



Plain English Campaign



Plain English Campaign's guide to
words about words

We put together our latest mini-guide 'Words about words' after collecting numerous queries over the years regarding specific troubling terms. It's in part a 'one-stop' resource that covers all the terms we've been asked about (plus a few suitable additions), as well as being a hopefully fun and informative resource.

Accismus

Someone pretending they don't want something they really do. For example, numerous book covers that loudly proclaim: "Do not read this book!"

Acrostic

A poem or series of lines in which certain letters, usually the first in each line, form a name, motto, or message when read in sequence.

Adynaton

A declaration of impossibility for effect, usually an exaggerated comparison with a more obvious impossibility. "I will sooner have a beard grow in the palm of my hand than he shall get one of his cheek." – William Shakespeare.

Alliteration

Words using the same letter for musical, mnemonic or immersive effect. In this example 'sibilance' (the repetitive use of the letter 's') is also employed: "She sells seashells by the seashore."

Allusion

An indirect reference to a place, event, or text by way of easily understood emphasis. "Watch out for the estate agents' noses growing as they describe the property" a direct allusion to Pinocchio.

Amphigory

Nonsense writing, usually in verse. "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe." – Lewis Carroll, 'Jabberwocky'.

Analogy

The illustration of an idea by using a more familiar comparison. "The Conservative cabinet reshuffle was akin to the band on the Titanic switching instruments."

Anatomy

A part of the body used as a verb (toe the line; face the music; foot the bill).

Anthropomorphism

The attribution of human behaviour to non-human things. For example, cartoons that include animal characters using human speech and mimicking human behaviour, often to encourage emotional connection, such as 'The Jungle Book' and 'The Lion King'.

Antonym

A word of opposite meaning. 'Love' as the antonym of 'hate'.

Antagonism

A single word containing meanings that contradict each other, such as 'cleave' which can mean both 'cut apart' and 'hold together'.

Apocryphal

A fabricated but engaging story meant to impart a serious, often moral, point via suggested authenticity. For example, a made-up disaster featuring an imaginary driver meant to dissuade people against drink-driving. "Bob had five pints and then left me in the pub, only later to crash his Ford Focus into a chip-shop. You shouldn't drink and drive!"

Aporia

An often insincere or rhetorical expression of doubt, about what a speaker should say, think, or do. "Oh no! Whatever shall I do now?"

Autoantonym

A word that can mean the opposite of itself. (See also: Contronym.)

Babblative

Given to babbling; prattling, prating, loquacious.

Blatteroon

A constant talker.

Bromide

Hackneyed phrases (such as “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like”) uttered by boring and predictable people. Coined by the American illustrator and humorist Gelett Burgess after the then-familiar sedative, potassium bromide.

Camouflanguage

Language using jargon, euphemisms, and other devices to hide the true meaning of what is being said, as often heard from witless and vaguely sinister corporate stooges.

Capitonym

A word which changes its meaning and pronunciation when capitalized, examples include polish and Polish, august and August, concord and Concord.

Conronym

A word which is its own opposite. ‘Cleave,’ meaning ‘adhere’ and ‘separate.’ See also: autoantonym.

Cryptonym

A private or secret name (Agent 007).

Dentiloquy

Speaking through clenched teeth.

Domunym

Literally ‘home name,’ used to identify people from particular places (Philadelphians; Annapolitans).

Exonym

A place name used by foreigners that differs from the name used by natives. For example, Londres is the French exonym for London; Germany is an exonym because Germans call it Deutschland.

Embolalia

The use of virtually meaningless filler words, phrases, or stammered speech items, either unconscious or while arranging thoughts, or as vacuous, inexpressive mannerisms. Remember Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*?

Etymology (occasionally confused with **Entomology**, the study of insects)

The study of word origins and changing word meanings.

Euphemism

The substitution of a harsh, offensive, or unpleasant word with a nicer alternative.

Garrulous

Extremely talkative.

Glyph

A symbol, such as on a public sign, that imparts information without words, especially a figure or character incised or in relief.

Hyperbole

Exaggeration for emphasis or rhetorical or dramatic effect. "There are a billion reasons why Donald Trump is a terrible President."

Hypercorrect

An incorrect linguistic construction in which the error comes from a mistaken effort to be correct, such as with 'Between you and I,' which should be 'between you and me.' See also: hyponym.

Hyponym

A word more specific than a related generic term. For example: **spoon** is a hyponym of **cutlery**. See also: hypercorrect.

