

English Can Be Tricky:

Homophones, Homographs, and Other Linguistic Oddities

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†Dr. Fred died 30 December 2018. This is one of his final papers.

Effective communication is the key to success in almost all endeavors. This is particularly important in medical practice, where poor communication fosters poor patient care, sometimes with fatal outcomes. In that light, many medical manuscripts that routinely cross my desk have conspicuous grammatical mistakes, punctuation errors, and confusing sentence structure. But in all fairness, proper use of the English language is not easy and can itself be confusing.

There are words, for example, that look wrong to your eye but sound right to your ear. Such incongruity is typical of misused *homophones*—words that sound alike but differ fundamentally in meaning, origin, and spelling.¹ “The *heroine* used a *vile vial* of *heroin*.”

Some words look alike and are spelled alike but are pronounced differently and have different origins and meanings. They are called *homographs*²: “He stood on the *bow* of the ship and played the violin with a *bow*. The *invalid* had an *invalid* driver’s license.”

Still other words have oxymoronic features. For instance, there is no egg in eggplant, no ham in hamburger, and no pine or apple in pineapple.³ Moreover, paradoxes abound: quicksand works slowly, boxing rings are square, and a guinea pig doesn’t come from Guinea, nor is it a pig.³

For readers who appreciate remarks of this sort and who welcome mental challenges, I offer my paraphrased version of an intriguing commentary on the word “up.”⁴

Up means toward the sky or at the top of the list. Yet, it is correct to say that we wake *up* and speak *up*, that topics come *up* for discussion, that officers are *up* for election, and that it is *up* to the secretary to type *up* a report. We also call *up* our friends, brighten *up* a room, polish *up* the silver, warm *up* the leftovers, clean *up* the kitchen, lock *up* the house, fix *up* the car, stir *up* trouble, line *up* for tickets, work *up* an appetite, think *up* excuses, dress *up* for special occasions, open *up* a stopped-*up* drain, and close *up* a store at night and open it *up* in the morning.

When rain threatens, we say that it’s clouding *up*. And when the sun comes out, we say it’s clearing *up*. Rain can mess things *up*, but without it, things can dry *up*.

To prevent any mix-up about the use of *Up*, we can look up *Up* in the dictionary, where it takes up lots of space and adds up to a slew of definitions. But if you’re up to it and don’t give up, you can build up many more ways to use *Up*, winding up with several hundred or more.

As a follow-up, I decided to dig up, pull up, turn up, and put up as many words as I could find to use with *Up* (Table I). I know up front that my list is incomplete and that some readers will be up in arms. They, in turn, will no doubt rise up to upstage me and will up my totals. At any rate, *Up* seems to have more meanings than any other 2-letter word in our lexicon.

Now my time is up. So I’ll wrap things up and respectfully shut up!

References

1. Fred HL, Bagg JE Jr. Homophones: sound-alike impediments to effective communication. *Tex Heart Inst J* 2014;41(1):3-4.
2. Schwager E. *Medical English usage and abuse*. Phoenix: The Oryx Press; 1991. p. 105.
3. Lederer R. Let’s face it: English is a crazy language [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/622763-let-s-face-it---english-is-a-crazy-language-there> [cited 2015 Mar 24].
4. Available from: <http://gpsinformation.info/main/UP.txt> [cited 2015 Mar 26].

TABLE I. Words Used with Up to Create Different Meanings*

A	act, add, am
B	back, bandage, bang, batter, bear, beat, beef, belly, bind, block, blow, booked, bottle, bottoms, bounce, bound, box, break, brighten, bring, brush, bubble, buckle, build, bundle, burn, bust, butter, buy
C	call, carve, catch, change, check, cheer, chew, chin, chop, clam, clean, climb, clog, close, cloud, come, conjure, cook, cough, count, cover, crack, crank, crawl, creep, crop, cross, crush, cuddle, curl, cut
D	dial, dig, divide, divvy, double, drag, draw, dream, dredge, dress, drive, drum, dry
E	ease, eat, end
F	face, fasten, fed, fess, fill, finish, fire, firm, first,** fix, flare, fold, follow, foul, free, freshen, freeze
G	game's, gather, gear, get, give, go, grind, grow
H	hand, hands, hang, hatch, head, heads, hike, high, hit, hobble, hoist, hold, hook, hurry, hush
I	inch, is
J	jack, jig's, jump
K	keep, kick
L	lace, lay, leave, leg, let, lick, lift, light, lighten, limp, line, liven, live it up, live up to, load, lock, look, loosen
M	make, man, march, mark, mash, measure, mess, mix, mop, move, mount, muck
N	nestle, next
O	one, open
P	pack, paint, pass, paste, patch, perk, pick, pile, pin, plug, point, polish, pop, post, press, prop, pucker, puff, pull, push, put
Q	queue
R	raise, rake, ratchet, rear, rest, ride, rig, ring, rip, rise, roll, rough, round, run, rustle
S	saddle, saunter, save, scoop, scrape, screw, scroll, scrounge, scrub, send, set, settle, sew, shape, shine, shove it, shoot, shore, show, sign, sit, size, slide, slip, slow, snuggle, soak, sop, sneak, speak, speed, spit, split, sponge, spruce, square, stack, stand, start, stay, stick, stink, stir, stitch, stock, stop, store, straight, straighten, string, stroll, suck it, sum, sweep, swell
T	take, tally, tape, tangle, team, tear, tee, think, throw, thumbs, tidy, tie, tighten, time's, tone, toss, touch, toughen, trade, trim, trip, trump, tuck, turn, type
U	on the up and up, up against it, up and about, up-and-coming, up and doing, up-and-down, up by, up for grabs, up for sale, up front, up in arms, up in the air, up on, up the ante, up the road, up to, up-to-date, up to it, up to no good, up to now, up to snuff, up with, use
V	vacuum
W	wake, walk, warm, wash, way, well, what's, whip, wind, wipe, wise, work, wound, write
X	—
Y	yoke
Z	zip, zoom

*For verb forms, only the first person present tense is listed.

**The initial item in an unlimited sequence.