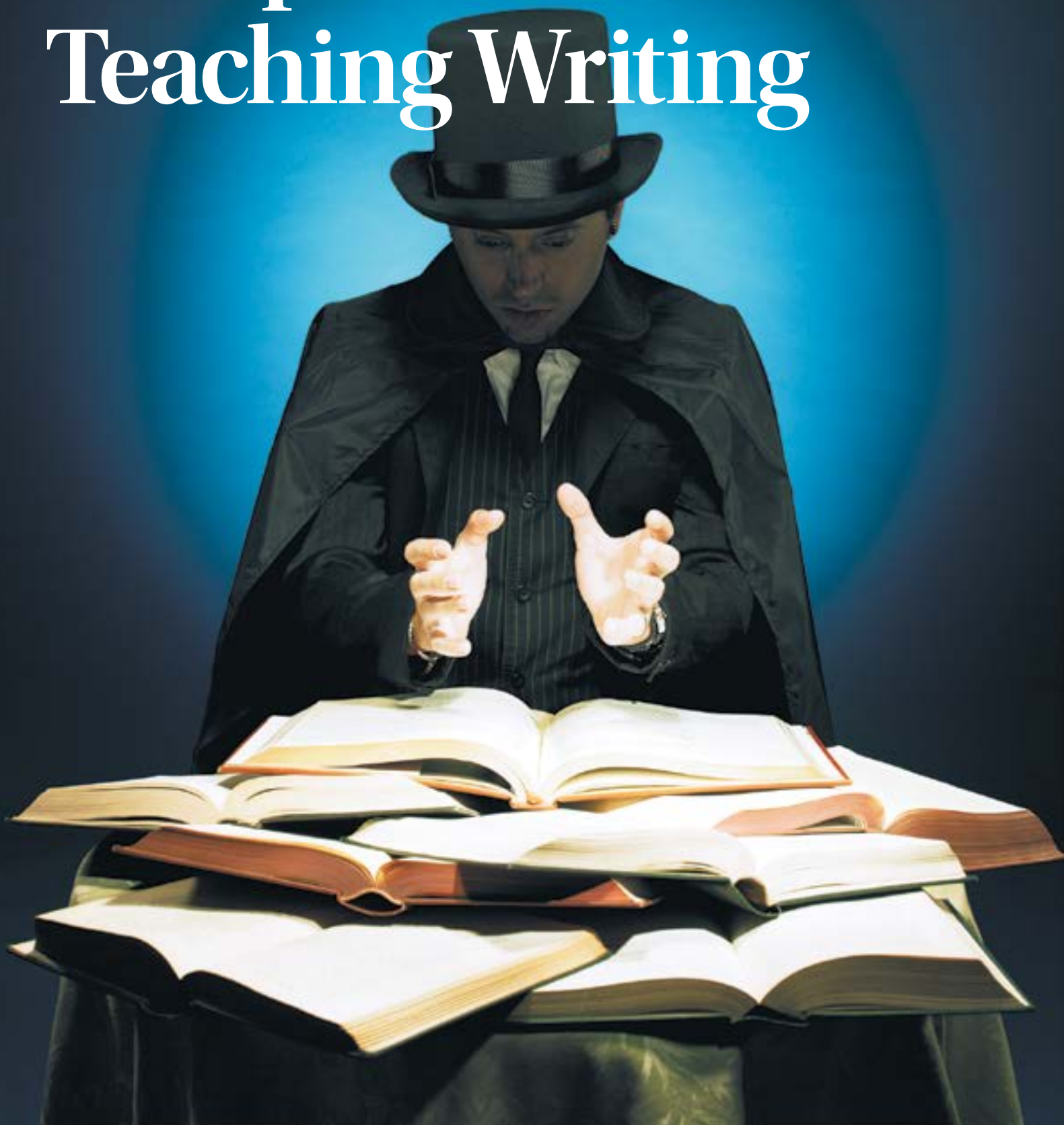


Focus

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

24 Tips for Teaching Writing



As a Chronicle of Higher Education individual subscriber,

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TO WRITE WELL, college students need to read to deepen their understanding of language. And they need to write. The 24 essays in this collection will prompt teachers to help their students grasp changes in what is acceptable language, explore the mysteries of word usage, and learn strategies to improve their writing. The essays are drawn from *Lingua Franca*, *The Chronicle's* free blog about language in academe. Students can read these posts and new ones at chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca.

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The 'Au Revoir' Problem

It can be disastrous to rely on only your instincts when writing

By BEN YAGODA

WAY BACK when I was taking “Introduction to French” during my freshman year in college, we were given a quiz a month or so into the term. At one point, the professor spoke some French words and we were asked to spell them. One of the words was the French phrase for “goodbye.”

This is what I wrote down: “orra voire.”

The professor had competently taught us that the term is *au revoir*. And I had learned it, up to a point. What happened on the day of the quiz (I’ve concluded in the many times I’ve mused about the incident since) is that I’d forgotten that French is a markedly different language from English, and most definitely so in terms of spelling. Falsely confident, I reverted to a sort of common-sense, instinctual mind-set, and spelled *au revoir* the way it sounds.

The reason I think so much about the mistake is that similar errors come up every week in the work students do in my writing classes, the aim of which is to teach them to produce prose on a professional level. That is not the same thing as learning a foreign language, but in both cases, it can be disastrous, or at least problematic, to rely on your instincts or on general logic.

The example that immediately occurs to me is a move so logical it has the word “logic” in its name. “Logical punctuation” refers to putting commas and periods outside quotation marks, “like this”. While it’s accepted in Britain and on Wikipedia and in some scholarly journals, and is more and more prevalent in unedited prose on the internet, it is still incorrect in American publishing. And so at the outset of every semester I stress that commas and periods always go inside quotation marks. Of course, students still put them outside, which I mark with “IQ,” which stands for “inside quotes.” I revisit the topic in class, and when they continue to logically punctuate, I point out the error in ALL CAPS, UNDERLINED. Sometimes I announce that I will deduct a point from their grade each time they make the error. And inevitably, in the final assignment, some students still do it. *Orra voire*.

Journalism — the form of writing I most often teach — really does resemble a foreign language,

with a great many counterintuitive rules. One that comes to mind is that journalists are not allowed to express an opinion, a.k.a. “editorialize.” There’s no obvious justification for the rule, and as a result, even if they master it for a moment, students backslide from September through June. Then there’s the convention of almost always using “said” as a verb of attribution. That’s as opposed to “stated,” “commented,” “remarked,” and other verbs, all of which are perfectly good words that would seem to have the added benefit of reducing word repetition. Word repetition is indeed a flaw in journalistic writing, up to and including “and,” “a,” and “the” (and students persist in perpetrating it, in an orra-voire kind of way), but for some reason, “said” is the one word that gets immunity. Doesn’t make sense, but you have to learn it, and if you rely on common sense, you never will.

This phenomenon applies not only to writing, but to many other endeavors that (unlike, say, Chinese or computer programming) appear to resemble stuff we already know how to do. The trick is to learn to ignore your instincts and your muscle memory. Skiing, personnel management, and courtship would seem to qualify. And tennis! Even today, after 50 years of playing that game, I sometimes find myself whacking a ball with all my might and seeing it hit the fence on a fly. In all these enterprises, there are geniuses whose instincts are preternaturally aligned with best practices, but the rest of us need a lot of help. Malcolm Gladwell has popularized the 10,000-hour rule — the idea that that amount of practice is a common denominator of elite athletes and others who make extraordinary contributions. I suggest that achieving basic competence in a skill requires a whole bunch of time and practice, too.

I dedicate this post to fellow faculty members, as they correct papers and assignments, with a gentle reminder that many of the writing errors and infelicities you encounter are there not because students are defying you, or are simple-minded, but because they relied on instinct.

So by all means correct the errors, but when you speak of them, and you will, be kind.

Ben Yagoda is a professor of English at the University of Delaware.

Originally published on May 10, 2016

Recalculating Route

It's easy to get lost in class, but it can lead to good results

BY WILLIAM GERMANO

BECAUSE I don't own a car, whenever I need to rent one I discover, all over again, the weird comfort of the NeverLost GPS.

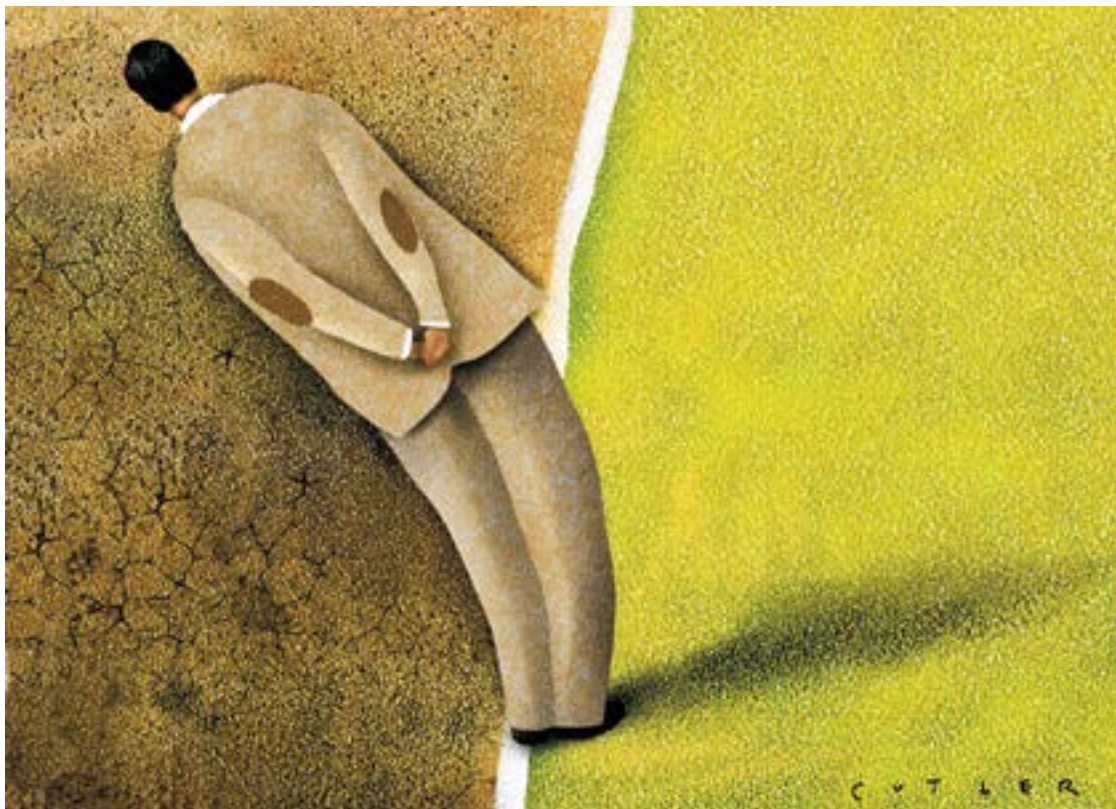
I do have a few skills that operate at a fairly high level, but spatial orientation isn't one of them. The idea of never being lost — or of being NeverLost™ — seems like a dream. (That word *neverlost* is absurd. Is it a rock star's California ranch? A classic of Edwardian children's lit?)

When I drive, I use the GPS constantly, sometimes talking back to the voice of the Electronic Lady (“Can't you be clearer? I already know that! No, it's not a turn, it's only a very slight bend. ...”), but mainly I'm grateful that there's a satellite that

knows how to get me to Exit 18.

And yet somehow I can't — or won't — always follow the Electronic Lady's directions. When that happens she announces, with an impressive absence of judgmental tone, that she is “recalculating route.” I've done something that makes her plans for me quite impossible.

For a moment I am reminded that I haven't just got myself lost, I've got the Electronic Lady lost, too, and now she's drawing down that higher knowledge with which she will describe a new path to the destination. I hear “recalculating route” at least once every time I rent a car, and I realize it's my favorite part of what the Electronic Lady has to say to me. Or maybe I just like getting safely lost.



DAVE CUTLER FOR THE CHRONICLE

It is easy to get lost in a class — easy for students, especially those for whom the material isn't easy at all, but easy for the professor, too.

Sure, it's possible to script a course so that being lost is an impossibility. But that's the kind of course I've never taught, won't, and probably can't. As for scripts, if you watched *Westworld*, you know that scripts are external impositions, doomed to go wrong. I will not mention Dolores or Wyatt again.

