

# Words About Words (#89 / May 2009)

## *A Monthly Column of Observations and Opinions for Clients, Colleagues, Associates, and Friends*

### **Aptitude Test**

Most of us tend to use *apt*, *liable*, and *likely* more or less interchangeably—but, while it's true that they're all in the family, Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* cautions that they aren't triplets. *Apt* means having an inherent tendency, customarily inclined, or naturally fit. *Liable* means open to or exposed to something unpleasant or disadvantageous. *Likely* means probable or expected.

Bernstein offers a sentence that illustrates the three words (and, he adds, performs a public service in the process): "Teenagers are apt to speed on an open road. If they do, they are liable to be arrested. Then they are likely to be sorry."

### **Birds of a Feather**

It's hard to imagine what English would be like without Latin. From just one humble noun—*grex*, *gregis*, meaning "flock"—we get a whole flock of familiar words: *aggregate* (to gather the flock together), *congregate* (to flock together in an assembly), *egregious* (standing out from the flock in a negative way), *gregarious* (seeking and enjoying the company of the flock), *integrate* (to bring all elements of the flock together), and *segregate* (to separate or isolate from the flock). Now you've herd the word, *WAW* concludes somewhat sheepishly.

### **Thrown for a Loss**

"In the last two seasons, [Peyton Manning] has been sacked the fewest times per attempt than any other quarterback in the NFL." The reporter let himself get sacked for big negative yardage by following *fewest* with "than," which doesn't work in English. He could have recast the phrase as "the fewest times ... of any quarterback" or "fewer times ... than any other quarterback." Either way, he gets comfortably beyond the line of scrimmage.

### **Funny Papers (Part 3)**

We're pulling for newspapers to survive, if for no other reason than to continue printing gems such as the following (courtesy of Larry Magne and Virginia Pratt):

- "County to pay \$250,000 to advertise lack of funds"
- "Federal Agents Raid Gun Shop, Find Weapons"
- "Police received a report of a newborn infant found in a trash can. Upon investigation, officers discovered it was only a burrito."
- "A caller reported at 7:14 p.m. that someone was on a porch yelling "Help!" from a residence on Bank Street. Officers responded and learned that the person was calling a cat named Help."
- "1995 NISSAN Maxima, green, leather, loaded, CD, auto start, sunroof, 4-door, good condition, \$4500. Not for sale."

## Phase to Faze

Yet another egregious example of spelling by ear (or by spellchecker): “On the West Coast, the new ‘new thing’ doesn’t phase venture capitalists at all.” Here’s an old “old thing”: “Phase” is not an alternative way to spell *faze*.

## Rules for Writing

WAW is pleased to offer these infallible rules for good writing:

- If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
- Sentences without verbs—bad idea.
- Run on sentences cause all sorts of problems for readers and people should never use them and must try to write better and divide their sentences.
- Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn’t.
- Hyphenate between syllables and avoid unnecessary hyphens.
- Be carefully to use adjectives and adverbs correct.
- Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck into the language.
- Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.

## If You’ve Got It, Flout It

The difference between “flaunt” and “flout” has been eluding writers (and would-be writers) for what seems like forever. Here’s a typical example: “The Founders never intended [to grant] ... a presidential privilege allowing White House advisers to flaunt congressional subpoenas.” To *flaunt* is to make a boastful display; to *flout* is to treat with contempt, which is what the reporter had in mind.

That’s the last word for this month’s *Words About Words*. As always, your comments, contributions, philosophical observations, and writing/editing assignments are welcome.

Until next month ...

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