

Please
Don't Do
That!

The Pocket Guide to Good Writing

JOHN J. SCHULZ

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For years I've heard professors decry the decline in the quality of student writing and the plea from communication company bosses: "Please, send us good writers." This booklet is a compendium of the most frequent errors made by poor writers. It has a 10-year record of success in classrooms and, more recently, in corporations as well. Memorize the key points, then apply them each time you write. Or, you could just put this compendium aside and ignore it. But Please Don't Do That! –JJS

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I. PUNCTUATION

A. The comma (,)

1. Misplaced commas can dramatically change the meaning of a sentence.

- a. A high school English teacher once wrote on a blackboard: "A woman without her man is useless." The teacher then asked his students to punctuate that sentence.

The boys wrote:

"A woman, without her man, is useless."

The girls wrote:

"A woman: without her, man is useless."

- b. Another classic:

A Valentine's Day candy store sign read:

"Send candy, and nuts to the girl you love."

2. Commas and periods with quotations and question marks ("," ".")

- a. Commas and periods always go INSIDE the quotation mark at the ends of sentences and phrases.

"Nice job," she said.

"A stitch in time saves nine." –B. Franklin

- b. Put the question mark inside the quote marks if the question is part of the quote but not a question involving the entire sentence. Put the question mark outside the "closing quote mark" if the question embraces the full sentence (see second example below).

“Why,” he asked, “should we do this?”

Is there any validity to Descartes' notion that “I think, therefore I am”?

- c. Never use single quote marks (' ') alone. Direct quotes, as shown in “b” above, use the double marks (“ ”). The single (') is used for a “quote within a quote.” If both come at the end of a sentence, the sentence ends with three marks outside the period or comma.

He said, “Let me quote Shakespeare, who wrote, ‘I’ll kill you if you do that.’”

3. Commas and periods with parentheses

(,)(.)

- a. Put periods and commas **after** the parentheses in sentences requiring a comma. Be aware that when parentheses are used, they sometimes substitute for commas.

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

- b. (No comma is required in the sentence above, but note that the sentence you are now reading is completely inside parentheses and thus requires a period **INSIDE** the closing parenthesis.)
- c. If the parenthetical remark comes at the end of what is a longer, non-parenthetical sentence, the period goes **OUTSIDE** the parenthesis when the sentence ends.

When the author cannot distinguish between “its” (possessive) and “it’s” (a contraction for “it is”), I want to scream out loud (but the new boss would think less of me, and so would other observers).

(Also see page 14 for more details on its and it’s.)

Note that because a parenthesis substituted, no comma was needed after the first parenthetical insert (**possessive**). Note, too, that the sentence CONTINUED after the second parenthetical remark, and a comma **was** needed after the parenthesis because it was also the conclusion of a temporal clause that began with “when.”

4. Commas in a series (, ... ,)

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

I have spoken to a, b, c and d. (No comma is needed after “c.”)

- b. If a long series of ideas in one sentence needs separation, or if the lack of a comma might indicate to the reader that “c and d” are one item, insert the extra comma.

Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen, the roads I’ve traveled, the pain I’m in, the peanuts I’ve eaten, and the dangers I’ve faced from wild strawberries.

- c. Here is a neat way to decide whether to use commas on both sides of a particular phrase in a sentence: If the phrase could be taken out of the sentence because it is peripheral to the main point you are making, then it should have commas on both sides.

Nobody knows the troubles I've seen ... the peanuts I've eaten, and, perhaps most of all, the dangers I've faced from wild strawberries.

The writer who cannot type is at a disadvantage. (No comma here because the main point of your sentences involves those writers who never learned to use the keyboard. Deleting "who cannot type" destroys the main point of the sentence.)

The writer, whose profession is an honorable one, seldom becomes rich. (Commas on both sides of "whose profession is an honorable one" because this information peripheral to the main point. It could be deleted without harming the author's main point.

B. The period (.)

- 1. Use a period at the end of a sentence** that contains at least one subject and one verb.

Jesus wept.

- 2. Use a period after initials before last names, but not when all initials are used.**

William G. Harding was a great president.

JFK was an even greater president.

3. Use a period after enumerations containing numbers or letters, or after most acronyms that spell words.

Please do the following: 1. Read your book, 2. Answer the questions, and 3. Write a report.

He is a proud citizen of the U.S.A.

C. Ellipses (...)

1. How many periods or "dots" should you use to indicate that words or sentences are missing from a quote?

- a.** FOUR dots signify the end of the sentence was chopped off.

"Now is the time for all good men"
(The quote said more before ending.)

