

Using your words

By Wes Fleming #87301

NEARLY 360 MILLION PEOPLE IN the world speak English as their first language. Most of them live in the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, but there are English-speaking enclaves in Africa and other places in the world. Despite this number of native English speakers, the English language is notoriously difficult to learn.

There are several reasons for that, and only one of them is the existence of nearly 1.1 million individual words that make up the language. English started out as a little-used dialect among the Germanic peoples that morphed as the Angles and the Saxons (who used it) relocated to northern Britain during the waning years of the Roman Empire. Norse languages influenced it, and the Norman invasion of England in the 11th century started the run to modern English by mashing together the language of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons and the French of the Normans. This confluence of language streams created a sometimes difficult situation in which there were two words for one object or concept – one from “high” society (Norman/French) and one from “low” society (Saxon/English).

According to the Global Language Monitor, the English language crossed the million-word threshold in 2009. The Economist drew on over two million vocabulary tests to determine that the average adult American has a vocabulary of between 20,000 and 35,000 words and further tells us that many native English speakers continue to add a word or two to their vocabulary every day.

With all the words that the average American knows, when we write, we often find ourselves falling back on comfortable words. Words that are

easy to come up with, easy to express ourselves with, and yet often these very words that we’re sure nobody will misunderstand become the linguistic equivalent of eating pasta with a butter sauce. Yes, it’s tasty and yes, it’s unlikely to offend or confuse anybody, but in the long run, there’s a nearly infinite number of ways to improve upon that basic end product. Let’s look at some of the most overused words in the English language and explore how we might find alternatives to them to spice up our writing without diluting our intent.

WE WANT EVERY READER OF THIS MAGAZINE TO HANG ON EVERY WORD OF EVERY WRITER.

You can improve your writing from the opening sentence by eliminating from usage the following words: very, really, quite, extremely, basically, essentially, totally, and completely. If you’re using one of these words to modify a phrase or another word, you’re likely better off choosing a different word or rewriting the phrase to express exactly what you’re thinking.

Instead of very pretty, use gorgeous. Don’t write quite smart, write genius. Instead of really amazing, use astounding. Don’t write extremely angry, write furious. Instead of completely stunned, use knocked out.

Totally, essentially, completely and basically tap into a slightly different vein, where it’s not emphasis the writer is trying to convey, but rather (usually) trying to draw additional attention to a phrase in some way. Using these words is a way to beat around the bush, linguistically speaking, and to end up padding your word count (thus making the reader work harder)

rather than clarifying what you’re expressing. For example:

Basically, what it meant was that my ride was over.

Instead of trying to show the reader that you’re boiling down some perceived complexity into words that they can understand, just say what you mean:

The flat tire and bent rim ended my ride before it even started.

This may require that you back up a sentence or two and reword the better part of a paragraph, but it’s worth it in the long run, because it makes what you’ve written more clear and, above all else, more interesting to read.

Remember that the purpose of my advice in this column is often directed at making people think you’re a better writer than you actually are. I admit that this is a little self-serving, because one of my goals is to make my job easier. I and my compatriots here at the *Owners News* read every single submission that comes in – in that respect, we are your first readers. If we’re not excited by a story, we’re pushed into a bit of a dilemma. Because the majority of ON content is sourced from MOA members, we want this to truly be your magazine, and that means including as much of your content as possible. We want every reader of this magazine to hang on every word of every writer.

When an article comes in with “very pretty” used as the descriptor for every single vista you came across in your trip across the southwest in October, we reach for the thesaurus to vary the language and make the article more interesting to read. The difficulty we face there is that we may inadvertently alter your meaning, your intention, ever so slightly. If you take the step of doing that yourself, you can ensure your exact meaning comes across in every description of every sunset you experienced along your route.

When I write, I keep three books next to

me. First is the AP Stylebook, simply because my day job requires that I keep to AP style and I feel inadequate without being able to put my hands on a copy without pushing back from my desk. Second is a dictionary; mine is nearly 30 years old at this point and was a gift from my grandparents when I graduated from high school. The third book I keep handy is a 10-year-old edition of Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus. I probably use this book more than the dictionary, and I use it most when self-editing after I've written a piece.

I like to print out my article and read through it as slowly as I can, and I circle every instance of 'very,' 'quite' and 'really,' which I use a lot when I write my first (and second, and third) drafts. If I can't think of another way to say what I want, I pull out the thesaurus. Sometimes I find the word there, sometimes I don't, but when I don't, I'm almost always able to find the inspiration I need to rewrite or restate the phrase to improve its flow and still say what I meant. In 2015, you don't have to buy a paperback copy of these reference manuals – they're available online (though access to the online AP Stylebook requires paying a subscription fee). ☺

Wes Fleming (87301) has been riding motorcycles for 20 years, writing and editing for longer than that, and worshipping Jack Riepe since conception. He's been known to both drag a knee and dangle a participle, but only in his younger, more daring days. If you have suggestions for future topics for this column, reach out and suggest away at wflaming@bmwmoa.org.

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