

On My Mind  
by Ruth L. Tighe

Newspapers are a great teaching tool - at times serving as models of good writing, at other times serving as stellar examples of poor writing habits. I don't know where the editor was, but one story this past week was such a good example of the latter that it deserves special mention.

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The item was about the "Relay for Life." Repeatedly in the story, the word corpse is used when core is what was meant. It was not a corpse committee that planned the event, but a core committee. And though the words may sound alike, they are far different in meaning!

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Another error that crops up all too often is putting a singular noun with a plural subject, or vice versa. Here, the writer put a plural subject with a singular verb, stating that there "was" over a thousand participants. It should have read, there "were" over a thousand participants.

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While variety enlivens dull stories, it can be overdone, as here, where the spokesman for the event is quoted as having "said gladly," "stated," "disclosed," "aired," "added," with yet another item reported as "according to." "Aired" is perhaps the worst offender. Its use here draws attention to the act, not the quote. Repetition of the word "said" is perfectly acceptable - provided it is not done to excess.

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One paragraph makes no sense whatsoever. It reads, "In 1998, at least 50 percent of the total mortality were cancer victims, according to cancer. This translates to one or two people dying of cancer during the past year." Excuse me?

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The article concludes with another bit of misspeak. It reads, "This project, dubbed as "Love Lights a Tree" will be dedicated to all cancer patients and survivors, living and dead." So far as I know, one does not usually consider either patients or survivors as dead.

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I realize that to the reporters who write for the local papers, English is a second language. I would be the first to admit that I don't know any other language well enough to write even a single sentence, much less well enough to write news stories. And I'd agree that no one is perfect - we're all entitled to make mistakes.

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But when a single article, particularly on a subject as sensitive, meaningful, significant as this one, contains not one minor error, but a number of major errors, it would appear no one was minding the store, as they say, and that, to me, is indefensible.

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Equally as indefensible, in my opinion, is that this same paper continues to ignore so blatantly the nearly universal opinion - recognized even by the CNMI Legislature - that smoking is harmful to one's health. There may not be written, formal, or legal, prohibitions against full-page ads that promote cigarette smoking, but certainly there are moral, empirical, and ethical grounds for not

doing so.

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Where the community is so small, where the victims are friends, neighbors, and their children, such evidence that the publisher still considers Mammon the more important value is not merely offensive, but in fact, rather appalling.

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Of course, it is possible that the custom of viewing newspapers as models of, among other things, exemplary language usage may be just that - a custom - and not universally practiced. But if proper use of the English language is considered to have any value at all, if it is considered of value for people of all ages and all walks of life, and if, moreover, learning by example is considered a valid strategy, it behooves the print - as well as the audio - media to make every effort to ensure that their use of language is, indeed, exemplary.

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The story about Congressman David M. Apatang's unhappiness with the U.S. Post Office couldn't have come at a more appropriate time. I'd have to agree that there seems to be something wrong with the service the U.S. Post Office is providing to the CNMI.

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Unlike Apatang's complaint, however, which seems to be with paying for, but not receiving, priority service, my complaint is with more general shipping delays. I subscribe to a weekly magazine published in the U.S., and have long since resigned myself to the fact that it will arrive by boat, and therefore four to six weeks late. But over the last week, I have received SIX issues of the magazine - covering the six weeks from June 14 through July 28 (one was a double-issue, covering two weeks).

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It doesn't take an idiot to conclude that for six weeks surface mail to the CNMI sat somewhere, unattended and ignored. Nor does it take an idiot to figure out that some of that surface mail made it from its source to the CNMI in a mere five weeks, while some of it took eleven weeks - more than twice as long. The questions are obvious: WHERE did it sit? And, WHY did it sit? WHO is responsible?

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Some mail gets hung up because vendors can't accommodate the CNMI's two-letter state code. But even mail that vendors try to speed up by putting "Air-Enhanced" labels on it, gets hung up. The delay could be due to a lazy employee. That has been found to be the case on occasion. But the pattern is too common, across too many different items and sources, to be the work of one lazy employee.

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Unless the delay is between the main post office on Saipan and its branch where my mail goes, the problem doesn't lie with the local post office either. But certainly, the local post master could call to the attention of those down the delivery line that the delays being experienced are unacceptable.

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Could there be fraud, too, as Apatang's complaint apparently suggests? It wouldn't surprise me.

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Nor does it surprise me to read that now Guam wants to take money from its retirement fund to cover government shortfalls. CNMI Legislators have filed any number of bills attempting to obtain money, one way or another, at the expense of the Retirement Fund to cover the CNMI's own shortage of funds.

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What is being proposed on Guam is to stretch repayment of a debt owed to Guam's retirement fund over thirty years instead of the present fifteen. According to Guam's governor - who initiated the idea - supposedly the move would not take money from the retirement fund, nor would it affect retirees. But that is precisely what reducing payment to Guam's retirement fund from \$53 million to \$26 million would do.

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Just as bakers need flour to make bread, so trusts such as retirement funds need a continuous inflow of money in order to continue paying out retiree benefits. If the amount of available flour is reduced, the baker will be forced to reduce the amount of bread he or she produces. So, too, if the amount of money made available to the retirement fund were to be reduced, the fund would be forced to reduce the benefits paid out to retirees.

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