

Think!

{ 1 }

The grouchy grammarian instructed me to tell you at the beginning that he can't teach anybody every individual thing and neither can I, but that we can "damn well" try to hound you into THINKING. Hence I begin with his fundamental rule:

*Think about what you're saying—
know what it means and where it came from.*

Though this rule is general rather than specific, discussion of it gives us the chance to take a sort of overview of our subject. Besides, the principle suffers from such frequent violation, as the grouch likes to say, that it unquestionably belongs among the forty-seven topics: "You can't stress it too much, Parrish!" But too busy to heed it, you say? No time? Well, surely you're not too busy to wish to avoid appearing ignorant in public, are you? And maybe tomorrow, or one day soon, you'll have a boss or a teacher who doesn't believe that mediocre is good enough and will therefore expect more from you. In any case, spend some time with the following examples.

• • •

12 TOPIC 1

During a TV travelogue showing the wonders of a Utah ski resort, the commentator informed us that forty years ago “the population had dwindled to 1,000 people.” Discussing an incident of urban unrest, an AP reporter noted that “blacks account for 43 percent of Cincinnati’s population of 331,000 people.” But what else could a *population* dwindle to or consist of besides “people,” since that’s what the word means? In each sentence, simply omitting “people” would have taken proper care of things.

The late evening news once declared that a certain luckless convict had been “electrocuted to death.” Now that’s true overkill, since *electrocute* means to execute by means of electricity. As the old grouch likes to say, pay attention to what words mean, and if you don’t really know, look them up. Don’t just take a stab at it. And, as noted above, don’t plead lack of time as an excuse.

Don’t forget *daylight savings time*, of course. A columnist commented in the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*: “Some may question how Daylight Savings Time contributes to the disintegration of our American Way of Life.” Regrettably, however, the writer isn’t bothered at all by the expression “Daylight SavingS Time”; he seems to be using it without thinking about it. He’s simply objecting to what he professes to see as the undesirable social effects of “fast time,” as people used to call DST.

And what about *rate of speed*? “The car smashed into the fruit stand while traveling at a high rate of speed.” Anybody who has had junior high science or math should remember that speed *is* a rate, and in such sentences one rate is enough. Merely say “while traveling at high speed.” Think! commands the grouch. He also suggests, in his own special style, that you remember what you once knew but have allowed to slip away.

A TV reporter informed us one evening that in 1938 “the country was in the grips of the Great Depression.” She didn’t mean, of course, that Americans of that era found themselves

confined inside some set of giant economic suitcases—*grips*—but was simply referring to the Depression’s strong grasp, or grip. As is often the case, she seemed to be employing a word without really thinking about its meaning—it was just a word. Sober narrators of historical programs dealing with that same era often tell us that something took place “at the height of the Depression.” Such a sentence, of course, completely demolishes “Depression” as a figure of speech; what the narrators mean is the *depth* of the Depression.

A Knight Ridder columnist, writing in the early days of the Clinton administration, observed that the president’s “softer” management style was “viewed with suspicion by those who don’t *ascribe* to it.” But *ascribe* is a word we use to make an observation about somebody else, and so it must have an object; you could, for example, *ascribe* softness to Clinton, but he himself must *subscribe* to a management style, an idea, or anything else.

Several years later, when management style had become the least of the Clinton administration’s worries, Rev. John Neuhaus of the magazine *First Things* delivered himself of a uniquely ghastly comment on the president’s personal problems: “It would be an enormous *emetic*—culturally, politically, morally—for us to have an impeachment. It would *purge* us” (*Washington Post*). As my grouchy friend responded, rather in the style of Samuel Johnson, “Americans may well offer profound thanks that we were not simultaneously hit by an emetic and a purge—both ends, so to speak, against the middle. The poor body politic might not have survived such a double assault.”

In making points in relation to time, writers often fall into redundancy or even simple silliness. In a profile of the British writer-politician Jeffrey Archer, the *New Yorker* observed that as a young MP, Archer “seemed to have a promising future *ahead of him*.” NBC-TV in Los Angeles produced a neat counterpart by telling viewers that an advertiser who had used Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in a commercial (and thereby

14 TOPIC 1

had stirred up quite a flap) planned to do more such ads and the audience should therefore “look for more historic figures *from the past*.” That, of course, would be a likely place to find historic figures, just as the future, for everybody, does, reassuringly, lie ahead.

A third member of this group is a photo caption bearing the information that FDR was “rarely seen in a wheelchair during his lifetime.” Nor, one cannot resist adding, has the situation changed much since his death. (A curious phrasing often occurs in relation to death. The writer will assert something like “*Before* her death she wrote her reflections on changes she had seen during her lifetime.” Well, this person could hardly have written these reflections *after* she died. A writer usually means in such a context “in the last year before her death,” “shortly before her death,” or something similar.)

The word *favorable* carries the idea of success, of moving toward a desired result. That’s why a radio listener was startled to hear a fuddled disc jockey interrupt his music to warn his audience that “conditions are *favorable*” for the development of a tornado—favorable, perhaps, from the point of view of the incipient tornado.

