# DICTIONARY *of* FINE DISTINCTIONS

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## Nuances, Niceties and Subtle Shades of Meaning

*An Assorted Synonymy & Encyclopedia of Commonly Confused Objects, Ideas & Words, Distinguished with the Aid of Illustrations*

ELI BURNSTEIN

ILLUSTRATED BY LIANA FINCK

Profile Books

# Introduction, Foreword *or* Preface

Which is it?

Everywhere we look, we're confronted by sneaky differences. That couch you're sitting on, is it more of a sofa? That cappuccino in your cup, how is it different from a flat white?

And it's not just the physical world, either. Do moral dilemmas differ from ethical ones? If we make an assumption, do we presume it as well? What about strategy and tactics? Proverbs and adages? Which of these terms is more accurate – or should we say, more *precise*?

In *Dictionary of Fine Distinctions*, we put life under the microscope, teasing irony apart from sarcasm, driving a wedge between gullies and ravines, exposing goblins, ogres and trolls to the harsh sunlight of analysis. The result? Crisp, sparkling clarity.

Each entry offers a sort of mental taste test – a Pepsi Challenge, even – serving up two or more commonly confused phenomena and a brief description of what makes them different.

Thank God, there are also illustrations.

And not just any illustrations. Simple yet thoughtful, carefully wrought yet rippling with charm, they're the handiwork of the one and only Liana Finck, whose

nervy lines have helped me to crystallise ideas in ways that words never could.

Of course, I should immediately clear my throat and say: reality is messy. So, while I have tried to single out differences as surgically as possible, regional variations in usage and the ever-shifting nature of language (not to mention my Canadian upbringing and general fallibility) mean that I won't hit the bullseye for everyone at all times. Plus, some things are just fuzzy.

A final, dewy-eyed note: as you flip through the book, my hope is that you'll walk away not just with a clearer grasp of a hundred or so fine distinctions, but with a deeper appreciation for the inexhaustible subtlety of life – for the infinite and infinitesimal nuances that turn up everywhere we look.

*Eli Burnstein*

P.S. Prefaces tend to deal with incidental topics like the book's origin, scope and limits, while introductions usually kick off the subject matter proper and at greater length, and generally feel more essential to the work.

Page numbers are a good giveaway: standing outside the main text, prefaces usually feature lowercase Roman numerals (i, ii, iii), while introductions tend to inaugurate the Arabic ones (1, 2, 3) that continue for the remainder of the book.

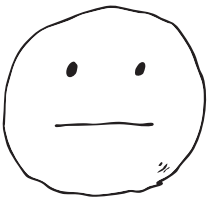
As you can tell, this is a preface.

Forewords, finally, are easier to spot, as they've been written by someone else – usually a well-known personage whose name is advertised on the cover to lend the book credibility. The most auxiliary of all, forewords generally come before prefaces, which, in turn, generally come before introductions.

Please don't hold the lack of a foreword against me.

Happy hair-splitting.

