

Danger! Essayist at Work!

By Dennis Payton Knight

So you think this essay writing game is a nice, safe way to pass the time. Well, let me tell you, pal, we take our chances with every shift of the shifter and every tap of the space bar.

Of course we rely first on the firepower of words themselves, but sometimes a “gee whillikers,” or “egad” does not enthuse by itself, and so one must throw caution to the wind and insert exclamation points where the English teacher said they don’t belong! Exclamation point! Editor be damned! Add another exclamation point!

Have you ever played with the TNT of **bold characters** and *italics*? Or tinkered with nitro glycerin *and* electricity by going **bold, italic and ALL CAPS WITH EXCLAMATION POINTS!!!?**

I added that last question mark because I am not only bold, but sometimes grammatical, all the while proving the use of such explosive armaments is not for the squeamish. It is where we brave essayists must sometimes go, and it is why we build barricades around us to keep unwary spectators out of harm’s way.

Or should I move the apostrophe one notch east, making the phrase “out of harms’ way?” It must depend on whether, in the act of writing, I’m spawning not one but many harms. In any case, stay back, because apostrophes do have a way of going off when you’re not ready. And do not get me started on quotation marks!

The modern essayists’ most common weapon of choice, which derives from Royal and Remington typewriters, but seems like it should be from Smith and Wesson, is a program called Microsoft Word, and it often backfires on us. It up and changes our spelling inventions using a built-in dictionary it swiped from Webster. If the program is challenged by a nice, twisting phrase, it hemorrhages red and blue. For instance, my use of “gee whillikers” up there in the second paragraph elicited a squiggly red underline. I am not changing it.

Human proofreaders are worse. Last week I was chastised by an editor for using the elegant phrase, “...an opportunity for you and I to ply our craft as writers.” She said it should read, “...for you and me to ply our craft...” I said, “*me* don’t ply a craft, *I* ply a craft,” but she said I was making *I* the object of a preposition, and only *me* gets to be that. She also cautioned me to fix it or I (or me) would spontaneously set our esteemed *Windsor Life* on fire.

I have used quotation marks, prepositions and other perplexities freely and abundantly in this piece, and I’m sure they present yet another opportunity for her and I to spar, and she will clobber me yet again. Or is it “for her and me to spar?”

That is the dangerous work of an essayist. Fortunately, we come armored with the motto by which every essayist thrives: “**JUST WRITE SOMETHING, STUPID!!!**” (The comma is optional.)