Eight Things to Toss

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Suggested Student Activities to Accompany Each Essay

Illustrations by Party Of One for The Washington Post
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The news media stokes stock-watching mania as if we were a nation of day traders. The phenomenon appears in its most extreme forms on the financial TV channels, but it’s everywhere: Ticktock changes in market indexes are plastered into a corner of cable news screens or scroll by in nonstop chyrons. Even nonfinancial outlets — broadcast, cable, radio and digital — diligently include a stock-market roundup in their reports.

But barely half of Americans own stock, and those who do are typically investing for retirement, in which case it makes no sense to follow the daily gyrations of the market. The herd mentality tugs at us to buy when we hear stocks are rising and to sell when stocks are falling. Yet studies show that when amateurs — and most pros, too — try to “time” the market, they do worse than if they’d simply added to an index fund at regular intervals. (The lack of context makes the updates even worse.

“Dow down 150 points” splashed in large type on a TV screen certainly sets off our fear receptors, but many news outlets omit, or play down, the percentage drop — which is often far less alarming.)

And if you’re going to insist on reporting what “the market” is doing this very minute, at least pick an index that actually represents the market as a whole. The Dow Jones industrial average comprises just 30 stocks — which, by the way, are added and deleted at the whims of the Dow gods, who don’t follow transparent rules for inclusion and exclusion.

TV producers aren’t going to dispense with this style of financial “coverage” entirely, although they should. You want the best shot at reaching your retirement goals? Stick to your long-term strategy, and don’t give those daily market updates a moment’s thought.

Suze Orman is a two-time Emmy Award–winning television host, the author of nine New York Times bestsellers, and the host of the Women & Money podcast.

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1. Why do people buy stocks?
2. What is the stock market? What are the basics of how it works?
3. What is Orman’s main reason for eliminating “daily stock-market updates”?
4. Locate the day’s stock market report. What information is provided?
5. Locate three online sites to find information about a company that interests you. What information do you find about the value of its stocks? Which website might have a bias for the company? To which age group(s) do its products or services appeal?
In 1981, having scarcely begun his presidency, my father was shot in the street by a young man trying to impress a famous actress. My mother, inside out with worry and feeling helpless to prevent such a thing from happening again, fell prey to an astrologer, who promised to warn of any particularly inauspicious days for my father to leave the house. This arrangement had little influence on the presidential schedule but produced considerable embarrassment when it was revealed some time later.

My mother was foolish, of course, but given the stressful circumstances, I’m inclined to forgive. I’m less charitably inclined toward the charlatan who took advantage of her. Anxious or not, it’s past time we abandoned astrology. Such pseudoscientific piffle is at best harmless folly. At worst, it belongs to a family of more pernicious intellectual lapses with serious consequences: climate change denial; creationism; the notion that we can install a reckless incompetent in the Oval Office without inviting disaster. Let’s consider astrology, innocuous as it may seem, a kind of gateway drug: It softens the mental ground for equally unsound but far more harmful ideas. If you believe in the stars, you can believe anything.

Astrology, which seems to be enjoying a renaissance among millennials and Gen Xers, is only one sad example from our flabby-minded post-truth era. A disturbing number of people are forgoing vaccinations for their kids or getting their “news” from assorted crackpots and hustlers on social media.

Reasoning is a hallmark of our species, but we’re forgetting how to do it. Magical thinking is a bad habit we need to break. We are not owed our own reality. Nature doesn’t care about politics. Jupiter doesn’t determine your character; you do. If you want to be influenced by the stars, buy a telescope.

Ron Reagan is a writer and political commentator living in Seattle and Tuscany.
‘Double Down’

BY DON SCHLESINGER

President Trump “doubled down on his intention to invalidate the Affordable Care Act in the courts,” a Washington Post columnist noted in April. He “doubled down” on threats to close the U.S.-Mexico border to asylum seekers (Newsweek) around the same time, and White House aides “doubled down” on denying disaster funding to Puerto Rico (NBC News). Democrats do it, too: Beto O’Rourke “doubled down” (The Post) on comparing Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric to Nazi discourse.

Clearly, this phrase, from blackjack, is applied to someone compounding an already dubious remark, suggestion or activity — miring himself even more deeply in controversy. Caught in a dangerous situation, this person opts for risky aggression.

But the term is not just overused, it’s wildly misused. In fact, these scenarios convey almost the opposite of its original meaning.

In blackjack, the maneuver consists of doubling the amount of one’s wager in exchange for accepting the limitation that only one more card may be drawn to the hand in question. It means a favorable situation for winning money has presented itself. While the strategy imparts greater risk, the implication is that the greater reward — a doubled payout — more than justifies the gamble. (You make the decision by comparing your hand with the face-up card that the dealer shows.)

