

I used to think I was not that bad and then I got to know me better...

It's hard to be a humor writer. I know what you're saying. You're saying, "How would you know?" And that's one of the hard parts. Humor is very subjective. Just because you didn't find something I wrote funny doesn't mean no one else did, although it's certainly possible no one else did.

Another hard thing is that those readers who do think you're funny also think you must be a happy-go-lucky person who's laughing all the time. The people who know you know otherwise. Once a reader said to my husband, "It must be fun being married to a humor columnist." And he said, "Why?" And when we got home, it was not fun for him.

And once while I was speaking to a group of elementary students about writing humor, one little boy raised his hand and said, "Mrs. Rosby, if you're so funny, why aren't you a comedian?" And I said, "Why weren't you held back?"

Just because I write humor doesn't mean I'm funny all the time—or nice. I'm joking though. I didn't really say anything about the kid being held back. Ha-ha! See what I mean about humor being subjective.

Another thing that bothers me about being a humor writer is that occasionally I'm forced to exploit the mistakes, misfortunes, faults and foibles of others because I have deadlines...and no other good idea. Recently, not one, but two friends told me about getting trapped in their shapewear—stuck in their Spanx. One friend was in a department store dressing room; the other was in her own home. She was alone and afraid. It was hysterical! What could I do? I had to write about it. People should know the dangers of those things.

But the worst part of being a humor writer is that I have to share my own mistakes, misfortunes, faults and foibles because there are way more of them, and because if I'm going to publicly humiliate someone, my readers prefer it be me instead of them.

It's not easy admitting your mistakes in such a public way, but you get through it by telling yourself that hardly anyone is going to read about it anyway. And besides, if you did a certain dumb thing, chances are good that other people have done it too. Those people will be, if not amused, at least sympathetic. Only later, after whatever you've written has been published and people are looking at you oddly, do you realize that, while you may not be the only one who's done that particular dumb thing, you are the only one who did it in that particular dumb way.

Lots of other people have driven away with briefcases on the hood of their cars. But theirs didn't slide off into the storm sewer like mine did. Lots of other people have gotten speeding tickets. But most of them didn't take a call on their cellphone while they were pulled over. And if they did, they wouldn't have admitted it.

Recently, my friend got a puppy. It was eight weeks old when I saw it for the first time, and it was so adorable that I wanted to steal it—right up until the moment it bit me in the nose. And I mean in the nose. Its little puppy teeth went right into my nostril. I pulled back, which was a mistake because then I had a small dog hanging from my nose.

Lots of other people have been chewed on by cute puppies, but most of them have never had one hanging from their nose. I had two thoughts while this was happening. One, *geez that hurts!* And two, *I'm going to have to write about this.*

It's okay though. Self-deprecating humor—the kind where you poke fun at yourself as opposed to someone else—is the noblest form of humor. And that's not just my opinion. It's also the opinion of every person I've ever poked fun at. Laughing at yourself not only means you won't hurt anyone else's feelings, it also means no one will come after you with a crowbar—at least not for laughing at them.

But writing about your own blunders and imperfections is an adventure in self-discovery, thus the title of this book. But remember, most blunders and imperfections are universal. I used to think you were not that bad either.

Chapter 1

Can We Talk?

Speak Up or Get a Grip!

Recently, a friend gave me one of those grippers you use to open jar lids. She said she'd found it at a thrift shop and, remembering I'd said I needed one, she'd purchased it for me. I thanked her profusely. How nice to be thought of. Except that I didn't remember telling her I needed it.

Not that I don't need it. It's just that up until that moment, with the gripper staring me in the face, it had not occurred to me how much I need it.

My friend seemed proud of herself for being so thoughtful. She proceeded to tell me her acquisition story, as bargain shoppers often do, and I pretended to listen while I racked my brain. Had I made any comment that would have led her to believe I was having trouble opening jars? I couldn't remember a single thing. And yet I have had trouble opening jars. If I hadn't mentioned I needed a gripper, I should have.

