

Media release

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“Alternative facts” named Worst Words of the Decade

Plain English Foundation has voted **alternative facts** as its worst word or phrase of the decade. The now infamous phrase from the Trump administration stood out in a post-truth period when global politics took an Orwellian turn.

“Politicians are known for obfuscation, but ‘alternative facts’ was particularly worrying,” said the Foundation’s Executive Director, Dr Neil James. “It suggests our elected leaders can be right even when they are factually wrong. That sets a dangerous precedent for democracy.”

Since 2010, Plain English Foundation has curated an annual list of the worst words and phrases to highlight the importance of clear public language. Political spin had a constant presence on these lists, from **freedom gas** and **efficiency dividend** to **efforting outreach** and **high value targeting**.

Corporate doublespeak was equally hard to avoid. Orica and Volkswagen took Worst Words titles when they tried to paper over pollution. Orica referred to chemical leaks as **fugitive emissions** while Volkswagen hid behind **possible emissions non-compliance** when it cheated on environmental tests.

The notable corporate trend of the decade was the way corporations spoke about job cuts when they had to fire staff. Instead, thousands of workers were **demised** or **disestablished** or subjected to **repositioning actions**. One was even offered **external career development opportunities**.

Business was also represented each year by new buzzwords. Although none of these took the top prize, jargon such as **thought shower**, **collabition**, **frictionless** and **strategic staircase** was a constant on our worst words lists.

The decade also spawned an impressive collection of Frankenwords, as brands vied to attract consumer attention. KFC’s **Goodification** was an early winner, and honourable mentions went to Sportsbet for **Merry Puntmas** and Tourism Australia for its recent **philausophy**.

“At best, these non-words are ugly and hard to make sense of,” noted Dr James. “At worst, they imply junk food is healthy and gambling is as special as a religious and family holiday.”

Celebrity speak and popular culture didn’t disappoint either. A-list divorces took on new labels such as **Branglexit** and **conscious uncoupling**, both of which topped an annual list.

These lists often rounded out with a mixed metaphor and non-apology, which captured some of the most mealy mouthed manglish of the decade.

The Foundation also released its 2020 list of worst words and phrases. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 generated many new words. While some were useful, the year’s worst winner **vertical consumption** was a rather overblown way of saying you can drink while standing.

The full 2020 list is available at www.plainenglishfoundation.com/worst-words. The complete long list of the decade’s worst words follows.

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Worst Words of the Decade 2010s

Annual winners

Vertical consumption

2020 was the year of COVID-19, and it generated some less than welcome words. South Australia announced it would ease coronavirus restrictions and allow people in bars to drink while standing up. The SA Government dubbed this “vertical consumption”.

Freedom gas

Fossil fuels like natural gas needed an image makeover in 2019, so the US Department of Energy came up with “freedom gas” and “molecules of US freedom” as its linguistic contribution to clean energy.

External career development opportunities

2018 was a poor year for corporate doublespeak. When our national public broadcaster used “external career development opportunities” to discuss firing its staff, it joined a long list of institutions incapable of using simple English to describe something difficult.

Alternative facts

Worst of the decade

Political doublespeak dominated our 2017 list with “alternative facts” coming out on top. This outrageous take on dishonesty was our clear winner in a decade that saw democracy decline.

Brangelexit

Frankenword “Brangelexit” topped our 2016 list. Combining Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's celebrity moniker “Brangelina” with the “Brexit” vote, it elevated a celebrity divorce to the level of a major world event.

Possible emissions non-compliance

2015 was a particularly bad year for corporate spin doctoring, and “possible emissions non-compliance” came out on top. Volkswagen's CEO used this phrase to describe what was actually cheating when regulators tested how much pollution its cars emit.

Conscious uncoupling

“Conscious uncoupling” was our 2014 winner. Gwyneth Paltrow used this phrase to describe her separation from husband Chris Martin.

Demising

HSBC got our 2013 vote when it announced it would be “demising the roles of 942 relationship managers” – or firing nearly 1,000 employees.

