

Rex Jaeschke's Blog Postings from
Tales from the Man who would be King
Volume 03 – Dec 2011 through Nov 2012

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Introduction

When I decided to start a blog, I wrote the first three installments and let them “bake” awhile before I posted them and announced the creation of the blog. I wanted to get past the romantic aspect of dreaming something up, jumping in and doing it, and then, later, finding out it wasn't sustainable. Now, more than 11 years later, looking back, not only was I able to deliver a substantive posting each month for 132 months, I have 16 of the 24 postings for the next two years already written, and ideas for the remaining eight mapped out!

On a semi-regular basis, over a home-made café-au-lait, I read an old posting, and I'm very happy to say that *I'm not embarrassed by any of them!* It surely has become a labor of love!

Over the years, a number of regular readers have suggested that I publish the postings in some sort of printed book form. Having written numerous technical books, many articles for technical journals, and a newspaper column, I am well aware of the formal publishing process, and the work involved in getting what I might consider to be a perfectly good manuscript into a shape that a publisher would accept. Regarding writing books, my financial return was probably far less than the minimum wage! Of course, I could self-publish, and, in fact, I have access to a facility to do just that at a very reasonable cost. After serious consideration and putting my ego aside, I decided that I would indeed re-publish the first 11-years-worth of installments, but in an electronic book form, PDF. And I would do so, 12 installments (that is, one year's-worth) per Volume.

To make it worth having these Volumes available for downloading instead of readers simply going to the website for installments one at a time, I've added some small value to the Volumes. Here are the enhancement and/or changes I've made:

- Did some light editing: corrected spelling mistakes, improved punctuation, and tweaked some grammatical constructs
- Corrected factual errors
- Updated outdated information
- Added an occasional bit of extra relevant information as an aside
- Added *many* more links, primarily to Wikipedia and Wiktionary
- Added a few photos. [I write installments using MS Word, which easily allows me to arrange embedded photos. However, when I export the result to my blog (which is hosted by the freely available BlogEngine.NET), the result is far from pleasing. As such, after some early experimentation, I have included very few photos.]
- Added forward pointers to relevant installments that came later

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- Regarding links to other installments, links to destinations that are in the same Volume resolve to the corresponding chapter in that Volume; otherwise, they resolve to the blog web site.

Lastly, a very big “Thank You!” to my reviewers, good friends John Tew and Tom Plum, who have been with me from the beginning. Now I say “good” friends. There is a saying, “Friends help you move, but good friends help you move bodies!” I have not yet asked either to help in such a manner, but for now, I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt.

Happy reading,

Rex Jaeschke, April 2021.

1. December 2011, “Making Good-Looking Documents”

These days, everyone’s an author, whether it is writing casual emails, letters to friends, papers for school, or proposals for work. Very few people have access to a secretary who, in days gone by, would take one’s draft and type it up neatly correcting spelling and grammar mistakes and generally making it look professional along the way.

I have long maintained that form is just as important as content, perhaps even more. The best-written text can be ignored if it is presented poorly. Now while a so-called *good-looking* document might not be worth reading, people will be more likely actually to read it, at least for a page or two because it *is* good looking.

In this essay, I’ll point out a number of things one can do to make a document more attractive and, therefore, more likely to be read. I have been writing for wide circulation and publication for more than 25 years, and I am completely self-taught in both writing and layout. I can say with complete certainty that I’ve learned a few things *not* to do!

Although I now happen to use Microsoft Word (2010 edition) for all my word processing, this essay is not about learning that application or indeed any specific tool. Rather, it’s about things that one should be able to do in any modern word processor.

The good news is that popular word processors provide a number of standard document templates and default settings, so one doesn’t have to configure everything. These include margins, font type and size, paragraph format, and line spacing, all of which can be overridden, as you need and get more advanced.

One very important thing to understand is that the better looking a document is, the less you will notice its layout. You’ll simply find the document easy to read and pleasant to follow without necessarily being able to say why. On the other hand, if the document contains many typefaces and font sizes, bold, italic, and underlined text, all mixed in together you will remember how truly bad it looked possibly to the extent that you were never inspired to read it, or that you remember the form but not the content. [Remember, nothing is a complete waste, it can always serve as a bad example!]

1.1 Don’t use your Word Processor as a Typewriter!

If you find yourself using your word processor as a typewriter, **STOP!** A word processor is configurable and can do many things for you if only you’d let it. So, stop trying to help it by applying manual formatting. Specifically,

- **Don’t** add extra spaces to the start of a paragraph to get that line indented. Instead, configure paragraphs to have the indenting you want, so that if you change your mind later, *all* paragraphs can be adjusted automatically by reconfiguring that property.
- **Don’t** use blank lines to try and get better spacing and/or page breaks. Instead, configure paragraphs to avoid *widows* and *orphans* (see below).
- **Don’t** use one or more tabs to arrange things in tabular form; instead, define a table and use that.

1.2 Page Width, Number of Columns, and Justification

Right now, stop reading this essay, and go and look at samples of the following kinds of publication: a newspaper, a novel, a glossy magazine, and a textbook. Compare the sizes of their pages, the number of columns per page, and whether the right-hand edge of text lines up with the right margin (that is, lines are

right-justified) or not (that is, the lines are set *ragged-right*). Now using that information, look at the following columns:

Ragged-right margins (like this paragraph) are artsy while right-justified margins are for those of us who crave order. In either case, when using a narrow column (such as in this example), you run into a problem. For many lines, the next word to be printed is too long to fit on that line, so it goes to the next line, leaving lots of space at the end of the previous line.

With right-justification (like this paragraph), if the extra space is evenly distributed between the words (or even between the letters) on that line, it might not be noticeable, but very often it is.

The alternate approach is for the word processor to hyphenate artificially the long word (like this paragraph) putting as many syllables as possible on the previous line with a single trailing hyphen, with the remaining syllable(s) on the next line. [Most readers never notice this; did you before I mentioned it?]

Every now and then, I see a glaring example of “rivers of white” in a newspaper column. That is, there is a lot of white space clumped together over a series of consecutive lines, mostly because the lines each contain a rather long word and excess space is

put entirely between words. I find this most distracting.

1.3 Avoiding Bad Line Breaks

Lines in the same paragraph are broken by the word processor at the space between consecutive words or after a real or artificially added hyphen. However, there are certain inter-word spaces where one should *not* break a line. For example, in the text “10 people”, “year 2001”, and “5th birthday”, ordinarily, it is bad style to allow a line break to occur at any of the inter-word spaces. To ensure such a break doesn't happen, one must use a non-breaking space instead of a regular space.

Occasionally, one uses some text that contains one or more hyphens, neither of which one wants to be a candidate for a line break. For example, every legal US resident gets assigned a Social Security Number of the form 123-45-6789. Ordinarily, one would want to read this number as a whole item, all on the same line. To ensure this, one must use a non-breaking hyphen instead of a regular hyphen.

It is quite common to end a paragraph with a word that contains three or fewer letters. In such cases, it is also a good idea to precede such a word with a non-breaking space, to avoid that short final word's being on a line on its own (that is, being an *orphan*).

1.4 Avoiding Bad Page Breaks

According to [Wikipedia](#), “In typesetting, widows and orphans are words or short lines at the beginning or end of a paragraph, which are left dangling at the top or bottom of a column, separated from the rest of the paragraph.”

Personally, I think that orphans are more distracting than are widows. In any event, both should be avoided as much as possible. Check your word processor's widow and orphan controls.

In general, word processors treat text as a set of paragraphs, with headings and subheadings also being paragraphs, but set a bit differently. In this section, I have used the heading “Avoiding Bad Page Breaks.” It would be bad form to have a page break occur between that heading and the following paragraph. Of course, as one edits a document over time, the addition and removal of text often causes page breaks to occur in different places. Rather than hoping to notice bad page breaks and “fix” them manually, one should be able to format the heading using some sort of “keep with next paragraph” property, so a page break will never occur immediately after it.

1.5 All Those Fonts and Typefaces

Let a new user loose on a word processor and pretty soon, he'll probably have discovered the myriad of fonts, typefaces, and point sizes, and tried to use many of them in the same document. This definitely is one instance in which *less is more*. Have too many visual distractions and the reader will be looking at the form only!

In my early days of computer-generated text processing, my printers had only a fixed-width typewriter font, which made for less-than-interesting documents. [At the very beginning, I actually worked on a popular computer system whose character set did *not* even have lowercase letters!] The advent of laser printers really opened up the use of proportional fonts and character sets with large numbers of symbols, including Greek letters, subscripts, superscripts, common fractions, and so on.

1.6 Getting the Reader's Attention

There are a number of ways of emphasizing text; they include the following:

- Centering it across the column or page –
This is useful for titles and subtitles
and for setting poems and wedding invitations.
- Setting it in **bold** – Do this sparingly; too much of it is equivalent to shouting.
- Setting it in *italic* – This is used effectively for one or two words at a time, foreign words or phrases, or quotations.
- Setting it with underline – This really is a holdover from typewriter days when there was no alternative. Don't use it unless required by a style guideline.
- Setting it in ***bold and italic with underline*** – Okay, that would get my attention and you an F on your paper I am grading.
- Using a different `typeface` – This is most often used to distinguish between different levels of headings and regular text. [I use this approach a great deal to distinguish computer-programming keywords from their English counterparts.]
- Using a different **point size** – This is most often used to distinguish between different levels of headings and regular text.
- Indenting the left (and possibly the right) margin of paragraphs borrowed from some other source (such as a poem or quotation).

If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worth reading,
Or do things worth the writing.

Benjamin Franklin

- Adding shading to a **word**, sentence, or paragraph.
- Adding some ruled lines or **surrounding text with a rectangle**.
- Using small caps – All lowercase letters are converted to uppercase, but are set in a slightly smaller point size than uppercase letters. For example, "Hello There" in small caps becomes "HELLO THERE".
- Using drop caps – Ordinarily, this is only used to start the first word of the first paragraph in a section; for example:

Once upon a time, in a
land far far away,
there lived a dragon
named Sylvester.
Now as dragons go,
Sylvester was pretty
friendly, and didn't eat more

than one young child per day. ...

- Setting it in a different colored foreground and/or background – Of course, while the use of colors on-screen can be effective, printing the resulting document on a black and white printer may limit its usefulness.
- Make the text blink – I can imagine this being used as a temporary placeholder.
- Use any number of other visual effects your word processor might provide.

1.7 Using the Right Form of Dash

Although standard keyboards usually provide only one kind of hyphen-minus key, other dash-like characters are useful and generally available. For example:

- The humble “-” – Use this for a hyphen. It can also be used as a minus sign, although a better alternative might be available if you want a minus sign to have the same width as a plus sign. [We already mentioned the non-breaking hyphen earlier.]
- An em dash – This dash has the width of the letter M in the current typeface/font. Use an em dash to insert an aside into a sentence, as in “He met Mary—a woman he’d dated many years earlier—on his way home from work.” Some writers put a space either side of an em dash; I don’t. Typically, a pair of em dashes is interchangeable with a pair of parentheses.
- An en dash – This dash has the width of the letter N in the current typeface/font. Use an en dash to separate the endpoints of a range, as in, “numbers 1–5” and “Monday–Friday”. [Using an ordinary (that is, a breaking) hyphen might cause an unwanted line break before the end value of the range.]

By the way, if you find yourself adding artificial hyphenation manually, you are using your Word Processor as a Typewriter; **STOP IT!**

1.8 Setting Margins

Large documents have pages that are usually printed on both sides and bound, either along a vertical edge or along the top edge. This requires that care be taken setting the page margins, so that left-sided (*verso*) and right-sided (*recto*) pages accommodate the bound edge.

1.9 Headers and Footers

Although adding these is easy, all too often they are missing from documents. Note that the contents of verso and recto pages might vary, and that the first page of a chapter/section might differ from both verso and recto. For example, the first line(s) of a chapter will ordinarily have the chapter number and name set in some special manner, in which case, it would be distracting (not to mention redundant) to also have that same information on that page’s header immediately above that line.

Then there is the question of page numbering and number position. In single-sided documents, page numbers are often right justified or centered at the bottom. In two-sided documents, page numbers

are often justified at the outer margin or centered at the bottom, or justified at the outer margin at the top.

The inner margin of the footer is a good place to put a Copyright notice.

1.10 Adding Asides

Occasionally, it is useful to supplement the main text with information that might be useful, but which is not essential. Such additional text should be presented in such a way that it is obviously not as important as the main body. The most common ways of doing this involve putting the extra text in the following places:

- Inside parentheses or square brackets, right in the body of the main text
- Inside a footnote
- Inside an endnote

The latter two approaches allow longer asides without distracting the reader. And when reading such documents in their native electronic form, one can usually jump to the accompanying note by clicking on the note marker in the main text. [Some people, including me, dislike endnotes in printed documents, as they can be hard to find.]

1.11 Lists

A good word processor should support both numbered and bulleted lists, as well as lists nested within a list, at least up to three levels deep. Note that the more sophisticated systems will let you replace the bullet with any number of alternate symbols.

If you find yourself formatting lists manually, you are using your Word Processor as a Typewriter;
STOP IT!

1.12 Tables

It is true that a picture can be worth a 1,000 words, and so too can a table. The main things to consider when creating a table are, as follows:

- Set column headings in some emphasized way (bold, italic, larger point size, for example). If there are multiple heading lines, set them differently, and maybe make the first line span all the columns. It can also be useful to shade headings in grey or some other color.
- If the final row is a summary or totals row, set it in a special way, perhaps like that for headers.
- For very long tables, request that headings be repeated at the top of each continued page.
- If the cells in any row contain more than a few lines of text, consider whether individual rows can be broken across page breaks or whether all the lines in row must be on the same page.
- Take care when choosing the alignment of the table, column headings, and cell contents.

If you find yourself formatting tables manually, you are using your Word Processor as a Typewriter;
STOP IT!

1.13 Adding Temporary Notes

Larger documents may be written over days, weeks, or even months, in which case, the author might like to leave placeholders about details yet to be determined or items to be done. See if your word processor provides a comment-tracking facility such that you can display or hide comments, or move through the set of comments mechanically without having to scan the text a page at a time looking for them.

1.14 More Advanced Options

There are many other things one might consider when formatting a document. And while they can require some investment of time to learn, they add a more sophisticated look to one's documents. These include the following:

- Links – these allow the on-line reader to jump to web pages, to places within the same document (via *bookmarks*, a special case of which is a *forward reference*), and to other documents.
- Tracked changes – this facility allows the changes to a previous edition to be tracked, so a reader can see both the old and new versions allowing her to proof the changes.
- Automatically numbering of figures and examples
- Adding pictures or photos and optionally having text flow around them
- Adding front matter pages before the first chapter/section, with such pages having Roman page numbers
- Providing a Table of Contents
- Adding a cross-reference index

1.15 Conclusion

Never distribute a document (or an email, for that matter) without running it through a spelling checker, and if possible, a grammar checker. Assuming you have such tools, not using them is just downright lazy! I guarantee you that your credibility will suffer if the document contains obvious spelling and grammatical errors. [It truly is stunning how many native English speakers don't know when to use *there* vs. *their* and *its* vs. *it's*, for example. A good checker will detect such misuses. However, I doubt any checker is infallible; I override mine on a regular basis.]

A final word of warning: If you get too anal about document layout, you will spend much more time critiquing a document's layout than you do reading its content. And while that might be appropriate when proofing a highbrow literary article, it's inappropriate for documents having a short shelf life, such as newspapers and personal communications.

Happy publishing!

2. January 2012, "Travel - Packing and Preparing"

With more than 1,500,000 air miles (2.5 million kms) under my belt (see "[Travel - Fly Me to the Moon](#)", from May 2010), and quite a few driving trips as well, I have a lot of experience at preparing for travel, and in this essay I'm going to share some of my tips with you. However, remember that I am far from [normal](#)!

Many years ago, I remember reading some advice about packing. It went something like this: Put on your bed all the stuff you are thinking of taking on your trip and divide it into three piles. Pile 1 contains the "absolutely essential" things; Pile 2 contains the "nice to have stuff;" and Pile 3 has those things that maybe, just maybe, you might have occasion to use. Now, when you have done that, take Piles 2 and 3 and put those things back in your cupboards! Personally, I find that to be good advice. With my packing, I try to be a minimalist, and I've gotten pretty good at it to the point that I rarely get back home from a trip and find that I didn't actually use something I packed, except hopefully the first aid kit.

2.1 Luggage

- Unless you are seriously physically impaired or a small child, don't take more pieces of luggage than you can manage yourself at one time without any assistance for at least 400 yards/meters.
- Buy only cases with wheels. There are two main kinds: those with two wheels that have a (sometimes adjustable length) rigid handle you use to pull, and those with four wheels that have a flexible strap you use to pull. Whichever you get, make sure that the wheel assembly is well made and preferably recessed to protect it from damage. (That said, note that wheels don't work at all well on cobblestones, which are prevalent in many European streets, so be ready to carry your luggage at least some of the time.)
- Lots of luggage is cheap and nasty, and after only one bout of typical airline baggage handling, can show serious signs of wear. Don't buy a \$20 case for a \$2,000 vacation!
- Luggage will get cut, scratched, and marked, so don't get hung up about its appearance. And don't spend more than is necessary. Besides, having expensive/designer luggage marks you as a potential target for thieves and scam artists.
- In these days of security checks, your luggage may be opened by security without your being present, even if it is locked. Besides, locks only keep honest people out, so don't get hung up on locking your luggage. I never lock mine.
- Invest in some decent labels that cannot be removed easily. Print the information clearly. Most ID tags that come with luggage are pretty crappy.
- Put your home address and contact information inside the luggage as well, preferably written in felt pen, so it can't be erased easily.
- Many bags and cases look alike. By using a secure strap with a distinctive color or design, you can more easily identify your bag on a baggage carousel.
- Don't put anything really valuable or critical to your trip in your checked luggage.
- Limit your carry-on luggage to a computer bag or attaché case, a purse, a garment bag, and a fanny pack/bum bag. Yes, waiting for your luggage on arrival can take time, but trying to carry

everything onboard a plane might mean you have to use the space under the seat in front of you for storage, and for those of us with long legs and/or on long flights, that's a definite no-no.

- Once at my destination, for personal activities I find a small daypack to be useful, to carry around a water bottle, some snack food, maps, guidebooks, and a first aid kit. If you don't take it aboard as carry-on luggage, fold it flat and put it inside your checked luggage.
- I'm a *big* fan of hands-free travel, so whenever possible, I take a backpack and I wear a fanny pack; that's it. That way, I can keep both hands free to push and shove my way onto public transport along with the locals, and to hold on to the bus/train straps if I'm forced to stand.

2.2 Clothing

- Let's start with the most important item, shoes! My guess is that by far the weakest part of any traveler's wardrobe is his or her footwear. Specifically, people plan on doing a lot of walking in shoes that were not designed for that purpose. While I'm no spendthrift, I spend at least \$120 for a pair of good walking shoes, which I buy at a high-end store that supplies hikers. [In fact, I practically live in those kinds of shoes any time I'm out of the house and not attending formal meetings.]
- Get practical! This means that while you might not go down your local street in your gardening clothes or without your hair done just right, almost everyone you will meet while traveling will be strangers who you will never see again. You certainly do not need a different outfit every day! In any event, dress to please yourself. But above all, be comfortable. It never ceases to amaze me how many people dress in business suits and such for an international flight during which they will sleep in their clothes! As for me, I like things loose, and I always undo my shoelaces while in flight, as my feet swell with the pressure difference.
- My favorite all-purposes clothing item is lightweight khaki trousers that dry quickly when wet, have zippered pockets, and whose legs can be removed by unzipping them and without taking my shoes off. For short trips I take only one pair; for longer trips I take two.
- My next favorite piece is a lightweight Gore-Tex coat with lots of pockets, some zippered some not. Buy one that supports a zip-in/zip-out liner jacket.
- Wear clothes in layers, so you can add or remove a layer at a time.
- Socks are important, and I often wear special polypropylene *wicking socks* underneath other socks, that wick the perspiration from my feet.
- I *always* carry a baseball cap in one coat pocket and a woolen cap and gloves in another.

