English is always changing, and that leaves us with troublesome words and phrases that are only sort of wrong. Some people insist the old ways to use words are the only correct ways, and other people use words in newer ways without even realizing the words are controversial. Like it or not, one way English changes is through misunderstandings and mistakes that gain a hold in the minds of enough people.

In other instances, we really have no rules. Some words have two acceptable spellings or two acceptable past tense forms. Sometimes experts take more of a “this way is better, but that way isn’t wrong” approach. It’s frustrating for people who just want to know what to write in their papers or e-mail messages.

Finally, some words are so confusing that people wish the rules would change, but they haven’t.

In this book, I tackle many of these infuriating words—most of which I haven’t covered in other books because they seemed
Introduction

too tricky—and I make judgments about which ones you should use without guilt today, and which ones you should shun a little longer. You likely will not agree with every choice, but at least I’ve taken a stand. In confusing cases like the 101 that follow, I’ve found that most people appreciate someone else doing the research, measuring the options, and making a recommendation.
Addicting

What’s the Trouble? *Addicting* is sometimes used interchangeably with *addictive*.

Some technical or medical books use *addicting* where a typical writer would likely use *addictive*: *Parents are told these drugs are not addicting*. Nevertheless, *addictive* is the more common term for describing something people struggle to quit.

What Should You Do?

Stick with *addictive* when you are trying to say a noun such as drug, video game, food, or lover has an unhealthy, nearly unbreakable hold on you.

*Joe Fox*: Do you know what? We are going to seduce them. We’re going to seduce them with our square footage, and our discounts, and our deep armchairs, and . . .

*Joe Fox, Kevin*: Our cappuccino.

*Joe Fox*: That’s right. They’re going to hate us at the beginning, but . . .

*Joe Fox, Kevin*: But we’ll get ‘em in the end.

*Joe Fox*: Do you know why?

*Kevin*: Why?

*Joe Fox*: Because we’re going to sell them cheap books and legal addictive stimulants. In the meantime, we’ll just put up a big sign: “Coming soon: a FoxBooks..."
Addicting

superstore and the end of civilization as you know it."

—Tom Hanks as Joe Fox and Dave Chappelle
as Kevin in the movie You’ve Got Mail

Reserve *addicting* for something or someone actively causing addiction.

**Should cocaine moms be prosecuted for addicting their babies?**

—*Jet* Magazine (headline)
What’s the Trouble? People wonder about the difference between African American and black.

Acceptable names for people of color have changed over time and are likely to change again in the future. Today, both African American and black are considered respectful by most people in the black community.

African American is capitalized, but black is usually lower-cased unless it’s part of the name of an organization (e.g., Congressional Black Caucus).

The Associated Press recommends a hyphen in African-American, but The Chicago Manual of Style recommends leaving it out in all compound nationalities (African American, Italian American, Chinese American, and so on).

Finally, African American sounds a little more formal than black, which could play a factor in your word choice.

What Should You Do?

For Americans of African descent, use African American or black. If the person you are describing is from another country, use another appropriate term, such as Caribbean American.

Opening tomorrow in New York, the documentary film White Wash explores the history of black surfing in America, painting a contrast to the global sport that is dominated by white males.

—James Sullivan in USA Today

African American men living in areas with low sunlight are up to 3.5 times more likely to
African American

have Vitamin D deficiency than Caucasian men and should take high levels of Vitamin D supplements.

—Northwestern University press release
Aggravate

What’s the Trouble? Some experts recommend avoiding *aggravate* when you mean “annoy” or “irritate,” but such use is common and has a long history.

*Aggravate* came to English from a Latin word that means “to make heavier,” and the argument that *aggravate* must mean “to make worse” instead of simply “annoy” or “irritate” hinges on that origin. In Latin, it meant to make things heavier, not just heavy—in other words, worse. However, people started using *aggravate* to mean “annoy” or “irritate” almost right away. The adjective *aggravating* even more forcefully took on the meaning of “annoying” or “irritating.” In fact, you’ll find *aggravating* used in this way more than any other.

> Ignorant people think it’s the noise which fighting cats make that is so aggravating, but it ain’t so; it is the sickening grammar that they use.

—Mark Twain in *A Tramp Abroad*

What Should You Do?

In formal situations or if you’re feeling especially sticklerish, avoid using *aggravate* to mean “irritate.”

> I know you have an innate talent for rubbing people the wrong way, Jack, but why for the love of God would you *aggravate the vice president*? [*Irritate* would be a better choice unless the vice president was already upset.]

—Sasha Roiz as Parker in the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*
Aggravate

Using *aggravating* to mean “irritating” is less risky than using *aggravate* to mean “irritate,” but some people may still object.

