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THE USAGE PANEL

The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

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hone¹  (hōn)

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n.

1. A fine-grained whetstone for giving a keen edge to a cutting tool.
2. A tool with a rotating abrasive tip for enlarging holes to precise dimensions.

tr.v. honed, hon-ing, hones

1. To sharpen on a fine-grained whetstone.
2. To perfect or make more intense or effective: *a speaker who honed her delivery by long practice.*

Phrasal Verb:

hone in *Usage Problem*

1. To move or advance toward a target or goal: *The missiles honed in on the military installation.*
2. To focus the attention or make progress achieving an objective: *The lawyer honed in on the gist of the plaintiff's testimony.*

[Middle English, from Old English *hān*, stone; see **kō-** in the Appendix of Indo-European roots. *Hone in*, alteration of *home in*.]

Usage Note: The verb *home* has been used to mean "to return home" (what homing pigeons do) since the 1920s. The introduction of radar in World War II gave it the related meaning "to return home by following a beam or landmark" and then "to find a target via a beam or signal," as when pilots and aircraft *homed on* a target. In the 1950s the verb was extended to the figurative sense "to narrow attention on" and *in* was added, so the expression became *home in on*. A decade later *hone in on*, containing the verb meaning "to sharpen," began to be used in the same sense. Presumably the substitution was encouraged both by the similarity in sound and the overlap in metaphorical meaning: sharpening one's focus made as much sense as directing it homeward. Whatever its origin, *hone in*, despite being common, is often viewed as a mistake. In our 2015 survey, 36 percent of the Usage Panel disapproved of the example *Direct mail allows you to hone in on your target audience*, and 40 percent would not accept *The purpose of the meeting was to hone in on strategies for improving the company's performance*. If you prefer to employ the more widely accepted idiom, stick with *home in* or use *zero in*.

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hone²  (hōn)

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intr.v. honed, hon-ing, hones

Informal

1. To whine or moan.
2. To hanker; yearn.

[Obsolete French *hoigner*, from Old French, perhaps from *hon*, cry of discontent.]

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

Indo-European Roots

Semitic Roots

The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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