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Opening Extract from...

How to Sound Clever

Written by Hubert van den Bergh

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HOW TO SOUND Clever

Master the 600 English words
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How to Sound Clever

**Master the 600 everyday words you
pretend to understand...when you don't**

Hubert van den Bergh

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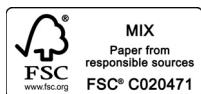
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Introduction

A couple of years ago, I was in a meeting trying to persuade some people of the merits of a business idea. The presentation seemed to be going well: the three people opposite me were nodding as I spoke. After ten minutes I stopped talking and put my pen down on the table in what I hoped was a business-deal-sealing kind of way. Then one of them spoke. 'You kept on using the word *salubrious*,' he said. 'Do you know what the word actually means?'

I should confess at this point that *salubrious* is one of those words I've never been sure about. It sounds like the French word for *dirty*, which is *sale*, but I can never remember if it in fact means the opposite: if it means *clean*. I had to go for one or the other now.

'Er...doesn't it mean *dirty*?,' I said weakly.

He shook his head. '*Salubrious* means the opposite – it means *clean*.'

The deal collapsed five minutes later.

Now, that particular gentleman may have been a stickler, but his point stands: if you can't be trusted with your use of those most elementary units of communication, words, then what can you be trusted with exactly?

That incident was the catalyst for this book. Over a two-year period, I looked up every word I didn't understand when I heard it in a conversation or read it in a newspaper. But is this book for you? Have a look at the three sentences below – if you don't understand the

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words in bold, then you'll get something out of this book. Be honest; don't **dissimulate** (turn to p. 51 if you're not sure of this word):

Manchester United's shirt sales depend on the club's continued **hegemony** (p. 90)

A **phalanx** (p. 150) of security guards monitors Obama

Journalists often describe stock markets as **febrile** (p. 70)

The three words highlighted above are part of a group that we all struggle with – these are the words we find **abstruse** (p. 5) yet nod to during conversations; the words that we see in newspaper articles and hope their context will **elucidate** (p. 60).

But the problem with leading our lives in this way is this:

If we need a word's context to understand its meaning, it follows that we lack the confidence to use that word ourselves.

Which means that, after our **halcyon** (p. 87) schooldays are over, our vocabulary never improves.

This book contains 600 or so English words that we're always meaning to look up. Each word summons up a concept that is **idiosyncratic** (p. 96); and so each word increases your ability to express what is in your head. And the unintended **corollary** (p. 39) of your using language in this more precise way is that you will sound clever.

Introduction

For each word, I list its root and then give an example of how to use it, such as:

perfunctory (adj.)

= (of an action) **done carelessly, as a matter of routine**
from the Latin *perfunctorius*: careless

e.g. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* author Truman Capote hated writing, so postponed it by sharpening pencils for hours: he found this **perfunctory** action soothing



The place for this book is on top of your bedside table or toilet cistern. Once you've flicked through it as you nod off or focus on **scatological** (p. 181) matters, you'll start to notice these 600 words everywhere. It's like buying a new car, a BMW, say; in the weeks afterwards, BMWs

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seem to fill the roads – not because their number has **proliferated** (p. 160) but because you are more alert to their presence.

Soon you will be so comfortable with these 600 words that you can use them yourself. This will give you a kick because you are expressing yourself in as **pellucid** (p. 147) a fashion as possible; and the unintended consequence of this is that your sentences will become **lapidary** (p. 110) and, as it happens, you will sound clever. So, enjoy...

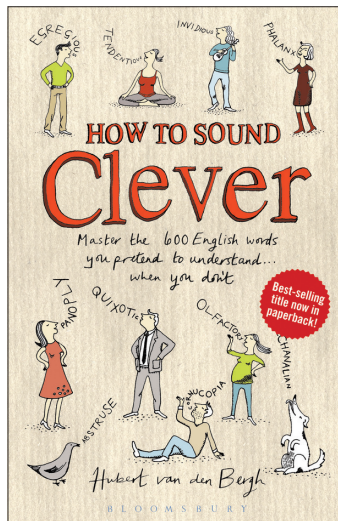
This book is dedicated to my mother, with her gift for science; and for my father, with his gift for art.

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