2.3 Personal Stuff

- A sheet of aluminum foil: It's light and takes up next-to-no space, yet you can use it for a 100 purposes from wrapping up leftover food, making a drinking cup, to storing pills/tablets. But you have to remember to take it with you everywhere; otherwise, you won't have it when you need it!
- Some of those clear plastic zip-up bags, in various sizes
- An alarm: you can't always rely on a hotel's wake-up call system and, besides, who will wake you if you fall asleep with jetlag on a long bus or train ride?

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- A small flashlight. [My friend John tells me that Mag lights are great. They are fairly small, built tough, waterproof, take only two AA batteries, and last a very long time. They also have an extra light bulb hidden inside the unit.]
- Some compact travel games and/or a deck of playing cards
- A pair of sunglasses (or clip-ons) and a spare pair of eyeglasses. And maybe even your prescription
- Insect repellent
- Sunscreen and lip balm
- A hand towel
- Medication, headache tablets, a basic first-aid kit, blister pads and stuff to deal with foot problems when doing a lot of walking
- A strong, plastic knife, fork, and spoon (or spork): I sometimes take a plastic bowl and cup as well, although leftover containers from take-away food places work just as well.
- Swiss Army knife
- A compact pillow for the plane flight and/or the hotel. I can sleep on gravel if I have a good pillow!
- Some simple groceries: I often take some packets of ketchup, pepper, salt, sugar, instant coffee, and tea bags, which are things that are difficult to buy in small amounts while traveling.
- Reading materials
- A small roll of toilet paper or a pack of tissues. Not all public toilets will have paper, and €10 bills are not meant for that purpose!
- For longer trips, some washing powder: many hotels have clothes lines in their rooms; hotel laundry services are usually quite expensive, so find a coin-operated laundry instead
- Writing materials to send postcards

2.4 Documentation

- Passport and visa(s)
- Health/vaccination card
- Travel tickets and itinerary, accommodation and car rental vouchers, reservation confirmation slips
- A domestic/international driver's license, as appropriate
- Business cards: It's handy to give them to interesting people you meet, and you can write your personal contact information on the back. If you don't have a business card, consider making some on your home computer and printing them on card stock.
- Contact names, addresses, and telephone numbers
- Travel/guidebooks
- Foreign language guides
- Maps
- Membership card for automobile club service
- Membership card for hosting organizations and host lists
- A map of your own country to show people who ask where you are from

2.5 Money and Valuables

- Some cash in your home currency sufficient for when you get back from an international trip and need a taxi or a cup of coffee, for example
- A primary and a backup credit card (along with their PINs): Some PINs contain letters, yet some cash machines around the world have only digits on their keypads, so if yours have letters, make sure you know the corresponding digits. Twice in the past two years, I've had my primary card cancelled for suspected fraudulent use while I was traveling, hence the recommendation to have a backup card.
- Check with your credit card company to see if they put a surcharge on purchases made outside your home country (mine charge an extra 3%)
- Cash machines are readily available in the developed world, so best to get local currency once there as you need it. However, some machines insist on giving you very large-valued bills, which can be hard to change.
- Buying foreign currency in your home country is very likely to be more expensive than buying it at your destination.
- Travelers checks are pretty much a thing of the past
- Consider having a money/passport pouch to wear under your clothing
- If traveling with companions, don't have one person carry all the cash; spread it around, so it doesn't all get lost or stolen at the same time
- I usually take a set of my country's coins (including some special-issue ones) to show people or to give as souvenirs
- Leave all but your "essential" jewelry at home

2.6 Electronics and Electrics

- Laptop, netbook, or tablet computer: these are useful for handling email; browsing the internet; playing music; using an internet phone system (such as [Skype](#)); viewing, sorting/renaming, and backing up digital photos; and even viewing video.
- A headset for computer/internet phone use (my netbook has built-in speakers, a microphone and a webcam, but my laptop has only speakers)
- Spare high-capacity memory sticks to hold backups of computer files and digital photos
- Digital camera, spare memory card, and charger
- Digital video camera, spare tapes or disks, and charger
- International power adaptor: I have several that take "anything in" and have "anything out", which includes support for plugs and sockets for US, Australia/NZ, Continental Europe, and the British Isles, all in one unit. Sometimes, it is convenient to be charging more than one device at a time; however, an international adaptor has only one socket. As such, I take a 3-way plug and I put that into the adaptor, allowing me to charge up to three things at once.
- I use a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) for my calendar, contacts, notes, and diaries. I could also use it for email and web browsing. It has a charger. A mobile phone might suffice for most of these activities, but international phone roaming charges may bankrupt you!
- If you can avoid it, don't take any appliances that draw a lot of current, such as hair dryers or curling tongs

- Men, for the most part, you can probably find support for an electric shaver, but you might want to take a hand razor and small soap stick instead, if not as well

2.7 Camping

- Tent with poles, pegs and waterproofing sealant if not waterproofed ahead of time (rarely works once you are there, and it rains and leaks; a patch of duct tape works best then)
- A small roll of duct tape or some wrapped around the outside of your thermos or water bottle
- Bedding: pillow, sleeping bag, mattress, air pump
- Stove
- Lantern and spare mantles
- Gas bottles
- Waterproof matches
- Cooking pots, pans, utensils, sharp knives, and cutting board
- Crockery and cutlery
- Axe and shovel
- Bucket and quart/gallon plastic jug
- Ice chest and ice
- Folding chairs and possibly a table
- Garbage bags
- Ropes and octopus straps
- Tarpaulin
- Thermos for hot/cold drinks and/or food
- Basic set of tools
- A whistle
- Groceries, including cooking support such as oil and spices

2.8 Traveling with Kids

- Take along activities to keep them happy especially when they have to wait 8 hours at an airport for a delayed flight. The two best things I found was a deck of UNO cards and some sort of music player on which you can record their favorite books
- Some airlines and train services still give out play kits to young travelers, so ask. And with the more sophisticated airline video systems available now even in Economy Class, kids have a much wider range of things to watch
- Don't expect your kids (or many adults, for that matter) to want to spend 4 hours in an art museum! Plan some kid-friendly activities and keep an eye out for playgrounds
- Take a spiral-bound book and work with your child/children to make a diary of the trip. Not only can you write in it each day, but you can also have the people you meet write in it, in their native language. You can glue in post cards, stickers, and stamps, receipts, brochures, and tickets, for example.

2.9 Things to do Before You Leave Home

- For not-necessarily-exotic destinations, at least 8 weeks in advance check if any vaccinations or (anti-malaria or other) tablets are required
- Arrange for garden and/or indoor plant support
- Arrange for pet support
- Arrange transportation to/from your home airport/train station
- Suspend postal deliveries or arrange for someone to collect your mail
- Suspend newspaper deliveries and have someone collect any free community newspapers that get thrown in your yard
- Consider leaving one or more lights on inside, or have them be triggered by a timer
- Consider recording a new answer phone message (see below)
- Switch off appliances, computers, and such
- Switch off the water supply to the washing machine or perhaps the whole house
- Adjust the heating/air conditioning levels
- Tell your immediate neighbors, so they can “keep an eye” on your place
- If appropriate, disable automatic downloading of email to your home computer, so you can get it on a different computer while traveling (this is necessary if you use something like MS Outlook, but not if you get your mail via a web browser)
- If you have a mobile phone and want to be able to make and/or receive calls while abroad, you'll need to see if you need SIM cards, and what the call charges will be. Alternatively, you might want to look at renting a mobile in the destination country
- On most personal trips, I keep an electronic diary. Before the start of each trip, I clone the general outline from the previous diary and get that setup with headings for each day of the new trip, so it's “ready to go.”
- Check with your credit card company to see if they would like to know where and when you will be going, so charges made in those countries at those times will not be considered suspicious and cause them to suspend or cancel your card while you are away
- If you have just bought a new still or video camera before your trip, spend serious time getting to know how to use it properly before you go. If you don't you run a high risk of capturing all those wonderful moments abroad, yet find they are pretty crappy once you get back home and look carefully at them. This is especially so with video where people move the camera way too fast, and with stills when they pay no attention to where the sun and other glare is while they take pictures.

Make sure you leave your house in a “safe” state, but without advertising to the casual passerby that you are actually away. For example, this suggests that you might not want to change your answer phone message to say that you are away, or at least not say just how long you will be gone.

2.10 Conclusion

Now, who has the most to gain by having a good trip? You do. And who has the most to lose by having a bad trip? You do. So, who should make the most effort to plan for a successful trip? Obviously, it's you, not your partner and not your travel agent or friend who recommended the trip.

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Above all, have a Plan B, even for Plan B. When things don't go right or as planned, be ready to move to a backup plan *before* you let yourself get upset. And if you find there was something you should have brought along but didn't, write it down and update your travel-planning list when you get home.

Bon voyage!

3. February 2012, “Living in Utopia”

In the 1960s, a number of planned communities were developed independently in different parts of the US. They were touted as *Cities of the Future*. One of the very first such developments was Reston, a city in Northern Virginia, 22 miles (40 kms) west of the White House in Washington DC. I discovered Reston late in 1980, and have lived there since January 1981.

Reston was the brainchild of one Robert E. Simon [RESton]. He cashed in his family's real estate holdings—which included Carnegie Hall in NYC—and bought the farmland on which Reston was built. Reston is largely an upscale community located in Fairfax County, one of the top socioeconomic areas in the country. Reston's population is about 60,000.

According to Wikipedia, utopia is, “the name of a fictional island, possessing a seemingly perfect socio-politico-legal system.” So, is Reston a utopia? I'll give my take on that later.

3.1 Housing Types

Reston has three different styles of housing:

1. Single-family homes: Typically, these have a full basement, a ground level, and an upstairs, although a few older places are ranch-style; that is, they have no upstairs. These homes usually have a 2-car garage, an open front yard, and a fenced back yard. They vary considerably in size as do their parcels of land. While some are made with brick, many are timber-framed with siding.
2. Town houses: These are built in *clusters* by a single developer. Although each unit has its own walls, adjacent units' walls literally touch. Many have a full basement, a ground level, and an upstairs, while others have two levels only. Most have patios, decks, and/or balconies. A few have 1- or 2-car garages. While some are made with brick, many are timber-framed with siding. Owners own their own land and collectively own the common areas.
3. Condominiums (or condos): These are built in *clusters* by a single developer. Adjacent units share common walls, floors, and roofs. Most have one level only and are in buildings of up to five floors; however, some penthouse units occupy two levels. Most have small patios or balconies. Very few have garages. Almost all are made with brick. Owners own their own condo and collectively own the land and common areas; they also jointly own the shared walls, floors, and roofs. When rented out, a condo is often called an *apartment*.

3.2 Government and Services

Strictly speaking, Reston is not a city or even a township, as it is not incorporated. Instead, it is administered by a homeowner's association, Reston Association (RA). As such, Reston has no mayor. Instead, it is run by a paid administrative group headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and overseen by an unpaid board of directors.

Reston covers an area about 4x4 miles square. In that area are four lakes, all of which provide for resident and public activities such as boating and fishing. All developments are connected by an extensive system of paths that meander through the heavily forested area. There are numerous

outdoor pools, an indoor pool, and many tennis courts. There are also parks, a nature center, and quite a few picnic and BBQ areas. All these things are maintained by RA, and although usage fees are charged for some activities, most things are covered by the \$540/year fee that each property owner must pay RA.

All townhouse and condo clusters, and some groups of single-family homes, were built by a number of developers. One of the requirements of developing a cluster is to put in place a mini government for that cluster. For example, my cluster, called Walden, consists of 52 townhouses. The Walden Cluster Association is a Virginia non-profit corporation having 52 members; that is, the townhouse owners. As such, the corporation has a set of Articles of Incorporation, officers, and bylaws. The cluster association is administered by an unpaid board of 6 directors who meet quarterly and serve 3-year terms, typically with two terms expiring each year. Directors are elected at the annual meeting of members. Here are the kinds of things a cluster association does:

- Maintain the common grounds and shared facilities. In my cluster, these include a playground, a dock on the lake, tree work, landscaping, lawn mowing, and mailboxes
- Reston does not provide garbage collection; instead, each cluster (or private house) arranges for that with one of a number of contractors
- The roads within a cluster are privately owned by that cluster, whose association must maintain them
- Having a private road means maintenance of private street lighting
- Fairfax County plows county roads only. All other roads in Reston are private, so each cluster (or private house) arranges for snow plowing with one of a number of contractors

Of course, all of these things cost money, so a cluster association needs to have a budget and a way to raise money. It does so by levying an assessment fee on each owner. In my case, that's \$265/quarter. Special assessments are possible, but better-run groups maintain sinking funds for big-ticket items such as road replacement. Condo associations typically charge much larger fees, as they cover more things, such as building insurance, maintenance of common entranceways, and perhaps even external appearance items (such as window replacement and painting) even for private areas. I know of a condo cluster that charges \$350/month, which also includes gas used for cooking and hot water. (In that cluster, individual properties do not have their own gas meters; each is billed based on its floor area.)

3.3 Neighborhoods vs. Downtown

The initial model divided the city into neighborhoods, each anchored with a shopping center and support facilities. Several have senior citizens' housing facilities nearby with tunnels under roads to allow safe crossing. A bus service connects the neighborhoods, and the surrounding county.

Some 20 years after the city was created, a downtown area was built (called "Reston Town Center"), with some very expensive shopping areas, a large hotel and conference center, an outdoor ice-skating rink, a fountain, and multistory parking stations. The ground level of each high-rise building houses retail stores while upper floors house commercial office space.

3.4 Rules and Regulations

As is often the case in planned communities, *thou shalt not do anything that might reduce the value of neighbors' homes or negatively impact their ability to enjoy living there*. For example:

- Each development has its own set of approved brick/paint colors, window styles, outdoor light fittings, and so on. If an owner wishes to change the external appearance of his property, he must notify his two immediate neighbors as well as his cluster association, and he must apply to the Design Review Board, which holds a public hearing/review.
- Outdoor clotheslines are not permitted. (I'm reminded of a Chinese family that moved into my cluster and, soon after, had lots of laundry drying on their deck with some of it hanging on the side rails, just as I'd seen in Hong Kong. There was great concern among neighbors as to who would tell them that was not permitted!)
- Motor homes, boats, and other recreational vehicles may not be stored permanently in one's yard or parked out front. Unless they are housed in a garage on the property, they must be stored (at an annual cost) in a yard in the forest, run by RA.
- Residents may not perform any non-trivial maintenance of their vehicles in front of their houses.
- There are four lakes, and boating and fishing are permitted; however, swimming is not. [That said, in a contradiction, the city's annual triathlon holds the swimming leg in one of these lakes.] Boats are limited to manual, wind, and electric propulsion only, with the power of any electric motor being severely limited. Boat lengths are limited to no more than about 15 feet.

From Reston's inception, all land had to be purchased from the city's developer, and that land had to be developed within a certain amount of time; otherwise, it had to be sold back to the developer. That is, land speculation was not permitted.

As a tongue-in-cheek statement, I've often characterized Reston as allowing one to breathe in on certain days and breathe out on others! However, if people don't like such rules, they should not move there. And to those residents who complain, it's not as if the rules were changed after they moved there. To be sure, living in a planned community can require compromises "for the good of the whole," so potential residents need to see if the pros outweigh the cons.

3.5 Transportation

For the most part, residents drive themselves or car-pool. However, many use bus services, primarily to the nearest subway station. A new subway line terminating in Reston is scheduled to open sometime in 2013, which might ease some congestion. [It should also help maintain and even enhance property values in the city.]

One of the few toll roads in the greater Washington DC area passes right through Reston. In recent years, the tolls have increased each year to help pay for the new subway. That said, the toll road does allow ease of access to/from Reston. An adjacent set of lanes provides easy (and free) access to Washington Dulles International airport (IAD).

A 45-mile bike path passes through Reston; however, outside that Reston itself is not particularly bike-friendly.

3.6 So, Who Lives There?

As I mentioned earlier, Reston is an up-scale area, catering for the middle- and upper-class. For example, one could easily spend a million dollars on a house there. That said an experiment was tried in various neighborhoods to have subsidized housing for marginalized families and individuals. My understanding is that caused a lot of problems, but some such neighborhoods fared better than did others.

Quite a few families have both parents working, and given that high school gets out early afternoon, that has led to a lot of “latch-key” kids being home (or out) on their own or with friends, sometimes getting into trouble.

3.7 Conclusion

So, is Reston a utopia? Not quite, but it has been very successful and it's an interesting experiment that is still evolving. During my 31 years there, there has been a steady, but static, stream of crimes and vandalism, including several drug-related murders and a serial rapist attacking women on the paths. There are also homeless people, a 70-bed residential shelter, and very active programs to help with food shortages.

Like many wealthy communities, people in Reston accumulate lots of stuff and have access to nice facilities, but many of them are so tied up in their daily commutes and overly busy lives that they don't make time to use their stuff or the facilities. In my case, I work from home most of the time and my schedule is flexible. I can take my canoe out on the lake, walk in the forest, or take a picnic to a park on any nice day that it suits. It's never crowded anywhere during the workweek, but it would be nice if more residents took advantage of the facilities for which they are already paying. C'est la vie.

4. March 2012, “How Committees Work”

I have been attending meetings of one sort of committee or another for more than 40 years now, and for most of those years I've served in an officer role, such as chair, vice chair, treasurer, secretary, or special projects leader. These committees' interests have included less formal things like sporting clubs, social clubs, professional associations, and school parent/teacher associations, to more formal homeowners associations and charitable foundations, and to quite rigorous US and international standards committees and consortia.

I've never had any formal training in how to get the most out of a meeting; it's all been “on the job” training. Fortunately, for the important work-related forums, I had some great mentors, and my experience in working with them has held me in good stead in my other committee work. You can read all the advice books you like, but there is no substitute for experiencing it firsthand, and having a mentor with whom you can ask questions and share your thoughts and goals.

To reach your goals in any sort of committee, you need confidence, some good and trusted allies, and better than fair communication skills, a combination that many (perhaps most) participants lack.

4.1 Original Charter and Bylaws

If you are thinking of joining a committee, find out how and why it was formed. Just what was the mission of the original founders? In formal settings, one should expect to find some sort of charter document or *Articles of Incorporation* that spell out some of the basics, such as the mission, the slate of officers, how officers are elected, membership requirements, and so on. A copy of this document should be made available to all prospective and new members, without exception or hardship.

Although there might be only one document, it is common to have a compact charter with a separate set of bylaws that contain more details of day-to-day operation about things like meeting rules, quorum, voting, dues, and so on. [There might even be a *Rules of Operation* manual separate from the bylaws.]

Locate the charter and bylaws, read them, and understand them. Ask questions if something isn't clear. Most dictators aren't benevolent, so if you run into a committee chair who shies away from questions about the founding and operating documents, beware, as he is probably trying to run things his way rather than the way the official rules were written.

