

Off-pudding

Up from the basement he emerged with paper in hand. This entrance was not unusual for my husband, Mike, since he has a home office down there, but what was unusual was his mood. Gleeefully thrusting the paper forward, he accelerated towards me, sitting in my fully extended, massive upholstered white recliner.

“Caffeine is misspelled here!” he announced, breathlessly, “You see its ‘e’ then ‘i’.”

“That’s stupid!” I answered, “The spelling rule says, ‘I before e except after c, and when in words pronounced like “a” as in neighbor and weigh. Caffeine is *not* a word pronounced like neighbor and weigh and it’s not after c, so it is c-a-f-f-i-e-n-e.” I replied.

“Well, it is still c-a f-f-e-i-n-e. You can look it up,” he said, glowing.

“This is so stupid! Rules are not *rules* when they have violations!”

“Get used to it because there is more, like, seize and weird.”

“Argh!” I cried, snapping in the foot rest, “See?! This is not a rule, it is just a stupid, vague suggestion at best but treated like a rule by people like you to make people like me feel dumb when they mess it up!”

“Sigh, yes, the English language and I are out to get you. People just don’t care about spelling properly and constructing grammatical sentences anymore. Oh. And it is off-putting with a tah-T, not off-pudding with a duh-D. Spell it o-f-f p-u-T-T-i-n-g not o-f-f p-u-D-D-i-n-g.”

“Tuh-T, Duh-D? What the hell are you saying?” I sputtered as he began his retreat down the stairwell “That doesn’t even make sense! No way, no way, no way.”

I was finishing up the newsletter from my neighborhood’s babysitting co-op. This group met once a month in a member’s home. At our meeting, we might discuss everyone’s babysitting exchanges or an upcoming party for the families, but mostly, we came looking for an excuse to be around other adults for a change. We even had a governing body – president, vice-president, activity coordinator and secretary. Taking on the job of co-op secretary was still pretty new to me. In fact, I didn’t even run for the job. I was elected in absentia, a very awkward situation to face on my return, but impossible to decline due to guilt that I never did anything but sit at the meetings and eat food while sharing under-my-breath comments with my friend and neighbor, Kathy. We loved to quietly mimic our German neighbor friend pointing out the hostess’s window valences. “Ach. I zee you uze za Velcro to poot up youa vindow treatments. It looks like you made zem yourself, yes?” we giggled. Observing our buffet plates, overflowing with many chocolate Hershey kisses, lemon iced Bundt cake and French-dip-burdened potato chips, “I had to stack the cookies on top of the cake to fit it all in without getting dip on them.” I might crow. “Yes, I noticed that when I had to use two hands to hold my own plate. I wanted to pick up the truffles that fell off your plate onto the floor, but I didn’t want to risk spillage,” she might reply.

My new job wasn’t a huge task. All I had to do was type up the meeting’s minutes, print it out, copy and deliver it to the 30 or so neighborhood women in the co-op. But the first time I tried to write it, I realized the expected output, “Let’s all thank Mary for hosting the pre-school Christmas cupcake decorating party. Everyone had a great time!” called for a certain, cookie cutter, dry communication style that I didn’t care for. I felt like I was writing dollar store greeting cards. But by adding to the newsletter “Come to the next meeting or you may be elected to host the co-op Valentines party” and “P.S. to Bonnie, I saw you eyeing my pine cone tree in the gift exchange.” felt better. Who knew creating the newsletter could be so much fun! But I knew I needed Mike to proofread my work before it could go public. I always needed Mike to proofread my writing before it could go public.

The standards of English have eluded me since trying to learn letters in 1st grade. As a child, it was hard to say what was worse, spelling or grammar. It was hard to say because my handwriting was so bad it looked like I was trying to write with my left foot. I knew what lay among the scribbles and scabbles though – misspelled words and butchered grammar that could break the soul of any English teacher. Trying to meet writing responsibilities in school, jobs, and life invariably triggered my bronchial grasp of English mechanics. My phlegmy grip leading me to write on my resume that I was a high school Candy Stripper, and not the Candy Striper I was. It’s sudden intrusion wrenching me from passing as a normal college freshman going so far as forcing me to answer my English professors incredulous question “How did you even get into this college?!”

In the movies, the protagonist overcomes obstacles and emerges a stronger and better version of herself, but my English flaw only got worse over time as people expected a person to learn the rules. It's surprising how many people positively relish finding spelling errors, punctuation slip-ups or incorrect word selections. "It's affect, not effect – chaw." I lived in exhausting fear of these exposés and that, if too many were revealed, people would think I was dumb and uneducable which I was never quite convinced I was not. It didn't seem fair to me either. I was a math person, and even if we tried to set such high expectations of others in our parallel universe, "You can't model the stopping distance of a variably decelerating vehicle using a simple integral? I can't believe you didn't know that! It's so easy!", I would not be surrounded by nodding support.

