

A Word, Please By June Casagrande



“While on the glacier, it was impossible not to feel humbled and awe-struck by its enormity.”

“I stood outside the arena amazed by its enormity.”

“When I look up at the night sky I am just overwhelmed by its enormity.”

If you were a student of William Strunk in the early 20th century carefully following the instructions laid out in his classroom guide “The Elements of Style,” you would have had no problem using the word “enormity” to refer to size — as the writers of the passages above did.

But if you read a copy of Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style” in the late-1950s or later, you would think that it’s a mistake to use “enormity” to mean bigness.

Yet if you open a dictionary today, you’ll see it’s not a mistake at all. What gives?

Well, like a lot of words, “enormity” has gone through significant changes over the years, some stickler-approved, some not.

Team Stickler is best represented by E.B. White, a onetime student of William J. Strunk, who in the late 1950s added about 50 pages to his former professor’s short classroom guide, transforming it into the bestseller

that still rakes in the bucks today.

Among the many bits of information White inserted to make Strunk’s classroom instructions sound like universal rules for every English speaker was this: “Enormity. Use only in the sense of ‘monstrous wickedness.’ Misleading, if not wrong, when used to express bigness.”

If you’re looking for the safest, most buttoned-down way to use “enormity,” you can stop reading here. Just stick to the meaning about badness, not bigness, and no one can say you’re wrong.

Of course, the folks who believe “badness” is the only meaning of “enormity” would have been wrong at previous points in history. In the late 1400s, “enormity” meant a state of being abnormal or, as the Oxford Universal Dictionary put it, “deviation from a normal standard or type.” The adjective “enormous” had the same root meaning around that time: “Deviating from ordinary rule or type.”

English speakers at the time, apparently, believed that being out of the ordinary was necessarily bad, indicated with “hence” in the Oxford Universal Dictionary’s etymology of “enormous”: “abnormal, hence monstrous.”

Slowly, “enormous” came to mean “exceedingly great, or monstrous,” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary. And eventually the “great” meaning took over the “monstrous” meaning to give us the “enormous” we use today.

To recap: “enormous” meant “bad” long before it meant “big.” And it meant “abnormal” even earlier than

that.

That’s just for the adjective. The noun “enormity” evolved on its own little journey. To traditionalists, the difference is night and day. Yes, “enormous” means big, they say, but “enormity” means bad.

If you like the idea of using “enormity” to mean “enormousness” and you don’t mind certain people thinking you’re wrong, you can. Says who? Modern dictionaries.

“‘Enormity,’ some people insist, is improperly used to denote large size,” notes Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary. “They insist on ‘enormousness’ for this meaning, and would limit ‘enormity’ to the meaning ‘great wickedness.’ Those who urge such a limitation may not recognize the subtlety with which enormity is actually used. It regularly denotes a considerable departure from the expected or normal.”

As an example, Merriam’s cites John Steinbeck: “They awakened; they sat up; and then the enormity of their situation burst upon them. ‘How did the fire start?’”

“Enormity” can also mean huge in size, Merriam’s says, citing this example from Paul Theroux: “Either the enormity of the desert or the sight of a tiny flower.”

Personally, I don’t use “enormity” to refer to size, mostly because I don’t want to get scolded. But if you want to, do..

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Lanier County News

Covering Lanier & Northern Lowndes Counties

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Lakeland, GA population = 2,691

Lanier County, GA population = 9,817

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