

The Style Invitational

Week LII: Proceed Gingerly



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

1. It will sweep over the world and change lives, cities, and ways of thinking.
2. If enough people see it you won't have to convince them to architect cities around it. It'll just happen.
3. Assembly can be performed in under 10 minutes using a screwdriver and wrenches.
4. The only question is, are people going to be allowed to use it?

This week's contest was proposed by dozens of people. Recent breathless news stories report the existence of a still-secret invention, code-named "Ginger," that

is said to meet each of the criteria above. What is this gizmo? First-prize winner gets a 3-by-6-foot Republican flag, a value of \$35.

First runner-up wins the tacky but estimable Style Invitational Loser Pen. Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. The Uncle's Pick wins the shockingly ugly "The Uncle Loves Me" T-shirt. Send your entries via fax to 202-334-4312, or by e-mail to losers@washpost.com, or by U.S. mail to The Style Invitational, Week LII, c/o The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. Deadline is Monday, Jan. 29. All entries must include the week number of the contest and your name, postal address and a daytime or evening telephone number. E-mail entries must include the week number in the subject field. Contests will be judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Editors reserve the right to edit entries for taste or content. Results will be published in four weeks. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes.

REPORT FROM WEEK XLVII,

in which we asked you to invent old derivations for common expressions:

◆ Second Runner-Up—**"You can't get blood from a stone"**: Some things are simply impossible; originally, phlebotomists' jargon acknowledging that Keith Richards's veins are long collapsed, useless to the Red Cross. (Chris Doyle, Burke; Phyllis Kepner, Columbia)

◆ First Runner-Up—**"Pay peanuts, get monkeys"**: You get the employees you pay for; from an experiment in which a thousand chimpanzees with a thousand typewriters were set to work for an indefinite period in an attempt to reproduce the works of Shakespeare. "Pay peanuts, get monkeys" was the only decipherable phrase produced, albeit in a surprisingly high percentage of cases. (Rod Ewing, York, England)

◆ And the winner of the South Dakota commemorative plate:

"To throw up one's hands": To surrender; from New Guinea cannibal society, in which it was considered de rigueur to be able to keep down one's food. When they failed, it often involved hands, which tended to be dirty, filled with small, sharp bones, and unusually hard to digest. (Gordon Labow, Glenelg)

◆ Honorable Mentions:

"Can't make heads or tails of it": Indecipherable; originally used to describe the government's ill-advised and ill-fated 42½-cent spherical coin. (Ben Aronin, White Plains, N.Y.)

"When my ship comes in": Hoped-for success; originally it referred specifically to the trade in illegal drugs. The message was slightly coded to fool authorities. (Tom Witte, Gaithersburg)

"Cut the cheese": To pass wind; from ancient times, when cheese was produced in large blocks and was hard as a rock. The cutter would have to exert himself terribly, bending and straining to the point where . . . (Gordon Labow, Glenelg)

"Pay through the nose": To overpay; from medieval times, when people used to exchange goods for mucus, which was highly prized as a wallpaper adhesive. (Gordon Labow, Glenelg)

"Out to lunch": Crazy; from early 20th-century urban life, when sweatshop workers thought they could take 10 minutes off during their 14-hour shift to eat something, and not get fired. (Michael Levy, Silver Spring)

"To eat a square meal": To eat healthfully; from the mistaken belief of 1970s parents that tofu was the healthiest diet. (Russ Beland, Springfield)

"To beggar description": To be virtually indescribable; from the fact that people avoid looking at homeless panhandlers, and therefore cannot describe them. (Chris Doyle, Burke)

"Any port in a storm": To make do under difficult conditions; derived from the fact that one ought not be such a snob when one is snowed in at one's winter chateau, and one should settle for whatever after-dinner drink is on hand, even if the vintage is not ideal. (Phyllis Kepner, Columbia)

"Well done is better than well said": Act, don't speak; when ordering steak, take what they give you because if you send it back, the chef will spit on it. (Dave Ferry, Leesburg)

"When the chips are down": Bad times; from the smell of the north 40 in the hot sun after the cattle have been grazing. (Howard Harrell, North Potomac)

"Snug as a bug in a rug": Safe and secure; originally a CIA expression, based on the success of covert listening devices placed in toupees. (Greg Robinson, Springfield)

"Chewing the fat": Jawing to no purpose; from a now-discredited weight loss program that was futile as well as disgusting, painful and often fatal. (Dave Zarrow, Herndon)

"Drunk as a skunk": Really drunk; selected as a phrase because "drunk" doesn't rhyme with "newspaper reporter." (John Held, Fairfax)

"Pull one's punches": To hold back for strategic purposes; from an arcane electoral procedure whereby weakly punched voting cards were withheld from the count. (Rod Ewing, York, England)

"Brevity is the soul of wit": The key to humor is being concise; from the Elizabethan notion that underpants ("brevities") embodied the essence of humor. ("To crown thyself the king of levity / Drop thy trunks and show thy brevity.") (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park)

"To start from scratch": To conceive something; from the action of some women who rake their fingernails on their partners' backs during sex. (Jennifer Hart, Arlington)

"Not to be sneezed at": Information to be ignored at one's peril; from the lesson number one impressed upon first-time cocaine users. (Sue Lin Chong, Washington)

"To bet one's bottom dollar": Bet one's last remaining money; from the movie "Papillon." (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

"To cry uncle": To submit in utter defeat; from the incorporation of the word "uncle" in Style Invitational entries in the last-ditch, desperate hope of appealing to the pathetic vainglory of one thickheaded prude and earning, at least, the Uncle's Pick. (James Winebrake, Harrisonburg; Ben Aronin, White Plains, N.Y.)

◆ The Uncle's Pick:

"He who laughs last laughs best": Only at the end can you see who is the real winner; from the fact that the Uncle, in his wisdom, invariably chooses the funniest entry. (Joseph Romm, Washington)
The Uncle Explains: And this week is no exception!

Next Week: Pickup Shticks