# Emoji *vs* Emoticon



EMOJI

;P

EMOTICON

**Emojis** are graphics.

**Emoticons** use type.

**Advanced Distinction**

¯_(ツ)_/¯

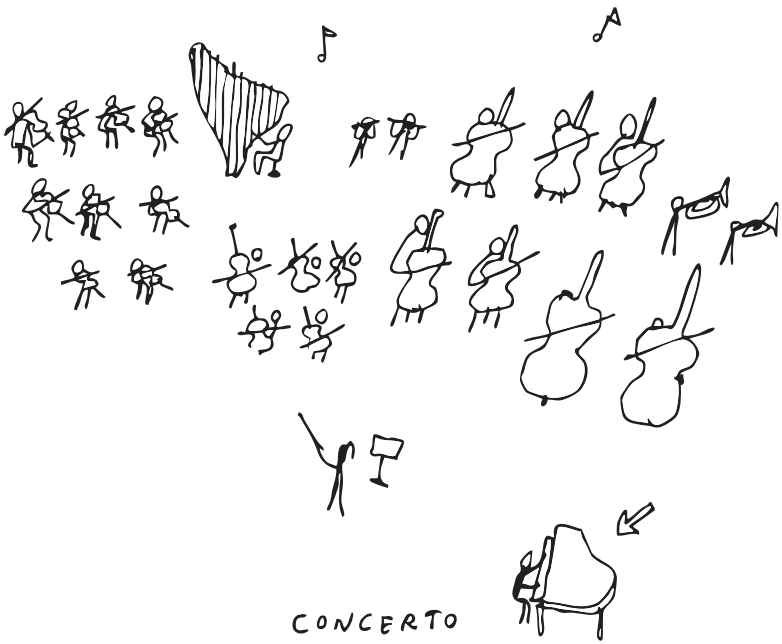
KAOMOJI

**Kaomojis** are an upright and more elaborate style of emoticon originating in Japan.

# Symphony *vs* Concerto

SYMPHONY

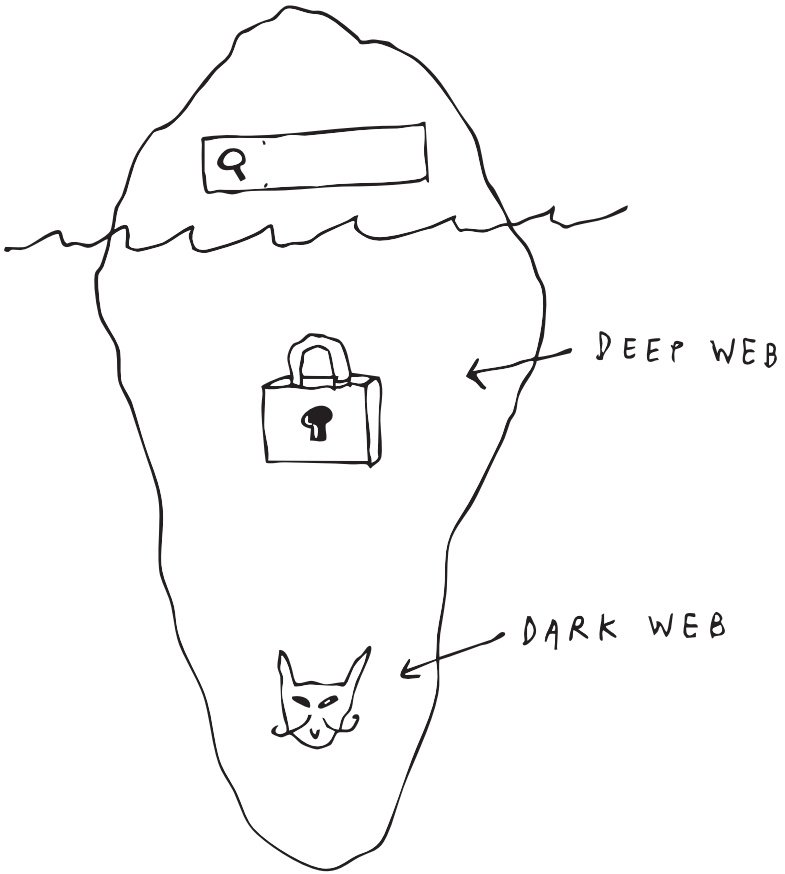
In a **symphony**, the whole orchestra
plays more or less together.




In a **concerto**, a soloist plays somewhat apart from, and in dialogue with, the broader orchestra.

That's why it's often called a piano concerto or a violin concerto: the star instrument is explicitly called out.

# Deep Web *vs* Dark Web



The **deep web** refers to web pages that don't show up in search results but which may be viewed if you're logged in to the website in question.

The **dark web** refers to websites accessible only through special anonymising software and consisting largely of illegal activity.

## The Fine Print

Deep web examples include email inboxes, personal banking account pages, company intranets, and the contents of academic and scientific databases.

Dark web examples include drug, weapons, data and sex trafficking platforms; child sexual abuse materials; and whistleblowing, activism and communications tools for dissidents in countries where free speech is restricted.

It is estimated that the 'surface web' makes up about 4 per cent of the total content on the internet, while 90 per cent is the deep web and 6 per cent the dark web, though estimates vary.

# Great Britain *vs* United Kingdom

GREAT BRITAIN

**Great Britain** is a geographical term referring to a single island or landmass.


UNITED KINGDOM

The **United Kingdom** is a political term referring to the country made up of England, Scotland and Wales (the mainlands of which make up Great Britain), together with Northern Ireland.

