

Opinion

Proper punctuation pays dividends for businesses, too

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

For centuries, the written word has meant much to mankind. When grouped in just the right sequence, the purposeful wording of the king's fiat could provoke revolution.



Grubaugh

"Hear ye, hear ye," the royal crier would say, reading from the order. "Your taxes are going up."

By the same token, the proper syntax has also made friends of foes.

"We should lay down our arms in pursuit of peace," one enemy would suggest in a missive to the other.

Artful prose between parties has been known to spawn eternal friendships. Such eloquence, elegantly flowing from pen to paper, makes for many a keepsake in our collective box of memories. One note, gracefully written, is an everlasting sign of not only our consideration and imagination but also our education.

I must ask, then: When is the last time you received such a note? Properly spelled? Wholly grammatical? The last time you read a sentence and seized over the misuse of "your and you're," "its

and it's," "their, they're and there?"

How sad in modern times that the act of writing, once considered an art, has been reduced to the graffiti of a cluttered mind, one that's incapable of producing a sentence that's spelled correctly, employs subject-verb agreement and short-cuts any legitimacy when it comes to communication.

"Yo, dude. LOL!" one BFF says to another by text.

Thank social media for killing the King's English. Credit, too, the fact that we let it happen.

Businesses beware: It might be costing you money. I may be old school, but I can tell you that nothing spells unprofessional quite like the gent who can't spell "professional." Read what you put on your website to entice customers. Study the wording of your proposals to buyers, vendors, and investors. Be as concerned with substance as you are with style. There is no penalty for proper punctuation.

Where did we go awry? Maybe it began with school systems relaxing their standards, just to let some kids pass? (If so, some of those kids should be held back a bit longer, say, until their 21st birthday.) Maybe it's the parents who pass down bad habits to their children?

Maybe it's just no longer di rigueur to emphasize nouns, adjectives and adverbs?

Scores of years ago — maybe it was just one score? — I started noticing an unwelcome trend. I would get a resume from a person and invariably he or she would say something akin to, "I is a writer and I would like to" It reminded me of Cheech and Chong's classic Evelyn Woods' speed-reading spoof. (View it on Google.) The net result was one resume, trashed.

Imagine the businessman hoping to land a multi-million-dollar contract, broaching the subject by letter with a prospective client but with obvious spelling or grammar errors. The receiving party might do the same thing I did with those yesteryear resumes. One must always assume that the receiving party places priority on professionalism.

Apparently, a lot of people agree with me. Tidio, a communicator for businesses, conducted a poll and surveyed 1,839 people to see to what extent they are attentive to grammar. Blog writer Gosia Szaniawska-Schiavo revealed that as many as 94 percent of U.S. respondents zero in on grammar and spelling when they browse or read online content. Some 95.5 percent of pre-baby boomers consider their generation to be the most attentive to grammar. A like number of Millennials also place emphasis on such things, which stands against the common belief that the younger you are, the more clueless you are about sentence structure.

At the same time, 96.5 percent

of all respondents admit that grammar mistakes influence the image of a person, and 97.2 percent claim that it affects the perception of a company.

Essentially, this means that almost everyone puts stock in the professionalism of your prose, whether it's coming via the writings of a CEO or a letter from the marketing department. Or, the spelling of the IT guy who puts together your website landing page, which is where many of today's customers get their first exposure to a business.

I am a fan of the written word, and I still cringe when my own writing goes off the cliff. Some of that is simply the rush of life. It doesn't mean a lack of intelligence, education or passion for getting it right. But let's face it, no matter how important your message, if people stumble over the prose, they're not getting the message.

All this proselytizing over communication reminds me of an old joke from a newsroom colleague:

The guard runs into the palace and breathlessly tells the king: "Sire, the peasants are revolting!" To which his besieged royal highness says, "Yes, they are."

Dennis Grubaugh is editor of the Illinois Business Journal. He can be reached at dgrubaugh@ibjonline.com or (618) 977-6865. Spellcheck was used in the creation of this column.

