Copy "Skunk" Words to Avoid
By Will Newman

I had an interesting experience this morning at my local elementary school.

Sarah, an extremely intelligent 7th grader, told me about a dispute she had with her mother over what she was wearing.

In addition to being intelligent, Sarah can also be very strong willed. The upshot for Sarah was she had to change clothes to suit her mother's will.

"I was so mad," Sarah told me, "I literally exploded!"

Sarah's only 13, so I avoided making obvious wise-guy comments I might have made to an older person. Sarah hadn't exploded. All of her body parts were exactly where they belonged.

At her request, I've been working with Sarah for a year on her already excellent writing skills. So I explained how she'd misused the word. She thanked me and laughed when she imagined pieces of Sarah scattered all over the classroom.

As a copywriter, be clear, be believable, be honest, but never be funny …

As a copywriter, you *never* want your reader to laugh at something you write in seriousness. (It's seldom a good idea even to be intentionally funny in copywriting.)

Causing your reader to laugh at an error like this distracts him, slows him down. It can even reduce your credibility.

When you misuse words like 'literally,' you run that risk. Certainly, not every reader would be bothered by the misuse of the word. Many might not even notice. But some will.

So why take the chance of derailing any reader who might become a buyer? It's not worth it.

That's why words like 'literally' should *never* be used … even when you use them in the strictest sense of the word.

Why shouldn't you use it if you're using it correctly?

Because when readers like me read or hear the word, they automatically slow down to see if it's being used correctly. You never want your readers to slow down.

You want them to be so riveted by *what* you're saying that they don't notice *how* you're saying it. A word like 'literally' can slow your reader.

Do you really want to distract your reader?

'Literally' is not the only word like this. Noted linguist Brian Garner has dubbed these words 'skunked words.' These are words that should be avoided because they carry an odor that slows or stops your reader.

Garner's *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* defines skunked words as "words whose meaning or usage is so disputed that using them is likely to <u>bother or distract</u> readers."

Let's take a look at the word 'bimonthly' as an example of a skunked word.

For a long time, bimonthly meant every two months. A bimonthly payment plan meant you pay every two months. (Similarly with biweekly and biannually).

But many people now understand it to mean twice a month. So who's right? Does 'bimonthly' mean every two months or twice a month?

Regardless of how conservative you are about language, both meanings are now correct. And confusing.

If you used them, you'd have to explain them to your reader. Does the bimonthly subscription come twice a month or every two months? This wastes time. Something a good copywriter simply doesn't do.

Because the meanings of these words aren't clear, they belong in the skunked words category … never use them.

Skunked words with a really bad odor …

Martha Barnet and Grant Barrett host my favorite language podcast A *Way with Words.* They've extended the meaning of skunked words beyond confusing or misused words. They include words with unsavory undertones … even if those undertones aren't reasonable.

This type of skunked words includes words and phrases that might carry unintended racial, sexual, or social undertones.

Here's a prime example: In 1999 Washington D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams accepted the resignation of a staffer who used a word that was misinterpreted as a racial slur. The offending word is defined as "grudgingly mean about spending."

The *Barnhard Dictionary of Etymology* traces the origins of the word to the 1300's, to words meaning "miser" in Middle English. Nowhere is there *any* mention of racial meanings associated with the word.

However, since it's easily mistaken for a very offensive word, I won't use it here. And I would *never* use it in my copywriting. It's not worth possibly offending any reader.

Other words and expressions in this category include "to call a spade a spade" and the 'b-word' when you're referring to a female dog.

Have we lost richness in expression because the need to erase these words from our writing?

Some people might say, "yes." But I look at avoiding skunked words as an opportunity for you and me to work harder to find a better way of saying what we want to say.

Write with a nose for the odor of a skunk …

I'd love to give you a list of all the skunked words to be avoided. Sorry. Can't do it. I'll give you *some* I've come up with. But here's the strategy that'll serve you better than any list.

Use words – all words – with an eye, ear, and nose for the odor of skunk. If you're not sure how a reader will interpret or respond to a word … if it's _possibly_ confusing, ambiguous, or offensive … that's your signal to look for a different way of saying it.

