



4-14-2014

Some Fortuitous Thoughts, Not Fulsome, Not Delivered From a Podium, During Penultimate Week

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Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "Some Fortuitous Thoughts, Not Fulsome, Not Delivered From a Podium, During Penultimate Week" (2014). *The Weekly Reader*. 51.

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April 14, 2014
Volume 5, Issue 27

The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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Some Fortuitous Thoughts, Not Fulsome, Not Delivered From a Podium, During Penultimate Week

I have been fascinated by language since an early age, so perhaps it is no accident that I became an English major in college. I especially like words that people commonly misuse. I am a collector of such words.

For example, "fortuitous." It is very common to hear a person say something like, "It was fortuitous that I brought my umbrella today, since it has started to rain." Despite the way it looks and sounds, "fortuitous" does not mean "fortunate"; it means "by chance." A coin flip is fortuitous—and your team is fortunate if it goes their way.

Another commonly misused word is "podium." The speaker did not stand at the podium; she no doubt stood at the lectern. A podium is something a speaker stands on.

When you describe a guy as having a goatee, he most likely has instead a Van Dyke, named after the Dutch painter. Custer wore a Van Dyke;

Maynard G. Krebs had a goatee.

I especially like "fulsome," since it is seldom used, but almost always used incorrectly. I have heard several speakers here at Winthrop say, "We have a fulsome agenda today for our meeting." Ouch! To quote a famous movie, "I do not think it means what you think it means." "Fulsome" means "offensively flattering or insincere; offensive to the taste or sensibilities." On second thought, maybe that agenda really *is* fulsome.

I am sure a few of my readers have already found a dictionary that sanctions some or all of these misused words; dictionaries will bend to popular usage eventually, and language does evolve and change. ("Fulsome" actually did mean "full" several centuries ago.) But I am a language stickler, and I like to keep these distinctions alive. (You can find my Facebook page, Mr. Grumpy Grammar Guy, if

you are so inclined.)

I bring up these words to introduce my absolute favorite: penultimate. Like "fulsome," the word is seldom used, but when it is, it is almost always used incorrectly. "This is the penultimate issue facing the Democrats today," I heard Michael Steele, former chair of the Republican National Committee, say on MSNBC the other day. "Penultimate" does not mean the biggest or the best; it means second to last.

To drive home the meaning of "penultimate," I began over a decade ago celebrating "Penultimate Day" with my classes. The last class is cause for celebration, but I like to celebrate the second-to-the-last class. Like Easter, Penultimate Day is a moveable feast: for my Monday-Wednesday class this semester, PD falls on April 23.

The celebration usually involves some sort of food and drink. and it also

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Think of how far we have come. Think of all you have covered. Think of all the challenges your students have met, all the work you and your students have accomplished, all the ways your students have grown, how much you and they have learned."



Continued from page 1

involves a costume. I began with Hawaiian shirts, but I found that not every student owns one, much to my surprise. (I tired of bringing in 15 or more shirts from my vast collection for the whole class to wear.) So Penultimate Day garb has now evolved to hats, boots, overalls, tie dye, and Hawaiian shirts, or any combination thereof. When you see me walking down the hall next Wednesday dressed this way, you will know why. I will join a class that is similarly festooned.

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The penultimate week of classes is not necessarily a time to panic. It is a good time to pause and reflect and plan and get a second wind. Stop and

think and breathe deeply. Now let's march on, to the ultimate week, and then to final exams.

You *are* giving a final exam or culminating experience, aren't you? During the scheduled exam time? As required by the Faculty Manual?

I have a confession to make: even though I have repeatedly brought up this issue of giving final exams during the exam period, since I often notice empty classrooms on my way to give my final exams, I have sometimes made other arrangements. I have never understood why we have to have exams on Saturday, and I find it very disruptive for me and my students, so I have sometimes given a take-home exam when my class had a Saturday exam.

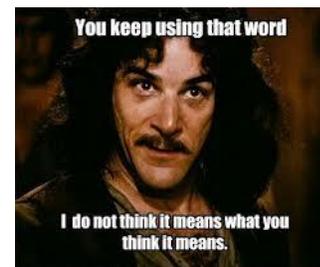
This year, I have a 3:00 pm exam on Saturday. As tempted as I was to make other arrangements, I knew I would be hypocritical if I did not give my exam at that time. So I will be there. You can check on me. Owens 209. But I sure would like to have that policy changed...

So, here we go, once more, the mad, crazy rush to the end of things. Before we and our

students know it, papers and exams and projects will all be turned in and grades will be posted and we will be singing the Alma Mater at commencement in our academic regalia.

But for now, in Penultimate Week, a time to pause, take a breath, and get ready to do a good job with the time that is left.

In addition, this is the penultimate *Weekly Reader* of the year! Thanks to those who read it and give me comments, positive mostly, thank goodness. Now, on to the end!



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent this year and in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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Thought For the Week

“But language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts.”
--Mark Twain