“Two people were killed when a U.S. helicopter prepared for search-and-rescue duty crashed *accidentally* in neighboring Pakistan.” Commenting on this tragic incident, the grouch wondered who could have supposed that the chopper might have crashed *purposefully*.

The arrangement of words in a sentence requires thought, too. You may need them all, but if you don’t have them in the right order they will turn on you. Note this example from the *Tampa Tribune*: “Shortly after 3:30 p.m. Friday, Tampa Fire Rescue officials said they responded to a call from a resident at the Cypress Run Apartments . . . who said she heard a child crying after falling from the second-story window.” “I see this kind of thing every day,” the grouch had written in a snarly little note

clipped to the paragraph, “but I have to admire anybody who’s falling from a window but still can think about something besides his immediate fate.”

A Web entrepreneur who marketed men’s shirts embroidered with the words WIFE BEATER, thus offending the operators of women’s shelters and the members of women’s rights groups, declared that he had hatched this great idea after watching the TV drama *Cops*, which he said often shows people “in sleeveless T-shirts” being arrested for domestic violence. While shaking his head in disgust at this particular blend of commercialism and folly, the grouchy grammarian snorted that if it’s sleeveless it’s not a T-shirt, because the name comes from the shape; it’s just a plain undershirt or, in some parts of the English-speaking world, a singlet. He conceded, however, that this point probably had not been of much concern to the saddened and infuriated women.

In a discussion of out-of-office U.S. presidents who decided to take up residence in New York, the *Times* observed: “Former presidents and vice presidents thinking about putting down roots in the Big Apple might do well to read E. B. White’s famous essay, ‘Here Is New York.’ It divides the city into *three quadrants*” (lifers, commuters, and those who come to Manhattan in search of something). Three quadrants? E. B. White, one of the most urbane and graceful of writers, the creator of the *New Yorker*’s original style and tone, had said *three quadrants*? A quadrant is a fourth, not a third. How could he have done such a thing? “Is that the *Times*’s error,” I asked the grouchy grammarian, “or did E. B. White really say that?” “I can’t tell you,” he said. “I couldn’t imagine that White could do such a thing, but, you know, I was afraid to look it up and find out.” I couldn’t blame him.*

*White was innocent, of course. “There are roughly three New Yorks” is what he wrote.

16 TOPIC 1

“Over the last five years, the Casino Queen . . . has brought 1,200 jobs to this *predominately* black city of 42,000 people [East St. Louis] just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.” Or, “Hyaline membrane disease is a dangerous condition, found *pre-dominately* in premature babies.” These sentences, one from the *New York Times*, the other from a syndicated medical column, are hardly likely to confuse a reader, but the grouch nevertheless clipped them. The craftsmanly writer, he would say, prefers *pre-dominantly*, which pairs with the adjective *predominant*; *predominately* he considers a slovenly impostor, since it has no counterpart adjective but is merely *-ly* hooked to the verb. He sees it as a second-class word.

My friend also detests such scramblings as the substitution of the adverb *somewhat* for the noun *something*, as in: “I have long been acknowledged as *somewhat* of an expert on sleep” (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*). You may be *somewhat* sleepy, but you can hardly be *somewhat* OF an anything. The *Los Angeles Times* committed the same blunder in informing us that “polo shirts have become *somewhat* of an American uniform,” and the newspaper supplement *American Profile* joined in by describing the development of the proposed World War II memorial as “*somewhat* of a bureaucratic quagmire at times.” Even the imparting of colorful personal information cannot cure this error: “I’m *somewhat* of a student of U.S. Cabinet secretaries. I have a tattoo of Elliot Richardson on my buttocks” (Tony Kornheiser, a columnist). *Somewhat* sloppy, all those items!

Metaphors and other figures of speech often do not receive the respect they deserve. For instance, a headline in the *New York Times* says: WRITING ABOUT RACE, WALKING ON EGGSHELLS—that is, proceeding warily in a delicate situation. This is nonsense. The real expression is *walking on eggs*. The idea is to tread so softly that you avoid turning those fragile eggs into nothing more than useless eggshells. Regrettably, an office supervisor in Texas showed no likelihood of making such an

effort. Responding to complaints about his excessive cursing, he fired back with both barrels: "I'm tired of walking on (expletive) eggshells, trying to make people happy around here." Unfortunately, perhaps, even the expletive cannot rescue the metaphor; to save it, the boss needed undamaged (expletive) eggs. Just be kind to metaphors, the grouch likes to say, and they will repay you richly.

A radio news report described a certain government project as an *overwhelming failure*. But overwhelm means to turn over, to overcome by superior power. You can overwhelm something if you're being successful, but never if you're failing.

Old strong ("irregular") verbs continually cause trouble. Speaking of President George W. Bush's actions in relation to an electric-power crisis in California, an AP writer observed that "Bush has *tread* carefully." That brings to mind the possibility of a chorus enthusiastically giving us "Onward, Christian Soldiers" with the line "Brothers, we are treading where the saints have *tread*." Doesn't sound quite right, does it?

