

The Columbian Life

Section D

Today's weather picture by Arianna Synder, 9, Vancouver, Sunset Elementary School



SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 2007



DAVE BARRY

More than words can convey

Welcome to "Ask Mister Language Person," written by the foremost leading world authority on the proper grammatical usagality of English, both orally and in the form of words. In this award-winning column, which appears nocturnally, we answer the grammar and vocabulary questions that are on the minds of many Americans just before they pass out.

Today, as is our wont, we begin with our first question:

You have a wont?

Yes, but we comb our hair such that you cannot see it.

With regards to the old spiritual song, "Gwine Jump Down, Turn Around, Pick a Bale of Cotton," why is the singer gwine jump down and turn around first?

He is hoping that he gwine pull a hamstring, and somebody else gwine have to pick the bale of cotton.

I work in Customer Service, and my co-workers and I are having a big debate about whether we should say that your call is "very" important to us, or "extremely" important to us. We argue about this all day long! My question is, how do we stop these stupid phones from ringing?

Someone will answer your question "momentarily."

I am a speechwriter for a leading presidential candidate, and I need to know which is correct: "integrity OUT the wazoo," or "integrity UP the wazoo."

We checked with both the Oxford English Dictionary and the Rev. Billy Graham, and they agree that the correct word is "wazooty."

I have trouble remembering the difference between the words "whose" and "who's." Should I put this in the form of a question?

In grammatical terminology, "who's" is an interlocutory contraption that is used to form the culinary indicative tense.

Example: "You will never guess who's brassiere they found in the gumbo."

"Whose" is the past paramilitary form of "whomsoever" and is properly used in veterinary interrogations.

Example: "Whose gwine spay all them weasels?"

I am a writer for "The Sopranos," and I've been arguing with one of my colleagues over the correct wording of some dialogue. I think it should be: "Bleep you, you bleeping bleeper!" Whereas he insists it should be: "Bleep yourself, you bleeperbleeper!" So I had him whacked.

Now he bleeps with the fishes.

Are you going to flagrantly pad this column with actual examples of language usage sent in by alert readers, as is your wont?

Of course:

David Davidson sent an article from the Tybee News containing this statement about the mayor of Tybee Island, Ga.: "He also said an older woman suffered a broken hip when a dog pounced

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DAVE BARRY is a columnist for the Miami Herald. This is a classic column was originally published Aug. 27, 2000. He is currently taking a leave of absence from writing his weekly humor column. Write to him c/o The Miami Herald, One Herald Plaza, Miami FL 33132.

Staff members at the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District get together in a room dubbed "Alaska" by employees, because it is so cold. Mary Devlin, right, makes her point with a joke while coworkers, from left to right, Donna Jones, Frank Matlock and Judy Mason react.



KIRSTINA WRIGHT for The Columbian

Are your meetings off-kilter?

Focus, structure can keep workers engaged instead of impatient

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

A total of 642 unread e-mails and seven hours of meetings await Patty Duitman. She woke at 4:15 a.m., arrived at work by 6 a.m., and now she's drinking a cup of French roast coffee while preparing to meet with the staff she supervises as operations manager of the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District.

The main library in Vancouver's Central Park has two conference rooms: One dubbed "Hawaii," because it stays unseasonably warm, and the other "Alaska," which explains the space heater.

Duitman's group is in the cold room on this chilly morning, and one of her subordinates asks the fundamental question: When is this going to be over?

Meeting overload plagues organizations of all kinds across the country. New technology hasn't eliminated meetings any more than it has created a paperless office.

Meetings take up about 40 percent of employee time, according to the National Statistics Council. And that time may not be well spent. In a series of MCI Conferencing studies, 90 percent of those surveyed admitted daydreaming during a meeting and 40 percent admitted falling asleep.

"Meetings today are too painful," says Larry Susskind, author of "Breaking Robert's Rules." "Loud-mouths often

take over, and other people don't know what to do. Then, those other people don't want to go anymore."

Duitman averages 30 hours of meetings per week. That's why she has to work 60-hour weeks and take paper-work home on the weekends. Along the way, she's encountered all types of meeting participants.

She says she enjoys productive sessions but detests when people are late, incessantly ramble or don't follow an agenda. She also demands that meetings end on time, or she just gets up and that's about to start.

In Duitman's recent morning session with her staff, Frank Matlock, the library district's accounting supervisor, asks right away, "Is this going to be over at 10:30?"

"No, 9:30," Duitman responds. Matlock says, "Ohhh, good," and the group laughs in a burst of relief.

