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How to Sound Really Clever

Written by Hubert van den Bergh

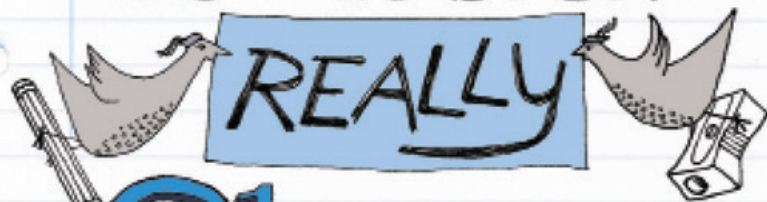
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HOW TO SOUND



Clever

600 Words You Need to Know



Hubert van den Bergh

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How to Sound Really Clever

Hubert van den Bergh

Illustrations by www.sandrahowgate.com

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Introduction

Boris Johnson: what a fun man. And the reason? His joyful approach to language. To Boris's mind, the ending of the Olympics was a 'final, tear-sodden juddering climax'; and the female beach volleyball contestants were 'glistening like wet otters'. As well as this salacious turn of phrase, Boris has a penchant for slightly tricky words that brighten up everyone's day – just look at these three examples:

On the Olympics village: 'Tessa Jowell...takes her duties as deputy mayor of the village so seriously that she actually **pernoctates** in the village, sharing the life of the young men and women on whom we pin our hopes.' (*The Daily Telegraph*)

On Roger Federer: '...money is surely among the **embrocations** that has kept his genius so elastic for so long.' (*The Daily Telegraph*)

On Norway's mass killer, Anders Breivik: 'Some people will read his dismal **expectorations** and conclude that this inflammatory guff is what really drove him on.' (*The Daily Telegraph*)

But what do the three words in bold mean? Read this book if you want to find out. All three are in here, along with another 600 or so that are equally fun (whilst still managing to be common currency, and definitely not 'dead' or obsolete). For the last two years, I've been jotting down the most wonderful words I've come across (in conversations and in newspaper articles), and this book is the result. These are the words that made me raise an admiring eyebrow, when I heard them trip off other people's tongues; and smile at, when I come across them in newsprint.

As you read them, some will give you that delightful rush as you recognise *le mot juste* – like **iridescent** (to describe the rainbow sheen of the soap bubbles in your bath), **umami** (of that meat-like taste in mushrooms and miso soup) and **casuistry** (of an argument that sounds great at the time, but afterwards doesn't quite add up).

And also the stories behind everyday words which pepper this book will surprise you – like that behind **pastiche** (and why it derives from the Italian for 'piecrust'); **piece of cake** (and what it

How to Sound Really Clever

has to do with American slaves working in 1900); and **virago** (an insult that started out as a compliment – to Joan of Arc).

Finally, you'll be able to clear up those linguistic riddles that no one around a dinner table ever seems to be able to – such as the true meanings of the words **nonplussed** (which people use – wrongly – to mean 'not bothered'), **disinterested** (which everyone thinks means 'not interested', but actually is all about money) and **gauntlet** (which in fact boasts two completely separate meanings and backstories, both steeped in buckets of blood: but how to tell which from which?)

Perfect for reading for 10 minutes before drifting into the arms of **Morpheus**, you'll amuse yourself – as well as any **interlocutor** (who'll be relishing your richer vocabulary) – with the answers in this book, and also ensuring your diction approaches the level of that most cunning linguist of all, Boris himself.

PS If a word's pronunciation is difficult, I have included a phonetic guide to saying it out loud; if it's not, I haven't.

