

The Superlatives Grow as the Standards Go

by Charles Miess



I am NOT going to obsess over it. I am NOT going to get upset because so many people refuse to follow the standards of good writing. Okay, I admit it—I'm a word freak. And a word freak pitted against the world often exudes more zeal than a born-again Christian. People in general just don't know how to express themselves in writing without resorting to wordiness and superlatives. They're as bad as the second grader who says with breathless sincerity, "I really, really, really, truly, truly love broccoli." But I don't let it get to me anymore. I've even learned to tolerate teachers and administrators at public schools who flout the conventions of good writing right in my face.

A prime example is the awards ceremony at my daughter's high school a few weeks ago. As they called up student after student to recognize them for academic excellence, I calmly read the program. I didn't pay any attention to the tired, plodding string of nouns in the title on the program flyer: "Academic Achievement Recognition Program," and even gave them credit for not adding the word "Committee." I ignored the fact that they acted as if they had invented the concept of letters and pins in their painfully long explanation that said nothing I didn't already know. "It was established," they said, "to recognize the efforts of academically achieving students." This was followed by two additional sentences that meant almost exactly the same thing using different words. I didn't let the redundancy bother me. I'm learning to be mature about things like that.

The program flyer went on to describe the academic letter: *The chenille "H", gold on purple, embossed with the word "ACADEMIC", is the tangible reward for high achievement.* I ignored the two misplaced commas that should have been inside of the quotation marks, and I tried not to be offended that they described a tangible object and didn't think I was smart enough to know that it was tangible, so they told me it was tangible. True to form, they added two more sentences that said essentially the same thing: *It symbolizes outstanding academic achievement. It is the visible recognition . . .* Visible? That cloth letter is visible as well as tangible? Now that's something worth knowing.

When my daughter's name was called for her award, I put the program down and watched her take her place among half the students in her class who smiled and beamed with their letters and certificates and pins. Even though I had read the long-winded descriptions of the pins and letters, I still wasn't sure what the difference was. I assumed the letter was for general smartness and the pin was for something more specific. I wondered if it were possible to get a letter without winning any pins. I suppose that would put a student in the embarrassing position of being generally smart, but specifically dumb. Not to worry, though. Each student sported a ribbon full of pins that could have knocked their classmates' academic heads off if they swung it around a few times.

Things were different in my day, let me tell you. Yes sir, in those days we worked damn hard for very little recognition. Science was my thing. I was in tenth grade, exactly my daughter's age, when I entered my homemade astronomical telescope in the Western New York Science Congress. It was a reflecting telescope, and I ground the mirror myself. It took me six months of grinding and complicated optical tests to get a spherical surface with an accuracy of a quarter wavelength of sodium light. Then I polished it and deepened

the center a few millionths of an inch to make it what they call parabolic. A parabolic reflector, if you remember from your high school physics, will properly converge the parallel rays of light from the stars. I spent long hours in the chemistry lab after school to deposit a layer of silver on the polished surface. My dad helped me with the tube and the mounting. It was a beautiful instrument.

I won fourth place among the hundreds of students who entered their projects. My prize was a hardbound volume of the Handbook of Chemistry. I also received a certificate. It was nothing fancy and gushy like they get today—just a plain certificate with a gold sticker in the corner that simply said “Award of Excellence.” Yet, in its simplicity lay force and vitality and elegance. Now that was an award that meant something!

When my daughter returned to take her seat, I noticed her certificate (and those of all her classmates) said “Outstanding Academic Excellence.” *Outstanding excellence?* For a moment, I thought that maybe our little country school was blessed with all the smartest kids in the whole U S of A. Yet, I knew that some of them were embarrassed by the unrestrained praise, while the smartest ones undoubtedly felt that accolades so freely given actually cheapened their accomplishments. When we got home my daughter plopped her letter, certificate, and sixteen pounds of pins on the table. They're still lying there among the junk mail and penny savers.



It wasn't that way with my certificate, no sir-ee. Mine was worth something to me, I'm here to tell you. That was back in the days when teachers and students aspired to real and unpretentious excellence. I framed my certificate right away and I have it till this day. There is one thing about it that bothers me, though.



When I got home from the science fair that day I took a closer look and discovered an “a” in the word excellence. That gold sticker said “Award of Excellence.”

They spelled excellence wrong! They spelled it wrong! The most important word in the whole stinking document and they spelled it WRONG! Yes, dammit, I admit it. After forty-eight years that still bothers the hell out of me.