

Please keep the noise down

I've finally had enough, enough even to provoke me to commit the local tabloid sin of writing in the first person even though this essay is not about the first person. In a recent edition of *Mother Jones* I found this sentence in an otherwise fine and informative piece entitled *Goodbye, New World Order*: "Yes, many people still want to believe in the United Nations – though they're becoming fewer and fewer in number." Not just fewer, not just fewer *and* fewer, but fewer and fewer in number. As opposed to fewer in color, of course. I can understand blue or red "in color" when you fear the reader might misunderstand you to be talking about the mood or political tendency of your house or car. Even small "in size" might someday make sense in some other universe. But fewer in number?

Finally goaded out of my grammatical gourd, I've decided to share my personal catalogue of foul language.

"We've decided to change the way we do things in the future." Why not change the way you do things in the past?

"We think that our company will offer sound investment opportunity going forward." Why not offer sound investment opportunity going backward?

"Having said that..." Yes, we just heard you.

"We'll be right back to discuss whether or not Halliburton should get the contract." What is the "or not" for? Whether Halliburton should get the contract is the question. The word "whether" does this all by itself. The only time "whether" doesn't work alone is when it really doesn't work at all and you ought to be saying "even if," instead. "The war will be a success even if we don't find weapons of mass destruction." The "whether or not" version not only dilutes the idea (a bad one to begin with), but makes no sense when you think about it.

"To answer the question about Halliburton, they did get the contract." They? There was only one Halliburton. If you feel compelled to use the plural, talk about Halliburton's executives.

"Every person has a right to express themselves." I have yet to see an idea or sentence that cannot be rewritten or rethought to avoid this grammatical atrocity. "We all have a right to express ourselves" or "Every person has a right to free expression."

"She let him and I both have it." You *know* that this can't be right. "He" and "I" are subjects. "Him and me" are objects, both direct and indirect. "Him and I" can never make sense.

"The problem is legislative in nature," said Senator Harry Reid recently in a tv interview. I've never understood the alternative venue. Perhaps I'm just not as well traveled as Mssr. Reid.

"He was a friend of Bush's before the election." That this annoying double possessive has become mainstream is a bad omen, much like the illiterate apostrophe plural often seen on business signs, as in "Quickie Auto Loan's."

"The batman and robin, if you will, of American politics." What if I won't? Much like "in any event," the term "if you will" indicates that the speaker just realized that what the speaker just said is bullshit.

"Bush's foreign policy can be understood in terms of his personal relationships." I once had a college instructor, the "whoop-te-do" in terms of sociology, who couldn't string two concepts together except by stating one "in terms of" the other. She used the term over 30 times an hour, rendering her lectures useless in terms of meaning. One day I spent the whole hour cataloguing the contexts in terms of trying to figure out what the hell it meant. What I came up with in terms of conclusions: everything and nothing. When you don't want anyone to know what you're talking

about, don't have a clue yourself, or just need to pad your thesis, say that A can occur or be understood "in terms of" B. Or that it can't. Don't forget to pick up your PhD on the way out.

"We're taking preventative measures." Why not incentive, corrective, objective, relative or preemptive? A few words are correctly written this way because the root has the "at" in it, as in "communicative." "Preventative" is just plain illiterate, which is not to say that you won't find it in the Nevada Revised Statutes, as in "preventative measures" (NRS 455.230), on the website of the Nevada Department of Human Resources ("emphasis on preventative programs"), and in the title of the Nevada "Division of Preventative Safety." In the official manual describing "proper behavior" for university employees, our top educators are told to place their "emphasis and efforts on "preventative rather than corrective action." You don't have to be literate to teach or write laws. But you knew that. Unfortunately, we've reached the corrective stage.

Then there's "disenfranchise." Like "the pill," we all know what franchise we're talking about. Someone who has the franchise has been enfranchised. Someone whose franchise has been taken away, has been disfranchised. "Disenfranchised" makes about as much sense as disabled, discouraged, discovered, or disclosed, but I confess the cause is lost. After all, whoever heard of getting something like this "distangled?"

Come now the lawyers. "Comes now the Plaintiff, by and through undersigned counsel, in the above-entitled case, blah, blah, blah." What other case were you thinking about when you drafted this nonsense and filed it under this caption in this case? Why did you put your name at the top and sign it at the bottom if the Plaintiff were doing this through someone else?

And for the dignity of the court, if the Plaintiff is coming now, please keep the noise down.