

How Martin Luther marched in Selma and other 'Top Exam Howlers'

Written by Bruce Alsobrook
Saturday, 29 August 2009 13:59

I catch so much grief over the occasional misspelled word that it's downright gratifying to me to find someone else has erred with pen and paper. (Hey, I maintain we get more than 99 percent of 'em right, so cool it!) Today I stumbled across something I haven't seen in a long time that left me more grateful than I've been in years, and I just had to share.

They're called exam howlers, but you may know them by other names, such as student bloopers.

They're classic spoonerisms, which are those slips of the tongue wherein we say something outlandishly funny. In this case, it's usually a student getting their facts mixed up, creating anamorphic and anachronistic statements on essay tests. Sometimes it's a public school. Occasionally it's a student at a respected university. It's always funny, though. (It's not to be confused with the Freudian slip, however, which occurs, for example, when you're having lunch with your parents, and you mean to say, "Please pass the salt," but instead slip up and say, "You ruined my life!")

Enjoy!

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Best Wank and Gaza: this year's top exam howlers

By Rebecca Attwood

Rebecca Attwood looks at the student bloopers that reduced their tutors to tears

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William Spooner - he of the spoonerism - would have been proud.

The egregious errors that prompted academics' happiest - and most worrying - moments during weeks of marking have been flooding in for Times Higher Education's "exam howlers" competition.

Alongside classic cases of catachresis, marvellous malapropisms, and terrifying typos, this year's entries include students who confused science with folklore, conflated famous figures who lived centuries apart, and came up with startling new interpretations of great literary works.

The "Google generation" finds it hard to imagine life before the world wide web, it seems. A student of Leo Enticknap, lecturer in cinema at the University of Leeds, explained that a political group "used the internet to publicise their cause, just like the French Resistance did during the Second World War".

On the other side of the pond, when David Null, an emeritus professor at California State Polytechnic University, asked his class to write about the person they most admired, he was impressed to receive an essay on Martin Luther.

It turned out to be a mishmash of facts about a 16th-century Protestant reformer, who miraculously also managed to head up the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, some four centuries later.

Meanwhile, a biology student spent an entire paper telling Kevin Reiling, from the Faculty of Sciences at Staffordshire University, about the science of gnomes.

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"It took me a while to realise she was referring to genomes," Dr Reiling remarked.

Be prepared: several of this year's entries are rather lewd.

We all know that Shakespeare can be bawdy, but even Peter Smith, reader in Renaissance studies and an expert on the playwright at Nottingham Trent University, was surprised by this explanation of a passage from King Lear.

The Fool's remark that "thou madest thy daughters thy mothers; for ... thou gavest them the rod and puttest down thine own breeches", means "King Lear pulled down his trousers and gave his daughters the rod", apparently.

In a similar vein, Dr Enticknap was told about a film being made undercover "to draw attention to human rights abuses in the West Bank and Gaza".

Sometimes mistakes uncannily reflect the feelings of the examiner.

When a finalist's commentary on a medieval French poem said that "all of the sentences end in a coma", Emma Cayley, senior lecturer in French at the University of Exeter, thought: "Yup, that's pretty much how I felt marking it, too."

Finally, Charles Booth, a reader at the University of the West of England's business school,

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came across a frank admission from a candidate who managed to produce a six-line answer to a two-hour examination consisting of two essay questions.

The final sentence read: "If this exam was a film, it would be called Total Retake."

A student at the University of Brunel told Gareth Dale, senior lecturer in politics and international relations, that the United States had the most powerful and advanced military in the world, possessing "highly-developed and powerful marital equipment".

Another misquoted Thomas Hobbes, explaining that the English philosopher believed "people in the state of nature were nasty, brutish and short". Hobbes was in fact referring to "life", rather than "people".

Asked about the British electoral system in an exam, a first-year politics student at Royal Holloway, University of London, told history lecturer Rene Wolf about a system called "first parcel post".

A student who conducted a research project in a local school stressed the role of "pier-support mechanisms" and the importance of carrying out inquiries in a "friendly manor" to Andrew Osbaldestin, the University of Portsmouth's head of maths.

When David Null, an emeritus professor at California State Polytechnic University, showed members of his class a film about a boy found in a forest in 1797, several thought they had watched a documentary about recent events.

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"The fact that there are no automobiles or electricity in the film did not shake one student's belief that the film was a recent documentary. He explained that he had never been to France and assumed it was just a very backward place," Professor Null said.

Meanwhile, John Wilson, placements tutor at the University of Central Lancashire, was asked for a reference via the following message: "Will you please be a referee for a job for which I am appalling?" The student in question wants to be a teacher.

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FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO .. More Howlers

The Bible is full of interesting caricatures. In the first book of the Bible, Guinness, Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree. One of their children, Cain, asked 'Am I my brother's son?'