St. Louis, take a page from Kansas to fund new convention center

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Over the past month, Bob Clark, the executive chairman of Clayco, one of the largest construction companies in the United States, has been everywhere trying to sell his idea to raze America's Center and build new rather than expand the existing venue. A Sept. 3, St. Louis Post-Dispatch headline, "11th hour pitch shakes St. Louis convention center expansion plans," pooped the concept as a Johnny-come-lately attempt to throw a wrench in the works. But that's not exactly true.



Ortbals

According to an interview Clark did with John Hancock and Mike Kelly on KMOX, the developer/contractor/entrepreneur has been pushing his idea behind the scenes for several years to government, civic and business leaders on both sides of the river. He says that everyone

supports the plan yet the city, county and the St. Louis Regional Convention and Visitors Commission have marched steadily forward with their \$200 million expansion plan. He's gone public with it now in hopes of bringing public opinion to bear on the decision-making process. That doesn't appear to be going well as the above referenced P-D article drew 70 comments, almost all of them negative.

The problem is funding. Despite the fact that St. Louis is Missouri's cash cow, the state legislature is generally hostile to urban needs. Many St. Louis Countians are not enamored with paying for amenities in the city, and the city itself is broke. Clark has suggested using money that may be won in the lawsuit against the Los Angeles Rams and the NFL but who knows what that might be, if anything at all, or when it might be realized. I think this is why the idea has languished and will continue to do so until Clark can devise a funding plan that minimizes the ask from state and local government.

Some say Clark's plan is too big — we need to do what we can afford. I think it's not big enough.

As I mentioned in last month's editorial, in the late 1990s, the states of Kansas

and Missouri were competing for a new racetrack that NASCAR CEO Bill France Jr. wanted to locate in the Kansas City area. To win that contest, Kansas came up with the idea for a new program: STAR (Sales Tax and Revenue) Bonds. This program allowed municipalities to issue bonds to finance the development of large commercial, entertainment and tourism projects and capture the sales taxes and other revenues produced within the district to service the debt. In order to subsidize the development of the racetrack, and thereby beat out Missouri, the city of Kansas City, Kansas created a district that was much larger than the racetrack itself and packed it with revenue producers. This area, known as Village West, has attracted \$1.2 billion in retail, dining and entertainment development which has subsidized the development of the racetrack. This is the path Clark should take.

I don't know anything about the convention business but those who do, like Bob O'Loughlin, CEO of Lodging Hospitality Management, former vice president of the CVC and former chairman of the Missouri Tourism Commission, says that the current expansion plan fails to put St. Louis in a position

to compete with cities like Nashville and Indianapolis. If that's true, spending \$200 million on that plan would be a mistake.

To the north of the dome lies vacant land referred to as the Bottle District. To the east of that lies a huge area of unused and underused land that was offered as a site for a new Rams stadium. It could all be included in a new STAR Bonds district. Bob Clark is a mover and shaker and has connections in the development business throughout the United States. He's the ideal person to fill that land with users that would not only generate the needed revenue but also complement and support the new convention center.

The beauty of a program like STAR Bonds is it only asks governments to give up future revenues that they would not have realized anyway. I would urge Clark to look to the state to pass similar legislation and to work with the city and the CVC to create a STAR Bonds district just as Kansas did for the Kansas Speedway. Frankly, it won't happen any other way.

Alan J. Ortals, former publisher of the Illinois Business Journal, can be reached at aortbals@ibjonline.com.



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P.O. Box C • Mascoutah, IL 62258
Web site: www.ibjonline.com
Periodical mailing permit 332440

President/Publisher: Greg Hoskins
ghoskins@heraldpubs.com (618) 566-8282
Editor: Dennis Grubaugh
dgrubaugh@ibjonline.com (618) 977-6865
Marketing Manager: Charles Huelsmann
chuelsmann@better-newspapers.com (618) 973-0414

emailus

If you would like to express your opinion on a topic relevant to Southwestern Illinois business readers, send your letter to the editor of 300 words or less to dgrubaugh@ibjonline.com
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