

Do Not Grind Armadillo Armor In This Mill

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Abstract—Some instructions for a coffee mill fail to take the reader's common sense seriously and so violate some basic rules for communication, called speech act rules. When the instructions violate the rules, the reader either gets confused or feels justified to stop reading. By writing the instructions this way, the company tries to protect itself from lawsuits. My argument shows that these instructions do nothing about liability. The better, less expensive, and only way to write instructions is to respect the reader's common sense.

THE PROBLEM

BEFORE YOU do anything else, read the instructions in the box. Some time ago I started a lecture to an audience of technical writers by showing them these instructions. While they were reading, I heard titters all over the hall. Yet when we began to discuss the instructions, no one could say what was wrong with them, and most people thought they were pretty ordinary—run of the mill, you might say. Certainly nobody could see any reason to get exercised about them. This audience was typical of technical writers, so I imagine you had much the same reaction, "A little silly, but so what?"

I agree that they are ordinary. But, I also think that there is something seriously wrong with them and that a serious issue is raised by the fact that they are ordinary. What's wrong with them? To put it simply, they are not instructions, even though they are called instructions and they have the linguistic form of instructions. They are not instructions because they do not satisfy the common-sense rules for instructions, rules that I will describe later. In effect, they do not take your or my common sense seriously. What's the issue? These "instructions" are squeezing out real instructions, the ones we need and can use, and I do not think they should be. The reason manufacturers choose to include these rather than real instructions is that they want to protect themselves from liability. This reason is, as I shall show, fallacious: only real instructions protect one from liability. Thus, since there is no reason for including "instructions," manufacturers might as well take our common sense seriously, and include real instructions with the coffee mill, instructions that tell us things that we want to know.

Before I go into detail about why these are not instructions, let me explain in intuitive terms what is wrong with

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them. Look at the instruction, "Do not use outdoors." This instruction sounds weird—it causes titters—because it does not seem to mean anything. It cannot mean what it literally says, since there is no reason on earth why I should not, if the mood strikes me, go out on my patio and grind coffee while I'm watching the sun rise. Nor, for that matter, is there any reason why I should not take the coffee mill along on a backpacking trip, plug it into the nearest redwood, and grind away. If we apply our common sense, we can guess that it actually means something like, "Do not use in certain (unspecified) situations outdoors." Thinking still further, we can see that such an instruction

IMPORTANT SAFEGUARDS

When using electrical appliances, basic safety precautions should always be observed, including the following:

1. Read all instructions.
2. To protect against risk of electrical shock do not put unit in water or other liquid.
3. Close supervision is necessary when any appliance is used by or near children.
4. Unplug from outlet when not in use, before putting on or taking off parts, and before cleaning.
5. Avoid contacting moving parts.
6. Do not operate any appliance with a damaged cord or plug or after the appliance malfunctions, has been dropped or damaged in any manner. Return appliance to the nearest authorized service facility for examination, repair or electrical or mechanical adjustment.
7. The use of attachments not recommended or sold by the appliance manufacturer may cause fire, electric shock or injury.
8. Do not use outdoors.
9. Do not let cord hang over edge of table or counter, or touch hot surfaces.
10. Do not use appliance for other than intended use.
11. Check hopper for presence of foreign objects before using.
12. This appliance is for household use. Any servicing other than cleaning and user maintenance should be performed by an authorized service representative.

SAVE THESE INSTRUCTIONS

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

Check voltage — for AC supply only
Make sure that the voltage indicated on the appliance is the same as indicated on your voltage supply.

Capacity upto 1.5 ozs.
Grinding period: about 20–30 seconds.

Capacity upto 2 ozs.
Grinding period: about 20–30 seconds.

Capacity upto 3 ozs.
Grinding period: about 30–40 seconds.

How to grind your coffee.

The mill can only be operated with the cover closed. The hand which holds the mill at the same time pushes the switch thus guaranteeing utmost safety.

You may choose the grain size of the coffee by prolonging or shortening the grinding period.

How to clean your coffee mill.

Unplug the appliance.
Remove all coffee after each grinding. Clean the housing with a cloth.



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could make sense. There might indeed be a problem if I fell in my swimming pool while I was grinding on the patio or if I let a pine cone fall in while I loaded the beans. Unfortunately, however, those problems or those situations are not really covered by this instruction, just as the problem of traffic accidents is not covered by the instruction, "Do not drive."

