

**Q.** When I made the comment, “I appreciate him coming to this office,” my secretary, who is a stickler for grammar, said that I should have said, “I appreciate his coming to this office.” Was I right, or was she?

**A.** Congratulate your secretary for being one of a small minority that recognizes a gerund. Then—for a good laugh—check the definition of “gerund” in *Webster’s 3<sup>rd</sup> New International Dictionary*. That definition is so long that I would waste space if I quoted it, but, unless you understand what a gerund is before you read the definition, you will not understand after reading it.

Briefly, a gerund is the -ing form of a verb used as if it were a noun, and the grammatical rule that applies to your question is that when a noun or pronoun precedes a gerund, the noun or pronoun must be in the possessive case. But this rule is seldom observed, and teachers of English as a second language say that they do not even mention it. However, I will miss that gerund-plus-possessive rule, for, unlike many rules of grammar, it actually makes sense.

For example, in your question, you will not miss *him*; you will miss *his coming* to your office—that is, his presence in your office, not the person himself. When you can substitute a noun in the phrase *his coming*, you are dealing with a gerund. In this sentence, you could substitute the noun *presence* for the word *coming*. Like your question, all of the following sentences contain gerunds:

- I disapproved of his behaving like that. (I disapprove of his behavior.)
- The congressman’s taking the job with a firm he had voted to favor is suspicious. (The congressman’s acceptance of ...)
- I was surprised by their announcing their disagreement with his offer. (their (announcement of ...))
- Her careful planning made the event a success. (Her careful plan ...)
- The firm’s refusing to grant her tenure seems unfair. (The firm’s refusal ...)

You have no doubt noticed that the

gerund rule is generally ignored. So, as with all language rules, the gerund rule is certain to disappear because it is no longer observed.

**Q.** A correspondent sent this item from the *New York Times* that caused him to do a double-take: “Osama bin Laden, who was killed in Pakistan on Sunday, was a son of the Saudi elite whose radical, violent campaign to re-create a seventh-century Muslim empire redefined the threat of terrorism for the 21st century.”

**A.** The journalist who drafted that item is guilty of a misplaced modifier. Whose “radical, violent campaign” was it? According to the statement, it was the “Saudi elite” that had incited a “radical, violent campaign.” In fact, what was meant was that bin Laden had done so, to the horror of some of the Saudi elite. The usually impeccable *Times* really slipped up on that comment.

Readers of this column would probably have no trouble rewriting the sentence to convey the exact meaning. One possible revision: “A son of the Saudi elite, Osama bin Laden, who was killed in Pakistan on Sunday, led a radical, violent campaign....” Or the writer can create a parenthetical phrase by enclosing the words “a son of the Saudi elite” within commas: “Osama bin Laden, a son of the Saudi elite, who was killed in Pakistan on Sunday, led a radical, violent campaign. ...” Or two sentences can be used instead of one: “Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan on Sunday. A son of an elite Saudi family, bin Laden led a radical, violent campaign. ...”

**Q.** This may seem a foolish question, but how does one decide whether to pronounce *the* as “thuh” and when to pronounce it as “thee”?

**A.** It’s not a foolish question; it’s a sensible question that few

would think to ask, and it has a simple, clear answer: I blame our “lazy tongues.” That is, we tend to pronounce words and phrases so that our tongues can move as little as possible.

Choosing to pronounce the definite article *the* as either “thuh” or “thee,” we usually choose the pronunciation that will allow our tongue to move the least.

As evidence: Notice that your tongue glides only a little, from behind the front teeth in “thuh” to the closed-lips *b* sound of “book,” when you say, “Thuh book.” Now say, “Thee” book, and your tongue must move from a position between the front teeth toward the back and roof of your mouth, then forward to a bilabial position, a more difficult transition. To avoid that additional movement, we tend to say “thuh” whenever a consonant follows the definite article *the*: “the book, the chair, the coffee table, the library, the dinosaur,” and so forth.

Now try choosing between “thuh” and “thee” before a word that begins with a vowel sound. When you pronounce “the” as “thee,” your tongue glides easily with a minimum of movement from the sound of “thee” to the vowel sound in the following word: “the airplane, the end, the apple, the elephant, the unmistakable,” and so forth.

Incidentally, to answer a question that the correspondent didn’t ask, this is the same reasoning we use when selecting the indefinite article “a” or “an.” To reduce the movement of our tongue, we use “an” when the following noun begins with a vowel sound. That choice permits our tongue to glide from “an” to the following vowel sound, as in “an orange,” “an operator,” “an illustrator,” “an uncle,” and so on. What matters is the sound, not the spelling of the letter that follows *an*. So our tongues choose the *u* in *unicorn*—a vowel pronounced like a consonant as if it were a consonant (“a unicorn.”) Try saying “an unicorn,” and you will immediately understand the problem. **TFL**

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