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| **Word** | **Definition** | **Example** |
| Abate | Grow less in intensity or degree | Rather than leave immediately and be drenched, they wait for the storm to abate |
| Abridge | Reduce (a text) in length | Because Webster’s dictionary had grown so large and unwieldly, the publishers decided to abridge it and bring out a condensed version. |
| Abstemious | Sparing in eating or drinking | Vegans are abstemious: they neither use nor consume animal products, abstaining from eating eggs and meat. |
| Abstract | Not concrete | To John, who had never missed a meal, hunger was an abstract concept, one he understood only in theory. |
| Abstruse | Difficult to understand | Baffled by the abstruse philosophical texts assigned n class, Dave asked Lexy to explain Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason  |
| Accessible | Able to be reached | We asked our guide whether the ruins were accessible on foot |
| Acclaim | Announce with great approval | Announcing the Olympic games, the sportscasters acclaimed every American victory and grumbled about every American defeat |
| Accolade | Expression of approval | In Hollywood, an “Oscar” is the highest accolade |
| Acknowledge | Recognize, possibly reluctantly, the status or rights of | Although Iris acknowledged that the Beatles’ tunes sounded old-fashioned, she still preferred them to the rap her brothers played. |
| Acquiesce | Agree without protesting | Although she appeared to acquiesce to her employer’s suggestion, I could tell she had reservations about the changes he wanted made |
| Acrid | Sharply bitter in taste or odor | A pistol shot rang out; the acrid odor of burnt gunpowder filled the room |
| Acrimonious | Bitter in words or manner | It was a very negative campaign: the rival candidates attacked each other using highly acrimonious terms |
| Adherent | Someone who follows a leader or supports a cause | As news of the scandal spread, the senator’s one-time adherents quickly deserted him |
| Adroit | Having skills or resourcefulness in coping with situations | I had to admire the adroit excuses that Dexter found to get out of doing any chores he disliked |
| Adulation | Excessive admiration | The conceited movie star relished the adulation he received from his groupies |
| Adversary | One who resists or opposes | The young wrestler struggled to defeat his terrible adversary |
| Adversity | Force negatively affecting one’s well-being | Dirt poor and out of work, he did not give up but continued struggling to overcome adversity |
| Advocate | Speak in favor of | Seeking the end of slavery, the abolitionists advocated freedom for the slaves |
| Aesthetic | Dealing with or capable of appreciating the beautiful | The beauty of Tiffany’s stained glass appealed to Esther’s aesthetic sense |
| Affable | Easy to talk to; warmly friendly | Accustomed to cold, impersonal supervisors, Nicholas was amazed at how affable his new manager was |
| Affirmation | Positive statement | Despite Tom’s affirmations of innocence, Aunt Polly suspected he had eaten the pie |
| Alacrity | Cheerful readiness to respond | Eager to get away to the mountains, Phil and Dave packed up their ski gear and climbed into the van with alacrity |
| Alleviate | Make more bearable | When Johnny came down with a bad case of poison oak, the doctor recommended calamine lotion to alleviate the itching |
| Allusion | Indirect or hinted reference | When Amanda said to the ticket scalper, “One hundred bucks? What do you want, a pound of flesh?” she was making an allusion to Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice |
| Aloof | Emotionally or physically distant | Shy by nature, she remained aloof while the rest of the group chattered away |
| Altruistic | Unselfishly concerned for the well-being of others | By providing college scholarships for economically disadvantaged youths, Eugene Lang performed a truly altruistic deed |
| Ambiguous | Having several possible meanings, and therefore unclear | Since both interpretations seemed possible, the judges could not decide which way to interpret a particularly ambiguous passage in the law |
| Ambivalence | State of having conflicting emotional attitudes | Torn between loving her parents one minute and hating them the next, she was confused by the ambivalence of her feelings |
| Amorphous | Lacking shape or definition | As soon as we have decided on our itinerary, we shall send you a copy; right now, our plans are still amorphous |
| Anachronism | Something out of place chronologically, not in its proper historical period | In Back to the Future, when Marty McFly is transported into the past, his skateboard is an anachronism.  |
| Analogous | Showing a likeness or similarity | There’s an old adage that watching government in action is analogous to watching meat be prepared. Neither process is pretty. |
| Anarchy | Political and social disorder; state of being without a governing body or leader | Denying that she advocated total anarchy, Katya maintained she wished only to change our government, not to destroy it utterly |
| Anecdote | Short account of a supposedly interesting or amusing incident | The boss prefaced his speech by telling a pointless anecdote about an encounter he’d had with former President Bush |
| Animosity | Active ill will | Martha showed her animosity toward her classmates by sending them hate messages on Twitter |
| Anomaly | Something not easily classified or that deviates from the norm | Most birds can fly. The ostrich, which cannot fly, is therefore an anomaly |
| Antagonism | Active resistance | Barry showed his antagonism toward his new stepmother by ignoring her whenever she tried talking to him. |
| Antipathy | Deep-seated dislike | Like most Boston Red Sox fans, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck feel a strong antipathy toward the New York Yankees, Boston’s bitter rivals |
| Apathy | Lack of concern, especially about things that others find important | A firm believer in democratic government, she could not understand the apathy of people who never bothered to vote |
| Appease | Cause to grow calm or subside | Tom and Jody tried to appease their crying baby by offering him one toy after another |
| Apprehension | Fear of future evil | Despite the apprehension many people feel about black bears, these bears are generally more afraid of humans than humans are of them |
| Appropriate | Take possession of for one’s own use (possibly without the authority or right to do so) | The ranch owners appropriated the lands that had originally been set aside for the Native American’s use |
| Arbitrary | Determined by impulse or whim; capricious | Baseball is a game of arbitrary calls; umpires constantly make decisions that to someone sitting in the bleachers make no sense |
| Archaic | Characteristic of an earlier or more primitive time | The foreign student spoke in correct but rather archaic English, for he had learned it from studying the English classics, not from every day conversation |
| Ardent | Characterized by intensity of feeling | Katya’s ardent enthusiasm inspired her fellow protesters to make even greater efforts on behalf of the cause |
| Articulate | Expressing oneself clearly | Her articulate PowerPoint presentation was so effective that the company immediately adopted her proposal |
| Ascendancy | Position of dominance; controlling influence | Leaders of religious cults maintain ascendancy over their followers by methods that can verge on brainwashing |
| Ascetic | Practicing self-denial | The wealthy, self-indulgent young man felt oddly drawn to the strict, ascetic lifestyle practiced by members of some monastic orders |
| Assiduous | Characterized by careful, persistent attention (to a task) | John was assiduous in compiling the bibliography for his term paper; he worked at the task for weeks before he was satisfied |
| Assuage | Lessen in intensity, or put an end to | Jilted by Jane, Richard tried to assuage his broken heart by eating ice cream. Several gallons later, he had assuaged his hunger but not his pain |
| Assumption | Something taken for granted; act of taking possession | The young princess made the foolish assumption that the regent would not object to her taking the reins of power |
| Astute | Characterized by shrewdness and clear-sightedness | Shrewdly purchasing valuable plots of land for small sums, John Jacob Astor gained a reputation as an astute investor |
| Atrophy | Waste away | After three months in a cast, your calf muscles are bound to atrophy; you’ll need physical therapy to get back in shape |
| Attribute | Explain by pointing out a cause | The author attributed Mozart’s success in music to the encouragement he received from his father |
| Augment | Make larger or more numerous | Armies augment their forces by calling up reinforcements; teachers augment their salaries by taking second jobs |
| Austere | Forbiddingly stern; severely simple and unornamented | The headmaster’s austere demeanor tended to scare off the more timid students, who never visited his study willingly |
| Autonomous | Not controlled or governed by outside forces | Although the University of California at Berkeley is just one part of the state university system, in many ways, Cal Berkeley is autonomous, for it runs several programs that are not subject to outside control |
| Banal | Lacking originality | With its worn-out dialogue and predictable plot, the sitcom struck me as numbingly banal |
| Bane | Source of harm or ruin | Lucy’s little brother was the bane of her existence; his sole aim in life seemed to be to make her totally miserable |
| Belie | Give a false impression | His coarse, hard-bitten exterior belied his inner sensitivity |
| Belittle | To cause someone or something to seem less | Barry constantly belittled people, making them feel insignificant and small |
| Benevolent | Disposed to do good | Mr. Goodman was a benevolent employer who made sure that each of his employees received a turkey at Thanksgiving |
| Benign | Gentle in disposition; not malignant | Although her benign smile and gentle bearing made Miss Marple seem to be a sweet little old lady, in reality she was a tough-minded, shrewd observer of human nature |
| Bleak | Barren and lacking in warmth | The frigid, inhospitable Aleutian Islands are bleak military outposts. It’s no wonder that soldiers assigned there have a bleak attitude toward their posting |
| Bolster | Support or prop up | The debaters accumulated huge file boxes full of evidence to bolster their arguments |
| Brevity | Shortness of expression | When you place a phone call from an airplane, brevity is essential; you are charged for every minute |
