



A1

You use this adjective to describe something that's truly top-notch or first class (you know, something like "This is an A1 book!"). You may also see it written as *A-1* or *A 1*, and you may hear folks describe something as *A number 1*. All these variations come from the eighteenth century when an Englishman named Edward Lloyd (whose name lives on as the founder of the famous insurer Lloyd's of London) began publishing Lloyd's Register, an annual list of ships and their equipment. Yes, people actually read that kind of thing back in those days. Anyway, each ship was given a two-part rating: the first part referred to the ship itself, and a rating of A meant that the ship's hull was brand-spanking new or fully restored; the second part referred to the ship's equipment, and a rating of 1 meant that the ship was fully stocked with the latest gear ("well and sufficiently found" in the quaint and indecipherable prose of the day). The worst rating given by Lloyd's Register was C3, but (not all that surprisingly) that designation never took off as a synonym for something not very good ("Britney's new album is C3!").

abracadabra

If you're a magician who's a bit on the old-fashioned side, you can use the word *abracadabra* right before you perform a trick as a way of ensuring the "success" of the trick. The rest of us can use the word to refer to any kind of nonsense or BALDERDASH. (Not surprisingly, a search of the literature reveals that the phrase "legal abracadabra" is quite common.) The traditional explanation for the origin of this curious word (no one knows exactly where it came from) is that the two "abra" parts are based on the first letters of the Hebrew words *ab* ("father"),

2 accomplice

ben (“son”), and *ruach acadosch* (“holy spirit”). Another good guess is that it comes from the Chaldean phrase *abbada ka dabra*, which means, curiously, “perish like the word.” Abracadabra doesn’t show up in English until 1696, but it’s much older than that, first appearing in a second-century Latin poem by the Roman physician Quintus Severus Sammonicus (they don’t make names like *that* anymore!). It’s thought that abracadabra was used as a kind of charm, but only if it appeared in the following form:

A B R A C A D A B R A
A B R A C A D A B R
A B R A C A D A B
A B R A C A D A
A B R A C A D
A B R A C A
A B R A C
A B R A
A B R
A B
A

Write it like that on a piece of parchment or inscribe it on a handy amulet, suspend it around your neck, and you’d soon be rid of your toothache or fever or whatever. Take two abracadabras and call me in the morning ...

accomplice

See COMPLICITY.

adultery

You may be surprised to hear that there’s no adult in adultery. That’s because the word adultery, “extramarital sex,” goes back to the Latin term *adulterare*, “to pollute, corrupt, or defile.” (This in turn comes from *alterare*, “to alter.”) Having relations with someone outside of one’s marriage was seen as defiling—or adulterating—the marriage vows, and the verb eventually turned into the noun adultery. There’s no adolescent in adultery, either, but there is an adult, because that word traces back to the Latin *adultus*, a form of the verb *adolescere*, “to grow up,” which was the source of the word adolescent.

aegis

The word *aegis* (it's pronounced EEjis) means “protection, support, or patronage.” For example, *They returned to their homes under the aegis of the U.N. peacekeeping force* or *The charity ball was held under the aegis of the Chamber of Commerce*. Things are always “under” the aegis because the word comes from Greek mythology, where it represented the shield of Zeus himself.

algebra

See ALGORITHM.

algorithm

This term will be familiar to anyone who has taken Computer Science 101 (remember flow charts?); it refers to some logical sequence of steps that leads to the solution of a problem. The idea is to then translate those steps into programming code so that a computer can be dragged into performing the grunt work of producing the actual solution. What term could be more high-tech? Strange, then, that the word wasn't coined at IBM in the 1950s, Microsoft in the 1980s, or somewhere in Silicon Valley in the 1990s. No, this word's pedigree goes way back to the *ninth century!* Back in 830, an Arab astronomer named Mohamed ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi wrote an important book on mathematics that, through various translations (and a few hundred years), brought Arabic numerals to the attention of Europe, thus blessedly ending the dominance of Roman numerals (the Super Bowl notwithstanding). The use of Arabic numbers and the decimal system was named after al-Khwarizmi, and became known as *algorism*, which turned into *algorithm*. By the way, the name of al-Khwarizmi's mathematics treatise was (take a deep breath) *Al-Kitab Almukhtamar fi Hisab al-Jabr w'al Muqabala* (this translates roughly as *The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing*), and it provided the math geeks of the day with techniques for manipulating equations. The *al-Jabr* portion of the title eventually turned into the word *algebra*.

