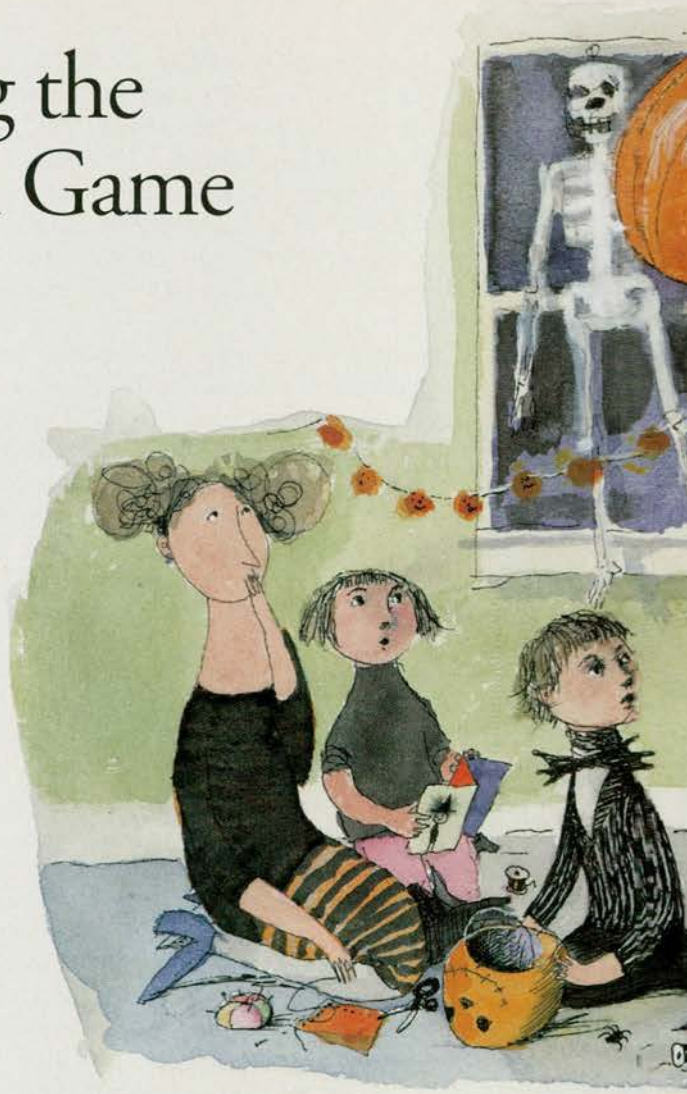
Playing the Synonym Game



By Ken Bresler

> We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

That was Sir Winston Churchill to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940. It's called his Speech on Dunkirk, and in it, Churchill said, "We shall fight" seven times.

Notice all the synonyms that he could have used, but didn't:

battle [as a verb]	take up arms
give battle	attack
do battle	assault
go to battle	assail
war [as a verb]	beset
war against	repel
go to war	repulse
wage war	resist
make war	withstand
take the field	stand ground

Only one word comes close to a synonym for "fight": "defend." Churchill wasn't scared of repetition, but many people are.

Gourd

The *Boston Globe* published an article Oct. 1, 2000, about a pumpkin-growing contest. The writer and editors should have faced facts: If you're going to write about a pumpkin-growing contest, you're going to use the word "pumpkin" a lot. "Pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin." Get used to it.

But no. The very first paragraph—before any reader could possibly be bored with the word "pumpkin"—refers to "the huge, orange produce item." Do you think that anyone goes home a few days before Hallowe'en and calls out, "Honey! Kids! Time to carve the orange produce item"?

A photograph accompanying the article pictured several pumpkins, and the caption referred to one of them as a "gourd." If you check the dictionary, the caption was technically correct: a pumpkin is a gourd. But who thinks of a pumpkin weighing 1,122 pounds (the one in the photo) as a gourd?

The process that leads to a pumpkin being called an "orange produce item" and a "gourd" has a few names. Theodore M. Bernstein, author of *The Careful Writer*, called it "synonymomania," and H.W. Fowler in his *Modern English Usage* called it "elegant variation."

Editors sometimes call it the "Slender Yellow Fruit Syndrome," wrote Patricia O'Connor in her book *Woe Is I*. "It is best explained by example: Freddie was offered an apple and a banana, and he chose the slender yellow fruit."

I call it "playing the synonym game."

