



**Body slam bad grammar!
Slapjack those solecisms!
Make style stylish!**

Grammar Smackdown!

Meld the *savagery* of professional wrestling with the *grace* of the English language and the stylebook's *splendid tyranny*. GET READY TO RUMBLE!

Guidelines

Some ideas from Deborah "The Grammarista" Gump, Ohio University (gump@ohio.edu), and Ron "The Grammar Man" Hartung, Tallahassee Democrat associate editor

The goal
Improve writing & editing

The prep time
2-3 hours

The event time
30-60 minutes

The cost
A lot (big prizes) or a little (small prizes)

Who's involved
Everyone, from the clerks to the executive editor



Grammar Smackdown! is a two-round test of your staff's knowledge of punctuation, spelling, grammar, style and, if you want, their ability to content edit (e.g., spot inconsistencies or illogical wording). The first round asks comparatively easy questions; the second round, the Smackdown! round, asks the toughies. You can tailor the questions to focus on areas you think your staff needs to work on, or the questions can run the gamut of trouble areas.

Each Smackdown! is different. The format of the event depends on how many people compete and how long you want the contest to last. Smackdowns! need at least 30 minutes to get rolling, but after an hour, competitors – and the audience – tend to tire. The number of teams depends on the number of players: Two-member teams provide only minimal coverage for the embarrassment that may follow an incorrect answer, while six-member teams are unwieldy. We have found that three- to five-member teams work best. You may have so many teams that you'll need more than one flight of competition; if so, consider spreading the Smackdown! over a few days, with the final day reserved for Champion Smacking!

The length of the event depends on how many questions are asked in the first round of each flight, how much time you give team members to agree on an answer, and how many teams are in each flight. For example, if four teams compete against one another, a five-question round requires 20 questions (five for each team). If you give each team a minute to agree on an answer, that will add up to about 30 minutes: 30 seconds to ask and display the question and a minute for the response. (You may find that 30 seconds is enough time to answer the question.) At the end of the first, easy round, you'll likely have a tie, with two or more teams getting all five questions right. At least, you hope you do, because that's when the Smackdown! round kicks in.

In the Smackdown! round, the questions get tougher and the action gets more physical. Place all teams at an equal distance from the master of ceremonies, or the Smackmaster. Each team selects a designated runner. On the Smackmaster's mark, the runners race to the Smackmaster's outreached arms to snatch the question and then run back to their teams. (If more than two teams are in the Smackdown! round, you'll need to grow a third arm or draft helpers.) Some Smackdown! questions may require teams to *write down* the correct answer; if so, provide pencils and be sure competitors understand the requirement. First runner to race back to the Smackmaster, smack the bell and deliver a correct answer wins! You'll need to factor the Smackdown! round into the length of the event; I ran a recent event that took six Smackdown! questions before a team finally hit upon a right answer.

Here are some other tips:

1. Appoint as Smackmaster a top editor and/or someone who is popular with the staff and has a light touch. If the event veers into seriousness, effectiveness will be lost.
2. You might also want to appoint a scorekeeper, a timekeeper and a sergeant at arms to quiet the rowdies. Your Smackmaster can be the referee of any disputes, or you might want to assign your copy desk chief to be the referee. (Frankly, more "jobs" means more staff participation.) Your Smackdown! team might want to come up with names for themselves. OU's team includes Herb "The Hammer" Amey, Ellen "The Eliminator" Gerl, Cary "The Crusher" Frith and Pat "The Peerless" Cambridge.
3. Consider grouping questions by topic so that at the end of a round, a mini-lesson can be given on correct usage. For example, you can wrap up a "that/which" round with a brief explanation of the

underlying essential/nonessential principle. Grouping requires multiple shorter rounds so that more topics can be covered. Teams in the Smackdown! round would be those who have the top two scores or finish in a tie.

4. Teams either can be self-selected (Joe and three of his friends get together), by department (photographers vs. the artists vs. the copy editors vs. the reporters) or cross-department (members of the team comes from different departments). Self-selection usually works best, better still if cross-department teams emerge. Managers might want to work behind the scenes to help ensure cross-department teams.

