

OK, Listen Up. This Is Simple.

Stoopid Science

- **The past year's most stunning example of making the relatively simple impossible to grasp:**

If the universe were a musical instrument, it would be inexplicably missing its low notes, perhaps, some cosmologists have suggested, because it is too small to play them. The universe is finite rather than infinite, they speculate. Like a violin that cannot produce deep cello notes, the universe cannot produce waves larger than itself.

In such a universe, if you went far enough in one direction, you would find yourself back where you started, on the other side of the universe, like a cursor disappearing off the left side of a screen and reappearing on the right.

One simple example of this is a bagel, which is what you get



when you wrap the left and right and top and bottom sides of the screen around so that they meet.

In the model proposed by Dr. Weeks and his colleagues, three-dimensional space has 12 sides, like a soccerball, or more technically a dodecahedron. (New York Times)

It's simple. A bagel is an example of cursor wrap-around on a screen that has been folded until all four sides are touching to make a dodecahedral object.

Inexplicably, bagels don't sound like cellos, nevertheless, cosmologists explain that bagels can't make waves the size of a cello. (Testy Copy Editors Science Adviser Anand Singh)

Losing Battle

We have, in recent days, referred to those attacking American forces in Iraq as "resistance fighters." Although this term is not inaccurate on its face, it conveys unintended meaning. To many, it romanticizes the work and goals of those killing GIs. We should avoid using it outside of quoted material.

The terms "insurgents" and "guerrillas" are also accurate descriptors and are preferred in this context. Please use them instead. (Memo to Los Angeles Times staff)

"Insurgent" is wrong any way you look at it. There is no use denying that some Iraqis are fighting an occupation force. They are not "rebels." (I would also question whether they are guerrilla fighters in a strict sense, but that's a discussion for another day.) "Insurgent" is best reserved for its political meanings; Howard Dean fits the definition of an insurgent Democrat. "Insurgent" also sometimes describes a rebel who is not violent.

Usually, You're Just Shot to Death

Jahkema Princess Hansen was shot in the head, torso and leg in a neighbor's townhouse off North Capitol Street NW. Authorities said she appeared to have been shot execution-style by a gunman who burst in and sprayed a room where Princess, as she was known, and at least one other girl were watching television. (Washington Post)

No. Unless a victim is strapped into an electric chair, or forced into a gas chamber, or given a "lethal injection," or, maybe, shot with a single bullet to the back of the head, it's not "execution style." Do a Nexis search on "execution-style" and you'll get a good grasp on the problem.

Because We Say So

Weapons of Mass Destruction: Avoid this term that is meant to single out the bad guys and “rogue” nations and ignores the most imposing arsenal of weapons, which belongs to the United States. Its meaning has been carefully crafted as code for “the arsenals of countries we don't like.” Lately, the phrase has been abused by the administration's opponents, often by the abbreviation WMD, which no one outside of newsrooms and award shows would use.

It wouldn't be such a bad phrase if it were used universally. We could lump JFK and LBJ in with Hussein, Stalin, Mao, etc., because they used “weapons of mass destruction” on their own people, too.

Usually the writer is referring to nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. In every instance, identify the specific type of weapon in question, or just list all three, if necessary. (It takes up about the same amount of space.)

It is best, as always, to be specific about what we mean, but we'll grant you a few

shorthand alternatives: “banned weapons” (if appropriate in context) and “unconventional weapons.” A copy editor at our paper gets away with “mass-killing weapons,” but it's borderline.

“Weapons of mass destruction” is flat wrong to use in reference to such things as biological weapons. Smallpox, for instance, would be bad news but it would be wrong to characterize an outbreak as “mass destruction.” The gas used in Russia to end the Chechen hostage-taking killed a number of people, but there was no “mass destruction.” A nuclear weapon--now there's “mass destruction.”