all over but the shouting

When someone tells you that “it’s all over but the shouting,” you know he’s telling you that although some situation or event is not yet done, the outcome or result of that situation is clear. And yet when the end does come, there’s often no shouting at all. What’s up with that? It turns out that there *used* to be shouting—lots of it. In England way back in the day, towns would make major decisions by a kind of live referendum. All the folks would gather in the town square or perhaps the village green and debate the matter at hand. They would then come to a decision based on a voice vote, and because of this, these gatherings were known as *shoutings*. If, before the gathering, the outcome of the vote was known or obvious, then the situation was said to be *all over but* (or *bar*) *the shouting*.

allure

An alluring person is one who is highly attractive and enticing. The verb *allure* made its way into English by way of the French verb *aleurrer*, “to bait.” It was originally used by falconers and referred to a device or bait to lure the birds into returning, from which we get the current sense of “enticing.” I suppose this means that the person doing the alluring must have to watch the other person like a hawk!

aloof

The word *aloof* means “detached, distant,” and we use those terms metaphorically. That is, the person isn’t literally distant, just emotionally or socially distant. However, at one time aloof really did refer to something that was literally distant. Back in the mid-sixteenth century, sailing captains would ask their helmsmen to keep the ship’s bow to the wind to avoid being blown toward the lee shore. In the sailing lingo of the day, *luff* referred to either the windward direction or to the windward side of the ship. So to steer with the bow to the wind meant to steer in the direction of the windward side. To make this so, the captain would give the order to “steer aluff,” where the word *aluff* is a combination of the prefix *a-*, meaning (in this case) “in the direction of” and *luff*. A hundred years or so later, *aluff* had become *aloof*, but it still

referred to steering the bow of a ship into the wind. Remember that the goal of steering aloof was to keep some distance between the ship and the shore, so it didn't take long before aloof also came to mean "at some distance; apart." The current sense of being emotionally detached or distant followed in quick order, so that by 1602, William Shakespeare, in his play *Hamlet*, had the character Laertes say "I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation."

Amazon

These days, this word refers to the world's second longest river, the world's largest (online) retailer, or a physically imposing woman who is both strong and strong-willed. This last meaning fits well with the origins of the word *Amazon*, which refers to a mythical race of all-female warriors who lived around Scythia (which would be where Ukraine sits today). The Greek historian Herodotus described them as particularly fierce fighters and called them *Androktones*, or "men-killers." Homer mentions the Amazons in *The Iliad* and says that they "fight like men." The origin of the word *Amazon* is disputed, but the most interesting idea is that it combines the prefix *a*, meaning "without," and the Greek term *mazos*, meaning "breast." (The latter gave us the now-obsolete word *mazology*, the study of mammals—now called mammalogy—one characteristic of which is the existence of mammary glands, that is to say, breasts.) This harkens to the legendary tendency for your average Amazon warrior have her right breast removed so that it wouldn't get in the way when wielding a bow and arrow. Now *that's* dedication!

The Amazin' Amazon

If the Amazon is the second-longest river in the world, what's the longest? That distinction belongs to the Nile River, which at 4,160 miles (that's 6,695 kilometers in metric-speak) is just a bit longer than the Amazon's 4,049 miles (6,516 kilometers). Or is it? A recent (Summer 2007) report by a team of Brazilian scientists upped the length of the Amazon to 4,225 miles (6,800 kilometers), making it (assuming the report is confirmed) the new champ.

ambulance

You may know that the verb *ambulate* means “to walk,” and the adverb *ambulatory* means “of or relating to walking.” Both terms came our way from the Latin word *ambulare*, “to walk.” By now you may be scratching your head because the word *ambulance* is mighty close to *ambulate* and *ambulatory*, but it’s a vehicle, for Pete’s sake! The thing has no legs! Ah, but it once did, in a manner of speaking. It used to be that in a war, if you got injured on the battlefield, your peers simply left you there until darkness fell and it was safe to drag you out for medical ministrations (assuming you were still alive to benefit from them). In the early nineteenth century, the French decided this wasn’t a great state of affairs. Their solution was to trick out a wagon or cart with basic medical supplies. They could quickly run the wagon onto the battlefield, pick up a wounded soldier, and tend to his injuries while getting him the heck out of there. The French saw this as a kind of moving hospital, so they named the wagon a *hôpital ambulante*, or “walking hospital.” During the Crimean War in the mid-nineteenth century, the British took note of these *hôpitals ambulantes* and borrowed the idea. They eventually dropped the *hôpital* part, and the wagons became known as just *ambulances*.

