

Adventures in the Written Word, May, 2025

For the last few months, some invisible creature named Copilot has been offering to help me write better emails, doing things like clarifying, summarizing, shortening, or lengthening my missives. I'm pretty confident in my ability to compose sentences—I wouldn't be here if I weren't—so I've scoffed at the notion of some machine teaching me anything. But that's not fair, dismissing an idea without testing it, so I decided to give the whatever-it-is a chance.

* * *

First I entered a typical email.

Hey, John. Sorry I missed you Sunday at the festival. The last day is always so hectic. But I do still want to buy that bow off you. I figure paying that much for a bow will instantly make me a great fiddler. I can offer a cheap-ass cello badly in need of a fingerboard wedge as a trade-in. When's a good time to mosey down to your shop. Any day is good, I don't really do anything. Tell Patty I'm still here if she ever gives up on you. Danny.

Here's longer, and more formal. I like "amidst." And I did not say "this week." The Thing came up with that on its own.

Dear John,
I hope this message finds you well. I apologize for missing you on Sunday at the festival; the last day is always quite hectic, and I couldn't find you amidst the crowd. I am still very much interested in purchasing the bow from you, as I believe it will greatly enhance my skills as a fiddler. In addition to purchasing the bow, I am also willing to offer a cello in need of a fingerboard wedge as a trade-in. Please let me know when would be a convenient time to visit your shop, as I am available any day this week. Additionally, I would appreciate it if you could convey to Patty that I am still around if she ever considers giving up on you. I look forward to hearing from you soon.
Best regards,
Danny

* * *

Here's a snippet from a political speech (sort of), badly in need of something or other.

Reminded me of the Biden circles that he used to have, right? He'd have eight circles and he couldn't fill 'em up. But then I heard he beat us with the popular vote. I don't know, I don't know—couldn't fill up the eight circles. I always loved those circles, they were so beautiful. They were so beautiful to look at. In fact the person that did them—that was the best thing about his—the level of that circle was great. But they couldn't get people, so they used to have the press stand in those circles, because they couldn't get the people.

Predictably, “Copilot can’t generate high-quality content for this” when asked to clarify it. Copilot also declined to rewrite it “like a poem.” Also, “Copilot can’t coach you on this email.” Finally, I asked Copilot to make this sound more “creative and inspired,” and got this.

Where creativity flourishes and inspiration strikes! This is the perfect environment for innovative ideas and artistic expression. It's where people come together to collaborate, share their visions, and bring their projects to life. Whether it's brainstorming new concepts, developing unique solutions, or simply finding the motivation to pursue your passions, this space is designed to nurture and support your creative journey.

So that’s a clear WIN for Copilot, recognizing that the speaker’s thought process is hopelessly wacko.

* * *

Next, I tried a sentence from “The Try-Works,” one of my two favorite chapters from *Moby-Dick*. (“The Whiteness of the Whale” is the other.)

As the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul.

Copilot’s declined to make this more “creative and artistic,” more “casual,” or “like a poem.” It did respond to an order to “rewrite.” This is probably about like the Reader’s Digest Condensed version. (Get that reference? You’re old.)

As the wind howled and the sea surged, the ship groaned and dived deeper into the night. The Pequod, filled with savages and fire, seemed to mirror the intense obsession of her commander’s soul.

* * *

By this time I was feeling a little discouraged. I had anticipated Copilot providing some amusement. Then I hit paydirt with this passage:

Under no circumstances shall the Company or its affiliates, partners, suppliers, or licensors be liable for any direct, indirect, consequential, special or exemplary damages arising out of or in connection with your access or use of or inability to access or use the application and any third party content or services, whether or not the damages were foreseeable and whether or not Company was advised of the possibility of such damages.

Here it is “like a poem.”

Under no circumstances, you see,
Shall the Company be held liable, free,
For any damages, indirect or rare,
Arising from the application, so beware.

Whether access is granted, or denied,
Consequential, special, or exemplified,
No partner, supplier, affiliate, nor friend,
Shall be liable, this rule won't bend.

Be it third-party content or service,
Foreseeable or not, don't be nervous,
Though warned of damages, you can't claim,
The Company, in this, has no blame.

“Content or service, don't be nervous.” Brilliant! Then asked to make this “casual,” Copilot blatantly cheated.

Under no circumstances, you see, Shall the Company be held liable, free, For any damages, indirect or rare, Arising from the application, so beware. Whether access is granted or denied, Consequential, special, or exemplified, No partner, supplier, affiliate, nor friend, Shall be liable, this rule won't bend. Be it third-party content or service, Foreseeable or not, don't be nervous, Though warned of damages, you can't claim, The Company, in this, has no blame.

Mozart did this, too. Commissioned once to write a viola sonata, he transcribed one of his clarinet sonatas from the treble to the alto clef. (Not implying that Copilot is a towering genius like Mozart. Yet.)

* * *

Encouraged by this silliness, I tried one more passage.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out that green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

“More creative and artistic.”

After an arduous journey, he reached the azure expanse of the lawn, where his dream shimmered tantalizingly close, almost within his grasp. Little did he know, it had already slipped away, lost in the murky depths of the city's shadows, where the somber fields of the republic stretched endlessly under the cloak of night.

“Like a poem.” Aside from the insistence on doggerel meter and rhyme, there’s actually some good stuff here. Either that, or my allergy medicine has hijacked my reasoning.

In the old, unknown world I brood,
Gatsby's wonder I include.
Green light at Daisy's dock,
Dream close, yet time's cruel mock.

Blue lawn, long journey's end,
Dreams so near, yet can't extend.
Unseen, behind him it lay,
In vast obscurity's sway.

Beyond the city, night's embrace,
Dark fields of republic's trace.
Dream once bright, now shadowed hue,
Under night, it slipped from view.

