

ATLAS FLUBBED

A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF AYN RAND'S ATLAS SHRUGGED

BY KEN V. KRAWCHUK

INTRODUCTION

In my humble opinion, *Atlas Shrugged* is the best book ever written.

As has happened with so many other people, reading the novel has changed my life. Since first picking it up in 1983 at the age of 30, I've read the book more times than I can count. The ideas the Author portrayed helped to transform me from a low-profile, lifelong liberal Democrat into an eight-time Libertarian Party candidate, including two record-breaking campaigns for Pennsylvania Governor and a credible run for the Libertarian Party vice presidential nomination. As the song says: What a long, strange trip it's been.

It has been my habit after each race to take a break, relax, and recharge my philosophical batteries by re-reading *Atlas Shrugged*; and when you read something enough times, little things inadvertently and unavoidably start to stand out and grab your attention, much like recognizing new foibles in your spouse after remaining oblivious to them for so many years.

This critique is the end-product of my latest re-reading, in the wake of an abortive run for U.S. Senate. It's a chronicle of what I believe to be some of the unnoticed foibles lurking within *Atlas Shrugged* that were secreted there by my metaphorical philosophical spouse.

I offer this critique in good spirit; not to drag down the good name of the Author or denigrate her writings, but rather to illustrate certain viewpoints that perhaps others may not have considered. Also, on a personal front, it offered me the pleasure of crawling around inside the bowels of the best book ever written. That alone is reason enough; but I digress.

Despite its epic length, I've found that *Atlas Shrugged* is virtually error free. Out of the 1,168 pages and over 600,000 words of the hardback edition, I could identify only twenty questionable passages; that works out to one error every fifty-eight pages, a record most could never hope to challenge. While most of them are indisputably errors, a few of my observations may be open to interpretation. I'll leave the final judgment to the reader; I'm only the messenger.

I've grouped the errors into four broad categories, ordered from what I consider to be the least important to the most. The categories are:

- Errors of Grammar (6 examples)
- Errors of Calculation (3 examples)
- Errors of Logic (7 examples)
- Errors of Philosophy (4 examples)

Within each category, the examples are similarly ranked from the least to most egregious. For each error, three items are included:

- The *context* of the error: This is the direct quote from *Atlas Shrugged* about which I comment;
- *Discussion* of the error: This is an explanation of where I feel the error lies;
- *Alternative*: Although it has often been observed that it is dangerous to speak after princes—or princesses—nevertheless I offer some suggested text purported to circumvent the error.

To assist the reader in locating the full source text, if need be, for all quotes I've included the page number and line number based upon the Random House hardback edition, represented as "page-dot-line". For example, the first line of the book is (3.1), meaning page 3, line 1, while the last line of the book is (1168.40), meaning page 1168, line 40. From this notation, it's possible to mathematically derive the location of the quotes in other editions of the book as well. For those interested in the details of the formula for doing so, see Appendix A.

As an aside, I have been informed by my Objectivist friends that the title and subtitles of this pamphlet may come across as needlessly harsh. Rest assured that my intent was to be clever, not defamatory, and how far I've missed that mark is an indication of the quality and limits of my cleverness. If anyone is offended by the titles, I suggest that you *get a life!* and simply get over it, lest you continue to surrender your peace of mind to every bozo who comes blathering down the boulevard. Besides: To quote Vernon Howard, "Inner liberty can be judged by how often a person feels offended, for you can no more insult a mature man than you can paint the air."

In that spirit, I trust you'll enjoy my blather.

Ken V. Krawchuk
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 Ken@KenK.org
 AtlasFlubbed@YahooGroups.com

PART ONE – ERRORS OF GRAMMAR

1. *Two choices...*

Context: (1034.23) [Galt speaking] *"Such is your morality of sacrifice and such are the twin ideals it offers: to refashion the life of your body in the image of a human stockyards, and the life of your spirit in the image of a dump."*

Discussion: The number of the indefinite article and its noun should be properly aligned. However, since this error is not in the softback edition, it is likely a typesetting error.

Alternative: *...in the image of a human stockyard..*

2. *Giving ground...*

Context: (317.5) *Among the stories, there was one so preposterously out of character that Dagny believed it to be true: nothing in Mulligan's nature could have given anyone ground to invent it.*

Discussion: The noun, in this context, can only be plural, much as with scissors or pants. This is not likely a typesetting error, as it exists in both the hardback and softback editions.

Alternative: *...nothing in Mulligan's nature could have given anyone grounds to invent it.*

3. *Oh, is they?*

Context: (19.15) *[Dagny] took a crumpled piece of notepaper from her pocket and tossed it to Eddie. "There's the figures and terms."*

Discussion: The number of the verb and its object should be properly aligned. It's not likely that this is a typesetting error, as it exists in both editions.