ammonia

The gas ammonia is composed of three parts hydrogen and one part nitrogen, but linguistically it’s composed of an Egyptian deity, salt, and camel dung! Let me explain: ancient Egyptian mythology included a primordial god named Amun (“the hidden one”), who was variously represented as a ram or as a man with a ram’s head. The Greeks worshipped the same god under the named Ammon. Near this god’s temple, devotees would for some reason heat camel dung (or perhaps camel urine) and sea salt to produce a substance called *sal ammoniac*, “salt of Ammon.” In 1782, a Swedish chemist with nothing better to do combined sal ammoniac with an alkali to create a new gas, which he dubbed *ammonia*.

antediluvian

If you want to describe something as old, you might call it *aged*, *archaic*, *antiquated*, or even *ancient*. However, if you want to describe something that's *really* old—and since you seem to like adjectives that begin with the letter *a*—then I suggest the word *antediluvian*, “extremely old.” How old are we talking here? Well, since this term comes from the Latin *antediluvium*, which combines *ante-*, “before” and *diluvium*, “deluge,” then we’re talking about, literally, before the Biblical Flood. Now *that* is old.

antimacassar

In Virtues nothing earthly could surpass her Save thine “incomparable Oil,” Macassar! This sarcastic bit of verse was penned by none other than Lord Byron (in his 1819 poem *Don Juan*), and he’s talking about a product called Macassar Oil, which first appeared earlier in that century. Macassar Oil was an unguent for the hair that claimed to remove “impurities,” provide hair with a “beautiful gloss and scent,” hold curls in place, and even cure baldness. The manufacturers claimed it was made from oils imported from a place called Macassar, a port on the Indonesian island that we now call Sulawesi. This is unlikely, but no matter: the product was a rousing success and before long few heads remained unoiled. That was bad news for the sofas and chairs of the day, because they soon became covered in oily stains. To fight back, housewives covered their furniture with decorative cloths that served to protect the fabric from the onslaught of Macassar Oil, so they become known as *antimacassars*.

April

See SEPTEMBER.

Aprium

See PLUOT.

arsenic hour

As most moms and dads know (assuming they have the time to find out these things), the arsenic hour is the hectic time of day after the parents arrive home from work and before dinner is served. This phrase also has a huge number of synonyms: *witching hour*, *sour hour*, *hurricane hour*, *granny hour*, *scotch hour*, *sherry hour*, and *suicide hour*. Clearly there's a deep well of black humor that's the source of these terms. Arsenic? Suicide? This forces those of us who are childless to wonder just what on Earth is going on out there! In neological circles, the presence of a large number of synonyms for something usually means not only that that something is an extremely common phenomenon, but also that it doesn't have an official name. (The sociological term for arsenic hour is the forgettable and far too understated *transition time*). Given the apparent intensity of the experience, people feel a need to label it somehow, so they come up with "X hour" constructions modeled, no doubt, on phrases such as *rush hour* and, ironically, *happy hour*. It's likely, too, that there's some influence here from the 1863 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem, *The Children's Hour*:

Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
That is known as the Children's Hour.

assassin

In the days of Omar Khayyam (he of the Rubaiyat fame), a band of malcontents roamed the Elburz Mountains, not far from the Caspian Sea. The leader of these bandits was an old school friend of Omar's, a man named Hasan Sabah, whose notoriety earned him the nickname Old Man of the Mountains. That notoriety was earned in rather ghastly fashion: from time to time, he and his followers would set upon and kill members of the government, religious figures, and other local VIPs. To get themselves stoked for these murderous missions, the rebels would eat copious amounts of the drug hashish. In the Arabic of the day, a person who ate a lot of hashish (or who was addicted to it) was called a *hashishiyun*, and that name soon stuck to this band of whacked-out

executioners. Over time, the word *hashishiyun* came to refer to anyone who is hired (or feels a strong need) to kill a public figure, and the word itself morphed into our modern word *assassin*. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “stone-cold killer.”

August

See SEPTEMBER.

average

This solid mathematical term is actually founded upon the not-so-solid sea. Its origins lie in the French word *avarie* and the Spanish equivalent *averia*, which both originally referred to a duty or tax charged to imported goods. The word became the abstract noun *average* in English by tacking on the suffix *-age* (a common linguistic process that has given us words such as *breakage*, *postage*, and *wreckage*). Over time, the meaning of the word *average* changed to any unexpected expenses incurred while shipping goods, and then to the expenses arising from damage or loss to goods shipped at sea. The owners of the cargo, the operators of the ship, and the insurers of both would figure out a way to distribute these expenses equitably among themselves. Eventually this idea of an equal distribution attached itself to the mathematical idea of the arithmetic mean, and our main sense of average was born.