

Hints, Admonitions, and Downright Threats from a Jaded Reader of Too Many Sloppy Essays

The following comments are not intended to take the place of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* or Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Here are mere technicalities; there you will find wisdom.

A. IF YOUR ESSAY CONTAINS ANY OF THE FOLLOWING UNCORRECTED ERRORS, BEWARE!

1. Starting a sentence with the word "Hopefully." **You** can be adverbially hopeful; a **situation** cannot be.
2. Leaving out the second "m" in "accommodate."
3. Putting an apostrophe in the possessive "its." ("It's" is the abbreviation for "it is.")
4. Forgetting to take the "e" out when "disaster" becomes "disastrous."
5. Writing "ie" when you mean "e.g.," or "eg" when you mean "i.e.": i.e.= *id est*= that is; e.g.= *exempli gratia* = for example.
6. Placing a semicolon (;) where you intend a colon (:): If you wish the reader to pause briefly for breath, or to collect his thoughts; or if you wish to separate a word or a phrase or a clause from what comes before and comes after; then do what I have done in the first line of the present passage: use commas. If, on the other hand, a succession of commas would be confusing, or you wish to warn the reader that the sentence is about to change direction, then use a semicolon, again as in the above passage. If, finally, you wish to alert the reader to something you are about to communicate, do so this way: put in a colon. There are other uses for the colon, as you will see from time to time in the following comments, but "Now hear this:" is the most Important one. There are other occasions when the most appropriate punctuation is a dash or a pair of dashes, but often this is an idiosyncratic matter, and not for legislation.
7. Submitting an essay of inappropriate length. If you are asked for 3,000 words, try to get reasonably close to that number, within a couple of hundred words either way. (One page of typescript counts as 300 words, so for a 3,000-word essay you should hand in no fewer than nine pages, no more than eleven, exclusive of tables, charts, maps and photographs.) No matter what your topic, you should be able to give its essence within these constraints. If, however, what you want to say takes you beyond the limit, put the overspill into one or more appendices. As long as you have said all the essential things in the body of your essay, you can go on forever in the appendix, and I won't care.
8. Making use of colloquialisms, especially inappropriate abbreviations: Notice the "won't" in the last line of the previous paragraph: I am being informal, conversational. In a formal essay, such linguistic ease **may** be out of place: it depends upon the tone you adopt. Consistency here is as important as it is everywhere else in your essay. Thus, no informal abbreviations where they do not fit, please. (But I'm not asking you to write like a stuffed shirt: far from it!)
9. Being stingy with footnotes: Provide lots of documentation. Any ideas not your own, or facts appropriated from somebody else, should be credited to the proper source. But **do** be stingy with quotations: **unless** your author writes so felicitously that his words beg to be quoted verbatim and at length, simply paraphrase * It can be an asterisk if footnotes are few, or a number, if they are many.
10. Submitting a messy bibliography: Your bibliography (and make sure there **is** a bibliography) must be in standard form, and consistent throughout. Your textbooks all have bibliographies, or should; use one of them

as your guide. Just remember that where a printed work has italics, a typed or handwritten one uses underlining. Titles of books and periodicals are underlined; titles of chapters and articles are surrounded by quotation marks. If your reference is to something written by one person but edited by another, say so: do not mistakenly list the editor as the author.

11. Failing to respect a deadline: Hand in your essay on the due date, or let there be a note from your mother or spouse or grieving friend that you are dead. No excuses, explanations or pleas for mercy will be entertained.

12. Neglecting to proofread: Since you **do** have a deadline to respect, you must budget your time carefully. Submitting a sloppy essay is a mark of disrespect in all directions: for yourself, your upbringing ("Hey, was you raised in a barn?"), your school, your teacher - indeed, for society itself. I can't ask you to write half a dozen drafts of your essay (I don't do it myself, though I should); but you can do at least two, and then read over your final draft and correct any mistakes you catch.

B. IF YOU DO THESE THINGS, YOUR GRADES MAY OR MAY NOT SUFFER, BUT I CERTAINLY WILL.

1. Writing sentences without verbs - unless you do so on purpose, for effect.

2. Same with the splitting of infinitives: To unconsciously split an infinitive is bad. If you have a good reason for splitting an infinitive, split; if not, not. But know what you are doing and why you are doing it. (Contemplate your navel.)

