

Like any living thing, English changes, and when it does, it is our duty to inform our fellow teachers about it. At Griffin High School, the English Department took advantage of the first faculty meeting of the year to tell the faculty about the new MLA style-sheet. One can only imagine how confused students could become if they are required to write footnotes in a history class but not in an English class.

For too many years, English instructors (myself included) have failed or forgotten to teach an attitude toward our subject. This attitude — that correct writing is important for everybody everywhere — will never be adopted by students and by other instructors if we confine the teaching of English to the classroom. Unless we fill ourselves with the same kind of missionary zeal that compelled the disciples to spread the Gospel, our students will continue to believe that reading and writing are merely eccentricities of the English Department with no apparent bearing on the “real world.”

A Vocabulary Bonus: Turning an Extra Duty into a T. G. I. F. Activity

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Students look forward to Fridays in all respects except one: they have to go to school. The last day of the week, rather than being the pinnacle of the week's activities, a final opportunity to gain knowledge before the weekend's hiatus, is more often the ultimate obstacle to overcome before the weekend provides relief from schooling. Most students hope that on Fridays their English teachers will appraise the situation, recognize its hopelessness, and allow them to ease through the day. We are often tempted to accommodate them, but our professional responsibilities deter us and we end up struggling through the day along with them. Ideally, the week should climax with an activity which is at once edifying and entertaining. Over the years we have developed a popular activity which has made something as loathly as the weekly vocabulary test an event which is not merely palatable but perhaps even toothsome to most students. This activity has also made teaching vocabulary studies seem less an added “duty” and more of a pleasure for us, as well.

The idea was conceived at a party when several spificated (are you getting the idea?) individuals were playing "Fictionary." One person, using a large dictionary, chose a word at random that he thought no one else would know. The word was presented to the group, and each person invented either a serious or absurd definition for it. The person with the dictionary wrote down the actual definition, the guesses were collected, and all were read in a random order. Each person then voted for the one he thought was correct. Surprisingly, the real definitions were often far more outrageous than the fabricated ones. The game was fun, it made good use of the dictionary, and although the words we came up with — quandong, purfle, xanthocroid, and yes, spificated — were not ones we used very often, we usually remembered later what they meant.

We thought that if adults with an average familiarity with the language could enjoy cooking up bizarre definitions for words, then perhaps students would do the same. Finding a practical classroom application for this was not difficult: at the end of the weekly vocabulary test, we would give a bonus word of the "Fictionary" ilk. When the students had written down a definition and a context sentence, either serious or silly, the papers would be collected and the results read to the class. This would allow the students to share in one another's ingenuity and hear examples of good, student-made definitions. If he so chose, the teacher could award points for originality and humor. Students who correctly spelled and defined the word and used it properly in a sentence — yes, it did happen occasionally — could be rewarded with anything from full credit for one word to an A for the entire test; should a student get several right in one semester, we could reward him with an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Hoboken, N.J. This might seem like a rather generous meed; however, how many high school students could correctly define quodlibetic, metagrobolized and gongoozler?

In the course of our testing, we discovered four basic guidelines necessary to get the most interest and value from the bonus words. First, and most obviously, it must sound unusual. Second and more importantly, however, it must have a definition which is surprising. A word like "kludge," for example, fits the first criterion but is a weak choice because of its dull and overly technical definition, "a computer made up of poorly matched components." On the other hand, "arachibutyrophobia" means "the fear of having peanut butter stick to the roof of the mouth." Now we're cooking.

Third, the word should lend itself to the invention of humorous definitions. Because no student is likely to be able to define the

bonus word correctly, something about it should provide a springboard for the students' creativity. This can be in the form of a smaller word within the word that gives them a starting point for a definition, such as "fun" in "funambulist," or it may be that part or all of the bonus word rhymes with or simply reminds them of another word: "zarf" and "scarf" or "tolypeutine" and "turpentine." Characteristic endings, such as "tion" in "ogganition" and "ous" in "apterous," are further aids. You must be careful about using words in which the students can latch on to several sounds within the word to come up with unimaginative responses; bellibones," for instance, will surely prompt predictable guesses.

Finally, words with dangerous connotations like "formication" and "prickmedainty" are bad choices, for the offerings might be somewhat risqué. In the same vein, a word such as "gynotikolobomassophile," which means "one who likes to nibble on a woman's earlobe," is best saved for adult gatherings. One final note in this regard: No matter what the word, some students are bound to come up with a definition dealing with sex, racial bigotry, "outhouse humor," or some other topic unsuitable to the classroom setting. We try to discourage this at all costs, going so far as to deduct points from the student's test score should he write something in bad taste. This usually discourages miscreants after a time or two.

The restrictions we suggest are not overly limiting because the language contains enough preposterous words to allow the inventive teacher to serve up a different treat with each test. Over the years, the students have greatly enjoyed inventing both plausible and bizarre definitions, and their work has been extremely creative. For "apterous," several students keyed on "apt" and suggested "of or pertaining to the tendency to do something," or "leaving no doubt." One boy, one of those science freaks we all seem to have, wrote: "having such a great appetite that the stomach starts releasing enzymes even though there is no food yet to digest." The word, in fact, means "without wings." When "palta" was given, a few of the better definitions centered around religion: "a golden vase used in religious ceremonies," and "part of a clergyman's wardrobe." One girl came surprisingly close with "an exotic vine fruit that grows in a climate between 100-103 degrees Fahrenheit; a very rare fruit growing near the equator." "Palta" is a synonym for "avocado." The possibilities for word choices are virtually limitless; all it takes is a good unabridged dictionary or thesaurus, or a book of strange words such as Josefa Heifetz Byrne's *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure, and Preposterous Words* or Susan Kelz Sperling's *Poplollies and Bellibones*.

Next to grammar exercises, students probably find nothing more tedious than vocabulary work. Our students do not complain nearly as much on Fridays when they are given their vocabulary quiz, not because the test itself is any easier or more interesting, but because they like having the bonus word. In the extra ten minutes required to give a bonus word and read the responses, students get practice in writing good definitions; they become more aware of characteristic endings for determining parts of speech; they get practice in using words in context; they will, no doubt, come into contact with most of the words which will appear on the vocabulary section of the SAT; and, as a real bonus, they can have a good time with words while they are learning more about them.