**QUICK AND DIRTY TIP**

When you hear cops on your favorite crime show talk about aggravated assault, remind yourself that *aggravated assault* is an assault that’s *worse* than normal, just like an *aggravating comment* makes somebody’s mood or situation *worse* than it already is.
Alright

What’s the Trouble? Nearly all usage guides condemn *alright*, but it occasionally shows up in the work of respected writers, and many people who aren’t language experts think it’s fine, or even the preferred spelling.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls *alright* a “frequent spelling of *all right*”—not quite saying outright that it is wrong, but making the implication. *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* is clearer: “*All right* is the only spelling Standard English recognizes.”

The word’s history is little help. According to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*, very early spellings included both one-word and two-word forms such as *ealriht* and *al rizt*. 
Alright

With the pressure to save space in status updates and text messages, *alright* is likely to gain currency rather than fade. The “saves space” argument is not new; an early proponent of *alright* over *all right* mentioned the cost savings of sending cable messages using *alright*.

Until popular usage guides such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *AP Stylebook* give their stamp of approval to *alright*, the word will be edited out of most professional work. However, one telling sign is that it’s easy to find quotations on GoodReads.com, transcribed by people who are likely to be above-average readers, that substitute *alright* when *all right* appears in the original book. I predict *alright* will eventually win.

**What Should You Do?**

Stick with *all right* unless you wish to be part of the charge to legitimize *alright*, which right now is a fringe position.


—Jack Kerouac in a personal letter to Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, William S. Burroughs, and Alan Ansen
**Alternate**

*What’s the Trouble?*  Traditionalists have sometimes made a distinction between the adjectives *alternate* and *alternative*.

Although some style guides try to make a distinction between *alternate* and *alternative*, most concede that both adjectives are acceptable when you mean “substitute”: *Find an alternate route. Find an alternative route.*

When people or events are taking turns, however, the only correct choice is *alternate*: *Mr. Brown has his son on alternate Saturdays. Alternate* is also the only correct choice when you’re using the word as a noun: *He was an alternate on the jury.*

What Should You Do?

Don’t fret about the adjectives *alternate* and *alternative*. Either is acceptable when you mean “substitute” and most other uses are obvious to native English speakers.

**BURTON “GUS” GUSTER:** How should we introduce ourselves? Don’t say “psychic.” They’ll shut you off. Pick something vague, like *Alternative Tactics Division.*

**SHAWN SPENCER:** How about the Bureau of Magic and Spell Casting?

—Dulé Hill as Gus and James Roday as Shawn in the TV series *Psych*
Alternate

**PENNY:** What is he doing?

**LEONARD HOFSTADTER:** It’s a little hard to explain. He’s pretending to be in an alternate universe where he occupies the same physical space as us, but cannot perceive us.

**SHELDON COOPER:** Oh, don’t flatter yourself. I’m just ignoring you.

—Kaley Cuoco as Penny, John Galecki as Leonard, and Jim Parsons as Sheldon in the TV series *The Big Bang Theory*
**Alternative**

- **What’s the Trouble?** A few people say that *alternative* can only be used when there are two choices.

The Latin root of *alternative* is *alter*, which means “the other of two” or simply “the other.” Based on this etymology, some usage writers in the 1800s began suggesting that *alternative* should be used only when describing a choice between two options—not three or more. However, few modern sources support the notion, and *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* reports that some have gone as far as to call it a fetish or pedantry.

**What Should You Do?**

Feel free to use *alternative* for three or more choices unless you have reason to believe you’re writing for someone who hangs on to the outdated rule.

> Libraries should be open to all—except the censor. We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors. For the Bill of Rights is the guardian of our security as well as our liberty.

—John F. Kennedy in the *Saturday Review*
American

What’s the Trouble? American is the only single word we have to refer to “a citizen of the United States of America” (USican?), but technically, an American is “anyone who lives in North America, Central America, or South America.”

We, the people, have been calling ourselves Americans since before our country was even founded (as have our detractors). Although all people of the American continents are actually Americans, most readers in the United States and Europe assume that an American is a U.S. citizen since that is how the word is most commonly used.

What Should You Do?

Despite its failings, use American to refer to “a citizen of the United States of America.” No better term exists. Feel free to feel guilty.

The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.

—Benjamin Franklin
Ax

What’s the Trouble? The handheld tool for chopping wood has two spellings: ax and axe.

The standard American spelling is ax, and the standard British spelling is axe. Axe body spray, which is heavily advertised in the United States, was created by a British company and first launched in France.

If you’d like to feel superior to the British, the Oxford English Dictionary says that the ax spelling is better than axe in terms of “etymology, phonology, and analogy.”

What Should You Do?

In America, spell the word ax.

In this country people don’t respect the morning. An alarm clock violently wakes them up, shatters their sleep like the blow of an ax, and they immediately surrender themselves to deadly haste. Can you tell me what kind of day can follow a beginning of such violence?

—Milan Kundera in Farewell Waltz
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