Idiolect

The speech of an individual, considered as a linguistic pattern unique among speakers of his or her language or dialect.

Interjection

A phrase consisting of words such as oh!, alas!, and ouch!, often marked by emphasis usually shown with an exclamation point.

Kenning

Replacement of a common noun by a more exciting compound, for example 'Information superhighway' rather than 'Internet.'

Kerning

The adjusted space between letters in a font.

Logophile

Word-lover.

Logorrhoea

Excessive use of words.

Metaphor

Unlike simile, which suggests something is directly comparable to something similar using 'as' or 'like', metaphor compares two things by suggesting that one thing is something else altogether. 'Love **is** a battlefield.' Simile would have it: 'Love **is like** a battlefield.'

Metonym

A word standing in for something connected to it, such as 'the Crown' when referring to the monarchy, 'the bottle' when referring to alcohol, 'wheels' when referring to a car.

Misandry

The flipside version of misogyny (hatred of women), but misandry (hatred of men) far less evident, it seems...

Mondegreen

A series of words, often humorous, that result from mishearing a statement or song lyric. For example: 'Every time you go away, you take a piece of meat with you,' misheard from Paul Young's 'Every Time You Go Away'.

Neologism

New word or term.

Nymrod

A person who insists on turning every multi-word term into an acronym.

Onomatopoeia

A word referring to a specific sound, whose pronunciation mimics that sound.

Oxymoron

An apparently contradictory term or statement that nonetheless often makes emphatic sense. "You've got to be cruel to be kind."

Palindrome

A word or phrase spelled the same forward and backward. "Dammit! I'm mad!"

Paradiastole

A figure of speech in which a vice is portrayed as a virtue. "I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered." George Best.

Parechesis

The repetition of the same sound in words in close or immediate succession. "Veni, vidi, vici." -- Julius Caesar. See also: alliteration, assonance, consonance.

Paradox

A contradictory statement that nonetheless may state a truth. "The child is the father of the man" – Wordsworth.

Pleonasm

The use of a superfluity of words, often deliberately, for emphasis. "I've never seen anything more obscene **in all my 80 years on this Earth.**"

Pseudoantonym

A word that appears to mean the opposite of what it actually means (unloosen; inflammable; ingenious; despoil; impassive).

Pubilect

A dialect unique to teenagers (puberty + dialect). Coined by Marcel Danesi, a professor of linguistics and semiotics at the University of Toronto.

Reduplicative

A word or phrase formed by the doubling of a syllable or other part of a word, sometimes with modifications. For example, 'so-so,' 'helter-skelter,' or 'beriberi.'

Ricochet word

A word or phrase formed by the doubling of a syllable or other part of a word, which involves modification of the initial or middle or final part of the root. For example, mish-mash, higgledy-piggledy (possibly a reduplication of 'pig'), 'hanky-panky,' 'honky tonk,' 'criss-cross.' See reduplicative.

Rhinestone vocabulary

Words or phrases chosen only because they appeal to a particular person or group. For example, political speakers using the likes of 'family values', 'equal rights', and 'lower taxes' for easy impact.

Simile

A figure of speech in which two things are compared, usually with 'as' or 'like'. "He **was like** a tornado." Unlike metaphor, where something is described as being something else altogether, without the use of 'as' or 'like' ("He **was** a tornado.")

Slang

A linguist specialising in slang words and phrases.

Slurvian

English characterized by slurred pronunciation. Examples include 'gimme' instead of 'give me,' 'd'jo' instead of 'did you,' and 'Frisco' instead of 'San Francisco.'

Stump-word

A word formed by shortening another word, such as 'math', 'gym' or 'ad'.

Synonym

One of two (or more) words that have the same (or very similar) meaning: big and large; error and mistake; run and sprint.

Technopropism

The unintentionally funny misuse of a technical word or phrase (for example "We'll release the product once it passes the fault infection test.").

Tmesis

Placing a word in the middle of another. 'Fan-bloody-tastic' and 'un-flipping-believable.'

Verbicide

The destruction of the sense or value of a word.

Weblish

A form of online English, the characteristics of which include the use of all-lowercase letters, less punctuation, spelling and grammatical errors, and an informal tone. Also, netspeak.

Wordfact

A much-applied label that eventually becomes accepted as fact. "Not all Brexiteers are 'xenophobes' – it is a mere wordfact."