A Rule of Thumb

Even the best writers and editors play the synonym game. In 1998, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission required mutual funds to write their prospectuses in plain English. To help implement the regulations, the SEC issued *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents.* I predict that the handbook will be a classic writing manual, yet its compilers—experienced and insight-

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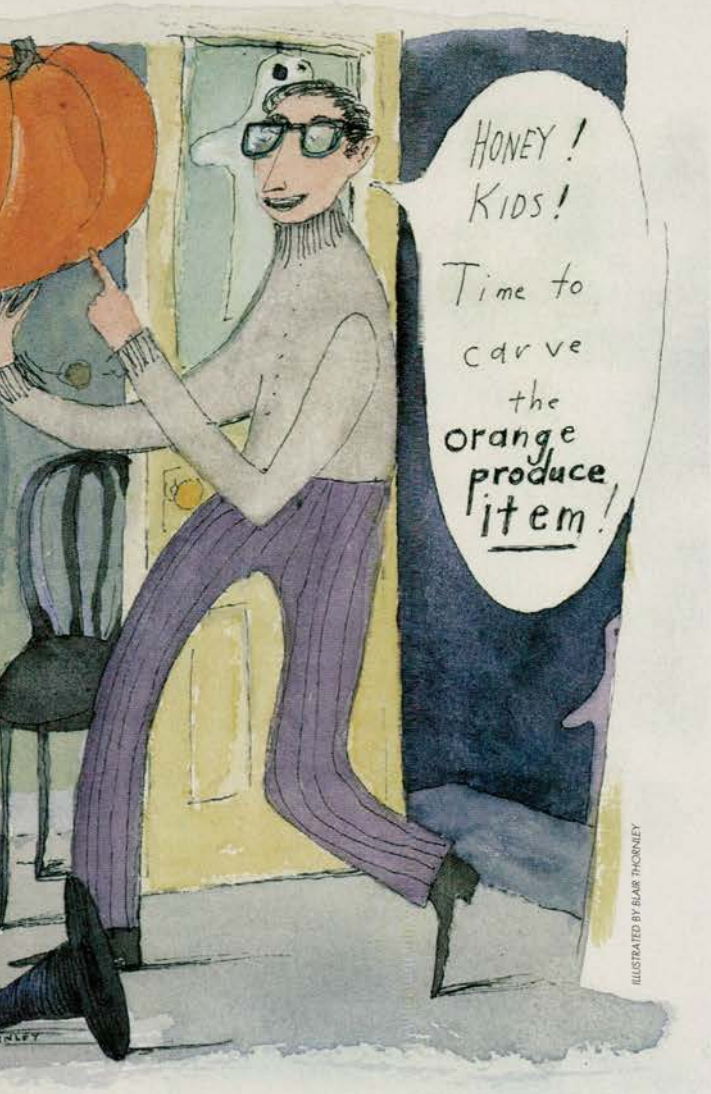

ful people—played the synonym game:

The word *principles* appears on pages 15, 16, and 67.

The word *guidelines* appears on pages 21, 32, 49, and 53.

The word *advice* appears on page 21.

The word *suggestions* appears on page 63 twice.

The phrase *a rule of thumb* appears on page 39.

The phrase *a general rule* appears on page 41.

The phrase *a safe rule* appears on page 47.

Does the word *principles* mean the same as the word *guidelines*? Is *advice* the same as *suggestions*? Are *suggestions* less important and authoritative than *guidelines*? Do *a rule of thumb, a general rule,* and *a safe rule* mean the same thing? A reader of the SEC's handbook is left wondering, "Is a synonym sometimes just a synonym?"

Reasons Not To Play

Playing the synonym game has at least six problems:

Call a spade a spade, not a "digging tool" or "an earth-moving implement."

It can be ridiculous, as in "slender yellow fruit."

It can be inexact. Mark Twain, the cogent commentator on language and so many other things, said that "when we have used a word a couple of times in a paragraph, we imagine we are growing tautological, and so we are weak enough to exchange it for some other word which only approximates exactness...."

It makes the writer do more work. Checking a thesaurus, even an electronic one, takes time. Devising synonyms without a thesaurus takes time.

One consulting firm wrote that it had "analyzed an S&L's operating strategy and determined the riskiness of the institution's loan and investment portfolios as part of an investigation of the causes of a large California savings and loan company's failure." In one sentence, "an S&L," "the institution," and "savings and loan company" all refer to the same thing. It took the writer some time and effort to think of those synonyms.

The writer could have written, "As part of an investigation into why a California savings and loan company failed, we analyzed its operating strategy and determined how risky its loan and investment portfolios were."

Synonyms make the readers do more work. But your job when you write is to do the readers' job for them. One consultant wrote, and I paraphrase, "We examined the market for a product. Our study identified competitors, evaluated the advantages of the product, and estimated demand. We also assessed the likelihood of new competitors entering the market."

"Examined," "identified," "evaluated," "estimated," and "assessed." Are these separate processes or the same? Some of them are probably separate; some of them are probably the same. But why did the reader have to stop and wonder?

It's unnecessary to use synonyms.

Being Pretentious vs. Being Boring

So why do people play the synonym game? People whom I teach and coach tell me, "That's how I learned to write in school" and "I don't want to be boring."