There is a funny dynamic at work here. For us to understand the instruction, we need enough common sense that we can distinguish between the dangerous and the safe situations that the instructions refer to. If, however, we have that much common sense, we do not need the instructions. For such instructions to be useful to us, that is to someone who can understand them, the instructions would have to specify dangerous situations outdoors that are genuinely, but not obviously dangerous. A similar dynamic is at work with several other instructions. Consider "Check hopper for presence of foreign objects before using." If we take this literally, then we are not supposed to grind things that we obviously can grind, like nut meats. If we do not, then we are so lacking in common sense that we do not need the instructions. To get around this problem, the writer must specify the dangerous situations or the dangerous objects.

If the writer decides to so specify and still wants to reach that segment of the audience that has no common sense—and evidently, the writer does—then the writer is stuck with a difficult problem. The writer must specify every conceivable dangerous outdoor situation or every conceivable foreign object. Not only should the writer say, in effect, "Do not grind pebbles in this mill," the writer must also say, "Do not grind armadillo armor in this mill." That kind of instruction is obviously absurd, however, so in practice, the writer contents himself or herself with absurdities of a quieter kind, the original instructions.

But why should the writer address people with no common sense? And if he does, why doesn't he or she at least tell the rest of us that these things do not need to be taken literally by anyone who has enough common sense to understand them? Obviously because the maker of the coffee mill wants to protect himself from the people with no common sense who damage themselves by falling in the swimming pool or grinding armadillo armor. If the need for that protection is a given one and the means of protecting himself is writing these instructions, then the writer's solution is actually not terrible. That is what the audience recognized when they refused to get exercised about these instructions.

The questions, then, that such instructions raise are obvious. Should the writer be addressing an audience with no common sense? Is doing that really protecting the company from liability? Is there some way we, the people who are likely to understand, can be addressed by the writer? These are the questions I will address in the rest of this article. I begin with a technical analysis drawn from the philosophy

of speech acts, which will explain why these purported instructions are not really instructions at all. Armed with that analysis, I show why it is costly to make the mistake of thinking that these are instructions and also why the apparent benefit, protection from liability, is not actually there. I conclude with some quite new suggestions about instructions and how they should be handled. These last suggestions are designed to get us, the real audience, back in the writer's picture.

SPEECH ACT RULES AND INSTRUCTIONS

These putative instructions are not in fact instructions, I have said, because they do not satisfy the common-sense rules for instructions. These rules and the peculiar way they work are described by the philosophy of speech acts.

What is a speech act? A speech act is an utterance which has a point to it: an order, a statement, a request, an announcement, an instruction. The philosophy of speech acts asks how it is that an utterance (a group of noises) can be made to have a point. Not all utterances, not even all grammatical English sentences, do. If I say, "Swim backwards through the concrete," there is no point to that utterance, even though it is a grammatical English sentence with the linguistic structure of an order. Many utterances which do have points, like "Is your room clean?" have different points depending on who is speaking and in what situation. Speech act philosophy is not, therefore, a branch of linguistics; rather, it is the study of a certain branch of human relations, the relations we set up when we want our linguistic utterances to accomplish something, such as to instruct people in the correct use of the coffee mill.

Those relations are a group of implicit rules that we all follow. The rules say that an utterance only *counts as*¹ a speech act—an instruction—when certain *conditions obtain*. In a sense, a speech act is like a move in a game. In games, moves count as moves only if certain rules are followed, and most of the time those rules specify conditions that must obtain. In football, for instance, a touchdown only counts as a touchdown if the ball has crossed the goal line in possession of the ball carrier, the ball was in play, and so forth. If all those conditions do not obtain—if, for instance, somebody on the offensive team had held an opponent on the same play—the touchdown does not count as a touchdown; it is called back. In speech act theory, when all the appropriate conditions do not obtain, the move cannot be called back; instead, speech act philosophers say, the speech act is *defective*. If the conditions do obtain, then the speech act has been *performed successfully*.

The conditions for the successful performance of a speech act are even more complex than the conditions for the successful scoring of a touchdown. But for the purposes of this article, I need not describe them all. The most important for our purposes are two *universal* conditions for the

¹ Technical terms from the philosophy of speech acts will be italicized.

successful performance of speech acts—which need to obtain if any kind of speech act is to be successful—and two specific conditions on the successful performance of instructions.¹ The universal conditions are that a speech act must be “non-obvious” (this is the non-obviousness condition) and that a speech act must be relevant (the relevance condition).² The specific conditions on instructions (a member of the class of orders) are that the speaker must have the appropriate authority over the hearer (the authority condition) and that the speaker must specify something that the listener is capable of doing (the *propositional content* condition).

