

Basic Writing & Editing Tips

“Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language.”

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

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10 Rules to Use

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.

the witch's malice

Charles's friend

Russ's Market

The pronominal possessives **hers, its, theirs, yours, and ours** have no apostrophe.

2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.

red, white, and blue

gold, silver, or copper

He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.

3. Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.

The best way to see a country, unless you are pressed for time, is to travel on foot.

November 14, 2004

A name or a title in direct address is parenthetic.

If, Sir, you refuse, I cannot predict what will happen.

Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.

The abbreviations **etc.**, **i.e.**, and **e.g.**, the abbreviations for **academic degrees**, and **titles that follow a name** are parenthetic.

Letters, packages, etc., should go here.

Horace Fulsome, Ph.D., presided.

John Q. Public, FLMI

4. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.

The situation is perilous, **but** there is still one chance of escape.

I have heard the arguments, **but** am still unconvinced.

When the connective is **and**, the comma should be omitted if the relation between the two statements is close or immediate.

He has had several years' experience **and** is thoroughly competent.

5. Do not join independent clauses with a comma.

If two or more clauses grammatically complete and not joined by a conjunction are to form a single compound sentence, the proper mark of punctuation is a semicolon.

Mary Shelley's works are entertaining; they are full of engaging ideas.

It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.

Creating two separate sentences would also work.

Mary Shelley's works are entertaining. They are full of engaging ideas.

It is nearly half past five. We cannot reach town before dark.

If a conjunction is inserted, the proper mark is a comma.

Mary Shelley's works are entertaining, **for** they are full of engaging ideas.

It is nearly half past five, **and** we cannot reach town before dark.

A comma is also preferable when the clauses are very short and alike in form, or when the tone of the sentence is easy and conversational.

The gates swung apart, the bridge fell, the portcullis was drawn up.

I hardly knew him, he was so changed.

Here today, gone tomorrow.

6. Do not break sentences in two.

Do not use periods as commas.

Incorrect:

I met them on a Cunard liner many years ago. Coming home from Liverpool to New York.

Correct:

I met them on a Cunard liner many years ago, coming home from Liverpool to New York.

7. Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.

Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

But even so, there was a directness and dispatch about animal burial: there was no stopover in the undertaker's foul parlor, no wreath or spray.

The squalor of the streets reminded her of a line from Oscar Wilde: “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

8. Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary.

His first thought on getting out of bed – if he had any thought at all – was to get back in again.

The rear axle began to make a noise – a grinding, chattering, teeth-gritting rasp.

9. The number of the subject determines the number of the verb.

The bittersweet flavor of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – is not soon forgotten.

Use a singular verb form after **each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone.**

Everybody thinks he has a unique sense of humor.

Although both clocks strike cheerfully, **neither** keeps good time.

A compound subject formed of two or more nouns joined by **and** almost always requires a plural verb.

The walrus **and** the carpenter were walking close at hand.

Certain compound subjects, often **clichés**, are so inseparable they are considered a unit and so take a singular verb as do compound subjects qualified by **each** or **every**.

The long and the short of it is

Bread and butter was all she served.

Every window, picture, and mirror was smashed.

A singular subject remains singular even if other nouns are connected to it by **with, as well as, in addition to, except, together with, and no less than.**

His speech **as well as** his manner is objectionable.

10. Use the proper case of pronoun.

The **personal pronouns**, as well as the pronoun **who**, change form as they function as subject or object.

Will Jane or **he** be hired, do you think?

The culprit, it turned out, was **he**.

Who knocks?

Give this to **whoever** looks idle.

In general, avoid “understood” verbs by supplying them.

I think Horace admires Jessica more than I.

I think Horace admires Jessica more than I **do**.

Polly loves cake more than me.

Polly loves cake more than she **loves** me.

Perfect Punctuation

The Period

A period is the closing mark for declarative sentences, mildly imperative sentences, and verbless sentences that are not questions or exciting.

Daedalus and Ariadne were both in on the labyrinth.

Hold your horses.

Really now.

Periods belong inside parentheses or brackets enclosing an independent sentence.

(He had shown such irrational devotion to his own opinions before.)

The rage and irony in his voice (I could hardly fail to notice the scorn with which he addressed me) alternated with a solicitous smile.

Periods go within quotation marks.

They were curled up beside their radio listening to Gustav Mahler's "I'm Gonna Lock My Heart."

We're going to dance our socks off to Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes."

The Question Mark

The question mark is used after a direct question.

What's on your schedule to ruin today?

The question mark expresses editorial uncertainty.

Saint Fracas (456?-458) had a short but raucous childhood.

A question mark concludes a confirmatory question.

