

# A



**Aberrant:** If something is aberrant it is deviating in some fashion or manner from the norm. Aberrant is a direct borrow from the Latin word *aberrāns*, meaning to go astray. A secondary meaning relates to behaviour, specifically bad behaviour or behaviour considered out of character or abnormal.

*Such aberrant behaviour will not be tolerated.*



**Abet:** To encourage or assist another in the fulfilment of an action or (often illegal) activity.

*She was charged by the police with aiding and abetting a bank robbery.*



**Abeyance:** In English the word abeyance can be used in technical legal language and in a more generalized manner. Disputes over the contents of a will, for example, may cause a property or title to be placed in abeyance, meaning waiting to be claimed by a rightful heir or owner. Future plans can also be in abeyance if they are dependent upon the outcome of a change in future circumstances.

*We had to put our plans for a camping trip in abeyance due to a sudden change in the weather forecast.*



**Abjure:** To abjure is to reject, renounce or forswear a belief, practice or opinion. The word shares the same Latin root *jurare*, meaning to swear an oath, as perjury and jury and hence has its groundings in law. It is possible of course to casually abjure any formerly held belief or opinion, but in the Middle Ages if the Spanish Inquisition demanded

someone abjure from ungodly practices or beliefs it usually meant being tortured or burned at the stake. Not to be confused with adjure (see below).

*He abjured his devotion to soccer when it became so expensive to attend matches.*



**Abnegate:** A verb that shares its Latin roots with several other words, all of them in denial. *Negare* means to deny or refute and the word abnegation began to appear in English as early as the fourteenth century. It was, however, several hundred years before abnegate appeared as a verb. This is an example of retroactive word formation, as it is natural to assume that the act of denying occurred before anyone was accused of being in denial. Abnegate can also be used in a formal sense to refer to the relinquishing of power or responsibility.

*President Obama rushed several bills through Congress before protocol decreed he abnegate his presidential powers.*



**Abrogate:** A potential malapropism with the previous entry, as in some senses abnegate and abrogate are very similar. To abrogate is to take authoritative action to abolish or annul something, whereas to abnegate is to give away authoritative power. Where it all gets a bit murky is when it comes to abnegating or abrogating moral responsibility for actions, but that is a matter for subjective judgement.

*The incursions by rebel forces had forced the government to abrogate the fragile peace treaty.*



**Abscond:** A borrowing from the Latin word *abscondere*, meaning to conceal or hide. People usually abscond in a hurry; typically to avoid detection of or an arrest for an unlawful action such as theft.

*They absconded with the weekly bar takings and fled to Spain.*



**Abstemious:** The words abstemious and abstain are often thought to be synonymous but in fact they derive from different Latin roots. To be abstemious is to deny oneself the joys of intoxicating drinks as the Latin root noun *temetum* means, basically, booze. The Middle English/Anglo-French word *abstinere*, however, means to hold back from or refrain. One can abstain from anything but only an abstemious person refuses a drink.

*Many people like to play at being abstemious, especially in January after weeks of self-indulgence.*



**Acarpous:** An Anglicization of the Greek word *karpós*, meaning fruit. *Karpós* is steeped in Greek mythology. In English, the addition of the prefix *a* as a negation gives us a word meaning simply, without fruit or barren. The word can also be used as a synonym for sterile or unfruitful in a figurative sense.

*After four hours the board meeting was becoming distinctly acarpous as not a single decision could be agreed upon.*



**Accoutrement:** Often used in plural form, accoutrements are extra or additional items used for some purpose (not always strictly necessary). Derived from Old French, the word originally referred to personal items soldiers carried with them. In modern parlance, accoutrements are often regarded as fashionable items – accessories such as hats, gloves, handbags and jewellery. Quite where the connection between the military and high fashion was formed is anybody's guess, except perhaps for the fact that French soldiers were generally well dressed and conscious of their appearance.

*The major wore all the accoutrements of his rank: sash, medals, ceremonial sword and, frankly, a quite silly hat.*



**Accumbent:** To be in an accumbent position is to be lying backwards and reclining. The word derives from the Latin *accumbere*, meaning to lie down or lean back. Historically the term

is the name given to the habit of eating while lying horizontally, as depicted in classical art and sculpture. It is questionable if the habit of the ancients adopting the posture while feasting was due to some misplaced medical ideas about digestion or was merely (and more probably) just an affectation of wealth and decadence.

*The frieze depicts the Emperor Nero, in accumbent posture, being tended to by a gaggle of concubines.*



**Acedia:** Derived from the Greek word *kēdos*, meaning care or grief, with the negative prefix *a* it translates as lack of caring. The word *acedia* in English was originally closely related to the sin of sloth and, as such, became synonymous with laziness. Over time, however, the meaning has become more associated with apathy or boredom.

*By Sunday he'd succumbed to acedia and stayed in bed until lunchtime staring at the ceiling.*



**Aciform:** A botanical term used to describe certain plants, *aciform* derives from the Latin noun *acus*, meaning needle. The word can be employed to describe anything that is shaped like or resembles a needle, such as the spines on a porcupine, or figuratively for anything that is sharp and spikey.

*Her aciform personality made her work colleagues wary of her.*



**Acquiesce:** To *acquiesce* first arrived in English in the seventeenth century via the French word *acquiescer*, meaning to remain at rest or to rest satisfied. However, its more modern meaning of to accept something without protest or to accede to the will of others comes from one of its earliest recorded uses in the writings of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In his famous work *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argues that strong government can only be achieved if the people ‘acquiesce’ to the rule of the sovereign and the guidance of the Church – that is, accept without question decisions made on their behalf. A more subtle

variation of usage is people being forced to acquiesce reluctantly because they have no viable alternative.

*'Our Beleeefe ... is in the Church; whose word we take, and acquiesce therein.'*

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)



**Acuity:** A complex word and one which needs to be used carefully. Acuity relates to the human senses and mental perception and in this context can be used as a synonym for the more common word sensitivity. To have strong aural acuity is to have very sharp and accurate hearing. To have mental acuity is to be perceptive and insightful.

*Serious head injuries can often have serious side-effects on the acuity of the senses.*



**Acumen:** Acumen in modern usage means to have a depth of perception or keen grasp and insight into a subject or area of knowledge. The word is closely related to acute as both stem from the Latin word for needle, *acus*. In the fifteenth century acumen related mostly to having quickness of mind and sharp wits and gave rise to the phrase 'as sharp as a needle'.

*Due to his mathematical acumen, and skill with numbers, he could solve in minutes complex problems that took other students several hours to understand.*



**Adjure:** A curious verb and its infrequent usage says much perhaps about the modern world. Although closely linked to other words such as importune and implore, adjure is much more earnest in nature and heralds from a time when people listened to each other more. To adjure is to solemnly advise somebody on a course of action. People who importune tend to be quite pushy and people who implore quite needy. People who adjure are more balanced, cautious and wise.

*My liege, I adjure thee to reconsider this course of action.*