Dictionaries now cite the new meaning alongside the old one. But if you are looking for a gambling cliche, why not consider “going all in” — the poker term for committing all of one’s chips to the pot. That tactic is used not only when one has an extremely strong hand (analogous to “doubling down” in blackjack) but also when one is in a vulnerable position (an aggressive bluff). That seems closer to what pundits mean by “doubling down.”

Don Schlesinger, a member of the Blackjack Hall of Fame, is the author of Blackjack Attack: Playing the Pros’ Way.

What words and phrases are commonly used in student vernacular? What do they mean?
Are any words from earlier generations being used again but with a different meaning?
Which word would you banish from use?
Authors have created words for the worlds they create. Find the origin of these words: “witticism,” “robot,” “cyberspace,” “serendipity,” “droog” “eucatastrophe,” and “horcrux.”
Create a word that communicates an aspect of a class, event or sport at your school or in your community.
Responding to Email

BY TAYLOR LORENZ

According to a study by the Radicati Group, a market research firm, people across the globe sent and received 269 billion emails a day in 2017. By 2022, that number is projected to reach more than 333 billion. Plenty of it is junk, but a lot of it seems to demand a response, if only because the person who wrote you is an old friend — or because they keep writing to “check back in.” As the message count rises, it’s hard to escape the feeling that you’re being pulled under.

People have adopted various coping mechanisms to deal with the deluge: Some strictly schedule themselves, emailing only in the morning or between certain hours. Others valiantly struggle to maintain inbox zero, consistently deleting every item in their inbox. And a few just snooze everything non-urgent until the weekend.

Here’s my strategy: I stopped responding to email.

Responding to email simply begets more email. Most endless email threads can be resolved in a three-minute phone conversation or Slack exchange instead of stretching out like a slow-motion ping-pong rally. And plenty of other messages just don’t warrant a response, or even consideration, in the first place. (Sorry, PR folks: I’m still not interested in your client’s blockchain-powered smoothie maker.)

As I’ve shifted more of my personal communication to chat apps like Facebook Messenger and iMessage, and more of my work communication to Slack, I find email less and less necessary. If we really have something to chat about, let’s actually chat, unburdened by all the time-wasting “Dears” and “All bests.” This year we should toss the expectation that everyone should respond to every email message and embrace the concept of inbox infinity.

Taylor Lorenz is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

What Do People You Know Do?

➊ Write a poll of no more than ten questions to learn about email sending, receiving and responding among people in your school and community. You may include two open-ended questions.

➋ Form groups. Each group is to give the poll to 25 people who are 13- to 17-year-olds; 25 people who are 18- to 21-year-olds; 25 people who are 22- to 32-year-olds; and to 25 people who are 33- to 50-year-olds.

➌ Tabulate responses in each age group and create an informational graphic.

➍ What do the open-ended questions tell you?

➎ Share your results with other groups and discuss your conclusions.
I love a few strips of crispy, fatty, delicious bacon. The flavor is delicious. And it adds a wonderful smokiness to some dishes — like in collard greens, or on pasta, in some salads, or maybe on top of broccoli-cheddar soup.

But there’s not much that’s worse than bacon where there shouldn’t be any.

And these days, there is a lot of bacon in a lot of places where there shouldn’t be any. It’s now common to see bacon soda, bacon chips, bacon hot sauce, bacon mints, bacon mayo, bacon vodka and bacon cotton candy. It’s time to get rid of all of that.

This type of gluttony is purely an American phenomenon. The savory, sweet smokiness of bacon does not go with everything! It often imparts a gag-inducing richness that leaves you unable to take more than a few bites or sips of a bacon-infused dish or drink. The first one is always: oh wow! That does taste just like bacon! And the next: okay, that’s all I can take of that. You end up wasting a whole lot of otherwise good food or drink because someone thought it would be cool to put bacon in it.

Attempting to replicate these recipes at home is especially revolting; the liquid smoke flavor that leaches out of a lot of store-bought bacon is unappetizing in the extreme. It overpowers my palate. It covers up the flavor of whatever you’re putting bacon in — and the porkiness of the bacon itself.

Consider me a bacon purist, I guess.

Anh Luu is the owner and executive chef at Tapalaya in Portland, Ore.

What is your favorite food? Can you imagine eating it as a beverage, a sauce, mint or dessert? You are a columnist. Write a column about this food — either with a humorous or serious tone. You may include recent research about the food and its ingredients. Society’s attitudes about it. Its history. Your earliest experience with it.
Exclamation Points

BY BENJAMIN DREYER

How well I recall, from the distant days of my relative youth, that the singing Pointer Sisters were, and I paraphrase, so excited and just couldn’t hide it. Well, it was the ’80s, and we were, some of us, rather hopped up.

