

## Hit the Nail on the Head

Measure Twice, Cut Once – March 2023

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One of my earliest memories from my dad's basement workshop involved large-headed roofing nails, a pine board, and a small hammer. I might have been 5 years old. My dad started a few nails in the board and gave me a very lightweight claw hammer. With his hand atop mine, I tried to drive the nails home. Only rarely did I hit the nail on the head. Luckily, I didn't hit him or myself on the head, either.

In common usage, someone who has hit the nail on the head has gotten something exactly right. Sometimes the expression refers to answering a question correctly. In other contexts, it might mean that one has articulated an idea precisely with well-chosen words. I haven't tracked down a definitive source for the first use of the metaphor, but the Voice of America website, says it was already in circulation when Thoreau used it in his 1849 book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

In carpentry, the benefits of hitting a nail on the head are best illuminated by considering the alternatives. When you miss the nail altogether, you leave an undesirable dimple on the wood, signaling your lack of skill for all the world to see. Or, you may whack your finger or thumb, which is more painful in the short run, but you do get to walk away without permanent visible evidence of your poor aim.

Perhaps you did strike the nail on the head, but not squarely. Depending on the angle of incidence, the nail might bend or penetrate the wood at an angle. Raise your hand if you ever attempted to salvage the situation by delivering a compensatory blow in the hopes of driving the nail along its intended path. Such attempts are fraught with problems ranging from enlarging the nail hole to introducing multiple bends in the nail. Long ago, when nails were expensive, wasting a nail due to poor workmanship was a costly error. If you take your medicine and pry a bent nail<sup>1</sup> from the work piece, there's the risk of further marring the wood or distorting the hole. And if, heaven forbid, your last powerful blow is off track, you can end up clinching the head and burying it in the wood.

The negative consequences are reason enough to develop the relevant skills (or to avoid using nails altogether). Moving from the literal to the metaphorical, what are the downsides of verbal mis-hits? It all depends on context, and the possibilities are endless. At a FIG gathering when someone asks the group for advice about solving a problem, one Guild member might offer a solution that hits the nail on the head, while others suggest legitimate but less perfect answers. No big deal. In a higher stakes situation, though, an answer that misses the mark could be much

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<sup>1</sup> If you should ever invest in property in Oak Ridge TN, you may want to look up Bent Nail General Contracting and Home Inspection, LLC. This has nothing to do with the current discussion, but Googling "Bent nail" led me there.

more consequential. One shop-related example: “Did I remember to tension the blade before turning on my bandsaw?”

More subtle, and perhaps more damaging, are cases when we inelegantly express an idea. English has so many words with multiple meanings or connotations that it’s challenging to be utterly unambiguous. Here’s a reader-participation exercise: Think of a time when you spoke hastily or intended to apologize and then immediately wanted to retract and begin again. “That didn’t come out right” or “Sorry, what I’m trying to say.” TV shows and movies get plenty of comedic mileage out of the (un)intended double-entendre, but a misplaced phrase can do real damage in a relationship. Failing to hit the nail on the head can injure the speaker and the listener. Thinking before we speak is a challenge, but one that is well-worth undertaking.

Rather than leave you with a heavy message or a regrettable memory of a clumsy moment in the past, let’s conclude on a lighter note. One of my favorite moments in the *M\*A\*S\*H* series comes when the medical team has left the hospital to treat soldiers near the line. They are holed up in a cave and are under enemy fire. When Alan Alda, as the war-resisting surgeon Capt. Hawkeye Pierce, hears the order to “Evacuate!” he responds, “I think I just did.”