3. Making paragraphs twitch with "which's" that have but ambiguous antecedents; or bristle with a thistle-thatch of "this's" that have no recognizable antecedents at all; or teem with unrecognizable "they's" and "them's": "They went into the house and switched on the lights, which showed them stuffing the silver into stout burlap bags. This startled them, which made them angry, so they hit them on the head with blunt objects."

4. Exhibiting fear of three little words, only one of which is in the title of the dear old song. The three useful, harmless little words are "but," "of," and "I."

a) Fear of "but" results in "howeveritis." Try to use "but" wherever it is appropriate; if, however, you must use "however" or die, wait a seemly moment and shove it in somewhere in the interior of a sentence: do not give it pride of place at the head. **However**, if you want to be emphatically emphatic, and stop the reader dead, then that's the way to do it (the way I've just done). You can - indeed you must - begin with the word "however" if it means, not "but" or "nevertheless," but "no matter how." Like this: "Writing with grace and verve is a talent not given to everyone, and no person can demand that another be talented. However pedestrian the writing style, however, there can be no excuse for lack of attention, of sheer sloppiness." You can avoid much of the difficulty by using "but" instead. "But you can't start a sentence with 'but'," you say. Yes you can. Honest. Also with "and."

b) Fear of "of" results in the repeated perpetration of the barbarism most characteristic of scientese, engineeringese, sociologese, computerese, and many of the other distressing forms of communication that plague us today: the **railway phrase**, in which all but the last of a string of nouns becomes a string of adjectives, to modify the one noun that really is a noun, which brings up the caboose: "factor analysis axis rotation procedures study initiation" will drive any right-thinking human being out of his (or, if you like, her) mind. And if you think it is an exaggeration - well, perhaps it is, but not by much.

There are times when the use of noun as adjective is inevitable: how else, for example, can you say "railway phrase" itself? Or is there a more graceful name that the British could have given to their *Town and Country Planning Act*? So bow to the inevitable and avoid the avoidable. If you see a string of adjectival nouns approaching, shunt it aside with a mind-saving "of" or two.

c) Fear of "I." This fear has been instilled in you by stupid people, who tell you that you will sound like an egotist if you use it. So what if you do sound like an egotist: you are one, aren't you? Or are you sick in the head?

Honesty is still the best policy. If you say "this was done" instead of "I did this," then you legitimately prompt the question: "By whom?" (Sometimes "by whom" is obvious, sometimes it is not.) Worse, you are thrown into the passive voice, and good writing demands the active voice. Still worse, by using the passive voice participles start dangling all over the place. (Do you recognize a dangling or unattached participle when you see one? There is one right there staring you in the face, back in the last sentence outside the bracket. If you don't already see how silly that sentence is, let's turn it around, and you will: "Still worse, participles start dangling all over the place by using the passive voice." The participles aren't using the passive voice, you are; so don't. Use "I".) Incidentally, a dangler can be undangled by turning the participle into a gerund (and if you don't recognize the dangler right there you've got problems): to turn a participle into a gerund - or maybe a gerundive: the distinction beats me - simply put a "the" in front of it and an "of" after it: "a dangler can be undangled by **the turning of** the participle into a gerund" (or a gerundive, as the case may be; who cares?).

5. Neglecting the hyphen. When two or more words that habitually keep company are used adjectivally, strengthen their bonds with the appropriate number of hyphens. "This book is up to date" becomes "this is an up-to-date book."

6. Saying "presently" when you mean "at present," or "currently," or "now." Why not "now"? It's short, says what it means, means what it says; but admittedly, it sometimes louses up the rhythm. Still, "presently" means "soon," in good time," so use it when that is what you want to say, and not otherwise.

7. Mixing up "effect" and "affect" - among the most common, and understandable, of errors. There is no logical way of telling them apart; even going back to the Latin origins is of no help. You will have to rely on memory; maybe this mnemonic will help: "Something that Exerts an Effect on Everybody will Always Affect Anybody."

8. Using the word "very" is frowned on by purists, though I don't know why. I find it a very useful word (but then, I'm addicted to overemphasis).

9. Here's a tricky one, that you may give attention to or not, as you wish. Notice where the period is at the end of the last paragraph. Putting the period inside the bracket is wrong, **unless** the pair of brackets enclose a complete sentence.