Here is an example of how those rules operate. Let us say that I mouth the following utterance, “Shut the door.” If this is to count as an order, it must satisfy the speech act conditions. The non-obviousness condition is satisfied if it is not obvious to speaker and hearer that the condition referred to by the statement already obtains or will obtain. If there is a door, and it is open, great. If, on the other hand, there were a door, but the hearer was already shutting the door, then the non-obviousness condition would not be satisfied and the order would be defective. If, by the way, after the door were shut, I immediately asserted that the door is shut, that would be a defective assertion, since it would already be obvious to both parties that the door is shut. The question, “Is the door shut?” would also be defective, for the same reasons.²

The relevance condition is satisfied if the course of the conversation allows the speech act as a possible continuation. In ordinary conversation, “Shut the door,” is usually an allowable continuation, but in intense conversations or in formal ones (a marriage ceremony, a court hearing), it is not. The authority condition is satisfied if I am allowed to order you to shut the door. If I am your superior officer, your employer, or your friend in a situation where it is easier for you to shut the door, then the authority condition is satisfied, and I can order you to shut the door. If I am your child or a social inferior, I cannot. The propositional condition is satisfied if you can, in fact, shut the door. If, however, the door were made of plutonium or weighed 10 tons, then the order would be defective.

At least the first 11 coffee mill instructions are defective; they fail to satisfy one or more speech act conditions. Look, for instance, at the first order. It is defective in precisely the same way that “Shut the door” when the hearer is already shutting it is defective. It tells you to do something that you are already doing.

“But is it obvious?” you might say. “We all know that people don’t read instructions.” True, they don’t. But in

² Notice, by the way, that we all play the speech act game, whether we consciously know the rules or not. We know, for instance, that “Is the door shut?” is defective; that’s why such questions are good ways of starting fights and why one way of stopping the impending fight is to claim that you really meant the question seriously.

any communication situation where this speech act is to count as this speech act (an instruction to keep reading), both parties have implicitly agreed that the reader will keep reading, and thus it is obvious (especially at the first instruction) that the situation specified is already the case.

This may sound a bit peculiar—one’s instinct is to tell people to keep reading if that’s what they should do—so let me expand on this reasoning.

When a speech act counts as a speech act, all the conditions have been satisfied. In this case, the relevance condition has been satisfied. For the relevance condition to be satisfied, however, the speaker and hearer (writer and reader) must be involved in a conversation. Conversations are a form of cooperative activity. In any cooperative activity, each party assumes that the other is acting in good faith, and each party agrees to act in good faith himself as long as the other person does or until the activity is accomplished. If the reader is to act in good faith here, he must read all the instructions. By picking up the instructions, therefore, the reader implicitly agrees to read all of them as long as the writer has done his part. The writer, in order to do his part, must acknowledge that the agreement is made. The reader may intend to renege on this agreement; that makes no difference as far as the writer is concerned. The writer must assume that the agreement holds. The first instruction, however shows that the writer is renegeing on the agreement by violating the non-obviousness condition. Ironically, as soon as the writer makes this defective speech act, he has stopped doing his part, and the reader can feel free to stop reading.

I can imagine a response to this argument which goes as follows: “If these were the good old days when instructions did contain relevant material, we would not need to remind people of what to do. But these are the bad new days. Most instructions are not any good; people know that; and so they no longer engage themselves to read all the instructions. Today, we have to have an instruction at the beginning which says in effect, “these instructions are different; you really do need these.”

Unfortunately, unless there is in fact some special, unusual reason for reading the instructions (not the case here), that is a no-win argument. The “hey-you-really-do-need-these” line is even easier to debase than the original “of-course-you-will-read-the-instructions-because-you-need-to.” Besides, it makes it impossible for the user to make the original, good-old agreement, since the line implicitly acknowledges that the agreement does not apply. Even in these sophisticated days, such a disclaimer has to be a strategic mistake, since it calls into question all the rest of the instructions.

