

The Bureau

John looked left at the looming paper mound of the "In" stack, and the corresponding, all-too-empty, "Out" circular bin on his right. He would have to start sometime. With a mental shrug, he pulled a folder at random from the middle of the "In" stack, and balanced its siblings above to prevent a paper-slide and the associated effort of cleanup.

The manilla sheath opened to reveal pages and pages of complete gibberish. It looked that way to John. But really, it couldn't be. It was an unending string of characters (at least it used the alphabet). Rather than pick another file out, he made himself busy with the one he had. It wasn't his fault if the self-important Bureau gave him nonsense.

John cross-referenced its label, and strained turning around to the tall shelves behind him. He yanked out the matching translation binder. That was done without needing to get out of his chair. It was a small victory.

He had the binder side-by-side with the splayed beige folder. John was already preparing his explanation for the inevitable questions on why exactly he wasted time with what must have been a clerical error. It was better to rehearse an excuse than attempt to change course.

He started reading the translation guide:

Rule 1: Replace every vowel with its corresponding consonant.

Step A: Adjust page margins to ensure stability in case of high winds.

(SEE: Entry on SAFETY MARGINS in previous edition of this guide)

Guideline a: Connect adjacent diphthongs to illustrate clear exit paths.

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This made no sense. And what was a diphthong? Then again, it was no use worrying about that yet, since "Rule 1" came first.

John set about marking out each a, e, i, o, and u. He'd always felt i's should be t's anyway. Dotting i's and crossing t's was too much work: better just to cross everything (and you can draw a t over an i if you don't mind a little mess). e's are just c's trying too hard, so best cut them down to size by striking out their central stroke. u's were inverted n's, so they all got a small arrow indicating "rotate." John went on, not minding that his process varied page-to-page and usually involved finding the path of least effort. If he had a philosophical bent, John might have smiled at the iconoclastic, no *egoclastic*, substitution of the individual "I" with the sign of the cross. But he hadn't, so he didn't.

Eventually, he got tired of squinting at the letters on the page and trying to judge if "y" counted as a vowel. So, John moved on from "Rule 1" to "Step A," just restraining himself from replacing it with the appropriate consonant. Copyeditors should restrain themselves when they read beyond their purview.

Safety margins and inclement weather, John couldn't see what place they had in his 8.5" x 11" sheets. Maybe the authoritative "Previous Edition" of the translation binder could make sense of it. On checking his current copy, it turned out to be the first and only printing of that particular guide. Once again, John glossed over the inconsistency and set about expanding this margin, decreasing that one, and adding a rakish tilt to the footer, all in the name of safety.

He was getting the hang of this, and knowing it was all wasted work did not trouble him at all. It was hardly his fault that he had a faulty translation guide. Nor did it surprise him in the slightest when he got to "Guideline a" mentioning diphthongs. After a quick glance at the dictionary balanced askew on his desk, John learned these were select pairs of vowels, all of which were now artfully amended through the first three pages. No matter.

As he entered a flow of redefining and connecting diphthongs with almost-straight lines across the black rows of text, John let his mind wander.

Eventually, and without recalling where his thoughts had drifted, he remembered where he was. Specifically, it was after 5pm on a workday, and he was still in the office. It was time to leave the desk and its contents until tomorrow.

Conveniently, he had also reached the end of the instructions, having finally applied the last "Recommendation i." He was left with a network of lines, letters, and barely concentric circles. Those last, John could not quite remember drawing, but they stared back at him from under his pen.

Not bothering to flip back through the day's labors, John up and left for an unremarkable commute home, and an equally unremarkable commute back sixteen hours later.

This daily sequence for John of meandering through some translation guide, followed by forgettable trips to and from his house, ran together down the calendar. One unhurried day, the news reports tripped him up.

As a rule, he avoided current events. If he ever slipped, he made sure to never offer his attention to their outstretched hands. This time he stumbled over a familiar bundle of lines and circles.

An obscure report bubbled to the chiron (it must have been a slow news day) of newly discovered Mayan ruins underneath a patch of farmland. Beneath the slurry of opinions on ownership and nomenclature and significance, there surfaced John's first day's work at the Bureau.

Somehow his scratchings had wandered from their page in his "Out" bin, and buried themselves as the lost remains of a great stone temple. That would have been quite the trick, if it weren't just an absurd coincidence.

Over the still running-together months and weeks and nights that followed, John saw his translations crop up in more and more unlikely places in the real world around him. He decided, in an uncharacteristic show of initiative, to make a test. He would break the rules! He would break the translation rules in such an obvious way that if his outbound papers tried to escape, they'd give themselves away at the first inspection.

The next day, his hand plucked another manila folder from the "In" box. This time it contained sketches for a grand landscape painting. Its associated translation manual directed him through the customarily mindless steps of correcting the grammar and manners of each stroke, converting cubits to meters, and adding a simple rhyme scheme. Procedure **N**, Commandments I through X, 64 Hexagrams of I Ching, they rolled past. Just before completing the document (a description of an absurd and impossible building smack in the middle of a European capital), John boldly scrawled a memo at the bottom, a warning to his work not to stray too far. He'd be watching. Not that it needed the warning: if the notes did wander off the page into the real world, the scribbles couldn't but help be noticed as a fantasy.

It wasn't until he stumbled across an advertisement for a vacation abroad that he noticed the havoc wrecked by his sketches and their attached addendum. That night, his scrawled note had tidied up, leapt, and plastered itself across the cityscape of Rome. Where had once been clear rectilinear streets, John's script handwriting had aligned itself to the straight rule of Via dei Fori Imperiali. His scrawl had tangled the streets on one side into an unrecognizable mess of curls and dead ends. At the end of this new maze of back alleys, where just before had been an empty plaza, sat the impossible building to which John had signed his name. He had created the Colosseum. Echoes of the arena scattered themselves around the world and history as ancient stadiums. No one else was any the wiser, for the Colosseum had been thoroughly embedded in the past as much as the present.

John was given a small warning (found on top of his "In" box) for his excesses on that assignment, but otherwise left unscathed. He grew into his role at the Bureau, and learned more of what other assignments were being passed around.

From that night forward he was careful to strictly obey each contradicting instruction given to him, without adding his opinion. Maybe if he was diligent he would one day find in his "In" box the manila folder corresponding to the annual rederivation of the English alphabet's order. He could put "B" second! Wouldn't that be a laugh.