

## Toby's Connotation Dictionary

### (Part One)

Robert is a hard worker. You know the type: he heard somewhere that he should 'work smarter, not harder' and he realized that if he worked smarter *and* harder, he'd be a millionaire in no time at all. He worked in IT all his life, and decided to start up a website combining two of his favorite things: whiskey and cigars.

Whiskeyandcigars.com (I made that up, but there really is a page with that name) was going to offer reviews, links to websites, a forum. He put all of his evenings and weekends into customizing open source software to really make the web page 'zing.' He quit his hobbies to invest that part of his budget into the hosting, advertising, and the specialized software necessary to make the website do what he wanted it to.

Of course, the site took off like a rocket. Soon, he was getting thousands of hits per day, and the Google Ads he was displaying started to generate a little income.

And then the crash came. You know the crash: the real-estate, Wall Street, the sky is falling crash.<sup>1</sup> The people who used to want to read and talk about cigars and whiskey suddenly stopped reading his web site and started reading about keeping their jobs.

When Robert's two year hosting contract was up, he didn't renew, and whiskeyandcigars.com vanished. He had some good experiences, but all of the work and money he invested was gone for good.

Some vocabulary we can use to describe Robert's experience:

**Problem:** As in “The problem wasn't the website, it was the crash.” The word 'problem' is, of course, negative. And it's associated with fault or blame. (“I'm not the problem, *he's* the problem.”) The verb for 'fixing' a problem is 'solve.' (“I solved the problem with the accounting software.”)

**Situation:** As in “Unfortunately, the situation on Wall Street was beyond Robert's control, and his target audience no longer had time to visit his site.” Situation refers to a lot of complex, interconnected factors. It's more neutral than 'problem,' but it's almost never<sup>2</sup> used to describe something positive. A situation is nobody's fault, it just is. The 'verbs' for 'fixing' a situation are 'overcome' or 'rise above.'<sup>3</sup> (“I was able to overcome a difficult situation to become the sales

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1 “The sky is falling” is a phrase from a fairy tale called “Chicken Little” in English. In the tale, a chicken is hit on the head by something, and starts to believe that the sky is falling. Now, the phrase is used to indicate uncontrolled, irrational panic.

2 When I say 'almost never,' have no scientific evidence to back this up. It's just my feeling.

3 I should say here that 'rise above' has a different connotation than 'overcome.' When you overcome a situation, you

manager.” Or, “He rose above the situation and did his English homework on the train.”

**Challenge:** As in “Robert never figured out how to overcome the challenge of declining site readership.” A challenge is, normally, something positive. A challenge is something difficult to do, but something that, once you've done it, you're glad you did it. Sports are often described in challenges: a marathon, winning a title, breaking your old record are all challenges. Some people use 'challenge' where others would use 'problem,' to make it seem positive. And sometimes they're right.<sup>4</sup> The verb for 'to fix' a challenge is 'meet'<sup>5</sup> or 'overcome.' (“The customer's manners were a challenge for me, but I met the challenge, and I think I'm a better sales representative for it.” “I overcame the staffing challenge, and now my department runs better than ever.”)

**Circumstances:** As in “Robert did a good job in difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, in this case, the circumstances won.” The 'circumstances' are like the word 'situation.' They describe everything *around* the actual event. They're like the context. In English, you'll hear of positive circumstances, difficult circumstances, impossible circumstances. Like the situation, the circumstances are, normally, nobody's fault. (And circumstances are *never* your fault.) It just refers to the 'context' in which you work. (“I was lucky to start teaching English in really good circumstances.”)

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work hard *within* the situation to do what you need to do. When you rise above a situation, you're able to—basically—ignore the situation and do what you need to do.

- 4 This is my opinion. . . but I really can't stand the motivational-speaker-types who are afraid to use a single negative word.
- 5 To 'meet' a challenge has the connotation of 'not being afraid of' or to 'confront your fear.' “I met the challenge, and now I'm a smarter person for it!” To 'overcome' a challenge is, basically, to 'solve' it. . . but there's no extra connotation of fear.