

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

Inundated by a river of words

By [George F. Will](#), Wednesday, October 26, 5:14 PM

You step onto an airport's moving walkway, a flat metal conveyor belt that conveys travelers down an airport concourse, sparing them the indignity of burning a few calories by walking a bit. And soon a recorded voice says: "The moving sidewalk is coming to an end. Please look down."

Well, yes. Pretty much everything does come to an end, doesn't it? Besides, we can actually *see* what we already knew — the moving walkway does not go on forever. So, is that announcement about it ending really necessary? Whatever happened to the rule, "Do not speak unless you can improve the silence"?

Passing through a U.S. airport is an immersion in a merciless river of words. They are intended to be helpful, but clearly they flow from an assumption that increasingly animates our government in its transactions with us. The assumption is that we are all infants or imbeciles in need of constant, kindly supervision and nudging, lest we allow ourselves to be flung off a moving walkway and over the edge of the world.

In Denver, underground trains take passengers to and from the ticketing area and departure concourses. As a train arrives, an announcement slightly louder than the noise of the arriving train says: "A train is arriving." Do tell.

At Kansas City's airport, a recurring announcement tells travelers: "Designated smoking areas are located outside, away from doors." That means the designated smoking areas *are* pretty much the entire Midwest and everything contiguous to it — all of Creation that is "away from" this airport's doors.

Perhaps some silly warnings are "necessary" to fend off the Fourth Branch of government, a.k.a. trial lawyers. But this merely underscores the fact that all this noise is symptomatic of modern derangements. Solemn warnings about nonexistent risks, and information intended to spare us the slightest responsibility for passing through life with a modicum of attention and intelligence — these express, among other things, an entitlement mentality that the nanny state foments: If something bad or even inconvenient or merely annoying happens to us, even if it results from our foolishness, daydreaming or brooding about the

meaning of life, we are entitled to sue *someone* for restitution.

These minatory pronouncements pouring from public-address systems would drive us mad if we made the mistake of paying attention to them. Fortunately, Americans' adaptive response to the ubiquity of advertising has caused them to develop mental filters that reduce public pronouncements to audible wallpaper — there but not noticed. Perhaps this is why the Department of Homeland Security no longer bothers to tell travelers it has set the terrorist threat level at burnt umber, or whatever.

And while we are at this, let us, as lawyers say, stipulate that Wolf Blitzer is a prince of a fellow and CNN is an ornament to civilization. Still, is it bad citizenship to wish that one could sit in an airport without enduring journalism?

The drizzle of superfluous words continues on the plane, beginning with “this is a no-smoking flight” — please tell us something we don't already know: Smoking on planes has been banned for more than a decade — and ending with the admonition that deplaning passengers should “make sure you have all your belongings.” Shoes? Check. Trousers? Check.

In the Augusta, Ga., airport, soft chimes — a pleasant Southern touch — warn travelers that the 86-word announcement they heard just 10 minutes ago is about to belabor them again: “May I have your attention, please. All travelers. If any unknown person attempts to give you any item. ... No liquids, aerosol cans or gels. ... There are a few exceptions, such as insulin and baby formula.” Every 10 minutes, never mind the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution.

“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life,” wrote George Eliot in “Middlemarch,” “it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” What silence? Where? One would fly there, were it not necessary to run the gantlet of airport words.

More and more public spaces are like airports, places where we are assaulted by instructions, advice, warnings and unwanted information. Almost none of this noise is necessary for people mature enough to be allowed to walk around the block, let alone fly around the country. This is the way the world will end, not with a bang but with an environmental blitzkrieg of blather.

georgewill@washpost.com

© The Washington Post Company