All or almost all of the things in the charter and bylaws can be amended, and you should know the process for doing so. Just because a group was chartered with a set of certain goals doesn't necessarily mean it has to stick with those forever.

If a group achieves its goal, it is okay to shut it down. Beware the chair that is always looking for “the next big thing” for his committee in order to keep himself visible or in a job.

4.2 Officer Positions and Responsibilities

Well-run committees typically have at least the following leadership positions:

1. Chair – prepares meeting agendas, runs meetings, and generally is the face of the group to the outside world.
2. Vice chair – typically manages documents and other administration, and serves as backup to the chair.
3. Secretary – For the most part this means, “meeting secretary,” in which case he records the minutes of each meeting and distributes them to the members. Some committees have a separate position of “correspondence secretary” to handle incoming and outgoing letters/email.
4. Treasurer – the person who collects fees, banks money, pays bills, issues checks for awards, and does pretty much anything financial.
5. Parliamentarian – for most committees, most business is non-controversial, but if things get emotional and tempers flare or the stakes are high, it is important to have a calm person who has an intimate knowledge of the charter and bylaws, as well as general rules for running meetings. This is the role of the Parliamentarian. Note, however, during a meeting, it is not the Parliamentarian's job to tell you as a member how to achieve a certain goal. (Certainly, you can and should talk to her off-line outside of meetings.)

A good chair and secretary combination is essential for the long-term success of a committee.

A formal committee might be incorporated, possibly as a non-profit corporation. In this case, not only will it need the positions above to run day-to-day operations, it will also need corporate officers, such as a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. And while these could be occupied by some of the same people as the operational positions, this might not be required or desirable.

4.3 Taking in Money

One of the ways membership is often defined is by charging a fee. Also, many groups are created to raise money for things like charitable uses, religious purposes, and political causes. In these cases, you need some way to manage the income and expenses. This typically involves the following:

1. Having some sort of a paper or electronic ledger in which to record all transactions.
2. Having a checking (and possibly a savings) bank account, and having at least two people who can sign checks and other financial documents. (For large amounts of money, you might need investment accounts as well, especially if you don't spend all the money you raise each year.)
3. Considering having a rule that requires at least two signatures to authorize payments over a certain amount.
4. For non-trivial operations, having an independent audit of the financial records each year.
5. Possibly filing a federal and/or state tax return.
6. Generation of financial summaries for each meeting as well as at the end of the financial year.
7. Possible need for an operating budget.
8. Possible need to handle payments/donations by credit card.
9. Need to issue receipts.

Organizations raising money from their membership or others need to know the tax rules of their country, state, and city. For example, here in the US, donations to a non-profit organization might be tax-deductible, but not if the organization's purpose is to promote a political party. Becoming registered as an organization to which donations are tax-deductible can be attractive, but it will require more paperwork, scrutiny, reporting, and regulation. It might even require that the group's tax return be made public (although the list of individual donors might not need to be disclosed).

4.4 Legal Issues

For the most part, this is only of concern to groups planning on collecting more than a little money. In such cases, it may be desirable for the officers to be covered by officer liability insurance.

4.5 Meetings

Many organizations have two kinds of meetings: board and general membership. In general, it is not efficient to have all members involved in making all decisions. As a result, groups usually have an executive committee or board, of five or six members, for example. They might meet monthly or quarterly to deal with operational business. Basically, the general membership delegates to them operating decisions. All members should be permitted to attend board meetings; however, for sensitive topics (such as discussing ejecting a member), the board might "go into executive session," which means that non-board members are asked to leave the room.

In this model, once a year, the group holds an annual general meeting at which the "big picture" information is presented, officer vacancies are filled, bylaw changes are considered, and policy decisions are made.

4.6 Parliamentary Procedure

In the US, unless it is specified otherwise by a committee's bylaws/rules, the rules for conducting a meeting are determined by [Roberts Rules of Order](#). Other countries may have their own formal or de facto set of rules or guidelines. Find out the situation in your country, get a copy of such rules, and learn at least the basic ones. A Parliamentarian should bring a copy to each meeting, so she can be consulted when procedural rules are questioned.

So, what sort of things might come up in a meeting that could need adjudication? Examples include the following:

1. Are there a sufficient number of members present to conduct business? That is, is a quorum present?
2. Is everyone present actually entitled to be there?
3. Was sufficient notice posted for the agenda, supporting documents, and meeting place/time?
4. Is it possible to undo a motion at the same meeting at which it was voted on and it passed?
5. What are the rules for amending a motion already on the floor?
6. How can you raise a *point of order* if you think the rules are being circumvented?
7. Can the chair's decision be overridden?

4.7 Decision Making

There are two main ways of making a decision: voting or by consensus. Either way, the process of how this is done needs to be documented. Note that consensus does not require unanimity, and relies heavily on the chair's assessment.

When it comes to voting, it is worth considering the following:

1. Who is eligible to vote?
2. Does the chair get to vote?
3. Will the vote be by voice, by a show of hands, or by a roll call (by asking each voting member present for her position, which is then recorded in the minutes)? Can a member request that a particular vote be done by roll call?
4. Are abstentions permitted?
5. For *No* and *Abstain* positions, are reasons required?
6. When not using the roll-call method, may a member request that her own vote be recorded explicitly in the minutes?

4.8 Meeting Agendas

A meeting without a written agenda circulated in advance indicates a lack of organization, an attempt to keep members in the dark, or both.

The agenda should list the main issues to be covered at the meeting to which it pertains, and any supporting documents needed for discussion of those issues. However, the agenda as distributed is not a law unto itself; specifically, whoever prepared the agenda does not have the right to dictate what the final agenda will be. All he gets is the right to propose an agenda. One of the first items on the agenda must be the adoption of the final agenda, and that's when items can be added, removed, or amended by the members present, according to committee rules.

It is common practice to issue a copy of any agenda revised at a meeting with the minutes of that meeting.

Certain agenda items can involve the review of non-trivial amounts of information, such as financial statements, bids and estimates by vendors, comparisons of competing services, applications for funds, and so on. In order for members to have a chance to read and digest such information, it should be distributed in advance. Formal committees often have something like a "two-week rule," which requires that any such document that is to be discussed at a meeting must be circulated at least two weeks prior to the meeting.

One of the worst things that can happen at a meeting is to be presented with a proposal and asked to vote on it without any prior distribution of the information needed to make that decision. Speak up if you object. Silence is often taken as assent.

[One issue that has arisen in recent times is the manner of document distribution and not just the time allotted. Is email distribution allowed and is it sufficient under the rules?]

4.9 Meeting Minutes

One of the hardest and most thankless jobs in a committee is that of recording secretary. A good one is worth keeping, so treat them right!

In these days of laptop computers, it is common for a secretary to write minutes electronically, in which case, the best approach is to create a template of the minutes in advance based on the draft agenda that has been circulated.

For the most part, it is best not to record verbatim just who said what, but rather, to capture the pros and cons of various positions. Of course, if a member specifically asks to have a verbatim copy of her own words recorded, then it is okay to do so.

Draft minutes should be distributed to the membership in a reasonable time, say within 30 days. And they must be distributed in advance of the next meeting of the organization. One of the first orders of business at a meeting must be the approval (possibly with corrections) of the minutes of the previous meeting. Until that is done, the official record of that previous meeting has not been completed, and it is very bad practice to have another meeting when the official outcome of the previous one has not yet been agreed upon.

4.10 Meeting Action items

It is common for members to take on, or for the chair to assign, action items during a meeting. When it comes to delivering on action items, in my experience, there are two main kinds of people: those who take care of their actions in the week or so after a meeting ends, and those who take care of them in the week before the following meeting. [As such, the amount of time separating those two weeks is generally irrelevant.]

Action items should be marked clearly as such in the minutes, and highlighting them with the word "Action" in bold in front of them is a good idea. Apart from recording new action items, place all open action items still pending from previous meetings near the front of each agenda, so they can be reviewed.

A lot of people "talk the talk," but don't "walk-the-walk." That is, once assigned an action item, they drag their feet and might even fail to deliver anything at all. Basically, they are there for the glory, but not the work needed to make things happen. If members are very tardy in fulfilling their assignments, consider adding to the action item the date on which the action item was assigned, so everyone will see how tardy that person is. A little bit of public embarrassment can go a long way, and a wise chair will avoid assigning action items to members with a tardy track record, or will reassign such items if sufficient progress isn't made in a certain amount of time.

For members to see their action items and to have a chance to act on them in a timely manner, the draft minutes need to be distributed reasonably soon after the end of the meeting. Also, one of the last items on the agenda should be to read out the action items assigned and their owners.

4.11 Possible Complications and Abuses

Some groups meet on a very regular basis. Assuming they record minutes, beware any group that doesn't allow sufficient time for minutes to be produced and circulated before they have to be approved at the following meeting.

Meeting announcements, agendas and supporting documents, and draft/final minutes should all be distributed or made available to all members. Now, although many people these days have email or can access an internet webpage, people who don't would be disenfranchised if that were the only means of communication to members. Unless the committee rules require electronic access, be prepared to make hard copies of some documents for some members some of the time, and allow extra time for their distribution.

For the most part, meetings of committees and any subcommittees must be held at times and in locations that are convenient and readily accessible to the membership at large. So, while it might be convenient for the retired members of a subcommittee to meet during a weekday, that will not suit most working members. Be sensitive to other members' constraints and avoid the appearance of restricting participation.

There are many people with good ideas, and there are many people who can speak eloquently. However, there are far fewer people who can do both. Certainly, a member planning to speak on any topic should prepare in advance; then once he has the floor, a good chair will help him articulate his position. And there is no place in a meeting for criticism unless it is constructive. If you are easily intimidated, you'll be far less likely to speak at any meeting let alone have things go your way.

I happen to work on a number of international committees in which all business is conducted in English, yet that is not the first language of many participants. In such cases, without being condescending, I speak more slowly and use a simpler vocabulary, and as a chair, I encourage and support those members needing help to express themselves. This can also be a concern in non-international committees. For example, I've seen immigrant parents with minimal English-language skills be so intimidated at parent/teacher association meetings that they don't speak at all, or worse still, they stop participating.

4.12 Conclusion

John Cleese (from the comedy troupe Monty Python's Flying Circus) produced and acted in a number of successful business training films, including *Meetings*, *Bloody Meetings* and *More Bloody Meetings*. Some of these are floating around on the internet. I highly recommend them.

I'm a great believer that for most committees the real business happens between meetings. You start with an idea, you run it by another member, and once the idea gels, you get support from several other members. That way, when it is discussed at a meeting, you have already worked out the kinks in your idea and you have others supporting you. That is, you use a meeting to ratify ideas raised previously and discussed off-line until there is a solid basis of support. **If you have a great idea, but you keep it to yourself, and you bring it to a meeting, you have no right to expect others to embrace your idea at that meeting until they have had sufficient time to consider (as in, sleep on) it.**

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Know your rights and exercise them, happy meeting!

5. April 2012, “Electronic Mail Etiquette”

I got my first email account last century, in 1988, which in internet time is a *very* long time ago. This was in the days before domain names—you know, those things like RexJaeschke.com, WhiteHouse.org, and number10.gov.uk—and email addresses were often quite long and contained multiple ! characters (called *bangs*). Since then, I have relied heavily on email for both personal and business use. In fact, today, it's my primary means of communication (that is, apart from talking to myself and my imaginary friends). The main reasons for this are that I communicate across (sometimes many) time zones, I often transmit text that is to be reviewed without requiring live discussion, I distribute travel diaries and personal essays, and I enjoy writing and reading good writing.

As I live by email, it is easy to assume that most other people do too, when—believe it or not—there are people who only use it on weekends—or Heaven Forbid!—on a monthly or even less-frequent basis. [To the latter, as politely as possible, “I suggest that you check your email as often as you check your postal mailbox. Otherwise, don't bother giving out your email address.”]

In this essay, I share with you a few of my pet peeves and observations about people who use email. I also include an email-related paper I wrote some years ago, but which is still relevant today.

5.1 A Good Subject is Worth a Hundred Words

Apparently, many people aren't able to come up with an accurate, succinct phrase to describe the purpose of their message. Let's call this the message *subject*.

Now and again I receive mail with an empty subject line or for which the sender's mailer has added their language's equivalent of the text “no subject”. As one of the first things one sees when creating a new message is the subject line, I have never understood how people can miss this. That said, these mails usually come from dear friends who are not especially computer-literate, so I give them credit for trying. I've also made suggestions to them over time as to how they might reduce the chance of their mail to me ending up in my spam folder and being at risk of being deleted without being read.

Every so often, I get mail from someone I know, but for which the subject suggests one thing, yet the message actually contains nothing whatsoever about that topic. What they have done presumably, is gone to their trash can of deleted messages, found one I sent them back when Adam was a boy [as in Adam and Eve], and “replied” to that, thereby incorporating not only my return address, but also that old subject line, which they don't bother changing. Perhaps they are lazy. More likely, they haven't set up an address book with my address in it, or their address book is so poorly organized that they can't find me. [Hmm, now how did I file Rex's name: Rex Jaeschke; Jaeschke, Rex; MyVeryBestFriend; WhatsHisFace, or The Devil Incarnate?]

Many of us who live by email place messages we've received into folders, which we often sort in subject order. This allows us to see all the messages about that particular subject. Of course, that only works when the message really is about that subject.

5.2 There are Good Reasons for Having a CC List

In days of old, when knights were bold, before word processing was invented, people actually wrote letters on typewriters (and some still do, including some well-known authors). In the case of business correspondence, they often noted—using CC—after their signature that a *carbon copy* of the letter was to be sent to one or more named people. Given the utility of this, it is no wonder that the exact same approach can be used in email. In fact, CC has become a verb.

To be sure, one can overdo the CC thing. Do all 27 people in your department really need to see this poorly written and entirely unnecessary observation that you made at this morning's staff meeting? [In fact, does *anyone* need to see it—*ever*?]

Say you are working on a project with another person, and you know that a third person is also interested in that project. You address mail to Person 1, and you CC Person 2. This suggests to both that the main recipient of the message—and most importantly, the one who is expected to reply, if a reply is needed—is Person 1, and that Person 2 likely is interested in the subject, but is somewhat peripheral to the activity. When Person 1 sends a reply, she should note whether anyone was shown on the CC list of the original posting, and if there were and they should receive her reply, she should chose *Reply-All* instead of simply *Reply*. Unfortunately, I get way too many replies from people who can't seem to understand that. As such, when they send their reply to me only, I then have to forward it along to the CC list I had expected them to CC. *Sacré bleu!*

5.3 There are Good Reasons for Having a BCC List

Just as letters might contain a CC, they can also contain a *blind carbon copy* (BCC). So, while any recipient will see the name of the primary receiver and all the CC'd people, none will see if there were any BCC'd recipients. And any recipient who does not see their name as primary or on the CC'd list knows they were BCC'd, but they don't know who else might have been as well. [Like CC, BCC is now a verb.]

Always assume that any message you receive was BCC'd by the sender to your local newspaper editor, your worst enemy, your parish priest, your wife *and* your mistress!

Even if you don't use BCC directly, you probably forward a copy of mail you've sent earlier, to others at a later time, which is simply a delayed BCC.

5.4 People with Lives Don't Need Extra Mail

It's an old joke that "If I didn't have bad luck, I'd have no luck at all!" Sadly, the email equivalent might well be, "If I didn't get spam or unnecessary CCs/BCCs, I'd get no mail at all!" I hope you don't suffer from that situation. As for me, I'd be quite happy to get fewer messages, especially those informing me I've won a lottery without even having bought a ticket, and those promising to enlarge certain of my body parts.

Regarding spam, I must say that my mail program's spam filter does an excellent job of putting true spam into a separate spam folder. Unfortunately, when I'm using mail on my laptop, the spam folder

has often scrolled off the (smaller) screen such that I don't see that it has anything in it. As a result, some legitimate and important mail that was inadvertently filed there by my mail program, sits there for hours if not days before I discover it.

5.5 If You Want Me to Read It, Make it Readable

One can argue that if it doesn't fit on a displayable screen, it doesn't exist. That is, don't put really important stuff later on because many readers don't get that far or pay less attention as they go. Instead, summarize the purpose of your mail in the opening paragraph, so the reader knows what it's all about and whether or not they should spend their precious time reading further.

Beware reading something that so annoys you that you just have to respond immediately, and without censorship. By all means write a reply, but sleep on it a night or two before you send it. Hurried and/or emotional replies quite often are so poorly organized that they have the opposite effect to that the author desired.

5.6 Spelling and Grammar Do Count

Pretty much any mail program these days has some sort of spelling checker, and some might also check grammar. If you have such a facility, please use it. If you are too lazy to use correct spelling and capitalization, then I expect you are also too lazy to manage well the project you are proposing to me in your email. I "see" you as you present yourself!

5.7 Resist the Temptation to Share

The *Forward* button on mail programs should charge your bank account each time you press it. At least that way, a lot less mail would probably get forwarded.

The worst example I have of forwarded mail is that of truly stupid jokes. And the really sad aspect of this is that these are often the *only* communications I ever get from some people. That is, they never have anything sensible to say or share. Clearly, they have no life!

5.8 Group Mailings of Personal Stuff

At the end of each year, I write a 4-page review of that year, which I circulate to numerous friends around the world. However, although it is tempting to send it to all of them in one big receiver or CC list, that is way too impersonal. Instead, I take the extra time to send it to each person individually, which also allows me to add something personal as well. I can respond to their news if they have done likewise with their own report.

It is my general policy to delete, possibly without even reading, impersonal "Dear Friend" mailings, even if they do come from friends or acquaintances.

My one exception to this rule is my travel diaries. I do distribute these to all recipients in one big (anonymous) list; that is, each recipient gets exactly the same message. In this case, no personalized message is necessary. However, I address the mail to myself and add all the other names using BCC, not CC, an important distinction. As such, none of the recipients knows about the others and if any of

them replies, it comes to me only, *not* to all recipients like it would if I'd put them on a CC list. That is, in this case, *Reply-All* acts just like *Reply*.

Whether you send customized individual messages or you send group mailings, understand a potential problem of assuming these people actually want to receive your message at all. The only way for them to get off your list is for them to ask you to remove them, and that might be embarrassing to either or both of you. In my case, each year, I go through my mailing lists and weed out the ones for people from whom I have had no meaningful communications in the previous year or two.

5.9 Identifying Yourself

More than a few email senders have email addresses that do not contain anything resembling their real names. (What are they hiding? Are they insecure?) Most mailers have a way to add your real name as well, and if you do that, when mail from you arrives in my in-box, I can tell straightaway who it's from.

5.10 Conclusion

Like doing any other task well, being a good email citizen requires a dose of knowledge, some forethought, and more than a little discipline. In this on-line age, your main—and possibly only—communication with many people might be your writing, so make the effort to create a positive picture. And, for Heaven's sake, please think twice before you press *Send* or *Forward*. Now I did ask nicely.

5.11 An Essay

Electronic Mail – The New Form of (Mis)Communication

[In 1995, I took an entry-level university course in English Composition. It had an accelerated schedule taking four weekends instead of 16 weeks. The final project for each student involved researching and writing a paper on a topic of their choice. Mine was on email. Although this paper is dated, it still makes sense in today's context when you include instant messaging and text messaging as well. I've dusted it off and I now present it here.]

The decline in the art of writing began in earnest with the introduction of the telephone. After all, writing a letter takes time and who has that anymore? And as the need for writing has decreased, so too has the emphasis to teach it. It's no wonder then that today the level of business English in the United States is 6th grade!

