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JESSE KARJALAINEN



6

SAMPLE
CHAPTERS

THE **JOY** OF ENGLISH

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Jesse Karjalainen, author of The Joy of English



01

very

This is very, very unnecessary

- ✓ **He has a big family and an expensive car.**
- ✗ *He has a very big family and a very expensive car.*
- ✓ **These are preliminary results.**
- ✗ *These are very preliminary results.*
- ✓ **I was on an overbooked flight.**
- ✗ *I was on a very overbooked flight.*
- ✓ **She was tiny.**
- ✗ *She was very small.*

- ✓ **It is also crucial to our very existence.**

Avoid overusing *very*, which can be removed from most sentences without any real loss of meaning, and consider an alternative choice of words.

People like to use the word *very*. It is arguably one of the most overused words in the English language – just behind *nice*. It is definitely one of the most frequently used “booster” words around. The habitual overuse of *very* fosters not only a poor vocabulary but also displays it for all to see.

People use it without realising that it adds nothing in meaning and is merely a calorie-free word that is good only for padding out text. This is why all good writers self-edit their work and banish it from their writing.

There are some typical problems caused by the indiscriminate use of *very*. Apart from being so (very) disliked in good writing, describing something with *very* can actually result in diluted meaning. Consider these:

- a very precise measurement
- a very brief affair
- a very central location

On reflection: *precise* already means “(very) accurate/specific”; *brief* already means “(very) short duration”; and *central* already means, “in the centre”. They are all absolute meanings. If *very* is necessary for the mean-



ing to be clear, then the words *precise*, *brief* and *central* lose power.

The other major problem with resorting to *very* is that it can become rather nonsensical. Let me show you what I mean:

- a very resistant material
- a very see-through blouse

As with *precise*, *brief* and *central*, using *very* with *resistant* makes no sense: something is either resistant or not. Unlike *very expensive*, which is relative and not an absolute, a blouse is either see-through or it is not – so why describe it as *very see-through*? There is simply no need.

So, if something is small, say it is *small*. If something is *very small*, then it is better to use, say, *tiny*. If something is *very wet*, why not use *soaked*, *saturated*, *sodden* or *drenched*? Remember, the point being made here is not about using clever words, just better words.

So what using *very* does is indicate that the writer is either really thinking of another word or has run out of words.

This means that *very [something]* is more often than not used when actually a better word exists. Consider the differences between these examples:

- ✓ **My dream is to buy a gigantic house in Texas.**
- ✓ **My dream is to buy a big house in Texas.**
- ✗ *My dream is to buy a very big house in Texas.*
- ✓ **Our pizzas are enormous.**
- ✓ **Our pizzas are large.**
- ✗ *Our pizzas are very large.*
- ✓ **Your feet are tiny!**
- ✓ **Your feet are small!**
- ✗ *Your feet are very small!*

As you can see, the use of *very* in this way will prevent writers from having to think of better words to express what they mean. Too many *verys* and the writing soon becomes dull and unexciting.

Check your writing for instances of *very xxx* and think about what might be a better word to use instead. Consult a thesaurus and replace two words with one. Your writing will improve greatly when you inject it with great new words.

- | | | |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------|
| very boring | → | tedious, mundane, coma-inducing |
| very quiet | → | shy, reserved, mute |

very important → critical, vital, key

Once serial users of *very* are converted into sparing users they are often surprised by the noticeable boost in impact that their words now have.

The same approach should be applied to *very much*. Instead, *much* is usually enough on its own.

- ✓ **I am feeling much better.**
- ✗ *I am feeling very much better.*

As a final note, there is one specific use of *very* where it is justified, and that is as a synonym of *specific*.

- ✓ **He grew up in this very house.**
- ✓ **The very notion is absurd.**
- ✓ **Its very existence makes it important.**

In these circumstances, *very* becomes a very (oops) handy tool. But be careful because sometimes it is not as you would think:

I have worked at two very different companies.

While the writer may think *very different* emphasises the contrast between two companies in a way that plain, old *different* does not, the writer also has another choice: to use the word *disparate* instead.

