.



cajole	To coax or encourage, usually to get someone to do something she doesn't want to do but that's good for her, such as take her medicine or get some rest. Say CAH-JOLE.
callow	Green; inexperienced; lacking maturity. You almost always hear the word combined with "youth," as in "Those callow youths don't appreciate the finer things in life."
calumny	A false statement designed to harm someone's reputation. It's intentional and malicious but has no particular legal implications like libel or slander. A jealous person might accuse a rival, or a candidate might accuse an opponent, of calumny.
camber	To arch upward in the middle. A rainbow cambers; so does a gentle hill. Downhill skis are cambered – the center is a few inches higher than the tip or heel. Pronounced CAM-BURR.
cambist	A classy way to describe someone who is a little too sharp with money. A currency trader or a particularly

*campanile / canonize*

zealous auctioneer is a cambist. Every school has at least one kid who manages to trade each item in his bagged lunch for some combination of cash and pizza. He's a cambist.

campanile      A bell tower that is usually separate from surrounding buildings. Far more common in Europe than in the States. The preferred pronunciation is *KAM-PUH-NEE-LEE*.

canard          A rumor, sham, false report or playful hoax – though less ominous than the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast. You could accuse someone of perpetrating a canard about the state of your business.

canonize        To include in a definitive collection – especially refers to written works. The works of Chaucer have been canonized; multiculturalists have been arguing to canonize the works of minority writers. One can speak of being included among the canon of great poets, for instance. Also used to describe the process of transforming ordinary people into saints. Pronounced *CAN-NON-/ZE*.

*canorous / carapace*

canorous	Pleasant-sounding, melodious and resonant. Could be used to describe organ music, or the sound of a rainstorm against the windowpanes. It may sound like cantankerous (cranky), but means something completely different. Pronounced CAN-OR-US.
caparison	To dress sumptuously; to gussy up. Although the word originally referred to the ornamental covering for a horse, it has come to be used for people as well, such as when heads of state get fully caparisoned for a ball at the White House. Say KUH-PAR-UH-SUHN.
capriccio	Not an Italian coffee. A capriccio is a frolic or caper, such as when a bunch of friends spontaneously decide to jump into a car and drive to the beach for the day. Pronounced CAP-REE-SHE-O.
captious	Critical and hard to please in an irritable, nit-picking way. Small children can be captious at the dinner table; teenagers and in-laws may be captious all the time. Say CAP-SHUSS.
carapace	The tough upper part of the turtle's shell. The carapace is the part that used to be polished and used

*carrel / catastrophenia*

for jewelry, combs and precious objects before turtles were threatened with extinction and the practice was outlawed in most countries. The word is sometimes used metaphorically to mean the demeanor of extremely self-protective people – or the pate of a bald man. Pronounced CAH-RAH-PISS.

carrel A small area in a library reserved for individual study. Most carrels contain a desk, chair and lamp. (After devising such a ridiculous place for studying, scholars even went so far as to *name* it!)

caryatid An architectural support column in the form of a draped female figure – the kind of structure, often seen in museums and Greek ruins, that resembles the Venus de Milo. (Not a bug; that's a katydid.) Pronounced CAR-EE-AH-TID.

castrophenia Believing that your thoughts are being stolen by your competitors. Screenwriters often suffer from castrophenia when they see that the movie they were just about to write has appeared in neighborhood theaters. Not *Castrophilia* – that's love of Fidel Castro, in case you were interested.

*catfalque | cavil*

catfalque	The raised platform that holds a coffin containing a corpse during funeral ceremonies. A funeral is no place to show off your vocabulary, though, so you'll have to be content to know that you <i>could</i> show off, if you were so inclined. Pronounced CAT-A-FALK.
catharsis	Originally referred to the emotional release, the necessity of which was created by Greek tragedy. Catharsis has come to mean any purging or release of emotions. Crying at the movies is considered cathartic. A debate continues to rage over whether violent movies offer catharsis – do they decrease violence among viewers or encourage it? Pronounced CAH- THAR-sis.
catholic	A broader meaning than "relating to the Christian church," catholic also means broad-minded or universal in tastes or views. Someone with catholic tastes might like both Beethoven and Madonna, Chinese food and coq au vin, Shakespeare and Stephen King.  To nit-pick or make small-minded criticisms or objections. An old-fashioned teacher might cavil at
cavil	

*celerity / chaff*

the way his students dress; a scholar might cavil at the latest novel of a professor-turned-best-selling- author. Pronounced KAV-EL.

**celerity** Speed or rapidity; a boy who eats his celery with great celerity gobbles his food; a student who does her homework with celerity probably makes a lot of mistakes. Celebrities who marry with celerity often find themselves with expensive divorce suits on their hands.

**cerulean** Deep blue, such as the color of the sky on a sunny day, the water off the coast of a Greek island, or Paul Newman's eyes. Not mentioned in the Crayola 64 crayon box. Pronounced SEH-RULE-EE-JN.

**chad** The little paper circles that fall from the hole- puncher and litter the floor, stick to your shoes and create static electricity that makes them almost impossible to scoop up. Used daily, this word is bound to improve your image.

**chaff** Generally used to mean the leftovers, the worthless part that remains after you've got what you want.

*changeling / charr e tte*

	Back when we were agrarian, the word referred to the stuff left over after harvesting wheat.
changeling	An infant, usually strange or ugly, substituted for another in the crib or in the nursery. Most often read about in fairy tales, but can be used when someone you know acts unusually, as in: "I've never seen you eat peanut butter before. Are you a changeling?"
charlatan	A fake or a phony; a person who claims to have skills, powers or talents that he doesn't possess, like a man without a medical degree who claims he's a doctor and says he can cure baldness. Pronounced SHARL-AH-TIN.
charnel	A house or building in which skeletons or bodies are deposited. Fortunately, it's difficult to find one these days. Pronounced CHAR-NL.
charrette	An effort to meet a deadline for some task by an all- out effort. Originally connoting the energy among a group of architects getting plans ready for a presentation, the word has come to refer to any group of professionals who get together and hustle to meet a due date. Pronounced SHAH-RET.

*chary / cheap-jack*

chary	Cautious; hesitant to act. Use <i>chary</i> when you mean "discreetly careful" more than "wary." One would be chary before investing in a risky stock or walking into a room full of screaming sixth-graders. Pronounced <i>CHAIR-EE</i> .
chasm	A huge gap or deep hole. "Bored with life, he leaped into the chasm." It can also be used figuratively to describe a gulf – the chasm between rich and poor, for example. Say <i>KAZ-M</i> .
chasmophile	A lover of nooks and crannies. Someone who likes sifting through the shelves of used-book stores, rummaging through flea markets and browsing in antique stores is probably a chasmophile. So are chipmunks, mice and an assortment of other field animals who nest in the rafters of old attics. It's pronounced <i>KAZ-MOH-FLE</i> .
cheap-jack	A peddler who sells cheap goods, like the people who sell underwear or tin earrings or inexpensive sunglasses at a flea market.



*cheechako | chrysalis*

cheechako	A greenhorn; not an insult, merely a different way of calling someone "inexperienced" or "new to the scene." The word has an excellent mouth feel, and will add sparkle and spice to your vocabulary. Say CHIH-CHAH-JCOH.
chimera	A mythological monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. The word has come to connote any horrible fear or morbid terror. The day before an exam, a student is liable to imagine any number of chimeras such as not knowing the answer to a single question, or receiving the lowest failing grade on record. Pronounce it KIM-EER-AH.
choplogic	Faulty reasoning, often overly complicated and confusing. (Not Freddy Kruger's mental state.)
chrysalis	The pupa of a butterfly. The word has come to connote any person or thing in the process of being born. An adolescent on the verge of self-discovery could be in a chrysalis state; a novel in the early stages of creation could be called a chrysalis. Pronounced CHRISS-A-LISS.

*cicatrix | circumscribe*

cicatrix	Not what happens when a kid gets tired of his favorite breakfast cereal; it's the scar that forms on a healed wound, the marks from childhood mishaps that cover the knees of most adults. It's pronounced <i>SIK'A'TRIKS</i> .
cicerone	A guide who escorts tourists or sightseers, such as the gondoliers of Venice or the people who lead walking tours in most cities. Pronounced <i>SISS-A-RO-NEE</i> .
circumlocution	A roundabout way of saying something; using too many words and complicated expressions. A person who wants to avoid answering certain questions or offering certain opinions is inclined to use circumlocution. A good way of disguising choplogic (see <i>chopbgic</i> ). Pronounced <i>SIR-KUM-LOH-CU-SHUN</i> .
circumscribe	To create limits or define boundaries; to establish definite means or procedures. At recess, for example, children can play in circumscribed ways: they can throw balls but not rocks; they can play tag but not hit each other. Also, the scope of your research might be circumscribed by the availability of time or money. Pronounced <i>SIR-kum-scribe</i> .

*clamjamfry / clerisy*

clamjamfry	Ordinary people or the collective mob; politicians walk among the clamjamfry to shake hands and kiss babies. Pronounce the word CLAM-JAM-FREE.
clarion	A shrill-sounding trumpet used as a signal in war. The word has come to be used metaphorically to describe any obvious warning of things to come – often a bad event. "When the guest arrived and rearranged the furniture in the guest room, it was a clarion call that a difficult visit was ahead." Pronounced CLARE-EE-ON. (See also <i>vuarison</i> .)
clemency	Mercy or forgiveness, especially in choosing punishment. "The judge displayed clemency in letting the thief go free because it was his first offense." "The students begged the teacher for clemency when they were caught cheating on the final exam." Because clemency conveys mildness, the word is also used to describe the weather: clement weather is perfect for a bike ride; <i>inclement</i> weather is generally stormy.
clerisy	Intelligentsia; the collective group of educated people. In order to be a member of the clerisy, it helps to know what the word means.

*clinomania / coeval*

clinomania	The overwhelming desire to stay in bed. For some reason, mild cases seem to occur most often on rainy Sunday mornings. Say CLINN-OH-MAY-NEE-AH.
clinqant	Glittering, from gold or tinsel. Christmas trees are clinqant, as is Zsa Zsa Gabor. What an appropriate sound the word has: <i>CLINK-EHNT</i> .
clock	Decorations along the sides of socks or stockings. The little argyles that sock manufacturers are fond of weaving into men's socks are clocks. The next time someone scares you, you can say, "You scared the clocks off my socks!"
cloy	To overdo and become nauseating; may be used as a verb and an adjective. Candy that is too sugary may cloy; people who are unnecessarily sweet or overly sensitive are cloying.
cockalorum	A conceited, self-important, pretentious person. Be careful in your use of this word, or you'll become one.
coeval	Contemporary; of the same time period. Bell-bottoms and love beads are coeval, so are two 30-year-olds. Pronounced COH-EE-VAL.

- colloquy Conversation, more like a formal dialogue than a casual chat. The kind of thing that goes on between a talk show host and his guest, or between two speakers at a symposium; hence the academic word *colloquium*. One doesn't usually have a colloquy with a friend on the telephone. Pronounced CAHL-OH-KWEE.
- colophon Not a brand of cookware. The page at the end of a book that describes the typeface used. In this age of desktop publishing, they're coming back in style. Also a publishers' emblem or trademark. Say KAHL- AH-FAHN.
- compendious It may sound as if the word means "big" and "encyclopedic" but it really means the opposite: concise, expressed in compact form – like *Monarch Notes* of the classics.
- complaisant Obliging and eager to please. Even though they're pronounced the same, don't confuse with *complacent*, which means self-satisfied and smug. A *complacent* person would probably expect to be served by a *complaisant* person.

*concupiscenc*    *contumacious*

<i>e</i>	<i>l</i>	<p>A fancy way of saying sexual desire or lust, with undertones of fertility. Like pulchritude (see <i>pulchri' tude</i>), the word won't help you get a date. But if you're going to use it, pronounce it correctly: CON- CYOOP-/H-SENSE.</p>
concupiscence		
		<p>A formal way of expressing blood ties or kinship. It does not denote specific relationships (such as "sister" or "cousin"), but rather a family connection. A family tree traces consanguinity. It's pronounced CON-SANG-G WIN-JT-EE.</p>
consanguinity		
		<p>A regrettable situation that leads to embarrassment, such as begging off a date by claiming sickness and then bumping into the canceled date at a restaurant on the same night, or making two appointments for the same time and having both show up at once. Pronounced <i>KON-TRA-TON</i>.</p>
contretemps		
		<p>Stubbornly rebellious against authority – not just irreverent, but downright disobedient. A child who refuses to stop talking during class after being asked twice is contumacious. Say KAHN-TOOM-AY-SHUSS.</p>

*coruscate / crepuscular*

coruscate	Sparkling or gleaming. A lake's surface coruscates in the sunlight, so does a newly washed car. The word can also be used figuratively. Someone with a lot of sparkle possesses a coruscating wit.
cosset	To spoil by coddling or excessively pampering. You can cosset a child by carrying him instead of letting him walk.
cozen	To defraud or trick. Usually less serious than downright fraud. Scalpers cozen their clients by charging outrageous rates for last-minute tickets. Rhymes with <i>dozen</i> : CUZ-/N.
craven	Very cowardly, with a connotation of moral disapproval. A craven liar doesn't have the courage to admit the truth about something. Pronounced CRAY-VEN.
crepuscular	Lit by twilight; dusky. Though it has an ugly sound, the word usually evokes a faintly romantic darkness, such as "the mountains crepuscular in the setting sun." The lighting in certain dim restaurants is crepuscular. Pronounced CREH-PUSSK-U-LAR.

*curmudgeon | cynosure*

curmudgeon	A mean-spirited, ungenerous, irritable nasty-face who usually has no sense of humor. Hitler was evil. Scrooge was a curmudgeon.
cygnet	A young swan. Often used to describe a particularly beautiful young woman. It's pronounced SIG-NIT.
cynosure	The center of attention – usually a person who becomes the main attraction and directs everyone else's focus. Elizabeth Taylor at a cocktail party, for example. Pronounced <i>SYE-NEH-SHUR</i> .



# D

dactyl	A finger or a toe. You have twenty dactyls; most birds have six. Pterodactyls had three-toed feet (get it?). Rhymes with <i>fractal</i> .
dada	A movement of art that hypothesized, "since art is everything, everything is art." That's why there are urinals and baseballs on exhibit in art museums. Not limited to the visual arts; use <i>dada</i> to describe any approach that is silly, stupid or ridiculous. Assonant with <i>mama</i> (see <i>assonance</i> ).
daymare	Yes, this is a word, and it means an anxiety attack – kind of like a nightmare during the daytime.
dearth	A shortage or scarcity. Squirrels might have a dearth of nuts by the end of the winter. Single women might complain of the dearth of heterosexual single

*deciduous | decry*

men who are sensitive and willing to make a commitment.

**deciduous** Dropping off after a period of growth, such as leaves, teeth or hair. The opposite of a deciduous tree is an evergreen. Except for the rare deciduous evergreen tree, which confuses everything. It's pronounced DEH-SID-YOU'US.

**declassé** Low-class in appearance, manners or taste; the word is generally reserved for those sufficiently upper-class to consider calling others low-class. Also used by the upper class to describe fashion that has become dated. Pronounced DAY-CLASS-AY.

**decorous** Proper, elegant in behavior and attitude. The proper decorum at a wedding does not include making bird calls or doing your Rodney Dangerfield imitation (regardless of how good it is). Pronounced DECK-OR-US.

**decry** To put down someone or something; to speak or write about a situation in a way that reveals regret, outrage or anger. One decries pollution of the environment or a political injustice.

*de facto / demagogue*

- de facto** Actually existing; a matter of fact. If the president of the company is on his yacht, the vice president becomes the de facto leader of the company. On the other hand, if the president of the company is on the vice-president's yacht, he becomes the de facto captain. Say DEH FACT-OH.
- defenestration** To throw out the window – what you sometimes feel like doing with whining children. It seems that such an important-sounding word should mean something else, which is why people will be stunned when you use it properly. Pronounced DEE-FENN-EH-STRAY-SHUN.
- degage** Not emotionally involved; more of an emotional state than merely being intellectually objective. A friend listening to an argument between other friends is degage. An umpire or a referee or a judge is at least meant to be degage. It's pronounced DAY-GAH-JAY.
- demagogue** Usually refers to a politician or a leader who gains power by playing on the emotions of his constituents; there's an element of charisma and danger in it. Adolf Hitler was a demagogue. Pronounced DEM-AH-GOG.

*demijohn | deracinate*

- demijohn            A narrow-necked bottle with wicker basket-work woven around it, like the empty bottles of Chianti that become candleholders on red-checked tablecloths in Italian restaurants.
- demimondaine    A fallen woman; a woman who has lost her good reputation by a foolish or indiscreet action. Pronounced DEMJ-MON-DANE.
- depredate            To plunder. Rome suffered depredation at the hands of Attila the Hun.
- de profundis    A Latin phrase for "out of the depths." Someone is pulled *de profundis* from sleep, meditation or thought. It has nothing to do with "profound," which makes the word an excellent excuse for why you weren't paying attention to whomever was speaking to you. Pronounced DAY PRO-FUND-ISS.
- deracinate            To uproot in a big sense. Plants are uprooted; families or whole cultures are deracinated. The African slave trade deracinated thousands of persons. Pronounced DEE-RASS-IN-ATE.

*descry / detente*

descry	To see or discover something, after careful observation. A flock of birds on the horizon on a foggy day can be descried. Can mean literally seeing something with your eyes or intellectually comprehending something that is difficult. It should not be confused with <i>decry</i> , which means to put down or disparage. Pronounced <i>DI-SKRY</i> .
desultory	Casually arranged, without particular or apparent structure. Clothes strewn on a bed lie there in a desultory fashion. Couples going nowhere in particular may stroll desultorily on a warm summer night; conversations about nothing in particular may go on in a desultory way. The word has nothing to do with depression, which some think it might. Pronounced <i>DEH-SUHL-TI/H-REE</i> .
detente	A relaxation of tensions between nations. Popularized by Henry Kissinger, this is a great concept and a great word to use in other situations. Coke and Pepsi could end a price war by agreeing to a detente; what's the point of mutual destruction? Pronounced <i>DAY- TAHNT</i> .

*detritus | devil's tattoo*

- detritus** Both a literal and figurative way of saying "debris." Empty soda cans on a beach are detritus; so are street punks who are looking for trouble. Pronounced DEH-TRY-TUS.
- de trop** From the French "too much," the word means overdone or excessive in a figurative sense. Wearing too much jewelry while working in a homeless shelter would be *de trop*. Unfortunately, using the word *de trop* is probably *de trop* in most situations and should be accompanied by an appropriate expression of mock snobbery. Pronounce it DEH TROH.
- deus ex machina** Originally in classical Greek drama, the god that came down to earth to solve a problem that couldn't be solved by any logical turn of events. It now refers to any chance event that intervenes and prevents a disaster from occurring. Sort of like a miracle, but not as good. Pronounced DAY-oos EX MA-KEEN-AH.
- devil's tattoo** A bit obscure, but poetic, way of describing a nervous hand or foot tapping. Drumming your fingers while waiting for an important phone call is a way of making the devil's tattoo. Sometimes shortened to just "tattoo."

*diacritical | diglot*

diacritical	A somewhat scientific way of saying "distinctive." One of the diacritical differences between a bird and an octopus is that a bird has two legs and an octopus has eight arms. It's pronounced DYE-A-KRIT-I-KLE .
diaphanous	Usually used to describe fabric, the word means sheer, delicate and flowing. Some sexy nightgowns are diaphanous, as are angel's wings and nylon curtains. Pronounced D/E-AFF-AH-NUSS.
diatribe	A bitter criticism or denunciation; an abusive dispute. Say DIE-UH-TRYBE. (See also <i>polemic</i> .)
dieresis	The two dots placed on top of the second of two vowels that indicates that they are supposed to be pronounced separately, as in cooperate. It's pronounced DYE-ER-JH-SIS.
diglot	Someone who is fluent in two languages is diglot. Can be both an adjective and a noun; it's just a different way of saying bilingual. Polyglot is the next step up. Pronounced DYE-GLOT.

*dilatory / diphthong*

dilatory	Moving slowly and causing delay. A turtle moves in a dilatory way. The word has nothing to do with <i>dilating</i> , which is what your eye doctor does to your pupils, or <i>depilatory</i> , which is a fancy way to say Nair. Pronounced DILL-AH-TOR-EE.
dilettante	A person with a superficial interest in art or any branch of knowledge; a dabbler. A dilettante is a person who doesn't hold a job and spends the days browsing through museums, taking art classes, renting old movies and cooking meals with exotic ingredients. Say DJLL-EH-TAHNT.
dingbat	Though Archie Bunker used this word as a form of playful insult, the word really means a piece of ornamental border, such as a trim of contrasting wallpaper or a decorative piece of type. Calling someone a dingbat is tantamount to calling them a bit of decoration.
diphthong	No, it's not a type of sandal. It's a syllable containing two letters used to make a single sound. For example the ou in sound. Pronounced DIF-THONG, not <i>DIP-THONG</i> .



*discreet | dissimulate*

discreet	Not to be confused with <i>discrete</i> , which is pronounced the same way but spelled differently. Discreet means being careful about what you say and the way you act, good at keeping other people's secrets; discrete means separate or distinct. If you are discreet, you do not talk about your neighbor's affairs. Grains of flour are not discrete – you can't eat just one – but dinner rolls are.
disingenuous	Pretending to be innocent or naive, which has the effect of being insincere. Smiling when you've been caught with your hand in the cookie jar. Has nothing to do with ingenious, by the way. It's pronounced D/s-EN-JEN'YOU'US.
dissemble	Not the opposite of assemble. To give a false or misleading appearance to something. To lie. Many investigative reporters enjoy asking tough questions to crooked businesspeople and watching them squirm and dissemble.
dissimulate	A little more subtle than outright lying, it means to pretend that something is other than it is. If the attorney general asks, "Did your company dump this

*dithyramb | doyen*

- toxic waste?" the lying CEO would say, "No." The dissimulating CEO would say, "What waste?"
- dithyramb      A wild and emotional outpouring in speech, song or writing. Naughty children provoke dithyrambs from their mothers. The tragic portions of operas are dithyrambs, too. It's pronounced DITH-EH-RAM.
- docent              A museum guide; the person who walks you through the antiquities room in a museum and explains how Egyptians built pyramids. Pronounced DOE-SENT.
- dotard              An old, feeble-minded person is a dotard. Almost certainly no longer politically correct, the word should be used with great care. Pronounce it
- doughty            Hearty, brave and courageous (as distinguished from dowdy, which means plain or unattractive). Pronounced DOWT-EE.
- doyen              The leader or commander; a *doyenne* if it's a woman. A successful artist might become the doyen of the art world and then, if she's hip enough, the doyen of the social world. It's pronounced DOI-EN.