*'For a moment she
rediscovered the purpose of her
life. She was here on earth to
grasp the meaning of its wild
enchantment and to call
each thing by its right
name...'*

Boris Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago

A

(in) abeyance (noun) = **to be temporarily unused** (*pronounced 'uh-bey-uhns'*) from the Old French *abeance*: aspiration to a title, from *a*: toward + *beer*: to gape

e.g. Her hair was unkempt and her appearance slovenly: from this, he deduced her love-life was **in abeyance**

abject (adj.) = (*of a situation*) **very degrading; (of a person) very degraded** from the Latin *abjectus*, past participle of *abjicere*: to reject, from *ab*:- away, and *jacere*: to throw

e.g. One art critic has described Tracy Emin's condom-filled tent as '**abject**'

to abjure (verb) = **to renounce in a solemn way** (*pronounced 'ab-jur'*) from the Latin *abjurare*, from *ab*:- away, and *jurare*: to swear

e.g. *Harry Potter* star Daniel Radcliffe has said of his drinking, 'As much as I would love to be a person that goes to parties and has a couple of drinks and has a nice time, that doesn't work for me. I do that very unsuccessfully'; consequently, the star has now **abjured** alcohol

abnegation (noun) = **saying 'no' to something desired** from the Latin *abnegare*, from *ab*:- away, and *negare*: to deny

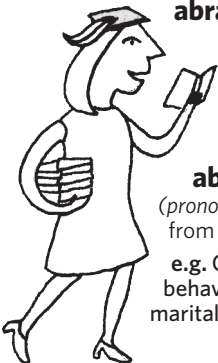
e.g. Militant atheist Christopher Hitchens once described religious belief as 'limitless **abnegation**...of self: a celestial North Korea'

abrasion (noun) = **the process of gradually wearing away** from the Latin *abradere*, from *ab*:- away, and *radere*: to scrape

e.g. He spent too much time at work, and the resulting **abrasions** in their relationship caused them to divorce

abrogate (verb) = (*of an agreement*) **to reject** (*pronounced 'ab-ruh-geyt'*) from the Latin, *abrogare*: to repeal, from *ab*:- away, and *rogare*: to propose a law

e.g. Critics of Bill Clinton said that, as a result of his behaviour with Monica Lewinsky, he had **abrogated** his marital responsibilities



acedia

acedia (noun) = **unaccountable melancholy** (pronounced 'a-see-dee-a') from the Greek, *akredeia*: indifference, from *a-*: without, and *kedos*: care

e.g. Halfway through my boss's motivational speech, my mind began to wander, and soon **acedia** took a grip of me

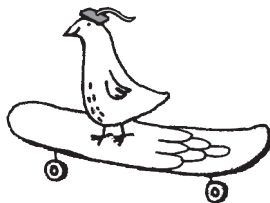
to acquiesce (verb) = **to accept something with reluctance but without protesting** (pronounced 'ak-wee-es') from the Latin, *acquiescere*, from *ad-*: to + *quiescere*: to rest

e.g. When he was 25, Ayrton Senna dated 15-year-old Adriane Yamin, whose mother insisted on acting as chaperone on dates; Senna had no choice but to **acquiesce**

acrostic (noun) = **a poem in which the first letter of each line - when viewed together - form a word** (pronounced 'uh-kros-tik') from the Greek *akrostikhis*, from *akron*: end + *stikhos*: line of verse

e.g. In the *Dictionary of Modern English Grammar*, Ned Halley defined an acrostic as:

Acrostics are playful
contrivances of prose or verse
rendered so that each line
opens or closes with words in
sequence to read from
top to bottom, their
initial or final letters
constituting a word or phrase.



ad hominem (adj.) = **(of a verbal attack) criticising an opponent's character rather than his policies** (pronounced 'ad hom-uh-nem') from the Latin *ad hominem*: to the person

e.g. Certain political rivals have launched vicious **ad hominem** attacks on Obama, questioning his US citizenship

adamantine (adj.) = **impossible to break** (pronounced 'ad-uh-man-tie-n') from the Greek, *adamas*: untamable, from *a-*: not + *daman*: to tame

e.g. Beatrix Potter formed an **adamantine** bond with her nanny's children, and used to write them letters dotted with pictures, which she eventually collected into her first book

adepts (of) (noun) = a person who is skilled (at something)
from the Latin *adeptus*: achieved

e.g. Journalists enjoy ridiculing **adepts of** Scientology for their beliefs

adipose (adj.) = (of body tissue) used for the storage of fat
(pronounced 'ad-uh-pohs') from the Latin, *adepts*, *adipis*: fat

