Please Don't Do That!

A list of the most common writing errors and how to avoid them.

Punctuation

A review of the use of commas, found in any decent dictionary, will be time well spent.

Commas and periods with quotations and question marks

Please, we beg you, put your commas and periods INSIDE the quotation mark at the ends of sentences and phrases. Also, put your question marks on the outside if the question embraces the full sentence, but inside the quotes if the question is only part of the quote itself, but not an all-embracing question encompassing the entire sentence (see example two in this set).

Examples: *"Why," he asked, "should we do this?"*
Is there any validity to the notion that "I think, therefore I am"?
"A stitch in time saves nine." --Ben Franklin

By the way, at no time, and in no place, do we use the single quote marks (' &') alone. Quotes, as shown above, use the double mark ("). The single (') is used for a "quote within a quote," and if both come at the end of a sentence, the sentence ends with three marks outside the period or comma.

Example: *He said, "Let me quote Shakespeare, who wrote, 'I'll kill you if you do that.'"*

Citing publications and articles. Film titles, books, magazines and other publications are to be italicized. Underlines were used to signal "italics" to the printing office, and still does when your computer or printer does not have italics. So,

Not "The New York Times" *The New York Times; Newsweek; All the Kings Men* by Robert Penn Warren; *Platoon; Matrix*.

Chapters in books and articles in other print publications are indicated with quote marks. To include a citation in the flow of a sentence (which I recommend for student papers and other writing where footnotes are optional or are not being used), do it this way:

In his March 30th comments in *The New York Times* entitled "Long Way Home," columnist George Will said, "Students who put film titles and publications in quote marks instead of italics are given 30 lashes every Friday afternoon at this outstanding university."

WHERE, OH WHERE DO THE COMMAS GO, WHERE, OH WHERE DO THEY...?

Commas and Periods with Parentheses

Put your periods and commas after the parenthesis in sentences requiring a comma, and be aware that when parentheses are used, they sometimes substitute for commas.

Examples: *A presidential spokesman (who has asked to remain anonymous) says the president plans to veto the bill.*

*(*No comma is required in the sentence above, *but note, please, that this sentence you're reading is complete inside parentheses and thus requires a period INSIDE the parenthesis.*)

If the parenthetical remark comes at the end of a longer sentence, the period goes on the OUTSIDE of the parenthesis when the sentence ends there.

Example: *I have a sudden impulse to scream when I find papers where students fail to properly distinguish between "its" (possessive) and "it's" (a contraction for "it is"), and I want to shout it in the corridors at COM (but my faculty colleagues would think less of me, and so would other observers).*

Commas in a series:

There is a beastie called the "Harvard Comma," but most of the time you do not need it.

Commas are designed to help clarify prose, not to clutter it. In a short series, where each category/idea is clearly separate, you do not need a last comma (the "Harvard comma").

Example: *I have spoken to a, b, c and d.* (No comma is needed after "c.")

If a *long* series of ideas in one sentence needs separation, or if the lack of a comma might indicate to the reader that "b & c" are one item, insert the extra comma.

Example: *Nobody knows the troubles I've seen, the roads I've traveled, the pain I'm in, the peanuts I've eaten live, and perhaps most of all, the dangers I've faced from wild strawberries.*

Last note on commas: don't take those little devils lightly; poor usage COSTS JOBS!

Grammar

"I don't know where Grampar is, but Grammar is out in the kitchen with me ma."

Countries and Companies are not people.

In sentences where a country or organization (be it IBM or the UN) is the subject (the originator of the action or activity), the second reference is to "it" (singular) and "its" (singular possessive).

Examples: *Russia sold all of ~~their~~ gold, and ~~they~~ later regretted doing so.*

This is wrong in two places. Instead, write it: "Russia sold all of its gold, and it later regretted doing so. (Indeed, you could save space by omitting the second "it.")

The New York Times *said in ~~their~~ Thursday editorial that ~~they~~ favored Bob Dole for president.*

Again, the *Times* is a newspaper, not a person. So read it: "...in its Thursday editorial that it favored...."

Malaprops, Gibberish and other Wrong Words and Phrases

Get it right, keep it tight, and nevermind what you meant to say.

