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Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

## I curated these artisanal words

When it rains, it pours, right? I must have struck a nerve or touched the third rail with that bit last month about Lake Superior State University's annual list of banished words. I realize cliches are low-hanging fruit for editors to ridicule, but OMG, it was amazing. And incredible. LOL! Readers literally sent emails to describe phrases they find contemptible. If we break down the silos, we see that we all have words we love to hate. Since my door is always open, I am pleased to reprint some here so we all might think outside the box and push the envelope.

**Many people think they know a salty curmudgeon, but Ray T., retired reporter and editor, actually is one. He focuses considerable hostility toward two usages that litter the language. I have lightly edited his note to make it suitable for a family blog post:**

"Back in the day" is blithe and futilely ambiguous. Like, is it at least BC or AD? Possibly it could be that special day in summer 1975, when (name withheld) taught me to simultaneously break wind in both directions as we walked into a press club dinner.

Also, I (expletive) hate "challenged." Once, I was complaining to my boss about a reporter. I said that (name withheld) was the laziest, most useless (expletive) on my team. The reassuring reply was "Yes, we are aware (name withheld) is challenged."

This (expletive) must cease.

**Jim F. reported that he despises the phrase “no problem.” He describes it as the “universal wrong answer.” From Jim’s email:**

May I have a decaf with one sugar? No problem.

Can you direct me to the plumbing aisle? No problem.

Should we punish carjackers like the Wild West punished horse thieves? No problem.

What is a quadratic equation? No problem.

Glad you politely omitted legal writers from the category of chronic word hackers. Even Practical Law, which prides itself on concise, clear writing, has issues. I do some contract work for them, writing Legal Updates and maintaining some Practice Notes. In legally enforceable documents I have drafted over the years, I have allegedly broken many elements of style as an uncharged co-conspirator of obtuse legalese. Lock me up? No problem.

**Subscriber Luann Z. was quick to unload:**

Here’s a peeve of mine:

Folks who say “Should you ...” rather than “If you... ”

As in, “Should you need to stand on your head, ... “ vs. “If you need to stand on your head, ... ”

Help!

**I feel obliged to share an email exchange I had with subscriber Toni N.:**

Toni: Thanks for that list of cliches! Clearly you were between a rock and a hard place for your blog, but you certainly had your ducks in a row!

Me: Yeah, Christmas came early for me, but it’s not over till it’s over.

Toni: True dat.

**Carrie M. has targeted one letter, and who could blame her?**

And can I add “K” to your list of irritating words/responses? That single letter response just grates on me. K, maybe it’s just me.

Pat Broderick (she's a [published author](#) so I don't think she'll mind if I use her full name) requests that we also shun these:

Add to the banned words list: “unpack” and “Is this the hill you want to die on?”  
Thank you.

Also, “go big or go home,” “you got this,” “you go girl!”

**Terry K., with whom I long ago prowled the not very mean streets of Chicago’s Northwest Side and nearby suburbs in pursuit of news, sports stories, and things that would make us laugh, can still tap into what I’m thinking:**

I love the list of banished words. If they asked me, I’d suggest adding “game-changer” and “iconic.” But why would they ask me?

About ten years ago, a “Curb Your Enthusiasm” episode made a running joke of “having said that,” and I think “that being said” deserves similar mockery.

[Click here for a video of Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld discussing "having said that."](#)



*If cliches were pieces of furniture. (Photo by Wonderlane on Unsplash)*

# Wish I'd written that

From *The Siberian Dilemma* by Martin Cruz Smith (thanks to Mike B. for letting me know that Arkady Renko is still in business as a main character):

The plane hit an air pocket and the girls across the aisle squealed.

“Relax, children. It’s always like this around Irkutsk,” Bolot said. “Pilots call it the ‘Bermuda Triangle of Siberia.’”

“Why is that?” Arkady asked.

“Crashes. It’s a difficult landing because the runway slopes and planes overshoot. Or they’re overloaded or they use faulty parts or the plane simply explodes. It’s always something. I usually take the train.”

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## Is that a fact?

To read the following item on the [Take My Word for It blog](#), [click here](#).

In my cub reporter days, after taking a company horse to an assignment, it was customary to assemble available facts into a news story, usually with the essential material in a short first paragraph.

Since then, a step has been added before the words are published. It must have begun at newspapers while I was in the pressroom talking to Gutenberg about that day’s run. These days, at credible news organizations that do their best to keep bias from creeping into stories, reporters and editors do something they often call fact checking. That means after stories are written, they are double-double-checked in a separate process to make sure everything presented as a fact is a fact.

That is laudable, but fact checking wasn’t always an extra step, except at book publishing houses and certain magazines. The term didn’t exist at newspapers that employed me early in my career because reporters and editors checked facts as an organic part of news and feature writing. You didn’t include it if it was not a fact. That’s still the core process at any reputable news organization, but rigorous fact checking has been emphasized to counter sketchy websites

and empty-headed “influencers” who batter us with preposterous schlock aimed at nurturing political and commercial schemes. Stories and commentaries that are demonstrably inaccurate or based on lies now find their way to us every day. Efforts to make up stuff and insist it’s true seem to have taken their cue from Arthurian legend, as reported by Monty Python:

The Black Knight: Tis but a scratch.

King Arthur: A scratch? Your arm’s off.

The Black Knight: No, it isn’t.

So what is it exactly, this fact checking? You will not be shocked. Writers and editors verify the source, establish whether that source is believable, and check whether multiple credible sources agree on the veracity of something. Context is evaluated.

Some checking is only cursory because we can still agree on certain things. For example, if you fall off a building, gravity pulls you toward earth, usually with consequences.

Novelists don’t get off easy just because they traffic in fiction. The setting and time an author writes about must have real-life underpinnings or readers lose faith in the storyteller.

If you are writing a historical novel set during the Civil War, you can make up characters, make up dialogue, make up bits of setting, but you can’t decide that Gettysburg is in Rhode Island. Say you are a free-thinking renegade and the flimsy strictures of novel writing cannot hold you; you adjust your beret to an even jauntier angle. Even so, you need an understanding of the facts as readers know them so they can recognize and remark upon your cleverness. Authors who are talented enough to weave a spell have to be careful not to break it.

This special status for fact checking is welcome. As a young man, maybe I didn’t notice fact checking needed its own spotlight because I majored in English. That’s like going to college on spec, and wouldn’t you know it, I later found that most jobs don’t require familiarity with Elizabethan literature. But in a fractious world, we face varied presentations of what is true, and we are pushed to make choices. Not everyone doing the choosing is a critical thinker. Grifters know that and play to it, so fact checking should be celebrated.

So ends my R&R (rant & reminiscence). I have just enough time left in the day to press my way through this darkened room, careful to avoid the rusted file cabinets so full they are dangerous, the broken pencils that landed at odd

angles when I threw them, the hot lead for the Linotype machine, the shelves that groan under the weight of phone books and encyclopedias, the half-filled coffee cups I use as ashtrays, the unstable stacks of newsprint, and the musty dictionaries. I need to peek through an almost undetectable gap in the filthy damask curtains to see if any street urchins are there to yell at.



*This rare woodcut captures me (at right) working on a story while two press operators fiddle with color correction.*

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Kind regards,  
jcannonbooks

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