

1-1-1974

Words Need to Look Right

Louis Foley
Babson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Foley, L. (1974). Words Need to Look Right. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 14 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol14/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

WORDS NEED TO LOOK RIGHT¹

Louis Foley

PROFESSOR EMERITUS, BABSON COLLEGE

With our modern visual-mindedness, words must look right or they distract attention, carry irrelevant overtones, interrupt the flow of ideas.

It is high time for a reassessment of the visual effect of words in print. Writing arose as a means of preserving what had first been *said*, but the time is long past when "reading" was thought of primarily as reading *aloud*, and it was by *hearing* that one understood. Now the immensely greater part of our reading is done silently as a matter of course. So the graphic form of a word has become an entity in itself; it is no longer *merely* a means of somehow suggesting the sound of a voice. The suggestion of sound is still there and is indispensable, but it is only part of the total impression.

This is what seems not to have been clearly perceived by the various individuals and groups who have been earnestly concerned with trying to overthrow our traditional ways of spelling. They have been obsessed with the idea of making our spelling "phonetic," according to their notions of what that would mean. While ostensibly aiming at simplifying English spelling, their recommended changes would actually make it considerably more complicated. Some years ago an editorial writer made a remark more profound in its implications than he may have realized. "Simplified spelling," he said, "paradoxical as it may seem, is terribly hard to read."

By and large, English spelling follows a *system* which is about as nearly phonetic as it needs to be. It cannot be made as neatly phonetic as some languages can be because it is just not that kind of language.

Advocates of spelling reform are particularly annoyed by the fact that in our spelling we represent the same sound in different ways in various words. They seem not to see that this diversity in representation is a positive enrichment of our language. While of course in a general way spelling represents the actual sounds of spoken words, that is not *all* that it does. Without losing its suggestion of the sound, the written or printed word goes on to acquire a life of its own, a sort of personality which the mere sound alone would often not clearly convey. So our numerous homonyms—words pronounced alike but

¹ Reprinted, with permission, from the *Proceedings* of the 19th International Technical Communications Conference, 1972.

spelled differently—put the reader in very different realms of thought. Except perhaps when someone is deliberately punning, we never think of the entirely distinct meaning of another word which happens to have the same sound.

In everyday speech, the non-verbal context of physical surroundings, as well as the fact of a subject already understood, prevents any possible confusion. In writing or print the absolute distinction in meaning is likewise automatically preserved by the visual effect of difference in spelling. This convenient means of unmistakable differentiation the iconoclastic reformers would completely destroy by making homonyms into homographs. With phonetics as a sacred ideal, there must be only one way of representing a given sound of a word.

To write *really* phonetically in English would result in transcriptions which only a trained phonetician could decipher. It is one of the peculiarities of our language that the pronunciation of a given word shifts as it appears in different phrases or with degrees of emphasis. And we are saying nothing about dialectal variations which may be equally acceptable.

We do write many things that we cannot say, and we need to do as we do. In *bookkeeping*, *roommate*, *bus-stop*, or *misspelling*, for instance, we cannot pronounce the double letters; we simply hold the consonant for the second syllable. Similarly with a phrase launched by the telegraph company during World War II: “fixed-text telegrams.” In speech we split the *x* into its two elements of *k* and *s* and say *fickstext*. For clarity in reading, however, we need to see the complete components which go together to form these expressions. Otherwise the words could not “look right.”

In recent years we have seen the coinage of many proprietary terms, invented as trade names in which a company could have exclusive rights, such as AiResearch, Bancorporation, Chekards, Deepile, Everight, Eveready, Flasholder, Handipt, Ho-Made, Mobilubrication, Nymphorm, Quikut, Realemon, Scenicruiser, Selfold, Servicenter, Servishell, Swee-Tissue, Traveloan. Some of these are compound words; others are phrases. The telescoped spelling registers the way we actually do say these things. Yet if we did not see these artificial forms in appropriate surroundings, or already *know* what they meant, some of them would surely be puzzling. If it were practiced generally in our language, this sort of thing would make reading very much harder. We need to *see* the real words whether we really *say* them or not. Otherwise we lose the trees for the forest.