# Envy *vs* Jealousy

| **Envy** is when you want something that someone else has. | **Jealousy** is when you *don't* want others to have something – or someone – that you do. |
|---|---|
| *I envy Mark's physique.* | *We were just hanging out. Stop being so jealous!* |

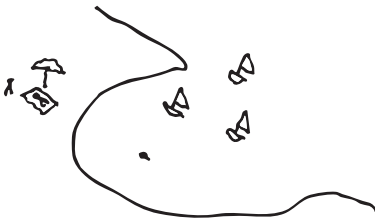
## To Have and Have Not

Envy is an unhappy longing for the possessions or qualities of others, while jealousy is an excessive guarding of the attentions one currently enjoys – whether love, sex or friendship – typified by an undue suspicion of others and possessiveness over the person or people granting those attentions. Even God, who wants all the worship to himself, gets jealous:

> *You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord … am a jealous God.*
>
> – Exodus 20:5

**USAGE NOTE:** Despite the protestations of some, jealous can also be used to mean envious (*You're going to France? Jealous.*) and has a centuries-old record of doing so. This makes sense when you consider that the two terms' opposing positions – one of wanting but not having, the other of having but risking losing to another – are often slippery and interchangeable.

# Bay *vs* Gulf *vs* Cove

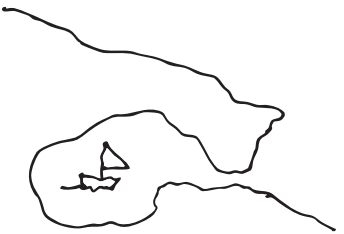


BAY

**Bays** are recessed bodies of water.

GULF

**Gulfs** are very large bays.



COVE

**Coves** are small bays, usually with narrow entrances and sheltered by steep cliff walls.

# Latte *vs* Flat White *vs* Cappuccino *vs* Cortado

All four espresso drinks contain steamed milk, but in different amounts: **lattes** are the largest and milkiest, while **cortados** are the smallest and strongest.

Where things get complicated is with the middle two. **Cappuccinos** may be slightly bigger than **flat whites** or vice versa – or, gallingly, one might contain a single rather than double shot of espresso – but plenty of coffee shops make them the exact same way.

The one difference worth noting, however, has to do with foam: baristas tend to stretch the milk in flat whites only around 20 to 30 per cent, while for cappuccinos they may go as high as 40 or even 50 per cent. The result? Cappuccinos are often fluffier in texture, which means that where cup size and espresso volume remain constant, they taste stronger too.

LATTE

FLAT WHITE

## Stretch?

Stretching is barista slang for aerating the milk, which is when you raise the steam wand to the surface of the milk to gently whisk in a little air. The difference, then, is that with a cappuccino, you *might* stretch the milk a few seconds longer, resulting in a fluffier liquid that, by virtue of its increased volume, doesn't cut the espresso as much.

That, at least, is the quasi-difference when both drinks are made with microfoam: the flat, white, silky-looking froth that comes standard on all flat whites (hence the name) and on 99 per cent of cappuccinos found in most trendy coffee shops today. But if you're bucking the microfoam trend, there's always the dry foam cappuccino of old, which is produced by bringing the spout a touch higher (and holding it there for longer) to introduce air more vigorously into the milk, resulting in those large-bubbled billows we all remember from the '90s. Bone-dry cappuccinos, a rare extreme, are all foam and no milk: a pillow on a black pond. Note, however,

CAPPUCCINO

CORTADO

that these misshapen crowns are for cappuccinos only: the 'dry foam flat white' is an impossible object.

## Surface Foam *vs* Textured Milk

But there's one more piece to the puzzle: blending. Contrary to those diagrams of espresso drinks you sometimes see – where foam, milk and espresso are laid out in distinct strips – a good flat white or latter-day cappuccino actually mixes all three together. That's because, once your expert barista aerates the milk, they will subsequently plunge the wand farther into the pitcher to create a whirlpool, effectively blending the foam they just made with the steaming milk below. The result? A thick, velvety, textured milk from top to bottom, which is then poured over the espresso.

Almost immediately, however, the textured milk will begin to separate, forming a head of surface foam that also gets progressively drier. And because there's often more air in a cappuccino to begin with (see above), over time you'll see it form a larger head (~1 cm) than that of a flat white (~5 mm). So while those diagrams of layered liquids unfairly write textured milk out of the story, they at least show you what you'd get if you left your drink untouched for way too long.

# Assume *vs* Presume

ASSUME

To **assume** is to suppose without proof.

*I assumed you knew where you were going!*

PRESUME

To **presume** is to do so with confidence or authority.

