


# The Style Invitational

Week 611: Ask Backwards, Erudite Edition

**This week's contest:** The Empress has received a bit of mail of late, ranging from polite tut-tuts to RAGING ALL-CAPITAL RANTS, suggesting that perhaps we should raise the level of our discourse from the "vulgar not clever!!!!," as one recent piece of fan mail put it. All right, then: Let us return to a favorite format. You are on "Jeopardy!" Here are the sophisticated answers. You supply the questions. And we trust that your entries will display the levels of taste and maturity for which The Style Invitational is renowned.



"Le Sacre du Printemps" but not "The Sack of Rome"	6.02 x 10 <sup>23</sup> pencils	The Real Babinski
Montaigne and the Rolling Stones	The Isle of Wight and the Islets of Langerhans	Hints From Abelard
Bob II, Chapter 4, Verse 9	Marginal Futility	Guns, Butter and Squeegees
Yoknapatawpha Mall	Sappho and Her Lyre	Only in the slow movement of the "Pathetique"

The winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up gets a superfantabulous prize donated by Russell Beland of Springfield as part of his obsessive effort to accumulate points in the Losers' own statistics (oh my yes, there's a serious competition going on among these people; see [www.gopherdruol.com](http://www.gopherdruol.com) and click on Stats): "Star Trek" Lieutenant Barbie and Commander Ken, he in the typical '60s Enterprise garb, she in red micromini-dress, tricorder and huge spray of platinum hair. (Russell lost interest, however, because Barbie's boots lack four-inch heels.) The dolls come with pole-shaped stands; while Ken's hooks behind his back, Barbie's, well, must make her feel a bit uncomfortable.

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](mailto:losers@washpost.com) or, if you really have to, by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Tuesday, May 31. 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 June 19. 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 Seth Brown of North Adams, Mass. This week's contest is adapted from an almost entirely different suggestion by Bill Spencer of Exeter, N.H. The idea below comes from Ken Gallant of Little Rock.

**Note to Losers everywhere:** If you find the above "Jeopardy!" answers incredibly stupid and unworkable, show us some better ones. Send your own in a separate e-mail marked "Jeopardy" in the subject line, and we will use a dozen of the least unworkable for the next Ask Backwards we do. (Of course, if your answer is printed, you won't be able to send in an entry on that one.)

**Report From Week 607,** in which readers were supposed to describe a historical event from a comically parochial perspective — a self-centered, narrow viewpoint that is oblivious to the true history being made: A whole lot of entrants misunderstood what we wanted and sent in perfectly amusing jokes that either didn't quite fit this bill (e.g., "1066: English Welcome Decent Food," from Jeff Brechlin of Eagan, Minn.) or didn't remotely ("Oct. 8, 1956: Larsen Hits Showers After 97 Pitches," from Elden Carnahan of Laurel).

- ♦ **Third runner-up: April 12, 1955 : Iron Lung Manufacturer Regretfully Announces Layoffs** (Thad Humphries, Warrenton)
- ♦ **Second runner-up: June 6, 1944: Local Boy Visits Normandy Area of France; Reports Beaches There Are Crowded and Noisy** (Marty McCullen, Gettysburg, Pa.)
- ♦ **First runner-up, the winner of the Arabic-language book "Muslims in the United States": April 14, 1912: Ocean Liner Damages Iceberg; Environmentalists Enraged** (Dennis Lindsay, Seabrook)
- ♦ **And the winner of the Inker: 1879: Entomologists Delighted With Mr. Edison's Moth-Attracting Device** (Anne Clark, Ann Arbor, Mich.)