Instructions 2, 3, and 4 also violate the non-obviousness condition. Instruction 2 is silly; what other liquid, benzene? Instructions 3 and 4 are pointless in the same way

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that "Do not use outdoors" was. If somebody is going to let his child grind up his fingers in the coffee mill or immerse the mill with the cord plugged in, this instruction is not going to stop him. It is virtually impossible to operate the coffee mill without putting the very close-fitting cap on. Not only is instruction 5 much like 4, but it violates the propositional content condition: it is impossible to contact the moving parts. Instruction 6 violates the authority condition. When one's authority comes from one's knowledge, one cannot order people to do patently unreasonable things. It is unreasonable to ask a person to pick up a dropped coffee mill each time he drops it, put it in a box, mail it to the manufacturer, leave his beans to spoil in the refrigerator, and not even try it out once in order to see whether it is damaged. Are you getting the idea? All eleven instructions violate one or more of the speech act conditions.

Let me hasten to point out that "obvious" is a relative term, and therefore "defective." An order to somebody to do something which is obvious that they would have done anyway is somewhat defective. And what is obvious to one person may not be clear to another person. Some may be unwilling to condemn the instructions for something like the following reasons. "People," you might say, "should be warned about relatively unlikely possibilities on the off chance that the reader did not happen to know about them or had not thought about them. After all, every one of us has been known to catch a cord that was hanging over the edge and fling the small electric appliance it was attached to to the ground and desuetude. Wouldn't it be nice to remind us not to do it, as in Instruction 9?" People use this reasoning constantly—anyway, my wife does—but even so, it does not do. You see, we have all lived for several years, and during that time, we have all discovered that electric appliances are rather cantankerous when their cords are pulled. Yet knowing this has not yet stopped us from leaving the cords over the edge. We do not need to be taught about cords; we need to remember that teaching at the proper time. Thus the only time telling us about cords would be appropriate is when it appears that we have forgotten, and even then, as my wife occasionally discovers, it might be better to let the matter rest. The instructions, however, cannot possibly tell us at the appropriate time. We read the instructions when we want to learn how to use the coffee mill, not when we are about to destroy some small appliance. And when we want to learn how to use the coffee mill, the instructions are perfectly obvious and thus defective.

THE PENALTIES FOR VIOLATING THE SPEECH ACT RULES

"But," you might say, "why not include defective instructions? It does no harm." Ah, but it does. I have been comparing speech acts to moves in a game. When a move in a game is defective, the resulting situation is outside the game. When a speech act is defective, there is no outside

to go to. That is as it should be. To the extent that the analogy works, the game is the communication activity, and being outside the game means being totally without communication. If human beings are to get along, this cannot happen too often; consequently, the communication situation is set up so that apparently defective speech acts do not wreck things. Thus, whenever we hear an apparently defective speech act, we take it that the person is still cooperating, and we try to reconstrue the speech act. Most commonly, we allow an apparently defective speech act to count as some other speech act, an *indirect speech act*. Less commonly, we misunderstand either the statement or the situation. The conversation can then continue, at least until our mistake is discovered. Only when both of these possibilities are exhausted will a speech act be taken as defective, and the listener feel warranted in ending the conversation because the speaker is not cooperating. The penalties, then, are of three kinds. First, and most likely, the direct speech act will be taken as an indirect speech act. Second, the direct speech act will be taken as saying something other than what was meant; it will be misunderstood. Third, the direct speech act will end the conversation.

Both of the first two possibilities deserve some further description. The paradigm case of an indirect speech act is as follows.³ You and I are sitting at a formal dinner, and I ask you, "Is that the salt over there?" This statement probably violates the propositional content condition for questions, e.g., that I must not know the situation specified. You realize that I have probably made a defective literal speech act, and you look around for some other speech act that I might be making instead (because you assume I'm cooperating). In this case, the possibility that I am making a request (another kind of speech act) leaps to mind, and after a little more thought, you can even work out what the request is.

Indirect speech acts are very common in our culture. We use them when we want to be polite, ironic, sarcastic, or indirect. We can use them so frequently only because we have evolved the convention that apparently defective speech acts should be taken as indirect speech acts, if that is at all possible.

Many times, however, an apparently defective speech act cannot possibly be an indirect speech act. Your next step, according to the convention, is to take it that the condition apparently violated is not in fact violated and cast around for some interpretation of the situation that would make the violation OK. Let us say, for instance, that the non-obviousness condition is apparently violated. Your response is to look around for something about the situation that calls for the speech act. Take, for instance, that first instruction. One possible response to it is to believe that there are two sets of instructions. In that case, the appar-

³ The argument has not been tested, so far as I know, in a court of law, but I see no reason why it could not be.

ently obvious speech act is not so obvious, and it is a matter of some urgency to get us to read those other instructions—all the instructions—as well as the ones in front of us. Your response, then, would be to look around for that other set of instructions. (Too outlandish? A friend of mine actually did it.)