*draconian | dystopia*

draconian	Drastic; harsh; inhuman. Cutting off the fingers of pickpockets is considered by many to be draconian punishment. It dramatically cuts down on recidivism, however. (See also <i>recidivate</i> .) It's pronounced DRAH-COH-NEE-AN.
dragoon	To force or coerce. Not a form of pirate money, which was <i>dubloons</i> . Pirates must have dragooned their victims to get their dubloons.
dulcet	Pleasant; melodious; sweet to the eye or ear. Usually used in conjunction with the word "tone." A nightingale sings in dulcet tones. (See also <i>mellifluous</i> .) Pronounce the word DULL-SET.
dystopia	The <b>opposite</b> of a <b>Utopia</b> ; a <b>place</b> where everything goes wrong. Say it DISS-TOH-PEE-AH.



# E

- ecce homo      The words of Pilate when presenting Christ to his accusers, the phrase means "Behold the man—here he is." It has come to be used for any vaguely similar contemporary circumstances. A scruffy freshman comes home from college with a sack full of dirty laundry and announces sarcastically, "Ecce homo." Pronounced *ECK-AY HOE-MOE*.
- echolalia      The involuntary repeating of someone's words or syllables right after they are uttered; a human echo chamber. Often associated with autism. Pronounced *ECK-OH-LAY-LEE-UH*.
- ecru      Cream-colored. A little more tan than off-white, but a lot lighter than beige. Lace curtains are often ecru. Pronounced *AY-CREW* or *EH-CREW*.

*ectomorphic / effete*

- ectomorphic Literally means "skinny," but the word more accurately describes a personality type. Abbott was the ectomorph, Costello was the endomorph. Ectomorphs are generally considered type-A personalities.
- ecumenical Though it has religious implications and is often associated with the Christian church, the word is used to mean "worldwide" or "universal." An ecumenical council on hunger would deal with the problem of hunger around the globe. Pronounced EHK-YOU-MEN-IH-CAL .
- edacious Devouring or consuming. Someone with an edacious appetite for books reads all the time; someone with an edacious appetite for food is probably fat. Don't confuse with *audacious*, which means having chutzpah. Pronounced ID-AY-SHUSS.
- effete Various meanings include sterile and depleted, but the most common usage conveys decadent, fey or affected. An effete snob is someone who shuns anything remotely commonplace; an effete person

*efficacious | effulge*

	indulges in rare or obscure pleasures. Pronounced <i>EH-FEET</i> .
efficacious	Efficient; effective. It might take a little longer to do a job efficaciously, but the desired effect is perfectly obtained. Ideal when used to describe medical treatment. Pronounced EFF-EH-KA Y-SHUSS.
effluence	A flowing out or streaming forth. The waste that comes from sewage-treatment plants is effluence. "An effluence of people poured from the stadium when the ball game was over, creating quite a traffic jam." Sounds like <i>affluence</i> with an <i>eh</i> at the beginning: pronounced <i>EF-LOO-ENCE</i> .
effluvium	A bad smell, usually invisible, often associated with waste-treatment facilities. Bad breath qualifies as effluvium. The smell of apple pie does not. Say EH-FLU'VEE'UM.
effulge	To shine brightly, both literally and figuratively. A child's face effulges at the sight of a toy store; the surface of a lake is effulgent in brilliant sunshine.

*egregious I embracery*

egregious	Originally meaning just plain "exceptional," egregious has come to mean not just bad, but outstandingly bad. When things are worse than awful, they are egregious. An egregious error would be calling your present lover by an old lover's name. Beating child for bad behavior is egregious punishment. Pronounced EH-GREE-juss.
elan eldritch	Dash or real style; charisma plus skill. David Niven had elan. Pronounced AY-LAN.
eleemosynary	Weird, eerie. "His eldritch neighbor continued to leave voodoo dolls all over his front lawn." A good way for little boys to describe their little sisters.
elephantine	Charitable or supported by a charity. The United Way is an eleemosynary institution. Often used in legalese to distinguish from "for-profit." Pronounced ELL-EH-MAH-SINN-AR-EE .
embracery	Like an elephant, not in size but in demeanor; lumbering and clumsy.  An effort to change someone's opinion, a judge or jury in particular, by bribes or threats.



*embrangle I e n c e p h a l e s t h e n i a*

- embrangle** Sounds like a combination of *embroil* and *entangle*, and that's more or less what it means – to confuse or perplex. After hearing both sides of the case, the judge's understanding of what happened was so embrangled that she couldn't decide who was guilty.
- emeritus** No longer actively employed, but kept on the staff as an honor. A professor emeritus probably doesn't teach any courses but gets paid to make a guest lecture or two. Pronounced EH-MER-IT-US.
- eminence grise** The power behind the throne – for example, in the '80s, Nancy Reagan (or even Nancy Reagan's astrologer). Literally means "gray eminence," if you care. Pronounced AY-MEE-NANS GREEZ.
- emolument** Not a skin cream. This is the pay or profit you receive from your job, or more likely, from a political office. Sometimes used as a nice way to say "kickback." Say EH-MAHL-YEH-MENT.
- encephalesthenia** Exhaustion due to emotional stress rather than lack of sleep or physical work. A person who deals with an impending lawsuit by taking naps constantly is

*encomium | enervate*

	probably suffering from encephalesthenia. Pronounced EN-SEF-A-LUS-THEEN-EE-A.
encomium	A eulogy that sums up the good qualities of a dead person. It's come to mean any ceremonious praise that celebrates a person dead or alive. Pronounced EN-CO'MEE'UM.
encyclical	A letter from the pope to all his bishops. It has come to be used figuratively to refer to any very important letter. The CEO of a company could send a memo to all the division heads, who might sarcastically refer to it as the boss's encyclical. Pronounced EN-SICK'UCK'AL.
endemic	Native or indigenous to a region or place. Cypress trees are endemic to the American South; muggings are endemic to large urban environments.
enervate	Even though this word sounds as if it denotes "to excite or make nervous," it means the opposite – to

- lecture can be very enervating, making an audience fall asleep. Pronounced ENN-ER-VATE.
- enigma      A puzzling matter that cannot be easily explained; perhaps the most famous use of the word is to describe the Mona Lisa's smile. A nice way to say that you have absolutely no idea – "It's an enigma." Say *EN-IG'MA*.
- ennui      From the French word for "boredom." It means indifferent; bored in a world-weary sense. The Duke of York suffered from it – too much money, not enough to do. Pronounced AHN-WEE.
- enormity      Contrary to popular belief, the word has nothing to do with size, but with horribleness or awfulness. The enormity of a situation – like starvation in Africa – describes the extent of the tragedy.
- eonism      A technical way of saying transvestism. A man who dresses in women's clothing and adopts feminine postures is exhibiting eonism. Pronounced EE-ON-ISM.

*ephemera / epigram*

- ephemera            Something lasting only a short time. Though often used to denote triviality, ephemera involves time or lifespan, not importance. An earthquake is ephemeral, as is youth. Pronounced EH-FEM-EH-RA.
- epicene             The word has nothing to do with the center of an earthquake; that's an *epicenter*. Epicene means reflecting both male and female characteristics; androgynous. The word has also acquired a secondary meaning as effeminate or feeble. Pronounced EPP-EH-SEEN.
- epigone             A disciple, not famous in his own right, of a famous writer. If there were a good example, he wouldn't be a proper epigone because he'd be famous. Pronounced EPP-I-GOHNE.
- epigram             A witty little remark such as: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." Oscar Wilde was famous for his epigrams. The quotation at the beginning of a book, which can sometimes be an epigram, is known as an *epigraph*. Also distinguish epigram from *aphorism*, which is a brief, but not necessarily witty, expression.

epiphany	The religious meaning is a Christian feast celebrated on January 6 to commemorate the appearance of Christ, but the word is also used to mean a sudden realization of the true meaning of something. The light bulb that appears over Newton's head in a
e pluribus Unum	cartoon demonstrates an epiphany. The light bulb in that cartoon is also an anachronism (see <i>anachronism</i> ). Pronounced EH-PIFF-ENN-EE.  The Latin words that comprise the official U. S. motto. They are included in every official seal of the United States, and you may also see them on dollar bills. The phrase means, "one out of the many," as in one country out of many states.
eponymous	Giving one's name to a book, a record or an organiza-

*equivocal / ersatz*

table? Because equitable implies fairness. The distribution might be equal, but it might not be fair.

Pronounced *EHK-WA-BULL*.

equivocal

Something that's equivocal has several meanings and is therefore capable of being interpreted in several ways. Answers that are equivocal are usually intentionally so; when someone doesn't want to commit himself, he would most likely give an equivocal answer. More often heard as the antonym, unequivocal, meaning "leaving no doubt."  
Pronounced *eh-QUIV-AH'CULL*.

ergasiophobia Fear of, or aversion, to work. What Maynard G.

Krebbs suffered in the Dobie Gillis show. If you're not too lazy to pronounce it, it's *EHR-GAZ-EE-OH-FOH-BEE-A*.

*eruct / esprit d'escalier*

eruct	An extremely erudite way of saying "belch." One way to remember the word is to think of <i>erupt</i> : "After the very large meal, the man leaned back in his chair and eructed." Pronounced EE-RUCT.
eschew	To avoid or shun something because you find it loathsome or unbearable. One can eschew on physical grounds, as in eschewing a wool coat in July, or in terms of taste, as in eschewing displays of physical affection in front of dinner guests. It's pronounced ESS'CHEW (like a sneeze).
esprit de corps	A feeling of unification or commonly held beliefs or attitudes among a group of people. The phrase can be used to describe a feeling of excitement and belonging that comes from being part of a successful group. Apple Computer had it for a while; so did the Peace Corps. Pronounced ESS-PREE DUH CORE.
esprit d'escalier	

You probably never knew that there was a word for

snappy retort to D'Artagnan until I was already up the stairs." The next time you find yourself speechless, just say, "When I come up with the esprit d'escalier, I'll give you a call." Pronounced ESS-PREE DEH-SCAHL-YAY.

One of those pieces of furniture (often referred to by pompous antiques dealers and interior decorators) that you feel too embarrassed to admit you've never heard of. It's a group of open shelves used to store knickknacks. Pronounce it AY-TAJ-A/R.

The basic characteristics of a person, group, institution or culture; not a form of anesthesia. "The ethos of '60s America was defined by TV." Pronounced EE-THOS.

The term for the unfortunate man who's been castrated. Traditionally employed by sheiks to protect their harem from loyal servants. Now used to describe someone who *acts* as if he'd been castrated. Pronounced YOU-NICK.



euphonious	Pleasant to listen to. The word can describe words or music. It's sometimes confused with <i>cacophonous</i> , which means the opposite. Pronounced YOU-FONE-EE-US.
evanesce	The word sounds like it means "bubbly," but it really means "to fade slowly." Champagne doesn't evanesce; sunsets do. Pronounced EH-VUH-NESS.
exacerbate	To incrementally increase the irritation or annoyance of something, as in: "Scratching his poison ivy did little but exacerbate the itching." Pronounced EX-ASS-UR-BATE.
excogitate	More than just thinking about an issue, to <i>excogitate</i> is to carefully reason it out. Pronounced EX-COJ-IH-TATE.
excoriate	To peel or take the skin from. The word is generally used figuratively. You peel an apple, but you excoriate someone for screwing up. Pronounced EX-KOR-EE-ATE.

*exculpate / expatiate*

exculpate	To free from blame. Exculpation doesn't mean forgiveness; it means that you were never guilty to begin with, and now your name is cleared. Pronounced <i>EX'KUL'PATE</i> .
exigency	An unexpected set of circumstances – but not synonymous with emergency. Urgent needs or demands arising from a set of circumstances. "I will definitely not raise taxes and positively not cut Social Security. Unless, of course, an exigency arises." Pronounced <i>EK-SEH-JEN-SEE</i> .
exordium	A more precise way to describe the introduction to a speech, presentation or book. Readers (such as yourself?) often skip over the preface, but they'll certainly spend the time to read the exordium if it is clearly labeled. Pronounced <i>EGG-ZORD-EE-UM</i> .
exoteric	Appropriate for general consumption. A lovely twist on the commonly used <i>esoteric</i> . If goat cheese is esoteric, then cheddar is exoteric.
expatiate	To expand upon, as in a speech that goes on to explain the causes and symptoms of an event. (Not to

*expeditious / extirpate*

be confused with people who emigrate to a foreign land, like Hemingway when he moved to Paris in the 1920s. That's *expatriate*.) Pronounced ECKS-PAY-SHEE-ATE.

expeditious

Quick and speedy in the sense of "most rapidly accomplished." An expeditious solution to feeling nauseatingly drunk is to pass out. Pronounced EKS-PEH-DISH'USS.

extirpate

To uproot or completely destroy. An earthquake may extirpate a small village.



# F

fabulist	A liar. If you want to accuse someone of not telling you the truth without instantaneously enraging them, call them a fabulist. It sounds gentler. Pronounced FAB-YOOLIST.
facetious	Flippant. When a tourist asks, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" the facetious New Yorker answers, "Practice, practice, practice." Say FASS-EE-SHUSS.
facinorous	Exceptionally evil or wicked. Not just the Witch of the West; more along the lines of Satan. It's pronounced FASS-IN-OR-US.
fakir	An Arabic word for a guy who makes his living charming snakes or lying on a bed of nails. Not pronounced like <i>faker</i> , which might be appropriate – instead, say FEH-KEER.

*farinaceous / faux pas*

farinaceous	Made from flour or meal and containing a lot of starch, such as bread, pasta or cereal. Vegetarians frequently eat farinaceous meals. Pronounced FARRAH-NAY-SHUS.
farrago	Not a dance – that's a <i>fandango</i> . A farrago is a jumbled hodgepodge, a mixture. If you haven't cleaned your closet in years, it's likely to be filled with a farrago of old winter coats, dirty socks, deflated balls and lonesome single shoes. Pronounced FAH-
fastuous	Overbearingly snotty, pretentious, or arrogant. Not to be confused with fatuous (see <i>fatuous</i> ), although fastuous people can be fatuous. Be kind to the fastuous among us, because they certainly suffer from
fatuous	Foolish or inane. Clowns aren't fatuous, they're silly. A boorish drunk or a fawning suitor can easily become fatuous, however. Say FATCH-OO-US.
faux pas	From the French for "false step." This is a wonderful word for a social blunder, an error of etiquette. If you

*feral / flcLneur*

pronounce your boss's name incorrectly while introducing his speech at a large convention, you have committed a faux pas. Say FOH PAH.

- feral                      Animalistic; existing in a wild state. With his ripped shirt and slight drool, Robert seemed almost feral. Pronounced *FEER-AL* or *FEHR-AL*.
- filtrum                    That little canal that leads from your nose to your mouth. You knew there was a name for it, and now you know what it is.
- flaccid                    Limp or flabby, like the stems of wilted flowers or the thighs of people who eat too much and don't exercise. The preferred pronunciation is *FLAK-SID*, although most people say *FLASS-ID*.
- flaneur                    A word that comes from the French and means "idler" or "loafer," such as someone who sits around all day eating croissants and smoking Gauloises and not doing much of anything else. Not the ideal mate. It's pronounced *FLA-NYUR*.

*fletcher / flotsam*

fletcher	A person who makes arrows. There's not much use for this word today, but you never know when you might run into Robin Hood and need some ammunition.
florid	The word has two equally used meanings: "rosy or ruddy" and also "flowery or elaborate." The man with the florid complexion sitting behind the bar composed a poem in florid language about the woman he loves. Pronounced <i>FLOOR-ID</i> .
floromancy	The belief that flowers have feelings and will respond to the way they are treated. People who talk to their plants and play music for them to help them grow most certainly believe in floromancy.
flotsam	Flotsam is the floating remains of a sunken or wrecked ship. <i>Jetsam</i> is the floating stuff purposely thrown overboard to keep a ship from sinking in the first place. In our modern age, the two words are generally used together, as in, "This antique store carries a collection of the flotsam and jetsam of



flout	To mock or show contempt: "The student flouted university rules by coming to class naked to the waist." It is important to distinguish <i>flout</i> from <i>flaunt</i> . <i>Haunt</i> is slightly more positive. You can flaunt wealth by wearing a diamond bracelet to play tennis, for example. <i>Flout</i> rhymes with <i>doubt</i> .
flubdub	You could also say claptrap, or bunkum. But there are times when only <i>flubdub</i> is adequate to describe a ridiculous, poorly-thought-out, bombastic argument.
flump	To drop with a heavy thud. Sort of the noise you make when you collapse in a chair or throw the laundry on the bed. Talk about onomatopoeia (see <i>onomatopoeia</i> )!
foozle	To bungle or goof up. Not recommended in referring to truly serious goof-ups, like erasing your hard disk. Better for describing the acts of a waiter who brings every single person the wrong dish at dinner. It's one of those words that makes you smile every time you use it. Rhymes with <i>boozle</i> .

*foray | founder*

foray	An attack or raid. Though the word has a military connotation, it is often used metaphorically. One can make a foray into astrophysics by buying a basic text and trying to understand the principles.
forte	Has two meanings, though only one appears in everyday conversation. In classical music, forte means "play this loudly!" It's pronounced <i>FOUR-TAY</i> since the word comes from the Italian. However, the usual meaning of forte is "strong point" as in, "Bad decisions are his forte" or "Cooking Cajun food is my forte." But if you want to sound smart, be sure to say the word correctly. It's pronounced <i>fort</i> with no vowel sound on the end.
fortuitous	Depending on luck or chance; accidental. Fortuitous circumstances may help you to win some money, but they can also cause you to lose a bet. Don't use the word to convey only good luck—it describes things that are up to chance, good or bad. The correct pronunciation is <i>FOR-TOO-JT-US</i> .
founder	To be wrecked and to sink. Mostly it's ships that founder, but you could use the word figuratively.

*fractious | fulsome*

Many people *founded* in the stock market on Black Monday, for example. The word is often confused with *flounder*, which in addition to being a fish, means "to move clumsily."

fractious

Irritable, whiny, quarrelsome and rebellious, a word that best applies to the behavior of children or to adults who are acting like children. Pronounced FRACK-SHISS.

frisson

A shiver, as from a thrill or a fright. A frisson passes through an audience watching the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The word is best used as a reaction to situations that intend to scare, such as roller coaster rides or horror films. It's actually a nice way to say goosebumps. Pronounced FREE-SON.

fulgent

Very bright; shining or radiant. A good word for describing things like the spaceship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or the full moon. Pronounced FUL-JENT.

fulsome

The word originally meant "disgustingly excessive" or "copious." It has evolved to connote disgusting,

*fungible*

tasteless and generally repellent. It's often confused to mean the opposite. A fulsome beauty exceeds the bounds of moderation and is probably not pretty at all. It's a good word to use when you want to insult someone covertly.

fungible

Easily interchangeable with something else; the opposite of unique. One loaf of bread is fungible with another. In a recession, some employers find certain employees fungible. It's pronounced *FUN-JI-BLE*.

# G

gaffe	A social blunder, just like a faux pas (see <i>faux pas</i> ). If you meet the president and call him Your Royal Highness, that's a gaffe. Pronounced GAFF.
gainsay	To contradict what another person says, as in: "I gainsay your insistence that she is brilliant; in fact, I don't find her smart at all."
galactoid	This is a nice word because the word has nothing to do with outer space—it means "milk-like." The only overlap in the intended and misused meanings then would be the Milky Way. Coffee creamers are galactoid. So is the blood of many insects.
garrulous	Excessively talkative in a silly, chattering way. Often misused to mean just plain friendly and willing to talk, which is <i>loquacious</i> . Save <i>garrulous</i> to describe

*gatefold / germane*

relatives who call frequently and make it impossible to get off the telephone no matter how hard you try. Pronounced GAH-RUH-LUSS.

gatefold This is a large page, folded and bound into a book or magazine. Examples are those expensive car or perfume advertisements in magazines or, most frequently, the maps included in certain books. The centerfold in *Playboy* is, as it sounds, a centrally located gatefold.

gelid A word for icy or frozen. It is rarely used figuratively. A haughty woman might have an icy stare, but gelid should be reserved for lakes in the winter or desserts offered by street vendors in the summer. Pronounce it *JELL-ID*.

genre Category. Similar items belong to the same genre. Science fiction is a genre of literature. Don't say GEN-REH; the word's pronounced ZHEAN-RAH (that's *zhean* as in Captain Jean-Luc Picard).

germane Another way of saying relevant, pertinent or appropriate, but strictly reserved for referring to ideas. You

couldn't say that wearing a certain pair of shoes is germane to a particular set of clothes. The topic of sexual harassment is germane to a discussion about rights in the workplace, however. In a conversation about classical music, James Brown is probably not germane. Pronounced JERM-AJN.

**gerrymander** The reorganization of the electoral districts of a state to give one political party an advantage. (Either you need this word or you don't.) Pronounced JER-RY-MAN-DER.

**gestalt** The word comes from a school of psychology, but has come to mean a way of describing the big picture of a situation. Add together all the pieces and sum them up in a feeling. This feeling can range from the complicated way our brain solves problems to the combination of smells, feelings and sensations you get during a massage. Pronounced GEH-SHTALT.

**gild** To coat with gold. When used figuratively, as in "gilding the lily," gild means adding refinement or ornamentation to something that doesn't need it. Pronounced like *guild*.