e.g. Teenagers who spend all day in front of the TV soon develop **adipose** layers around their midriff

to adumbrate (verb) = to outline (pronounced 'ad-uhm-breyt')
from the Latin *ad*:- to, and *umbrare*: to cast a shadow (from *umbra*: shade)

e.g. In *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding **adumbrated** the way society can quickly revert to savagery

agitprop (noun) = political propaganda, especially in drama and art (pronounced 'aj-it-prop') from the Russian *agitatsiya*: agitation, and *propaganda*: propaganda

e.g. Harold Pinter's earlier plays, focusing on love and power struggles, are much more popular than the **agitprop** drama of his later years

akimbo (adv.) = (of arms) with hands on the hips and elbows turned outward in a V-formation; (of legs) flung out wildly from the Middle English *in*: in, and *kenebowe*: bend

e.g. If you come across a celebrity in a bar, you will normally see a bodyguard beside them, dressed in black and with arms **akimbo**



alarmist (adj.) = causing needless alarm from the Old French *alarme*: alarm, from Italian *allarme*, from *all'arme*!: to arms!

e.g. Some scientists say talk of global warming is **alarmist**

albatross (around the neck)

albatross (around the neck) (set phrase) = **a source of annoyance or guilt** *for full explanation, see box below*

e.g. Pavarotti was known as 'the king of cancellations' and – as he often pulled out of events at the very last minute – often ended up as an **albatross** for organisers

This metaphorical sense of 'albatross' derives from Coleridge's poem Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798), which features a sailor who shoots an albatross dead.

After the shooting, the guilty sailor in the poem is then forced to wear the bird's carcass everywhere he goes – as a sign that he alone, and not the rest of the crew, was responsible for the death of the albatross (which was traditionally seen as a good-luck charm).

And so an albatross becomes an encumbrance for the sailor, and entered the language as a metaphor for a source of negative emotion.

ambit (noun) = **the scope of something** from the Latin, *ambitus*: circuit, from *ambire*: to go around

e.g. After he turned 40, he decided that any girl between the ages of 20 and 40 fell within his dating **ambit**

amour fou (set phrase) = **an uncontrollable passion** (pronounced 'amore foo') from the French, *amour fou*: insane love

e.g. *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare's classic tale of

amour fou: the two lovers cannot give up their liaison, even though they know it will result in their deaths

-ana (suffix) = **(put at the end of another word) denoting things associated with a person or with a subject** from the neuter plural of the Latin adjectival ending *-anus*

e.g. Harry Houdini died in 1926, but his props – such as his Chinese Water Torture Cell – are still actively sought out by collectors of **Houdiniana**



anagnorisis (noun) = **the moment in the plot when the hero makes a discovery that explains what he did not understand before** (pronounced 'an-ag-nawr-uh-sis') from the Greek *anagnorisis*: recognition; for full explanation, see box below

e.g. Boris Johnson has said that Greece has experienced hubris and nemesis but now needs **anagnorisis**: the recognition it would be better off abandoning the euro

In Aristotle's Poetics, there are several stages for a hero to go through; and the classics scholar and Mayor of London Boris Johnson summarised these in an article about the Greek debt crisis entitled The greatest gift to the Greeks might be to let them go it alone:

'...we have had hamartia – the tragic flaw in the system that allowed high-spending countries to free ride on low interest rates. We have had the hubris – the belief the good times would never end. We have had nemesis – disaster. We now need the anagnorisis – the moment of recognition that Greece would be better off in a state of Byronic liberation, forging a new economic identity with a New Drachma. Then there will be catharsis, the experience of purgation and relief.'