Notice, by the way, that this is why pleonasms are so confusing. Take a sentence like, "Start the starter." The meaning itself does not confuse us. The fact that the speaker may be indirectly alerting us to the existence of an abnormal condition confuses us. It might be that the starter actually does require separate starting before it can be used to start the engine. It is while we consider and reject that possibility that we feel a moment of confusion.

How do we tell whether a speech act is direct, indirect, or direct but sensible only if we reinterpret the situation? It is very simple; we use our common sense. We use our common sense to tell whether asking about salt shakers is appropriate at dinner parties or whether it might be possible that there are two sets of instructions. Notice, though, that we don't just invoke our common sense when we think a speech act might be defective. We use our common sense to tell whether any speech act is defective in the first place. We use our common sense, in other words, whenever we understand any speech act. Not only that, we assume that the other person also has common sense, since we assume that the other person is going through the same reasoning we are. Thus, the entire communication situation is built on our common sense. And the less common sense either party to the communication has, the less possible communication is.

The writer of these instructions is writing instructions which will either be misunderstood or taken as defective by anybody with common sense. He does this, as I have said, because he is trying to reach people who do not have any common sense. But this argument shows that people who have no common sense cannot understand the instructions anyway.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

The writer was put in this uncomfortable position because the company was trying to protect itself. If some user is on a camping trip and he loads the hopper with coffee and a pine cone falls in and the blades break on the pine cone and the top breaks and a blade flies out into his eye, the company wants to be able to say, "Well we told you not to use it outdoors." In court. The user, not the company, is negligent, the argument runs, because the user did not read or pay any attention to the instructions. The instructions, then, are not meant to be part of a genuine conversation. They are simply put there to take care of silly cases. The legal department sits around and tries to think up every conceivable situation in which some fool could dam-

age himself with the coffee mill, and then for each situation, it puts in an instruction, so the company will not have to pay.

My argument shows, however, that simply naming cases and putting them in the form of instructions does nothing whatsoever about the company's liability.³ In order to prove that it has not been negligent, the company must show that it has warned people of dangers. Warning is a speech act. For the warning to be a warning, the instructions must be successful speech acts, and they must be embedded in a successful conversation. Otherwise no one needs to pay any attention to them. But in this case, as we have seen, warnings cannot be successful, because they cannot be given in the right situation. One cannot warn people not to leave the cord hanging out over the edge by putting a warning to that effect in some instructions.⁴

Is the company negligent if it does not include those instructions? Clearly not, since including them has no effect. At most, the only safety precaution of this kind that the company needs to put in is something general like, "Take the safety precautions you would take with any electric appliance." It only needs to do that because it is conventional to put some warning in instructions, so putting nothing in might make the conversation defective. The company would have to do more, of course, if the mill were badly-engineered or non-obviously dangerous in some way. But as it is, it's a pretty good coffee mill.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF WRITING INSTRUCTIONS LIKE THESE

The goal of these instructions is to get people to use the coffee mill safely and correctly. If the goal is reached, the mill maker benefits. If the instructions are bad, there are two possible kinds of costs. First, the coffee mill could be harder to use. Second, the company could lose money or reputation.

Let us assume for a moment that I really need the instructions if I am to operate the mill correctly. The worst that these instructions could do is confuse me. Now this confusion is pretty transitory—it does not take long to realize that there is only one set of instructions—and, in the short run, unimportant. Eventually, I will learn to operate the coffee mill. I could just pick through the defective speech

⁴ A historical note. Liability law got off to a bad start in a case that involved precisely this issue. A girl was burned when her parents put a boiling-water humidifier on top of a dresser and she tripped over the cord. The court ruled that there should have been a warning on the humidifier; that decision is probably the source of several of the instructions you've just read. I think that the decision was correct, but badly interpreted. The warning should be there, but only because there was an unusual situation, a badly-engineered lid and a specific, boiling-water design. The error the parents made was thinking that the water would not spill. The parents would not, after all, have put an open pot of boiling water on the dresser.

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acts and find the successful ones and pay attention to those. If I am inured to instructions like these, as most of us are, I will not even blame the company for wasting my time, especially since the mill was made in Korea and the instructions were printed in Hong Kong.

