The Write Word’s

Easy Editing

and

Spiffy

Style Guide

The Write Word
Copywriting and Editing Services
Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It is like passing around samples of their own sputum.
– Vladimir Nabokov
Introduction

A Little Editing Music, Please

Say you’re new to the mysteries of the editing trade, whether you’re a marketing writer in a 1,000-person corporation or a freelance copyeditor just building your chops in the business. Or maybe you’re a writer that simply likes to clean up her own messes. Perhaps you’re a seasoned old hand who just wants a refresher course before being asked to proof the A–F entries of Wikipedia. This guide is intended to acquaint you with editing/proofreading fundamentals and then some. We’ll start by explaining the purposes of editing, move into noting some editorial tools, dance over to reviewing the various approaches to and methods of editing, and finally, to demonstrate the glories of editing in action, we’ll supply some mesmerizing “before and after” examples of unedited and edited documents.

But wait, that’s not all! There’s also a style guide that covers zany subjects like ap...
In these tormented times of assigning blame to others for our own on-paper commission of dark deeds, I believe that it is empowering—by Jove!—to take head-on the awesome responsibility of words committed to that paper. Or, more and more, committed to that screen. Perhaps a useful way to look at it is by thinking of those times when you might have participated in passing notes in your grammar school class—what was so riotously funny when shared with your friends became sordid and unclean when you were forced by the teacher to read it aloud in class. It’s easy to see that good editing might save you some embarrassment, both in your class notes and your speeches to the board of directors. You may send away for my DVD, “Editing and the Inner Child,” after you finish reading.

### Pitfalls and Enemies of Editing

#### Overediting

Before I outline some approaches to editing, it’s necessary to consider some of the things that can inhibit or mar its effective practice. The first one is equally as treacherous as not editing a document, and that is to over-edit a document. This harkens back to one of the first concerns you as an editor should have: what is the purpose of this piece of communication? There are vast differences in complexity, scope and intent between a memo to the sales team and a company financial report, and the differences in the composition of such documents has a great relevance to their editorial decomposition.

Therefore, to spend a great deal of deliberative time in considering whether to use “implement” or “execute” in a two-sentence message about positioning the microwave in the lunchroom is time wasted. (Besides, those are both weenie words anyway.) Just as you don’t time your eggs with an atomic clock, it is overkill to use a fine-tooth comb on writing that has no hair to be combed. Speaking of no hair, I will use Seth Godin’s phrase: “Ship, as in get it out the door.” A piece of writing that is endlessly niggled over is a piece of writing that goes unshipped and unread.

#### Overformatting

A closely related foible is one that addresses one of the joys of the computer age—the ability to change the appearance of your document in myriad ways. This “boon” has hidden costs: you can spend twenty minutes writing a simple report and forty minutes formatting it. Certainly an acute eye for which fonts are complementary and whether a half-point rule is better under a subhead than a one-point rule are valid concerns—for a graphic artist preparing a publication with wide circulation. However, in many instances, flashy graphics and pretty typography are poor, if not misleading, substitutes for the substance of your message. Simplicity has an elegance that commands attention.

This of course matters less for electronic documents, which thankfully can’t express all the fripperies of exotic typography without hard-coding complications. And if you have a client waiting for a two-paragraph blurb on their “About” page, they really aren’t going to give a hoot whether you dress your text in a tux—they just want the words, not their foundation garments.

Speaking of spending endless time aligning decimal points (that’s a little joke—you should align your decimals, dammit!), time itself can be either an ally or an enemy when putting together a publication. You actually can edit a document to needless “perfection” if you have the time. It is my experience that a piece of writing can pass my desk ten times, and even if it’s just a two-page sell sheet, I can always find something else “wrong” or needful of change. The possibilities of how a sentence can be constructed are virtually limitless, but you have to consider whether the results are worth the effort. If you’re writing on a deadline, it’s often better to be “almost right” than “absolutely, unquestionably, the very rightest right.”

#### Style and Inconsistency

Another issue of “rightness” is that of editing styles. William Safire might have sent a letter bomb to John Simon over whether to use “which” or “that” after a relative clause. The Associated Press might declare that you must eliminate the final comma in a comma series, e.g., “I dressed my cat in leather stockings, boots and miniskirt,” while Fowler’s Modern English Usage implies that you will be flogged if you don’t put a comma after “boots.” For many of these so-called controversies, it is actually the privilege of the author to decide. A sentence’s rhythm might skip a beat with the inclusion or exclusion of a single comma, but don’t let mold grow in your coffee with debating it. Language is remarkably dynamic—though there are many staunch defenders of “whom,” its employment may fall by the same wayside where “shan’t” is quietly rotting.
Don’t get me wrong—grammar and punctuation are by no means merely subjective. There are some authorities to consult. *Pinckert’s Practical Grammar* is my source for a number of editing attitudes, a book that miraculously enough makes reading about grammar both informative and amusing. For those thorny issues of syntax and semantics, I fall back upon *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition) and *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition as my arbiters of what’s right and true, and though other authorities might contest certain usage practices of theirs, I wouldn’t veer from their road. Unless, of course, a proposed correction was presented in a compelling way; flexibility is as good in an editor as in an acrobat, you know. (There are electronic versions of many of these venerable tomes these days, and they can be a quick fix for sticky grammar kerfuffles, but if I have the time, I still like to peruse on paper.) Check the Style Guide section below for elaboration on electronic aids to good grammar and its worthy pursuit.

As I say in that Style Guide section, my choices and articulations there aren’t the end-all and be-all—they are suggestions and encouragements for paying attention to your writing.

Consistency is one of the keys for issues of style. You might arbitrarily decide that you will always use lowercase letters to introduce entries, e.g.,

a) a tisket  
b) a tasket  
so it would seem obviously confounding to have

A) a triscuit  
B) a tasmanian devil

two pages later. But sometimes the obvious just ain’t so—you have to be vigilant to be consistent, and sharply conscious of such distinctions if their instances are scattered throughout a long document.
Time

In one of those grand paradoxes that so enliven existence, I have to list as a prominent editing tool one of the items I’ve also listed as an editing pitfall: time. A document that is hurriedly edited is the document that gets away with having the repetition of the word “the” in this sentence. Maybe you caught it, maybe you didn’t, but chances are that if you were in a hurry, your eye would skip by. Time, which lends itself well to over-editing, extends a friendlier hand to the editor or proofreader who can breathe slowly and steadily while poring over a manuscript. Of course, this isn’t really an issue in a business letter, but for a document of any wordy substance, time is an ally—don’t rush your edit.

Spellcheckers and Grammar Checkers

Speaking of the “double the” in the paragraph above brings up editing allies of a more ambiguous nature—spellcheckers and grammar (or style) checkers. A spellchecker is a very useful tool, and one that should be employed as a first line of defense in a document; most of them would alert you when instances like two the’s ripple the rug of your sentences. However, I think they can give you a sense of false security. Any writing of real importance should be reviewed after you’ve spellchecked it, for they won’t see the “you” as wrong when you meant “your”; they won’t flag homophones (like to, too, and two) as a mistake when you’ve spellchecked it, for they won’t see the “you” as wrong when you meant “your”; they won’t flag homophones (like to, too, and two) as a mistake when mistakes are made, etc.

As for grammar checkers, many of them will find style mistakes such as those above, but I have tried several and even though they can be customized to ignore your deliberate “mistakes” (such as the use of the passive voice), I think they are only useful for writers unfamiliar with common standards of written language, and are more of a hindrance than an aid. They can be useful for indicating a certain reading level in a piece of writing (they will tell you if your writing has too many “big” words and what reading level of audience it is slanted toward), but even then, they are clumsy and not responsive to nuance in writing. Submit the passages of your favorite writings to them—they will generate such criticism that you’ll wonder how Twain or Shakespeare could have ever found print. I’ve argued with Word’s grammar checker on multiple occasions, and the damn thing just won’t listen. It’s never bought me a drink either—hmmmmph!

Many good editors couldn’t state the difference between a subordinate clause and Santa Claus, but they can recognize when a sentence or word is wrong, and suggest what to do about it.

