

# Let's leave it to the poets to decide

By Theodore M. Bernstein  
Let's leave it. Here's a letter from Kay Koehler, a columnist of Little Rock, Ark.:

Dear Ted:

My friend, concerning "let" and "leave,"  
Forgive me, but I do believe  
That in a way you blew it.

If I "let" you buy me a drink,  
It means, if you just stop and think,  
You have my "leave" to do it.

And in the British Isles I met  
A sign that said they'd rooms to "let."  
Just how do you construe it?

I must report—a sight I leave—  
The room I "let" was one to "leave,"  
So shabby did I view it.

Though "leave" and "let" sometimes confuse,  
I find that they also amuse;  
Therefore let us drink to it.

Before I give you leave to go,  
Which means I'll let you leave, you know,  
Another thing upsets me.

That "let," which means we can partake,  
Did not when Ham-let said he'd make  
"A ghost of him that lets me."

Does that mean one who is unfettered  
Finds himself as well unlettered?  
Now there's a thought that frets me!

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And the reply:

Oh, Kay! Oh, no it's not okay  
To have you think, much less to say  
That I would ever "blow it."

Your let's a verb, your leave a noun;  
They don't compare (unless you clown):  
They differ and you know it.

Awfully distorted words. Most people don't give a second thought to the change in meaning of such a word as *awfully* so that it denotes simply *very*. But P. Wenograd of Philadelphia noticed such a usage by Senator Mondale, who said that Jimmy Carter was "an uncommon man, *terribly* gifted, committed, experienced ready." Didn't he mean *very* or *extremely*, but not *terribly*? asked the reader. He surely did. The conversion of powerful adverbs into simple intensives began with the British but is common in the speech of Americans as well. Adverbs that have undergone such treatment include *horribly*, *frightfully*, *dreadfully*, *fearfully* and probably several more. In most instances the use of such words in extravagant hyperbole, or exaggeration, has not damaged their ability to express their primary strong meanings. If it did it would be appallingly damaging to the language.



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