

## 12.3 Design flaws

## READING

- A** 1 Read this article and **highlight** the parts that amuse you, or which strike a chord with you.

## DESIGN FLAWS

I have a teenaged son who is a runner. He has, at a conservative estimate, 6,100 pairs of running shoes, and every one of them represents a greater investment of cumulative design effort than, say, Milton Keynes.

These shoes are amazing. I was just reading a review in one of his running magazines of the latest in 'sport utility sneakers', as they are called here, and it was full of passages like this: 'A dual-density EVA midsole with air units fore and aft provides stability while a gel heel-insert absorbs shock, but the shoe makes a narrow footprint, a characteristic that typically suits only the biomechanically efficient runner.' Alan Shepard went into space with less science at his disposal than that.

So here is my question. If my son can have his choice of a seemingly limitless range of scrupulously engineered, biomechanically efficient footwear, why does my computer keyboard suck? This is a serious enquiry.

My computer keyboard has 102 keys – almost double what my old manual typewriter had – which on the face of it seems awfully generous. Among other typographical luxuries, I can choose between three styles of bracket and two kinds of colon. I can dress my text with carets (^) and tildes (~). I can have slashes that fall to the left or to the right, and goodness knows what else.

I have so many keys, in fact, that over on the right-hand side of the keyboard there are whole communities of buttons of whose function I haven't the tiniest inkling. Occasionally I hit one by accident and subsequently discover that several paragraphs of my work now look like this, or that I have written the last page and a half in an interesting but unfortunately non-alphabetic font called Wingdings, but otherwise I haven't the faintest idea what those buttons are there for.

Never mind that many of these keys duplicate the functions of other keys, while others apparently do nothing at all (my favourite in this respect is one marked 'Pause', which when pressed does absolutely nothing, raising the interesting metaphysical question of whether it is therefore doing its job), or that several keys are arrayed in slightly imbecilic places. The delete key, for instance, is right beside the overprint key, so that often I discover, with a trill of gay laughter, that my most recent thoughts have been devouring, Pacman-like, everything I had previously written. Quite often, I somehow hit a combination of keys that summons a box which says, in effect, 'This Is a Pointless Box. Do You Want It?' which is followed by another that says, 'Are You Sure You Don't Want the Pointless Box?' Never mind all that. I have known for a long time that the computer is not my friend.

But here is what gets me. Out of all the 102 keys at my disposal, there is no key for the fraction  $\frac{1}{2}$ . Typewriter keyboards always used to have a key for  $\frac{1}{2}$ . Now, however, if I wish to write  $\frac{1}{2}$ , I have to bring down the font menu and call up a directory called 'WP Characters', then hunt through a number of sub-directories until I remember or more often blunder on the particular one, 'Typographic Symbols', in which hides the furtive  $\frac{1}{2}$  sign. This is irksome and pointless and it doesn't seem right to me.

But then most things in the world don't seem right to me. On the dashboard of our family car is a shallow indentation about the size of a paperback book. If you are looking for somewhere to put your sunglasses or spare change, it is the obvious place, and it works extremely well, I must say, so long as the car is not actually moving. As soon as you put the car in motion, however, and particularly when you touch the brakes, turn a corner, or go up a gentle slope, everything slides off. There is, you see, no lip round this dashboard tray. It is just a flat space, with a dimpled bottom. It can hold nothing that has not been nailed to it.



So I ask you: what, then, is it for? Somebody had to design it. It didn't just appear spontaneously. Some person – perhaps, for all I know, a whole committee of people in the Dashboard Stowage Division – had to invest time and thought in incorporating into the design of this vehicle a storage tray that will actually hold nothing. That is really quite an achievement.

But it is nothing, of course, compared with the manifold design achievements of those responsible for the modern video recorder. Now I am not going to go on about how impossible it is to programme the typical video recorder because you know that already. Nor will I observe how irritating it is that you must cross the room and get down on your belly to confirm that it is actually recording. But I will just make one small passing observation. I recently bought a video recorder and one of the selling points – one of the things the manufacturer boasted about – was that it was capable of recording programmes up to twelve months in advance. Now think about this for a moment and tell me any circumstance – and I mean any circumstance at all – in which you can envision wanting to set a video machine to record a programme one year from now.

I don't want to sound like some old guy who is always moaning. I freely acknowledge that there are many excellent, well-engineered products that didn't exist when I was a boy – the pocket calculator and kettles that switch off automatically are two that fill me yet with gratitude and wonder – but it does seem to me that an awful lot of things out there have been designed by people who cannot possibly have stopped to think how they will be used.