It is interesting to note that what one technology pushed far into the background, another technology now demands; to communicate effectively by electronic mail (email), one must be able to write well. And given the rapid growth in the use of email, there are large numbers of adults communicating using, at best, 6th-grade English, providing a lot of opportunities for miscommunication. So much so, that a whole syllabary has been invented to help writers and readers of email understand the real tone and meaning of an electronically transmitted message. These symbols are called *emoticons*, a contraction for *emotional icons*. Emoticons “are symbols created by arranging characters into a

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meaningful picture. Often, they must be read sideways to be understood. For example, here is the most common type of emoticon, the *smiley face* or *smiley :-)*, which can be seen best by tilting your head to the left 90 degrees” (Rose 12).

For a detailed description and discussion of emoticons, [click here](#).

Another device used in email is the acronym. While this device certainly can save typing, it has become an integral part of the language of cyberspeak. The following table contains a sampling:

Acronym	Meaning	Acronym	Meaning
BIF	Basis in fact	OTOH	On the other hand
BTW	By the way	PITA	Pain in the a*s
FAQ	Frequently asked question(s)	POV	Point of view
FTF/F2F	Face to face	RL	Real life
FWIW	For what it's worth	ROTFL	Rolling on the floor, laughing
FYI	For your information	RSN	Real soon now
IMHO	In my humble opinion	RTFM	Read the f**king manual
IMNSHO	In my not-so-humble opinion	SOL	S**t out of luck
IMO	In my opinion	TIA	Thanks in advance
IOW	In other words	TIC	Tongue in cheek
NBIF	No basis in fact	WTF	What the f**k!
NFW	No f**king way	WTH	What the heck!

In terms of interaction, writing is a passive activity. It usually involves thought and planning, and we tend to pay more attention to grammar and correctness. We can also produce and review several drafts if we wish. On the other hand, speaking is interactive and, depending on the number of speakers involved, may be one- or many-sided. The agenda is fluid, we are much more susceptible to emotional impact, and we pay far less attention to grammar and correctness. And in cases where we can see the speaker, we often glean a significant part of the message from non-verbal clues such as facial expressions and gestures.

Email is a hybrid form of communication, having aspects of both writing and speaking. At best, email is semi-interactive. Some electronic forums require participants to be “on-line” simultaneously. Their dialogue is interactive; however, they cannot interrupt each other; their interactions are electronically synchronized. Like speaking, emotions can easily have a significant impact when writing, to the point

when a considerable amount of the dialogue is accusatory or disrespectful in nature. This is known as *flaming*. Flaming “is where people impulsively react to a message and send uncensored, emotionally laden and often derogatory messages—a practice that is almost nonexistent in paper writing” (Kelley quoted in Safire 14). Responses are often spontaneous, impulsive, and incautious.

Since the exchange is solely via the written word, emoticons and acronyms are needed to communicate emphasis and tone. For example, writing words in capital letters is the equivalent to shouting them. Hawisher and Moran wrote, “In writing to a screen, writers may at times lose the sense of an audience, become self-absorbed, and lose the constraints and inhibitions that the imagined audience provides. What would be censored in face-to-face confrontation or in a paper-mail letter may not be censored on email” (631).

A considerable amount of email is composed “off-line”. In theory, this provides the respondent an opportunity to read a message carefully before replying. However, the ease and speed with which we can originate and respond to email is an important factor. Hawisher and Moran suggest that “While it is possible to reread a message many times the medium itself does not encourage much rereading and reflection before responding.

Further, if the original response is put off, the original email message may be superseded by a new one. In general, originators of email seem to demand a rapid response. “Communicating on-line involves a minor but real personal risk, and a response—any response—is generally interpreted as a success while silence means failure” (Feenberg 23–24).

There is conjecture that the electronic medium makes screen-text more difficult to read than print-text. Printed matter uses typographic aids and is organized side-by-side in pages. On the other hand, most email consists of loosely formatted text in one typeface, written on a continuous scroll. According to Hawisher and Moran, “Our own experience suggests too that readers of email messages have difficulty in sorting out the salient from the less salient elements of a message” (630). How best to organize an email message? Put the important bits at the front? At the very end? Try to pick a title that adequately describes all main points? These important questions have yet to be answered.

Email writing style can vary widely, even depending on the sender's profession. For example, some scientific users dispense with uppercase letters completely; changing case slows down typing. They simply view email as a communications tool and use it in a clinical way, much as they would a calculator. People from other professions often use a more friendly protocol involving polite introductions and elaborate signatures containing cute pictures.

In Shea's “Core Rules of Netiquette”, she emphasizes the importance of good writing: “Networks let you reach out to people. And none of them can see you. You won't be judged by the color of your skin, eyes, or hair, your weight, your age, or your clothing. You will, however, be judged by the quality of your writing ... So spelling and grammar count.”

Email is but one part of the electronic communication revolution. Another part is multimedia, which involves the use of film, video, animation, and sound. The current craze in this area is the obtaining of information from the World Wide Web (The Web), a set of repositories of information providing everything from a visual tour of the Whitehouse to ordering from a clothing catalog. “Considering the

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sorry state of literacy, there's real danger in even a partial abandonment of narrative forms and rigorous modes of thought associated with logical arguments, where A leads to B.

Multimedia's forte is not reason, but hot emotional impact—the same ingredients that make TV news compelling yet less filling. Will the level of discourse in this country, already fuzzied up by television, sink to that of videogames? Or will the proliferation of information and new techniques to impart it initiate a new Renaissance?" (Levy 25).

Email and its electronic siblings are ushering in a new age of communication, around the block, across the country, and throughout the world. Like all technologies, the impact, both positive and negative, will be up to the individual users. At least they are getting more people to communicate and more often as well. And without communication, there can be little progress, in any civilized sense. :-)

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6. May 2012, “Shooting and Editing Home Video”

I bought my first video camera in January 1988. It used full-size analog VHS videotapes, was quite large, and used a large and heavy battery, which required an even larger and heavier charger. Over the next 15½ years, I shot 76 hours of home movies. In September 2003, I bought my second video camera, which was digital (but not HD). It records to 1-hour tape. In the 8 years since, I have recorded about 65 hours of home movies, which I have edited down to 61 1-hour DVDs.

In December 2011 and January 2012, I converted my 38 2-hour analog tapes to digital, and edited them down to 35 1-hour DVDs. [It took me quite a few tries to do this over a multi-year period before I found an approach that ended up with video that was at least as good a quality as the original analog tape.]

In this essay, I'll share with you some of the things I've learned along the way to creating 100 hours of edited video.

6.1 Being Realistic

A big promise of shooting one's own video is the ability to edit out the silly or boring bits as well as those minutes of film of the ground as you walk along thinking you had switched off the camera, but hadn't. Plus, you can add from those thousands of transitions and special effects that came with the editing software. [For example, mine allows me to transition from one scene to the next by folding the final image into a paper airplane and then having it fly off into the next scene!] However, editing video requires some idea of how to make a movie, and no training comes with the camera. Be prepared to spend time figuring out what you'll need to do to be successful.

If you thought you could get by with only a few blank video tapes/discs because you can reuse them, you'd better be ready to edit your video and burn it to DVD within 30 days of returning from your trip. In any event, you can't reuse your media until you've at least copied its contents off to some other place, even if you don't do any editing. (See later below.)

6.2 Some terminology

First, let's define some terms:

frame — Each separate image recorded. Most frames are the video content contained within *scenes*. A few are *titles* that introduce each *chapter*, and one set on each disc will be the *menu* for the set of chapters on that disc.

scene — That continuous piece of footage taken from the time you press *Record* until you press *Stop Record*. For example, you shoot a 30-second scene of little Mary showing you her new bicycle. Then you shoot several 60-second scenes of her riding it around in front of the house. Later, you shoot a 90-second scene of her riding it up a ramp and through a flaming hoop, blindfolded, while steering with her knees. [With an analog recording, nothing special is recorded with each frame. However, with a digital recording, a *time stamp* is written for each single video frame of the scene. And if the time between two consecutive frames differs by an amount greater than the length of time it takes for one

frame to record or play, any device reading that video can tell that there must have been a scene break between those two frames. That is, with digital video, a reading device can detect the start and end of each scene automatically, which is useful when it comes to dealing with *transitions*.]

chapter — All of the scenes that together make up a single event. For example, all the scenes of Mary riding her new bike make up one chapter, possibly titled, “Mary Knievel Gets a New Bike.” When we say, “I made a home movie,” we’re talking about a single chapter.

transition — The space between the end of one scene and the next within a chapter; the space between the end of a chapter and the next chapter’s title frame or between a chapter’s title frame and the first scene. Either way, if you do nothing, one scene simply gives way abruptly to the next without any smooth transition, such as fading out and fading back. To understand transitions, watch any movie or TV show and see how they handle the changeover from one scene to the next. If done well, the casual observer won’t notice the change.

title — A special frame that introduces a chapter. It is often a digital photo representative of that chapter or a frame extracted from that chapter. [In the case of my analog conversions, I had almost no digital or digitized photos of the entire video subject, so I adopted one of my editing software’s title templates, and used that for all titles.]

menu — The top-level title of a disc that shows you all the chapters available on that disc, with the chapter list possibly spread over a number of frames. [The way I’ve designed them, my menu frames hold six chapters each. Each menu frame then has arrows allowing me to move to the next/previous menu frame.]

It is important to note that except for content frames, none of these things exists until you edit your video. What comes directly out of your video camera has no scenes, chapters, transitions, titles, or menus, only a set of content frames (each possibly with a time stamp).

6.3 What’s in My Camera Bag?

I have two golden rules regarding what to put in my camera bag besides, of course, the camera:

- Always carry a spare, fully charged battery apart from the one in the camera. The one time you forget to do that will be the one time your primary battery runs down 10 minutes into your 2-hour round-the-island boat tour. (Ordinarily, I do not recharge a battery until it’s completely discharged.)
- Always carry at least one spare blank tape/disc/memory card (I usually carry at least two). That way, you’ll have plenty of recording time regardless of what’s left on the tape/disc/memory card currently in the camera.

Occasionally, you can get caught in the rain, so it’s worth putting a strong zippered plastic bag in your camera bag in which you can seal your camera. It can also be used in places with high humidity.

Despite being in the high-tech business, I also carry a pencil and some paper to make the occasional note about certain scenes, to be read during editing. I also pack some business cards. And I almost always have a few emergency rations (like a chocolate bar).

Once you have filled a disc/tape/memory card and you get back to your hotel, take that media out of your camera bag, and leave it in the hotel (maybe even locked in your room safe). Leaving it in your camera bag increases the risk that you might lose it, or have it stolen when you take your bag outside again.

Although I pack my battery charger in my camera bag when I'm traveling, I never take it with me when I'm out shooting locally.

The other essential thing I carry is a basic digital still camera. For the most part, I use that to take pictures from which I chose the title of each chapter. Occasionally, I have a bunch more nice shots and if there is space at the end of a DVD, I add a chapter made up entirely of still photos, each separated with a 4-second transition, making a nice slide show.

One habit I follow religiously is to close the catch on my bag each time I take the camera out or put it back in. The reason for this is that if you lose your balance (on a slippery hiking path or on the deck of a boat, for example), the stuff in your bag won't all fall out and down a steep ravine or overboard.

6.4 Shooting Video

Know your equipment. If you plan to go out and buy a video camera to use on some big trip, take the time to learn how to use it properly. Shoot some video with a variety of settings and in different lightings. And if you can watch it on your home TV too, that will help you learn what to do, and, just as importantly, what not to do.

Each time before you record, clean the camera lens with a soft cloth. It's too late when you are editing that scene once you are back home to find distracting dirt, dust, water droplets, or some such impurity right there in the middle of the action. [Regarding cleaning the lens, my good friend John recommends a hand air blower, which is a rubber bulb that when squeezed directs a jet of air at the lens. This is especially good for removing particles too small for the naked eye. Besides, even a soft cloth risks scratching the lens if there are tiny pieces of grit or sand there.]

Don't forget that cameras record sound too! This might be obvious, but watch most people shooting video and you'll see that they say little if anything. However, don't say the obvious: "Now I'm zooming in on Johnny;" "As you can see, the train has stopped;" "Now we're lighting the birthday candles." Also, as you stretch that extra distance to take a better shot, and you bump your head hard on some object, that Mother-of-all-swear-words you say will also get recorded right there along with darling Johnny's school play.

Think about what you are going to say before you start filming. (After all, you are playing movie director; seriously.) Provide information that will augment what the viewer will see.

Don't pan (that is, move the camera sideways or up/down) too fast. This is definitely one thing to practice at home. Watching some people's video is like riding a rollercoaster; everything just flashes by. If you think that you are going slow, you'll likely find that you are still going at least twice as fast as you should. S-l-o-w i-t w-a-y d-o-w-n!

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Don't zoom too quickly or too much. The zoom control on my first camera required a heavy touch while that on my second didn't, so it took some practice to zoom slowly. Too much zooming will make viewers lose interest. And when you are at maximum zoom, the slightest movement of the camera is greatly magnified, so if you can't hold it really still, use a stand or lean it against something.

Don't shoot too much of the same subject; it gets boring. And shooting too little means that the scene is almost over before it starts.

Don't shoot into the sun, a bright light, or a fire, or with a bright background behind someone (such as someone sitting at a window).

If you have an on-screen date/time marker, remember to put it on at the start of the first scene of each chapter, but don't leave it on for more than 10 seconds.

All of the digital cameras I've seen allow you to view through an eyepiece or on a small screen. I usually use the eyepiece, as that significantly reduces the battery use. And while you can only see a small window via the eyepiece, with a bit of practice, you can open your other eye, so you can see the window from the eyepiece superimposed on the actual view allowing you to move the camera smoothly to action happening outside that window.

Make sure you have a strong safety strap on the camera and always put your shooting hand through it, so the camera can't fall far if you drop it.

When shooting each scene, start the camera a few seconds before the event you are filming and/or before you start talking, and let it run late. You can always delete any extra time during editing, but you can't add missing audio or video.

The more experience you get from editing, the better will be your future filming, hopefully, to the point that your chapters need little or no editing.

6.5 Uploading Video to a Computer

A digital camera should come with a cable that connects it directly to a computer via a USB or a FireWire port. If a CD-ROM also came with the camera, install the software it contains. What you eventually want is for the video on the camera's media to be uploaded/acquired/copied to the hard drive as either an MPEG or a DV file. (The former is much smaller than the latter, but doesn't have the latter's high quality.) In the case of my old analog camera, I connected that to an adaptor that converted from analog to digital and then sent that to the computer via a USB or a FireWire port. As my analog film sound was in mono, I used a splitter cable to record the same sound on both the left and right channels.

As I mentioned earlier, the timestamps on digital media allow scene starts and ends to be detected automatically, which is a great help when it comes to editing. That way, it's easy to find the place to insert a transition. With analog video, my software (Pinnacle) allows me to define artificially a scene as a given number of seconds. Whatever duration you chose, it will almost always be wrong, but that's not the point. The longer the scene the harder it is to edit it. After some trial and error, I settled on 20 seconds, so when digitized, each of my 2-hour VHS tapes became 360 20-second artificial scenes,

and that proved to be a good choice. Of course, most actual scenes ran much longer than 20 seconds, in which case, I did not put any transition (that is, delay) between artificial scenes that really went together to make up a real scene. I did not combine artificial scenes into real scenes, although I could have done so. There was no advantage to doing so.

My software allows me to trim the start and/or end from a scene, and to split any scene into two at the point I specify. And the two parts of a split scene can themselves be split again.

With a digital camera, the acquisition software uploading the video controls the camera through a series of mouse clicks. In the case of an analog camera, you have to use one hand to operate the camera controls while the other is clicking the mouse on the software. As such, you can “lose” a second or two of video when your software doesn't start recording until after a few frames of video have played. Given the time stamp on digital recordings, the software knows then the video ends; however, for analog input, you need to tell the software to stop acquiring. The speed of the acquisition is the normal playing speed of the camera, so it takes an hour to upload an hour of video.

One of the problems I initially had when acquiring analog video was that the result was of lower quality than the physical tape from which it was taken, and that didn't seem right. What I was doing was playing the tapes on my old analog camera, which appeared to be working just fine. However, I had a new VHS/DVD deck and I tested that against the old camera. And the result was just as good as the original tape. Apparently, the read heads on my old camera were dirty making the video acquired via it of lesser quality. So, clean your player headers thoroughly before acquiring video especially from old VHS tapes.

[When I first started uploading digital video more than 8 years ago, I made sure I had plenty of disc space available. However, when I first tried an upload, the software tested the speed of my disc and told me it was too slow, and wouldn't be able to keep up with the camera. I was using a high-speed FireWire connection, which was quite a bit faster than the then-current USB 1.1. With today's faster connections and cheap/fast discs, that probably won't be a problem unless you are using some old equipment.]

6.6 Editing Video

With my software, it's quite easy. In one window you select the digitized input file, which is opened to reveal all the scenes as pages of thumbnails (using the first frame from each scene), presented in chronological order. In a second window, there is a blank storyboard to which you drag scenes from the input window. You can't edit a scene until it's been dragged to the storyboard. Scenes can be trimmed, split, removed, or rearranged, as you like. I never mess with the audio, as it is fine the way it comes, but your software probably will let you dub over video.

In my case, I record to 1-hour DVDs. So, I drag all the scenes from the input window and make a pass over them, getting rid of “obvious” stuff I don't want, identifying chapters, and inserting chapter titles. There are two main scenarios for recording video. In the first, you shoot a few minutes now and then on different and probably unrelated subjects. As a result, you might produce a disc of “miscellaneous” stuff. In the second case, you cruised the Caribbean and shot 100 minutes of video. In this case, you

might try and condense that down to one disc, so that is the only thing on the disc. That makes it much easier to make copies of the whole disc to give to the friends who accompanied you on the trip.

Over a 25-year period, a number of close friends and relatives have featured prominently in my videos, so I plan to put together one or more composite discs containing all the chapters pertaining to them. This is straightforward. I create a new, empty storyboard, and cut and paste whole, already edited chapters from other storyboards I edited earlier.

Once I figured out the editing process and I started shooting video with editing in mind, I found that my video needed less and less editing to the point where I could edit and produce a 1-hour DVD in about an hour once it had been uploaded.

6.7 Video Disc and Content Indexes

Once you have created final, edited discs, how do you track what is on them such that you can find the disc(s) and chapter(s) of interest later on? There is a limit to how much you can write on a label or on the disc itself, and that limit is small. At best, you can write a disc ID/number, an overall title, and the dates spanned by the disc's contents.

In my case, I have two sets of DVD's: those produced from digital video have IDs of the form DVD-*nnn*, where *nnn* is a 3-digit number 001, 002, 003, and so on; those produced from analog video have IDs of the form AVD-*nnn*. This allows for 999 discs in each series, which I fully expect will be sufficient for my lifetime.

I maintain two separate index documents:

- A formatted text document that for each disc, contains the disc ID, an overall title, date span information, and a list of the chapters on that disc with chapter numbers and titles. This is printed and a hard copy is stored with the discs, which are themselves stored in a zippered DVD binder.
- A spreadsheet that contains one row per chapter. That row contains the following columns: the raw source filename, date taken, the DVD ID, chapter number on the disc, the chapter name/title, and keywords I wish to associate with the chapter (primarily the names of all the main people, events, and places depicted in the chapter). I search this in electronic form to find any or all chapters involving a particular person, place, or event.