I will admit that using *very* is so ingrained and comes as such second nature that it is not going to be easy to stop immediately. You will no doubt notice them flying into your sentences without a second's thought. However, I am equally positive that your instincts to resist will strengthen with time.

Notice how, just by stripping one word from your vocabulary, you find yourself searching for clearer and more effective ways to express yourself? This is a great example of how, by taking even a small amount of time to think about how you use language, you can improve your language skills no end.

02

a historic versus an historic

An 'orrible hysteria over 'istoric

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ a historic victory | ✓ a horrific accident |
| ✗ an historic victory | ✗ an horrific accident |
| ✓ a hotel receptionist | ✓ a hysterical woman |
| ✗ an hotel receptionist | ✗ an hysterical woman |
| ✓ an honour to serve | ✓ a heroic deed |
| ✗ a honour to serve | ✗ an heroic deed |

Do not be afraid to use *a* instead of *an* with *hotel*, *historic*, *horrific*, *heroic*, *habitual* and *hysterical*. These are all correct because they begin with a “huh”-sound.

Only four words (and their derivatives) beginning with h remain “huh-less” in spoken English and therefore need *an* in front of them. These are: *heir*, *honour*, *hour* and *honest*. This does not include foreign words, such as *homage* or *hors d'oeuvres*. The rest are no longer “huh-less” in pronunciation, which means that there is no phonetic reason to use *an* with them. It really is that simple. Honest!

A fuller list of non-“huh” words that *an* correctly precedes includes:

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| ✓ an heir | ✓ an heirless |
| ✓ an heiress | ✓ an heirloom |
| ✓ an heirship | ✓ an honest |
| ✓ an honesty | ✓ an honour |
| ✓ an honorand | ✓ an honourable |
| ✓ an honorarium | ✓ an honorary |
| ✓ an honorific | ✓ an hour |
| ✓ an hourly | ✓ an hourglass |

Note: In the US, *herb* remains “huh”-less, so justifies having *an*.

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| ✓ (US) an herb | ✓ (UK) a herb |
|----------------|---------------|

For those of you who remain unconvinced, here is how it all happened:

many English words come from Latin via French; Latin h-words of course have no “huh”-sound in French, Italian and Spanish (Latin. *hora* → French. *heure* “err”, Italian. *ora* “ora”, Spanish. *hora* “ora”); in English the new h-words were, over time, made to complement the Germanic “huh”-sound of *high*, *house*, *home* etc.; many words remained variable, fluctuating between both pronunciations. *The King James Bible* (1611), for example, includes *an haven*, *an hedge*, *an hidden*, *an house* and *an hypocrite* among others. Now that we no longer say *'ouse*, *'orse*, *'ero* or *'istory*, these words do not warrant the *an* that they once did.

Despite this, there are those who argue until they are blue in the face that there are “exceptions”, such as the old favourites *historic*, *hotel* and *horrific*. They are wrong and their insistence serves only to keep this old wives’ tale alive. Those journalists and announcers who frequently reinforce this so-called rule over the airwaves only exacerbate the paranoia and confusion surrounding its use.

As a final point, there is one major irony directly relating to (but no longer affecting) the *a/an* confusion, which is that the letter h is correctly pronounced – and spelt, for that matter – as *aitch*. Even though in Modern English one no longer “drops one’s aitches”, the “aitch” pronunciation remains correct. This said, “haitch” is on the march, like it or not. This is nothing to waste one’s breath over, in my opinion. Say it as you please. There are bigger linguistic fish to fry when it comes to English. *Aitch/haitch* is the only remaining example of variable pronunciation in English of the “huh” category, apart from *'erb*, of course. Maybe it should correctly be spelt *'aitch* – with an apostrophe? But let’s not go there!

03

‘I before E, except after C’
when beige pigs fly

Erase this famous mantra from your mind because there are far too many exceptions to this so-called “rule” for it to ever be of benefit.

Reciting the words “i before e, except after c” has never helped anyone get to grips with their spelling. This is because, contrary to popular belief, this “rule” does not hold true. It probably just makes the situation worse.