Getting lost is the risk the teacher takes. There are better and less-good ways of being lost and, *pace* Robert Frost, always more than two roads diverging in whatever yellow wood I'm trying to explore with my students.

I've come to a stage in teaching where I'm expecting to recalculate the route whenever we meet. Sure, there is the grudging reformulation of the class's objectives on days when it's clear that they haven't done the reading, or when the student who was to give a class presentation was suddenly felled by a mysterious, quite temporary, and utterly non-threatening malady.

So you recalculate route. You ad lib, you review materials, pull out the "For Emergency Use Only" pages in the notebook you carry, or turn whatever

you have to work with into a teaching moment.

Not every recalculated route involves making the students run the classroom, at least for a while, but sometimes that's what has to happen. Nobody promised that recalculating would be entirely on your own terms.

Some courses can be taught where everything has to operate flawlessly or the course fails. If you do teach that way, try taking a different exit, just once, and see if you don't still wind up at a good destination, maybe even the destination you intended to begin with, only at a different entry point.

When you teach you're the driver and the Electronic Lady at the same time, showing the map, announcing the landmarks and the turns, letting the carload know, as unjudgmentally as you can, that the route needs to be recalculated.

Getting a little lost in the classroom can be a good thing. It's not quite like being with your robotic Hertz companion, but it's an opportunity I've come to expect and even enjoy.

William Germano is dean of humanities at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science.

Originally published on November 29, 2016

Wordsmith Bingo

What are the defining characteristics of good prose?

BY BEN YAGODA

MY FACEBOOK (and actual) friend Gene Seymour posted this the other day:

Some 40 years ago, Wilfrid Sheed began his post-mortem for Cyril Connolly by asking who the best living writer of English prose is now. His pal John Leonard made a case for Malcolm Muggeridge while Sheed tossed out such eminences of the era as Cheever & E.B. White, concluding that what complicated the cases for both was that neither could likely do what the other could. (I vaguely remember that being the case.) Anyway, thinking about it now, I wonder who we'd suggest this minute. And wondered, also, whether the time & place for such questions has passed us all by.

A lively discussion ensued. Some commenters (I believe) misunderstood Gene's question and banded about the names of such favorite novelists as Roth, Pynchon, Tóibín, Marilynne Robinson, Cormac McCarthy, and Zadie Smith. But from the names he mentioned — Connolly, Muggeridge, White, and Sheed and Leonard themselves — I took "best living writer of English prose" to refer to a more generalized person of letters, someone who had at his or her command the full range of English diction and rhetorical figures. Commenters mentioned Naipaul, Theroux, and Didion: all good candidates, in my opinion, and notable for having (like Connolly et al.) not confined themselves to any one genre, but gone back and forth among fiction, reportage, memoir, essay, and criticism. Some of the names that came to my own mind were Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker*, James Wolcott of *Vanity Fair*, Virginia Heffernan of the internet, and Russell Baker of, well, of writing. But if I had to pick one person it would probably be Clive James, the great Australian-English critic, whose wonderful *Unreliable Memoirs* (1980) is very much in the Connolly mode.

But Gene may be right in suggesting that the

time for such personages has passed. Muggeridge, Connolly, Orwell, and Waugh were all born in 1903. Graham Greene came on the scene the following year, and Henry Green and Anthony Powell the year after that. It was an amazing literary generation, memorably chronicled by Martin Green in *Children of the Sun*. Part of their distinctiveness came from the way they straddled eras and sensibilities; Green emphasized the shadow cast over their lives and careers by the Great War, which killed or damaged so many of their older brothers and schoolmates.

Connolly spent a lot of his memoir, *Enemies of Promise* (1938), talking about prose style, specifically the contrast between what he called the Mandarin and vernacular styles. The vernacular offers "the cursive style, the agreeable manners, the precise and poetical impact of Forster's diction, the lucidity of Maugham ... the timing of Hemingway, the smooth cutting edge of Isherwood, the indignation of Lawrence, the honesty of Orwell, ..."

The Mandarin style, on the other hand:

is beloved by literary pundits, by those who would make the written word as unlike as possible to the spoken one. It is the style of all those writers whose tendency is to make their language convey more than they mean or more than they feel, it is the style of most artists and all humbugs. ...

The Mandarin style at its best yields the richest and most complete expression of the English language. It is the diction of Donne, Browne, Addison, Johnson, Gibbon, de Quincey, Landor, Carlyle, and Ruskin as opposed to that of Bunyan, Dryden, Locke, Defoe, Cowper, Cobbett, Hazlitt, Southey, and Newman. It is characterized by long sentences with many dependent clauses, by the use of the subjunctive and conditional, by exclamations and interjections, quotations, allusions, metaphors, long images, Latin terminology, subtlety, and conceits.

Its cardinal assumption is that neither the writer nor the reader is in a hurry, that both are possessed of a classical education and a private income.

I agree with Connolly's contention that in modern times, in order for a writer to last, he or she must take from both schools. That's pretty much what the critic F.W. Bateson (1901-78) was saying when he set down, in 1966, what I consider the best short list of the "defining characteristics of good prose: a preference for short sentences diversified by an occasionally very long one; a tone that is relaxed and almost colloquial; a large vocabulary that enjoys exploiting the different etymological and social levels of words; and an insistence on verbal and logical precision."

The mention of John Leonard, the late critic for the *Times* and many other outlets, brought to mind my own first published essay in a national publication. It was a (loving) parody of the column Leonard wrote for the *Times* in the late 70s, "Private Lives." (The columns were collected in a book, *Private Lives in the Imperial City*. I see a used copy is available for \$.01. Buy it.) At the time, I wasn't clued-in enough to follow either the vernacular or the Mandarin school. So I repaired myself to the New York Public Library Annex — which was so far west on 43rd Street that I believe it was be-

Originally published on October 30, 2014

tween 15th and 16th Avenues — and read dozens of Leonard's columns on microfilm. I made a chart quantifying his devices and mannerisms, and used that as a template for my takeoff.

That's obviously not the most organic way to do humor, but my piece, "Personal Existence," was nevertheless accepted over the transom by the weekly *Village Voice*. The editor said he didn't know when he'd have room for it and would let me know. But he didn't. I was too cheap/poor to buy the paper, so each week I would go to the aptly named Epiphany Branch of the NYPL, on East 23rd Street, and read the table of contents to see if it was in. *The Voice* came out on Wednesday, and one Tuesday I happened to be flipping through the previous week's paper and discovered that my piece was buried so deep, between the futon and escort ads, and considered so negligible that it hadn't made the table of contents and had escaped my notice the previous Wednesday. I ran out to try to find a copy, and finally located the last dog-eared one on offer at a newsstand on the northwest corner of 23rd and 3rd.

Good times.

Ben Yagoda is a professor of English at the University of Delaware.

The 'However' Myth

By Geoff Pullum

WHEN I see the dumb prohibitions that college-educated speakers of American English have been coerced into believing, it makes me want to weep. In another article in this guide (“The Comma Sutra,” Page 20), my colleague and electronic pen pal Ben Yagoda reported these fully correct judgments (I mark the ungrammatical example with a star):

1. *The weather is great today, however it’s supposed to rain tomorrow.
2. The weather is great today, but it’s supposed to rain tomorrow.
3. The weather is great today. However, it’s supposed to rain tomorrow.

Ben is right: The first is a run-on error or comma splice, but the other two are fine. Yet a significant number of the nearly 700 online comments he got on an article on grammar that he wrote for *The New York Times* expressed the opinion that sentence No. 3 is some kind of grammar error. Ye gods.

I blame those old fools Strunk and White. “In the meaning ‘nevertheless,’” wrote William Strunk in 1918, this adverb is “not to come first in its sentence or clause”; and E.B. White kept a similar statement in the 1959 reanimation of *The Elements of Style*: “Avoid starting a sentence with ‘however’ when the meaning is ‘nevertheless,’” it says (Page 48). “The word usually serves better when not in first position.”

Is this good advice? Well, don’t just hang your head and worry: Investigate! You are as capable as I am. Go to Project Gutenberg, download some classic books from when Strunk was a young man (the late 1800s), and use your word processor to search for occurrences of “however” at the beginning of a sentence. Let’s start with *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In the opening scene, Algernon says: “However, it makes no matter.” When interviewing Jack, Lady Bracknell says: “However, I am quite ready to enter your name,” and a bit later, “However, that could easily be altered.” In the last act Jack says: “However, you have got to catch the four-five,” and Dr. Chasuble says: “However, as your present mood seems to be one peculiarly secular, I will return to the church at once.”

Are we supposed to think Oscar Wilde was unable to represent Algernon Moncrieff and Lady Bracknell and Jack Worthing (a.k.a. Ernest Moncrieff) and the learned Dr. Chasuble as speaking Standard English correctly? This is insanity.

Originally published on June 7, 2012

You will find sentence-initial uses of the adverb “however” in works by Lewis Carroll, Willa Cather, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Arthur Machen, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Bram Stoker, Mark Twain — in fact, by every author I have investigated.

The hundred-year nightmare of grammar instruction in this country has littered the brains of many college-educated Americans with many lies told by incompetent grammar and style gurus. Few are more obvious than this one. Yet anyone who reports on what the facts show is likely to be charged with dumbing down, or ignoring the rules, or being left-wing, or thinking that anything goes.

How can I free people from the self-imposed burden of these mythical constraints, these “rules” that good writers do not respect and never did?

Perhaps this observation will help: Strunk and White assert that “When however comes first, it means in whatever way or to whatever extent.” This is not true, but it gives a useful clue about their concern. They seem to imagine that there is a danger of ambiguity. It is not true. Certainly, these two sentences share the same sequence of letters:

4. However it turns out, we’ll be covered.
5. However, it turns out we’ll be covered.

In No. 4, the “however” means “no matter how,” and in No. 5 it means “nonetheless.” But the commas clarify everything. In the terms of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the exhaustive conditional adjunct that begins (4) must not have a comma after the first word, while the supplementary connective adjunct that begins (5) must be followed by a comma. The idea that all ambiguity in English should or could be avoided is absurd, of course, but for what it is worth, no ambiguity arises here.

The connective adjunct “however” has always been grammatically and stylistically permitted as the first word of an independent clause, and there is no reason to think otherwise unless you believe authoritarian old nitwits like Strunk and White when they assert something that, as the literature of their time will readily show you, is entirely without rationale.

Please, educated Americans everywhere, stop wasting your time on learning and remembering ridiculous usage stipulations like this. Break free, and leave such linguistically unmotivated nonsense behind.

Geoff Pullum is a professor of linguistics at the University of Edinburgh.

Witnessing a Rule Change: Singular ‘They’

A newspaper stirs up dissent by permitting the usage as a last resort

By Anne Curzan

I HAVE a new favorite mug. It was given to me by the graduate students in the joint program in English and education (JPEE) and celebrates my advocacy of singular *they* — with an explanatory footnote.

But when can we stop including the footnote?

We got one step closer in December 2015, when Bill Walsh, chief of the night copy desk at *The Washington Post*, sent an email to the newsroom announcing some changes in the style guidelines. In addition to eliminating the hyphen in *email* and endorsing the spelling *mic* over *mike*, his email gave in to singular *they* as “permissible” when rewriting the sentence to make it plural is “impossible or hopelessly awkward.” Walsh also noted the usefulness of *they* when referring to people who identify outside the male-female binary.

Walsh’s email — and more specifically the part of his email about singular *they* — made headlines, including an article by Bill Walsh himself. John E. McIntyre, night content production editor at *The Baltimore Sun* and a longtime advocate of singular *they*, published a nice piece addressing some of the common objections to it. And Arika Okrent, blogging at Mental Floss, predicted that other news organizations will follow the *Post*’s lead. I would guess she is right.

This is how rules change: one style guide at a time. And often cautiously. Walsh does not wholeheartedly embrace singular *they*. He frames it as a permissible last resort when there is no way to get around the need for a generic singular pronoun. When nothing terrible happens — readers are not confused by singular *they*, if they even notice it, and no one cancels their subscription to the newspaper over it — singular *they* will become an ever more standard option.

Originally published on December 16, 2015

It will take a while for widespread acceptance of singular *they* among English teachers and copy editors. After all, some of them are still strictly enforcing the rule about not splitting infinitives, and that was cautiously accepted by Oxford and others some 20 years ago. But I think it is fair to say that singular *they* now has its foot solidly in the door of acceptable English usage. Or, to change the metaphor, the gatekeepers of formal English usage have cracked open the gate.