Reading

Many good editors couldn’t state the difference between a subordinate clause and Santa Claus, but they can recognize when a sentence or word is wrong, and suggest what to do about it. That kind of knowledge is only gained by wide and frequent reading, and isn’t a tool in the normal sense; it’s more of an attitude towards language. People who want to write well should read well, though that doesn’t mean you can’t slip in some National Enquirer with your Jane Eyre.

To state the obvious, an eye for detail (and a willingness to look for what isn’t obvious) is a strong asset for an editor/proofreader to have: you need to notice a missing period, an extra space between words, when a font or font’s weight is wrong, when your boss won’t buy you lunch because you edited his writing—every little thing and then every little thing’s little thing. Hey, it’s a job.

An eye (just one, and bloodshot at that) for spelling seems to be related to that wide-reading business, and a certain ability to visualize words in memory. English is such an irregular language in regards to orthography (you know: is it assistant or assistant, resistant or resistant, hitchhiked or hitchhiked?) that you often have to rely on your sense that something’s wrong rather than on a formula or rule. And of course there are those handy-dandy spellcheckers, and books that list commonly misspelled words.

Paper Tools vs Them New-Fangled Electronic Gizmos

I alluded to this earlier, but to elaborate: besides the mentioned electronic versions of language heavy hitters, there are gazillions (technical term) of grammar, word and language sites on the web—and some of them even give you good advice. You could Google your eyes out (and then go to the Braille versions) and never finish your quest to definitively define a dangling participle, so if that’s your cup of p’s and q’s, after it! Heck, you can even listen to the Grammar Girl’s podcast on iTunes, which is a charming thing. I don’t want to put in a long list of grammar/dictionary sites, so I’ll just put in a new favorite: Wordnik, at http://www.wordnik.com/. It’s an interesting word and language resource that even has some user interactivity built in. But I’m a fellow that still loves hefting a big dictionary down when I have a moment for a by-the-page word search.

Speaking of those weighty tomes from another time, my faves again are Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition, The Chicago Manual of Style (now at its 16th edition!) and the Associated Press Stylebook. They have graciously loaned me [Note: this means I stole them] some concepts and notions used in the Style.
Guide section. Of course, like all good mental athletes, grammarians like to tussle a bit, so you may find info that's—gasp!—considered treasure in one corner, tripe in another.

Speaking of dictionaries, they are an editor’s best friend (because you can throw them at writers). Keep one nearby and refer to it often, even if just to learn the etymology of hyrax and other indispensable words. Of course, I’m betraying my hoary origins by praising paper dictionaries; full disclosure: when I worked on the first Gutenberg Bible, I used to use a pica scale (sometimes called a pica ruler), a little plastic ruler-like thing that gave me precise measurements of type and leading. And those guys thought I was bleeding-edge.
Types of Editing

Brief or Relatively Unimportant Documents

There are probably as many ways to edit as there are to make pancakes (email me your favorite recipes); we’ll consider a few. Some editorial procedures are determined by the document itself: you would give a certain degree of precise attention to a scientific treatise that wouldn’t be given to a movie review. A lot of what I’m discussing below is if you are an in-house copyeditor or some other lofty office holder; if you are an independent writer, goodness (and badness) knows that you’d better edit everything you’re producing with a hard eye. Clients can be sticklers for trivial details like spelling their names correctly.

Say you were the editor at a software company, as I was many years ago. If you were verifying system requirements, you probably wouldn’t want the documentation of software requirements to read “a lot of RAM.” However, colorful or subjective or not-altogether precise language about the software could peacefully exist in an advertisement without qualm. Context is crucial.

Some broad generalities to consider: Does the document meet its goals? Does it address the appropriate audience and vice versa? (This is not to ask if it undresses your audience.) Is the level of detail too scanty, or too heavy?

Let’s consider some types of company documents: For an internal memo or email, you could simply re-read it for sense, making sure to run the spell-check. A business letter of any substance might require analyzing it for coherency and logic, inclusion of the spell-check, and perhaps a printout to read over before you send your final draft. Advertising, marketing and sales copy need all of those concerns met, and perhaps a reading aloud to note the pitch and rhythm of the message.

Long documents, such as whitepapers or company positioning statements require full scrutiny: print out the documents, mark them up with your editing pen, and go over them again. Though I do edit longish documents on the screen, if it’s something that is critical or for which a company needs to put forth its best, burnished face, print it and read it with care, more than once.

Longer Documents

For the manual or significantly long document, editing is usually done in phases. For example, let’s say you are going to edit a 10-page proposal describing in detail a software game you’ve designed, your first ever, something you’ve labored on for a year. Let’s say the proposal is going to someone who could make or break the game’s publication. Let’s say that someone is a notable tyrant who is a stickler for the unbending rules of good grammar and composition. Let’s say the proposal will be complex, with included graphics. This is probably something you want to both read well and look well—don’t do your final hard-copy proof while you’re eating lobster.

Voice

When you’re working with another’s writing, whether within your company or as a contractor, you need to recognize and protect the original voice of the piece. This can especially come to the fore for a longer document, but also can be prevalent in website copy, where the company expresses its character in tone, word selection and even the length of sentences. Make a conscious effort to retain the feel of the piece: if it uses slang or informal language, don’t insert any ponderous verbiage that makes the reader wonder if the writer has multiple personalities.

Of course, it is part of your job as an editor to suggest that the face of a piece might be too formal, too wordy, too friendly for its intended audience or goal. But major shifts in the character of an article of writing should be discussed with your client or your boss before you decide to insert any naughty limericks in an annual report, just to spice it up a bit.

EXAMPLES OF EDITING STAGES

Stage 1: Outline

Here you would examine the document’s outline (if it has one), assessing its overall structure and determining if there are missing or superfluous subject areas.

Stage 2: First Draft (Content Edit)

This is where substantive structural changes can be suggested: changes in overall tone or slant, deep shifting of paragraphs, suggestions to amplify or discard ideas, etc. This might be the most difficult edit, because the document is still in manu-
The Dance of Language

This is also the time for editors to consider a sentence’s rhythm: two sentences can contain similar ideas and meaning, but one might shimmy like Fred Astaire and the other like Fred Munster. Which would you want as your dance partner?

Consider:

After a long, loping run through the green expanse of the outfield, the ball settled in his glove like a fluttering dove.

and

He ran and caught the ball.

Or perhaps:

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

and

He ran and caught the ball.

Or perhaps:

That’s the way it goes.

Of course, you might be choking with Hemingwayian rage, saying that the second sentences are clearly superior to the first, which might blushingly admit to being a touch overwrought, F. Scott notwithstanding. I’m not disagreeing—not exactly.

Again, context is the thing. Fluttering doves might have no place in your business letter, but perhaps there’s a place where they might nest in your proposal. What I’m saying is that we can often overlook—to our discredit—the fact that written communication has a rhythm, a sound heard in your mind. Paying attention to how one sentence, or even one word, passes on the baton to the next is important. Sentences have movement and body. If you are steadily climbing the rope of a sentence and when you reach for the next word your hand grips a frog rather than the rope, it’s a bit unpleasant. Just be aware of the frogs in your writing.

In this regard, one of the best ways to check a piece of writing is to read it aloud—places where you stumble are often those places where the writing has no legs, or one leg too many. I realize that reading your work aloud may prompt your office mate in the cubicle next to you to put pasta sauce on your keyboard. If circumstances prevent reading aloud, learn how to read aloud in your mind. With practice, this method can be effective: you will hear whether the flow of words has a big clot in the pipes. You can begin to hear the difference between a fine mist of words and a gushing cataract. When you get really good, you’ll be able to hear the subtle difference between a dash and a comma, and this will make your command of them all the better. Try it.

Stage 3: Corrected Manuscript (Line Edit)

This stage treats the corrected manuscript, in which you might still make considerable changes, but they shouldn’t be of broad structural value. From here on out, the editor must be conscious of confining edits to the requested level—don’t make theme/style changes unless they contribute a necessary adjustment to the copy. Comprehensive issues of focus, tone and organization should already be settled.

