

PRO TIPS

for media advisers

Comments from Jack Kennedy

Roy Peter Clark has been one of the nation's preeminent writing coaches for decades, and he still writes occasional posts for Poynter, as well as writing books on writing that help shape the thinking of professionals. His ideas are equally important for high school journalists (or any high school or college writer?).

We run the risk of sparking divisive arguments in our classroom when we discuss political rhetoric, but there are times, as in this recent case of the president of the United States claiming he is being "lynched," when classes that focus on precision of language, not to mention reporting the truth (as best we can find it), might be able to find a way to show broader implications of using rhetoric improperly.

This commentary from RPC includes the definition of a word I admit to not knowing up until today, as well as a quick etymology of "lynch" and lots of everyday examples of how we sometimes use false comparisons.

Some of those just fly right by, as we do some mental editing and easily understand the hyperbole or translate the false into something more meaningful.

But our work is based on precision and clarity, so we need to pay attention to how language is being used or misused, and do our best to encourage our writers to avoid falsity.

Trump's 'lynching' tweet highlights the dark world of false comparisons

October 23, 2019 / Roy Peter Clark

When it comes to public language, we live in the era of the false comparison. I wrote that sentence in 2011, and it still stands.

I want to revisit that charge in the light of President Donald Trump's assertion that recent actions against him amount to a "lynching." Condemning the Democrats' move to impeach him, the president tweeted:

"All Republicans must remember what they are witnessing here — a lynching. But we will WIN!"

By now we are familiar with Trump's rhetorical style. Whether he is telling lies or truths, or something in between, he is prone to overstatement. That tendency can be detected above in his uppercase WIN, followed by an exclaimer.

All members of all political parties do some of that, some of the time. Trump has made it the hallmark of his political style. He is Trump the Stumper. Insulter-in-Chief. The pro-wrestling promoter. The carnival barker. The pitchman. To use a rhetorical term, Trump is the supreme *dysphemist*.

I learned the word "dysphemism" not long ago. It is the opposite of the more common word "euphemism." Each involves the substitution of a harsher or softer term for a neutral term.

Let's say I am writing that a relative "died." I could say that he "passed away," or "went home," or grandiloquently "climbed the Golden Staircase." Those are euphemisms.

But if I say he "kicked the bucket," or is "pushing up daisies" or — gruesomely — that he is now "worm food," I have crossed into the land of dysphemism.

The dictionary suggests these examples: My car is a "heap." This butter is "axle grease." My grandmother is the "old bag."

After World War II, George Orwell wrote an essay, now famous, titled "Politics and the English Language." He argued that language corruption leads to political corruption, and vice versa. His most compelling examples were euphemistic:

"In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism.... Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification."

I have no data, no content analysis, to confirm this, but Trump seems more inclined toward dysphemism than euphemism. Calling immigrants or refugees "criminal aliens." Calling information that he doesn't like "fake news." Calling reporters "enemies of the people." Calling investigations "witch hunts." A committee hearing is part of a "coup." His critics are "traitors." He is a victim of a "lynching."

Trump does use softer language, of course, and it often comes in response to criticism of specific actions or policies. But these tend toward overstatement as well. The crowd was the biggest, this person who likes him is the greatest, his controversial phone call was perfect.

The word "lynch" most likely derives from the bad work of an 1820 American vigilante named William Lynch. Trump's use of the term sparked condemnation, followed by explanations from the president's supporters that he was not trying to compare his political predicament to what African-Americans suffered during the days of slavery and Jim Crow.

I get that. He didn't mean it. But he said it. And because of his status alone, he bears responsibility for saying it. All of us bear responsibility for our words, especially our analogies and comparisons. The more public the person, the more power a person has, the greater the responsibility to not misuse the language. Trump does not get a pass because highfalutin' language distinctions are not his bag. Others could help him if he wanted help. He seems to feel safer in a political world where the bar for language to be considered offensive is very, very high.

In my 2011 essay I revisited the 1991 Senate hearing that confirmed Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court. Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill. The testimony was lurid, the debate contentious. Thomas complained, "This is a circus. It's a national disgrace. And from my standpoint, as a black American, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you. You will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree."

I argued with others after 9/11 that President George Bush should not call an American war effort in the Middle East a "crusade." (To his credit, he stopped.) On other similar topics, I wrote: "I can blow the whistle at efforts to

nickname a football team 'the Lynch Mob,' just because a star player is named John Lynch. If the team plays horribly, I'll holler if a coach characterizes the botched effort as 'an abortion.' An act of arson – even against a house of worship – does not qualify ... as a 'Holocaust.'"

I cited Sarah Palin's uninformed use of the term "blood libel" in a political argument. I highlighted how Hank Williams Jr. lost his job after comparing President Barack Obama to Hitler, something that happens eventually to all sitting presidents. And I argued that when Bryant Gumbel described NBA Commissioner David Stern as a "plantation overseer," he, too, was practicing the dark art of the false comparison.

True comparison – whether it comes as analogy, metaphor or simile – helps us see old things in new ways. Or it helps us understand something new and strange by holding it up against something familiar. Even kids can do this, as when our then-7-year-old daughter Emily woke up to tell us that she "had a movie" – that is, a dream.

Let's all use this brief moment, when we will argue about the word "lynching," and recommit ourselves as public writers to the responsible and creative use of language, calling out language malpractice when it really matters.

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It should not matter whether a writer or speaker holds particular political views – in fact, providing examples from a variety of public figures is a best practice.

Notice how RPC has revisited previous posts where he has called out various speakers on their use of false comparisons.

I suppose this might be interpreted as going too far in trying to provide "balance" – there is certainly an argument to be pursued about journalistic "false equivalences," where journalists have implied that one view is just as valid as another and therefore given credence to positions that don't meet basic standards of logic and decency.

But the more important point here is that we need to remind our students to at least attempt to reach out to those holding alternative views and see if we can find any "truths" in those positions.

My favorite definition of journalism, which I learned from Carl Bernstein when I listened to a speech he gave many years ago: **"Journalism is the best obtainable version of the truth."**

"What do readers NEED to know, and WHEN do they need to know?"

– Bob Steele

Check out a more complete discussion of what was discussed at our Winter Professional Development conference in 2018, focused on ethics and media, by going to <https://colstudentmedia.com/csmanews/2017/02/07/winter-thaw-focuses-on-journalistic-ethics/>

Or go to colstudentmedia.com and search for "ethics."

He literally wrote the book on ethics

Bob Steele, now retired from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where he worked for over 20 years, was a featured speaker at the CSMA Professional Development winter workshop in 2018, and he delved into the concept of DOING ethics.

Along with Al Thompkins, also from Poynter, Bob developed a series of handouts in 1991, and the basics have not changed much over time.

Bob believes in using a clear process (in writing and in ethics), and asking a series of questions when confronted with any sort of ethical di-

lemma. He talks about the difference between "red light ethics," (thou shalt NOT!) vs. "green light ethics" (how to minimize harm, as with using anonymous sources).

In thinking of today's "instant news" environment, he said that we often put rookie reporters online right away, "but without much experience in making best decisions." Perhaps we should assign our most experienced reporters to social media reporting, where they can bring their wise thinking to bear.

Print media, he said, has lots of layers of editing and discussion in the process, and is perhaps a better place to learn.