As a historian of the English language, I have accepted this cautious creep toward acceptability, even though there is nothing grammatically wrong with singular *they* other than the fact that people say there is something wrong with it. It makes sense that the dissipation of long-established grammar and style rules takes time.

As a professor of English and a copy editor, I am one of the gatekeepers when it comes to what counts as “acceptable” in formal, edited prose. I am doing and will continue to do what I can to speed things along: I voted “completely acceptable” for all the sentences with singular *they* on the

2015 usage survey for *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*; I will continue to use singular *they* in my own academic writing; I talk with students about the debate in class; and obviously I can’t seem to help but write about singular *they* on the *Lingua Franca* blog. The next step is to assume that my readers will see singular *they* as standard enough (e.g., in the line above about no one canceling their subscription) that it merits no special comment.

I have decided to keep the mug and drop the footnote.

Anne Curzan is a professor of English at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.



ANNE CURZAN

Slash: Not Just a Punctuation Mark Anymore

Students show why *slash* has become the word to watch

By Anne Curzan

IN the undergraduate history of English course I am teaching this term, I request/require that the students teach me two new slang words every day before I begin class. I learn some great words this way (e.g., *hangry* “cranky or angry due to feeling hungry”; *adorkable* “adorable in a dorky way”). More importantly, the activity reinforces for students a key message of the course: that the history of English is happening all around us (and that slang is humans’ linguistic creativity at work, not linguistic corruption).

Two weeks ago, one student brought up the word *slash* as an example of new slang, and it quickly became clear to me that many students are using *slash* in ways unfamiliar to me. In the classes since then, I have come to the students with follow-up questions about the new use of *slash*. Finally, a student asked, “Why are you so interested in this?” I answered, “Slang creates a lot of new nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. It isn’t that often that slang creates a new conjunction.”

Let me explain. Lots of us use the slash (/) in writing to capture two or more descriptions of the same thing, with a meaning something like “or,” “and,” or “and/or” — e.g., “my sister/best friend” or “request/require.” The slash typically separates two things that are the same part of speech or parallel grammatically; and we can say that slash out loud if needed: “my sister slash best friend.”

Now I wouldn’t write that phrase down that way, with the slash spelled out, but students tell me they now often do. A student kindly sent me some real examples from her Facebook chat (shared with her permission):

1. Does anyone care if my cousin comes and visits slash stays with us Friday night?
2. I have been asking everyone I know in the Chicago area if they’re going slash if they’d willing [sic] to let me tag along slash show me around because frankly I’d have no idea how to get around Chicago on my own

Another student sent me this excerpt from her blog post:

3. ... culminating in Friday’s shootout-slash-car-chase-slash-manhunt-slash-media-circus around the apprehension of the bombing suspect.

That same student then provided me this example of slash, which demonstrates a slightly different, although clearly related, meaning:

4. I spent all day in the UG Li [library] yesterday writing my French paper slash posting pictures of cats on my sister’s Facebook wall.

As this sentence makes clear, the slash is distinguishing between (a) the activity that the speaker or writer was intending to do or should have been doing, and (b) the activity that the speaker or writer actually did or anticipated they would do (yes, I did use “they” as a singular right there — more on that in “Witnessing a Rule Change: Singular ‘They,’” on the opposite page). Other students provided these additional examples:

5. I went to class slash caught up on Game of Thrones. [I made sure to clarify that this was not in reference to our class!]
6. I need to go home and write my essay slash take a nap.

If the story of *slash* ended there, with a perfectly logical semantic extension of *slash* from its more conventional use, I wouldn’t be writing about it here on *Lingua Franca*. But for at least a good number of students, the conjunctive use of *slash* has extended to link a second related thought or clause to the first with a meaning that is often not quite “and” or “and/or” or “as well as.” It means something more like “following up.” Here are some real examples from students:

7. I really love that hot dog place on Liberty

Street. Slash can we go there tomorrow?

8. Has anyone seen my moccasins anywhere?
Slash were they given to someone to wear home
ever?

9. I'll let you know though. Slash I don't know
when I'm going to be home tonight

10. so what've you been up to? slash should we be
skyping?

11. finishing them right now. slash if i don't finish
them now they'll be done in first hour tomorrow

The student who searched her Facebook chat records found instances of this use of *slash* as far back as 2010. (When I shared a draft of this post with the students in the class to make sure I have my facts straight, several noted that in examples like (7) and (9), they would be more likely to use a comma in between the clauses and a lower-case "slash.")

The innovative uses of *slash* don't stop there either: Some students are also using *slash* to introduce an afterthought that is also a topic shift, captured in this sample text from a student:

12. JUST SAW ALEX! Slash I just chubbed on oat-

Originally published on April 24, 2013

meal raisin cookies at north quad and i miss you

This innovative conjunction (or conjunctive adverb, depending on how you want to interpret it) occurs, students tell me, even more commonly in speech than in writing. And in writing, it is often getting written out as *slash*, even in electronically mediated communication, where one might expect the quicker punctuation mark (/) rather than the five-letter word *slash*.

Slash is clearly a word to watch. Slash I do mean word, not punctuation mark. The emergence of a new conjunction/conjunctive adverb (let alone one stemming from a punctuation mark) is like a rare-bird sighting in the world of linguistics: an innovation in the slang of young people embedding itself as a function word in the language. This use of *slash* is so commonplace for students in my class that they almost forgot to mention it as a new slang word this term. That young people have integrated innovative *slash* into their language while barely noticing its presence is all the more reason that conjunctive *slash* might have staying power.

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Conversation Piece

The more colloquial word is usually better

By Ben Yagoda

“Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation.” — LAURENCE STERNE

“The great struggle of a writer is to learn to write as he would talk.” — LINCOLN STEFFENS

“The greatest [writers] give the impression that their style was nursed by the closest attention to colloquial speech.” — THORNTON WILDER

“Good prose should resemble the conversation of a well-bred man.” — SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THESE QUOTATIONS, in their various ways, get to a deceptively simple truth about good writing. That is, it should be similar to speech, *but*. ... The *but* is expressed by Sterne in “properly managed,” by Steffens in “would,” by Wilder in “the impression,” by Maugham in “should” and “well-bred.” Everyone knows that pure speech doesn’t work on the page. Transcribe any conversation (except maybe one between John Updike and Clive James) and you will see rampant halts and starts, “um”s and “uh”s, redundancies, ellipses, grammatical solecisms, and all manner of infelicities.

That’s the chaff. Once you’ve separated out the wheat of spoken language, your writing can reap three significant benefits. One of them is diction. Given a choice of two synonymous words (*funny/humorous, often/frequently, about/regarding*), the simpler, more colloquial one is usually better, but weak writers make a beeline for the fancy one, and often misuse it, to boot. The critic James Wolcott once told me in an interview,

I never use words in print that I wouldn’t use in conversation. There are all these words you see in print but in fact nobody ever says. Words like “hauntingly lyrical” or “indefatigable,” which is even hard to say. ... Then there are hedge-words [critics] use in negative reviews — “given such-and-such, it’s unfortunate. ...” Or “it’s lamentable.” Come on, you don’t think it’s lamentable, you’re enjoying it.

Second, straying from the usually simple syntax of spoken language can be a problem. A good example is a reliance on nominalizations, or nouns formed through the graceless annexation of other parts of speech. The scholar and writing teacher Helen Sword calls them “zombie nouns,” because “they cannibalize active verbs,

Henry James, it is said, wrote the way he talked: in long, involved sentences.



GRANGER COLLECTION

suck the lifeblood from adjectives and substitute abstract entities for human beings.” Writing in *The New York Times*, Sword reproduced a passage from an unnamed social-sciences book; I’ve italicized the zombie nouns. Note also features that customarily accompany these nouns: excessive use of prepositions (capitalized), of the weak verb *to be* (underlined), and of the passive voice (boldface).

The partial *participation* OF newcomers **is by no means “disconnected”** FROM the practice OF interest. Furthermore, it is also a dynamic concept. In this sense, *peripherality*, when it **is enabled**, suggests an *opening*, a way OF gaining access TO sources FOR *understanding* THROUGH *growing involvement*. The *ambiguity* inherent IN peripheral *participation* must then **be connected** to issues OF *legitimacy*, OF the social *organization* OF and control OVER resources, if it is to gain its full analytical *potential*.

Admittedly, some people in the academy talk as well as write this way, and comparable flim-flamery can be heard in business and government meetings. But in speech, compared with writing, the inanity is more obvious.

This is not to say that everybody should write like Hemingway. But the prose of even the most literary writers — the good ones, that is — has an oral quality. William Allen White spent a lot of time with Henry James and observed that the novelist “talked, as he wrote, in long involved sentences with a little murmur — mum-mum-mum — standing for parentheses, and with all these rhetorical hooks he seemed to be poking about in his mind, fumbling through the whole basket of his conversational vocabulary, to find the exact word, which he used in talking about most ordinary matters. He seemed to create with those parentheses.”

Finally, good writing has good rhythm, which

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is why the single best piece of writing advice is to read your stuff aloud. If it doesn’t scan, revision is your plan.

All this has long been widely recognized, but a new psychological study suggests we only knew the half of it. “The Sound of Intellect,” an article in the June issue of *Psychological Science*, reports the results of an experiment in which a group of M.B.A. candidates at the University of Chicago’s business school were asked to prepare two brief pitches for prospective employers, one a written text and one an audio recording. A random group of people were asked to judge the pitches on three criteria: intellect, hiring likelihood, and general impressions. On all three measures, the audio pitches were judged significantly better.

The most important reason for this result, the authors propose, is a feature of speech: “variance in pitch,” which “may reveal the presence of an active and lively mind” and “can convey enthusiasm, interest, and active deliberation.” And all the while I thought I was getting that stuff into my scribbling!

But don’t despair, fellow scribes. The authors — Juliana Schroeder and Nicholas Epley — allow that their results “do not indicate that it is *impossible* for a talented writer to overcome the limitations of text alone; they indicate only that our M.B.A. students ... did not predict that they needed to overcome these limitations and did not do so spontaneously.” (Emphasis added.)

The task, apparently, is to simulate in print a speaker’s rising and falling pitch. The means of doing so would seem to be a redoubled attention to rhythm, including emphasized words (whether using real or implied italics), rhetorical questions, maybe an exclamation point here and there, and even sentence fragments. Like this. It’s worth a try, if we would endeavor to read as smart as we sound.

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What's the Matter With 'Me'?

Resistance to the object pronoun seems to be on the rise

By WILLIAM GERMANO

WHEN DID we decide that *me* was ungrammatical? Or if not ungrammatical, then maybe vulgarly self-promoting?

"Sally, who had given the keys to Jim and I, discovered that she was locked out of her office."

"Congratulations from Susan and I on inheriting that time share!"

"Sadly, the carton of tangelos promised to Mildred, Juan, and I never reached Bushwick."

The problem is hardly new, and writers on usage, including Mignon Fogarty (a.k.a. Grammar Girl), have gently admonished us to mind our *I*'s and *me*'s.

Nonetheless, the resistance to the object pronoun *me* seems to be on the rise, at least to judge from what one hears from television broadcasters and well-educated public speakers.

Perhaps we need some new mnemonics to help us out. The now antique expression "between you, me, and the lamppost" was de facto a reminder that a pronoun introduced by *between* will take an object case. Nobody would say "between you, we, and the lamppost." Yet one frequently hears "between you and I," often as a throw-away opener to what proves not to be much of a confidence at all. "Between you and I, Juan hates tangelos."

That horrible pedantic streak in some of us, including this writer, lurches when the subject-case pronoun intrudes itself. And it's always the first person rather than the third that causes mischief. You're not going to hear "Those tangelos should have reached Mildred and we, even if Juan hates them."

I don't want to wade into the deep waters of what makes "Hi, it's me" or "*C'est moi*" perfectly

good constructions. It's the shallow waters of over-used *I* that has me (not I) fussed.

There's something about *me* that makes people uncomfortable, and something about *I* that reassures. Linguists, who have the technical knowledge I lack, can describe the problem more precisely. Yet the resistible rise of the first-person singular pronoun sounds like a social one: Many speakers, insecure about grammatical Rules, default to what sounds formal, and *me* ain't sounding formal enough.

The tilt toward the formal-sounding (not to be confused with the formal) might also explain the current enthusiasm for the reflexive pronoun. A

friend recently pointed out to me her frustration with the emergence of *myself* where *me* would be just fine. Her example, which coincidentally involves the notorious Sally (see above), reads "They passed the butter to Sally and myself for our toast."

