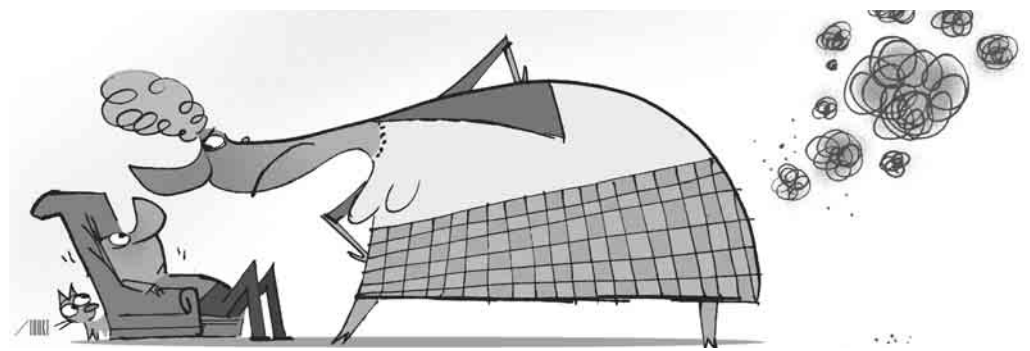


The Style Invitational

Week 596: Take Her Words for It



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

My wife knows her gas is clever ammunition: If she is unhappy, all she has to do is make a flame!

This week's contest: Use the words of this week's Ask Amy advice column (at right), as a pool from which to compose your own useful (or useless) thoughts, as in the example above. You can't alter the words except to ignore or change capitalization and punctuation, including hyphens and apostrophes. You may use a single word as many times as it is used in the passages (e.g., you could use "the" up to 12 times). First-prize winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up receives, direct from New Delhi courtesy of Loser Robin Diallo, "Khushwant Singh's Joke Book No. 1" and a comic book called, we swear, Tinkle Digest. They are in English.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or, if you really have to, by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 14. Put the week number in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with

your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published March 6. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Tom Witte of Montgomery Village.

Report from Week 592, in which we asked for various types of humor playing off the Super Bowl. You can see this evening how close your absurd ideas came to the actual absurd event. The most commonly submitted tasteless idea: Have the fans do "the tsunami" instead of "the wave."

- ◆ **Third runner-up:** *"Improvements" to the game:* Extend the use of Roman numerals beyond just the game number: "It's III and IX on their own XLIV-yard line . . . oops, that's gonna be a XV-yard penalty! (Russell Beland, Springfield)
- ◆ **Second runner-up:** *During-the-game sponsors:* Right after the third quarter, have a dozen monstrous SUVs come roaring down the stadium aisles and into the seats, scattering people like duckpins. Then Jack Bauer of "24" leaps out and points some obscene phallic weapon at everyone and begins screaming at them all to "GET DOWN! GET DOWN TO YOUR DEALER NOW!" So not only is it an ad for a new suburban assault vehicle, it's also a tie-in for Fox! (Bill Spencer, Exeter, N.H.)
- ◆ **First runner-up, the winner of the three dozen pairs of Groucho glasses:** *Improvements to the game:* Like in baseball, have the president do the opening kickoff. (Jack Cackler, Falls Church)
- ◆ **And the winner of the Inker:** *Commercial:* View of a man's back as he holds something underneath a Clydesdale. Sound of liquid splashing into a metal bucket. Second scene: A man wearing a Miller Brewing Co. cap says proudly: "That's not how we make OUR beer." (Peter Larsen, Williston, Vt.)

◆ Honorable Mentions Commercials we'd like (or wouldn't like) to see:

Middle-aged man and woman get ready for bed, setting the alarm clock, woman taking off her makeup. "Viagra. When you can't think of a fantasy." (Chuck Smith, Wood-bridge)

Mock halftime show: Justin Timberlake reaches over to rip Janet Jackson's shirt, revealing a purple bra. He pulls and tears at it, but it stays on. "Maidenform. Our wardrobes don't malfunction." (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)

Hilary Duff buys a Diet Pepsi from a machine outside a gas station. She distracts a man who walks into traffic and gets hit by a bus. But it's okay! He's a terrorist who harmlessly explodes. Hilary sips her Diet Pepsi and smiles in vacuous triumph. (Ned Bent, Oak Hill)

Dick Van Dyke, Dick Clark and Dick Van Patten, each with a sexy young woman on his arm. Voice-over: Take it from a bunch of old . . . guys: Viagra really works. (Michelle Stupak, Ellicott City)

The Oval Office, softly lit. President Bush sits at his desk, with Donald Rumsfeld leaning over him discussing the budget. Voice-over: "If a relaxing moment turns into the right moment . . . [Bush and Rumsfeld share a look] will you be ready?"

Bush and Rumsfeld grab hands and together press a red button on the desk. Cut to an image of a B-2 bombing a Middle Eastern country.

