

These words are counting on you

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 17 March 2023 03:54



I've always been a numbers guy. In elementary school, if anyone made fun of my disproportionately large head, I would withhold answers to math homework. Yes, I was an egghead in more ways than one.

Of course, I love to think about the intersection of words and numbers. The other day I heard someone say "to the tenth degree." As a number and word nerd, I knew this was wrong. In fact, to the tenth degree is a large amount; however, the correct term is "to the nth degree."

To the nth degree means "as much as possible." In math terms, to the nth degree means the highest power of the variable in a polynomial — think something "squared," which would be a number with a little "2" in the top corner. To the "nth" degree is an algebraic term for the largest number possible in the top corner, signified by the letter "n."

As it turns out, math and English get nerdy in a hurry! But we're not done yet.

Did you know that "zero" gets treated like a plural number? I'm guessing a team of powdered-wigged grammarians flipped a coin to decide this at some point in the days of yore.

When you discuss one "potato," you use the singular form of potato. When you discuss two "potatoes," you use the plural form. What about "zero"? You have zero "potatoes." Yep, when it comes to English grammar, zero is plural.

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Speaking of plural number terms, what about “math” and “maths”? We all know that the full term is “mathematics,” but which is the correct shortened word term? That depends on where you live.

In the U.S., we shorten “mathematics” to “math.” The reason we do this is that “mathematics” is what we call a “mass” noun. A mass noun, as you may recall, is an uncountable, or abstract notion.

Think about words like “sunshine,” “information” and “psychology.” Since “mathematics” is a mass noun, we attribute a singular verb to it: The mathematics class was easy.

While we tend to use the term “math” in the U.S. and Canada, our English-speaking compadres in the U.K., Ireland and Australia (among others) use “maths.” Their argument is that mathematics is plural, as it ends with an -s. Because of this, they argue that the shortened form of “mathematics” should be “maths.”

They are entitled to their incorrect opinion.

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