The butter, not to mention the toast, could simply be passed to *me*. I don't think I've seen this as often in student writing as I have heard it in the speech of adults who want to sound correct.

And that's the problem with the problem. People want to sound correct, even if that means putting on what feels like an ill-fitting formal coat to do so.

For the moment, though, one might think of *Gypsy*'s Mama Rose, belting out her salute to herself (note, not to *her*, which would point

elsewhere). Think of Rose not just as the ultimate stage mother but as an insistent usage adviser. It's Rose's turn, she says, and now it's time for *me*, for *me*, for *me*, for *me*, for *me*, for *me*, for *me*.

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Ethel Merman in character as Mama Rose in the musical *Gypsy*

AP IMAGES



Make Mine Factitive

Certain verbs entail metamorphosis

By LUCY FERRISS

OF THE MANY mean tricks I pulled on my children, a particular favorite (of mine, not theirs) took place when they popped into the kitchen and said, “Mommy, make me an ice-cream sundae!”

“Poof!” I would say, wiggling my fingers. “You’re an ice-cream sundae!”

The joke relies on one of those slippery English-language phenomena, wherein the same syntax can have two different grammatical structures and hence two meanings. My children wish me to create (transitive verb) a sundae (direct object) for them (indirect object). I offer to make (factitive verb) them (direct object) a sundae (objective complement).

The factitive verb, for language fanatics, is a gas. The root of the term is the Latin *facere*, to *make* or *do*. Anything that makes something something is factitive, and the making can be as concrete as hammer and nails or as ephemeral as a thought. I can, for instance, consider the dean an idiot, and *poof!* Grammatically, at least, he’s an idiot. I can make my home a castle; we can elect Senator X president. Moving on to adjectives as complements, I can make you beautiful; I can judge my students wanting. I can even make something something by using an infinitive: I made him stay home.

More on that last sentence in a second — but first I’d like to turn to *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye’s daughters’ opening song, “Matchmaker, Matchmaker,” plays on the factitive verb’s double entendre in a memorable way. “Make me a match,” the girls beg, in much the same way that my kids would beg for a sundae. To confirm their meaning, they sing, “Find me a find, catch me a catch” — in other words, find or catch something for me. But in the next verse, they sing, “For Papa, make him a scholar; for Mama, make him rich as a king” — and here, the *make* is factitive. “Poof!” they seem to want to say, “He’s a scholar!”

Underlying this shift in the function of “make” is a subtle meaning for the girls themselves. Their

opening pleas, “Make me a match,” seems now to be asking not only for good men, but also for the girls to be made, themselves, into good matches — to be *matched*.

The syntax gets even more slippery when we apply the infinitive, as I did above. Even one of my grammar gurus, Eugene Moutoux, calls the infinitive following a possibly factitive verb a “gray area” of grammar. He writes:

In the sentence “See Spot run,” what is being seen is Spot’s running, which might argue for *Spot run* as a subject with infinitive. It’s not really Spot that is the primary focus of the seeing but Spot’s running. The same thing can be said for “Let us go.” It’s not so much we who are being permitted, but our going is being permitted. In other words, *us* doesn’t seem as much like a direct object as the subject of an infinitive phrase. Now, with the sentence “We made him stay home,” it doesn’t seem like we are forcing his staying home but that we are forcing him. This would argue for calling *him* in this sentence a direct object.

Does any of this parsing make a difference, in terms of correct syntax or acceptable style? No. If I write a hard-boiled western in which Sheriff Jones says to One-Eyed Sam, “I’ll see you hang,” the reader is welcome to consider whether Jones’s mental image is of a transformation — Sam with his six-shooters being made into Sam hanging — or merely of Sam’s dangling from a rope. But even when it doesn’t “matter,” language can be fun to contemplate. I, for one, enjoy contemplating the ways in which certain verbs entail metamorphosis, if only for a moment of suspended disbelief. For those who object to this way of thinking about verbs — well, I guess I am making myself toast.

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Time Present

When it comes to verb tense, it's OK to mix it up

BY LUCY FERRISS

NOTHING says “start of academic year” better than early student papers that get snarled in verbs. Is it “Eliot writes” or “Eliot wrote”? Is it “I lived in Vermont, which is always frigid in March” or “I lived in Vermont, which was always frigid in March”? Is it “The girl who was next to me was named Stephanie,” or “The girl who was next to me is named Stephanie”?

Each discipline probably has its own style guide on verb usage; at the very least, I know that MLA style and APA style differ on their approaches to verb tense in referencing research. Whole books could be — and have been — written on the question of tense alone. The first thorny thicket students find themselves in has to do with critical discussion. Just for fun(!), let's take Immanuel Kant, who lived almost three centuries ago; it stands to reason that everything he thought or argued, he argued in the past. Indeed, Wikipedia's Kant entry uses past tense throughout the section on Kant's biography and into the section on his philosophy, where we read, for example, “Kant defined the Enlightenment as an age shaped by the Latin motto *Sapere aude*.” But then things start to slip. Kant's work, we read, “reconciled many of the differences between the rationalist and empiricist traditions of the 18th century” and “has also been a starting point for many 20th-century philosophers.”

OK, so all the guys from the 18th century are dead and some of the 20th-century minds are still ticking away. But then: “For the sake of morality and as a ground for reason, Kant asserted, people are justified in believing in God, even though they could never know God's presence empirically.” Where, one might ask, did that *are* come from, and how does it mesh with that *could*? Finally, the Wikipedia entry seems to shift gear entirely: “Kant defines his theory of perception in his influential 1781 work *The Critique of Pure Reason*.” But wait! There's a last nugget of past tense trailing behind — “Kant deemed it obvious that we have some objective knowledge of the world” — only a few paragraphs later.

No wonder our undergraduates are confused. “Write about literature in the present tense,” advises the MLA style manual. But when are Kant's writings literature and when are they historical events?

Generally, we try to distinguish between biography and criticism. The biographical subject (Kant)

lived in the past; everything he thought, said, and suffered belongs to the completed span of his life. His work lives on. When we use “Kant” in the sense of “all things Kantian,” we are actually using “Kant” as a sort of metonym. We are treating him (or “it”) as a force or argument that continues to be present in our lives. Sounds simple. When someone says, “Mozart was great,” we might want to know either the circumstances in which we was great (“He was a great jokester”) or how the greatness of his music has been compromised; when someone says, “Mozart is great,” she is expressing a love for Mozart's music. Yet in actual writing, as the entry on Kant demonstrates, the lines between the life and the work are not so easily drawn, and the use of present or past is more art than science. Reading the Wikipedia entry on Kant, I don't experience any “bump” in tense, even though the author writes the following sentences in close proximity and long after the biographical summary of Kant's life is complete:

- Kant asserts that experience is based both upon the perception of external objects and a priori knowledge.
- Kant deemed it obvious that we have some objective knowledge of the world, such as, say, Newtonian physics.
- Judgments are, for Kant, the preconditions of any thought.
- Kant believed that all the possible propositions within Aristotle's syllogistic logic are equivalent to all possible judgments.

We could spend a long time arguing why each of these statements demands the verb tense assigned to it, and why they all differ from student work that contends, for instance, “*In Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen pushed us to consider whether marriage was always about material advantage. Is Jane Austen merely a product of her time?” The long-term solution is the usual one: read, read, read. For the short term, I find teaching the notion of the personage as metonym to be useful, though hardly sufficient.

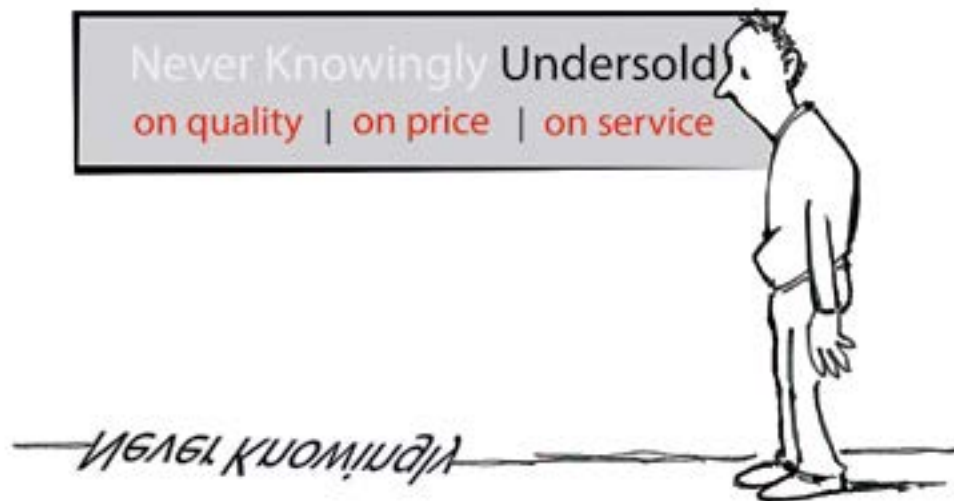
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Watching Adverbs

Mindlessly deleting them will not improve bad writing

By GEOFF PULLUM



BOB MCGRATH

D ICTIONARY PUBLISHERS these days try to maintain websites that do more than just advertise books. They offer word-of-the-day features, blog posts, English lessons, hints for teachers, educational technology news, all sorts of things. Macmillan offers Macmillan Dictionary Blog, where a January 17, 2013, post on writing asserted that “adverbs are monsters,” and made an explicit recommendation:

Try this exercise: Go through a piece of writing, ideally an essay of your own. Delete all adverbs and adverbial phrases, all those “surprisingly,” “interestingly,” “very,” “extremely,” “fortunately,” “on the other hand,” “almost invariably.” (While you are at it, also score out those clauses that frame the content, like “we may consider that,” “it is likely that,” “there is a possibility that.”)

Question 1: Have you lost any content?

Question 2: Is it easier to read?

Usually the meaning is still exactly the same but the piece is far easier to read.

I want to hang my head and cry when I see writing advice as boneheadedly misguided as this (and

unfortunately that’s way too often).

Take a look at the last sentence quoted: “Usually the meaning is still exactly the same but the piece is far easier to read.” The underlined words are all adverbs, so under its author’s advice the sentence should have read, “The meaning is the same but the piece is easier to read.”

If adverbs are monsters, and the main point of the piece is to recommend deleting them all, what happened here? Either the advice-giver is so stupid that he believes his advice but didn’t notice his own four flagrant violations of it, or the advice is so stupid that no advice-giver would dream of applying it to someone sensible like himself. I don’t see any other possibilities.

Applying this adverb-erasing recommendation across the board would be disastrous, in random ways. In some cases it would cause a spectacular change of sense: The slogan of the British department-store chain John Lewis, *Never Knowingly Undersold*, would become *Undersold*. Quite often it would yield vapid slop with the wrong meaning: *Defusing a bomb must be done carefully* would become *Defusing a bomb must be done*; *The dog had been brutally treated* would become *The dog had been treated*. Sometimes it would create outright ungrammaticality: *A carefully worded letter* would become *a worded letter*.

What mindless adverb erasure cannot be trusted to do, though, is improve bad or indifferent writing.

The post does back off a little when it gets into detail. It divides adverbs into manner adverbs (*smugly, intelligently, squashily*), time adverbs (*soon, often, yesterday*), hedges (*maybe, possibly, probably*), emphasizees (*very, extremely, absolutely*), sentence adverbs (*however, consequently, funnily [enough]*), and finally “extreme horrors like *just* and *quite*,” and proposes that differential levels of forbiddenness apply.

“The time adverbs I allow,” says our guide to better writing, magnanimously. Moreover, “the hedges I forgive, after careful consideration, if the sentence would be untrue without them.” So he would not necessarily have us replace *Earthquakes are seldom predictable* by *Earthquakes are predictable*.

But manner adverbs, emphasizees, and sentence adverbs are all to be committed to the flames. “The sentence adverbs,” we are told, “are wildly overused by many authors.” (*Wildly* overused, mark you: That’s a manner adverb.)

The truth is that nothing as mechanical as abandoning adverbs (or certain subclasses of adverbs) is going to uniformly improve your prose. Similar advice is handed out elsewhere (by the royally knighted but linguistically benighted broadcaster Sir Alistair Cooke, for example, and naturally,

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by Strunk and White’s toxic little compendium of misguided maxims); but like the familiar advice to avoid passive clauses, it is never followed by the people who recommend following it.

The writers they admire never follow it either. And I don’t mean just that fine writing with adverbs is possible; I mean that **all** fine writing in English has adverbs (just open any work of literature you respect and start reading).