*gimme caps | Gordian knot*

gimme caps	The ubiquitous baseball-style caps that bear various logos in front are called gimme caps. The word is said to come from farmers who are fond of asking tractor salesmen wearing these caps with their company name, "Gimme one of those caps."
glean	To gather or absorb information. You can glean information on nuclear weapons by reading secret plans, or glean a bit about an executive's personality by the way she shakes hands. Rhymes with <i>clean</i> .
gobbet	Another way of saying morsel or lump, as in: "Please put a gobbet of whipped cream on top of my pecan pie." Say <i>GOB-BIT</i> .
googol	The number 1, followed by 100 zeros. This is the biggest number with a name (not counting the googolplex, which is cheating). It might be nice to offer someone you love a googol kisses.
Gordian knot	An apparently unsolvable problem. Alexander (before he was <i>the Great</i> ) was presented with a rope containing a huge knot, and told that the first man to untie it would rule Europe. He took out his sword



*gossamer / grand guignol*

and cut it in half. The word is commonly used to describe any complex problem begging for a drastic solution.

**gossamer** Originally a cobweb, now the word describes any translucent, wispy object. The *Gossamer Albatross* was the first pedal-powered aircraft – so named because of its fragile gossamer wings. Pronounced GOSS-AH-M URR.

Slender and graceful, such as a fawn, a gazelle or a ballet dancer. It's pronounced GRASS-ILL.

**gracile** This is the word for any sign or letter which signifies a word, such as &. (and), \$ (dollars) or @ (at). Say GRAM-AH-LOG.

**grammatalogue** Connoting a drama with strains of horror. It's the kind of word people like to use metaphorically. A difficult divorce or the cruel way someone was fired from a job might be described as a *grand guignol*. Pronounced GRAND GEEN-YOL.

**grand guignol**

*gregarious / gudgeon*

gregarious	Friendly. Occasionally used to imply insincerity, gregarious should be reserved for those that are truly outgoing and friendly. Rhymes with <i>precarious</i> .
griffin	A mythical beast with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Not the sort of animal you'd want to see flying over your Miata if the top were down.
grimalkin	It sounds like some form of medieval clothing, perhaps a vest for holding arrows, but it means an old female cat. A nice way to affectionately refer to one's pet. Pronounced GRIM-ALL-KEN.
grommet	A small, metal-reinforced hole, especially in a sail or other piece of canvas. Used to attach ropes or other tie-downs.
grum	Like it sounds: grim, glum or surly. It's got a nice undertone of grumpy that comes across with the pronunciation. If your car breaks down on the third lap of the Indy 500, you have the right to act grum.
gudgeon	An easy mark, someone who is duped without effort. The guys who play three-card monte on the street are

*gullible | gustatory*

just waiting for a gudgeon to come along so they can beat him and make a quick twenty bucks. Though the word sounds a bit archaic, it has a nice lumbering sound. Also a metal pivot—see *pintle*.

gullible

Often misused, this isn't really a word. It's not in the dictionary. (Got ya! Sorry, but we couldn't resist!)

gunkhole

Though it sounds like a noun, this word is really a verb which means to sail slowly along a coastline, stopping along the way in quiet ports. To gunkhole down the East Coast to the Florida Keys would make a very relaxing vacation, provided you're not the type who gets seasick.

gunwale

The top of the side of a boat (where the rail might be). Especially used in referring to small boats such as canoes. Originally used to describe the place where you'd rest your gun (probably for shooting fish, or some other sporting activity). Pronounced *GUN-ELL*.

gustatory

Tasting. A gustatory menu in a fancy restaurant allows you to try lots of different dishes. Say *GUS- TAH-TOR-EE*.

*gynarchy*

**gynarchy**

Government by a woman or by women. Not to be confused with *matriarchy*, which refers to a family or tribe headed by women. Until recently, Great Britain was a gynarchy. Ironically, pronounced GUY-NARK-EE.

# H

- hajj                      A pilgrimage to Mecca made at least once by pious Muslims. Can be used figuratively to refer to any pilgrimage. Many senior citizens make their annual hajj to Florida in the winter, for example. Pronounced HAH/.
- halcyon                The word derives from an ancient fabled bird that bred during the winter solstice and charmed the winds and seas, calming them during that period. It has simply come to mean calm, tranquil, and happy. People often refer to "the halcyon days" when they are feeling nostalgic about an easier or more prosperous time in their lives. It's pronounced HAL-SEE-ON.
- halidom                A holy place, thing, or sanctuary, such as a chapel or church. Halidome can also be spelled with an e on the end, and it's pronounced HAL-IH-DOME.

*h a n d s e l / h a v e l o c k*

handsel	Not Gretel's brother; there's no <i>d</i> in his name. A gift or present that is meant to bring good luck, such as a bottle of champagne to the owner of a new restaurant. Pronounced HAND-SELL.
harbinger	A person, thing or event that foreshadows the arrival of something. The first robin is a harbinger of spring; the sight of billboards for hundreds of miles is a harbinger of Wall Drug in South Dakota. It's pronounced <i>HAR-BIN'JER</i> , not HAR-BJNG-ER.
harridan	A bad-tempered old woman; a hag. <i>Harridan</i> could be used to describe your eighth-grade history teacher, a nasty neighbor or the wicked witch in a fairy tale. Pronounced HA-RIH-DEN.
haruspex	In ancient Rome, a fortuneteller who predicted the future by reading sheep entrails. What a great word to describe a trend analyst who doesn't know what he's talking about.
havelock	A cloth covering for a cap which has a flap to protect the back of the neck from the sun – the kind of thing Lawrence of Arabia wore. Players on outdoor urban

*hedonist / hegira*

	<p>basketball courts wear havelocks today. Pronounced <i>HAVE-LOK</i>.</p>
hedonist	<p>A person addicted to things that give pleasure or happiness. A hedonist puts chocolate ice cream <i>and</i> hot fudge on a flourless chocolate cake, or spends class time sunbathing while attending the University of Miami. Pronounced HE-DUN-IST.</p>
hegemony	<p>This word frequently crops up in academic texts, and means political and/or economic leadership, as in one country over another or one state over another. Japan has hegemony over the United States in the consumer electronics industry. Pronounced HEH- / EM-EN-EE.</p>
hegira	<p>A flight or escape from one situation to another that offers better circumstances. It often refers to the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D., but it may be used metaphorically, as in making a hegira to a job that provides better pay and more interesting work. Say HE-JIH-RA.</p>

*hermaphrodite / heuristic*

hermaphrodite	This is a human being or an animal that has both male and female sex organs. Do not confuse with an <i>androgynous</i> , someone who exhibits both male and female sexual manners and traits. There are many androgynous people in the world, but very few hermaphrodites.
heterodox	A person or a belief that is not in accordance with established orthodox belief. Heterodox is generally used to refer to religion but can be used more broadly. For example, a Catholic who maintains heterodox beliefs may support the abortion movement. A professor at a conservative university who has heterodox ideas may cancel all classes in favor of life experience internships and private conferences. Pronounced HETT-ERR-OH-DOX.
heteronym	A word spelled like another, but with a different sound and meaning, such as <i>lead</i> and <i>lead</i> , <i>read</i> and <i>read</i> . Pronounced HET-ERR-OH-NIM.
heuristic	The hints, techniques and concepts we use to make decisions. How does a doctor decide what drug to



red one? An important concept, because understanding the heuristics that we use to make a decision can help us learn how to do it better. Pronounced HYUR- ISS-TIC.

hiatus	A break in a career or routine. Optimistic TV producers talk about a show going on hiatus, when they really mean that it has been canceled. Pronounce it HJ-AY-TI/SS. (See also <i>lacuna</i> .)
highbinder	This is a word for swindler or confidence man. It's a particularly nice word because you can accuse someone of being a highbinder without insulting him – he probably won't know what the word means! (See also <i>gudgeon</i> .)
hirsute	Hairy. A man in need of a shave is hirsute. You would not describe a sticky or hairy situation as hirsute. Pronounced <i>HEER-SUIT</i> .
histrionic	Overly dramatic; so excessively theatrical as to be unbelievable. A teenager who sobbingly declares that he will die if he is cut from the tennis team is engaging in histrionics. Pronounced HISS-TREE-ON-IC.

*hoary / homeopathy*

hoary	Gray- or white-haired with age. There is no insult in this word. Old Man Time has a hoary beard. Santa Claus does, too. Rhymes with <i>story</i> .
Hobson's choice	Thomas Hobson was not a philosopher, but a 16th- 17th century English stable owner who insisted that his clients take the horse closest to the door. The phrase, named after Hobson, means a decision that offers no alternative. In short – take it or leave it.
hoi polloi	People often use this word to mean the fancy people in a society, but it means the opposite. The hoi polloi are the common people, the vulgar masses whom Marie Antoinette dismissed by suggesting that they eat cake. It's pronounced HOY <i>POLL-OY</i> .
homeopathy	Though the word has come to be used to mean natural medicine, such as ginseng or flower therapy, as opposed to pharmaceuticals, it means treating disease by administering minute doses of drugs that normally produce symptoms like those of the disease. Pronounced HOE-MEE-OP-UH-THEE.

*h o m i l y / h o o d o o*

homily	A sermon or a moral lecture. Priests deliver homilies on living morally; coaches deliver homilies on living cleanly; parents often deliver homilies on both. Pronounced HOM-/LL-EE.
homunculus	Literally meaning "little man," this word can be used to refer to anybody who's more than 20 years old and less than five feet tall, but the word is more commonly used figuratively to mean "the little man inside the box making decisions." Often used in philosophy as a slick way to describe consciousness or computers. Your mind is nothing more than a skull with a homunculus inside, making the decisions (who's inside the homunculus? another homunculus!). Pronounced <i>HO-MUNG-KYUH-LUSS</i> .
honorarium	A token payment made for professional services, generally less than should be charged. When a congressman gives a speech, the conference organizers don't degrade him by paying him – they give him an honorarium.
hoodoo	A nice folksy way of saying bad luck; kind of like voodoo with a vengeance. He suffered a bolt of

*hortatory / huggermugger*

- hoodoo last month when he lost his job, cracked up his car, *and* misplaced his dry-cleaning ticket.
- hortatory Urging someone to do something. The sergeant made a hortatory speech in an effort to convince the boys to join the army. Pronounced HOR-TAH-TOR-EE.
- hot spur A rash, impetuous person who is volatile, hot-tempered, and easily spurred to violence. There's some generosity in the insult; it's kinder than calling
- hubris someone a homicidal maniac.
- Excessive pride; proud to a fault. Originally used to describe the flaw of mere mortals who challenged the gods. Icarus was guilty of hubris, as is Donald Trump. Pronounced HYOU-BRISS.
- huggermugger Chaotic secrecy. The machinations of the CIA or the behind-closed-doors board meetings of corporations under siege are best described as huggermugger.

hunks	Not beefcake, like a male model—that's a <i>hunk</i> . A mean, disagreeable, old person who is often cheap and miserly. Scrooge was a hunks before he met his ghosts.
hyperbole	An intentionally exaggerated exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally. "You're the nicest person I've ever met" might be an exaggeration, but "You're the nicest person in the whole wide world" is a hyperbole. Pronounced HIGH-PER-BO-LEE.
hypocorism	A word for baby talk like "kitchee, kitchee, koo," or for pet names like "Snookeeookums," "Sweetie pie" or "My little dumpling." Newlyweds and parents of newborn babies are fond of speaking in hypocorisms — before they know better. It's pronounced HL-POCK-ER'ISM.



# I

iatrogenic	The sad situation of getting sicker after treatment by a doctor. Lately expanded to connote making anything worse in an effort to make it better. Someone who goes into a hospital to be treated for a broken leg and then catches a bad virus from the person in the neighboring bed suffers from the iatrogenic conditions common to many hospitals. Pronounced <i>EE- YAT-RUH'JEN'IC</i> .
ichthyoid	This is a scientific word for "fish-like." Some underwater creatures are ichthyoid; so are the handshakes of certain disagreeable people. Pronounced <i>ICK~ THEE-OID</i> .
iconoclast	Someone who attacks traditional or popular values, beliefs or symbols of traditional values. The man carrying the "God is Dead" sign is an iconoclast, as is

*iconography | idiogamist*

a politician who attacks beloved TV stars. Along with hubris (see *hubris*), this word belongs in your everyday vocabulary. Pronounced EYE-CON-OH-CLAST.

- iconography Pictorial or symbolic representation of something. Cave writings depict ancient cultures by telling stories through pictures; in the same way, urban graffiti often provides the iconography for contemporary urban street culture. Pronounced EYE-KON-AH-GRAFF-EE.
- idem The Latin word for "ditto." (Not those blue-printed papers you used to sniff in elementary school.) Ditto means "repeat that last item again." Some people prefer to use *idem* rather than *ditto*, abbreviated to *id.* in scholarly works. It's pronounced EYE-DEM or EE-DEM.
- idiogamist A man who is capable of engaging in sexual intercourse only with his wife. Pronounce it ID-EE-AH-GAM-IST.



idioglossia	This is the word for the invented, unintelligible form of speech shared by twins, siblings or any children who are closely associated. You could probably extend the definition to describe intense technical discussions between computer whizzes, or the shorthand used by waiters at a short-order lunch counter. It's pronounced ID-EE-A-GLOSS-EE-A.
idiograph	This is not the writing of a stupid person, but rather the word for any private trademark or signature. A common idiograph among teenage girls is to dot the i's in their names with a heart. Pronounced IH-DEE-OH-GRAFF. (See also <i>paraph.</i> )
ignoble	It basically means the opposite of "noble" — mean, contemptible and of generally low character. Taking credit for someone else's work is an ignoble act, as is lying, stealing, cheating and generally acting like a selfish, ungenerous jerk. Say it IG-NO-BULL.
imbroglia	A state of confusion; an entangled mess. Often used to describe a mob of players duking it out at home plate, or a skirmish among many factions on Capitol Hill. The correct pronunciation is IM-BROHL-YOH (don't pronounce the g).

*imminent / imprimatur*

- imminent** About to happen. Thunderstorms and temper tantrums are often described as imminent. *Imminently* is a powerful way to say "soon."
- impecunious** Poor. The word has a slightly antiquated flavor. Huckleberry Finn was impecunious; the people on welfare lines today are unemployed and poor. Pronounced JM-PECK-YOO-NEE-US.
- implacable** Not to be pleased, convinced or reconciled. Implacable carries with it more class than *stubborn*. Say it M'PLACK'AH-BULL.
- importune** To beg or plead with great intensity and persistence. A child might beg her mother to let her stay up late; a man might importune his wife not to leave him. Choose *importune* when the importance of the plea is great enough to merit the word. Say IM-POOR-TUNE.
- imprimatur** A stamp of approval from an acknowledged expert. An endorsement in the form of a logo, signature or brand name. Jack Nicklaus lends his imprimatur to a line of golf clubs. He didn't design them, he doesn't make them and he doesn't play with them; he just

*impunity / inculcate*

endorses them with his name. Pronounce it *IM-PREH-MAH-TER*.

- impunity** Freedom from punishment. If you do something with impunity, you know you'll get away with it; if you do it without impunity, you know you'll be in deep trouble—and you're not using the word correctly either! Say *IM-PEW-NIT-EE*.
- inchoate** Not yet formed; just begun. A novel is inchoate after the first chapter has been written; the earth was inchoate when nothing existed but primordial ooze. Pronounced *IN-KOH-IT*.
- incubus** An evil spirit that annoys people while they are sleeping and, in particular, a spirit that badgers women for sexual favors. A better way to say you didn't have a very good night's sleep. Pronounced *IN' CUBE-US*.
- inculcate** The opposite of exculpate; to blame, more in a legal sense than a moral one. Thieves and murderers are inculpated by society; parents are blamed when their children misbehave. Don't confuse the word with

*indefectible I in extremis*

*inculcate*, which means to teach by constant repetition. Pronounced JN-CULL-PAYT.

indefectible	Perfect; without flaw or defect. It can be used to describe a person's character, as well as a perfect diamond or a work of art. Pronounced IN-DEE-FECT-L-BLE.
indemnity	Insurance or compensation against loss. You can indemnify someone against damages that may occur because of your actions. For movie buffs, double indemnity is an insurance phrase for a double pay-off in certain instances – murder, for example.
ineffable	Indescribable, impossible to capture in words. Usually used for things that are indescribably good or too mysterious or spiritual to put into words. A Mounds bar is not ineffable, but the beauty of nature may be.
in extremis	The Latin expression for "near death." When a person on his deathbed makes a sudden decision, such as to change his will and leave everything to a distant cousin, his decision is said to have been made in extremis. The word is often misused to mean a

**in flagrante delicto I ingenue**

state of near insanity, since things that are decided in extremis are by their very nature, well, extreme.  
Pronounced IN EX-STREEMWSS.

- in flagrante delicto** An evocative Latin phrase for being caught in the middle of a sexual act. A wife leaves work early and comes home to find her husband in *flagrante delicto* with another woman. (Sexual infidelity must have been common in Roman times, too.) Pronounce it *IN FLAG-RAN-TAY DEL-JFC-TOE*.
- infamous** This doesn't mean "not famous." Infamous describes a famous person whose fame is based on unsavory acts. Serial killers and hardened criminals are infamous, as are most dictators. Pronounced /N-FEH-MUSS.
- inflammable** Just like flammable, but the word is longer. Both types of objects will burst into flames when lit. No one really knows the difference.
- ingenue** A naive young woman or, just as common, an actress who plays the role of a naive young woman. Marilyn Monroe made the type famous. It's pronounced *EN-JEN-OO*.

*ingenuous I inscrutable*

ingenuous	Not <i>ingenious</i> , nor <i>disingenuous</i> . Ingenuous means naive and unworldly. (Ingenious means clever. Disingenuous means <i>pretending</i> to be innocent and naive.) "His big brown eyes and charming, ingenuous grin made him very likeable." Pronounce it IN-JENN-YOU-US.
inimical	Often confused with <i>inimitable</i> (which means impossible to imitate), inimical means hostile and unfriendly. An inimical rival should be avoided, not because he's in a class by himself but because he's downright vicious.
iniquity	Complete wickedness; often found in a den for some reason. Say IH-NICK-WIHT-EE.
innervate	The opposite of enervate, which means to weaken or drain. Innervate means to stimulate or furnish with nervous energy. Some things can be enervating <i>and</i> innervating at the same time, such as spending several hours with a group of raucous kids. Pronounced INN'ERV'ATE.
inscrutable	Mysterious; difficult to understand or fully grasp. A great catch-all word that can be applied to people,

*insouciance I interjacent*

- ideas, written works or life in general. Obscure philosophers are inscrutable; shy people who don't talk much are often inscrutable.
- insouciance Indifference, but with a subtle twist of devil-may-care. An apathetic person may be simply indifferent to what's going on; a person who intentionally acts as if she doesn't care in order to look cool or invulnerable is showing insouciance. Pronounced /N-SOO-SEE-ENTS.
- intents and purposes Usually used in the phrase "for all intents and purposes," it means under usual circumstances or during normal conditions: For all intents and purposes, a seat belt increases the safety of the driver. Not *intensive purposes*, a common mistake.
- interdict To forbid or sternly prohibit. It's best used with official pronouncements. A key word in the war against drugs, usually accomplished by the Coast Guard. Pronounced IN-TER-DIKT (not IN-TER-DITE.)
- interjacent In between, unlike *adjacent*, which means next to.

*internecine / intransigent*

	hotel room that was interjacent to the rooms of their friends so they could intercede if a fight broke out."
internecine	Since the word is almost always used in conjunction with "warfare," it has come to be misunderstood to mean "nuclear." In fact, it means "mutually destructive." A divorce can be internecine, so can squabbling among divisions of a company. Pronounced <i>INTER-NESS-EEN</i> .
intestate	Dying without a will. In many states, this costs your heirs lots of money. For some reason, many Americans believe that creating a will somehow encourages an early visit from the Grim Reaper.
intort	Kind of like contort, but neater. When you twist or curl something around a fixed point, you intort it. Pretzels could be described this way, complicated logic probably not.
intractable	Stubborn or obstinate, such as a child who won't behave even after being scolded.
intransigent	Like <i>intractable</i> (see above) but with more intensity, the word means stubborn, obstinate, refusing to



compromise or change an opinion or belief. It implies a bit of ideological commitment that adds to the refusal to change, as in: "The employees demonstrated in front of the building to demand better working conditions, but the management remained intransigent." It's pronounced JN-TRANS-IH-JENT.

inure

To become hardened and unaffected by hardship, difficulty or attack. The boy was teased so often for being shorter than his classmates that after a while he became inured to the taunting words and tried out for the basketball team. Pronounced JN-YOOR.

invective

Although this word sounds as if it should be an adjective, it's a noun that means "strongly abusive verbal criticism." Ship captains are well known for using invective to motivate their sailors. Say INN-VECK-TJVE.

irascible

Of an irritable temperament; easily annoyed. An irascible person has no patience for anybody or anything, and flies off the handle at the slightest provocation. Often associated with cantankerous old men. It's pronounced JR-ASS-JH-BULL.

*irenic / iterate*

- irenic                      Peaceful, calm and capable of inducing serenity. Save this word to refer to personalities rather than things. Lakes are placid; people who meditate are said to be irenic. Pronounced *EYE-REN'IK*.
- iterate                     It means the same thing as reiterate: to repeat over and over. Use *reiterate* if you want people to understand what you're saying; save *iterate* for describing learning by doing something over and over again, getting better or more accurate each time. That's called an iterative process. An iteration describes *one* of the repetitions. Pronounced *IT-ER-ATE*.

# I

- jape                      This is a nice word because it's both a noun and a verb. To joke or to tease; also a taunt, wisecrack or practical joke. "He continued to jape me over my new glasses." "I opened the door and a huge bowl of Jell-O fell on my head – quite a jape!"
- jeune                     This word has nothing to do with the month in which everyone gets married. It means dull and uninteresting, immature and lacking in wisdom. Adolescents are notorious for being considered *jeune* by adults and for considering everybody, adults included, *jeune*. Pronounced ZHI-ZHOON.
- jerry-built              Held together with toothpicks and glue; shoddily built or slapped together. Very similar to *jury-rig*, which implies something built hastily with whatever was at hand. "He jury-rigged a contraption to automatically rock the cradle, but since it was jerry-built, it collapsed."

