CHAPTER

12 A Brief Review of Grammar

As long ago as the first chapter, I included acceptable usage among the most important qualities of good writing. Indeed, some professionals seem to be bothered almost as much by shaky grammar as by shaky thinking. Benjamin DeMott, not only a fine writer but an English teacher, recalls one rock-ribbed senior partner in a law firm who was obsessed with what he thought was the misuse of the comma. Obviously such quirks are impossible to predict. But are there any particular errors that most managers and professional people find especially troublesome? Oddly enough, there has been little research into this question. In September 1979 I decided to try and find out.

In September of 1979, I sent a questionnaire to 101 professional people, asking them how they would respond to lapses from standard English usage and mechanics in each of 63 sentences if those sentences appeared in a business document that came across their desks. The 84 people who responded to the questionnaire represented a broad range of professionals: engineers, judges, bankers, attorneys, architects, public relation executives, corporation and college presidents, tax analysts, investment counselors, and a U.S. Congressman, to name just a few. They ranged in age from 30 to 70, but most were in their late 40's and early 50's. 22 were women, and 62 were men. No English teachers were included in the survey.

Each of the 63 sentences on the questionnaire contained one error in usage or mechanics, and the respondents were asked to mark one of these responses for every sentence: Does Not Bother Me, Bothers Me a Little, Bothers Me a Lot. The last question asked for an open-ended comment about the most annoying feature they encountered in writing they had to read.

After tabulating all the responses to the sentences and reading all the comments, I came to these conclusions about how professional people react to writing that they encounter in the course of their work.

1. Women take a more conservative attitude about standard English usage than men do. On every item, the percentage of women marking "Bothers Me a Lot" was much higher than the percentage of men.

2. The defects in writing that professional people complained of most were *lack of clarity, wordiness,* and *failure to get to the point.* They also complained strongly about poor grammar, faulty punctuation, and bad spelling.
3. The middle-aged, educated, and successful men and women who occupy positions of responsibility in the business and professional world are sensitive to the way people write. Even allowing for the strong possibility that they were more than normally conservative in responding to a questionnaire from an English teacher, most professionals seem to believe that writers should observe the conventions of standard English usage.

Responses to the individual items on the survey indicate, however, that these professional people clearly consider some lapses in usage and mechanics much more serious than others. Here is the way in which they ranked items on the questionnaire:

Extremely serious lapses from the standard:

Incorrect verb forms. E.g., "he brung," "we was," "he don't."

Double negatives.

Sentence fragments.

Subjects in the objective case. E.g., "Him and Jones are going."

Fused sentences. E.g., "He loved his job he never took holidays."

Failure to capitalize proper names, especially those referring to people and places.

A comma between the verb and complement of the sentence. E.g., "Cox cannot predict, that street crime will diminish."

Serious lapses from the standard:

Faulty parallelism.

Subject-verb disagreement.

Adjectives used to modify verbs. E.g., "He treats his men bad."

Not marking interrupters such as "However" with commas.

Subjective pronouns used for objects. E.g., "The Army sent my husband and I to Japan."

Confusion of the verbs "sit" and "set."

Moderately serious lapses:

Tense shifting.

Dangling modifiers.

Failure to use quotation marks around quoted material.

Plural modifier with a singular noun. E.g., "*These* kind."

Omitting commas in a series.

Faulty predication. E.g., "The policy intimidates applications."

Ambiguous use of "which."

Objective form of a pronoun used as a subjective complement. E.g., "That is her across the street."

Confusion of the verbs "affect" and "effect."

Lapses that seem to matter very little:

Failure to distinguish between "whoever" and "whomever."

Omitting commas to set off interrupting phrases such as appositives.

Joining independent clauses with a comma; that is, a comma splice.

Confusion of "its" and "it's."

Failure to use the possessive form before a gerund. E.g., "The company objects to *us* hiring new salespeople."

Failure to distinguish between "among" and "between."

Lapses that do not seem to matter:

A qualifying word used before "unique." E.g., "That is the *most* unique plan we have seen."

"They" used to refer to a singular pronoun. E.g., "Everyone knows *they* will have to go."

Omitting a comma after an introductory clause.

Singular verb form used with "data." E.g., "The data *is* significant."

Linking verb followed by "when." E.g., "The problem is when patients refuse to cooperate."

Using the pronoun "that" to refer to people.

Using a colon after a linking verb. E.g., "The causes of the decline are: inflation, apathy, and unemployment."

The Grammar of Sentences

Sentence Fragments /frag

For a discussion of sentence fragments and ways to treat them, see pp. 145–47 of the text.

Comma Splices /CS

Sometimes when writers are working in haste and not thinking about the relationships between the statements they are putting down, they may join two groups of words that could be read as sentences with a comma instead of with a conjunction that would show the relationship between those word groups. When they do, they produce a *comma splice* (sometimes also called a *comma fault* or a *comma blunder*). That is, they join independent clauses with a punctuation mark that is so weak it cannot properly indicate the strong pause that should come in such a sentence. Here is an example of a weakly punctuated sentence:

> The first part of the book gave Jim no problem, it was the second part that stumped him.

Notice that the reader does not get a strong sense of separation between the two parts of the sentence. The emphasis would come through more clearly if it were written like this:

> The first part of the book gave Jim no problem, but the second part stumped him.

or this:

> Although the first part of the book gave Jim no problem, the second part stumped him.