If the mantra were true, then the assumption is that all or most words of this type are ordinarily spelt *-ie-*. There are, of course, many words that follow this rule:

-IE- WORDS

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| ✓ belief | ✓ believe |
| ✓ biennale | ✓ biennial |
| ✓ brief | ✓ chief |
| ✓ field | ✓ fiend |
| ✓ fiery | ✓ friend |
| ✓ frieze | ✓ gradient |
| ✓ grief | ✓ hierarchy |
| ✓ hieroglyph | ✓ hygiene |
| ✓ lenient | ✓ mischievous |
| ✓ niece | ✓ oriental |
| ✓ piercing | ✓ priest |
| ✓ quiet | ✓ relief |
| ✓ relieve | ✓ science |
| ✓ series | ✓ shield |
| ✓ siege | ✓ thief |
| ✓ tier | ✓ variety |
| ✓ view | ✓ yield |

So far so good, and then therefore, according to the rationale, there are some that are spelt *-ei-* because they come after a *-c-*:

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C + -EI- WORDS

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| ✓ ceiling | ✓ conceive |
| ✓ deceive | ✓ receive |
| ✓ perceive | ✓ beige |
| ✓ codeine | ✓ caffeine |
| ✓ receipt | ✓ receiver |

If only it were that simple, but the problem is that there are plenty of words that break both so-called rules. First are those that have no *-c-* but are still spelt *-ei-*:

-EI- WORDS NOT AFTER C

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| ✓ caffeine | ✓ counterfeit |
| ✓ codeine | ✓ either |
| ✓ forfeit | ✓ foreign |
| ✓ heifer | ✓ freight |
| ✓ heinous | ✓ height |
| ✓ heist | ✓ heir |
| ✓ inveigh | ✓ leisure |
| ✓ neighbour | ✓ neither |
| ✓ protein | ✓ seize |
| ✓ sleigh | ✓ sleight |
| ✓ their | ✓ veil |
| ✓ vein | ✓ weigh |
| ✓ weir | ✓ weird |

Second, there are also words with a *-c-* that are spelt *-ie-*:

I BEFORE E EXCEPT AFTER C... OR, NOT

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| ✓ ancient | ✓ conscience |
| ✓ society | ✓ deficiencies |
| ✓ efficient | ✓ science |
| ✓ scientific | ✓ species |
| ✓ sufficient | ✓ policies |
| ✓ fancied | ✓ prescient |
| ✓ glacier | ✓ financier |

This is far from being a complete list of examples but this all proves is why you are better off unlearning the “i before e...” myth. It will not improve your spelling – it will probably only make it worse.

04

who versus whom

Whom is not yet doomed

- ✓ I want to know who did what to whom.
- ✗ I want to know who did what to who.
- ✓ To whom it may concern.
- ✗ To who it may concern.
- ✓ For whom the bell tolls.
- ✗ For who the bell tolls.
- ✓ They always preach to whomever will listen.
- ✗ They always preach to whoever will listen.

If you remember anything at all about using *who* and *whom*, it must be this: *whom* rather than *who* is used directly after words such as *to*, *by*, *for*, *at*, *in*, *with*, *from*, *towards* and *of* etc. At a more in-depth level, use *whom* when *who* is the object.

I have several pieces of advice when it comes to using *who/whom*. First, *who* will become *whom* almost without fail when it directly follows words (prepositions) like *about*, *at*, *by*, *in*, *for*, *from*, *of*, *towards*, *with* etc.:

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| ✓ about whom | ✓ at whom |
| ✓ by whom | ✓ in whom |
| ✓ for whom | ✓ from whom |
| ✓ of whom | ✓ towards whom |
| ✓ with whom | ✓ without whom |
| ✗ about who | ✗ at who |
| ✗ by who | ✗ in who |
| ✗ for who | ✗ from who |
| ✗ of who | ✗ towards who |
| ✗ with who | ✗ without who |

This simple rule goes a long way towards getting *who/whom* right and serves as a great starting point – all without knowing a shred of grammar.

