

3-2014

# Creating Clarity: Careful Use of Contronyms

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

*Concordia University School of Law*, [tfordyce@cu-portland.edu](mailto:tfordyce@cu-portland.edu)

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Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, *Creating Clarity: Careful Use of Contronyms*, *Advocate*, Mar.-Apr. 2014, at 54.

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# Creating Clarity: Careful Use of Cononyms

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

**C**ononyms were not among the categories of “nyms” I learned as a child. I know all about synonyms, homonyms, and antonyms. So I was surprised when I recently learned about cononyms.

Cononyms are words that are their own antonyms (in fact, they are sometimes called autoantonyms). That’s right, the same word can have two opposing or contradictory meanings. Think of *dust*. *Dust* can mean to add fine particles to something:

*The plane was dusting the field.*

Or it can mean to remove fine particles.

*I needed to dust my office after the windstorm.*

Because cononyms have contradictory meanings, writers must depend on context to make sure the reader understands which meaning the writer intended. Context can come in either the paragraph or the sentence. Alternatively, you can assure that your meaning is crystal clear by using the cononym only for its preferred meaning and choosing a different word if the reader might be confused.

Here are some of my new favorite cononyms.

## Sanction

*Sanction* is particularly tricky. It can be either a noun or a verb, and both usages have contradictory meanings. As a noun, a *sanction* is either a threat of a penalty or official permission.

*The court gave its sanction.*



Did the court approve something or impose a penalty? Without more context, the reader wouldn’t know.

*Because drug courts were so successful, advocates in Idaho sought permission to use this type of program. The court gave its sanction. Thus, the drug court program was born.*

*The court gave its sanction to provide CLE credits to authors who publish in *The Advocate*.*

As a verb, *sanction* is either to give official permission or to impose a sanction.

*The court sanctioned two problem-solving courts: drug courts and mental health courts.*

*The court sanctioned the defendant for multiple violations of the discovery rules.*

Of course, using a preposition can also help: giving *sanction to* signals approval, while issuing *sanctions against* signals a penalty.

Don’t forget: the approval definition of *sanction* is the more commonly understood. If you are dealing with someone other than a court or another attorney, avoid using *sanction* to mean

penalty or penalize. You would hate to have a client think you had advised her that the court would permit her conduct, when you were instead suggesting a penalty.

## Oversight

*Oversight* can mean to monitor something or to unintentionally fail to notice or do something.

*She had administrative oversight of the project.*

*The defendant claimed his failure to pay multiple parking tickets was an oversight.*

Using *oversight* to mean an obligation to monitor, however, should be avoided. Instead, use *monitor* or *supervise*. This will avoid the reader mistakenly believing a person is in charge of botching something.

## Left

As a verb *left* can mean either depart or to let remain.

*He left for work at 8:00 a.m.*

*I left my citation manual at home (oh no!).*

There is no preferred usage for *left*, but context usually makes your meaning clear. Just make sure your meaning isn't *left* to the reader's imagination.

### Trim

When you *trim* something, you either add to the edges of something or remove from the edges of something.

*He trimmed the tree.*

Was he using tinsel or a chainsaw to do the trimming? While the *add to* meaning of trim might not come up often in your writing, don't needlessly trim context from your writing.

### Resign

This one won't create confusion in speech because it's a homograph, not a homophone. *Resign* meaning to quit is spelled the same as *resign* meaning to sign again. So, when writing *resign* it's especially important to make sure you use context and prepositions to make your meaning clear.

*He resigned the army.*

Without either *resigned from* or *resigned up for*, the writer won't know whether this gentleman quit or re-enlisted. Instead of resigning yourself to confusing word choice, edit your writing for clarity.<sup>1</sup>

### Fast

*Fast* can mean either moving rapidly, or remaining firm, fixed, or unmoving.

*The car was moving fast.*

*The boat was tied fast to the dock.*

This one isn't likely to create confusion, but hold *fast* to your conviction that writing should be clear.

### Off

In certain situations *off* can actually mean activated or turned on.

*The alarm went off while she was at work.*

But it can also mean that something was deactivated.

*When he got home, he turned the alarm off.*

Like *fast*, *off* isn't likely to create confusion, but if you're worried alarm bells will go off in a reader's head, opt for a different word than a contronym.

### Screen

*Screen* can mean to show or to hide.

*The theater is screening the new movie at 12:01 a.m.*

*They need to screen their junk pile!*

Don't screen your meaning with contronyms — make sure to use context or synonyms to show the reader your meaning.

### Help

When I first saw *help* on a list of contronyms, I was confused. But then the author explained that *help* can mean to assist or to prevent.

*I hope my column helps you become a better writer.*

*Once I learned about contronyms, I couldn't help but research them.*

### Continue

The opposite means of this one should be obvious to any attorney. *Continue* means to keep doing an action or to suspend an action. To an attorney, the meaning of this sentence is clear:

*The court is likely to continue the hearing.*

You read this to mean that the hearing will be farther in the future. But the preferred meaning of *continue* is to keep doing something. A client is likely to believe this sentence means the court will keep on having the hearing, as opposed to postponing it. When dealing with non-law-trained readers, use *postpone* or *defer* instead

of *continue* in the sense of suspending or stopping.

### Appropriate

The verb *appropriate* can mean to take exclusive possession or to give to another for its own use.

*He appropriated trust funds for himself.*

*The legislature appropriated funds for school maintenance.*

Context is likely to make this one clear, and there isn't a preferred meaning. Nevertheless, *appropriate* some time to making your writing clearer.

### Finished

This fun contronym can mean either polished to a high degree or excellence, or doomed.

*After learning about contronyms, her brain felt finished!*

### Sources

- Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 197, 200-01, 602, 727 (3d ed. Oxford Univ. Press 2009).
- Judith B. Herman, Mental Floss, *14 Words that Are Their Own Opposites*, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/49834/14-words-are-their-own-opposites> (Apr. 2, 2013).

### Endnotes

1. Yes, I cheated there. I inserted a third meaning of *resign*. Did it keep you on your toes?

### About the Author

**Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff** is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a boutique firm focusing on civil appeals. You can reach her at [tfordyce@cu-portland.edu](mailto:tfordyce@cu-portland.edu) or [tfr@raineylawoffice.com](mailto:tfr@raineylawoffice.com).