

“We die. That may be the meaning of life.
But we do language. That may be the
measure of our lives.”

—Toni Morrison, *Nobel Acceptance Speech*
(1994)

Here begins a bimonthly column about editing, mostly as it is related to science. Its world will be the love of language and the work of the editor. I'll try to keep it informative, engaging, practical, and timely. I'll strive to alert you to new and helpful reference works or train a spotlight on neglected ones. I welcome your questions, comments, or quibbles.

Enhancing Readability

What makes a document readable? Different rules and guidelines drive fiction and nonfiction, but some are universal, including the following:

Helpful Formatting. Use sufficient “white space” around and within your text so that the reader’s eye can quickly find the needed information. Think like an architect and build in “textual windows” to admit the (mental) light. Use numbered or bulleted lists to help the reader analyze and assimilate complex constructions. Short sentences and paragraphs are especially helpful to the online reader.

Directness. From Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*: “Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place.” And use the active voice; it helps take the “Lab Land” out of the discourse—the mystical world wherein experiments appear to run unbidden, results magically appear, conclusions reach themselves, and no human agent seems involved. (How then explain the authors’ names—or did they insert themselves?)

A Telling Vocabulary. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995), the British scholar David Crystal illustrates beautifully the nuances available to the right word. He displays (p 157) “28 lexemes belonging to the semantic world of ‘madness’” in a word-wheel with the core word *mad* at its center (Americans would probably choose “insane”). The choices arrayed around the top of the circle include literary, academic, and technical terms; those on the

bottom progress through colloquial, dated, and archaic and move on to recent terms that are whimsical or comical. Some of the choices are *psychotic*, *demented*, *unbalanced*, *mental*, *cuckoo*, *batty*, *crazy*, and *bonkers*, each suggesting a different writing style and circumstance.

Global English. Because of the Internet and World Wide Web, English is increasingly important as a means of global communication. A recent survey found that more people in China study English than live in the entire United States. Using words that bear two or more meanings in a global context causes misinterpretation—thus the recent rendering on a Web site of mad cow disease as “angry cow disease”. Major differences exist even between British and American English. In *Notes from a Small Island* (1995), Bill Bryson estimates that at least 4000 words in the two main branches of English bear different meanings although they are spelled identically. Bryson notes that the phrasal verb *make up* can mean “reconcile”, “comprise”, and “apply cosmetics”. And how does one explain to a person who is new to English the three meanings of *run into* in the sentences “The dog ran into the street”, “The car ran into the tree”, and “The man ran into an old friend”?

Careful Proofreading. Unhook your eye from your mind. Editors are familiar with the tricky phrase “Paris in the the spring”. That case typifies many wherein the eye sees what the mind tells it to see—one *the* instead of two. Reversing the process—forcing the mind to see what the eye sees—is one of the hardest disciplines for a beginning editor to master. A spell-checker is a great help, but none can detect the difference between a “dumb waiter” and a “dumbwaiter” (see “Chuckle of the Month” below).

Chuckle of the Month. Real estate ad in the 27 October *Palo Alto Daily News*: “The state-of-the-art kitchen offers stainless-steel appliances, granite counters, custom cabinets, a water purification system, and a convenient dumb waiter.”

Reminds me of a restaurant I recently visited.