## ♦ A Chronicle of Honorable Mentions:

- 1403 B.C.: Red Sea Clam Diggers Report Best Day Ever** (Barry Blyveis, Columbia)
- A.D. 1: Census Influx Exposes Bethlehem Hotel Shortage; Some Visitors Redirected to Egypt** (Vince Drayne, Chevy Chase; Fred S. Souk, Reston)
- 33, Jerusalem: Local Thief Spared; 2 Executed** (John V.R. Williams, Rockville)
- July 4, 1826: Adams, Jefferson Die on Same Day; Madison, John Quincy Adams Have to Split 'Dead Pool'** (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
- April 15, 1865: 'Our American Cousin' Playwright Demands Full Performance After Last Night's Interruption** (Art Grinath, Takoma Park; Dave Kelsey, Fairfax)
- May 8, 1869: 'Golden Spike' Driven; Government Contractors Collude to Use Extravagant Materials in Construction Project, Critics Charge** (Russell Beland, Springfield)
- October 1871, Chicago: Conflagration Could Have Been Prevented by Vegetarianism, Proponents Declare** (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)
- 1879, Menlo Park, N.J.: Cartoonists Gain New Symbol to Indicate Good Ideas** (Art Grinath; Ron Jackson, Chevy Chase)
- April 18, 1906, San Francisco: Realtors Report Some Houses Have Improved Views** (Jane Auerbach, Los Angeles)
- Aug. 15, 1914: Palindrome Writers Elated at Canal Opening** (Art Grinath; Russell Beland)
- Aug. 20, 1929: 10-lb. William Moulden Born at Georgetown Hospital; Stock Market Hits Record High; Both Events Promise Many Years of Happiness** (Bill Moulden, Frederick)
- May 3, 1937: Dirigible Mishap Heralds Explosion in Helium Futures** (Chris Doyle, Raleigh; Kimmarie Kryscnski, Brunswick, Md.)
- Dec. 7, 1941: Waikiki Beach Volleyball Tourney Canceled** (Cecil J. Clark, Asheville, N.C.)
- Aug. 6, 1945: Einstein Equation Verified, Physics Professors Note** (Dennis Lindsay, Seabrook)
- 11:30 a.m., May 29, 1953: Edmund Hillary Proves His Watch Works** (Sylvia Betts, Vancouver, B.C.)
- Nov. 24, 1963: Thousands Thrill to NFL Action as Championship Race Tightens!** (Jack Cackler, Falls Church)
- Dec. 3, 1967: Janitors Complain of 3-Hour Operating Room Cleanup After Dr. Barnard Performs Some Surgery** (Barry Blyveis)
- June 17, 1972: At DNC Headquarters, Scotch Brand Masking Tape Holds the Door Open for History** (Bill Spencer, Exeter, N.H.)
- Aug. 8, 1974: Office of Personnel Management Notes High-Level Use of 'Early Out' Option** (Jeff Covel, Arlington)
- April 1975: As Saigon Falls, U.S. Strip Malls Await New Cuisine** (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)
- November 1975: Death of Generalissimo Inspires Writers at Fledgling Comedy Sketch Show** (Stephen Dudzik)
- Dec. 8, 1980: Residents of N.Y.'s Dakota Apartment House Complain of Noise on Sidewalk** (Judith Cottrill, New York)
- 1985: Interior Decorators Tout New 'AOL' Coasters** (Anne Clark)
- Jan. 20, 1989: Quayle Sworn In as Vice President; Comedy Writers Begin 4-Year Stint of Working Overtime** (Russell Beland)
- Nov. 12, 1989: German Graffiti Artists Distraught After 'Our Favorite Canvas' Is Demolished** (Art Grinath; John V.R. Williams; Sylvia Betts, Vancouver, B.C.)
- June 14, 1994: Ford Bronco Shows Poor Gas Mileage, Even at Low Speed, SUV Opponents Note** (Ned Bent, Oak Hill)
- 1995, Brentwood, Calif.: Product Placement Proves Success: Ford Broncos, Bruno Magli Shoes, Isotoner Gloves Report Soaring Brand Recognition** (Chris Doyle)
- Dec. 14, 2003: Czar Steps Down From The Style Invitational; C. Smith Returns to Heterosexual Life** (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
- Oct. 27, 2004: St. Louis Cardinals Lose World Series** (Joseph Romm, Washington)

Next Week: Comeback Next Week, or Riposte Scripts

## MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

### If They Already Know, Why Announce?

What could there be left to announce in the old, formal way, using third-person wording and postal-system delivery?

Is there anyone graduating, marrying or giving birth who hasn't already told everyone in sight, and as many strangers as electronically possible?