Perhaps the most successful attempt to change our spelling since

the time of Noah Webster was the campaign launched by the *Chicago Tribune* with its commitment to its own pet list of “simplified” forms, featured in its edition of January 28, 1934, in an article by James O’Donnell Bennet. Less than six months later, the crudity of that effort had already become apparent. An editorial in that newspaper on May 20 of the same year “views certain aspects of its new deal in spelling with doubt if not dismay”:

“Words often contain pictures. They mean pictures. They are not merely so many letters logically arranged and phonetically true, but they are pictures of things. ‘Island’ is the picture of a body of land surrounded by water. It should have some palm trees on it. It may have Robinson Crusoe on it. He’d never get off an iland. There is no such picture in iland. Iland is an animal, a strange one, but somehow related to an eland. The picture in iland is that of a head with horns and distended nostrils arising from the water. It is swimming desperately and may make land, but it is being chased by simplified spellers. They want its antlers, a distressing sight.”

“You may have your own pet aversion in the revised list,” said the editorial. “‘Iland’ is *The Tribune’s*. Why, then, you say, keep on doing it? That’s the worst of a new deal. You start out with *catalog* and go on to *staf* and then you are at *iland*, lost on an uninhabited iland.”

“You start out with *catalog* . . .” Usually the beginning of any corruption is difficult if not impossible to trace, but here the chief culprit seems clearly indicated and avowed. And for some of us even an “uninhabited iland” is less dismaying than lumbering with irrelevant “logs.”

Catalogue is, of course, one of the myriads of French words adopted in English. Since about the year 1500, French words taken into English have kept their French form. There is nothing unusual about a *-gue* ending. We have not only *monologue*, *dialogue*, and *Decalogue*, analogous in form with *catalogue*, but numerous others such as *ague*, *tongue*, *fatigue*, *morgue*, *brogue*, *league*, *colleague*, *intrigue*, *fugue*, *harangue*, or *meringue*, which apparently no one has ever thought of chopping down.

When the form of a word has well stood the test of time, brashly tampering with it may entail unforeseeable results. When the Simplified Spelling Board adopted their proposed list, did no one see the new creations with enough objectivity to perceive some of their inevitable irrelevant suggestiveness? Looking at *vaudevil*, one can hardly help seeing a strange demon. *Effervest* looks like some curious garment. *Sented* might be a cousin of “bursted” or “casted.” *Campain*

would be a mysterious kind of suffering. Reducing all *-logue* endings to *-log* gives us inescapable reminders of “logs” which have no connection with logging. Some colleges which for a while issued a “catalog” now have gone back to *catalogue*, and perhaps more might do so if no face-saving were involved.

It is purely clear that for the modern silent reader words in print perform a function which is not simply a matter of registering phonetically the way those words would sound if they were being spoken. Nevertheless there are aspects of living speech which do need to be reflected in print, but which have seemed to be increasingly obscured in very recent years. This insidious kind of corruption is a beclouding of the difference between two kinds of elements in English which are as distinct from each other as any two things could be: phrases and compound words. Incidentally, the expression “compound words” is itself naturally a *phrase*.

We have various kinds of phrases, but the same principle appears alike in all. The accent falls on the final word of the phrase and marks its unity in that way: in *school*, at *night*, built a new *house*, tried a different *plan*, John *Smith*, Boston, *Massachusetts*, President *Nixon*.

We do just the opposite with compound words. We put the stress on the *first* element of a compound; the second element, which is generally the basic one, tends to subside into something like a mere grammatical ending. These opposite ways of accenting phrases and compounds often occur in the same breath, as “can’t play *basketball*.” The accent strikes the last word of the *phrase*, but just as inevitably on the *first* part of that word if it happens to be a compound. Again, the story-title, “Little Red *Riding-Hood*,” is a perfect example.