Alternative: *There are the figures and terms.*

4. *I say tomato...*

Context: (824.39) *Dr. Stadler saw a woman being escorted down the steps from the back row, her head bent, a handkerchief pressed to her mouth: she was sick at her stomach.*

Discussion: The idiom is virtually never used as presented, and an Internet search reveals that the preposition *at* is only used one half of one percent of the time; the rest use *to* instead.

Alternative: *...she was sick to her stomach.*

5. The long and short of it...

Context: (909.9) *The wires had been worn by more rains and years than they had been intended to carry; one of them had kept sagging, through the hours of that morning, under the fragile load of raindrops; then its one last drop had grown on the wire's curve and had hung like a crystal bead, gathering the weight of many seconds; the bead and the wire had given up together and, as soundless as the fall of tears, the wire had broken and fallen with the fall of the bead.*

Discussion: Among its 88 words, this run-on sentence boasts no fewer than three semicolons, an excessive number, and perhaps a world record. While the grammatical argument could be made that the sentence is of one thought, the same can be said for any properly-constructed paragraph.

[Editor's note: This sentence comprises the larger part of this Editor's favorite paragraph in the entire book.]

Alternative: *The wires had been worn by more rains and years than they had been intended to carry. One of them had kept sagging, through the hours of that morning, under the fragile load of raindrops; then its one last drop had grown on the wire's curve and had hung like a crystal bead, gathering the weight of many seconds. The bead and the wire had given up together and, as soundless as the fall of tears, the wire had broken and fallen with the fall of the bead.*

6. Count on it...

Context: (747.11) *"We had no rules of any kind," said Galt, "except one. When a man took our oath, it meant a single commitment: not to work in his own profession, not to give to the world the benefit of his mind."*

Discussion: *Not to work* is a single commitment. *Not to give benefits* is another, giving a total of two commitments, or at least a two-part, single commitment.

Alternative: *"We had no rules of any kind," said Galt, "except that when a man took our oath, it meant a commitment not to work in his own profession, not to give to the world the benefit of his mind."*

PART TWO – ERRORS OF CALCULATIONS

1. Losing track...

Context: (474.1) [Rearden speaking] *"I am supposed to deliver to Taggart Transcontinental, on February fifteenth, sixty thousand tons of rail, which is to give you three hundred miles of track. You will receive—for the same sum of money—eighty thousand tons of rail, which will give you five hundred miles of track. You know what material is cheaper and lighter than steel. Your rail will not be steel, it will be Rearden metal.*

Discussion: Given that 60,000 tons of steel rail is 300 miles of track, and two rails make one track, it takes 100 tons of steel rail per mile of rail, or about 113 pounds per yard of rail. However, the weight per yard laid by the Pennsylvania Railroad in the 1930's was 155 pounds per yard, about 36% heavier than the rail Rearden would have rolled. Since diesels didn't impose the concentrated loads on a track that steam locomotive would, there was a shift back to 132 to 136 pound rail in the 1950's, which remains the typical weight range for modern rail, yet still about 20% heavier than the rail cited by Rand. Since much-more massive steam locomotives still plied the road throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, the heavier rail of the 1930's would serve as the better norm. However, for rails made of Rearden metal, the calculations yield 80 tons per mile of track, or 90 pounds per yard. Given the revolutionary nature of Rearden Metal and the lack of any hard engineering data elsewhere in the book, this number can be accepted. But not for steel.

Alternative: *... sixty thousand tons of rail, which is to give you over two hundred miles of track, or the converse, eighty-two thousand tons of rail, which is to give you three hundred miles of track. A less-confusing comparison would be: *For the same sum of money you will receive the same weight of rail, but it will give you more than twice as much track.**

2. Distinguished Toastmaster?

Context: (1100.32) [Galt speaking] *"It took me three hours on the radio to tell you why."*

(1100.36) [Galt speaking] *"What I told you, in three hours, was that it won't work."*

Discussion: The average speaking rate for the English language is in the range of 125 to 150 words per minute. Given the subject matter, emotional content, and frequent bursts of dramatic delivery, Galt more likely delivered his speech in the 100-to-125-word range. However, Galt's speech contains over 33,000 words. Do the math, and that comes out to an Alvin and the Chipmunks-like 184 words per minute.

John Galt was never one to be a fast talker.

