

The Case for Grammar
By Arthur Martello

I have recently immersed myself in reading a multitude of books on mentalism written by some of our top experts, and, while attempting to control my pedantic compulsion to correct, have at long last found myself dangling at the end of my proverbial “rope of patience.”

There is an insidious disease that has spread throughout much of the recent magical literature; although there may be incidence of it happening in writings of the past, a cursory review of a number of the classics that occupy my shelves fails to come up with as many occurrences of this problem. No one is immune from this disease; we all have some form of it. The disease that I speak of is the abuse of grammar. Yes, we all have it! Some of us are horrible spellers. Some of us have problems with punctuation or capitalization. Many of us have tendencies to confuse words. Fortunately, the technological advances of science have given us computers that can help correct these symptoms. Our spellcheckers will often catch not only typos, but downright incorrect spelling mistakes.

The specific malady that seems to be so pervasive in today’s writing is something known as subject/pronoun agreement. This means that when you use a pronoun in a sentence it must agree in number (singular or plural) with the thing to which it refers. Simply put, if you are talking about one person you must use a pronoun that agrees with one person. In this particular case, that pronoun would be “he or she.” If you are talking about a group of people, the pronoun would be “they or them.”

According to the *Guide to Indefinite Pronouns* (www.lsu.edu/faculty/jpullia/indefinite.htm), “Approximately 95% of student errors with pronouns are due to a lack of knowledge about indefinite pronouns – are they singular or plural. Students, often not knowing that indefinite pronouns like “anyone” and “anybody” are singular will use plural definite pronouns with them in sentences.” The result is an ungrammatical sentence such as the following:

Anyone who hates card tricks should have their head examined.

Here, the pronoun “anyone” is singular and should be referring to a singular person (his or her). Some ways to make this sentence grammatically correct are:

People who hate card tricks should have their heads examined.

Anyone who hates card tricks should have his/her head examined.

Card-trick haters are not sane people.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that the indefinite pronouns anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one, and nobody are always singular. This is sometimes perplexing to writers who feel that everyone and everybody (especially) are referring to more than one person.

So what does this have to do with magic?

When this error occurs, it is often overlooked by the casual reader. But when the mistake occurs during the explanation of a magic routine, it can cause one to wonder just whom the writer is talking about. Let me cite an example of my frustration with this type of situation.

I have taken the following from an actual text. I certainly do not mean to insult the author; I have privately informed him of this grammatical faux pas and was graciously acknowledged. In the following scenario the performer is on stage with three spectators and has taken back three index cards from each spectator. The written text explains:

Ask spectator number one their first name. Holding the cards in a stack, write it openly on the top card. Ask this person to think of a number of their friends. As they do this, stare at them and think.

Although the reader can correctly interpret the initial part of this grammatically incorrect sentence and understand just whom the writer is referring to, the final sentence is confusing. Is the performer staring at the spectator or the group? When the author instructs the reader to “stare at them,” does he mean the group or spectator number one?

“Spectator number one” refers to one person. Let’s give him a name. We will call him Jack. If we substitute this name instead of calling him “spectator number one,” the grammatical inconsistency becomes more obvious:

Ask Jack their first name. Holding the cards in a stack, write it openly on the top card. Ask Jack to think of a number of their friends. As they do this, stare at them and think.”

Do you see how confusing this can become?

I am certain that this error comes out of an attempt by authors to avoid sexist language. Rather than say, “Ask spectator number one his first name,” the author chose to not identify gender. Unfortunately, the replacement of a plural pronoun for the correct singular pronoun is a grammatical error. A writer may also make this substitution to avoid the overuse of his/her, he/she, him/her, etc., which is understandable, but nonetheless incorrect.

The problem can simply be fixed by being more consistent; use the singular pronoun throughout, use the plural pronoun throughout, or restructure the sentence so that no pronouns are needed. Let’s re-write this sentence.

Ask spectator number one his first name. Holding the cards in a stack, write it openly on the top card. Ask this person to think of a number of his friends. As he does this, stare at him and think.

Good writers generally avoid gendered pronouns by making them plural. This is fine as long as the subject is also plural. To avoid writing, “A magician needs to communicate with *his* audience,” a writer may write, “Magicians need to communicate with their audience.” To write, “A magician needs to communicate with *their* audience,” is incorrect. This has become a common practice in magic literature, though not as blatantly as in the previous sentence. Another way of avoiding the intentional use of the wrong pronoun is to simply state that you will be using the pronoun *him* or

her to refer to the singular person with no sexist intent. Authors have done this quite successfully in the past.

I should mention that there is a Web site at the University of Texas dedicated to the use of the word “their” as the gender-non-specific, singular pronoun. With the 14th edition (1993), the *Chicago Manual of Style* briefly revised their neutral stance to actually recommend “singular use of *they* and *their*,” noting a “revival” of this usage and citing “its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare.” However, regret regarding that printing is expressed at their Web site; with the current 15th edition (2003), they have returned to their original neutral position (www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/Pronouns/Pronouns12.html).

This essay was written not with the intention of ripping apart the authors who have shared their valuable information, techniques, methods, and creativity with us. Nor would I be so bold to assume that I could do a better job. I merely ask that they take note of this issue when they are writing, or invest in an editor who can recognize such obvious inconsistencies in the use of grammar.

Without mentioning names, I picked up some books from my library and opened each to a random page looking for evidence of this type of error. Here are some examples:

Book 1: “Keeping the cards face down at all times, the spectator uses the pen to place an ‘X’ on the face of the unknown bottom card. They do this without looking at the card. They then mix the cards again.”

Book 2: “At some point during your performance you point to a spectator and ask them to stand.”

Book 3: “You will place the three objects spread across your upwardly facing hands, palms up, and behind your back. You face away from the spectator, and ask them to pick up one object in each of their hands, straight up, only high enough to get the objects off of your hands, leaving you only with one object. No matter which objects they pick up, you will leave the remaining object behind your back in one hand, and turn around to face the spectator immediately, before he gets a chance to try to hide them from you.”

Book 4: “In short, the participant draws anything on the back of your business card. They keep this drawing safe by sandwiching it between their hand and the table (or between their palms).”

I think you get the picture.

Am I being too picky? I think not. If we are bold enough to deem our thoughts important enough to be committed to print, then we must be certain that they are worthy of proper grammatical content. We set examples in our writing. The use of improper grammar imparts the feeling that the writer does not really care about what he is saying enough to proofread his work or have someone else proofread it for him. At the very least, a professional work merits professional resources. I would

not want the essay you are reading published without the benefit of an editor to correct the typos I might have overlooked or the dangling participle I may have missed in my own proofreading.

While grammatical errors will continue to exist in professional publications as surely as baseball players will continue to make errors on the baseball field, we need to work at keeping them to a minimum. If we choose to write, we need to work as diligently at perfecting our skills at this craft as we do in perfecting our performance.

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