"Success has a thousand parents. ..."

(The sentence ended with parents and the quote said more — "Failure is an orphan." — after the end of the sentence.)

- b.** THREE dots are used when a quote is truncated in the middle of a sentence, and the quote then continues to the end of the sentence.

"Now is the time ... to come to the aid of the party." (Words cut in the middle.)

NOTE: Some styles and editors do not add extra spaces before starting ellipses, but the

Associated Press Style Book recommends spaces around the periods. As noted above, this style also allows you to show which part of a sentence is missing quoted material (when you use four periods).

- c. If you begin a quote somewhere AFTER the first word in the quote, do not start the quoted portion with a capital letter.

Perhaps Shakespeare best described our role in peacetime when he wrote, " ... there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility." (Although there is more to that famous speech in **Henry V**, this quote from it ended at the end of the sentence. Note the punctuation.)

D. The semicolon (;)

1. **Semicolons can be used to join two or more related, but independent, ideas in one sentence.** The phrase or phrases that follow semicolons should stand on their own; the subject of the sentence, which preceded the first semicolon, can be "understood," but the phrase that follows should stand as an independent idea, often with a verb and object. The semicolon, thus, is a mark that substitutes for conjunctions, such as "but," "and," "however," "moreover," etc.

As author I. M. Gifted once said, "Some people are naturally good writers"; fortunately, good writing is a skill that can be learned.

(Note that the sentence could also have been written: As author ... "Some people are

naturally good writers," and, fortunately, good writing is a skill that can be learned.)

NOTE: Avoid overuse of the semicolon as a conjunction, because it usually means constructing a more complex sentence that most often can be better expressed as two independent sentences. Too much punctuation slows readers down.

2. Semicolons are also used for clarification in a list of things that contains commas.

The temperature in Spokane, Wash., was 76 degrees; Boston, 85; Miami, 99; and Dallas, 65.

3. Punctuating semicolons: Unlike commas and periods, semicolons go outside the quote marks (see first example above under #1).

E. The colon (:)

1. The colon usually is used at the end of a sentence to introduce lists of things.

In terms of explaining the American Revolution, she offered three ideas: the Stamp Act, the Sons of Liberty and disenchantment with British authorities.

2. Sometimes the colon is used for emphasis.

He offered only one theory: We hate British tea.

NOTE: The dash (see "F" below) is also used for emphasis and often is more "forceful" than a colon.

3. The colon also can be used to introduce quotations, especially long ones.

President I. M. Longwinded said: "I will push for a tax bill that lessens the burden on those who own goldfish. This bill will"

4. Punctuating colons: Capitalize the first word after the colon if the word is a proper noun or if it is the start of a complete sentence (with a subject and verb). Colons go outside quotation marks unless part of the quotation itself.

F. The dash (—)

1. Use a dash to indicate abrupt change.

I will go to the Bahamas — if I pass this course.

NOTE: AP recommends spaces on both sides of the dash, but many editors prefer no space.

2. Use a dash for attribution.

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away."
—Ben Franklin

NOTE: This is an exception to the AP spacing rule: no space between dash and the name.

3. Use a dash to separate a series within a phrase.

She listed the qualities — good writing skills, perseverance, independence, endless curiosity — that she liked in a journalist.

G. The hyphen (-)

1. Use a hyphen to avoid ambiguity.

The small-business men will speak to the club. (Note, without the hyphen, the business men are small.)

2. The hyphen is also used as a compound modifier — two or more words that express a single concept that precede a noun. This is one of the most difficult punctuation marks to deal with. The general rule is this: If the two or more words that precede the noun cannot stand alone (that is, they depend upon each other for meaning), then hyphenate.

The 21-year-old man is doing well in class. (Note that “21,” “year,” and “old” depend upon each other for their meaning — they cannot stand alone — hence, they need to be hyphenated.)

She has a full-time job.

3. Generally speaking, do not hyphenate when the modifiers come after the noun.

The only exception is when the modifier occurs after the form of the verb “to be.”

She works full time. I sleep a lot.

Her job is full-time. My sloth is never-ending.

4. Never use a hyphen with adverbs that end in “ly,” because readers expect them to modify the words that follow them.

H. The exclamation point (!)

1. The exclamation point is used to express a high degree of surprise or other emotion.

"Halt!" the police officer cried to the robber.

2. But exclamation points generally should be avoided.

They are sensational, sound emotional or hysterical (or like an extract from a 7th-grader's diary). They are inappropriate in academic or professional writing, where the detached, more subdued tone enhances the author's credibility. (Note that occasionally in this opus I have used them. They indicate a shriek of pain and indignation or a faint touch of humor.)