| Buttress | Shore up using an external support | The attorney came up with several far-fetched arguments in a vain attempt to buttress his weak case |
| Cacophonous | Marked by harsh or discordant sound | Do orchestra students actually enjoy the cacophonous sounds they make when they are tuning up? How can they stand the racket they make? |
| Cajole | Persuade in the face of reluctance | Diane tried to cajole her father into letting her drive the family car |
| Calculated | Deliberately planned (to achieve a goal, accomplish a purpose) | Lexy’s choice of clothing to wear to the debate tournaments was carefully calculated to impress the judges |
| Candor | Open honesty | When Terry asked Tom how she looked, she was hoping for compliments, not for candor |
| Capitulate | Give up resisting | Okay, I capitulate! I’ll pick up my bedroom. Just quit nagging me! |
| Capricious | Impulsive and unpredictable | The winter storm was capricious: it changed course unpredictably. Jen was capricious, too: she changed friends almost as often as she changed clothes |
| Captivate | Attract and keep someone’s interest | Bart and Lisa were captivated by their new babysitter’s skill at juggling chainsaws |
| Catalyst | Something that causes an event or change to occur | Jen-Michael Cousteau, one of the world’s leading ocean explorers, hopes that the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster will become a catalyst for political, industrial, and environmental change |
| Censorious | Highly critical | We live in a morally censorious climate, one that does not readily tolerate weirdness, willfulness, or imperfection |
| Censure | Harshly criticize | The senator was censured for behavior inappropriate to a member of Congress |
| Cliché | Phrase dulled in meaning by repetition; trite theme; person who acts in wholly predictable ways | In writing your SAT essay, avoid using clichés like “sadder but wiser” and “old as the hills” |
| Coercion | Use of force to compel someone to obey; threat of violence or reprisal | The inquisitors used both physical and psychological coercion to force Joan of Arc to deny that God had sent visions to her |
| Cogent | Strongly appealing to reason; well argued | Katya presented her case with such cogent arguments that the jury had to decide in favor of her client |
| Coherence | Logical consistency; quality of sticking together | To keep the show going from season to season, the producers of Lost added plot points and characters until the story lost its original coherence; in fact, it became incoherent |
| Cohesion | Tendency to keep together | A firm believer in the maxim “Divide and conquer,” the evil emperor, by means of lies and trickery, sought to disrupt the cohesion of the federation of free worlds |
| Collaborate | Work together | Mystery writers Jonathan and Faye Kellerman generally write alone; occasionally, however, they collaborate on a novel |
| Colloquial | Pertaining to conversational or common speech | Some of the newer, less formal passages on the SAT have a colloquial tone that is intended to make them more appealing to students |
| Commemorate | Honor the memory of | The statue of the Minute Man commemorates the valiant soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War |
| Compile | Gather or put together | We compiled a list of the words most frequently used on SAT examinations |
| Complacency | Satisfaction with one’s person, possessions, or accomplishments | You may be in first place right now, but your competitors are catching up fast. This is no time for complacency |
| Complement | Make something complete or perfect | The waiter recommended a glass of port to complement the cheese |
| Compliance | Conformity in fulfilling requirements; readiness to yield | The architect realized that his design for the new school had to be in compliance with the local building code |
| Composure | Mental calmness | Even the latest crisis at work could not shake Nancy’s composure |
| Comprehensive | Completely covering (a field or subject) | We will spend the final two weeks of school on a comprehensive review of everything we covered in class this semester |
| Concede | Acknowledge something to be true; grant as a privilege | Despite all the evidence Monica had assembled, Mark refused to concede that she was right |
| Conciliatory | Gaining goodwill by acting in a pleasing manner | Tina was still angry despite Tony’s soft and conciliatory words |
| Concise | Covering a great deal in few words | When you send a message on Twitter, be concise: a tweet cannot be more than 140 characters long |
| Concur | Express agreement with an opinion; happen together | Justice Sotomayor wrote a minority opinion because she did not concur with the reasoning of her fellow justices |
| Condone | Treat as if harmless or unimportant | Unlike Widow Douglas, who condoned Huck’s minor offenses, Miss Watson did nothing but scold him for his misdeeds |
| Conflagration | Great fire | In the conflagration that followed the 1906 earthquake, much of San Francisco went up in flames |
| Confound | Throw into confusion or bewilder | No mystery could confound Sherlock Holmes for long. He easily solved the most mystifying case. |
| Conjecture | Deduce by guessing | Although there was no official count, the organizers conjectured that more than 10,000 marchers took part in the March for Peace |
| Consensus | Agreement arrived at by a group as a whole | Every time the garden club members had nearly reached a consensus about what to plant, Mistress Mary, quite contrary, disagreed |
| Constraint | Embarrassed awkwardness; repression of feelings | When the boys first met their new stepmother, they felt some constraint, but eventually they lost that initial awkwardness and talked with her comfortably |
| Contend | Argue earnestly; struggle in rivalry | Sociologist Harry Edwards contends that some colleges exploit young African-American athletes, supporting them as athletes but failing to support them as students |
| Contentious | Involving argument | Violently disagreeing with the referees’ ruling, Coach Ben became so contentious that they threw him out of the game |
| Contract | 1. Reduce in size
2. Become affected by a disease
 | Warm metal expands; cold metal contracts.When Michael served in the Peace Corps in Malaysia, he contracted malaria |
| Converge | Tend to meet or come together | In 1995, African-American men from all over the United States converged on Washington DC, to take part in the historic Million Man March |
| Conviction | 1. Verdict that someone is guilty of a crime
2. Strongly held belief
 | Even her conviction for murder did not shake Peter’s conviction that Harriet was innocent of the crime |
| Cordial | Warmly friendly; sincerely felt | Our hosts greeted us at the airport with a cordial welcome and a hearty hug |
| Corroborate | Support with evidence | Though Huck was quite willing to corroborate Tom’s story, Aunt Polly knew better than to believe either of them. |
| Credulity | Tendency to believe too easily | Con artists take advantage of the credulity of inexperienced Internet users to gain access to their credit card information. |
| Criterion | Decisive factor | What criterion did you use when you selected this essay as the prizewinner? |
| Cryptic | Having a secret meaning | Thoroughly baffled by Holmes’s cryptic remarks, Watson wondered whether Holmes was intentionally concealing his thoughts about the crime. |
| Culpable | Deserving blame | It was an honest mistake, a well-intentioned mistake, a mistake for which no one was culpable, but it was a mistake all the same. |
| Cursory | Hastily done | Because a cursory examination of the ruins indicates the possibility of arson, we believe the insurance agency should undertake a more thorough investigation of the fire’s cause. |
| Debilitate | Sap the strength of | Michael’s severe bout of the flu debilitated him so much that for a week he was too tired to go back to work. |
| Debunk | Expose as false or exaggerated | Pointing out that the candidate had consistently voted against strengthening antipollution legislation, the reporters debunked his claim that he was a fervent environmentalist. |
| Decorum | Appropriateness in behavior; orderliness and good taste in manners | Even the best-mannered students have trouble behaving with proper decorum on the last day of school. |
| Decry | Express strong disapproval of | The founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman, strongly decries the lack of financial aid and moral support for children in America today. |
| Deference | Courteous regard for another’s wish; respect owed to a superior | In deference to the minister’s request, please do not take photographs during the wedding service. |
| Definitive | Most compete; providing a final answer | Although many programming tests describe themselves as definitive guides to the subject, almost all of them leave out essential pieces of information. |
| Degradation | Lowering in rank or dignity | Some secretaries object to fetching the boss a cup of coffee because they feel that being asked to do such nonprofessional tasks is degrading, and they refuse to put up with that sort of degradation. |
| Deleterious | Injurious to health | If you believe that smoking is deleterious to your health (and the surgeon general certainly does), then quit! |
| Delineate | Set forth in detail | Using only a few descriptive phrases, Austen manages to delineate the character of Mr. Collins so deftly that we can predict his every move. |
| Denounce | Proclaim as evil | The reform candidates denounced the corrupt city officials for having betrayed the public’s trust. |
| Depict | Represent using words or a picture | Some newspaper accounts depicted the movie star as a reclusive prima donna; others portrayed her as a sensitive artist harassed by the media. |
| Deplore | Regret strongly; express grief over | Although the advice columnist deplored the high rate of divorce nowadays, she realized that not every marriage could be saved. |
| Depravity | Extreme corruption | The depravity of Caligula’s behavior came to sicken even those who had willingly participated in his earlier, comparatively innocent, antics. |
| Deprecate | Express strong disapproval of; protest against; belittle | Because she was a firm believer in old-fashioned courtesy, Miss Post deprecated the modern tendency to address new acquaintances by their first names. |
| Deride | Laugh at scornfully | The reviewers unanimously derided Hwang’s new play, mocking its pretentious dialogue, flat characters, and simpleminded plot. |
| Derivative | Lacking in originality | Although her earlier poetry was clearly derivative in nature, the critics thought she had promise and eventually would find her own voice. |