Moses led the Hebrew slaves to the Red Sea, where they made themselves unleavened bread which is bread made without any ingredients. Moses went up on Mount Cynanide to get the ten commandments. He died before he ever reached Canada.

Solomom had three hundred wives and seven hundred porcupines.

The Greeks were a highly sculptured people and without them we wouldn't have history. The

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Greeks also had myths. A myth is a female moth.

Actually, Homer was not written by Homer but another man of that name.

Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock. After his death, his career suffered a dramatic decline.

In the Olympic game, Greeks ran races, jumped, hurled the biscuits and threw the java.

Eventually the Romans conquered the Greeks. History calls people Romans because they never stayed in one place for very long.

Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the battlefields of Gaul. The Ids of March murdered him because they thought he was going to be made king. Dying, he gasped out: 'Tee hee, Brutus'.

Nero was a cruel tyranny who would torture his subjects by playing the fiddle to them.

Joan of Arc was burnt to a steak and was cannonized by Bernard Shaw. Finally Magna Carta provided that no man should be hanged twice for the same offence.

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In midevil times most people were alliterate. The greatest writer of the futile ages was Chaucer, who wrote many poems and verses and also wrote literature.

Another story was William Tell, who shot an arrow through an apple while standing on his son's head.

Queen Elizabeth was the 'Virgin Queen'. As a queen she was a success. When she exposed herself before her troops they all shouted 'hurrah'.

It was an age of great inventions and discoveries. Gutenberg invented removable type and the Bible. Another important invention was the circulation of the blood. Sir Walter Raleigh is a historical figure because he invented cigarettes and started smoking. And Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world with a 100 foot clipper.

The greatest writer of the Renaissance was William Shakespeare. He was born in the year 1564, supposedly on his birthday. He never mad much money and is famous only because of his plays. He wrote tragedies, comedies and hysterectomies, all in Islamic pentameter. Romeo and Juliet are an example of a heroic couplet. Romeo's last wish was to be laid by Juliet.

Writing at the same times as Shakespeare was Miguel Cervantes. He wrote Donkey Hote. The next great author was John Milton. Milton wrote Paradise Lost. Then his wife died and he wrote Paradise Regained.

During the Renaissaance America began. Christopher Columbus was a great navigator who discovered America while cursing about the Atlantic. His ships were called the Pinto, the Nina and the Santa Fe.

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Later the Pilgrims crossed the ocean, and this was called Pilgrim's Progress. The winter of 1620 was a hard one for the settlers. Many people died and many babies were born. Captain John Smith was responsible for all this.

One of the causes for the Revolutionary war was the English put tacks in their tea. Also the colonists would send their parcels through the post without stamps. Finally, the colonists won the War and no longer had to pay for taxes. Delegates from the original 13 states formed the Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson, a Virgin, and Benjamin Franklin were two signers of the Declaration of Independence. Franklin discovered electricity by rubbing two cats backwards and declared 'A horse divided against itself cannot stand'. Franklin died in 1790 and is still dead.

Soon the Constitution of the United States was adopted to secure domestic hostility. Under the constitution the people enjoyed the right to keep bare arms.

Abraham Lincoln became America's greatest Precedent. Lincoln's mother died in infancy, and he was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands. Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. On the night of April 14 1865, Lincoln went to the theatre and got shot in his seat by one of the actors in a moving picture show. The believed assassin was John Booth, a supposedly insane actor. This ruined Booth's career.

Meanwhile in Europe, the enlightenment was a reasonable time. Voltaire invented electricity and also wrote a book called Candy.

Gravity was invented by Issac Walton. It is chiefly noticeable in the autumn when the apples are falling off the trees.

Johann Bach wrote a great many musical compositions and had a large number of children. In

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between he practised on an old spinster which he kept up in his attic. Bach died from 1750 to the present. Bach was the most famous composer in the world and so was Handel. Handel was half German, half Italian and half English. He was very large.

Beethoven wrote music even though he was deaf. He was so deaf he wrote loud music. He took long walks in the forest even when everyone was calling for him. Beethoven expired in 1827 and later died for this.

The French revolution was accomplished before it happened and catapulted into Napoleon. Napoleon wanted an heir to inherit his power, but since Josephine was baroness, she couldn't have any children.

The sun never set on the British Empire because the British Empire is in the East and the sun sets in the West.

Queen Victoria was the longest queen. She sat on a thorn for 63 years. She was a moral woman who practised virtue. Her death was the final event that ended her reign.

The nineteenth century was a time of a great many thoughts and inventions. People stopped reproducing by hand and started reproducing by machine. The invention of the steamboat caused a network of rivers to spring up. Cyrus McCormick invented the McCormick reaper, which did the work of a hundred men.

Louis Pasteur discovered a cure for rabbits. Charles Darwin was a naturalist who wrote the Organ of the Species, Madman Curie discovered radio. And Karl Marx became one of the Marx Brothers.

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The First World War caused by the assignation of the Arch-Duck by an anahist, ushered in a new error in the anals of human history.