



## Let a Simile Be Your Umbrella

By William Safire

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### By Tom Hess

As I carried this book with me for several weeks--I was slowly reading it--many people glanced at the cover and remarked *"Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella? Is that some kind of self-help book?"* Eventually I gave up and said, *"Yeah, sure, that's it. Self-help."*

Actually, If you want to learn more about the English language, "Let a Simile Be Your Umbrella" **is** a good self-help book.

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The Pulitzer Prize winning author William Safire has been writing 'on language' for over forty years. For the last 20 plus years he has delighted the readers of the New York Times Magazine with his column "On Language". His insights about the changing usage, grammar, and etymology of the words and phrases that fill our world sometimes lead to clarity. And at other times they fog the lenses of the most deliberate reader.

Much like James Burke's "Connections" TV documentaries that map the leaps and jumps of science and civilization; "Let a Simile Be Your Umbrella" leads the reader through the twisted lexiconography that is our common English language. But perhaps **not** so common.

### **"Introduction"**

*"If you're hungry for a hoagie, you're probably in Pennsylvania or New Jersey; all along the Atlantic Coast, you ask for a sub, if you're in New England you demand a grinder, in New York a hero, in Louisiana a po'boy and a torpedo all over."*

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### **The Author...**

William Safire was born in 1929. A dropout (after attending two years) from Syracuse University, Safire worked as a radio and television producer, a U.S. Army correspondent, and as a 'profiles' reporter at the New York Herald Tribune.

While working in public relations during the late 1950s, he was instrumental in bringing Premeire Nikita Khrushchev and Vice-President Richard Nixon together for the 1959 Moscow

"kitchen" debate at a U.S. Trade and Cultural Fair in Moscow. The conservative Safire later campaigned for Nixon during the 1968 Presidential race and afterward served as a senior White House speechwriter and advisor for the now-President Nixon.

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**"The Hard Way"**

**"My informal job title in the Nixon Administration was Rejected Counsel. That's because, as a speech writer, I would occasionally put my head into the Oval Office to say: 'Mr. President--Do the popular thing! Take the easy way!' Mr. Nixon would ritualistically throw me out of the office, allowing me to submit a speech draft that would truthfully report: 'Some of my aides have suggested that I do the popular thing, that I should take the easy way. But I have rejected such counsel.'"**

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Safire joined the New York Times as a political columnist after the 'collapse' of the Nixon Presidency in 1973. He won his Pulitzer Prize in 1978 for "distinguished commentary". His "On Language" column, the basis for this book and others, began in 1979. His bibliography includes works in the fields of language, politics, writing, advice, and political fiction.

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**The Content...**

"Let a Simile Be Your Umbrella" is loosely arranged in alphabetical order by the phrase or word being discussed by a given column. All the entries are excerpts from columns that ran from (apparently) the mid 1980s through the mid 1990s. No dates are assigned to any of the individual columns/entries.

A unique feature of this book (and the columns that they arose from) is the feedback that Safire accepts from his readers. However, unlike the generally friendly '*way to write, you slay me!*' style of Epinions.com; these comments are hard-edged (but sometimes humorous), informed, 'just-the-facts-ma'am' responses to the given discussion.

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Received in reply to: "**Half in Love with 'Full Frontal'**"

**"Your droll commentary about 'full frontal' (nudity) brings to mind Archie Bunker's nonpareil observation, made in connection with some kind of protest demonstration in which she had participated, that daughter Gloria was in the state of 'full nudal frontity'"**

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It should be noted that each reply/comment is attributed to real people with real positions in real locations. Indeed, Safire takes his relationship with his readers so seriously that, for several contributors, the fact and date of their death is noted by the author.

Another unique characteristic of these replies/comments is the delight his readers take in 'catching' a mistake (or perceived mistake) made by Safire. He gladly welcomes this criticism from the "*Gotcha! Gang*" and the "*Nitpickers League*". For legitimate mistakes that he does acknowledge, he usually dryly asserts that they are traps set for his readers. An attitude I plan to adopt for this review.

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**"Gotcha! Gang Strikes Again"**

**"'You, of all people,' begin the letters from the Gotcha! Gang, a hardy tribe obsessed with accuracy and a lust for catching error in others.**

**As longtime readers know, I occasionally stud my language and political columns with "mistakes" to see if anybody is paying attention, or to draw mail. It's a trap, of course."**

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**The Good...**

Simile is a book that covers a lot of ground. A simple column talking about "*soda water*" runs through seltzer, two cents plain, soda, plain soda, soda pop, soft drinks, pop, dope, white soda, soda water, club soda, sparkling water, fizzy water, branch water, tap water, still water, l'eau minerale, mineral water; all these before finally concluding that "*If you prefer the bubbles, the 'with-it' term is fizzy water, an adaptation of British slang for Champagne. With or without minerals, unbruised by ice, its age is not yet done. (Urp.)*"

Opening the book at random pages, the reader finds discussions about *burdensharing*, *wrong vs wronger*, *evenhanded*, *proximity talks*, *timeline*, *iconography*, *hardscrabble*, *goo-goo*, *downsized*, *boontling jargon*, *'excrement of a male bovine'*, and on and on.

There is a very complete index that references all the key words in each discussion.

This is the kind of book that one can skip through at any pace desired, reading everything or reading only what interests the reader. A self-guided tour through Mr. Safire's brave new lexical world.

**The Bad...**

There is not a Table of Contents. While the book is arranged alphabetically, it is sometimes difficult to remember where a particular word or phrase was discussed.

Because of Safire's background, a lot of the situations that set up the columns are based on political happenings of the late 1980s and early 1990s. If the reader is unfamiliar with the people or the situations it can be like reading a dry political handbook.

**The Final Word...**

For anyone who loves words, standing on their own, and the stories behind their evolution, this book will be a delicious read.

For someone who wants a developed, consistent style over the entire book; who prefers to read long, flowing, descriptive passages; this is not your book.

[Tom Hess](#) writes reviews on the [Epinions.com](#) site.