Goodification

When KFC chose “Goodification” as the slogan for its marketing campaign, we had to choose it as our Worst Word of 2012.

Fugitive emissions

2011 was a banner year for corporate evasion and euphemistic spin, with “fugitive emissions” (more commonly known as pollution) the worst.

Moving forward

2010 was filled with Manglish and gobbledegook, but we couldn't get past “moving forward”. Julia Gillard repeated this slogan more than 20 times when she announced the federal election.

1 Political spin and slogans

Alternative facts

Winner 2017

On his first day in the job, US President Trump's then press secretary lied about the size of the inauguration crowd. Defending him, counsellor Kellyanne Conway said he had merely given "alternative facts".

By definition, a fact cannot have an alternative that is also a fact.

Freedom gas

Winner 2019

As the debate around climate change reached fever pitch in 2019, the US Department of Energy rebranded natural gas as "freedom gas". It was proud to help export "molecules of US freedom" to the world.

Moving forward

Winner 2010

Sadly a cliché that was starting to fade out became the communication centrepiece for Labor's federal election campaign in 2010. It was neatly matched by Tony Abbott's repetitive slogan: "great big new tax".

Efficiency dividend

Politicians have long been squeamish about funding cuts and taxes. In 2014, Senator Mathias Cormann was adamant that the government was making an "efficiency dividend", not a cut, to the ABC's funding. It later admitted that funding was, in fact, cut.

Sexual risk avoidance

Orwellian trends in American government continued when the State Department in 2017 officially dubbed sex education as "sexual risk avoidance". Then it sent health agencies a list of forbidden words. Science-based advice is now known as "science in consideration with community standards and wishes".

IMAs

In 2012, the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship branded people arriving by boat as "Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs)". Former Defence Minister Stephen Smith then referred to the interception of people-smuggling operations as "disruption events".

High value targeting

Back in the United States, in 2014 WikiLeaks released a CIA report on "high value targeting" – the killing of an important enemy. A US Senate Intelligence Committee also reported the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (torture). A year later, our own Defence Minister Kevin Andrews had to explain what the "precision guided weapons" used in Syrian air strikes really were: bombs.

Efforting outreach

In 2020, White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany told Fox and Friends that President Trump and his administration were trying their best to contact the family of police shooting victim Jacob Blake: "We are efforting outreach, have not been able to connect yet."

The family's lawyer noted his office "had received no calls to set up any kind of meeting".

2 Corporate doublespeak

Fugitive emissions

Winner 2011

Manufacturer Orica was in trouble during 2011 for chemical leaks. But it couldn't bring itself to use the word "pollution" when admitting to "fugitive emissions" for substances such as ammonia.

The mining industry features on the lists whenever the environment is at stake. BHP Billiton reassured us in 2015 that the sludge from its failed Samarco mine was "relatively inert". The Carmichael mine operators cause "authorised avoidable impacts" (environmental damage). And residents of Morwell had to breathe foul-smelling smoke in 2014 due to an "open cut event" (mine fire).

Possible emissions non-compliance

Winner 2015

After a long investigation, Volkswagen finally admitted some of its cars cheated a vehicle emissions testing system. Their CEO said he was told that there was a "possible emissions non-compliance" that could be remedied. The "non-compliance" was a code in the car's computer that reduced emissions during environmental testing.

Involuntary de-boarding

When video of security dragging a bleeding passenger from his seat went viral in 2017, United Airlines tried to downplay the "involuntary de-boarding" with a tepid apology for "reaccommodating" passengers.

Over in Australian skies, REX had problems with "uncommanded engine operations" (a propeller falling off). And let's not forget Qantas's "loss of separation" (planes flying too close to each other, 2013) and "pavement failure" (runway pothole, 2014).

Rapid disassembly

14 million vehicles were recalled in 2014 because their Takata airbags had an unfortunate tendency towards "rapid disassembly". That meant some of them exploded. In 2016, Samsung faced a similar setback when its phones started catching fire. But that was just a "battery cell issue".

Not aligned to the legislative requirements

NIB tried to gloss over its illegal rejection of thousands of health insurance claims. Rather than breaking the law, it admitted that its processes were "not aligned to the legislative requirements".

