Resources for Teachers and Students

by Art Peterson

One of my first epiphanies as a teacher of writing occurred when I realized an obvious fact: words are everywhere. The writing teacher can rely on the yellow pages of the phone book with as much purpose as he draws on the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

And the Internet, despite its technological underpinnings, has had the effect of increasing geometrically the number of sentences circulating in the world and available for classroom use.

The question for the writing teacher, then, is what to do with this raw material. Those of us blessed or cursed with a didactic state of mind live perhaps too much with this question. Take the following list of headlines. It wafted our way from some pit stop on the information superhighway. The headlines may be real or apocryphal, most probably a mix of the two, but the compiler of the list had no purpose other than to amuse, perhaps tweaking a bit the boundaries of good taste.

But not me. I am thinking nouns and verbs; I am seeing confusion caused by the omission of articles, prepositions and auxiliary verbs, or by misplaced modifiers. I am looking around for a classroom filled with students so I may scrawl on the chalk board “Teacher Strikes Idle Kids.” “What are two interpretations of this sentence?” I want to know. “What causes this confusion?” Suddenly we are talking about — dare I say it — parts of speech, even possessive apostrophes.

If you are, as I am, afflicted by the need to turn damn near everything into a “teachable moment,” spend some time analyzing the lessons in language that cry out from many of these bloopers. Are we teaching grammar in context here? I’m not sure, but we are having a lot of fun.

The Year’s Best Headlines:

- Include Your Children When Baking Cookies
- Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash
- Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
- Survivor of Siamese Twins Joins Parents
- Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
- Prostitutes Appeal to Pope
- Panda Mating Fails; Veterinarian Takes Over
- British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands
- Lung Cancer in Women Mushrooms
- Eye Drops Off Shelf
- Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
- Enraged Cow Injures Farmer With Ax
- Plane Too Close to Ground, Crash Probe Told
- Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
- Stolen Painting Found by Tree
- Two Sisters Reunited After 18 Years at Checkout Counter
- Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in 10 Years
- War Dims Hope for Peace
- Cold Wave Linked to Temperatures
- Deer Kill 17,000
- Enfields Couple Slain; Police Suspect Homicide
- Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
- Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead
- Man Struck by Lightning Faces Battery Charge
- New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
- Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft
- Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
- Ban on Soliciting Dead in Trotwood
- Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
- New Vaccine May Contain Rabies
- Hospitals are Sued by 7 Foot Doctors