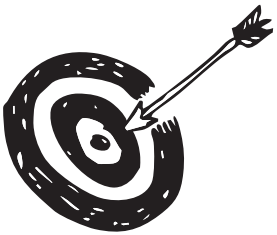
*Your daughter, I presume?*

## The Fine Print

Assume and presume both mean to suppose, believe or take for granted that something is true despite a lack of hard proof. Yet presuming is more confident because it suggests that there's at least *some* good evidence for the thing believed: *When the boat washed up empty, he was presumed dead*. Assuming, by contrast, is based on weaker grounds for belief, or none at all, and thus lacks the swagger of presumption: *You assume incorrectly – I'm Belgian*.

# Accuracy *vs* Precision

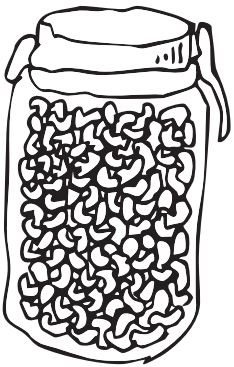
ACCURACY



PRECISION

**Accuracy** refers to how close you are to the correct answer.

**Precision** refers to how closely or finely you're measuring.



**Example**

A jar has 76 jelly beans in it. David guesses there are 125. Lucy guesses there are between 50 and 100. David is precise but not accurate; Lucy is accurate but not precise.

## Technically Speaking

In the sciences, these terms have more technical – but ultimately similar – meanings to their everyday counterparts: accuracy refers to how close your readings are to an object's true value, while precision refers to how close your readings are to one another, i.e. to how *consistent* they are.

The distinction is useful in diagnosing different kinds of error: accurate but imprecise readings suggest your tools are too coarse – you need a yardstick that can measure in eighth inches rather than quarter inches – while precise but inaccurate readings may mean your tools are poorly calibrated – your yardstick isn't quite a yard, and it's introducing systemic bias into your results.

### TARGET PRACTICE

- Precise but inaccurate archers are off the mark but consistently so: a slight tweak in their angle and they'll be pros.
- Imprecise but accurate archers are *on* the mark but only roughly so: with practice and focus, they'll start hitting the bullseye dead-on.
- Archers who are both imprecise and inaccurate are bad at archery.

# Ethics *vs* Morality



**Ethics** refers to intelligible principles of right and wrong.

*Code of ethics*
*Workplace ethics*

**Morality** refers to right and wrong as a *felt sense*.

*Moral compass*
*Moral fibre*

One is rational, explicit and defined by one's social or professional community; the other is emotional, deep-seated and dictated by one's conscience or God.

That's why an immoral act sounds graver than an unethical one: one may get you fired, but the other could land you in hell.

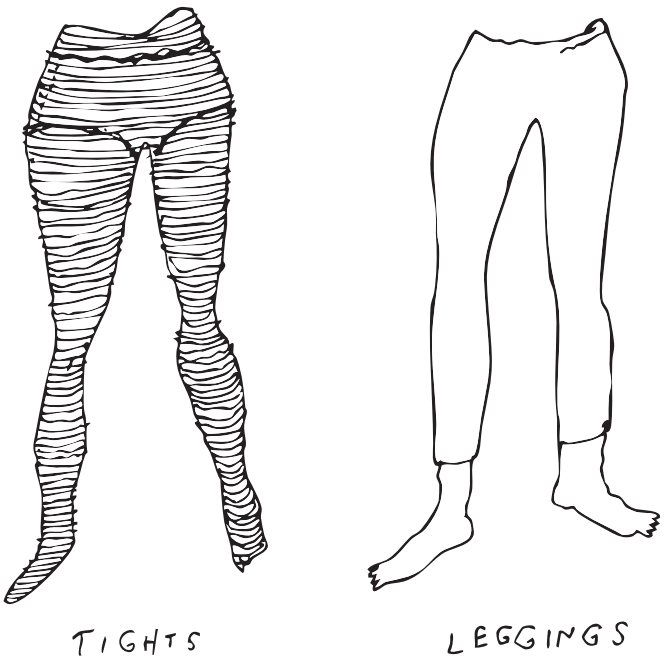
## The Fine Print

With characteristic sass, usage master H. W. Fowler notes that 'The two words, once fully synonymous, & existing together only because English scholars knew both Greek & Latin ['ethics' being Greek in origin, 'morality' Latin], have so far divided functions that neither is superfluous … *ethics* is the science of morals, & *morals* are the practice of ethics.'*

