

Robert Hartwell Fiske's Disagreeable English

A Bimonthly Bulletin of Misused, Misspelled, and Mispronounced English

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Six times a year, we will send you this addendum to [Robert Hartwell Fiske's Dictionary of Unendurable English](#). Each bulletin will include new examples of misused, misspelled, or mispronounced English.

1. calculus Misused for *thinking* (or similar words). • In what is shaping up to be a classic Washington stalemate, that could change the *calculus*, giving Republicans extra leverage. USE *thinking*. • The *calculus* was that growth would come from the export sector and it would be enough to offset the shrinkage in the domestic economy. USE *reasoning*.

Aside from its use in the fields of mathematics, pathology, and dentistry, *calculus* has also, and more recently, come to mean estimation or calculation. But in many instances of this usage, *calculus* means no more than thinking.

I think the calculus is, is what looks good for my next election. —
Senator Tom Coburn

2. forment Misused for *foment*. • You *forment* anger and hate with your vicious talk that polarizes people. USE *foment*. • As is too often the case, the male ego is a tool used to *forment* strife and a wise man will recognize Truth when spoken or, in this case, written. USE *foment*. • Anybody *formenting* or planning to *forment* trouble should be arrested and put behind the bars. USE *fomenting*; *foment*.

Foment means to rouse or incite; to promote the growth of. *Forment*, though widely used, is wholly incorrect. *Foment* derives from the Latin *fovēre*, to warm; *forment* derives from people not reading, people not listening, people not thinking.

3. incongruous The pronunciation of *incongruous* is (in-KON-groo-es), not (in-kon-GROO-es).

4. ineffable Misused for *extreme* (or similar words). • A night after Game 6's *ineffable* comebacks the Cardinals took the lead early and held it, and that was all. USE *incredible*. • It was *ineffably* kind and considerate of you. USE *wonderfully*. • The passing of Apple founder Steve Jobs got me thinking about the *ineffable* ways both he and Walt Disney made their marks on the world. USE *remarkable*.

Ineffable means beyond description; too great to be expressed in words. It is a synonym for words like *unutterable* or *unspeakable*, not for words like *very* or *extreme*, *exceeding* or *incredible*.

5. meditative The pronunciation of *meditative* is (MED-i-tay-tiv), not (mah-DID-ah-tiv).

6. misspell (spell) Misused for *misspelling* (*spelling*). • There was a *misspell* in your name. USE *misspelling*. • Leslie Marshall blobs (not a *misspell*) about Cain and attracts 40 comments to your piddling four. USE *misspelling*. • Whichever *spell* you use, make sure you follow exactly the given directions; even a wrong step or a *misspell* immediately means death. USE *spelling*; *misspelling*.

The idea of speaking or writing well appeals to few people today, since we use words like *invite* as a noun instead of *invitation*, *enthused* as an adjective instead of *enthusiastic*, and *misspell* as a noun instead of *misspelling*. Many people today have scant notion, no notion, perhaps, of what it is to be well spoken, what it is to write well.

7. oxymoron Misused for *oxymoronic*. The adjective of *oxymoron* is *oxymoronic*, not *oxymoron*. • Her poems are very difficult but easy to understand at the same time (I'm aware that's *oxymoron*). USE *oxymoronic*. • Be ignorant and intelligent and know that that's *oxymoron*. USE *oxymoronic*. • So it's *oxymoron* to say democrats in general are racist, when in truth there are members of both parties that are in fact racist. USE *oxymoronic*.

So all of those things together make it really critical that Congress and the president work together. I know that seems almost oxymoron at this time — some consensus and cooperation in Washington? — Diane Swonk, chief economist, Mesirow Financial

8. profiteer Misused for *profit* (or similar words). • It's really disappointing and annoying people are seeking to *profiteer* from tickets that are free. USE *profit*. • Palin is simply a *profiteer* who caught a lottery strike when McCain foolishly selected her. USE *opportunist*.

To *profiteer* (PROF-i-tir) means to make excessive profits on goods in short supply or difficult to obtain; it does not mean, simply, to make a profit. This sentence uses the word *profiteer* correctly: • He cited reports that in several towns in Bulacan and Pampanga hit by severe flooding, *profiteers* took advantage of the disaster to jack up the price of bottled drinking water to as much as P140 per liter.