"Northrop Grumman" appears on the screen, along with the warning: "Although a rare occurrence, insurrections lasting more than two years require immediate U.N. assistance." (Andrew Goldberg, Potomac)

The Pepto-Bismol commercial in which actors do a Macarena-like dance acting out nausea, heartburn, diarrhea, etc., goes about 2 percent further: The actors actually vomit, HAVE diarrhea . . . (Cheryl Furst, Falls Church)

A Mini Cooper pulls into a tiny parking space in two maneuvers. The driver steps out, admires his work and strolls off. A Hummer pulls up abreast of the Mini, hesitates, and then backs up *onto* the Mini *and* the car behind it, crushing both. The driver steps out, admires her work and walks off. Voice-over: "Hummer drivers never double-park." (Chris Doyle, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii)

"See this quarterback? He makes more money in a year than you'll make in your life. But he doesn't have Sure-Safe security systems. Here's his home address, and his away-game schedule . . . (Seth Brown)

Why not combine the two products most often advertised during the Super Bowl: "Studweiser Blue. With that special added ingredient, you'll see wazzup every time. And for platonic relationships, try Studweiser Light." (Ron Mayer, Columbia; Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

Series of shots: Immense home. Two people at a restaurant, the table loaded with food. A closet stuffed with clothes. Teen wearing headphones, playing video game, talking on cell phone. Finally a shot from the very back of a cavernous Ford Excursion, a woman driving with one child. "Ford SUVs. Way more than you possibly need. The American way." (Jean Sorensen, Herndon)

Focus on two men in the stands watching the game. As the game progresses, they keep drinking beer. The first man keeps going to the restroom, standing in long lines, missing big plays; the second man just keeps sitting and smiling. "Depends. Never miss a moment." (Paula Rubinoﬀ, Oakton)

"Hey, Mark Brunell! You just watched the Super Bowl from your living room after signing a \$43 million contract as a 34-year-old quarterback with a spaghetti arm AND the mobility of a refrigerator AND leading the Redskins to a losing record! What are you gonna do now?" "I'M GOING TO LEISURE WORLD!" (Bob Dalton, Arlington, who's not bitter or anything)

Halftime entertainment

Have Michael Jackson sing at halftime, and have Justin Timberlake reach over and "accidentally" pull off his nose. (John Kammer, Herndon; Seth Brown)

A tribute to soldiers! Dress people up in military uniforms from different countries throughout history. Uniforms from China, uniforms from Greece, uniforms from the Afrika Korps . . . (Harry Windsor, London) (Sarah W. Gaymon, Gambrills)

How about a rousing halftime tribute to a player who was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame 20 years ago—O.J. Simpson? (Tom Witte, Montgomery Village)

During-the-Game Sponsors

To show support for the war effort, Budweiser sponsors a Let's All Get Bombed promotion during which all beer in the stadium is free. (John Kammer)

"Improvements" to the game and its coverage:

Dress the refs in togas and have them announce penalties in the manner of a Greek chorus: "And thus did he who received the projectile abandon the Ways of Olympus, seeking Glory of the Self in a most offensive celebration; and as such, he shall suffer the Yellow Pennant, and his team shall forgo 15 yards on the ensuing kickoff." (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

The Alberto Gonzales Worst Call of the Day (Phil Frankenfeld, Washington)

Players must be dressed in the costumes of their team mascot. (Seth Brown)

After the game, winners of a special lottery will be allowed to go on the field to throw cups of beer at players from the losing team. (Roy Ashley, Washington)

Run a crawler message at the bottom of the screen during commercials updating viewers on the game. (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)

MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

A Modest Proposal

We have succeeded in teaching people to brag.

Personally, Miss Manners never quite saw the need. Listening to people extol their possessions, talents, ancestors, degrees, looks, salaries, brains, important connections and work-out routines turned out to be less charming than was evidently expected. It is one thing when 4-year-olds announce, apropos of nothing, "I got new shoes!" and another when adults drag out brand names from their feet.

Yet a wide variety of social forces has combined, for some time now, to teach people to brag. Education promoted self-esteem, by which it reversed the usual sequence of accomplishment and congratulation. Popular psychology fostered the idea of self-love, and we all know how romance inspires one to prattle on about the virtues of the beloved.

Then along came the assertiveness movement. Originally aimed at instructing people to assert themselves at the workplace in order to get their proper due, it leapt into all aspects of life. Swagging had reinvented itself as strategy and therapy.

Around that time, matchmaking gave up on the idea of depending on others to notice one's lovable-ness and was literally advertising itself. It turned out that the world was full of people who, by their own admission, had movie-star looks, sensitive souls, healthy incomes, fun-loving natures and no prospects.

In other aspects of social life, increasingly centered on aggrandizing individuals at their own adult birthday parties, weddings or even supposed "roasts," people were supposed to praise one another. But it's a rare such speaker who has not discovered how to turn this around by praising the guest of honor for an astute appreciation of—none other than the speaker.

No one need feel left out of bragging extravaganzas. The description of an individual as being "nothing to brag about" is meaningless now that reverse bragging has become so popular. It pretty much outclasses straightforward bragging nowadays. Who garners more admiration—the person

who recounts a string of successes or the one whose saga is about mistreatment and failure?