The second thing to remember is that when it comes to casual conversation, there is nothing wrong with simply using *who* every time. Shocking as this suggestion may sound, *who* is not likely to be misunderstood. You can use it safe in the knowledge that 90% of people will find it acceptable. Few will take offence because the word *whom* is in many respects on the endangered-species list in this regard. Many people – especially those born around the 1970s and later – get by perfectly well using *who* in place of *whom* without any problems or concerns.

For many, these first two approaches are enough to get by with. Nevertheless, the correct usage of *whom* is often treated as a shibboleth that marks a “good education” – so take care, especially in formal circles.

For those wanting a clearer explanation, the third piece of advice is to say that *who* must always be *whom* when expressed in the object form. This can seem an easy concept but it is a lot trickier to put into practice.

Whom is an example of an old form of English that has survived beyond its use-by date. Before you begin to write me an angry letter in protest, let me elaborate. Of the approximately 1 million words in the English language, *who* (as well as the derivatives *whoever* and *whomever*) is one of only six words that have different subject/object forms. The other five are: *I*, *he*, *they*, *she* and *we*.

SUBJECT

I
he
they
she
we
who

OBJECT

me
him
them
her
us
whom

From this perspective, the difference between *who* and *whom* is seemingly clear: *whom* is the object form of *who* and few will be confused about which of the following examples are correct:

| | |
|------------|-------------------|
| With I? | <i>With me?</i> |
| With she? | <i>With her?</i> |
| With he? | <i>With him?</i> |
| With we? | <i>With us?</i> |
| With they? | <i>With them?</i> |
| With who? | <i>With whom?</i> |

In this context the difference between the two seems simple enough. Here-



in lies the real reason that people have so much difficulty with *who/whom*: it is that they have difficulty understanding the difference between subject and object.

This is Jesse, who wrote that book. (*subject*)

This is Jesse, whom you have been asking about. (*object*)

All of a sudden the *who/whom* game is no longer so much fun. Both of these examples use *who/whom* according to the same principles stated in the lists above, but I can guarantee you that a lot of people will find the difference far from obvious. Is the following example correct or incorrect according to subject/object principles?

I have no idea whom she decided to confide in.

When put on the spot, not everyone will have the confidence to say that this sentence is, indeed, correct. (The clue is that *whom* refers to a third party, someone other than *she*.) The problem with *whom* is that this lack of confidence means that using it correctly has not only become cumbersome for many, but also that it no longer sounds natural in casual language. *Whom* runs the risk of sounding stilted – even when correct. Consider these examples:

| | | |
|------------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Whom did you speak to? | or | Who did you speak to? |
| Whom do you believe? | or | Who do you believe? |
| Whom can it be? | or | Who can it be? |
| Whom did he help? | or | Who did he help? |
| Whom did he marry? | or | Who did he marry? |
| Whom will they choose? | or | Who will they choose? |

Strictly speaking, *whom* is correct in each case because the *who* refers to a third party, i.e. the object. But it would also be overly formal (just like, *With whom did you speak?*). It would be awkward to insist on *whom* in the case of ‘whom did she marry?’ In truth, modern English speakers prefer to use *who* in cases such as these. Few would go out of their way to insist on using *whom* – even though it is technically correct. Compared with the rest of the contents of this book, the demise of *whom* is not one that I will lose sleep over. Someone once said: “Whom, is doomed.”

If you are still reading this chapter, you can probably begin to see that getting *who/whom* correct involves much more than learning a new word and its meaning. If you are still interested to understand this further, I would

advise you to do some independent research specifically on the matter of subject versus object.

Whichever approach is right for you, my final piece of advice is to avoid *whom* unless you are confident that it is correct. The fear of making a mistake with *who/whom* can lead to people opting for *whom* thinking that they are playing it safe, only to get it wrong. As a linguistic *faux pas*, using *whom* when it is not needed is far worse than getting it wrong the other way round. If you care about how others will judge your English, then avoid falling into this group. It is amazing how many people do!

Sample pages – uncorrected proofs

05

less versus fewer

How many fewer? How much less?

