

The Times (and Words) Are a-Changing

English has tremendous fluidity. It readily adopts words from foreign languages, often without immediately "anglifying" their spellings or pronunciations. As Shakespeare so aptly demonstrated, English also allows words to be used as various parts of speech without any alteration of form. And English shapes itself differently each generation by accepting and rejecting popular usages and vocabulary. Writers should be ever aware of the changing nature of their artistic medium.

We have gradually taken to speaking in letters or acronyms rather than full words especially where technology has become ingrained in our everyday life and work. Companies have *IT* departments. We can communicate via *IM*. We connect our hardware with *USBs*. We spend millions on *ISPs*, *DVDs*, and *MP3s*. Such pseudo-words are common and acceptable in almost any modern context.

Technology has given us new functions for old words. *Text*, for example, is no longer just a noun. The sight of a *mouse* on a desk does not necessarily send a person running for traps. And the modern version of *spam* is far more universally hated than the canned pork of the same name. Again, readers are accustomed to and will readily accept these usage shifts.

For decades, stylebooks frowned upon the use of impact as a verb meaning "to affect," insisting that, when used as a verb, it could only mean "to cause to stick or lodge." Nowadays, these same manuals acknowledge that "to affect" is indeed a common and understood usage. Even the newest editions of both the layman-preferred Merriam-Webster and the linguist-revered Oxford English Dictionaries have included a number of modern terms that were unacknowledged or termed non-standard in previous editions.

In the past fifteen years or so, we have lost many of our *problems* only to have them replaced by *issues*. While stunning or incredible events in the eighties and nineties were often described as *awesome*, in this century they are more likely to be pronounced *amazing*. While not earth-shattering, generational lexical choices such as these bear thoughtful consideration because they can subtly date a person's writing. For this reason, it may be advisable to choose traditional over modern word choices--or vice versa--depending on one's intended audience.

English morphs in various ways. We writers would do well to weigh choices to determine which will work best for our audiences and, when necessary, edit accordingly.

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About the Author

AnnaLisa Michalski writes and publishes the ezine [Word-wise](#) and owns and operates [Admin Maven](#), a virtual assisting service specializing in proofreading and copy editing.