More likely, I will stop reading and work it out on my own. Remember, the very first instruction has announced that the writer is not going to cooperate, and each succeeding instruction saps my confidence. Still, even if I stop reading, it is not very serious. The coffee mill is designed so well that you cannot make a mistake in operating it. Just put the cap on and push down. Whirrrrrr. If I am the same normally sensible human being who did not want to read those instructions, I can do everything without reading the instructions.

I can work it out on my own, of course, until I try to figure out answers to questions like the following.

1. If I do not fill the hopper full, does that reduce the grinding time?
2. What grain size do I need for drip coffee?
3. Can I grind walnuts in the coffee mill?

Then again, with these instructions, I will not find these things out anyway.

What are the costs to the company? Not much. All that happens after I encounter instructions like the first one is that I realize that the company does not give good instructions. That's all right; I won't hold it against them, just so long as they make good coffee mills. Most people don't even mind if the reasonable questions, like those described above, are not answered. Effectively, then, bad instructions do not mar the company's image in any important way, so the costs of the bad instructions are negligible, merely the costs of paying the writers, printing the instructions, and including them in the box.

If, on the other hand, I cannot work it out, then the costs to the company are more serious. I would indeed hold it against the company if I could not get the machine to work. I would also hold it against the company if the bad instructions led me wrong. Say, for instance, the hopper were badly designed, and the acid from the coffee would corrode the hopper and the blades. It would be imperative to clean the hopper after every use, just as the instructions say. Frankly, I don't do that. I pay no attention to that instruction, because it comes from the people who brought me, "Return the machine when you drop it." I trust the design more than the instructions. I would, moreover, feel justifiably angry if I were to discover a corroded hopper.

Notice, by the way, the company's forcing me to trust their design could get them into legal hot water. On the outside of the box that the mill came in, I read, "Grinds

nuts, spices, and grains." What if I do use the mill for nuts? Instruction 11 says "Check hopper for presence of foreign objects before using." The combination leaves it up to me to work out what counts as a foreign object. Surely walnuts are OK, but what if I accidentally get some bits of walnut shell in there? What about cardamon pods? What about seeds? If those work, what is a foreign object? Surely something softer than pebbles will screw the mill up and endanger my eyesight. But what? The instructions do not say, and if I get it wrong, I feel entitled, as I guess every American does these days, to sue.

A BETTER WAY

There are two questions remaining. One, is there any logical way of writing instructions which will reduce legal liability? Two, how do you write instructions which address the concerns of your buyers? (How much coffee, what is a foreign object?) We know how you can start. Take the common sense of the readers seriously. But even doing that, the answer is not clear. Lists of instructions just cannot meet all the possible concerns of the sensible readers, because most such concerns are irrelevant to most readers and so the writer still runs the risk of performing defective speech acts. This is a general problem with lists when the readers read with different interests. There is no simple way around it.

But there is a complex way, and it really is better. To see what it is, let me return to one of the defective speech acts, "Do not use this appliance for other than the intended use." Apart from the solecism (use for use), why is this defective? Because we all know that tools are meant to be used in certain ways and that they do not work well when they're not. This is not just a random fact; we use this knowledge whenever we learn how to operate a machine. In order to use this coffee mill for the first time, I ascertain what the intended use of the various parts of the mill is and then I use them that way. (Aha, the lid fits on that way. So, if you push this down, the mill goes. Etc.) So with this instruction, our hands are already figuratively on the doorknob.

Notice, though, that this instruction subsumes all the rest. Using the mill outdoors is not an intended use. Grinding foreign objects, including armadillo armor, is not an intended use. If one construes "use" broadly enough, then even the caution about leaving the cord over the edge can be subsumed under the instruction, since "use" includes the way it's used. There is nothing wrong with that subsumption; indeed, I think it is the way to go. If people know how something is intended to be used, they can then work out how to use it; they can work out all the safety precautions mentioned here; and, what is more, they can also work out the answer to all the natural questions they have.

