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The Awful "Like" Word

by

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***A Grammar Book for You and I … Oops,* Me!**

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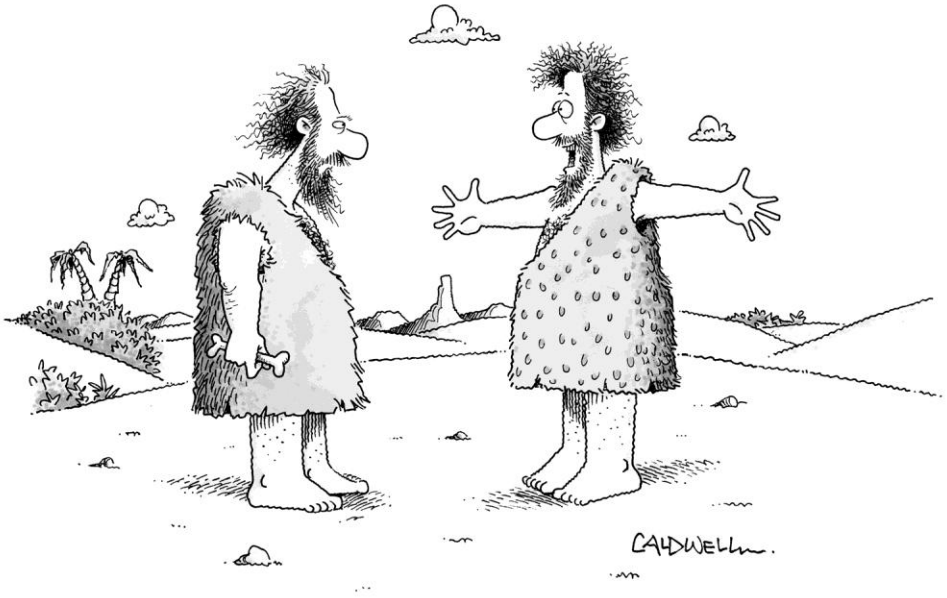
Chapter 13, The *Like* Word:
"Like, I'mlike gonna learn how to like talk."

If you have a "like" habit, the time has come: Break it. Many people cannot make it through a single sentence without scores of "I'm like" and "She was like" and "She's all . . . ." For good measure, they throw in the *like* word as adjectives, adverbs, and indecipherable constructions.



"At first I'm pissed because she's all 'Fur is death! Fur is death!' But then I think, Dude! She's naked!"

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An Overview of the *like* Word

In the late 1980s, the Drug Enforcement Administration dispatched a crack team of enforcers to a southern university. They struck pay dirt, finding drug paraphernalia in several fraternity houses. Editors of *The Washington Post* dispatched their crack team of reporters to gauge student reaction. In its story, the *Post* included one of those boxed quotations designed to attract attention to the article.

Unfortunately for the university's public-relations department, the *Post* quoted a student "thinker" who summed up the reaction this way:

- **"We were like, 'Whoa!'"**

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Millions of *Post* readers scratched their heads, wondering just exactly what the students thought of the DEA raid. Did they endorse it? Did they find it incredibly funny? Did they feel a sense of outrage? Relief? Fear? Shame?

We know very little, of course, only that students "were like, 'Whoa.'" We can fill in the blanks. The expression means whatever we want.

Substitute for Thought

Like every generation before it (in the '60s we used *ya know* a lot), the youth of today have devised their own expression as a substitute for thought—a new verb, *tobelike*, spelled just like that, spoken just like that, as a single word, often joined permanently to its subject.

We can conjugate this new verb: *tobelike*.

In the present tense, "I'mlike."

In the past tense, "Iwaslike."

On the subway once, I heard a young "professional" say in the future tense, "I'llbelike."

Introducing Quotations with the *Like* Word

Usually, people use *tobelike* to introduce quoted sources. In that form, it doesn't harm the language too much or totally prevent thought from taking place. We can hear entire conversations, peppered with the verb *tobelike* and gobs of *likes* thrown in for good measure, and come away at least marginally informed.