Easier navigation of pain relief options

The ACCC took legal action in 2015 when Nurofen was pricing the same product differently depending on the type of pain. The company explained that its "pain-specific products provide easier navigation of pain relief options in the grocery environment".

Negative good

When Choice magazine in 2011 raised the damage done by teeth whitening, a spokesperson for the dental industry described the problem as a "negative good".

3 Employment euphemisms

External career development opportunities

Winner 2018

Every year, organisations prove themselves incapable of using 2 clear and simple words: “job losses”. They tie themselves in linguistic knots rather than dealing with cuts honestly and sympathetically.

Our Worst Words winner from 2018, former ABC chairman Justin Milne, claimed he didn’t fire a journalist but rather offered her “external career development opportunities”.

Demising

Winner 2013

Another winner – this time from 2013 – was HSBC when it announced that “The bank will be demising the roles of 942 relationship managers” – or firing nearly 1,000 employees

Voluntary employee separations

When car manufacturer Ford Europe announced it would be cutting labour costs in 2019, it too hid behind doublespeak. Staff would go through a “voluntary employee separation”.

Unallocated plants

Meanwhile, staff at 5 General Motors plants were left confused when the carmaker reported the plants would be “unallocated in 2019”. This meant they were to be closed, with up to 14,000 staff losing their jobs.

Disestablished

In 2016, a New Zealand university put it succinctly, but still not plainly: “It is proposed that 16.28 full-time equivalent staff are disestablished.”

Appropriate financial envelope

In 2014, Microsoft went the other way. It emailed its employees to explain that its device strategy “must ... be accomplished within an appropriate financial envelope”. In the 11th paragraph, the email got to the point: 12,500 staff would lose their jobs.

Repositioning actions

And again in 2012, Citigroup announced that 11,000 workers would go in “a series of repositioning actions that will further reduce expenses and improve efficiency across the company”.

Short-term variable remuneration [to] elicit a discretionary effort

At the Banking Royal Commission in 2018, Commonwealth Bank CEO Matt Comyn was unwilling to admit the bank used bonuses to encourage staff to sell more products. He said that the bank offers “short-term variable remuneration” which “elicits discretionary effort”. When pushed, he did concede that this was linked to poor customer outcomes.

Vessels of opportunity

In 2010, BP tried to spin its disastrous Gulf of Mexico oil spill as a job opportunity. Under the “vessels of opportunity” program, boat owners whose jobs were destroyed by the spill were employed in the clean-up.

4 Buzzwords

The annual list of worst words and phrases has featured a number of business buzzwords. Fortunately, some have died a rapid death. Others have proven more persistent.

Thought shower	When someone says “thought shower” in the workplace today, they usually add some ironic air quotes. But back in 2010, UK employers were seriously asking staff to take “thought showers” rather than “brainstorm” because the latter might offend people with epilepsy.
Strategic staircase	Also in 2010, “strategic staircase” took hold as a replacement for “forward plan” (itself a tautology). Business gurus seemed to need a future in 3D where we could move both onwards and upwards.
Collabition	This awkward mangling of “collaboration” and “competition” came in 2014. Not to be confused with “coopetition”, where businesses work with their competitors, to everyone’s advantage. Nor with “collusion”.
Rejourneying	A 2015 addition to business jargon was “rejourneying”. As in: “We’re rejourneying the business to focus increasingly on mobile devices”. We probably would’ve just said “We’re changing our focus”.
Frictionless	A “frictionless customer experience” was one of many uses for this buzzword reported at a major retail conference in 2019. We can only hope that it slips out of use without resistance.
PCBU	We celebrated when new health and safety laws replaced the 5-syllable “occupational” with “work” in 2012. However, they also introduced an unnecessary 4-part acronym. An “employer” became a “person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU)”.
Dangerous aquatic organisms	<p>The use of technical buzzwords between consenting professionals is one thing. But when they end up on public signage, we have to protest.</p> <p>Several local councils have given us terrible signs over the years. On the Gold Coast in 2014, we were warned about the “potential for dangerous aquatic organisms” in waterways (also known as sharks).</p> <p>In Sydney, a 2016 storm prompted a council to post signs saying:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">For your safety we advise you not to visit the park during or just after heavy rain and strong winds because of the risk of tree failure.</p> <p>This turned out to mean we should watch out for falling branches.</p> <p>And then there is this cryptic 2017 notice that we are yet to decipher:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">No fixing of restraints to the handrail stanchions is permitted without the express permission of The Blue Mountains City Council.</p>