That said, here are some of the more common skunked words and phrases:

- *begs the question* (consistently misused)

- *oriental* (considered by some an ethnic slur)

- *jimmies* (an ice cream topping, but a racial slur in some regions)

- *livid* (commonly misused, means drained of blood, *not* reddish)

- *couldn't care less / couldn't care more* (just plain confusing)

- *enervate* (misused, means to drain of energy, *not* to energize)

- *notorious* (now being used to mean "famous" instead of "infamous")

One last comment about skunked words: Avoiding skunked words is *never* about being politically correct. Avoid them because you risk confusing or offending your reader. Not because of some socially imposed restriction.

But sometimes you do need to be politically incorrect in copywriting. And that's what we'll chat about next week.

What words would you add to the skunked words list? Let us know what they are and why in the comment section below. I'd love to hear … and I know other readers would too.

Related Content:

- The Secret Behind Kid Books and Copywriting Success
- The Art and Science of Being Believable
- The Art of Providing a Compassionate Copywriting Critique
- How to Make Every Sales Letter a Blockbuster
- More by Will Newman
- More from The Golden Thread

28 Responses to "Copy "Skunk" Words to Avoid"

Gotta admit...this one is hard for me. My copywriter brain understands what you're saying, but my personal feelings are already upset that language is being hijacked by the politically correct among us to such an extent that you can't say ANYTHING without it being misconstrued or invoking some kind of altered, negative meaning. Should someone else's ignorance preclude me from saying (the apt description) "niggardly", per your example? In copywriting: yes; in "real" life, I'm not so sure.

Guest (EllenB) – over a year ago

Two words, frequently used and misused spring to mind Will.
The first is COOL, which may upset a lot of people who love to use it.
The second is MASSIVE, often being heard in schools by children who want to impress their friends.

upmarket – over a year ago

Two words I often notice being misused: "affect" and "effect." Both words can be used as noun or verb but oftentimes they are interchanged thus clouding what the writer meant in the whole sentence.

Leo Blanco – over a year ago

The hideous "IRREGARDLESS" has probably ruined regardless. Any thoughts on whether "regardless" is distracting?

highwattage – over a year ago

"On any given Saturday, any team can beat another" skunks terribly. It SHOULD read: "Each Saturday, the best will likely win save for at least one upset. But lottsa luck determining which!"

And speaking of "terrible." Education's campaign that "A mind is a terrible thing to waste" TOTALLY skunks. After all, it's the wasting of the mind that's truly terrible; NOT the mind itself.

Guest (Chris Morris) – over a year ago

Here are two more: Humongous used as early as the 90's and its contemporary-Ginormous. They must be in the dictionary as they didn't flunk spellcheck.

mike1000 – over a year ago

Unique is the perfect word that has been stolen.

Anne Weatherill – over a year ago

THANK you for exposing "literally" as THE worst expression in use today. We also need to dump "basically," "epic," and STOP beginning every sentence with "Sooo" or "I mean." I fear for mankind when the educated can't discern stupidity in speech.

Guest (CleMedia) – over a year ago

"Sanction" is tricky because it's so useful that you wouldn't want to banish it forever, yet it has multiple, often contradictory, meanings. Take a peek at the 12-line entry in Webster's (Collegiate) 11th. What's interesting is that the word is derived from a root that means "to make holy." Try squaring that with "an economic or military coercive measure adopted usu. [usually] by several nations in concert for forcing a nation violating international law to desist or yield to adjudication."

The Writer-s Midwife – over a year ago

Probably any word that is too regional, unless it is for a very local market where everyone knows what you mean. Submarine sandwiches? They're heroes some places and grinders in others, but these words are not always recognized outside their areas.

Guest (Laura Eisener) – over a year ago

Ironically, not stating the skunked words is both very distracting (this is the only time and place it is appropriate to warn writers precisely what not to use), and I had to actually leave the article to Google the offense. My train ride is now over, I did not have time to finish the article, I am still not 100% certain of the offensive word(s), and I do not buy hypocrisy.

