



The Case of the Missing *-ly* by John Maling

Occasionally, while listening to others, I am jarred. The speaker drops the *-ly* from an *ly*-adverb. Really. It's gone! My warning system, installed long ago by my ninth grade teacher, Miss Shields, rings a bell. Can't help it. Like Pavlov's dog – grammatical salivation!

There are adverbs, not just *ly*-adverbs, which should be dropped from sentences, written or spoken. But when one belongs, honor it, and for heaven's sake, if it's an *ly*-adverb, don't "betail" it. ("Betail" is the opposite of "behead.") This is one example of careless use of our beloved language. So what's the problem?

Our writing is contaminated by the Sloppy-Speech-Virus. Troubles addressed by Bud Gardner in *The Craft of Writing and Editing* are degenerative diseases of the pen, contracted from our speech habits picked up from peers, the media – you name it. Professional speakers have learned to be careful. They do use slang and figures of speech from time to time but they wouldn't think of putting them in writing. In conversation, however, we are sloppy, not careful, don't really care, think that however whatever we say is simply great, and take great exception to any negative opinion on the however, if not the whatever. Try to correct someone's grammar in mid-speech and see the atmosphere change seasons.

To adverb or not to adverb, that is...um... our narrow focus. According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, an adverb "is any member of a class of words that in many languages are distinguished in form, as *partly* in English by the ending *-ly*, or by functioning as modifiers of verbs or clauses, and in some languages, as Latin and English, also as modifiers of adjectives or *other* adverbs or adverbial phrases, as *very*, *well*, *quickly*. Adverbs typically express some relation of place, time, manner, attendant circumstance, degree, cause, inference, result, condition, exception, concession, purpose, or means."

Holy, Moly! If this is too much, try the succinct, "a word or group of words that modifies a verb, an adjective or other adverb," from *Write Right*, by Jan Venolia, or the definition from my Miss Shields: "how, when, where or why."

Webster's provides an impressive definition. What a word! So powerful; capable of leaping tall buildings with a single bound. What breadth, what usefulness! But, darn-it-all, Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* say that most adverbs are unnecessary because "they can be cluttery and annoying." William Zinsser in *On Writing Well* puts it simply, "Most adverbs are unnecessary." Our own Bud Gardner is as severe as any regarding their use and misuse.

Before throwing the baby out, however, consider the power of the *-ly*. Take a simple, unassuming adjective or participle, hang on an *-ly*, and, voila, you have an *ly*-adverb! Before you is the opportunity to broaden, deepen and enrich your work. But this power, unbridled, can lead to literary disaster. Strunk and White, Zinsser and Gardner give dire warning ...but...they didn't say that *all* adverbs are unnecessary, just *most*. It's a Taste Committee matter, and because of the complexity of adverb usage, Taste Committee meetings with heavy-duty pruning will be necessary.

There's a difference in the use of adverbs in writing and the use of adverbs in speech. Our speech naturally tends to be loose; this was pointed out to me by Bud. Adverbs are clutter-words in both our written and spoken language and definitely a factor in "bad" writing. They have their place, however, under the umbrella of Style. But literature and the written "media" do not amputate an *ly*-adverb! The amputation of the *-ly* occurs in speech by the licensed malpractitioner. He or she can be anyone, friend or foe, amateur or professional.

Take a favorite of adult and adolescent masses, TV newscasters and the rich and politically powerful: "*real good*." "That's a *real good* issue for us to take on at our next Board (or Cabinet) meeting." I believe the intent is "...a *really good* issue...;" *real* in "*real good*" is intended to modify good here which calls for an adverb. Instead we used an adjective. If you're going to drop the *-ly* from *really*, one could say "a *good, real* issue," and we would understand. *Real* in that usage is an adjective modifying "issue," not an adverb modifying the adjective *good*.

Or, a simpler example: "I feel *different* about that." How do you feel? *Differently!* On the other hand try "I have a *different* feeling about that."

Case closed.

John Maling specializes in editing non-fiction books. Drawing on his educational and scientific background, John is skilled in editing a variety of genres as well as creating the Index when a book has completed layout. John's professional background includes teaching, research and publishing in physics and engineering. He is the author of Have You Ever Held a Mountain?, a photo-illustrated poetry gift book, in collaboration with Grant Collier, award-winning and published Colorado photographer.