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Oops!

Do I Do That?

Discrete
vs.
Discreet

This common error was suggested as an "Oops! Do I Do That?" by a newsletter reader.

Discrete means something separate and distinct; *discreet* means good judgment, especially in keeping silent (similar to *prudent*).

NO:

She's so poised and discrete about her family's inheritance.

YES:

This needs to be divided into discrete sections.

YES:

Thank you for being so discreet about my health problems.

Just What Exactly Is "the Skin of My Teeth" Anyway?

Sneaking away by "the skin of my teeth" has developed into a common expression for making a narrow escape. But where did such a creepy-sounding saying come from in the first place?

The phrase is mentioned in Chapter 19, Verse 20 of the Book of Job: "My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth." Other translations, however, have the phrase as "My flesh rots on my bones, my teeth drop from my gums."

While the original intent of the phrase was to note how ill and emaciated Job had become, the phrase has been adapted over time to mean a narrow escape.

Have a Quick Grammar Question?

Struggling with where to go for a quick grammar question? Need a tune-up on your writing or spelling? Check out the About.com Guide to Grammar and Composition site. Led by a college English professor (and one of Kelci's About.com colleagues), it's a fantastic resource.

It's bookmark worthy!

<http://grammar.about.com>

Nifty Word of the Month

omerta, *foreign term*:

conspiracy of silence (Italian etymology).

(Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Jan. 30, 2009)

That or Which?

One of the most frequent errors seen by kelcilynn.com is the incorrect use of *that* and *which*.

An easy way to decide between *that* and *which* is to ask yourself a simple question: If I take out what follows after *which*, will the meaning of my sentence change significantly? For example:

The dog that has a red collar runs very fast.

The dog, which has a red collar, runs very fast.

The first sentence indicates that there may be many dogs, and that the author wants to identify the one with the red collar. The second sentence indicates that the dog, who happens to have a red collar, runs very fast. You can take out *which has a red collar* in the second sentence and not drastically change the meaning; if you took out *that has a red collar* in the first sentence, a reader may not know to which dog you were referring. (For those more familiar with English grammar terminology: *that* is used for restrictive clauses while *which* is reserved for nonrestrictive clauses.)

Another key item to know about *that* versus *which*: you should always set off your *which* element with commas, like in the example above. (Conversely, you should not set off your *that* element with commas.)

The following sentence appeared in an AP story on February 1. It's a great example of the proper use of *that* and *which*:

The Food and Drug Administration said Friday it had asked the Justice Department to launch a criminal investigation into Peanut Corp., which authorities say shipped products that initially tested positive for salmonella after retesting and getting a negative result.

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