

Are you sure you know what that word means?

By now you will have heard about the Cleveland local news anchor Kristi Capel and how she used a racial slur to describe Lady Gaga's performance at the Academy Awards. According to this report in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Capel apologized and said she did not know what the word meant (I am not using the word here because it is racist).

Think about that for a moment: *A news anchor, while broadcasting live, used a word that she did not understand.*

In Capel's case, I don't think there was any racial motivation behind this incident, but there was something much more common: ignorance. She was called out (and rightfully so) because what she said was racist. But every single day, people are guilty of using words they don't understand, mangling their meaning.

If you watch enough TV or read enough stuff online or in print, you will see many instances of misused words. To quote Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*:

"You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

Lifehack says that travesty, ironic and bemused are among the 10 Most Commonly Misused Words. Just look up the phrase "misused words" in your favorite search engine and you will get loads of examples (there are many more than 10).

Here's one I see all the time

One word that I have seen misused over and over is "misnomer." Merriam-Webster defines misnomer as:

: *the misnaming of a person in a legal instrument*

: a use of a wrong or inappropriate name : a wrong name or inappropriate designation

Basically, a misnomer is using the wrong *name* for something . The example used by Merriam-Webster is the *international* airport that only serves domestic flights. Seems straightforward enough. Yet, many times I hear journalists using the word misnomer when what they really mean is misunderstanding. They'll say something like: "It's a misnomer to say that the senator is going to vote for the bill."

You know that word doesn't exist, right?

There are some people who make up words or mispronounce words. Huffington Post lists "11 Commonly Used Made-Up Words That Drive Us Insane" to include: "expresso," "supposably," and the famous "irregardless." (Buzzfeed has a similar list: 17 Misused and Made-Up Words That Make You Rage.)

Using words that don't mean what you think they do only makes you sound ignorant to those who do understand the meaning. In cases like Capel's, not only will you sound ignorant but you may also offend. So here are some warnings:

- If you are not sure of what a word means *precisely*, don't use it.
- If you think a word is right, but you aren't absolutely sure, don't use it.
- If you think you will sound like you know what you are talking about because you are using a long word, definitely don't use it.
- And finally, use a dictionary. Look that pesky word up.

What words do you often notice as being misused?