

A Few Classes Short of a Major

By

Dorothy Rosby

I have great sympathy for politicians who embarrass themselves at elementary schools by misspelling words like tomato or potato. (Or is it potatoe?) If elementary school students ever ask me to spell a word for them, I'll tell them to look it up!

I'm joking. What I'll really say is, "Boys and girls, have you heard about that wonderful computer program called Spell Check? There's also a program which checks grammar, but I'm not sure it knows anymore than I do, which isn't that much." Then the teacher will say, "Well, Mrs. Rosby. I think that's all we have time for today. Thank you for visiting." And she'll shoo me out of the classroom and shake her head disapprovingly as I leave.

People expect good spelling and grammar from someone with a journalism major and an English minor which, I'm proud to say, I have. But remember, it's an English minor, not a major. If I'd had the wherewithal to take a few more classes, I'd have an English major and I might have been able to spell "wherewithal" without help from my spell checker.

I might also know if the "minor" in English minor should be capitalized or not, because the websites I checked are inconsistent. Capitalization can be tricky for an English minor--or an English Minor. One of the dumbest mistakes I've ever made in column--at least one of the dumbest I'll admit to--involved capitalization. I once wrote about buying a raffle ticket for an afghan, only I capitalized it. So it appeared that instead of a cozy, handmade blanket, I was hoping to win a person from Afghanistan! And for

just one dollar! Unfortunately I didn't win either one. An afghan would be nice, but an Afghan could cook me the food of his homeland, leaving me to lie around the house before supper. Or would it be "lay" around the house?

I wouldn't be asking if I had an English major. I'd know exactly when to use "lie" instead of "lay" and "fewer" instead of "less." As it is, I have to consult my trusty reference book, and then I have to go lie down.

I also have to be very careful about words like "there and their" and "to, too, and two" and "bare and bear" because, as you know, a "bear behind" is very different from a "bare behind."

Being acutely aware of my own grammar and usage problems has not, in the least, kept me from being entertained by the failings of others. A friend once claimed to be on the "urge of a nervous breakdown" instead of the "verge" of a nervous breakdown. I was on the verge of urging her to stop being overdramatic.

I once heard a speaker say a particular celebrity, whom I've forgotten now, was being "indicted" into a Hall of Fame. It may have been appropriate, depending on which Hall of Fame it was. And whenever I see an advertisement that reads, "Just \$3 for children," I can't help but think, "Wow! That's a lot less than I paid for mine."

But before I judge anyone else harshly, I remind myself of another really embarrassing mistake I made. I once confused "latter" and "former" in a column about insomnia. I MEANT to say, "Late night phone calls generally fall into two categories: tragic or obscene. If it's the former and someone is dead, they'll still be that way in the morning. If the caller was obscene, they'll still be that way in the morning too."

That's what I meant to say. But I typed in "latter" instead of "former," making it deadly to be obscene and confusing the only reader who had made it that far in my column. Someone with an English Major would never have done that.

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