Decades later, I find myself inclined to contain my enthusiasm.

As a longtime copy editor, I’d no more ask you to rid your writing of exclamation points than I’d ask you to shun adverbs (which I love), semicolons (which I worship) or the word “the.” But the overuse of exclamation points — they’re just so tempting when you feel the need to turn up the volume on a workaday thought — has lately mushroomed into the standing ovation of punctuation: an obligatory, performative demonstration of enthusiasm meant to reassure their users that they’ve had a good time or can provide one. That salad? Delicious! That meeting? Productive! In texts and on social media, lest one be read as frostily sarcastic, every greeting must be a “Hi!” and every expression of gratitude a “Thanks!” And the result of all that thrilled intensity? If everything’s exciting, ultimately nothing is.

Most thoughts, at least as expressed in writing, would better conclude with the self-effacing chill of the simple period, so that when we do pull up a bang — as the ! is sometimes called — it might make an impression.

I once suggested that writers confine themselves, over the course of a full-length book, to, at most, a dozen exclamation points, to which one writer immediately rejoined, “Over the course of an entire career, you mean.”

I can’t aspire to such writerly stoicism, but: (Exclamation) point taken.

Benjamin Dreyer is the managing editor and copy chief of Random House and the author of the New York Times bestseller Dreyer’s English.
School Portraits

BY MARISA BELLACK

The appeal of school portraits was understandable in the late 1850s, when photographer George K. Warren was coaxing Ivy League seniors into his makeshift studio. The technology was new and thrilling: Glass-plate negatives allowed photographers, for the first time, to make multiple copies of a single image. And yet the process was complicated enough that there weren’t many cameras out there. Senior portraits, bound into elegant albums, would have been treasured as possibly the only photographs a young man might have of himself and his friends, says Shannon Thomas Perich, curator of the National Museum of American History’s photography collection.

But now? I have more than 10,000 photos of my kids. At every school event, there’s a designated volunteer photographer, and parents are encouraged afterward to submit photos for the yearbook. That’s for elementary school. Teens and college kids don’t seem to have any problems taking photos of themselves and their friends. It’s hard to see the value in posed school portraits on top of all that.

Okay, so there’s something democratic in situating every student similarly, regardless of circumstance. But these photos aren’t cheap. Prints of one pose and a set of digitals go for $145 at our school. Retouching is an additional $15 to $35 to remove “minor facial blemishes,” whiten teeth and even skin tone. The emphasis seems more on capitalism than on democracy.

And photographing everyone the same way drains personality. Many school portraits still look like the ones Warren took back in 1858: students posed stiffly in front of a blotchy backdrop. Perich appreciates that “there’s something very joyful in the optimism of the school portraits, the pride of being in school.” But she adds: “I would rather have a snapshot than a portrait of someone.”

Marisa Bellack is The Washington Post’s Europe editor.

Present an argument for or against school portraits. Include in your argumentation examples from Marisa Bellack’s essay or your life experience.
On a Saturday “date night.” Our mom would kiss my sister and me good night as we choked on her cloying cloud of Chanel No. 5, the aroma Velcroing itself to my nose for hours afterward. “Why would you want to smell like that?” we’d whine. Big state, big scent, I suppose.

My mom wasn’t alone. The fragrance industry (including perfume, deodorant and other products) is worth roughly $75 billion globally; it introduces about 100 scents annually. This year’s newest nose-turners include additions by Tom Ford, Dior, Gucci and, from Carolina Hererra, “Good Girl,” in a stiletto-shaped bottle. Macy’s alone carries more than 1,000 perfumes. I smell this stuff on the commuter across the aisle, the woman next to me in spin class and even my friend who seems to reek of SweeTarts.

Much like cigarette smoke, this is an assault on everyone. You wouldn’t shove your blasting headphones in every passerby’s ears or force your co-workers to eat your salmon surprise for lunch, so why should nonconsensual olfactory overload be any different?

What’s more, perfume is full of chemicals called phthalates, which one study linked to developmental disorders in children whose mothers were exposed during pregnancy. Fragrances can also be toxic, preying upon allergies, which means your smellacious colleague could be the cause of your sneezing, headaches or nausea. I’d advise you to look at the ingredients on your bottle’s label, but thanks to trade-secret laws, perfume-makers are protected from disclosing their formulas.

You don’t need to pour all your eau de toilettes down the toilet. But using just a dab vs. a half-bottle’s worth could be a start. Opting for natural-based oils, lotions or fragrances (except patchouli — never patchouli) would be better. The rest of us would breathe a little easier.

Lindsey Kaufman Palan is a freelance creative director in advertising and Brooklyn-based writer.

Write an anecdote about an experience you had with perfume you wore or was worn by someone else.