Here is where you would probably perform your line edit, where you attentively consider construction and phrasing; here any spelling and grammatical miscues are re-cued. Also, the correctness of information must be verified: things like phone numbers, technical specifications, and legal issues, if they are native to the document. If this piece were circulating through all company departments, then Administrators, Researchers, Project Managers and Bosses might all have their shot at careful reading and careful correcting for their respective concerns. The same climbing (or sadly, descending) the rungs could take place if you are editing for a client, who turns out to have seven levels of review. It’s vital to get these matters settled at this stage, because corrections at the layout stage are more complex (graphic elements and their text counterparts can be torn asunder) and more time-consuming—and thus more frustrating for all. We all need to pay attention at this stage.

script, and doesn’t have the benefit of layout and graphics (if it is a document destined to those heights) to clarify things. This type of edit is a content edit, proofreader’s pen put aside, no conscious attention paid to grammar or spelling. A content edit is done to:

• scan for readability, structure and logic
• look for how the ideas are developed, supported and elaborated upon
• look for paragraphs that have a natural bond with their preceding and succeeding brethren—unless you are the crafty writer that can turn a startling corner in a document without leaving your reader breathless.

This type of edit is a reading for sense, to verify that the premises or themes of the work are persuasive and aren’t larded with superfluous ideas or empty suitcases of words (and to make sure those suitcases are tidily packed!). In this kind of edit, you would consider moving entire paragraphs around or removing entire paragraphs. If the document truly needed the scalpel, you might have to address if it meets the overall intended theme.

Chapter 3 – Types of Editing

The Dance of Language

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Also, be sure in your line edit to:
• pay attention to chapter heads, subheads, title pages and the like (if there are any of these), because it’s often this big display type that can get the better of you, while you’re paying minute attention to the body copy.
• always double-check the obvious — when you’re a journalist you want to make sure that the name of the person you’re slandering is spelled right. It’s easy to overlook the big, bold type in favor of the text; you don’t want to make all of those evil degenerates who only gain pleasure by pointing out a proofreader’s error happy, now do you?

Stage 4: Layout or Page Proofs (Visual Edit)
After you complete your line edit and verify your corrections, it’s time for a visual edit. Visual edits are best done on the printed page, unless you’re pressed for time. Rare are the people who can proofread better onscreen than on paper. Some documents will never get to this phase, because they are solely text, or have an innocuous, simple layout. But for those pieces that do move to a layout stage, this phase, when the document has come back from layout, brings up a host of formatting concerns to be conscious of in addition to textual issues.

This is where you concern yourself with matters like:
• alignments (you know, those pesky decimals)
• letter and word spacing, and leading, or line spacing.
If you have put your document in a desktop publishing program like InDesign or Quark, you have some control over letter and word spacing, which can be the source of some visual anomalies in your type. You might find some lines with great gaps between words and some lines so tight that they can’t breathe.

If it’s a document where the visuals are a deep concern, you might want to eliminate widows and orphans, which are single words or single lines at the tops or bottoms of pages that can make a document look blotchy. Speaking of the bottoms of pages, the visual edit is also where you verify the pagination and the content of chapter identification footers, etc., if it’s a book-like edition. Again, if it’s a desktop publication, be sure to look at all of the lines that end a paragraph for their continuity and sense, because they can sometimes can be “rolled up” and obscured by the layout program.

One old editor’s trick (there are few things worse than an old editor — aagh! The smell of cigars!) is to turn your document upside down to see if the spacing is even between heads and subheads and between lines of text. That way you don’t have the distraction of the content of the words, just a visual view of the document.

You must also consider type styles, line breaks, pagination, white space and graphics placement (including checking words within graphics), and that certain intangible feel or “color” of a page, as typographers say. You shouldn’t be making major text changes at this point unless you can supply the budget to cover it and be responsible for dealing with any anxieties about printing and shipping deadlines. Of course, with the decline of print, these concerns aren’t as prevalent as they once were. But if you are dealing with important print-stage documents, only a very, very naughty in-house colleague or outhouse (did I say that?) client would venture to suggest changes now that would be congenially welcomed at Stage 3.

If it’s a long document that more than one person works on, you have to be very careful to check any corrections against the original edited manuscript. More than once has a correction resulted in another mistake nearby — Satan never sleeps, you know. Electronic versioning has eliminated some of these concerns, but when you are at the eleventh hour with a deadline, and you are looking at printed copies (and even electronic ones) shared among editors, confusion can still make for calamity.

Of course, if you are writing to your mechanic to complain about being overcharged on your tune-up, you wouldn’t go through all of these stages. Just make sure your curses are on target and that you cc: your lawyer. And of course, when you’re finished, read it over, again. All good documents deserve the favor of an edit.

Stage 5: Bluelines, Page Proofs, Galley Proofs and Other Antiquities
Even with today’s digital plates, for long, printed documents like manuals or guides, companies usually still receive some form of “final” proofs, such as a blue-line, page proofs or galley proofs. No matter their name, you still have to check their credentials. At this stage, you should scan every page again (not a line edit,
but a swift "review edit" and if you have time, look over random pages again in their entirety, verifying pagination through the chapter headings and table of contents (and pagination throughout), checking that sentences end paragraphs properly (they can "drop out" and lose lines), that text flows from one page to another, etc. Check all the graphics for clarity. If there are many errors in these random pages, you probably need to go through the whole damn thing again.

So now that you've presented your splendidly composed document to your beneficent boss or your congenial client and he's signed the contract for the design to the tune of dancing dollars, remind him not to forget your friendly neighborhood editor. We get tired of eating cheese sandwiches too.

General Editing Edicts (and a good soldier he was)

A few general considerations (some unabashedly stolen from Pinckert):

- Eliminate the inessential. Pare down the superfluous verbiage, and if you think there isn't any, slam a shot of espresso and look again. (Or just read anything I've written—you'll see what not to do.)

- Vary your sentence patterns. Sentences of the same length—that have the one-two-three of subject, verb, object—have the regular rhythm of the sleeper's breath. And the smell. Push the verbs to the front, use subordinate clauses, pause in your sentence's middle, strangle your sentence—there are a million ways to make words work; try some.

- Don't overqualify your ideas (i.e., eliminate the weak knees). Too many "sometimes" or "in this instance" or "probably" or "maybes" or "mights" tend to take the muscle out of your work. I have a tendency to do this, sort of, a little. Tell the world: Brussels sprouts are hideous!—not kind of hideous.

- All writing is rewriting. It's been said that you should go through your work and remove those parts you like the best, because they are your favorite pet ideas or expressions or the flashy tricks that distract by calling attention to themselves. This one is tough.

- If you're editing someone else's work, don't practice editing as confrontation. This is where you might arbitrarily find "errors" to demonstrate the writer's or perhaps another editor's incompetence. If you are not the original writer, your work should shape the expression of the writer's thoughts, not the thoughts themselves. A good editor enhances the writer's strengths.

- If you fill your business writing with words like "proactive" and "parameters," that's your choice, but please include a clothespin so readers can clip their noses.
We Have Proof!

And Now a Little Proofreading Music, Please ...

The following pages display a page of proofreader’s marks and provide a brief demonstration of proofreading in action—who said language instruction wasn’t dramatic? (Again, we are speaking here of proofing on the page, manually. I’m not going to go into the efficacies of using Word’s Track Changes tools here for electronic docs, or some of the collaborative “in-the-cloud” document sharing/proofing; I’ll address some of those issues later below.)

Some proofreaders insert their corrections directly above the in-copy line that carries the correction, others below; corrections of considerable size might be typed on an appended sheet and referred to as “Insert A,” “Insert B” and so on. The way I was instructed to proofread (in those Days of Ignorance, when an IBM XT was the apex of desktop horsepower) was to insert the corrective proof mark in the text, and provide its explanatory narrative in the margin—usually the right-hand margin, dependent on layout. Thus you might see the caret (insert) symbol in the text, indicating an insertion and the character or word to be inserted in the right-hand margin next to the relevant line.

I find that this works better than insertions above or below, although there are times when the layout and the available white space would impel you to place corrections at various places in the text in question. A line drawn from the insertion point caret to the corrective material should be effective in that instance. For the sake of ease and consistency, a company’s internally edited documents should be handled in this or some other fixed way, unless there is a manifestly better approach. That’s especially true if there are multiple editors working on documents—having the same set of proofing marks makes it so much easier than chasing down a secondary editor with a pained “WTF” look on your face.

Deeper degrees of edit indicate that you are confident that the editing suggestion makes a material improvement to the writing. I did choose to replace some words with others, which is far more audacious than mere proofreading; straight proofreading rarely ventures an opinion, unless it concerns some grammatical squabble. Deeper degrees of edit indicate that you are confident that the editing suggestion makes a material improvement to the writing. My example edit might be done at the “middle manuscript” draft stage or even the first proofing pass after layout, if it’s a document that is being laid out.

