



Overtaking the Upstarts

By Gene Zipperlen

A couple of notable confusions, which, as you might imagine, we noted:

"[He] is immediately captured by the Psychlos, an alien race that has overtaken Earth and is using humans as slave laborers."

"But Putin also argues that Russia's main problem is 'the lack of will' and 'the lack of firmness' that have overtaken the country and allowed criminal gangs to infiltrate the economy and government."

In both cases, the right phrase is "taken over," not "overtaken." The difference is significant.

While we're on the subject, we've seen cases in which "start-up" is confused with "upstart." That difference is even more significant: One means "just beginning"; the other means "nouveau riche" or someone who has recently come into power.

INTRUDERS WILL BE ELIMINATED

Not much is so intrusive in a good quotation as an insertion in brackets. Sometimes such a thing can be edited out -- by using a partial quote, for instance -- but more often the time to avoid it is in the writing. A careful writer can establish the context of a quotation so that brackets are unnecessary. Brackets are a lazy way out, and we should all discourage their use.

The temptation to use brackets in quotes generally means that the sentence or paragraph needs help. Try to write it another way.

One option is ending the quotation earlier or beginning it later:

Jones said, "Because he [Smith] didn't understand the rules, he broke them."

BETTER:

Jones said that because Smith "didn't understand the rules, he broke them."

Another example:

Jones said, "Because he [Smith] didn't know which direction he was traveling, he ended up there [in Burleson]."

BETTER:

Jones said that because Smith "didn't know which direction he was traveling, he ended up" in Burleson.

Another technique is to provide the context in a preceding sentence so the reader will understand without the brackets:

Smith was found early Wednesday morning wandering around Burleson. "Because he didn't know which direction he was traveling, he ended up there," Jones said.

Still other options are paraphrasing the quotation or finding a better one -- or deciding that no explanation is really needed, as was the case on June 21:

"The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has threatened to pull the state's federal housing dollars if she remains on the board.

" 'Unless this is rectified soon, we are jeopardizing all of our federal funds,' said Michael Grimes, a legislative aide to state Sen. Chris Harris of Arlington. 'We can't let these funds be jeopardized by allowing her [Griffin] to participate in this process.' "

The "her" in the second paragraph is the fourth feminine pronoun in the first four grafes of the story, all referring to the same woman. I submit to you that "[Griffin]" is unnecessary.

Such writing, though well-intentioned, slows our customers for no good reason. Careful writing and editing can often prevent the need for brackets within quotes. All it takes is a little thought about avoiding them.

NON SEQUITURS OF NOTE, Vol. II

The World's Largest News-Gathering Organization told us, "Such crimes are rare in Luxembourg, which lies between Belgium, Germany and France."

DANGLER! DANGLER, WILL ROBINSON!

"Based on a unique fan system, the Swedish automobile is the first to offer the accessory in passenger cars."

TOXIC WRITING

Though pollutants may be toxic, they are not necessarily toxins, though many people involved in the debate over air quality are fond of calling them that (and we dutifully quote them in this mistake). A toxin is a poison that is produced biologically; something living -- a microorganism, a snake, an insect -- made or secreted it in a biological process. Smokestack and motor vehicle emissions do not meet those specs.

WHAT CQ REALLY MEANS

The story said the person "died Wednesday night of an apparent heart attack at Charleton[cq] Methodist Hospital."

The skeptical copy editor looked it up, something the reporter, and the reporter's editor, hadn't done. It's spelled "Charlton." No "e." In the phone book, on the Web, almost every time it's mentioned, it's Charlton -- except in an early Associated Press story that the reporter used for the "facts."

The review said, "In a lineup that included Britney Spear[cq] wanna-be Mandy Moore" It's "Spears."

These things happen more often than you might think if you don't work on a copy desk. So here's a reminder of the real meaning of the cryptic notation "cq."

But first, here's what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean "The Associated Press put it in the story, so it must be right." Nor does it mean "I think it's right, but somebody should check it." Above all, it doesn't mean "My editor told me to put this after capitalized words."

"CQ" -- whose origin has been lost -- is a pledge that the information is factually correct. In other words, it might say, "With my professional reputation at stake, I have verified this information and certify that it is indeed, and in fact, correct."