In *The Writing of Economics*, D. McCloskey wrote, "many of the rules we learned in Miss Jones's class in the eighth grade are wrong....'Never repeat the same word or phrase within three lines,' said Miss Jones, and because the rule fitted splendidly with our budding verbosity at age 13 we adopted it as the habit of a lifetime."

What's my response to "I don't want to be boring"? I have two responses:

If you have to choose between being pretentious, ridiculous, and inexact (by using synonyms), choose being boring.

Using the same word is not boring. Reread Churchill's Speech on Dunkirk. □

SCIENCE

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mystery has been forever compromised need have no fears; in the end, there is always mystery. Those who suggest that it is blasphemous to probe God's intentions are themselves guilty of blasphemy. God is not a conjuror, whose tricks seem tawdry when exposed. The more you see, the more wondrous it all becomes.

In short, as Isaac Newton and most of his contemporaries saw (including Galileo, who was a good Catholic), it is remarkably simple to reconcile excellent science with religion. Much of the essence of religion is to experience first the awe and then the sense of reverence that should follow from it. Science inspires in just this way.

Why, then, does science allow itself to be seen as the natural enemy of religion, and thus antagonize so many people for no good reason at all? Yes, there are some serious conflicts. The clash between Darwin and Genesis, for example, lies not in the details of geology, for Genesis can be seen as a good first draft, made in the virtual absence of data (or any inkling of "testable hypothesis"). The clash is as the American philosopher Daniel Dennett describes it in his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea.* Orthodox Christians of the 19th century argued, as philosopher John Locke had done in the 17th, that intelligent beings could not be made except by an even more intelligent Creator already in place; but natural selection shows how, in principle, life and then intelligence can emerge from simple beginnings, with no overseer at all. But religion as a whole does not rest on that one piece of theology; and in general, given that religion is innately untestable, it remains outside the purlieus of science. There can be spats, but there is no mortal conflict in which to engage.

Science can indeed be very hard—but for many different reasons, and it is important to distinguish them. It is hard because there is so much of it, and different bits depend on other bits, so it takes a long time to get into. But then, the same is true of any subject, from music to Spanish conversation. It is esoteric—meaning you have to know the background before you can come to grips with the matter in hand. Again, this is true of everything. Much of science, such as immunology, is complicated. But so is gardening—yet it is not innately difficult. Some science, such as quantum mechanics, is truly counter-intuitive. But scientists, too, have difficulty with this: As Niels Bohr said, if you think it is easy, you haven't understood the problem. Or as a professor of physics once told me when I asked him how he pictured a nine-dimensional universe: "You don't. You just do the mathematics." Mathematics is always a problem because the human brain is not geared to it. We are nature's wordsmiths. But some spectacularly good scientists have also been spectacularly bad mathematicians. Darwin regretted his own innumeracy. Michael Faraday, a visionary physicist, pleaded forlornly for "plain words." There are very few Newtons around, able to invent a new form of mathematics (calculus, in his case) when the traditional kinds prove inadequate.

In short, scientists also have trouble with the problems in science that are really hard. Most of them, like most of us, see only as far as the geniuses allow them to see. Indeed, take away the top 20 geniuses from the past 400 years and we would still be living in the 17th century, with the clever but stilted physics of Robert Boyle and John Ray's natural history. On the other hand, once the big ideas are explained, then some of them at least—including those of biology, which impact most directly on our lives—are actually rather easy. Natural selection can be explained in five minutes (although it has taken 140 years so far to work through the connotations); and Mendel's experiments with peas, the basis of all subsequent genetics, seem so simple that we may wonder what the fuss was about. In fact, Mendel's was the simplicity of genius. But we lesser mortals can wallow in his vision, just as we do in Mozart and Picasso. We don't have to belong to a special club to take part. Insisting on the difficulty looks very like an attempt to protect the high priesthood. But those who build walls invite graffiti.

Scientists must loosen up. It is false, for example, to suggest, as they sometimes have, that people who do not practice science have no right to comment at all and get it wrong when they do. The corollary, that scientists can be relied upon to get it right, is equally false. To be sure, there would be no science at all without scientists; but that does not mean that science belongs to them, any more than art belongs to artists, or politics to politicians. Science's greatest quality is that it does not rely upon authority, at least in principle. Its ideas are explicit, laid out for universal scrutiny. Only religion is arcane, and can make a virtue of this. To insist on the specialness of scientists, and to appeal to their authority, is to adopt the methods of religion at its most pristine, where all ideas must be filtered through the chosen few. If everyone comments on science, then many silly things will be said. But that is what it means for a subject truly to be part of culture.

When they are drawn into public debate, scientists, like all of us, should tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We have been treated again and again to the stock phrase: "There is no evidence that...." I have never heard anyone add: "But absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence." Without that codicil, we do not have the whole truth.

