

# The difference between *feel* and *think*

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David Rome Prize for Best Lyric Essay, Fall 2009

*Authority and American Usage*, previously, *Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage*, by David Foster Wallace. *Consider the Lobster*, Little, Brown and Company, 2005. Also: Harper's Magazine, April, 2001.

Far below: an imagined presence, dictated.

This is not a review of David Foster Wallace's "Authority and American Usage," nor is it a mourning-DFW-as-a-great-American-writer-and-cultural-figure/savior essay. It is not a study of what it means to be post-modern or post-post-modern after American literature's long entrapment in minimalism and the popularity of writers DFW would snark at—Updike, for example, "the voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV." This is, instead (and supposedly), about my reading of "Authority and American Usage,"—not my reading in a hyper-critical reporter/book-

reviewer sense, but my reading in the most personal way it is possible to read. I will describe the sweat I broke into halfway through the essay, the itchiness caused by seemingly endless (but not excessive) footnotes, the brief teary-eyed gaze I was left with, hours after I began, when I finished the essay, and the unexpected excitement the essay provoked in me for DFW.

It took me the better part of an hour to get through the first few pages of the essay. I could blame this on my tendency to be distracted when reading, my physical restlessness, my need to write down good quotes because I shun writing

in books themselves. During these first few pages, I took a break to read some DFW obituaries, another break to check the New Yorker article about DFW in the issue that had, coincidentally or not, just arrived in the mail. My roommate came in asking for a cigarette. And by the time I had fallen back into the groove of the essay, the constant syncopation that miraculously read the same as rhythm, I was exhausted (and sweating).

I had never been so exhausted by reading. And I read a lot of different kinds of writing: good writing, bad writing, dense writing, critical writing, theoretical writing, rhyming writing,

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THIS MEDICATION  
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The writer did not need to focus to write. Wallace's death surprised even Wallace, who'd been expecting something more dramatic, maybe a fall into a chimney or from a roof, but not this slow, sitting-type thing. So Wallace's wishes had not been honored, at least according to Wallace.

dull writing, academic writing, juvenile writing, playful writing, vulgar writing, &c. But DFW's essay does not fit into any of these categories. Nor does it fit into a category of its own. I had nowhere to put it. But this lack of genre was not where the exhaustion came from; I was tired from the texture and substance of each sentence<sup>1</sup>. For example:

A key point here is that the resemblance between usage rules and certain conventions of etiquette or fashion is closer than the Philosophical Descriptivists<sup>a</sup> know and far more important than they understand.

The sentence enters without pretense: "A key point," DFW writes; he makes sure the reader is paying attention (though it is hard to imagine a passive, apathetic audience sticking with the essay this long). Then there is some sort of similarity

<sup>1</sup> An annoyance: the word *unpack* when it refers to anything other than removing the contents of a box, suitcase, or other appropriate container.

<sup>a</sup> It's best to let DFW define these terms: "[L]inguistic conservatives are now formally known as Prescriptivists and linguistic liberals as Descriptivists." But your author must add: Prescriptivists think there are certain unchangeable

between "usage rules" and "certain conventions of etiquette or fashion." Taken out of context, this comparison between usage rules and fashion—something obviously grammatical and something either popular or populist, respectively—seems haphazard and a poor group of words lying between one full stop and the next. But finish the sentence: the Philosophical Descriptivists do not understand the resemblance completely, and they might not even know that such a resemblance is more than passing. So this sentence raises a lot in terms of subject matter and possible polemics. It's a fucking good sentence; it combines popularity with the usually-boring-grammar with the technical "Philosophical Descriptivists." What's more<sup>2</sup>: It even sounds good.

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rules to grammar, and Descriptivists believe that language should change as society changes. Again, DFW: "Because language is constantly evolving, such standards will always be fluid." Also: "There is a sense in which specific linguistic conventions are arbitrary."

<sup>2</sup> Again, it's a fucking good sentence.

The possible side effects of Nardil are wacky: fatigue, insomnia, sexual difficulty, urinary hesitancy, carbohydrate craving, and trembling.

