



# Troublesome Words

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Even the best copy editors can stand to refresh their knowledge. The following are some of the trickier words and phrases to cross a copy desk:

## Center on

Things center *on*, *in* or *at* something else—they don't center *around* something.

## Behalf of

One word makes a big difference.

*In* behalf of means "for the benefit of." *On* behalf of means "in the place of."

*On behalf of the recipient, the newspaper accepted the Pulitzer. ... The grant was given in behalf of the schools.*

## Presume and Assume

The action of *presuming* is based in fact or because no evidence exists to the contrary. The act of *assuming* is dangerous because it accepts as fact without any sound basis for doing so.

## Healthful vs. Healthy

When something contributes to the health and well-being of something else, it is *healthful*. The word *healthy* denotes physical and mental fitness and health. *I feel healthy because I eat healthful foods.*

## Contemptible and Contemptuous

Anything that deserves contempt is *contemptible*. Anything that shows or expresses contempt can be described as *contemptuous*. *That contemptuous comment makes him contemptible.*

## "I could care less."

Perhaps the most frequently misused phrase in the history of civilization. People actually mean to say they could *not* possibly care less.

This is fine in quotes, but don't write it.

### Feeling badly vs. Feeling bad

People really can't *feel* badly unless they have trouble with their nerve endings or coordination. One can perform **badly**, as a baseball player might make several errors. One can feel **bad** in that he or she might regret treating someone with contempt. But a substandard sense of feeling does not make one feel badly.

### Uninterested and Disinterested

Pay attention to prefixes. Uninterested means a person lacks interest in something. To be disinterested means to be impartial or unbiased. Journalists, of course, should be disinterested, not uninterested.

### Try to

Another frequently heard but misused phrase is *try and* as in "The Jazz will try and win against the Lakers." The Jazz will try *to* win against the Lakers. Beware of similar phrases such as "be sure and..."

### Can't help ... but

The phrase "I can't help but..." hides a tricky double negative. Once again, it is spoken so frequently that it sounds acceptable. Use phrases such as **can't help thinking** rather than **can't help but think**.

### Different from vs. Different than

The grammar rule states that a writer should use *different from* with nouns and pronouns and *different than* with clauses.

*Led Zeppelin is different from Mozart. Listening to Led Zeppelin is different than listening to Mozart.*

### Repairable and Reparable

Physical items, such as toasters and blast furnaces, are repairable. Nonphysical things, such as your reputation as a quality reporter, are reparable.

### Discreet vs. Discrete

To be **discreet** means to keep silent about a delicate matter. To be **discrete** means to be separate or distinct. *He is often discreet with his discrete opinions.*

### Comprise

Comprise, which means "to consist of" should be used in active voice with a direct object. The Beatles comprised four uniquely talented musicians. Writers should **avoid** the idiomatic usage "comprised of..." *The Beatles were comprised of John, Paul, George and Ringo* — wrong!

Also wrong is this: *John, Paul, George and Ringo comprise The Beatles*. No — The whole thing comprises its constituent parts (from John E. McIntyre of the Baltimore Sun).

### **Historic vs. Historical**

The word **historic** can be attributed to something that is significant in history. **Historical** means "about history." A biography of Millard Fillmore written by my 10-year-old nephew is historical. It is hardly historic.

### **Affect and Effect**

Until this error is eradicated, it deserves mention on any troublesome words list. *Affect* means "to influence." *Effect*, as a verb, means "to produce or accomplish." One can **effect** change. One can **affect** the outcome of something.

### **The unnecessary "together"**

Marshall University journalism professor George Arnold points out that the word "together" often gets needlessly coupled with the following words: assemble, bind, blend, bond, combine, cooperate, entwine, gather, huddle, join, knit, merge, mesh, mix, mold, splice, staple, tangled, tie and weld. "Together" can be eliminated in each case.

**Quick Hits** (thanks to writing coach Jim Stasiowski of Baltimore, Md.):

**Limpid** means clearly and free from obscurity. It has nothing to do with being limp.

**Begs the question** is not quite the same as "prompts the question," which is the phrase's third listed definition in most dictionaries. The first two definitions are "to assume the truth of the very point raised in question" or "evade the issue."

**Fulsome** means disgusting. It is not related in any way to "full."

**Noisome** also means disgusting, but is more particularly tied to odor. It does not mean loud.

One throws down the **gauntlet**, but runs the **gantlet**.

**The prefix Re-** : Be careful. It can often be superfluous such as in re-aggravate.

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