Thus, a law student might describe his experience in class to a friend this way:

> My professor waslike, "Does the Bill of Rights apply to the states?"
>
> And I waslike, "In most cases, yes."
>
> And she waslike, "Well, when do these rights not apply?"
>
> So I waslike trying to remember the case law, but she waslike rushed for an answer so she like went on to like the next guy.

The student manages to convey some meaning. But he cannot look forward to any awards for elocution.

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A Ubiquitous Word

Sadly, the verb *tobelike* and other variations of the *like* word do more than introduce quotations. They pervade young people's speech. They threaten the language—and therefore thought itself. *Tobelike* and *like* often require the "speaker" to resort to wild gesticulations of hand and arm, accompanied by guttural grunts and groans.

Thus we might hear two young "professionals" share the hardships of the day:

He: "I'mlike up to here."
(Hand and forearm, parallel to the ground, rise to level of eyebrow.)

She: "Like yeah."
(Heel of hand, with fingers curled to back of head, strikes center of forehead.)

He: "Like yesterday waslike, 'Ugh!'"
(The theme begins to develop.)

She: "I'mlike, oh well, you know."
(Gentle but rhythmic nods of total understanding.)

He: "So you'llbelike, with it."
(Presumably a question denoting sympathy.)

She: "I'mlike . . . you know. What EVer."
(Mutual nods of assent to newly shared precepts.)

Perhaps I exaggerate. But I do so to make a point: If people talk this way, quite likely they will find writing even more difficult. One trend I have observed: People with the *like* habit overuse the verb *to be* in their writing. They simply cannot write a sentence without saying "something *is* this" or "something *was* that."

When I teach courses in persuasive writing, as an exercise I urge the participants to write and speak at some length without using the verb *to be* and the *like* word at all. When they try it out, they often get tongue-tied or contract a case of writer's block. But after a while, they catch on to the magic of speaking without thought-stopping expressions and of writing with verb-based prose.

Parents, Take Note

Parents might try the exercise out on their children. Bribe them. Put a $10 bill on the breakfast table and challenge them to make it through a second helping of waffles

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without using the *tobelike* verb and without misusing the *like* word. Up it to $100. Your money's safe.

Like as a Verb

If your children ask about the correct meaning of *like*, point out that it serves as a verb, all by itself. Your children can say, "I *like* waffles" or "I would *like* another serving."

Like as a Preposition

Point out that it also serves as a preposition and in that capacity hooks nouns to sentences. Your children can say, "He runs *like* the wind."

Indeed, go ahead and point out that *to be* can join *like* if they truly want to show what something or somebody *was like*.

Thus the commercial "I want to be *like* Mike" has its grammar in order.

So does "He was *like* a father to me."

But virtually everyone addicted to the *like* word uses it to show not what something *is like* but what something actually *is*. They use it to show identity (*is*), not similarity (*like*): *He's like tall*. Well, *is* he or *isn't* he?

Like as a Noun

You can also point out that *like* serves as a noun, as in *likes* and *dislikes*.

Like as an Adjective

The word spans almost all parts of speech and can serve as an adjective (*she mastered lacrosse, field hockey, and like sports*).

Like as an Adverb

Informally, *like* can serve as an adverb (*the tree is more like 100 than 50 feet*).

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Like as a Conjunction

Here we stir up a hornet's nest. According to some sources, the word *like* can also act as a subordinating conjunction.

Charles Darwin wrote in 1866: "Unfortunately few have observed like you have done." *New Fowler*, p. 458.

Consider the words of *Random House*:

> *Like* as a conjunction meaning "as, in the same way as" (*Many shoppers study the food ads like brokers study market reports*) or "as if" (*It looks like it will rain*) has been used for nearly 500 years and by many distinguished literary and intellectual figures. Since the mid-19th century there have been objections, often vehement, to these uses. Nevertheless, such uses are almost universal today in all but the most formal speech and writing. In extremely careful speech and in much formal writing, *as*, *as if*, and *as though* are more commonly used than *like*: *The commanding general accepted full responsibility for the incident, as any professional soldier would. Many of the Greenwich Village bohemians lived as if* (or *as though*) *there were no tomorrow.* *Random House*, p. 1114.

