



We Are Not Bemused...

Source: John E. McIntyre, assistant managing editor, the Baltimore Sun

You may see yourself as on the verge of being overwhelmed in a beleaguered outpost of English usage, but here is ammunition against imprecision in the use of words.

Words commonly misused

Another -- Another means one more of the same kind or quantity. If you sell your cow for five magic beans and then win five more in a wager, you have won **another** five beans. If you win six or four, you have won six or four **more**, not another six or four.

Bemused -- No connection with amusement. It means preoccupied or befuddled.

Comprise -- **The plan will be presented Friday in Brussels, Belgium, at a meeting of foreign ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States, according to diplomatic sources. The five powers comprise the so-called Contact Group on Bosnia.** They do not. The so-called Contact Group on Bosnia **comprises** Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States. The whole thing comprises its constituent parts. The parts compose or make up the whole.

Dilemma -- The word means a choice between two equally unpleasant options. Do not use it where **problem, difficulty, predicament or quandary** would be more appropriate.

Enormity -- Nothing to do with size. An **enormity** is not a big thing, but a horrible thing, an outrageous thing, a heinous thing.

Expatriate -- We see this – more often than you might think -- written phonetically as "ex-patriot," a word that does not exist. An expatriate has gone out of ("ex") his or her native country ("patria") to live. Patriotism has no necessary connection with it.

Face -- **Fleiss faces a minimum of three years, and up to eight years and eight months in prison. A sentencing hearing was set for Jan. 20.** To **face** is to confront, to meet squarely, head-on, immediately. What Heidi Fleiss faces is the **prospect** of a particular sentence, a

possibility. She will face the sentence at the moment the judge pronounces it. It is preferable in such contexts to say that a defendant **could be sentenced** to a particular term. Observing this distinction will involve changing some of our habits.

Following -- Do not use following as a preposition. When you mean **after**, that is the word to use. The AP Stylebooks example: **He spoke after dinner. Not: He spoke following dinner.**

However -- **However** emphasizes a contrast. It should fall at the pivotal point between the two elements -- in the middle of a sentence, if that is where the shift occurs, or at the beginning of a sentence that contrasts with the immediately previous sentence. Don't let it fall so late in the sentence that the effect is lost. The ban on using it at the start of a sentence is a superstition. However, don't overdo it or use **however** when **nevertheless** or **all the same** would sound more natural.

Including -- Include suggests part of the whole group. Use **comprise**, if you follow the entry on that word, in listing the complete members or constituents of a group; use **include** to introduce a partial listing.

Infamous - It means **notorious**, not just **well-known**. Don't use it as a synonym for famous. In fact, since it is a pejorative, better not use it at all. (Sportswriters in particular should note: The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was infamous. Very few events from sporting contests ever approach that pitch of notoriety.)

Ironically -- **Mallia was signed by Dayton last season because No. 1 goalie Carlos Pena had a separated shoulder. Ironically, Smith played with Pens not only with the Dynamo but also in their high school days in Culver City, Calif.** Not **ironically**, but **coincidentally**. "Irony" as a rhetorical term means a statement that means the opposite of what it says. It can be applied as well to events to suggest some reversal or other contrast involving opportunity and events. In the main, this is a word that doesn't need to be used at all. If there is irony present, the ready reader will perceive it. Show; don't tell.

Like -- **He feels like he was personally repudiated.** ... Using **like** in place of **as if** or **as though** is colloquial and should be avoided.

Literally -- **The three-year varsity player literally carried the team to victory in the Catholic League tournament championship.** ... If only we had been able to get art with that. The word "literally" means according to the exact meaning of the word, to the letter. Don't use it to mean figuratively or metaphorically; don't use it for emphasis. If you can't take a picture of what the action is, it isn't literal.

Mull -- **They continue to hold discussions with Brian David, agent for Smith, who is mulling a two-year offer from the California Angels.** You can mull wine or cider, but you do

not mull other things. **Mull over** is idiomatic for "to meditate" or "to ponder."

Most -- **Most every day in an Eldersburg neighborhood of green lawns and tidy homes, a woman bearing an evening meal heads for the Gates house.** Using **most** for **almost** is a colloquialism that we try to avoid, except in direct quotation.

Schizophrenic -- The word does not refer to a split personality, multiple personality or the state of being of two minds about a subject. It is a severe psychological disorder characterized by separation of the thought processes from the emotions, distorted perception of reality, and the like. Don't use it casually, and don't use its slang equivalent, **schizo**, at all

Superlatives -- Words that should make you tremble as you enter them into stories: **largest, first, most, only.** We have only to write that some event is the **first** of its kind or that some person is the only one to have done something and the phones begin to ring. Don't bestow such distinctions unless you have personally verified the accuracy, and be cautious and sparing with them even then.

That -- We often omit this conjunction when it is needed. Use **that** when there is a time element after a verb: **He said yesterday that he would file suit.** Use **that** when there are two parallel subordinate clauses in a sentence: **He said that he would file suit and that he would not settle.** Use **that** before subordinate clauses beginning with conjunctions such as **after, although, because, in addition to, until** and **while.** Thus: **He said that although he is a reasonable man, he still intends to sue.** Some verbs require **that:** **advocate, assert, contend, declare, estimate, make clear, point out, propose** and **state.**

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