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INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS: HOW TO BEAT THE BUBBLEHEADS

Most research indicates that internal communication – especially the top-down sort that comes from management – doesn't have a whole lot of credibility with employees. That's not surprising, since for the most part it's driven by Bubbleheads.

Now before you started canceling your subscriptions, let me say this:

I'm not casting aspersions on you, the dedicated corporate communicators whose job it is to persuade employees that working for The Acme Corp. is better than winning the Power Ball jackpot.

What I am saying is that you are crippled by people who have absolutely no business being involved with internal communications.

Those being, of course, the aforementioned Bubbleheads.

Meet The Bubbleheads

Why are they Bubbleheads? Not because they're fools, but because they tend to live in their own little worlds – The Bubble – and communicate solely from that perspective.

Generally, they fall into four categories:

- **Executives.** These B-Heads tend to say what they think people need to hear as opposed to what's in employees' interest. It's often rife with corporate-speak and condescension, which is probably okay since no one reads this stuff anyway.
- **Lawyers.** Need I say more?
- **Technical personnel.** By these, I'm talking about compliance types, engineers, benefits specialists, and the like – people whose job (often by necessity, I'll admit) is steeped in multi-syllable words, acronyms, and jargon.
- **HR professionals.** I include these folks mostly because in the era of downsizing and rightsizing, a lot of the internal communication function has fallen to them. In a perfect world, it ought to be in marketing.

When the Bubbleheads are in charge of – or even play a part in – employee communications, the results are pretty predictable. You'll get copy that is

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boring, predictable, bloodless, wordy, irrelevant, and fuzzily messaged (if it's messaged at all).

Beat The Bubbleheads

Of course, there are ways to prevent the Bubbleheads from exerting too much influence over internal communications. Here are seven of them:

Link content to strategy. Internal newsletters should not be about live babies and dead fish (i.e., births and bass tournaments). They should be about strategy. Everything should in some way reflect the elements of your strategic plan. This goes beyond content to include headlines, quote-outs, signature heads, "inside" boxes, design elements – all of it.

Message relentlessly. Never miss a chance to reinforce your overriding corporate theme or messages. You may get tired of it, and feel some pressure to avoid redundancy. Resist. Learn to say the same thing over and over and over – just differently.

Cut the BS. As the sidebar indicates, a lot of employees don't believe what they hear and think management spins too much. That compels a level of honesty that, frankly, too many executives and almost all lawyers can't stomach – and that may be understandable in some cases. The point is to tell as much of the truth as you can, explain as thoroughly as you can from your perspective, and don't try to convince anyone you're selling lemonade when they all know it's a lemon.

Write in conversational English. Bubbleheads

typically don't speak Bubblehead. Employees speak English. Your communications should reflect that, and sound human. Don't be afraid to bend some of the dumber non-rules of English. Every piece should sound like something you'd say, one to one, to a colleague over a cup of coffee.

Adopt a "many-to-many" approach. Don't simply assume employees get all their information from a single source. Use as many vehicles as possible to reach as many people as possible — and, as mentioned above, don't worry about overlap.

Provide context. A major mistake is to assume that employees will make the leap from information to communication. They won't. You have to not only provide information, but put it in a context that enhances understanding. If you ask employees to make up their minds about what something means, they will, and their interpretation will likely be a whole lot different from yours.

Edit for consistency. It's hard to believe, I know, but people in organizations have their own agendas. That's fine, so long as those agendas don't get in the way of consistency. So when you review content, make sure that the material is consistent – with other content, and with organizational intent. The quickest way to kill credibility is to put out conflicting messages.

Universal Approval Isn't The Goal

One thing to keep in mind – and the Bubbleheads typically don't get it – is this:

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The goal of internal communication is not to win universal approval. That's just not going to happen.

We all know that the people who are most likely to complain will complain; that their comments will probably find their way to someone of some importance; and that you'll catch hell for it.

The goal is understanding. You want to put out a

consistent, relevant, strategic message in as many forms as possible, to as many people as possible, through as many media as possible. If you do it effectively, and are willing to write outside the bubble, you'll win more people than you'll lose. And these days, that is victory enough.

CREDIBILITY: WHO CAN YOU BELIEVE?

