

## standard usage

This story has already cost me my father. It was a loss of the worst kind, a loss I can live with. This distinguishes it from the loss of my job as director of the writing programs at McClintock College at the close of the 1996 academic year. I have to replace the job; I can't live without one of those. Fortunately, I will not have to conduct a search. My qualifications and my experience, along with the details of my dismissal, were broadcast in news stories and editorials throughout New England and New York during the last two weeks of May. You might have heard about me; my dead father did. I was the guy who refused to pass a so-called Black female student on the spelling portion of the Competency Achievement Test (CAT) and thus prevented her from entering her junior-year practice-teaching experience. It turned out all right in the end, in the World's terms: Rashelle was awarded a provisional pass by the college's academic dean, and I became the poster child of the angry so-called White people who are waging a campaign against political correctness. I found myself in bed with people who use the phrase "politically correct" as a white sheet. They use it to intimidate good people and to disguise their distaste for behaviors and institutional policies that acknowledge our place in history. They hate to be reminded of the past, which they treat like a corpse, rotten but hidden from view, memorialized with a headstone that records a few dates and a pious epitaph. Thus their outrage when someone starts digging it up. The past is dead; let it be. After a few years and a few bouquets of cut flowers, the smooth granite block is all we have, and it becomes a substitute for whatever lies beneath it. But the past is not a corpse. And the dead are not dead, as I have

learned this month, this cool and breezy June. And though it makes a less effective epithet, could we suspend use of the term “politically correct” and accuse do-gooders instead of being morally correct? This is what is meant. After all, most of us know that we ought to bend over backward to help people whose lives are hard. When He was asked how often we are supposed to inconvenience ourselves, the White Jesus said, Not just seven times but seventy times seven times. (Don’t do the math. He was a poet. He meant “Again. Always again.”) Of course, there are fanatics everywhere, like germs, and they can infect a place. And college campuses are Petri dishes for extremism. At McClintock, bending over to help became so fashionable that walking upright was deemed insensitive. Administrators and faculty scurried around like crabs, and students got to like being bigger. I don’t blame Rashelle for doing her best to avoid the spelling section of the CAT. What was I going to do, snap at her heels with my claw? Besides, as she explained in the letter she wrote under the guidance of a sociologist, “Mark has been showing his prejudgism to me.” It sounded like a morals charge, but in her accompanying documentation, the sociologist explained that “*prejudgism* is a remarkable coinage, wherein Rashelle has conflated the behavioral inclination (the prejudice) with the sociopersonal causative (racism), and by importing the *g* to create a nonstandard spelling of the word (*prejudice* is the version most often recorded in English-language communities), Rashelle reconvenes the word with its literal cognate (*judge*). In short, Rashelle has been pre-judged, mis-judged.” My judgment was and remains to this day a simple one: Rashelle can become an 80 percent speller. That’s what I did for seven years at McClintock; I believed everyone could be literate—in the standard sense. I taught freshmen and sophomores how to spell and use rudimentary grammar. It was my work, not a cause. But

publicity turned me into the Standard Bearer for Standards, and after I was fired, I was invited to apply for openings at three universities and four colleges in Boston, not one of them as progressive or innovative as McClintock, where I belong. I have my first interview this afternoon at Massachusetts Commonwealth University (MCU), pioneers in the policy of recruiting wealthy international students to bypass affirmative action quotas. (*Quota*: a great, plain word demonized by those who know we need quotas, rather like the name Eugene McCarthy.) I do not belong at MCU. But before you entertain any gripes on my behalf, be aware that I will be named an associate professor of literature or the humanities (so that the students in my basic skills classes do not suspect they are being forced to do remedial work); I will be paid forty or fifty thousand dollars per academic year (not your standard year—classes meet two or three times a week and there are two fourteen-week semesters; do the math); and along with the attendant privileges, technology, support services, and benefits, I will be given parking rights in the city, where off-street spaces are otherwise sold or leased as condominiums. These conditions of employment, I have learned, constitute my “academic freedom”—another disguise, this one worn proudly, like regalia, by the conspirators better known as the Faculty. Don’t misunderstand me; academic freedom remains a serious matter in higher education, but it is a matter of principal.

### **DICTION TIP**

#### **Principal/Principle**

A classic example of the dangers of “trick” teaching. You all remember that the head of your school is your “pal,” and thus the

spelling “principal.” Yes? The problem is an odd one: the trick is too memorable. Young students immediately isolate the “pal” ending and reserve it for school administrators. So from now on, think of it this way: the principal is the main person in a school, as books have main or principal characters, and you earn interest on the main amount of money, the principal, in your account. The other principle means rule; we use it for the rules of academic disciplines and for our ethical and moral rules or standards. Becoming people of principle ought to be our principal goal; we should not stand on our principles nor on our principals, no matter how crabby.