My first real engineering job after college gave me a taste of the dangers of English transgressions. Sitting my 22-year old self in a conference room with my department, brainstorming a topic I have long forgotten, we all wrote ideas on pieces of paper, folded them and put them in a bowl sitting on a veneered rectangular conference table. After we put our ideas in the bowl, we each took turns reading one of the paper slips. The rule of brainstorming is to not critique the ideas at this early stage— just lay them all out and absolutely no judgment shall pass. After a few minutes of reading the slips of paper, Wayman, a computer science type with a wicked sense of humor exclaimed, "Who keeps writing maybe, maybe?!" I hoped for another hand to go up, but I suppose I knew it could be only one person. I suspected I'd written 'maybe' this way all my life and had been corrected, but it got lost in the bloodshed of all the other corrections to my writing. And really, is that stupid "y" even necessary? I probably just stuck it somewhere that seemed innocuous. In this closed and trapped situation, I felt it best to fess up, better to get it over with since it would be no small matter for them to figure out who it was given the residual left-foot penmanship. And they all had a great laugh, thinking I had made this mistake only today, as if it were a fluke. "Ha ha! Don't know what happened to my brain today," I said nervously, hoping that would keep my shroud of being "literate."

It was going to be a lifelong task. Emerging technology did assist me though. Spell check helped a lot. When I changed careers and became a teacher, my spellchecked notes became my protective shield. Inevitably though, writing at the board, I would go off-script only to face my English demons. *Was it spelled sight or site, wave or waive? Was it always or allways or all ways - the first doesn't look right, but neither do the other two. I can't stand here doing nothing. Think, think. I know, 'at all times.' Credibility threat averted!!!!*

Yes, my awkward and uncomfortable relationship with spelling and grammar might seem to prohibit my relishing words but that's now how it went. Finding the right words for an idea is like finding just the right spice to add in an otherwise lackluster sauce for dinner's pork roast, turning a dull meal into an exciting taste adventure. The sounds of words, their sensory impact, their specificity, the surgical descriptive detail they can add, the images they can elicit, all go far beyond its literal or connotative meaning and offer up a sweet spot of exactly expressing what you mean to say. "I *dread* calling the insurance company." A word whose small size states the emotion directly and succinctly – no rambling or over-explaining. A word bookended by the same thuddy *duh* sound - tongue against teeth, the lips having to sneer to pronounce it. It sounds like dead. The word carries so much more impact than its mere dictionary definition. *Dread*. Perfect. Then there's engrossed, thunderstruck, exasperated, gob smacked, thwarted, stymied, hindered, vexed, baffled, perplexed, gravelly, twinkling, staggered, vex, rustle, shiver, grit, pebble, fizzle, patter, ripple, whisper. Ah, so satisfying. But sometimes what words *should* be used aren't satisfying at all.

"Can you pass the salt?" It seems innocuous. But, to Mike, I get, "I *can* pass the salt. I am, in fact, capable of passing the salt." After which he sits motionless waiting for me to ask "correctly." I just do The Reach because I don't *like* saying "Would you please pass the salt," or "May you pass the salt?", these more "correct" versions too cloying and needy. These grammar commandos, the spelling ideologues and the punctuation nitpickers, try to force me, us, to the "proper" way. I reject this proper way, I like my way better.

And now this tah-T verbal assault? I mean, I was annoyed when he told me, “You have to put commas between the costumes worn by the kids at the Halloween party, lions – comma - tigers – comma - and bears. Commas go between items in a list.” I considered how much better the list sounded without commas and their pesky, intrusive pausing effect. Maybe I want the words to spill out, one right after the other! No pause! An example like, “Don’t look now but there is a huge angry hungry running tiger coming after you!” proves my point. This is pause prohibitive, clearly. I can’t say, “Don’t look now but there is a huge *pause* angry *pause* hungry *pause* running tiger coming after you!” You’d be eaten before I got done!

“I hate commas in this list!” I told him

“And yet, that is the way it is. If you used grammar check on the computer, you would see for yourself,” he said with more than a little exasperation.

“No! Stupid grammar check gangs up to be obnoxious and relentless with all its rules and ‘suggestions’. I hate it.”

“Of course you do.”

But this betrayal was much, much worse I thought, as he continued plodding down the stairs to his office, still holding the red-pen he used to stab me in the back.

“Off-putting” didn’t make sense! The expression is used when you feel alienated from something. When something causes repugnance, it repels you. Off-pudding is *just* that. There you are, in the kitchen, getting ready to eat a bit of last night’s roast chicken, finished off with the chocolate pudding from earlier in the week. So, you open the fridge and get the chicken, *yum*, and go for the bowl of pudding. But something is not quite right. A funny smell permeates the air. Is it the chicken? [*Sniff, sniff.*] No, that smells fine. What can it be? You turn to the pudding. Open the plastic saran wrap and BANG! A vicious odor hurls out, a green fuzzy growth emerges from the surface, and something in there is producing a semi-clear gelatinous ooze.

And I am totally alienated.

I feel repugnance.

I am repelled.

This pudding is OFF-PUDDING.