*jettison / jodhpurs*

jettison	To throw overboard. Jetsam (see <i>flotsam</i> ) is jettisoned all the time.
jihad	The word literally means a holy war waged by Muslims as a religious duty, but it has come to be used for any cause undertaken on behalf of certain principles. Pronounced JIH-HAHD.
jingoism	Aggressive patriotism, usually manifested by chanting slogans and waving banners or symbols. Jingoism has something of a negative connotation because it suggests unreasonable excess. Often associated with xenophobia (see <i>xenophobia</i> ), which is the fear of foreigners.
jocose	Someone who's always joking around is jocose. Compare to <i>verbose</i> , which describes someone who's always talking. Pronounced JOH-COSE.
jodhpurs	Those ridiculous pants, worn by horseback riders and motorcycle cops, with very wide thighs and narrow calves. Dudley DoRight wears a pair. Named after a city in western India, in case you were curious. Pronounced JOD-PURRS.

*joey / juxtapose*

joey	A baby kangaroo. Not just because his mama named him that. All baby kangaroos are called joeys, just as all baby bears are called cubs.
Jungian	Carl Jung was a contemporary and follower of Freud, and is best known for his theories of a universal mythology, a connection that brings us all back to basic roots. If you believe in this stuff, you're Jungian. Say it <i>YOONG'EE'UN</i> .
juvnescent	Youthful. It has no negative connotation like immature or naive; it literally means "young." Plants are juvenescent in the seedling stage; the moon is juvenescent when it first begins to wax. Pronounced <i>JOO-VAN'ESS'ENT</i> .
juxtapose	This is one of those words people love to use to sound smart, particularly when criticizing art, fiction or films. The word means to put next to something else for comparison. You can juxtapose the letters on the Scrabble board to score more points.



Kafkaesque	A reference to the early 20th-century novels of Franz Kafka, whose surreal, nightmarish plots revolve around protagonists who are caught in a strangling web of bureaucracy. Now applied to any event in which a person is trapped by stultifying bureaucratic measures. Pronounced KAHFF-KAH-ESK.
kakistocracy	A wonderfully descriptive word, often needed and rarely recognized, that means "government by the worst people in the state." It's pronounced KACK-ISS-TOCK-RAH-SEE.
katabatic	Moving down a slope or valley. Skiing is clearly a katabatic sport. Pronounced CAT-A-BAT-IK.
kef	The word refers to a drowsy, dreamy state induced by a narcotic, such as marijuana, but can be used to mean a stupor brought about by anything. A dull

*k e g l e r / k i l l j o y*

	speaker can put his audience in a kef; traveling by car on a long turnpike can do the same thing. Say KEHF.
kegler	It sounds like a kegler might be a person who drinks a lot of beer, but in fact it's a person who bowls, such as Ralph Kramden of "The Honeymooners." So, it may in fact be a person who drinks a lot of beer.
ken	Area of expertise or authority. "'That's outside my ken,' said the detective." Rhymes with ?en.
kente	A type of African cloth. Developed hundreds of years ago, kente cloth is a sign of royalty and wealth. Also spelled <i>kinte</i> . Pronounced KEHN-TAY.
key grip	One of the unknown movie professions seen in the credits of every film. The grip sets up scenery and camera dollies; the head of all the grips on a film is called the key grip.
killjoy	The opposite of "the life of the party." Your dour friend who is always pointing out the risks, the dangers and the downsides is a killjoy. Kids call him or her a spoilsport.



*kinetic / knell*

kinetic	Filled with motion. Ballet is a kinetic art, and a kinesiologist studies human motion. Pronounced <i>KIN-EH-TICK</i> .
kiosk	A small, open-sided building, often used for selling tickets or dispensing information. It's pronounced <i>KEE-OSK</i> , not <i>KY-OSK</i> .
kismet	Fate or destiny. Usually used in a positive sense — it was kismet that Lana Turner happened to be at the counter at Schwab's the day she was discovered. Pronounced <i>KIZ-MET</i> .
kith	Your family is kin; your friends are kith. When the whole gang gets together, you refer to them as your kith and kin.
knell	The sound of a bell tolling. The word is most often used to refer to the sound of funeral bells ringing. Almost always coupled with "death." For instance, "Videocassettes sounded the death knell for revival movie houses." Rhymes with <i>bell</i> .

*knurl | kudos*

- knurl                    A series of small ridges, such as those found along the edge of a quarter. It's a good word to know if you need to explain any magic tricks that involve coins.
- kowtow                    To bow before someone. Though it can mean bowing in a gesture of genuine respect, as it did when the word was coined by the Chinese, it has come to mean groveling or currying favor. Rhymes with *how now brown cow*.
- krotoscope                Remember those old dance shows on TV when prizes were awarded to the contestant who earned the most applause? The device used to measure applause is a krotoscope. Probably developed in some secret government lab. Say CROW-TEH-SCOPE.
- kudos                    Not a method of self-defense, or a brand of chocolate bar, but applause or praise. Critics extend kudos to playwrights. Say KOO-DOZE.

# L

- labile                      Although the word means unstable in general, it is most frequently used to mean emotionally unstable, as in temperamental or moody. A child who cries at the slightest provocation is labile; an adult who laughs too loudly at a joke and then sinks suddenly into depression is also labile. Labile people generally make others uncomfortable, since every reaction comes across like an overreaction. Pronounce it like *label*.
- lachrymose                Given to weeping. It has less to do with being sad than it does with shedding tears. The movies that we call tear-jerkers make us cry because they are sad. Eyedrops, air pollution or a bitter wind can make us lachrymose. Pronounced LACK-RF-MOSE.
- lacuna                      This is not a South Sea islet, a California beach, a type of punctuation or a foreign currency. A lacuna is a rather elegant way of describing a gap or a missing

*l a m b e n t / l a n u g o*

portion. The most famous lacuna of all is the 18-minute gap in the Watergate tapes. If you borrow a book from a careless friend and the middle fifty pages are missing, you might call to ask what happened in the lacuna. It's pronounced LAK-YOO-NAH. The plural is *lacunae*, and surprisingly enough, is pronounced LAK-YOO-NEE.

lambent

Dealing gently but brilliantly with a subject, or touching something lightly and playfully on the surface. Intelligent criticism of a work of art might be considered lambent; fiction dealing broadly but cleverly with society's ills is lambent. On the more literal side, a poet might describe the lambent sunlight playing on the surface of a stream.

lanai

Hotel jargon for a private terrace or balcony that comes with a room. It's a good idea when on vacation to request a LAN-EYE, even if you're not in Hawaii.

lanugo

All expectant parents know this one because they read the book that contains photos of a developing fetus. Lanugo is literally the soft, downy hairs that cover the fetus and newborn babies. Say LAH-NEW-GO.

lee	The sheltered side of something; the side away from the wind. Most things have a leeward (say <i>LEE-WORD</i> or <i>LOO-WURD</i> ) side and a windward side, at least most things in windy places. Rhymes with <i>flee</i> .
legerdemain	A particularly elegant way of saying dexterity in the use of one's hands to perform magic tricks, juggling, or other feats of deception. The word might be used more wryly, as in "That creative accountant's tax work was a feat of legerdemain." Pronounced LEJ-ER-DEM-ANE.
leitmotif	A theme maintained throughout a body of work, particularly a musical work, associated with a character, an idea or an emotion. It's pronounced UTE-MO-TEEF.
lethologica	A temporary inability to remember a word or a name; the condition that makes you screw up your face and say, "Ooh...it's on the tip of my tongue." The next time a friend forgets a word, here's hoping you don't say, "Oh, there's a word for that condition. It's called...ooh...I forget." It's pronounced LETH-AL-OH- JIK-AH.

*lexicon / light year*

lexicon	This word refers to the working or usable vocabulary of a language, a person or a culture. After reading this book, your lexicon should be greatly expanded. Say LECKS-IH-CON.
libertarian	An advocate of liberty of thought and action. Also refers to a political party which supports minimal gov-ernment intervention, except in law and military defense.
libertine	Not to be confused with a <i>libertarian</i> (see above), a libertine is someone who advocates the liberty to be dissolute, particularly with regard to sexual needs. A libertine, like a rake or a roue (see <i>roue</i> ) seeks to satisfy personal lust at just about any cost. Don Juan was a libertine.
licentious	A licentious person is a <i>libertine</i> (see above); someone uncontrolled in sexual indulgence. Say LIE-SEN-SHUSS.
lickerish	Lustful and lecherous. (See <i>licentious</i> above.)
light year	Definitely not a length of time. It's a distance, specifically the distance light travels in one year (just over five trillion miles). Excellent for use in particularly <i>hyperbolic</i> (see <i>hyperbole</i> ) sentences.

*Lilliputian / linchpin*

**Lilliputian** Describes someone from the mythical island of Lilliput. Featured in Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels*, these people are about three inches tall. A fancy way to say "small." (See also *yahoo*.)

**limn** To capture through an artistic medium; to evoke or describe, either in a drawing or in words. A poet may limn the beauty of a sunset in rhyming couplets; an artist may limn the beauty of a person or an object using clay or watercolors or shards of pottery, for that matter. Pronounced *LIMM*.

This is one of those words you're sure you know the meaning of—droopy, limp, flaccid (see *flaccid*), right? Wrong. In fact, limpid means clear or transparent. A country stream is limpid; Elizabeth Taylor's eyes are limpid—even unpolluted air could be described as limpid.

**linchpin** A lot like a cotter pin. Traditionally, a piece of hardware that holds together a piece of machinery, now used to describe the crucial element in an argument or organization.

*lingua franca | livery*

- lingua franca** Sounds like a pasta dish, but it's not. The phrase describes a common language—a good way to break the ice in a difficult negotiation. When people talk sports, they are engaging in a lingua franca. Say it like it looks: *LING-WAH FRANK-AH*.
- lissom** Supple; agile; lithe. Ballet dancers are lissom. Olympic athletes are lissom. Michael Jordan is lissom, even when he's just walking down the street. Sometimes spelled *lissome*. Say *LISS-uHM*.
- litotes** Someone who speaks in litotes uses understatements in which two negatives make a positive. "She's not a bad actress" is a litotes; so is "You're not looking half- bad." Pronounce it *L/E-TOH-TEEZ*.
- liverish** A word used to describe people who have personalities not unlike the taste of liver—if you don't like liver. A liverish person is unpleasant, disagreeable, easily irritated and generally icky to be around.
- livery** The clothing or uniform worn by the servants of high-ranking people. A chauffeur's suit and cap is his



livery; the crewcut, sunglasses, dark suit and white shirt is the livery of an FBI agent. The term can be used somewhat facetiously to refer to any uniform. Black leather, spiky hair and lots of earrings is the livery of the punk scene, for example. Say LIHV-ER-EE.

livid

The word literally means the color of flesh after being strangled — bluish-gray — but most of the time it's used to describe furious anger, as in choking with anger. If you arrive a half-hour late for a meeting with someone who hates to be kept waiting, you're likely to find that the person you are meeting is either livid or not there. Say LIH-VID.

logorrhea

Not a bad case of indigestion, but close. The word basically means diarrhea of the mouth. When you meet someone who makes you nervous and you begin to chatter nervously and say stupid things that you regret later, you are suffering from a temporary case of logorrhea. Things could be worse—it's a real medical condition and some people suffer it permanently. It's pronounced LOG-A-REE-AH.

*looby / lubricious*

looby	A silly, stupid person – a novel twist on <i>boob</i> .
Lothario	A reference to a character in an 18th-century play by Rowe, this is a man who charms women and lies to them in order to gain sexual favors, not unlike a rake, a roue (see <i>roue</i> ), a libertine (see <i>libertine</i> ), or a licentious (see <i>licentious</i> ) man.
louche	Decadent, depraved, seedy and immoral. The streets of Saigon during the Viet Nam war were louche; certain bars along the waterfront in port cities are louche. You can use the word to describe a person's character, but it's better used to capture an atmosphere. Pronounced LOOSH.
loup	A half-mask, the kind that covers only the eyes and nose. Batman and Catwoman favor them, although theirs are clearly more elaborate than the average loup. Rhymes with <i>soup</i> .
lubricious	You can pronounce it LOO-BRIK-US or LOO-BRISH-US, and either way it means slippery in a literal sense (as in lubricated), or slippery in a more figurative sense (lecherous, lascivious or licentious). <i>Rakes, roues,</i>

*lucubrate I lysophobia*

*Lotharios* (see above) are all lubricious; so is a newly waxed floor or a well-oiled hinge.

lucubrate	To burn the midnight oil – to work or study late into the night. The home office and the personal computer have made lucubration far easier. Pronounced LOO-KYEH-BRATE.
lumpen	Has nothing to do with oatmeal. Most often seen with "proletariat," as in "lumpen proletariat." It means people deprived of their rights and homes, or otherwise degraded in social standing.
lurid	Vulgar; designed in a way that appeals to our baser instincts, which generally means not very subtle. Lurid colors are exceptionally bright; lurid clothes are gaudy or revealing; lurid language is probably peppered with violent or sexual references; lurid dancing is sexually suggestive. It's not necessarily bad, just blatant. It's pronounced LOOR-ID.
lysophobia	How's this for self-fulfilling prophecy? The word means a morbid dread of going insane. It's pronounced CRAY-ZEE. Sorry: LISS-O-FOE-BEE-A.



# M

- macedoine Not a citizen of Macedonia. This is the kind of word you see on the menus of fancy restaurants that offer things like *mtdaillons* of beef or chicken *en crotite*. It means diced and mixed. A macedoine of fruit is nothing more or less than a fruit cocktail. But it sounds much more exotic, doesn't it? It's pronounced *MASS-EH'DWAN*.
- machination This word really rolls *off* the tongue. It means a secret plot or scheme and has a particularly sneaky and underhanded tone. Competitive coworkers often get involved in machinations to move up in the office hierarchy. Pronounced *MAK-IN-AY-SHUN*.
- macroeconomics The study of the broad and general aspects of an economy, such as the general level of inflation, rather than of a particular aspect of a society's economy (see *microeconomics*).

*m a d r i l e n e / m a i l l o t*

- madrilene** Sounds like an 18th-century dance step or a pretentious name for a little girl, but it's neither. In fact, it's a kind of soup—tomato-flavored broth, served jellied and cold or liquid and hot. At least you now know whether you want to order some next time you're having a macédoine of fruit (see *macedoine*). Say MAD-REE-LEN.
- magna cum laude** Get it straight: *summa cum laude* is the highest praise and it means just that; *magna cum laude* is the next highest and means with great praise; *cum laude* is the lowest of three honors and it means, simply, with honor. If you graduate with any of the three you're doing just great. By the way, it's pronounced MAGNA KUM LOUD-UH.
- magniloquent** If you call someone magniloquent, it's not a compliment. It means boastful, pompous, and full of hot air—a great way to insult a magniloquent person.
- maillot** A type of fabric of a particularly close knit, the kind often used to make one-piece swimsuits. It's come to denote any one-piece swimsuit, regardless of the fabric. Pronounced MY-OH.

maladroit	This word has several meanings, none of them complimentary. It means physically awkward or clumsy, as well as verbally awkward in the sense of tactless. Though the word comes from the French, it's been anglicized to be pronounced MAL-AH-DROYT.
malapropism	The confusion of similar-sounding words, usually with ridiculous results. "Beware the ideas of March." "It's not the heat; it's the humility." Pronounced MAL-AH-PROP-ISM.
malfeasance	A somewhat official form of misconduct. If a public official commits a crime while in office, he or she commits a malfeasance. The word is generally not used to refer to ordinary people; they commit crimes. Embezzling campaign funds for private use, for example, is malfeasance. It's pronounced MAL-FEE-ZANCE.
malice	The desire to see a great deal of evil done upon another. Worse than spite or holding a grudge, malice is serious hatred. Pronounced <i>mahl-iss</i> . Rhymes with "Alice."

*m a l i n g e r / m a t u t i n a l*

- malinge** To pretend to be sick in order to avoid work. A child who doesn't want to go to school can pretend to have a sore throat. If he wants to be honest, he can tell his parents he's malingering and hope they don't know what the word means. Pronounced MA-LING-ER.
- manque** The word is usually combined with "artist" or "poet," as in *artist manque*, perhaps because it means unfulfilled or might-have-been. (After all, who ever heard of an accountant manque?)  
Pronounced
- mare's-nest** Something thought to be a great discovery that is really nothing more than a big hoax is a mare's-nest. Maybe the name comes from the fact that horses can't lay eggs?
- martinet** A strict disciplinarian. It has a military connotation – but it doesn't have to. General Patton was a martinet; but so was that evil history teacher who gave you too much homework every night.
- matutinal** A rather economical way of saying "happening in the morning" from the French "matin." Breakfast is a



*maunder / mawkish*

matutinal meal; many people like to take matutinal walks; certain radio programs are matutinal. Pronounced MA-TOO-TEH-NALL.

maunder

O.K. to confuse with *meander*, which means more or less the same thing. To maunder is to walk or talk in a random or confused manner. "The sick man, flushed with fever, maundered on about his wasted life."

maverick

In the spirit of the famed TV sheriff, a maverick is a nonconformist or a rebel, a person whose thoughts and actions are different from most others. A maverick is willing to break ground with his beliefs. An iconoclast (see *iconoclast*) believes in attacking established beliefs, but a maverick believes in creating new ones. The Beatles were mavericks in rock and roll; Einstein was a maverick physicist.

mawkish

Overly sentimental or maudlin. Your great-aunt, who is always hugging and crying and talking about who's in her will, is mawkish. It's not a good way to be. Soap operas are mawkish; so are bad movies. Say MAWK-ISH.

*meet | mellifluous*

meet	There's a nice, slightly archaic, meaning for this word aside from the obvious one. Something that is meet is fitting, suitable or appropriate. Wearing a tie to certain restaurants is meet attire. Coming up with a good retort is finding meet words for the situation and avoiding an esprit d'escalier (see <i>esprit d'escalier</i> ).
megrims	A depression or sinking into low spirits. Someone down in the dumps is suffering the megrims. Pronounced MEE-GRIMS.
melange	This French word for "mixture" is slightly more evocative than plain old "mixture." It's used for more subtle descriptions. A combination of flour, sugar and milk is a mixture. A blend of passion, romance and eros is a melange. Say MAY-LAHNJ.
melee	One step short of a riot; a confused or tumultuous fight among several people. Useful in painting a powerful word picture. Pronounced MAY-LAY.
mellifluous	A nightingale's song is mellifluous, as is a lover's whisper. Music or sound that flows smoothly or

*m e n s c h / meretricious*

sweetly, like the sound of the word itself: MELL-IF-  
LOO-USS.

mensh

A Yiddish word for someone who combines wisdom,  
humor and honor. Say MENSH.

menticide

A way of saying "brainwashing." Menticide means  
exactly the same thing, but has an even more evil  
ring to it—as if you're literally killing a mind.

mercurial

Describes someone whose mood changes in a heart-  
beat. It's also used to describe someone who is always  
upbeat—the assumption being, perhaps, that they  
must be depressed in private. In both cases, mercurial  
people may be difficult, but they are always interest-  
ing. Pronounced MEHR-CURE-EE-ULL.

meretricious

Acting flashy in an effort to look like something  
you're not. A meretricious artist paints with a lot of  
elaborate brush strokes, but the painting isn't inter-  
esting; a meretricious novelist may use fancy language  
but write a book with no real literary impact. Pro-  
nounced MEH-RJH-TRISH-USS.

**m e r m a n / m e t e**

- merman** The male version of a mermaid. We hear about them less often, but they still make their way into fairy tales. Pronounced like *Superman*, not like Ethel *Merman*.
- messianic** Someone who is messianic acts like a messiah. An excellent way to describe someone who seems to be on a mission from God, or who promotes her ideas with a little too much fervor. Say it MESS-EE-AN-IK.
- mestizo** Not a kind of wood used for grilling at a California restaurant, but a person of mixed ancestry, usually part Indian and part African.
- metaphrase** A word-for-word translation, to be distinguished from a *paraphrase*, which summarizes the gist of something. A nice way of saying "verbatim" and sounding hightech about it.
- mete** To mete out something is to distribute it in measured portions, as in to mete out a punishment to a group of students (for some reason, it seems punishment is always meted). It sounds just like *meat* but spelled differently.

*metier / miasma*

metier	This is another word for <i>forte</i> (see <i>forte</i> ) – an occupation or activity in which a person has a particularly strong talent. However, unlike <i>forte</i> , which is pronounced <i>fort</i> , <i>metier</i> retains its French pronunciation:
metonymy	This is a figure of speech used as a stylistic device by many writers who probably don't know there is a name for it. When you use a metonymy, you substitute an attribute or an example of a thing for the thing itself, evoking one idea by a term that is related. "Today, <i>the White House</i> announced a tax hike," for example, or "He gave up <i>the bottle</i> ." Pronounced MET-TAHN-EH-MEE.
mettle	Courageous spirit or vigorous energy. A person of mettle is a brave person who is willing to take action. For some reason, mettle is always being tested.
miasma	The foul-smelling gases given off by decaying matter in marshes and swamps. It's usually used figuratively to describe any confusing subject or event that's hard to sort out. "Her explanation of biogenetics was a miasma of scientific theories and incomprehensible equations." Pronounced MY-AZ-MA.

*microeconomics | millennium*

**microeconomics** The opposite of macroeconomics (see *macro-*  
*economics*) economics applied to the  
specific aspects  
of an economy: supply and  
demand and the price of  
sugar, for example.

**mien**

A person's demeanor, the manner or habits that  
reflect character or attitude. I can tell by his mien—  
his furrowed brow, his grimace, the way his hands  
are

**milieu**

clutching his elbows and his foot is tapping— that  
he's furious. Pronounced MEEN.

The environment or the conditions surrounding a  
person or thing; it's kind of like a natural habitat,  
the place where someone is most comfortable. A dog  
on a leash set free to run in a park will usually bound  
about, happy to be in his milieu. Say it MIL-YOO.

**millennium**

Literally a period of a thousand years, the word can  
also refer to a supposedly approaching period of  
general happiness and prosperity, or figuratively to  
any great length of time: "How have you been? I

milquetoast	Someone with a character like bread dipped in milk— bland, timid, meek and unassertive. The word refers to the comic-strip character Caspar Milquetoast, created by H. T. Webster. That's why it's spelled with a <i>qu</i> and not with a <i>k</i> . Say MILK-TOAST.
minatory	Threatening or menacing. When they bark, growl and bare their teeth, dogs are making minatory postures at mail carriers. Pronounced M/N-AT-ORV.
mingy	An onomatopoeic (see <i>onomatopoeia</i> ) way of saying mean-spirited, stingy and ungenerous. It wraps up the definition nicely in one word, and you're sure that whomever it's directed to will catch the drift, even without knowing the word. It's pronounced M/N-JEE.
minikin	A delicate or diminutive object or person. A porcelain miniature on a shelf is a minikin, but so is a very short and attractive person. Of course, if that person models clothes, you've found a minikin mannequin.
minion	A servile follower of an important or powerful person: a secretary, assistant, associate and the like.