| Despondent | Showing extreme gloom or depression | Once cheerful and lighthearted, William became seriously despondent after breaking up with Jan. |
| Detachment | Emotional remoteness | Psychoanalysts must maintain their professional detachment and stay uninvolved with their patients’ personal lives. |
| Deterrent | Something that discourages | Does the threat of capital punishment serve as a deterrent to potential killers? |
| Detrimental | Causing injury or damage | Journalists wondered whether news of the senator’s affair would prove detrimental to his chances of being reelected. |
| Devious | Not straightforward; departing from accepted conduct | The Joker’s plan was so devious that his underlings had a hard time following its shifts and dodges. |
| Devise | Form in one’s mind (a plan, a method, or invention) | How clever the Joker was, to devise such a cunning, devious plan! |
| Didactic | Intended to teach or convey information | While Joan Walsh Anglund clearly gets across her message about the nature of friendship and the need to share and be flexible, her writing is not the last bit didactic or dogmatic. |
| Diffidence | Lack of confidence | Can people who are naturally inclined to diffidence get over their shyness to become fast-talking, successful television personalities? |
| Diffuse | Spread out; both wordy and poorly organized | If you pay authors by the word, you’re temping them to produce diffuse books instead of concise ones. |
| Digression | Departure from the main subject | Nobody minded when Professor Renoir’s lectures wandered away from their official theme: his digressions were always more fascinating than the topic of the day. |
| Dilemma | Choice of two unsatisfactory alternatives | “Here am I brought to a very pretty dilemma; I must commit murder or commit matrimony.” – George Farquhar |
| Diligence | Steadiness of effort; persistent hard work | Greatly impressed by the part-time worker’s diligence, her employer offered her a full-time job. |
| Diminution | Reduction in size | Old Jack was as sharp at eighty as he had been at fifty; increasing age had led to no diminution of his mental acuity. |
| Discerning | Mentally quick and observant | Although the movie star was no genius, she was sufficiently discerning to tell her true friends from the countless phones who flattered her. |
| Disclose | Make known; cause to be seen | Although competitors offered him bribes, Scott refused to disclose any information about his company’s new product. |
| Discordant | Disagreeable to the ear; not in harmony | Nothing is quite so discordant as the sound of a middle school orchestra tuning up. |
| Discount | Minimize the significance of | Be prepared to discount what he has to say about his ex-wife; he is still very bitter about the divorce. |
| Discourse | Formally discuss a subject at some length; hold a conversation | In extemporaneous speaking events (known to high school debaters as “extemp”), competitors must discourse on a subject with only thirty minutes to prepare their speech. |
| Discredit | Destroy confidence in; hurt the reputation of | Political campaigns are growing increasingly negative as candidates try to discredit one another. |
| Discrepancy | Inconsistency; disagreement between facts or claims; difference | Looking for any inconsistencies in the testimony that might exonerate his client, the defense lawyer pounced on a discrepancy between the two witnesses’ versions of what had occurred. |
| Discriminating | Able to see subtle differences (secondary meaning) | A superb interpreter of Picasso, she was sufficiently discriminating to judge the most complex works of art. |
| Disdain | View with scorn or contempt | The bookish student disdained fashion models for their apparent lack of intellectual interests. |
| Disinclination | Slight aversion or lack of willingness | Some mornings I feel a great disinclination to get out of bed. |
| Dismiss | Refuse to accept or consider | Because Tina believed in Tony’s fidelity, she dismissed the notion that he might be having an affair. |
| Disparage | Sneer at | A doting mother, Emma was more likely to praise her son’s childish finger paintings than to disparage them. |
| Disparity | Condition of inequality | Their disparity in rank made no difference at all to the prince and Cinderella. |
| Disperse | Cause to break up or spread widely apart | The police fired tear gas into the crowd to disperse the protesters. |
| Disposition | 1. Final arrangement; 2. Temperamental makeup or mood
 | Dissatisfied with the disposition of his late mother’s house, which had been left to his sister, Bart loudly cursed Lisa. He always had a nasty disposition. |
| Disputatious | Fond of arguing | Convinced he knew more than his lawyers, Alan was a disputatious client, always ready to argue about the best way to conduct the case. |
| Disseminate | Scatter (as in sowing seeds) | By their use of the Internet, propagandists have been able to disseminate their pet doctrines to new audiences around the globe. |
| Dissent | Withhold agreement | In the recent Supreme Court decision, Justice Sotomayor dissented from the majority opinion. |
| Distinction | 1. State of being worthy or noble; 2. Perception of a difference
 | A holder of the Medal of Honor, George served with great distinction during World War II. However, he made a distinction between World War II and Vietnam, which he believed was an immoral war. |
| Divergent | Tending to move or draw apart | After medical school, the two doctors took widely divergent paths, one becoming a wealthy plastic surgeon, the other joining the nonprofit Doctors Without Borders. |
| Doctrine | A teaching or belief, in general; a particular principle (religious, legal, etc.) being taught | He was so committed to the doctrines of his faith that he was unable to evaluate them objectively. |
| Document | Create a detailed record; provide written evidence to support statements | She kept all the receipts from her business trip in order to document her expenses for the Internal Revenue Service. |
| Dogmatic | Positive in asserting one’s opinion (especially when it is unwarranted) | Inflexible and dogmatic, Doug was not a man to be troubled by doubts. |
| Dormant | Marked by a lack of activity; temporarily quiet, as if sleeping | At fifty her long-dormant ambition to write flared up once more; within a year she had completed the first of her great historical novels. |
| Dubious | Causing doubt to arise; of doubtful quality | Many critics of the SAT contend that the test is of dubious worth: they doubt the test accurately predicts which students will succeed in college. |
| Duplicity | Double-dealing | When Tanya learned that Mark had been two-timing her, she was furious at his duplicity |
| Ebullient | Overflowing with high spirits; showing excitement | Nothing could repress Amy’s ebullient nature; she was always bubbling over with enthusiasm. |
| Eclectic | Composed of elements drawn from a variety of sources | The reviewers praised the new restaurant’s eclectic selection of dishes, which ranged from Asian stir-frys to French ragouts and stews. |
| Edify | Instruct in moral matters; benefit spiritually | Nothing is worse than a novel that seeks to edify the reader; there is no place in literature for heavy-handed moralizing. |
| Egotism | Excessive sense of self-importance; lack of consideration for others | “But enough of this chitchat about you and your little problems. Let’st alk about what’s really important: me!” (How’s that for egotism?) |
| Elaborate | Expand or work out something in detail | Tell me more. Please elaborate on your reasons for wanting to attend Harvard. |
| Elated | In high spirits | Grinning from ear to ear, the downhill skier was clearly elated by her Olympic victory. |
| Elicit | Draw out (a response or reaction) | The photographer made funny faces in an attempt to elicit a smile from his shy subject. |
| Eloquence | Forceful and persuasive speech | The crowds were stirred by Martin Luther King’s eloquence. |
| Elucidate | Throw light upon; make clear | According to Sherlock Holmes, the very point that appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one that is most likely to elucidate it. |
| Elusive | Hard to grasp or capture | No matter how hard Tom tried to lure the trout into taking the bait, the fish was too elusive for him to catch. |
| Embellish | Make more beautiful; make a story more interesting by adding (generally fictitious) details | The costume designer embellished the leading lady’s ball gown with yards and yards of ribbon and lace. The producer embellished his account of his Hollywood years with a list of all the starlets who had been madly in love with him. |
| Eminent | High in reputation | In *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey recounts the lives of four leading figures of the Victorian era, pointing out aspects of their characters that were not in keeping with their high reputations. |
| Emulate | Attempt to equal or outdo | In a brief essay, describe a person you admire, someone whose virtues and achievements you would like to emulate. |
| Endorse | Give support to | Everyone waited to see which one of the rival candidates for the city council the mayor would endorse. |
| Enhance | Make more attractive or effective | You can enhance your chances of being admitted to the college of your choice by learning to write well. |
| Enigma | Puzzling or unexplainable situation or event | “What do women want?” asked Dr. Sigmund Freud. Their behavior was an enigma to him. |
| Enmity | Active ill will (generally mutual) | From the start, the twins appeared to hate one another. No one could account for their enmity. |
| Enumerate | Mention one by one | Huck hung his head in shame as Miss Watson enumerated his many faults. |
| Ephemeral | Lasting only a short time | The mayfly is an ephemeral creature; its adult life lasts little more than a day. |
| Epitome | Perfect example or embodiment | As he sang, “I am the very model of a modern Major-General,” in *The Pirates of Penzance,* Major-General Stanley proclaimed himself the epitome of an officer and a gentleman. |
| Equitable | Dealing fairly with everyone | According to the Constitution, legislative districts have to be roughly equal in size to guarantee that voters have an equitable share of the power. “One person, one vote” – it’s only fair. |
| Equivocal | Intentionally misleading; open to more than one interpretation | Rejecting the candidate’s equivocal comments on tax reform, the reporters pressed him to state clearly where he stood on the issue. |