This profoundly silly post ends with a mention of a science journalist who remarked that “an adverb is for the linguistic dwarf unable to reach for the correct verb.” The metaphorical equation of dwarfism with inadequacy seems unpleasant, but setting that aside, the presupposition is that for most adverb-plus-verb combinations in English there is an alternative choice of verb that is synonymous with the combination, and you should use it. That is flatly and plainly false. You can’t substitute a synonymous verb for *usually walks*, or *wildly overused*, or *boneheadedly misguided*, or *rarely participates*, or *fidgedet incessantly*; the verbs don’t exist.

Do as the advice-giver does, not as he says. When he needs an adverb, he uses one. You should too. Decisively, proudly, and fearlessly.

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BOB MCGRATH

The Comma Sutra

After a comma splice appeared in an essay, epithets followed

By BEN YAGODA

THE CELEBRATED SAGE Yogi Berra, referring to the many aphorisms apocryphally attributed to him, once observed, “I really didn’t say everything I said.” One of the things he really did say (according to the reliable *Yale Book of Quotations*) is, “You can observe a lot by watching.” I will modify that as follows: “You can learn a lot by just writing.”

Inspiring that thought was [a piece](#) I wrote recently for *The New York Times*, the second of two on commas. The first installment drew a lot of reaction, but it was as nothing compared with the second. As I write, it’s the No. 1 most e-mailed story on the *Times* site for both the past seven days and the past 30 days; it generated 697 comments, before comments were closed.

And the main thing I learned was that, improbably, a great many people care a great deal about commas. Who knew? Getting into the weeds, the point that elicited probably the biggest reaction is represented by this reader comment:

You wrote “The weather is great today. However, it’s supposed to rain tomorrow.” This was cited as a correct example; however, I was told that

what is correct is the construction I am using in this sentence. (“however” after the semi-colon).

Until reading all those comments and getting all those e-mails, I was actually not aware that anyone ever held that belief. I was enlightened when I looked up *however* in *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*. Lo and behold: It cites two sources — Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* and William Zinsser’s *How to Write Well* — that counsel against starting sentences with the word. However, all other cited authorities properly say it’s perfectly OK, as does *Merriam-Webster’s* itself. I confess I still don’t understand why anyone would proscribe this or, even more bafflingly, allow *however* after a semicolon but not after a period.

The next-biggest group of comments related to this sentence of mine: “None are correct.” As one person said, “Shouldn’t you have written: ‘None IS correct’, since ‘none’ is supposed to be singular, a contraction of ‘no one’ or ‘not one’?”

I looked back at my original draft and found I had indeed written “none is correct.” So the *Times* must have changed it to *are*. But that doesn’t bother me much. In cases where a plural noun is in-

cluded, such as “none of the members of the club is coming,” the *is* sounds pretentious and forced. I prefer *are*, and I believe current usage manuals back me up. When the plural noun is not there but implied (in my sentence, the phrase “of them” is elided), I guess I do prefer *is*.

Since writing the preceding paragraph, I learned that the *Times* sent the following reply to people who complained about “None are correct”:

We appreciate your careful reading, but I have to inform you that our usage was correct. Here is the entry from the *New York Times* stylebook:

None. Despite a widespread assumption that it stands for *not one*, the word has been construed as a plural (*not any*) in most contexts for centuries. H.W. Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) endorsed the plural use. Make *none* plural except when emphasizing the idea of *not one* or *no one* — and then consider using those phrases instead.

Thank you for reading the *Times* and taking a moment to share your thoughts.

Moving right along, there was this comment:

My nerdy self loved this article; however, I am completely perplexed by the one missing comma that I did not understand — the one not in this sentence: “He was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1964.”

Why is a comma necessary after “Iowa”?

One way to answer the question is the *because-I-said-so tack*: A comma after *Iowa* is the universal practice in U.S. publications and publishing, that’s why. But it’s more complicated than that. My students really want to leave out that comma, as do people all over the internet, which is why I included the point in my original article. A reason for this may be a logical or grammatical flaw in the convention. However (take *that*, commenters!), the flaw is more in the comma before the word *Iowa* than the one after it.

That is, the usual logic is to surround with commas nonrestrictive (also referred to as nondefining or nonessential) words, phrases, and clauses. So I’d write, “*My wife, Allison, and my friend Bill went with me.*” Commas before and after *Allison* because I have only one wife, and thus the word is nonrestrictive. No commas before or after *Bill* because I have many friends, and thus the word is restrictive. But *Iowa* in this case is restrictive: it tells us which Des Moines is being referred to. A better example would be a reference to the *September 11, 2001, attacks*. The year 2001 is restrictive, so

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by customary logic should not be preceded or followed by a comma.

But commas are the convention, for better or worse. And it’s surely the case that if a comma is put before the state or year, one has to be put after it as well.

The most surprising group of reactions came from what I thought of as a completely innocuous example of a comma splice:

He used to be a moderate, now he’s a card-carrying Tea Partier.

Hoo boy, was I wrong. Apparently, the sentence was featured on the Drudge Report as an example of *New York Times* liberal-socialism, and readers were urged to excoriate the newspaper and me. (I say “apparently,” because in order to confirm that I would actually have to read the Drudge Report.) I was called many epithets, some of them printable and a few even spelled correctly.

One of the more measured protests was posted on my Facebook page by Maggi Cook. She wrote:

Mr. Yagoda — how about this one: She use to be reasonable, now she is associated with the terrorist OWS. Or this one: I thought my professor was going to talk about the French Revolution. It turns out his topic today was about the Socialist tendencies of the Obama administration.

I honestly didn’t intend to say anything bad about the Tea Party. Indeed, the example in the *Times* didn’t say or imply that Tea Partiers are horrible or racist or anything other than not “moderate.” This is the exact position espoused by the Tea Partier Ted Cruz in his comments after a Texas Republican Senate primary on May 30, 2012: “This race is ground zero in the battle between the *moderate* establishment and the conservative tidal wave that’s sweeping this country.” (Italics added.)

Still, my sentence was published in an editorially liberal newspaper, so I can see how some people might misinterpret the intent. Consequently I am going to take Ms. Cook up on her offer! I’ll explain. The comma post was adapted from my new book, *How to Not Write Bad*, to be published in February 2013. And I hereby pledge to change the comma-splice example in the book as follows:

He used to be a moderate, now he’s a card-carrying member of Occupy Wall Street.

Somebody will have to tell me if the Drudge Report approves.

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Say, 'What'?

BY LUCY FERRISS

PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE, for reasons I fail to understand completely, is one of the hardest things for my fiction-writing students to master. Autocorrect inserts a capital after any form of so-called terminal punctuation, so “*Are you going out?*” he asked becomes “*Are you going out?*” He asked. Certain that the verb accompanying the speaker’s name is the dialogue tag, many students write, *She laughed, “That’s a funny joke.”* Master classes on the rules, the craft, and the art of punctuating dialogue make some impression, but deeply confused students often default to abjuring any sort of punctuation: “*I think I’ll go out*” he said “*after I’ve done the laundry.*”

Almost all conventions regarding punctuation in dialogue rely on common sense. If the quoted speech is part of the sentence as a whole, the punctuation between it and the dialogue tag should not be terminal, nor should the first letter of the tag be capitalized. If the speaker is interrupted, a dash could go before the quotation mark; if the speaker’s tag interrupts the speech, dashes should lie outside punctuation marks. And so on.

But the simplest and most basic mark of punctuation we associate with dialogue receives almost no scrutiny, even though the basis of the convention is the hardest to discern. I refer to the comma.

The verb *said*, for starters, is a transitive verb. We don’t simply say; we always say something. Generally, we don’t like to separate transitive verbs from their objects with commas, any more than we separate subjects from verbs with commas. You would not, for instance, write *He hit, Bobby* or *I steered, my 10-foot catamaran around the shoals before landing safely in the harbor.* Yet the convention of using a comma to initiate a line of quoted speech has so hardened into a rule that three out of four undergraduates, by my estimate, will insert commas before anything in quotes. Thus we get:

Hemingway wrote, “Hills like White Elephants.”

I liked, “The Lottery” better than, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.”

Before making, “Castello Cavalcanti” Wes Anderson had never filmed a commercial.

Monet’s, “Impression Sunrise” is one of his most famous paintings.

It’s easy enough, I suppose, to instruct stu-

dents to use commas before quoted speech and not before titles. But handing them a rule doesn’t provide a rationale. Moreover, we can all think of instances of quoted speech that don’t call for commas.

He’s the kind of guy who says “Whatever” to whatever you propose.

You say “Come home this minute” every time I ask if I can stay out late.

The judgment call regarding such commas is illustrated in this very post. In my first paragraph, I followed the introductory word *write* with a comma; in the fourth paragraph, I left it without. I made this apparently inconsistent choice instinctively, and my editor did not change it. James Harbeck, who writes the blog *Sesquiotica*, expresses the rationale for comma use in dialogue sensitively if not succinctly:

When the quoted material is within a narrative frame — even if it’s the only thing in the narrative frame — and we’re being taken to the scene, as it were, a comma is generally used. But when the quoted material is being treated as an instance of an utterance of that phrase, and the verb is the main thing rather than being an entrance point to dialogue (in other words, when the quoted material is truly the complement of the verb rather than an act of locution introduced), a comma is not called for.

You can find illustrative examples in Harbeck’s “[Commas Before Quotes](#)” post. The essential element here, I think — and the one I try to impress on students, if they’re not too glazed-eyed to listen — is that dialogue tag words (*said, shouted, whisper, write, and so on*) can take us to the scene. The comma is the curtain parting, letting the drama emerge. If the descriptive quality of the verb takes precedence over the dramatic emergence of the speech, the comma is a distraction and a hindrance.

It’s a long explication, not a short rule. But sometimes the long way around is the only way in.

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Dashing Through

Dashes can lose their effectiveness — if they're overused

By ANNE CURZAN

JONATHAN TWINGLEY
FOR THE CHRONICLE



ONCE you start using the dash in your writing, it can be hard to stop. I'm talking about the em-dash here — that punctuation mark that is so helpful at linking phrases and clauses that don't seem well served by a comma, semi-colon, or colon.

I started wondering the other day whether — and how badly — one can misuse the dash. Most style guides provide a good amount of leeway in terms of how the dash can function — it can function like a colon (as it did right there), parentheses (as it did in the first sentence of this paragraph), or a comma (as it did in the second sentence of this post). I sometimes see the dash used in place of a semi-colon — and while that use strikes me as a bit less ideal, I am reluctant to call it wrong.

This week I read a sentence in a memo that had two em-dashes in it, connecting three clauses sequentially, and that seems to me to stretch the dash beyond effective usage. The sentence worked along these lines:

The retreat will fall on the last Friday in June, which may not work for all faculty — but this will not be the only opportunity for faculty to discuss the curricular reforms — we'll hold another full faculty meeting to discuss the curriculum early in September.

I felt the urge to replace the second dash with a

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period — or perhaps a semicolon, but the period seemed like a better idea.

The dash has a certain flair to it in its informality and its versatility. It makes a parenthetical a bit more prominent — a bit less parenthetical — than parentheses. It adds more sentential importance to an additional thought or an afterthought than a comma can do.

This blog post, though, may highlight one way we as writers can start to make the dash less effective — by overusing it. As an editor I have started to create informal rules about the em-dash, such as no more than two sentences per paragraph with dashes — and more ideally only one per paragraph. And certainly you don't get to use the em-dash in every sentence in a paragraph — even if arguably every sentence legitimately could take a dash.

It is disconcerting to be violating this rule so flagrantly in this post. And I would guess that at this point, you as a reader are tired of seeing the dash here — and perhaps distracted by its frequent appearance. Ideally punctuation should not be distracting. It should do its work organizing sentences on the page more subtly.

Is overuse misuse? I'm not ready to say that. But overuse can certainly deprive the dash of its punctuational punch.

Anne Curzan is a professor of English at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.



COURTESY OF BBC

Being an Apostrophe

An apostrophe is not a punctuation mark; it's a silent letter

By GEOFF PULLUM

A PUTATIVE grammar outrage blew up a week ago in Britain when the Conservative-dominated Mid Devon District Council announced plans to “abolish the apostrophe.” The signs for Beck’s Square, Blundell’s Avenue, and St. George’s Well would under the new policy say *Becks Square*, *Blundells Avenue*, and *St. Georges Well*. Indeed, the council has been using apostrophe-free signs for years, like other districts (the pictured sign for Baker’s View is in neighboring Teignbridge district). The proposal was simply to make the tacit policy official.

