



THE BIG BOOK OF
WORDS
YOU SHOULD KNOW TO
**SOUND
SMART**

A GUIDE *for* ASPIRING
INTELLECTUALS

ROBERT W. BLY

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DEDICATION

To Dr. Jeffrey Segal

INTRODUCTION

A radio commercial for a mail-order course on building your vocabulary states, “People judge you by the words you use.”

To help people judge you as wise and educated, we published our book *The Words You Should Know to Sound Smart*. It sold well and spawned an annual calendar. But our readers told us: “More big words to make us sound even smarter, please!”

The result is the book you now hold in your hands, *The Big Book of Words You Should Know to Sound Smart*. It was written so that people who hear you speak will see you as really smart—perhaps even smarter than you really are.

Some people who want to sound smart have cultivated a large vocabulary, which they unleash with great regularity. This book can serve as your “translator” when speaking with these pseudointellectuals.

Many other people possess a large vocabulary but use it sparingly, preferring to speak and write in plain English. As more than one writing instructor has put it, “Your goal is to express, not to impress.”

It’s possible that *The Big Book of Words You Should Know to Sound Smart* may even put some money in your pocket. People who have a good vocabulary come off as confident, intelligent, and motivated—qualities necessary for financial success.

The motivational speaker Earl Nightingale liked to tell students about a twenty-year study of college graduates. The study concluded, “Without a single exception, those who had scored highest on the vocabulary test given in college were in the top income group, while those who had scored the lowest were in the bottom income group.”

Scientist John O’Connor gave vocabulary tests to executive and supervisory personnel in thirty-nine large manufacturing companies. On average: test scores for the company presidents were nearly three times higher than their shop foremen.

Vocabulary researchers Richard C. Anderson and William. E. Nagy write, “One of the most consistent findings of educational research is that having a small vocabulary portends poor school performance and, conversely, having a large vocabulary is associated with school success.”

Whether this book helps you get higher grades or advance in your career, it's fun to improve your command of the English language—either to impress or express. Some of the words in *The Big Book of Words You Should Know to Sound Smart* can do just that: make you sound educated and intelligent.

With this book at your fingertips, you can command an expanded vocabulary enabling you to debate philosophical precepts with the intelligentsia, wax poetic with the literati, and lock academic horns with the clerisy. These bon mots can help you converse with the best of the portentous artistes and aesthetes—and impress the perfervid hoi polloi with your tarradiddle. With this compendious tome, you are only a daily erudite witticism away from true loquaciousness.

On the other hand, you may simply get pleasure out of knowing these words and adding them to your vocabulary quiver, even if you keep most of them in reserve.

It's your call.

A Note on the Pronunciation

Pronunciation keys given in this book are rendered phonetically, without using special symbols or systems.

Many of the words in this book have multiple meanings and pronunciations—in addition to those listed here—that are entirely correct.

Regional influences can affect pronunciation of certain words. In this book, we use the most commonly accepted pronunciation for each word, recognizing that it is by no means the only acceptable pronunciation.

A Note on the Sources

In his book *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Simon Winchester observes that there are essentially three sources for the words in any dictionary: (1) words found in existing dictionaries; (2) words overheard in conversation; and (3) words found “by a concerted trawl through the text of literature.” *The Big Book of Words You Should Know to Sound Smart* is populated with words from all three sources. In particular, I owe a debt of gratitude to the *New York Review of Books*. I read every issue and find new words in each one.

More than a dozen of the words are from Jason Bateman's movie *Bad Words*. Many come from the books of Harlan Ellison, Pat Conroy, Nicholson Baker, and other

authors who employ a sophisticated vocabulary.

As for dictionaries, my three primary references were *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fifth Edition*, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition* which, contrary to its name, comes in two massive volumes.

A

“Of course the illusion of art is to make one believe that great literature is very close to life, but exactly the opposite is true. Life is AMORPHOUS, literature is formal.”

Françoise Sagan, French novelist and playwright

abasement (*ah-BAYS-meant*), *noun*

A humiliation or dressing-down.

