



Dear Letters Columnist,

The boss says “everything must be secure.” I started making a list of things to check for security, and there’s no way I can do all this. What do I do?

Thank you,

—They’ll Blame Me
for Ransomware

Oh, TBMfR, my sweet summer child.

You hit the “rant” button. Buckle in.

I’ve previously written in this very column about how the word “firewall” means nothing. The term is void, without clarity or purpose. The F-word should be removed from your vocabulary immediately, by armed force if necessary, and replaced by a more specific term that means... something. Anything.

“Security?” It’s like that, but even more appalling.

I will readily concede that out in meatspace, these eight distasteful letters have a role. How would you know which people to avoid without the phrase *security guard*? Yes, yes, *authoritarian goon* could serve in its place, but it doesn’t precisely roll off the tongue. Social Security? That’s a thing. But how do these relate to computing?

As always in these cases, I reach for the Single Source of Linguistic Truth: my Oxford English Dictionary, from that delightful Edwardian era best known as World War Intermission. Computers were people then and understood instructions like “lock up the cipher’s secret keys at the end of your shift.” We didn’t have to define locks, or secrets, or ciphers in sufficient detail that a machine designed to the highest standards of malicious obedience couldn’t misunderstand them. Security meant “do it right or the authoritarian goons will smack you until you do.” So, let’s go to the official definition of this word.

Wait. The official definition fills most of page 370 and spills over onto 371. There’s no way I’ll quote all that. I’ll skim and cherry-pick some definitions that conveniently support my argument.

1. “The condition of being secure.”

Defining a word with its own root? That’s nearly as helpful as the documentation helpdesk staff give users. Moving on.

2. “The condition of being protected from or not exposed to danger; safety.”

Here’s my question: does the boss want the staff computers protected from danger, or the staff protected from the dangers of computers? Don’t you dare try to tell me that computers don’t threaten people; I’ve seen YouTube, and don’t get me started on Myspace or Facestagram or whatever they call it these days.