In English we happen to have two very different parts of speech which look alike because they both end in *-ing*. First there is the present participle, used like any adjective, describing the action of the following noun, which is always the word accented: “a rolling *stone*,” “an entering *wedge*,” “a shrinking *violet*,” “the reading *public*,” “an increasing *demand*,” “a howling *success*,” “a going *concern*,” “the opening *chorus*,” “a vanishing *species*,” “a thriving *community*,” “a guiding *hand*,” “a burning *desire*,” “a growing *need*,” “creeping *paralysis*.” All such expressions are of course typical *phrases*, and are spoken accordingly.

Quite different in relationship of ideas, as in manner of utterance, is the use of the verbal noun. It has been used a great deal in making compound words on a pattern which has become very common. Like other compounds, these are always accented on the first element as the

important part, while the second subsides into an appendage as something seemingly barely worth mentioning: *stepping-stones*, *mailing-list*, *reading-matter*, *swimming-pool*, *bathing-suit*, *standing-room*, *eating-apples*, *whipping-boy*, *growing-pains*, *parking-lot*, *bowling-alley*, *drinking-fountain*, *shaving-brush*—we might go on indefinitely. In each case the verbal noun is like the object of an implied preposition: stones for stepping, a pool for swimming, a lot for parking, a brush for shaving. Naturally these expressions are quite different in grammatical construction from a noun preceded by a participle; the idea of *stepping-stones* is a far cry from that of rolling *stones*. If such compounds are not hyphenated to make their structure instantly recognizable, then we must understand them in spite of their form instead of being aided by it.

Now there is complete inconsistency and disorder in the way compound words are commonly treated, not only by the mass media but in dictionaries, handbooks, and manuals of style, which secretaries innocently consult as supposedly infallible guides to correctness. We see some unmistakably genuine compounds divided as if they were quite separate words. Some we see hyphenated, and others joined solidly. One might imagine that these two different ways of joining represent different degrees of tightness of unification, but such is simply not the case. While nowhere do we find it clearly and frankly recognized, there is a perfectly understandable principle which, as by instinct, has been followed to a considerable extent, though very unevenly. Any compound can be welded solidly if it *looks* right that way, as many do. If, on the other hand, it is not immediately clear, or if the joining produces a queer-looking jumble of letters in the middle, then evidently it is better to hyphenate instead.

We are accustomed to many solidly-joined compounds which cause no difficulty whatever, such as *baseball*, *football*, *workshop*, *workman*, *workhouse*, *womenfolk*, *journeyman*, *Churchman*, *businessman*, *goldsmith*, *dishcloth*, *cookbook*, *whetstone*, *millwright*, *gaslight*, *skullcap*, *footnote*, *newspaper*, and other common examples.

Some people, however, have carried the soldering process absurdly too far. As extreme exaggeration of solid joining as has ever been perpetrated will be found in John Dos Passos' *Nineteen-Nineteen*. Some of the specimens we can accept without discomfort in their new form, as *waterline*, *guncrew*, or *palm-tree*, though we see them thus for the first time. Others, though easily decipherable, distract attention momentarily by their unusual appearance, as *paperlittered*, *rawmaterial*, *sunsetpink*, *tobaccocolored*, *bananabunches*, or *machinegunfire*. Some look

like queer sorts of new words, as do *gasstove*, *messtable*, or *tomatocan*. Some indeed simply do not, in their solid form, really spell the words according to our well-established system for combining letters: *brass-hats*, *hangerson*, or *teathings*, which looks like a variant spelling for *teethings* of babies cutting their teeth. Surely it is obvious that hyphenation would have made any of these compounds easier to read and saved them from attracting attention pointlessly by their queer appearance.

Sometimes in newspapers we see a woman reporter referred to by the slang term *news-hen*. When this expression is printed solidly, “newshen,” as seems usually to happen, it no longer spells what is intended but something else.

We have become accustomed to speaking of a youngster who drops out of school as a “drop-out.” When this term appears in solid form instead of hyphenated, as it has been printed in newspapers, it cannot possibly look right. It no longer *spells* what is intended; it spells *dropout*, by the same well-established principle which marks the difference between *hoping* and *hoping* or *slopping* and *sloping*.