In his sermon, our pastor warned that pornography is a global ABASEMENT of all humankind, not just women.

abate (*uh-BAIT*), *verb*

Reduce in intensity.

The police came round to cite me for failing to ABATE my smoky chimney.

abatement (*ah-BAIT-ment*), *noun*

The reduction or elimination of a tax, claim, fine, or debt.

By having her daddy pull strings in the mayor’s office, Sylvia received a quick ABATEMENT of her traffic ticket.

abatjour (*ah-ba-ZHOO-er*), *noun*

An object that allows or diverts light into buildings.

As part of my remodeling project, I’m building a skylight as an ABATJOUR to lighten the front hallway.

abecedarium (*ay-bee-see-DAIR-ee-um*), *noun*

An elementary school textbook used for teaching the alphabet.

In former years, McGuffey’s Eclectic Primer was used in elementary schools as an ABECEDARIUM for young students.

abessive (uh-BESS-ev), adjective

Indicating the absence of something.

The ABESSIVE character of game in the forest meant we had to rely on a vegetarian diet during our camping trip.

abiogenesis (ay-bye-oh-JEN-eh-sis), noun

Spontaneous generation of life.

ABIOGENESIS is the mechanism in the Star Trek movies by which Spock is brought back from the dead.

abiturient (ah-bih-TUR-ee-ent), noun

A German pupil about to leave high school and enter a university.

Rachel, having completed her high school years with flying colors, was an ABITURIENT on the verge of an Oxford education.

abjure (ab-JOOR), transitive verb

To renounce or turn your back on a belief or position you once held near and dear.

Once Jodi tasted my mouth-watering, medium-rare filet mignon, she ABJURED the vegetarian lifestyle forever.

ablaut (AHB-lout), noun

An alteration in the internal structure of a word that affects its meaning.

In English, the words sing, sang, and sung are an example of an ABLAUT, since the change of a letter changes their tense.

ablution (ah-BLEW-shin), noun

A washing of the hands and face, or bathing of the entire body.

I begin each day with my morning ABLUTIONS.

abominate (uh-BOM-in-ate), verb

When you *abominate* something, you really, really hate and dislike it—and view it with considerable loathing.

“For my part, I ABOMINATE all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever.” —Herman Melville, American author

aboral (*ab-AWR-ul*), adjective

Away from the mouth.

Johnny moved his fork in an ABORAL manner, showing his dislike of Brussels sprouts.

abraxas (*uh-BRAK-suhs*), noun

A mystical word sometimes found carved on gemstones.

Maryanne's New Age malachite pendulum was engraved with an ABRAXAS to enhance its power.

absconce (*ab-SKAWNS*), noun

An old-fashioned lantern formerly used in monasteries.

The monk illuminated his path with an ABSCONCE.

abscond (*ab-SKOND*), verb

To leave in a hurry but quietly, so as to escape notice, especially to avoid trouble.

Bored out of his wits, Jared ABSCONDED with the family Mercedes, but he wrapped it around a large oak tree.

absquatulate (*ab-SKAW-chew-late*), verb

To exit without warning.

I routinely ABSQUATULATE from dull parties, social gatherings, and other events.

abstemious (*ab-STEE-me-us*), adjective

To eat plain and simple food in moderation, avoiding overindulgence in drink and gluttony at the table.

Gandhi led an ABSTEMIOUS life.

absterge (*ab-STIRJ*), verb

To wipe clean; to erase.

Because Roger had been a juvenile when he committed vandalism, the court agreed to ABSTERGE his record.

abstruse (*ab-STROOS*), adjective

Arcane, complex, difficult to understand and learn.

Bob began to wish there was, in fact, a Santa Claus because he found the "simple instructions" to his son's bicycle far too ABSTRUSE.

acanthous (uh-KAN-thus), adjective

Spiny; covered in spines.

Sea urchins are ACANTHOUS, which means beachgoers shouldn't step on them so as to avoid puncture wounds to the feet.

acarine (AK-uh-rayne), adjective

Having to do with mites.

Dr. Moore's ACARINE studies resulted in his developing a new medicine to prevent ear mites in animals.

acatour (ak-uh-TOOR), noun

Quartermaster or provisioner.