II. GRAMMAR

A. It, it's and its

1. "It's" is a contraction ("it is") and "its" is a possessive.

Confusing the two is one of the most common grammatical errors. "Its" violates a rule: Our possessives usually have an apostrophe. But "its" is the possessive form.

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

~~Its~~ rather cold out today," he said. (No! Incorrect usage. He said "it is" rather chilly, and you can expect a distinctly chilly reception from your boss or professor if you blow this one. So, the first word should be spelled It's.)

(Now it is YOUR TURN: Have FUN! You can spot hundreds of these efforts to dull the senses, obscure or hide reality, fuzz the truth, and most of all, make prose flabby, unclear and incredibly boring. After hunting for “whiches,” go gather some “gobbledygook.”)

VIII. SOME “REALLY NEAT” TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

A. Follow the example of good journalists. Most writing is designed to inform, uplift or entertain us. Ninety-nine percent of the time it is to convey information. Do it tightly and clearly by creating a good lead sentence. Virtually all good “leads” provide the following information within that first sentence: Who? What? When? Where? Why or How? Notice how often that is done, usually in under 30 words, by good journalists writing “hard news.”

President I. B. Machismo told White House reporters in Washington Thursday that if relations with Havana do not improve, he will order the Marines to invade Cuba.

Note that the “Five W’s and H formula” left nothing missing or unclear to the reader. Next, amplify on this lead, or add new information in follow-up sentences. This **inverted-pyramid** formula, where the most important information is in that first sentence, is the best formula to use for MOST of the writing you do. (If you seek to uplift or entertain, other approaches may apply. But not in most memos, e-mails, business correspondence or news reporting, or in essays and other written school assignments.)

B. Do a quick sketch outline when you want to convey several thoughts, even if it is no longer than a memo or letter. Then, organize the points into a logical flow, recognizing that with a proper lead sentence, half your work is already done. (“Well begun is half done.”) Remember, those who fail to plan are planning to fail. That is as true in writing as in life.

C. When in doubt, leave it out. “This is the Prime Directive” (Star Trek) or, as Strunk and White said in their marvelous book, *Elements of Style*, “Omit needless words.” Learn from Michelangelo. Once asked how he created those beautiful sculptured marble horses, he famously replied, “I select a beautiful piece of marble, then cut away all the parts that don’t look like a horse.” Do the same with your written work. If it is not accurate, necessary to the point, or efficiently “saying what you meant to say,” cut it.

D. Avoid starting with “There is”

Almost any sentence that begins with “There is/are/were” will be improved when you rewrite, cutting those words at the beginning.

~~There are many who are called, but few who get selected.~~

Instead: Many are called, but few are chosen.

~~There is a great example of this...~~

Instead: A great example of this is

E. 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 golf), and it is also true of poor speaking habits, ya' know, like, I mean, aw, ya' know. Edit, clarify, punctuate and properly spell EVERYTHING you write. This includes every e-mail you send. (This is the best writing "practice" of all; we write so many e-mails these days.) "Practice" by writing every e-mail perfectly. Soon, the words flow, the ideas have diamond clarity, and every bit of grammar, syntax and punctuation is perfect and effortless. (Your friends won't notice the difference, but your bosses and teachers will!)

F. 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? (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:

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

G. Proofread carefully to see if you _ any words out. Edit thyself ruthlessly by using eyes and ears simultaneously (and don't "own" the writing.

Pretend, instead, that someone else wrote what you are now editing; you will find it easier to make cuts and changes). Many pros do this: read the final product aloud to yourself. If it doesn't shake, rattle, roll, sing or sound right, fix it. Make it clear. Often, your eyes may skip over a mistake, but your ears will catch the problem. And if the sentence you are reading aloud makes you out of breath, it is probably too long. Rewrite.

H. Save it for a rainy day, Shakespeare.

Sometimes we get inspired. The Muses strike and our prose soars to heights that angels envy. But the blasted stuff just doesn't fit with what we wanted to convey. 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.

I. Keep it simple, precise, concise. Think of some of the greatest "leads" or punchy paragraphs in all of literature: "Jesus wept"; "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"; "Call me Ishmael." And Thomas Paine's famous, "These are the times that try men's souls."

J. Work hard at writing. Back in the days of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson famously wrote: "No one should write for free. The work is too hard." He was correct. Becoming a good writer is hard work, but anyone willing to work can become good. Remaining a good writer requires vigilance — a recognition that even the best among us get sloppy from time to time or fall into bad habits. But **Please Don't Do That!**