When the compound *teen-ager* is printed solidly without a hyphen, as we see it all too often, it looks as if the second part were merely a grammatical ending as in *manager* or *dowager*, and the natural pronunciation is no longer logically represented. Incidentally in passing, we might notice this as a result of off-hand irresponsible word-coinage—as if there were something vital in the detail that the numbers of years of certain ages end in *-teen*.

For a good while we have found it convenient to use increasingly a transposed phrase or even a clause as a sort of pseudo-compound. We take a modifying phrase which would normally come *after* a noun and put it first, using hyphens to mark it as expressing a unified idea. A man who is well dressed becomes a well-dressed man, a driver who hits and runs becomes a hit-and-run driver, a decision made once for all is a once-for-all decision, clothes sold ready to wear are ready-to-wear clothes. We speak of “run-of-the-mine specimens,” “a never-to-be-forgotten experience,” “catch-as-catch-can wrestling,” “half-thought-through statements.” New combinations of this sort are being manufactured continually. A single newspaper editorial contains several, including “out-in-the-open squabbling” and “the latest we-wish-it-hadn’t-happened public quarrel.” We are told that the “strong-back-and-weak-mind kind of job is becoming out of date.”

Hyphenating such expressions makes them easy to grasp at once as they would not be if the words stood separately. Yet it is absolutely

clear that they are *not* compound words. They are never accented on the first element, as true compounds are, and the words keep their natural separate meanings instead of fusing to form a distinct idea as is commonly the case with compounds. At the same time they cease to be phrases as they would be in the original word-order. What really happens is that such a combination becomes the *first part* of a phrase, with the accent now falling on what it modifies, as “a hit-and-run driver,” “a once-for-all *decision*.”

In 1964, a representative of *The New York Times* spoke before a “workshop” of editors of business publications on the subject of “The Importance of Style.” After his address he was called upon to answer a number of specific questions. One of these was, “What about hyphenating words?” He answered, “We try to eliminate this as much as possible.”

Now a speaker in such circumstances, confronted with a number of queries, cannot be blamed for neatly evading a question when a complete answer to it would require a detailed explanation of some length. The reply given in this instance may seem to dispose of the matter quite definitely, but actually it is no answer at all. Any amount of elimination of hyphens is “possible,” all the way to not using any at all. In his preceding address, however, the speaker had emphasized the importance of *consistency*, and surely this should apply to hyphenation as much as to anything else.

Though the failure to register compounds for what they are may often be merely a careless annoyance, sometimes it can cause real misunderstanding or at least leave meaning unclear. The great authority on English usage, Otto Jespersen, understood this matter perfectly, and illustrated it by some amusing examples, one of which was an advertisement for a “superfluous hair-remover.”

Some years ago there was a widely-circulated story about “the cost of a comma.” As it was told, the government lost a huge sum of money through a slight typographical error in the printing of a customs regulation which was intended to favor fruit-growing by admitting young trees free of duty. As it came out, a comma was wrongly placed after “fruit,” so that “foreign fruit, plants, and” (whatever else followed in the list) had to be admitted without charge. What was *really* wrong, however, was the lack of a hyphen to mark the compound word *fruit-plants*.

If the neglect to show compound words as such, when they really are, be considered a sin of omission, then the joining of phrases as if

they were compounds when they are nothing of the sort seems a more heinous sin of commission.

About the early 1920s, a phrase which caught popular fancy and was soon being heard everywhere was "worth while." It means literally, of course, "worth the time it takes." How much is that? The phrase merely begs the question. Yet somehow this vague expression seemed to have some mysterious magical potency. It was uttered with a sort of unctuousness as if it described something as indisputably valuable. As has happened so often in modern speech, the phrase soon began to be transposed in front of the noun it modified. Such people as school officials, referring to what young people ought to be doing outside school-hours, would speak with an air of great satisfaction of "worth-while activities."