Guest (Guest) – over a year ago

Hello All :)

I'd like to add that folks get floundering and foundering confused. The later means not able to get a footing, to fail, to be unsuccessful, to sink, to be lame, and so forth. This term is often confused with a type of fish, flounder. Some dictionaries actually allow for the confusion, and add floundering with a definition that is similar - something along the lines of a fish flopping around.
I however know an English professor who gets irate about this. So I would add this to the list especially if writing to an academic or highly literary or educated crowd.

Happy Writing!!

Guest *(Cleveland Miller)* – over a year ago

Skunked phrase?! How about the MOST useless phrase in the history of language(?): "..it is what it is!" (?)

Doug

Guest *(Doug the bug)* – over a year ago

Shakespeare had a vocabulary of over 30,000 words. The average person today has 3,000 to 5,000. Does anyone else see a problem here? What happened to the other 25,000 words? I believe that at some point in history they got "skunked". We now have lost the ability to effectively communicate, simply because of a language barrier that we created over the past several hundred years. Why not attempt to salvage the language, instead of banning even more words from daily use?

Guest *(Gloria)* – over a year ago

The preposition "concerning" is frequently abused as an adjective, probably confused with "disconcerting". This error is becoming so common place, the dictionary may need to accommodate this as a new acceptable usage.

Guest *(Don Clifford)* – over a year ago

The preposition "concerning" is often misused as an adjective, probably confused with "disconcerting". This error is so common dictionaries may need to change to accommodate this new common usage.

Don Clifford – over a year ago

Doug, your comment depends on "what the meaning of is...is.

Thanks for all the great comments.

Guest *(CR)* – over a year ago

George Orwell might have had a "field day," with this topic. Orwell's essay, 'Politics and the English Language,' is, at the very least, thought provoking. Sometimes, we speak too much and say little.

Guest (Robin) – over a year ago

Hello all!

It appears I've hit a couple of nerves with this one. I'm pleased I did because the two underlying topics here are very important to copywriting. As to the issue of political correctness, I'm withholding responding until after today's TGT comes out when I do address that subject.

I appreciate all of you who added their own "skunked words." Seems like we agree on those. At the end of the day, I'd say this article piqued interest. (Of course, I deliberately used that horrendous phrase.)

Thank you all.

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

an insect in Alabama Known as the boll weaver is often called the bowl weaver

Guest (Gerri Darrisaw) – over a year ago

When Nathaniel Hawthorne was harbormaster in Salem MA, he wrote in his diary:

"Sometimes words are failed silences."

KT – over a year ago

Hello KT,

I love that quote. Thank you.

Best wishes,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

I thought it was a boll weevil? Thank you, Will for using the correct "piqued", I'm tired of seeing that something peaked interest! Another word that I hear misused a lot of late is "subsequently". I find that people use it when they mean "consequently".

JeanS – over a year ago

Hi, there are so many things to read that I am can't really don't know what is the best opportunity for me. I will continue to read until I am confident to write my first article.

Wanda Simpson Miller – over a year ago

"Horrorific". I hate it.

Guest *(Russell Miller)* – over a year ago

Hello Wanda,

I agree that you should continue to read AWAI articles to gain confidence to write your first article. But there's something more important you must be doing. Write! Write articles you'd like to submit. Then rewrite them until you're truly confident. Write daily and your confidence will grow daily.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

I think that this post is including what William Safire called Janus words (words facing two directions, having two contradictory meanings) with skunked words, which have picked up an unrelated negative meaning as if sprayed by a skunk.
—Steve Dunham, author, Editor's Companion book and blog

Guest *(Steve Dunham)* – 7 months ago

Thank you, Steve, for the perceptive comment. Janus words — AKA "contranyms — could fall into the realm of skunked words because they can easily cause confusion. If a basketball team is "sanctioned," have they been given the okay to play or prohibited?

Thank you for posting.
Will Newman

Will Newman – 7 months ago

---

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924