But out came the usual suspects to froth and fulminate. A spokesman for the Plain English Society, Steve Jenner, launched straight into a slippery-slope argument (as if nothing had ever been written on fallacies or critical thinking): “It’s nonsense,” he raged; “Where’s it going to stop? Are we going to declare war on commas, outlaw full stops?”

Within about three working days the media outcry had bullied the Mid Devon council into reversing itself.

What interested me, however, was not the policy

or the abandonment of it but the many references to “punctuation” in the overheated news coverage. The apostrophe is not a punctuation mark. It doesn’t punctuate. Punctuation marks are placed between units (sentences, clauses, phrases, words, morphemes) to signal structure, boundaries, or pauses. The apostrophe appears within words. It’s a 27th letter of the alphabet. This issue concerns spelling.

Several other characters have joined the 26 letters as characters that appear in written words: the @-sign in email addresses; “+” and “#” in the programming language names C++ and C#; and of course one punctuation mark that serves ambiguously as a letter, in the typographically unpleasant corporate name Yahoo! The apostrophe just has a longer history than these. It occurs in:

1. inflectionally negated auxiliary verbs bearing the *n’t* suffix (yes, it’s a suffix: see the paper “Cliticization vs. Inflection: English *N’T*,” by Arnold Zwicky and me in *Language*, Vol. 59 [1983], pp. 502-513);
2. the clitic forms of certain auxiliaries (*d* for

had and *would*, 'll for *will*, 'm for *am*, 're for *are*, 's for *is* and *has*, and 've for tensed *have*; see the same paper);

3. proper names such as O'Brien or D'Arcy;
4. various other words originating as abbreviations or foreign names, like '60s, c'mon, e'en, ne'er-do-well, o'clock, rock 'n' roll, etc.;
5. the irregular plurals of certain unusual nouns (*A's* and *B's*, *3's* and *4's*, *I's* and *me's*); and above all
6. the genitive forms of nouns (the personal pronouns are exceptional nouns with the irregular apostrophe-free genitive forms *her*, *his*, *its*, *my*, *our*, *their*, *whose*, and *your*; the pompous-style indefinite pronoun *one*, as in *One should recuse oneself*, is an exception to the exception, with a regular genitive, *one's*).

All of this concerns the famously irregular and sometimes insane English orthography. Apostrophes have no punctuation role. (True, a half-page about them on Page 1,763 of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* does fall in the chapter on punctuation, *faute de mieux*; but it doesn't disagree with what I said above.) As usual, the people pothering on about grammar errors don't know what they're pothering about.

What of the redundancy that the Mid Devon

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council seemed to imply? Well, the apostrophe does have the striking peculiarity of lacking any corresponding pronunciation. While *e* and *k* and *g* and *h* and others are **sometimes** silent, the letter ' is **always** silent. Hence genitives (singular and plural) are phonetically identical to regular plurals: *Box* has plural *boxes*, genitive singular *box's*, and genitive plural *boxes'*, all pronounced the same. Yet hearers aren't confused.

Google completely ignores the 27th letter unless it's inside quotation marks. The search pattern *tuition fee's* will induce Google to show you millions of correctly spelled pages on tuition fees. You have to type "tuition fee's" into the box to see the few thousand cases of people illiterately spelling the plural with an apostrophe. (The top hit is a payment page for a business academy.)

I always use the apostrophe in the standard way, even when texting; I'm a conservative. But human reading abilities are astonishingly robust under even radical disruption of spelling. (You will in all likelihood have as subtly no difficulty in reading this parenthetical remark.) The level of harmful confusion attendant on dropping all apostrophes from written English would be zero.

I'm not going to advocate scrapping it. I'm not a revolutionary. But I wouldn't shed a tear for it.

Geoff Pullum is a professor of linguistics at the University of Edinburgh.

Adviser Advisory

Which spelling to use may depend on alphabetical order

By ALLAN METCALF

THE MARK of a real journalist, I learned long ago, is knowing the proper spelling of *adviser*.

It stands out because until stepping into journalism, most neophytes have learned the other spelling. In high school, clubs and activities have *advisors*. In college, more of the same, usually with academic progress monitored by a faculty *advisor*.

Against that background, *adviser* seems, er, a little undignified. But it's an ironclad rule in journalism. The entry for the word in *The Associated Press Stylebook* says it flatly :

adviser Not advisor.

How did this come about? What motivated the AP to go against the grain of most official titles?

I think I know. It's very simple: In the alphabet, *e* comes before *o*.

It goes like this: Suppose you're making a dictionary and you discover that both *adviser* and *advisor* have been used for a long time. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, you find the earliest example of *adviser* (with its present-day meaning) dated 1575, *advisor*, 1589.

Though you'd like to give just one proper spelling for each

word, the evidence says both are proper, so you list them both. But you can't list them simultaneously,

one on top of the other. So what's the logical thing to do? Put them in alphabetical order. And that makes *adviser* always first.

OK, now you're a journalist. Lexicographers may have to allow multiple spellings for a word, but journalists can't. To avoid distracting your readers, you need a uniform style. And so you say that the first spelling in a dictionary is the one to use, even if the others are OK.

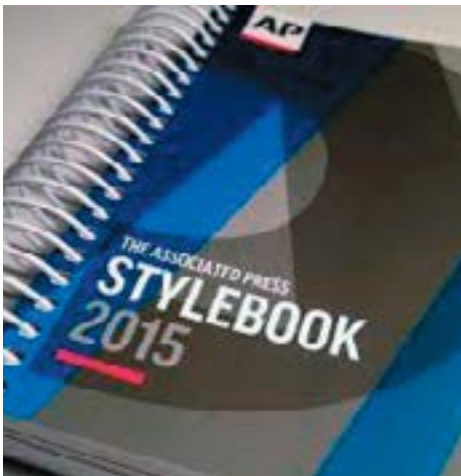
I think that's how the AP choice of *adviser* came into being. Simple as that. But once entrenched, it has become a shibboleth for journalists. AP's online "Ask the Editor" includes this 2012 exchange from Portland, Ore.:

Q. Do you have any plans to revisit "adviser" as preferred over "advisor"? *Webster's New World College Dictionary Fourth Edition* lists "advisor" first and gives "adviser" as second choice. Also, the -or spelling seems to be widely preferred outside of the journalism world, so a lot of copy comes to us with "advisor" and must be changed (not to mention the issue of official job titles also tending toward -or). Seems like the tide is turning toward the -or spelling.

A. AP is sticking with *adviser*. We use the "or" spelling if it's in a formal title or a recognized certification.

I think it also has to do with the journalist's healthy skepticism about the prestige of official titles. Come on, an *adviser* is just somebody who gives advice, not specially qualified by virtue of being called an *advisor*. You can rub it in each time you write the word and at the same time show that your hands are clean; it's just the way we journalists have to write it.

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JEROME CORGIER FOR THE CHRONICLE

20 Things Students Say Help Them Learn

Undergraduates give their professors and themselves some advice

By ANNE CURZAN

NEAR THE END of August, the 2014 *Business Insider* article “10 Things Every College Professor Hates” started circulating on Facebook again. I had just finished the syllabus for my introductory English linguistics class at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and was feeling excited to be headed back into the classroom. Yet here was this article, which felt so negative. It didn’t come across as entirely respectful of all that students bring to the table. And the piece, aimed at students about “interacting with your professor or teaching assistant,” seemed to give more attention to pleasing the professor than to real learning.

I wondered: What would happen if you asked undergraduate students not about how to please the professor but about what promotes good

learning, for all of us, together, as participants in a learning community? I talked it over with the graduate-student instructor working with me, and we decided to do just that in the first discussion sections for the year. What better way to think together about what kind of learning community we wanted to build?

So that first Friday students read and discussed the *Business Insider* article, and then we asked them to create lists: (a) What students can do to promote good learning; and (b) What instructors can do to promote good learning. Here’s what students had to say, to each other and to me and my graduate assistant.*

* Many thanks to all the students who also offered suggestions on a draft of this post.

10 Things Students Can Do to Promote Good Learning

1. Expect to learn every day. That's on you. Don't worry so much about whether you're doing enough to get a good grade — focus instead on what you are learning and what you want to learn. If you're doing that, the “good grade” will often follow. (Not always, but often — we want to be honest about that! But the same is true if you're just focused on getting a good grade. ...)
2. Feel empowered to — and make the effort to — participate. Trust that other students and your instructor care about what you have to say. (And see No. 4 for how to help out here.) Be willing to be vulnerable and open in discussions, because that's how learning happens.
3. Ask questions. Ask questions. Ask questions. (And while we're on this topic, don't disparage other people for asking their questions.)
4. Listen to one another. And please don't distract other people. If for some reason you have decided not to pay attention, don't make it a group thing!
5. Come prepared for class. This means leaving yourself time to get assignments done, which much of the time means getting started earlier than the night before, which means being organized, which means probably getting a planner.
6. Acknowledge when you're falling behind or need help. And then get help immediately! It will just spiral if you wait. (If that hasn't happened to you yet, trust us on this one.)
7. Go to office hours. Even if you don't have questions or need help, go just to make a connection with your professors. They sit in their office waiting to talk to students about the subject they're so passionate about!
8. Know what you need, emotionally and physically, to succeed. Allow yourself to make mistakes. And remember that learning can be uncomfortable (and we're not talking about the uncomfortable classroom chairs).
9. Talk to classmates you don't know and try to support other students. That means sometimes just taking the time to introduce yourself to a student you don't know who is sitting next to you.
10. Remember that your instructor is a human too.

10 Things Instructors Can Do to Promote Good Learning

1. Know that it's OK to humanize yourself (e.g., it's OK if you're having a rough day — we get it).
2. Know students' names. We get that this is hard if it is a big class, but it matters.
3. Know who students are (e.g., Are some of us shy in class? Do we work or play sports or play in bands or lead extracurricular groups or sing or dance or juggle parenting and school or a hundred other things? Why did we decide to take this course? What do we hope to learn?).
4. Assume students want to be there and are prepared.
5. Create and foster mutual respect in the classroom. And really, doing No. 4 is a big part of No. 5. Well, actually most of this list supports this one.
6. Recognize that sometimes life can get in the way of learning for students, so take the time to diagnose the problem (e.g., if a student is having trouble staying awake in class, it could be because they had to work overtime last night, not because they were out partying).
7. Hold all students to the same rigorous expectations.
8. Refrain from interrupting students to get a point across. We know that sometimes one of us can get long-winded and you may need to redirect; but we try not to interrupt you and it's really nice when you don't interrupt us.
9. Please don't feel you need to comment all the time in a full-class discussion. Sometimes we need you to guide the discussion, and sometimes we really don't need you every turn.
10. Listen to what students have to say. I am so glad we took this chance to listen to what students had to say. There are heaps of wisdom here.

Of course, a different group of students would create a different list, and that's great. The point is that by talking together, and listening, the students, the graduate-student instructor, and I now have this framework to think about and work to create the kind of learning community we want to be.

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How Dangerous Are Danglers?

Creating intentionally funny danglers helps students avoid them

By ANNE CURZAN

IDON'T REMEMBER many grammar lessons from junior high school, but for whatever reason, one sentence from the lesson about dangling and misplaced modifiers has stuck with me. Here's the sentence: "Clinging to the side of the aquarium, Mary saw a starfish." Poor Mary! It is exhausting to have to cling to the side of an aquarium that way.

Now, of course, if we heard this sentence, we would probably assume it was the starfish clinging to the side of the aquarium, as this is the most logical and sensible interpretation. But if we look closely at the structure of the sentence, the participial phrase "clinging to the side of the aquarium" modifies "Mary" — if we work from the assumption that participles and other modifiers sit next to what they modify. So, this sentence could be "fixed" with alternate versions such as "Clinging to the side of the aquarium, the starfish stared at Mary," or "Mary saw the starfish clinging to the side of the aquarium."

I used this example last week in my "Grammar Boot Camp" course as a way to introduce dangling participles/modifiers, or "danglers," as Bryan Garner calls them. Given our ability to interpret most danglers in spoken language without too much effort (if we even notice them), I think students were expecting me to say that we don't need to worry much about them as writers either. But, in fact, the advice to avoid danglers in writing is generally good advice.