6.8 Preserving Without Editing

Consider the case in which you have a bunch of old analog tapes whose contents you'd like to preserve before the tapes deteriorate. Even if you don't have the time or skills to edit them now, at least consider uploading them to a hard disc. [Truly big discs—as much as 3TB—are quite cheap and compact these days.] The same is true for digital recording media. If you want to reuse it (and why not?), you'll have to upload the contents first. Of course, once you record back over the media you can never go back to the original. That is, the copy you have on the hard disc is your only copy, so you should consider having a backup as well. [I have 3 2TB discs, each containing the same contents, but which are stored in different locations.] Oh, and by the way, if you think that would cost too much to

have spare, big discs “lying around,” ask yourself what you’d be willing to pay to get back your video if you lost the only copy. (See the subject of backup in my essay, “[Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#)”, from December 2010.)

Some VHS/DVD decks have the ability to digitize an input tape onto a DVD, allowing some minimal editing and addition of titles such that the resulting DVD can be playable directly. I didn’t play much with that option, as I knew I wanted to do some serious editing along the way. [In fact, more than 50% of my original analog video fell on the cutting floor during editing.] That said this option might be attractive as the easiest, quickest, and cheapest way to go initially. And, later on, you should be able to upload the resulting DVDs to your computer for editing.

6.9 Which DVD Format Should I Use?

Computer-friendly DVDs comes in various flavors: +R, +RW, -R, -RW, and -RAM, among others. A format ending in R is read-only, so you can only write to it once. A format ending in RW is rewritable, typically up to 1,000 times. [There are also Dual-Layer discs, whose designations end in DL; however, despite their increased capacity, not all of my DVD players can handle them, so I don’t use them.] Ideally, I wanted to record my videos on the same kind of media on which store-bought/rental videos are recorded; however, I’ve never been able to find out what that format is. In the meantime, DVD+R and DVD+RW work fine for me, as discs of this kind play in every video and computer-based DVD player I’ve ever tested them in.

When I have completed a 1-hour storyboard and have proofed it as much as possible using the editing software, I burn a copy to a DVD+RW disc. I then play that disc on several DVD video players connected to TVs as well as one on a computer to make sure it works okay. Assuming it does, I then fire up my DVD-copying software and make a copy, writing to a DVD+R disc, which becomes my master copy. [I actually have two DVD burners on my network, so copying from one to the other is easy. If you have only one, copying will be done via a temporary disc file. When copying a disc, always be sure to choose the copy-with-verify option, if that is available.] I then erase the DVD+RW disc ready for the next editing session. I never write my proofing copy directly to a DVD+R disc. If I did and there were problems in the chapters/titles, which I wanted to correct, I’d have to throw away the disc instead of reusing it. So, while you’ll need a supply of write-once discs on which to make your permanent recordings, also keep a handful of rewritable ones for temporary use.

Even though DVD formats are universal, that does not mean that everyone can read/play everyone else’s DVDs. For example, the world is broken into a number of regions each having a different region code. And DVDs recorded for one region can only be played on machines for that region. [If you put a “foreign” DVD into a Windows-based player, it will allow you to play it several times after which time Windows will switch permanently to that region code only!] The good news is that there is a truly international region code, and my editing software uses that (as do all editing products, I suspect). Such discs can be read on any player worldwide.

6.10 Conclusion

There are always newer, bigger, and better options available for shooting and editing video, so if you use that as an excuse to wait “until the sales next Christmas,” my guess is that you really aren’t serious

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about making videos. In my case, although cameras with mini discs instead of tape were just becoming available, they were more expensive and were not as proven as the old tape technology, so I went with tape. Since then, personal HD cameras have become available. C'est la vie!

Until about 15 months ago, my TVs were all analog, each having the classic US 4:3 aspect ratio, so my videos looked okay, as that matched my video cameras. However, once I went to a widescreen set, I found it better to set it to the "narrow screen" mode, so people and pictures didn't get stretched out of proportion.

If all this sounds like a lot of work, it is! Don't underestimate the discipline and effort needed to be successful. And like most things in life, the more you do, the better you get, so the sooner you get started editing, the better will be your shooting, and vice versa. Best wishes on that "short feature" Oscar Nomination!

7. June 2012, “English – Part 1: A Potpourri”

I was born and raised in Australia, and while English is my native language, to be sure, Australian English is a dialect. I've now lived in the US for 32 years, y'all, where they practice another dialect, along with some different spellings and pronunciations, and a whole other vocabulary.

For the past 30 years, I've traveled widely and met and done business with many people who spoke yet other dialects of English. And many of them spoke English as a second, third, or even fourth language.

Some 25 years ago, a series called The Story of English was shown on US television. In nine parts, it detailed the development of the English Language around the world. What intrigued me most was the occasional use of subtitles, not as closed captioning for deaf viewers, but as an aid to understanding what some people were actually saying. I recall thinking, “These people may well be speaking their dialect of English, but I sure as heck don't understand a word they are saying!”

I am reminded of some international meetings I chaired 20 years ago that were attended by a Scotsman. The group's members were not at all shy about agreeing or disagreeing strongly with each other's presentations, and after any member spoke, there usually was a lively discussion. However, each time the Scotsman spoke there was complete silence, and it took me a while to figure out that no one else had understood him. For the most part, I managed to follow his presentation, so as chair, I took on the job of paraphrasing some of his points, so others could comment.

7.1 Different Regional and National Dialects

The dialects of English with which I am most familiar are Australian, British, and American. [With Australia being a member of the British Commonwealth, Australian English is an outgrowth of British English, and started evolving 10 minutes after the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay in 1788.]

In 1979, I was at a travel agent's office in Adelaide, Australia, planning a one-way trip to the US where I was to work for at least a year. I was given a booklet containing 500 words and phrases in Australian English and their equivalent in American English. At the time, I thought it was a rather silly idea, but once I'd been in the US awhile, I discovered that there were substantial differences in vocabulary and meaning. The problems came in two flavors: using words listeners didn't understand, and using words they understood to mean something entirely different. Here are a few examples:

- Biscuits and gravy – Watch enough American movies or TV shows and you'll come across people eating this for breakfast. However, in British English, a sweet biscuit is what American English calls a cookie while a savory biscuit is called a cracker. On the other hand, in American English a biscuit is what British English calls a scone. [While I have met Americans who know what a scone is, most of them pronounce the *one* as in *phone*, while British English says it as *on*.] Regarding gravy, to me, that was brown, and you had it with a roast dinner. As to why anyone would want to smother it on their cookies was a mystery to me. As it happens, breakfast gravy in America is white and thick, and often has bits of sausage in it. So, once I saw what this concoction actually looked like, it seemed quite appealing and tasted even better. [Originally a southern tradition, this dish is now widely available throughout the US.]

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- Peanut butter and jelly – Again, from my TV- and movie-watching experience, I knew what peanut butter was; it just happened to be called *peanut paste* in my country. But it was the jelly that sounded strange. To me, jelly was that colored gelatinous desert one made from a box of powder. In the US, that product goes by its trade name, Jell-O. To Americans, jelly is a clear, fruit preserve, and in the case of peanut butter and jelly, it always seems to be red-grape flavored. Once I got passed the idea of wobbly gobs of gelatin on my peanut paste, I found the real thing quite tasty.
- Jumper – Our first location to live in the US was Chicago, which is known for cold winters, and winter was approaching. Some friends were asking us how cold it got back in Australia. My wife replied that in winter she usually wore a jumper, but if it was especially cold she might wear two of them. Now, apparently, they privately thought that unusual, but being polite they made no comment. It was only when I said that I too wore a jumper in winter that they sought clarification. To them, a jumper was some sort of a dress worn only by women and children. [See an alternate meaning in the hyperlink above.] It turned out that the meaning we wished to convey is met by the American word sweater. [I can imagine why one would want to drape around oneself a person who sweats, but that has nothing to do with keeping warm!]
- Thongs – Australia has a lot of beaches and Aussies have a lot of free time. They like to go to the beach, especially in hot weather. Now in South Australia, my home state, they often wear thongs to the beach, and many non-Aussies might think that's okay. But when an American hears that Aussies are quite happy to wear their thongs when they "go down the street" or "in the supermarket or bank," they come up with an interesting image. To me, thongs were rubber sandals, that some people call flip-flops. As I have since discovered, the singular *thong* denotes a very brief covering for one's nether regions.
- Iced coffee – This one sounds simple enough that it's hard to imagine any confusion. Yet to me, its coffee-flavored milk while in the US, I discovered it was simply cold coffee, made with water.
- Soda – I grew up buying bottles of *cool drink*, but then I heard about *pop*, soda pop, *soft drink*, and *fizzy drink*, among others. [Apparently, soda was also called *tonic* in some US regions.]
- Rubber – Down under, we have these on the end of each of our lead pencils. (Remember the Boy Scout's motto, "Be prepared!") To many Americans, who understand this word to mean *condom*, they find this amusing. What Aussies have, Americans call an *eraser*! [That said, to many older Americans, rubbers are overshoes, those things one puts over ones shoes going out in the rain, while they knew condoms by a popular brand name, Trojan. In a likewise manner, in the UK, Durex was a popular brand of condom while that same name was used for sticky tape in Australia.]
- Fanny pack vs. Bum bag – To Americans, a fanny pack is a zippered pouch you wear around your waist. However, given the vulgar meaning of the word fanny in British and Aussie English, they've come up with an alternate name, *bum bag*. Since Aussies wear it on their front and not on their *bum*, that does seem odd. But then *bum* means something quite different in America. Go figure! [To older Americans from states more closely associated with British English, *bum* does indeed refer to *buttocks*.]

One of the most surprising things I've learned about differences has to do with regional vocabularies. After having traveled to many countries while based in the US, I started to explore Australia, visiting parts of my own state I'd never gone to before as well as other states. I very quickly found that the

Australia I grew up knowing was not quite the same as that country others 300 or more miles away had experienced.

7.2 Those Dreadful Americans are Taking Over the World

Yes, they are, but what's your point? Seriously though, the lingua franca of international business and travel is English, with more and more emphasis on some form of an American dialect. [Unfortunately, one of America's biggest exports in that category is the unnecessary and inappropriate use of *like*. For like some speakers, like it pervades like every phrase!]

Some years ago, I was visiting Australia where I ran into a local complaining about the "excessive" influence the US had on the world. I asked her if she was taking a stand, marching in the streets, or doing anything at all about it. (Of course, she wasn't she was just complaining about it.) In particular, I pointed out that for many years, what used to be called *Chemist Shops* were now called *pharmacies*. Yet I didn't recall that being forced on Australia. Similarly, somewhere along the way *peanut paste* became known as *peanut butter*.

If you are tired of all that American influence, remember, "Nothing is a complete waste. It can always serve as a bad example!" In any event, if you recognize a "problem" yet you do nothing but talk about it, then you've become part of the problem.

7.3 Getting Defensive

It is not uncommon for people to guess at one's national origins by one's accent or dialect use. However, after some rather negative encounters, I've learned to be a bit cautious.

As you might imagine, when traveling abroad, Canadians do get mistaken for Americans, something they generally deny rather quickly. However, if one listens carefully and long enough to many native English-speaking Canadians, one can hear words like *out* and *about* pronounced as *owt* and *abowt*, respectively. And speakers from certain areas like to add an extra *a* between some words. [The joke goes that when officials were picking a name for their new country, they said, "Let's have a C, a, an N, a, and a D, a," which resulted in the present day *Canada*!]

Well, like Canadians, some New Zealanders are tired of being in the shadow, but for them it's Australia. [NO, New Zealand is not a state of Australia, and NO, it's not on the other end of the Sydney Harbor Bridge. Apparently, it's a whole separate country—thanks Wikipedia.] I ran into a rabid Kiwi in a hotel in rural Scotland. My family and I were eating lunch in the dining room when I heard the group at the table next to me talk, and it sounded *Orstralian* to me. However, when I asked the elderly gentleman if he was an Aussie, he was most indignant. He behaved as if I'd accused him of being English!

Although it's not really a language issue, you may have heard that there is a certain amount of friction between the English and other peoples in the United Kingdom. [That tends to happen when you go around subjugating folks for hundreds of years.] An illustration of this is the Scotsman and the Englishman talking over a beer when the issue of heritage came up. In a loud voice the Englishman said, "I was born an Englishman; I've lived as an Englishman; and by God I'll die an Englishman." To which the Scotsman replied, "Have ye no ambition?"

7.4 The Secret to Successful Writing and Speaking

To those of you claiming to have a really extensive vocabulary, I present you with the following quote to test that claim. For the rest of you, you might want to keep a copy handy to impress your friends and to have ready a short and entertaining speech just in case you are asked to speak publicly at a minute's notice:

"In promulgating your esoteric cogitations, or articulating your superficial sentimentalities, and amicable, philosophical or psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your conversational communications possess a clarified conciseness, a compact comprehensibility, coalescent consistency, and a concatenated cogency. Eschew all conglomerations of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement and asinine affectation. Let your extemporaneous descantings and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and veracious vivacity, without rodomontade or thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous prolixity, psittaceous vacuity, ventriloquial verbosity, and vaniloquent vapidity. Shun double entendre, pruriant jocosity, and pestiferous profanity, obscurant or apparent.

In other words, talk plainly, briefly, naturally, sensibly, truthfully, purely. Keep from 'slang;' don't put on airs; say what you mean; mean what you say; *and don't use big words!*"

Wisconsin Journal of Education, vol. XI 1881, p. 79, (W.C. Whitford and S.S. Rockwood, editors and publishers), citing *The New England Journal of Education*.

7.5 Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that, "England and America are two countries separated by a common language." I think he hit it right on.

Of all English dialects, which do you think is the easiest to understand? To me, it's South African. I find they tend to speak clearly and not too fast.

Regarding people being able to identify someone's dialect, I'm reminded of a time when my (Aussie) wife was playing tennis, and a woman who had heard her talking came over and said, "Don't tell where you are from. I'm good with accents, so let me figure it out." After a few minutes she said, "You're from just outside London, England, right?" To which my wife replied, "Yes, about 10,000 miles outside!"

I have read that one possible way to identify the native dialect of an English speaker is to ask them to say *fish and chips*. I'm no linguist, but the sound of that simple phrase is quite different when heard across the dialect spectrum.

Finally, let me give a plug to a website and book whose contents were written by my friend and colleague (who, by the way, is *not* called Dr. Watson). Chris Rae's [The Septic's Companion](#) "is an A-to-Zed dictionary of British Slang words and phrases, written by a Scotsman living in America." While the dictionary entries are all available on-line for free, the book has enough clever extras to make it worth buying. Besides, Chris could do with the royalties to help pay for his [elocution](#) lessons!

8. July 2012, “Are You Getting Enough Vacation?”

Some years ago, I read an article in an airline's in-flight magazine. The article was all about *Vacation Deficit Disorder* (VDD), and it was very cleverly written, especially as many of the things that “ail” society just have to have 3-letter abbreviations or acronyms.

I started my working life in Australia, so was introduced to leisure time through that culture (which, by the way, uses the term *holiday* rather than *vacation*). And now that I've been living in the US for 32 years, I can compare the two systems, at least as much as they existed during my time in each. Along the way, I've spent quite a bit of time in other countries, but only as a visitor.

8.1 Vacation Time

After three years in private industry where I worked a 40-hour week, in 1973. I started a job with the South Australian State civil service. There, I worked five days a week, Monday through Friday, for 7½ hours each day, for a total of 37½ hours/week. Everyone, regardless of years of service, got four weeks of vacation time per year, a good number of public holidays, and, of course, sick days.

Around that time, a major row erupted with regard to holiday pay for people who worked the night shift in a variety of skilled trades. If I remember correctly, workers on night shift were paid 17½% extra over the day-shift folks. What happened was that one or more unions demanded that these workers get their normal pay while they were on vacation, even though they weren't holidaying on night shift. Now the labor unions were very strong in Australia back then [pretty much all of them were affiliated under one massive umbrella], and the demand was granted. However, the really strange aspect was that not only did the night-shift workers get it, so too did the day shift and *everyone else* as well! Yes, even I got it. So, whenever we took time off, we got paid 17½% extra for doing absolutely nothing. What a country!

[Speaking of civil servants and “doing nothing,” a civil servant gets home from work and his wife asks him what he did that day. “Nothing,” he replied. “And what will you do tomorrow?” she asked. “Nothing,” he said. When she asked, “But didn't you do that all day today?” he replied, “Oh yes, but I didn't get finished!”]

8.2 Flexitime

Around 1975, the state government added an interesting twist to the workday by allowing a flexible-working-hours system to be used in many agencies and departments. In my case, we had an electronic time clock that recorded time in 1/100ths of an hour. Each participant had a plastic keycard that one inserted into one's slot when one arrived at work, and that one removed when one left for lunch or to go home. The day was broken into morning and afternoon with each having a *core period*. For the morning, that was 10:00–12:00, and for the afternoon, it was 14:00–16:00. The idea was that ordinarily, employees would be expected to be at their desks during the core periods, for meetings or to handle phone calls from fellow employees, other agencies, and the public.

One could start work at any time 08:00–10:00, and could stop work 16:00–18:00. (The clocks did not operate before 08:00 or after 18:00, so if one had to be working outside those hours, one got one's

supervisor to authorize a manual adjustment.) One had to take a lunch break of 30–120 minutes during 12:00–14:00. So, the shortest day one could work was the four core hours, and the longest was 9½ hours.

At the end of each 4-week period, each participant had to have worked 140–160 hours ($4 \times 37\frac{1}{2} = 150$), which meant one could have a credit or debit of up to 10 hours. By accumulating time, one could take off up to two half days or one whole day per month.

The important thing about the whole program is that within reason and consent of supervisors and coworkers on group projects, employees had the ability to manage their work and personal time. For example, they could come late (or early) and miss peak-hour traffic, attend meetings with their child's teacher, take their car to a garage for repairs, or schedule health-related appointments. And in summertime when daylight savings time was in effect, they could leave at 4 pm and go to the beach or play 18 holes of golf every weekday afternoon. What a system!

[At the time, I had a supervisor who knew *down to the second*—I kid you not—the time it took for him to pack his things, take off and hang up his lab coat, and put his hand on the doorknob to leave exactly as the second hand on the clock passed 5 pm. When flexitime arrived, he no longer knew when it was time to quit, and it took him quite some getting used to.]

Several years later—by which time I'd moved to a different government department—being the entrepreneur, I proposed to my boss a private extension of the basic plan, which he authorized. My group had its own minicomputer, and every Friday after lunch, we disabled all users, and the machine spent 3–4 hours dedicated to backing up all its data to magnetic tape. This meant that for 10% of each week, all staff in that group were without their applications, and that seemed wasteful. I proposed that every Friday I start work after lunch and work until 9 pm, and that we'd only disable the users around 5:30 pm. That way, users had the computer the whole week and only one person (me) was unable to use the system for those few hours.

8.3 Long-Service Leave

A system that existed in Australia well before I got into the work force was *long service leave*. Basically, it was a reward system for loyalty to the employer/company. For each year an employee worked for a given employer, she was credited with nine calendar days over and above her annual vacation. However, she could not use that time until after working there for 10 years. By that time, she had accumulated 90 calendar days; that is, 3 months. From that point on, the employee negotiated with the employer as to how much of that time she could take off and when. For example, some employees took it all off at the same time, others took 180 days at half pay, while others took a week or two off here and there. After 15 years of service, the employee accrued 15 days/year, which when taken with the four weeks of vacation gave six weeks off per year. [In 2011, this option was under threat from the Government, but was retained following protests from unions.]

