



Wendy Lathrop is licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, and as a Professional Planner in New Jersey. She has been involved since 1974 in surveying projects ranging from construction to boundary to environmental land use disputes.

The Language Police

A February article in a Philadelphia newspaper made me laugh and shake my head as I read of an unexpected but long wished-for event. A U.S. Magistrate Judge in one of the local suburban counties decided in favor of the attorney presenting a case before him, and thus granted the lawyer's client the full request of \$354,167. However, due to the poor quality of the brief submitted for the case, His Honor slashed the requested attorney fees from \$300 per hour to \$150 per hour for his writing, although courtroom work earned the full rate.

The reason for the distinction was the number of typographical errors that were "careless to the point of disrespectful." Judge Jacob Hart pointed to the many misspellings of the "United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania," noting that "[c]onsidering the religious persuasion of the presiding officer, the 'Passover' District would have been more appropriate." Furthermore, Judge Hart took offense to the attorney's letter addressed to him as "Jacon" Hart, commenting in his opinion that "I appreciate the elevation to what sounds like a character in *The Lord of the Rings*, but, alas, I am but a judge."

How significant a single missing or misplaced character can be! A number of years ago I received a letter from a job applicant to whom I had written a "thanks, but not this time" letter after her interview. She wanted to know why she had not been hired since she insisted she was a stickler for detail and very conscientious. But because the envelope and opening salutations each contained a different misspelling of my name, I was not convinced that I had made an error in declining to offer her a clerical position in my office.

Reliance on spell-checkers abounds, and unfortunately these well-meaning automatons sometimes offer bad advice. I have to teach every new computer I use that the name "Wendy" (a word I use at least once in every piece of correspondence) is not really supposed to be "weedy" or "windy," no matter how hard or frequently it insists that I'm the one who has erred. The brain inside my computer also has a hard time accepting the fact that the proper use of brackets around a change in a quotation (such as in the second paragraph of this article) is not an attempt to create an outline format with points A, B, and C.

Although raised by a schoolteacher with little patience for repeated errors, I still can be sloppy in writing and proofing, and readily admit to having committed some egregious sins against the English language. But it does seem easier to proof more meticulously if that step does not immediately follow the first writing. During the writing process, that little voice in my brain does all the work, dictating the words and punc-

tuation that are to appear in print. If the proofing is too soon after that first draft (and a first draft should never be the final one), then that same little voice, which takes full pride in authorship and can admit no wrong, continues to say, "Looks good to me! Send it out!" Only when that murmuring is temporarily distracted, even for just an hour, can it see the page with new eyes and catch those misplaced clauses that confuse rather than elucidate and word choices that sound like bad translations from a language other than English.

There is one consistent category of written material that all too frequently does sound like a secret decoder ring should have been included in the package. For some reason, technical manuals for software seem to be the most poorly composed of documents although they are often the most desperately searched for enlightenment. A COGO package I recently tested came with the observation that "[m]any commands contents a series of options" and directions to



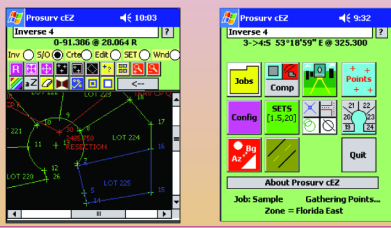
“move the properly pointer device on the screen.” Through context, I could figure out what I was supposed to do, but I have read better English even in martial arts manuals that have been translated from Chinese and Japanese. One such book in my personal library explains a self-defense technique to defuse and deflect a certain frontal attack with a series of specific joint locks and unbalancing moves, ending with instructions to “then throw the rascal to the ground.” Although perhaps not the most contemporary language usage, the verbiage is at least both correct and understandable.

Abbreviations can create another stumbling block to communication across the chasms of unshared experiences and differing backgrounds. A reference in one of the trade publications to which I subscribe temporarily confused my husband, a research physician, who frowned while trying to make sense of “BMP” in a title. The title appeared both on the cover (where space is at a premium) and within the feature article (where space is more generously available). It wasn't until the second paragraph that the author managed to provide a translation for my baffled spouse, whose personal frame of reference yielded “bone morphogenic protein,” completely unrelated to the article's topic of “best management practices” for stormwater detention.

Another recent newspaper article reviewed a hot-selling British book entitled *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, with the subtitle of *The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. The author (Lynne Truss) notes, “Punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play.” Apparently a lighter look at the purpose and propriety of those pesky little marks, the book includes the story of how the title came to be. A panda walks into a café and orders a sandwich, eats it, then pulls out a gun and fires two shots in the air. In response to the bewildered waiter's question of “Why?” the panda throws him a copy of a poorly punctuated wildlife manual while walking out the door, and tells the waiter to look it up. Here's what the waiter reads: “Panda: Large mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.” *A*

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