My friend was now carrying on about how often she uses her own gripper, as do her mother, her sister, and the neighbor down the street. And then it occurred to me. What if my friend has me confused with someone else? Now that person will go on struggling with her kosher dills and grape jelly, and it will be my fault. What a thing to have on my conscience!

But what could I do? By that time we were a good ten minutes into the conversation; a conversation in which I had enthusiastically thanked my friend for her thoughtfulness and agreed that yes, I could really use the gripper. It seemed too late to say, "I'm sorry. Now that I think about it, I think you must have me confused with someone else who's lost their grip."

But I didn't have the courage. Instead I offered to pay her for the gripper which I hadn't planned on buying. I was concerned that if I paid her, she'd start bringing me all sorts of things I need, but don't know it yet. I offered anyway, and she graciously

declined. It was a gift; a gift that was probably meant for someone else. I took it and use it often, always wondering, am I forgetful or am I a liar? Don't answer that.

Meanwhile, my friend hasn't brought me any other useful kitchen items—or anything else for that matter. Maybe she's onto me. Or maybe I haven't mentioned I need anything else, in which case, I could really use some wooden spoons.

I'm sure this story serves to illustrate a point, though I'm not sure what it is. Maybe just that the longer you wait, the harder it gets to speak up. Whether it's telling your neighbor that it was you who reported their barking dog to animal control. Or telling your parents that you're the one who burned down the garage when you were 14. These are just examples, mind you. We had a carport when I was growing up, and it's still standing.

I swear my delay was only an attempt to buy thinking time. But I waited too long, and I certainly didn't want to embarrass us both after we'd carried on like that. Plus, I was afraid she'd want the gripper back.

Is This a Good Time to Talk?

I walk into my company's restroom and a coworker in one of the stalls speaks. I say, "Excuse me." She says something else I can't understand. I say, "I'm sorry. What did you say?" She says, "I wasn't talking to you!" Oh.

I apologize and she flushes.

I want to ask if she realizes the person she's talking to on her cellphone probably heard the flush too. I want to ask her why, as a working mother, she's not taking full advantage of a rare opportunity to be alone in a restroom stall. I want to ask her what she'll do if she drops her phone. But I don't say anything. I don't want to interrupt her if she's making another call.

Flash forward. I'm taking an early morning walk in the park. I see just two other walkers. One passes me talking on her cellphone; the other comes toward me, staring at hers. Neither of them responds to my "good morning." I want to tell them, "I can't think of many people I'd like to hear from at 6 o'clock in the morning and even fewer who would like to hear from me." I want to say, "You're missing the birds twittering while you're tweeting!" I don't though. I have no way of knowing if she's tweeting. But I do know she's not one of the few people who'd like to hear from me at 6 a.m.

Flash forward again. There are ten relatives packed into my living room. Four of them are staring at screens of one kind or another, probably keeping up on Facebook. I want to say, "Hey, I'm your Facebook friend, and I'm standing right here!" I don't though because I'm afraid they'll unfriend me.

I go out for dinner with my husband and son and they stare at their cellphones. I want to take my own phone out, call one of them, and ask, "Is this a good time to talk?" I don't though because I'm busy watching the television over their heads.

Enough! I've been silent about this issue too long. Devices that were designed to improve communication are ruining it face-to-face. Technology that was meant to make life better is making it more stressful. And it's all because we think we're better at multi-tasking than we are. Stop before you do something crazy!

You could tell the convenience store clerk standing in front of you that you'll be home by 8:00, and your husband on the cellphone that you've got gas. You could rear-end a police car while you're texting and driving. Or, heaven forbid, you could flush your cellphone. On second thought...

A Woman of Few, Well-Chosen Words

You just don't know how much you talk until you can't do it anymore. You're probably thinking, "Speak for yourself." I wish I could. Like all other body parts, we completely take our vocal cords for granted until they aren't working properly. And mine haven't worked for three long days. It's very nearly torture for me, though it must be a pleasant respite to those around me. When I open my mouth to speak, only a whisper comes out—a hoarse whisper at that. I'm the "hoarse whisperer," and I don't see how it would make a good movie.

