

Boring Words vs. Wordboarding

Written by Laura Von Harten



Somebody told me that lately my writing has gotten really boring.

To be honest, I've been bored with it myself.

I don't get bored writing it, I just get bored **READING** it.

So what's the difference between the stuff that reads fast and fun and the stuff that reads **DULL**?

Sometimes I'm writing in order to educate myself. Sometimes I'm writing just for fun. Sometimes it's a little bit of both.

Some of the more interesting columns are flights of fancy. Some are riddled with sarcasm and cynicism. Some of them reek of disappointment, outrage and deep-seated anger.

And some of the most interesting columns are just downright crazy. I start writing in a way that is so earnest and heartfelt that I have to take a leap off the cliff of logic. It's the only way to get back down to earth.

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Usually my mental bungees help me bounce back to the bigger picture and re-enter our mutually-agreed upon lived reality or whatever you want to call it. But you can't always count on it. Sometimes I crash. And what's more interesting than a crash?

This kind of writing is reckless, risk-seeking, irresponsible, irreverent. And to a lot of readers, irrelevant.

I wonder about these readers. Maybe we just aren't on the same wavelength. Maybe, over the course of their lives, they have developed a more mature adult relationship with the English language. Maybe they are allergic to absurdity. Who's to say?

But whatever. They're just not into it. They want it all serious, all the time.

And it makes me think, words are to some people what snow is to others.

Let me explain. When I see a mountain slope covered with snow, I think, wow that's a big pile of snow. Then I start thinking about dinner or something.

My sister, on the other hand, looks at the same mountain slope and grabs her snowboard. She analyzes the contours of the terrain and speculates on the advisability of all the various routes she could possibly take. Then she hikes to the top, often for hours at time, just to enjoy a few minutes worth of downhill thrills.

I think she's nuts.

But words are as exhilarating to me as snow is to her. Words are things to be played with, climbed on, thrown around, and, when finally set down on paper, hidden in my underwear drawer.

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Words are like snow in their variability, too. Words have unique shapes and sounds and colors and textures and smells and mouth feels and just about any other kind of sensory description you could assign to a physical object.

I understand, of course, that words are just symbols. But the truth is that symbols come in different flavors and some are simply tastier than others.

And with words, as with everything else in life, context matters as much, if not more, than content.

So here are some of my classifications of word contexts.

STANDALONE WORDS

Some words do fine on their own. Four-letter words in particular don't need a lot of linguistic garnish or adjective-laden sauces to create a noticeable impact on readers' moods. As a matter of fact, curse words are so strong that all you have to do is throw one into your sentence-stew and all of a sudden the whole thing has an entirely different and unpleasant flavor.

TOXIC COMBINATIONS

Some words shouldn't get mixed up together in the same sentence. The results can be explosive. Less extreme cases cause annoyance.

Annoyance is not dangerous in and of itself, but chronic abuse of certain word combinations causes long-term damage to the fiber of our language.

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For instance, “rich” and “history.” As I often point out to word-loving friends, “rich history” is a deeply cliched word pairing that, in my opinion, merits sudden death.

“Rich” and “history” are both fine and useful words, but you have to separate them from each other or they’ll cause trouble.

If you put them in the same sentence they tend to sit next to each other, and then before you know it the whole class is distracted and is not focusing on the task at hand, which is conveying meaning.

COMPLEMENTARY COMBINATIONS

Like pairing an entree with a wine – some words go better together. Until they don’t. See TOXIC COMBINATIONS.

COMPLICATED COMBINATIONS

In the linguistic kitchen it’s easy to take exotic words and whip up something special:

In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn

a stately pleasure dome decree

where Alph the sacred river,

yadda yadda yadda ...

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Yummy, yes, but that's entirely predictable. Writing is guaranteed to be flavorful when the recipe includes lots of rich ingredients: foreign words, words with weird letter combinations, words with lots of syllables.

But it doesn't take a whole lot of effort. It's like loading great gobs of butter and cream into a tiny bowl of pasta. It tastes great, but what else would you expect?

SYNERGISTIC COMBINATIONS

It's more amazing when you can take little bits of nothing much words and turn them into a great big unified something.

I can't think of an example right off the bat. All I know is that you can string some unremarkable words together to create a something that is truly meaningful and memorable.

OK, an example: "We the people..."

It's the verbal equivalent of salt, water and chicken. Nothing fancy, but the result is a delicious chicken-stock phrase with intense feeling and flavor. No Xanadu required.

Now back to boring writing, mountain slopes, snow, words, etc.

Time to get off the board, and I hope it was worth the hike.

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