Before reading DFW's "Authority and American Usage," I'd been resisting reading his work for various reasons—none of them good. I had heard of him before he died but was never in the right mood to try him as a new-for-me writer. There is something to adopting, accepting—or at least preparing to accept—a new writer into the repertoire of what you've read. I feel bizarrely connected, emotionally, to authors I like. So maybe I was not ready to let another writer in.

I first learned he died when I visited the McSweeney's website and found a smattering of tearily-written elegies, mournful letters, desperate attempts to remember a great writer.

One of his goals was to write until his fingers froze above the page, awe-struck at the beauty that he had just brought into the world; it was this kind of inner arrogance that helped maintain Wallace's otherwise low self-worth.

"Infinite Jest" would make a good signature but could only be pulled off if the writing was fucking good, Wallace thought.

Wallace began drinking coffee every morning and didn't stop until he'd written at least four thousand words.

From 1977 till his death, Wallace never wrote in a novel with anything but pencil—pens stained the pages too permanently and made Wallace get teary-eyed, no matter the context.

Wallace was, in general, not unhappy.

In the sun, Wallace thought his legs' shadows were awfully thick.

That summer he wanted to be tan but worried about skin cancer, ultimately deciding that taking up smoking would kill him faster than the sun, so he could tan away, worry about lung cancer only.

## CONSULTE A TU MEDICO ANTES DE INGERIR MEDICINAS QUE NO NECESITAN RECTA, YA QUE PUEDEN AFECTAR LA EFECTIVIDAD DE ESTAS MEDICINAS

David Wallace was not the name he expected. His family did not expect to name him David, nor Wallace. At Amherst he dropped his beer on the carpet and slinked away quickly.

I couldn't start reading him then for fear of being a late-adaptor or, worse—an adaptor of a recently-dead author, someone who reads only what's *fashionable* or *obvious*. I did not want to be conspicuous, so I decided to wait. But really I was just building up to a bigger beginning than any writer probably deserves, simply for fairness' sake. Anything too built up, after all, is just preparation for a let-down<sup>3</sup>.

Then I read the essay. It certainly does not deal, explicitly or even implicitly, emotional issues. Grammar makes people mad, but it rarely makes them cry. But the essay's words themselves were beautiful. They clearly came from painstaking choice, nothing less than poetry to describe a markedly un-poetic subject.

Soon after, I read the obituaries. And for

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<sup>3</sup> This is what I told myself.

reasons the reader will find boring or irrelevant<sup>4</sup> I was unable to turn away from DFW's struggles with mood-altering medication. It fascinated me, but it fascinated me in a sick way, a way that I did not want to allow and one that bothered me in its very existence. Of course we look for causes of suicide, and DFW was no different. But these obit writers took huge leaps, pretended to understand what, to them, was a directly causal effect between his medication—or lack thereof—and his suicide. I don't like their assumptions. I also don't like how they change the way we read DFW, as if always searching for signs of his troubles. His writing can stand on its own, but first we must let it<sup>5</sup>.

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To begin: Remove DFW from the scene<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> And reasons, for that matter, I simply don't want to get into but must mention for the coherence of anything.

<sup>5</sup> (Let the ending arrive when it does; let it be. It is premature or not, but this is not my concern. My concern is for the writing, not the pain behind it, but the pain it can

Look at the essay as essay. It should be boring. It's not even a review of a regular, English-language dictionary; it's a review of a usage dictionary. It's esoteric. I hadn't considered the existence of a usage dictionary<sup>7</sup>. I hadn't considered using the term *usage dictionary* except to describe the only reference dictionary I knew: Strunk & White. But I read this essay and accepted its terminology and intention. It is an exciting essay about a surprisingly exciting topic. And it's mysterious. Maybe my fascination—or obsession—with language makes me particularly susceptible to DFW's writing, particularly close to already falling into the hands of dirty yet precocious and unvulgar language.

“People really do judge one another according to their use of language. Constantly.”