At work, I stay in my office, avoiding the break room, normally my favorite spot. I sit staring at my ringing telephone rather than pick it up and whisper into it. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I believe that if you're going to whisper on the telephone, you should be the one placing the call.

At home, I rely on my son to answer the phone, though I'm concerned he'll sign us up for a new phone service and a stack of credit cards. He has bigger worries. On my first full day of silence, he asked, "How are you going to call us for supper?"

The little sign language I know is not helpful. I can make the sign for "thank you" which seems useful, and "I love pizza" which does not, though "get me a pizza" might be.

And it's also possible that when I think I'm gesturing "thank you" or "I love pizza," I'm actually saying, "There's something in your teeth" and "What have you done to your hair?" Besides sign language would only be helpful if everyone around me could understand it. Even then, one can only accomplish so much repeating "I love pizza" and even less with, "There's something in your teeth."

The most painful part of my forced silence is the shocking realization that I talk a lot more than I realize—though it may not be as shocking to everyone else. Even worse, a great deal of what I say would be better left unsaid. Each time I'm tempted to speak, which is often, I weigh the importance of what I want to say against the pain and effort of forcing a whisper. Most of the time, it isn't worth it. I want to yell at my son for misplacing his keys again. Just as well I don't; I can't find mine either. I want to tell the man in front of me at the grocery store that he has more than thirteen items. Then I realize I have fourteen. I want to scream at a truckload of teenagers that nearly run me over. It's a good thing I don't. They may turn around and finish the job.

The experience leads me to make a vow: Once my voice returns, I will weigh my words more carefully. I will become a woman of few, well-chosen words. And then, in the middle of my third silent night, I trip over a shoe in the dark and swear out loud—few words, but not well chosen. That's when I realize my voice is back. It sounds like a Canadian honker, but it's back.

But with my first words in three days being swear words, I've already failed in my pledge. That's almost as sobering as realizing that the most important thing I say all day is, "Supper's ready."

E-Etiquette

No one ever talks to me anymore. They text me instead of calling me on the telephone. They email me instead of walking down the hall to my office. I can't decide if they're busy, or lazy or just don't like me anymore. Now that I've called them lazy, they probably don't.

At any rate, it feels like everyone is avoiding me. What's more, it feels like I'm avoiding them. And if we're all going to avoid each other, we ought to at least be nice about it. So today, I'd like to discuss electronic etiquette.

I'll start with texting etiquette because I have fewer rules for texting than I do for email.

1. Don't text and drive, especially if you're driving on the same road I'm on.
2. Don't text me while we're in the same room—unless it's a very large room and you're saving me a seat up front.
3. Consider calling—if you remember how. I know it's hard to believe, but there are times when it would actually be faster. Take this actual example of a texted “conversation” I had with my son.

HIM: pick me up

ME: when and where

HIM: 5

ME: WHERE?

HIM: downtown

ME: where downtown

HIM: the store

ME: which store??

HIM: on the corner

ME: CALL ME!!!!

HIM: why

My own preferred method of avoiding face-to-face or telephone conversation is email. I don't mean to brag here, but that's because I type really fast—way faster than I text. Faster than I think, too, which can be dangerous. So I try to keep the following rules in mind when I email.

1. Email communication can't convey facial expressions and voice inflection no matter how big you smile while you type. That means the most innocent of messages, like “What a dumb idea!” or “What were you thinking?” can come across harshly even if you meant them in the nicest possible way. Some people add little smiley faces to ease the pain, as in, “What a dumb idea! ☺” But that doesn't always work—at least it doesn't always work when I get that message. That's why it's important to choose your words carefully, for example, “I'm very sorry, but, in my opinion, that's a dumb idea!”

2. IF YOU WRITE IN ALL CAPITALS, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE ANGRY. So avoid it—unless you are angry. Then add a bunch of exclamation points too.