The professional services firm Towers Perrin has conducted various surveys examining the quality and credibility of internal communications. Here are some findings from a study released earlier this year, as reported by *The Boston Globe*:

- 51 percent of employees believe employers try too hard to "spin" the truth.
- 60 percent said employers communicate more honestly with shareholders than with employees.
- 58 percent said employers communicate more honestly with customers than with employees.
- 48 percent said information they get from their direct supervisors was less reliable than what they received from CEO's.
- Two-thirds of employees under 35 trust communications from management, compared with 44 percent of those 50 and older.
- 59 percent of employees with five or less years on the job said employers were open and honest, compared with 48 percent of those with more than five years.
- 57 percent of employees who earn \$100,000 or more annually believe their employers communicate honestly, compared with 44 percent of those earning less than \$100,000.

Towers Perrin's Mark Schumann put it in a context that ought to ring an alarm bell or two among corporate communicators. He told *The Globe*:

"These results reveal a worrisome employer-employee dynamic. Regardless of the topic, an organization will find it difficult to motivate, engage, and retain their most talented employees if their messages are not believed. . . .Employees, like shareholders, lenders, and potential investors, expect more transparency today from the organizations in which they have invested their time and talents."

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STRUCTURALLY TROUBLESOME

Too often, writers adopt certain structures inside a sentence that have the practical effect of undercutting their work. Sometimes it's out of habit; sometimes it's in the mistaken belief that using them somehow elevates the prose.

But whatever the reason, these structures cause a couple of problems that every writer should avoid.

Basically, we're talking about sentences built around the following verbs or verb phrases:

- **Make:** "The prosecutor's arguments made the witness go silent."
- **Do:** "The agency does research on critical issues."
- **Give:** "The CEO gave a briefing to the Board."
- **Provide:** "We asked the staff to provide a clarification of its proposal."
- **Perform:** "Each department must perform a review of its efficiency."
- **There is/There are:** "This is what we need to do" and "There are three goals in this plan."

Nothing is technically wrong with any of those sentences. Still, some bad things are happening.

To begin with, the structures make each one longer than it needs to be. The verb phrase "made the witness go silent" can easily be rewritten as "silenced the witness." You end up cutting two words out, reducing the overall sentence length by 25 percent.

The do/give/perform/provide structures can be easily rewritten as well: "The agency researches critical issues" (28 percent shorter); "The CEO

briefed the Board" (37 percent shorter); "We asked the staff to clarify its proposal" (27 percent shorter); "Each department must review its efficiency" (33 percent shorter).

But note something else in those first five examples.

In each case, we have taken a weak, multi-word verb phrase and strengthened it with a single active verb. While I'm not one of those people who believes verbs are the only things that make a sentence work, there's no denying that a stronger verb makes for a better sentence.

In the sixth example, the problem is similar: Using "there is" or "there are" just guts the sentence.

"We need to do this" is by far stronger and more active than "This is what we need to do." The same is true for "This plan has three goals" rather than "There are three goals in this plan." Of course, in both cases you're taking out needless words, too. So you end up with sentences that are not only stronger, but shorter and easier to grasp on a single reading as well.

The point here, like it is in almost everything else we publish in this thing, is not to propose an across-the-board ban on these kinds of structures (we leave that sort of inflexibility to the self-styled Grammar Police). We're just suggesting that when the natural urge comes to use them, take a second to reconsider and see if you say it better and briefer.

TO BOLDLY SPLIT WHAT NO ONE DARED SPLIT BEFORE

Remember our old pal Robert Lowth – the bishop of London responsible for the stupid rule that bans prepositions from the end of a sentence?

Well he's back.

The good bishop, it seems, was apparently also the first on record to say that splitting an infinitive was tantamount to grammar heresy. But he's kind of outdone himself in this case, as the rule – and its roots – are even dumber than his rationale for prohibiting the terminal preposition.

Besides, why should we listen to a misguided cleric of the past when we can get the final truth from a starship captain of the future?

A Dead Rule From A Dead Language

It all started with Lowth's infamous 1762 book, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (which, it should be noted, conveniently ignored the fact that split infinitives had been around since the 13th century).

