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WORDS AND PHRASES

Brandy? Vouchsafe errant couch! CRANBERRIES! CRANBERRIES!

Fiction is made of language and language is made of words. Writers have long appreciated words for their ability to communicate ideas to readers. Some writers, though, seem unaware that this works only when both parties agree beforehand on what words mean. Overlook this simple but essential precondition, and things can go wrong in a number of ways.

The Puffer Fish

Wherein the author flaunts his vocabulary

His father was IRA and his mother was Quebecois, and they had relinquished their mortal coils in the internecine conflagration that ended their conjoined separatist movement, IRA-Q. The appellation he was given by his progenitors was Ray O'Vaque ("Like the battery," he'd elucidate, with an adamantine stare that proscribed any

mirth). In his years of incarceration, however, he had earned the sobriquet "Uncle Milty" for his piscine amatory habits.

He had been emancipated from the penitentiary for three weeks, and now his restless peregrinations had conveyed him to this liminal place, seeking compurgation in the permafrost of the hyperborean tundra, which was an apt analogue of the permafrost in his heart. He insinuated himself into the caravansary with nugatory expectations, which were confirmed by the exiguous provisions for comfort. But then the bartender looked up from laving the begrimed bar, his eyes growing luminous as he ejaculated, "Milt!"

Beginning writers often believe that the true genius uses only words from the furthest reaches of the English language, the darkest recesses of the dictionary, the sort of words that cannot survive on their own in any natural environment.

Sorry; this is not writing. This is showing off, and nobody likes a show-off.

There are of course things you would write that you would not say in conversation ("I said, bewildered"), but words that draw attention to themselves by their rarity draw attention away from the story you are telling and remind the reader of the writer and his thesaurus. In a worst-case scenario, a game of ping-pong develops between the writer's thesaurus and the reader's dictionary.

When the reader has stopped to wonder at your delamificatious vocabulary, or, worse, when the reader has stopped because the word you've used has no more meaning to him than a random ptliijnbvc of letters, the reader is not involved in your story.

This is not to say that you should write with one hand tied

behind your back, making sure that you only use language accessible to a fifth grader. There is nothing wrong with making the occasional reader occasionally reach for the dictionary. However, the only legitimate reason to do that is *if the word you have chosen is the best word to express the idea.* Generally, saying "edifice" instead of "building" doesn't tell your reader anything more about the building; it tells the reader that you know the word edifice.

The Crepuscular Handbag

Wherein the author flaunts somebody else's vocabulary

Henderson toyed with the onset of Melinda's bikini, ruminating his designs. "Asleep so soon?" he whickered. Of course he was vigilant that this sleep was the due of the unsavory drug he had slavered in her drink prior to the debarking of his private schooner boat. Ululating under his breath, he perused her bikini to the floor and embroiled himself in her well-endowed bust.

He vacated a myriad times in the naively prolonged girl. She didn't suspect a nary, lolling Michigan-style. "You will sell for pretty pennies," he voiced, palming her redolent hind.

Using words the reader does not know is a bad idea, but it is at least defensible; there are excuses. There are no excuses for using words you yourself do not know. Nonwriters might wonder how this could happen, and frankly, from time to time, so do we, but it does, and with appalling frequency.

If you've seen a word only once and have not taken the trouble to look it up, the chances of shooting yourself in the foot are high.

Using a word almost correctly, or using a word almost exactly like the right word, amounts to almost speaking English. You may think that the occasional slip-up won't matter; but the language you choose is the clothing in which your novel is draped, and saying "incredulous" when you mean "incredible" is the prose equivalent of walking into a meeting wearing your underwear on the outside.

We have no way of knowing what words you are going to misuse, so we cannot offer you a list. What we can offer, though, is a test that you yourself can apply to any word, whenever you are in doubt.

A Test: Do I Know This Word?

Ask yourself: "Do I know this word?"
If the answer is no, then you do not know it.

The short-term solution is to use a word you *do* know. That means a word you would comfortably use when talking to an overeducated and sarcastic friend who would not hesitate to make fun of you for misusing a word.

If you feel that limiting yourself to words you know leaves you with too small a vocabulary for your purposes, there is no short-term solution. Your only recourse is to take the time to read more books and to expand the kind of books you read. You may have fallen into the habit of reading only a few favorite authors, or reading only within a particular genre, or subgenre, of book.

