

Stop Saying “Very Bad”: Awful, Dreadful or Appalling?

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

113 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Martin, how was your hotel?

Very bad.

And the restaurant?

Very bad.

The weather?

Also very bad.

You have given me three reviews, but only one description.

It was an efficient description.

Efficient, perhaps.

Precise, no.

Then what should I say?

Awful, dreadful or appalling.

All three sound quite strong.

They are.

But they do not always communicate exactly the same idea.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox and Practice Arena Five-Minute English.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

Today we are replacing “very bad” with three stronger words: awful, dreadful and appalling.

Let us begin with awful.

Awful is a common, flexible word for something extremely bad or unpleasant.

You can have an awful day.

Awful weather.

An awful headache.



Or an awful experience.

So I could say: The hotel room was awful.

Yes.

Perhaps it was dirty, uncomfortable or noisy.

Does awful always describe something serious?

Not necessarily.

In everyday conversation, we often use it to express a strong negative reaction.

For example: I feel awful about forgetting her birthday.

Or: This coffee tastes awful.

That is strong, but very natural.

Now let us look at dreadful.

Dreadful also means extremely bad or unpleasant.

It is especially common in British English.

We can say: The weather was dreadful.

Or: We received some dreadful news.

What is the difference between awful and dreadful?

They often overlap.

But dreadful can carry a feeling of suffering, worry or something difficult to endure.

A dreadful journey.

A dreadful mistake.

A dreadful feeling.

If your train was delayed for five hours and the station was freezing, you might describe the journey as dreadful.

That sounds accurate.

Dreadful can also sound slightly more dramatic or traditional than awful, depending on the speaker.

So awful is very broad and conversational.

And dreadful often emphasises how unpleasant or distressing the experience felt.

Now we need appalling.

Appalling means shockingly bad.

It expresses strong criticism or moral disapproval.

We often use it for behaviour, conditions, treatment, service or standards.



Appalling behaviour.

Appalling working conditions.

Appalling customer service.

Or an appalling lack of preparation.

Could I say the hotel service was appalling?

Yes, if the service was so bad that it shocked or seriously angered you.

Perhaps nobody cleaned the rooms, the staff ignored every complaint and the fire exit was blocked.

That would be appalling.

It is stronger than simply saying the service was unpleasant.

Exactly.

Appalling often contains a judgement: this should not be acceptable.

Could I describe my coffee as appalling?

Grammatically, yes.

But unless it is truly shocking, awful would sound more natural.

So collocation and context matter.

They always do.

Let us compare the three words.

Awful is a broad, common word for something extremely bad or unpleasant.

Dreadful often emphasises a deeply unpleasant, worrying or difficult experience.

And appalling describes something shockingly bad or unacceptable.

Time for a quick challenge.

Choose awful, dreadful or appalling before we answer.

Situation one.

Your soup tastes extremely unpleasant.

It tastes awful.

Situation two.

A long journey included cancelled trains, heavy rain and a lost suitcase.

It was a dreadful journey.

Situation three.

A company makes employees work in dangerous conditions without protection.



The working conditions are appalling.

Situation four.

You wake up with a very unpleasant headache.

You have an awful headache.

Now improve this sentence: The service was very bad.

Was it simply unpleasant?

Then it may have been awful.

Was it a miserable experience from beginning to end?

It may have been dreadful.

Was it shockingly bad and unacceptable?

Then it was appalling.

Quick recap.

Awful: extremely bad or unpleasant.

Dreadful: extremely unpleasant, distressing or difficult to endure.

Appalling: shockingly bad or unacceptable.

On the episode page at yourenglishtoolbox.com, you can use the seven-speed player to listen again at the rhythm that works best for you.

Slow the difficult examples down, then return to normal speed when the differences feel clear.

The direct link is in the episode description.

So, Martin, give me your hotel review again.

The room was awful.

Good.

The weather was dreadful.

Much better.

And the way the manager spoke to the staff was appalling.

Now that is a precise review.

Unfortunately, it is still a terrible holiday.

But it has become an excellent vocabulary lesson.

See you next time, friends.

Goodbye.