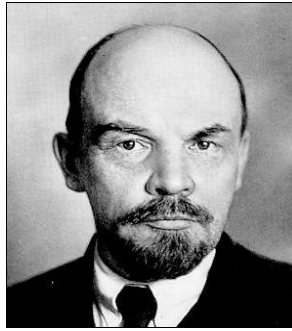
Let's call things what they are as best we can. Adopting a government's terror terminology doesn't do anyone any good.

Leaving the phrase in is lazy editing.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom,” et al:

Naming military offensives is more Pentagon doublespeak. Leave their use to the TV shows.

Peacekeeper: The events in Haiti remind us that international forces deploy soldiers. Avoiding this euphemism saves you one day from writing the headline “Peacekeeper fatally shoots mother,



2 children.” If you must make it clear, for some reason, that France is not invading Haiti, and need to explain the purpose of the mission, say the troops or soldiers are there to “police” the region.

Think about it: Most meetings and committees aren't *special* in the least.

Just about every event and proclamation deemed *official* is not.

When something is reported to have been done *quietly* (a tax increase inserted into a bill; an infielder amassing an 18-game hitting streak), it usually means we merely weren't paying attention before.

We don't really know what sources *think*, *feel* or *believe*. And, frankly, we don't care. They might--deep down--truly think or believe the opposite of what they tell reporters. Let's simply report what they say.

Reserve the use of *formal* exclusively for stories that involve tuxedos and evening gowns, and you'll never go wrong.

Mind Your Manners, Please

Q. *I'm a young copy editor on a desk with experienced hands and sometimes I don't know how to behave. Do you have any tips? -- Anonymous in L.A.*

A. *Sure. We're overdue for a review of copy-desk etiquette anyhow:*

- **Don't complain to the slot about a headline change unless the change makes it wrong.**
- **While you're at it, don't complain, period.**
- **Don't make a major production about errors you find in copy or on proof. Just fix them.**
- **Don't interrupt a colleague's discussion, unless it concerns a story assigned to you.**
- **Don't assume you have the standing to begin open debate with a colleague. Keep your challenges to private messages.**
- **Although mindless chatter has a long copy-desk tradition, learn to control it. When in doubt, STFU. Remember that respect is earned.**
- **Another cliché: Don't miss the forest for the goddamn trees.**

Fun for the Whole Family

When writers don't know where to begin, they often begin nowhere. Here's a lead that can go anywhere. Where it did go?

ETNA, Ohio--The farmland in this part of central Ohio is as flat as an open palm. The economy has been depressed for years, but that hardly dents the persistent optimism of local farmers. Maybe the corn will grow higher this year. Maybe

the tomatoes will be redder.

A. But some voracious and persistent insects have other things in mind.

B. But this year there is a spookiness and chill cascading across the land. A brazen gunman has been roaming the rural roads and circling the interstate.

C. Aaron Walsh has been hoping for better crops since

drought ravaged the region three summers ago. But every time he thought things were looking up, a mysterious series of circles appeared in his fields, destroying, it seemed, all the best plants.

D. In faraway Seattle, executives at Starbucks Inc. read the crop reports, studied the census data and came to a startling conclusion: Etna is the perfect place to begin the next wave of upscale coffee stores.

Seems Reasonable. It Probably Won't Work.

Reporters don't read stylebooks. They don't carry them with them on assignment or have them at their elbow when filing by remote from the state Capitol or the stadium. They don't even know where their copy with the undented spine disappeared to a couple years ago.

Reporters don't pay attention to mass e-mails reminding them of common style breaches or alerting them to new edicts. They instantly misfile those that are printed out and stuffed into every mailbox.

So copy editors spend time fixing the same seven things in the same reporter's stories day in and day out. The football beat writer might always refer to "red shirt fresh-

men"; the education reporter can wear us down with stories of "second graders" during the "2003-2004" school year.

Reporters and source editors do seem to respond to a one-on-one approach. And anticipating the common mistakes before publication, rather than red-marking a story and tossing it at them, seems to get better results.