Let me explain: There is a difference between

evoke. To take a critical stand: the importance lies, here, in the signified, not the signifier. DFW wrote gorgeous words, so let those words remain. And let him die.)

<sup>6</sup> As much as possible; that is, read the essay for its language, and only then remember who the author is.

<sup>7</sup> Nor had I considered the existence of a review of a usage dictionary.

His family always worried too much, especially when he left a pile of magazines next to the foot, not the head, of his bed.

He began leaving magazines there so the dog wouldn't get to them (this came after an unfortunate run-in with the writer's *Chicago Manual of Style*).

When he wrote, his hands trembled, but his mind trembled more.

That same feeling, he thought, is what made William Styron great.

Wallace wrote forever, he decided—but this was before forever could happen, as it can with the newest advances.

## MEDICATION SHOULD BE TAKEN WITH PLENTY OF WATER

**I**n September, Wallace decided to never be a police officer. The editing was his least favorite part; he grew sick of killing darlings after the first few fell off the page.

Howard was nowhere to be found, most of the time.

“Broom” received the usual criticism; that is, none at all.

Yet “Broom” was the only topic Wallace would not discuss over Wednesday's sea scallops and beer dinner.

“Broom” was the ending before this whole forever notion became.

In the attic Wallace sat for hours trying to cry.

Back in his room, he continued stacking magazines until he had, by osmosis alone, absorbed the trickery of both Norman Mailer and John Updike.

Wallace had never wanted to be glued to a telephone.

the words *feel* and *think*. Obviously they are different words thanks to being spelled and pronounced differently. They are made of different combinations of letters, each a signifier for a certain sound, so together, the whole team of them can signify what is meant to be signified. (I could include that cute diagram here, the one with the tree, but I'll resist.) But they are also different because they have different meanings:

**feel:** 1. to undergo an emotional sensation or be in a particular state of mind 2. come to believe on the basis of emotion, intuitions, or indefinite grounds

**think:** 1. judge or regard; look upon 2. use or exercise the mind of one's power of reason in order to make inferences, decisions, or arrive at a solution or judgments

I'd like to think this is something DFW

would have cared about—the subtly important difference between the two words and what it means when one is used incorrectly. I suppose, in deciding the words can be used incorrectly, I am taking a prescriptivist view of language and grammar. I'd prefer to be the lefty descriptivist, but I can't hide my cringes<sup>8</sup> when someone says *feel* instead of *think*.

There is a difference between these two sentences: "I feel like Barack Obama is the right man for the job," and, "I think Barack Obama is the right man for the job." Of course you could argue that the presidency is as much about emotion as it is about logic and reason, but I would argue back, based on my reactionary backlash against reactionary right-wingers. The first sentence might be correct if the presidency is,

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<sup>8</sup> I am often an asshole.

indeed, based on emotion. But it's not based on emotion—at least not emotion alone.

Maybe a different example is more appropriate: "I feel like you are an asshole," and, "I think you are an asshole." The implications of these two sentences are drastically different. Feeling like someone is an asshole is based on emotions. Emotionally, the person seems to be an asshole. But can emotions be logical and rational enough to really define someone as an asshole? Or does it not matter—the person's an asshole if you think she's an asshole? Certainly saying "I think you are an asshole" is the stronger claim. It is more dangerous to think something, so people feel it instead, hide behind emotions, which are inherently internal and hard to understand. Language is protective.

At the crosswalk, he rarely looked left and right.

"Girl with" was as far as he got in titling his grand opus.

In December, Wallace decided winter coats were for the weak-hearted, those whose fingers hurt after a mere ten minutes in windy cold.

Slowly, normality disappeared from Wallace's writing, until the only coherent words that remained were articles and the rare ampersand (which one can't even assume stands in for "and," Wallace would point out).

At the end there was nothing, he said, once.

Wallace picked the pen based on its thickness, opting for a very fine point but not one that required so much page-scratching as to exhaust the arm.

By then his arm was already tired from lifting that damned espresso cup.

Wallace worked best in the afternoons but worst in the evenings.