You're part of that rodent family from Palermo, aren't you?

A request or order surreptitiously or politely phrased as a question does not end in a question mark.

Would you please muffle your little commotion and straighten out your mugs.

With rhetorical questions, a question mark is optional.

So what.

Question marks stay with titles and interrogative sentences that are part of another sentence.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is the book on which Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* is based.

Do you agree with Proust that "each of us finds lucidity only in those ideas which are in the same state of confusion as his own"?

How had this dreadful suspicion arisen? was everyone's question in that tense saloon.

The Comma

Use a comma between two adjectives when they modify the same noun and the word *and* can be inserted between them without altering the meaning.

We entered a large, disreputable museum.

She let out a low, false chortle.

Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

As he usually did when entering a strange room or arrangement, he thought fondly and desperately of his motto, "Be cool," which never did him any good.

The Semicolon

Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses with no connecting words.

I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs (adverbs that join independent clauses): *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc.*

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; **therefore**, they decided to camp for the night.

The Apostrophe

In forming the possessive singular of phrases and expressions used as compound nouns, the last word of the compound gets an 's.

The **Countess of Troo's** ocelot is sharpening its claws on the tapestry again.

The apostrophe is attached to the last word in a hyphenated noun.

his **mother-in-law's** cookies

If two or more nouns possess something together, only the last noun carries the apostrophe.

Room service arrived with Rosie and Nimrod's crustaceans.

Anjula and Alyosha's common language ran out of hyperbole.

When possession is not shared use separate apostrophes and s's.

Todor did Anjula's and Alyosha's hair.

Aunt Toosla's and Uncle Ladislav's backhands

Plural nouns ending in **s** become possessive with the addition of an apostrophe. For plurals not ending with an **s**, an apostrophe and **s** are often needed to form the possessive.

The goats' picnic in the haberdashery

The women's waistlines and willfulness

The Hyphen

A hyphen connects the parts of some compound words used as nouns or adjectives. It is also used in some words formed with prefixes.

her ill-tempered cat

The starry-eyed sycophant

A hyphen is not used when a compound adjective or other modifier follows the noun.

His off-color bagpipes are seriously **out of tune**.

His **out-of-tune** bagpipes have been hidden in my room.

**Do not use a hyphen when a compound begins with an adverb ending in –
ly.**

a freakishly attired ombudsman

that profoundly regretful ratcatcher

A hyphen joins compound numbers from **twenty-one to ninety-nine and is used to express fractions.**

thirty-six

two-thirds

A fraction should not be hyphenated if one of its elements is already hyphenated.

forty-four hundredths

one sixty-fourth

When numbers are not spelled out, hyphens link them with units of measurement to form adjectives. Money figures, however, are hyphenated only when spelled out.

The **5,000-year-old** fossil lay grinning in his palm.

A **\$5 million** deficit smacks of the good old days.

The waiter sniffed at his **five-dollar** tip and softly clucked his insouciant thanks.

Hyphens are used to join numbers with other words.

two-, three-, and four-room apartments

seven-year itch

ten-o'clock shadow

In the course of a normal sentence, spell out ages given.

Timothy will be **fifty-six** tomorrow.

Nadia became his girlfriend when she was an **eighteen-year-old** rebel with painted claws.

The Colon

The terms ***as follows*** and ***the following*** require a colon if followed immediately by the illustrating or listed items or if the introducing clause is incomplete without such items.

The way to her heart was ***as follows***: take a left many times and then go straight.

Doomed contains ***the following*** characters: Heidi, Horvath, Gabriel, Angela, and the Spanish lady from Spain.

A colon is used to introduce an extended quotation.

As luck would have it, she turned the radio on just as Garrison Keillor began to speak:

“Humor, a good sense of it, is to Americans what manhood is to Spaniards and we will go to great lengths to prove it. Experiments with laboratory rats have shown that, if one psychologist in the room laughs at something a rat does, all of the other psychologists in the room will laugh equally. Nobody wants to be left holding the joke.”

A colon appears after the salutation of a business letter.

Dear Sir:

I wish to complain, without seeming to, for otherwise I am completely satisfied with all your errors, ineptitude, and faux pas.

Ellipses

Ellipses come in threes and fours, and each collection of periods has its function in indicating omitted words.

Three dots stand for an omission within or at the beginning of a sentence.

“. . . and so his gnarled hand held on to her raincoat long after she’d given him the slip.”

“He released the raincoat . . . hoping it would never again remind him of her.”

Four dots (a period and three spaced dots) are used to show omission of the final words of the quoted sentence, the first words of the following one, an entire sentence or more, or a complete paragraph or more. A question mark or exclamation mark in the original remains and is followed by the three dots of the ellipsis.