The mayor of Albuquerque decided he wants a downtown arena to be his legacy. It's the topic of the moment. We're going to be seeing four or five stories a week for a long time, it seems. After the first three, the copy desk made a pre-emptive strike. The reporters

and editors handling those stories were reminded that "multipurpose" and "nonprofit" aren't hyphenated, and "10,000-seat" is.

We're writing about an iffy proposal, so remember to use the conditional.

You don't build a "proposed" arena, and you don't build a "new" one. You propose to build one.

A few of them needed follow-up reminders. But the stories consistently come over much cleaner.

The result: It buys us more time on deadline. It frees copy editors from petty, redundant housekeeping and allows a little more time for true editing and fact-checking.

SADDAM HUSSEIN CAPTURED

Ace in the hole

INSIDE

Hussein's future: Decisions about Saddam Hussein's trial are needed, legal experts say. **Page A3**

Fighting in Iraq: Hussein's capture is unlikely to diminish fighting in the short term. **Page A3**

International aid: U.S. lawmakers hope Hussein's capture

Manhunt ends near hometown

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Clever, No?

No. In misguided attempts to be clever with headlines that called for no cleverness, many newspapers came up with "Ace in the Hole" over the story of Saddam Hussein's capture. News stories about "history-making events" demand straightforward headlines. And remember: If you think you're clever, think again. It's probably been done before, or someone else is doing it too.

This Is What We're Up Against

Steve Buttry of the Omaha World-Herald says in a handout used to train his newspaper's copy editors: "Heads are like poetry. Hell, they are poetry."

No, they're not. No, they're not.

In the same handout, John Schlander of the St. Petersburg Times offers these headline tips:

Think of key words and do some free association to develop angles. This is how most wordplay, good and bad, seems to develop. Good wordplay makes good use of contrast, or delightfully twists a phrase or is somehow pleasing to the ear. It's not a groaner pun, and it doesn't rely purely on alliteration. A great wordplay example from sports (and a monthly contest winner): So close, so Favre (when Brett

Favre and the Packers stole a game from the Bucs). Think also of rhyming words, or words that sound like they look: gritty kitty, for example, or beep and boom. The reader can almost hear the headline.

That is the sort of thinking that makes headlines so god-awful. "So close, so Favre," my ass.

The headline's status as a "monthly contest winner" carries no weight. At a newspaper for which I was once a slot editor, and which shall remain nameless here, we used to write awful "wordplay" headlines we knew would win the monthly headline contest, run them for one edition to get the tearsheets, and fix them for the main run. We used the prize money to buy pizza. (PB)

We're Just Not That Interesting

On September 21, 2003, my electricity was restored at 12:11 p.m. after 2 days, 11 hours and 18 minutes. I can report that although having no power was an inconvenience and not very much fun, nothing happened to me that would be worth writing about.

Please remind reporters, columnists, and other newspaper personnel that they are not to write about their experiences when the power was out.

This reminder should accompany the usual orders to writers not to write about their children.

A headline that takes a little too much on faith:

Palestinians Dispirited in Birthplace of Christ

Despite its relative autonomy, Bethlehem seeks deliverance from occupation and intifada.

By MEGAN K. STACK
Times Staff Writer

BETHLEHEM, West Bank —
A few spots of Christmas color

Square on Wednesday, but most all were locals. Few gious pilgrims chose to wo in this war zone, and most estinians were forbidden to through the Israeli checkp into town.

Christmas arrives dur winter of frozen hopes in Ch birthplace. The local econ in tatters, the ancient groves and vineyards outsi



"This is like group therapy with prisoners in the Poynter Institute's dungeon."

The Testy Copy Editors Web site deals with this sort of thing all the time. We're not an "editor's toolbox," so don't come looking to find out whether midnight is "a.m." or "p.m." We are polite to each other but most impolite toward writers and editors who aren't around to defend themselves.