



**(U) Write Right: Grab Bag**

FROM: [REDACTED]  
of the Reporting Board (S12)  
Run Date: 01/27/2006

(U) This month we accede to our readers' requests that we comment on several "language incidents" and usage questions.

**1. Avoid Neologisms (U)**

(U) "Officials Humored by Question" -- so the question was being indulgent toward the officials, was it? NOT.

(U) "Surrendered Chieftain Urges Insurgents to Accept Amnesty" -- No, in fact, he was not surrendered; nobody handed him over to anyone. *He* did the surrendering.

(U) We realize it is difficult not to succumb to the trend when our leaders "pulse their audience" and use, for instance, "robust" as a verb, or vow to "support organizational up-skilling," but we urge our reporters to heed the words of our hero Marcus Fabius Quintilian: "*You should not aim to be understood, but to be impossible to misunderstand.*" As the [SIGINT Reporter's Style and Usage Manual](#) says:

*"(U) While neologisms are part of normal language change and with frequent use become part of the everyday language, clarity is the most important principle in writing reports. Do not use recent or uncommon neologisms, especially those that could cause confusion, just as you would avoid using colloquial language."*

**2. Begging the Question (U)**

(U) This in turn raises a question: at what point does a change in usage harden, and does the change lead to confusion? This must be judged on a case-by-case basis; flexibility is a good thing, but this column's goal is "absolute clarity in one reading" and therefore we recommend sticking to older, established usage during transitional periods. Having said that, we venture to declare one transitional period pretty much over with. "Begging the question" is now generally used to mean "raising an inevitable question," but the expression started out as a bad translation of the Latin term for a particular type of logical fallacy ("petitio principii") in the study of rhetoric. Insisting that the phrase remain limited to that esoteric use would be as absurd as maintaining, as our A.P. English teacher did in the '70s, that "epitome" could only be used to mean a precis or digest.

**3. Keep It Simple (U)**

(U) How do YOU say "check the calendar"? Here's how an Organization That Will Remain Nameless (OTWRN) put it:

*(U//FOUO) Effective [date], [OTWRN] will maintain an on-line Event Calendar for use by all elements of the [OTWRN] enterprise. This tool will provide opportunities to leverage events and continue to keep the workforce informed of what is happening within*



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[OTWRN].

(U) Checking the calendar = "provid[ing] opportunities to leverage events and continu[ing] to keep the workforce informed of what is happening within [OTWRN]." This has got to be some kind of record. Several reporters who brought this to our attention noted that they often practice "[Tight Writing](#)" in an idle moment by translating such "communications" into Plain English. Or rather, plain English. Which brings us to our last item:

#### **4. Capitalism (U)**

(U) There seems to be a move toward increased capitalization of common nouns, to the point where some documents appear at first glance to be written in German. Reporters should consult the [Style Manual entry on Capitalization](#) for guidance.

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(U) See earlier editions of "Write Right" in the [Write Right '05](#) series.

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