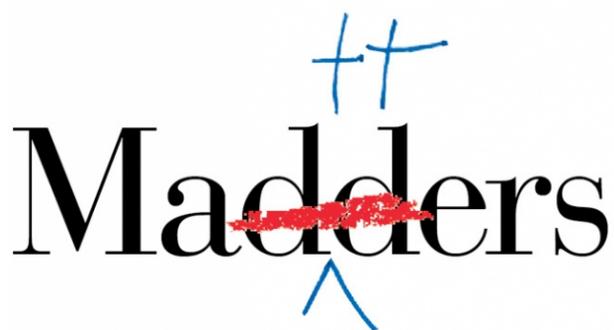




THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Spelling Matters



By Mikita Brotzman | JANUARY 15, 2012 ✓

PREMIUM

A couple of years ago, I was on a hiring committee for a position in counseling psychology that had proved difficult to fill. During one of our meetings, we were handed the résumé of an applicant the chair was eager to hire, not only because her

experience and qualifications seemed tailor-made for the post, but also because she was a diversity candidate (which, I gathered, meant a candidate who was not Caucasian). Looking over the document, however, I noticed three spelling errors on the first page, one of which was in the candidate's field of expertise, which she had described as "complimentary medicine." I glanced at my colleagues. Would anyone else mention it? If not, should I?

I hesitated for two reasons: First, I was the only humanist on a committee of psychologists, and I didn't want to seem like a nit-picker; and second, I was a newcomer to the institution and unfamiliar with protocol. Still, when everyone else expressed approval of the candidate, I couldn't stop myself. In my experience, I said, egregious misspellings in a résumé are grounds for instant rejection. When asked for examples, I pointed to the phrase "complimentary medicine." Two members of the committee still did not see a problem, compelling me to explain the difference between "complimentary" and "complementary."

Even then, the error was not taken seriously. One person described it as a "typo." "I always get mixed up between 'insure' and 'ensure,'" said another. The dean suggested that this candidate, while obviously a strong clinician, might not be especially polished



when it came to "the academic side of things."

I left the meeting feeling both indignant—what is a university, after all, but a place where "the academic side of things" is paramount?—but also afraid I'd come across as a pedant or, worse, a racist. Beyond this, while I've never thought of myself as a grammar Nazi, I was baffled, not so much by my colleagues' disregard for standards of acceptable English as by their assumption that such errors shouldn't stand in the way of hiring a person who, in all other respects, was just what they were looking for. The assumption of my colleagues was that to be an effective therapist and a successful teacher of clinical skills, polished writing isn't necessary.

That may very well be true, but still, a certain level of proficiency should surely be taken for granted. Is it really fussy to suggest that someone with a Ph.D. should be able to spell the name of her own specialty? To me, as to most of my colleagues in the humanities, grammar and style are inseparable from "meaning," whereas to the other members of the hiring committee, spelling mistakes were minor issues that had little bearing on the underlying information. The same problem arose when I gave low grades, in a clinical-psychology course, to papers full of grammar, syntax, and punctuation mistakes. The students were indignant and offended, and complained to the program chair. ("This isn't an English class!")

It wasn't an English class, true, but in most universities in the United States, English is the medium of instruction, and regardless of subject, I expect my students to abide by the rules of ordinary English prose. That, at least, was what I said at the time.

But the more I think about it now, the trickier the question becomes. After all, I realize, there are always limits to the errors I correct. I don't correct em dashes that should be en dashes, for example; I don't correct misplaced hyphens, I don't fuss about spaces after periods, extra dots in an ellipsis, or margin widths. My corrections are always limited to more-obvious errors (at least, obvious to me), such as misplaced apostrophes, subject-object agreement, illogical fragments, and run-on sentences. But if I'm going to pay attention to errors, shouldn't I try to be consistent?

Another question: If a student is permitted to reach the Ph.D level without being able to

spell the name of her specialty, should she be solely to blame? Did her supervisor never notice or draw attention to the error? What if the candidate were not a native speaker? Should she have been given leeway? Researchers in the field of language-order dyslexia have suggested that difficulties with spelling could be rooted in our genes, and in the way that our brains are wired. Biology, it seems, influences not only those with dyslexia but also people without the syndrome, so those with spelling problems can, to a certain extent, blame their genetic makeup. If that is true, should "bad" spellers be given the same rights as everyone else, despite their problematic prose?

Finally, if there are plenty of professors who do not recognize what (to me, at least) are blindingly obvious errors, perhaps the problem is not theirs, but mine. Perhaps I am, in fact, an old-fashioned pedant, prejudiced against the modern age with its relaxed spelling rules. Perhaps I'm naïve to expect job candidates not to make spelling mistakes on their résumés. In the end, my pointing out the candidate's bad spelling did not make her look stupid or foolish or incompetent or careless—it just made me look picky and arcane. Perhaps it's me, not the job candidate, who needs re-educating.

But I'm glad I stood my ground by at least speaking out. In an age of spell-check and grammar-check, it's not very difficult to avoid large and obvious errors of this kind. After all, when I type "complimentary medicine" into a search engine, I'm immediately asked, "Do you mean complementary medicine?" Indeed, at a time when most job searches are yielding hundreds of résumés, bad spelling can be a godsend—a way of weeding out those who are thoughtless and inattentive to detail, or who simply don't think that spelling matters. To my mind, while accurate spelling may be only one aspect of attention to detail, dismissing it is symptomatic of a potentially more significant lack of care.

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