

Punctuation Can Turn Into A Series Of Mad Dashes

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Dear Mr. Lederer: I've been noticing a disturbing trend in the Union-Tribune, namely, incorrect hyphenation between print lines. For example, front page today's (5/5) newspaper – da-redevils;. Do you think the reason is poor editing or faulty software? – Gil Ramirez

Coincidentally, Readers' Representative Adrian Vore addressed complaints like this 10 days later in this past Sunday's edition. He explained that the cause of the "odd hyphenation of words at the end of lines" showing up in the paper has been "a new story and page production software system ... Tribune Publishing Co. technicians are aware of the problem and are trying to correct it."

The Union-Tribune is far from alone in being plagued by gremlins creating mad dashes. I once did a double take when I read the following sentence in another paper's sports section:

Parker, a New York Giants defensive end, was rear-rested this week in connection with the death of his girlfriend's 4-year-old son.

Rear-rested for re-arrested? Clearly the product of a typesetting program run amok. Until these devices become more sophisticated, we readers will continue to chuckle at or sigh about unintentionally loopy hyphenation. Have a look at some more genuine, authentic, certified hyphos (a word I've made up on the model of typos):

sung-lasses, barf-lies, serv-icemen, wee-knights, warp-lanes, doork-nobs, brooms-ticks, pre-gnant, airstrips, boots-traps, stars-truck, sli-pup, ong-oing and (gasp!) the-rapist!

Dear Mr. Lederer: Have you noticed the increasing misuse of the perfect verb tense, e.g., 'I have ran that course twice'? I've even heard newscasters misuse perfect tenses of verbs. I'm thinking this might be due to the fact that formal grammar usage is not taught in most K-12 schools now. Also, are shown and drunk still verbs in standard usage? I've heard "He has showed" and "She had drank" so many times that I'm wondering if my own usage is out of date. – Cindy Hartley

Stick to your verbal guns, Cindy. Shown and drunk are still standard verbs, as is gone, despite the proliferation of (chalk scraping on blackboard) "I should have went to the concert."

English verbs fall into two broad classes: regular and irregular. Most verbs are regular, forming their past and present perfect tenses by adding -d, -ed, or -t, as in I walk. I walked. I have walked. I bend. I bent. I have bent. Irregular verbs, in contrast, go back in time through internal vowel changes, as in begin (present tense) began (past tense) begun (present perfect tense), sing sang sung, see saw seen and write wrote written. Note that, in strong, irregular verbs like ring rang rung, the vowels move from the front of your mouth to the back of your throat as the verbs retreat in time. These verbs are labeled irregular because they exhibit 17 different patterns, from the unchanging I set, I set, I set to the kaleidoscopic I am, I was, I have been.

Here are a dozen verbs that become nettlesome as they go back in time. Identify the past-tense form(s) of each verb:

1. dive
2. fly
3. hang
4. kneel
5. light
6. plead
7. shine
8. sneak
9. swim
10. tread
11. wake
12. weave

1. Dived. Dove is acceptable but less common.
2. Flew, unless you're describing what a player did when he hit a ball high in the air and flied out.
3. Pictures, coats and holiday ornaments are hung, but criminals found guilty of capital offenses are hanged, or at least they used to be.
4. Kneeled or knelt, but knelt is way more common, as are the similarly sounded dream-dreamt and leap-leapt.
5. Lighted and lit are equally acceptable.
6. Pleaded, rather than pled, is the strongly preferred past and present-perfect tense form, including "pleaded guilty."
7. Shone, if the verb means "to radiate," shine, if the verb means "to polish," "While the sun shone, he shined his best pair of shoes."
8. Sneaked is the more prevalent and acceptable form. 9. As in shrink-shrank-shrunk, swam is the preferable past-tense form of swim.
10. Trod is preferable to treaded as a past-tense form of tread, except when one is swimming, as in "She treaded water." 11. Wake and its close kin awake are two verbs still in ferment with several possible past-tense forms. Woke and awoke are preferred.
12. Wove for making cloth, weaved for moving in a zigzag pattern, although wove is also acceptable in that im-material context.

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