- ✓ 5 items or fewer.
- ✗ 5 items or less.
- ✓ I try to use fewer plastic bags.
- ✗ I try to use less plastic bags.
- ✓ I will try to eat less chocolate.
- ✗ I will try to eat fewer chocolate.

Think of *less* in terms of meaning “not as much” and *fewer* as meaning “not as many”.

Getting *less* and *fewer* right isn't always straightforward. If the explanation above does not make immediate sense, ask yourself this question about what it is you want to refer to: would you say, “How many?” or “How much?” Write *fewer* when you would answer “many” and write *less* when you would answer “much”.

EXAMPLE:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Items | How many items? <i>many = fewer</i> ✓ Five items or fewer ✗ <i>Five items or less</i> |
| People | How many people? <i>many = fewer</i> ✓ There were fewer people than expected ✗ <i>There were less people than expected</i> |
| Money | How much money? <i>much = less</i> ✓ £100 or less ✗ <i>£100 or fewer</i> |

- Points** How many points?
much = less
 ✓ **I now have fewer points**
 ✗ *I now have less points*

You should find it easier to get *less* and *fewer* right by following the simple guidelines above.

Some things, however, can still cause confusion, especially when it comes to *years*, *months*, *hours* and *units of currency*. Ask yourself if the following are correct:

- I am working less hours.
 She has been with the company three years less than me.
 He got paid £200 less than me.
 She should be vaccinated at less than 11 months.

All of these sentences are correct because they refer to a *span of time* or *lump sums* – we are talking about “how much time” and “how much money”, not necessarily the individual hours or pounds.

Whether or not to write “less doctors”, “less teachers” or even “less soldiers” is also a tricky one. Although, technically, these professionals can be lumped together (like *money* and *time*) and seen as a mass or collective group, this approach is generally discouraged because this description tends to dehumanise and devalue each professional’s input and the role that they play as individuals. Most people want to be treated by a doctor, not an anonymous, faceless health worker. In return, these professionals prefer to be treated as individuals and for you to use *fewer*.

- ✓ **The school has decided to employ fewer teachers next year.**
- ✗ *The school has decided to employ less teachers next year.*
- ✓ **We were shocked to find out that there are fewer doctors in our area than there used to be.**
- ✗ *We were shocked to find out that there are less doctors in our area than there used to be.*

The same rules apply to *least* and *fewest*:

- ✓ **I did not think that I would get the fewest votes of all of the candidates.**
- ✗ *I did not think that I would get the least votes of all of the candidates.*

This corresponds with our trick of asking *how many* or *how much* votes.

06

redundancies and tautologies*How much are your free gifts?*

✗ *no added additives*

Streamline your writing by removing redundant words.

A tautology is saying the same thing twice. A redundant word is one that is unnecessary, like *end result*. Choose your words carefully.