People who quit their jobs before qualifying to take any long service leave, but yet having worked at least seven years, were paid out the amount accrued. Some employees were allowed to carry forward large amounts of annual vacation and/or long-service leave enabling them to retire early (possibly by several years). In the case of my wife, she was a student at a state teachers' college for three years

during which time she not only paid no tuition fees, she received a living allowance. As such, she was considered to be on the payroll of the state Department of Education, so those three years actually counted towards her long-service leave. What a country!

8.4 Welcome to the “Real World,” America!

Imagine my surprise when I started work in the US. What a primitive country (he says, tongue in cheek)! I worked a 40-hour week, got two weeks off a year with no shift-penalty loading, and no long-service leave. And as my first Easter approached, there I was making plans for my 4-day long-weekend when my colleagues said, “What are you talking about? There are no public holidays at Easter in the US.” Say what? This great Christian-founded country has no holidays on one of the two biggest Christian events; how can that be? [Australians have both the Good Friday before and Easter Monday after, off work. It's a time of huge sporting events and, sadly, many horrific road accidents.]

Over the years, I met many people who only got one week of vacation in each of their first few years at an entry-level job, and I don't recall knowing anyone who got more than three weeks. One exception was teachers, but then they either didn't get paid during their long summer break, or they arranged to get paid all year, but at a reduced salary each month.

And then there were the people who never even used all their vacation, and their employers had a “use it or lose it” policy. I noted with interest too that some employers allocated four weeks of vacation and sick pay combined per year, and if one didn't get sick, one could use those days as personal time.

Over the years, I've hosted many guests from Europe, and oftentimes I'd held receptions for them, so they could meet my friends and neighbors. Inevitably, someone would ask my guest, “And how long are you visited the US?” To which my guest would reply, “Three weeks.” “My, that's a lot of time off!” “No, not really; I still have three more weeks to take later in the year.”

8.5 Setting My Own Rules

Some 28 years ago, I went into business for myself, and right from the start one of my main goals was to take as much time off as I could afford. And except for a period five years ago when I worked more than fulltime on a major project, I've had at least three months off each year and in some years six months (mostly taken days or weeks at a time). My other main goal was to never hire any employees, which made it much easier to take time off.

The rationale for these goals was to enjoy myself as I went along and to travel while I was younger and in better physical condition to enjoy adventures. And with the advent of the internet, I can easily run my business from remote places while traveling for personal purposes.

8.6 Working from Home

One of the biggest non-productive periods of many workers' lives is the time they spend commuting. In my general area, it is not uncommon for people to spend 2–3 hours each business day getting to/from work. And all too often, they are stressed out by that experience alone.

From the very beginning of my business, I've worked from home. However, from time to time, I did (and still do) have to conform to the real world. For example, when I taught seminars, I had to work my clients' hours, and when I attend conferences and standards meetings, I have to work local business hours. Fortunately, these days, such events are few and far between.

Of course, telecommuting is not for everyone, even if it is a viable option. Some employees need the discipline of an office environment and the camaraderie of having real rather than virtual co-workers.

[15+ years ago, I told someone that I'd just cut my commute by 90%, and they were pleased for me, until that is I told them I'd moved my office from the basement up two floors next to my bedroom. It was about then they suggested that my parents were unmarried!]

8.7 Conclusion

Not everyone has the flexibility that I have enjoyed, but if you don't propose some workable scenarios and ask your employer what options exist, you'll never know. Perhaps working four 10-hour days each week and having a 3-day weekend *every* week or working from home one day a week is doable.

As far as I can see, many people look at personal time as that time left over after work and other "essential" things have been done. You might try looking at it from the other direction. That is, I'd like to have this much time off, and to do that here's how my work would have to fit in. Obviously, you need to work enough to "pay the rent," but it really is a matter of priorities and not confusing your needs with your wants!

So why did I leave such a great system like that in Australia? Well, as they say, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." Besides, I didn't fully appreciate what I had until some years after I had moved away. And after five years, I had plenty of flexibility due to my being self-employed.

Oh, don't forget to have your VDD vaccination!

9. August 2012, “What is Normal – Part 5: Numbers and Counting Systems”

We all know how to count. How do we count? Well, we just “know” how; there probably are some rules but most of us have long forgotten them.

In so-called “primitive” civilizations, they had (and perhaps still have) symbols for no more than the numbers 1, 2, and many. Didn't they ever need to count things, and, if so, how did they do it? The answer is, “They used tally sticks,” which, as Wikipedia states, “... was an ancient memory aid device to record and document numbers, quantities, or even messages”. Basically, the first time a shepherd let his sheep out to pasture, he carved a notch in a stick for each sheep that passed him. Then when he brought them back home again, he checked that he had one for each notch. [Tally sticks are not to be confused with tally marks.]

Now the Roman numeral system has been around for a while, if fact, since the Romans; hmm, funny about that! And while you might have amused yourself on occasion when trying to decipher the vintage of a movie copyright, if you've ever tried to do arithmetic using that system, you'll soon see why it didn't take off. Besides, you needed different symbols for the digit 1 in the numbers 1, 10, 100, 1000, and so on. Fortunately, the idea of place-value notation came along in the 5th century. But even then we didn't get a symbol for the idea of zero for another 100 years. [I well remember observing a heated discussion some 25 years ago between people who thought zero was special while others thought it “was just another point on the number line.”]

For quite a few centuries now, the predominant number system has been one based on the number 10; hence the term decimal, from the Latin decimus. We'll look at that number system later, along with number systems in general. The system most of us use now has the digits 0–9, which are referred to as Arabic numerals or, more correctly, Hindu-Arabic numerals.

9.1 Things You Might be Taking for Granted

When writing large numbers, we often talk of having *thousands* separators, as in 1,234,567, which many Europeans would write as 1.234.567 or even 1 234 567, where the space separators are non-breaking spaces. (For a discussion of decimal comma see the March 2010 essay, “What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started”.) But life is not like a box of chocolates, and some people group their digits in twos or threes, or combinations thereof. (Is that normal?)

Then there is the issue of how to write negative values. In some contexts, people use a preceding minus sign. In others, they enclose the number in parentheses, while in others they might use a DB prefix or suffix to indicate a financial debit (with CR being used to indicate a credit).

The digits in numbers are written left-to-right in decreasing position value, right? So, if what we commonly use are referred to as Arabic digits and Arabic is written right-to-left, how does one write a multi-digit number in Arabic? Although I'd learned the answer to that question some time ago, it wasn't until I actually edited in Microsoft's Word some Arabic text containing numbers, that I fully appreciated it. Yes, the text is written right-to-left, but within that text, numbers are written left-to-

right. Now while a word-processor can handle that by dynamically inserting extra digits to the right as they are typed, that is not true with handwriting. That is, when writing such text by hand, one needs to leave sufficient space for the whole number to the left of the previously written text, and then proceed to write the digits left-to-right.

When English speakers speak multi-digit numbers, they do so in the order the digits are written. That is, 57 is said “fifty-seven” with each word separate. But that’s not necessarily how the Germans do it; to them, 57 is written and pronounced as one word, “siebenundfünfzig”, which literally is “seven and fifty.” And yes, Germans like to write a large number a single very long word. For example, 3,526 (or 3.526 using their period thousands-separator) is written as “dreitausendfünfhundertsechszwanzig”. That makes for interesting problems when breaking such long words across lines when typesetting. And what’s with the French word for 80? I’m referring to “quatre-vingts”, which literally is “four twenties.” Sacré bleu!

9.2 The Decimal Number System

Let's look more formally at the decimal number system, the one we use every day, for things like prices, street addresses, and telephone numbers.

Consider the number 12,458. (The comma here represents the thousands separator, but as we know, that is not universal.) We all “know” that number represents the value twelve thousand four hundred and fifty-eight. How do we know that? Well for starters, the decimal number system has 10 distinct symbols, the digits 0–9. Decimal numbers are written such that the value of a digit is based on its position within that number. For example, the digit 5 can represent five, fifty, or five hundred. (This is different from some other number systems such as those developed by the Romans and Japanese.) Let's break down the decimal number 12,458 into its parts, as follows:

$1 \times 10,000$	=	1×10^4	=	10,000
$2 \times 1,000$	=	2×10^3	=	2,000
4×100	=	4×10^2	=	400
5×10	=	5×10^1	=	50
8×1	=	8×10^0	=	8
				12,458

The digits, starting from the right-most one going left, are referred to as the *ones* digit, the *tens* digit, the *hundreds* digit, the *thousands* digit, the *ten thousands* digit, and so on, for obvious reasons.

Consider the following example in which we add two numbers together:

$$\begin{array}{r} 546 \\ +478 \\ \hline 1,024 \end{array}$$

When two digits are added, the result may be larger than one digit, in which case, we *carry* 1 to the next column to the left. For example, $6 + 8 = 14$, so we carry 1 and put down 4. The next column to the left now becomes $4 + 7 + 1 = 12$, the 1 is carried and the 2 is put down. And so the process is repeated. With subtraction, when we subtract one digit from another we may have to *borrow* 1 instead of carrying it. For example:

$$\begin{array}{r} 1,024 \\ -478 \\ \hline 546 \end{array}$$

Whether we realize it or not, we need to know 400 rules to do basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of two decimal digits. We simply have to remember them! And even though we can take a few shortcuts ($3 + 4$ is equivalent to $4 + 3$, for example) there are still a lot of rules.

If we were to build a machine to perform these basic arithmetic operations, it would have to know all these rules. It would also need a way to represent each of the 10 digits. Mechanically, this is possible; an old-style automobile mileage odometer is one example. However, representing 10 different states makes the machine more complicated/expensive. This is particularly so if the machine is based on magnetic, electrical, or electronic properties, as are modern computers.

The decimal number system is based on the number 10. The numbers we normally write then are base-10 numbers. We can write such numbers with the base explicitly shown. For example, the number 123 can be written formally with a decimal base using the notation 123_{10} , where the base is shown as a subscript. In ordinary usage, the subscript is omitted because the writer means “base-10 number system” and most readers know only that number system. However, other number systems are in common use in computing, as we shall see below.

For the most part, people other than computer programmers and engineers, and mathematicians can ignore number systems other than base-10.

9.3 The Binary Number System

The rules we have seen for writing base-10 numbers can be applied to numbers of any arbitrary base. In fact, it's really the other way around; the base-10 system is a specific instance of the general number system idea.

To have a number system with base B , we simply need to pick B unique symbols, assign distinct values to them, and specify their value order. Therefore, to have a base-2 (or binary) number system, we need two symbols; 0 and 1 are used where 0 is less than 1. Here are some base-10 numbers and their base-2 equivalents, with the latter written in parentheses: 0 (0_2), 1 (1_2), 2 (10_2), 3 (11_2), 4 (100_2), 5 (101_2), 6 (110_2), 7 (111_2), 8 (1000_2), 9 (1001_2), 10 (1010_2), 100 (1100100_2), 1,000 (1111101000_2), 10,000 (10011100010000_2), 100,000 (11000011010100000_2), and 1,000,000 (11110100001001000000_2).

The larger the number system base (or *radix*), the bigger the number that can be expressed with a given number of digit positions. Conversely, the smaller the radix, the more digit positions are required to express a given number. Since 2 is the smallest possible radix, it produces the most unwieldy numbers, as shown in the examples above.

Numbers written in binary can get verbose, but they have one very important property: The number of rules needed to perform arithmetic operations on them is very small compared to the base-10 system. For example, in addition, we have $0 + 0$, $0 + 1$, $1 + 0$, and $1 + 1$, with only the last one producing a carry.

If we were to build a machine to perform these basic arithmetic operations, it would have to know only a few rules. It would also need a way to represent each of the two digits. This is easy, regardless of whether the machine is mechanical, magnetic, electrical, or electronic, so much so, that modern computers deal directly with base-2 numbers.

We've all heard the word *bit*. Just what is a bit? The term *bit* comes from the words *binary digit*. The longer term is cumbersome; while we can say that a given number can be represented in 16 binary digits, it's much easier to say it can be represented in 16 bits. An 8-bit computer processes values eight bits at a time while a 16-bit computer can manipulate 16 bits at a time. From this, we can reasonably assume that a 64-bit computer is more capable in some sense than a 32-bit computer, a 16-bit computer, and an 8-bit computer, in that order.

9.4 The Hexadecimal Number System

After decimal, the most commonly used number system these days is hexadecimal (or *hex* for short). As its name implies, it has a base of 16 and, therefore, needs 16 symbols. The symbols used are 0–9 and A–F where A–F have the values 10–15, respectively. (Lowercase a–f can be used instead of A–F, and upper- and lowercase letters can be mixed in the same number.) If you think a number containing letters looks silly, remember in the hexadecimal system A–F *are* digits. Just take a mental step back and remember that the assignment of symbols to meanings (as with letters and digits) is simply a convention.

Here are some base-10 numbers and their base-16 equivalents, with the latter written in parentheses: 0 (0_{16}), 1 (1_{16}), 2 (2_{16}), 3 (3_{16}), 4 (4_{16}), 5 (5_{16}), 6 (6_{16}), 7 (7_{16}), 8 (8_{16}), 9 (9_{16}), 10 (A_{16}), 100 (64_{16}), 1,000 ($3E8_{16}$), 10,000 (2710_{16}), 100,000 ($186A0_{16}$), and 1,000,000 ($F4240_{16}$).

Mere mortals generally don't have to understand the hexadecimal number system, but if you have ever configured a wireless device to the internet using a password or access key, you may have found yourself entering a "secret code" that looks something like 4749D8B754. That's because these things are often required to be hexadecimal numbers. [I've also seen screens full of hexadecimal numbers

scrolling or frozen on malfunctioning airport flight displays and even once on an in-flight screen when the video system was being reinitialized.]

9.5 Other Number Systems

There are an infinite number of number systems; pick a base, chose the corresponding number of distinct symbols, and voila, you have a new number system. However, you might have difficulty convincing others to use it.

Now you don't have to be a computer or math nerd to deal with number systems other than decimal, although it does help. Back in the *really* old days (even before your parents were born, as in the 3rd millennium BCE), the Sumerians used the sexagesimal number system, which had a base of 60. They very generously passed that along to the Babylonians. Clearly, back then, counting on one's fingers was not possible! There are traces of this concept with us today. For example, in our time system, there are 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour. And when looking at latitude or longitude on a globe, there are 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in a degree.

Another culture that was very advanced with respect to math and science was the Maya. Their number system used base twenty (vigesimal).

While an understanding of alternate number systems and computer-based arithmetic is not necessary for most computer programming tasks, without such knowledge programmers cannot exploit certain kinds of hardware or programming languages, or understand some of the principles on which modern computing is based.

Back in the old days of computing (1970s and earlier) many of us programmers had to be familiar with the octal number system, which has base 8. As you might expect, the digits in that system are 0–7. [I really *do* miss the DEC PDP-11!]

To read more than you probably want to know about number systems, click here.

9.6 Conclusion

With respect to numbers and counting I do have a pet peeve, namely, the misuse of *number* when digit is meant. The number 123 contains three digits, 1, 2, and 3. It does *not* contain three numbers! That is, a number consists of one or more digits. A number cannot contain another number. So, use the terms correctly or *Mr. and Mrs. Spank will have to make a trip to bottyland!* [That's a famous quote from QEI's nanny in an episode of the second series of Black Adder.]

We all know about percentages, and are used to seeing signs like "Sale, 50% off!" But did you know that percent had a sibling, per mil? A per mil is a tenth of a percent or one part per thousand, and is written using the symbol ‰. Now let's see who's the first to post a comment about seeing this symbol in a publication.

A number of companies sell calculators that allow numbers to be entered and displayed in various bases. I've been a fan of HP scientific and programmable calculators since 1970, and I own an HP-16C. This calculator supports binary, octal, decimal, and hexadecimal modes of operation; allows ones- or

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twos-complement or unsigned representation; has bit-manipulation operations; and supports word sizes up to 64 bits. It's so reliable I can always count on it!

10. September 2012, “A Little Bit of American Civics”

[If you are an American, you might find this useful as a refresher course, especially with the up-coming Presidential election. If you are not “of the Stars and Stripes faith,” perhaps this will help you understand some of that “awful American news that keeps on invading your TV set and newspapers!” For those of you living in countries where you get only 1–2 months’ notice of a general election, be thankful.]

I was born in and lived in Australia for 25 years, but I know very little about its political system. I’ve now lived in the US for 33 years, and I’m a US citizen. (See my April 2010 essay “[The Road to US Citizenship](#)”.) Along the way, I’ve become very interested in the US Constitution, I’ve read quite a bit about US Presidents, and I’ve followed closely the deliberations of the US Supreme Court.

Over the years, I’ve researched many civics-related questions and picked up lots of trivia. In this 2-part essay, I’ll share with you some of what I’ve learned. In this first part, I’ll cover the Constitution and the best-known bits of the Executive Branch (Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet). In the second part, I’ll cover the Legislative Branch (Senate and House), Presidential Succession, the Judicial Branch (primarily the Supreme Court), the flag, and Third Parties and Independents.

10.1 The Constitution

The [US Constitution](#) is the supreme law of the United States. It was drafted by a group of very able and interesting men (who happened to be white and generally more affluent and more educated than most Americans were), and was adopted by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, late in 1787. Several years later, it became law when it was ratified by a sufficient number of states. [It is important to mention that not all state delegates appointed to the Constitutional Convention actually attended, and not all those who attended actually approved/signed the result. Rhode Island did not even send any delegates (probably because they were too busy taking care of their [chickens](#)!) It is also worth noting that the first governing document, the [Articles of Confederation](#), which preceded the constitution, left a lot to be desired. Even the Americans don’t always get it right the first time!]

To Americans, their Constitution is the bedrock of society. Imagine their surprise then when they learn that [some countries do not have a written constitution](#). (Can you say *The United Kingdom*?) And they are also quite puzzled when they hear of some failed country setting about writing yet another new constitution. [Can you say *Banana Republic*?]

As for me, I don’t find it all surprising that the US Constitution and Congressional model have been adopted or adapted by more than a few countries. For the most part, I much prefer it over the widespread [Parliamentary system](#) under which I grew up. [Yes, I’m grown up, but as some of you know firsthand, I don’t always act like it.]

The basic thrust of the Constitution was to “establish the rules and separate powers of the three branches of the federal government: a legislature, the [bicameral](#) Congress; an executive branch led by the President; and a federal judiciary headed by the Supreme Court.” Also, it assigns the powers not explicitly given to the Federal Government, to the individual states.

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The Constitution can be amended, and, remarkably, in its 225-year history only 27 amendments have been approved (and one of those, the 18th, was negated by another, the 21st, the respective creation and subsequent repeal of Prohibition).

Although many good ideas were proposed for the Constitution, it was decided to adopt it in an incomplete form, and then add more things soon after through amendments, the first 10 of which are known as The Bill of Rights. Although these 10 amendments were soon ratified, the original package approved by Congress and submitted for ratification contained 12. Of the two that didn't "make the cut" way back when, one of them finally received support from enough states to become the 27th Amendment, adopted in 1992, a mere 203 years after it was submitted! So, what was this monumental change? If Congress gives itself a pay raise, that raise cannot take effect until the next (2-year) Congressional term. [Three quarters of the states are required to ratify an amendment, and as time went on, more states joined the union, so it required more states to ratify the amendment.] The other amendment that didn't "make the cut" is still waiting to be ratified, although that is unlikely to ever happen. This one has to do with making rules regarding representation in the House of Representatives. (While the Constitution spells out representation for the Senate [each state gets two senators], it does not do so for the House [where the number of representatives is based on population].)