Lowth, you'll recall, was one of those freaks who thought that English needed to be "elevated" to its Latin roots. And in the language of Caesar, he pointed out in his book, one does not split an infinitive.

For good reason. It's impossible.

In Latin, you see, infinitives are one word. For example, *ponere* means "to place." You'll agree, it's mighty tough to insert an adverb in the middle of a word.

Of course, if logic were a driver of language,

Lowth's argument would have been seen for the absurdly faux rule it is and rejected forever.

But, sadly, language has nothing to do with logic. It's all about grammarians. And, man, they took to this one like a puppy takes to a fire hydrant.

A Dumb Idea Gets Traction

At first, no one paid much attention to Lowth (ah, but would that be the case today). However, as English started to become the province of the masses in the 19th century – gasp! – the Grammar Bobbies felt compelled to steal it back from the vast verbal unwashed.

Which meant re-elevating it to the pure Latin form.

Enter Henry Alford, who delivered a diatribe against the split infinitive with his 1866 tome, *Plea for the Queen's English*. In next to no time, the rule had more followers than the Pied Piper had rats.

It got so bad, in fact, that when the United States and England were negotiating a treaty, the British government let its representatives concede on issues like fishing rights – but forbade them to accept any accord that included a split infinitive.

(What is it with the British, anyway? David Foster Wallace wrote in *Harper's* about "the legendary assistant to P.M. Margaret Thatcher who refused to read any memo with a split infinitive in it.")

The Backlash Begins

At the turn century, some writers began to see

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the light of logic. It more or less started in the 1907 version of *The King's English*, in which brothers H.W. and F.G. Fowler wrote:

"The split infinitive has taken such hold upon the consciousness of journalists that, instead of warning the novice against splitting the infinitives, we must warn him against the curious superstition that the splitting or not splitting makes the difference between a good and a bad writer."

Nearly 20 years later, H.W. Fowler chimed in on his own in *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, calling writers who avoid splitting infinitives "boggyhaunted creatures." In 1931, George O. Curme wrote in *Grammar of the English Language* that it is actually better to split infinitives because "it makes for clearer expression."

Fast forward to 1993 and *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*, which states that the split infinitive "eliminates all possibility of ambiguity." Then to 1996, when *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* boldly announced, "The only rationale for condemning the construction is based on a false analogy with Latin." And finally to 2003 and *The Chicago Manual of Style*: "(I)t is now widely acknowledged that adverbs sometimes justifiably separate the to from the principal verb."

Concludes the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. in a story on its web page:

"For the past 100 years, virtually all leading experts on English have dismissed the blanket rule against split infinitives as pointless."

Despite All Evidence To The Contrary...

But even in the face of this near universal rejection, the rule lives on. Why?

Kingsley Amis, in his book *The King's English*, published posthumously in 1997, probably hit the nail on the proverbial head:

"People with strong erroneous views about 'correct' English are just the sort of people who consider your application for a job, decide whether you are 'educated' or not, wonder about your general suitability for this and that."

They also make decisions about raises, promotions, and your willingness to be a "team player."

So there you have it. And as a result, we often end up with text that reads as if it's been forced to jump through the Contorted English Hoop. "I hope to really like this recipe" becomes either "I really hope to like this recipe," "I hope really to like this recipe," or "I hope to like this recipe, really."

Do the Grammar Cops care that that each of those sentences means something different than the original or makes no sense at all? Not a chance. All that matters is that we're writing according to a language that was spoken thousands of years ago by fat white guys in togas and bad wigs.

Grammar According To Capt. James T. Kirk

And yet, here's something I find truly amazing:

In our training sessions, when we say it's okay – even preferred – to split an infinitive, we attract the occasional boo or hiss. Then we remind the non-believers of what that noted grammarian, Gene Roddenberry, wrote about the mission of the starship *Enterprise*:

“To boldly go where no man has gone before.”

There's usually a brief pause after that. Followed by murmurs of agreement. Followed by the nodding of heads.

Apparently if Capt. James T. Kirk approves of split infinitives, it's okay.

So the next time the Grammar Police come rolling around, be prepared with the arguments. And if all else fails, well, you can always just put the phaser on Stun...



SO WHO IS THIS GUY, ANYWAY?

