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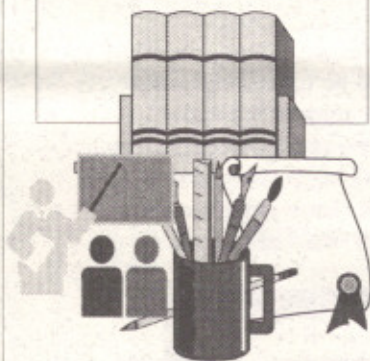
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The great tragedy of Science:
the slaying of a beautiful
hypothesis by an ugly fact.

Thomas Huxley

On Whether (Or Not)

Someone recently posted the following question to a specialty group on the Internet: "What is the rule governing the use of *or not* with *whether*? The following sentences both make sense to me as a native speaker of English: (1) I don't know whether it will rain on Monday; and (2) I will see you on Monday, whether or not it rains. Are these sentences grammatically correct?" The computer soon brought forth the following replies: (a) "You're correct; they're both acceptable and proper." (b) "You're incorrect. The former is not proper, and the latter, while not improper, is verbose, even though it is common. *Whether* denotes a differentiation between several choices, and should not be used with a single antecedent. The proper word to use for the subjunctive clause in the first sentence is *if*, as in 'I don't know *if* it will rain on Monday.'" (c) "Thus spake the American Heritage Third: '*whether*: Used in indirect questions to introduce one alternative: We should find out whether the museum is open.' A usage note under the definition of *if* specifically discourages the use of *if* in such cases because it often creates ambiguities."

What do YOU think? Which is the correct answer, (a), (b), or (c)? I confess to being stumped, although leaning toward omitting *or not* as implied (my only authority was a character in a book by George V. Higgins, one of my favorite writers) and wanting to replace *whether* with *if* in the first sentence (again, just a gut feeling). An expert source from the local newspaper answered as follows: "I love grammar questions, because they give everybody a chance to get passionate about a matter of no consequence at all, only without the use of guns. They should try this system in the Balkans. Regarding the question at hand, your sample sentences are acceptable and proper as stated. . . . As you rightly surmise, there are instances in which it is wrong to append *or not* to *whether*. The test for determining such instances is whether or not you can delete *or not* without affecting the sentence. For example, in the preceding sentence *or not* adds nothing to the sense and is thus superfluous, if hard to resist. Not so in your sentence No. 2. Regarding sentence No. 1, though *if* and *whether* are more or less synonymous, *if* can be ambiguous in some circumstances. The AH3 example is 'Let her know *if* she is invited,' which can be interpreted to mean "let her know whether she is invited" or 'Let her know in the event that she is invited.' . . . Since there are always unbelievers, let me quote Theodore Bernstein (*The Careful Writer*, 1965): "Usually the *or not* is a space waster. . . . When, however, the intention is to give equal stress to the alternatives, the *or not* is mandatory. . . . One way to test whether the *or not* is necessary is to substitute *if* for *whether*. If the change to *if* produces a different meaning . . . the *or not* must be supplied.' Sentence No. 2 once again passes the test."

Revising Prose

3rd Edition, by Richard A. Lanham. Macmillan, New York, 1992.
(Paperback, \$18.00).

reviewed by Shirley Peterson, ELS

Multimedia strikes again. Macmillan will provide, at extra cost, a 30-minute video to go along with the book and also a separate hardcopy workbook; the latter is an excellent idea. The original edition of *Revising Prose* was studded with useful but ignorable demands that the reader complete a relevant exercise before moving on. "Moving on" in this third edition still requires reading and thinking about many examples of incorrect or bloated passages, but does not induce the guilt associated with things left undone.

The main focus of *Revising Prose* remains on the single sentence, and the diagnostic "paramedic method" still lies at the heart of Lanham's system. Diagnosis of the ailment is partway to cure: strings of prepositional phrases basted together by a form of "is" can evolve into a sentence that pleases the mind, eye, and ear, and individually improved sentences can be further modified to form a coherent, rhythmically appealing paragraph.

Rhythm is important in any language, but particularly in English. Try reading aloud one of the convoluted sentences in an ordinary scientific report: the tongue tangles, the breath runs out midway, and the voice assumes a monotone; the sentence is monotonous. (When the sentence is read silently, the eyes seem to whisper to the ears, "Booooooring!" and the mind mutters, "Just gimme a verb.") A good sentence, on the other hand, can be read aloud with feeling and emphasis and before one runs out of breath.

Examples of poor writing in *Revising Prose* range from student work to the California Penal Code (which, upon reflection, is a range from A to B). Lanham recasts Section 384A of the Penal Code as a piece of Greek drama, complete with chorus, to demonstrate the attempt at poetry he sees in its turgid language. The recasting works beautifully and hilariously, though I am not sure he is right about officialese trying to be poetic. (I think poetry lies more in the essence of a piece, and that is what we are trying to distill by tightening the writing.) Properly applied, the paramedic method exposes The Official Style in all its pomposity.

Lanham admits that clarity and simplicity in writing might not meet bureaucratic approval. He suggests that learning officialese is often a matter of career preservation but seldom good for the soul. His

The Paramedic Method

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask, "Where's the action?" "Who's kicking who[sic]?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast—no slow windups.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a "/".

philosophy is not quite "we are what we write" or "we write what we are" but something like "we can write with grace and clarity and become more than we were."

The author points out that the advent of word processing has made revision not only easy, but habitual. No more getting words down on paper; instead, we "get them up and moving around"—that's good. His suggested use of the search feature of word processors to turn up "is" is good, too. The excitement he demonstrates about typefaces, however, is less attractive. His observation that typeface selection is now an authorial rather than an editorial function may be true in some fields of publishing, but not in ours.