Science needs a new image. Its Apollonic rationality is wonderful at its best, clear and pure. Beware, though, what has lately been called "the rationalistic fallacy." That it is rational does not make it right, or good, or necessarily better than some impassioned, if badly articulated, instinct. Besides, science has a romantic face, too. It is methodical, but it does not simply grind to its conclusions. Creativity matters at least as much as in the arts: huge leaps of imagination that come from nowhere.

All in all, we need much more than committees and professors for the public understanding of science, lectures to the unwashed masses. We need a different kind of science education. Science should not be taught simply as an apprenticeship—which, more often than not, remains the case—but as a significant slice of cultural history and a way of looking at the world. □

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decision to deny a diploma do not mandate and fund intervention for students who fail the tests.

2. Forty-two percent of the states that use test results for promotion decisions at the middle school level and 40 percent that use them at the elementary school level do not mandate and fund such programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the current context for the development and implementation of standards-based reforms, the AFT recommends the following:

■ In regard to **standards,** the states should,

1. Explain the standards they set and the performance levels they require for meeting them. Parents and teachers rightly ask, "Is the standard realistic?" States should compare their standards, assessments, and results with those of high-performing countries.
2. Make sure that social studies standards are specific about the United States and world history that students should learn at each of the three educational levels.
3. Provide examples of standards and of student work at various grades and performance levels so that teachers, students, parents, and the public all know what is expected.

■ In regard to **curricula,** states should,

1. Involve teachers in the development of grade-by-grade curricula aligned to the standards in the core subject.
2. Specify the learning continuum in the core subjects to show the progression and development of critical knowledge and skills from grade to grade.
3. Identify instructional resources—reading materials, textbooks, software, and so forth—that are aligned to the standards.
4. Provide information on instructional strategies or techniques to help teach the standards.
5. Provide performance indicators to clarify the quality of student work required for mastery of the content standards.
6. Develop lesson-plan data banks that include exemplary lessons and student work related to instruction in the standards.
7. Provide guidance and incentives to schools so that they attend to important areas of the curriculum that are not assessed—e.g., art, music, foreign languages.

■ In regard to **assessments and their use,** states should,

1. Phase in consequences related to tests to ensure that districts have adequate time to implement curricula, professional development, and intervention systems.
2. Work to improve test instruments to ensure that the results reflect students' skills and knowledge at the appropriate grade and performance level. Well-designed assessments should also provide schools and districts with useful and timely information about the strengths and weaknesses of their instructional program, enabling them to improve professional development programs and target interventions and other resources more effectively.
3. Give students multiple opportunities to pass high-stakes assessments, and develop an appeals process for high-stakes decisions.
4. Not put all the weight on a single test when making important decisions about students. Look for confirmatory evidence from other indicators of achievement including student work samples, performance assessments, other standardized tests, and the like.
5. Acknowledge and reward student achievement gains, not just absolute levels of academic achievement.
6. Report the progress of achievement in schools and districts by categories of student—e.g., grade level, racial and ethnic group, socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, special education.
7. Provide benchmarks for different levels of student performance on high-stakes assessments—thus creating the foundation for differentiated diplomas based on the results of high school exit exams. In this way, states could raise the bar for all students while providing an extra incentive for students who strive to excel beyond the standard.

■ In regard to **intervention,** states should,

1. Provide high-quality preschool programs for all students

and early intervention for students identified as at risk for not meeting the standards.

2. Provide adequate resources to ensure that students have access to any extra assistance they need to learn the material. This might require smaller classes, alternative settings for disruptive students, and extra time with a well-trained instructor, as well as access to any specialists and special services that are necessary.
3. Help to identify or develop the curricula, materials, and instructional approaches that can be used in effective intervention programs.
4. Provide the funds for continued implementation and monitoring of such programs.

In sum, if states are to achieve their goal of educating all students to a high standard, they must develop comprehensive and coherent standards-based systems. Attention must be given to the quality of the individual elements that make up the system—standards, curriculum, assessment, professional development for teachers, intervention for students. The standards must be strong because they are the bedrock of the system, and the assessments must be aligned to the standards and be credible in terms of the knowledge and skills students are expected to master. Further, states must bear in mind that in a standards-based system, the primary purpose of assessments is to ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at the next level and to trigger assistance for those who would otherwise fall through the cracks. Therefore, the tests must identify students who need help and ensure that districts have the necessary resources they need to provide that help.

When essential elements of a standards-based system are missing or underdeveloped—as they are in many states where testing runs ahead of strong standards or where tests are not aligned to the standards—failure rates may be excessive and test scores inaccurate, and students and their parents may become frustrated and angry. If these problems persist, the promise of standards-based reform will remain unmet. □