

Saying What You Mean, Using the Smallest Words Possible

In these difficult times, our thoughts understandably turn to the likelihood that we have way too many words in the English language.

A few months ago, I signed up for a daily newsletter called Word Genius, which sends me a “Word of the Day” email to hopefully expand my vocabulary. It was a mistake.

There’s a reason the average newspaper is written at the 11th-grade level, which is usually the tolerable limit for a 9th-grade reader. We already have plenty of perfectly good words that everybody knows – why confuse things?

It used to be that few people would stop reading their books to look up a definition when they tripped and fell over an unfamiliar word. That would require a dictionary by the bedside table. Fast forward to the current century, where I’ve been reading a lot more novels on my iPad. Last week I accidentally discovered that pressing on any word brings up options including “Look Up” and “Search.” Look Up immediately defines the word, and Search brings up every instance where that word appears in the novel.

For example, when I’m reading along and “Mr. Sommersby” is mentioned, I’m saying to myself, “Who the hell is Mr. Sommersby?” The Search function immediately goes back to show me where that character was introduced. How cool is that?

But I digress. Some examples of useless Words of the Day I’ve recently learned appear in the following provided sentences: “The hummingbird made a fugacious stop on my flowers.” “When you’re alone, I need to colloque with you.” “She had an entire shelf in her home library devoted to Bildungsroman.”

I’d define each of those odd words for you but it doesn’t matter, because when I become America’s Benevolent Dictator of Words and Usage I’m going to permanently remove them from the English language. Not to mention finding out if I can have Word Genius’s internet privileges revoked for providing such a useless and irritating service.

I know this is pretty big talk from someone who used the word “multitudinous” in his last column, when “many” would have worked just fine. That’s how I became aware that I had a problem.

An empathetic benevolent dictator would allow exceptions for words believed to have no English equivalent, like “Schadenfreude” - the pleasure one derives from another person's misfortune. I recently learned to my dismay there is indeed an English equivalent; “epicaricacy.” Don’t bother to remember that – it’s on my list of words to be culled.

And there’s the slippery slope. I could have said “removed” instead of “culled,” but this usage implies a non-random selectivity based on an undesirable trait. Come to think of it, “multitudinous” implies an innumerable amount bordering on excess, while “many” usually has no such connotation. And I suppose I could have used “meaning” just now instead of “connotation.”

Now that I think about it, forget the whole thing. I’m pretty sure I could never be appointed Benevolent Dictator of Words and Usage anyway.

In fall 2008, writers Group Member Dave Parsons asked a Press-Citizen editor if he could submit an extra column. He was told: “As long as it’s not another one about the floods.”