"Feeling," and all those other guys:

The only way you will end up feeling badly is if I chop off your fingers... (which may make me feel bad, and you feel far worse).

When describing feelings, avoid the adverbial (ly) form. You feel bad, you smell bad (or badly, if your smelling is impaired), etc. But worst of all is the "feeling badly" barbarism.

Add to your credibility: realize that I do not care what you "believe" or "feel"

We are neither your chaplains nor your psychiatrists; most of us do not CARE what you believe (articles of faith) or how well your fingers are working or what emotional response you are having. In any serious gathering, these words hurt your credibility. Rather, we want to know what you THINK. So, use "I think" and **not** "*I feel*" or "*I believe*" when writing or speaking.

Contractions: Avoid them when you write academic papers. Spell out *don't*, *won't,* etc.

Don't "Try and do" anything....

This is a silly construction. It appears we have a two-step process. Rather, write or say, "I will try to do..." and never "...try and do...."

Back to Its and It's.

The most mind-boggling of all the misspellings (or call-it-what-you-will) is the misuse of the simple three-letter derivation of "it." Please burn this into thy brain:

"Its" violates a rule. In English, the possessive form usually has an apostrophe. In this case, it is the possessive form.

Examples: *This dog is lost and I don't know who its owner is.* (Correct usage.)

"~~Its~~ kinda cold out today," he said. (No! Incorrect usage. He said "it is" rather chilly, and you can expect a distinctly chilly reception from your professor if you blow this one. So, in example two, the first word would be *It's. But remember, no contractions in an academic paper.*)

"**Impact" is not a verb**. It is becoming one, but avoid it. Some people shriek when they see it (rightly, in my view). Say instead, *The (subject) has/have/had an impact.*

Avoid the awkward "he/she" construction and syntax violations such as "the audience...they"; "the viewer (or reader)...they...." Use plurals: "audiences, viewers, readers...they...." This solves the grammar/syntax problem and eliminates the irritating "he/she" nonsense.

While we are on the topic, avoid "change of voice or tense." This occurs when authors suddenly switch to "you," for example, or move from historical past tense to present tense for no reason. AND WHILE WE ARE AT IT, AVOID THE GHASTLY "ONE" as the sentence subject.

I see brutalized prose like this far too often: *In the 1990s, people would go to the magazine rack and see this immediately. ~~You~~ go into any store and it ~~is~~ obvious. ~~One~~ can find dozens of examples of magazines that are selling "sex on a stick." This caused an uproar at the time.*

Note that the second and third sentences are designed to move readers through time and space in ways that are more disconcerting than any space travel. Here is how it should read:

In the 1990s, people would go to the magazine rack and they could find dozens of obvious examples of magazines that were selling "sex on a stick." This caused an uproar at the time. (Note how many wasted words and redundancies have been eliminated here.)

Which Witch is Which? And when do we go on a "Which Hunt"?

In British English, "which" is often used in ways that are grammatically incorrect in "American English." Here are three rules of thumb that will help with two problems.

1. Re-read the sentence and try substituting "that" for "which." If it works, then you've just been on a "Which Hunt" and have corrected the problem.

2. Remember: with some rare exceptions, the word "which" usually initiates a dependent clause and thus is preceded BY A COMMA. (If you can substitute "that" without losing clarity, do so, and drop the comma. Your sentence is now less choppy.)

3. Take one last look at the sentence after you've done your substitution. SEE IF YOU CAN DELETE THE WORD "*THAT*."

Examples: *The subject ~~which~~ I want to talk about today is the incorrect use of "which."* **First step:** Replace the first "which" with "that" to be grammatically correct; **second step**, delete "that" and you will have omitted needless words.

He said ~~that~~ he was going to town.

The apple ~~which~~ I ate was sour. (And no "that" is needed).

To make this third example correct in terms of punctuation, you would write:

The apple, which I ate, was sour. (Two commas, and a silly construction.)

"Data" is a plural. Thus, we would say, "The data *indicate*." "Datum," is singular, but it is also jargon and a bit stuffy. Try to avoid it. Instead, try "The *evidence* indicates," or other alternatives. **And this stunning news: "MEDIA" is the PLURAL of "medium."**

Differ from, differ with, different than, aw, heck, what's the difference?