The expedition's ACATOUR made sure that everyone was well supplied with food, clothing, and adequate shelter.

accidie (AK-si-dee), noun

Sloth; laziness; a feeling of torpor.

My cat, having chased a feather for ten minutes, was sunk in ACCIDIE, curled around her tail.

acclimate (AK-luh-mate), verb

Adjust oneself to a new set of climatic conditions.

As we ascended Mount Everest, we had to continually ACCLIMATE ourselves to the thinner air.

accoucheuse (ak-oo-ZHOOZ), noun

A midwife.

In many rural areas, babies were delivered by an ACCOUCHEUSE, since doctors were not immediately available.

accoy (ah-KAWY), verb

To pacify; to soothe.

The baby was so upset by his uncle's presence that it required his mother to ACCOY him and return him to calm.

accretion (uh-KREE-shun), noun

The gradual accumulation of something over time.

Mr. Scrooge's ACCRETION of money for many years had made him one of the richest men in London.

accubation (*ak-you-BAY-shun*), *noun*

The act of reclining on a couch.

Diners in ancient Rome engaged in ACCUBATION while eating, rising only to call for more food and wine.

acculturation (*ah-kul-cherr-AYE-shin*), *noun*

The process of adapting to a different culture.

Just because sushi makes me queasy doesn't mean I'm opposed to ACCULTURATION.

aceldama (*uh-SEL-duh-muh*), *noun*

A place of bloodshed and slaughter.

The old house was now a horrific ACELDAMA, with dead bodies scattered about the living room.

acerbate (*AA-sir-bayt*), *verb*

To irritate or make worse.

The Koch brothers' multimillion-dollar support of conservative candidates only ACERBATES the liberals' disdain of libertarianism.

acersecomic (*uh-kare-suh-KAH-mik*), *noun*

Someone whose hair has never been cut.

The wild man, who had lived in the jungle his entire life with no contact with human society, was ACERSECOMIC, with his tangled hair reaching below his waist.

achloropsia (*uh-klor-OP-see-uh*), *noun*

Color blindness in respect to the color green.

Margery's ACHLOROPSIA prevented her from seeing the coming of spring green grass to her lawn.

achromatic (*ak-ruh-MAT-ik*), *adjective*

Completely without color.

The designers painted the entire room white and filled it with white furniture, leaving it starkly ACHROMATIC.

acicular (*uh-SI-kyou-ler*), adjective

Needle-shaped.

The ACICULAR rock formations found in parts of the Rocky Mountains are spires that challenge the best climbers.

acinaciform (*uh-SIN-uh-si-form*), adjective

Shaped like a scimitar.

Gaelen seized the ACINACIFORM piece of wood and used it to defend himself from his opponents' flashing swords.

acouasm (*ah-COO-ahz-um*), noun

Thinking you are hearing strange sounds that are not really there.

Witnesses to the supernatural often suffer from ACOUASM.

acquest (*uh-KWEST*), noun

Property acquired by some means other than inheritance.

I didn't inherit my house; it was an ACQUEST from a close friend, who gave it to me before he died.

acrimonious (*ah-kri-MOAN-ee-us*), adjective

Angry; bitter; disputed.

"There is something about the literary life that repels me, all this desperate building of castles on cobwebs, the long-drawn ACRIMONIOUS struggle to make something important which we all know will be gone forever in a few years..."

—Raymond Chandler, American author

acropathy (*uh-KROP-uh-thee*), noun

Any disease affecting the body's extremities (hands, feet, etc.).

As a result of leprosy, many people in the Middle Ages suffered from ACROPATHY and lost fingers and toes.

acroscopic (*ak-roh-SKOP-ik*), adjective

Moving toward the high point.

As we traversed the mountainside, we were aware of our ACROSCOPIC quest to get to the top.

adelphogamy (*ah-del-FOE-gah-me*), noun

Marriage to your brother's wife.

All men practicing ADELPHOGAMY are polygamists.

adjudicate (*ah-JOO-dih-kate*), verb

To preside over or listen to opposing arguments and help two parties settle their difference and come to an agreement.