Alternative: *...five hours...*

3. The sounds of silence?

Context: (250.30) *The earth below was streaked with moonlight, when Wyatt led them up an outside stairway to the second floor of the house, to the open gallery at the doors of the guest rooms. He wished them good night and they heard his steps descending the stairs. The moonlight seemed to drain sound as it drained color. The steps rolled into a distant past, and when they died, the silence had the quality of a solitude that had lasted for a long time, as if no person were left anywhere in reach.*

Discussion: Considering what happens next, the moon would have to be working overtime indeed to drain all *that* sound!

Alternative: *Wyatt wished them good night. "You can sleep late if you like", he called over his shoulder. "The rooms of this house are all soundproofed, so it's likely no one will disturb your slumber." They heard his steps descending the stairs.*

PART THREE – ERRORS OF LOGIC

1. A piercing stare...

Context: (520.46) *She answered by the silent affirmation of closing her eyes and inclining her head. She saw his lantern circling through the air as she turned away.*

Discussion: It's difficult to see a lantern with one's eyes closed.

Alternative: *She answered by the silent affirmation of closing her eyes and inclining her head. Upon opening them, she saw his lantern circling through the air as she turned away.*

2. Divining the future...

Context: (709.12) [Wyatt speaking to Dagny] *"I'll see you tonight."*
(714.3) [Later, Galt speaking to Mulligan by phone] *"Tonight? Yes, I think so. We will."*

(714.26) [Shortly after, Galt speaking to Dagny] *"If you're not too tired by evening", he said, "Mulligan has invited us for dinner."*

Discussion: At the time that Wyatt informed Dagny that he would see her that night, plans for the evening had not yet been made. Indeed, Wyatt was not yet aware that Dagny was in the valley until that moment, so he would have had no chance to have heard the plans, nor reason to anticipate them, no reason to speak of the evening.

Alternative: *Maybe I'll see you tonight.*

3. Do as I say...

Context: (1135.11) *"Don't worry," said Ferris.*

(1135.15) *"It seems to me . . . that we have no other choice . . .", said Mouch; it was almost a whisper.*

(1135.19) *Dr. Ferris turned to Lawson. "Gene," he said tensely, still whispering, "run to the radio-control office. Order all stations to stand by."*

Discussion: Dr. Ferris was not whispering, and therefore could not still whisper. Only Mouch could do that.

Alternative: *"Gene," he said tensely, whispering in turn.*

4. Going the distance...

- Context: (681.28) *"The wire's okay," [Kellogg] said. "The current's on. It's this particular instrument that's out of order. There's a chance the next one might be working." He added, "The next one is five miles away." "Let's go," [Dagny] said.*
(683.7) *It was Kellogg who glanced back, after a while, and she followed his glance: there was no headlight behind them.*
- Discussion: Dagny chose the least efficient direction in which to walk. Given that it would be a five mile walk to the next track phone, it did not matter in which direction they walked to reach it; it would still be five miles. However, heading for the track phone behind the Comet would have taken just as long to reach, but would have reduced by five to ten miles the total distance they would have to walk in order to ultimately return to the Comet.
- Alternative: Rather than saying, "Let's go", Dagny should have said, "Our walk back will be miles shorter if we try for the track phone behind the Comet." She turned back in the direction of the feeble headlight. "Let's go." Omit 683.7-8.

5. The in's and out's...

- Context: (991.7) [Wet Nurse speaking] ". . . that's when they shot me . . . in the parking lot . . . from behind . . ."
(989.26) [Rearden] felt the boy's hand clutching his with abnormal strength of agony, while he was noticing the tortured lines on the face, the drained lips, the glazing eyes and the thin, dark trickle from a small, black hole in too wrong, too close a spot on the left side of the boy's chest.
- Discussion: A *small, black hole* is the mark of an entrance wound, not an exit wound, making it unlikely the Wet Nurse was shot from behind. Most bullets are designed to hit their target without exiting at all, thereby imparting all of their kinetic energy to the target. In most situations, being shot from behind will not create an exit wound in front, especially with a thick target like a torso, and the odds are great that the bullet would be deflected or halted by impact with bone. Further, exit wounds are generally larger and more irregular than entrance wounds and would not leave a *small, black hole*, but rather some beveling oriented away from the entrance wound or

ricochet. A low-power weapon would not have the punch to reach all the way through, and a high-power weapon would do much more damage on exit.