What an amazing, perfect expression! I use it a lot. Someone who shakes my hand with a warm, moist, squishy palm is off-pudding. There are liquid drops of something left around the seat cover on a public toilet. Off-pudding. I see a long slug slime trail lacing across a deck lounge just as I am to sit down, off-pudding. It is not off-putting! When I hear that, I envision a stuffy, stiff English gentlemen sneering and *tsking* about an untrimmed hedge or someone’s skewed bow tie, all while he holds a tea cup, pinky extended. That is not how I feel with Mr. Squishy hands, not at all. My senses say putrid, gelatinous pudding.

This expression is even awesome in milder situations, like in the case of my newsletter’s: “Anything stated in these minutes that appears to be off-pudding or in questionable taste is probably off-pudding and in questionable taste.” I stood behind the Pah-p. Maybe my writing was offensive to someone, alienating because I did not simply state the facts, repelled because I teased Bonny about lusting after my fake pinecone tree in the Christmas gift exchange, felt repugnance when I referred to there being naked men and chocolate at the next meeting – a mandatory meeting (the meeting, not the naked men). Maybe it left a bad taste in their mouth.

Maybe it was off-pudding.

And here Mike has the audacity to claim it is actually some feeble, lightweight, flaccid, limp-wristed verbal noodle?

“You may be right about a lot of things, but not about everything!” I punched the air. “Who insisted we needed a five-gallon tub of primer paint for the shed in the backyard, and who felt one gallon was enough?”

“Hum?”

“Do we need to go to the garage to visit our primer-tub albatross, still holding those 4 gallons?”

“Who was right then, buster?!”

Mike, now only a sliver still within sight, sighed.

“I was right. You were wrong. You are not infallible. You just have to be righter – to show off how much you know. Mr. Bossy Dictator Grammar Pants,” I said stabbing the air.

Taking one step forward, he said, “Don’t you say you are ‘put off’ when someone offends you? You don’t say ‘pud off’ or ‘pudded off.’”

“No!” I bellowed

But in my head, I considered – it sounded faintly, somewhat, possibly logical. Maybe it wasn’t a problem though. My word didn’t have to derive from some other word. Didn’t have to be rearranged from something already known. My ‘off-pudding’ could be a separate, it’s-own-thing expression, owing nothing to others. He just couldn’t be right about this.

Stomping up the stairs and into my office, I sat down at my computer and slapped on the keys, pulling up Google to give me necessary verification. *Does he even get the whole idea of the perfect word?* I fumed. *Why else would he be so casually dismissive of what is so obviously an amazing expression? I can’t make him see the rainbow in the sky.* I entered “off-pudding” in the search bar and I received over 626,000 hits. Confidence coursed through my entire body, even though the first entry talked about black pudding, that turns out to be a frightening British dessert, followed by a number of other pudding recipes including Apricot upside-down pudding and corn-on-the-cob pudding. Fighting off doubt, I paused. Could this quest beg the question: “What would a definition search for “off-putting” give me?” Hesitating, *Do I really want to know this?*

Up to that moment, I wasn’t *sure* it wasn’t off-pudding. I could go through life in blissful ignorance, remaining under the protection of uncertainty. I could honestly reject that second-rate expression, and people couldn’t really judge me so harshly – more of a funny quirk - and nothing like that ridiculed misspelling of “maybe”. I could probably get away with it. And really, maybe I am right. I only looked at the first page of hits, maybe I just needed to dig in a little bit more. But page after page only gave me more and more pudding particulars. Tearing off the band aid, I googled “definition of off-putting.” Hit one: a definition - hit two: another definition - hit three: yet another definition. Dictionary entries seemed to fall over themselves in a mad attempt to fill my screen. Hope fading to a dark, heartless whisper, I clicked on one entry. “Off-putting: unpleasant, disconcerting, or repellent.” “No!” I yelled at no one, thrashing the air like Rumpelstiltskin. My off-pudding reality was in fact only off-putting?

Oh, hateful Google!

Oh, cruel reality!

Oh, blind, robotic, heartless English Fascists!

Flaccid off-putting was their choice – their stupid choice – the fools! I still had to finish the newsletter, and despite my crushing loss, I completed all the stupid corrections, made copies and delivered them. Would people even notice the tragic loss held within its papery content?

Later, Kathy called to review the day’s annoyances and, topping the list, the man sitting next to us at lunch. While he could have been a fine human being in general, he, unfortunately, ate food that started with an unhinged snake-jaw bite, and completed each chew as if his mouth were an amphitheater. Every munch emitted a squishy, squashy sound that reverberated around the room. We could hear the inner cheek flesh stick and release from his teeth with each chew. And despite his otherwise acceptable presentation, ugh!

“Did you see him eating a tuna fish sandwich?!” Kathy said.

“Yes! I found it so, incredibly off . . .,” I stopped.

How did I really feel about his eating? What was my reaction? What do I say?

“So off-pudding,” I finished.

Like I opened the fridge for a spoonful of yummy chocolate pudding only to find it was now liquefied and forming its own bacteria colony, I thought with satisfaction.

Later at the dinner table, Mike observed, “I saw that you corrected your newsletter.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“So next time you’ll write with fewer errors?”

“You’ll just have to stay on tenderhooks,” I snorted.

A glint popped into his eye as he calmly said, “Did you say ‘tenderhooks’? With a D? You know its tenderhooks, with a T.”