One thing *differs from* another. When I disagree with you, I *differ with* you.

But there ain't no *different than* what works good when you are writin' or speakin'.

Affect and Effect: "**Affect**" as a verb describes action. It means "to produce an effect upon." (as a noun, rarely used, except in psychology—it describes an emotion). "**Effect**," as a noun, means "result."

Example: > *The effect of Katrina was devastating*.

Fewer and Less. "Fewer" relates to things *countable, numerical, concrete*. "Less" describes the *non-quantifiable, quality, the abstract.* In speech and in writing, these are often abused.

Examples: *>We may be few in numbers, but we are no less brave.* (Correct)

>I have ~~less~~ dollars than you. (Incorrect)

>We have ~~less~~ horses than we need to win. (Incorrect)

Is it the United States, America, the USA? Are we in the "States"? Where are we? Generally, in the noun form (as the subject or object of a sentence), it is better to spell out names of countries that are also easily recognized by their initials. In the adjectival form, and in other supporting, modifying roles, the initials work better. Do use "U.S. officials," "U.S. interests," etc. But do not use "The U.S."; "The U.K." etc.

Examples: *>The United States now is at peace, and U.S. officials say the focus is on better American-made cars, music, movies and butter, not guns.*

>When I was in the U.K. (no, try "in Britain"), *I really missed the States.* (Again, NO; "the States" is slang, which should be avoided.)

Keep it tight. Get it right. Avoid flabby prose. Some repeat offenders:

Wasted words and flabby prose do grave disservice to your reader, and will often give you the label of "bad writer." *I hate it when that happens....* (Notice that FOUR dots signify the end of the sentence, three are used when a quote is truncated in the middle of a sentence, or when the sentence continues.) In each of the following, avoid the first construction. Use the second.

"In order to" means "to," and there are other signs of flab or imprecision.

Not "in order to"	to
Not "a great number"	many
Not "at this point in time"	now
Not "came to a realization"	realized
Not "come to a consensus"	agree
Not "despite the fact that"	although
Not "for the purpose of"	to, or, for
Not "is of the opinion that"	thinks (some would use "believes," but see above.)
Not "gave approval"	approved
Not "whether or not"	"whether" suffices *most* of the time (not always). It implies, indeed usually *assumes* "or not."

A million ways to clobber the simple, precise word "because." (Oh, did I exaggerate?)

Not "since"	because ("since" can be confusing, it implies "time"--since when?)
Not "as"	because
Not "in that"	because
Not "whereas"	because (and stop talking like a lawyer unless it is a legal brief)
Not "due to the fact that"	Yes, again, "because."

Avoid the pedantic and stuffy. Communicate clearly. Do it with the simplest words.

Unless you've been to Law School, you can live without ever using the word "whereas...." Also:

Not "utilize"	use
Not "funding"	money (unless there is a rare, compelling reason for the "f" word)
Not "prioritize "	set priorities
Not "impacts"	has an impact (As noted earlier, avoid using "impact" as a verb.)

While we are at it, never play poker with a guy named "Slim," eat at a place called "Mom's," or...spell "toward" incorrectly. **"Towards" is the second choice in dictionaries and preferred usage in Britain, but <u>we don't use it in this style guide.</u>** And...

not "orientate"	it's "orient,"
not "careful scrutinization"	it's "careful scrutiny"

The next problem area involves construction, where we want ~~both~~ precision <u>and</u> tightness. (And why is this sentence a good example of more flabby prose?)
When to *avoid* the "both...and" construction:

"Both" was unnecessary in the first sentence above because the reader can fully grasp the meaning without the "both." In sentences where two items or "ideas" are

enumerated, there is no need to "warn the reader" that they must wrap their minds around two complicated thoughts or ideas if what follows is short and simple. Thus we would not write *Both day and night; Both men and women; Both milk and cheese.* These are simple items in a series and "Both" is flabby prose.

When to *use* "Both...and...."

If two complex notions are going to be presented in the same sentence, the "Both...and" construction provides proper warning to the reader that two relatively lengthy or complex ideas are just down the road.

