

Wake Up Grumpy – and Teach Him “Direct Address”

Little things make a big difference.

Here on my desk is an oversized mug that usually has some coffee in it. On the outside is a picture of jowly, white-bearded old Grumpy, one of the famous Seven Dwarves from the Disney cartoon. He looks sleepy and ornery. On the inside, just below the rim, in flowing red script, is the phrase *Wake Up Grumpy*.

This phrase has three different meanings, and I don't know which one the mug intends. Is it telling me to wake up in a grumpy mood? Is it telling me to wake up someone named Grumpy? Or is the writer addressing me as “Grumpy” and telling me to wake up, but simply forgetting to put the comma in front of my name?

That's the thing. It doesn't say *Wake Up, Grumpy*. If it did – if that comma were there – I'd know that I'm being addressed (often fittingly) as “Grumpy.” But the comma's not there. So, if I interpret the phrase according to the way we structure meaning in English, it's ambiguous in only two ways, not three. It would have to be advising me either to wake up in a grumpy mood or to wake up someone named Grumpy.

But this assumes, of course, that the writer knows what he's doing and has actually written what he intends. And there's the problem. I don't have any faith in that.

I do have a lot of faith in writers' blissful disregard – did I say ignorance? – of direct address, and I have this great faith because I see the convention ignored far more often than I see it practiced. When someone means “She's dressed to kill, Jack,” what I read is *She's dressed to kill Jack*. When a writer's telling Jill that he knows how to paint, what I read is *I know how to paint Jill*. On and on it goes. *Can't you read Tom? When do we eat Mom? Please pass the pork Dick*.

So the writer may have intended *Wake Up, Grumpy* but written *Wake Up Grumpy* because he doesn't know any better. I flatly refuse to believe he left the comma out on purpose, hoping that someone like me would someday waste ten minutes pondering his intention. In my experience, people who know how to punctuate generally take some pains to be clear.

Now, if the “u” in *Up* were lowercase – if the flowing red script said *Wake up Grumpy* – I'd entertain the possibility that the writer wants me to wake Grumpy up, but didn't want to end his phrase with a preposition. Lots of people twist and contort the language because of that phobia. Similarly, if the “g” of *Grumpy* were lowercase, I'd halfway accept the notion that the writer wants me to be grumpy when I wake up.

But the first letter of each word is capitalized. Who knows why? This is one more bit of evidence that the writer doesn't understand convention. And that, in turn, argues for the

interpretation of *Wake up, Grumpy*, where the writer ignored the convention of direct address. Besides, it makes most sense for the intent to be *Wake up, Grumpy*. After all, the phrase is on a coffee mug, and the reason we drink coffee is to wake up, unless we're French or something.

The bottom line is that I don't know what my mug means.

And there it is. A Ph.D. in Literature and Linguistics who has several clues but no certainty about what his coffee mug means.

My wife and kids brought this mug back from a trip to Disney World. You'd think that someone at Disney World would proofread these things, know what direct address is, and then have enough respect for the reader to put that comma in there where it goes. But I suppose it just goes to show how widespread this particular unawareness – did I say ignorance? – is.

Sure, if we look at this from the perspective of the universe, it isn't a big deal. But I wish people who write for the masses would observe the little niceties that make their intention plain. It just seems to me a man shouldn't have to wrestle with the meaning of a phrase on his coffee mug.

I realize perfectly well that only five people in fifty thousand would ever notice the ambiguity of my mug, and of those five, only one would be crabbified by it. But that's me: I'm *Grumpy*.