

Start a Drive to Boost Your Vocabulary

By Bryan A. Garner

Adopt this little fiction: There's a right word for every place in the text, and your job is to find that right word. One of my primary mentors in law, Charles Alan Wright, held this view—and I'm sure he helped instill it in me.

You may well decide to forgo the word *exiguous*—preferring *meager* or *scanty* instead—but you should know the word. For that matter, you should know all the “SAT words,” which aren't really mouth-stretchers at all; they should be part of your everyday word choices, even in speech. (Believe it or not, this is something that writers work at, though many commonly disclaim it.) You ought to be exposed to *abstemious* and *bumptious* and *facetious* and *garrulous* and *jejune* and *lachrymose* and *perfidious* and *remonstrate* and *stygian*. Why? Because you're a professional writer. That's how I see it.

Now maybe that's a stretch. But you'd do well to enrich your vocabulary. Accomplished writers cultivate the tools of their trade. You'll want a *much* bigger vocabulary as a reader than you'll actually use as a writer. For one thing, you'll be a more astute reader.

There used to be studies finding that the more successful the person, the bigger the

vocabulary—whatever the field of endeavor. Cecil W. Mann put it succinctly in the book *Twentieth Century English* in 1936: “[V]ocabulary—qualitatively and quantitatively—is one important measure of intelligence.” It seems to be true in business, in the arts, and certainly in law. Whether or not this correlation would hold up in contemporary studies—and I wager it would—you'd do well to assume that it's true.

At the University of Texas at Austin, the Harry Ransom Center holds the noted writer David Foster Wallace's papers, among which are vocabulary notebooks that he used for building his word-stock. Many writers do this kind of word-collecting. Maybe you feel as if you should have started long ago. Yet it's never too late to start. All you must do is consider it a mortal sin to read past a word you don't know. You must record it, look it up in a reliable dictionary at the next opportune moment, copy down its definition, and (if it's potentially useful) commit it to memory. Then try to use it conversationally (I kid you not) within the next 48 hours. (Make sure your experimenting does not take place during moot court!) At first you

may feel a little foolish, but in time you'll realize that this is an important part of your continued intellectual growth.

Start analyzing the English vocabulary. It's natural to dislike unnecessarily difficult words for ordinary ideas (such as *esurient* for *hungry*) and to appreciate words that have no simpler equivalent (such as *coterie* or *enthymeme*). You'll soon become a connoisseur (not to say a “cognoscente”) of English words, and your well-supplied mind will call up words with greater and greater facility. Every effective writer undergoes this type of personal growth.

Oh, and you'll never be caught in the embarrassment of thinking that *enervate* means “to invigorate” (it means “to weaken”) or that *proscribe* means “to require” (it means “to prohibit”). People who aren't verbally conscious commonly mistake the meanings of words. A lawyer ought to have at the ready thousands of such serviceable words as these with absolutely no hesitation about how to pronounce them.

Effective writers make their subjects interesting; ineffective writers make them dull. It comes down to that. So you must fret

If you want to write really well, one thing you simply must do is to stock your mind with an ample vocabulary. You need words at your disposal. Lots of them. Interesting words. Apt words. Your real vocabulary is measured not by how many words you can recognize, but by how many you can call up and use.

“Plain Language” is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. Want to contribute a plain-English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901, or at kimblej@cooley.edu. For an index of past columns, visit www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/.

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over your phrasing and worry about whether you've said what you want to say in the best possible way—both truthfully and elegantly. In good writing, you'll typically find mostly small, ordinary words deftly fitted together. But then you'll hit upon the one or two choice words that make all the difference—a slightly offbeat, piquant phrasing that most average writers would never hit upon. It's not difficult to spot the attention-getting word choices in these passages:

- “Bentham used to inveigh violently against the phantoms produced by this artificial treatment of evidence and the travesty of right that was often produced by it. His philippics were not in vain, and a great many simplifications and improvements have been achieved since his time.” Paul Vinogradoff, *Common-Sense in Law* 92 (1925).
- “Independence does not mean cantankerousness, and a judge may be a strong judge without being an impossible person. Nothing is more distressing on any bench than the exhibition of a captious, impatient, querulous spirit.” Charles Evans Hughes, *The Supreme Court of the United States* 68 (1928).
- “I note with deep and increasing regret that some jurists on the bench and many jurists off the bench evidence no instinct for simplicity or terseness of expression. They clothe their thoughts with a prodigality of drapery that ought to be repulsive to the wholesome-minded.” Edward H. Warren, *The Rights of Margin Customers Against Wrongdoing Stockbrokers and Some Other Problems in the Modern Law of Pledge* (1941).
- “An insipid, note-cluttered, nit-picking rebuttal statement is far worse than none

at all.” Prentice H. Marshall, “Oral Argument,” in *Illinois Civil Practice After Trial*, 9–1, 9–25 (1976).

Properly viewed, there's no real contradiction between having an ample vocabulary and adhering to plain English. You must have a bigger vocabulary than you actually use. There's no reason to use *autocthonous* instead of *native* or *indigenous*—but there's no harm in knowing the word, either. And you'll never want to use a fancy-pants word that has an everyday equivalent. Yet neither should you encounter fancy-pants words in someone else's writing without immediately recognizing them and knowing how to translate them into simpler words. That's part of being fully literate in the higher sense.

Let me caution you here about an egregiously arcane legal writer *not* to be emulated: Judge Bruce Selya. He has the highly peculiar habit of introducing high-flown words that (1) have nothing to do with the subject at hand, and (2) almost invariably have simpler, more straightforward equiva-

lents. He'll never write *examination*, preferring instead *perscrutation*—and the same goes for *decurtate* (his word for *shortened*), *eschatocol* (his word for a conclusion), *impuissant* (his word for *powerless* or *feeble*), *inconcinnate* (his word for *unsuitable*), *paralogical* (his word for *illogical*), *vaticinate* (his word for *prophecy* or *foretell*), etc.

No sensible person, after all, is impressed by big-word ostentation of this kind—written perhaps by a Selya protégé on the South Carolina bench:

The cognoscenti of health care nomology trust and rely upon Peer Review Statutes as the quiddity and hypostasis of the hospital/physician relationship. *Wieters v. Bon-Secours-St. Francis Xavier Hosp., Inc.*, 662 S.E.2d 430, 436 (S.C. Ct. App. 2008).

Let that serve as a warning to all word-besotted pedants! ■

Reprinted from Bryan A. Garner's ABA column in The Student Lawyer.

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Some Favorite Vocabulary-Building Books

Charles Harrington Elster, *Verbal Advantage* (2000)

Peter Funk, *It Pays to Increase Your Word Power* (1968)

Wilfred Funk, *Six Weeks to Words of Power* (1953)

Wilfred Funk and Norman Lewis, *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary* (rev ed 1970)

Maxwell Nurnberg and Morris Rosenblum, *How to Build a Better Vocabulary* (1983) (a book with terrific cartoons throughout)

Johnson O'Connor, *English Vocabulary Builder*, 3 vols. (1948)

S. Stephenson Smith, *How to Double Your Vocabulary* (1974)

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