



(U) Learning to Love English

FROM: Chief Warrant Officer John F. Berry

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(U//FOUO) Editor's note: Here are more thoughts on writing from John Berry (pictured), an annual contributor to *SID today*. The entire article is UNCLASSIFIED.

One of my best experiences in journalism occurred unexpectedly in 1992 when my editor at the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* told me to follow him outside during his hourly smoke break. I was then an intern trying to break into the newspaper business. My editor, always looking for an excuse to light up, took a deep drag and told me I was doing "okay" as a reporter but needed to grow up as a writer.

Two decades later, after nearly 20 years in newspaper reporting, I consider his advice the moment when I removed my training wheels as a writer and started jumping curbs with English.

I am Chief Warrant Officer John Berry, an Army Reservist who trains once each year in the Meade Operations Center. After a civilian career in newspapers, I am now a technical writer from Redlands, California. This is my fourth year writing articles about grammar and writing for *SID today*. I am still floored at the interest and feedback those articles generated.

At the *Sun-Sentinel*, I was stunned by my editor's comment. I was getting my name into a top-notch newspaper and angling for a job there after graduation (I didn't get it). I was also getting some positive feedback from fellow reporters about my performance, so I was dumbstruck by the suggestion.

My editor's point was this: I was just functioning in the language and I needed to learn an appreciation for it to get ahead in the newspaper world. He suggested several possibilities to clue me in, including reading "On Language,"* a New York Times column then written by wordsmith William Safire. I have pretty much read it ever since.

I later took a course at the University of Florida called "History of the English Language." One requirement was reading "The Mother Tongue," a book by Bill Bryson that instilled pride by knowing that I had a fluent grasp on one of the most difficult languages among the estimated 600 now used around the world.

That book was my shiny-penny-in-the-pool moment when my editor's comments came into focus. Too bad I waited until my mid-20s to figure it out. I wish I had read Bryson's book in high school.

What makes English stand apart from all other languages is the richness of its vocabulary. To be successful, we need to use a



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thesaurus, a book that doesn't even exist for other languages. English abounds in synonyms, which is why we can attach a special nuance to "house" to make it a "home." (Take that, French speakers!)

The next factor that makes English such an expressive language is its flexibility. We can make an almost endless list of words pull double duty as both nouns and verbs. That list includes "drink, fight, fire, sleep, run, look, act, view..."

As a technical writer in civilian life, I appreciate the exactness of the language. I first learned how much other languages had problems with clarity while learning Arabic at the Defense Language Institute. In 1998, one of my Jordanian professors told me how much he appreciated how precise he could be in English (he quickly reminded me that Arabic was the language of the poets).

Bryson didn't mention this in his book, but I derive unlimited amounts of gloating from knowing that English, once among a doggerel backwater of languages centuries ago, is consuming the world at Internet-fast speeds. I love that English absorbed the languages of England's invaders and produced a language that outlived its attackers. (Take that, Germanic tribes!)

The respect and appreciation for English I learned in college continued throughout nearly two decades of newspaper reporting. As a crime and courts beat reporter, I acquired the confidence to explore new ways of writing stories instead of just relying on the predictable, routine and often boring "formula writing" of how such stories typically appear in the newspaper.

But breaking out of the "comfort zone" of predictable writing didn't start well. I still remember one editor at my first newspaper, *The News-Press* in Fort Myers, Florida, belly laughing at some of my attempts (he meant well). I remember an editor at my second paper, *The Press-Enterprise* in Riverside, California, wondering whether I even understood basic newspaper writing (I think he was kidding).

I don't recall my journalism professors telling me that creativity required a thick skin and perseverance; I guess that that was something I just had to learn the hard way.

In time, my attempts to be creative and different were mimicked by reporters at competing papers (although they would never admit it). Eventually, my stories sailed through the editing process and appeared in the paper almost exactly as they had left my fingers hours before. And all that may never have happened if a chain-smoking editor (he's still alive) hadn't hauled me out onto a sidewalk and told me to evolve.

To this day, I'm still looking for new and interesting ways to improve. My latest acquisition is "Grammar Girl," a smarmy audio book helping writers with numerous mnemonic devices, such as one explaining how to correctly use "that" and "which" in a sentence. I also like Merriam-Webster's "Word of the Day," which sends me an e-mail with a challenging or mystifying word, often taken from the news.

I've coached several newbie writers in journalism. I can eventually get a sense when they are just functioning in a language and when

they are showing some spark. My advice to them was to accept, embrace and love English for what it is instead of fighting all of its confusion and oddities.

* Since I've got your attention, I want to use this opportunity to cure a grammatical illness at NSA: misplaced punctuation with closing quotations. In American English, periods and commas always come **before** the closing quotation. Colons and semicolons, although rarely used in these situations, always come **after** the closing quotation. All other punctuation marks could go either way -- inside the final quotation if it's part of the quoted material or outside if it belongs to the entire sentence.

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