*minuti a / miscreant*

Acolytes (see *acolyte*) and disciples serve voluntarily – minions are caught up in the swirls of the bureaucracy.

**minutia** The small, trivial details of something. Someone who worries about minutiae often overlooks the stuff that matters. Pronounced M/N-NOO-SHAH.

**mirabile dictu** A Latin phrase meaning "wonderful to relate" or "strange to tell." It's the kind of phrase, used sparingly, that can enhance a tale of even the most mundane events: "I went into my daughter's room this morning and – *mirabile dictu* – she had cleaned it up!" It's pronounced MEER-AB-EEL-AY DIK-TOO.

**miscegenation** Marriage or cohabitation of people from different races; the mixture of races by interbreeding. Amazingly enough, this was illegal in Virginia until the mid-1960s. Not to be confused with misogyny (see *misogyny*), which means hatred of women. It's pronounced M/SS-E;;-EN- AY-SHUN.

**miscreant** Depraved or villainously wicked. The word can be used as a noun to describe a person who commits a



	not-so-serious crime. Fences are posted to keep miscreants out of parks; paints have been developed to discourage miscreants from drawing graffiti on buses and trains. Pronounced MISS-CREE-ANT.
misogamy	Hatred of marriage, a common condition.
misogyny	Hatred of women. You can call a woman-hater a misogynist. Pronounce it M/SS-OJ-EN-EE.
misopedia	The last of the <i>miso-</i> words we're going to include in this book; it means hatred of children, especially one's own. Certainly a good word to use on a day when the little ones are really getting on your nerves.
mnemonic	A trick used to help remember something, such as remembering someone's birthday because it's the same date as the Battle of Waterloo, or the colors of the spectrum by ROYGBIV, or trigonometry by SOHCAHTOA. Pronounced NEH-MON-IK.
mo	Canadian slang for emotional stress, shortened from <i>emo</i> . Usually used with a suffix. A bride who gets a run in her stocking two minutes before the ceremony

*modus operandi / mollify*

is moing. A group of students hit with a surprise quiz have a mofest. The word is unique in its ability to capture an all-too-common state of mind. Rhymes with *go*.

*modus operandi* A Latin phrase that means "mode of operation."

Formerly used by Dick Tracy and the Dragnet team to describe the telltale signs a criminal leaves behind, it's now perfect to describe anyone who has a certain way of operating. "Don't worry about Marc—screaming at a meeting is part of his *modus operandi*." Often shortened to "M.O." Pronounced *MOH-DUS OPP-EHR-AHN-DIE*.

*moil*

Hard work and drudgery, like toil with an *m*. We moiled away for hours over dictionaries to find the best words to include in this book.

*mollify*

To soothe, appease or calm down. Chamberlain tried to mollify Hitler. A father might try to mollify a small child who dropped an ice-cream cone.

*monodomous I morose*

monodomous	Living in a single nest, as do bees, ants or humans who can't afford a country house. Pronounced MAH-NOD-AH'MUSS.
monomania	Like an obsession, an overwhelming enthusiasm for a single idea, interest or activity to the exclusion of other pursuits. Great entrepreneurs are often monomaniacs. They're good for society, but you wouldn't want to marry one.
monotheism	The belief that there is only one God. Atheists are certain that there is no God, while those who are agnostic are unwilling to state an opinion. Distinguish from those who believe that they <i>are</i> God. (See also <i>theomania</i> .)
mordant	Biting or sarcastic; often combined with wit, as in mordant wit. Someone with a mordant wit is critical with sophisticated humor – Lenny Bruce, for example. (See also <i>acerbic</i> .)
morose	Moody, sullen or gloomy. Much more powerful than the overused "depressed." Pronounced MUH-ROHS.

*motile / mugwump*

- motile** Capable of motion or moving. The word is used most often in microbiological contexts. Plants, animals and people move; cells and bacteria, for example, are motile. If the mold in your refrigerator turns motile, it's time to defrost. Pronounced MOH-T/LL.
- mountebank** This somewhat archaic word means a traveling salesman for quack remedies; it's come to be used to mean any trickster or charlatan. Pronounced MOLWT-A-BANK, it's a good word for the stars of those half-hour-long infomercials that sell car wax and nostril-hair removers.
- mufti** The civilian clothes donned by one who usually wears a uniform. Sailors might dress in mufti when they leave a ship to visit a port city; a lawyer who comes to work one day in jeans and a t-shirt instead of the usual suit is dressed in mufti. Pronounced MUFF-TEE.
- mugwump** Someone who acts independently of a political party, or who can't decide, and so remains neutral on political or other issues. The word is also used to mean any mealy-mouthed wimp who refuses to take a stand.

*m u m m e r / m y r i a d*

mummer	A person wearing a mask or costume at a parade or a masquerade party. Particularly appropriate to describe participants in the Mardi Gras parade.
munificent	Extremely generous and willing to give. It has a slightly different meaning than <i>beneficent</i> , which means willing to do good. Many students receive scholarships thanks to munificent corporate and private sponsors. Pronounced MEW-N/FF-EH-SENT.
mussitation	Silently imitating the lip movements of people who are speaking; the kind of behavior that can drive a speaker crazy. (Bet you didn't realize there was a word for this, did you?)
myopia	The medical term for near-sightedness also connotes a more figurative lack of vision, or short-sightedness. People who wear glasses with certain prescriptions suffer from myopia; people who fail to see the consequences of the things they say or do are also <i>myopic</i> .
myriad	This adjective simply means "a lot." You can say there were myriad stars in the sky or there were myriad grains of sand on the beach. It's pronounced MEER-EE-AD.



# N

- nabob                      Made famous by Spiro Agnew's description of the press and liberals as "the nattering nabobs of negativism," a nabob is actually a person of great wealth who has made a fortune in a faraway country, especially India. It seems that the Vice President forfeited accurate English in favor of alliteration.
- nadir                        A nadir is literally a point in the heavens directly opposite the zenith (see *zenith*). It is often used, however, to connote a low point, as in the nadir of a career or of a life. "He hit the nadir when he lost his house, his job and his wife on one day." Sounds like *Nader*, as in Ralph. (See also *apogee*.)
- naissance                 The birth or origin of a concept, an organization, a movement or an idea, as opposed to the *renaissance*,

*narcolepsy | nefarious*

or rebirth of any of those things. The naissance of rock-and-roll took place in the '50s and '60s; its renaissance was in the '80s. Say NAY-SENSE.

**narcolepsy** A condition characterized by an overwhelming desire for brief periods of sleep. The word is often used figuratively to describe feeling terrifically bored: Dull speeches can induce narcolepsy.

**nascent** In the formative stages or in the process of being created. (See also *chrysalis*.) The word is best used to describe abstract things such as ideas, feelings or creative works. A nascent feeling would be one that's just beginning to come to consciousness. Pronounced NAY-SENT.

**necromancy** A scientific-sounding word for sorcery or witchcraft. Use it when you want something to sound a little more serious than just plain "magic." Say NEK-RUH-MAN-SEE.



*neophyte / ne plus ultra*

quite seriously, however: Hitler's henchmen committed nefarious acts. Pronounced NEH-FARE-EE-USS.

neophyte

Another way of saying "novice" or "beginner." Someone who takes up tennis for the first time is a neophyte. Pronounced NEE-OH-FIGHT.

nepenthe

Anything which makes someone forget sorrow, suffering or pain. For some, alcohol is a nepenthe for woes. Others prefer books, movies or shopping. Pronounced NIH-PEN-THEE.

nephology

This is the scientific term for the study of clouds. The next time you decide to escape to a field and lie on the grass and find shapes of animals in the clouds, you can say you spent the afternoon studying nephology. Pronounced NEFF-OL-OH-JEE.

ne plus ultra

The Latin phrase for the absolute top, the culminating point, the highest degree. For an antique-car collector, finding a Tucker in mint condition would be the *ne plus ultra*. It's pronounced NAY PLUSS OOL-TRA.

*nepotism / nihilism*

nepotism	Showing favoritism to friends or relatives in business or politics. If the boss's son is an incompetent idiot and nevertheless is appointed president of the company, chances are that nepotism is at work.
nethermost	A long word for "lowest" or "farthest down," generally used literally—not figuratively. The earth's core is the nethermost region of the planet. The Arctic is the nethermost region of the earth.
nettlesome	Irritating or annoying. When a car's burglar alarm goes off and blares for hours, that's nettlesome. Particularly in the middle of the night.
niggling	Excessively petty or nit-picking. A job that involves endless poring over details is niggling work.
nihilism	Skepticism so complete that it denies there can be any objective basis for truth and, by extension, that there are no morals or values in the universe. A good word for a philosophy that annihilates just about every concept previously thought to exist. Pronounced NYE-EH-LISM.

nirvana	This word refers to the Buddhist belief in the release from the cycle of reincarnation that leads to the end of all desire and suffering, but it has come to be used to mean a state akin to heaven on earth. A birthday party with a big cake, lots of candy and ice cream, and piles of presents may be a child's idea of nirvana.
nodus	A complication or a difficulty, kind of like a snag. If you hit a nodus in your research, you're likely to be stuck for days trying to discover the right answer. The plural is nodi. Pronounced <i>NODE-us</i> .
noisome	If you think this has to do with an assault on the ears, you've got the wrong organ. Strangely enough, the word means foul-smelling. The diaper bin is noisome. Pronounced <i>NOY-SUM</i> .
nom de guerre	From the French, it means the same thing as "pseudonym." Robert Zimmerman's <i>nom de guerre</i> , for example, is Bob Dylan. If you're going to use it, pronounce it correctly: <i>NOME DE GAIR</i> .
nubbin	This word means exactly what it sounds like – a lumpy stub, a bumpy nub. The pills that form on

*nubile | nympholepsy*

sweaters after you've worn them for a time could just as well be called nubbins.

**nubile** Of marriageable age or condition. Since that once meant about 15 years of age, the word came to mean all attractive, young women. Pronounce it NOO-BILE or NOO-BILL.

**nugatory** This is not a reference to a kind of candy. The word means "worthless" or "insignificant." The side effects of a particularly safe medicine, for example, are nugatory. Pronounced NOOG-AT-OREE.

**nympholepsy** The condition of having deep emotional longings for something unattainable. The best description we've ever heard of first love!

# O

- obdurate                      Cruelly stubborn and hard-hearted; in fact, downright insensitive. Someone who is hard to convince is stubborn, but someone who won't give in to a simple and reasonable plea is obdurate. Pronounced OB-DER-IT.
- obfuscate                     To confuse. Perfect if you want to confuse someone who's not being clear with you – tell her to stop obfuscating. Say *OB-FUSS-KATE*.
- oblique                        Like the angle in geometry, which includes lines which are neither parallel nor perpendicular, the word refers to things that are not straight or straightforward, but indirect. An oblique reference does not directly address the true subject but alludes to it in a secondary or slightly obscure way. It's pronounced *OH-BLEEK*.

*obloquy | obumbrate*

obloquy	Public censure or blame, usually verbal. Richard Nixon suffered the obloquy of the press as the events at the Watergate Hotel were revealed. Pronounced <i>OB-LUH'KWEE</i> .
obscurantism	Something that is obscure is hard to understand, little known, darkly vague; obscurantism is intentional vagueness or obscurity, a conscious keeping in the dark.
obsequiou	An obsequious person fawns, sucks up to or kowtows (see <i>kowtow</i> ) to someone else. Say <i>OB-SEE-KWEE-USS</i> .
s obtuse	When describing an idea or explanation, <i>obtuse</i> is the opposite of lucid or clear. The CPA's explanation of deferred tax credits was quite obtuse, so the client fired him.
obumbrate	Not to be confused with <i>adumbrate</i> , which means to foreshadow, <i>obumbrate</i> means to darken, overshadow or make difficult to see or understand. The word should be used only figuratively. Skies <i>cbud over</i> before a rainstorm; weak explanations <i>obumbrate</i> the understanding of a scientific concept. Say <i>AH- BUM-BRATE</i> .

- octogenarian A person between the ages of 80 and 90, just as a septuagenarian is a person between the ages of 70 and 80. The word has a nice ring to it and sounds a lot better than "senior citizen."
- octothorpe The term created by the Bell System in 1967 for the # or pound sign. Imagine a voice-mail system that instructed callers to "Please press the octothorpe." No one would get any messages!
- odalisque A female slave or concubine in a harem, usually portrayed in 17th- and 18th-century paintings reclining on a divan, swathed in transparent drapery. It's sometimes a good word to use to describe a sexy or sultry (see *sultry*) woman. It's pronounced OH-DAL-ISK.
- oenology The science of wine or winemaking. Next time you're offered an expensive wine list and asked to make a choice, you can pass the list to your date and say, "You choose; I'm not an oenologist." If you don't know wines, at least you'll come across as someone with a great vocabulary. Someone who does love wine is an *oenophile*. Pronounced OH-NAHL-OH-GEE.

*officious / ombudsman*

officious	An officious person meddles or interferes without being asked. Overbearing mothers are officious, as are strangers who tell you what you should or shouldn't do. Officials are rarely officious, and officious people are not necessarily officials.
oligarchy	A government in which a small group exercises power over the majority. A company run by a committee is accurately referred to as an oligarchy. Say OH-L/G-ARK-EE.
olio	Yes, it means "oil" in other languages, but the definition we're interested in is what it means in <i>English</i> , which is a hodge-podge, a mixture of miscellaneous elements. A grab bag contains an olio of presents; a seafood stew contains an olio of vegetables and fish. (See also/arrago.)
ombudsman	An official whose job is to investigate complaints made by private citizens about abuses or wrongdoing performed by the government or by the organization he represents. Pronounced OMM-BUDZ-MUHN.



omnifarious	Of all varieties or forms; diverse. Nothing to do with being supremely wicked or evil. That's nefarious (see <i>nefarious</i> ). Say OMM-NEH-FAIR-EE-USS.
omnificent	Having supreme creative power; able to create all things. Many people think God is omnificent; some very egotistical people think they are, too. Say OMM-NIF-EH-SENT.
oniomania	An irrepressible urge to buy things; the kind of condition that inspires astronomical credit card bills and t-shirt slogans like: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." Pronounced OHN-EE-OH-MAIN-EE-A.
onomatopoeia	A word that sounds like what it defines (see <i>flump</i> ). Consider "hiss" or "scratch." Sort of mumble when you say it: AHN-EH-MAHT-EH-PEE-UH.
oppugn	Not to be confused with <i>opine</i> , which means to offer an opinion, <i>oppugn</i> means to fight against or counter-attack. "You always squeeze the toothpaste from the middle!" he said. "You drink from the milk carton and eat crackers in bed!" she oppugned. It's pronounced OH-PEWVN.

*orthography / ossify*

- orthography      It's not the study of birds, tooth appliances or support shoes. Orthography is the correct spelling of words according to established rules or usage. Newspaper editors worry about this a lot. Saying "Check the orthography" is much like, "Please proofread this." Say OR'THOG'RUH'FREE.
- oscitant          An oscitant person acts as if he just took a Valium or is badly in need of a nap: lazy, drowsy, inattentive and unfocused. It can be used to describe a physical condition or a state of mind. More temporary than narcolepsy (see *narcolepsy*). Say OSS-IH-TENT.
- osculate          To kiss and/or hug. Like *pulchritude* (see *pulchritude*), this is an ugly word for a wonderful action. The word was probably created by a lexicographer who didn't do enough osculating.
- ossify             To turn to bone. This word can be used both literally and figuratively. It means to become brittle and bone-hard (like a slice of bread after it's been lying in the sun for a few days) or to become mentally brittle or rigid in attitude and outlook.

otiose	Idle, useless and unnecessary. Not to be confused with <i>adipose</i> , which means fat. When companies make cutbacks, they can fire the otiose personnel and they won't be sued for discriminating against overweight people. Say OH-TEE-OSE.
oubliette	A hidden dungeon that can only be entered from above; the kind of word that pops up frequently in fairy tales that feature monsters. Fair maidens and princesses are always being thrown into oubliettes by evil monsters. It's pronounced OO-BLEE-ET.
ovine	If a cow is a bovine (see <i>bovine</i> ), what's a sheep? Ovine! Use this word to describe sheep-like behavior. This could include lack of individual initiative, a tendency to say <i>baaah</i> , or wool growing on one's back.
oxhaft	Approximately 57 gallons. Useful in hyperbolic (see <i>hyperbole</i> ) statements such as, "I'd like an oxhaft of double decaf espresso please."
oxymoron	This word describes a phrase that is internally contradictory. We like "jumbo shrimp" and "deposed President-for-Life."



# p

- padnag                    Literally, it means an old, slow horse, like a nag, but it's a good word for describing an old piece of well-loved but slow office equipment, or a broken-down car that still gets around. It's pronounced PAD-NAG.
- paillette                 A large sequin or spangle, the kind sewn onto evening gowns to make them glitter. Now you know what those sparkly things are called! Pronounced PAL-YET.
- paladin                  A brave knight or a chivalrous champion; a good word to use for that person you've been hoping will ride in on a white horse and save the day. When that savior rides in, call him or her a PAL-AH-D/N.
- palaver                  Idle chitchat or meaningless chatter. Adults make palaver at cocktail parties, as do teenagers on the telephone. It's pronounced PELL-AV-ER.

*palimpsest / panacea*

- palimpsest            A piece of parchment or other tablet, used for early writing, that was erased and reused a second time. This is the kind of word that crops up in auctions for famous manuscripts and at antique stores that deal in old books and prints. It is most often used figuratively, however, to connote a piece of work in which a previously completed and erased work shines through. An example – math homework in which a teacher can see the ways that a student attempted to solve a problem before coming up with the final answer. Say PAL-JMP-SEST.
- palindrome            A word or phrase that reads the same backward as forward, such as "Madam, I'm Adam" or "RADAR" or "A man, a plan, a canal – Panama!"
- palliative            Something that eases or soothes a situation, feeling or condition without solving or curing it. Aspirin, for example, is a palliative because it can take away the fever caused by a virus, but can't cure the virus itself. Giving a crying child a lollipop after an allergy shot has a palliative effect. Say PAL-EE-AH-T/V.
- panacea                A cure for all ills. Since nothing is a cure-all, the word is usually used in the negative, as in: "The

*p a n d e m i c | p a n j a n d r u m*

government policy is not a panacea for all of society's ills, but it will relieve certain economic burdens of the poor." Pronounced PAN-A-SEE-AH.

pandemic Distributed or prevalent practically throughout the world; universal. Homelessness is a problem pandemic to every urban society. Throughout the world, *Coca-Cola* is the pandemic drink of choice. A pandemic is similar to an epidemic, but a pandemic is much more widespread.

panegyric A speech that lavishly praises someone or something. A homeopathic (see *homeopathy*) doctor might deliver a panegyric on the healing qualities of ginseng. It's pronounced PAN-JH-JYE-RIK or PAN-IH-JEER-IK.

panjandrum A pompous, self-important official, such as the people who check your bags at customs or the oh-so- helpful assistants behind the desks in motor vehicle bureaus. If you're really frustrated by the way they treat you, you could probably call them panjandrums and get away with it. Say PAN-JAN-DREM.

*panoply / paralogize*

panoply	A complete array of something that is usually quite splendid in its breadth and size. "A panoply of flowers blanketed the open field." "A panoply of desserts covered the wedding buffet table." Say PAN-EH-PLÉE.
papilote	Bet you didn't know there was a word for this. It's the little piece of colorful fringed paper wrapped around the end of a lamb chop. You see fewer and fewer of them, but they're still around in certain fine restaurants. Pronounce it PAP-ILL-OAT.
paraclete	A person you call upon to intercede. Referees, umpires, and judges are all paracletes. Pronounced PAR-AH-CLEET.
paradigm	A model example; the standard to hold up for comparison. Politicians hold up the decline of the U.S. auto industry as a paradigm for Japanese strategy in other areas. Pronounced PAR-A-D/ME.
paralogize	This odd verb means "to draw illogical conclusions from a series of facts." An example: after being told about a pet that barks, likes bones, chases cats and wags its tail, you say, "Oh, I didn't know you had a parrot." It's pronounced PAR-AHL-OH-J/ZÉ.



paraph	The word for the elaborate flourishes people add to their signatures to make them unique. Think John Hancock. In this age of Bic pens, they're rapidly disappearing. Pronounced PAR-EFF or PAR-EFF. (See also <i>idiograph</i> .)
paravalent	Sexually potent only in unusual circumstances—a fancy word for kinky.
parlous	You might think this has something to do with speech or parlance, but it doesn't. It means perilous, dangerous and difficult to escape from. "After a number of parlous incidents in the jungle, which included being bitten by snakes and shot at by poachers, the tourists decided to take their next vacation in Miami." It's pronounced PAR-LUSS.
parochial	Excessively narrow in outlook; having backward views stemming from a lack of worldly experience. People who live in small towns are often considered parochial in their attitudes and beliefs. Don't confuse with parochial schools, which, while often parochial, may not be. It's pronounced PAR-OKE-EE-AL.

*paroxysm / passementerie*

- paroxysm A fit or outburst, often of emotion, as in: "The comedian inspired the crowd to paroxysms of laughter." Pronounced PAHR-OX-JZM.
- parure A matched set of jewelry, such as earrings and a necklace; the kind of word seen most often on museum cards and in auction catalogues. Save the word for when you're talking about diamonds and emeralds – not Bakelite. Pronounced PUH-ROOR.
- parvenu A subtler word for what we usually call *nouveau riche*. A parvenu is someone who has recently acquired money or social status, but has not yet acquired the appropriate style or manner. The word can also be used to describe any newcomer to a situation who has not yet learned to handle his role or responsibility, such as a young worker who gets a big promotion and acts obnoxious and superior around the people who were his closest colleagues the day before. Pronounced PAR-VEN-YOO. (See also *arriviste*.)
- passementerie The squiggly, braided trimming you see on clothing such as matador's suits, felt sombreros or other clothing. (How did you live without knowing that?) It's pronounced PASS-A-MENT-A/R-EE.

