The Grouchy Grammarian™

A How-Not-To Guide to the 47 Most Common Mistakes in English Made by Journalists, Broadcasters, and Others Who Should Know Better

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I’m not working in architecture, I’m working in architecture as a language, and I think you have to have a grammar in order to have a language. You can use it, you know, for normal purposes, and you speak in prose. And if you are good at that, you speak in wonderful prose. And if you are really good, you can be a poet.

—LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE, 1955

The English language is exquisite and a source of delight.

—JOYCE CAROL OATES, 2001
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It wasn’t any one thing that finally turned my old friend, the grouchy grammarian, into a strident activist. For a long time he had been minding his own business, he told me, with no desire to get into any arguments with anybody. I didn’t completely believe him, to tell you the truth. For all his talk about loving a quiet life and trying to stay out of trouble, I knew he enjoyed a good fight.

What happened, exactly?

I had stopped by to see him one morning in March. Though he gave me as friendly a greeting as his nature permitted, his voice was heavy with depression. I saw nothing unusual in that, of course. Every time he picked up a newspaper or clicked on the TV, he would see or hear some blunder that would start him cursing reporters, editors, broadcasters, media executives, and, more fundamentally, the schools and colleges that had produced such bunglers. But today he seemed even more downcast—and therefore grumpier—than usual.

I asked him what the trouble was.

In just a few weeks it would be April, the old grump snapped, and he already dreaded its coming. Didn’t I realize that TV newscasters, National Public Radio reporters, newspaper headline
writers, and other media types would soon be telling us all, with infuriating repetitiveness, to set our clocks ahead on a certain Saturday night because “daylight savings time” was arriving? (When he chose to, he could speak in loud italics.) “SavingS time,” he repeated, hissing the $.

“There’s no such damned thing, of course,” he said; “the expression makes no sense at all. The correct term, daylight-saving time, describes a method of conserving, or saving, daylight by changing the clock rather than changing people’s habits.”

I knew that, and he knew I knew it, but we seemed to agree that he shouldn’t risk a stroke through trying to repress his feelings.

“The rise of savings here,” growled my gruff old friend, “is probably the result of this word’s increasing use as a singular rather than a plural noun. Look at advertisers—they’re the chief perpetrators.” Riffing (not rifling) through his mail one day, it seemed, he had felt particular irritation when he came across a brochure with this message: “For only $19.95 (a $10 savings), you can receive a full-grain leather Shirt Pocket Briefcase.” “It’s only one saving!” he snarled. “Savings represents a plural idea, standing for the results of many individual acts of saving. We have a savings account, but buying something we need at a reduced price represents a saving.”

As you can see, my friend not only had a snappish temperament, he had a strongly developed fondness for leaping into a lecture from a standing start.

Other incidents followed the savings affair as winter moved into spring. One evening, while the grouch and I were watching a basketball tournament game, he recoiled in horror when an otherwise competent basketball color commentator declared after a player intercepted a pass and started downfloor that there was “nobody between he and the basket.”

Not long afterward, he heard another color commentator,
this one on baseball, offer the opinion that if a runner tagged out at second base had slid, “he may have been safe.”

Spelling, too, concerned my friend. He plucked a clipping from a stack of papers and waved it at me. When it stopped fluttering, I saw from the type that it had come from the New York Times; the headline read “Profit Rises 10% at Phillip Morris.” My friend also noted that another newspaper believes that the Duke of Edinburgh’s first name is Phillip and that we once had a march king named John Phillip Sousa (the latter a belief shared at least once by the Times Magazine). “And the people at the Museum of Modern Art,” he said with a kind of negative chortle, “think they know a composer named P-h-i-l-l-i-p Glass. They spelled it that way in one of the ads for that concert series they have in the summer.”

When the grouchy grammarian heard an actor in a TV drama describe a souvenir as “a nice momento,” he reacted with deep disgust. “Those people must think that the word is a fancy Spanish or perhaps Italian adaptation of moment,” he barked. “But what in God’s name would the idea of moment have to do with the idea of remembering? Actually, memento merely comes from the Latin verb meminisse—to remember.”