* * *

Bonus: At some point, my simple name auto-fill signature at the bottom of the email was transformed. Probably I accidentally highlighted it along with a passage I was asking Copilot to enhance. I’m going to leave it this way.

Danny Williams, the spirited soul from Morgantown, West Virginia.

Watch your language.

Headline in *The Herald-Dispatch*: Huntington man woken up by beating.

Writing an email, grammar check flagged my uses of "my capabilities" and "my brain," recommending I change them to "me capabilities" and "me brain." Then when I remarked that apparently Popeye wrote their style book, I got another flag, and a suggestion to use "Popeye wrote them style book."

“We will notify you of acceptance or declination within four weeks.”

From a magazine to which I submitted a short story. “Declination” is not exactly wrong here. Merriam-Webster online—not the best dictionary, but somehow the default—does list “a formal refusal” under definition 5. Most people who know this word use it in conjunction with “right

ascension.” Together, these two terms describe any position of an object in the sky, the way longitude and latitude do for positions down here. (BTW: Four weeks are passed, and no acceptance or declination—or right ascension—yet.)

Looking for 2 night stands if anyone has some/knows someone pm me!
[Online Facebook yard sale post.]

On her first visit to Morocco’s largest city, a visitor swears off her phone, the internet and even printed guides. Her aim? To get lost, learn as she goes, and reclaim the serendipity of travel.
[NYT travel story]

“Serendipity” was an inescapable fad word about 1968 or so, pounded repeatedly into our brains. It’s a meaningful word—“happy discovery” or such—not a fad filler word like “basically” or “know what I’m saying.” Search “Weird Al know what I’m saying” on YouTube.

Washington police chase man who stole ex-girlfriend’s chicken: ‘I’ve got Polly’

A 50-year-old man has appeared in court after being charged as a “chicken thief.”

A Port Orchard, Washington man allegedly violated an order of protection by breaking into his ex-girlfriend’s house and then stealing her chicken, according to authorities in Washington’s Kitsap County.

The call for help came in the early morning of March 29 from a woman who said her former boyfriend invaded her home and snatched her pet chicken, named Polly.

He allegedly screamed, “I’ve got Polly” several times before running away – chicken in hand.

[NY Post]

“The legislative and executive appetite to get water to the lake has absolutely evaporated,” said Ben Abbott, an ecology professor at Brigham Young University.

Water. Evaporated. I hope this was intentional.

Helpful advice from the people at Nikon, about using a control which is positioned next to the eyepiece on my camera:

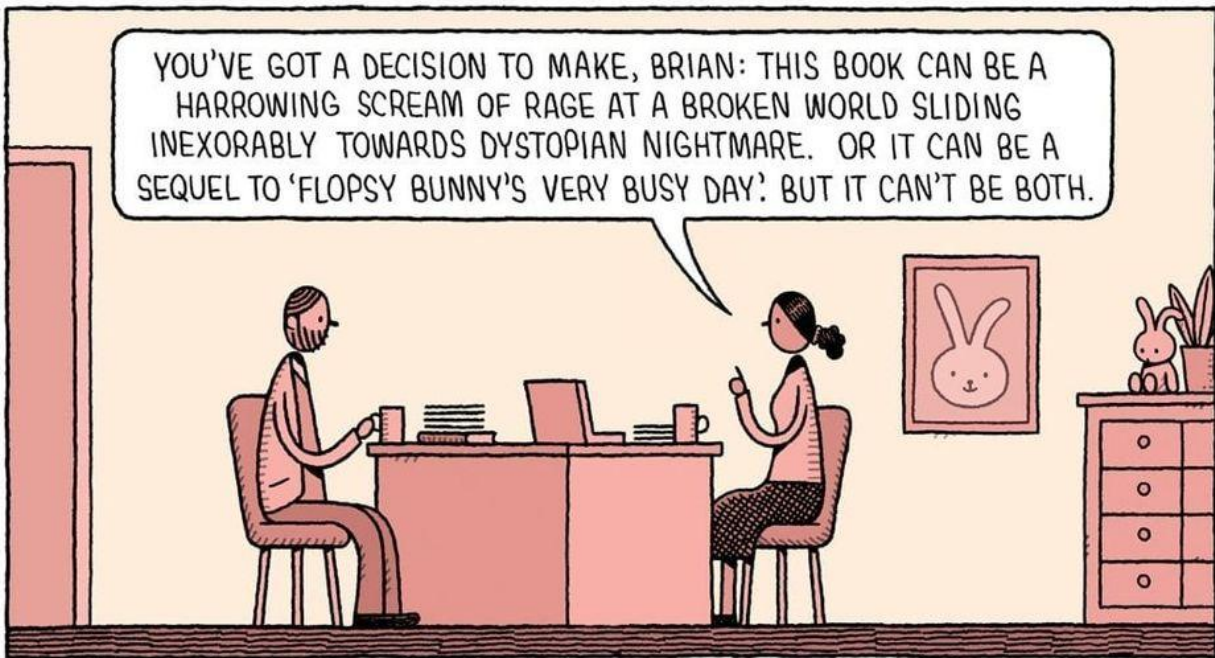
"Be careful not to put your fingers or fingernail in your eye."

Man Arrested After Robbing Morgantown Hot Spot While Barefoot
[WDTV News headline]

Oh yeah, I almost forgot:

One ostensible reason I’m writing these things is to get my name out there to writers, who have been know to lurk here at Ms. Willis’s site. I’m an editor, and I’d really like to hear about your work, whether it’s a vague idea, a completed manuscript, or something in between. I’ll give you two free hours of my time, and send you some encouraging words. Mayhap I’ll display some

insight into what you're trying to write, and you'll pay me money to do more for you. Perhaps I can help you with some of those tough choices.



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