- pastiche** A literary or musical work composed of a mixture of borrowed themes or styles. Some might say that rap is a pastiche of soul music, poetry and reggae. Pronounced PAHSS-TEESH.
- pathetic fallacy** The attribution of human emotions to elements of nature; for example, describing a rainy day as a sad or depressing day. Distinguish from anthropomorphism (see *anthropomorphism*), which attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects.
- pathos** Any work or situation that inspires pity or sorrow. It should be distinguished from bathos (see *bathos*), which chronicles a fall from the sublime to the commonplace. Pronounced PAYTH-OSE or PAY-THOSS.
- patina** The outermost layer of a metal surface, most particularly the filmy green layer that forms on bronze or copper after oxidation that is thought to add beauty. You could be figurative and use it to describe a person's manner and appearance. It's pronounced PAT-JH-NUH. Also *patine*, pronounced PAH-TEEN.

*patois / peccant*

patois	Local dialect or jargon; a language peculiar to people of a certain area that is distinct from the standard language. Natives of Caribbean islands, for instance, converse in French or English or Dutch with tourists, but speak patois among themselves. It's pronounced PAT-WAH.
patronize	Two very different but useful meanings. To patronize a store means to do business there, while to patronize a fellow human is to condescend to him or her: " <i>Of course, I'll be there on time. Let me give you a signed statement.</i> "
peccadillo	The word refers to small sins or minor offenses, often sexual. When a married woman has a brief affair, she has a peccadillo. If a worker borrows a few dollars from petty cash and takes a long time to pay it back, that's also a peccadillo.
peccant	This does not mean spicy and flavorful; that's piquant (see <i>piquant</i> ). Guilty of a moral sin. Perhaps the woman who had a <i>peccadillo</i> (see above) could be considered peccant. Pronounced PECK-ANT.

*pedagogue / penultimate*

pedagogue	This word can simply mean "teacher," but more often it has the same meaning as <i>pedant</i> (see below), an extremely opinionated teacher who tries to force those opinions on others, ignoring common sense in favor of theoretical knowledge.
pedant	A teacher, but the implication is one who is tiresome, and always focused on small details. "Be careful with your new-found vocabulary skills, or you'll become a pedant and no one will talk to you any more." (See <i>pedagogue</i> above.)
pellucid	Transparent or translucent; as long as you can see through something, you may call it pellucid. Say PEL-L OO-S/D.
penicil	No, it's not a writing implement. In fact, it's the kind of short, bristly tufts of hair or fur you find along the backs of caterpillars. A great word for crossword puzzles or for teasing a friend who just got a punk haircut. Say PEN-L-S/LL.
penultimate	Second to last, whether it's your place on line, or the next-to-the-last paragraph. The letter t is the

*perdition / perfidious*

	penultimate letter in the word <i>penultimate</i> . Say PEN-UL-TIM-IT.
perdition	Utter ruin of the spirit; eternal damnation. Even if you don't believe in Hell, you can believe in perdition; it has no necessary religious connotation, but suggests ultimate punishment for moral sin. Say PER-DISH-IN.
peregrinate	A verb that means to wander or travel with no plans or itinerary. Jack Kerouac wrote of his peregrinations in <i>On the Road</i> . It's pronounced PER-EG-R/N-ATE. (See also <i>peripatetic</i> .)
peremptory	Dictatorial or authoritarian; allowing no room for argument. Brusque. "Go to your room!" is a peremptory order.
perfervid	Extremely ardent or intense; fervent to the nth degree. Zealots are perfervid, whatever their cause. Say PER-FUR-VID. (See also <i>messianic</i> .)
perfidious	Treacherous; nefarious; wicked. There are lots of words for evil; perfidious carries a note of disloyalty or

*perfunctory / persevere*

	betrayal. Benedict Arnold was perfidious. To call him a perfidious traitor would be redundant.
perfunctory	Routine; performed automatically, without thought or feeling. A job done perfunctorily reveals no particular passion and seems careless. A perfunctory greeting lacks enthusiasm. Say <i>PER-FUNK-TOR-EE</i> .
peripatetic	An adjective or noun that means traveling from place to place; itinerant. Migrant workers are peripatetic. You can also be peripatetic by reading this book in no particular order. (See also <i>peregrinate</i> .)
perorate	This word is a mouthful, as is its meaning, which is: to make a lengthy speech, often summarizing everything that's been said before. When you try, say <i>PER-UH-RATE</i> .
perquisite	Abbreviated to "perk." The perquisites of a job are the advantages or fees that come in addition to the regular salary, such as use of a company car or paid vacation time; fringe benefits.
persevere	To persist. Never give up. Not spelled perservere, a common error. Say <i>PURR-S/H-VEER</i> .

*persiflage / pharisee*

persiflage	Light banter. (See also <i>bavardage</i> .) Pronounced <i>PER-SIF'LAJ</i> .
pertinacious	Holding firmly to a belief or opinion; unwilling to be drawn away from a previously held idea. (See also <i>obdurate</i> .) Pronounced <b>PERT-IN-AY-SHUSS</b> .
peruse	To review thoroughly, study carefully. Often misused to mean "skim." Say <i>PURR-OOZE</i> .
pestle	As in "mortar and pestle," the traditional tools used by a pharmacist. The pestle is the stick that looks like a knee bone; the mortar is the little bowl that holds the stuff to be crushed.
pettifogger	A person overly concerned with details, such as certain accountants or lawyers for the opposing side. A pettifogger is someone who nit-picks, a niggler (see <i>niggler</i> ).
pharisee	A sanctimonious, self-righteous hypocrite; someone who loudly criticizes others for behavior he engages in himself. Say <b>FAIR-fS-HE</b> , even though he's not fair at all.



*p h a t i c | p h i l i s t i n e*

phatic	This word is used to describe language that conveys friendship or sociability rather than information. Greetings exchanged among friends at a party, or conversations on a receiving line at a wedding or funeral, are generally phatic. It's pronounced FAT-ICK.
phenology	Not to be confused with <i>phrenology</i> ; that's the study of the skull as an indicator of mental characteristics. Phenology is the study of the role of climate in annually recurring natural phenomena, such as bird migration, animal hibernation, plant flowerings and so forth.
philipic	Sounds like a cure for indigestion, but it's more likely to cause a stomachache than cure one. A philipic is a hostile speech that denounces a person or thing with great bitterness. Demonstrators deliver philipics during rallies; furious spouses deliver philipics against erring partners. Pronounced PHIL-IPP-ICK.
philistine	An uncultured person; someone who has no interest or knowledge of art or civilization. Someone who'd rather go skateboarding than to a museum would be considered funloving by some and a philistine by

*p h i l o b a t / p i l a s t e r*

others. If you don't want to sound like a philistine, pronounce it FILL-ISS-TEEN.

- philobat            A lover of travel. Someone who takes taxis every day is not a philobat; someone who's been around the world several times is either a philobat or has a very tough job in sales. It's pronounced FIL-OH-BAT.
- picaresque        Roguish or devilish. Don Quixote was the original picaresque character (see *quixotic*). Take care to distinguish from *picturesque*, which describes pleasant scenery. Pronounced PICK-AH-REHSK.
- piebald            Often used to describe horses, cows or cats. It means covered with irregular patches of different colors, especially black and white. Think of the cows on Ben and Jerry's ice-cream containers.
- pilaster            A fancy word for a fake column, the kind that doesn't stand freely, but runs along the walls of rooms that are trying to resemble the Colosseum in Rome or an ancient Greek ruin. Pronounce PIE-LASS-TER.

*p i n c i t i n g / p i s m i r e*

pindlin	Frail or puny. Distinguished in usage from <i>piddling</i> , which means trivial or trifling.
g pintle	Like peanut butter is to jelly, a pintle is inextricably linked with a <i>gudgeon</i> , a metal pivot. The pintle is a little pin that sticks into the hinge-like holes of the gudgeon, holding a rudder to the back of a small sailboat. When you're searching for a figurative phrase to describe an interlocked set, say, "They fit like a pintle and gudgeon."
piquant	Not to be confused with peccant (see <i>peccant</i> ). A pleasantly sharp or spicy flavor. Good marinara sauce, Cajun ribs, Szechwan beef and chicken Vindaloo are all piquant. Classier than saying "hot," and having to explain you mean spicy. Pronounced (once your mouth cools down) PEEK-ANT OR PEEK-UNT.
pismire	Another word for "ant." You can use it to refer to the little bug, or to describe something equally tiny. It's a good word to use when you're annoyed with someone, as in: "I'm tired of your pismire hobbies that leave no time for more important things." Pronounced PISS-MIRE.

*plangent / plenipotentiary*

plangent	Deep, low and resonantly mournful. Used to describe the music at a funeral or the mooing of a lone cow in an open field. Pronounced <i>PLAN-JENT</i> .
pledget	A small wad of cotton or paper used to absorb liquid, such as the little patch of tissue you use to staunch the blood when you cut yourself shaving.
Pleistocene era	Of all the geological periods, probably the most interesting to remember since it includes the Ice Ages and the evolution of early man. It is also the geological epoch that immediately precedes our present epoch. If you haven't seen someone for a while, you can hyperbolize (see <i>hyperbole</i> ) back to the Pleistocene era. It's pronounced <i>PLY-STESS-SEEN</i> .
plenipotentiary	A person vested with the full power to act on behalf of someone else. It's more than a power of attorney. A parent may act as a plenipotentiary for a child; an ambassador may be sent to act as a plenipotentiary for the ruler of a country. Pronounce <i>PLEHN-EH-PEH- TEN-SH EE-EHR-EE</i> .

*plethora / polemic*

plethora	An excess; more than enough to choose from; a glut. Imelda Marcos, for example, had a plethora of shoes in her closet. Say PLETH-OR-AH.
plunder	To pillage. "Plunder and pillage" is redundant. Pick one and use it exclusively.
plutocracy	Government by the wealthy—not by the dog from the Walt Disney cartoons. Say PLOO-TOCK-REH-SEE.
pocourante	How's this for a great insult? Someone who is careless or shows little concern or interest for a job or responsibility. A person who consistently leaves work early and takes too many days off is a pocourante; so is a student who doesn't attend classes or hand in assignments. Pronounced PO-CO-CYOOR-ANT-EE.
poi	Mashed taro root. Rhymes with <i>boy</i> . A very mushy, traditional Hawaiian dish that hasn't attracted much attention on the mainland.
polemic	A controversy or an argument made to refute something (similar in tone to a diatribe; see <i>diatribe</i> ). <i>Das Kapital</i> was a polemic against the injustices of capitalism. It's pronounced PUH-LEM-IK.

*politesse | polymath*

politesse	Like politeness, it means refined or courteous behavior. It's just a more refined and polite way of saying so. With great <i>politesse</i> , the butler bowed and led the guests into the drawing room. In general, people with drawing rooms act with <i>politesse</i> . It's pronounced POLE-EE-TESS.
poltroon	Sounds like an army expression, but it's not. Unless, of course, you're AWOL – the word means "coward."
polyandry	You know <i>monogamy</i> and <i>bigamy</i> , but this word belongs exclusively to women. It's the act of having more than one husband at a time. Don't confuse it with <i>polygyny</i> (that's having more than one wife at a time) or <i>polygamy</i> (either spouse having more than one partner at a time).
polyglot	A polyglot is able to speak several languages fluently. A polyglot group is composed of people who speak a variety of languages, such as the U.N.'s General Assembly.
polymath	This is neither a higher form of mathematics nor someone who's taken a lot of algebra courses. A

*polymorphous | popinjay*

	<p>polymath is someone who knows a great deal about a lot of different subjects; a well-educated, intelligent person with eclectic interests.</p>
polymorphous	<p>Occurring in any number of varied forms, such as the voice of a mockingbird which can imitate other birds or the changing colors of a chameleon. Say POL-EE- MORF-us.</p>
polysemous	<p>Ambiguous in the sense of having several different meanings. An artfully concise book title that could be interpreted in several different ways is polysemous. Abraham Lincoln's famous book review, "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like" is polysemous. Pronounce it POLL-EE- SEEM-us.</p>
	<p>To express opinions in a pompous, overly ponderous way. (See also pedant.)</p>
pontificate	<p>A vain, narcissistic, empty-headed person of either sex — the kind of person you date once and never again.</p>
popinjay	

*popple | portico | portmanteau | postiche*

**popple** Just like it sounds, it means to tumble about or bob up and down irregularly. Boiling water popples in the pot; clothes popple past the circular window of a dryer when they're drying; buoys popple on the

**portico** surface of a lake on a windy day.

A portico is an open porch consisting of four columns and a roof (but no walls) that you often see along the sides of old colonial houses. These days, people tend to enclose them and use them as sun porches.

**portmanteau** A blend or combination of uses. The word is most often used as a noun to describe words that combine or blend other words like "smog" or "docudrama." It's pronounced PORT-MAN-TOH.

**postiche** Not to be confused with a pastiche (see *pastiche*). A postiche is a superfluous ornament, usually added to a sculpture or work that is already finished. Think of adding earrings to the Statue of Liberty or a mustache to the Mona Lisa. Pronounced



*postpositive / precis*

postpositive	A word that is always used after another. For example, <i>manque</i> (see <i>manque</i> ) never stands alone, instead we say "artist <i>manque</i> ."
postprandial	Something that happens after dinner, such as a postprandial walk or postprandial snifter of brandy. If it happens before dinner, it's called <i>preprandial</i> – imagine a cocktail or, if it's a weekend, a nap.
pothor	It's kind of like "bother" when it's used as a noun. A pother is a fuss or commotion: "Don't make such a pother about it. We promised we'd visit our relatives, and we're going."
preciosity	An excessive fastidiousness, particularly in the use of language. It refers to something precious or affected, not precious in the ordinary sense of the word. It's pronounced PRESH-EE-OSS-IH-TEE.
precis	A summary. Book reviews frequently contain a precis of the plot of the book discussed. Pronounced PRAY-SEE.

*predicable / preternatural*

- predicable            Something that can be stated as true or that can be proved. Pronounced PRED-IK-AH-BULL.
- predormition    The period of semiconsciousness before sleep, when you either begin to dream or to worry (in which case you may not sleep at all).
- prepossess            Has nothing to do with a pawn shop. To impress favorably either beforehand or immediately. Someone who makes a good first impression is very prepossessing.
- presage                It means to forewarn or to portend. The first snowflake presages winter. You may know the word, but do you know that it's pronounced *PRESS'lj?*
- preterhuman    This is another way of saying superhuman or beyond the powers of mere mortals. (Clark Kent must have thought that "Preterman" sounded pretty silly.) It's pronounced PREE-TER-HYOO-MAN.
- preternatural    Beyond the course of nature – almost supernatural.  
The forest can be preternaturally quiet – so quiet that it's not natural. Pronounced PREE-TER-NATCH-OO R-UL.

*prevaricate | pristine*

prevaricate	Not quite fibbing, but close. When you prevaricate, you make vague or misleading statements without telling an outright falsehood. If you don't want to go somewhere and you're feeling healthy, "I can't make it tonight. I'm sick" is a lie; "I'm not sure I can make it tonight. I'll get there if I can but don't wait for me" is a prevarication. Say PRJH-VARE-/H-KATE .
prima facie	A Latin term for self-evident or apparent. Getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar is prima facie evidence of theft. It's pronounced PREE-MA FASH-EE.
primer	A book that covers the basics of a subject. Originally used to describe the books used in one-room school- houses, it can now be applied to software documentation or basic texts in any subject. Careful with the pronunciation. Rhymes with <i>simmer</i> .
primogenitor	Often confused to mean first-born or heir apparent. In fact, it means ancestor. Pronounced PR/ME-OH- JEN-IT-OR.
pristine	When something is pristine, it retains its original or pure form. Most commonly, works of art or antiques

*proactive / prolicide*

in perfect condition are described as pristine. A photograph that has no creases, tears or stains is pristine. Say *PRISS-TEEN*.

**proactive** Often misused to mean "active." It means the opposite of reactive. Action that is proactive precedes, even promotes or prevents, a situation. Politicians are reactive; good chess players are proactive.

**probity** Honesty; integrity; incorruptibility. Has nothing to do with probability or wills. Pronounced *PROH-BIT-EE*.

**prognosticate** To predict from available facts, to foresee or prophesize. The word has to do with making a judgment based on available information rather than using spiritual or astrological signs. Economists prognosticate the future state of the economy based on certain indicators; pollsters prognosticate the outcome of elections based on polling results.

**prolicide** The killing of one's own or other children. The kind of act you'd like to commit when the four-year-old that's sitting right in front of you on a trans-Atlantic flight begins to scream. Pronounce it *PRO-LISS-IDE*.

*prolix I proscribe*

prolix	Unnecessarily wordy; verbose. 'Nuff said. Pronounced <i>PROH-ux</i> .
Promethean	Daringly original; innovative and creative. In Greek mythology, Prometheus got in big trouble for stealing fire from Mount Olympus and giving it to mankind. Say <i>PRO-MEE-THEE-AN</i> .
propinquity	Closeness or nearness, either physically (as in proximity) or spiritually (as in affinity). Something lying right next to something else is in propinquity to it; two people who share spiritual, philosophical or intellectual ideas also have a propinquity.
prosaic	It doesn't mean fancy – exactly the opposite. The word literally means commonplace or ordinary but has an added touch of meaning boring and dull. Apricot tea is exotic; orange pekoe is prosaic. Pronounced <i>PRO-ZAY-ik</i> .
proscribe	The noun for this verb is <i>proscription</i> and it means almost the exact opposite of "prescription." To proscribe something is to forbid it or label it dangerous. Tea and toast would be proscribed for an upset

*proselytize / Proustian*

	stomach; red-hot chili peppers would be proscribed. Say PROH-SCR/BE.
proselytize	Someone who proselytizes tries to convert others by using strongly persuasive language or convincing argument. It implies a certain degree of oppressive lecturing. Demonstrators proselytize about their causes, as do zealots, fanatics and members of some organized religions. Pronouncing it is easy – PROSS-ELL-IT-IZE. Just try to remember how to spell it!
protean	Easily changeable from one form to another. Someone who can fit into any social situation, changing types to fit the circumstances, is protean. Pronounced PROH'TEE'AN.
Proustian	This is a reference to Marcel Proust's novel <i>Remembrance of Things Past</i> , in which the protagonist takes a bite of a pastry he enjoyed as a child, and the taste of the pastry evokes a flood of childhood memories. The term has come to mean any sensory experience that provokes a flood of nostalgia. When an adult has a glass of chocolate milk and an Oreo, he or she is likely to have a Proustian experience. The smell of

newly-mown grass is often Proustian, evoking memories of summer camp or trips to the country. Say PROOST-EE-AN.

provenance Place of origin or source. Frequently used when obtaining information about a work of art or an antique. The next time you're in a posh antique store and want to give the impression that you belong there, say to the owner, "Can you tell something about the provenance of this crystal thingee?" Say PR AH V-EN-ENCE.

puce No one is quite clear about what color puce really is. Some say chartreuse; others guess pinkish-purple. Others shrug and offer, "Green?" Well, here's the official answer: the word comes from the French word for "flea" and designates the color of a flea, which, if you put that flea under a microscope, you would discover is purplish-brown. Rhymes with *loose*.

puerile There is great debate about the pronunciation of this word, which means "childish or immature." Grown-ups who go around their offices sticking "Kick Me" signs on the backs of their coworkers are considered

*pulchritude / pursy*

puerile, especially by the people who get the signs stuck on their backs. The preferred pronunciation is not *PWER'IL*, but *PYOOR-IL*.

**pulchritude** The opposite of what it sounds like. Someone of great pulchritude is absolutely beautiful. The only known use of this word is to confuse those who hear it. Pronounced *PULK-RI-TOOD*.

**punctilious** Not someone who knows where to put punctuation—although it could be. A punctilious person is someone who is meticulous and pays attention to details, punctuation or otherwise.

**purlieu** There are several definitions for this word, but the most usable one is a habitat or a place one frequents. The local bar is the purlieu for certain folks; the library is the purlieu for others. When you are in your particular purlieu, it becomes your milieu (see *milieu*). Say it *PURR-LYOO*.

**pursy** Short of breath, especially because of being too fat. The obese man in front of you who is slowly climbing the steps and panting heavily is pursy. Vivid word, isn't it?



*putsch*

putsch

The German word for a sudden uprising and take-over. It generally refers to a government coup, but if a group of coworkers get together to kick out their superior and take over her responsibilities, that's a putsch too. Rhymes with *butch*.



# Q

- quagmire      This word means swamp or bog or any earth that shakes when trodden upon, but it is probably more often used figuratively to mean a murky mess. A teenager's room might be a quagmire of dirty clothes, food wrappers and old magazines; a bad answer to an essay question on an exam might be a quagmire of poorly expressed thoughts and conflicting ideas. Say *KWAG-UY'ER*.
- quash      This is not a vegetable akin to eggplant or zucchini; it's a verb that means "to put an end to" or "to get rid of." Mostly you quash ideas or feelings, not people (that's *murder*).
- quay      An often misused word. A quay is a wharf, not a bay. So a walk out on Hawk's Quay in Florida won't get you wet. And it is pronounced *KEY*, not *KWAY*.

*quasi / quiescent*

- quasi                    A word you always see in combination with another word, as in "quasi-intelligence," "quasi-healthy," "quasi-important." It means seeming to be, but not really being. A quasi-intelligent person probably sounds smart and insightful, but if you listen carefully he may be saying very little. Quasi-healthy food may be labeled "all natural" but contain lots of sugar or fat. Pronounced QWAY-ZEE or KWAH-ZEE.
- querulous              Complaining in a whining, peevish sort of way. Parents become irritated or annoyed when their children misbehave; children become querulous when they're forced to behave. A querulous adult is probably acting like a child. It's pronounced KWER-
- quidnunc                A gossip. The only word that ends in unc.
- quid pro quo    Tit for tat; something given in return. If you are a vengeful person and I'm nasty to you, quid pro quo you'll be nasty to me. Pronounced KWID PRO KWO.
- quiescent                A nice word for "motionless" or "still." If someone isn't talking, he's quiet; if he's lying down, he's

quincunx / quixotic

sleeping or relaxing; if he's sitting motionless on a couch and staring into space, he's quiescent (or catatonic). A still lake at dawn is quiescent. The coolest use of this word is for the Popsicle, which is quiescently frozen. It's pronounced *KWEE-ESS-ENT*.

quincunx

A hard word to say (and even harder to spell). It means the arrangement of five objects with one at each corner of a square, and the remaining one in the center. Think of the arrangement of a five of hearts on a playing card (or anything else arranged like the five on a playing card). Pronounced *KWING-KUNKS*.

quisling

A collaborating spy. The word derives from Major Vidkun Quisling, who aided the German invaders of his native Norway during World War II. It can be used to refer to anyone who spies on his own group for the benefit of a competitor.

quixotic

This word is often misused to mean "flaky" or "changeable." In fact, as anyone who remembers the story of Don Quixote knows, a quixotic person is someone who is romantic and idealistic and pursues lofty but impractical goals. One grows impatient with

*q u o t i d i a n*

quixotic people but rarely dislikes them. It's pronounced *KWIKS'OTT'ICK*.

quotidian

Ordinary, common, or occurring every day, such as a dose of vitamins. Pronounced *KWOH-TIDD-EE-LN*.