From blogs to bumper stickers, personal news is disseminated as never before. Interested or not, you may be assured that you will hear everything — not just the facts about what steps people are taking in their lives, but all the emotions that go along with them.

Yet the formal announcement is still used. Misused, mostly. Failure to understand its purpose and form has led to some peculiar predicaments. This is not just a problem for Miss Manners with her generally unheeded plea of do it right or don't do it at all. These misunderstandings keep leading to testy feelings and unnecessary expense.

The chief misunderstanding is that an announcement is tantamount to a notice due for a present. This preposterous notion is held not only by indignant recipients, who feel they have to consider themselves in debt to people they hardly know, but by those who send announcements and are counting on substantial returns.

An announcement is merely an announcement. It is not a bill. Presents may be freely given, but only congratulations are required as a response to an announcement of a birth, graduation or marriage.

Nor is it intended as a souvenir, although announcements do make prime scrapbook material. You really need to order announcements only if you have a lot of people who would not otherwise learn your news but who would want to know it. When schools give their graduates graduation announcements to send out, the implication is that everyone the graduate knows should get one. But in most cases, everyone who cares already knows, and only the closest relatives care enough to want one anyway.

There are as many ways to make informal announcements as there are forms of communication: word of mouth, telephone, letter, e-mail, text messaging and probably something new since Miss Manners last checked. So why do people in-

sist on ordering formal announcements, and then messing up the forms to make them less formal?

Formal announcements are worded in the third person, with full names and honorifics. They do not contain emotion, just the facts. So if you want to announce how ecstatic or relieved you are to be getting married, if you think your real first name doesn't suit you as well as your nickname, if you believe that honorifics make you sound too old — formal announcements are not what you want.

A clue that you should not be spending the money for them is if you look at the correct versions and think, "Oh, that's so formal; how can I make it friendly and more personal?"

Dear Miss Manners:

Upon saying to a bereaved person, "I'm very sorry," I have, a couple of times over the years, received the response, "Why be sorry? It's not your fault."

Once I said, "Well, I'm sorry anyway," and walked away thoroughly embarrassed. On the other occasion, in my confusion, I'm afraid I simply snapped my mouth shut, stared wide-eyed a moment, and walked away without a word.

How should one respond to "Why be sorry? It's not your fault"?

Rattling people by pretending not to understand conventional expressions that are in common usage is a habit Miss Manners loathes. But we allow some leeway to the bereaved, so let us pretend that these people honestly didn't realize that "I'm sorry" can express sympathy as well as remorse.

So you should tell them somberly: "No, I mean I'm sorry for you. I'm offering you my sympathy." Let us hope they will be gracious enough to be contrite and thank you for your concern.

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

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## ASK AMY

Dear Amy:

I am a 20-year-old college student, and I have a very hard major and a big problem.

In high school I was always a good student. I joined the ROTC program at my college, and I'm doing very well in it. The problem is that I am not doing so well in my regular classes because I'm often tired and have a lack of interest. The officers who run the ROTC program always emphasize that school comes first, but I never seem to want to do my work. It's very hard with all of the responsibilities that I have with ROTC. With the little extra time I have, I need to sleep.

I often feel melancholy and stay in my room a lot, sometimes locking myself in all day. I fight with my parents because they are very controlling, even though I am on scholarship.

The only time I feel happy is when I am doing ROTC projects with my fellow cadets, and when I get to lead I get excited because I'm good at it. I feel really focused when I'm doing anything with the program.

I want to talk with someone, but I don't want to be classified as "depressed" because that might get me dismissed from ROTC. I also don't want to look weak in front of my superiors or peers and waste their time by mentioning this.

I already thought of speaking with some clergy in my campus area, but I don't feel comfortable with any of them.

How can you help me?

Confused Cadet

First of all, depression is not a sign of weakness. It is an illness, and if you have it you wouldn't be able to control it through sheer force of will. If you are clinically depressed, you need treatment.

You should start by attacking the issue of your academic workload. The fact is, if you don't complete your class work, you will fail your classes and that would be worse for your ROTC prospects than perhaps dropping a class; an academic adviser can help you shift your workload to take some of the heat off.