- Alternative: *...the thin, dark trickle from a ragged black hole in too wrong, too close a spot...*

6. Fair weather friend...

- Context: (1156.37) *The wheels [of Francisco's airplane] were running faster, as if gaining speed and purpose and lightness, ignoring the impotent obstacles of small jolts from the ruts of the ground.*
- Discussion: John Galt's rescue occurs on the night of February 27th in New Hampshire. The odds of there being no snow on the ground at that latitude and time of year are virtually zero.
- Alternative: *...ignoring the impotent obstacles of small jolts from the inadequately-plowed, potholed backroad*

7. A scrap of hope...

- Context: (290.42) *"Hank, that motor was the most valuable thing inside this factory," [Dagny] said, her voice low. "It was more valuable than the whole factory and everything it ever contained. Yet it was passed up and left in the refuse. It was the only thing nobody found worth the trouble of taking."*
(356.36) [Dr. Stadler speaking] *"How could they abandon, just abandon, a thing of this kind [...] And besides, from a purely practical aspect, why was that motor left in a junk pile?"*
- Discussion: Perhaps a plausible reason the motor was left behind was because it was a prototype that never did work?
- Alternative: None. Given the importance of the motor to the plot development, any alternative wording would need to be far reaching, and beyond the scope of this pamphlet.

PART FOUR – ERRORS OF PHILOSOPHY

1. Anarchy rules!

- Context: (747.11) *We have no rules of any kind", said Galt, "except one. When a man took our oath, it meant a single commitment: not to work in his own profession, not to give to the world the benefit of his mind.*
(709.27) *Our first rule here, Miss Taggart", [Galt] answered, "is that one must always see for oneself."*
(714.13) *"Miss Taggart," [Galt] said, we have no laws in this valley, no rules, no formal organization of any kind. But we have certain customs which we all observe..."*
(714..16) [Galt speaking] *"I'll warn you now that there is one word that is forbidden in this valley: the word, 'give'."*
- Discussion: Given the wide range of opinion from a single individual regarding the rules, perhaps one should check their premises. At the very least, the set of rules, or lack thereof, should be cited more consistently.
- Alternative: The suggested alternative to this and other errors of philosophy are too voluminous for this otherwise-brief treatise.

2. What's good for the goose...

- Context: (995.13) *But a different breed of teachers had once existed, [Rearden] thought, and had reared the men who created this country; he thought that mothers should set out on their knees to look for men like Hugh Akston, to find them and beg them to return.*
(1113.36) *[Chick Morrison] pointed to a pile of papers he had spread on a table [in front of Galt]. "Here's a plea signed by ten thousand schoolchildren, begging for you to join us and save them. Here's a plea from the home for the crippled. Here's a petition sent by the ministers of two hundred different faiths. Here's an appeal from the mothers of the country." Galt remained motionless, not extending his hand for the papers.*
- Discussion: Obviously it's not the begging that's important, but rather the reason for begging. Yet no standard for choosing one over the other is explicitly mentioned.
- Alternative: The suggested alternative to this and other errors of philosophy are too voluminous for this otherwise-brief treatise.

3. You always hurt the one you love...

- Context: (615.28) *[Francisco speaking] "Dagny, if you think that I don't know how much I've hurt you..."*
(618.10) *He seized her hand, he pressed his mouth to it, then his face, not to let her see the reflection of what the years had been like. "If it's any kind of atonement, which it isn't... whatever I made you suffer, that's how I paid for it... by knowing what I was doing to you and having to do it..."*
(517.14) *[Dagny speaking] "Is that what you always do to those who... mean a great deal to you?"*
- Discussion: What sort of person deliberately hurts the woman he professes to love, then has the nerve to cite his own subsequent suffering as atonement for having hurt her -- which he then claims it isn't? What, then, is the atonement? He may just as well punch her in the face, then atone for the act by claiming his knuckles hurt -- which he can then assert that it doesn't. So metaphorically speaking, Dagny is left with a black eye and Francisco sore knuckles, both as collateral damage of Francisco's spiteful destruction of D'Anconia Copper..
- Alternative: (618.10) *He seized her hand, he pressed his mouth to it, then his face, not to let her see the reflection of what the years had been like. "Dagny, I can't expect you to ever forgive me for having been so deliberately cruel." He stood slowly. "I guess I'll be on my way now. You deserve better than the likes of me."*
Omit 618.15 through 620.40.

4. The Pot and the Kettle...

- Context: (286.39) *[Rearden and Dagny] reached the factory of the Twentieth Century Motor Company... A rusted padlock hung on the door of the main entrance...*
(293.9) *[The clerk] wondered why the blond, hard-faced man, who sat with the woman in front of his desk, looked grimly out the window at their car, at a large object wrapped in canvas, roped tightly under the raised cover of the car's luggage compartment.*
(293.17) *[The clerk speaking] "There's been a lot of looting going on. All of the mixed owners grabbed what furniture or other things they could haul out of [the factory], even if the sheriff did put a padlock on the door."*

Discussion: What sort of person removes other people's property from a padlocked factory and hides it in their trunk? The clerk called it accurately: Looters!