Really, it's not that much to ask: If you cq a name, it's your duty to check it first. Your own credibility hangs in the balance, and your employer lives or dies by it.

NON SEQUITUR OF THE MONTH (as submitted for publication) The Texas town, "which is nearly 48 percent white, more than 44 percent Hispanic and nearly 7 percent black, has just three traffic lights." ... And they are 33.3 percent green, 33.3 percent yellow and 33.3 percent red, one copy editor noted.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT Whenever you quote an association or organization from a news release or from your own research, it's a good idea to tell our customers what the association does, where it gets its money and so forth. That way they can decide for themselves whether the association is credible and what its biases are, if it has any. Many libraries have a three-volume directory of associations (it's very

reliable), and you can go to the organization's Web site (that's somewhat less reliable) to find out what an organization's interests are.

Here comes the sermon: It's all about credibility. Readers don't have to believe us; we have to give them good reason to. Credibility and the accuracy that builds it have to come first -- before telling a good story, before elegant writing, before catching readers' interest, before anything else. The facts have to be, well, facts. If that doesn't happen, *everything else* is wasted effort.

SPACE WASTERS Here are some verbose or redundant phrases and their plain English translations. Some of these substitutions won't work all the time. But verbiage creeps into our writing at every opportunity; whenever we can, we should strike a blow for conciseness.

A sufficient number of = enough

An insufficient number of = too few or not enough

A large number of = many

A small number of = few or several

A larger number of = more

A smaller number of = fewer

Inside the city limits = inside the city

Boundary line = boundary

Controversial issue = issue

He did it earlier this year. = He did it this year.

She will do it later this month. = She will do it this month.

Family members = relatives

Is able to = can

Was unable to = could not

There are some cars that guzzle gas. = Some cars guzzle gas.

It was then that they realized ... = Then they realized ...

Set a maximum on = limit

Old adage = adage

Trite cliché = cliché

Mass exodus = exodus

SPACE WASTERS, THE SEQUEL

prior to = before

subsequent to = after

subsequent = later

highest number of = most

lowest number of = least or fewest

build a new runway = build a runway

write a new book = write a book

in the near future = soon

civil lawsuit = lawsuit

best quality = best

improve the quality of = improve

potential risk = risk

potential threat = threat

potential hazard = hazard

potential danger = danger

SON OF SPACE WASTERS, THE SEQUEL

After the war ended = after the war

Before the war started

= before the war

Pile up = pile

Raise up = raise

Lower down = lower

Drop down = drop

Stand up = stand

Sit down = sit

Law enforcement officers = law officers

By the end of May = before June

Before the end of the year = this year

By the first of next year = this year

Make a decision = decide

Come to a decision = decide

Reach a decision = decide

Come to an agreement = agree

Reach an agreement = agree

Forge an agreement = agree

Excess verbiage = verbiage

Mass exodus = exodus

District court judge = district judge

SON OF SPACE WASTERS MEETS COPY EDITOR

Large in size = large

Red in color = red

Orange-colored = orange

(but silver- or gold-colored is often necessary)

Ornery by nature = ornery

Triangular in shape = triangular

Voted in favor of giving = voted to give

Voted to approve = approved

Manufacturing plant = factory

Is in the process of planning = is planning

Weather conditions = weather

Run the risk of = risk

Are more numerous than = outnumber

A little bit of = a little

A small amount of = a little

A large amount of = a lot

A larger number of = more

BRIDE OF SPACE WASTERS MEETS SAMURAI COPY EDITOR

Lt. John Jones of the Fort Worth Police Department = Fort Worth police Lt. John Jones (or if the context has been established, police Lt. John Jones Deputy Mary Smith of the Tarrant County Sheriff's

Department = Tarrant County sheriff's Deputy Mary Smith (or in context, sheriff's Deputy Mary Smith)

Decide whether or not to let = decide whether to let

She chose to go to Weatherford instead = She went to Weatherford instead

BRIDE OF SPACE WASTER'S FATHER-IN-LAW MEETS SON OF SAMURAI COPY EDITOR

crisis situation = crisis

conduct an investigation into = investigate

early yesterday morning = early yesterday

in the early morning hours of March 23 = early March 23

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