Given that Robert Lowth seems to be the guy responsible for some of the dumbest rules of English, we set out on a little investigation to see who this guy really was.

First impressions are revealing: He looked like a standard poodle with a beak nose. But I digress.

Lowth was born in Hampshire, England, in 1710, and got his B.A. in 1733 and M.A. in 1737, both from Oxford. Somewhere in there, he entered the Anglican Church, and was named vicar of Overton, Hampshire. He held that position until 1741, when he was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford.

He became archdeacon of Winchester in 1750; left Oxford to get married in 1752; was appointed rector of East Woodhay in 1753; and got his Doctorate in Divinity from Oxford in 1754 for writing *Praelectiones Academicae de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*. It was about Hebrew poetry.

In 1762, he published *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, which would become known for its flat ban on splitting infinitives and ending sentences with a preposition. Academic references to the book often state that Lowth's goal was to “regulate English usage within the rules of Latin grammar.” Unfortunately, the book

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SAY WHAT?



Who says we Americans have a monopoly on government bureaucratese?

The UK-based Plain English Campaign is a self-described “independent pressure group” that fights for public information to be written in understandable language. Annually, it gives the “Foot in Mouth” award for the most incoherent statement uttered by a public figure.

One winner was Member of Parliament Boris Johnson who, on the BBC TV quiz show *Have I Got News For You?* uttered a phrase that would have even

Donald Rumsfeld scratching his head:

“I could not fail to disagree with you less.”

I’ve parsed that quadruple negative from every direction, and got nothing but a headache for the trouble. So if you can come up with something that makes sense, and give us a rationale for your conclusion, send it to doug@beabetterwriter.com. Best answer gets some cool writer swag.

As for the last go-round, Marge Rice of Wells Fargo ran her winning streak to two by translating “mobile dentition” as loose teeth.

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remained a staple in classrooms until the early 20th century.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Authentic Hinduism* (really – even I wouldn’t make that up), Lowth was part of a school that “took a critical view and spent a lot of time in correcting the shortcomings and the improprieties of the English language that were commonly in use...They held the view that Latin was still a superior language.”

Lucky for the language, he stayed too busy to screw things up any more than he already had. Lowth was consecrated bishop of St. Davids in 1766; quickly transferred to Oxford, where he was bishop until 1777; and became bishop of

London that same year. He died in 1787.

Okay class, to recap:

Here’s a guy whose day job had nothing to do with writing. His doctoral dissertation (or whatever they called it back then) was in Latin and on a subject not even remotely connected to English. His academic specialty was poetry. He wanted to regulate the way we write. He took the elitist position that language was being perverted by “commoners.” (And don’t forget, he looked like a poodle.)

So tell me again: Why are we paying any attention to what he had to say?



NOT-SO-LIVE, FROM NEW YORK, IT'S EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT WEB CONTENT

In October, I did a session at the International PRSA Conference in New York entitled “Take Back Your Web Site: The Second Internet Revolution.” It combined empirical research, anecdotal evidence, and personal experience to make an argument for how web content should be written and displayed – and who should do it.

My thesis was (and is) this:

Strategic communicators have ceded the power of the Internet to people who have no idea how to communicate – the IT crowd, artists, tekkies who like the cool new applications, information freaks, etc. – and need to take it back.

Here are some of the key points:

- Ease of navigation and fast downloads are the top two reasons users return to a site; “fun” and animation matter the least.
- Information on a site should be no more than two clicks away.
- Use web-friendly words of one and two syllables rather than longer synonyms; for example “get” instead of “obtain”; “about” instead of “approximately”; “now” instead of “currently”; etc.
- Limit paragraphs to one sentence when possible.
- Create scannable text by using bullet points, heads and subheads, and bold-faced value statements inside sentences.
- Even though the Internet is a function of technology, it is also an intimate, one-to-one medium; as such, sites need a personality.
- Web text should be written conversationally.
- “Text rules on the PC screen” and artwork is not a point of entry.
- Users view short text blocks, headlines, and captions before they view graphics.
- Users “parachute” into a site, and there is no guarantee they’ll land on the home page. So every page needs to have consistent branding, messaging, and key words.
- Users prefer brief summaries with links, and dislike links alone.
- If press releases are posted in your site, include the lead paragraph and the headline – not just the headline – as your link.
- Flash technology is generally useless in 98 to 99 percent of applications.