After you’ve withstood the rigors of this proofing exercise, you can cool down by checking out (“checking out”—get it?) the Editing Checklist following, which condenses the editing stages of the guide into an easy-to-use checklist summary.

To illustrate this fascinating procedure, I’ve written a small piece of timeless prose with a few intentional miscues, provided for you on the page following the proofreader’s marks. The page succeeding that displays the text with proof marks and insertions, and the final page has the piece in all of its polished glory. The errors that I correct are fundamental: no participles show the slightest dangle, subjects congenially agree with their verbs, and commas have the good sense not to be spliced. I just wanted to demonstrate the basics.
Advise for the Lovescorned
(Tales from the Cryptic)

Think you’ve got relationship problems? Guess again, Bucko. Read this letter one of our customers accidentally sent us rather than her registration card and you’ll know that you’re squeeze is valentine by comparison.

My boyfriend is a Vampire. It’s a problem as old as time; perhaps even older. As you know, the undead never really call it quits, never walk gracefully out of the picture, never let honeyed memory sweeten the true bite of their deeds. Basically, they just hang around 24-hour bowling alleys, say insolent things to all-night convenience store clerks, and drink an occasional six-pack of plasma from the necks of sozzled stooges that wobble their last unfortunate walk down darkened alleys.

Look—I’m not complaining. Ok, so he doesn’t make it to my company picnics, often spilled old grave yard dirt out of his cuffs and onto my carpets, and doesn’t show me any affection unless I’ve just gotten a very drippy paper cut—I can deal with it.

The real problem is his parents. You don’t know trouble until you’ve dealt with a vampires parents. Always harping on the ethnic thing: "Why can’t you find a nice Transylvanian girl? Whatever happened to that lovely witch, Gellspittle, who at least had an decent job, raising black widows? This skinny wartless wonder with the dreadful clean house and the open curtains—where have we gone wrong?"

Hey, it’s not like I haven’t tried. I got up with them night after night at 4 to play Scrabble and to teach the rats to whistle, but the bags under my eyes began to look like Jiffy Pop packages. I drew the line at the bat thing: would anyone you know dress up in a full-on bat outfit, swoop down winding staircases, and try to "locate the refrigerator by sonar" , like his parents asked?

So I guess it’s over. I’ve started going out with some fraternity guy; he’s sweet but a little dumb. I guess I got used to Frank—I’m a little bit repulsed by how tan the frat boy’s skin is, and he doesn’t quite get it when I tell him that I really, really like to have my neck bitten. Oh well, it could have been worse. At least Frank’s clothes were sharp—I could have gone out with Mummy.
Advice for the Lovescorned
Tales from the Cryptic

Think you've got relationship problems? Guess again, Bucko. Read this letter one of our customers accidentally sent us rather than her registration card and you'll know that your squeeze is Valintino by comparison.

My boyfriend is a vampire. It's a problem as old as time, perhaps even older. As you know, the undead never really call it quits, never step gracefully out of the picture, never let honeyed memory sweeten the true bite of their deeds. Basically, they just hang around 24-hour bowling alleys, say impertinent things to all-night convenience store clerks, and drink an occasional six-pack of plasma from the necks of sozzled stooges that wobble their last unfortunate walk down darkened alleys.

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Chapter 4 – We Have Proof!
Editing Checklist

Editing is a process of stages. Within stages, you should also progress in separate steps. In other words, don't try to look for all the things in a given stage in one review of the document. You should go through the document checking just a few things—or even one thing—at a time (e.g., look at only headings on one run-through, look at only page numbers on another, etc.). Depending on how many times you see the document, you might end up combining some of the stages below. Even so, don’t try to cover too many bases with each review of the draft.

NOTE: This checklist is comprehensive in the sense that it covers all the responsibilities of the main editor, directed toward an in-house editor, but applicable to all. At some editorial requests, you might only concern yourself with the checklist items in bold—that’s where you can really help in the editorial process. Of course, if you happen to notice anything else that needs fixing, mark it too.

Stage 1: Outline

Examine the document’s outline, assessing its overall structure and organization. Check the order of information.

Determine if there are missing or superfluous subject areas.

Stage 2: First Draft (Content Edit)

At this point you’re reading for sense and logic, so you’ll be making substantive structural changes as necessary. Don’t focus on grammar or spelling.

Suggest changes in tone or slant.

Look at readability, structure, focus and logic.

Consider moving entire paragraphs around or removing paragraphs altogether.

Look at cohesiveness (does one paragraph flow from the preceding one and to the succeeding one?).

Suggest amplifying or discarding ideas.

Look for how the ideas are developed, supported and elaborated upon.

Pass the document by relevant personnel (e.g., sales, producers, tech supporters, marketers, etc.).

Check accuracy of information (last-minute changes, versions, etc.).

Stage 3: Corrected Manuscript (Line Edit)

This stage treats the corrected manuscript, in which you might still make considerable changes, but they shouldn’t be of broad structural value. From here on out, the editor must be conscious of confining edits to the requested level—don’t make style changes unless they reflect an actual error in the copy. Comprehensive issues of focus, tone and organization should already be settled.

Consider construction and phrasing.

Check spelling and grammar.

Verify the correctness of things like phone numbers, technical specs, legal issues, name spellings, etc. Final responsibility for accuracy of information rests with the author.

Notice sentences’ rhythm. Do they sound polished? (Read them aloud if you need to.)

Stage 4: Layout or Page Proofs (Visual Edit)

This phase, when the document has come from layout, brings up a host of formatting concerns to be conscious of in addition to textual issues (you shouldn’t be making any major text changes). Because of the number of edits at this phase, you will probably have a few rounds of checking that the changes were made before the document goes to press, if that’s its fate.

Check corrections against the original edited manuscript. (Corrected problems often create new ones.)

Look at alignment.

Check letter and word spacing as well as leading, or line spacing.

Look at line breaks and page breaks.

Eliminate widows and orphans.

Check the correctness and clarity of graphics, verifying placement and making sure that the graphic is the right one.

Check words within graphics (legible?) and callouts (right one? spelling? capitalization?).

Verify pagination (missing pages?) and the content of chapter identification footers.

Check headings: levels, styles, spacing, etc.

Make sure type styles and fonts are correct.

Check lines that end a paragraph for continuity because they can sometimes be “rolled up” and obscured by the layout program.
Stage 5: Lino/Blueline/Page/Galley Proofs  Date: ______________

☐ Check corrections against the original edited manuscript.
☐ Without reading the document, scan every page looking for errors with graphics and text.
☐ If time, look over a few random pages more thoroughly checking headings, sentences and paragraphs (ensuring that they didn’t “drop out”) and that text flows from one page to another. (If there are many errors on these random pages, that probably means you should look the whole thing over again, in detail.)
☐ Re-verify table of contents (TOC) page accuracy.
☐ Verify index page accuracy (select a few random ones if it’s a large document).
☐ Re-verify pagination.
Stylin’ in Style

Below is a decidedly non-comprehensive (you haven’t all day, after all) list of style and usage points, pluckily stolen from style and usage mavens across the globe. Of course, mavens tend to argue a lot, so I just exercised my own prejudices and chose the examples I know in my prescriptivists heart are right. (My descriptivists heart wins most of the other arguments.) And since language (and its legislative branch, grammar) is such a malleable, living thing, it’s always fun to see the dustups between the prescriptivists and the descriptivists. Being a practical fellow, I’m more in the descriptivist camp, though I have to admit I sometimes admire the ironclad assertions of the prescriptivist apparatchiks, who HATE changing standards. Or non-standard standards. Or standards that slump a bit.

Of course, if I tried to make this style guide exhaustive, it would exhaust you. You can always Google for more examples of online style guides. One of the newer ones is Yahoo’s, found at http://styleguide.yahoo.com/writing. It’s got a section on writing for the Web, which is, in these days of “chunkifying” information, helpful. And chunky. Yahoo’s guide also has an Editing 101 section, but mine’s better, because those guys who wrote theirs are Yahooos.

