

Wally - P-10 + AP 12

from

Dave Barry's

BAD HABITS

A 100% Fact-free Book

by Dave Barry

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Note from Wally: Do

not take "notes" from this

article. Instead, jot down some

"Musings."

hmmm....

What Is and Ain't

Grammatical

I CANNOT OVEREMPHASIZE the importance of good grammar.

What a crock. I could easily overemphasize the importance of good grammar. For example, I could say: "Bad grammar is the leading cause of slow, painful death in North America" or "Without good grammar, the United States would have lost World War Two."

The truth is that grammar is not the most important thing in the world. The Super Bowl is the most important thing in the world. But grammar is still important. For example, suppose you are being interviewed for a job as an airplane pilot, and your prospective employer asks you if you have any experience, and you answer: "Well, I ain't never actually flied no actual airplanes or nothing, but I got several pilot-style hats and several friends who I like to talk about airplanes with."

If you answer this way, the prospective employer will immediately realize that you have ended your sentence with a preposition. (What you should have said, of course, is "several friends with who I like to talk about airplanes.") So you will not get the job, because airline pilots have to use good grammar when they get on the intercom and explain to the passengers that, because of high winds, the plane is going to take off several hours late and land in Pierre, South Dakota, instead of Los Angeles.

We did not always have grammar. In medieval England, people said whatever they wanted, without regard to rules, and as a result they sounded like morons. Take the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who couldn't even spell his first name right. He wrote a large poem called *Canterbury Tales*, in which people from various professions — knight, monk, miller, reever, riveter, eeler, diver, stevedore, spinnaker, et cetera — drone on and on like this:

*In a somer seoun whon softe was the sunne
I kylled a younge birde ande I ate it on a bunne.*

When Chaucer's poem was published, everybody read it and said: "My God, we need some grammar around here." So they formed a Grammar Commission, which developed the parts of speech, the main ones being nouns, verbs, predicates, conjectures, particles, proverbs, adjoiners, coordinates, and rebuttals. Then the commission made up hundreds and hundreds of grammar rules, all of which were strictly enforced.

When the colonists came to America, they rebelled against British grammar. They openly used words like "ain't" and "finalize," and when they wrote the Declaration of Independence they deliberately misspelled many words. Thanks to their courage, today we Americans have only two rules of grammar:

Rule 1. The word me is always incorrect.

Most of us learn this rule as children, from our mothers. We say things like: "Mom, can Bobby and me roll the camping trailer over Mrs. Johnson's cat?" And our mothers say: "Remember your grammar, dear. You mean: 'Can Bobby and I

roll the camping trailer over Mrs. Johnson's cat?' Of course you can, but be home by dinnertime."

The only exception to this rule is in formal business writing, where instead of "I" you must use "the undersigned." For example, this business letter is incorrect:

"Dear Hunky-Dory Canned Fruit Company: A couple days ago my wife bought a can of your cling peaches and served them to my mother who has a weak heart and she damn near died when she bit into a live grub. If I ever find out where you live, I am gonna whomp you on the head with a ax handle."

This should be corrected as follows:

" . . . If the undersigned ever finds out where you live, the undersigned is gonna whomp you on the head with a ax handle."

Rule 2. You're not allowed to split infinitives.

An infinitive is the word *to* and whatever comes right behind it, such as "to a tee," "to the best of my ability," "tomato," et cetera. Splitting an infinitive is putting something between the "to" and the other words. For example, this is incorrect:

"Hey man, you got any, you know, spare change you could give to, like, me?"

The correct version is:

" . . . spare change you could, like, give to me?"

THE ADVANTAGE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH is that, because there are so few rules, practically anybody can learn to speak it in just a few minutes. The disadvantage is that Americans generally sound like jerks, whereas the British sound really smart, especially to Americans. That's why Americans are so

fond of those British dramas they're always showing on public television, the ones introduced by Alistair Cooke. Americans love people who talk like Alistair Cooke. He could introduce old episodes of "Hawaii Five-O" and Americans would think they were extremely enlightening.

So the trick is to use American grammar, which is simple, but talk with a British accent, which is impressive. This technique is taught at all your really snotty private schools, where the kids learn to sound like Elliot Richardson. Remember Elliot? He sounded extremely British, and as a result he got to be Attorney General, Secretary of State, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Vice President at the same time.