“How I long to know your name! . . . I can almost see your eyelashes flapping as your eyes caress the page.”

“Days like this give sight a rest and allow other senses to function more freely. . . .”

Tense: A Question of Time

Do not shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action or state is the same.

Incorrect:

The ocean contains rich minerals that washed down from rivers and streams.

Correct:

The ocean contains rich minerals that wash down from rivers and streams.

Do shift tense to indicate a change in time frame from one action or state to another.

The children love their new tree house, which they built themselves.

Common Usage Errors

Affect / Effect

Affect is a verb meaning “have an influence on.”

The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not **affect** my vote against the Clean Air Act.”

When you **affect** a situation, you have an **effect** on it.

“When I left the stove on, the **effect** was that the house filled with smoke.”

E-mail

Use a hyphen. Do not capitalize unless it appears at the beginning of a sentence or list.

Geographical terms

Capitalize north, south, east and west when they are part of specific geographic regions or official names of organizations. Don't capitalize general compass directions.

the Far East

the east entrance

the Western hemisphere

the western United States

Internet

This is capitalized in all instances.

Its / It's

“It's” always means “it is” or “it has” and nothing else.

Try changing the “its” in your sentence to “his” and if it doesn't make sense, then go with “it's.”

Online

Just one word and lowercased unless it begins a sentence.

Percentages

Spell out percentage - use % only in charts of tabular material.

They're / Their / There

“**They're**” is always the contraction of they are.

They're going to the theatre in style.

“**Their**” is a possessive pronoun like “her” or “our.”

They eat their hotdogs with sauerkraut.

Everything else is “**there.**”

There goes the ball, out of the park!

See it? Right there!

There aren't very many home runs like that.

Titles

Do capitalize titles if they directly precede the name of the individual. Do not capitalize a title following the name of an individual or just a title by itself.

Your / You're

“**You're**” is always a contraction of “you are.”

“**Your**” is possessive.

Proofreading Pointers

Our mind is aware of our intentions when we write. We miss errors because our mind corrects them even as we read them based on our intention. Here are a few tips to help perfect your proofreading.

Enlist an editor or two

A friend, a classmate, a colleague, a family member – choose someone who can critically look at your work and with whom you have a strong relationship.

ALWAYS USE THE SPELLCHECKER

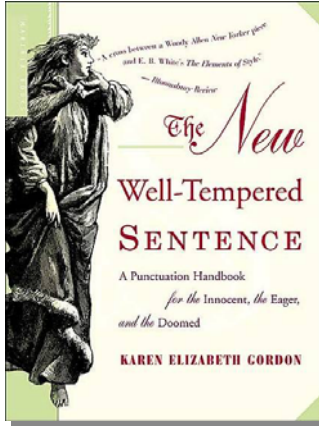
All writing should utilize modern software. There is no excuse for egregiously misspelled words with the availability of spellchecking tools.

Read from bottom up and / or Read from right to left

The mind is incredible! You won't believe what you'll find when you trick yourself into reading every word or phrase separate from the whole.

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oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat
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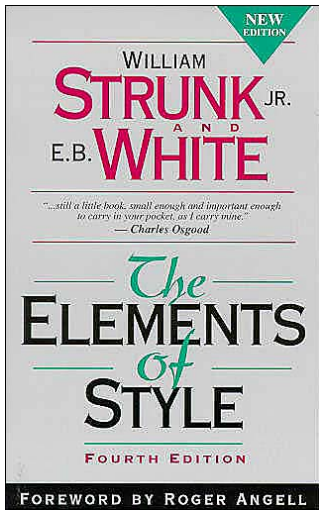
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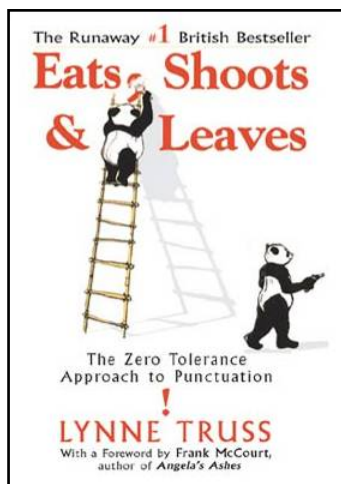
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Strunk, William Jr. and White, E.B.

The Elements of Style

Longman: New York, 2000



Truss, Lynn

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

Gotham: New York, 2004



“Common Errors in English”

<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/>



DOANE
COLLEGE

Style / Resource Guide

http://www.doane.edu/About_Doane/Offices/OCM/branding/guide/

Guide to Grammar & Writing

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>



“Online Writing Lab”

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>