Another that lets you search for word, sentence and paragraph-level grammar is the Guide to Grammar and Writing:— http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/. You can also check out the BBC News style guide online at http://www.bbctraining.com/pdfs/newstyleguide.pdf. It’s from 2003, and targets journalistic writing (and of course you’ll hunt endlessly for the Monty Python jokes), but it’s jolly good.

You’ll also be happy to know you can see the full contents of the “little book,” Strunk and White’s Elements of Style, right here: http://www.bartleby.com/141/. You’d do just as well to read any of E.B. White’s essays for an in-the-field example of stellar writing. Heck, even the Chicago Manual of Style has an online version.

I originally wrote this guide as the basis for a company style guide, needed by firms of any size that produce lots of documents. However, I’ve edited and augmented it so that it will help you pen love notes to the postman or apply for that little Rhodes scholarship that would go well with your wool trousers. The most important thing in a company or individual style guide is consistency—once your style is set, be it in a single document or every page of your company’s public presence, stay with it. That would mean, even if it’s a freelance document you’re editing, stay the course: Periods after bullets in one section should match the next, and the next… and on for every punctilious little rule.

Most example sentences below by Mr. Bentley, channeling S. Dali.

Style Conventions

Acronyms
Always use the full term for an acronym first, with the acronym in parentheses, and the acronym thereafter. Once you define the term, you don’t need to repeat yourself. Well-known acronyms, such as HR or PC, don’t need to be spelled out.

It’s not necessary to wear a flak jacket into the Great Gravestones HR department, but you might need one if you go to the Department of Righteousness, Egalitarianism, Crockery and Kleptomania (DRECK).

Adverbs Used as Adjectives
Never hyphenate compound adjectives if the first word ends in -ly, such as highly respected.

Ages
When referring to ages, use the same conventions as with numbers.

Mr. Bentley feels the withering indignity of being a 56-year-old man.

Mr. Bentley, at 56 years old, is lucky his face still fits.

Apostrophes
Use apostrophes with an s for abbreviations that contain periods, lowercase letters used as nouns, and capital letters that would be confusing if s alone were added to form a plural.

M.A.’s and Ph.D.’s (but CPAs and PCs)

x’s, y’s, and z’s

S’s, A’s and I’s (but the three Rs and user IDs)

Brackets
Brackets should not be used interchangeably with parentheses. Use brackets as parentheses within parentheses, or to enclose editorial clarification, comments, corrections, or explanations in quoted material.
Capitalization
In general, capitalizing the first letter of a word should not be used for emphasis. If you want to stress a word, put it in italics or boldface or ALL CAPS (though you should use all caps sparingly because they tend to SHOUT!).

Headings and Titles
Regarding prepositions, use initial caps on all words in a heading, title or callout except for a, an, or the, or prepositions of fewer than four letters such as in, by, or for—unless they are the first or last word.

How to Play With Grenades Safely
Getting What You Pay For

Regarding hyphenated terms in headings or titles, capitalize the first letter of the second word as well if it’s a noun or proper adjective, or if it has equal force with the first element. (Some people always lowercase the second word regardless; just be consistent.)

In-House Product Design  English-speaking People
Off-Computer Activities  Self-sustaining Reaction
On-Screen Instructions  Re-establishing User Confidence

For more info on capitalization, see any book on writing style, or the Capitalization section at the end of Webster’s Eleventh New Collegiate, or Google it and you’ll get more citations than you can shake an uppercase at.

Job Positions and Job Titles
Capitalize a position title only when it precedes a name as a person’s specific title. Do not capitalize a title when it follows or replaces a name.

Susie Macaroon, vice president of marketing, has agreed to the plan.
Vice President of Marketing Susie Macaroon has agreed to the plan.

Do not capitalize a generic reference to a position or organization.

All the left-handed directors think...
Our department voted...
The board of directors agreed...

Departments
Do not capitalize a department name when used with the word “department.” For clarity, do capitalize it when you drop the word “department.”

Please sign the last page and return it to the marketing department.
Please sign the last page and return it to Marketing.

Chapter 5 – Stylin’ in Style

Capitalization of Names and Terms
Try to avoid excessive capitalization in your text. You’ll find that you can represent many words derived from or associated with proper nouns as lower case without losing clarity. The most important rule is to be consistent.

Capitalize civil, military, religious, professional titles, and titles of nobility only when they immediately precede a personal name as part of the name.

Czar Micholinias Bremer nodded his head, and a thousand other heads were lopped from their bodies.

It didn’t take long for the oppressed peoples to design a special gift for the czar.

Colons
You usually use a colon to introduce a list or series. However, don’t use one if you introduce a list with expressions such as namely, for instance, for example, or that is. And don’t use a colon unless the list consists of one or more grammatically complete clauses.

Roger Ramjet saved our nation in four ways: stopped a deadly comet with his dentures, plugged an erupting volcano with old laundry, mixed acid rain with jalapenos for award-winning chili, and won at Russian roulette, annoying the Russians.

Roger Ramjet saved our nation in four ways, namely, stopped a deadly comet with his dentures, plugged an erupting volcano with old laundry, mixed acid rain with jalapenos for award-winning chili, and won at Russian roulette, annoying the Russians.

A sentence in which the terms as follows or the following directly precede the listed items, or the introductory sentence is incomplete without those items, requires a colon.

The best approach is as follows:
• Wake up
• Stretch
• Consider your obligations
• Go back to bed

You should use a colon to introduce a formal statement, an extract, or a speech in a dialogue.

A mensch isn’t a mensch unless:
• He/she/it hears the beat of a different drummer.
• He/she/it straightens out the curves and curves out the straights.
• He/she/it thinks that software preceded the Big Bang.
• He/she/it hopes that the Messiah isn’t dressed in workout clothes.
Avoid ending a page with a colon (with the list materials on the page following). Insert a page break or rewrite your text to avoid this construction. Follow a colon with a single space. (And we don’t recommend that the he/she/it construction ever darkens the door of any pages but these.)

Commas
Omit commas after short introductory phrases (four words or fewer) at the beginning of a sentence, except where required for emphasis. If omitting the comma might confuse your reader, put one in.
If we go now we flirt with disaster.
During this week we shall construct the perfect lollipop.
During Debbie’s reign, havoc ruled.

Use commas only with numerals greater than four digits.
Usurious charges: $6666
Wart-ridden charges: $33,000
Pages 100 through 1000 were filled with obscene episodes.

And never forget: The paper cut from a comma splice is particularly painful.

Cultural Periods
Cultural periods recognized by archaeologists and anthropologists, or based upon characteristic technology, are capitalized. Comparable modern designations, however, are best left lowercase.
The Stone Age
The Bronze Age
Ice Age
space age
information age
stoned age

Dashes
I always—and I mean always—use em-dashes in my writing, because they can signal a more pregnant pause than a comma, or can push a reader back from the edge of a cliff—or throw her over. The visual difference between dashes can sometimes be subtle, depending on the font, but they are distinct.
An em dash looks like this: —
An en dash looks like this: –
A hyphen looks like this: -

Use em dashes (also seen as “m-dashes”) to suggest sudden changes in construction or to set off parenthetical elements whose logical relationship to the rest of the sentence is more remote than can be indicated by commas. Do not put spaces around an em dash.

My primary interest—other than padding my coffers with stolen funds—was to look out for the welfare of the downtrodden.

You can also use an em dash to reiterate. In that case, it would mean that is. Never use a dash in conjunction with that is.
Yes: There’s only one course to follow—grease your knees and play canasta.
No: There’s only one course to follow—that is, grease your knees and play canasta.

En dashes show range between numbers of pages and running dates. Otherwise, use the word to to indicate range. A hair space, for you layout aficionados, is okay to set off an en-dash, though spacing around an en-dash is not typical.
Twelve to thirteen people filled out the Rush Limbaugh costume.
We decided to stage a three-day solar eclipse running from November 1–3.
We decided to stage a three-day solar eclipse running from November 1 to 3.

Use hyphens in documents that need to be plain text. Also, in print, you’ll often see two hyphens—no spaces—serving as an em-dash.
She wore an itsy-bitsy, yellow polka-dot bikini.
You know what we like to do Friday nights—party!

Dates
Write dates as follows:
On October 20, 1954
In October 1954

Never use all-figure dates. The American style of MM/DD/YY can be confusing to international readers and business contacts.

