

IT OUGHTA BE A LAW, Y'KNOW

By Fred Hobbs

The U.S. Constitution is historic and monumentally important. The First Amendment is a major and cherished addendum to it. Far be it from me to tinker with a key basic American right embodied in freedom of speech.

But, now given the opportunity to write about a fanciful proposition such as “if I Could Make it a Law”, I would like to offer the tweaking of one tiny smidgen of that venerable document. I'd like to make it a crime to repeat constantly the expression “y'know”, especially if it is inserted between almost every word in a conversation. I suppose the infraction doesn't reach the level of a felony, but at the very least it is a class one grammatical misdemeanor.

The phrase “y'know” (more commonly spoken as if it were one word) is called a “filler.” A “filler” is a sound or word that is spoken in conversation by one participant to signal to others that he or she has paused to think, but is not yet finished speaking.

A distinguished American professor emeritus of English says that kind of deviation from the standard use of English should be judged by “sophisticated users such as professional writers, editors, teachers and literate executives.” We assume they don't say “y'know” a lot. But, y'know who does say y'know a lot? Professional and college athletes when interviewed on radio or TV (and presumably by the print press, who mercifully edit out the extraneous and offensive words.)

Even the current number one quarterback for the Denver Broncos, Kyle Orton, interjects a goodly number of fillers while explaining the woes and wows of the most recent game. Many of us tend to forgive our gladiators for using the filler so liberally, especially if they are gifted on the field or court of battle and, in this case, especially if the Broncos win.

Athletes are not the only conversational culprits, though. I have heard the offending words (and I'll wager you have also) from the lips of many teenagers, some teachers, politicians, store clerks, my plumber, and even a prominent business leader or two (what happened to that “literate executive” mentioned above?

If the phrase is so universal, some may ask what is the harm? And, is the phrase really bad grammar? Technically, and according to dictionary definition, probably not.

However the question could be debated with this caveat offered by a nationally prominent advertising executive: “Arguments over grammar and style are often as fierce as those over IBM vs. MAC and as fruitless as Coke vs. Pepsi or y'know, boxers vs. briefs.”

But, fruitless or not, bad grammar or not, if I could make it a law I'd ban the phrase. You know I would!