A PICTURE MAY BE WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS -- BUT BASIC ENGLISH ISN'T

For anyone out there who still doubts the value of short words (i.e., technical writers and lawyers) here's further evidence that brevity is better.

Back in 1930, a guy named Charles K. Ogden wrote a book called *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar*. It identified 850 words that made up, as the title implies, what's called Basic English – good, simple, understandable communications.

The list was developed like this:

It started with the 25,000-word *Oxford Pocket English Dictionary*. Redundancies were then removed, as were words that could be replaced by

combinations of simpler words. In the end, more than 95 percent of the dictionary was eliminated.

But here's what's really interesting. Of the 850 words that survived:

- 60 percent were one syllable
- 28 percent were two syllables
- 9 percent were three syllables
- 3 percent were four or more syllables

Translated, that means almost 90 percent of basic English consists of simple words. And therein lies a lesson for those who believe – incorrectly – that five-dollar words have more value than their nickel counterparts.

OKAY, SO THIS GORILLA IS TALKING TO A PARROTT, AND SHE SAYS...

For all of our natural loquaciousness, it appears that we humans are comparative word pikers compared to our friends in the animal kingdom.

Consider Koko the Gorilla. Born in 1972 and a student of scientist Penny Patterson, Koko has a language of about 2,000 words. Beyond that, she (Koko, not Penny) has an IQ of between 70 and 95; 100 is considered normal in humans.

Then there's N'kisi the African Gray Parrott from Manhattan. She not only talks in a language that's variously estimated to number 800 to 1,000 words (though certified at 950). She also reads minds.

I'm not making this up, either.

THE 850

In determining what constituted Basic English, Ogden broke the words into five categories – Operations (100 words), General Words (400), Picturable Words (200), General Qualities (100), and Opposites (50).

My guess is that not too many of you are interested in wading through the list. But someone is bound to wonder what they are, and good writers always anticipate audience questions. So here are the 850 by category.

OPERATIONS

Come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take, be, do, have, say, see, send, may, will, about, across, after, against, among, at, before, between, by, down, from, in, off, on, over, through, to, under, up, with, as, for, of, till, than, a, the, all, any, every,

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little, much, no, other, some, such, that, this, I, he, you, who, and, because, but, or, if, though, while, how, when, where, why, again, ever, far, forward, here, near, now, out, still, then, there, together, well, almost, enough, even, not, only, quite, so, very, tomorrow, yesterday, north, south, east, west, please, yes .

GENERAL WORDS

Account, act, addition, adjustment, advertisement, agreement, air, amount, amusement, animal, answer, apparatus, approval, argument, art, attack, attempt, attention, attraction, authority, back, balance, base, behavior, belief, birth, bit, bite, blood, blow, body, brass, bread, breath, brother, building, burn, burst, business, butter, canvas, care, cause, chalk, chance, change, cloth, coal, color, comfort, committee, company, comparison.

Also:

Competition, condition, connection, control, cook, copper, copy, cork, cotton, cough, country, cover, crack, credit, crime, crush, cry ,current, curve, damage, danger, daughter, day, death, debt, decision, degree, design, desire, destruction, detail, development, digestion, direction, discovery, discussion, disease, disgust, distance, distribution, division, doubt, drink, driving, dust, earth, edge, education, effect, end, error, event.

Also:

Example, exchange, existence, expansion, experience, expert, fact, fall, family, father, fear, feeling, fiction, field, fight, fire, flame, flight, flower, fold, food, force, form, friend, front, fruit, glass, gold, government, grain, grass, grip, group, growth, guide, harbor, harmony, hate, hearing,

heat, help, history, hole, hope, hour, humor, ice, idea, impulse, increase, industry, ink, insect, instrument, insurance, interest, invention, iron, jelly, join.

Also:

Journey, judge, jump, kick, kiss, knowledge, land, language, laugh, law, lead, learning, leather, letter, level, lift, light, limit, linen, liquid, list, look, loss, love, machine, man, manager, mark, market, mass, meal, measure, meat, meeting, memory, metal, middle, milk, mind, mine, minute, mist, money, month, morning ,mother, motion, mountain, move, music, name, nation, need, news, night, noise, note, number, observation, offer.