# R

- raconteur            A great storyteller; the kind of person who tells wonderfully amusing anecdotes with split-second timing and a great choice of words. Mark Twain is perhaps the most famous example. Say RACK-ON-TOUR.
- raffish                Tacky, cheap or in bad taste. The word can refer to people or things. A tourist dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and plaid shorts looks raffish, as do most of the doo-dads sold in airport souvenir shops.
- raillery                Not the stuff trains run on. Pronounced RAY-LER-EE, it's another word for good-natured banter and light teasing. (See also *bavardage*.)
- ramekin                This belongs with papilote (see *papilote*) in the "Obscure Restaurant" list. A ramekin is the lidless

*randy / ratiocinate*

ceramic baking dish used for individual servings of foods such as French onion soup. Say RAM-EH-KIN.

- randy Lustful or lecherous. In the '50s, this word was used instead of "horny."
- rankle To cause long-lasting anger or resentment. Nasty, superior and unfair employers rankle their employees.
- rapacious Plundering or taking by force. Rapacious soldiers don't just occupy a town, they pillage it. (See also *plunder*.)
- rara avis A Latin phrase for an unusual person or thing – a rare bird. A very scholarly way of saying one-in-a-million. Pronounce it RAIR-UH AY-viss.
- rasher One thin slice of bacon is a rasher, although many people now use the word to mean an order of several slices. Next time you order breakfast, ask for six or seven rashers of bacon.
- ratiocinate To reason by use of formal logic. That would include inducing, deducing, and every method in between.



*recalcitrant | reconnoiter*

When you give a great deal of thought to a problem, you can say you figured it out by ratiocination. Pronounced RASH-EE-OH-SIN-ATE.

- recalcitrant      Rebellious, stubborn and disobedient. The word is generally reserved to describe difficult children (or adults who act like difficult children). "I begged him to come to the concert, but he was recalcitrant, refusing to go because no Motown music was going to be played at the Philharmonic."
- recidivate      To relapse. Most often used to describe convicts who are released from prison, then commit more crimes. Chain smokers who try to quit are prone to recidivism. Pronounced REE-SID-I-VATE.
- recondite      Esoteric; little known; obscure. References to medieval history texts, the mating rituals of rare Australian birds, or Norwegian jazz, for example, are recondite. Pronounced RECK-EHN-DITE.
- reconnoiter      To engage in a preliminary survey of something in order to gain information. This word was first a military term but has expanded to mean checking

*recreant / red herring*

anything out in advance of doing it. You can reconnoiter a parking lot for available spaces, for instance, before driving your car in. It's pronounced REE-CON-OY-TER and can also be spelled reconnoitre (but that would be affected – see *preciosity*).

recreant This has nothing to do with play or outdoor sports; a recreant is a traitor or a coward, someone who abandons his friends, family or country. It's pronounced REK-REE-ANT.

rectitude Moral righteousness or integrity. People who say or do things with rectitude have generally been truly good. There's no self-righteousness or hypocrisy involved. Mother Theresa has rectitude, as do a lot of good people who are less famous.

red herring Something introduced merely to divert attention from a more important and possibly controversial issue. Appears in Agatha Christie mysteries all the time. In a different context, it's also used to denote a printed prospectus detailing the terms of issuance of shares of a new corporation.

*redolent / remonstrate*

redolent	A very musical word for fragrant or sweet-smelling. Gardens are redolent in spring, as are the newly washed heads of infants. Pronounced RED-A-LENT.
refractory	Hard to manage; resistant to conventional treatment. A child who refuses to obey is refractory. So is a malignant tumor that does not respond to chemotherapy or any other conventional cancer therapy.
refulgent	Shining or gleaming, like harbor lights or stars on a clear night. R/H-FUHL-JENT is the way to say it.
reify	To make an abstract concept concrete. A written contract, for example, may reify the terms of an agreement that have been discussed in a meeting. It's pronounced REE- IFF-EYE.
rejoinder	A response to an answer, usually a good response but not quite as clever as a riposte (see <i>riposte</i> ).
remonstrate	To plea in protest; kind of like a verbal version of "to demonstrate." Striking workers may demonstrate in picket lines and then arrange meetings to remonstrate with the management. Pronounced REH- MAHN-STRATE.

*remontado / rimple*

remontado	A person who escapes the pressures of civilization by fleeing to the mountains (or the islands, or...)- Say REE-MAHN-TAH-DOH .
renege	You probably know what it means to go back on one's word or break a promise. But did you know it had an <i>e</i> on the end? It's pronounced REE-NEGG.
reprobate	A depraved or unprincipled person; someone who is all but morally hopeless. It's pronounced REP-ROH-BATE.
restive	The opposite of restful, this word means fidgety, nervously impatient and uneasy. A variation on <i>restless</i> .
retrench	To reduce or cut back. During a recession, people tend to retrench, spending less on luxury items and entertainment.
rimple	Not a hat worn by a nun or a medieval lady; that's a wimple. Rimple is just another word for a wrinkle or crease. Aging persons have rimples around their eyes; poorly packed clothes come out of the suitcase filled with rimples.

riposte	A sharp, usually clever, retort; the exact opposite of an esprit d'escalier (see <i>esprit d'escalier</i> ). Originally a fencing term. It's pronounced <i>REE-POST</i> .
rodomontade	A bragging, boastful speech. None of us could bear to listen to another word of that arrogant pedant's rodomontade. (See also <i>pedant</i> .) It's pronounced <i>ROD-EM-ON-TA ID</i> .
roman a clef	Literally, "novel with a key." A novel in which the characters are real people disguised by fictitious names. Pronounced <i>ROH-MAN AH CLAY</i> .
roue	A rake; a dissipated, lascivious man, but with a touch of the dashing romantic. Don Juan took the cake. It's pronounced <i>ROO-AY</i> .
rubric	Not the multicolored puzzle cube, but close. A set of regulations for behavior or procedure. Say <i>ROOB-RJC</i> .
rumbelow	A combination of meaningless syllables that evoke a feeling or mood, such as "yo-ho-ho" or "tra-la-la" or "lah-di-dah." Pronounced <i>RLJM-BEH-LOH</i> .

*ruthful*

ruthful

The opposite of ruthless is indeed a word; it means having pity, compassion or remorse. To use it as a noun, just say "ruth": "At the funeral, the murderer showed ruth."

# S

sage	We know it's a spice, but it also means "extremely wise." In particular, it refers to the kind of wisdom that comes from experience rather than from books.
salacious	Yet another word for lustful and lecherous. (See also <i>licentious</i> , <i>randy</i> and <i>lascivious</i> .) Pronounced SAHL-AY-SHUSS.
salient	The most notable; the things that stand out as the most important. The salient features of a product are the things that make it worth buying. It's pronounced SAIL-YENT.
salmagundi	A mixture or miscellaneous collection. (See also <i>farrago</i> and <i>olio</i> .)

*salubrious / soporific*

salubrious	Promoting good health. Spa water, vitamins and oat bran (and a slew of other items that are health-food store staples) are said to be salubrious. Say it SAL-OO BREE-USS.
sang froid	Composure or calm in the face of danger, difficulty or annoyance. The guards in front of Buckingham Palace maintain their sang froid under all circumstances. Pronounced SANG FRWAH.
sanguine	Cheerful and optimistic. After looking through the annual report, he felt sanguine about his investment.
sans souci	Resorts are fond of naming themselves with this French phrase, perhaps because it means "carefree." Peggy Lee sings a great song about it.
saporific	Not to be confused with soporific (see <i>soporific</i> ), saporific with an <i>a</i> means "giving flavor." Dull lectures, B-movies, and tranquilizers are soporifics; red pepper, hot fudge, and curry are all saporifics.



*sardonic | scatology*

sardonic	Bitter or scornful. It can describe a sense of humor, a personality type or a work of art.
sartorial	Relating to clothing, especially men's clothing. The emperor who wanted new clothes called on the sartorial skills of everyone in his kingdom.
saturnalia	A period of wild revelry. Bacchanals (see <i>bacchanal</i> ) are drunken revelries in imitation of the Roman god Bacchus. Similarly, saturnalia honors Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture. Interestingly enough, though saturnalias are wild parties, a <i>saturnine</i> person is cold, gloomy and depressed.
scarify	To make superficial cuts or scratches. Certain African and Latin American tribes scarify their faces and bodies for decoration. The word can also be used in a figurative sense to mean making small insults, wounding with words. "The children scarified the new kid in the class by teasing him mercilessly about the way he dressed." Pronounced SCAR-IF-EVE.
scatology	The study of or excessive interest in excrement or obscenity, such as the works of William S. Burroughs or Laurence Sterne.

*schwa / scurrilous*

schwa	The upside-down e you always see in a dictionary. It denotes the sound similar to <i>eh</i> , as in about, edible, circus. . Pronounced SHWAH.
scintilla	A spark or minute particle. It's usually accompanied by a modifier, as in, "not even a scintilla" or "not one scintilla." Pronounced SIN-TILL-AH.
scion	A child, in particular an heir. It's pronounced SIGH-ON.
scotch	Not just a whiskey. It means to wound without killing; to render harmless, such as shooting someone in the leg to prevent her escape.
scunner	Lots of people feel the victims of scunners. It means a dislike taken for no reason. If a teacher takes a scunner to you, you're in trouble.
scurrilous	Incredibly abusive, obscenely nasty. Villains are guilty of scurrilous deeds. This is a good word to use when you need to yell at someone who's made you furious, as in: "I'm sick and tired of your scurrilous treatment of me and everyone else around you." Say <i>SCUR-RIL'USS</i> .

sedulous	Someone who is sedulous is diligent and persevering and never gives up the ship, such as the Terminator, or, on the brighter side, the pioneers who settled the West. It's pronounced SEJ-EH-LESS.
semantics	The aspect of linguistics that is concerned with the meaning and usage of words. Being precise in what you say and how you say it is the greatest benefit of semantics. When someone's response to your argument is that you're just playing with semantics, they've decided to stop fighting about the facts, and to start accusing you of using double talk (which you would never do, of course).
seminal	Despite the i, the word derives from "semen," and means the source of a style, an idea or a philosophy. The Federalist Papers are a seminal work of American political thought; Einstein's work is seminal to modern physics. It's pronounced SEMM-IN-AL.
semiotics	The study of signs and symbols. Like linguistics, an oft-misunderstood yet fascinating field of study.
senescent	Aging, or becoming old. Generally used to describe people rather than things. Houses become decrepit;

*sententious / sesquipedalian*

	people become senescent. Pronounced SEH-NESS-SENT.
sententious	The word has two almost contradictory meanings: full of terse, pithy truths, or self-righteously moralizing and pedantic. Be careful how you use it. Pronounced SEN-TEN-SHUSS.
sequacious	Following smoothly or logically; happening in a sequence. A sequacious argument would be hard to argue with; a sequacious movie would be easy to follow.
serendipity	Serendipity is something wonderful that happens suddenly and unexpectedly, such as bumping into a dear friend 1,000 miles from home just after you've lost your traveler's checks.
serry	To crowd together closely. Sardines are packed, but people in an elevator are serryed.
sesquipedalian	This is one of our favorites. It means a very long word (literally "a foot and a half"), or given to using very long words. A sesquipedalian loves using words like <i>SESS-KWIH'PEH'DALE-YAN</i> .

sexagenarian Aged between sixty and seventy years old. (See also *octogenarian*.)

shaman Literally, a shaman is a priest or witch doctor who uses supernatural powers in various tribal religions in Africa and Asia. The word is now used figuratively for any contemporary guru-type who exercises a kind of religious control over a set of followers. Jim Jones was a kind of shaman; some parents worry that certain heavy-metal rock stars are considered to be shamans by their young fans. Say SHAH-MEN.

shibboleth A doctrine or belief once held to be of great importance by a particular group or sect but now seen as rather old-fashioned and useless. Stoning witches and refraining from shopping on Sundays are both examples of shibboleths.

sibilant Any speech sound that resembles a hiss; in particular, words that begin with *s*, *z* or *sh*. Of course, it's all in the way you pronounce them. "Yes" is not necessarily sibilant, but could be: "Yesssssssss, my pretty," said the wicked witch." If you like, you can pronounce it SSSSSSSSIB-EH-LANT.

sic / sinecure

<b>SIC</b>	Intentionally written. When used in printed materials, it means, "The person who wrote this article/ letter/speech is an idiot; look at the mistake he made. But we the editors are smart, so don't blame us." Place it in parentheses after a mistake (sic). Sounds like <i>sick</i> .
sidereal	Relating to or determined by the stars. Astrologers profit from selling phony sidereal advice. Pronounced <i>SYE'DEER'EE-AL</i> .
simian	Resembling a monkey or ape in physical characteristics.
simpatico	In sympathy in ideas, manners or personalities. A successful computer-dating service puts simpatico people in contact. Say <i>SJMM-PAT-EE-COH</i> .
simulacrum	Deceptive likeness to or seeming similarity. Wax museums specialize in them. Pronounced <i>SIM-YOOL-AY-CRUM</i> .
sinecure	An office or post that provides honor or prestige and possibly even profit but which requires almost no

sine qua non / sirenic

work. Certain ambassadors' posts are considered sinecures, for example, because the job involves a lot of formal parties and official gatherings but very little political responsibility. It's pronounced *SIN-A-CU RE*.

sine qua non	A Latin phrase for an indispensable requirement or essential need. Being a good host is the sine qua non for being the ambassador of good will for a country. It's pronounced SEE-NAY <i>KWA</i> NON.
sinistrodextral	Moving from left to right. An obvious example: written English is a sinistrodextral language; written Hebrew is not.
sipid	The opposite of <i>insipid</i> (tasteless) is a word in its own right. It means having a pleasing taste, flavor or character, such as a good full-bodied wine or a strong cheese.
sirenic	Having the qualities of a siren (the human kind)—women who are irresistibly alluring and almost dangerously tempting. Michelle Pfeiffer frequently plays sirenic roles. Pronounced <i>SY-REN-LCK</i> .

s i t o m a n i c / s m a r m y

sitomaniac	An abnormal or even neurotic craving for food. The next time you sit down with a spoon and a half gallon of ice cream, just grin and say you're having an attack of sitomania.
skulduggery	If you do something sneaky and underhanded, you are engaging in skulduggery. Though it's clearly dishonorable conduct, it's not as bad as an outright felony – you don't necessarily get thrown in jail for it. Filling your mom's purse with raspberry Jell-O is skulduggery. (Also spelled <i>skullduggery</i> .)
sloven	This is the noun for "slovenly." People who dress in a slovenly way are carelessly sloppy; sloven, therefore, is another word for slob. You can also use it as a name for someone who does a job poorly or haphazardly. The guy who came in to wash your windows and left great big streaks on the glass is a sloven. Pronounced SLAH-VENN.
slubber	To do hastily and carelessly. A <i>sloven</i> (see above) slubbers his work.
smarmy	Ingratiating; falsely flattering or fawning in order to get in someone's good graces. People without notice-



	able talent who need business are often smarmy, falling all over their clients. (See also <i>obsequious</i> .)
sniffish	Picture a haughty person with her nose in the air, sniffing disdainfully and staring contemptuously and you've got it—a sniffish snob.
snood	The Yuppie hairband made famous by Hillary Clinton is called a snood. Also a netlike cap worn by women. A snood was originally a badge of virginity. Now it just keeps your hair out of your eyes. Rhymes with <i>food</i> .
sobriquet	Moniker, another word for nickname. Chicago's sobriquet is "The Windy City." Pronounced SOH-BRICK'AY.
sociopath	A favorite insult to hurl at selfish, nasty, ungenerous and unthoughtful people, the word is a clinical term meaning someone who is hostile to society. Serial killers are often sociopaths.
sodality	Like <i>solidarity</i> , the word means companionship or union in attitude or belief. Two people who share common interests have a sodality between them.

*soigne | solipsism*

soigne	Elegant in the sense of "well-groomed" or "carefully put together." A woman in a simple black dress with her hair arranged in a French twist (in the style of Audrey Hepburn or Catherine Deneuve) is soigne. It's pronounced SWAN-YAY.
soiree	From the French: a social gathering that takes place in the evening for a particular purpose, such as listening to live music, holding a discussion group or reading poetry. It has come to be used to mean any party held at night. Pronounced SWAR-AY.
solecism	Any mistake or inconsistency, including a grammatical error. A person who says "who" when he should say "whom," or "me" when he should say "I," speaks in solecisms. It's pronounced SOLL-EH-SIZ-EM. To pronounce it any other way would be a solecism.

*s o m a t i s t | s o t t o v o c e*

somatist	A psychiatrist who believes that all mental illnesses are physical in origin. Almost the opposite of someone who believes that all illnesses are <i>psychosomatic</i> , or psychological in origin.
sonorous	Capable of producing deep, rich sound, like the bells of Notre Dame. Pronounced SAHN-OR-USS.
sophism	A deceptive or false argument or belief. When someone comes up with a series of facts that don't prove the point she's trying to make, you can accuse her of making a sophism. Say SOFF-IZM.
soporific	Something that produces sleep is a soporific. It can be used as a noun or an adjective. A sleeping pill is a soporific. A geography lecture may be soporific. (See also <i>saporific</i> , which has an entirely different meaning.)
sotto voce	These Latin words mean "in a whisper" – in a very low voice so as not to be overheard. Often seen in screenplays and stage directions. Use it as an adjective. " 'Blanche is a cow,' Hortense said sotto voce to her friend Hermione." Pronounced SOH-TOE VOE-CHAY.

*sough I specious*

- sough                    To make a sighing or rustling sound. Trees sough in a gentle wind. On a breezy day, the reeds along the edge of a pond sough. Pronounced *sow*, not *SUFF*.
- soupfon                 The French word for a hint, a dash, a trace. It can be used in a recipe, such as a soup<sup>9</sup>on of brandy in the chowder, but it's commonly used figuratively as well. "The comedy was a delightful mix of terrific acting, slapstick humor and a soup<sup>^</sup>on of social parody." It's pronounced *sooP-SON*, like when Mom or Pop calls the kid in for dinner.
- spado                    Another word for a castrated man or animal (see also *eunuch*). Literally. Rhymes with *Play-Dough*.
- sparge                  A sparge is a sprinkling or a spattering, like a sparge of wild lilies along the side of a highway. It can also be used as a verb, but it sounds more awkward than "scatter" or "sprinkle."
- specious                Something that seems correct on the surface but turns out to be false or wrong. A specious argument sounds great but doesn't prove its point. It's pronounced *SPEE-SHUSS*.

spelunk	To explore caves. We wonder if spelunkers get their equipment in the same store as keglers do (see <i>kegler</i> ). Note that if you need to know the difference between a stalactite (see <i>stalactite</i> ) and a stalagmite, you should ask a spelunker. Say SPEH-LUNK.
spiniferous	Sounds like something that's either marvelous or delicious, but it's not. Blowfish and porcupines are spiniferous. The word means "covered with spines." Pronounced SPIN-JFF-ER-USS.
spoonerism	A spoonerism is the exchange of the first letter of two or more syllables or words with comic or clever results. This word comes from an English clergyman named W. A. Spooner who often made such slips of the tongue: "flutterby" for "butterfly," for example.
spoor	One of those words you hear often but are never quite sure what it means—a track or trail of bones, dung, or fur made by a person or an animal being hunted.
spurious	Not genuine; counterfeit. You could be talking about money or sympathy. If it's fake, it's spurious.

*squib / stodge*

squib	A short, witty composition or saying, often an item in a newspaper. It also describes a short football kick.
stalactite	Not, of course, to be confused with <i>stalagmite</i> . Let's sort them out once and for all: a stalactite is the icicle-like formation that hangs from the roof or wall of a cave. A stalagmite is a deposit on the floor of the cave that looks like an inverted stalactite. Remember that stalactites must be <i>tight</i> to stay on the roof of the cave and you'll be all set. Both are made from crystalline calcium carbonate buildup.
stalwart	Stout; steady; dependably courageous. Friends who can be counted on for their bravery and loyalty are stalwart.
stentorian	People often use this word to mean authoritarian, but that's not exactly what it means. Someone who speaks with a stentorian voice speaks loudly and harshly. It often has the effect of being authoritarian, however.
stodge	To eat greedily; to gorge or stuff. People on diets often sneak down to the kitchen in the middle of the

night to stodge themselves with leftovers from the fridge.

- stolid                    Unemotional, or at least slow to express feelings. Certain men who were raised in the pre-consciousness-raising days are stolid. Old army officers who insist that their family members call them General, for instance, are also stolid. Pronounced STAHL-JD.
- subaltern                Subordinate or of lower rank. It's used as an adjective. "The president and her subaltern staff toured the factory to see how the assembly-line workers were doing."
- subjacent                Adjacent means side by side; so subjacent means lying directly under. "The basement of the house was subjacent to the living room." Say SUB-JAY-SENT.
- subrogate                To substitute, as in subrogating fat-free foods for ice cream and butter when you're on a diet. When your history teacher was sick and you got a replacement for the day, she was not called a subrogate teacher because that's just not the idiom! Don't confuse subrogate with *surrogate*, which means more or less the same thing, but can be used as a noun.

*subsume | summa cum laude*

**subsume** To consider an idea, principle, theory or category as part of a larger whole. "Existentialism is subsumed by philosophy in the liberal arts class offerings at the university."