Just think for a moment of all the everyday items you have to puzzle over – fax machines, photocopiers, central heating thermostats, airline tickets, television remote control units, hotel showers and alarm clocks, microwave ovens, almost any electrical product owned by someone other than you – because they are ill thought out.

And why are they so ill thought out? Because all the best designers are making running shoes. Either that, or they are just idiots. In either case, it really isn't fair.

Bill Bryson

## 2 Find words in the text which mean the same as the following:


- ¶3 infinite    ¶4 decorate    ¶5 typeface    ¶6 idiotic    ¶7 discover by accident    ¶8 hollow area  
 ¶9 without human intervention    ¶10 numerous    ¶10 imagine    ¶11 complaining

### B


Choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence:

- The writer finds his computer keyboard ...  
 a inefficient    c frustrating  
 b confusing    d infuriating
- with a trill of gay laughter (¶6) is an example of ...  
 a heavy irony    c his cheerfulness in the face of adversity  
 b gentle irony    d a paradox
- What irritates the writer most about his computer is ...  
 a the pointless boxes that appear    c the lack of a ½ key  
 b how easy it is to delete accidentally    d the keys he never uses
- The indentation on his car's dashboard works fine ...  
 a when the car is driven slowly    c except when it is used for loose change  
 b when the car is stationary    d except when the car is parked on a slope
- The facility of being able to set a video recorder to record 12 months from now is ...  
 a a useful feature    c pointless  
 b a good marketing feature    d likely to make programming it harder
- The problem with many products is that the designers ...  
 a have concentrated on appearance    c are inadequately trained  
 b haven't considered the users    d know how to use their own products

### C

 Write a SUMMARY of what the writer LIKES about modern design and technology (50–70 words).

### D

 Discuss these questions:

- What did you find funny about the article? Tell each other which parts struck a chord with you.
- Look again at paragraph 10. Is the writer just *an old guy who is always moaning*?
- Look again at paragraph 12. Which of the products have you had to puzzle over? Do you share the writer's feelings about them?



## 12.4 Verbs + prepositions

## GRAMMAR REVIEW

A

Read each set of notes and then do the exercises below. Choose from among these prepositions:

about against at by for from in on out of to with

1 Some verbs normally **HAVE TO BE** followed by a preposition:Who does that white coat **belong to**?You must be **confusing** me **with** someone else.Where do you **come from**?

Fill in the missing prepositions in this list:

combine something .....

engage .....

part .....

compare something .....

invest .....

reason .....

contrast something .....

lean .....

rely .....

depend .....

mistake it/them .....

separate something .....

2 Some verbs **CAN** be used with a prepositional phrase (but they needn't be):I think he **applied** last week.Yes, but what did he **apply for**? Who did he **apply to**? When did he **apply**?He **applied to** his father's company for a job.

Add the missing prepositions. The verbs in blue can be used with more than one preposition.

agree .....

insist .....

smell .....

apologise .....

interfere .....

struggle .....

approve .....

intrude .....

succeed .....

bargain .....

negotiate .....

suffer .....

care .....

object .....

talk .....

decide .....

quarrel .....

vote .....

experiment .....

resign .....

watch .....

hope .....

retire .....

worry .....

3 Some verbs normally followed by an object can **ALSO** be used with prepositional phrases:She **accused** someone. Yes but what did she **accuse** them **of**?He **borrowed** something. Yes, but who did he **borrow** it **from**?

Add the missing prepositions. The verbs in blue can be used with more than one preposition.

admire him .....

deliver it .....

thank her .....

blame her .....

punish him .....

threaten them .....

congratulate him .....

rescue them .....

use it .....

consult her .....

respect her .....

warn him .....

convince them .....

take it .....

B

Fill each gap with a suitable preposition.

## Penguin power pushes propellers aside

A ship that flaps its way <sup>1</sup> the water like a penguin is to be built <sup>2</sup> the United States after engineers realised that the bird is much better at moving <sup>3</sup> the water than a propeller-driven boat.

Boat builders have been using propellers <sup>4</sup> over 150 years but researchers have been uncomfortable at the knowledge that the aquatic world, <sup>5</sup> 150 million years <sup>6</sup> evolutionary experience, has ignored propellers as a means of moving <sup>7</sup> water.

After studying the fins <sup>8</sup> various fish, the researchers, <sup>9</sup> the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, realised that penguins slide <sup>10</sup> water at least 15 per cent more efficiently than boats.

From videos of swimming penguins, the researchers watched the birds' pectoral fins waft