

Adventures in the Written Word, April 2025

Wow, there's a lot of written-wordy-type stuff happening these days. Maybe the biggest (non-) news is that the folks at *The New Yorker* have updated their style guide. Don't get all excited. The venerable magazine is not going to be lessening its snobbish, artsy, elitist tone. They've just made a few concessions to the reality of the 1990s. No more Web site, in-box, and cell phone. They're going one-word. But they're standing by that long list of usages which most readers find either charming or maddening. Double consonants in words like travelling and focussed. Two words for per cent, and a hyphen in teen-ager. And of course the dieresis (from the Greek for "flyspeck") for reëlection and coöperation and such. (I have no confidence that these special characters will survive the trip from West Virginia to New Jersey, so use your imagination if necessary.)

The diereses do have a logical basis. The two words cited above begin with "reel" and "coop." The flyspecks are a reminder that we're not talking reels and coops here, like that reminder may be necessary in some alternate universe. And as for the confusion between American and British usage in words like traveller, colour, centre, and such, blame Noah Webster, compiler of the first successful dictionary in America, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1848. He saw mucking with spelling as an assertion of American independence from England. Like that whole Revolutionary War thing wasn't enough.

And of course *The New Yorker* needs its own style guide. We all do. We had a house style guide on the college newspaper where I worked, back in the chiseled stone days. When the word "university" stood alone as representing our school, it was upper-case. As in most styles, titles were up when they were before a name, and down after. "Dean John Miller . . ." but "John Miller, dean of social work . . ." An important local road was Patteson Drive, not Patterson. The school is in Monongalia County, on the banks of the Monongahela River. There is no Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. The guy who founded that whiskey company was Jack Daniel, not Daniels. The mast of the battleship *USS West Virginia*, sunk at Pear Harbor, stands on a plaza in the middle of campus. Beside it is the ship's bell of a previous *USS West Virginia*, retired after World War One. Confuse the two, and you get an angry letter from the VFW. We even had to add a note to write "flying disc," not "Frisbee," after the guys at the Wham-O company threatened to sue us if we ever again take the name of their toy in vain. If you mess any of this up, it's your own fault. The correct info is right there in the style guide.

Looking for that special amusement you get from other people's fails? Search online for "baseball cap mistake." The New Era sportswear company got all artsy, and produced special hats for fans of major league baseball teams, with the first letter of the team's town or nickname printed large over top of the team's name. Putting a big "T" over the word "Texas" produced a cap seeming to proclaim "TETAS," which is Spanish for "boobies." The big "H" on the Houston Astros' cap created "ASHOS," and the "A" in the middle of the Angels came out "ANAELS." Trying to include images in these essays usually doesn't work, but you'll find this easily enough. For an even funnier and more shocking design fail, check this out.

https://www.reddit.com/r/BadDesigns/comments/11memcm/suit_yourself_or_something_else/

Some time in the 1500s, someone at Huntingfield Manor in Suffolk, England noticed that a book of land deeds was beginning to fall apart. The material was parchment, of course, processed sheepskin, so some preservation-minded person patched the manuscript with a piece of scrap parchment. The manuscript was part of a collection donated to Cambridge library in the 1970s. In 2019, a scholar saw the patch and wondered where the piece of scrap came from. Of course nobody wanted to damage the manuscript, so researchers tried photographing the patch under different colors of ultraviolet and infrared light. They took it to the university's zoology department and subjected it to a CT scan from a machine used to examine fossils. They used mirrors, magnets, and prisms to photograph inside folds. Finally, they had enough little pieces to begin assembling them like a jigsaw puzzle.

The manuscript turned out to be a priceless find: extremely rare stories of Arthurian romance, copied by a scribe between 1275 and 1315, and part of the "Suite Vulgate du Merlin," an Old French sequel to the start of the Arthur legend. Fewer than 40 copies of the Suite Vulgate exist, and of course no two are the same because of the vagaries of hand-copying manuscripts. This new find, collated with the others, will allow scholars to come a little closer to the ur-text. One tale is of Gawain wielding the enchanted sword Excalibur, kicking Saxon butt. In another episode, a mysterious blind harpist interrupts Arthur and Guinevere at a feast, and embarks upon a seemingly fatal quest. The harpist is Merlin in disguise, so it all works out.

Beyond its importance to the Arthurian universe, this discovery will no doubt prove valuable in ways nobody can predict. Many years ago in grad school, I learned of a codicologist who was determining what year parchment was produced by using some spectrum of light to reveal the skin's fat content, and comparing this with rainfall records. More rain, richer forage, fatter sheep.

As you would expect, this story has stirred up some excitement. Look around the internet and learn more.

Novelist Rebecca Makkai shares an engaging and informative piece on the business of book blurbs.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/04/books/review/simon-and-schuster-blurbs-books.html>

I write non-fiction. It's what I enjoy, it's what I think I'm good at, and it's what I've been able to foist on the public for the past 60 years or so. But lately I've dabble in some fiction, mostly in the setting of our host Ms. Willis's online class. Now for the first time, I've sent some fiction out into the world. Okay, a tiny part of the world. I've submitted two short stories and a novel idea to a writing contest, so it's likely my readership will consist of one judge. Want to join this elite group? Email me, and I'll send you the stuff. I would especially treasure some feedback.
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Watch your language

Headline: Juvenile Missing From Monongalia County Safe
If the kid can break out of a safe, he's going to be hard to catch.

"Police said that officers tried to disperse the crowd using a Public Address System (loudspeaker), but were . . . "

Thanks, WBOY reporter, for saving me a trip to the dictionary.

(The constabulary action, by the way, was an attempt to stop students on fraternity row from playing loud music and dancing in the street on an unusually warm, sunny March afternoon.)

Passengers seen on wing of plane after jet catches fire - BBC headline

The jet was on the ground, and passengers were exiting via an escape route over the wing. That is not the first image which came to my mind after reading this headline.

"It's a literal minefield out there for anyone looking to buy quality tools on a budget." - some ad
The HALO Trust supports efforts to clear landmines from WWII battlegrounds. Looks like it's time for them to turn their attention to Harbor Freight parking lots.

"This hummingbird house is taking the world by storm." - some other ad
Trying to envision a big, mean hummingbird house, kicking the world's ass.

Pickup line

I'm an editor. Been doing it about 60 years, in quite a variety of settings, and I'm really good at it. (Not bragging, exactly. If I had spent 60 years building ships in bottles, I would be damn good at that by now.) And I really enjoy it. So send me something, from an idea you're thinking about writing, to a complete draft ready for the nit-picky stuff, and I'll check it out for two hours and give you my well-reasoned and insightful feedback—for free! (Limited time offer. Expires when I croak.)

editorwv@hotmail.com

That Arthurian discovery I mentioned above? You can read it for yourself right here.

