

Aunt Ruth and the Train to Gettysburg

X One Century minus
X 13 years ago...

X Three-fourths of a
X century plus 12...

X Six decades and
X an additional 27...

While I'm in the time machine, I still can't get over the fact that we're doing this," declared an excited Aunt Ruth. "I know it's a long ways there, but you know I'm not adverse to travel, and I'm so anxious to speak with Abraham Lincoln that I can almost taste it. All I'm waiting on is for this machine to go as fast as it can go. All right, are we ready to precede? Let's get on with it. I want to meet Mr. Lincoln; plus, I'm hungry as a bear."

At that moment, though, I put my hands to my mouth and did perhaps my best grammar police call ever: "One Adam Twelve, One Adam Twelve, we have numerous and severe shreadings of the English language in a time machine located at the corner of Fourteenth and Vine. Be on the lookout for a handsome nephew, accompanied by the perpetrator, a vastly overweight and senile, old—"

WHAM! The umbrella came down on my head with a fury that hasn't been felt since early on in the grammar classic *I Laid an Egg on Aunt Ruth's Head*. I definitely deserved it, and I didn't even complain as a lump on my head began forming.

"I am not old," croaked Aunt Ruth. "Now, what were the grammatical difficulties that you encountered in my earlier utterance? Are you, indeed, concerned about the following?"

At this point, she began rattling off the following list of grammatical errors:

“1. Avoid using *while* instead of *although* if it can lead to ambiguities. *While* could mean *at the same time*, but it also could mean *although* or *whereas*. I said that *while* I am in the time machine, I still can’t get over the fact that I am doing this. Do I mean that if I were not in the time machine, I would be able to get over that fact?

“2. When referring to distance, one place is a long way from another place, not a long ways.

“3. When using *adverse* or *averse*, remember that *adverse* means difficult or unfavorable; *averse* means being opposed or reluctant. I said I am not adverse to travel, but I should have said I am not averse to travel.

“4. *Anxious* carries with it the sense of worry or apprehension. Though I may be anxious in the time machine, I was attempting to express that I was eager to get there. *Eager* would have been better than *anxious*.

“5. I said I was waiting *on* the machine to go as fast as it can go. I should have said I am waiting *for* the machine. To wait on someone is what a waiter or waitress does. To wait for something is to be ready or in some state of preparedness for something.

“6. *Precede* means to come before something; *proceed* means to continue. I should have used *proceed*.

“7. Do not use *plus* as a conjunction to connect two independent clauses. When I said, ‘plus, I’m hungry as a bear,’ I should have used *and* or *but* or some other appropriate conjunction.”

Aunt Ruth had finished her list. I was stunned. “Aunt Ruth, you mean you knew that you were saying those things incorrectly?”

“Well of course, my dear nephew. I’ve been hanging around you a long time ... don’t you think I’m going to do some preemptive research so that I can avoid these grammatical stumbling blocks?”

“I suppose so ... but how long have you been doing this?”

“Longer than you think,” she said with a wink. “Now, let’s get going. I’m eager to meet perhaps the greatest president of all time. Beside, I want to give him a surprise.”

“*Beside*? You mean *besides*, right?”

“Uh, what’s the difference? I figured since it’s forward and not forwards, and it’s backward and not backwards, that it would be *beside* and not *besides*.”

“Well, *beside* means next to; *besides* means also or in addition to. Anyway, what’s your surprise for Mr. Lincoln?”

“Oh, I just wanted to give him a copy of the biography that Carl Sandburg wrote about him.”

“You can’t do that, Aunt Ruth.”

“I cannot? Watch me.”

“Okay, I mean you shouldn’t. Of course you can—you are able—but it’s not a good idea. We shouldn’t mess with history.”

“Why not?”

“Well, what if Mr. Lincoln read ahead in the book and found out what was going to happen in the future?”

“That could certainly change things, couldn’t it. Okay, you’re right. I won’t mess with history. So I suppose that means that I shouldn’t give him a copy of the picture of me standing at Mount Ruthmore.”

“Right,” I sighed.

We arrived almost instantly. After all, the year 1863 really wasn’t all that long ago. We found ourselves on a train bound from Washington, D.C., to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The president’s security staff were surprised at our arrival initially, but they quickly got over it and allowed us to mingle with the other passengers on board, including the president himself.

As usually happens when I have an opportunity to speak with someone famous, I stumbled with my conversation with Mr. Lincoln. I had thought of all these great questions, subjects of tremendous historical import, but when it came right down to it, all I could really talk about was the weather.

Aunt Ruth, on the other hand, somehow turned on her charm, and she spent over an hour conversing with the president in a corner of the car.

I watched them closely, mostly to make sure Aunt Ruth wasn't overstepping her bounds by trying to change history. The president had a solemn, somber look on his face at first, but eventually he was smiling, and I thought I even heard him chuckle a time or two.

The train conductor announced our imminent arrival to Gettysburg, and Aunt Ruth approached me. "We best be going back home now, Nephew. I've done my part."

As we were getting into the time machine, Mr. Lincoln walked up to say good-bye. "Ruth, thank you for your thoughts on the introduction. *Four score and seven ...* that's brilliant. I think I'll use it. Perhaps I will be able to give you a copy of the speech someday. And Nephew, I enjoyed talking with you. I share your fascination with the weather. Good-bye, my friends."

Aunt Ruth and I stepped into the time machine and closed the hatch. "Ready?" I asked.

"Ready!" she said.

"Okie doke. Let's go!"

With the push of a button, we were gone, headed back to real life so that we could fight the good fight for the preservation of English grammar and usage in the free world. What adventures lay before us? I had no idea, but I knew that any adventure with Aunt Ruth, the indomitable one, was worth it.