analogue (noun) = **a thing comparable to another thing** from the Greek, *analogos*: proportionate

e.g. The English phrase 'self-deprecation' has no **analogue** in the French language: for it seems that French people have no such concept

to anatomise (verb) = **to dissect in detail** from the Greek *ana-*: up, and *tomia*: cutting

e.g. *Fifty Shades of Grey* **anatomises** the sadomasochistic relationship between a college graduate, Anastasia Steele and a manipulative billionaire, Christian Grey

anhedonic (adj.) = **unable to feel pleasure** (pronounced 'an-hee-doh-nik') from the Greek, *an*: without + *hedone*: pleasure

e.g. In *Winnie the Pooh*, Eeyore is an 'old grey donkey' who wanders around emitting an **anhedonic** listlessness

animadversion

animadversion (noun) = **(formal) a critical statement** from the Latin, *animadvertere*: to criticise, from *animus*: mind + *advertere*, from *a*: toward, and *vertere*: to turn

e.g. Germany's approach to the euro has been subjected to severe **animadversion** by Southern countries desperate for greater financial assistance

antic (adj.) = **grotesque and strange** from the 16th-century Italian *antico*: antique (with the connotation of 'grotesque')

e.g. One of the reasons why sculptor Auguste Rodin is so celebrated is that his statues appear far from static, emitting an **antic** energy

antonym (noun) = **a word that is opposite in meaning to another word** from the French, *antonyme*, from the Greek, *ant-*, from *anti*: against, + *onoma*: a name

e.g. Militant atheists see religion as the **antonym** of tolerance

apercu (noun) = **an illuminating comment** (pronounced 'a-per-su') from the French *apercevoir*: to perceive

e.g. Author Theodor Seuss Geisel aka Dr Seuss had no children of his own; when asked why, he'd deliver this **apercu**, 'You have 'em; I'll entertain 'em.'

apotropaic (adj.) = **supposedly possessing the power to avert bad luck** (pronounced 'ap-uh-truh-pey-ik') from the Greek, *apotropaios*: averting evil, from *apotrepein*: to turn away from

e.g. After a person dies, the calming funeral service serves an **apotropaic** function

appurtenances (pl. noun) = **an item associated with a particular activity** from the Old French *apertenance*, from the Latin, *appertinere*: to belong to

e.g. Men who work in finance are often obsessed with acquiring yachts and other **appurtenances** of wealth



aquiline

aquiline (adj.) = (of a nose) curved or hooked, in a similar way to an eagle's beak from the Latin *aquila*: an eagle

e.g. Abraham Lincoln sported a fine **aquiline** nose



arabesque

arabesque (noun) = **an ornamental design composed of intertwined flowing lines (originally found in Arabia); (of ballet) a posture in which the body is supported on one leg, while the other leg is kept flat and extended backward** from the Italian *arabesco*: in the Arabic style, referring to ornamental Moorish architecture and to musical work with an ornamental theme, from *arabo*: Arab

e.g. When it's very cold, **arabesques** of snowflakes alight on your overcoat and dissolve

to arraign (verb) = **to call (someone) before a court to answer a criminal allegation** (pronounced 'uh-reyn') from the Latin, *ad*: to, and *ration*:-: reason

e.g. After Bruce Lee's son, Brandon, was shot dead on the set of *The Crow*, the fellow actor who'd fired the bullet, was not **arraigned** as it was clearly an accident (a live cartridge had been left in the chamber by mistake)

arrant (adj.) = **complete and utter** from the Middle English, a variant of 'errant' (meaning 'travelling'), originally in phrases such as 'an arrant thief', meaning 'a roving thief', then, in time, 'a total thief'

e.g. When the fawning North Korean media reported in 2010 that Kim Jong Il's distinctive jumpsuits had set fashion trends in the West, European journalists dismissed these claims as **arrant nonsense**

to arrogate (a right) (verb) = **to claim (a right) without good cause** (pronounced 'ar-uh-geyt') from the Latin *arrogare*: to claim for oneself, from *ad*: to, and *rogare*: to ask

e.g. Alfred Hitchcock **arrogated** the right to appear in every film he directed; in *Strangers on a Train*, for example, you can see him struggling to get a double bass onto a train

asperity (noun) = **(of someone's manner) roughness** from the Latin *asperitas*: roughness, from *asper*: rough

e.g. One way of stopping a compliment from sounding too cloying, is to deliver it with some **asperity** in your voice



(set in) aspic (set phrase) = **to be perfectly preserved from an earlier era** for full etymology, see box below

e.g. Some men over 70 have an attitude towards women that seems **set in aspic**

The phrase 'set in aspic' literally refers to food – such as leftover chicken – that's been set in a mould of 'aspic', a kind of savoury jelly that dates from the Middle Ages.