5. Start early to collect questions, preferably examples from your own publication. Or you can solicit contributions from the staff, perhaps with small prizes given to those who contribute a lot of examples. This has the side benefit of encouraging your staff to read their own publication more closely. The brave among you can ask readers to submit examples. You'll need two categories of questions: easy and hard.

Here are some sample easy questions:

WHAT'S IN THE WRONG PLACE, AND WHERE SHOULD IT BE? He not only embarrassed himself but them as well.

Judy's family members were (laying, lying, lieing) on the floor.

FIX THE PROBLEM: Although barely visible behind the lectern, Alley's message was strong.

He displayed his Grammar Smackdown! trophy on the (mantel, mantle, lentil) above his fireplace.

The athletic director emphasized to his coaches that his biggest concern was finding (uninterested, disinterested) referees.

Here are some sample hard questions:

Lifting a phrase from Shakespeare, she said that the fun of competing in Grammar Smackdown! was reward enough and that winning a prize would be (gilding, painting, stealing) the lily.

FIX THIS SENTENCE: Hamlet disapproved of a Danish custom that saluted drinking prowess in spite of the fact that he was to the manor born.

WHICH WORDS DO YOU SUSPECT ARE INCORRECT IN THIS QUOTE? WRITE WHAT YOU THINK THE PERSON ACTUALLY SAID: "It's the only religious film I've seen that really seems to deal directly with what happened instead of with all kinds of sentimental eyes, cleaned-up, postcard versions of it."

PLEASE FIX THE PROBLEM WORD BY WRITING IN THE CORRECT WORD: Jim Mize, owner of Jim's Small Engine Service Inc. in Wise, W.Va., sells lawn and garden equipment to the local college. As a steel dealer, he gets a special rate on equipment and can charge the college 20 percent below regular price.

Most of the questions I've used come from Ron Hartung at the *Tallahassee Democrat*, whose duties include running the paper's training program. You can get a weekly supply of questions by signing up

for his e-mailed grammar quiz, which uses snafus from his paper. He announces the winners and explains the answers the following week. The e-mail quiz began as a fun training activity for his newsroom, but the list has grown to include dozens of outsiders. He's happy to put you on his mailing list. Just send him an e-mail at rhartung@tallahassee.com.

6. Ahead of the event, as part of your marketing material, consider advertising grammar resources to spur people to study up. Interactive training materials can be found at the Web sites of the American Copy Editors Society (copydesk.org), News University at Poynter (http://newsu.org/courses/course_list.aspx) and EditTeach.org. Here are just a few:

<http://www.copydesk.org/quizzes.htm>
<http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~russial/grammar/grambo.html>
www.longleaf.net/newsroom101/

7. Everyone who competes should get something, even if it's just a balloon they can tie to their desk (which makes for a nice visual statement). Prizes for the winning team can be big (money always works), almost big (coupons for food or movies), or in-house freebies (T-shirts, umbrellas or whatever has value to staffers). You might want to give prizes for team names and even costumes. Teams have been quite creative with their names: the Back Slashers, Fellowship of the Rim, Diatribe Divas, Metrotextuals, Mortal Syntax, Phi Slamma Grammas, League of Extraordinary Word Warriors.

8. Spread the word early and often via newsroom posters and e-mail. You can even hype the Smackdown! by using spot contests leading up to the big day: Tape a question to a fishbowl placed in a prominent position. Staffers drop their answers into the bowl throughout the day; after the last news meeting of the day, the managing editor selects the winner by pulling answers out of the bowl until he gets a correct answer.

9. Be sure to pick a time when everyone can participate, either on a team or in the audience. Use an Elmo to project the questions to the audience so that everyone can try to figure out the answer. If you don't have an Elmo, you can print out the questions in type large enough for everyone to see. You'll need two copies of the easy questions – one for the team and one for the audience to read – and three (or more) copies of Smackdown! questions – two (or more) copies for the teams and one for the audience to read.

10. Never forget this is supposed to be fun. The more frivolity the better. The second-biggest danger to a newsroom, behind a lack of training, is stress. Your Grammar Smackdown! must be oddball enough to be a stress circuit breaker.