Also, visit your campus counseling center. If you are depressed, a counselor can give you strategies to cope with it. Depression can be tricky because the symptoms of the disease itself sometimes make it difficult to seek treatment, yet you must do so. If there is an ROTC officer you feel particularly close to, you should seek his or her counsel. Your officer's job is to administer the program and make sure the cadets are healthy and doing well. I assure you, this would not be the first time they have dealt with a depressed or stressed student.

It is great that you have found your strength in the ROTC program. Now it's time to take some of

those leadership skills and apply them to helping yourself. I know you can do it.

Dear Amy:

I am 18 years old and have met a really great girl. We have been dating for a few months and we get along really well together. We have a very special relationship.

The only problem is that I have never had sex. I'm not in the "no sex before marriage" crowd, but I do want my first time to be with someone I care deeply about.

I definitely think this girl could be "the one," but she has already had sex with a guy she dated before we met.

The thing is, I would really like my first time to be with a virgin, because I want it to be as special for her as it is for me. I worry that I will look back on my first time and only be able to see that it wasn't the same special experience for her. But then, I worry that if I wait for a girl who has never had sex, I'll be passing up this really great relationship for no justifiable reason.

I've been mulling this over for months, and I still don't know what to think.

Can you help me?

Sexual Healing in Boston

Because I'm not available to assume full responsibility for this decision, I can't make this important choice for you. The decision to have sex should be between the two of you, not between the two of us.

You seem fixated on this whole virgin concept, and I hate being the one to tell you this, but to my knowledge the "first time" isn't quite the magic carpet ride you may be envisioning. It's strange. It's bizarre. It's best experienced between two people who are crazy about each other and committed to being together. It is definitely worth waiting for, but sex, like most things, tends to get better with practice.

You are an adult. I assume your girl is, too. Talk this out. Talk, talk, talk. They might not have told you this in health class, but the most important part of the sexual experience is the talking. This decision should be mutual and the experience should be respectful and loving. If your girlfriend is more experienced, then let her lead the way.

Be "safe." Use birth control.

*Write to Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611.*

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## BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

Both sides vulnerable

NORTH			EAST		
♠	K 6		♠	10 9 8 5 2	
♥	J 8		♥	9 6 3	
♦	9 7 4 2		♦	8	
♣	K Q 8 6 3		♣	A J 10 5	
WEST			SOUTH (D)		
♠	4		♠	A Q J 7 3	
♥	K Q 10 5 2		♥	A 7 4	
♦	J 6 3		♦	A K Q 10 5	
♣	9 7 4 2		♣	None	

The bidding:

South	West	North	East
2 ♠	Pass	3 ♣	Pass
3 ♦	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
4 ♥	Pass	4 ♠	Pass
6 ♦	All Pass		

Opening lead: ♥ K

Cy the Cynic's former occupation, if ever he had one, continues to be the object of speculation at my club. Cy won't discuss the matter, except to respond to questions with gag answers:

"Cy, did you work at a fire hydrant plant?" someone will ask.

"I wanted to," Cy will reply, "but I could never find a place to park."

"Were you a tree surgeon?" "I wouldn't work in a branch office."

"How about a building superintendent, Cy?"

"No, I'd rather sleep than heat." "Did you ever apply for a job at a bank?"

"Once. I thought there was money in it."

Cy was South in today's deal and thought there had to be money in it when North raised the dia-

monds and then cue-bid in spades. At six diamonds, Cy took the ace of hearts, drew trumps and led a spade to the king and a spade to his ace. West discarded, and East-West took the money: Cy ruffed his fifth spade in dummy but lost two hearts.

A 5-1 spade break endangers the slam, but Cy has an extra chance. After he draws trumps, he can take the A-K of spades. When West discards, Cy leads the king of clubs for a ruffing finesse. He ruffs East's ace, concedes a heart, ruffs a heart in dummy and takes the queen of clubs for his 12th trick.

As the cards lie, South might also succeed by conceding a heart after drawing trumps. If West led a third heart, South would ruff in dummy, ruff a club and run his trumps, squeezing East in spades and clubs.

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