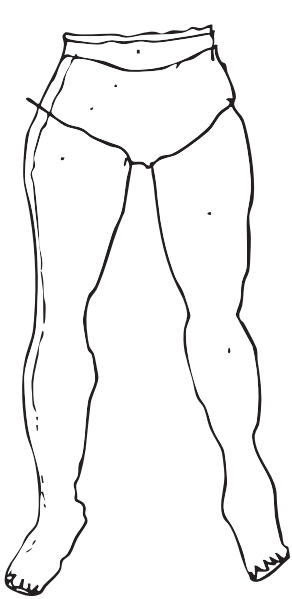
While Fowler is here alluding to ethics as a branch of philosophy, the conceptual flavour of the word can be heard in its everyday sense as well: whether theorised by Aristotle or spelled out in a code of conduct, ethics is morality, as it were, with glasses on.

* H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 1st edn (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1926), 152.

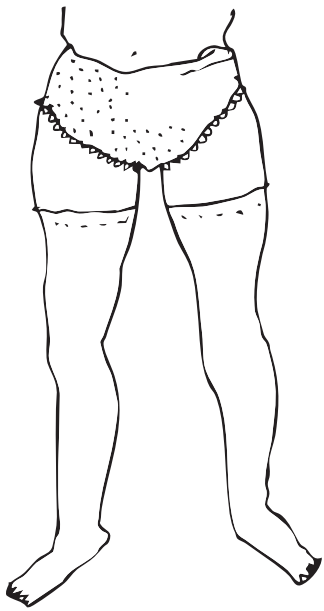
# Tights *vs* Leggings *vs* Pantyhose *vs* Stockings




**Tights** cover the feet. **Leggings**, as their name suggests, don't. Tights are also an undergarment and so tend to be thinner and somewhat sheer, whereas leggings can be thicker and worn as trousers all on their own.



PANTYHOSE

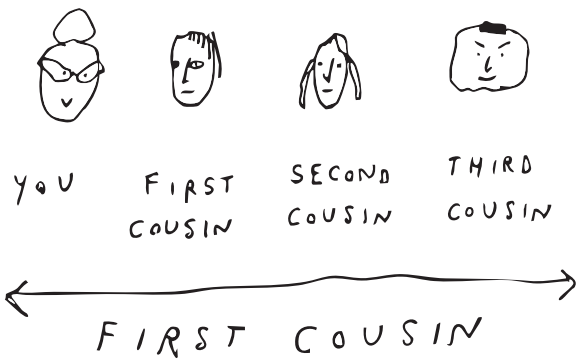


STOCKINGS

**Pantyhose** (sheer tights in the UK) are an extra-sheer form of tights, often with more opaque fabric covering the upper or 'panty' portion of the panty/hose combination that their name suggests.

Less common today, **stockings** are detached undergarments that stop around the thigh. Sort of like the ones hanging over the fireplace at Christmas.

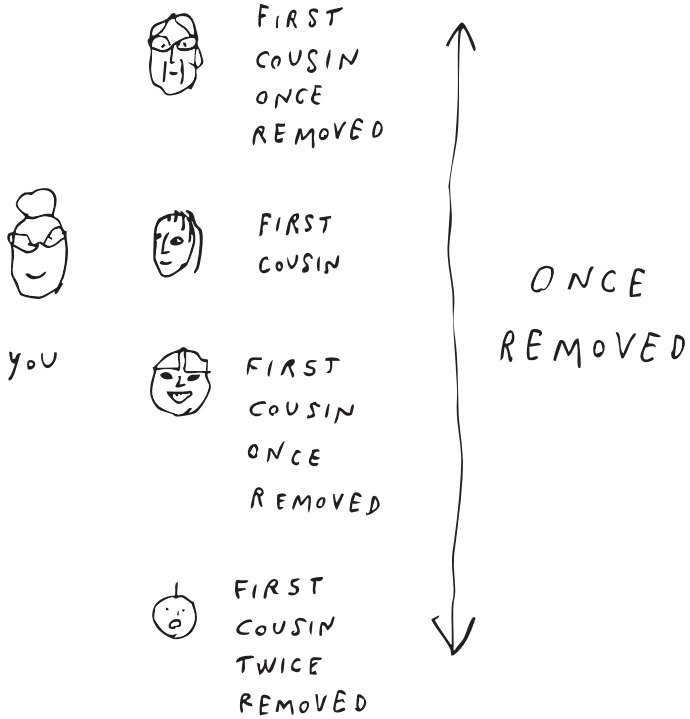
# First Cousin *vs* Once Removed




**First cousins** have the same grandparents. Second cousins have the same great-grandparents. In general, degree of cousinhood is determined by distance to a common ancestor.