5 Frankenwords

Among the worst words of the decade are the Frankenwords – made up Frankenstein words that companies use to attract consumer attention.

Goodification

Winner 2012

In 2012, KFC and its ad agency decided it was time to sell junk food with junk language:

We've set out on a mission to improve everything we do. We call it "The Goodification". It's simple; you take a good thing, goodify it, and voila! It's gooderer.

Zump

While COVID-19 spawned a number of useful new words, "zumping" refers to dumping a romantic partner on Zoom. With luck, a COVID vaccine will also cure this practice.

She-session

Because the COVID recession is disproportionately impacting women, someone had to invent an ugly word for it: "She-session".

Hipsturbia

Another Frankenword of 2020 described a predicted real estate trend, where suburbs were set to attract 'hip' residents. Hipsturbing indeed.

Philausophy

When Tourism Australia launched its 2019 marketing campaign, it no doubt wanted a memorable slogan. But with reactions ranging from muted embarrassment to sheer confusion, "Come live our philausophy" had people talking for all the wrong reasons.

Gariage

As the debate on same sex marriage raged in 2017, a spokesperson for the "No" campaign suggested we consider alternatives such as "gariage" or "pairage", instead of extending the definition of marriage.

Merry Puntmas

In another bad year for Frankenwords, Sportsbet coined "Merry Puntmas" to celebrate the big racing season. There was something particularly inappropriate about turning a religious and family celebration into a gambling promotion.

Joyments

The umbrella company for Australian lotteries created "joyments" in 2017 for those everyday moments of joy, like having "a scratchie in your pocket". We found little joy in "joyments" as a word.

Betterers

In 2017, a campaign dubbed personal loan specialists as "the Betterers". Surely they could have come up with something betterer themselves.

Giftorium gifticians

Myer created a Mother's Day giftorium in 2015 to help you select the perfect present. That November, they went a step further, offering a Christmas giftorium staffed by a troupe of gifticians. Good grief!

6 Celebrity speak and popular culture

Another feature of the worst words of the decade was celebrity speak. Just like corporations, some celebrities resorted to euphemisms to protect their “brand”.

Brangelexit

Winner 2016

When supercouple Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie split up, it spawned one of the ugliest Frankenwords of the decade, combining “Brangelina” with “Brexit”. Elevating a celebrity divorce to the level of a major world event was a poor reflection on 2016.

Conscious uncoupling

Winner 2014

Two years before Brangelina called it quits, Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband, Chris Martin, also decided to separate. But they preferred to call it a “conscious uncoupling”.

In 2019, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and his novelist wife, MacKenzie Bezos, also avoided the “D” word. They preferred to think of their split as “a long period of loving exploration”.

Situationship

Relationships also featured on the 2018 list with a new label for a committed yet undefined bond: “situationship”. As one author described it, this is somewhere between “more than casual dating” and “not quite fully serious”. They were casually serious.

Gestational carrier

Nicole Kidman welcomed a new baby in 2011 with the worst euphemism for a surrogate mother:

No words can adequately convey the incredible gratitude that we feel for everyone who was so supportive throughout this process, in particular our gestational carrier.

-elfie and couplie

While “selfie” has become a useful word, we were worried by the 2013 spin-offs, like “belfie” (photo of your own bottom) and “drelfie” (photo of yourself while drunk). Then 2014 saw the advent of the “couplie” (photo with your significant other) and the “legsie” or “footsie” (photo of your suntanned legs and manicured feet against a scenic backdrop).

Let’s all just stopsie please.