Centuries and decades are spelled out in reference to particular centuries and decades unless they are part of a proper name.
the twentieth century
during the eighties
fifth century B.C.
Use figures when identifying decades by century. Do not use apostrophes.

*The consuming fiscal fires of the 1980s*

*Idolater’s Symposium 95*

*1995 (not ’95)*

**Ellipses**

Ellipsis points (the old dot, dot, dot) indicate the omission of a word, phrase, line or paragraph from a quotation or reference. Use three dots, with a space on either side, within a sentence and use four at the end of a sentence (an ellipsis followed by a period). Using the ellipsis to indicate a broken train of thought may appear poetic, but usually is a weak means of construction. There’s also a typographical character for an ellipsis that prevents the periods from straying onto another line; it’s an operating-system dependent (and sometimes font-dependent) dingus, so you’ll have to look it up.

*The brochure says, “All students should . . . bring a video camera and a hare-brained sandwich.”*

*The brochure guarantees, “A full refund is promised . . . .”*

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**End-of-Line Hyphenation**

Because word processors and page-layout programs tend to base hyphenation on an algorithm rather than the conventions of English word division, you might want to turn off automatic justification and hyphenation, or be especially vigilant in double-checking for hyphenation errors. Remember that different dictionaries may break words in different places; all editorial decisions of these sorts should be based on the same dictionary—for me, *Webster’s Eleventh Collegiate*.

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**Exclamation Marks**

In standard business writing, use an exclamation mark only if it is part of quoted material. Always try to use emphatic words rather than emphatic punctuation.

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**Fractions**

Leave a space between a whole number and a fraction.

5 1/4 inches

---

**Hyphens**

Two words connected by a hyphen are known as a *compound*. Compounds typically evolve into single words, such as postman or newspaper. The correct usage depends on the compound’s stage of evolution. In computer terminology, the trend is to eliminate hyphens and write a compound as a single word as soon as popular usage indicates it will become a permanent compound. Thus, words like *standalone* and *tumbledown* huddle in a group rather than at arm’s length. See the section on compound words in *The Chicago Manual of Style* for a good discussion on compounds.

---

**Italics**

Italicize all book, magazine, or newsletter titles. Set words used as words and letters used as letters in italics; set numbers used as numbers in roman. Italicize foreign words unless they are commonplace.

We had a quibble over *existentialism*. He thought it meant a philosophical movement and I knew it meant three aspirins.

That’s Smythe, with an *e*.

You should use italics only sparingly for emphasis. Try to express the same tone through the structure of the writing. Remember to always italicize any punctuation marks that immediately follow an italicized word.

---

**Italics in All-Italic Text**

If you need to emphasize words in all-italics text, set the emphasized word(s) in roman typeface.

*The health care crisis was precipitated by bad baloney and politicians with slight laps—does anyone care?*

---

**Numbers**

- Spell out numbers up to and including ten; use numerals for numbers above ten.
- Exceptions:
  - If a sentence must start with a number above ten, it should be spelled out (unless the number is a date—which should always be written as a numeral).
  - If a sentence includes numbers both below and above ten, either spell out or use numerals consistently for all of them.
- Always write out *millions, billions* and up (3 billion, 105 million, etc.).
- Use numerals for times of day, and use periods: 11 a.m., 3:15 p.m.
- Use “midnight” and “noon” instead of 12:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., to avoid any possible confusion.
- For values of less than one dollar, use the cents sign: 2¢ for two cents.
- Dollars, euros, pounds, yen, lira and other forms of currency are referred to in lower-case; use the appropriate symbol where available (£, ¥, € etc.).
- Phone number style: (XXX) XXX-XXXX (Some designer types like XXX.XXX.XXX.XXX)
The Write Word's Easy Editing and Spiffy Style Guide

Chapter 5 – Stylin' in Style

The Macintosh’s wink
The persimmons’ leakage

Although there is controversy among grammarians, most agree that you should omit the s for singular possessives that look and sound like plurals. So, if it’s awkward to say the word with an s after the apostrophe, leave it off.

Jesus’ magnificence

Although it’s probably best to avoid that particular usage and just word the statement differently:
The magnificence of Rodney Dangerfield’s lower lip.

Its is possessive. It’s is the contraction of it is.

It’s no wonder Bob’s cat is losing its mind.

Your is possessive. You’re is the contraction of you are.

You’re mistaken if you think that’s where you’re going to park your beast of a Lincoln.

Their is possessive. They’re is the contraction of they are.

They’re airing their complaints over there, at the customer service desk.

Prefixes, Suffixes
You should generally use a closed style (not hyphenated) for prefixes and suffixes.
Check The Chicago Manual of Style for elaboration and examples.

gridlike
multicolored
nontechnical
preexisting
reentry

Common exceptions for prefixes include all-, by-, cross-, ex-, half-, self-, and quasi-

all-purpose
by-product
cross-reference
self-confidence

Plurals
Acronyms and Abbreviations
To form the plural part of an acronym or abbreviation, add an s but no apostrophe.
ICs, RAMs, ROMs

Adjectives
Don’t add s to an adjective unless necessary. For example, it’s electronic circuit but electronics engineer. Other words that fall into this class of adjectives are graphic and graphics, communication and communications, numeric and numerics.

Letters, Characters, Symbols
To form the plural of a letter, character, or symbol, add an apostrophe and an s.
p’s 6’s, +’s

Words as Words
Form the plural of a word italicized to show that it is used as a word by adding an apostrophe and an s. Don’t italicize the apostrophe or the s.
His sentences had too many qualifications: lots of but’s.

Possessives
Form singular possessives of both common and proper nouns by adding an apostrophe and an s. Form the possessive of plural nouns by adding an apostrophe only.
The car’s exhaust

Numbers Used as Adjectives
Use a hyphen when a number is part of a compound adjective preceding a noun.
a 10 1/2-foot sandwich

However, if the adjective is not part of a compound, don’t hyphenate:
a sandwich of 10 1/2 feet

Parentheses
If you employ multiple parenthetical thoughts in a single sentence, most grammarians suggest that you alternate between brackets and parentheses, or even go to the length of using curly brackets for the tertiary use, but the use of standard parenthetical symbols throughout is fine too. Most grammarians also say to structure your sentences so you don’t have to use a parenthetical, but I don’t listen, because most grammarians are nebbishes. (Nyah, nyah! Come and get me!)

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Common exceptions for suffixes include -cost, -size, -style, -type, and -wise.
- low-cost alternative
- media-wise consumer
- medium-size group

Quotation Marks
The close quote follows the period at the end of a sentence, even when a quote begins mid-sentence. This seems illogical, but this is English, so just do it. (You like to be ordered about, don’t you?) Though those Englishly English, the Brits, do this quite the opposite.
You’re still going to fight us on this, saying things like, “I don’t buy it.”

The close quote, for a word followed by a comma, follows the comma.
The spreadsheet columns on your screen should be “First Quarter,” “Second Quarter,” and “Third Quarter.”

The close quote, for a word or phrase followed by a colon or semicolon, precedes the colon or semicolon.
He said, “I’ll call you”; then he left.

Single and Double Quotes
Use double quotation marks for quoted words, phrases and sentences. Only use single quotes around a word, phrase or sentence when it falls within quotes. Again, British usage varies.
Then he said, “You might say you’re ‘income deficient,’ but I think the government calls it unemployed.”

Block Style
If you set off a quotation in block style, do not use quotation marks. For quotes within the block, use double quotes.
Rick Rogers, who reviewed the game, had only good things to say:
The graphics were superb, the sound effects a blast, and the music inspiring. As a matter of fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a game so consistently superior across the board. Believe me, when you play Bloviating Cowboy, you’ll say, ‘I love what this game does to me.’ And you’ll be addicted.

Smart vs. Straight Quotes
Use “curly” (IBM) or ‘smart’ (Mac) quotes, rather than the ‘straight’ ones. (Look at the quotes around the words “curly” and “straight” to see the difference.) In MS Word, you can use smart quotes by default by selecting “Change straight quotes to smart quotes” in the Autocorrect dialog box found in the Tools menu.