Example: If we are going to be successful diplomats, we must be both skilled and obvious listeners in all conversations and concise, accurate reporters when we relay valuable new information to our supervisors.

Numbers, Capitalization and a few other Goodies to remember:

Avoid using too many numbers, but do use numbers. (Have I confused you?)

We are all suckers for numbers. There is a precision about them that adds greatly to the credibility of our points or arguments. They are wonderfully persuasive. But learn to convey them clearly. When writing prose, here is how:

>Use $95 million, not $95,000,000. Use 10 thousand, not 10,000.

>CAUTION: "at least $1 to $2 million" is probably not what you meant.

More likely, you had in mind "at least $1 *million* to $2 million." A common error is to leave out the key word. *We see that five to 10 thousand times a year.* (Nope!)

Spelling vs. numbers: Except when dealing in currency or percentages (where we always use numbers except at the start of sentences), SPELL OUT FROM ONE TO NINE, and SWITCH TO NUMBERS FROM 10 ON UP. How high is up? See rule 1. Thus, write "five thousand" or "nine thousand"; then switch to "10 thousand" and so on.

HOWEVER (darn, there is always that "however" and I am repeating this), **never start sentences with figures. Spell them out, including percentages and dollars.**

	Fifty percent	Ten
Examples:	>~~50%~~ of all those polled....	~~10~~ million dollars in damages....

Next, our style note on years/decades: *Do not use apostrophes with centuries.* Thus, not "1900's," but "1900s." If you truncate decades like "the '90s" (instead of "1990s"), start with an apostrophe (') prior to the first number, as was done in the previous line. *Note: All publishers and some other organizations have a "style book" in which certain arbitrary choices are required. This is an example of an arbitrary style choice. Writing "1990's" is also correct, but it is NOT our style.*

JARGON, PASSIVE VOICE AND OTHER OBFUSCATION

"Mistakes were made." --Pres. Bill Clinton, 1996.

Jargon is terrific fun. It makes us "insiders," members of the *cognoscenti*, those "in the know," way ahead of the pack; we're players, not "no shows." It makes us FEEL good. Big deal! Jargon consists of words that are known almost exclusively to insiders, so turn all that wonderful high-tech, arcane and "inside baseball" slang terminology into plain, clear English for the rest of us. *That is a key job of every skilled professional communicator aiming at a mass audience.* If you wonder what I am talking about, open almost any computer instruction manual and you will see what I mean.

Passives, obfuscation, and other ways to fuzz the daylights out of things:

YOU, I am sure, will be alarmed to hear that most of our professors find as many as one-third of all their students do not know what is meant by "AVOID PASSIVE VOICE WRITING." Certainly YOU KNOW, but for some of your friends, herewith:

Active voice means the subject of the sentence is the "actor" and the action is described by the verb (action word) that follows.

Examples: *>Bill hit the ball. The ball broke the window. Bill will pay for it.*

Passive voice is wonderful for politicians, bureaucrats, and cowards. They can avoid all responsibility. It is classic obfuscation because it fails to answer the question of "who or what is responsible?"

Examples: *>Mistakes were made. The ball was hit. Damage was done. The window was broken.* (If I had learned this construction when I was young, I would have avoided paying for a lot of windows when I was playing sandlot baseball.)

Obfuscation (sometimes called "Gobbledygook") involves words and phrases that obscure simple ideas, make our prose flabby, and are somehow now "politically correct."

Examples: *>He is altitudinally disadvantaged = He is short.*
>He is motivationally deprived. = Your kid is flunkin' outta here.

(Now it is YOUR TURN: You'll find hundreds of examples of passives that dull the senses, hide reality, fuzz truth, and most of all, make prose flabby, unclear and boring.)

Use of Capitals

I will not bore you with the obvious rules, i.e., capitalization of proper names and so on. Often it is "titles" we get wrong. As a rule of thumb, if you are identifying someone by rank as well as by name, capitalize each key word. If you insert a "the" just before the job title, drop the capitals, insert a comma, and capitalize the person's name.

