June, 2005

Problem Words and Pairs in Legal Writing—Part IV

Gerald Lebovits

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Owls Shouldn’t Claw at Eagles

Big Ed Reilly and the Lindbergh Kidnapping Case

by William H. Manz

Also in this Issue

A Case for Amending EPTL 4-1.4
Kinship Proceedings
Estate Planning in the Face of Divorce
Motorist Insurance Law Update - Part II
Problem Words and Pairs in Legal Writing — Part IV

This series of columns will help you decide which word to use. But once you’ve resolved the issue of word choice, be careful to use the rite (wright? write? right?) homonym and homophone. Homonyms are words that have the same form as other words but which have different meanings (“through” the wall or “through” with work). Homophones are words that are pronounced the same but are spelled differently (“aid” and “aide”; “dear” and “deer”; “bee” and “be”).

The Spell Checker Poem makes it clear how errors can go undetected:

I have a spelling Checker;  
It cam with my PC.  
It clearly marks for my revue,  
Mistakes I cannot sea.  
I’ve run this poem threw it;  
I’m sure your pleased to no.  
Its letter perfect in it’s weigh;  
I have a spelling Checker.

Two rite with care is quite a feet,  
Of witch won should bee proud.  
Two rite with care is quite a feet,  
Two rite with care is quite a feet.  
Two rite with care is quite a feet,  
Two rite with care is quite a feet.

One New York judicial opinion innocently explains the nature of homophone errors, in a sense. In 1988 a court reporter transcribed a trial judge’s instruction to a jury in a criminal case that “each defendant is presumed to be innocent in a sense.” The Appellate Division affirmed the conviction but chastised the judge. After the Appellate Division’s opinion was published, the prosecution moved to correct the opinion. Here’s how the Appellate Division decided the motion, amending its opinion “in fairness to the parties, and indeed to the trial judge”:

Essentially, the People confront us with the same problem which confronted Frederick, the love-starved hero of The Pirates of Penzance, whose life, as all Savoyards know, was severely complicated by the failure of his nurse, in his infancy, to understand his dying father’s wish that Frederick be apprenticed to a pilot.

Due to a sad misunderstanding, the nurse apprenticed Frederick to a pirate, with dire consequences that are only resolved in the last act. Thus the People urge here that Justice [Edward J.] McLaughlin, in his charge to the jury, did not say that the defendant is presumed to be innocent “in a sense,” but merely repeated the word “innocence.” There is no suggestion that this was done through “innocent merriment,” in the sense used by The Mikado. 1

If, whether. “If,” when compared with “whether,” means “if and only if.” “Whether,” when compared with “if,” means “whether or not.” Attorney: “Judge, please let me know if (or whether?) you want me to brief the issue.” The “if” requests an answer only if the judge wants a brief. The “whether” requests an answer to the attorney’s question no matter what. Law clerk: “Your opinion writing will be competent if (or whether?) you practice writing.” For most people, it is “if.” Only stars write competently whether or not they practice writing.

Illegal. Anything against the law, including the civil law, is illegal. If you mean illegal in the penal sense, prefer “criminal” to “illegal.”


Imply, infer. To “imply” is to suggest or express indirectly. To “infer” is to surmise or conclude. The writer implies; the reader infers.

Important, importantly? — the former. The pretentious “more importantly” is grammatically incorrect, a hyper-correction.

In, into, in to. “In” means “within.” “Into” means “from outside to inside” or “from one point to another.” The “in” in an adverb-preposition combination modifies a verb. Correct: “While drunk, Mr. X drove in his Corvette. In his stupor he drove into a van. But he turned himself into an honest citizen by turning himself in to the police.”

Inequity, inequality. An “inequity” is an inequality or unfairness in treatment. An “iniquity” is an evil deed.

Informant, informer. The two are synonymous; both give information. But only an informer gives information to law enforcement. Some information: New York courts habitually call informers “informer,” as in “confidential informants,” because “informer” has a pejorative connotation.

Ingenious, ingenuous, disingenuous. Something or someone “ingenious” is innovatively smart. Someone “ingenuous” is candid and guileless. “Disingenuous” people hide their feelings and thoughts. A “disingenuous” argument might be a correct argument, but it is not a candid argument.
Innumerable, numerous. Things “innumerable” can be counted, but only with great difficulty. “Innumerable” does not mean “countless.” “Numerous” means many.

Instinctive, intuitive. “Instinctive” behavior is inborn. “Intuitive” behavior is unreasoned. Correct: “After the witness instinctively blinked and swallowed, the trial judge intuitively suspected that the witness was lying.”

Intra, inter. “Intra” means “within” or “inside.” “Inter” means “between” or “among.” An intramural Moot Court competition, for example, is a competition held within a school for students of that school only. An intermural Moot Court competition is held for students of more than one school.

Involve. To “involve” means “to envelop.” It does not mean to “cause,” “concern,” “imply,” “mean,” “result in,” or “use.” Incorrect: “The case involved a civil-rights dispute.”


Gerald Lebovits is a judge of the New York City Civil Court, Housing Part, in Manhattan. An adjunct professor at New York Law School, he has written Advanced Judicial Opinion Writing, a handbook for New York’s trial and appellate courts, from which this column is adapted. His e-mail address is Glebovits@aol.com.

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertiser</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avis &amp; Budget Rent A Car</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertholon-Rowland Corp.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Image Realty</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Itkowitz</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Guild for the Blind</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KinderLaw LLC</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawbook Exchange, Ltd.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LexisNexis</td>
<td>cover 2, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McPhillips Fitzgerald &amp; Cullum</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Academy of CLE</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orr &amp; Reno, P.A.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steinberg, Fineo, Berger and Fischoff, P.C.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior Information Services</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson West</td>
<td>cover 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William A. Denman</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>