So there I am, dutifully filling out a survey about our new my.superdupersecuritygroup.org bulletin board system when I finish the last question and click on the SUBMIT button.

WHAM!

“A single-line error message appears: “BAD VERB” it says, all by itself on the screen. No other information. No helpful guidance of the sort we teach our students to insert in error messages (“Always make error messages interpretable to the user: they don’t know or care what the internal error codes are, so tell them what to DO.”)

Nope. Just “BAD VERB” sitting in solitary splendor at the top of an otherwise empty page.

Muttering a few bad verbs of my own, I take a PDF printout of my survey responses, append a PDF printout of the error message and send the file to the support group with a note explaining what happened.

Later that day, I get the following e-mail:

“I’m the survey administrator and I got your message from the support group. You got the error message because you did not answer questions 8, 9 and even though they are marked as required fields by the asterisk after the question.”

Well, I take a look at those questions, and here’s what I write back to the charming person and others.

* * *

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you very much for providing such a good example of flawed user interface. I am copying my colleagues in the computer sciences group so they can illustrate their undergraduate lectures on Web design by pointing to your survey.

Question 8: "Is there a particular site, page or set of documents that are hard to find?" If you really insist on making this a required field, change the text to read, "Identify at least one particular site, page or set of documents that are hard to find – we cannot believe that you would actually want to leave this blank as a response. Or, if you want to be really difficult, write any of the words NO, NIET, NON, NICHTS or UGRONYDSKY in the space below."

Question 9: "What are your top five favorite things about my.superdupersecuritygroup.org?" Using the same reasoning – that you have made this a required field for no perceptible reason – I
suggest that you alter the question to read, "What are your top five favorite things about my.superdupersecuritygroup.org? If none come to mind, insert any five favorite things about sourdough, ball bearings or tardigrades."

Question 10: "Do you have five things that aren't doing it for you on my.superdupersecuritygroup.org?"

Oh now really. The answer space is infinite. How about

1) Providing the answer to Life, the Universe and Everything (thought to be 42 according to some experts).

2) Solving the problem of world peace or alternatively, of whirled peas.

3) Finding the largest prime number or demonstrating that there is no largest prime.

4) Explaining why my computer works perfectly as soon as a technical support staffer arrives – but no earlier – to fix the problem I reported twenty minutes ago.

5) Offering questionnaires that correctly #distinguish between required answers and optional answers.

Finally, in case the serious message didn't get through all the humor above, CHANGE QUESTIONS 8, 9 AND 10 TO OPTIONAL FIELDS RIGHT NOW, just like Question 13, which reads, “Please feel free to leave any parting thoughts about my.superdupersecuritygroup.org.”

And have someone fix the error message so that it is meaningful to users.

* * *

I don’t know if the charming person found my comments funny, but those fields and that error message really do need to get fixed, BAD VERB it.

* * *

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Responses from readers:

Well Done!
Submitted by Anonymous on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 5:30am
Thanks for doing what I have often been tempted to do in the face of these and similar nonsensical behaviors!

Bravo!
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 6:08am.
Thank-you for the humour, the memories, and the perfect message!

I used to be one of those programmers
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 6:26am.
Its so quick and easy to write code to do exactly what you want and its even easier and faster if you assume that everyone will know exactly what to put in and TFB if it is bad input; I don't have the time to write a routine to parse and interpret your input, get it right the first time! If you get an error message you don't understand then you don't deserve to be using my program - go back to playing Pong. And BTW: I also never documented either, my programs were self documenting. After all, who needs documentation for a perfect program that has no bugs of any kind and will never need updating or changing.
I'm not a programmer any longer but after graduating from Hamburger U. I can say "Would you like fries with that" in 5 languages. (Next week I get to do the drive thru)
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Ditto Bravo.
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 6:35am.
Thanks Mitch

Ditto Bravo!
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 6:44am.
Curmudgeoness becomes you..
fred t.

A nice dose of humor
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 7:03am.
Finding the largest prime number or demonstrating that there is no largest prime.
You made my morning, thank you!

Standing ovation!
Submitted by Anon on Tue, 07/22/2008 - 7:22am.
You hit this dead on! I am really tired of BADVERB interfaces, with questions just like you describe. I have taken to filling in sarcastic or sardonic commentary.