Most amendments were proposed without an expiration date, leading to the 203-year wait mentioned above. However, this changed starting in 1917 when an expiration date was first used. Since then, two amendments have expired without being ratified: The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), 1972, and The District of Columbia Voting Rights Amendment, 1978.

For my US Citizenship test, I had to remember the answers to about 100 questions, some 10 of which I'd be asked at my in-person interview. And while I was also given the answers in advance, one question was far more complex than all the other others, namely:

Question: Name the amendments that guarantee or address voting rights.

Answer: 15th (non-white males get the vote), 19th (women get the vote), 24th (state laws allowing poll taxes cannot be applied to Federal elections), and 26th (lowering the voting age from 21 to 18).

[Even in my old age, I can easily remember the purpose of each, but I sure don't remember their numbers!]

Remember that the states get to keep all the rights not explicitly given to the Federal Government by the Constitution. And some states had laws to prevent certain categories of people from voting. However, the 24th amendment prohibits such laws from being applied to Federal elections; that is, for President, Vice President, Senator, and Representative. [Other amendments prohibit other restrictions to voting.]

10.2 The Executive Branch

Through his cabinet secretaries, the President oversees almost all so-called civil servants and military personnel. In general, it is accepted that the Vice President is part of the Executive Branch; however, he is also President of the Senate, which is part of the Legislative Branch.

10.2.1 The Presidency

The President of the United States heads the executive branch.

According to the Constitution, “No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States.”

[At this stage, we pause for a moment of silence during which we reflect on the shortsightedness of the Founding Fathers by their disallowing moi to become President because of a lack of natural bornness! What were they thinking? It's probably just as well, as “President Rex” sounds a bit odd given that *Rex* is Latin for *King*!]

You may have read how back before the 2008 election (and even before this coming one) some people questioned whether Barack Obama was a natural born Citizen. This also happened, but to a lesser extent, to his opponent, Senator John McCain of Arizona. He was born in the Panama Canal Zone, and the question was whether or not that was formally part of the US to make him a citizen. Interestingly, McCain's predecessor as senator, Barry Goldwater, was born in the Arizona Territory, before it became a state. And that raised a similar question back when he ran for President.

The President is elected to a 4-year term, and, originally, the Constitution placed no limits on the number of terms that could be served. The first President, George Washington, thought that two terms was enough and that set the precedent. However, Franklin Roosevelt (FDR) changed all that when he was elected to four successive terms starting in 1933. (He died early in his 4th term, and it has since been discovered that there was a long history of death in his family!) This “carrying on like a monarch” upset enough people that the 22nd Amendment was created and ratified to limit the presidency to two terms, where a term is defined as “more than two years.” So, if a president dies in office and has less than two years left on his term, the vice president who serves that remaining time can also serve two full terms of his own. However, FDR died leaving more than two years, but the amendment exempted the then current president, Harry Truman, so he was not term limited. (In any event, he ran and served for only one full term of his own.)

George Washington was President number 1 and Barack Obama is President number 44; however, there have only been 43 Presidents. That's because Grover Cleveland served two non-consecutive terms and is number 22 and 24. [Senate President pro tempore [David Rice Atchison's](#) tombstone states that he was President for a day. President-elect Zachary Taylor (#12) refused to be inaugurated on a Sunday leaving the presidency technically vacant from noon on Saturday, March 3, 1849 when outgoing President Polk's (#11) term ended, until Monday, March 5 at noon when Taylor was sworn in.]

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Sometime after the US was created, Congress determined that the election for President (and Vice President) takes place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of years that are an exact multiple of 4 (as in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and so on). After being elected, the President-elect has a transition period during which to “get organized” and to start nominating his cabinet members and many other appointees. George Washington (#1) took office on April 30, 1789 (having been elected on February 4 of that year). Presidents from John Adams (#2) on took office on March 4, until Dwight Eisenhower (#34), who took office on January 20. Currently, the transition period is about 10 weeks (3 in November, 4 in December, and 3 in January), which is not a lot to get ready to “hit the ground running” for the leader for the free world. [In many (most?) countries a new leader takes office within days or weeks of being elected giving them next to no time to get ready.] Nowadays, the Presidential Inauguration takes place on the steps of The Capitol in Washington at noon, Eastern Standard Time, January 20.

Four Presidents were assassinated while in office: Lincoln (#16), Garfield (#20), McKinley (#25), and Kennedy (#35). Four Presidents died of natural causes while in office: Wm. Harrison (#9), Taylor (#12), Harding (#29), and F.D. Roosevelt (#32). One President resigned: Nixon (#37). Five died in their first term with Harrison lasting only a month. Wilson (#28) suffered a stroke during his second term that paralyzed his left side and blinded him in his left eye. Historians generally agree that his wife Edith and his chief of staff conspired to keep the extent of his incapacity secret and ran the government on his behalf. This situation was one of the big reasons for the 25th Amendment's handling of Presidential incapacity.

The states in which the most Presidents were born are Virginia (8), Ohio (7), and Massachusetts and New York (each 4). Twenty-five Presidents were lawyers.

Andrew Johnson (#17) was the first president to be impeached. Clinton (#42) was the second. Both were found not guilty. Impeachment proceedings were begun against Nixon (#37); however, he resigned before they were completed. [According to [Wikipedia](#), ‘At the Philadelphia Convention, Benjamin Franklin noted that, historically, the removal of “obnoxious” chief executives had been accomplished by assassination. Franklin suggested that a proceduralized mechanism for removal—impeachment—would be preferable.’]

Kennedy (#35) was the first Catholic president. Ford (#38) was the first non-elected Vice President and the first non-elected President. Bush Jr. (#43) was the winner of the first election resolved by the Supreme Court. Obama (#44) was the first non-white president.

Taft (#27) was the last to have a cow at the White House and the first to have automobiles there. Coolidge (#30) had nine hours of sleep a night plus 2–4-hour naps in the afternoons. Hoover (#31) was the first to donate his salary to charity. F.D. Roosevelt (#32) was the first to appear on TV, and the first to visit an overseas war zone. Eisenhower (#34) served in both World Wars and was the first with a pilot's license. Kennedy (#35) won a Pulitzer Prize. Ford (#38) survived two assassination attempts by women. Carter (#39) was the first to be born in a hospital, the first to be sworn in using his nickname, Jimmy, and the first to send his mother on a diplomatic mission. (After the start of the [Iran Hostage Crisis](#), she [Ms. Lillian] proposed putting a bounty on Ayatollah Khomeini's head!) Reagan (#40) was the

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first to have headed a labor union, the first to have been divorced, and the oldest (nearly 70 at his inauguration).

Four presidents have received the Nobel Peace Prize: Teddy Roosevelt (#26) in 1906, Wilson (#28) in 1919, Carter (#39) in 2002, and Obama (#44) in 2009.

Most common-use US banknotes have pictures of Presidents: \$1 [Washington (#1)], \$2 [Jefferson (#3)], \$5 [Lincoln (#16)], \$20 [Jackson (#7)], and \$50 [Grant (#18)]. [The non-President ones are \$10 (Alexander Hamilton, the first Treasurer and the man who invented the National Debt, perhaps the most successful modern invention ever!) and \$100 (Benjamin Franklin).]

Everyone knows that the President is protected by the Secret Service, but such protective duty didn't start until 1902 after President McKinley (#25) was the third one to be assassinated. [Until then, these agents' primary job was to catch counterfeiters of US currency.]

A well-known fact is that the Presidential Retreat is called Camp David. This is located some 60 miles northwest of Washington DC, in the state of Maryland. It took on that role during FDR's time. It received its current name from Eisenhower, whose father and grandson were both named David. The President gets to this hideaway on a helicopter called Marine One. He uses Air Force One to fly longer distances (and to take his best friends golfing) and his limo is often referred to as The Beast. Of course, the President and his family live in the White House, which is right next door to the Federal Treasury building, making it very convenient when he needs to use his ATM card to get small amounts of cash to pay for a pizza delivery, or to withdraw a billion or two for petty cash!

10.2.2 The Vice Presidency

Like the President, the Vice President (VP) must be a natural-born U.S. citizen, be at least 35 years old, and have resided in the US at least 14 years. The 12th amendment to the Constitution requires that "no person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States".

The 20th amendment requires that the Vice President's term of office begin at noon, Eastern Standard Time, on January 20 of the year following the election. This date marks the beginning of a 4-year term. The President and Vice President run on the same ticket; that is, they run together as a package.

Throughout US history, the role of the Vice President has largely been small and ceremonial. Texan John Nance Garner (known affectionately by some as *Cactus Jack*), who served as FDR's Vice President from 1933 to 1941, claimed that the Vice Presidency "isn't worth a pitcher of warm piss."

As you may know Bush Sr., Reagan's VP and then President 41, served as a navy torpedo bomber pilot in WWII, during which he was shot down and had to use his parachute. While in office, he vowed he would make another parachute jump, but this time it would be voluntarily. And he did, several times. A variant of the story goes like this: George is being readied for his jump and his instructor is refreshing his memory. "Sir, this is the cord for your primary chute." "Yes, I remember that." "If that fails to open, you pull this cord, which opens your auxiliary chute." "Right, but what's this third cord for?" "Well sir, if your primary and auxiliary chutes fail to open, you pull this one and it sounds a bell in the Vice

President's office telling him to get ready to attend a state funeral!" After all, attending such funerals was and still is one of the VP's main tasks.

Initially, on the death of the President there was doubt as to whether the VP would become the new President or merely an acting President. This was resolved in 1841 on the death of Wm. Harrison when his VP, John Tyler, "declared it so."

Listen up now all you US Civics Experts; it's Question Time: When President Kennedy was killed in Dallas in 1963, his VP, L.B. Johnson (#36) was sworn in by a federal judge on Air Force One. Who served the remainder of the term as Johnson's VP? Now, I've posed this question to many Americans, and I have gotten a whole host of answers, but only two people have gotten it right thus far. It's a trick question! The answer is that he had no VP. Yep, that's right; the Constitution made no provision for filling a vacant VP slot. And this was the 8th time the sitting VP has stepped up to fill a vacant presidency, and therefore the 8th time he had *no* VP!

The 25th Amendment was drafted and ratified to clarify succession. Section 2 states, "Whenever there is a vacancy in the office of the Vice President, the President shall nominate a Vice President who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of both Houses of Congress." The first Vice President selected by this method was Gerald Ford, who took office after VP Spiro Agnew resigned in 1973. Then when Nixon resigned as President, Ford became the first unelected President; and he nominated Nelson Rockefeller as his VP.

Fourteen Vice Presidents went on to become President although not all inherited the mantle of their immediate predecessor. Richard Nixon is the only non-sitting Vice President to be elected President, as well as the only person to be elected President and Vice President twice each.

The VP is also President of the US Senate, where he has two jobs: to vote in the event of a deadlock and to preside over and certify the official vote count of the [U.S. Electoral College](#).

Prior to 1974, the VP had to find his own place to live while in Washington DC. Finally, an official residence was provided at [Number One Observatory Circle](#), but it was not occupied for another three years until VP Mondale moved in.

Bush Sr.'s VP, Dan Quayle, was so inept that someone started a website that was dedicated to his gaffes, of which there were many. He demonstrated on national TV that a VP need not know how to spell. And in advance of an up-coming trip to Latin America, he lamented not having paid more attention in his Latin classes at school! I can honestly say that the embarrassing spectacle of his term was what started me thinking about becoming a citizen, so I could vote.

10.2.3 The Cabinet

Unlike in a parliamentary system in which cabinet members are elected politicians, the members of the [Cabinet of the United States](#) are nominated by the President and approved by the Senate, and serve at the pleasure of the President. Each heads his/her corresponding government department. There are currently 15 cabinet members, and all have the title "Secretary of xxx" except for Justice, which is headed by the *Attorney General*. [Defense is a cabinet department and under that, there exists

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subordinate military departments for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, along with a whole slew of defense-related agencies.]

There are a number of cabinet-level officers, which includes the VP, the White House Chief of Staff, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the ambassador to the UN. From time to time, departments are created, disbanded, or renamed. Homeland Security, the most recent—and likely the biggest—was created in the aftermath of 9/11. The first President, George Washington, had a Cabinet of four: State, Treasury, War, and Attorney General. [The War department later became Defense.]

The “Department of Dirty Tricks” (that is, the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]) is not a cabinet department. In fact, it really doesn't exist except in movies.

A detailed list of all the cabinet members of all the Presidents can be found [here](#).

In general, it seems that being a Cabinet Secretary is not a good launching pad for higher office. Hoover (#31) was the most recent Cabinet member (Commerce) to have become President, way back in 1929. Taft (#27) did it all! He was Teddy Roosevelt's War Secretary; then he was President, and, finally, he was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. [Grossly overweight, Taft got stuck in the White House bathtub the first time he used it.]

Stay tuned for [Part 2](#), y'all!

11. October 2012, “A Little Bit More American Civics”

In the [first part](#), I covered the Constitution and the Executive Branch (Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet). In this second part, I'll cover the Legislative Branch (Senate and House), Presidential Succession, the Judicial Branch (primarily the Supreme Court), the flag, and Third Parties and Independents.

11.1 The Legislative Branch – Congress

The [US Congress](#) is the legislative branch of government, and it consists of the [Senate](#) and the [House of Representatives](#). [Although these are occasionally referred to as the upper and lower house, respectively, that is rare, and can give a misleading impression as to the roles of each when compared with a parliamentary system in which the upper house is often a *house of review*.]

Members are now chosen by direct election (initially, senators were elected by their state legislature).

For the most part, the Senate and House have equal powers. However, only the Senate can ratify a treaty or approve presidential appointments (such as ambassadors, cabinet members, and Federal judges). [As one not-quite-so-well-written high school student wrote, “The President of the United States, in having foreign affairs, has to have the consent of the Senate.” It's not clear that President Clinton had such consent, but then again, his *affairs* might have been entirely domestic!] Only the House can initiate a revenue-raising bill. When a President is impeached, charges are brought by the House, whose members act as the prosecution, while the members of the Senate act as the jury. (The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court presides over the trial.)

Although only Congress has the power to declare war or to sustain a military action, as [Commander-in-Chief](#) of the armed forces, the President can commit the military for up to 90 days without congressional approval. Unless such commitment seems flawed in a major way, most Senators and Representatives will support the President's action, as they don't want to be seen to be “letting the troops down” once they have been committed, even if privately they disagree with the decision. [Note that the Korean and Vietnam “wars” were not declared wars.]

As I suggested earlier, not all Federal employees come under the Executive Branch. For example, the following organizations support the Legislative Branch: [Library of Congress](#) (the library with the world's largest collection, and perhaps surprisingly, from which one *cannot* borrow a book [they can, however, be read on-site by the public, but otherwise are resources available to Congress]), the [Congressional Research Service](#), and the [Congressional Budget Office](#).

A *term of Congress* runs two years, starting on January 3 of odd-numbered years, and is divided into two 1-year *sessions*. (*Other or special sessions* are called from time to time.)

11.1.1 The Senate

Members of the Senate are called—TA DA—*senators*.

According to the Constitution, each state—regardless of population—has two senators, making 100 senators in all. The Federal Capital, Washington DC, is not represented (and neither are other US

territories, such as Puerto Rico). Each senator is elected to a 6-year term, with one third of the 100 senators' terms expiring every congressional term. The 6-year terms of any state's two senators are never the same. There are no Senate Districts; both senators in a state represent that whole state. The idea behind a 6-year term is to allow senators to weather the storm over a longer period, especially if they make unpopular decisions. (Public furor based on their votes can well and truly die down before they are next up for election.)

The VP is the ex officio President of the Senate, and can only vote to break a tie. (For a list of such votes, [press here](#).) However, to run the Senate on a day-to-day basis, the Senate elects a [President pro tempore](#), who is third in line to the President.

The Constitution requires that a senator be at least 30 years old, have been a citizen of the US for at least the past nine years, and be an inhabitant of the state in which they run at the time of their election. (Hillary Clinton moved to New York State, so she could run for senator there.)

Obama (#44), Nixon (#37), LBJ (#36), Kennedy (#35), and Truman (#33) were recent Presidents who served in the Senate.

11.1.2 The House of Representatives

Members of the House of Representatives are called *representatives, congressmen, or congresswomen*.

The Constitution does not speak to the size of the House, but it clearly was intended that states with larger populations have more Representatives. Also, each state must have at least one Representative. Currently, due to their small populations, seven states have only one, in which case, the whole state is their district; they are Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. California, the most populous state currently has 53 Representatives.

As the population grew, the House was expanded until around 1913 when it was frozen at 435 members. In years divisible by 10, a national census is taken and the allocation of seats by state is adjusted as a result of population migration. In 1959, Alaska and Hawaii were admitted as the 49th and 50th states, respectively, and each got one new Representative, making the total 437, temporarily. However, the next year's census reduced that back to 435, resulting in two seats being taken away from other states.

While the Federal Capital, Washington DC, has a Delegate in the House, unlike Representatives she cannot vote on the main floor. Each Representative is elected to a 2-year term, with [all 435](#) Representatives' terms expiring [every](#) congressional term. As such, they have to spend a lot more time in their home Districts appeasing their constituents. In fact, soon after they get elected, they start working on getting reelected! [Unfortunately, due a number of factors, most incumbents get reelected.]

The House is led by the Speaker, who is second in line to the President. [It is most interesting to note that the Constitution does *not* require the Speaker actually to be an elected member of the House he

or she will lead! However, all Speakers thus far have been elected representatives. Nor does the Speaker have to be of the majority party in the House.]

The boundaries of Districts in each state are controlled by that state and are purely based on political power. In my humble opinion, that mechanism has been, and continues to be, widely abused, with redistricting often being based on ethnic, income, and partisan political factors. (The process of deciding boundaries is called Gerrymandering, named for Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry who had his 15 minutes of fame back in 1812.)

The Constitution requires that a Representative be at least 25 years old, have been a citizen of the US for the past seven years, and be an inhabitant of the state (but not necessarily the District) they represent.

Bush Sr. (#41), Ford (#40), Nixon (#37), and LBJ (#36) were recent Presidents who served in the House.

11.2 Getting a Law Passed

For a law to pass, it must be approved by the Senate, the House, and not be vetoed by the President. (The President can sign or not sign a bill. A Presidential veto can be overridden, however. For an interesting complication, see pocket veto.) [When similar bills pass the Senate and House, a Conference Committee irons out their differences.] Even if a law gets past all that, it can still be overturned—possible many years later—by the Supreme Court as being *unconstitutional*. For example, even if the Senate, House, and President all agree to ban almost all personal ownership of handguns, the resulting law would almost certainly be struck down by the Supreme Court based on the Constitution's 2nd Amendment rights that "Protects an individual's right to bear arms." For such a law to survive, the Constitution would have to be changed, and—by design—that is a much harder job than just making a Federal law.

11.3 Presidential Succession

If a President dies or resigns while in office, who takes over? Well, the obvious answer is, "The VP." But what if the VP cannot take over? The Presidential line of succession is addressed in the Constitution and in Amendments 20 and 25. The bottom line is that the VP comes first, followed by the Speaker of the House, then the President pro tempore of the Senate, and then the Cabinet heads in order of the creation of their Department (with State coming first). [Despite his extensive experience at playing President on a long-running TV show, rumors that Martin Sheen comes next cannot be verified.]

