



Guerrilla Grammar

On March 2, Jeff Deck, 28, and his band of merry copyeditors set out on a nationwide campaign to seek out typos in public signage and obliterate them. Twelve thousand miles, 73 days, 33 states, two provinces, and one District of Columbia later, TEAL (the Typo Eradication Advancement League) had found 423 typos and corrected 231 of them—proving once and for all that while the pen is mightier than the sword, the whiteout is mightier than the pen.

Jonas Moody: Smilla had her sense of snow. They couldn't keep John Henry away from the railroad tracks. But tell me about *your* deep-seated passion.

Jeff Deck: I have always had an eye for noticing typos—seeing them in signs wherever I've gone—for as back as I remember.

Moody: And what spurred your great crusade across America?

Deck: I went to my 5-year college reunion at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire, and was speaking with classmates who were becoming doctors and lawyers—people who could have an impact on the world. So I thought about how I might be able to accomplish that myself using what few talents I had!

Moody: Which led you to establishing the Typo Eradication League and setting off on this road trip?

Deck: I thought of my tendency to notice typos and I began to wonder if I could do something about those typos. What if I could actually fix them? I ended up combining that idea with this

pen to go around the country, and it ended up making for a good combination.

Moody: And who were you able to enlist to fight for the cause along with you?

Deck: I had a rotating cast of companions along the trip: my friend Benjamin was with me from D.C. to Los Angeles. Josh was along for the West Coast. And Jane was along from Seattle to Minneapolis. Then Benjamin rejoined from Madison, Wisconsin back to Somerville, Mass where I live.

Moody: Was it exhilarating when you actually started correcting public signage? A lifelong desire acted out?

Deck: The very first were a couple of typos in my shower curtain, which isn't really public. But overall, I was apprehensive at first. During my first round of type-correcting I was too intimidated to ask people. The first corrections I did were in secret. It wasn't actually until I met up with Benjamin in DC that I got a little more courage about approaching people to fix typos.

Moody: What are some of the more severe cases you've run across?

Deck: They are all vile in their own way, but one measurement you could use is the physical size of the typo. There was one in Chicago that was particularly bad. It was the sign for "MILWUAKEE FURNITURE" because it was on Milwaukee Avenue. That one was probably about three feet by three feet and just out there for everyone to see.

Moody: Were you able to right that wrong?

Deck: We told the guy at the desk about the mistake and got the same response we got at many other places: he passed on the responsibility to his supervisor, who was conveniently not in the office.

Moody: I understand that you were stymied quite a lot, but what's the recipe for a successful typo-correction?

Deck: It helps if the person we're approaching has a sense of humor. Otherwise they're probably going to get defensive or angry or at least hide their hostility behind the mask of "Thank you very much! Have a good day! Bye now!" The cases where we did find success, typically the person was open to listening to us and would either see the humor in the mission or be genuinely appreciative of us pointing out the mistake.



Moody: Did you come in with red pens blazing or did you try to take a gentler approach?

Deck: Our operating principle was just to not be a jerk. As with so many things in life, you can fix more typos with honey than with vinegar. We would be as polite as possible, because we weren't going after the people. We just wanted to fix the typos.

Moody: Did you ever get into any tight situations?

Deck: Relatively few. There were a few times when it came down to outright hostility. One time was in L.A., which I guess I should have expected. There was a guy who got a little angry with us when we pointed out that the grocery store where he worked had "GROCERRY" spelled on their storefront. He ended up calling us some nasty names and we had to drive away in a hurry.

Moody: Any other big city attitudes? New York? Boston?

Deck: Niagara Falls.

Moody: In Canada?

Deck: I hadn't expected it, but we were in a sketchy part of town in the middle of correcting a sign for a fortuneteller, who had put an apostrophe in "PALM READING'S". All of the sudden these guys pulled up out of nowhere wearing these gold chains around their necks. They told us to keep on walking or they would make sure we couldn't walk anymore. So we kept going.

Moody: What do you think of the people who make those errors?

Deck: There are two main reasons people make mistakes. Sometimes it's carelessness or a simple oversight. But sometimes it's a genuine gap in their education. We were stretching the definition of typo because some of these things were just plain old errors. We would try to give people the benefit of the doubt, so we weren't making judgments about whether we personally thought they were ignorant or had just made a simple mistake. We weren't going after the people themselves; just the mistakes.

Moody: Besides making the world a better place grammatically, did you pick up any insight into America from your travels?

Deck: I noticed widespread commercialization in a lot of cities—more than I expected. A lot more places than I thought that look exactly alike. That was disheartening, to see that a lot of places in America are losing their identities. When you go to some cities you could be anywhere else in America with your Wal-Mart and Applebee's and Burger King. It made me appreciate the places we found that were holding onto their own identities. And those would be the places where we would attempt to help them out by wiping out their typos.

Moody: Now that your trip has come to an end, can you say that TEAL's work is done?

Deck: TEAL's work may never be done. We've heard from a lot of people saying they've always wanted to do something like this on their own. They've always noticed mistakes around them and felt like they're the only people who care about them. So we're glad to find that there are other weirdoes out there who do care about this stuff!