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English as it is broken

Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.

Inking a description

THIS submission from a reader proved tricky, in the sense that we found it difficult to stay clear of the technical jargon. So, belt up and here we go.

Now, some punctuation in this whole collection of words would have been useful. Alternatively, we could run each new description with a bullet. This will make the list easier on the eye and the meaning clearer. It would look like this:

- High-quality ink
- Brightly coloured
- Write agreeable
- Slippery flowing freely
- Safety not poisonous
- Do enjoy to write the fun

'High-quality ink' and 'brightly coloured' are fine, no problems there.

Then we are told that the ink 'write agreeable'. The third person singular form of the verb is needed so that 'writes' agrees with ink. The word 'agreeable' is in the adjectival form when the adverbial form, 'agreeably', is required here. But 'agreeably' is not an appropriate adverb to use with 'writes', so we should just say: 'It writes well.'

Next, since ink that 'flows freely' already communicates the idea, 'slippery' is redundant, not to mention unidiomatic.

Since we're describing the ink, the next phrase should use the adjectival form. Hence, it should be 'Safe' rather than 'Safety'. So, it should read 'Safe, not poisonous'.

Finally, we can only guess at what the manufacturer is trying to communicate with this: 'Do enjoy to write the fun.' Perhaps what they intended to say is: 'Fun to write with.'

War of words and worlds?

LET'S touch on the difference between British and American spelling.

- Programme or program
- Favourite or favorite
- Rigour or rigor

A student once commented that the British use more letters to spell! Based on the examples above, that seems to be the case until one considers a word like 'fulfil', which is typically spelt as 'fulfill' by the Americans.

Incidentally, the past tense of 'spell' can be written as 'spelt' or 'spelled'. Can you guess which is used in British English?

It might also be interesting to note that the British do use 'program' - but only when it is associated with computer usage, and refers to a set of instructions given to a computer to make it perform an operation.

In Singapore, the standard used to be British English, but that seems to be changing as more of us are exposed to American spelling.

Next week, we will look at words which may actually be used differently in the two countries and in Singapore. Send us your suggestions if you have any!

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