| Erroneous | Containing a mistake | Reasoning from insufficient data, Sherlock Holmes found he had reached an entirely erroneous conclusion. What an embarrassing mistake! |
| Erudite | Possessing great knowledge | Though his fellow students considered him a gifted scholar, Paul knew he would have to spend many years in serious study before he could consider himself truly erudite. |
| Esoteric | Known only to the chosen few (and therefore mysterious) | Stories in *The New Yorker* often include esoteric allusions to obscure people and events. |
| Eulogy | Expression of praise, often on the occasion of someone’s death | Instead of delivering a spoken eulogy at Genny’s memorial service, Jeff sang a song he had written in her memory. |
| Euphemism | Mild expression in place of an unpleasant one | The Nazis did not refer to the slaughter of the Jews as genocide; instead, they used a euphemism, calling it “the final solution.” |
| Exacerbate | Increase or intensify the severity of | When acacias are in bloom, the increase of pollen in the air exacerbates Richard’s hay fever. |
| Exalt | Raise in rank or dignity | Queen Elizabeth exalted the rock star Mick Jagger to the rank of knighthood; he’s now known as Sir Mick Jagger. |
| Excerpt | Selected passage (written or musical) | The cinematic equivalent of an excerpt from a novel is a film clip. |
| Execute | Put into effect; carry out | The ballet master wanted to see how well Margaret could execute a pirouette. |
| Exemplary | Serving as a model worthy of imitation | At commencement, the dean praised Ellen for her exemplary behavior as class president. |
| Exemplify | Serve as an example of | For a generation of balletgoers, Mikhail Baryshnikov, the pride of the Russian ballet, exemplified the ideal of masculine grace. |
| Exempt | Not subject to a duty or obligation | Do I have to pay taxes on my scholarship, or are scholarship awards exempt from taxation? |
| Exhaustive | Treating all aspects of a subject or topic | We have made an exhaustive study of all published SAT tests, and we are happy to share our research with you. |
| Exhilarating | Invigorating and refreshing | Though some of the hikers found tramping through the snow tiring, Jeff found the walk on the cold, crisp day exhilarating. |
| Exonerate | Clear from blame | DNA evidence has been used to exonerate suspects falsely accused of crimes. |
| Expedient | Governed by self-interest | A pragmatic politician, he was guided more by what was expedient than by what was right. |
| Expedite | Speed up the progress of (a process); accomplish with promptness | We paid an extra $3.95 to Amazon to have them expedite the shipping of our order. |
| Explicit | Clearly defined; leaving nothing implied | Don’t just hint around that you’re dissatisfied; be explicit about what’s bugging you. |
| Exploit (n) | Deed or action, particularly a brave deed. | Raoul Wallenberg won fame for his exploits in rescuing Jews from Hitler’s forces. |
| Exploit (v) | Make use of, sometimes unjustly | Cesar Chavez fought attempts to exploit migrant farm workers in California. |
| Extol | Praise highly | The president extolled the astronauts, whom he called the pioneers of the Space Age. |
| Extraneous | Not belonging or pertinent to something | No wonder Ted can’t think straight! His mind is so cluttered with extraneous trivia that he can’t concentrate on the essentials. |
| Extricate | Release from a difficulty | Icebreakers were needed to extricate the trapped whales from the icy floes that closed them in. |
| Exuberance | Unrestrained vigor and joy | I was bowled over by the exuberance of Amy’s welcome. What an enthusiastic greeting! |
| Facilitate | Help bring about; make less difficult | Rest and proper nourishment should facilitate the patient’s recovery. |
| Fallacious | Logically unsound | Paradoxically, fallacious reasoning does not always produce incorrect results; even though your logic may be flawed, the conclusion you reach may still be correct. |
| Falter | Move or act hesitantly or unsteadily | When told to dive off the high road, Walter did not falter but immediately launched into a smooth swan dive. |
| Fanaticism | Extreme devotion to a belief or cause | According to philosopher George Santayana, fanaticism can be defined as “redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim”; fanatics go beyond normal standards of behavior in their obsession with their cause. |
| Fastidious | Difficult to please | Bobby was such a fastidious eater that he would eat a sandwich only if his mother first cut off every scrap of crust. |
| Feasible | Capable of being done | Without additional funding, it may not be feasible to build a new stadium for the team on the city’s highly developed West Side. |
| Fervor | Passionate intensity of feeling; earnestness of emotion | At the protest rally, the students cheered the strikers and booed the dean with equal fervor. |
| Flagrant | Conspicuously bad | The governor’s appointment of his brother-in-law to the State Supreme Court was a flagrant violation of the state laws against nepotism (favoritism based on kinship). |
| Flippant | Lacking proper seriousness | When Mark told Mona he loved her, she dismissed his earnest declaration with a flippant “Oh, you say that to all the girls!” |
| Florid | Tinged with red; having an overly decorated literary style | If you go to Florida and get sunburned, your complexion will look florid; if you write flowery postcards abouty our trip, your prose will be florid as well. |
| Foolhardy | Foolishly bold; lacking caution | The devil-may-care stuntman took one too many foolhardy risks and landed in a hospital bed. |
| Formulaic | Following a formula or set procedure | A good romantic comedy is formulaic – it follows the classic “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy and girl realize they are meant for each other” pattern – without being totally predictable. |
| Frivolous | Lacking in seriousness | Although Nancy enjoyed Bill’s frivolous, lighthearted companionship, she sometimes wondered whether he could ever be serious. |
| Frugality | Carefulness in spending money or using resources | In these economically hard times, anyone who doesn’t learn to practice frugality risks bankruptcy |
| Furtive | Done in a secretive or shifty manner | Noticing the furtive glance the customer gave the diamond bracelet on the counter, the jeweler wondered whether he had a potential shoplifter in the store. |
| Futile | Incapable of serving any useful purpose | It is futile for me to try to get any studying done around here while my brother and his friends are throwing a Super Bowl party. |
| Garrulous | Excessively conversational in a rambling, roundabout way | My Uncle Henry can out-talk any three people I know. He is the most garrulous man in Cayuga County. |
| Genre | Particular variety of art or literature | Both a short story writer and a poet, Langston Hughes provided himself equally skilled in either genre. |
| Glutton | Someone who eats too much | Did you really eat a dozen hot dogs? You are such a glutton! |
| Gratify | Give pleasure to | Lori’s parents were gratified by her successful performance on the SAT. |
| Gratuitous | Given freely; uncalled for | Quit making gratuitous comments about my driving; no one asked you for your opinion. |
| Gravity | Seriousness or critical nature | We could tell we were in serious trouble from the gravity of the principal’s expression. |
| Gregarious | Seeking the company of others | Typically, partygoers are gregarious; hermits are not. |
| Guile | Crafty or cunning deception to achieve a goal | Othello’s false friend Iago used considerable guile to trick Othello into believing that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. |
| Gullible | Easily deceived; overly ready to believe | Gullible people have only themselves to blame if they fall for con artists repeatedly. As the saying goes, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” |
| Hackneyed | Lacking in originality | HE was just a hack screenwriter churning out hackneyed remakes with story lines that were older than he was, and he was fifty-three. |
| Hamper | Interfere with | The new mother didn’t realize how much the effort of caring for an infant would hamper her ability to keep immaculate house. |
| Hardy | Able to withstand harsh conditions | We asked the gardening expert to recommend particularly hardy plants that could survive our harsh New England winters. |
| Haughtiness | Disdain towards persons supposedly lower in rank or status | When Elizabeth realized that Darcy considered himself too good to dance with his inferiors, she took great offense at his haughtiness. |
| Hedonist | One who believes that pleasure is the sole aim in life | A thorough hedonist, he considered only his own pleasure, ignoring any claims his family had on his money or time. |
| Heresy | Opinion contrary to popular belief or to accepted religion | Galileo’s assertion that the earth moved around the sun directly contradicted the religious teachings of his day; as a result, he was tried for heresy. |
| Hierarchy | Arrangement by rank or standing; authoritarian body organized into ranks | To be a low man on the totem pole is to have a decidedly inferior place in the hierarchy. |
| Homogeneous | Of the same nature or kind | Because the student body at their daughter’s prep school was so homogeneous, they decided to send her to a school that offered greater cultural diversity. |
| Hyperbole | Extravagant statement (usually not meant to be taken literally) | As far as I’m concerned, Apple’s claim about its new computer are pure hyperbole; no machine is that good. |
| Hypocritical | Pretending to be virtuous | It was hypocritical of Martha to compliment me about my poetry and then make fun of my verses behind my back. |
| Hypothetical | Based on assumptions or hypotheses | Suppose you are accepted by Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. Which one would you attend? Remember, this is only a hypothetical situation. |
| Iconoclastic | Attacking cherished traditions | Deeply iconoclastic, Jean Genet deliberately set out to shock conventional theatergoers with his radical plays. |
| Idiosyncrasy | Individual trait, usually odd in nature | One of Richard Nixon’s little idiosyncrasies was a liking for ketchup on his cottage cheese. |
| Illicit | Not authorized by law | It’s wrong to be complicit in an action that’s illicit. If you are, it’s very awful, since the action is unlawful. |
| Illusory | Not real; causing an illusion | Unfortunately, the costs of running the lemonade stand were so high that Tom’s profits proved illusory. |
| Immaterial | Of no particular importance | Though Kit said it was wholly immaterial whether she had a birthday party or not, we knew she really wanted us to throw her a party. |