In June, Wallace turned again to his tanning operation, which made writing difficult, since tanning is best conducted lying down and not in the sitting position that proved most efficaz for Wallace's writing.

By May of next year, he looked like a ghost again.

Wallace was never very confident but strutted around like some sort of royal turkey or otherwise shitty translation.

"Infinite Jest," he thought again.

His relationship with his parents was nearly perfect, minus the rare door-slamming yelling-till-the-walls-shake eruption.

In the room where he grew up, Wallace displayed odd sorts of turtles beneath the windowsill.

That same windowsill was where he pictured himself smoking like the

There is a difference between the two words. When a person misuses<sup>9</sup> them, I judge. It is uppity and pretentious and makes me think I am an asshole. At the depth of it, though, is my ironically emotional response to DFW's review of a usage dictionary and how rationally, yet beautifully, he examines language.

My first thought: Language should make me think something, I think, and it should, only secondarily, make me feel something. But this is obviously and immediately false; poetry and lyric prose make me feel long before they make me think. A revision: An essay about something as dry as grammar and usage dictionaries should make me think, then feel. Unlike my first statement, this is not immediately false. It makes at least some sense that intellectual

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<sup>9</sup> I guess it's relative, this misuse, since many disagree with your author's strict distinction between the two verbs. But let your author be a prescriptivist here, and a prescriptivist who is correct—just for this moment.

writing about an intellectual topic should provoke an intellectual response, at least at first. But DFW's essay provoked emotional responses first, sometimes, and these very responses provoked more emotional responses until, finally, enough had piled up that I realized it was time to think.

The way DFW employs language brings about emotional responses; his gift for words and language is irrepensible. I can feel his passion about a goddamned usage dictionary. This can't be right.

That the essay affects me emotionally more than intellectually affects me both emotionally and intellectually. Language should make sense. Reading about a usage dictionary and finding my eyes welling up with afternoon-tears does not make sense. Language is supposed to encourage

communication. But it also must tap into emotions—intellectual curiosity is not enough to drive everything. His essay pierces emotionally because I cannot rationalize it intellectually; I want to think when I should feel, and I'm left nearly crying about American usage. DFW's claims are uncertain. DFW is (was) uncertain.

It is still being in love with your high-school boyfriend, struck by the realization that you have been comparing every boy afterwards to him—an unfair and impossible comparison. But you do it and can't decide if it serves any intellectual or emotional purpose. You try to rationalize letting grammar change, but you're stuck on the difference between *think* and *feel*. It is sappy: You *think* you are no longer in love, but you *feel* otherwise. What's worst about it is you are

characters in that television show about ad-men. In Bloomington, the air was suffocating, but not like the suffocation caused by altitude sickness. Though "Infinite"—but he stopped. Wallace sent manuscripts away and worried about the stamp value instead of the writing. Wallace was a good writer, but he knew better than to think so. Pietsch suggested, during one of their stoned nights in, that Wallace try writing while high. "Infinite Jest" was all that came out when Wallace tried writing while high. Wallace did not like writing after smoking joints. As soon as that night ended, Wallace vowed to work in more

coffee shops and fewer living rooms—he was turned off by the title of the latter. Wallace worked best with music on, voices creeping in past the headphones, but not too much. Yet he liked the buzz of amphetamines. "The Pale" was that feeling when he stood up too quickly, victim to low blood pressure. The problem, for Wallace, was not of writers' block but of self-imposed fear of the blank page. In one attempt to fight the enemy, Wallace wandered the city for no more than four hours, painting character sketches in weak adjectives and the rare adverb. Fogle decides for Wallace, Wallace decided.

emotionally invested in the difference between *think* and *feel*. That damn boyfriend won't disappear.

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"Authority and American Usage" shows an obsession with language, with grammar, with syntax, with words. And it is written in a way that covertly supports this obsession. If DFW had written a pretty-good essay, his argument—and even the subtle plot of the essay—would not be as strong. But because each sentence is a nearly seamless tapestry of words, the work as a whole gains a weird, ephemeral-but-then-lasting sort of beauty. An example:

I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be Dogmatic than Democratic, especially about the issues that are both vexed and highly charged. I submit further

that the issues surrounding "correctness" in contemporary American usage are both vexed and highly charged, and that the fundamental questions they involve are ones whose answers have to be literally worked out instead of merely found.