"People always whine about how much time they waste in meetings," says Rita Gunther McGrath, co-author of "MarketBusters: 40 Strategic Moves that Drive Exceptional Business Growth."

"They know what it takes to make a meeting effective. But they just don't do it. ... It's laziness. A lack of focus," she says. "People tend to say, 'I don't have

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Pointers for inspiring better meetings

"Meetings that are too long tire the audience to the point that they are unable to participate fully. ... The job of a good presenter is to finish before the audience."

T. Scott Gross, author of "Positively Outrageous Service."

"Introduce creative pursuits. Bring in relaxing jazz music or a role-playing exercise. ... You can't get a better meeting by having a faster computer."

Mark Sincevich, chief perspective officer at Staash Press.

"Use meetings to focus on issues, and deliver status reports by e-mail. ... Have a Not-Agenda: A list of topics that are off-limits for this meeting. Indicate when these items might be expected to be on a future agenda."

Rick Brenner, author of "101 Tips for Effective Managers."

"Once you've accomplished what you started out to do, you're done. Declare success and move on. Don't go over the same territory again and again. If new ideas come out of discussions, plan a separate side trip."

Linda Popky, marketing strategy expert at L2M Associates, Inc.

Six ideas to consider before holding any meeting

1. Don't meet. Avoid a meeting if the same information could be covered in a memo, e-mail or brief report. By remembering to question the session's fundamental premise, you'll cut down on wasted time and restore your group's belief that the meetings they attend are necessary.

2. Set objectives for the meeting before planning the agenda. The more concrete your objectives, the more focused your agenda will be. Try answering this question, "By the end of the meeting, I want the group to ..."

3. Provide an agenda beforehand. Your agenda needs to include a one-sentence description of the meeting objectives, a list of the topics to be covered and a list stating who will address each topic for how long. Follow the agenda closely.

4. Assign meeting preparation. Give all participants something to prepare for the meeting, and that meeting will take on a new significance to each group member.

5. Assign action items. Don't finish any discussion in the meeting without deciding how to act upon it.

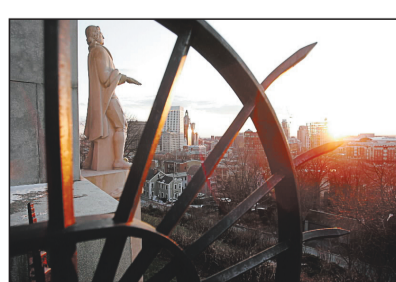
6. Examine the process. Don't leave the meeting without assessing what took place and making a plan to improve the next meeting.

Source: effectivemeetings.com

your Guide:



Source of cacao beans can result in distinct flavors and aromas /D3



Travel: Fans of author H.P. Lovecraft delight in walking tour of his beloved Providence /D4

Coming Monday:

Horticultural therapist offers classes in adult day program /D1

BOOKS

King brings Midas touch to comic books

Best-selling author's 'Dark Tower' series makes successful transition to new genre

By COLLEEN LONG
Associated Press writer

NEW YORK — There are few things Stephen King hasn't tried when it comes to his work. He's already the master of horror fiction, a tour guide through disturbing and fantastical worlds, a writing coach, a nonfiction author, a magazine columnist, a screen writer and even a director.

He can now claim a new genre with the recent Marvel Entertainment comics publication "The Dark Tower," based on his book series of the same name.

"I'm a big fan of the medium," King said of comic books. "A different way to tell stories is always exciting. It's like being a kid with a chemistry set."

It's not that he's a comic book buff. In fact, he hasn't really kept tabs on the medium since his "Sandman" days as a child. But when the idea came up to make his seven-book "Dark Tower" series into a comic serial, he jumped at the chance.

The time is right for the collaboration, as both the genre and the author are being showered with critical and academic success like never before. These days, comic books aren't just for gangly teenage boys or geeky adults, and King isn't just a grocery store paperback writer.

"It asks something more of the reader than an old 'Donald Duck' or an 'Archie' or 'Vernonia,'" King says of the new comic. "You have to learn how to read it, and find out you're going to be challenged."

The "Dark Tower" is part Western, part fantasy and part adventure, centering on the story of Roland Deschain, a man who lives in a futuristic kind of world, and his quest to find the "Man in Black" and, later on, the dark tower.

King calls it his life's work — it took him nearly 20 years

to complete the series, with the final book published in 2004. But unlike myriad other King stories, it's never been made into a film or TV show.

