



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 16, 2010

Edwin Newman, Defender of Good English, Dead at 91

When Edwin Newman published his phenomenal bestseller *Strictly Speaking*, a blurb on the back cover quoted a reviewer who described the erudite author as "a glass of chilled wine awash in a sea of tepid Tab." That is probably the greatest tribute to the surpassing virtue of verbal wheat over rhetorical chaff since Thomas Jefferson said the words of Jesus stand out from those of his commentators like so many "diamonds in a dung heap."



Newman, whose death at 91 was announced yesterday, was refreshing and illuminating. A working newsman much of his life, he was for many years a welcome and eloquent addition to the staff of NBC News. His books caused even the careful writer to stop and think about what clichés he was writing — a difficult task for a newsman on deadline or even a journalist with time to spare. How often before [Strictly Speaking](#) and its sequel, [A Civil Tongue](#) did we pause and even cringe before writing of a labor-management agreement that had been "hammered out" (the workers brought their tools) in "the crucible" of a "crisis" — or worse — a "crisis situation." How often did some crisis, real or imagined, lead us to a "major milestone"? The genius of Edwin Newman was in his ability to make "Major Milestone" report for duty and make us notice him when he stood at attention and saluted smartly.

Yes, "major milestone" is redundant. So is "arson fire." (I pray I shall not live long enough to see an arson flood.) Other catch phrases are contradictory, like "rather unique." Uniqueness does not admit degrees. Something is either unique or it isn't. Remembering that should be among the top priorities of struggling or even affluent journalists. It would not do to have such important considerations among one's bottom priorities.

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Edwin Newman would no doubt flinch, and possibly did, at the names of some of our modern ballparks. He might wonder why a nice baseball park, like the one in which the Eastern League's New Hampshire Fisher Cats play in Manchester, bears the awkward and unattractive name, Merchantsauto.com



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Stadium. He would not be tempted, I think, to watch .com baseball. And he would undoubtedly wince upon hearing in a pre-game ceremony: "The next first pitch will be thrown by...."

Indeed, it was in ballparks and, especially, broadcast booths that Newman mined a rich vein of malapropisms and oxymoronic phrases. As a Catholic, I think of Edwin Newman every time I hear the Blessed Mother of our Savior hailed as "Our Lady of Good Success." Is there such a thing as bad success? There is, of course, success in evil enterprises, but Our Lady wouldn't go there. Ballplayers rush in where angels fear to tread, however, and will glibly talk about the "good success" they had against a certain pitcher in a particular game. Newman even quoted one batsman as celebrating the "good success" he had against a certain pitcher, made all the sweeter by the fact that, "I've had awful success against him in the past."

Every time I hear Joe Castiglione, voice of the Red Sox and professor of sports journalism, talk about how a certain hitter has done against a certain pitcher, "in the past," I wonder when that conscientious sports reporter will tell us how the same batter has done against the same or a different pitcher in the *future*. I look back at my old high school yearbook and marvel at the number of us who wished each other "success in the future." By that time, I was already in need of a lot more success — and I mean "good success" — in my past. Because, frankly, I'd had "awful success" in high school in the past.

Some football teams present difficulties for their opponents because their defenses have "so many different variations." If only defenses would have the same variations, life would be simpler for offensive coaches — though not for serious linguists.

Newman's famous books are now more than 30 years old and he goes to his reward as one who tried to stem the tide of bad grammar and careless usage of the English language. Alas, the tepid Tab appears to have washed over him. Today, even the much educated say things like, "I had dinner last night with he and his wife." (No, dummy, you had dinner with *him*, whether or not his wife was there.) To use the popular clichés, "at the end of the day," it "doesn't take a brain surgeon" to figure that out. 'Cause "it's not rocket science." Y'know?

And how about the all-purpose New England adjective "wicked" — now meaning "good"? I once complimented a bartender for being especially nice and she hastened to inform me that other bartenders on duty at the same restaurant were equally nice. "Patty's wicked nice," she said. When I appeared confused over Patty's wickedness (in my imagination, Patty was only "wicked" with me and in an intimate setting), her friend explained: "She's wicked nice. There's no other way to say it, she's just wicked nice."

And that's wicked cool. But I would still like to spank the waitress (a wicked thought) who, when I asked her to "expedite" my request for a second beer, thought I meant I wanted her to cancel it, which she dutifully did. When I finally completed my meal, down to that second glass of beer, I looked for the girl whose endearing young charms were unencumbered by a heavy vocabulary. After waiting what I believed was a reasonable amount of time, I approached the cash register with my bill in hand.

"Oh, you have to pay your waitress," the lady at the cash register insisted.

"I can't find her," I explained.

"Oh, my," the lady said. "Where is Melissa?"

"Perhaps she's gone to buy a dictionary," I suggested.

No such luck. I should have bought her one and given it to her the next evening. Just a basic dictionary,



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mind you. I don't think she would have appreciated *Strictly Speaking* by Edwin Newman. But I did. And do.

And always will.

Photo: In this March 21, 1976 file photo, NBC newscaster Edwin Newman is shown during an interview at his New York office: AP Images



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