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Later in his essay, DFW recreates a speech he gives to students who do not use SWE—Standard Written English (which I always misread as "Standard White English"—DFW sees the possibility for this mistake too). In his speech, he emphasizes the importance of using this kind of mainstream English simply to have your speech accepted in the first place. You must use the language of the rulers if you want to displace those rulers. You can't write like a black person, he tells black people: "I'm not going to let you

write in SBE<sup>10</sup> either." You can't write like an uppity academic, he might tell uppity academics:

Maybe it's a combination of my SNOOTitude and the fact that I end up having to read a lot of it for my job, but I'm afraid I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE, and loathe it even more than the stilted incoherences of Presidential English.

He supports his argument:

In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's

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<sup>10</sup> Standard Black English

## DO NOT CHEW OR CRUSH, SWALLOW WHOLE.

Other agents to speed up writing included gingerbread, banana bread, and cocaine. "The Pale" came more after a good binge.

On his final manuscripts, Wallace crossed a lot out, but did so in pencil, like he was writing in a novel already published.

Wallace began to breathe heavier after he took up smoking.

Wallace began smoking when he decided it would help him think, but soon after the habit began, he was only helped in his obsessive thinking about smoking and nothing else.

Wallace's literary ambitions began when he began.

## MAY CAUSE DROWSINESS OR DIZZINESS WHEN TAKING THIS MEDICINE THE EFFETIVENESS OF BIRTH CONTROL PILLS IS DECREASED. USE ADDITIONAL AND/OR ALTERNATE METHODS OF BIRTH CONTROL.

They fell together on the bed and lay still for only a few moments.

Green chose the bedspread.

Green had always chosen the decorations.

Wallace was a better writer than decorator, but all he admitted to was being good at criticizing and complaining.

At Pomona he could work on his tan for most of the year.

racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself.

I'm surprised he gets away with this, that he's not called a racist, conservative, Bush-league asshole. But because the speech is delivered with such eloquence, thus demonstrating the power of well-used American English in its "standard" form, it supports itself.

This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair,

and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them.

Still, I cringed when DFW brought up Standard Written English. I didn't want the essay to become impossible racialized, carried outside my realm of direct experience. I took a break, let my head fall against the propped-up pillow, pictured myself sweating in a foreign city, tongue dry with language barriers and paranoia. I listened to the wind whipping the unread letters on the windowsill. Maybe I was just thirsty—that kind of thirst that masquerades as hunger and only becomes clear after too much cereal, or the thirst that seems quenched by beer but eventually leaves you, tongue lolled out, crawling away from bass-driven music. Reading DFW is arduous. It

is weary. There is too much to keep track of, but this is beauty.

I felt like I needed to make up my mind about the SWE thing while I was reading, but this made me stop reading, lose the path of DFW's language, forget the last footnote I read. These were forced breaks, each more appealing in its possibility to solve my internal argument.

Language and politics are dangerous to mix, but they do, all the time: the way the word for *sea* in Spanish is feminine in poetry and masculine in prose, the way English lacks a third-person, singular, and genderless pronoun and leaves us stuck with the mistake *they*.

I wanted his language to be mine, definitively mine.

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"The Pale" stopped happening as much at Pomona.

At times Wallace wished he'd been born a painter or photographer, observation he thought much easier than the physicality of writing the world.

## NOT TO BE TAKEN BY MOUTH

Wallace was easily tired.

Wallace and Green rarely discussed that draining fatigue.

Wallace tried combinations of drugs and eased the come-downs with tranquilizers.

Six months before he stopped writing, Wallace lay on his death bed for

the last time.

In his afterlife, Wallace did not exist like he did in his real life.

Around this island, Wallace thought, could exist every civilization without touching or speaking a kind word to one another.