In fact, 'aspic' is originally a French word, deriving from 'asp', referring to the asp snake, a viper with similar colouring to the jelly.

Today, when we say of a person or situation that they're 'set in aspic', we mean that they're frozen in the past.

astrigent (adj.) = **(of someone's manner) severe; (of a taste) sharp** from the Latin *astringere*: to pull tight, from *ad*: toward, and *stringere*: to pull tight

e.g. Whereas certain politicians found Margaret Thatcher's style **astrigent**, the late Alan Clark MP found her ways positively arousing (a fact he documented in his diaries)

to attenuate (verb) = **to reduce the effect of** from Latin, *attenuare*: to make slender, from *ad*:- to, and *tenuare*: to make thin; 'to attenuate' literally means 'to make thin'

e.g. Cynics say the best way to **attenuate** heartache is to kiss someone else

au courant (adj.) = **up-to-date with events** (*pronounced 'au-kur-ohn'*) from the French *au courant*: in the (regular) course

e.g. Before directing *Raging Bull*, Martin Scorsese went to numerous boxing matches, so as to be **au courant** with details like 'the blood sponge' to wipe away blood

autarky / autarchy (noun) = **an entity that is economically independent** (*pronounced 'aw-tar-kee'*) from the Greek *autarkes*: self-sufficiency, from *autos*: self and *-arkhein*: to suffice

e.g. With its refusal to deal with other countries, North Korea is perhaps the last remaining **autarky** in the world

(an) avatar (of)

(an) avatar (of) (noun) = **an embodiment (of)** from the Sanskrit, *avatar*: descent, from *ava*: down + *tar*:- cross

e.g. For film buffs, John Wayne remains an **avatar** of alpha masculinity

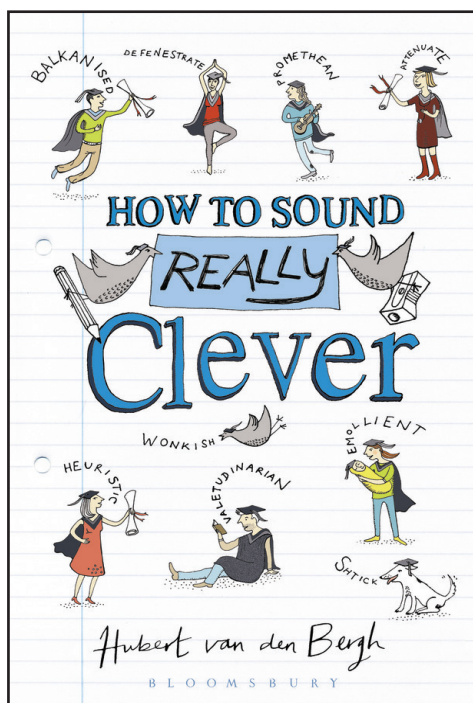
to aver (verb) = **to state to be the case** (*pronounced 'uh-ver'*) from the Old French, *averer*: to aver, based on the Latin, *ad*: to (implying 'cause to be') + *verus*: true

e.g. Bruce Lee's name meant 'return again' in Cantonese; his mother chose it as she **averred** her son would one day return to the United States (where he was born), and she was proved right

avowedly (+ adj.) (adv.) = **openly confessing to being (+ adj.)** from the Old French, *avouer*: to acknowledge, from the Latin, *advocare*: to summon in defence

e.g. When his ex-wife started dating billionaire Ted Turner, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler wrote in an email, 'She will not be Ted's only girlfriend. Ted is permanently and **avowedly** non-monogamous.'





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How to Sound Really Clever explains and illustrates 500 words that can outfox us, such as 'condign', 'anachronistic', 'Zelig-like' and 'agitprop'. Each entry features an etymological description as well as useful example phrases so that readers can quickly see the correct context for each word. Anecdotes and witty illustrations appear throughout to make a book that is entertaining and will help the reader to boost their vocabulary.

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