By casting a wider net, you will catch more words, and your vocabulary will inevitably—though slowly—be enriched.

The Crepitating Parasol

Wherein the author trips over his own cleverness

Pausing in their circumambulation of the verdancy, the *duo jocularly noted a bi-canine (that is, a duplication of* Fidos, one perched atop deux) in 4/4-time venereal congress amid the rhododenra. The cadence of the connubial kinetics near-mesmerizing, the pooch performance secured the gawkery of Jasper and Jasperia.

"The rites of spring," quoted Homo Sapiens the first (for he was aware, in a trice, of that species he called his own, differentiating his bipedal egoism from the foursquare unselfconsciousness of the curs). "Qua Stravinsky's well-known jeu d'esprit."

"Ah, scrumptuoso!" exulted his perky hominid companion-ette, humming a few bars. Her virile counterpart-ner now brought his attention to attention, however at ease, focused on the spectacle of her unvoluminous but perfectly formed mammary attractions. Truly the HS (Homo Sapiens) manifested too, sporadically, as dog.

Some writers feel compelled not only to wrangle exotic words but to make them do tricks as well. For these writers, no formation is too baroque; no pun is too obscure.

Nigel Tufnel of Spinal Tap memorably pointed out that there is a fine line between clever and stupid. The harder you try to be

clever, the more momentum you will have when you arrive at that line, and the less likely you are to notice when you cross it.

Very skilled writers will sometimes use baroque prose to good effect, but even among successful literary authors, the vast majority avoid flowery writing. Writing is not like figure skating, where flashier tricks are required to move up in competition. Ornate prose is an idiosyncrasy of certain writers rather than a pinnacle all writers are working toward.

Trans-Parent

Authors often say that their novels are like their children, and you want your novel, just like your children, to reflect well on you. When it goes out into the world, you hope that it will make you proud. But like a parent, an author must learn that her novel has needs of its own, and they are not the same as the author's.

Yes, you want your son's behavior toward women to reflect a loving relationship with his mother. However, if a woman is compelled to think about that relationship whenever they're in bed together, something has gone very very wrong.

A humorous or ornately embroidered passage that takes the reader out of the novel to reflect on the author's brilliance is likely to be a bug, rather than a feature. In fact, whenever you are particularly taken with a bit of your own cleverness, it is not a bad idea to stop and consider whether it serves your novel or you.

Anything that draws attention to the author at the expense of her novel is bad parenting.

Are Sticks and Stones Still an Option?

Wherein the author mangles common expressions

Herbert Hooviér was the crème de la menthe of fashion reporters. He had spent six years honing his journalistic nose as a foreign correspondent first, and was pretty tough company to get past. Normally he wouldn't trust anyone with his back tied, and always made sure he looked before he took a leap of fate. But he had met his match made in heaven in Vera Wang, the fashionable designer.

She was as pretty as he pictured, with a body so great you could bounce her hindquarters off it. She was the apples and oranges of his eye. Herbert, or Herb, tried not to give in to his urgent, but she was a piece of no resistance, and his masculine whiles were no match for her cat's meow.

When she opened the door for their second date, she looked great, stunning him.

"Your place or mine?" she queried.

"Touché," he returned, begging her question.

When somebody is said to speak like a native, it means that person has learned to speak a language idiomatically. Conversely, when you use idioms incorrectly, it makes you sound as if you come from a different culture than the reader, and possibly a different planet. Getting individual words wrong can make you sound illiterate; getting idioms wrong can make you sound as if you don't speak English.

While you can't simply look these things up in a dictionary, you are fortunate to live in a time when you can google any-

thing. If you have any uncertainty about an idiom, try an Internet search and see how other people have used it. If the phrase you are using does not return a few thousand hits, you probably have the wording of the idiom wrong.

And if you are thinking "I can't possibly check everything that way," perhaps you have too many such phrases. This can result in

Breeding Contempt

Wherein the author relies too much on clichés

She gave him a deep, melting kiss before falling into his strong arms, swept away by her feelings. Her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. The square-jawed he-man crushed her in a powerful embrace. "My darling, I'll never let you go," he swore.

Her knees were weak. The hot-blooded Spaniard had broken through all her defenses. He was all she'd ever dreamed of.

The sound of distant gunfire shattered the silence. Only yesterday, she would have been scared out of her skin. But she had come to see that life was cheap in this banana republic. In the back of her mind, Melinda knew she would never be at home here, but she would stay by the side of this Latin lover who had stolen her heart.