The point of taking a critical and questioning approach to prescriptive usage rules is to determine which ones are worth following because they are helpful in creating clearer, less ambiguous, and/or more aesthetically pleasing prose; which ones are worth following at least some of the time because they are shibboleths that may get our writing (and us) judged as not good enough; and which ones are not worth following because they are out of date, not widely held or known, etc. I think the advice

about avoiding danglers falls into the first category. Writing cannot tolerate as much ambiguity as speech because there is less context, and we are not there to clarify if need be; putting modifiers next to the noun phrase they modify makes things easier and clearer for readers. And avoids unintended humor.

I asked students to create some intentionally funny danglers, and here are three where the modifier is "misplaced" (i.e., the intended noun phrase is in the sentence but not next to the modifier):

Oozing slowly across the dish, Kevin watched the egg yolk.

Gasping for his last breath, the professor killed the cockroach.

Grooming each other, my professor and I saw the kittens.

Other examples contained modifiers that were "dangling" in the sense that they referred to the speaker/writer, who does not appear as a noun phrase in the sentence. Consider:

Swimming through the water, the goggles fogged up.

Rushing to submit my homework on time, my computer crashed.

Another example wasn't especially funny (the students pointed out that being funny on demand is a big ask, which is a completely fair point!), but it raises a key question about when a dangler stops dangling:

Reviewing the final essay, it became apparent students had not studied.

Given the existential *it*, we as readers know that the participial phrase "reviewing the final essay" is

modifying something else: probably the speaker/writer or some understood group of people who are reviewing the students' final essays. These danglers tend to feel more OK because they come closer to the set of "acceptable danglers," sometimes called "disguised conjunctions."

With participles such as *considering*, *assuming*, *given*, *regarding*, *owing (to)*, *speaking (of)*, and a few others, editors tend to allow the participial phrase to function adverbially, modifying the entire sentence. For example:

Considering the danger, she is lucky to have gotten out alive.

Even taking all these factors into account, a team cannot win without strong defense.

H.W. Fowler raises the interesting question of when this kind of participle becomes acceptable as a "disguised conjunction/preposition." How would we know? He uses the example of *referring to*. He compares these two openings to a sentence:

Referring to your letter, you do not state ...

Referring to your letter, I find that you do not state ...

To start to answer that question, I went to the

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academic section of the Corpus of Contemporary American English and found almost all instances of sentence-initial "referring to ..." have the relevant noun right after the phrase (e.g., "Referring to X, the author argues ..."). But there are certainly exceptions, such as: "Referring to Figure 2, the presence of the safety provisions shifts the demand curve up." So usage suggests that editors, at least, continue to see *referring to* as a participial modifier, requiring writers to juxtapose a noun phrase for it to modify. But it is certainly not confusing to write "Referring to Figure 2, the data ..." Nor is it ungrammatical.

In Bryan Garner's discussion of danglers in *Garner's Modern English Usage*, I was struck by the line: "Most danglers are ungrammatical." This statement suggests that if a participial phrase at the beginning of the sentence is not followed by the noun phrase it is supposed to modify, the sentence is *ungrammatical*. But let's think about what "ungrammatical" means, at least to linguists. When we encounter most of these sentences with danglers, do we understand them? Does our grammar, in the descriptive sense, allow participial phrases (and other modifiers) to be separated from the noun phrase they modify? Clearly the answer is yes.

Anne Curzan is a professor of English at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Labeling Words

Students discuss which usages they would mark as offensive

By ANNE CURZAN

OF COURSE, dictionaries are very human products, specific to a time, a place, and a cultural moment, as well as to that dictionary's editors' philosophy. The big standard dictionaries that we now take for granted are remarkable achievements, meticulous in their compilation and revision; and we turn to them as authorities on words with good reason. But they involve human decisions at every turn.

Easy enough to say, but what does this really mean? To bring the point home to students in a very real way, I have found it effective to recreate some of the decisions dictionary editors must make. And one of the most accessible entrées I have found is usage labels.

Every dictionary has its own set of usage labels. *The American Heritage* dictionaries, as one example, use: *Nonstandard*, *Offensive*, *Vulgar*, *Derogatory*, *Slang*, *Informal*, and *Usage Problem*. Before we start the exercise itself, students and I often have productive conversations about the difference between *vulgar* and *offensive*, *informal* and *slang*, using the descriptions in *American Heritage* as our guide.

Then it's time to apply these labels. I usually select 10 to 12 words that do or reasonably could have usage labels and reproduce their definitions on a handout with blanks in every place where there could be a usage label. For instance:

- sleazebag** n. _____ A sleazy person.
whore n. 1. _____ A prostitute.
2. _____ A person considered sexually promiscuous. 3. _____ A person considered as having compromised principles for personal gain.

I eavesdrop as students work through in pairs what labels they think are most appropriate. Students are usually asking just the right questions: What are the criteria? Is this word always offensive? Is this word rebellious in a slangy kind of way or just informal? And so on. (Last year, as I walked around the room, I also learned that some students didn't realize what *prick* referred to before it referred to a person.)

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We then go through the list together, and I share what usage labels the dictionary editors of whatever dictionary we're using included for each entry. Suddenly the editors' decisions come under a different kind of scrutiny — and are sometimes challenged.

For example, in the fifth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2011), not one of the definitions of *whore* has a usage label. Many students disagree with this decision; they opted for *offensive* for at least some of the definitions.

If we so choose, we can then check the online version of the dictionary, where it turns out that the editors have added *Often offensive* for the second definition.

Has something changed radically between 2011 and 2015? Probably not. Was the word *whore* often offensive in 2011, when the print version came out? Yes.

As this entry makes clear, dictionary editors revisit earlier decisions just like most of the rest of us and can change their minds — made all the easier and more efficient now that many dictionaries are available and regularly updated online. (Interestingly, *slut* similarly had no usage labels in the print edition from 2011 but now has *Often offensive* for its primary definition of “A person considered to be sexually promiscuous.”)

If students never look at a dictionary entry quite the same way again, the activity has done its job. I hope students will continue to see standard dictionaries as invaluable resources for information about words' pronunciations, definitions, etymologies, and more — as fully authoritative, but in a very human way.

And if some of you reading this realize that perhaps you haven't always been including dictionaries in your references and decide to change your ways, it will be a happy byproduct. We will be giving dictionary editors more of the credit they're due and will have lowered the pedestal on which we often put dictionaries one responsible notch.

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JOYCE HESSELBERTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

Trying to Write the Mighty Line

Analyzing poetic forms helps students hear the music inherent in English

By LUCY FERRISS

FOR YEARS, now, I've taught a mixed-genre "Introduction to Creative Writing" course with a very specific poetry component. Each student in the class must choose a poetic form he or she loves; I suggest two dozen of them, and leave books explicating several dozen other choices on the shelf outside my office. Each student gives a short presentation on their chosen form — its provenance, history, development, parameters, and best-known practitioners. They recite from memory at least 12 lines of a poem written in that form. Finally, they write a poem in that form for class critique.

This unit gets the highest praise and deepest criticism from students in the class. Invariably, on student evaluations, some student recommends (usually in ALL CAPS) that the unit be removed as tedious and too hard. Almost always, though, at least one student reports something along the lines of this semester's note, that "This assignment ... was the first time a professor has challenged me to reach out of my comfort zone ... yet my favorite

piece of work is the octave I wrote."

My challenge, each year, is to tune students' ears to the accentual language they speak. English is a strongly accented language. We inherited verse initially from Greek and Roman poets, whose long and short syllables created the music of the (often sung) poetry. But we don't lengthen syllables in English so much as we stress them, pronouncing the second syllable of a word like *believe* louder than the first. Very early English poetry was not unlike hip-hop today, in that it paid attention only to the stresses in the line and more or less chanted the lines so each foot, regardless of syllables, had the same tempo. Later, we began adding in the nonaccented syllables, so the "music," if you will, emerged from the tantalizing pattern of stress to nonstress. Thus the iamb, the anapest, the dactyl, the trochee, and so on. As Mark Liberman put it on the blog *Language Log*, in English, "metrics is applied phonology."

Not all students choose to write in forms that feature meter, but some do, and for them, I find

that hearing the stress patterns inherent in the language they speak has become increasingly difficult. I once heard the renowned contemporary formalist Marilyn Hacker say that if she saw a student mentally counting stresses on her fingers, she knew she had the beginnings of a poet. I would be loath to apply that standard now. One student recently chose to write in blank verse. “Marlowe’s mighty line” and Shakespeare’s staple for all his plays, blank verse eschews rhyme but cleaves to a mostly iambic pentameter pattern, whose perhaps apocryphal justification is that the iamb (lub-DUB) echoes the heartbeat, and the five-meter line is about the length of a human breath. Examples are almost countless:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun
(Shakespeare)

You stars that reign’d at my nativity (Marlowe)

It little profits that an idle king (Tennyson)

Each night at eight my neighbor hacks and
spits (John Canaday)

When I see birches bend to left and right
(Frost)

I emailed her. I haven’t heard from her.
(Marilyn Hacker)

My student, like most others in the class, had been taught to count syllables (10 to a line) in order to “calculate” iambic pentameter, just as she had been taught to count syllables in order to write haiku — a favorite of high-school poetry-writing exercises because of the form’s short length, but also a form that translates with difficulty from the linguistic structures of Japanese. Syllable-counting is useless in trying to achieve musicality in English, and even on its own terms, the exercise fails because (given the propensity of spoken English

to “swallow” many syllables) students fail to count, say, the *-en* or *-ing* endings of many words.

But in earlier times, I was able to sit with students, read lines aloud, ask them to note the stresses they heard, and establish where there was (or was not) some sort of metrical pattern. With my blank-verse student, we read her lines — lurching combinations of anapests, dactyls, and iambs, with as many as six and as few as three feet to a line — aloud over and over, and she could not hear what was loud and what was soft. Discouraged, she asked how she might learn where the accents lay in words or phrases she wanted to use. I pointed out that, while one-syllable words derived their stress from syntax, any time she went to look up the pronunciation of a word with more than one syllable, the dictionary would show her where the stresses lay. “But I would never look in a dictionary to pronounce a word,” she said.

“If you didn’t know the word,” I said, “how else would you learn to pronounce it?”

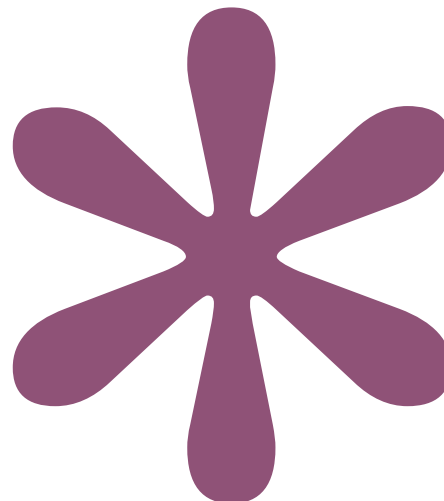
“I go to Google translate,” she said, “and they say the word for me. But I don’t hear the stress.”

I sort of threw up my hands at that point. A half-hour later, a poet who had passed earlier by my office door stuck her head in. “I CANnot WAIT for CLASSes TO be DONE,” she said, with a knowing grin.

At the risk of becoming one of those hand-wringing old-timers, I wonder if the ways in which our text-based language and its oral counterpart are operating today are affecting our ability to hear the music inherent in English. If you are a high-school teacher reading this, I’d like at least to ask you to stop telling students to count syllables. Have them listen, instead. They could start by listening to a [recording on YouTube](#) of Dylan Thomas reading his poem “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.”

Lucy Ferriss is writer in residence at Trinity College, in Connecticut.

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Permission to Footnote

Scrutinizing other writers' footnotes opens students' eyes to their many functions

By ANNE CURZAN

IT'S BEEN 17 years since my realization that I was hoarding footnotes. I was using plenty of footnotes in my own academic work: I had been doing that since graduate school. But I was withholding footnotes from undergraduates.

Not that I was actively forbidding undergraduate students from inserting footnotes into their essays. But I wasn't teaching them how to do it either, which meant that their essays included exactly zero footnotes.

I was teaching a senior seminar at the time of the realization. Due to the departmental goals for the seminar, the writing assignments for the entire course built toward a final long seminar paper. I decided to use weekly short written responses to hone two academic skills: incorporating and responding to the arguments of other scholars, and using footnotes effectively. So for these weekly one-page responses to readings, students were required to incorporate two quotes from the readings and at least one footnote.

If students had thought about footnotes at all, most of them considered them a citation device — as they used to be before almost all academic style guidelines moved to parenthetical references. “So then what goes into the footnotes?” students logically asked.