**Once removed** means you're a generation apart. Twice removed means you're two generations apart. In general, degree of removal is determined by the generational difference between the two cousins themselves.

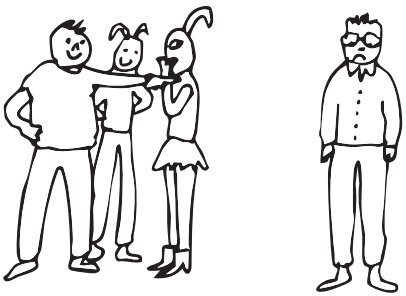
In short, when you hear 'third cousin', you're about to meet someone you're barely related to, but when you hear 'thrice removed', you're about to meet someone astoundingly old.




**MNEMONIC 1 (HORIZONTALITY):** Cousinhood is horizontal. Removalhood is vertical. If you don't hear the word 'removed', you're in the same generation.

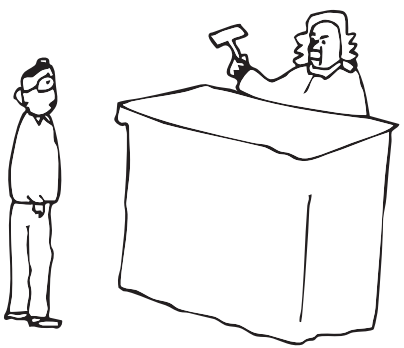
**MNEMONIC 2 (THE *G* RULE):** To establish degree of cousinhood, simply count the number of *g*'s before finding a shared ancestor: same grandparents? First cousins. Same great-grandparents? Second cousins. And so on … And if you're of different generations, simply pick the smaller number of *g*'s between you: if my grandparents are your great-grandparents, we're first cousins – and because of the single generational difference between us, we're also once removed.

# Shame *vs* Guilt



SHAME

You feel **shame** for not
being good enough.



GUILT

You feel **guilt** for not doing
the right thing.

## Who You Are *vs* What You Do

Shame is the feeling that your innate qualities don't live up to the standards of beauty, intelligence, character, etc., as defined by your peers or society.

Guilt, by contrast, is the feeling that the actions or thoughts over which you have control transgress standards of right and wrong as dictated by the law, your parents, your conscience or your god.

One is about who you are and are not, the other about what you do or don't do: I feel ashamed of my puny muscles – and guilty for not going to the gym.

# Autocrat *vs* Despot *vs* Tyrant *vs* Dictator

**Autocrats** rule with absolute power. **Despots** rule with absolute power cruelly and oppressively. **Tyrants** rule with absolute power cruelly, oppressively and illegitimately (usurpers). **Dictators** rule with absolute power cruelly, oppressively and under a newly established regime.

### The Fine Print

- An autocrat rules with absolute power by legitimate means, often within a long-standing or established political system such as a monarchy. Of the four terms, autocrat carries the least negative connotation, though it's still widely considered undesirable.
  *Archetype*: **Tsar Nicholas II of Russia**

- A despot rules with absolute power by legitimate means, but oppressively so, and often within a long-standing political order where the domination of the ruler and the unfreedom of its people is the norm. Carrying a regrettable hint of orientalism, the term has historically been used by Western nations in reference to leaders of countries elsewhere – a counterpoint, as it were, to the freedom of one's own state.
  *Archetype*: **Pharaoh Rameses II of Ancient Egypt**

- Unlike the first two rulers, whose sovereignty is sanctioned by law or custom, tyrants are illegitimate

usurpers, seizing the reins by nefarious means. And while despots may hold entire peoples under their thumb as a matter of course, tyrants add an extra measure of frenzied, paranoia-fuelled cruelty towards perceived rivals and political threats.
***Archetype*: Macbeth, king of Scotland**

*O nation miserable,*
*With an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptred,*
*When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again … ?*

– *Macbeth*, act 4, scene 3

- A dictator, finally, rules with self-legitimising power within a recently established (rather than long-standing) political order, which is why a dictator is typically not a monarch (tyrants aren't so picky). Here, too, cruelty and oppression are the norm, drawing on ideology, propaganda and militarisation to convert its people from the old way of doing things to the wholly new regime.
***Archetype*: Adolf Hitler, führer of Nazi Germany**

**ORIGINAL MEANINGS**: In the Roman Republic, the term *dictator* referred to an individual temporarily granted extraordinary powers in a state of emergency – but when Julius Caesar was pronounced *dictator perpetuo*, the original meaning of the term was perverted, prefiguring the doublespeak of modern dictatorships (e.g. 'president for life').