I nodded, dutifully.

“All these blunders!” the grouch said to me one day. “They’re getting to me, Parrish, really getting to me! Just killing me! Where do they come from? Where in the hell do they come from?”

“Well,” I said, “they may—”

“A general lack of information—that’s it, damn it! And what an overall effect—anything but professionalism! Anything but professionalism! What did these people study in high school
and college? Headline writing? Advertising techniques? No English, no history? Have they never loved words and ideas, the way a carpenter loves wood or a chef loves herbs? Didn’t they want to know subjects and verbs, adverbs and prepositions, as the carpenter knows nails and sandpaper and hot glue? Have they never taken a sentence apart to see what made it run?”

I was about to respond to all these sizzling exclamation points and question marks with a little joke about verbs and herbs, but before I could get my tongue moving he gave me what amounted to a glare. “These are important questions, Parrish—damned important!” He paused. “You wouldn’t disagree with me, would you?”

“No, sir, I certainly wouldn’t. But—”

“But what?” His voice had a real crackle in it.

The time for jokes had clearly passed. I decided to take a bold step. I’d been thinking about it ever since the daylight-saving incident, and now seemed as good a chance as I would ever get.

“Well, sir,” I said, “what are you going to do about it?” I meant was he just going to stump around and rumble and swear as he read his newspaper, just content himself with hurling invective at the faces on the TV screen? Settle for being nothing more than a complaining old sourpuss?

I didn’t put it that way, of course, but I must have spoken clearly enough for the point to come through.

My friend hawed and harrumphed for a minute or two, while I sat quietly. It wasn’t up to him to save the language, he declared, much as he loved it. Language had always had its Don Quixotes and always would have them, and all honor to them—but he didn’t have to join their company. And it certainly wasn’t up to him to try to educate the media. In any case, those people wouldn’t pay any attention to him; they already knew everything, didn’t they?
Beneath the surface, however, the recent run of blunders must have been working on him, pushing him to the brink. Yet I admit I felt a surge of surprise when, with a sort of terminal, the-die-is-cast *bumph!* he said that well, perhaps . . . perhaps he could try being at least a little bit positive instead of wholly negative. (He meant, of course, a *very* little bit positive. He was, after all, a confirmed grump and a lifelong grouch. Actually, I felt, he was announcing his readiness for battle.) He would do no writing himself, of course; he had neither the inclination nor the time for that. But if I was foolish enough to think I could make a real contribution to the well-being of his beloved language, I was welcome to go through the clippings in his file folders—and swollen folders they were—and jot down some of the comments he had made about them, and others he might offer in conversation; I could pass this information along to the public in any form that seemed suitable to me.

Any work we produced would be prescriptive, of course; otherwise, said my friend, it would have no point. We would actually say that some usages are better than others and even that some are right and others are wrong. He readily conceded that prescribing in matters of grammar and usage has long been out of style in the world of linguistics, but “if you merely want description, just walk down the street, take a ride on the subway, go to the opera—you’ll hear all kinds of people saying all kinds of things. That’s not worth my time or yours, Parrish. You’ll want to show your readers how the language is used by informed and thoughtful people, and why this is the best way. You’ll be concerned with nothing less than craftsmanship, and you’ll pay attention to accuracy and grace as well.” He said this with a kind of professional pride. “You’ll be producing a manual of practical correctness, and you’ll have to do it negatively, of course, by showing mistakes—usages writers should avoid.”

“A how-not-to manual,” I suggested.
One more hump! “But philosophically, of course, just the opposite. That’s what will give it any value it may have.”

In all this talk, did the grouchy grammarian display a measure of conceit? Yes, he did. But, to his credit, he also revealed a surprising measure of compassion. “You don’t want to shoot at the easy targets—the people at the local dailies and the small TV and radio stations. They have plenty of problems, of course, and they can certainly use your help. But almost all of the examples you’ll see in these folders come from much higher up on the mountain: National Public Radio, the New York Times, the Associated Press, the History Channel, the broadcast TV networks, the big newspaper chains. These people are, or are trying to be, true professionals. They’re supposed to serve as models for the rest of us. They’re the ones who should welcome a simple manual, especially when they realize that they themselves have written a good part of it.” He allowed himself a chuckle. “Not the best part, of course.”