Marvel gathered its best artists and writers for the project. Jae Lee and Richard Isanove worked together on the drawings and the result is a somber, fluid book in deep red and black tones, very different from the traditional "WHAM!" superhero comics.

The plot, too, is unlike traditional comic books, because writers Peter David and Robin Furth had to start from scratch. They work within King's story, but flesh out parts of Roland's life not detailed in the books.

"Unlike Marvel Comics, with 40 years of reference, this world hadn't been drawn," said Marvel publisher Dan Buckley. "There's no movie, no TV show, no place we could go to as a style guide."

Buckley said they worked backward, deciding first how many issues they'd need to tell a story, then plotting the stories loosely for the artists, who were given a lot of independence to create the world.

King was very pleased with the result. "It's a little like a tour of your own imagination," he said.

So far, the title has seen significant commercial success. More than 200,000 issues of the first issue were sold, by far the best-selling non-superhero comic in more than a decade. Marvel executives are hoping the comic will bring in readers new to the genre; King hopes comic readers will find an exciting new story in the "Dark Tower."

"I think this is sort of like a coming-out party for the comic industry, a way to reach out to the mainstream," said Marvel Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada. "We're a very serious art form."



TINA FINEBERG/The Associated Press

Author Stephen King participates in a panel at Comic Con on Feb. 24 in New York. Marvel Comics is turning King's seven-book "Dark Tower" series into a comic serial.

There will be an initial series of seven books, and Lee is currently completing the art for the last book. It took about two years to get the idea off the ground, but once the wheels got moving, it's been a faster pace.

King serves as a consultant and has ultimate control over decisions, but he lets the "comic book geniuses" do their work.

"I don't usually think of writing as a collaborative sport," he said. "But to me, the 'Dark Tower' looks more like a movie panel. Little by little, we've created this whole world."

King is known mostly for his enormously popular horror novels, such as "Carrie," "Pet Cemetery," "Misery" and "The Shining," but he's also written a slew of other works, from the personal novella "The Body" to "Hearts in Atlantis," "The Green Mile" and "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft."

He's recently been writing a pop culture column in Entertainment Weekly, and the lifelong Boston Red Sox fan wrote the book "Faithful: Two

Diehard Boston Red Sox Fans Chronicle the Historic 2004 Season" with Stewart O'Nan.

King, 59, lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, Tabitha. They have three grown children.

In 1999, King was hit by a car while walking down the road in Lovell, Maine. The accident affected him profoundly both physically and mentally, and shortly thereafter he suggested he would retire.

"I didn't feel very well at the end of the 'Dark Tower' series," he said. "And I thought that anything that I do after this is going to be feel a little bit tired and used up, because that's the way I felt. I was in a lot of physical pain."

He didn't exactly stick to his claim, but he has stopped his usual breakneck pace.

"The pain got better, and I just started to write again. For a long time, I didn't write anything, but then I did 'Lisey's Story,' and it seemed like a different book. It felt like an old book, but in a good way. You never know what is going to happen when you start a project."

King has long been both a darling of best seller lists and a critical target as well. While readers voraciously buy up his words, he fends off charges of everything from shallowness to self-indulgence to just plain lack of talent.

His critical luck has started changing. He won a 1996 O. Henry Award for a story he had published in The New Yorker. "Wonder Boys" author Michael Chabon, who grew up reading King stories, selected King works to run in two anthologies put out under Dave Eggers' "McSweeney's" collection.

In 2003, King was awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, although the honor seriously irked some critics. And university professors around the country have started teaching courses on his work.

"I outlived a lot of my worst critics," he said, in jest. "And now, a lot of people who write literary criticism, I scared them ... under their bedcovers. I'm like the Catholic Church: Give them to me young and

they're mine forever." Seriously, though, he thinks any critical success he received is because he has simply improved as a writer.

His monstrous bevy of fans, however, are unfazed by literary criticism. At the release of the first "Dark Tower" book, thousands poured into a conference room at the Comic-Con summit to hear him speak. After a lengthy standing ovation, they stood in awe, photographing King and repeating over and over, in a tone much too casual for someone they've never met: "You are a genius," and "You are my hero."

Just as his fans feel they know King, they also feel a sense of ownership over his work. He said he fielded many letters from disappointed fans after he completed the "Dark Tower" series.

"I knew at the end what it was going to be and I knew it wasn't going to satisfy everyone," he said. "It will be the same when J.K. Rowling finishes the 'Harry Potter' books. There's no way to please everyone, but I think many fans were satisfied."