Alternative: (293.9) *[The clerk] wondered why the blond, hard-faced man, who sat with the woman in front of his desk, looked grimly out the window, as if he were visualizing some distant sacrilege.*
Omit 298.19-21, 27-31. Replace 358.2-16 with *She looked at him, astonished. "Why, no. It's in Wisconsin."*
Replace *dead tunnels* at 359.35 with *platform area*, and *platform* with *tunnels*. Omit the sentence starting at 955.39.

APPENDIX A – FINDING THE QUOTES IN SOFTBACK EDITIONS

To assist the reader in locating a particular quoted text, the page number and line number from the Random House hardback edition is included with each quote, represented as "page-dot-line". For example, the first line of the book is (3.1), meaning page 3, line 1, while the last line of the book is (1168.40), meaning page 1168, line 40.

From this notation, it's also possible to mathematically derive the location of the same quotes in other editions of the book. To glean an approximate page number, divide the number of pages in the hardback version, 1168, by the number of pages in any other edition, then multiply the result by the desired page number. In general, the formula appears as follows:

$$\frac{\text{(Number of pages in the hardback)}}{\text{(Number of pages in the softback)}} \times \text{Hardback page number} = \text{Softback page number}$$

For example, the line, "Get the hell out of my way!" appears at 1125.24 in the hardback edition. To find it in the Penguin 35th anniversary edition, which has 1074 pages, calculate $1168/1074 \times 1125 = 1034$. While the quote actually resides at (1035.6), the formula at least indicates the near neighborhood of the quote. In a thousand-page-plus book, this can be a true Godsend.

Be warned that this formula only gives a general answer, and in some cases the result may vary significantly from the actual location of the quote, especially for references toward the front of the book. That's because different versions have differing amounts of blank pages between the parts, and they tend to begin on pages other than Page One, such as page 3 for the hardback and page 11 for the 35th anniversary softback. As an example of this drift, the nationalization of the San Sebastian mines is reported at (72.10) in the hardback edition. Calculating $1168/1074 \times 72$ yields 78, but the same event in the softback edition is actually at (73.34). It's close, but not close enough.

Fortunately, a more-precise formula can be derived by taking the variations of various editions into account.

First, normalize the number of pages to make the references based upon page 1. For the hardback edition (which begins on page 3), that means subtracting 2 from the number of hardback pages ($3 - 2 = 1$). Similarly, subtract 10 from the number of pages in the softback edition (which begins on page 11, so $11 - 10 = 1$). To keep the page numbers consistent with each other, a similar normalization should also be performed with all page number references in the hardback edition. That

means subtracting two from all page references before performing any calculations, and similarly, the final figure must then be de-normalized on the back end by adding back the ten originally subtracted.

Using this modified formula, the results for the two examples come very close to the actual location of the quote:

$$[(1168-2) / (1074-10) \times (1125 - 2)] + 10 = 1034$$

$$[(1168-2) / (1074-10) \times (72 - 2)] + 10 = 74$$

To gain even more accuracy, the line number can be incorporated into the calculations. Since there are 46 lines per page in the hardback edition, an approximate fractional location of the line on the page can be derived merely by multiplying the line number by 2, and including it with the page number as an actual decimal. Further, to account for the difference of white space between part 1 and part 2, subtract 1 from all results for page numbers less than 339.

Using this more-precise formula, the results for the two examples come even closer:

$$[(1168-2) / (1074-10) \times (1125.48 - 2)] + 10 = 1035.22$$

...with the .22 indicating line 11. Similarly...

$$[(1168-2) / (1074-10) \times (72.20 - 2)] + 10 - 1 = 73.06$$

...with the .06 indicating line 3. In both cases, the result is very close to the actual location of each quote at (1035.6) and (73.34), respectively.

To sum up, the general formula is:

$$\{ [(HT-HN) / (ST-SN)] \times [HP-HN+(2 \times HL)] \} + SN - 1 = SP$$

where:

- HT is the total number of pages in the hardback edition
- HN is the positive difference between 1 and the first page number of the hardback edition
- ST is the total number of pages in the softback edition
- SN is the positive difference between 1 and the first page number of the softback edition
- HP is the page number of a quote in the hardback edition
- HL is the line number of a quote in the hardback edition
- SP is the page number of a quote in the softback edition
- Note that the final "- 1" is only subtracted for HP less than 339.

In general, the formula will bring you within a page of your intended destination—and that sure beats thumbing through a thousand pages! Happy hunting.