| Immutable | Not subject to change | All things change over time; nothing is immutable. |
| Impair | Make worse | Drinking alcohol can impair your ability to drive safely; if you’re going to drink, don’t drive. |
| Impeccable | Having no flaws | The uncrowned queen of the fashion industry, Diana was famous for her impeccable taste. |
| Impecunious | Having little or no money | Though Scrooge claimed he was too impecunious to give money to charity, he easily could have afforded to be generous to those in need. |
| Impede | Cause delay in progress or movement | The special prosecutor determined that the attorney general, though inept, had not intentionally set out to impede the progress of the investigation. |
| Implement | Put into effect | The mayor was unwilling to implement the plan until she was sure it had the governor’s backing. |
| Impudence | State of bold or contemptuous disregard for others | Kissed on the cheek by a perfect stranger, Lady Catherine exclaimed, “Of all the nerve! Young man, I should have you horsewhipped for your impudence.” |
| Inadvertently | In a manner exhibiting a lack of attention | Judy’s great fear was that she might inadvertently omit a question on the exam and mismark her entire answer sheet. |
| Inane | Lacking a point or sense | There’s no point to what you’re saying. Why are you bothering to make such inane remarks? |
| Incidental | Not essential | The scholarship covered his major expenses at college and some of his incidental expenses as well. |
| Incisive | Highly direct and decisive | Television writer Rod Serling once commented, “It is difficult to produce a television documentary that is both incisive and probing and every twelve minutes one is interrupted by twelve dancing rabbits singing about toilet paper.” |
| Incite | Arouse to action | In a fiery speech, Mario incited his fellow students to go out on strike to protest the university’s antiaffirmative action stand. |
| Inclusive | Tending to include or take in all | The comedian turned down the invitation to join the club, joking that any organization that would admit him was too inclusive. |
| Incongruous | Logically inconsistent | Towering over the nearby houses, the McMansion looked wholly incongruous in this historic neighborhood of small Craftsman bungalows. |
| Inconsequential | Having no significance | Brushing off Ali’s apologies for having broken the wineglass, Tamara said, “Don’t worry about it; it’s inconsequential.” |
| Incorrigible | Incapable of being reformed | Though Widow Douglas had hopes of reforming Huck, Miss Watson considered him incorrigible and swore he would come to no good end. |
| Indefatigable | Incapable of being tired | Although the effort of taking out the garbage left Wayne exhausted for the whole morning, when it came to partying, he was indefatigable. |
| Indict | Charge with a crime | If the grand jury indicts he suspect, he will go to trial. |
| Indifferent | Unmoved or unconcerned by | Because Ann felt no desire to marry, she was indifferent to Carl’s constant proposals. |
| Indiscriminate | Not marked by making careful distinctions; choosing at random | Mother disapproved of Junior’s indiscriminate television viewing; she wished he’d be a little more discriminating in his choice of shows. |
| Indolent | Disinclined to effort; habitually lazy | Couch potatoes who lie back on their sofas watching television all day are by definition indolent. |
| Induce | Move someone to do something by persuasion | After their quarrel, Tina said nothing could induce her to talk to Tony again. |
| Ineffable | Unable to be put into words | Looking down at her newborn daughter, Ruth felt such ineffable joy that, for the first time in her adult life, she had no words to convey what was in her heart. |
| Inert | Lacking power to move | “Get up, you lazybones,” she cried to her husband, who lay in bed inert. |
| Inexorable | Unable to be moved or stopped | The “march of history” is thought of as, in some sense, inexorable, likely to take its course despite our wishes or prayers, an inevitable process to which we all must adjust ourselves. |
| Ingenious | Resourcefully inventive | Kit admired the ingenious way her iPod shuffled the songs on her playlist. |
| Inherent | Firmly established by nature or habit | Katya’s inherent love of justice moved her to champion the cause of anyone she considered unfairly treated by society. |
| Innate | Existing from birth | The infant Mozart’s parents quickly realized that their son had an innate gift for music. |
| Innocuous | Not likely to harm or injure | An occasional glass of wine with dinner is relatively innocuous and should have no ill effect on you. |
| Innovation | Introduction of something new | Although Richard liked to keep up with the latest technological innovations, he didn’t always abandon tried-and-true techniques in favor of something new. |
| Insipid | Lacking in flavor | Flat prose and flat ginger ale are equally insipid; both lack sparkle. |
| Instigate | Incite to an action | Rumors of police corruption led to the mayor to instigate an investigation into the department’s activities. |
| Insularity | Narrow provincial point of view | British insularity is proverbial: there is nothing like living on an island, once the center of an empire, to encourage the island-dwellers in a sense of their superiority to “all of those foreigners out there.” |
| Integrity | Commitment to moral and ethical principles; state of being whole | Lincoln, whose personal integrity has inspired millions, fought a civil war to maintain the integrity of the Republic, that these United States might remain undivided for all time. |
| Intervene | Come between in order to prevent or alter; occur between (events, periods of time) | If two good friends get into a fight, don’t try to intervene: if you do, they may gang up on you. |
| Intimidate | Make fearful | Bullies loved to intimidate Clark Kent. Little did they know that, despite his timid appearance, Clark was actually Superman in disguise. |
| Intractable | Not easily managed or controlled | Charlie Brown’s pal Pigpen was intractable: he absolutely refused to take a bath. |
| Intrepid | Exhibiting courage | For her intrepid conduct nursing the wounded during the Crimean War and her many great contributions to the art of nursing, Florence Nightingale received the Royal Red Cross award from Queen Victoria. |
| Inundate | Overwhelm | This semester I am inundated with work; you should see the piles of paperwork flooding my desk. |
| Inure | Become accustomed to something unpleasant or unwelcome | Although Cinderella was inured to the drudgery of her menial tasks, she still flinched when her stepsisters hurled insults at her. |
| Invert | Turn upside down or inside out | If you invert your body in a handstand, the blood will rush to your head. |
| Irate | Caused or characterized by anger | Fuming, the irate customer wrote a scorching letter of complaint to the manager of the store. |
| Ironic | Resulting in an unexpected and poignantly incongruous or unwanted outcome | It is ironic that his success came when he least wanted it. |
| Irreproachable | Free from blame | Homer’s conduct at the office party was irreproachable; even Marge didn’t have anything bad to say about how he behaved. |
| Itinerant | Characterized by traveling from place to place | During the Civil War, my great-grandfather, an itinerant tailor, followed the union Army from Pennsylvania to Virginia as he made uniforms for the troops. |
| Jocular | Characterized by joking | Although Bill knew the boss had no sense of humor, he couldn’t resist making one jocular remark. |
| Juxtaposition | State of being placed side by side or close together | The museum curator placed the Eskimo-carved wooden totem pole in juxtaposition with two contemporary stone masks from Africa, creating a stunning effect. |
| Labyrinth | Something very intricate or winding in structure; place made up of twisting passages and blind alleys | Hiding from Indian Joe, Tom and Becky soon lost themselves in the labyrinth of secret underground caves. |
| Laconic | Brief and to the point; using few words | The classic cowboy hero is a laconic figure, someone generally described as the strong, silent type. |
| Lament | Express sorrow | People all over the world lamented the loss of so many lives on 9/11. |
| Lampoon | Make the subject of ridicule | The satirical website *the Onion* lampoons anything, no matter how sensitive the subject. A typical hea”Lucky Dead Student Gets Own Page in Yearbook.” |
| Lassitude | Feeling or state of weariness or listlessness | After a massage and a long soak in the hot tub, I gave in to my growing lassitude and lay down for a nap. |
| Laud | Give praise to | World leaders lauded the heroic efforts of the rescue workers after the Haitian earthquake. |
| Lavish | Occurring or produced in abundance | Her wealthy suitors wooed her with lavish gifts. In fact, they lavished lavish gifts upon her. |
| Lethargic | Lacking energy | In class, Laura tried to stay alert and listen to the professor, but the stuffy room made her lethargic; she felt as if she was about to nod off. |
| Levity | Lack of proper seriousness | Stop giggling and wriggling around in the pew; such levity is improper in church. |
| Linger | Loiter or dawdle; continue to exist, although losing strength | Hoping to see Juliet pass by, Romeo lingered outside the Capulet house for hours. Though Mother made stuffed cabbage on Monday, the smell lingered around the house for days. |
| Listless | Lacking in spirit or energy | We had expected the young puppy to be lively and playful, and so his drooping head and listless manner had us worried. |
| Lofty | Very elevated in character; rising to an impressive height | Though Sonia Sotomayor’s fellow students used to tease her about her lofty ambitions, she rose to hold one of the highest positions in the land. |
| Loquacious | Inclined to talk excessively | Though our daughter barely says a word to use these days, put a cell phone in her hand and you’ll see how loquacious she can be: our phone bills are out of sight! |
| Malicious | Showing ill will | Jealous of Cinderella’s beauty, her malicious stepsisters expressed their spite by forcing her to do menial tasks. |
| Mar | Injure in a way that spoils perfection | Don’t let spelling errors mar your college essay: use Spell Check, for heaven’s sake! |
| Materialism | Preoccupation with physical comforts and things | By its nature, materialism is opposed to idealism, for where the materialist emphasizes the needs of the body, the idealist emphasizes the needs of the soul. |