Suddenly, together we were scrutinizing the footnotes of the book chapters and articles we were reading as part of class discussion. We

found definitions of terms and justifications for using one term over another, historical background, explanations of more-obscure references, references to additional resources, and sometimes really interesting but somewhat tangential information. Students started to use these models for their own footnotes, and they were hooked.

Why? Because footnotes are useful. For example, sometimes as writers we discover some interesting fact or connection that we really want to share with readers. As we draft the essay or chapter (or whatever it is), we realize at some point that this fact or connection is not fully relevant to the point we are making in a particular paragraph. But we like it too much to lose it entirely. The solution: a footnote.

Undergraduate writers face exactly the same conundrum sometimes, but without access to footnotes they may see only two choices: include this fascinating bit and accept that it makes the paragraph work less well; or omit it and lose the chance to share this potentially engaging piece of knowledge. If students opt for the former, their instructor may then criticize the inclusion of tangential information, no matter how interesting it is.

Or at times a student will spend a lot of space in the main text of an argument-based essay explaining a historical event or providing background on how a piece of technology works. We as instructors may encourage the student not

to get bogged down in background and foreground the argument. If the student is concerned readers may need the background or explanation, they are caught between their sense of their audience's needs and ours. The solution: a footnote.

Why, then, aren't we teaching first-year undergraduate writers to use footnotes? Why not add this useful device to their writing toolbox as they navigate the transition from high-school to college writing?

Microsoft Word and other word-processing programs now make inserting footnotes into a text incredibly easy. And if we're honest about it, footnotes can make any piece of writing look more academic, more sophisticated — and maybe even smarter. I think that matters. If we're trying to help undergraduate writers enter the scholarly discourse, let's allow their writing to look even more like academic writing.

There are other benefits too. In my experience, everything that helps student writers invest in a piece of writing (e.g., giving students choices so that they can write about questions they care about, allowing students to use footnotes so that they are engaged with how the writing looks on the page) makes for better writing. In addition, when any of us as writers sorts through what information belongs in the main text and what infor-

mation belongs in a footnote, as well as what terms or ideas might benefit from a footnote with more explanation, it often encourages us to organize arguments and evidence more effectively.*

I started teaching footnotes with seniors 17 years ago, and I quickly realized that students shouldn't have had to wait three full years of college for permission to footnote. In my experience, undergraduate writers at all levels appreciate the gift of the footnote, as well as detailed discussions about how to use the footnote well (including how not to overuse it). And their writing sometimes jumps in quality as a result.

For all these reasons, I have gone from hoarding to sharing footnotes. There are plenty to go around.

* Footnotes also occasionally figure in my revision process — and I talk with students about this as well. When I'm working on a draft and realize that some information is too tangential or minor or otherwise unnecessary in the main text, but I'm too fond of the material to let it go entirely, I will first move it into a footnote. By the next round of revision, I sometimes have managed to get enough distance from the footnote that I can simply cut it; I just needed to let go of the material more slowly than slashing it in the first round. (For the record, this paragraph was in the main text for a while. Then I moved it here. Give me a few more days, and I might delete it entirely.)

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A Challenge Centered Around Usage

Students, state your new composition rule

By ALLAN METCALF

FOR a Lingua Franca post of mine that centered around the name of a dog in a movie, the very first comment centered around neither the dog nor the movie, but the phrase “centered around” itself. The commenter, “Earshape,” wrote: “I do not expect someone careful about language to say CENTERED AROUND.”

Why not?

I chose “centered around” rather than the alternative “centered on” because the movie did not always focus directly on the dog. Rather, the dog was the center of things going on around it. Officer, my poetic license is up to date.

But to find out why a careful language person should be expected to avoid “centered around,” let’s turn to *Merriam-Webster’s Concise Dictionary of English Usage*, the trustworthy guide not only to actual usage but to the history of critical comments on usage. Like the Congressional Budget Office, it’s nonpartisan; it simply presents the facts.

And the facts are that until the 1920s, nobody complained about “center around.” Then, some as-yet-unidentified maven started the ball rolling by declaring that “center around” is illogical. Others picked up this stricture, and soon it spread like a computer virus through the usage handbooks, with the warning that “some people” consider it illogical.

What’s so illogical about “centered about”? Well, the logic is complicated, and it’s a matter of debate.

But surprise! This post is not about the logic or illogic of “center around.” Rather, it’s to describe a classroom exercise that takes “center around” as a model.

So please, don’t waste your hammer and tongs on the logic of “center around.” Instead, take this opportunity to forge a brand-new usage rule that

will pointlessly vex students in English composition classes, and writers for publications, for generations to come.

To do this exercise:

- State your new rule,
- explain its logic, and
- give an example of a sentence that violates the rule, and show how to correct it.

The rule has to be a brand new one, not announced in any previous usage manual, but — and this is the hard part — it has to look venerable. Nobody is going to pay attention to a rule that looks new and arbitrary and idiosyncratic. No, you want a rule that appears to have been followed by careful writers all along, while being misused or ignored by careless writers.

In other words, it should be like “center around.” You need to find something people frequently say or write, show its illogic, and insist on its eradication from good writing. And don’t worry, you can find logic to approve or condemn any usage. Language is conventional, not logical.

Everyone has pet peeves about language, but most are too obviously just pet peeves about vocabulary. The annual list from Lake Superior State University of words that should be banished is an example of what not to do for this exercise. It’s too simple and obvious to say we shouldn’t say “amazing,” “shared sacrifice,” “man cave,” or “thank you in advance,” to take examples from the 2012 Lake Superior State list. No, it should be a matter of grammar, like the question of which preposition to use with the verb “center.”

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BOB MCGRATH

You Guys!

Credit Guy Fawkes for this common form of address

By ALLAN METCALF

GUY FAWKES didn't succeed in his terrorist plot four centuries ago. And the Guy Fawkes masks worn by Occupy Wall Street protesters in October 2011 were unlikely to terrorize the 1 percent. But Guy has succeeded beyond a doubt in one thing: changing the English language.

We talk about him all the time. He's the *guy* of *you guys*.

Changing the language wasn't part of his plot. But if it weren't for his attempt to blow up the British houses of Parliament in 1605, we wouldn't have

the *guys* of today.

The interaction of history and language sometimes produces strange results, and this is one of the strangest. Here's how it happened:

Four hundred years ago, the official religion of England depended on the religion of the monarch. Queen Elizabeth had died in 1603, to be succeeded by King James. Both ruled by virtue of being Protestant, head of the Church of England, and independent of the Pope. But there were many Roman Catholics in England who wanted to return England to Catholicism.

One of them was Guy Fawkes.

He was an Englishman, born in York in 1570.

As a young man he crossed the English Channel to fight on the side of Catholic armies in Flanders and France. In 1604 he slipped back into England and began working with others to put barrels of gunpowder in a cellar underneath the houses of Parliament. One of his co-conspirators, Thomas Percy, had conveniently rented a house next door.

They began filling the cellars with gunpowder in March 1605, and by November were ready to blow up the place at a time when Parliament would be in session. But during the night of November 4, a search party inspected the cellars and found Fawkes with the gunpowder. They arrested him before he could cause any damage.

Along with four co-conspirators, he was hanged, drawn, and quartered in January. So much for Guy Fawkes.

But his name lived on. Hearing of the plot foiled, on November 5, Londoners started bonfires to celebrate. And Parliament, happy to have escaped, declared November 5 an annual day of thanksgiving. As the years went on, it became the custom to make effigies of Guy Fawkes and others (particularly the Pope) and burn them in November 5 bonfires. The effigies were called *guys*.

Colonial America often celebrated Guy Fawkes Day as vigorously as England. But with independence came opposition to the anti-Catholic character of the celebration, as well as indifference to the historical Guy Fawkes. By the mid-19th century, in American English, *guy* came to have a more neutral meaning, first a strange-looking straw effigy, then a strange-looking man, then just any man, a guy. And so we talk about *guys* today, a slangy way of referring to men and boys.

That's the explanation for *guy*. But how do we get *you guys*, our most common way of addressing more than one person?

The answer is grammatical. *Guy* is a noun. But in *you guys*, it takes on the guise of a pronoun.

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And why is that? Blame it on an epidemic of politeness among speakers of the English language.

In the 18th century, speakers of English became so polite that they used the polite form *you* to address not just several people but even just one. Instead of *thou art* we said *you are*, even to one person.

But we still like to distinguish between singular and plural in our pronouns, so speakers of English invented a variety of ways to make a plural form of *you*. Some added *-s* in various shapes to make *youse*, *you'ns*, or *yinz*. Others, especially in the American South, added *all* to make *you all* and *y'all*.

And then, around the middle of the past century, people began adding *guys* to make *you guys*. Until then, *guy* referred just to men and boys, but the combination *you guys* acted as a plural second-person pronoun and could be applied to humans of any gender.

No, *guys* didn't actually become a pronoun. It remains a noun. It's just that the combination of *you* and *guys* acts like a plural pronoun. Funny thing, language!

Once that was established, *you guys* could be shortened to *guys* but still function as a second-person pronoun. "*You guys*, get to work" could be expressed as "*Guys*, get to work" without being restricted to males.

And so we have *you guys* today as the most widely used plural of *you*, at least in the United States. If you're someone, especially someone female, who doesn't like being addressed as *you guys* when you're dining with a friend in a restaurant, either because it's slangy or because *guys* ought to be men — you can blame it on Guy Fawkes. But don't blame him too much, because if we'd kept *thou*, we'd never have *you guys*.

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I'm So Uber You

With the rise of the car service, uber has become an emphatic modifier

By WILLIAM GERMANO

IT BEGAN with Nietzsche. Now it's about taxicabs.

We have entered the world of *uberness*, or possibly *Überness*. The *Übermensch*, Nietzsche suggested in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, is an alternative to divine authority, a model for living beyond what he regarded acidly as the restrictive values of organized religion.

Nietzsche's early translators struggled to "English" the term *Übermensch*, and we're still not really there. *Overman*, *Superman* — neither feels quite right. Both feel awfully 1938. On the one hand these English translations bear the taint of mid-century German politics. On the other hand, there's a reason that Action Comics No. 1 is the world's most valuable of all such fragile publications: It's where the character of Superman made his debut.

The prefix *über* moved out of German and attached itself, with or without its umlaut, to all sorts of words and concepts. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides instances of *uber* (or *über*) from the early 1960s onward, though always in combined forms. Thus the *OED*'s historical archive gives us *uber-fan*, *uber-model*, *uber-hip*, *uber-marionette*, *uber-modern*. (Reorganize that with mathematical economy and you get one uber hip model modern marionette fan.)

The *OED* does not, however, give us an independent, free-floating *uber*.

I keep hearing *uber* used as a modifier, and in unlikely ways. There's the combinatory "She is, like, so uber-enthusiastic," which is evidently very very enthusiastic. But there's also "That was so *uber*," which is a bit like saying something is the ne plus ultra. The heroine in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* says that her love is "beyond beyond," which is totally *uber*.

I'm tempted to attribute the rise of *uber* as an independent signifier to the Uber car-service phenomenon. Uber, founded in 2009, has taken the

transportation world by storm — not without challenges, but definitely without umlauts. It's not *Über*, and your Uber driver isn't an *Überführer*, much less an *Übermensch*. Even in Germany, where the transportation company has entered the fray, you'll be taking an Uber.

That umlaut is a sticking point, but one only wishes it were more adhesive, and not less. I wrote a while back on how the marketing world loves umlauts. In some quarters, marketing is nothing if not diacritical.

Over is a good English word that conflates at least two senses — above and finished, or *über* and *kaputt*. In English, or at least American, conversation, things can be *uber* (very), while relationships can be — and frequently are — *over*.

Uber gets you there, and *over* — well, *over* just doesn't.

Our contemporary use of *uber* as an emphatic modifier might also reflect the inexhaustible fascination with superheroes. Hollywood seems never to tire of them; witness the current *Batman v Superman* (I love the deployment of the judicial *v* here, and am waiting for Justice the Notorious RBG to weigh in).

As a point of theatrical trivia, I note that the Bernstein, Comden, and Green musical *On the Town* has a minor character, a building superintendent, billed as Mr. Uperman (full name on the character list is S. Uperman).

The show's even got a musical number that takes place during a taxi ride. In the 1949 film, sailor Frank Sinatra is in the insistent hands of cabbie Betty Garrett.

Nietzsche, contemporary lingo, superheroes, and cab rides. It's only a matter of time until a script bangs them all into one scenario.

How about *Übermensch v Superman*? Now that'd be a movie I'd buy popcorn for.

I might even Uber to the theater.

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