Other sources fervently disagree with this loose approach. Mr. Fowler himself minced no words:

> Every illiterate person uses this construction daily . . . .
> *New Fowler*, p. 458.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that examples of the use of *like* as a conjunction do appear in the works of "many recent writers of standing" but also points out that such use is "generally condemned as vulgar or slovenly . . . ." Quoted in *New Fowler*, p. 458.

Like as a Conjunction: Four Uses

New Fowler examined the works of leading writers in England, America, and other countries, and identified four situations where they use *like* as a conjunction:

- **1. The *If you knew Susie* Exception: Repeat the Verb**

  In the subordinate clause, writers often repeat the verb appearing in the main clause. They introduce the subordinate clause with *like*:

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*I **need** a new car **like** I **need** a hole in the head*.
—E. Good, 2001.

*If you **knew** Susie **like** I **know** Susie . . . .*

New Fowler's Comment: "[This construction] must surely escape further censure or reproach."

The following examples and comments appear in *New Fowler*, p. 458.

- **2. To Replace *As If* or *As Though***

  It looks like it's still a fox.
  —*New Yorker*, 1986.

- **3. The *Like I said* Exception**

  Substitutes for *as* in "fixed, somewhat jocular, phrases of saying and telling . . . ."

  Like you say, you're a dead woman.
  —M. Wesley, 1983.

- **4. To Make Comparisons**

  Used in the same way as "in the manner (that)" or "in the way (that)."

  How was I to know she'd turn out like she did?
  —C. Burns, 1985.

As a budding grammarian, you should know of this battle. At Bubba's you can easily get away with *like* as a conjunction. But in formal settings—the faculty lounge, scholarly writing (and talking), your master's thesis—you should use the traditional conjunctions *as*, *as if*, and *as though*. In the words of *New Fowler*:

> It would appear that in many kinds of written and spoken English *like* as a conjunction is struggling towards acceptable standard or neutral ground. It is not there yet. But the distributional patterns suggest that the long-standing resistance to this omnipresent little word is beginning to crumble. *New Fowler*, p. 459.

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Overusing *Like* Threatens Your Career

Consider the views of the experts:

> ***New Fowler***
>
> By the mid-20c., however, [the use of *like*] as an incoherent and prevalent filler had reached the proportions of an epidemic, and it is now scorned by standard speakers as a **vulgarism of the first order**. *New Fowler*, p. 459.

> ***Garner Oxford***
>
> Since the 1980s, *be like* is also a **juvenile colloquialism** equivalent to *said* in relating a conversation—e.g.: "And I was like, 'Yes, I do.' But he was like, 'No you don't. And so I was like, 'If you're just going to contradict me, then . . . .'" In teenagers, this usage is all but ubiquitous. In adults, it shows **arrested development**. *Garner Oxford*, p. 212.

Urge your children to stay away from *tobelike*. Point out that saying *"She was like tall"* says nothing at all. And vigorously stress that grunts and groans and *"like . . . ah . . . like this"* and *"like . . . um . . . ah . . . like that"* peg the speaker as one who has some work to do before taking control of the language.

And if you write or talk for a living—as most of us do—try the exercise yourself. Listen to your own patterns of speech. I have a friend, my age, in his 60s. He has picked up the *like* habit from his teenager.

If you use *tobelike* and misuse the *like* word, just stop it. Then try writing a chapter like this one, and in 1,700 words see if you can use the verb *to be*—as I have—only once. (Can you find it? The *be*'s in the examples and quotations don't count.)

Go ahead. Try it out.

You'llbelike, "Whoa!"

Perhaps from now on you'll say…

I'm going to learn how to talk.

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Conclusion

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