I propose that these instructions can be replaced by one instruction, use as the mill is intended to be used, as long as the intentions are spelled out. Here is an example of what I mean:

1. Use the mill as it's intended to be used. It's meant primarily for coffee beans. If you grind nothing but coffee in it and clean it out fairly frequently, you will get years of useful life from it. It will also grind any small, dry object which is softer than coffee beans, including toasted grain, many spices, and nut meats.
2. If you do grind anything but coffee in it or if you don't clean it out, two things could happen. First, although the hopper is tightly sealed, residue or oil can eventually filter through the shaft into the motor and gum up the works. Second, oil, acid, or hard particles can damage the hopper or the blades. If you try to grind very hard spices, like cardamon pods, or very oily ones, like peanuts, you will probably reduce the useful life of the machine. When grinding nut meats, if you don't pick all the bits of shell out, the blades may very well break, and even though the hopper lid is strong, the flying blades could be dangerous.
3. The mill is emphatically not designed to grind up fingers, pebbles, earrings, or knife blades. One of our younger users tells us that it will not grind up small, plastic dinosaurs. Please, take his word for it.

With something like this, you are way ahead of the game. You are providing useful information, and you are being readable. You might even be providing some entertainment. But you are also doing something more. You are getting the user to think about the tool in the right way, to adopt the point of view of the designer. With this point of view, the user might even treat the tool with respect. With this point of view, the user may even listen to a sensible discussion of the mill's limits.

4. The coffee mill is very sturdy, but if you drop it on a hard floor, it might break. Probably, only the casing would crack, and if that's all that happens, don't worry. But if part of the internal mechanism breaks, the mill could be very dangerous. [Note: This is not obvious, by the way. To say this with any authority, one must know how the mill works.] So if you drop it, use the following procedures:
 - a. Inspect the casing and the hopper for stray bits of plastic. Look especially carefully around the blades. If you find any, remove them; otherwise, they might fall into the motor.
 - b. Rotate the blades by hand. If they don't move freely, send the mill in for repairs. Don't even try to start it.

- c. Shake it hard and listen for rattling. If it rattles, you have probably broken a spring, and any further use will burn up the motor. Send it in for repairs. If nothing seems to be wrong, try grinding a little bit of coffee in the mill. If it works, don't worry. But if it makes funny noises, let the factory take care of it.

Even this has a little too much of the obvious about it. It might be improved by including more information which the reader does not know. One could say something like, "The casing is made of sturdy, shatterproof plastic, but the insides have a number of delicate parts. If you drop this from a counter onto a hard floor, probably nothing will happen. If it does break anything, most likely... ." The principle is clear: If you tell people how things ought to work, using information they do not know, then they can be relied upon to use their common sense. In this case, they can be relied upon to pack up the mill only when they should.

True, my suggested version goes completely against the grain. The instructions are long and relatively complex. If you believe that a reader only reads short instructions which are laid out into neat little steps, or if you believe that readers need to have everything the writer thinks of spelled out, then you are not going to like these suggestions. (Or, for that matter, if you think that instructions ought to be formal and that dinosaurs are too cute, you are not going to like them.) I admit that these are legitimate considerations. Readers, especially readers in a hurry, are put off by lots of dense black print. But my suggested version can be made to look neat, can have a pretty format, can even have little pictures. It can also be shorter.

But really, these considerations are beside the point. The original instructions, and most instructions like them, are defective. My suggested version, whatever its faults, is not. Always, my version subscribes to a basic principle: Tell people, directly or indirectly, things they do not already have the common sense to know. Adhering to this principle is simply a matter of having respect for the other person. Failing to adhere to it, no matter how great one's fear of lawsuits and no matter how substantial the precedent, is simply failing to have this respect.

ADDENDUM

Several readers of the original draft asked me to spell out the costs and benefits of doing instructions in the way I suggest. In a sense, I think this is the wrong way of thinking about it, since the argument for doing things my way is at bottom moral. But here they are. First of all, there are no costs. Anyone with common sense does not read the original instructions anyway. The benefits have mostly to

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do with the fact that people will use the coffee mill more effectively. The company sees few immediate advantages from that. At best, the repair department will be used more effectively. But the long-term advantages are significant. People who know exactly what the coffee mill can do and who get satisfaction from using it are more likely to buy other products of the company or buy more coffee mills for presents. Good documentation gives a company a good reputation. Perhaps that's because people respect a company that clearly respects them.

REFERENCES

1. The terminology (and the football example) is drawn from John Searle, whose analysis is considered authoritative. See J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, and also "Indirect Speech Acts" in *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
2. The relevance condition is an addition to Searle's work. I discuss it at length in an unpublished manuscript, "Speech Acts and Conversation Acts."
3. The example, like the football game example and the door-shutting example, is Searle's.