As my daughters pummeled each other while screaming at top volume, I tried desperately to ADJUDICATE their quarrel.

ad nauseam (*ad-NAW-zee-um*), adverb

Something that goes on and on, or is done over and over again, to a ridiculous, even sickening degree.

At first we were all impressed that Steve could recite the entire Gettysburg Address, but we all got kind of sickened when he repeated the feat AD NAUSEAM.

adroit (*ah-DROYT*), adjective

Skilled or clever in a particular pursuit.

“It’s kind of sad,” Betty said to Barbara, “that Will thinks his ADROIT opera-singing abilities will impress women.”

adsorb (*add-SORB*), verb

To collect a dissolved liquid or gas on a surface.

He invented a dry chemical dehumidifier that ADSORBBS excess moisture from a room.

aegis (*AYE-jis*), noun

The protection, support, and help rendered by a guardian, supporter, backer, or mentor.

Jill thinks she’s above reproach because she’s under the AEGIS of that marketing vice president with a penchant for younger women.

aesthetic (*es-THEH-tik*), adjective

Relating to beauty and the appreciation of beauty.

Covering your walls with pictures torn from the newspaper does not constitute a genuine AESTHETIC sense, Harold.

affectation (*ah-fek-TAY-shun*), noun

Behaviors or mannerisms that are exaggerated, extreme, eccentric, and deliberately showy, often an effort to attract attention.

“AFFECTION is awkward and forces imitation of what should be genuine and easy.” —John Locke, British philosopher

afflatus (*uh-FLAY-tuss*), *noun*

Inspiration that seems to come from divine origin.

The Nobel Prize–winning novelist attributed her abilities to AFFLATUS rather than to her own abilities.

aficionado (*uh-fish-ee-uh-NAH-doe*), *noun*

A devotee, someone who is enthralled with and supports a particular activity.

Dwight often refers to himself as an AFICIONADO of American-made microbrews.

aggrandize (*ah-GRAND-ize*), *verb*

To exaggerate, put on a false front, and make something look greater and grander than it really is.

Phil tries to AGGRANDIZE his reputation by stating that he is a charter member of the Bill O’Reilly fan club, but everybody just thinks this “feat” makes him pathetic.

agoraphobia (*ah-GORE-ah-foe-bee-ah*), *noun*

Fear of being outdoors or in public.

People believe Ms. Atkins to be antisocial, but it was her AGORAPHOBIA that made her a shut-in for decades.

ailanthus (*a-LANN-thus*), *noun*

A type of tree with pointed leaves and green flowers.

“I was hoping to find a crack in the pavement where my AILANTHUS of a poem could take root.” —Nicholson Baker, writer

akimbo (*ah-KIM-bo*), *adverb*

With hands on hips and elbows turned outward.

When my father gets really mad, he stands stock-still, arms AKIMBO, and slowly turns red in the face.

alacrity (*ah-LAK-rih-tee*), *noun*

Cheerful cooperation rendered with enthusiasm, promptness, and politeness.

The ALACRITY with which Steve responded to Helen’s invitation is nothing short of astonishing.

aleatory (*AIL-ee-ah-tore-ee*), adjective

An action that is unplanned, spontaneous, or spur of the moment rather than deliberately thought out and carefully considered; an outcome that is anything but certain and depends on luck, randomness, or chance.

“Of course you lost the election!” Miranda yelled. “An ALEATORY, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants campaign is never going to be a recipe for success!”

allegory (*AL-eh-gor-ee*), noun

A story told to communicate a hidden meaning or deeper theme.

Many of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales are clear ALLEGORIES of the consequences of children’s rotten behavior.

alliteration (*ah-lit-ter-AYE-shun*), noun

The repetition of similar sounds, especially at the beginnings of words, in written speech or the spoken word.

I’d forgotten how much Alicia likes to use ALLITERATION in her insults, but I was reminded quickly when she called me a cruel, callous cretin.

amatory (*AM-uh-tore-ee*), adjective

Having to do with sexual love.

Pete hasn’t stopped sulking since Alice spurned his AMATORY advances at the office Christmas party.

ambiguity (*am-bih-GYOO-ih-tee*), noun

Uncertainty; lacking clear definition.