Also:

Oil, operation, opinion, order, organization, ornament, owner, page, pain, paint, paper, part, paste, payment, peace, person, place, plant, play, pleasure, point, poison, polish, porter, position, powder, power, price, print, process, produce, profit, property, prose, protest, pull, punishment, purpose, push, quality, question, rain, range, rate, ray, reaction, reading, reason, record, regret, relation, religion, representative, request, respect, rest, reward, rhythm, rice, river, road, roll, room, rub, rule, run, salt, sand, scale, science, sea.

Also:

Seat, secretary, selection, self, sense, servant, sex, shade, shake, shame, shock, side, sign, silk, silver, sister, size, sky, sleep, slip, slope, smash, smell, smile, smoke, sneeze, snow, soap, society, son, song, sort, sound, soup, space, stage, start, statement, steam, steel, step, stitch, stone, stop, story, stretch, structure substance sugar, suggestion, summer, support, surprise, swim,

system, talk, taste, tax, teaching, tendency, test, theory, thing.

Also:

Thought, thunder, time, tin, top, touch, trade, transport, trick, trouble, turn, twist, unit, use, value, verse, vessel, view, voice, walk, war, wash, waste, water, wave, wax, way, weather, week, weight, wind, wine, winter, woman, wood, wool, word, work, wound, writing, year.

PICTURABLE WORDS

Angle, ant, apple, arch, arm, army, baby, bag, ball, band, basin, basket, bath, bed, bee, bell, berry, bird, blade, board, boat, bone, book, boot, bottle, box, boy, brain, brake, branch, brick, bridge, brush, bucket, bulb, button, cake, camera, card, cart, carriage, cat, chain, cheese, chest, chin, church, circle, clock, cloud, coat, collar, comb, cord, cow, cup, curtain, cushion, dog, door, drain, drawer, dress, drop, ear, egg, engine, eye, face, farm.

Also:

Feather, finger, fish, flag, floor, fly, foot, fork, fowl, frame, garden, girl, glove, goat, gun, hair, hammer, hand, hat, head, heart, hook, horn, horse, hospital, house, island, jewel, kettle, key, knee, knife, knot, leaf, leg, library, line, lip, lock, map, match, monkey, moon, mouth, muscle, nail, neck, needle, nerve, net, nose, nut, office, orange, oven, parcel, pen, pencil, picture, pig, pin, pipe, plane, plate, plough/plow, pocket, pot, potato, prison.

Also:

Pump, rail, rat, receipt, ring, rod, roof, root, sail, school, scissors, screw, seed, sheep, shelf, ship, shirt, shoe, skin, skirt, snake, sock, spade,

sponge, spoon, spring, square, stamp, star, station, stem, stick, stocking, stomach, store, street, sun, table, tail, thread, throat, thumb, ticket, toe, tongue, tooth, town, train, tray, tree, trousers, umbrella, wall, watch, wheel, whip, whistle, window, wing, wire, worm.

GENERAL QUALITIES

Able, acid, angry, automatic, beautiful, black, boiling, bright, broken, brown, cheap, chemical, chief, clean, clear, common, complex, conscious, cut, deep, dependent, early, elastic, electric, equal, fat, fertile, first, fixed, flat, free, frequent, full, general, good, great, grey/gray, hanging, happy, hard, healthy, high, hollow, important, kind, like.

Also:

Living, long, male, married, material, medical, military, natural, necessary, new, normal, open, parallel, past, physical, political, poor, possible, present, private, probable, quick, quiet, ready, red, regular, responsible, right, round, same, second, separate, serious, sharp, smooth, sticky, stiff, straight, strong, sudden, sweet, tall, thick, tight, tired, true, violent, waiting, warm, wet, wide, wise, yellow, young.

OPPOSITES

Awake, bad, bent, bitter, blue, certain, cold, complete, cruel, dark, dead, dear, delicate, different, dirty, dry, false, feeble, female, foolish, future, green, ill, last, late, left, loose, loud, low, mixed, narrow, old, opposite, public, rough, sad, safe, secret, short, shut, simple, slow, small, soft, solid, special, strange, thin, white, wrong.