Clichés become clichés for a reason. At some point in time, every cliché was a fresh or surprising turn of phrase, and it

expressed something so well that it entered the language as a unit of meaning, in many cases operating like a single word. Often, one of these boilerplate phrases is perfectly acceptable. To say that somebody is "drop-dead gorgeous" conveys an idea without distracting attention from the general thrust of the narrative.

There is a critical point, however, at which the constant use of off-the-shelf phrases saps the life from your writing. Because they are so familiar, these phrases are drained of even the meaning of the individual words that make them up. We skip over the phrase "pretty as a picture" without picturing anything; at best, it means no more than the word "pretty" alone, and at worst, nothing at all.

Clichés and common expressions also offer the potential danger of being too close to the thing to which they refer. They can create a momentary, or even permanent, confusion in the reader's mind as to whether he should take something literally or metaphorically. If your character has a gimlet eye, we recommend that she drink something other than a gimlet.

The explorer knew that his trek would be filled with pitfalls.

On the day of the marathon, Joe got out of bed and hit the ground running.

Finally, because of the lowest-common-denominator selection process by which clichés spread, they generally convey only the most ham-fisted ideas and are inappropriate for writing that requires precision or nuance. Clichéd expressions should particularly be avoided when trying to describe key emotions, important actions—anything the reader will want to experience in detail. Clichés paint with broad strokes and are best reserved for the familiar and unsurprising. If that describes the key emotions and important actions in your book—oops!

And in your heart of hearts, you know this is true.

I Mean This!! It's Important!!!

Wherein the author punctuates hysterically

Men were *so* difficult! At first Jack seemed to be so *into her,* but now Melinda didn't know WHAT to think! He'd seemed *so cold* when she ran into him in the alley the other night, surrounded by his work associates, who were all **such rough men**!!!

Perhaps she was doing the Wrong Thing, she thought as she headed towards their rendezvous by the abandoned wharves. How did she know he wasn't up to *something—something*—UNCOUTH?! It was getting dark, and the doorways were all full of Loose Women in their paint and *cheap* scent. She HATED that type, the type of woman who sold her most Precious Asset that was meant to be **sacred** to her husband!

Suddenly! she spotted Jack, and **her heart melted**—like a heart that had been frozen, but then was subjected to heat. "JACK! It's ME! I'm *so glad to see you*!" she said, and ran to him, **All Her Doubts Forgotten.**

The exclamation mark is the most commonly abused form of punctuation. While commas, often appear, randomly in unpublished manuscripts—and there is an epidemic—of unnecessary—em-dashes, it is the exclamation mark which takes the most punishment.

We understand that you are excited to be a novelist, but there are very few occasions when you should use an exclamation mark, and all of them are in dialogue. Even here they should be used sparingly, usually to indicate that a character is

in fact shouting. Here is an appropriate use of the exclamation mark:

The last thing he expected when the elevator door opened was the snarling tiger that leapt at him.

"Ahhhhh!"

Overuse of exclamation marks makes them dwindle in significance until finally they carry no more urgency than a period—but one that graphically pokes you in the eye as you reach the end of each sentence. They are even more of a liability while they remain functional, and the reader responds to every one. Then the writing appears to be engaged in frantic hand-waving, straining every muscle to convince the reader that the action is important. Where the action is not important, this will seem bizarre and random, like underlining the word "the." Where the action is important, the exclamation points are like so many speed bumps: they pause your story to focus attention on the punctuation.

In almost all situations that do not involve immediate physical danger or great surprise, you should think twice before using an exclamation mark. If you have thought twice and the exclamation mark is still there, think about it three times, or however many times it takes until you delete it.

Other typographical conventions used for emphasis—italics, all caps, and bold—should likewise be used *infrequently*, VERY RARELY, and **never**.

Similarly, some writers, displaying either an admirable knowledge of sixteenth-century English literature or a fondness for the German way of doing things, will Capitalize Important Nouns, or Anything Else that seems Significant. (This is not a reference to those writers participating in the current vogue for self-conscious Ironic Capitalization; we are speaking here to those writers who assume that Love

and Honor deserve initial capitals because they are Eternally Important.)

There are specific ways in which initial caps are used in contemporary English; fortunately, these are explained in the many style guides available.