

WordWatch

A WRITER'S GUIDE TO LINGUISTIC DISTINCTIONS



Compiled by Lawrence Fellows

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abbreviate, abridge.

To *abbreviate* a thing is to reduce it or make it smaller, as a word might be shortened by leaving letters out, so that the whole thing can still be recognized in the smaller version.

To *abridge* a thing is to reduce or condense it, as a report might be expressed in fewer words, in such manner that the spirit of the original version is retained.

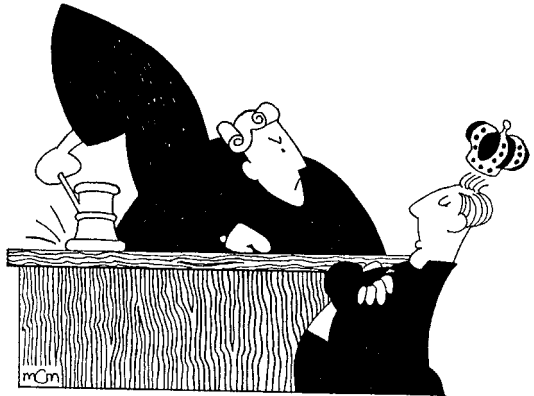


abrogate, arrogate.

Here are two words that sound alike but could hardly be more disparate in meaning.

To *abrogate* is to annul by authority, as a law; to abolish, to repeal. To *arrogate* is to claim or take presumptuously or without right; to assume, to usurp. Two words can hardly be more opposite in meaning than that.

A lot of people think *arrogate* has a meaning that is something like arrogant. A lot of people are wrong.



abstruse, arcane.

Sometimes things are both *abstruse* and *arcane*, but the words do not mean the same thing. *Abstruse* means difficult to understand. *Arcane* means known or understood only by those having special, secret knowledge. Some legal documents are *abstruse* simply because they were written long ago when legal language was even more complicated than now. That does not mean that the documents are *arcane*. The teachings and scriptures of certain religious groups, like the ancient gnostics, were *arcane* because they were fully understood only by a few priests or specially appointed persons.

Some lawyers would like it if all laws were *arcane*, understood by only a high priesthood of lawyers that would include, presumably, yours truly...

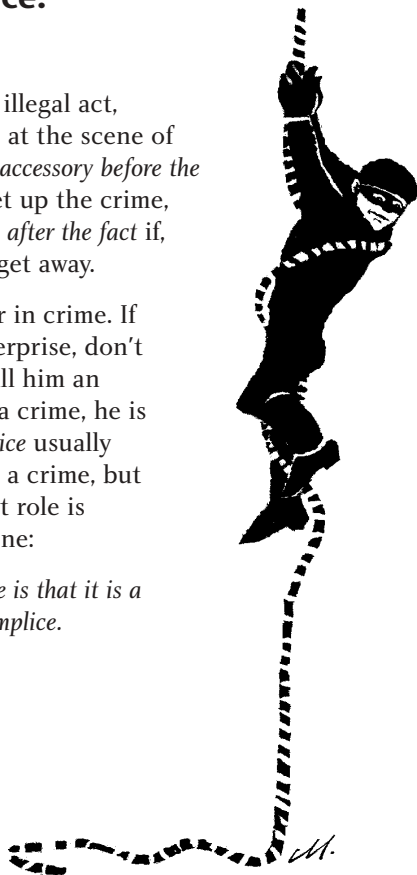


accessory, accomplice.

An *accessory* assists in an illegal act, although he need not be at the scene of the crime. He can be an *accessory before the fact* if he helps plan or set up the crime, or he can be an *accessory after the fact* if, say, he helps the culprit get away.

An *accomplice* is a partner in crime. If he assists in a lawful enterprise, don't call him an *accomplice*; call him an assistant. If he assists in a crime, he is an *accomplice*. An *accomplice* usually plays a secondary role in a crime, but as Beaudelaire noted that role is sometimes an essential one:

What is irritating about love is that it is a crime that requires an accomplice.



accident, mishap.

An *accident* is an unexpected event, usually an unfortunate one, such as a gun going off by *accident*. But an *accident* does not always imply misfortune.

He met an old friend by accident, and took her for a ride in his rowboat.

While *accident* need not imply misfortune, it sometimes does; *mishap* always does, although a *mishap* is a minor misfortune, never a serious one. There is no such thing as a major *mishap*.

While rowing out to the island, they struck a rock. That was a mishap, but they were close enough to the island to scramble onto it. Only by accident were they so close to shore.