Cultural externalities

As lovers of words, we couldn’t let go a Productivity Commission report on the publishing industry in 2016 that talked a lot about “cultural externalities”. We used to call these “books”.

Microgapping

Finally, popular culture brought us a new label for a quick holiday: “microgapping”. Launched by the 2018 Visit England campaign, this narrowly beat two other travel Frankenwords: jobbymoon (a break you take in between jobs) and painmoon (a break when something bad happens).

7 Mixed metaphors

Each year, we selected the worst examples of mixed metaphors. Unsurprisingly, politicians and sports administrators featured regularly. But so did journalists – and they should know better.

The avalanche, the die and the chips

For example, the award for worst mixed metaphor of 2015 went to Jack Warner, Vice President of FIFA, for this explanation of corruption:

Not even death will stop the avalanche that is coming. The die is cast. There can be no turning back. Let the chips fall where they fall.

Honourable mention went to journalist Laura Tingle:

The high moral ground has become such a tiny wedge in the ocean for the government to stand on.

And to the Welsh Tory Leader Andrew Davies for this effort:

The fig-leaf they are trying to pull over people's eyes just won't wash.

A drowning man grabbing at a fig leaf

Politicians in general are rather fond of figs and water. Labor Leader Bill Shorten was the category winner in 2018 with:

Let's call it what it is — Mr Morrison has leapt on the tweet like a drowning man will grab at a fig leaf.

Close runner up that year included the commentator who described a stand-off between Donald Trump and Amazon's Jeff Bezos this way:

You want to play with me in the sandbox, then you better put on your helmet, pack a lunch and bring your flashlight.

Suppository of all wisdom

We know it came out at a doorstep during an exhausting election campaign. But we can never un-hear Tony Abbott explaining in 2013:

No one, however smart, however well educated, however experienced ... is the suppository of all wisdom.

A magnetic building both lyrical and euphonic, driven by pizzazz and charm

Real estate generated the mixed metaphor of 2020.

We are used to property descriptions getting out of hand, but this breathless sequence for a new apartment block apparently involves taking a drive with musical magnets.

Don't poke that bear

Yet nothing can top the world of sport when it comes to a mixed metaphor. Here's an epic, and our favourite of the decade, from a 2013 media story on the use of drugs in sport:

It's not enough to just muddy the waters. If you're going to poke that bear, you better not go to a gunfight carrying a spoon.

8 Non apologies

Things go wrong. People do the wrong thing. Yet instead of admitting a mistake, so many pretend to apologise without actually doing so. Here are the worst offenders of the decade.

The physical result of a bite Clear candidate for non-apology of the decade was Uruguayan footballer Luis Suarez, who said after biting his Italian rival in a 2014 World Cup soccer game: “The truth is that my colleague Giorgio Chiellini suffered the physical result of a bite in the collision he suffered with me.”

Perceived failings 2017 was also a rich year for non-apologies. After the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the local mayor reluctantly resigned with this classic non-apology: “I have to accept my share of responsibility for these perceived failings”.

I might have terrified a few people, or whatever Australian television personality Don Burke explained when he was confronted by evidence of sexual harassment:
I might have terrified a few people, or whatever, and I shouldn't have done that, but these sort of things bear no relation to me and what I am about.

Over rotated on one value When discussing why Twitter had suspended a controversial columnist from the platform in 2018, CEO Jack Dorsey explained: “We likely over-rotated on one value”. A simple sorry would have sufficed.

The honourable and right thing to do In 2019, Prince Andrew explained why he decided to stay at the house of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein:
It was definitely the wrong thing to do but at the time I felt like it was the right and honourable thing to do and I admit fully that my judgement was probably coloured by my tendency to be too honourable but that's just the way it is.

We haven't apologised for the event itself, per se, but apologised for the distress the event caused. Rio Tinto also added a top contender for non-apology. When senior executive Chris Salisbury was recorded commenting on the destruction of two 46,000-year-old landmarks in the Juukan Gorge, he gave the game away when it comes to the sincerity of corporate apologies.
Some senior Rio Tinto executives later resigned.