*Tyrant*, meanwhile, originally referred to usurpers but not necessarily bad ones – maybe they deposed a despot.

# Typeface *vs* Font

| | |
|---|---|
| Helvetica | Helvetica Light |
| Arial | Helvetica Regular |
| Courier | *Helvetica Italic* |
| Garamond | **Helvetica Bold** |
| Comic Sans | ***Helvetica Bold Italic*** |
| TYPEFACE | FONT |

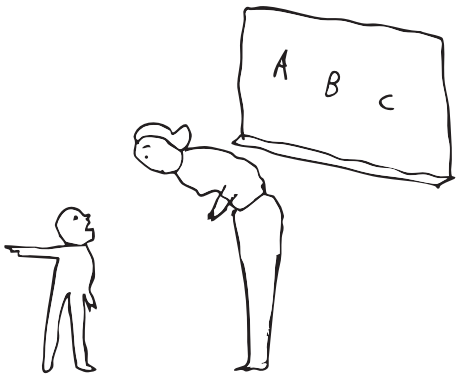
**Typeface** refers to a typographical design system, **font** to one of its many weights (light to **heavy**) or styles (roman, **boldface**, *italic*, condensed, etc.).

In short, a typeface is a family, while a font is one of its members.

**USAGE NOTE**: Outside the world of typography, the use of font to mean typeface is so common that the error, if it can even be called one, is likely here to stay. Given that font is easier to say, that might not be such a bad thing.

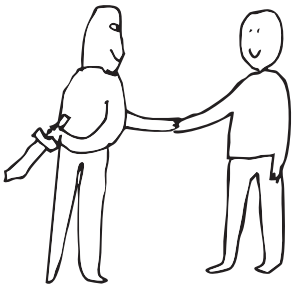
You are currently reading the Regular font of the Swift LT typeface. (The main typeface above is also Swift LT (Regular), but bigger.)

# Snitch *vs* Rat




SNITCH

A **snitch** informs on others (tattletale).



RAT

A **rat** sells out their own (traitor).

When Randy Wagstaff tells the assistant principal who sprayed graffiti at school, he's a snitch. When Cypher betrays Morpheus to Agent Smith, he's a rat.

## A Tale of Two Rats

Note that the term 'rat' may refer to an actual traitor *or* to an undercover agent who, though never really part of the group to begin with, nevertheless embeds with them and eventually breaks their trust. The former we may call true rats (Cypher, Judas), the latter false rats or moles (Donnie Brasco, Billy Costigan).