Range (numbers)
Use the word to rather than a hyphen to show range between numbers. Dates and page numbers are exceptions to this rule and require en dashes.
six to eight fence-sitting orangutans
12 to 15 gap-toothed grannies
9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
September 15–20
The occult mystery is revealed on pages 3–33

Semicolons
The semicolon is truly the formal gentleman of punctuation (top hat and all). Use a semicolon to combine two grammatically complete (and content-related) sentences into one. Follow the semicolon with one space.
Software toys might be the answer to the common cold; they are nutritive, portable, and a constant delight.

When using conjunctions like then, however, thus, hence, and therefore in a compound sentence, precede them with a semicolon. Use a comma before clauses introduced by yet and so.
Clarissa had learned how to use her hair like a hydrogen bomb; however, she hadn’t considered the social repercussions. Most people found the resulting smoke annoying, so she reverted back to brandishing power tools.

Spacing
Words
When some of us learned typing in junior high, we learned on typewriters. (Whippersnappers: look it up.) Correct spacing meant one space except after a period and after a colon, in which case there were two. Nowadays, in the zingy computer age, it’s taboo to apply the two-space rule. (You should be embarrassed!) You’ll see the difference if you look at anything published today compared to typed documents of the past.
Thus, convention now is one space after periods and after colons. (If you just can’t adjust, I know of this bar/dance club where your type congregates. It’s called the Space Bar and you shouldn’t have a problem finding a partner there for a little two-space.)
Paragraphs
Business correspondence should be single-spaced. Double-space between paragraphs only if you are not indenting the first line of the paragraph. You should not do both—leave a space between paragraphs and indent the first line. In lengthy business reports you can double-space the table of contents, tables, and other items that are much easier to read with more space.

Headings
Don’t be timid with headings in business letters, memos and reports. They usually improve your document by making the organization very clear. You should have a line space above a heading and, if you like, half a line-space between the heading and the following paragraph.

Symbols
Always spell out percent in formal body copy; don’t use the % sign. Use the percent symbol in tables or figures only, and then only when needed for space. Always spell out inches, feet, and degrees.

Time
Never use 12 noon or 12 midnight—noon and midnight are sufficient. And a.m. and p.m. are always lowercase, with periods and no spaces. Never use o’clock. Time zones are only capitalized when abbreviated.

6:30 p.m.
7 p.m. (not 7:00 p.m.)
EST (but eastern standard time)

Preferred Words and Terms
The following list contains some useful examples of preferred words or phrases and their spellings, along with their variants, often a wordier way to say the same darn thing. In general, when the dictionary lists two spellings, the first is preferred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Variant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affect</td>
<td>not impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after</td>
<td>not subsequent to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afterward</td>
<td>not afterwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aid, help, assist</td>
<td>not facilitate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>also, and</td>
<td>not additionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>although</td>
<td>not despite the fact that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and others</td>
<td>not et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are</td>
<td>not designed to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because</td>
<td>not due to the fact that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between you and me</td>
<td>not between you and I (wrong!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before</td>
<td>not prior to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by, with</td>
<td>not by means of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by way of, through</td>
<td>not via</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carry out</td>
<td>not effectuate, execute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centered on</td>
<td>not centered around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change</td>
<td>not modification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different from</td>
<td>not different than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dimmed, unavailable</td>
<td>not grayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easy to use</td>
<td>not easy of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>except</td>
<td>not with the exception of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face</td>
<td>not font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>not on behalf of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>not the purpose of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gray</td>
<td>not grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if</td>
<td>not in case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in summary</td>
<td>not to summarize the above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inside</td>
<td>not inside of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like</td>
<td>not along the lines of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>now</td>
<td>not at the present time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occasionally</td>
<td>not on a few occasions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resemble</td>
<td>not look something like, look similar to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>run</td>
<td>not execute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since</td>
<td>not in view of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so that</td>
<td>not with the result that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specify</td>
<td>not detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stop, end</td>
<td>not abort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that is</td>
<td>not i.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then</td>
<td>not after this is accomplished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>titled, named</td>
<td>not entitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to</td>
<td>not in order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toward</td>
<td>not towards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underscore</td>
<td>not underline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Final Bit of Biz About Adverbs and Adjectives

Speaking of style, some of us in the crowd, and I won’t name names (though the initials Tom Bentley come to mind) can sometimes be a little, how you say, expressive in our expressions. Those voluble souls like to hear the rollicking sounds of words stacked atop words, subordinate phrases linking arms with comely clauses, merry parentheticals doing the minuet in the middle of a sentence.

Well. There’s a fellow whose work I mightily admire, and that’s Mark Twain. He said, “If you see an adverb, kill it.” Thus, the “mightily” in that sentence above should be writhing on this page, its lifeblood spilled. Old Sam is right in the sense that if you have a sentence like “She wearily, heavily cast the bon-bon at his simpering face,” it eliminates making a picture in a reader’s mind. If, instead you tried, “She sighed, raised her arm, and in slow motion lobbed a bon-bon at his face,” there is both more character development in the sentence, as well as a verb that intimates a less-than-forceful throw.

What you want are your verbs to have the verve: you don’t need to accompany a verb with foppish foot soldiers if your verb carries its own sword. And your clever eye probably also saw that I lopped off the “simpering” (much as I love the word, sigh) from the sentence as well. Yep, excess adjectivizing puts ankle weights on your work as well. I know, I know, you LOVE your adverbs and adjectives. Me too. (And parentheses too.) Just be conscious of their overuse, and perhaps your reliance on them to muscle your verbiage along. They can be quite flabby in practice.

By the way, you can certainly have your characters simper. But take the challenge of conveying their coy ways in their actions, not through bland description. I know it’s tough. I’ll try it if you will.
A Pocketful of General Usage Tips

Active and Passive

At its heart, writing is about people doing things. Activity is interesting. Where you can, write sentences with subjects that are doing things, and not subjects that are simply receiving actions performed upon them. Compare these two sentences:

* A séance will be held by the company’s directors next week.
* The company’s directors will hold a séance next week.

The first is an example of the passive voice; the second is the active voice. Don’t be put off, it’s really very simple: the passive voice is where something or someone is acted upon, and the active voice has an actor, somebody or thing doing something or another. Active verbs and construction are inherently more compelling and dynamic than passive ones.

Active voice: A does B.
Passive voice: B is done (usually by A).

The active voice will help give your writing some vitality and life. It can also make a weak sentence more emphatic and give it greater impact. Compare these examples. The first is in the passive, the second active:

* There were riots in several towns in Northern England last night, in which police clashed with stone-throwing youths.
* Youths throwing stones clashed with police during riots in several towns in Northern England last night.

The *there is, there are* constructions are overused. Why waste time stating that something exists when you could get on with it and describe the action? The imagery in the second version is much more vivid and powerful and helps the audience to visualize what went on.

And/Or

Rewrite to avoid this construction. And/or else.

Danglers

Check out these paltry pups:

* If found guilty, the financial wizard oversight committee could fine the wicked financial wizards.
* After eating my lunch, the waiter engaged me in conversation.
* When trying to log on, the system rejects my password.

Phrases at the beginning of a sentence need a noun or a pronoun, and they will cling to the first one that comes along. This can make nonsense of your writing. In these examples, the oversight committee is not at risk of being found guilty, the waiter did not eat my lunch, and the system is not trying to log on.

If your writing causes confusion, so that readers have to pause and check the parts of your sentence to work out exactly what you mean, you have lost them. Write simply, write clearly, and if you must use this kind of construction (called a dangling modifier), make sure that the something to be modified is right next to the phrase. Then you will not write like this: *After orbiting the asteroid for more than a year, the mission scientists decided to set the probe down on its surface.*

Due To

Not “due to the fact that.” A phrase beginning with *due to* must function as a subject complement; it cannot function as an independent prepositional phrase. (How’s that for scolding?)

* No: Due to your constant carping, your memories were shredded.
* Yes: We shredded your memories due to your constant carping.

Listing and Itemizing

Use a list to emphasize key points and present steps for instructions. A list saves your readers time by allowing them to review a considerable amount of information at a glance. Make your sentence structure parallel for all items in a list. That is, if you begin the first bullet point with a verb, be sure and begin the others the same way.

Provide a clear transition between the introductory text and the list. End the introduction with a colon if it and the items listed are incomplete sentences. If the text in your list is so long that the concept can’t be grasped quickly, start over—or stick to straight body copy.