3. Remember, even some very smart people don't know all the shorthand that's out there. Me, for example. If I had known long ago that IDK means “I don't know,” I could have saved myself a lot of typing over the years. And I'm embarrassed to admit it, but it took me a long time to figure out that LOL means “laugh out loud,” partly because

what people LOL about isn't always that funny. Maybe they don't know what it means either. Honestly, there was a time I thought it meant "lots of luck." So when friends bought lottery tickets or applied for jobs, I wished them LOL. I'm sure this did wonders to boost their confidence before the job interview.

4. Use a catchy subject line that gets attention and sums up your message. But be careful you don't sound like a spammer. That means you should never say "Want to be rich without hard work?" or "Get a college degree without studying," though I'm not sure why you would say that.

5. This is just my opinion, but don't put privacy messages on your email. If you ask me, there is no better way to get the whole world to read something than putting the word "CONFIDENTIAL" on it. In fact, I was thinking of putting it on my book cover and at the top of every page.

6. When all else fails, pick up the phone. I recently spent a morning in an email conversation that went something like this:

"What day works for you?"

"How about Tuesday at 9?"

"No, Tuesday doesn't work."

"How about Thursday?"

"What time Thursday?"

"Eleven?"

"Won't work. How about 2?"

I should have said, "Give me your phone number." or rather, "GIVE ME YOUR PHONE NUMBER!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

What Hath Bell Wrought?

The first words ever spoken on a telephone were those of inventor Alexander Graham Bell to his assistant, Thomas Watson, on March 10, 1876: "Mr. Watson. Come here. I want to see you." These words not only marked the beginning of telephone history, they are also the first documented example of poor telephone manners. No "hello." No "please." No "Am I getting you at a bad time?"

I suppose we can forgive Bell for his lack of courtesy. He must have been terribly excited, what with inventing the gizmo that would revolutionize communication and make it possible to win radio call-in contests. And Watson may not have taken offense anyway; he was probably thrilled he wouldn't have to order his pizza by mail anymore.

But these days, we need to be more aware of telephone etiquette. While telephones have evolved to the point they can do everything but shine our shoes, telephone manners started out badly and went down line from there.

I don't mean to imply that I'm above poor telephone manners myself. I'm not old enough to have used a party line, but if I'd grown up with one, I can assure you I would have listened in on my neighbors. Had Bell's telephone been on a party line, his first words might have been, "Mr. Watson, come here. I don't want Mr. Johnson or Mrs. Smith to steal my invention."

At some point, party lines went away and the only people who could listen in on telephone calls were family members. (I know this because I did it.) There were telephones in every home and they were ringing at all hours of the day and night. Watson

might have answered that first historic phone call with, “Mr. Bell, I told you not to call me during dinner.”

Eventually, phone booths popped up everywhere, paving the way for Superman comics and creating a whole new set of issues. If he’d built one of those right away, Bell would have had to borrow a quarter to make that first call.

And then along came the answering machine. “Mr. Watson, pick up the phone. I know you’re there.”

Then there was the cordless phone, which my family lovingly referred to as the “walk-around phone” when we could find it and the “walk-away phone” when we couldn’t. Had Bell invented it right away, he would have had to ask his assistant for help before he could make his first call. “Mr. Watson, where’s the telephone?” “The what, sir?”

We’re all lucky Bell didn’t start out with call waiting. Who knows how things would be different if Watson had answered that first momentous telephone call with, “Let me put you on hold. I’ve got another call. Kidding!”

Or what if Bell’s first telephone had caller ID, allowing Watson to screen his calls? “I’m not answering that. Mr. Bell is bossy and he has no manners!”

Then there was the cellphone and a return to eavesdropping—except cellphones aren’t as efficient as party lines because we can only hear one side of the conversation. Fortunately Bell could have kept his message private by texting, “Watson, come here.” And Watson would have texted back, “No need to text me, sir. I’m in the next room.”

Had Bell’s first phone been a smartphone, Watson would have been too busy playing Candy Crush or changing his ring tones to answer the call. Bell would have stomped down the hall, taken one look at his once-loyal assistant, and said, “Oh, Watson! What have I done?”

And Watson would have replied, “Who cares, Mr. Bell. Let’s take a selfie!”