| Mercenary | Interested in money or gain | Mercenary motives inspired Andy’s every deed: his first question was always, “What’s in it for me?” |
| Metaphor | Implied comparison of one thing to another (without the use of like or as); figure of speech | Is an old-fashioned hairstyle an apt metaphor for being out of step with the times and in need of change? |
| Methodical | Following a system or method | Decide what you intend to do, and then, rather than taking shortcuts, be methodical in carrying out your plans. |
| Meticulous | Excessively careful | Mother was a meticulous housekeeper, unwilling to allow a single speck of dirt to mar her perfect home. |
| Misanthrope | One who hates or mistrusts mankind | Max described himself as an equal opportunity misanthrope: he hated babies (too fussy), children (too hyper), teenagers (too hormonal), young adults (too complacent), the middle-aged (too brow-beaten), and seniors (too out of touch). |
| Miserly | Marked by stinginess and greed | The miserly old man greedily counted the gold coins he had hoarded over the years. |
| Misnomer | Wrong name or incorrect designation | Morning sickness is a misnomer: it can hit you night or day. |
| Mitigate | Make less intense or severe | Because solar energy can reduce greenhouse gases and provide increased energy efficiency, conversion to the use of solar energy may help mitigate the threat of global warming. |
| Mollify | Moderate in intensity | The airline customer service agent tried to mollify the angry passenger by offering her a seat in first class. |
| Morose | Having an ill-humored disposition | Forced to take early retirement, Bill acted remorse for months; then, all of a sudden, he shook off his sullen mood and was his usual cheerful self. |
| Mundane | Having to do with transitory, every day concerns; worldly as opposed to spiritual | Uninterested in philosophical or spiritual discussions, Tom talked only of mundane matters such as the daily weather forecast or the latest basketball results.  |
| Munificent | Very generous in giving | The Annenberg Trust made a munificent gift that supported art programs in the public schools. |
| Myriad | A very large number | Myriads of mosquitoes from the marshes invaded our campground at twilight. |
| Naïveté  | Quality of being unsophisticated | Touched by the naïveté of sweet, convent-trained Cosette, Marius pledges himself to protect her innocence. |
| Nebulous | Not distinct; like a cloud | Phil and Adam tried to come up with a clear, intelligible business plan and not some vague, nebulous proposal. |
| Nefarious | Very wicked | The villain’s crimes, though various, were one and all nefarious. |
| Negate | Cancel out; deny the truth of | A sudden surge of adrenalin can negate the effects of fatigue; there’s nothing like a good shock to wake you up. |
| Nonchalance | Lack of concern | Cool, calm, and collected, James Bond shows remarkable nonchalance in the face of danger. |
| Notoriety | State of having a bad reputation | “Any publicity is good publicity,” said the starlet. “If I can’t have a good reputation, I’ll settle for notoriety.” |
| Novelty | Something new | Inflight WiFi connections are no longer a novelty; most airlines now offer Internet access on their planes for a fee. |
| Nuance | Shade of difference in meaning or in color | Jody gazed at the Monet landscape for an hour, appreciating every subtle nuance of color in the painting. |
| Nurture | Support and encourage (growth, development) | The Head Start program attempts to nurture prekindergarten children so that they will do well when they enter elementary school. |
| Obdurate | Stubbornly persistent in resisting persuasion | Although defeat appeared inevitable, the general was obdurate in his refusal to surrender. |
| Obliterate | Destroy completely | The tidal wave obliterated several island villages. |
| Oblivion | State of being forgotten | After a decade of popularity, Hurston’s works had fallen in oblivion; no one bothered to read her novels and short stories any more. |
| Obscure | Make unclear | At times he seemed purposely to obscure his meaning, preferring mystery to clarity. |
| Obstinate | 1. Unreasonably persistent (in an opinion, etc.) 2. Not easily controlled, cured, or removed
 | We tried to persuade Bob to give up smoking, but he was obstinate and refused to change. Blackberry stickers are the most obstinate weeds I know; once established in a yard, they are extremely hard to root out. |
| Officious | Excessively pushy in offering one’s services | After her long flight, Jill just wanted to nap, but the officious bellboy was intent on showing her all the special features of the deluxe suite. |
| Ominous | Having an alarming character that threatens evil | Those clouds are ominous; they suggest a severe storm is on its way. |
| Opaque | Not transparent | The opaque window shade kept the sunlight out of the room. |
| Opportunist | Individual who sacrifices principles for expediency by taking advantage of “opportunities” | Joe is such a greedy opportunist that he tripled the price of bottled water at his stores as soon as the earthquake struck. |
| Optimist | One who expects things to turn out for the best; person who looks on the bright side | The pessimist says the glass is half empty; the optimist says the glass is half full. |
| Opulence | Extreme wealth | The glitter and opulence of the ballroom took Cinderella’s breath away. |
| Orator | One recognized as a skillful public speaker | The abolitionist Frederick Douglass was a brilliant orator whose speeches brought home to his audience the evils of slavery. |
| Ornate | Excessively or elaborately decorated | With its elaborately carved, convoluted lines, furniture of the Baroque period was highly ornate. |
| Ostentatious | Trying to attract attention | The rich new student tried to attract friends by making an ostentatious display of his wealth. |
| Overt | Not hidden from view; out in the open | Emma’s overt antagonism toward Jane made us uncomfortable; we wished she would make some effort to conceal her hostility. |
| Pacifist | One opposed to war or any other form of violence | Shooting his way through the jungle, Rambo was clearly not a pacifist. |
| Paradox | Something apparently contradictory in nature; statement that looks false, but is actually correct | In *Legally Blonde,* Elle Woods presents a bit of a paradox, for she is at one and the same time a bubble-headed sorority girl and a keen-witted law student. |
| Paragon | Model of perfection | “I’m always teasing Margot about being a paragon of virtue these days, and she hates it. Maybe it’ll teach her not to be such a goody-goody.” (Anne Frank) |
| Parody | Humorous imitation (of a serious literary or musical work, a person, an event) | The show *Forbidden Broadway* presents parodies spoofing that year’s new productions playing on Broadway. |
| Partisan | Committed to a particular party or cause | On certain issues of principle, the senator refused to take a partisan stand, but let her conscience be her guide. |
| Patronize | 1. Provide support for; 2. Act superior toward; 3. Be a customer of
 | Penniless artists hope to find some wealthy art lover who will patronize them. IF a waiter patronized me, talking down to me because he thought I knew nothing about gourmet dining, I’d refuse to patronize his restaurant. |
| Paucity | Smallness of quantity or number | They closed the restaurant because the paucity of customers made running it a losing proposition. |
| Pedantic | Overly concerned with small details, especially when teaching; tending to show off one’s learning | Leavening her decisions with humorous, down-to-earth anecdotes, Judge Judy made a pleasant contrast to the typical, pedantic legal scholar. |
| Pedestrian | Performed in an unimaginative manner | Unintentionally boring, he turned out page after page of pedestrian pose. |
| Perfunctory | Lacking interest, care, or enthusiasm; not thorough | Giving the tabletop only a perfunctory swipe with her dust cloth, Betty told herself she’d polish it thoroughly tomorrow. |
| Peripheral | Related to the surface or outer part; of minor importance | Rather than live in the crowded city center, we chose to buy a house in one of the peripheral suburbs ringing the metropolis. |
| Pernicious | Very destructive | Crack cocaine has a pernicious effect on urban society: it has destroyed families, turned children into drug dealers, and increased the spread of violent crime. |
| Perpetuate | Make something last; preserve from extinction | Some critics attack *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because they believe the book perpetuates a false image of African-Americans. |
| Pervasive | Spread throughout every part | Despite airing her clothes for several hours, she could not rid them of the pervasive odor of mothballs that clung to them. |
| Pessimism | Belief that things will turn out badly; tendency to expect the worst | Considering how well you’ve done in class so far, you have no real reason for pessimism about your final grade. |
| Phenomena | Observable facts; subjects of scientific investigation | Among the most beautiful natural phenomena, Auroras, also known as the northern and southern lights, are natural light displays in the sky. |
| Philanthropist | One who actively attempts to further human welfare | In his role as philanthropist and public benefactor, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., donated millions to charity; as an individual, however, he was a tight-fisted old man. |
| Piety | Religious devotion | Saintly Mother Teresa was noted for her piety; radical organizer Mother Jones was not. |
| Pithy | Terse and to the point | While other girls might have gone on and on about how uncool Elton was, Liz summed him up in one pithy comment: “He’s bogus.” |
| Placate | Appease, often by making concessions | The store manager tried to placate the angry customer, offering to replace the damaged merchandise or to give back her money right away. |
| Plausible | Appearing to be worth believing (but often not) | Your mother made you stay home from school because she needed you to program the VCR? I’m sorry, you’ll have to come up with a more plausible excuse than that. |
| Polarize | Split into opposite extremes or camps | In this fiercely contested election year, illegal immigration is a hot-button issue that will further polarize the nation’s electorate into opposing factions. |
| Polemical | Aggressive in a verbal attack | Lexy was a master of polemical rhetoric; she should have worn a T-shirt with the slogan “Born to Debate.” |
| Ponderous | Very heavy; awkward because of its heaviness; tedious and lacking in fluency or grace | The elephant is ponderous, his trumpet call most thunderous. He cannot gallop, jump, or trot. The reason is he weighs a lot. |
