

# Aha! Computers Can't Syllabicate

THERE is still one little thing that gives us a feeling of superiority over the computer. That is the use of a short dash called a hyphen.

Editors and reporters have abandoned typewriters and copy paper for word-processor keyboards and video display terminals. Linotypes have been succeeded by cold type.

We still pound away on an old-fashioned typewriter with letters on a swivel ball that spells words accurately most of the time.

No longer does an editor reflect his moods by the size and vigor of his markings on a reporter's efforts. Proofreading seems to be a relic of the past and a computer error is a mistake forever.

Computers can read, write, add, subtract, divide, multiply and talk. They can lay out facts or plans and perform certain manufacturing or production jobs.

But computers can't think. People can, although there are indications that we may not be attaining our full potential.

Ever since computers have been setting type, it has been evident

that they haven't the foggiest idea about syllabification of words. This skill seems to be beyond their programming capacity.

A few days ago, this newspaper had a story of a car that had halted at a "sto-plight." That may have been lawful but the hyphenation was awful. There may be times to argue about placement of a hyphen, as in "hand-less" or "han-dling," but "stop-light" is clear-cut. Divided as it was, it could momentarily perplex a reader with a Ph.D.

The interruption in reading set off a search for additional examples in this and other publications. We quickly found: boo-kends, houses- broken, store-front, surpr-ise, tea-naged and dinin-groom.

An amusing description of what happens to words in a processor was found in *The Review of the News*. The writer observed:

"When the words you want processed appear on the screen, press the input button and you can have them sliced, pureed, diced, crushed,

stabbed, pierced, snipped, grooved, notched, slotted, slit, disemboweled, gashed, cloven, shaved or rasped."

In the old days, the now-extinct proofreader was apt to call a writer on the merest suspicion of a mis-used word. A linotype operator who placed a hyphen in the middle of a syllable might have had his qualifications questioned.

It wasn't easy for us schoolboys to learn to hyphenate properly and possibly computers eventually may learn to put the little dashes in the right places. The danger is that by then, readers may have become unable to recognize the difference.

When computers first came along workers were warned to "look alive; you might be replaced by a computer." Many of them have been.

Our typewriting might be obsolete but we can do one thing a computer or word processor doesn't seem to have mastered. We can hyphenate in the right places, at least us-u-ally!

March 1, 1983

Ferdie J. Deering  
The Daily Oklahoman  
500 North Broadway  
Oklahoma City, OK

Dear Ferdie Deering:

I am writing to you in reference to your article "Aha! Computers Can't Syllabicate". You stated that word processors and computers do not hyphenate, and when they do they hyphenate in the wrong position. Well, my IBM Displaywriter System, Textpack 4 hyphenates and syllabicates in the proper positions. This letter that I am writing to you now will be hyphenated in the proper positions and will be done by my Textpack 4 system.

I think you should do a little more research before doing such an article.

Sincerely,

*Jane Blackmore*  
Jane Blackmore