Short Lists

When a list consists of words or phrases (that is, not complete sentences), you don’t need to capitalize the first letter of each word, though you should if your list is mainly phrases. Do not punctuate the list: do not put a period at the end of each item, or at the end of the last item. (For such a simple list, you don’t even need numbers or bullets in front, but something often looks better than nothing.)
For our ski trip, be sure to pack:
1. food
2. skis and boots
3. chains
4. a map of how to get there
5. food
6. ski pants
7. turtleneck sweater
8. food
9. eight gallons of whiskey

Before using SimWhatever, you should know how to:
• Fill out a registration card
• Use a mouse
• Use menus and submenus
• Read (the manual is Shakespearean)
• Click and drag

Bulleted Lists
Typically, bulleted lists outline or summarize key ideas. Use incomplete sentences if the introductory sentence is incomplete, and keep the construction parallel. You should have at least two, and preferably three or more, items to list. A period at the end of every line in a series of bullets is optional.

Here we undertake the proposition that the fruitcake will be the downfall of civilization. You’ll undoubtedly agree with these hypotheses:
• Benedict Arnold was known to send fruitcakes at the holidays.
• Even Jack Daniels tastes bad with fruitcake.
• Fruitcakes have no documented spiritual life.
• A fruitcake couldn’t possibly save you from drowning.

Numbered Lists
Use numbered lists or sequential lists in step-by-step instructions. When writing instructions, use imperatives (commands or orders, for example, open this, say that, write this) to instruct the user to perform tasks. Use transition words to mark time and sequence. And use short sentences and brief paragraphs to keep your points clear and straightforward.
1. Open the file by double-clicking on it.
2. If that fails, call sweetly to the file in a melodious voice.
3. If the file still won’t open, grasp it firmly with two hands and tear.

Definition Lists
When you are defining specific terms or relationships in a tabular (or columnar) format, use a definition list. In other words, you enter the name of the term, then define or elaborate on it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition Lists</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Save Button</td>
<td>Saves selected species from environmental destruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rave Button</td>
<td>Plays hours of tachycardiac music accompanied by strobe lights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knave Button</td>
<td>Causes every character in the game to behave like Newt Gingrich.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pronouns
Try to avoid gender wars by substituting you or one for he or she. Use both he or his and she or her; omit the pronoun; or change a singular reference to plural.

There is some contention, but major reference works, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, and prevalent usage, accept the use of a plural pronoun to refer to a singular subject. Avoid the he/she construction.

No: Everyone with a pet marmot should begin cleaning his or her pet now.
Yes: All those with a pet marmot should begin cleaning their pets now.

There Is, There Are
As mentioned, avoid using there is or there are to begin sentences. With practice you can get into the habit of finding better constructions.

No: There are dancing hard drives on order.
Yes: Dancing hard drives are on order.

Think in terms of doing rather than being—that old active/passive:

No: There were no illustrations nor hot fudge sundaes in our documentation.
Yes: Our documentation lacked illustrations and sundaes.

Writing Clearly
Below are some basic suggestions for writing effectively. Of course the requirements of format, tone and message differ according to audience and intention.

A business letter written to a client would vary greatly in tone from material in website content, which can occasionally be seen to exhibit the dreaded creative writing, with all of its pitfalls and persuasions. Every type of writing, however, must adhere to some shared standards of communication. I originally wrote a lot of this guide in regards to writing software documentation, but most of it applies to writing in general.

There are many reference works to help you shape your writing style: Karen Gordon’s punctuation and grammar epics: The New Well-Tempered Sentence and
Avoid using qualifiers. Words like rather, little, very, pretty, and quite weaken an argument. Try not to use totally, completely, or absolutely as superlatives. For example:

Michael is like the totally bitchin’ boss.

Gives no more information than

Michael is a great boss. (Did you see this one, Michael?)

Sexist Language (also see “Pronouns” above)

We have a language difficulty: its lack of a singular pronoun to refer to a mixed group or to an individual whose sex is not known to us at the time we write. Working with what we have and perhaps riding the edge of acceptability—which is often how our language evolves—there are the following options. If you can determine your reader’s level of sensitivity on the “he or she” issue, do so, and write with that in mind.

• If the reference will be made only once, you can gracefully (?) say he or she or him or her. Too much of this construction, though, detracts from your message as your reader busily sifts through all the people you’re talking about (and trying not to offend).

• You can make the reference plural, avoiding the problem altogether.

Players can design their city the way they like.

Instead of

Each player can design his or her city the way he or she likes.

• An ungraceful alternative that should be used only when you know the message will not be read aloud is he/she, his/her, and him/her. Don’t use s/he. It’s ugly. In fact, all of them are ugly.

• If you can find out the sex of the person your pronoun is referring to, do so, and then choose the appropriate pronoun.

• Some readers of both gender still find him and he perfectly acceptable as common gender. Use them only if you are certain you will not offend.

• A change that is currently happening is that they, their and them are sometimes used in the singular.

Each person should look at their manual.

Chapter 6 – Pocketful of Usage Tips

The transition may take a while, if it “takes” at all—the current style books now have conflicting information on the subject. Therefore, unless you want to risk your reader(s) thinking you don’t know your grammar, you should try to stick with tradition until the acceptability of a new style is widespread. So, substitute she for he when he is being used as a common gender pronoun. Change is good.

You can generally avoid gender wars by using more creative vocabulary or by changing man to person. For example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Instead of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>operator-hours</td>
<td>manhours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no one</td>
<td>no man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salesperson</td>
<td>salesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synthetic</td>
<td>manmade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humanity</td>
<td>mankind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mail carrier</td>
<td>postman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>veneral scourge</td>
<td>man about town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summaries

In most document instances, avoid formal summaries (though some documents, like whitepapers, employ them as a standard). Don’t start out by summarizing what you intend to say:

This section will describe human beings in detail. It will discuss the many foibles and peculiarities of these beings, including their penchant for cold pizza in the morning. It will conclude with an analysis of the purpose of these beings written out as an epic poem, in the style of Gilgamesh.

If your structure is so poor that it requires a road map, start over. And except for long or complicated essays, don’t recapitulate your points at the end.

A general summary, as a chapter introduction or overview, however, can be helpful, especially in training materials and detailed documentation. Enumerating main topics in a bulleted list is a ready means to convey broad spans of information. (In an essay, however, circling back to your initial theme is often the best means to give the writing resonance.)

In this section, we’ll discuss the Google plan to dominate the world. Specifically, we’ll cover:

• How Google software will be found in all breakfast products.

• The secret integration of the word “Google” into every bill in Congress.

• Sergey Brin’s image found on Mt. Rushmore.
Use simple, active sentences (I just won’t stop hammering, will I?). The active voice is stronger, more direct, and more concise than the passive voice. (However, there are instances where the use of the passive voice is the proper choice.)

No: A hammer shouldn’t be used to install the software.
Yes: You shouldn’t use a hammer to install the software.

If you have trouble getting started on a writing project, or feel compelled to write convoluted legalese, stop. Take a deep breath. Say what you mean out loud, or if your cube comrade or your cat might be alarmed, say it aloud to yourself. Then write it down. The result will most likely be short, simple sentences that get your point across.

Verb Forms
Don’t create verbs from nouns. No matter how much you might have admired Alexander Haig (remember?) and neo-verbifiers like him, it’s an unforgivable trait. An action phrase on a menu may be very descriptive, but resist the urge to turn it into a verb. Adding “do” to the phrase doesn’t help.

No: You can do a search-and-replace on the document.
Yes: Use the Search and Replace option to find and correct misspelled words.

Write for one reader. Keep all references to the user in the second person (you) rather than third (he or she). Construct sentences so that people feel in control of the programs, not the other way around.

No: The disks shouldn’t be labeled with banana peels.
No: Users shouldn’t label disks with banana peels.
Yes: You shouldn’t label disks with banana peels, silly.

Summing It Up
Hey, how can anyone sum up language and its merry pursuits? It’s a rollicking, rolling living thing, and no matter how many parentheses you use, you’ll never quite corral it. Do the best you can. So, instead of a summary, I’ll end this with a joke:

A comma, a period and a semicolon walk into a bar ...
Oh wait! I can’t finish the joke; I forget how it’s punctuated.

PS By the way, I know that someone will delight in finding a typo or some mangled construction in this doc. Enjoy the victory!

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Thanks, Tom Bentley
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