

Careful

To be careful is to pay close attention to whatever is before you—a task to perform, a relationship to maintain, a thank you note to write. Being careful is clearly related to being cautious. But while being cautious can merge into being too cautious, being careful is rarely pushed to excess. Are you careful? Are you ever too careful?

Examples

1

I have translated a long and difficult epic poem by an early modern Greek poet. I have attracted some attention in literary circles, with the result that I am invited to read from and talk about my translation at a gathering of Hellenic intellectuals in New York City. I am flattered, agree to give a reading, and in the next weeks spend some hours reciting to myself from the poem, in my translation and in Greek, so that I will be prepared. But my preparation is inadequate. I have not read the Greek aloud to native speakers, and my pronunciation is only fair; I have not mastered the references in the text, which my listeners, whom I have underestimated, know very well; I have not prepared my own historical introduction sufficiently. The result? I am unprepared and embarrassed. I determine never to undertake such an experience again without full preparation. I determine to be more careful.

2

When I first went to Greece, I worked in the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. As a group, we students visited many ancient Greek temples, and were particularly awed by the Parthenon and the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Each of those temples is surrounded by an extensive frieze depicting mythical action. On the inside, that is backside, of these friezes, where no one could see it, the workmanship—marble polishing, corner shaping, interface carving—is as precise and careful as on the front, where it is visible to the worshipper. You might say that no corners were cut in the making of these friezes.