Sometimes writers don't seem to have paid full attention to their own sentences. Bringing us up to date on the Dubai Open, a reporter told us that Martina Hingis "overcame some bad moments in the first set, then recovered to beat No. 7 Tamarine Tanasugarn of Thailand in the semifinals." This seems to be setting up a contrast between *overcame* and *recovered*, as if the writer meant to say that Hingis suffered or experienced the bad moments and then recovered from them. But, of course, these two words are on the same side of the fence, with the overcoming creating the recovery. It would have been better, probably, to say that Hingis overcame some bad moments to take the first set and went on to drub Tanasugarn in the second (she won it 6-1).

An NPR report on a horrible accident in Nova Scotia included the sentence: "Four schoolchildren were killed when a bus *lost control*." The bus *went out of control*, as reporters used to take pains to say to avoid any possible charge of libel, but if any-

18 TOPIC 1

one or anything lost control, it had to be the driver. The bus, after all, was inanimate.

My friend seems almost to have chuckled, however, over a surprising statement in an advertisement bearing the byline of the president of the National Education Association. “Last month,” wrote the educator, “we published ‘Making Low-Performing Schools a Priority.’” Extreme conservatives have sometimes seemed to accuse the NEA of such anti-intellectual purposes, but one hardly expected to hear agreement from the president of the organization. “Think about what you’re saying,” my friend likes to say, “and say what you mean.”

A little more thought might have kept the Washington football team’s publicist from boasting on the organization’s Web page that REDSKINS READ CHILDREN’S BOOKS. And further cerebration might have kept a *Washington Post* headline writer (for the on-line edition) from declaring: SALVADORANS LOOK FOR MORE VICTIMS. It wasn’t that these Central Americans had suddenly turned bloodthirsty—they were simply trying to find survivors of an earthquake.

Those preparing an ad for a Los Angeles store also could have profited from the advice to think and think again; it might have kept them from producing this blaring headline: SLIPCOVERS—A NEW LOOK FOR MOM. One recipient of the mailer noted, “Somebody has a big mama.”

One of the best contributions here came from the popular National Public Radio program *All Things Considered*. Reporting on a widely covered trial, the cohost of the program declared: “A Florida teenager was sentenced today . . . to twenty-eight years in prison for shooting his teacher between the eyes.” At the bottom of the memo page the grouch had scribbled, “How many years would the boy have received for shooting the teacher between the toes?” And in a second note he posed an important question: “How’s the teacher?” The point, of course, was that

the boy was sentenced for killing the teacher, not for shooting the victim in one particular part of the body or another.

Discussing the threat to the development of new performers posed by the repackaging of old recordings of “seminal figures,” a record executive declared (in the *New York Times Magazine*): “In very practical terms, if you’re not among the *uninitiated*, you go into a store and you are confronted with a decision [on] the complete Monk on Blue Note or the new Eric Reid or Brad Mehldau,” and you will, said the executive, pick the seminal figure and thus fail to discover new artists. Surely he meant “if you’re not among the *initiated*,” and it would have been nice of the editors to have helped him out.

Simple structure constitutes the problem here: “In February, Hong Kong jeweler Lan Sai-wing introduced a solid-gold bathroom (including washbasin and two toilets), constructed as homage to Vladimir Lenin’s critique of capitalist waste, telling reporters that he had *dreamed* all his life to *have* enough money to build a gold toilet.” If you’re going to dream such a dream at all, you dream *of having*, of course.

(I occasionally wondered whether I dared mention to my friend that some people—intellectuals!—write vaguely and cloudily *on purpose*! I was thinking here not of academics in general but of a more specialized group, those who say they must attack language and try to “destabilize” it in order to destroy its “illegitimate” power over all of us. They therefore consider it their noble duty to produce prose that varies between simple sloppiness and absolute unintelligibility. They certainly do not appear to have taken to heart, or even to have heard, George Orwell’s observation that “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” But I never could make myself bring up the point. The grouchy grammarian already suffered enough without having to cope with the idea that anybody would deliberately produce bad writing.)

• • •

I conclude this topic with a look at a persistent mental picture. It shows my friend leaning forward in his chair, barking at the TV screen: “As far as the humidity *what?*” He was watching the weather news, and for what I gathered was at least the thousandth time was berating the reporter for treating *as far as* as the equivalent of *as for*. If you say “as far as,” he never tires of telling me, you must supply not only a subject but a verb as well: *as far as the humidity is concerned, as far as the plot goes . . .*

Think! the grouchy grammarian enjoins us all, friend or foe.

THE GROUCH’S REMINDERS

- Think about what you’re saying!
- Pay attention to what a word means and where it came from. If you don’t know, look it up.
- Pay attention to the arrangement of words in a sentence.
- *Somewhat* is an adverb; *something* is a noun.
- Be kind to metaphors.
- Don’t use old sayings and figures of speech you’re only vaguely familiar with. They will only get you into trouble.