

**HELPFUL HINTS IN ENGLISH: A
COMPANION VOLUME TO "BETTER
SAY." A BOOK OF HELPFUL
SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CORRECT USE
OF ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES**

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Helpful hints in English: a companion volume to "Better Say." A book of helpful suggestions for the correct use of English words and phrases by James C. Fernald

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JAMES C. FERNALD

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BOOKS are delightful when prosperity happily smiles; when adversity threatens, they are inseparable comforters. They give strength to human compacts, nor are grave opinions brought forward without books. Arts and sciences, the benefits of which no mind can calculate, depend upon books.

RICHARD AUNGERVYLE.

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A COMPANION VOLUME TO
"BETTER SAY." A BOOK OF
HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS FOR
THE CORRECT USE OF ENG-
LISH WORDS AND PHRASES

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Introduction to Helpful Hints in English

IDIOMS AND ERRORS IN ENGLISH

AN IDIOM is not an error, and an error does not rise to the dignity of an idiom.

An idiom is a crisp, compact form of speech, full of condensed, vigorous meaning, but defiant of all rules of grammar or logic; as, *look out, let go, let alone, hold on* (meaning *stop*), *I can't stand it*, etc.

A Modern Greek student in an American college would say, when one of these forms was explained to him, "Ah! That is one of your *idiotisms*." The mistake of the purists is, that they hold every *idiom* to be an *idiotism*, and would weed out of the language all those terse expressions that can neither be parsed nor analyzed. They consider it dreadful to say, "There is a man *here* who sells oysters," for how can *there* be *here*? If the man is *there* he can not be *here*.

So they would go at our language with square, saw, and chisel, to shape it to system, as if a nurseryman were to scrape off in the spring every swelling bud that breaks the even contour of the bark.

The idiom is of ancient lineage and full of life; it comes down from an unanalytic past, when men thought, spoke, and lived, without too curiously asking why. It clings to the living speech, and can be really understood and felt only by coming into close touch with those who join the phrase with life and action. For the health and vigor of a language it is as needful to protect the idioms as to eradicate the errors; in fact, we could far better afford to tolerate some errors than to abolish all idioms. Hence, when we meet the purist with ax on his shoulder, we call out, "Woodman, spare that idiom!" We cling to the

W. H. Miller

inheritance of the Anglo-Saxon toils and conquests on sea and shore, crystallized into the sparkling brilliancy of idiomatic English speech.

Errors by commonness may masquerade as idioms, but differ from them as being confused rather than condensed.

Errors in English may be :—

1. In the misuse of words and phrases, as of *statue* for *statute*, *respectively* for *respectfully*, *affect* for *effect*, etc. ; in the use of a good word in a false connection, as when the Irish-American "regretted that he was not born in his native country," or in some parts of the West one will ask a stranger, "Where is your native home?" ; or, perhaps, in the use of falsely formed words that have no real existence ; as, *irregardless*.

2. In false constructions ; as, "The president does not and never *has used* tobacco in any form ;" "He is taller than *me*."

3. In mistaken pronunciation. In the spoken language *the pronunciation of the word is the word* ; the only element of communication between speaker and hearer is the *uttered sound*. False pronunciation may disguise a word so as to make it unrecognizable. A Boston shipping firm received from one of their captains the apparent cipher :

"Own to the bloked the vige is spilt."

At last they discovered that the seaman had written phonetically as he pronounced, and that the message was :

"Owing to the blockade the voyage is spilt"
(Ow'n' to the blok'ed the vige is spilt).

In less extreme cases a false pronunciation affects an educated hearer as a false note affects a musical ear, with a sense of jar and discord, as when one says *probly* for *probably*. It is the purpose of the following pages to justify some of the best-known idioms against attack, and to correct some of the most common errors in English expression.

KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

The letters used in the phonetic respelling have the sounds given in the following table. The mark \sim under a letter, as $\underset{\sim}{g}$, indicates a colloquial weakening of the vowel-sound toward u in *but*. The mark \sim indicates that the colloquial weakening is toward i in *pity*.

a	as in partake, monarch, breakfast, final.
ä	as in arm, aims, calm, father, martyr.
ä	as in ask, chant, dance, fast, grasp.
ä	as in at, add, man, random.
ä	as in fare, bear, fair, heir, there.
ä	as in alloy, accuse, madman.
ä	as in pen, sunset, excuse, ferry, yet.
ä	as in eclipse, epistle, elegant, element.
ä	as in moment, absence, colonel.
ä	as in ever, fern, bird, fir.
ä	as in fate, ale, aid, eight, play, they.
ä	as in usage, mountain, preface.
ä	as in tin, it, divide, fill, miss.
ä	as in machine, meet, eve, bias, serene.
ä	as in react, remain, create.
ä	as in obey, follow, eulogy, theory.
ä	as in no, glory, note, blow, over, foal.
ä	as in not, odd, what, comma, forset, was.
ä	as in nor, abhor, ought, authority, walk.
ä	as in actor, idiot, atom.
ä	as in full, could, book, woman, part.
ä	as in rule, rude, food, unto, wooing.
ä	as in measure, injure, nature.
ä	as in but, tub, under, nation, hurry.
ä	as in burn, cur, curl, hurt, work, wort.
ä	as in pine, eye, ply, height, ice, fire.
ä	as in out, thou, owl, bound, town.
ä	as in oil, boy, avoid, joint, moist.
ä	as in duration, motto.
ä	as in few, advice, duty, mute.
ä	as in future, lecture, nature.
c = k	as in cat, epoch, ceptic, chess, king.
ch	as in church, chair, match, chip, much.
cw = qu	as in queen, quite, quit, quality.
dh (th)	as in the, then, smooth, breathe.
f	as in fancy, sulfur, physic, laugh.
g (hard)	as in go, gun, game, dog.
hw (wh)	as in why, when, where, while.
j	as in jaw, gem, pigeon, religion, soldier.
ng	as in sing, long, tongue, flung.
v	as in ink, bank, junction, single.
s	as in sin, cull, city, vice, cypress.
sh	as in she, chaise, machine, ocean, social.
th	as in thin, worth, breath, path, think.
z	as in zone, is, lives, music, vice.
zh	as in azure, treasure, ambrosia.

HELPFUL HINTS IN ENGLISH

[The phonetics of this book are those of the *Scientific Alphabet* prepared by THE AMERICAN PHILOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, adopted and recommended by THE AMERICAN SPELLING REFORM ASSOCIATION, and used in the Funk & Wagnall STANDARD DICTIONARY. The sounds of the phonetic letters and diacritics will be readily understood by reference to the key-plan at the foot of each page.]

A

a. { *A* before a consonant sound (whatever the spelling);
an. { *an* before a vowel sound (whatever the spelling); a word beginning with silent *h* (as *honest*, *honor*, etc.) takes *an*; a word beginning with the long sound of *u* (as *unit*, *university*, etc., where the *u* has the sound of *you*) takes *a*; we say *a* peach, *an* apple, *an* honor, *a* history, *a* humble worshiper, *a* historical subject, *a* unit, *a* union, *a* university, *a* uniform; the matter is euphonic; sound alone determines. An adjective between article and noun may change *a* to *an*, or the reverse; as, *a* man, *an* honest man; *an* apple, *a* ripe apple; *an* appeal, *a* humble appeal, etc.; the short sound of *u* takes *an*; as, *an* unknown quantity.

a or an omitted. "They were heirs to *large property*"; that is, inheritance of "large property" was the fact in the case of each independently; "heirs to a large property" would imply that they were jointly to inherit the same "property." The omission of "a" makes "property" generic, rather than particular. See **few**; **MANY**.

above. See **OVER AND ABOVE**.

ac-cept', ac-sept'. | "All the specimens were *accepted*."
ex-cept', ec-sept'. | *except* one." To *accept* is "to take, receive"; to *except* is to "take out, reject." Do not confuse the two words.

accept of. The preposition is here not needed nor allowed. Say simply, "I *accept* your decision," etc.; *admit* and *approve* take *of*; *accept* and *permit* do not; there is no rule in the matter; each expression must be learned by itself.

ad-dress', noun and verb. There is no authority for the very common pronunciation, *ad'dress*.

papŭ, ask; at, ăir; element, thêy, nêggo; It. ĭ, ĩ (ee);
o, ôh; orator, ôr; full, rŭle; bus, ôr; flŭtŭre (future);
aisle; au (out); ail; c (k) chat; dh (the); go; sing,
lŭk; thin.