Before all this got going, Miss Manners does not recall our being a nation of shrinking violets and can't-do types thwarted by adversity. Perhaps bragging was a necessary antidote to some national tendency of being overly deferential and passive that she happened to miss.

If so, it is over now. We've cured it.

The next step would be to revive the concept of modesty—perhaps not in the matter of covering vital body parts, but at least when it comes to exposing one's other good points.

Modesty is a virtue in itself, although that is a recommendation that has a poor record for inspiring changes in public behavior. Fortunately, modesty has other virtues—social virtues, which is what bragging mistakenly aims to achieve.

It provides a time-release system of information so that people are not wiped out by your confluence of advantages. It stimulates conversation, as people have to work to find out about one another. Best of all, it inspires the same sort of skepticism in listeners that bragging does—and thus accomplishes what bragging does not.

Dear Miss Manners:

What is the correct way to tell my boyfriend that I am pregnant? We have been dating for five years, but I do not know how he will react.

Neither does Miss Manners, but she believes that it would be a good idea for you to find out.

She recommends covering him with congratulations and kisses. While this is not likely to be a case where his delight or distress hangs on the wording of your statement, it is the gracious way to hint what reaction is expected.

Feeling incorrect? E-mail your etiquette questions to Miss Manners (who is distraught that she cannot reply personally) at MissManners@unitedmedia.com or mail to United Media, 200 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

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ASK AMY

Dear Amy:

You asked for reader responses to the letter from the woman who witnessed a mother berating her daughter in public at an ice skating rink and didn't know what to do.

When I was a child, my mother would lose her temper and yell at me in public. At home she threw things and hit me with different objects. She was also an affectionate and enthusiastically involved parent. She was college-educated, attended church regularly, did not drink, and we lived in a solid, middle-class community.

Life was a roller-coaster ride that went on until I left home as a very young adult.

I know many strangers witnessed my mother's behavior. I don't recall one person ever stepping in to help me. Once I was an adult, neighbors and friends told me that they were aware of what was happening but didn't think it was their place to intervene.

As a young woman, I found myself in a very dangerous situation, and it never occurred to me to ask someone for help. The impact of that changed my life forever.

I am now a mother myself. I have experienced the embarrassment of my children throwing temper tantrums in public. Once a stranger crossed the street and offered to help and offered the help directly to my daughter. I did not take offense. He was checking out a situation he was not sure about. He was doing the right thing.

I guess I'm trying to say that it is important to do something. That woman should have spoken to the coach directly and specifically about what she had witnessed. She should have stepped up to the mother and gently said, "You look like you're having a tough day, can I help you? We all can use a break sometimes, right?"

Three people would have benefited—the parent, her child and the child of the woman who wrote to you would have seen an example of compassion instead of indifference. And trust me, one simple act can make all the difference for years to come.

Speak Up for Children

Thank you so much for your eloquent testimony. When people intervene thoughtfully, they are not just giving a parent notice, but they are also demonstrating an important value to the children involved. I hadn't thought about that before I read your letter and other letters from survivors.

Dear Amy:

Some parents are bullies, whether or not they realize it. And imagine being completely dependent for your food, shelter and safety on someone who bullies, berates and humiliates you.

I don't have to imagine it. I lived it. How, as a boy, I wished someone would intervene. Of

course, whenever anyone did challenge my mother, she immediately painted them as "stupid" or "crazy." Maybe if enough people who recognize inappropriate parental behavior speak up directly to the offending parent when they see this, it would finally become socially unacceptable to treat a child this way.

Survivor

I hope that the people who attempted to intervene with your mother made an impression on you. It can be near impossible to know what to do in these situations, but I'd be willing to be called "crazy" if that's what it took to get a parent's attention.

Dear Amy:

As a figure skater myself, I see this sort of behavior more often than I would care to recount. However, at the rink where I work, parents are not allowed in the same rink as their children when group lessons are taking place.

If I see this sort of thing, I usually try to make a joke out of it, as in "Hey, Mom, if you think it's that easy, why don't you put on some skates and come on out?" The child usually laughs and the parents realize that perhaps they have overstepped their bounds. If they don't get it, I am happy to stand up for the child in a more abrupt way. Skating is supposed to be fun, not a career for a young child.

Maegan

When I jokingly referred to this bully of a mom as "Tonya Harding," one reader chose to berate me. She pointed out that Harding herself was most likely bullied as a child on the rink.

Point taken. One awful result of adults bullying children is that it can perpetuate the aggression.

Dear Amy:

I once had a dad in a parking lot scream at me, "What are you looking at?" when I tried to stop him from screaming at his child by staring at him with a shocked look on my face.

Once, when I thought that a woman was about to hit her daughter, I went up to the mom and said quietly, so only she could hear, "You're all she has." It stopped her cold. I've used it as my own mantra when I was losing my temper.

EB

Wow. Now it's my mantra. Thank you.

Ask Amy is written by Amy Dickinson. Write to her at askamy@tribune.com or Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611.

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BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

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