King takes it all in stride, saying he is grateful to have reached people with his writing. And anyway, someone will always set his ego in check.

For example, at a Publix grocery store in Florida, the author was shopping near the pet food section and an old woman approached him.

"She's like 104, this hunched-up woman with her shopping cart and she says to me, 'I know who you are. You write those horrible books. They might be all right for some people, but I don't like them. Why don't you write something nice like that 'Green Mile,'" he said.

King told the woman that he did, in fact, write the story.

"And she said, 'No you didn't.' Just like that. And that was the end of the conversation. It made me doubt my own identity," he said.

Meetings:

From Page D1

time to put all of that structure into a meeting.' But if they would put in that structure,

they would spend a lot less time in the silly meeting."

As job demands grow, particularly for managers, McGrath says defining the clear purpose of each meeting beforehand has become paramount. Also critical, she adds,

is realizing that meetings are about learning and that people learn in different ways.

"Activist types aren't happy unless they have something to do. Reflectors take a long time to think through things and need to be prodded to come to life. Theorists aren't happy unless they are making models and seeing the complete picture. Pragmatists only want to know what the fastest way to the bottom line is," says McGrath, a professor at Columbia Business School. "A lot of people simply overlook that there are a bunch of diverse human beings in the room."

In the local library's "Alaska" space, each department manager delivers an update to Duitman in a different style. Some read from notes. Some pose larger questions. Others add quips. Each one represents a communication path to many more employees in the system, creating a web that Duitman wants to keep tight.

Kelly Ackley, purchasing and mail supervisor, mentions at one point, "I'm just waiting for the Vancouver mall furniture order."

To which, Mary Devlin, community libraries director, says, "We have a furniture meeting this afternoon."

The group thinks that is funny. A moment for the laugh. Then back to the agenda. Duitman wants to finish this session on time. Flippant humor is just one of the ways a meeting can get hijacked.

In his book, Susskind sets up a scenario in which personalities get in the way of volunteers trying to plan a celebration for their small town.

"One person wants to vote on everything," he says. "One person wants to be the boss. Another person thinks if he just did more research, the data would show the right

answer. One person is nice and wants everyone else to be deferential to each other. ... Every single issue becomes contentious."

Susskind, who has taught negotiation at Harvard, suggests a collaborative approach to meetings that starts with a set of ground rules, generated by a consensus of the group. An impartial facilitator also helps keep the discussion headed toward a target.

"The facilitator needs to say, 'There will be an agenda. We will stay on the agenda that's agreed by everybody, and we will need the permission of the group to go further,'" Susskind says. "Most people don't have ground rules discussed and accepted by everybody. So, of course, things go awry."

Duitman and her group of library administrators run through their staff meeting efficiently, using shorthand

such as: "a RFP for the RFID will be going out within the next two weeks."

It's 9:15 a.m. Done 15 minutes early, they quit with little chitchat. Everyone has other meetings to attend. The group gratefully receives the time as if it were a company bonus, distributed in minutes rather than dollars.

Duitman has several other appointments this day. A few more cups of coffee to drink. More than her job keeps her busy. She is president of her homeowner's association and active in the Greater Vancouver Chamber of Commerce. It's also tax season. She checks her PocketPC. A private financial planner expects Duitman at her office by 10.

For a meeting.

BRETT OPPEGAARD writes general-interest features. Reach him at 360-759-8028 or brett.oppegaard@columbian.com.

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Barry:

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on her and read a long letter from someone supporting the dog ban."

Tim O'Marra sent in an article from the Skagit Valley (Wash.) Herald containing this sentence: "Suspecting the action was suspicious, the officer ordered both of them to raise their hands."

Chaz Liebowitz sent in an article from The Miami Herald that begins: "Davie police are searching for a man with a .25-caliber semi-automatic handgun to rob a convenience store Wednesday."

Several readers sent in an article from the Richmond Times-Dispatch concerning

a dump-truck driver who "dropped more than 59,000 pounds of processed human excrement on Interstate 295" and was charged with "failure to contain his load."

Sue Colson sent in a "Police Blotter" item from the Port Aransas (Texas) South Jetty, consisting entirely of this fascinating statement: "No goat was found in the trunk of a vehicle when an officer responded to a complaint on East Avenue G at about 1:20 p.m."

Today's writing tip: In writing a resumé, make sure that it is "up to date" and reflects current economic conditions:

Wrong: "I am currently working for a 'dot-com' company."

Right: "I am currently living in an appliance carton."

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