The pattern of the expression, established since no one knows when, is exactly the same as that of "worth a million dollars" or "not worth a nickel." The accent naturally goes not on the preposition but on its *object*, *what* the thing in question is worth. When the phrase, properly hyphenated, is placed ahead of what it modifies, it is pronounced with even tone, and the stress goes on the substantive: "worth-while *activities*." Wherever placed, however, it is no true compound word, either in its structure or in the way it is spoken. Yet in very recent years we frequently see it printed solidly as one word, not only when it precedes the noun but even when it follows. For instance, with this false compounding, an editorial discussing college education asks, "Is it all worthwhile?" A publication of a highly respectable educational society tells us that "any student who learns something of a foreign language has achieved something worthwhile . . ." There could be no more complete confusion between a compound word and a perfectly normal *phrase*. And, as might be expected, the ultra-permissive modern dictionaries, with their supine worship of so-called "usage," no matter how careless or confused, actually show the expression in solid form, though they do *not* indicate it as accented on the first element, as a compound would be. With their insistence upon being merely "descriptive, not prescriptive," what some of our modern lexicographers seem not to realize is that the innocent person who looks up something in the dictionary thinks he is referring to an *authority*, as at the same time the dictionary purports to be. He wants to find out what is *correct*. If there are no principles, if anything goes, then why bother?

Another prepositional phrase which is now frequently transposed ahead of what it modifies is *over all*. A picture or view *over all* be-

comes “the over-all picture.” When the phrase is written solidly “overall,” it looks as if it belonged in the class of compounds like *overcoat*, *overshoes*, or *overall*, a protective garment for workmen.

When the phrase *under way*, with the accent naturally on the object *way*, appears in solid form as “underway,” it looks as if it were like *underwear*, *undershirt*, *undercoating*, or proper names such as *Underwood* or *Underhill*, whereas of course it is nothing of the sort.

As outstanding an example of such distortion as has ever happened, one which has been sweeping the country in the last very few years, is the handling of the phrase *any more* as if it were a single word. Nowadays we see this careless confusion continually in all manner of publications, not only in contexts somewhat less than literate but in some of our generally best-edited periodicals. Here we have a perfectly natural phrase composed of the adjective or adverb *more* modified by the adverb *any*, with the accent on *more* as everyone speaks it. It is exactly analogous to *no more*, *much more*, or a little bit *more*. Treating it as a compound implies accentuation of *any*, as in *anything*, *anywhere*, or *anytime*, which means at any moment, as distinguished from *any time*, which means any duration, as “That job won’t take *any time*.” These two senses of *time* are infinitely different.

Anybody means any person, a very different idea from any *body*. With similar distinction, a recent advertisement of form-fitting garments uses as a clever slogan “Be Some Body,” which is not the same as being *somebody*. *Anyone*, meaning any person, is quite distinct from any *one*: “*Any one* of these would be bad enough.”

Even when such contrasting constructions are in juxtaposition, editors seem unaware of the difference. We read that the astronauts were told, while in space, that the seismometer they had planted on the moon had recorded not only the thump of equipment they had jettisoned but even the footfalls of the crewmen themselves. As reported in the newspaper, the response came from the Eagle’s cabin: “You can’t get away with anything anymore.” We may be sure that our astronaut didn’t *say* it that way. He would have given the phrase the natural intonation that Ethel Barrymore gave it in one of her most famous lines: “That’s all there is; there isn’t any *more*.”

We are all familiar with the advice that good writing is not merely words on paper but keeps the tone of living speech. We should “write the way we talk”—meaning of course when we are talking at our best. Surely, if we are seriously concerned with giving writing the effect of spoken language, realistic recognition of the clear-cut difference between compound words and phrases which are *not* compounds

is plainly indicated. Confusion of these quite different constructions offends both the eye and the ear.

No doubt some people will consider that we are simply at the mercy of all the carelessness of the mass media, which are effectively teaching various corruptions by continual repetition. Toward this as toward other forms of widespread modern pollution, I think we are not obliged to hold such a fatalistic attitude.