Poets who revel in AMBIGUITY are one of the reasons many people hate poetry.

ambrosia (*am-BRO-zsha*), noun

Nectar, supposedly the food of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus.

To my parents, sugary Passover wine was the AMBROSIA of the gods.

ameliorate (*ah-MEAL-your-ate*), verb

To correct a deficiency or defect; to make right a wrong; to take actions that make up, at least in part, for negative actions or failure to take action previously.

After you insulted her mother, I don’t think even the most expensive piece of jewelry will be enough to AMELIORATE your relationship with Marcia.

amenable (*ah-MEE-nah-bull*), adjective

One who readily and agreeably gives in to the wishes and desires of others.

Mark considers himself AMENABLE, but the rest of us just think he's a pushover.

amorphous (*ah-MORE-fis*), adjective

Without definite shape, substance, or form; lacking definition and boundaries.

“Of course the illusion of art is to make one believe that great literature is very close to life, but exactly the opposite is true. Life is AMORPHOUS, literature is formal.” – Françoise Sagan, French novelist and playwright

amphibology (*am-fih-BAHL-ah-gee*), noun

Double meaning or ambiguity.

Famous comic Norm Crosby based his routines of mangled words largely on mispronunciation and AMPHIBOLOGY.

anabasis (*a-nuh-BAY-sis*), noun

A military expedition from the coast of a country into its interior.

The ancient Persian ruler Cyrus conducted an ANABASIS against his foe, Artaxerxes.

anabatic (*an-ah-BAT-ik*), adjective

Upward movement driven by air currents.

The glider pilot delighted the air show attendees with ANABATIC aerial acrobatics.

anachronism (*ah-NAK-ruh-niz-em*), noun

A person, place, thing, or idea whose time has past, and who seems to belong to an earlier age.

His three record players—and the fact that he doesn't even know what an MP3 is—make Jim something of an ANACHRONISM.

analemma (*an-al-EM-ah*), noun

A figure-eight pattern made by marking the position of the sun at the same time each day throughout the year.

ANALEMMAS are produced as the earth's tilt changes relative to the sun.

analogous (*an-AL-a-gus*), adjective

Similar or comparable in some respects.

Nikki tried to argue that attending public school in Manhattan was ANALOGOUS to attending the prestigious boarding school in the country, but her argument was

weak and her grandmother wasn't buying it.

anaphora (*an-AFF-for-ah*), *noun*

Repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences or stanzas.

ANAPHORA is a valuable arrow in the poet's quiver.

anathema (*ah-NATH-eh-ma*), *noun*

Something so distasteful to you, so alien and foreign to your understanding, that you find it sickening and repellant—as if you were allergic to it.

Religious services were an ANATHEMA to Russ, what with him being a dedicated atheist and all.

androcentrism (*an-druh-SEN-tri-zum*), *noun*

An outlook that emphasizes a masculine point of view.

"Larry," Joan warned, "that ANDROCENTRISM may be all the rage in the locker room, but you'd better leave it out of our bedroom if you know what's good for you."

anfractuous (*an-FRACK-chuh-wuss*), *adjective*

Full of windings and intricacies, like a good mystery novel.

The novel's ANFRAC TUOUS plot worked on paper, but it became stupefyingly confusing—actually, just plain stupid—onscreen.

animadversion (*an-uh-mad-VER-zhun*), *noun*

Very harsh criticism that suggests disapproval of what is being criticized.

My boss's frequent ANIMADVERSIONS have led to high staff turnover.

anomaly (*ah-NAHM-ah-lee*), *noun*

An exception to the norm; something different and unexpected that logically should not exist.

"After a thousand meters of this broken-field walking, Mitsuno came upon an ANOMALY: a patch of sand perhaps ten meters square." —Fred Pohl and Thomas Thomas, American science fiction authors

antebellum (*ant-eh-BELL-um*), *adjective*

Representative of or found in the Old South, meaning pre-Civil War.

"But John Allan was a successful immigrant merchant—by no means the type of gentleman planter who stood in the place of aristocrat in the self-conception of