

By ANNE DONNELL

Are you willing to teach us all about the subjunctive? It seems to be about the hardest thing there is in grammar, so you if you want a pass on it, I'd understand. I'm a former teacher myself.
-Other Subjects My Domain

Well, I got into teaching a few other subjects myself, even one year of math (eighth grade), some art, some history. Some manners, some "debate" skills, shouting, fussing, desk cleaning, wearing funny clothes and bad make-up. There must be more.

But, I can now hardly carry on a conversation with a seventh grader. Even if I use the subjunctive.

Teaching the subjunctive (certainly not "all about" !) still seems a mountain too distant, too high. But then you column readers, aren't sticking gum on furniture, passing obscene notes, yawning, and rolling your eyes – or are you? Three cheers for bald and wrinkled and paunchy.

I apologize to nice people back then and right now, some of whom stop me and tell me they read this column. I will say that when someone comments, "You still writing that column?" I have a little clue about their non reading, but I'm honored by all those of you who make a point to tell me you're reading. Thank you.

The subjunctive mood is often tied to unreality – wishes, things that won't happen. It's a way of letting the listener or reader know this. Quite an amazing little road down which grammar traveled, isn't it? An alert to unreality.

However, "English Grammar 4 U" online (that title says a lot) states, "Subjunctive is rather insignificant in modern English. Most likely you might come across this form in American English, and most probably in formal texts." So, relief 4 U, and peace 2 U.

The subjunctive is typically formed by using the past tense plural, even if the subject is singular. (a happy instance in which one is released from subject-verb agreement, a release I've noted spread all over the place anyway. Don't it never annoy you?)

EXAMPLES OF CONDITIONS CONTRARY TO FACT. (Some congressman or congresswoman can help you determine fact, if that's a quandary for you. Congresspeople are big on fact finding.) If I were you, I'd never go there again. If I were President of the United States of America, I'd make every one of those kids do everything I say.

EXAMPLE OF WISH. I wish I were so rich I could buy the Gulf of Mexico. (Huh?) THIS CAN ALSO HAVE THE SENSE OF REQUEST. I wish that you be gone by tomorrow.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE. The subjunctive can be used to follow an independent clause that uses adjectives or verbs that indicate urgency. EXAMPLES OF THAT. It seemed crucial that he demand a hearing. People demand that the troops be sent home.

There's a formulaic subjunctive used in some fixed phrases. EXAMPLES OF FIXED PHRASES. God save the queen. [not seen as an order given to God, but as a desired condition or a wish] Long live the king. Thy will be done. Be that as it may.

The subjunctive is inaccurately seen as trouble, but its biggest drawback is its unavoidable formal tone. We're informal, as they say, to a fault!

ONLINE DEPARTMENT "Should I Really Join Facebook?" (Thanks, A.R.) *When I bought my Blackberry, I thought about the 30-year business I ran with 1800 employees, all without a cell phone that plays music, takes videos, pictures and communicates with Facebook and Twitter. I signed up under duress for Twitter and Facebook, so my seven kids, their spouses, 13 grandkids and 2 great grand kids could communicate with me in the modern way. I figured I could handle something as simple as Twitter with only 140 characters of space. That was before one of my grandkids hooked me up for Tweeter, Tweetree, Twhirl, Twitterfon, Tweetie and Twittererific Tweetdeck, Twitpix and something that sends every message to my cell phone and every other program within the texting world. My phone was beeping every three minutes*

with the details of everything except the bathroom details of the entire next generation. I am not ready to live like this. I keep my cell phone in the garage in my golf bag. The kids bought me a GPS for my last birthday because they say I get lost every now and then going over to the grocery store or library. I keep that in a box under my tool bench with the Bluetooth [it's red] phone I am supposed to use when I drive. I wore it once and was standing in line at Barnes and Noble talking to my wife and everyone in the nearest 50 yards was glaring at me. I had to take my hearing aid out to use it, and I got a little loud. I mean the GPS looked pretty smart on my dash board, but the lady inside that gadget was the most annoying, rudest person I had run into in a long time. Every 10 minutes, she would sarcastically say, "Re-calc-u-lating." You would think that she could be nicer. It was like she could barely tolerate me. She would let go with a deep sigh and then tell me to make a U-turn at the next light. Then if I made a right turn instead. Well, it was not a good relationship. When I get really lost now, I call my wife and tell her the name of the cross streets and while she is starting to develop the same tone as Gypsy, the GPS lady, at least she loves me. To be perfectly frank, I am still trying to learn how to use the cordless phones in our house. We have had them for 4 years, but I still haven't figured out how I can lose three phones all at once and have to run around digging under chair cushions and checking bathrooms and the dirty laundry baskets when the phone rings. The world is just getting too complex for me. They even mess me up every time I go to the grocery store. You would think they could settle on something themselves but this sudden "Paper or Plastic?" every time I check out just knocks me for a loop. I bought some of those cloth reusable bags to avoid looking confused, but I never remember to take them in with me. Now I toss it back to them. When they ask me, "Paper or Plastic?" I just say, "Doesn't matter to me. I am bi-sacksual." Then it's their turn to stare at me with a blank look. I was recently asked if I tweet. I answered, "No, but I do toot a lot." We senior citizens don't need any more gadgets. The TV remote and the garage door remote are about all we can handle.