

# Gulf and Golf

By Art Stevens

I suffer from a very rare disease. It's called dysgraphia, which is an impairment of the ability to write, but the disease also affects the way I speak.

The good news is that the disease only affects me in one narrow way: the inability to distinguish the difference between the words gulf and golf. I say gulf when I mean golf and I say golf when I mean gulf.

It's very embarrassing and has caused me endless awkwardness and social ostracism. When I call my friends and tell them I'd like to set up a gulf game they hang up on me. When I describe Sanibel's charms and landmarks I refer to the Golf of Mexico and draw blank stares and gaping jaws. People are put in an awkward position. They don't know if I'm putting them on or just plain dumb. There aren't too many people who can't get the two words right. I believe I'm a minority of one.

I don't have a problem with any other words, even the most difficult. I was a champion speller when I was a kid and breezed through even the most multi-syllabic words.

I'm not sure how it happened. Maybe it's a result of a trauma, a blow on the head or some inner rage. But one day in elementary school many years ago the teacher asked us to raise our hands and name various bodies of water. I thrust my hand in the air and was called on.

"There are rivers, oceans, bays, canals, streams, seas, lakes and golfs." There was a long pause while both the teacher and the class tried to absorb what had just been said. And after a few moments came raucous laughter from the class. I couldn't understand why. I went over what I had just said and everything seemed to check out. Weren't they all bodies of water? I could swear that an ocean was a very large body of water. And so on.

"Class, class, please stop that," the teacher said. "Art, you are quite correct in the bodies of water you described. But you may have made one small mistake. The last one you said should be gulf, not golf. Please say gulf."

"Gulf," I gulped.

"Good," she said, relieved. "Now name them again."

Stammering this time, I repeated what I had said earlier: "Rivers, oceans, bays, canals, streams, seas, lakes and, and --- golfs."

The teacher took me by the ear and brought me to the principal's office. "Art needs a lesson in classroom behavior," she told the principal. Whereupon I was sent to

the detention room, where I had to write the word “gulf” one hundred times on the blackboard.

For years after that traumatic incident I would avoid using those two words. I knew what the sport and the body of water were but by now I couldn't bring myself to try to use the two words in company.

Childhood led to adulthood and I led a normal life. Except that I would never use those two words. But then there came a time when I decided to take up gulf – and buy a house near the Gulf of Mexico. Problems were to follow.

The first problem took place when I called the Dunes Gulf Pro Shop and said that I wanted to take gulf lessons. The person on the other end of the line said “We don't have any boats, jet skis or water equipment here. We have eighteen holes and all the services you need for them.”

I said, “I'm aware of that and I'd like to participate. I'd like to take lessons.” So it was arranged. I started taking lessons and avoided referring to the name of the sport itself. I would refer to courses in the area, clubs, putting, chip shots and swings – but not gulf itself (see what I mean?).

But the other word would keep popping up. When we had guests in our house I would ask them if they'd like to go swimming in the gulf. They were embarrassed to correct me, so they said yes. And I would say I wonder what the temperature of the gulf is today.

Finally, one of our guests could stand it no longer. “Art,” he said hesitantly, “don't you mean gulf?” And I would say, “That's what I said – gulf. Be careful. The undertow in the gulf can sometimes be tricky.”

And then when I tried to take part in discussions about U.S. foreign policies my disease symptoms would surface.

“Yes, I agree with you. The first Golf War was necessary but the second Golf War is open to question.”

And one of the participants in the discussion would mock me gently. “I assume you mean the wars between Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer.” So I avoid any further commentary on what is taking place in that part of the world.

It's not that I'm unaware of this rare disease. I'm certainly aware of the effect it has on everyone around me. I believe they're used to it by now and some friends occasionally suggest that I be treated for it. But I decided that I would ride it out. That maybe someday my brain cells would reorganize themselves and work it out. That I would be able to say and write those two words correctly.

But until that day I have learned to live with it. Tomorrow I will be playing gulf with some friends and the next day I will be sailing on the Golf of Mexico.