You can do it, too. Practice in your home, then approach someone on the street and say: "Tally-ho, old chap. I would consider it a great honour if you would favour me with some spare change." You're bound to get quick results.

It Takes a Lot of Gaul

ONE OF THE MOST USELESS CLASSES I ever took in high school, ranking right up there with calculus, was French. I took several years of French, and I learned hundreds of phrases, not one of which I would ever actually want to say to anybody. For example, my French teachers insisted that when I met a French person I should say "*Comment allez-vous?*" It turns out that this means "How do you go?" which is not the kind of thing you say when you want to strike someone as being intelligent. Your average French person already thinks most Americans are idiots, and you're not going to improve his opinion much if you barge up on him on some Paris street and start spewing high school French phrases:

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YOU: *Comment allez-vous?* ("How do you go?")

FRENCH PERSON: *Je vais à pied, évidemment. Vous devez avoir les cerveaux d'une truite.* ("I go on foot, obviously. You must have the brains of a trout.")

YOU: *Où est la bibliothèque?* ("Where is the library?")

FRENCH PERSON: *Partez, s'il vous plaît. J'ai un fusil.* ("Please go away. I have a gun.")

MY WIFE DIDN'T DO ANY BETTER in high school French. She learned to say "*Je me suis cassé la jambe*" ("I have broken my leg") and "*Elle n'est pas jolie*" ("She is not pretty"). What on earth is she supposed to do with these phrases? I mean, suppose she does go to France and break her leg:

MY WIFE: *Je me suis cassé la jambe.* ("I have broken my leg.")

FRENCH BYSTANDERS: *C'est dommage.* ("What a pity.")

MY WIFE: *Elle n'est pas jolie.* ("She is not pretty.")

FRENCH BYSTANDERS: *Bien, excusez-nous pour vivre. Vous n'êtes pas un grand prix vous-même.* ("Well, excuse us for living. You are no great prize yourself.")

My wife would never get an ambulance that way. She'd be lucky if the bystanders didn't spit on her.

DESPITE THE FACT that the teacher insisted on making me speak like a fool, I stuck with high school French, because at the time the only alternative was Latin, which is even more worthless. For one thing, everybody who speaks Latin is dead. For another thing, all you ever read in Latin class is Caesar's account of the Gallic Wars, in which Caesar drones on and on about tramping around Gaul. These had to be the dullest wars in history, which is why finally the Romans got so bored that they let the empire collapse and quit speaking

Latin. In fact, they gave up on spoken language altogether, and today their descendants communicate by means of hand gestures.

When I got to college, I briefly considered taking Chinese or Russian, but abandoned this notion when I discovered that the Russians and the Chinese use Communist alphabets. I also rejected German, because it is too bulky. For example, the German word for "cat" is *einfehbrungaltfrieichenspraakunt-worterbuchgegenwart*. It can take up to two days to order lunch in German.

THE RESULT OF ALL THIS is that I know very little of any foreign language, and what I do know is either useless or embarrassing. Most Americans are in the same situation. Fortunately, you don't really need another language, because, as you know if you have ever traveled abroad, virtually all foreign persons speak English. In fact, I sometimes suspect that there are no foreign languages, that foreign persons really speak English all the time and just pretend to speak foreign languages so they can amuse themselves by conning dumb American tourists into saying things like "How do you go?"

So if you plan to travel abroad, you should not waste your time learning some foreign language that could well turn out to be fraudulent. Instead, you should practice pronouncing, in a very loud, clear voice, certain useful English phrases for travelers. Here are the main ones:

- "Do you speak English?"
- "Thank God. Where can I find a bathroom?"
- "Is that one of those bathrooms where you wind up standing on some street corner in a structure that offers no more privacy than a beach umbrella?"
- "Thank God. Will the bathroom have a squat female attendant who will watch my every move lest I leave without

giving her a tip, even though the bathroom has obviously not been cleaned once since it was built by Visigoths more than twelve thousand years ago?"

— "Thank God. Say, you speak pretty good English, for a foreign person."

THESE PHRASES will take care of your basic needs abroad, and the fact that you have taken the time to learn to pronounce them loudly and clearly will leave a lasting impression on your foreign hosts.