10. Attaching singular verbs to plural nouns, and plural verbs to singular nouns. The relations between verbs and pronouns also take a terrible beating. (An aside: notice the word "relations;" "relationships" are for members of a family, mostly.) "The government has often proclaimed in their newspaper ads that they would pass any law it was able to."

11. Exhibiting an addiction to fancy words. If you are hooked, do me the favour of consulting a dictionary, to make sure that a) the fancy word means what you think it means, and b) you are spelling it right.

12. Repeating when you shouldn't and failing to repeat when you should. Sometimes people get stuck on a phrase or a word and repeat it over and over again throughout the essay. Or they will write a few paragraphs on page 3 and repeat them essentially unchanged on page 7. The words may be different, but the facts or

ideas will be the same. These are things to guard against. Occasionally, though, there are repetitions that cannot be avoided. For example: "He took some apples, flour, sugar and baked an apple pie." That poor little "and" is overworked. The reader expects another ingredient to follow it: "He took some apples, flour, sugar and shortening....." But since he forgot the shortening, an "and" must appear before "sugar" so the sentence then reads: "He took some apples, flour and sugar, and baked an apple pie."

13. Failing to use a) all libraries available to you, and especially the scholarly and scientific periodicals in them; and b) all librarians available to you, especially reference librarians. They are marvellously talented and helpful, every one (at least in my experience).

14. Making uncritical use of daily newspapers as sources of supposedly precise and accurate information. Newspapers do not pretend to be authoritative, so do not do the pretending for them. If used with discrimination, though, newspapers can be invaluable.

15. Throwing quotation marks around like confetti. Think: "Am I quoting something? That is, am I using these 'inverted commas', 'ces guillemets', 'diese Gånsefüeschen', in an appropriate manner? Or am I being arch?" Don't be arch. And if you have a quotation inside a quotation inside a quotation, alternate double and single marks: "Jack said: 'Jill said, 'Jim said: 'Joan said: "Nuts!" ' ' ' ' " (Come to think of it, if computer programmers had at their disposal brackets of different shapes, instead of being constrained to use the one shape, they would suffer fewer breakdowns, as would computer programs. (But that is asking for Utopia. (Or is it?)))

16. Plagiarizing. You know enough not to take someone else's work and call the whole thing your own, without attribution, but sometimes you may find yourself unconsciously guilty of one or another different bit of plagiarizing. Viz: You quote a sentence from an author, then write down the next sentence in that author's very words, without enclosing the second sentence in quotation marks. That's plagiarism. Or: You submit the same essay, or slightly amended versions of the same essay, to two different profs, without letting on. That too is plagiarism: you are plagiarizing yourself. But watch that you don't fall into the opposite trap: over-quoting. In section A 9. above you were advised to be stingy with quotations, especially when what you are quoting sounds like this: "Whitmore Phisby claims that 'More solar energy, can be stored quicker by waiting for a sunny day.' " Phisby is a dope for stating the obvious, you would be a bigger dope for quoting his unmemorable words verbatim, and you'd be the biggest dope of all for quoting his idiocies (misplaced comma, misused words, dangling participle) without noticing that they **are** idiocies. Most of the time it is best to steal (legally) somebody else's ideas without at the same time stealing the words he clothes them in. When you do quote, make the quotation tell.

17. Committing the second-deadliest scholarly sin. If plagiarism is the deadliest of all scholarly sins - and I think it is enough to merit getting kicked out of the university for - then next to it must come making the source of your information look a bigger damn fool than he is. Everything I have been saying in these notes up to this point comes together here, and what it all amounts to is that one shows a sense of responsibility. A quotation must be exact in every respect. If the spelling is American ("labor" for "labour"; "defense" for "defence") then that's the way it's quoted. If a word is used in an unfamiliar or incorrect way, or spelled differently from the way your dictionary says it should be spelled, then you quote it as is, and follow it with " (sic)", which means (freely translated) "It ain't my fault." But if your source writes "swath" and means "swath", whereas you quote the word as "swathe", or even "swarth", then that is a deadly sin. Or if you put in unwanted commas, or leave out essential ones, then that too is a sin of the second-worst kind. Here, if anywhere, you must proofread, and check dictionaries, and proofread again, to make sure you're getting it right.

R.I. Wolfe , Department of Geography, York University

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