

THE FINE ART OF MISPELLING

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I have never misspelled a word in my life. I've tried to do it many times, but who can consciously misspell a word? Once I tried misspelling DOG. I typed DAHG, careful not to hit the O key instead of the A and the H. But since I intended to spell it that way, I didn't misspell it. I merely succeeded in spelling an unconventional variant of it. If I had accidentally typed DOG, then I would've misspelled DAHG. So I tried to purposely misspell DAHG instead of DOG, and it worked! I typed DOG. But no, it didn't work. In attempting to misspell DAHG, I actually spelled DOG in two different, correct ways! First, I succeeded in spelling DAHG incorrectly, which I intended to do, and second, I spelled DOG in the correct way.

I decided to try other variations of DOG in the hopes that I'd misspell one of them. I sat down at the typewriter and wrote DOGG, DOHG, DAAG, DEGH, DAHAG, DOYG, DAGAG, DOIGUE, etc. Every one of these words, however, was a correctly spelled misspelling of the word DOG. I was very disappointed. If I couldn't misspell a simple word like DOG, then how could I misspell something far more complicated, like HONORABILITUDINITY?

I decided to go over to my neighbor's and ask him if he would tutor me. He'd learned how to misspell words when he was in grade school, and never forgot after all these years. He said his misspelling ability actually improves with age. As I reached the top step on his front porch, I saw a handwritten sign taped to the door. It said IME NOTT HOAM. EY WUN TA DIH STOARE TU GHID ZUM VOOOD PHAR DEENR. I was totally impressed with his elegant words. In just one sentence, he asserted his right to be the master of his orthographic fate. At the same time, he conveyed a message in English without one word being spelled correctly! Unfortunately, misspellings notwithstanding, his message told the truth. I knocked just to make sure, but no, nobody answered the door.

I returned home and took out my dictionary. As I leafed through it, I decided that the problem wasn't with me. The problem was with the dictionary. It had no misspelled words—at least none that I knew of. My neighbor didn't own a dictionary; thus he was never tainted by the dangers of correct spelling. He used to say to me, "Why do you worry about how to spell things the right way? Everyone tries to spell words the right way, except for people like me, the rugged individualists, who spell to the beat of a different dictionary. If you could see the words coming out of my mouth, you would find that they're all misspelled, but they sound the same as if they were correctly spelled. Correct spelling is not only unnecessary, it's a cliché!"

I never forgot the advice he gave me next. "Don't read! If you don't read for a long enough time, you'll forget how to spell. You'll be a free spirit, as free from proper spelling as you were when you were a child." But I couldn't give up my books. I'd had them for such a long time, and I enjoy reading them, even though they are packed with correctly spelled words. Besides, what else are books good for? They can be read, and that's about all.

I riffled through the dictionary. I flapped its pages like wings. I slammed it shut and tossed it on the table. Then I knew the answer! It lay in the word DOG. If I were to learn how to misspell as well as my neighbor, I would have to do something so radical that it would loosen my inherent ability to write the wrong letters in the wrong order. And that is where DOG bounded back in. I jumped up and grabbed a blank notebook and started putting together a Dog Wordbook. I started covering the pages with different variations of the word DOG. Some were very close to it: DOC, DCG, etc. Some were very far from it: UZXERH, SWEF, etc. I was confident that before the night was over, I would be an authority on misspelling the word DOG.

By early morning I had finished. I felt tired but pleased. I decided to sleep with the book under my pillow, as if it's misspelling aura would seep through the down and permeate my dreams. I fell into a deep sleep. I woke in the late afternoon. I lifted the pillow and grabbed the Dog Wordbook. Fingers trembling, I opened it to a page at random and started to read the words aloud: DOG, DOG, DOG, DOG, DOG, DOG! I was baffled, depressed, shocked, stunned, puzzled, flabbergasted, and piqued—all at the same time. I riffled through the other pages. Wherever I looked, there was DOG spelled correctly! I must've been so tired last night that my subconscious wouldn't let me spell DOG in any other way. I'd never intended to spell any of those DOGs correctly.

And then I had a revelation: in failure I had found success! I'd intended to spell all the DOGs the wrong way, but I misspelled them the right way. I was overjoyed, pleased, ebullient, tickled, euphoric, amused and ecstatic—all at the same time. And I've since realized that, even though I continue to spell every word as the dictionary says it should be spelled, I'm actually misspelling every single one of them. I fully intend to misspell, but I spell correctly. Every word of mine that you read is actually misspelled! If I succeeded and spelled the words wrong, then I would've spelled them correctly in the wrong way, and they wouldn't really be misspelled. I've finally gone beyond my neighbor in my spelling ability. It's easy to spell words incorrectly, but it's very hard to intend to spell them incorrectly and wind up spelling them correctly instead. That's exactly what I do: I misspell the misspellings by spelling the words correctly, and that is a higher order of misspelling! My correctly spelled words are much more misspelled than my neighbor's incorrectly spelled words. He can misspell each correct word in many, many different ways, but I can misspell each incorrect word in only one way, the way that it's supposed to be spelled.

I have learned the ultimate truth of written language: the highest form of misspelling is correct spelling.