**subterfuge** An evasion or deceit used to conceal or avoid something. High-school students use many forms of subterfuge in order to get out of physical education classes: they pretend to be sick, arrange to meet with a teacher or intentionally break a toe. It's pronounced *SUB-TER'FYOOJ*.

**sui generis** A Latin phrase for "unique" or "one of a kind." You may claim an incredibly ugly antique vase that a pretentious relative gave you is a sui generis work of art. Opposite of generic. The correct pronunciation is *SOO-EYE JEN'ER'IS*.

Very hot and humid, like the air on a mid-August night in Miami, or sensual and voluptuous, like Rita Hayworth or Kathleen Turner.

**sultry**

**summa cum laude** Latin for "with highest praise," the highest honor granted to exceptional graduates. (See also *magna cum laude*.) Pronounced *SOO-MA KUM LOUD-A*.



*supercilious / sylph*

supercilious	Haughty, contemptuous or superior. (See also <i>bump' tious</i> .) From the Latin word for "eyebrows." Pronounced SOO-PER-SJLL-EE-US.
supernal	Celestial; heavenly; above ordinary human existence. Gods exhibit supernal powers; people with oversized egos think they do, too. Say SOO-PER-NULL.
surfeit	It's pronounced SIR-F/T, and it means an excess. The wealthy have a surfeit of assets.
susurrus	This word often crops up in highly descriptive prose. It means a gentle whispering or rustling, such as the sound of tall grass blowing in the wind or dry leaves dancing along pavement on an autumn day. It's pronounced a bit like the sound it describes: soo-SIR- oos. (See also <i>sough</i> .)
sybarite	A person who lives luxuriously and self-indulgently. Very posh resorts love to advertise as "a haven for sybarites." Say SIB-ER-JTE.
sylph	A slender, graceful woman. Audrey Hepburn is the prototype. Say it SIHLF.

*synecdoche / synergy*

- synecdoche      A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole, such as "Get your butt in here." (Obviously the speaker wants more than just your posterior.) Or the whole may be used to describe a part, as in "Big Business is responsible for polluting this lake." It's pronounced *SIH-NEK-DUH-KEE*.
- synergy      Cooperative activity. Getting more than the sum of the parts. Synergy occurs in an office, for example, when coworkers give each other energy and inspire each other to be more creative and productive than they would be alone. Say *SIN-ER-JEE*.

# T

- taciturn** Preferring to remain silent; unwilling to talk. Children are often taciturn when they are asked to explain their behavior; adults are taciturn whenever they prefer to keep their feelings private. Taciturn people generally don't join group therapy unless they're trying to get over their unwillingness to talk to people.
- talaria** The winged sandals worn by Mercury. Granted, Mercury and FTD are probably the only people who need to use this word regularly, but think about all those times you were in a hurry and wished you had a pair of talaria. Rhymes with *malaria*.
- talisman** A lucky charm. Typically a rabbit's foot or any other doo-dad you habitually bring along when you're playing a team sport or gambling.

*tatterdemalion / temblor*

tatterdemalion A person dressed in ragged clothing; possibly a decent alternative to "homeless person," except that a person in ragged clothing may very well have a home. The kids in the old "Our Gang" TV series were tatterdemalions.

telegenic Sounds like a fortuneteller or someone with supernatural powers, but it's not. Someone who is telegenic looks good on television or, to use the more contemporary phrase, is videogenic.

teleology The belief that all things in nature are created for a particular purpose. Evolution is all about teleology – the duckbilled platypus has developed a duckbill because it is useful in an overall natural design. Misused, this reasoning can give rise to statements like, "If man were meant to fly, he'd have wings." Pronounced TEL-EE-AHL-OH-JEE.

temblor Another word for earthquake. Most often used by reporters in California in reporting on *yet another* earthquake. Note that the word is not tremblor, which may seem more accurate, but doesn't exist!

*temerity | termagant*

temerity	Daring, but meaning reckless or bold, more than brave. Someone who saves a mugging victim has courage; a student who talks back to a teacher has temerity.
tendentious	Not to be confused with <i>tenacious</i> , which means persistent. <i>Tendentious</i> means having a particular tendency; leaning; lacking impartiality. Tendentious people make poor judges.
tenebrous	Gloomy and dark. Stormy skies are tenebrous. So are the expressions on the faces of depressed people. Pronounced TEN-EB-RUSS.
tergiversation	Ambivalence; a continual changing of one's mind. Someone who can't decide what to wear to a party- or whether to go at all—is suffering a bout of tergiversation. It's pronounced TER-JIV-ER-ZAY-SHUN.
termagant	A violent, overbearing or shrewish woman. Some thought Joan Crawford fit this category. It's pronounced TERM-AG-ENT.

*terrapin / throe*

- terrapin            An edible freshwater turtle. The name comes from the Algonquin Indians. Useful if you're ever offered turtle soup: "It has terrapins in it," you'll say.
- theomania           Here's a great one to throw at that narcissistic friend of yours the next time you get in an argument. A theomaniac is someone who believes he is God or has been chosen by God for some special purpose. Distinguish from messianic (see *messianic*), which can have less heavenly associations.
- thersitical           Verbally abusive; using foul language. When you hurl curses at someone, you are being thersitical. Pronounced *THER-SIT'EH'KULL*.
- thespian            Anything relating to acting or the theatre. A small town's thespian society is responsible for the local theatre.
- throe                It's pronounced *throw* but when it's spelled this way, it means a sharp pang of emotion. Adolescents frequently find themselves in the throes of despair; new lovers are usually in the throes of passion.

tiffin	In India, millions of women prepare lunches each morning and send them by messenger to their husbands at work. This light midday meal is called a tiffin, and can now be used as an elegant way of describing the yogurt and apple you eat every day.
tilak	The colored mark worn on the forehead by Hindu men and women. It's pronounced <i>TIL-ik</i> .
timorous	Meek, fearful; another word for timid. Yes, you can be timorous as a mouse.
tintinnabulation	The sound of ringing bells. The word often used as an example of onomatopoeia (see <i>onomatopoeia</i> ) because it sounds just like what it means. Immortalized in Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The Bells."
tonsorial	This has nothing to do with those things in your throat that swell up when you're sick. Someone skilled in the tonsorial arts is a great barber.
toper	Someone who drinks alcohol in excessive quantities is a toper and probably frequently slips into a torpor (see <i>torporific</i> ). Rhymes with <i>doper</i> .

*t o o t h s o m e | t r a n s m o g r i f y*

toothsome	Dentists are rarely toothsome. Toothsome means delicious or luscious: fresh peaches, perhaps, or a ripe avocado.
toponym	A name which is derived from the name of a place, such as Indiana Jones or Broadway Joe Namath. It's pronounced TOP-OH-NIM.
torporific	A lot like a soporific (see <i>soporific</i> ). It means producing a state of inertia, called a <i>torpor</i> .
tortuous	This word does not mean causing torture; that's <i>torturous</i> . A tortuous road is a winding, twisting or crooked road; a tortuous argument is so convoluted that it's hard to follow.
traduce	To slander, malign, or ruin someone's reputation. Say TRAH-DOOSE.
transmogrify	To change in form or appearance, usually much for the worse. Dr. Jekyll transmogrified into Mr. Hyde. A simple project can transmogrify into a convoluted disaster when your boss's boss decides to change the objectives.



triage	An arrangement derived from medical situations that separates things into three categories of urgency – kill it, save it, or leave it where it is for the time being. Battlefield casualties are triaged. You can also approach decisions in a busy office the same way. It's pronounced TREE-AJ.
trilemma	Like a dilemma but with one extra problem – a situation in which there are three mutually exclusive alternatives.
trompe l'oeil	A painting intended to create an illusion. For example, a very realistic mural on the outside of a windowless building that gives the impression that windows exist. From the French for "deceiving the eye," it's pronounced TROMP LOY.
truculent	This is a very harsh word, though few people use it correctly. It means cruel, brutal, savage. The behavior of the Nazis during the Holocaust was truculent. It's pronounced TRL/CK-YOO-LENT.
turbid	Opaque in the sense of muddy or clouded. This word is often confused with <i>turgid</i> , which means bloated,

*turnback / tyro*

swollen and pompous. Turgid prose can also be turbid prose, but these words do not mean the same thing.

**turnback** The curved end of a clothes hanger. To prevent guests from stealing hangers, most hotels have replaced the turnback with a straight piece that fits into a hoop attached to the closet rod.

**turtlet** A baby turtle. Cute, eh?

**tyro** Also spelled *tiro* (both are correct), it means a beginner or novice. (See also *neophyte*.) Pronounced *TIE-ROW*.

# U

ubiety	The opposite of absence, it means presence or the state of being there. Had Gertrude Stein known the word, she might have said of Oakland, "There is no ubiety there" instead of "There is no 'there' there"—but then she wouldn't have sounded like Gertrude Stein. Say YOU-BY-ET-EH.
ubiquitous	Appearing everywhere at the same time; omnipresent. During the Gulf War, yellow ribbons were ubiquitous. On commuter trains at rush hour, suits and ties are ubiquitous. Pronounced YOU-BICK-QUIT-US.
ultramarine	Not an underwater superhero. Deep blue in color.
ululate	To howl like a dog, hoot like an owl or wail like a coyote—the kind of sound friends make at 2:00 in

*u m b r a g e / u n s e e m l y*

the morning when they leave a bar, link arms and look up at the moon. It's pronounced *YOOL-YA-LATE*.

**umbrage** The sense of being slighted or of having one's feelings hurt. You can take umbrage or give it. If someone calls you a silly fool, you would take umbrage at the remark – or possibly give umbrage for the remark and call her an idiot.

**unctuous** Oily or slimy. Not a literal description as much as a way of describing someone's character. A person who is overly flattering or too smooth is unctuous. Lounge lizards, for example, are unctuous. Pronounced *UNK-SHUSS*.

**unexceptionable** A nice word that should not be confused with *unexceptional*. Unexceptional means ordinary or average. Unexceptionable means without exception or fault; beyond criticism.

**unseemly** Inappropriate; not in keeping with good taste. Walking into a fancy French restaurant without shoes on is unseemly behavior.

untoward	Very close to <i>unseemly</i> (see above). Untoward behavior is improper, not so much a question of good taste as of being rude. Pronounced <i>UN-TORD</i> .
urbane	Sophisticated, suave, worldly; at home in most social situations. Someone who knows which wine to order with which course, can read a menu in most languages and can maintain charming dinner-table conversation is urbane. Pronounced <i>UR-BAYNE</i> .
usury	The practice of lending money at illegally high interest rates. Even if not illegal, exorbitant rates (like those used for credit cards) can be described as usurious. Pronounced <i>YOO-ZHER-EE</i> .
uvula	The little glob of flesh that hangs down at the back of the mouth. You often see one wobbling when cartoon characters yell, and children always mistake it for a tonsil. It's pronounced <i>YOOV-YUH-LUH</i> .
uxorious	Completely enamored with one's wife, in fact overly so. A man who is completely submissive to his spouse is uxorious. It's pronounced <i>UK-SOR-EE-US</i> .



# V

- vacuous** Empty-headed; without ideas or purpose. It's often used to describe someone who is attractive but dumb. Chippendale's male strippers are a paradigm (see *paradigm*) for vacuity. Pronounced VAfC-vou-us.
- vagary** A whimsical, capricious or eccentric idea or action. Pronounced VAY-GER-EE.
- valetudinarian** This is not the smart student who makes a speech at graduation (that's a *valedictorian*). A valetudinarian is an invalid or a convalescing person who is obsessed with his poor health. Distinguish from a *hypochondriac*, who has the same feelings, but is healthy.
- vassal** A subordinate. Not exactly a slave – more like a subject. From the feudal relationship between kings and their subjects. You could use the term sarcastically to refer to the boss's assistants.

vaunt / verisimilitude

vaunt	It means "to boast of" or "to brag about," and is usually used to describe a reputation. It is hard to get a reservation in a much-vaunted restaurant.
venal	Capable of being bribed; open to being corrupted. Pronounced VEENL.
venial	Contrary to popular misuse, a venial sin is one that <i>can</i> be pardoned, overlooked or forgiven. Distinguish from <i>venal</i> (see above), which is the Hall of Fame as far as sins go.
veracity	Truth. The veracity of something can be proven by hard evidence. Something that has veracity is <i>veracious</i> . This should not be confused with someone who is <i>voracious</i> , which means excessively eager, hungry for food or any other need.
verisimilitude	This is one of those words like juxtapose (see juxtapose) that people love to use in order to sound smart when criticizing art, literature or drama. It means the appearance of truth. So a film with verisimilitude does a good job of imitating life. Pronounced VEHR- IH-SEH-MILL-EH-TOOD .



*vernal / vituperative*

vernal	Happening in the spring. For example, an equinox, or the budding of flowers, or the sighting of the first robin...
victress	Or <i>victrix</i> . A female victor, such as Joan of Arc, is a <i>VICK-TRESS</i> .
vigorish	This is a charge paid to a bookie for placing a bet; it can also refer to an interest fee paid to a moneylender.
virago	A fierce-tempered woman. "Hell hath no fury like a..." Well, virago. Pronounced VEH-RAH-GO.
vitiate	To impair or pollute or to make illegal or invalid. Toxic wastes can vitiate a body of water; cheating in a team sport vitiates the winning results. Say VJSH-EE-ATE.
vituperative	Violently abusive or fault-finding language, kind of like carping. When you bawl someone out, you use vituperative language. Pronounced VYE-TOO-PEH-RAY-TIV.

*volition / vulpine*

volitation	The act of or capacity for flying. Birds have it; so does Superman. It's pronounced VOLE-IH-TAY-SHUN.
volition	Free will. Doing something of your own volition means that you decided on your own to do it. You decided without outside aid or intervention.
voluble	Someone who is voluble is talkative or loquacious. The word is generally used as a compliment to describe a friendly and verbal person. Use garrulous (see <i>garrulous</i> ) for "overly talkative." A big mouth is garrulous; a talkative companion is voluble.
vulgate	A popular word with literature buffs, it means the generally recognized or most used version of a work. The vulgate version of Shakespeare is the one professors assign most often.
vulpine	Fox-like. Someone who is crafty or sneaky and seems to slip through your fingers is vulpine.

# W

wallah wallah	It means the same thing as muckity-muck or head honcho. A wallah wallah is the person in charge.
wamble	Not what Elmer Fudd does in a motor home. To move unsteadily or stagger about. A drunk wambles down the street after a night at the bar. Say either <i>WOM-BULL</i> or <i>WHAM-BULL</i> .
wampus	An unpleasant person, kind of like a lout. The lone heckler who keeps interrupting a great speech is a wampus.
wanton	No, not a soup. Unprovoked, unjustified and generally egregiously out of control. Nasty people act with wanton disregard for the feelings of others; rioters may act with wanton destructiveness, breaking windows and looting shops. Say it <i>WAHN-TIN</i> .

*war i son / welter*

- warison** A note sounded to start an attack. This can be a literal trumpet call or a figurative battle cry. "When they decided to take separate vacations, I knew that was the warison for the divorce that followed." Pronounced *WAR-UH-SON*.
- welt** A more powerful way to say "a bruise." Boxers often have welts after a difficult match.
- Weltanschauung** A German word that means "world outlook" or "world view." It's a fancy way to say "perspective," and if you use it correctly, it sounds intelligent but not pretentious. If you want to talk about small-town morality, you can talk about the town's *Weltanschauung*. If you want to argue with someone, you can begin by saying "You have a different *Weltanschauung*" – you'll probably begin with an advantage. Make sure you pronounce it correctly: *VELT-AN-SHUNG*.
- welter** A lot or a great many; confusion, turmoil. Imagine having a welter of homework to do or seeing a welter of dirty laundry scattered about your room. Also a verb that means to writhe or wallow.

Weltschmerz	The kind of word only the Germans could come up with. It literally means "world pain," but it's used to evoke a strong melancholy over the state of the world. Woody Allen exhibits <i>Weltschmerz</i> in most of his films; Ingmar Bergman does too, only without the humor. It's pronounced VELT-SHMERTZ.
whelk	An extremely civilized word for pimple, and a lot more euphonious (see <i>euphonious</i> ) than "zit." Say <i>WELK</i> .
whiffle	There are several meanings for this word, but the best is "to vacillate or go back and forth about something." Before going out to dinner, one may whiffle between wanting Chinese or Italian food.
white paper	An official report by the government about a specific issue. Environmentalists might refer to a white paper on the spotted owl.
winnow	It literally means to separate the grain from the chaff by getting rid of the chaff. There's even a piece of farm equipment called a <i>winnower</i> . You are more likely to use this word figuratively, however. You can

*w i n s o m e / w i z e n e d*

winnow out the weak athletes to make an all-star team, or winnow the unimportant books from your overcrowded shelves and give them away.

winsome You lose some. (Just kidding.) This word means charming or attractive in a disarming way. It's pronounced *WIN-SUM*, and it's used to refer to both sexes.

witch ball You probably know it as a disco ball, but this is the original word; it came before disco was even invented. A witch ball is one of those globes with many mirrored facets that hangs from the ceiling and sparkles as it rotates.

wittol A variation on *cuckold*, a wittol is a man who knows about his wife's adultery and tolerates it. A cuckold is a man whose wife has been unfaithful, but he may not know about it.

wizened Dried up and shriveled. An apple left in the sun too long is dried up; an old man's wrinkled face is wizened. Pronounced *WIZ-END*.

*w o r m / w r a i t h*

worm	This isn't just the squiggly, slithering invertebrate. A worm is another word for the thread of a screw.
wraith	A ghost. The word is supposed to mean a ghost that appears before a person to foretell his or her death, but it's now used more generally to refer to any apparition. The Ghostbusters, for instance, fought wraiths.





Xanadu	Originally a place of idyllic beauty in Samuel Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," it has come to refer to any place of idyllic beauty. For many people, Xanadu would be a beautiful cabin overlooking a mirror pond, surrounded by lush evergreens. Maybe that's why so many people have named their vacation homes Xanadu. Say ZAN-AH-DOO.
xebec	A three-masted sailing ship. A perfect word to use in <i>Scrabble</i> or <i>Ghost</i> . Or if you see a tall ship passing by, you can say, "Hey, there goes a ZEE-BEK."
xenophobia	Fear or hatred of foreigners, or of anything strange or foreign. It's pronounced ZEN-A-FO-BEE-AH.
xeric	Characterized by having or needing a very small amount of moisture. Deserts are xeric, as are many desert plants. It's said ZIR-JK.



# Y

- yahoo                      The word comes from the name of a race of coarse and vulgar people invented by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, but it has expanded over the past two centuries to mean any utterly gross person: a slob with no common courtesy is a yahoo. (See also *Lilliputian*.)
- yatter                      Like natter or patter, to make idle chatter. (What's the matter? You wish the definition were fatter?)
- yegg                        Not something you eat with yacon. A yegg is a petty burglar or common thug. What we generally refer to as a mugger can also be called a yegg.
- yin and yang    You may know that these refer to the two universal forces in Chinese philosophy that are said to create the harmonious balance of nature and control the

*y i n a n d y a n g*

destiny of all things, but do you know which is which? Yin is the dark, cold, still, and feminine aspect of things; Yang is the bright, warm, active and masculine aspect.

# Z

- zaftig                    A Yiddish adjective that describes a woman who is pleasingly plump or well-rounded. Mae West is the queen of zaftig. It's pronounced ZOFF-TIG.
- zarf                      The holder for a handleless coffee cup. Though Styrofoam and cardboard have largely put zarfs out of business, you often see the plastic variety piled next to the office coffee machine.
- zealous                 Eager and diligently devoted; ardent. A zealous worker comes in at the crack of dawn and works till the wee hours of the night to get a job done as thoroughly and perfectly as possible. A *zealot*, on the other hand, is someone who is devoted to a fault—a fanatic. Say ZELL-us and ZELL-UT.

*Zeitgeist / zoanthropy*

Zeitgeist	Another great German word, in the spirit of <i>Weltanschauung</i> and <i>Weltschmerz</i> , that has broad philosophical implications. It means "spirit of the times," and refers to the general cultural, moral, and intellectual climate of a particular era. It's pronounced <i>ZITE-GUYST</i> .
zith	The word literally refers to the point on the celestial sphere that is directly above the observer at any given location, and is therefore the highest point. It is the opposite of the nadir (see <i>nadir</i> ), which is directly below. It is used to refer to any highest point, as in the zenith of someone's career or life.
zephyr	A gentle breeze. It might blow through the trees and grasses, sighing and creating susurruses (see <i>sough</i> and <i>susurrus</i> ).
zinfandel	A pink or white wine that people like and wine critics don't. Made from a small black grape, usually in California. Pronounced <i>ZIN-FEHN-DELL</i> .
zoanthropy	A mental illness in which the patient believes he is an animal. A woman says to a psychiatrist, "My

*zoetrope / zugzu/ang*

husband has believed he's a chicken for the last four years." "Why'd you wait so long to come to me?" he asks. "We needed the eggs." That's zoanthropy. Pronounced ZOE-AN-THREP-EE.

zoetrope

The forerunner of the motion picture, a zoetrope is a device consisting of a drum inside which is placed a series of images representing successive positions of a moving object. When the drum is rotated rapidly, the images, seen through slits on the walls of the drum, give an illusion of motion. This is the conceptual breakthrough that led to the development of motion pictures. It's also the name of Francis Ford Copolla's film company. (Now you can say you know *everything*.) Pronounced ZOH-EH-TROPE.

zoology

The science of animal study. There is no "zoo" in zoology—next time you need to say it, the correct pronunciation is ZOH-AHL-OH-;EE.

zugzwang

Chess enthusiasts probably know this word because it means a situation in a game of chess where all the moves open to one player will cause damage to his position. Like many chess moves, it's an excellent

*z w i e b a c k / z y g o t e*

word to use metaphorically. It's pronounced  
*TSOOK-TSFANG*.

zwieback Sweetened bread, cooked twice and sliced thin.  
Usually used by teething youngsters to give them  
something to do with their newfound teeth. Say  
*ZWEE-BACK*.

zygote A term from cellular biology, generally used in  
conversation to refer to the cell that results from the  
meeting of the egg and the sperm. Father to son: "I've  
known you ever since you were a zygote." 'Pro-  
nounced *ZYE-GOAT*.



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