| Pragmatic | Concerned with the practical worth or impact of something; dealing with facts | The coming trip to France should provide me with a pragmatic test of the value of my conversational French class. |
| Precarious | Dependent on unknown conditions or circumstances and therefore dangerous | Saying the stock would be a precarious investment, Tom advised Michael against purchasing it. |
| Preclude | Keep from happening; exclude the possibility | The fact that the band was already booked to play in Hollywood on New Year’s Eve precluded their accepting the New Year’s Eve gig in London. |
| Precocious | Advanced in development | Teachers thought Polly was precocious, very gifted for her age, but her classmates agreed she was a smart aleck. |
| Precursor | Someone or something that precedes another | Was Monday’s 5.4 earthquake an aftershock of last week’s 7.2 Baja earthquake, or was it the precursor of an even more powerful earthquake still to come? |
| Predator | Creature that seizes and devours another; person who robs or exploits others | Not just cats, but a wide variety of predators – owls, hawks, weasels, foxes – catch mice for dinner. |
| Predecessor | Former occupant of a position or office now held by another | Commentators who predicted that the new Supreme Court justice would be less liberal than her predecessor so far have been proved wrong. |
| Predilection | Tendency to regard something favorably | Although Georgia O’Keefe painted many subjects over the years, she had a definite predilection for painting flowers. |
| Presumptuous | Taking liberties; excessively forward | Matilda thought it was somewhat presumptuous of the young man to have addressed her without first having been introduced. Perhaps manners were freer here in the New World. |
| Pretentious | Making an exaggerated show, to attract attention; making unjustified claims | Because the excessively large new homes in the area struck us as pretentious, we made fun of them, calling them McMansions. |
| Prevalent | Generally accepted | A radical committed to social change, Reed had no patience with the conservative views prevalent in the America of his day. |
| Prodigal | Reckless with money | Don’t be so prodigal spending my money; when you’ve earned some money of your own, you can waste it as much as you want. |
| Profane | Treat in an unworthy manner | Tourists are urged not to profane the sanctity of holy places by wearing tank tops and other immodest garb. |
| Profound | Having depth (especially intellectual); coming from far below the surface | The BP oil spill has caused profound damage to the entire Gulf Coast. |
| Profusion | Abundant quantity; lavish expenditure | Along the Mendocino coast, where there is enough moisture, wildflowers flourish in great profusion. |
| Proliferation | Rapid increase in numbers | Times of economic hardship inevitably encourage the proliferation of countless get-rich-quick schemes. |
| Prolific | Highly productive | My editors must think I’m a prolific writer: they expect me to revise six books this semester. |
| Proponent | One who advocates or argues for something | In the Senate, proponents of the universal health care measure lobbied to gain additional support for the controversial legislation. |
| Prosaic | Dull and unimaginative | Though the ad writers had come up with a wildly imaginative campaign to publicize the new product, the head office rejected it for a more prosaic, ordinary approach. |
| Provincial | Pertaining to a province; lacking urban sophistication; limited in outlook | As provincial governor, Sir Henry administered the queen’s law in his remote corner of Canada. Out of touch with London news, he soon became sadly provincial, interested only in local affairs. |
| Proximity | State of being close | Blind people sometimes develop a compensatory ability to sense the proximity of objects around them. |
| Prudent | Shrewd in handling practical matters; showing wisdom | A miser hoards money not because he is prudent but because he is stingy. |
| Qualified | 1. Made fit (by training, experience) to do a specific job; 2. Limited in some manner (secondary meaning)
 | Was the candidate for tax collector qualified accountant? Unable to give the candidate full support, the mayor gave him only a qualified endorsement. |
| Quandary | State of perplexity | When both Harvard and Stanford accepted Laura, she was in a quandary as to which school she should attend. |
| Quell | Put an end to | Miss Minchin’s demeanor was so stern and forbidding that she could quell any unrest among her students with one intimidating glance. |
| Querulous | Habitually fussy and full of complaints | Even the most agreeable toddlers can begin to act querulous if they miss their nap. |
| Quiescent | Temporarily inactive; at rest | After the great eruption, fear of Mount Etna was great; people did not return to cultivate its rich hillside lands until the volcano had been quiescent for a full two years. |
| Quixotic | Idealistic but impractical | Simon’s head is in the clouds; he constantly comes up with quixotic, unworkable schemes. |
| Ramble | Wander aimlessly (physically or verbally) | Listening to the teacher ramble, Judy wondered whether he’d ever get to the point. |
| Rancor | Lasting resentment | Thirty years after the war, she could not let go of the past but was still consumed with rancor against the enemy. |
| Random | Without definite purpose, plan, or aim | Although the sponsor of the raffle claimed all winners were chosen at random, people had their suspicions when the grand prize went to the sponsor’s brother-in-law. |
| Rant | Speak wildly, noisily, or grandiloquently; scold forcefully | When he heard I’d totaled the family car, Dad began to rant at me like a total madman. |
| Ratify | Approve formally | Because of the lack of a quorum, Congress failed to ratify measures that had been passed by the Senate, including the Freedom of Information Act. |
| Rationale | Fundamental reason or justification (not always reasonable) | Her need to have someplace to hang her earring collection was Dora’s rationale for piercing fifteen holes in each ear. |
| Raucous | Disorderly and boisterous; harsh and shrill | The raucous crowds of New Year’s Eve revelers got progressively noisier as midnight drew near. |
| Rebuttal | Response with contrary evidence; reply pointing out flaws in opponent’s argument | The defense lawyer confidently listened to the prosecutor sum up his case, sure that she could answer his arguments in her rebuttal. |
| Recant | Retract a previous statement; openly confess an error | Those who can, keep true to their faith. Those who can’t, recant. Hoping to make Joan of Arc recant her sworn testimony, her English captors tried to convince her that her visions had been sent by the Devil. |
| Recluse | Someone who withdraws from society | Disappointed in love, Miss Emily became a recluse; she shut herself away in her empty mansion and refused to see another living soul. |
| Recount | Give a detailed account | A born storyteller, my father loved to recount anecdotes about his early years in New York City. |
| Rectify | Set right | You had better rectify your accounting errors before the auditors arrive. |
| Redundant | Excessively wordy; more than needed | The bottle of wine I brought to Bob’s party was certainly redundant. How was I to know that he owned a winery? |
| Refute | Prove false; overthrow by means of evidence | The defense attorney found several respectable witnesses who were able to refute the lies told by the prosecution’s sole witness. |
| Regimen | Systematic program or plan; regular course of training | Reggie prepared for the marathon by following a strict regimen: he began every day with a brisk run to the Starbucks down the block. |
| Relegate | Consign to an inferior position | After Ralph dropped his second tray of drinks that week, the manager swiftly relegated him to a minor post behind the bar. |
| Remorse | Deep regret for past misdeeds | After his mother’s death, Minh felt remorse for all the times he had laughed at her broken English and old-fashioned ways. |
| Renounce | Give up voluntarily | Even though she knew she would be burned at the stake as a witch, Joan of Arc refused to renounce her belief that her voices came from God. |
| Repel | Drive away; create distaste in | At first the Beast’s grotesque appearance repelled Beauty, but she came to love the tender heart hidden behind that beastly exterior. |
| Reprehensible | Deserving blame | Shocked by the viciousness of the bombing, politicians of every party uniformly condemned the terrorists’ reprehensible deed. |
| Reprimand | Strong rebuke | Every time Ermengarde made a mistake in class, she was terrified that she would receive a harsh reprimand from Miss Minchin. |
| Reprove | Scold, generally in a gentle manner | Though Aunt Bea at times had to reprove Opie for inattention in church, she believed he was at heart a God-fearing lad. |
| Repudiate | Refuse to have anything to do with; reject the authority of | One separating from Tony, Tina announced that she would repudiate all debts acquired by her soon-to-be ex-husband. |
| Rescind | Make (an act or contract) void | Thanks to the adoption of new economy measures, with a savings of $140 million, the school board was able to rescind the layoffs of 540 teachers. |
| Reserve | Formal but distant manner; avoidance of intimacy | Although some girls were attracted by Mark’s air of reserve, Judy was put off by it, for she felt his aloofness indicated a lack of openness. |
| Resigned | Accepting one’s fate | Resigned to his downtrodden existence, the day laborer was too meek to protest his supervisor’s bullying. |
| Resolution | Firmness of purpose; formal expression of opinion; separation into elements | Nothing could shake Philip’s resolution that his children would get the best education that money could buy. |
| Resolve | Firmness of purpose | How dare you question my resolve to take up skydiving? Of course I haven’t changed my mind! |
| Restraint | Influence that curbs or brings under control | Control yourself, young lady! Show some restraint! |
| Reticent | Inclined to be silent | Compared to Jo, who was perfectly ready to chat with anyone about anything, Beth was reticent about what she considered personal matters. |
| Retract | Take back; draw back | When I saw how Fred and his fraternity brothers had trashed the frat house, I decided to retract my offer to let them use our summer cottage over spring break. |
| Reverent | Showing deep respect or adoration | Though I bow my head in church and recite my prayers, sometimes I don’t feel particularly reverent. |