How to Trap a Zoid

WE SHOULD ALL BE GRATEFUL that we have mathematics. For example, without mathematics, it would be almost impossible to figure out what size tip you should leave. Even with mathematics, this is very difficult. The mathematical formula for tipping, which was discovered by Sir Isaac Newton, states that the tip equals 15 percent of the bill, but unfortunately the bill is always \$17.43, and nobody has the vaguest idea what 15 percent of \$17.43 is. The finest brains in the country have been working on this problem for years, using large computers, and they have yet to come up with an answer. So most of us wind up tipping a random amount of money, usually \$3.50, which we increase slightly if the waiter performs an extra service, such as not spitting in the food. And that's just one of the ways we use mathematics in our everyday lives.

Mathematics got started in ancient Egypt, when the ancient Egyptians discovered the numbers 3 and 8. They used these numbers to develop the mathematical formulas

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the pyramids, which were actually supposed to be spherical. Eventually people in other countries discovered more numbers, and today we have more than ten thousand of them.

After the discovery of numbers, the next major stride in mathematics came when the ancient Greeks discovered the hypotenuse. The Greeks used the hypotenuse to manufacture right triangles for export to other countries. Included free with each triangle was a copy of the famous Pythagorean Theorem (named for its discoverer, Bob Theorem), which states: "Some of the squares of the opposite sides are equal to 14.6 percent of your grossly adjusted annual unearned interest, unless there are two or more runners on base at the time." To this very day, children memorize the Pythagorean Theorem in school, which accounts for their behavior.

The ancient Greeks made so much money with the right triangle that they developed a whole line of mathematical items, such as the rhomboid, the diameter, the parabola, the hyperbole, the irrational number, the pentathlon, the cube, the really deranged number, and the square root. In fact, the ancient Greeks developed all the really popular items; everything developed since then has failed miserably. Take algebra. I don't know who dreamed up algebra, but whoever it was obviously had a lot of time to waste, because it is utterly useless. In algebra class, day after day, the teacher would write something like this on the blackboard:

$$4x + 2 = 14$$

Then he would ask us what x stood for. It turns out that it stood for 3, but how the hell were we supposed to know that? He was the one who dreamed up x in the first place, and it seemed grossly unfair for him to expect us to know what he was thinking of at the time. And to make matters worse, the next day he would have x equal some other number, such as 4,

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depending on his mood. I spent an entire year in algebra class, and to this day I don't have the faintest notion what x stands for, which is why I hardly ever use it for anything.

Calculus is even worse. When I went to college, all of us freshmen had to take a semester of calculus. It was like a fraternity initiation. The professor, who wore a bow tie and grew up on another planet, would start the class with a statement like this: "Let us consider the problem of a helix uncoiling in n dimensions." He never told us *why* this was a problem, or *why* anybody would want to consider it even if it was. He would merely turn around and start filling the blackboard with alien symbols, and he would keep it up until it was time to leave. Every now and then he would give us a test, and I always got a zero. In fact, "zero" was the only mathematical concept I ever understood in calculus class.

I decided to quit calculus the day I stabbed myself in the head with Jeff White's pencil. Jeff sat next to me in class, and to amuse ourselves while the professor was writing alien symbols on the blackboard we would play childish pranks on each other. One day Jeff tried to knock my books off my desk, so I grabbed them with one hand and, with the other hand, snatched Jeff's pencil, which I attempted to break by smashing it against my head, only I didn't get the angle right, so I ended up driving the point into my skull, where it broke off. This created quite a commotion, but the professor was deeply engrossed in the problem of a trapezoid rotating in y dimensions, and he didn't even notice the problem of a student with a pencil point lodged in his skull. So Jeff and I just got up and walked over to the infirmary.

The nurse was very suspicious. She said: "Are you telling me that you stabbed *yourself* in the head with a pencil?" Then she looked very suspiciously at Jeff. Jeff said, defensively: "Really. He stabbed himself." And the nurse said: "Why would anybody stab himself with a pencil?" And so I stared suspiciously at Jeff, and said: "Yeah, why *would* I stab myself with a pencil?"

Anyway, the nurse got the pencil point out of my skull, but I didn't go back to calculus class ever again. Jeff dropped out of college a short while later, although I'm pretty sure this had nothing to do with the pencil incident.

