

Why ‘grateful’ is spelled that way

Written by ‘Grammar Guy’ By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
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As we turn our calendars to November, I always wonder why there isn’t any good Thanksgiving music out there. Halloween has a handful of hits. Obviously, Christmas and Hanukkah have their own genre of “holiday” music. Why doesn’t Thanksgiving get any good songs?

These songs would be great. I’d be grateful to have a song connected with Thanksgiving in addition to Adam Sandler’s lonely “Turkey Song.” Wait a second — is it “grateful” or “greatful?” Let’s get to the bottom of this cornucopia of spelling confusion.

I’m going to cut to the chase and let you know that “grateful” (with one “l”) is the correct spelling. The misspelling “greatful” is not a word. Don’t use it. Don’t let your friends spell it that way. It’s incorrect.

Of course, always be kind when correcting others’ spelling or grammar, and only do it on a one-on-one basis. Never correct someone’s spelling or grammar in public!

How do we get this word “grateful” that just looks strange? After all, Tony the Tiger never says, “They’re grate!” when referring to a heaping bowl of Frosted Flakes. A “grate” is a noun that means “a frame of metal bars used to block something.” When used as a verb, “grate” means to either “reduce to small pieces by using a grater” or “to make an unpleasant sound.”

If we think again about this “grat-” word stem, we can recall words like “gratify,” “gratitude” and

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even “gratis” (something for free). It’s time to bust out our Latin dictionaries, folks.

The root Latin word we get “grateful” from is “gratus,” which means “pleasing or grateful.” This has no connection whatsoever with potatoes “au gratin.” “Gratin” is a French culinary term for something that is topped with a browned crust. “Gratin” comes from the French word “gratter,” which means “to scrape” or “to grate.” There it is!

Now we can see where these two “grat-” words get their different meanings. A sound that is “grating” to your ears is incredibly unpleasant. It’s the sound of nails on a chalkboard or a fork scraping against a dinner plate.

Words including “ingratiate,” “gratuity” and even “congratulate” come from the Latin root word that means “grateful.” Although initially, it makes sense to spell “grateful” incorrectly, now it all makes sense.

Cheese is great. You can grate cheese. If a friend gives you an entire wheel of cheese, you are grateful for the thoughtful gesture. Now if we can just get someone to write songs about Thanksgiving and cheese, that would be great.

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