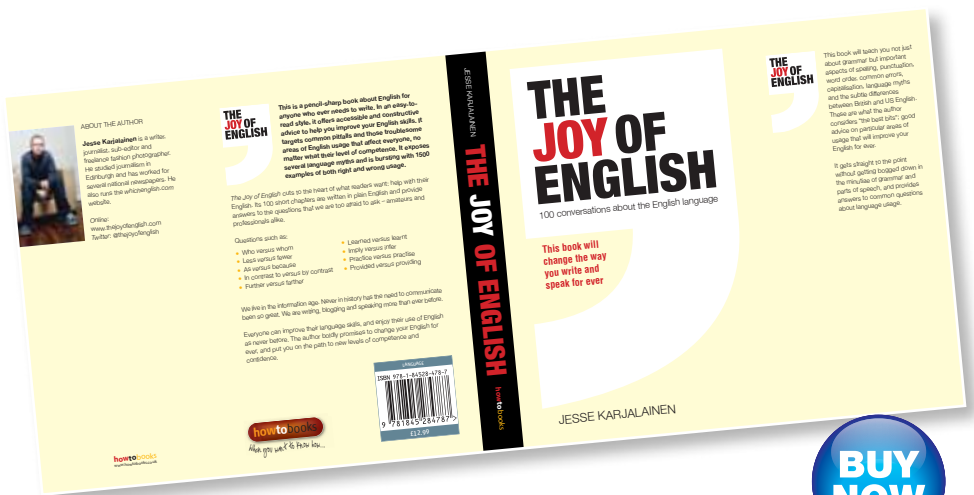
- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ gift | ✓ result |
| ✗ <i>free gift</i> | ✗ <i>end result</i> |
| ✓ ice | ✓ filled |
| ✗ <i>frozen ice</i> | ✗ <i>filled to capacity</i> |
| ✓ venom | ✓ blue |
| ✗ <i>poisonous venom</i> | ✗ <i>blue in colour</i> |
| ✓ order | ✓ dilemma |
| ✗ <i>pre-order</i> | ✗ <i>difficult dilemma</i> |
| ✓ fundamentals | ✓ midnight |
| ✗ <i>basic fundamentals</i> | ✗ <i>12 midnight</i> |
| ✓ bonus | ✓ alone |
| ✗ <i>added bonus</i> | ✗ <i>alone by myself</i> |
| ✓ and/also | ✓ cancel |
| ✗ <i>and also</i> | ✗ <i>cancel out</i> |
| ✓ monopoly | ✓ status |
| ✗ <i>complete monopoly</i> | ✗ <i>current status</i> |
| ✓ degree | ✓ imports |
| ✗ <i>university degree</i> | ✗ <i>foreign imports</i> |
| ✓ HIV | ✓ truth |
| ✗ <i>HIV virus</i> | ✗ <i>honest truth</i> |
| ✓ in August | ✓ exaggerate |
| ✗ <i>in the month of August</i> | ✗ <i>over exaggerate</i> |
| ✓ postpone | ✓ opposite |
| ✗ <i>postpone until later</i> | ✗ <i>complete opposite</i> |
| ✓ free | ✓ best |
| ✗ <i>for free</i> | ✗ <i>best ever</i> |
| ✓ summary | ✓ bouquet |
| ✗ <i>brief summary</i> | ✗ <i>bouquet of flowers</i> |
| ✓ cameo | ✓ scrutiny |
| ✗ <i>cameo appearance</i> | ✗ <i>close scrutiny</i> |

Sample pages – uncorrected proofs

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ✓ could | ✓ trend |
| ✗ <i>could possibly</i> | ✗ <i>current trend</i> |
| ✓ depreciate | ✓ estimated at |
| ✗ <i>depreciate in value</i> | ✗ <i>estimated at about</i> |
| ✓ evolve | ✓ colleague/housemate |
| ✗ <i>evolve over time</i> | ✗ <i>fellow colleague/housemate</i> |
| ✓ tundra | ✓ introduced a |
| ✗ <i>frozen tundra</i> | ✗ <i>introduced a new</i> |
| ✓ witness | ✓ pending |
| ✗ <i>eyewitness</i> | ✗ <i>now pending</i> |
| ✓ proverb/cliche | ✓ fad |
| ✗ <i>old proverb/cliche</i> | ✗ <i>passing fad</i> |
| ✓ remains | ✓ impulse |
| ✗ <i>still remains</i> | ✗ <i>sudden impulse</i> |
| ✓ goal | ✓ write |
| ✗ <i>ultimate goal</i> | ✗ <i>write down</i> |
| ✓ high | ✓ noon |
| ✗ <i>high up</i> | ✗ <i>12 noon</i> |
| ✓ pure | ✓ introduced |
| ✗ <i>100% pure</i> | ✗ <i>first introduced</i> |
| ✓ court | ✓ only |
| ✗ <i>courthouse</i> | ✗ <i>one and only</i> |

In my (own) opinion, it is not necessary to write (down) more words than are needed. After (close) scrutiny, I think you will agree that the above list (of redundant words and tautologies) is both amusing and (also) useful. While a lot of people (still) remain who use them (themselves), I hope that you will resist any (sudden) impulse to do the same. This advice is (100%) pure gold.

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