

DANGEROUS WORDS

Guidance on How to Avoid Defaming or Insulting People

**Presentation of
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Some common words, when used carelessly, can result in potentially libelous statements.

Sometimes the problem occurs because the writer uses a word without knowing what it means.

Other times, the problem occurs because the writer uses a seemingly harmless word inappropriately in combination with other words.

Some other common words, when used carelessly, can result in an inaccurate or unfair characterization of a person, but those mischaracterizations usually do not rise to the level of defamation.

Here is guidance on 25 troublesome words, grouped into three categories:

Category 1

Words that are potentially defamatory regardless of how they are used

collude

The verb *collude* and the noun *collusion* refer to activity in which people cooperate to pursue illegal or deceitful goals. If you want merely to express the idea that two people had worked together on a project or venture, then use *cooperated* or *collaborated*—not *colluded*. Writing that two people “colluded” is potentially libelous.

exorbitant

Exorbitant means that the price of something is unlawfully excessive—not simply that the price is high. You can write that a business charged “exorbitant” prices only if a court or a regulatory agency has issued a ruling to that effect. Otherwise, writing that a business had charged “exorbitant” prices is potentially libelous.

refute

Refute means “to disprove.” Do not confuse *refute* with *rebut*, which means to argue to the contrary. If you write that a person’s statement has been “refuted,” it means that the person was found to have lied or to have erred. It is potentially libelous to mistakenly declare that a person’s statement has been “refuted.”

reportedly

Reportedly means “it has been reported.” The use of *reportedly* results in the publishing of unattributed statements, and those statements can be potentially libelous. The best course is to avoid using *reportedly*. Write: “Moore was charged with embezzlement”—not “Moore reportedly embezzled money.”

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Category 1

Words that are potentially defamatory regardless of how they are used (Continued)

reputed

Reputed can mean “widely believed to be,” as in “a reputed mobster.” The use of *reputed* results in the publishing of unattributed statements, and those statements can be potentially libelous. The best course is to avoid using *reputed* or *reputedly* to refer to a person unless the reference is flattering.

slush fund

The term *slush fund* refers to money that an organization assembles to pursue illegal activities. *Slush fund* is not simply a synonym for a secret fund or a discretionary fund, and it is potentially libelous to use *slush fund* if no illegality is involved. If illegal activities are involved, you can use *slush fund*, but the best course is simply to use the term “illegal fund.”

Category 2

Words that are potentially defamatory if they are used in a particular way

accused

Terms such as “accused rapist” or “accused murderer” are potentially libelous because the term means that a person is a rapist or a murderer who has been accused of something. Instead, write “the man accused of rape” or “the woman accused of murder.”

because

It is potentially libelous to write: “Sarah James sued for divorce because her husband had beaten her.” That construction implies that the husband had, in fact, beaten her. Instead, write: “Sarah James sued for divorce, charging that her husband had beaten her.”

fight

In referring to a disagreement between people, use the word *fight* only if violence is involved. If the disagreement is nonviolent, use a word such as “quarrel” or “dispute.” It is potentially libelous to leave the impression that a disagreement was violent when it was not.

for

It is potentially libelous to write: “Jim Jones was arrested for robbing the bank.” That construction implies that Jones did, in fact, rob the bank. Instead, write: “Jim Jones was arrested on a charge of robbing the bank.” If a person is convicted of the crime, you can use the “for” construction, as in: “Jim Jones was sentenced to prison for robbing a bank.”

link, tie

Link and *tie* are words that can be used to indicate a connection between two people, a connection between a person and an occurrence, or a connection between two occurrences. Attribute any statement that uses *link* or *tie* in that manner. This headline, for example, is potentially libelous: “Banker, mobster linked.” The headline needs to be long enough to tell the story, as in: “Witness links banker, mobster.”

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Category 3

Words that can be unintentionally insulting but probably not defamatory

enervated

The verb *enervate* means “to weaken.” If you say that a speaker “enervated” his audience, you are indicating that you think the speaker performed poorly. If you intend to praise the speaker, you should say that he “energized” the audience. Because many people are confused about the meaning of *enervated*, the best course is to avoid using the word.

expediently

The adverb *expediently* refers to achieving an objective in a manner that is efficient but perhaps unprincipled. If you say that a person solved a management problem “expediently,” you leave the impression that you might not approve of the method that she used. If you intended to indicate only that the person had solved the problem quickly, then you should say that she had acted “expeditiously.”

extravagant

Extravagant refers to something that is wasteful or excessive, as in: “The dictator enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle.” Do not confuse *extravagant* with the adjectives *elegant* or *elaborate*. If you describe a person’s wedding as being “extravagant,” you are conveying an impression that you probably did not intend.

figurehead

If you describe a person as a *figurehead*, that means the person holds a position of leadership but possesses no power. *Figurehead* is not a synonym for “leader.” Because *figurehead* is a pejorative term, writers should be wary of using it.

fulsome

Fulsome means “disgustingly excessive”—not “plentiful.” If you write that a person “delivered fulsome praise,” you are conveying an impression that you probably did not intend. Because many people are confused about the meaning of *fulsome*, the best course is to avoid using the word.

gourmand

If you describe a person as a *gourmand*, that means the person tends to eat to excess. *Gourmet* is the correct word to use to describe a person who is a connoisseur of fine food and drink. Because many people are confused about the meaning of *gourmand*, the best course is to avoid using the word.

jealous

If you state that you are “jealous” of someone, that means that you resent the person’s success. If you want merely to indicate that you covet something that a person possesses, then state that you are “envious” of that person—not “jealous.”

loquacious

If you describe a person as “loquacious,” that means that you think the person is excessively talkative. If you want to indicate that the person speaks clearly and forcefully, use the word “eloquent.”

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Words that can be unintentionally insulting but probably not defamatory (Continued)

nauseous

Nauseous refers to someone or something that causes nausea, so if you describe a person as being "nauseous," that means the person causes nausea in others. If you want to indicate that a person is suffering from nausea, write that the person feels "nauseated."

noisome

Noisome means "offensive to the sense of smell." The word does not mean "noisy." If you refer to cheerleaders as being "noisome," you are conveying an impression that you probably did not intend. Because many people are confused about the meaning of *noisome*, the best course is to avoid using the word.

prejudiced

If you state that someone is *prejudiced*, that means you think the person holds unfounded, unfavorable opinions about a particular group of people. Do not confuse *prejudiced* with *biased*—a word used to describe a person who cannot render an impartial judgment in a particular situation.

tiresome

Tiresome means "annoying," whereas *tiring* refers to something that makes a person tired. For example, a professor's lecture might be "tiring" for the students, but the professor is probably not "tiresome."

verbiage

Verbiage means verbose writing—not simply writing. Thus, do not refer to a person's writing as being "verbiage" unless you are criticizing the writing.

The Pro's English

The material presented in *Dangerous Words* is included in Dr. Joseph Keefer's book titled *The Pro's English: A Guide for Meeting the Highest Standards of Word Usage*—a 195-page book that offers guidance on how to use about 900 troublesome words and expressions.

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