# Weasel-Words Rip My Flesh!

# Spotting a bogus trend story on Page One of today's New York Times.

*By Jack Shafer* Posted Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2005, at 6:38 PM ET

How many "many's" are too many for one news story?

Like its fellow weasel-words—some, few, often, seems, likely,more—many serves writers who haven't found the data to support their argument. A light splash of weasel-words in a news story is acceptable if only because journalism is not an exact science and deadlines must be observed. But when a reporter pours a whole jug of weasel-words into a piece, as Louise Story does on Page One of today's (Sept. 20)New York Times in "[Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/20/national/20women.html?ex=1284868800&en=6a8e0c413c09c249&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss)," she needlessly exposes one of the trade's best-kept secrets for all to see. She deserves a week in the stockades. And her editor deserves a month.

Story uses the particularly useful weasel-word "many" 12 times—including once in the headline—to illustrate the emerging trend of Ivy League-class women who attend top schools but have no intention of assuming the careers they prepared for.

She informs readers that "**many of these women**" being groomed for the occupational elite "say that is not what they want." She repeats the weasel-word three more times in the next two paragraphs and returns to it whenever she needs to express impressive quantity but has no real numbers. She writes:

**Many women** at the nation's most elite colleges say they have already decided that they will put aside their careers in favor of raising children. Though some of these students are not planning to have children and some hope to have a family and work full time, **many others**, like Ms. Liu, say they will happily play a traditional female role, with motherhood their main commitment.

Much attention has been focused on career women who leave the work force to rear children. What seems to be changing is that while **many** **women in college** two or three decades ago expected to have full-time careers, their daughters, while still in college, say they have already decided to suspend or end their careers when they have children. …

**Many students** say staying home is not a shocking idea among their friends. Shannon Flynn, an 18-year-old from Guilford, Conn., who is a freshman at Harvard, says **many of her girlfriends** do not want to work full time. …

Yet the likelihood that so **many young women** plan to opt out of high-powered careers presents a conundrum. …

What seems new is that while **many of their mothers** expected to have hard-charging careers, then scaled back their professional plans only after having children, the women of this generation expect their careers to take second place to child rearing. …

Sarah Currie, a senior at Harvard, said **many of the men** in her American Family class last fall approved of women's plans to stay home with their children. …

**For many feminists**, it may come as a shock to hear how unbothered **many young women** at the nation's top schools are by the strictures of traditional roles. …

None of these many'squantify anything. You could as easily substitute the word some for every manyand not gain or lose any information. Or substitute the word fewand lose only the wind in Story's sails. By fudging the available facts with weasel-words, Story makes a flaccid concept stand up—as long as nobody examines it closely.

For instance, Story writes that she interviewed "Ivy League students, including 138 freshman and senior females at Yale who replied to e-mail questions sent to members of two residential colleges over the last school year." Because she doesn't attribute the preparation of the e-mail survey to anyone, one must assume that she or somebody at the Timescomposed and sent it. A questionnaire answered by 138 Yale women sounds like it may contain useful information. But even a social-science dropout wouldn't consider the findings to be anything but anecdotal unless he knew 1) what questions were asked (Story doesn't say), 2) how many questionnaires were distributed, and 3) why freshman and seniors received the questionnaires to the exclusion of sophomores and juniors. Also, 4) a social-science dropout would ask if the Timescontaminated its e-mailed survey with leading questions and hence attracted a disproportionate number of respondents who sympathize with the article's underlying and predetermined thesis.

To say Story's piece contains a thesis oversells it. Early on, she squishes out on the whole concept with the weasel-word seems. She writes, "What **seems** to be changing is that while many women in college two or three decades ago expected to have full-time careers, their daughters, while still in college, say they have already decided to suspend or end their careers when they have children."

To say the piece was edited would also be to oversell it. Story rewrites this seems sentence about two-thirds of the way through the piece without adding any new information. "What **seems** new is that while many of their mothers expected to have hard-charging careers, then scaled back their professional plans only after having children, the women of this generation expect their careers to take second place to child rearing." [Emphasis added.]

Halfway through, Story discounts her allegedly newsworthy findings by acknowledging that a "person's expectations at age 18 are less than perfect predictors of their life choices 10 years later." If they're less than perfect predictors, then why are we reading about their predictions on Page One of the Times?

While bogus, "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood" isn't false: It can't be false because it never says anything sturdy enough to be tested. So, how did it get to Page One? Is there a New York Timesconspiracy afoot to drive feminists crazy and persuade young women that their place is in the home? Did the paper dispatch Timescolumnist John Tierney to write a pair of provocative columns on this theme earlier this year ([early May](http://nwanews.com/story_print.php?paper=adg&Editorial=section&storyid=117652) and [late May](http://www.dailystar.com/dailystar/printDS/77707.php)) and recruit Lisa Belkin to dance the idea around in an October 2003 Times Magazine feature titled "[The Opt-Out Revolution](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html?ex=1382500800&en=02f8d75eb63908e0&ei=5007&partner=USERLAND)"?

Nah.

I suspect a Timeseditor glommed onto the idea while overhearing some cocktail party chatter—"Say, did you hear that Sam blew hundreds of thousands of dollars sending his daughter to Yale and now she and her friends say all they want in the future is to get married and stay at home?"—and passed the concept to the writer or her editors and asked them to develop it.

You can see the editorial gears whirring: The press has already drained our collectiveanxiety about well-educated women assuming greater power in the workplace. So, the only editorial vein left to mine is our collective anxiety about well-educated women deciding not to work instead. Evidence that the Timeseditors know how to push our buttons can be found in the fact that as I write, this slight article about college students is the "[Most E-Mailed](http://www.nytimes.com/gst/mostemailed.html)" article on the newspaper's Web site.

<http://www.slate.com/id/2126636/> retrieved on September 2, 2010