Meanwhile, Wallace continued struggling with his writing and in struggling turned out a modest sixteen-novel operatic beauty.

There were fifteen novels, really, and one prologue bullshit piece that Wallace wrote last.

Wallace saw himself in the mirror the opposite from the photographs, of course, but the stasis of the negative-driven images was eerily present.

Soon after an hour spent watching his reflection in a fogged-glass panelled door, Wallace erupted into sobbing.

Ever since he started biting his nails, his teeth chattered sometimes.

The first edition of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* was released in 1985. My parents keep a copy of the first volume—which includes the A through C entries and a hefty introduction—in the dictionary-and-encyclopedia area of our bookshelves. According to the book’s introduction, the book can be traced back “almost a hundred years, to the founding in 1889 of its sponsoring body, the American Dialect Society (ADS).” My own history with the book can be traced back almost ten years, to when that book was first placed on that shelf, grouped with the few other reference books my family owns. But my substantive history with the book is recent; I only read the introduction after reading DFW’s review<sup>11</sup>, and would never have made it beyond flipping through the pages

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<sup>11</sup> Again, who knew you could review reference books?

looking for dirty words if it weren’t for DFW’s emphasis on the importance of introductions in dictionaries:

But almost nobody ever bothers with these little intros, and it’s not just their six-point type or the fact that dictionaries tend to be hard on the lap. It’s that these intros aren’t actually written for you or me or the average citizen.... They’re written for other lexicographers and critics; and in fact they’re not really introductory at all, but polemical.

*DARE* comes from years of collecting questionnaires with questions in categories from time, weather, and houses to wildflowers, weeds, clothing (men’s and women’s), and honesty and dishonesty<sup>12</sup>. “In an attempt to avoid prompting specific replies, questions were phrased without

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<sup>12</sup> Complete list of categories, in order of appearance: Time; Weather; Topography; Houses; Furniture; Utensils; Dishes; Foods; Vegetables and Fruits; Domestic Animals; Farm Animals; Farming; Farm Buildings; Vehicles and Transportation; Boats and Sailing; Fishing, Hunting, Wildlife; Birds; Insects; Wildflowers; Weeds, Trees,

using words the might possibly be given as answers,” according to the introduction. (Notice the passive voice, a requisite for a questionnaire to read like a questionnaire, for a reference book to seem as boring as it should.)

Sample questions from the questionnaire used to create *DARE*:

To get to the second floor, you walk up the \_\_\_\_\_.

Other diseases that come from continual drinking:

Other names for the devil:

Are there any “magical” cures for corns or warts, like rubbing them with something special, or in a special way?

An immoral woman:

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Bushes, etc.; Buying and Selling; Money; Honesty and Dishonesty; Clothing — Men’s and Women’s; Parts of the Body; Physical Actions; Family Relationships; Courtship, Marriage, Childbearing; Health and Disease; Religion and Beliefs [shorter than the next section]; Tobacco, Liquor; Children’s Games; Entertainments and Celebrations;

When he found the pens his father used to write grocery lists, Wallace tried reproducing the handwriting with the word “lettuce” but decided to settle, briefly, upon failure after thirty-three attempts.

He continued trying to copy the handwriting with each grocery list, failing less each time.

Not every person can be a great writer, Wallace reminded himself when he struggled to turn simile to metaphor and back again.

During the time he occupied the page, Wallace could not recognize faces. About ten minutes after, these faces returned and spoke the most beautiful language Wallace had ever heard.

Caring for words was a tiring proposition.

Green believes Wallace cared too much for the syntax.

After she whispered in his ear, he repeated the phrase with the Latin voicing.

Green returned to Wallace twisted in sentences.



The responses from these questions were then compiled to create definitions for idiomatic terms or folk words. For example:

**bestest** adj, adv [best + -est]

1893 Shands MS Speech 19, Bestest [FIX].

Double superlative, formed from best. Used by negroes. 1953 Brewer World Brazos 9 eTX [Black], Of occasion in De Bottoms . . you kin fin' some of de bestes' preachuhs dat done evuh grace a pulpit. 1965 DARE Tape FL21 [Inf White], I like 'em raw bestest of all.

and:

**cunterman** n Also **cutterman**

See quotes.