The third edition of *Revising Prose* has both an index and an appendix. (The appendix includes words such as *homoioteleuton* [look it up under *homeo-* or *homoeo-*] which originally meant "like ending" or "rhyming" and now refers to matching case endings like -ing, -ed, or -tion—a bit of arcaica some may find fascinating.)

In combination with the workbook, the third edition of *Revising Prose* would be most helpful in a "how to edit" program (I can't imagine what the video is good for!). Once the paramedic method has been internalized, and all practicing editors have done so in one way or another, there seems little reason to add this \$18 paperback book to one's library.

City editor to freelance critic:
"Some poor devil took a year of
his life to write this book."
Critic to editor: "And I gave up
a day of my life to read it."

E. L. Doctorow, *Waterworks*

ABOUT OUR MEMBERS

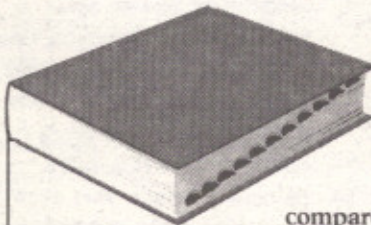
Congratulations and a sincere welcome to the following new members of BELS:

Suzanne Bristow-Marcalus
 Barry Drees
 Catherine C. Elverston
 Patricia McCarty
 Esko Meriluoto
 Alistair Reeves
 Patricia D. Wolf

Anne Covell
 Vera N. Dutka
 James Gavin
 Herbert K. (Ken) McGinty
 Diane Monsivais
 Ellen K. Weil
 Ronald W. Wolf



A study of the peer-review system as it functions in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that 43% of reviewers produced good reviews. Good reviewers tended to be under 40 years of age, from top academic institutions, well known to the editor, and blinded to the authors' identities. Other characteristics of a good reviewer were previous clinical research training, additional postgraduate degrees, and longer time spent on each review. Academic rank appeared to be inversely proportional to the quality of review, but this association was not statistically significant. [*J Gen Intern Med* 1993;8:508-9.]



REMINDERS

compare with - one thing is usually compared *with* another of the same or similar class in order to point out their similarities or differences. This is almost always the proper construction for BELSites to use in their professional capacities.

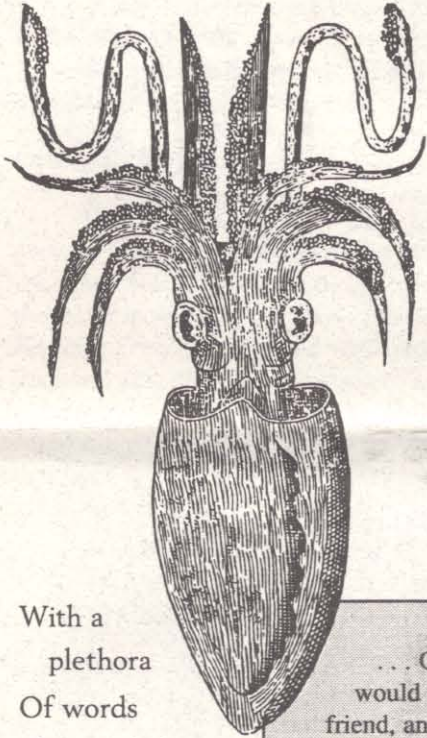
Upon testing, the study group showed a 70% increase in collagen synthesis over baseline values, compared with the controls, which showed no detectable increase.

Pope compares Homer with Virgil.

compare to - in figurative writing, one thing may be compared *to* another of a different class on the basis of a real or imagined similarity. Should probably be reserved for metaphorical comparisons and other nonscientific forms of communication, although *Words Into Type* and Huth's *Medical Style & Format* accept it to mean "judged against a standard of reference."

Pope compares Homer to the Nile, pouring out his riches with a boundless overflow.

Compared to Norman, Grace was a neophyte.



With a
plethora
Of words
The would-be
Explicator
Hides himself
Like a squid
In his own ink.

John M. Burns,
BioGraffiti

... Only a seriously disturbed person would sincerely wish to have an editor for a friend, and all editors know this; that is why they are chronically morose, neither have nor wish to have any friends, and if desperate to acquire them surely would not seek them in the ranks of the disturbed. ... Editors who anticpally decide they simply must have friends buy large Golden Retrievers, and spend their weekends donating blood and serving dinners to the homeless.

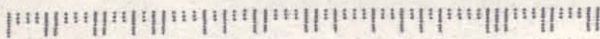
George V. Higgins, *On Writing*

Scheduled BELS Exams for 1995

- | | |
|------------|---|
| March 11 | Hotel Richelieu, San Francisco, CA |
| March 11 | Ramada Inn, Philadelphia, PA |
| May 6 | Ramada Inn Kansas City North, Kansas City, MO |
| July 15 | Howard Johnson's at Woburn, Boston, MA |
| July 15 | Robson Square Conference Center, Vancouver, BC,
Canada |
| July 15 | North Hospital, Duke University, Durham, NC |
| October 28 | Ramada Inn, Baltimore, MD |

These dates are all Saturdays, and in every case the exam will begin at 1:00 PM. Deadline for registration is 2 weeks before the examination is to be given. For further information, write to BELS, P. O. Box 824, Highlands, NC 28741.

Richard Lederer, author of *Anguished English*, has put together another collection of malapropisms, flubs, inadvertent humor, and mangled-syntax cases in a new book called *More Anguished English*. Sample: "Man struck by lightning faces battery charge." This is a funny, painless reminder that even the great ones make mistakes. Check it out.



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