With 15 Cabinet Departments currently, that provides for 18 backup Presidents, which sounds like a lot. However, each January, the President makes his annual State of the Union address in which he reports on the current condition of the country, and outlines his legislative agenda and national priorities for the next year. This event takes place in the House of Representatives. Present are the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet, all 435 members of the House, all 100 members of the Senate, and all 9 Justices of the Supreme Court, unless, of course, they have a note from their Mom excusing them! Basically, the entire US Government leadership is under the same roof at the same time! So, what if a catastrophic event wiped out that whole group? [If you have never seen the movie King Ralph, I highly recommend it.] Fortunately, one Cabinet Secretary agrees to stay (hopefully far)

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away from that event, so there is someone left to take charge. That said if he/she becomes the new President he/she can't nominate a new VP, any Cabinet members or Supreme Court judges until the Senate and/or House gets repopulated. [The replacement of vacated House and Senate seats is handled by each State's Constitution.]

Note that the Speaker of the House and the President pro tempore of the Senate might not be from the same party as the President. And some Presidents appoint Cabinet Secretaries who are not from their party.

[During the weeks I wrote and revised this essay, I watched all 28 episodes of the 2nd season of the popular TV series 24, which starred Kiefer Sutherland. When the President calls off an attack on three middle east nations, the VP calls a meeting of the Cabinet to try and get them to vote that the President is unfit and should be relieved. This possibility is in fact provided for by the 25th Amendment.]

11.4 The Judicial Branch

The Constitution requires that there be one court called the Supreme Court, which is atop a Federal Court system. Congress is empowered to create additional subordinate courts and structures as part of the federal court system. Like the Legislative Branch, the Judicial Branch has its own set of civil servants to administer its operations, separate from the Executive Branch. Most Federal judges are appointed for life and can only be removed by impeachment. [Some have been imprisoned, but continued to draw their salary!]

11.4.1 The Supreme Court

The Supreme Court of the US is the highest court in the land and its decisions are final; there is no mechanism to appeal any of its decisions. Its job is to interpret the US Constitution when asked to do so. It currently consists of the Chief Justice—who heads the Judicial Branch—and eight Associate Justices (all of whom are naked under those flowing black robes).

Of course, the Founding Fathers had no inkling of the changes technology and evolved thinking has wrought since the Constitution was written, so determining how this document should be applied to such modern-day questions as animal and human cloning, genetic modification, and conducting business on the internet, for example, could be seen as a stretch. In that regard, there are two camps of Justices: the Big-Endians and the Little Endians. Just kidding, OK! After all, this is a pretty dry subject! Actually, there are the more conservative Strict Constructionists who argue one must apply the plain meaning of the actual words as written by the Founding Fathers, and the Judicial Activists who take into account political, historical, scientific, and personal issues when interpreting the present-day meaning of the words in the Constitution. This distinction becomes important when a vacancy occurs, and the sitting President gets to nominate a replacement supposedly "reasonably aligned with his thinking." However, the Senate has to approve. While only 12 nominees have been rejected, many more nominees have been withdrawn when it was clear they had no real chance of getting Senate approval.

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[I remember well in 1987 when Reagan nominated [Robert Bork](#). That created a firestorm. I went off to Europe for some weeks during which time I was out of contact with US news. On my return, I learned that not only had Bork's nomination been voted down, Reagan had then picked Douglas Ginsburg, who very quickly admitted he'd smoked some marijuana while a professor at Harvard. Eventually, Anthony Kennedy was nominated and accepted.]

The Constitution sets no qualifications whatsoever for service as a Supreme Court Justice. Bush Jr. (whom I prefer to call, "Bush the very much lessor") nominated a lawyer who had also served as White House counsel, but who had never been a judge. Under much protest, he withdrew her name. Interestingly, Chief Justice [Earl Warren](#), who some say was the most powerful jurist in U.S. history, was never a judge until he became Chief Justice.

The Chief Justice need not have been an Associate Justice prior. Indeed, the sitting Chief, [John Roberts](#), came straight in to the top spot, at the grand old age of 50! So, barring any accidents, illness, or his running off with Associate Justice/Hot Babe [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), we can expect to have him occupy that seat for a long time.

11.5 The Flag

As it exists today, the [US flag](#) consists of 13 alternating red and white stripes and 50 5-pointed white stars on a blue background. The stripes represent the original 13 colonies that became the first states, and the 50 stars represent the 50 states.

Back at the beginning of the country, the flag had only 13 stars and 13 stripes. A few years later, two more states joined the union, so two more stars and two more stripes were added, and that was the flag that flew during the War of 1812 when the Brits made an unfriendly visit, and the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," was inspired. Later yet, five more states were added, but some smart person at the now-defunct *Department of Forward Thinking* suggested that adding a stripe for each new state then and later would give rise to some awfully thin stripes [especially if we took over all of Canada as well. Oops, I didn't mean to let that slip!], so they went back to 13, and just kept increasing the number of stars.

Now there are rules and protocols about proper flag usage and disposal, but, unfortunately, these are not widely promoted nor followed. I often see flags flying—even at official buildings and facilities—in inclement weather, in the dark, or in a torn state, all of which are prohibited. I especially remember the days immediately following 9/11 when people attached small flags to the roofs of their cars, so they could flutter freely in the wind at 70 miles per hour. Of course, many of them quickly became tattered although their owners kept flying them. "Yeah; let's wave the flag while disrespecting it!" As for my flag, it hangs loosely on the wall of the main entrance inside my house, in a well-lit, dry, calm place.

11.6 Third Parties and Independents

Unlike numerous other democracies, the US seems to have fewer third party and independent candidates. Certainly, we've had Senators and Representatives change parties or leave a party to become independent, and we've had them elected as independents. I am not aware of any Constitutional obstacles to third party and independent candidates running and being elected and

even holding the balance of power in either or both the Senate and House. However, having them hold the Presidency is another matter altogether.

As it happens, the President is not elected directly by the people. Yes, the people vote, but once that voting has been counted, there is one final step needed before a result can be ratified, and that involves the [Electoral College](#). There are 538 Electoral College delegate votes (435 [the number of Representatives] + 100 [the number of Senators] + 3 for Washington DC [per the 23rd Amendment]), and becoming President requires a simple majority, 270, to win. In all but two (less-populous) states, it's "winner-takes-all-delegates." For example, the most-populous state, California, currently has 55 delegates, and whoever wins the popular vote in that state gets all 55. (In the two other states, delegates are pro-rated based on the popular vote.) So, for a third party or independent candidate to win the Presidency, he/she would have to get on the ballot in at least all the most populous states, and win many of those states. And to be sure, that has been tried, and it likely will be tried again. But even if such a candidate became President, he/she would still need the consent of the Senate and House to get *any* legislation passed.

To be clear, regardless of the number of candidates in the general Presidential election, the one with the most votes—even if that count is fewer than 50%—is the winner, so long as they get the most electoral votes. (For example, in 1992, Bill Clinton won with 43% of the popular vote and 370 electoral votes, Bush Sr. got 37.5% of the popular vote and 168 electoral votes, while third-party candidate Ross Perot got 18.9% of the popular vote, but no electoral votes, as he did not win any states.)

In other countries, third parties are often seen as partners in coalition governments, and when one or more such partners leave the coalition, the government can collapse with a general election being called. There is no such thing as a coalition government, per se, in the US system; however, the President and the majorities of the Senate and House could come from different parties.

[I have never tried to understand fully the Electoral College system, and I think it's a mystery to a lot of people. And every time we get close to a Presidential election, the debate about whether that mechanism is still relevant raises its head.]

11.7 Conclusion

I've implied several times that the National Capital did not have full representation in Congress, so let me explain that here. **Prior to 1961, when the 23rd Amendment was ratified, citizens of voting age living in Washington, D.C. could not vote for President or Vice President, as DC is not a U.S. state.** Now while that amendment did not make DC a state, it treats it like one for Presidential election purposes by giving it three electoral college delegates, two for the Senators it would have, and one for the single Representative. That said, **DC still does not have any representation in the Senate at all, and its lone delegate in the House cannot vote except in subcommittees.** To that end, DC auto license plates contain the phrase, "[Taxation without representation](#)," which harks back to one of the main complaints colonists had against the British, and that led to the Revolutionary War. So why doesn't DC become a state. That has been tried and it will, no doubt, be tried again. But one main obstacle is that DC is solidly aligned with the Democratic Party. And having two new Democratic members in the Senate could very easily allow the Democrats to control that in a tight election, whereas the winning

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margin in the House is usually not just by one or two seats. So, from the Republican Party viewpoint, they don't want to admit three guaranteed new Democrats to Congress unless the party has a way of offsetting that. [In this regard, when Democratic Hawaii and Republican Alaska were admitted as new states in 1959, they countered each other.]

The number of terms a President may serve is limited as are those for Governors of many states, but that is not the case for Senators or Representatives. What do you think about term limits?

Among others, my birth country, Australia, makes voting compulsory, and fines citizens who do not vote. The claim there is that voting is one's civic duty. On most days, I'd just as soon ignore those who chose not to participate, but on others, well maybe I see the point.

For a humorous read about Microsoft's "reported" acquisition of the US Government as a wholly owned subsidiary, click [here](#).

Recently, I was reading a book called *Anguished English: An Anthology of Accidental Assaults upon our Language*, by Richard Lederer. One entry appropriate to this essay is, "Senators are chosen as committee chairmen on the basis of *senility*." Now while that might have been true in a few instances, the writer/speaker probably meant *seniority* instead.

12. November 2012, “English – Part 2: Pronunciation”

During the past 35 years, I've looked at a number of languages, with a variety of writing systems. [See my July 2010 essay, “[What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems](#)”.] In more recent years, I've helped to teach English to speakers of other languages. It seems to me that while the grammar for English is simpler than for some other languages, pronunciation can be *very* difficult, especially in the absence of the [diacritical marks](#) present in other European languages. Yes, there are some rules, but there are many exceptions, which you simply have to learn by [rote](#).

English is my native language, and I've been speaking it for some 57 years. Although I have known about pronunciation guides for some years, I'd never taken the time to understand them. Having now spent some time studying the topic, I have a good idea of their intent.

In this essay, I'll look at breaking words into syllables and the pronunciation of those syllables, adding some extra commentary as I go. However, I won't even try to provide complete coverage of the subject. Hopefully though, I'll give you enough information and links that you'll be able to find out more for yourself should you be so inclined. By the way, I'll be focusing on pronunciation of American English.

12.1 Breaking Words into Syllables

Each word consists of one or more [syllables](#), each of which is a basic unit of speech that consists of a single sound. A syllable might consist of one to six or, perhaps, even more letters. The process of breaking a word into its constituent syllables is known as *syllabication*. The typical way of indicating the syllables in a word is to separate them with a centered dot; for example:

- hat
- but·ton
- e·lec·tric
- in·ter·i·or
- en·thu·si·as·tic
- an·ti·dis·es·tab·lish·ment·ar·i·an·ism

[It is rumored that in parts of Texas, the word *shit* has at least four syllables, as in *shi-i-i-it!*]

[The Japanese writing systems [hiragana](#) and [katakana](#) do not use an alphabet, per se. Instead, they are [syllabaries](#). That is, each character has a sound; there are no such things as an alphabet or letters. Is that normal? Again, see my July 2010 essay.]

12.2 The Notation for Vowels

Unfortunately, there are a number of different notation systems for English pronunciation, and some of them appear to be quite complicated. I settled on what I see as the simpler [United States dictionary transcription](#) system, which Wikipedia says is, “similar to those used by *American Heritage*, *Merriam Webster*, and *Random House* dictionaries”.

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For my essays, for definitions I usually refer to [Wikipedia](#) and [Wiktionary](#), but for this series on English, I'm supplementing these with the [American Heritage Dictionary \(AHD\)](#).

For the most part, the sounds of consonants are straightforward; it's the vowel sounds—and combinations of vowels with consonants and other vowels—that cause confusion. As such, we'll start with those. (Each word is followed by its pronunciation in parentheses.)

Consider the AHD entry for *man*:

man (mǎn)

The pronunciation of the *m* and *n* are as expected, but what about the *a*? Specifically, how do we distinguish this *a* from other *a*-sounds, such as that in *mane*? AHD does this by putting a [breve](#) diacritical mark over the *a* to indicate the vowel has a short sound.

As you might expect, we distinguish different *a*-sounds by using different diacritical marks. For example:

mane, main, Maine (mān) — *these are [homophones](#)*

In this case, we use a [macron](#) to indicate a long sound.

Continuing on with the other vowels, we have the following examples:

met (mět)

meet, meat, mete (mēt) — *more homophones*

pin (pĭn)

pine (pīn)

not (nōt)

note (nōt)

cub (kŭb)

cut (kŭt)

There is no long-*u* sound. (See *cube* and *cute* below regarding a “long-oooh.”)

By the way, just how does one pronounce the word *macron*? AHD shows both mākřōn and mǎkrōn; it also shows that the 2nd syllable can be -krən (see discussion of the schwa below). And as for *breve*, AHD shows that brĕv or brēv are equally acceptable.

There are more than two different *a*-sounds, so it should come as no surprise that there are more than two diacritical marks used in this pronunciation guide. For example:

man (mǎn)

main (mān)

car (kār)

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care (kâr)
hair (hâr)

The two dots are called a diaeresis (or umlaut). The little up-arrow is called a circumflex. These marks can be used with other vowel sounds as well. For example:

pier, peer (pîr)
here, hear (hîr)
ear (îr)

for (fôr) — *interestingly, AHD shows fore, four (fôr, fôr)*
bought (bôt)
caught (kôt)
paw (pô)

herd, heard (hûrd)
bird (bûrd)
curd (kûrd)
word (wûrd)
firm (fûrm)
term (tûrm)
urn, earn (ûrn)

Consider the following heteronyms:

tear (târ) — *to pull apart*
tear (tîr) — *the thing produced when one cries*

There are a number of other *o*-sounds; for example:

boil (boil)
coin (koin)
moist (moist)
voice (vois)

our (our)
cloud (kloud)
snout (snout)

boot (bōōt) — *uses a double macron*
cube (kyōōb)
cute (kyōōt)
true (trōō)
soup (sōōp)

book (bōōk) — *uses a double breve*
tour (tōōr)

broom (brōom, brōom)

A difference between American-English and other English dialects is the pronunciation of certain *n*-sounds. For examples:

news (nōōz, nyōōz)

tune (tōōn, tyōōn)

However, AHD permits both for American speakers.

Unless we're reading a dictionary, we won't see pronunciation-guide diacritical marks (or syllable-separating centered dots for that matter). However, occasionally we might come across some of those marks used in ordinary English-language typesetting. The diaeresis is one example. Consider the following words:

naïve

Noël

Chloë

In these cases, the vowel with the diaeresis is pronounced separately from the preceding vowel; that is, the two vowels do not make a diphthong.

[Note carefully that some of these diacritical marks have entirely different meanings when used in writing other languages. For example, German allows an umlaut on its a, o, and u, while French allows a circumflex on its e.]

12.3 The Notation for Consonants

According to the literature, the following consonants each have only one pronunciation: b, d, f, j, k, l, m, p, r, t, v, w, y, and z. However, one exception I've noted is that the d in *schedule* is pronounced j.

For the most part, the letter c sounds like k, but sometimes s. The combination ch is treated separately. For example:

cat (kăt)

face (fās)

cent (sěnt)

catch (kăch)

check (chěk)

scheme (skēm) — *not the usual ch-sound*

In American English, *schedule* is pronounced without the h, while in British English, that word is pronounced without the c.

The letter g has its own sound, but sometimes is pronounced j. For example:

gag (gǎg)
gauge (gāj)
sponge (spǔnj)
gem (jěm)

high (hī) — *an exception*

The letter h has its own sound except in the combination wh (or th, ch, and sh). For example:

hat (hăt)
host (hōst)

where (hwâr, wâr)
when (hwěn, wěn)
which (hwích, wích)
while (hwīl, wīl)

The letter n has its own sound except in the combination ng. For example:

ran (rǎn)
rang (rǎng)

change (chānj) — *here the ng is treated as nj*

The letter q has no sound of its own; it uses that for k. For example:

quack (kwǎk)
quite (kwīt)
queue (kyōō)
plaque (plǎk)

The letter s has its own sound except in the combination sh. For example:

since (sĭns)
stone (stōn)
cash, cache (kǎsh)
shine (shĭn)

The letter t has its own sound except in the combination th. For example:

tent (těnt)
thin (thĭn)
three (thrē)

this (thĭs) — *a slightly different th-sound*

The letter x is usually pronounced ks, but sometimes z (as in words prefixed with *xeno* and *xylo*). For example:

box (böks)
mixed (mīkst)

12.4 Unpronounced Letters

English has many words with letters that are not voiced. Here are some examples:

halve (häv, häv)
scent (sënt)
knot (nöt)
whole (hōl)
hour (our)
ghost (gōst)

12.5 Multisyllabic Words

Thus far, we've looked only at words containing one syllable. When a word has multiple syllables, the possibility exists for stress (or emphasis) to be placed on one syllable over another. For example, in the word *con·tro·ver·sy*, people disagree as to whether the stress goes on the first or the second syllable. (AHD says, "the first".)

Consider the following examples:

go·ing (gō'ing)
pret·ty (prīt'ē)
em·brace (ēm-brās')bot·tle·brush (böt'l-brüş')

The end of a syllable is indicated by the presence of a stress (prime) character ('), a hyphen-minus (-), or the end of the word. The stress indicators apply to the syllable that immediately precedes them.

[Some treatments of pronunciation define both a primary and a secondary stress character. I have used only one.]

12.6 The Humble Schwa

A common symbol seen in pronunciation guides is the *schwa* (shwä), written as ə, an upside-down-and-reversed, lowercase e. According to Wikipedia, it's "an unstressed and toneless neutral vowel sound in some languages" and "is the most common vowel sound" in English. Here are some examples of its use:

doz·en (duz'ən)
cir·cus (sūr'kəs)
i·tem (ī'təm)

gal·lop (gǎl'əp)
po·ta·to (pə-tā'tō)

12.7 The “zh” Sound

The final sound is *zh*. Here are some examples:

tel·e·vi·sion (těl'ə-vīzh'ən)
pleas·ure (plězh'ər)
ga·rage (gə-rāzh')

12.8 The Many Faces of “ough”

This letter combination has one of the most diverse sets of different pronunciations. For example:

chough (chŭf)
plough (plou)
slough (slōō, slou)
though (thō)
bought (bôt)
cough (kôf, kôf)

12.9 Conclusion

After a year in the US (in Chicago), I moved to northern Virginia, some 22 miles (40 kms) west of the National capital, Washington DC. Back then, the main road to my city was Route 7. Using my Australian English knowledge, I dared to pronounce *route* as rōōt, for which I not only received grief, but there were people who claimed to have no idea what I was talking about. The locals pronounced it the same as the word *rout*. Since then, I've met many American speakers who use one or the other forms, and AHD blesses both. To those who insist its pronounced rout, I point them to the famous American highway Route 66, which I've only ever heard pronounced as rōōt.

This essay concentrates on American English, but not all Americans speak alike. And for some words it is quite acceptable to have more than one pronunciation. Rules are good, but if there is one thing we can say for sure about English is there are almost *always* exceptions to the rules. And since there are no pronunciation police (yet) here in the US, regardless of what the rules are, for those of us trying to understand Americans when they speak, we need to be ready for variations. (Now whether they have anything worth listening to is another matter altogether!)

Now and again, I'm exposed to news and business reports on a BBC TV channel. The pronunciation of the following words by its newsreaders and reporters compared with those from the US always jump out at me:

Iraq (is it ĭ·răk, ĭ·răk, or ĭ·răk?)
The Finnish technology company *Nokia*

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Oh, and by the way, when pronouncing things don't forget to use your dental fricatives! And never put the em-fä'sis on the wrong sīl-ä'bəl!

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