



Everybody Needs a Mrs. Strickland! But why?

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I have been in academia a long time, and I have been involved with this journal for a long time. Exactly how long is not relevant to the topic of this short commentary. However, as I work with authors, as I review manuscripts, as I once again turn on “track changes” in Word, as I get a certain delightfully impish enjoyment from typing one of my favorite comments within track changes, I am often taken back many years ago to my sophomore year in high school in the Midwest of the United States and to Mrs. Strickland’s sophomore English class. By the way, two current examples of my favorite comments made to authors are “Avoid purposefully obfuscating language” and “You are now suffering from AOL (= Acronym Overload).”

Back to Mrs. Strickland, who would likely now be getting ready to verbally pounce on me for wandering off my topic, plus I just did the dreaded thing – I *split the infinitive!* Well, she probably wasn’t a “Mrs.” We, that is, I and my fellow suffering students, perceived of her as the proverbial “old maid school teacher,” and we thought of her as very, very, very old. Who knows what tricks memory has played upon me over the years, but I see her in my mind as skinny and having wispy and sparse white hair that stuck out rather oddly. This little, aged person had us all cowed! We listened to her, we did what she told us to do, we did our homework, we tried to slouch down in our seats as her eyes roved around the room. Most importantly, we learned – or at least I think most of us did! The physical image I just described does not fit one’s model of a teenage hero figure. However, many decades later, she is a language hero for me, and I hope that she can read these words from the grammar-ly heaven where her spirit now resides. I doubt that she received many “thank-you’s” from her students during her teaching career – sadly, but now I want to extend my enthusiastic *thank you* to her publicly – and to all those like her.

Quite simply, she led me to care about language, about my ability to communicate the meaning and thoughts I wanted to convey, about seeking to find the right word for what I wanted to say, about not dangling my metaphors, about realizing that punctuation in writing has an important communicative purpose, about making sure that my subjects and verbs agreed, and about all those other sorts of language things that lurk in my primordial language brain. I want to note, however, that I am not talking just about the mechanics of language. It is about clarity, meaning, and the recognition that there is a reader on the other side of what I

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write. I want Mrs. Strickland to know that I do care, and, moreover, I think it is imperative that we all care about seeking to communicate as well and as least imperfectly as possible.

Now that phrase, *least imperfectly*, is certainly filled with linguistic tension, so I will seek to explain more clearly what I am trying to convey. We are human beings, and we can only connect with each other through communication – written, oral, non-verbal, and even sometimes kinesthetic communication. If I give you a good sock in the jaw, I will have communicated something to you. Because communication of whatever sort is the only way we have of relating to each other, it behooves us to seek to do so as well as possible but with the realization that we will never attain perfection in our attempt. For example, the minute I say aloud or write *mother* or *father*, two very basic words for everyone in every language, we have had a failure in our communication because we each bring a different understanding to those words due to our different experiences. Thus, it behooves us to try find the best word for what we want to say and the best way of saying it so that we are seeking to be as least imperfect in our attempt as possible.

Let us now bring these thoughts to the realm of higher education. As members of the academy, whatever your role may be as you read these words, you probably join me in feeling a certain sense of pride in what the academy is meant to be, the high ideals that we seek to espouse as we go about the business of higher education. I would like to suggest to you that these high ideals should also translate into our use of language – that we should care about what we say and how we say it. I would further suggest that we should not accept a declining standard for our language – either written or spoken. If we do so, we are contributing to a lowering of our standards for our relationships to each other, and we are potentially undermining the effectiveness of the role of higher education in society.

Over the past few days I have snuffled around via the web and looked at other journals, and to an extent what I have found has been quite disappointing. I am not thinking of simple matters of copy editing, such as where commas should go or the avoidance of dangling metaphors or the misuse of the word *faculty*, which is a singular collective and cannot be mixed with plural forms. (One cannot write, for example, the faculty distribute their syllabi....) Rather, I am thinking of our obligation as scholars which involves dissemination of the results of our scholarly work to others and, in particular, of our obligation to strive for quality and excellence in our communication.

As authors prepare a manuscript, as editors begin their work, I would suggest that it is imperative to keep in mind the goal of communicating as well as possible, and this goal is undergirded by the word *care*. If we genuinely *care* about how well we communicate, we will indeed chase after perfection. If I seek the right word, I will not write “illicit responses,” but I will write “elicit responses.” If writing about compensation for faculty members, I will not write of faculty “iniquity,” but I will write of “inequity.” I will not create a sentence of way too many words, recognizing that a reader will likely get lost in the verbal morass of which I might actually be quite proud. I will not unthinkingly throw a new thought into the conclusion of the manuscript, which is not where a new thought belongs. If writing for a general readership, I will seek wording that is not jargon, not so discipline-specific that persons outside the field are not likely to be able to understand what I want to say. I will avoid creating acronyms that are not commonly understood. I will re-read the manuscript for completeness of information, clarity of thought, and logical and reasoned progression through the material so that I can carry readers along with me in my effort to communicate with them.

Thinking about these things as we write and re-write means that we do indeed *care*, and it shows that Mrs. Strickland had a remarkable effect – at least on me. Caring about our ability to

communicate connects directly, in my opinion, with the sense of academic honor and responsibility and with the ideals that we espouse as members of the community of higher education. I hope you share in that feeling of *caring*.

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