1981 Seventeen Letters PA, In East Stroudsburg,

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Emotional States and Attitudes; Types and Attitudes of People; Relationships among People; Schoolgoing, Mental Actions; Manner of Action or Being; Size, Quantity and Number; Position; Exclamations; Verb Forms (Within Text)

and some of the surrounding areas, we used the word cunterman or cutterman, to describe a person who is a slob. I am not sure about the origin of this word, but I believe it may have evolved from a similar sounding family name from the area.

The book seems more remarkable when I consider all the times I've gazed at it from the TV-room couch and decided that, since it is only the first volume, and since we don't have the next four volumes, it's somehow not worth reading. This is ridiculous.

And it would have come in handy, too. There is an entry, for example, on Adam's off-ox, "a person or thing one does not know and cannot identify." My parents discussed more than

a few times the phrase "Adam's off-ass," which, regrettably, is not in the book but clearly finds a stand-in with the off-ox.

The book also serves as a stand-in for the feeling I get when reading DFW, the physical exhaustion usually saved for running and other tough aerobic activity, or for wandering a foreign city for hours on end. It is the exhaustion of feeling like you'll never be able to move again, not even to make the few steps across the room for water to soothe your now-painful thirst. The footnotes are a scratchy wool blanket or barely audible radio, just loud enough to make out the songs if you listen hard. I cannot identify this exhaustion, really, but I now know it well after hours spent reading—and savoring—"Authority and American Usage."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Savoring DFW's usage more than the usage discussed in his essay, savoring his syntax more than the actual SWE syntax that I subscribed to without even knowing it existed.

Another entry from *DARE*—and I swear this came from random flipping and isn't just some authorial trick to make a segue<sup>14</sup>—is “chew.” The first definitions are not related to DFW's addiction—an answer to a half-decade of cigarette smoking getting in the way of properly-functioning lungs but a way to maintain the way nicotine leaves DFW, at least according to his correspondence with Dave Eggers<sup>15</sup>, more alert and thinking better. In fact, none of the definitions refer to the tobacco product. The word's use as a noun is, going by the length and number of definitions, less important than its use as a verb. To chew can mean to eat noisily, to talk, to embarrass, or to argue. And *chew*, the noun, can mean attachment or grasp, an argument, or an Irish person.

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<sup>14</sup> After identifying said segue, your author has ensured that it will fall flat.

<sup>15</sup> Who, himself, falls flat trying to be like DFW. But falling flat for Eggers is still writing pretty damn well.

Eggers is surprisingly fascinated by DFW's tobacco use as per his questioning in the above-mentioned interview. Perhaps he has, like me, a strange desire to really take up smoking in the name of literary genius or some other equally-bullshit reason. There is something so arresting in what DFW calls the suicide of smoking. And so foreshadowing it's hard to turn away.

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David Foster Wallace killed himself on Sept. 12, 2008. His wife, Karen Green, came home and found his hanging body. The literary world reacted passionately with a deluge of tributes, essays, obituary-essays, critical-essays, and sound-bite friendly sentences praising the writer. When the autopsy report was completed on Oct. 27, 2008, more about DFW surfaced. The obsession

with his prescribed medication, if not apparent before, takes centerstage in any discussion about him.

The epistolary tradition seems the most prominent trend in the section of the McSweeney's website dedicated to DFW. Many writers mention correspondences they maintained with DFW.

People speculate about him in a way usually reserved for either real friends or people you really want to be. DFW falls, obviously, in the latter category.

They mention readings and panel appearances. Some talk about being in classes of his, and others mention workshop-type events. These writers are all in awe of a man they barely know<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> This is when you're supposed to grin at your author, or just say “Fuck you” and turn away.

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<sup>x</sup> “The folk expressions of the American people are part of the nation's heritage, as varied as the land itself.”

I've lost variance; I lie, archaic, prying the book's binding apart so it opens to the right page, always.