What I Meant to Say

When you tell the waitress, “I’d like the salad,” don’t you really mean, “I’ll order the salad. What I’d like is a bacon double cheeseburger, French fries, and a large chocolate shake.” Well that’s what I mean. But if I said what I meant, it wouldn’t be too much later that I’d be saying, “I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach,” and we both know I don’t really mean that.

Clearly, we don’t always say what we mean. And I’m not necessarily suggesting we start. If we did, both the employment and the divorce rates might be worse than they are. Nevertheless, sometimes I find it refreshing when other people say what they really mean—as long as it isn’t offensive and I agree with it.

When someone is giving me directions, and they say, “You can’t miss it,” I know what they really mean is they can’t miss it. But, remember, they’ve already been there. Is it on fire? Blocking the road? No? Then I can miss it.

When someone says, “Nothing is impossible,” they’re not recommending you try pouring ten-ounces of hot cocoa into an eight-ounce cup or attempt skydiving without a parachute.

If they say they slept like a baby, they don’t mean they woke up crying at midnight because they were wet and hungry.

If the sign says “Slow Children,” it’s not a reflection on the families in the neighborhood. And if you see an advertisement with the words, “Children are free,” it probably means children get in free. You shouldn’t get too excited if you’re in the market for one.

When the trailer says the movie is for “mature audiences only,” chances are good it’s really for immature adults.

And when you call up the doctor’s office, and the receptionist says, “Can you spell your name,” I think she already knows you can.

Sometimes people say things they may or may not actually mean. But insecure listeners like me can easily take them the wrong way. Like when someone says, “You look nice today,” I always wonder if they think I don’t any other day. If they say, “You look like you’ve lost weight,” I wonder if that means they think I needed to. And if they say, “You can get away with it,” I wonder if they really mean they wouldn’t be caught dead in it.

When somebody says, “No offense, but...,” I’ve taken offense before they get the rest of the sentence out. And if they say, “Don’t take this wrong,” I already have.

When someone asks, “How are you?” don’t you wonder if they really want to know. When I answer “I’m doing well,” I certainly don’t mean it every time.

If somebody tells you, “You’re not getting any younger,” I’m pretty sure they mean, “You’re old.” When they say, “Your heart is in the right place,” they’re implying that everything else is a little off kilter. And if someone says, “Well, it’s none of my business,” trust me, that doesn’t mean they don’t want to know.

Let’s Hear It for Listeners

When I attend a self-improvement seminar, I like to start applying what I learn immediately—to the people in my life.

Apparently, I’m not alone. After a recent workshop on good listening, several woman told me they were inspired—to get their families to attend. We were in agreement; we are good listeners. Our problem is being listened to. (At least, I think that’s what we agreed on.)

Some bad listeners I know pretend to listen. They nod, smile, even respond. Sort of.

A woman I know came home from a difficult day at work, hungry and dreading the prospect of cooking dinner. When she saw her husband sprawled on the couch, absorbed in *NCIS* reruns, she snapped. “I should leave you!” she said, loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

Without taking his eyes off the television, he responded, “We’ll get a pizza.”

I have a similar effect on men. I recall an incident that occurred long ago at a high school dance. (Very long ago.) You know the kind. The wallflowers of one gender line up by one wall; the wallflowers of the other gender line up by the other wall; and the popular kids dance in the middle. I was by the west wall.

Then Mr. Wonderful came over to me. He didn’t ask me to dance, but he didn’t ask to copy my homework either. I was so flattered that it took me awhile to notice he

wasn't listening when I responded to his charming weather-related questions. He was scanning the room for someone else to talk to.

Years of similar experiences have taught me how to deal with this type of bad listener: Keep talking as though you don't notice their rudeness, then casually say something shocking, like, "Is it true what I heard about your wife?" or "How did you get the black eye?"

The worst kind of listener is the one who is just waiting for you to pause so she can talk. Sometimes she doesn't even wait. I sympathize with interrupters (being one myself). I have more trouble with the one-upper interrupter, who, no matter what you say, has a better story.

Tell her about your appendectomy and she interrupts to say, "Try living through a heart transplant." Tell her your grandfather knew Elvis. She tells you her grandfather *was* Elvis, and he never mentioned your grandfather.