Examples: *>former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger; College of Arts and Sciences Dean Jeffrey Henderson*; *Bank Boston President Joseph Lottabucks.*

Examples: *>the U.S. secretary of state, Madeline Albright; the British prime minister, Tony Blair; the former chairman of the board at Bank Boston, I. H. Morebucks.*

Note that president, prime minister, secretary of state and all other fancy and powerful-sounding job titles remain lower case unless you attach them to a person's name. (Note also: some stylebooks, and thus some publications, DO capitalize various government and business "offices."

A FEW OTHER BARBARISMS TO AVOID IN SPEECH AND IN WRITING:

--Exclamation points should be avoided. They are sensational, sound emotional or hysterical (or like an extract from a 7th-grade girl's diary just after she discovers boys) and are inappropriate in academic papers, where the detached, more subdued tone enhances credibility. *(Note that in this epistle, I have used a few. They indicate a shriek of pain or indignation.)*

--For heaven's sake, **spell the teacher's name correctly** when you turn in papers...*and spell the addressee's name correctly when you are sending out resumes*.

--In your speech patterns, you must **learn an entirely new, apparently foreign language.** It is called "adult." If you wish to be taken seriously in a serious academic institution designed to train young adults to enter adult-world professions, then learn to speak the language. *"I mean, like, ya know, when I hear this stuff, I'm like, ya know. And*

when I heard a student say that in class for the hundredth time in a vain effort to express an idea, I was like, ya know, and then I go, ya know." ***GOOD GRIEF! "VALLEY GIRL" HAS HIT THE EAST COAST WITH A VENGEANCE!***

If, by now, you are feeling BADLY… (see a surgeon or nerve doctor), otherwise… *"I have a little bugaboo/ it drives me quite insane. / To hear them "feeling badly" means / "This person is inane."* (More precisely, a poor grammarian.) If you are emotionally distraught, you are "**feeling BAD**." If you have lost all feeling in your fingers, you are "FEELING BADLY." Go see a doctor. But stop adding the "ly" to "feeling bad."

AND FINALLY, A FEW "REALLY NEAT" TIPS:

1. **Omit needless words**. When in doubt, leave it out.

2. **Do at least a quick sketch outline when you want to convey several thoughts**, even if it is in an epistle no longer than a memo or letter. Then, organize the points into a logical flow. Remember, those who fail to plan are planning to fail. That is as true in writing as in life.

3. **Practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect**. All other "practice" is mere repetition leading to bad habits that become increasingly difficult to eradicate. This is especially true with writing, *and it is also true of poor speaking habits, ya know, like, I mean, aw, ya know.* Here is the point: edit, clarify, punctuate and properly spell EVERYTHING you write. This includes EVERY e-mail you send. In sum, practice doing it perfectly every time. Soon, the words flow, the ideas appear with clarity, and every bit of grammar, syntax and punctuation is perfect... effortlessly.

4. **Don't ask questions, provide answers.** You add nothing to your important points by trying to "set them up with a question" that you then proceed to answer in the next sentence. This wastes words and space, and most of all, the reader's precious time. Here was a dandy:

~~Why do we do this? Well, first of all because~~ life today is full of deadlines and pressures. ~~But where do those pressures come from?~~ (The sentence just ended in a preposition...avoid this, too.) *~~Well, they come in no small part~~ from the communication revolution and resulting information overload.* **Get to the point. THIS is what the author had in mind** (what mind?)**:**

We do this because life today is full of deadlines and pressures that come in part from the communication revolution and resulting "information overload."

5. **Edit thyself ruthlessly**. The best technique I know is to READ THE FINAL PRODUCT ALOUD. *If it doesn't shake, rattle, roll, stink or smell right, fix it.* Be clear.

6. ***Save it for a rainy day, Shakespeare***. Sometimes we get inspired, the Muses strike and the prose soars to heights the angels envy. But the blasted stuff just doesn't fit with the topic at hand. DO NOT FALL IN LOVE WITH THE PHRASE OR THE PASSAGE. CUT IT. SAVE IT FOR SOMEWHERE ELSE, SOME OTHER TIME. Use it when you write your Great American Novel.

7. **Be simple, precise, concise**. Think of some of the greatest "leads" or punchy paragraphs in all of literature: "And Jesus wept"; "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"; "Call me Ishmael."

--John J. Schulz