| Rhetorical | Concerned with the persuasive use of language; pertaining to effective communication; used merely for style | Never try to answer a rhetorical question like “Is the Pope Catholic?” The speaker asks it only to make a point, not to elicit a reply, and if you respond, “Yes, he is,” you will just sound foolish. |
| Rigorous | Demanding strict attention to meeting standards | Disliked by his super officers, the officer candidate in *An Officer and a Gentleman* went through an extremely rigorous training program. |
| Robust | Possessing or showing strength | After pumping iron and taking karate for six months, the little old lady was so robust that she could break a plank with her fist. |
| Sage | Person celebrated for wisdom | Hearing tales of a mysterious Master of All Knowledge who lived in the hills of Tibet, Sandy was possessed with a burning desire to consult the legendary sage. |
| Sanction | Make valid; give consent to | Nothing will convince me to sanction the engagement of my daughter to such a worthless young man. |
| Satirical | Using biting wit to attack folly | Through the comments of the characters in his cartoon strip *Doonesbury,* cartoonist Gary Trudeau makes fun of political corruption; his humor is satirical. |
| Scrupulous | Conscientious and exact; extremely thorough | Although Alfred is scrupulous in fulfilling his duties at work, he is less conscientious about meeting his obligations at home. |
| Scrutiny | Close and critical examination | At evening block inspection, the recruits’ bunkroom, washroom, and gear came under the inspecting officer’s close scrutiny. |
| Seclusion | State of being removed from social contact | One moment she loved being surrounded by crowds; the next, she sought seclusion. |
| Servile | Slavishly submissive | Constantly fawning on his employer, Uriah Heep was a servile creature. |
| Skeptic | Person who suspends judgment until the evidence supporting a point of view has been examined. | I am a skeptic about the proposed new health plan I want some proof that it can work. |
| Sluggish | Disinclined to exert oneself; slow to react | After two nights without sleep, she felt sluggish and incapable of exertion. |
| Somber | Dark and gloomy; depressing in nature | From the doctor’s grim expression, I could tell he had somber news. |
| Soporific | Marked by or inducing sleepiness | Because John once had fallen asleep reading *War and Peace,* he thought that all Russian novels were soporific. |
| Specious | Seemingly reasonable but incorrect; superficially plausible | This alleged crisis is no crisis at all. It is based on specious claims about financial institutions, on scare stories about impeding economic ruin. |
| Sporadic | Occurring irregularly; recurring unpredictably | Because his attendance in class had been at best sporadic, the teacher was tempted to flunk him. |
| Spurious | Not genuine or authentic | Natasha’s claim to be the lost heir of the Romanoffs was spurious; the only thing Russian about her was the vodka she drank. |
| Squander | Spend foolishly | If you squander your allowance on video games and manga, you won’t have enough money to buy the new bike you want. |
| Stagnant | Not flowing; not advancing | Mosquitoes commonly breed in pools of stagnant water. When the economy is stagnant, even college graduates struggle to find work. |
| Static | Showing little or no change; lacking development | Bob and Jane had been dating for months but things didn’t seem to be going anywhere: their relationship was static. |
| Strident | Loud and harsh | Whenever Sue was angry, she tried to avoid raising her voice because she had no wish to sound strident. |
| Submissive | Giving way to someone or something that one is unable to resist | Crushed by his authoritarian father, Will had no defiance left in him; he was totally submissive in the face of authority. |
| Subordinate | Occupying a lower rank | Bishop Proudie’s wife expected all of the subordinate clergy to behave with great deference to the wife of their superior. |
| Subside | Settle down; sink to the bottom | The doctor assured Johnny’s parents that their son’s fever would eventually subside. |
| Substantiate | Establish by evidence or proof | These endorsements written by satisfied customers substantiate our claim that *Barron’s SAT* is the best SAT-prep book on the market. |
| Succinct | Without wasted words; short and to the point | Don’t bore your audience with excess verbiage; be succinct. |
| Superficial | On the surface; not thorough | To revise a textbook properly, you must do more than make a few superficial changes to the manuscript. |
| Superfluous | More than required | Please try not to include so many superfluous details in your report; the bare facts are all I need. |
| Supplant | Replace another, especially by force | In early Anglo-Saxon times, one tribe would drive out and supplant another until that tribe was driven out in turn by a third. |
| Surpass | Go beyond the powers of | The legendary athlete Jim Thorpe, who surpassed all his competitors at the 1912 Olympic Games, made a name for himself in baseball, football, and track. |
| Surreptitious | Done by stealth | Government agents have been known to use wiretapping and other surreptitious methods to spy on suspected terrorists. |
| Susceptible | Easily influenced; open to impression; having little resistance, as to a disease | Said the con man to the extremely susceptible customer, “Buy this new miracle drug and you will no longer be susceptible to the common cold.” |
| Sustain | Live through; keep up; give support to; bear up under | Stuart sustained such heavy losses in the stock market that he could no longer sustain his jet-setting lifestyle. |
| Taciturn | Disinclined to talk | The stereotypical cowboy is a taciturn soul, answering length questions with a terse “yep” or “nope.” |
| Tantamount | Corresponding in some respects; alike in quantity, effect, or value | Because so few Southern blacks could afford to pay the poll tax, imposing such a tax on prospective voters was tantamount to denying black voters the right to vote. |
| Tenacity | Stubborn determination to reach a goal, and unwillingness to admit defeat | Jean Valjean could not believe the tenacity of Inspector Javert. All Valjean had done was to steal a loaf of bread, and nonetheless the inspector had pursued him doggedly for twenty years! |
| Tentative | Showing uncertainty; not fully developed | Unaccustomed to strangers, Bobby at first was tentative about approaching the new babysitter. |
| Terse | Concise and to the point | There is a fine line between speech that is terse and speech so abrupt that it verges on being rude. |
| Tirade | Extended forceful speech, generally critical in nature | The cigar smoker went into a bitter tirade, denouncing the antismoking forces that had succeeded in banning smoking from most restaurants and planes. |
| Transient | Staying for a short time | Youth’s beauty is transient; it quickly fades with age |
| Trepidation | Nervous apprehension | As she entered the office of the dean of admissions, Sharon felt some trepidation about how her interview would go. |
| Trifling | Of very little significance | Why bother going to see a doctor for such a trifling, childish complaint? |
| Trite | Not fresh or original | Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back – what a trite plot! |
| Turbulent | Violently agitated | Warned of turbulent weather conditions ahead, the pilot told the passenger to fasten their seat belts. |
| Turmoil | Great commotion and confusion | Lydia running off with a soldier! Mother fainting at the news! The Bennet household was in turmoil! |
| Undermine | Chip away at | The recent corruption scandals have undermined many people’s faith in the city government. |
| Uniformity | The quality of always having the same form or manner | After a while, the uniformity of television sitcoms becomes boring. |
| Unprecedented | Never before experienced or known | The producers claimed that *New Moon’s* box-office success was unprecedented, but the opening night sales for *Pirates of the Caribbean 3* were at least as good. |
| Unwarranted | Having no justification or grounds | We could not understand Warren’s unwarranted rudeness to his mother’s guests. |
| Usurp | Seize another’s power, rank, or authority | “Judicial activism” is the alleged tendency of some judges to usurp the power of elected legislatures by making the law rather than merely interpreting it. |
| Vacillate | Hesitate in making a choice | Uncertain which suitor she ought to accept, the princess vacillated, first favoring one, then the other. |
| Venerate | Regard with esteem | In Tibet today, the common people still venerate their traditional spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. |
| Verbose | Using or containing more words than needed | Someone mute cannot talk; someone verbose can hardly stop talking. |
| Vestigial | Relating to visible traces left by something that no longer exists | The ostrich has vestigial wings, appendix-like, the silly things. Why wings? You ask, and so do I. Wings or not, this bird can’t fly. |
| Viable | Practical or workable; capable of maintaining life | The plan to build a new stadium, though lacking a few details, is viable and stands a good chance of winning popular support. |
| Vigor | Active physical or mental strength | Although he was over seventy years old, Jack had the vigor of a man in his prime. |
| Vindicate | 1. Clear from blame; 2. Provide justification or support for
 | The lawyer’s goal was to vindicate her client and prove him innocent of all charges. The critics’ uniformly poor reviews vindicate my opinion that *Prince of Persia is a lousy movie.* |
| Virulent | 1. Extremely severe; highly noxious; 2. Spitefully hostile
 | Laid up with a virulent case of measles, Vera blamed her doctors because her recovery took so long. In fact, she became quite virulent on the subject of the quality of modern medical care. |
| Volatile | 1. Evaporating rapidly; 2. Tending to explode into violence or to change unexpectedly
 | Acetone is an extremely volatile liquid: it evaporates instantly. The diva’s temper was extremely volatile: the only thing you could predict was that she would blow up. |
| Voluble | Tending to talk easily or rapidly | Excessively voluble speakers suffer from logorrhea: They run off at the mouth a lot! |
| Whimsical | Full of sudden, eccentric notions | The Beatles expressed themselves through capricious, flip humor and whimsical displays of carefree abandon. |
| Zealot | Person who shows excessive religious or political fervor | Though Glenn was devout, he was no zealot: he never tried to force his beliefs on his friends. |