You can't beat one-upper interrupters; I recommend you let them win. But first, casually change the topic to grave mistakes you've made or your most embarrassing moments.

Up until now we've dealt with bad listeners who at least pretend to listen. There are some who don't even grunt in the appropriate places. I have this problem with my son. While I speak, he goes on doing what he's doing with nary a nod to show he's heard a word I've said.

In response to that annoying habit, I've developed my own annoying habit: I answer myself. Let's say I ask my son to vacuum. He says...nothing. So I say, "Certainly, Mother. You gave birth to me, fed me and clothed me. Vacuuming is the least I can do. Shall I wash the windows, too?"

At this, he is guaranteed to respond, "I heard you!" Who knew?

I have to admit I'm not always the best listener myself. I do a lot of things besides listen while I'm on the phone (dishes, laundry, cooking.) Next to the dishwasher, the cordless phone has done more for my housework than any technological advance since the broom. It hasn't done much for my listening skills, however.

And I would like to improve my listening abilities. I really would. But not half as much as I want the people in my life to improve theirs.

Listen up! Six Habits for Good Listeners

Somebody very wise once said, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we eat." No, wait. That doesn't sound right. Maybe I wasn't listening.

And I really want to be a better listener. The benefits are clear. People like you better when you listen to them. Every once in a while, you learn something. And I can't speak for anyone else here—though I'd really like to—but listening more than I talk often keeps me from saying something I haven't thought of yet.

So after much research and soul searching, I've come up with my Six Habits for Good Listeners:

1. Become genuinely interested in what other people have to say. Like most things in life, that's easier to talk about than it is to do. But remember, you can learn

something from almost everyone; though in some cases, it may be just that you never want to talk as much as they do.

2. Pay attention. Focus directly on the speaker. Give them your complete and undivided attention. Sit up straight, lean forward and look them right in the eye. Do this until they stop talking—or until they start to look intimidated and back away from you.

3. Get rid of all distractions when you're trying to carry on a conversation. This will give the other person the impression that you're listening—even if you aren't. Turn off the television; put your cellphone down and rip theirs out of their hands if you have to. That ought to encourage them to open up to you.

4. Fight the urge to interrupt. I empathize with interrupters, being one myself. Sometimes, I'm so interested in what the other person is saying that I just have to know more. So I interrupt to ask a question, for example, "What on earth are you talking about?"

Other times I interrupt to finish a sentence for the speaker because I already know what they're going to say, and they're taking way too long to say it. Of course, sometimes I'm wrong. And sometimes I interrupt because what I have to say is...well...more interesting, at least to me.

Whatever the reason, interrupting not only annoys the speaker, it also wrecks the flow of their story and, in some cases, brings it to a halt. On the bright side, that gives me a chance to talk.

5. Ask questions at appropriate times. You might be thinking, "But won't asking questions signal to the other person that I want them to keep talking?" Yes, it will. But asking questions also assures them that you're a good listener who is genuinely concerned about their situation, unless your question is, "Are you nuts?" or "What were you thinking?"

6. When the person has finished speaking, paraphrase what they've said so that they can clarify any areas of confusion. "So let's see if I understood you correctly. Yada, yada, blah, blah, blah," except you probably shouldn't say, "Yada, yada, blah, blah, blah."

Other books by Dorothy Rosby include:

Website: www.dorothyrosby.com

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/author/dorothyrosby>

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Other books by Dorothy Rosby include:

'Tis the Season to Feel Inadequate: Holidays, Special Occasions and Other Times Our Celebrations Get Out of Hand A collection of humorous essays about how we let our expectations steal the joy out of Christmas and other holidays and special events.

Alexa's a Spy and Other Things to Be Ticked Off About: Humorous Essays on the Hazards of Our Time Part comical call to arms and part tongue-in-cheek tirade about the hassles of modern life.

I Didn't Know You Could Make Birthday Cake from Scratch: Parenting Blunders from Cradle to Empty Nest The little book of big parenting boo-boos.