9. put your hands together Slang for greet or welcome, *put your hands together* is as tiresome to hear as it is annoying to be told. People know when applause is expected of them, and they know when they wish to applaud; none need be told when to clap.

• And the star has just entered the building — *put your hands together* for the new Mercedes-Benz C63 AMG Coupe Black Series. • *Put your hands together* and say Hallelujah for the breathtaking new production of Jesus Christ Superstar. • Ladies and gentlemen, please *put your hands together* for David "The Bullet" Smith.

10. so much Typically heard in the widespread and fulsome *thank you so much* (Thank you so much for providing this course; Thank you so much for all my birthday messages), *so much* is also heard in other, equally annoying, utterances: • Thank you *so much*, and I love your book *so much*. • *Thank you so much* for these beautiful words; your support and encouragement mean *so much* to me.

A genuine-sounding *thank you* (or even *thank you very much*) is being usurped by a specious-sounding *thank you so much* and, worse still, *thank you sooooo much*. It's nearly the only expression of thanks that we hear today. Do people not have any sense of themselves? Must they persistently do as others do, and speak as others speak? Imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery; it's the starkest form of insincerity.

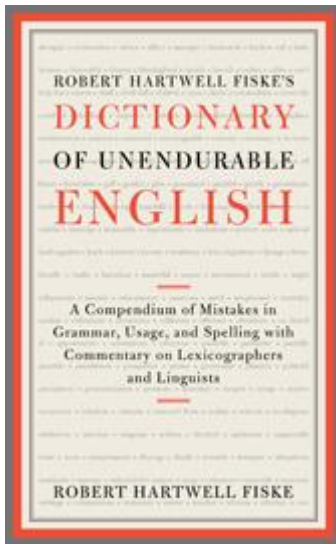
Especially odd or amusing usages:

animosity Misused for *anonymity*. • I suppose I would never get to know him as a person, but at least I could enjoy his humor in my *animosity*. USE *anonymity*.

no problem Misused for *you're welcome* (or similar words).

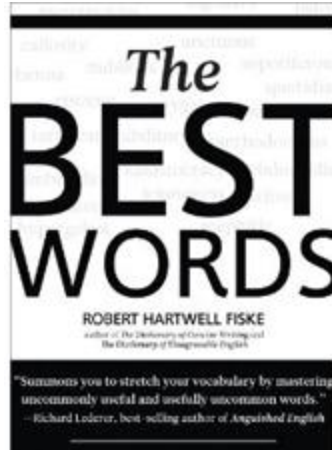
- "How are you?"
- "OK. Thanks."
- "No problem."

**Grammar, Usage, and Spelling
with Commentary on
Lexicographers and Linguists**



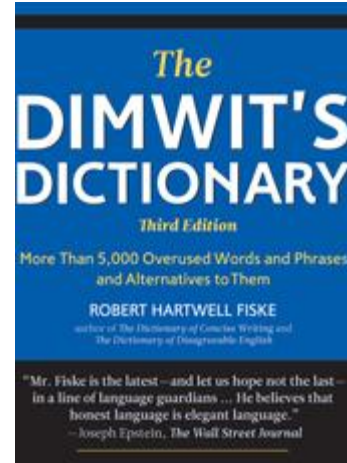
Today's popular dictionaries often fail to define words correctly or to distinguish between them; some dictionaries even maintain that one word means the same as another simply because people who do not know the correct meanings of the words confuse them. *Robert Hartwell Fiske's Dictionary of Unendurable English* — a supplement to whatever dictionary you own or use — is an attempt to combat this nonsense, to return meaning and distinction to the words we use.

You can order *Robert Hartwell Fiske's Dictionary of Unendurable English* from [Vocabula](#) or [Simon & Schuster](#) or [Amazon](#) or elsewhere.



The point of learning new words is not to impress your friends or to seem more intelligent than they. The point is to see more, to understand more. An ever-increasing vocabulary uncovers connections, introduces spheres, and — in reminding us that there are words for all thoughts, all feelings, all behaviors, all things — upholds all humankind.

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Whereas a witticism is a clever remark or phrase — indeed, the height of expression — a "dimwitticism" is the converse; it is a commonplace remark or phrase. Dimwitticisms are worn-out words and phrases; they are expressions that dull our reason and dim our insight, formulas that we rely on when we are too lazy to express what we think or even to discover how we feel. The more we use them, the more we conform — in thought and feeling — to everyone else who uses them.

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