**MORE SNITCHES**

- Randall Weems
- Reginald 'Bubbles' Cousins

**MORE TRUE RATS**

- Pussy Bonpensiero
- Fredo Corleone

**MORE FALSE RATS (MOLES)**

- Colin Sullivan
- Mr Orange

# Epigram *vs* Aphorism *vs* Maxim *vs* Adage *vs* Proverb

### EPIGRAM

**Epigrams** are witty.

*'One should always play fairly …*
*when one has the winning cards.'*

– Mrs Cheveley, in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*

### APHORISM

**Aphorisms** are philosophical.

*'Even the bravest of us rarely has the courage*
*for what he really knows.'*

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

### MAXIM

**Maxims** are rules of conduct.

*'Know thyself.'*

– Inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi

### ADAGE

**Adages** are old and well-known.

*'The best defence is a good offence.'*

### PROVERB

**Proverbs** are folk/traditional.

*'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'*

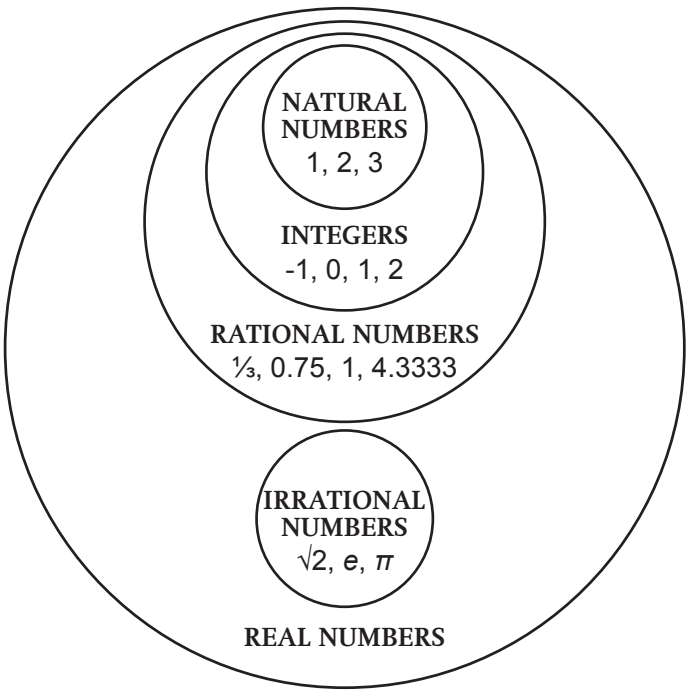
– English proverb

The first two tend to be attributable to an individual writer, the latter three less so, but really, these categories are defined so loosely, and their potential for overlap is so great, that your best bet is just to try to say something clever and let others decide.

## Adages of Old

Incidentally, given that all adages are old, or at least are supposed to be, the phrase *old adage* is considered by many usage experts to be redundant. Yet it's a pairing that goes back centuries, proving that our love of emphasis (or the charm of alliteration) makes bad logicians of us all.

# Natural Numbers *vs* Integers *vs* Rational Numbers *vs* Real Numbers




1, 2, 3, and so on are **natural numbers**. Add negatives and you've got **integers**. Add fractions (or their expression as decimal numbers) and you've got **rational numbers**. Finally, add non-terminating, non-repeating decimal numbers like $\pi$ (3.14159 …) and $\sqrt{2}$ (1.24348 …), otherwise known as **irrational numbers**, and you've got the set of all **real numbers**.

## Zero Debate

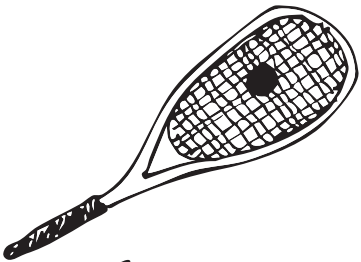
Natural numbers are sometimes referred to as 'counting numbers', which is nice and intuitive (1 cow, 2 cows). Annoyingly, however, some number systems include 0 among the set of natural numbers, which kind of messes up the whole counting thing. (Can you count no cows? Not really.) Yet other systems fare no better, for by relegating 0 to a slightly broader set called **whole numbers**, they make the whole thing needlessly complicated. This insoluble dilemma is, I'm sure, a source of endless frustration to the mathematics community.

Also: rational numbers are so called because they're made up of *ratios* of two integers, aka fractions. Irrational numbers, by contrast, cannot be reduced to such ratios – they are incommensurable. Hence the never-ending randomness.

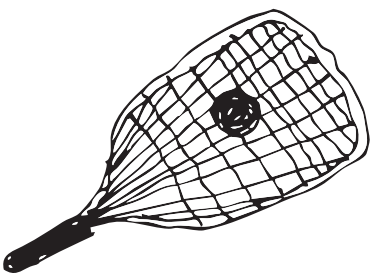
## Advanced Distinction


Beyond the universe of real numbers lies an exotic category of hypothetical oddities called **imaginary numbers** (√-1, shortened to *i*), which, together with real numbers, form an extended set known as **complex numbers**.

# Squash *vs* Racquetball




In **squash**, you hit a firm ball
with a narrow racket.




In **racquetball**, you hit a bouncy
ball with a fat racket.

If you remember one of them,
make it squash: it's much more popular.

## Cube Sports

Both sports are played in an enclosed, four-walled space by either two players or four. In racquetball, though, the racket's a bit shorter and wider, the ball's a bit bigger and bouncier, and the court's a bit longer and higher.

There are a handful of other differences, too, including how you serve (volley vs bounce serve), how scoring works (per rally vs per served rally), and, most importantly, what counts as out of bounds: in squash, the ball can't hit the ceiling, upper walls or a strip of metal at the bottom called the 'tin'. In racquetball, it's comparatively open season.

Between the ball, racket and playable surface area, racquetball is arguably a bit easier to pick up, though squash, as mentioned, is far more widespread.

Oh, and there's a third sport played in the UK called racketball (note the spelling) that in its rules, equipment and dimensions falls somewhere between the other two. To confuse matters even more, it was recently renamed 'squash 57'.