Later that evening, back home and sitting at my desk, I realized what a foolish chance I had taken. Suppose my friend had responded to my challenge by harrumphing around for a few minutes and then deciding to write his own book! What a catastrophe that would have been—not because of his ideas but because he could never have changed his personality in order to ingratiate himself with the public; he’s incapable of even minor tinkering, and thus his personal style would have emerged as his writing style. Instead of spreading honey to catch flies, he would have expected the little creatures to appear in hordes, thirsty for vinegar. If they didn’t, that would simply be their own loss.

So, given all that grouchiness, why did I put up with my friend? Why did I choose to spend time with him? I could learn a great deal from him, and that was important. But, beyond that, I think, one old book sums it up. Worn and shabby, with a slip of paper protruding from its pages, it caught my eye one day as we were sitting in my friend’s little study, and when I picked it up I
saw that it was a World War II–era book-club collection of Robert Browning’s poems. I turned to the flagged page: “A Grammarian’s Funeral”—I might have expected it! In a little introductory paragraph to this poem, the editor told readers that here “the humble scholar becomes a hero, a man of courage and steadfast purpose, successful in his failures.” My friend had long ago added his own mark, by underscoring two of Browning’s lines: “So, with the throttling hands of death at strife / Ground he at grammar.” My friend sees himself in a dramatic light, no doubt, but, like the Renaissance grammarian in Browning’s poem, he has remained steadfast, true to his star. To my friend, that old grammarian was certainly no dusty, hairsplitting scholar busying himself with insignificant minutiae of language. And even though in our talk about our project the grouchy grammarian showed little awareness of the tender sensitivities that characterize our touchy contemporary culture, he didn’t encourage me to go after small and easily wounded game. He wanted to take on the big boys. That appealed to me, too. Why shouldn’t I have some fun?

As soon as I began working on the project, I realized that my friend had his own special view of the sentence—a simple analogy that provided the basis for all his thinking. He saw it as a car engine, with its equivalents of pistons, valves, carburetor, distributor (as you would expect, this vision had come to him long before the development of fuel injection and computerized firing control), each specialized part working with all the others to move the reader or the listener from A to B, or, if necessary, from A all the way to Z. It was a rational entity, whose workings could be understood by anybody—you simply had to take the trouble to look. He had no particular stylistic bill of goods to sell—he seemed to like all levels of diction, from the mandarin
to the slangy. But if you didn’t understand the working of the sentence, he said, you had no chance of achieving precision and clarity, and if you aimed for the elegant and the poetic but couldn’t make subject and verb agree, you could produce nothing but mush. He preached internal harmony for all kinds of sentences, no matter what their content.

“Keep the book short,” my friend said, “and don’t start it with any kind of introduction. The mistakes and infelicities—and the corrections—are what’s important. Just get right into the thick of things. In medias res, you know.”


Some time later, when I went to give him a sort of interim report, he wanted to know how many topics, as he called them, I had found. It was working out to more than forty, I told him.

“That many?” he said, in almost a wondering tone. “I didn’t realize you were going to take them all.”

I hadn’t, I told him. I had taken those that popped up most frequently, as we had planned. The files held many more that I hadn’t touched. Besides, a number of the topics were short and quite word specific. That seemed to satisfy him. When I told him that, as far as possible, I had arranged the items in the order in which the blunders seemed to annoy him, because I considered this about as good a measure of their relative importance as I was likely to find, I received the only words of praise—well, half-praise—I heard from him at any time during my work on the project. Almost smiling, he said, “I couldn’t have done it much better myself.”*

*Fortunately, my friend didn’t insist that I produce a classic round number of topics; he had little concern about that kind of tidiness one way or the other. When I commented that a few of his points relating to efficiency and grace did not involve literal correctness, he agreed that instead of calling those particular usages errors, I might think of them as “infelicities to be cured.”
THE TOPICS
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.
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