

Translate Questions into English

"Wheel of Fortune" was an important test prep for me.
—Mo Rocca, "The Daily Show"

In 1996, after thirteen successful years on "Wheel of Fortune," letter-turner Vanna White set a world record for the greatest quantity of apparel ever on television—5,500 outfits. A proud day for the entire White family. And what did she do on the show? Vanna White turned enough small boxes to reveal hidden letters that a discerning viewer would want to be disemvoweled.

But there is a lesson here. The hidden phrases that contestants must guess to win are quickly obvious to everyone in the audience and at home. Quick and obvious are good things, especially when you're under the pressure of a timed exam. Therefore, you should immediately translate all questions into words and phrases you recognize and understand. This translation is not always as easy as it sounds.

As a high school student, University of Chicago professor Austan Goolsbee discussed the potential for absurdity:

How do standardized tests judge your academic promise? Well, if you can define words like desuetude and lascivious, then you have average potential. To rank at the top, you need to know words like ouabain, which is an African poison, or schistosomiasis, an endemic disease mentioned in the novel Lord Jim. I'll admit, such words may come in handy on a

really boring date when you have nothing else to talk about, but do they accurately reflect learning potential?

The truth is that the folks at ACT sometimes choose passages that are unfamiliar. That makes sense. No student can possibly have studied all known reading material before the exam. Unfortunately, some obscure passages are steeped in language just as obscure.

Your task becomes, then, to translate that language into understandable ideas. In other words, *paraphrase*.

With a doff of the thinking cap to Edwin Newman's *On Language*, let's practice on three statements that lack clarity.

1. *In order to improve security, we request that, effective immediately, no employees use the above subject doors for ingress and egress to the building.*

In other words, don't open these doors.

2. *The older man became an experiencing person in my life, lending an aura to my developing personality of absolute rapport and communicatory relevance.*

The older man was sympathetic and understanding.

3. *The definition of net wage rate in equation (2) suggests that wage-rate changes are best parameterized by changes in u.*

Well . . . u are in big trouble . . . plus we all know how painful parameterizing can be.

There are, of course, other ways to get lost in the language "bewilderment." A critical reader should be aware of euphemisms. Writers sometimes substitute euphemisms for words that are harsh or distasteful. Euphemisms often avoid the truth, lack clarity, and are more evasive than helpful.

Pentagon officials are frequent winners of the "Doublespeak Award," which is given yearly to the individuals or groups that have done the most outstanding job of using language meant to "bam-boozle and befuddle." Once, in the 1990s, the National Council of Teachers of English presented the award to the Defense Department for giving us an "armed situation"—not a war—in the Persian Gulf.

War is tough on words, according to the English teachers. The first Gulf War was rich in euphemisms, says William Lutz, a Rutgers University professor and chairman of the organization's Committee on Public Doublespeak.

For instance, bombing attacks against Iraq in 1991 were "efforts," and warplanes were "weapon systems." When pilots were on missions, they were "visiting a site." Buildings were "hard targets" and people were "soft" ones. Bombs didn't kill. They "degraded," "neutralized," "cleansed," or "sanitized." Killing the enemy was termed "servicing the target."

The allies were also guilty as charged by the teachers. The government of Saudi Arabia, unable to accept U.S. female soldiers, called them "males with female features."