

# bernstein | Sorry, but 'most unique' on words | is absolutely not possible

By Theodore M. Bernstein

Most unusual. A clipping from an Iowa paper, sent this way by Mrs. Peter Leinhauser of Ottumwa, Iowa, quotes the school superintendent of that city as saying, "Our budget situation is probably the most unique in the state because of the severity of the loss of students over the last three years." One would expect a school official to know that unique means the only one of its kind or unequalled, that there cannot be degrees of uniqueness. As has been mentioned here before, there are not many absolutes in English, but unique is one of them.

One thing and another. Some words have a host of meanings that we often are unaware of until someone questions one of them. Such a questioning touched off turmoil in the office of Bill Marsano of Wayne, Pa. In the middle of a discussion a colleague of his said, "There is such a thing as being too forgiving," whereupon another colleague said, "What thing? A written pardon may be a thing, but to be forgiving is not." From that point the argument took off. We could say that the use of thing in a context like that is idiomatic, which it is, and let it go

at that. But dictionaries contain so many definitions of the word that it becomes clear that the disputed use is quite valid. Definitions range from an inanimate object to a matter of circumstance, an idea, an opinion or a quality.

Displays of ability. A month ago a reader sent in a newspaper clipping which contained a sentence saying that a poll showed President Ford ahead "on the basis of greater experience and electability." That word, said the reader, is not in the dictionary, "but it should be." By coincidence, the very next day we saw a newspaper sentence that said the sending of messages privately from the White House to reporters to get across to a government official that he has outlived his usefulness is a valuable technique because "it allows for 'deniability.'" And two days later a reporter wrote about voters who expressed favorability toward a candidate. Are we on the verge of a new era of suffixation such as those that gave us -wise words (weatherwise, dollarwise) and -ese words (Pentagonese, pedagogue)?

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## Minority volunteers needed for programs

The People and Prisons Program (PPP) needs minority student volunteers, said Candy Marshall, program director and a junior criminal justice major from Elm Creek.

PPP is a UNL student volunteer group which works with inmates at the Nebraska Center for Women in York, a prison which houses women felons from Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming and North Dakota. PPP began in September 1975, and each Saturday UNL volunteers teach prison inmates crafts or join them in sports activities.

Marshall said there are many minority residents at York, and white volunteers cannot always relate to them. To encourage minority participation in PPP activities, they need minority volunteers, she said, especially Indians and Blacks.


Lack of minority volunteers in the program resulted from PPP's failure to tell minorities that they were needed, she said. Next semester, PPP will advertise for volunteers in minority publications, she added.

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