Either revision correctly de-emphasizes the first part of the sentence, and puts the stress on the second. In the original, the parts of the sentence appear to be equal.

Here is another example of a weakly punctuated sentence:

> Society is another strong force in shaping morals, people tend to have those values of the society in which they grew up.

This time by using a comma splice the writer has disguised the cause and effect relationship between the parts of the sentence.

For two reasons writers should usually avoid comma splices. First, independent commas that "tack" clauses together indicate that the writer is unsure or unconcerned about the relationship between the parts of the sentences. Second, commas that join independent clauses invite misinterpretation. A comma is such a weak interrupter that the reader is liable to slip right over it.

However, if you want to join several short independent clauses with commas to increase the tempo of your writing, you can probably do so without creating any problems. For example:

She met him, she liked him, she married him.
It's not smart, it's not practical, it's not legal.

Fused or Run-on Sentences /fs

Sentences in which two independent clauses have been run together without any punctuation are confusing and distracting to the readers. Here is an example of a fused sentence:

The success of horror movies is not surprising some people have always enjoyed being frightened.

Without punctuation, a reader at first makes "some people" the object of "is surprising" and then has to go back and reprocess the sentence. Also, without punctuation, the reader at first misses the cause and effect relationship of the clauses. This sentence could be revised to:

The success of horror movies is not surprising; some people have always enjoyed being frightened.

Dangling Modifiers /dg

Modifying phrases that don't fit with the word or phrase that they seem to be attached to can cause problems for readers. Usually those misfit phrases, which we call *dangling modifiers*, come at the beginning of a sentence as an introductory phrase. An example of a dangling modifier is:

After leaving Cheyenne, the cost of living became a problem.

The reader expects to find out who left Cheyenne, and is frustrated. Here is another example:

Having worked all day, mistakes were to be expected.

At first one gets the impression that the mistakes have worked.

Notice that writers increase their chances of beginning a sentence with a dangling modifier when they use abstract subjects and passive verbs. If the writers of both sentences had used an acting, concrete subject, probably they would have seen their mistakes immediately.

Parallelism ///

Practiced writers use parallel structures frequently in order to unify and tighten their writing. That is, they incorporate two or more points in a sentence by using a series of phrases or clauses that have identical structure. For instance:

Country Western fans love Willie Nelson, jazz fans love Oscar Peterson, and ballad fans love Judy Collins.

or

Stein hit Hollywood determined to live high, hang loose, stay single, and make money.

Sentences like these work by establishing a pattern that helps the reader to anticipate what is coming. It is like seeing groups of similar figures on a test sheet; circles together, triangles together, squares together, and so on. But when people see a figure that doesn't fit—a circle among the triangles, for instance—they find the exception jarring to their sense of unity. The same thing happens when readers find phrases or clauses that don't fit the pattern of the rest of the sentence. Here is an example of faulty parallelism:

My purpose was to show what services are available, how many people use them, and *having the audience feel the services are significant.*

The reader does a double take after the second comma because the third point is not handled in the same way as the first two. Here is another example:

The commission has two options: either they can recommend legislation to plug tax loopholes or *getting rid of the graduated tax scale altogether.*

The reader expects a second independent clause after "or" but gets confused because the structure changes.

Probably the time to check your writing for parallel structures is when you are doing the second draft. As you read over your sentences, try to see what patterns you are setting up, and be sure that you don't disappoint or frustrate your reader by making sudden switches.

Sentence Predication /pred

Every complete sentence must have at least two parts: a subject and verb. The verb, along with all of the parts that go with the verb to make a statement,

is called the *predicate* of the sentence. Thus the portion of the sentence that completes the assertion that began with the subject of the sentence is called the *predication of a sentence*. Sometimes, however, people writing sentences try to pair up subjects and verbs or objects and verbs that just don't work well together. We call the problem caused by such mismatched combinations *faulty predication*. Most cases of faulty predication seem to fall into one of three categories.

1. Mismatched subject + active verb.

   The rape center will accompany the victim to court.
   Research grants want to get the best qualified applicants.

In each of these sentences the writer has predicated an action that the subject could not carry out; a "rape center" cannot "accompany" someone, and a "research grant" cannot "want." Notice that if the writers had used personal subjects instead of abstract ones for these sentences, they probably would have avoided the mistake. If you start your main clause with a personal subject, you are much less apt to join that subject with a mismatched verb.

2. Subject + linking verb + mismatched complement.

   The main trait a person needs is success.
   The activities available for young people are swimming pools and tennis courts.
   Energy and transportation are problems for our generation.

When people write sentences like these, they seem to have forgotten that the verb *to be* and other linking verbs act as a kind of equal sign (=) in sentences in which the complement of the sentence is a noun. Thus when they use a linking verb after a subject, they should be sure that the noun complement they put after it can logically be equated with the subject. In none of the sentences above could the reader make that equation. "Success" is not a "trait," "activity" cannot be a "swimming pool," and "energy" cannot be equated with "problem."

Again, if the writers of these sentences had started out with personal subjects, they probably would not have gotten into these tangles. These sentences could be rewritten:

A person needs to be successful.
Young people can use the swimming pools and tennis courts.
Our generation faces problems with energy and transportation.

Writers who use the construction, "Something is when . . ." are getting tangled in the same kind of mistake.

The worst problem is when motorists ignore these signals.
Community property is when husband and wife share all earnings.

Although a reader is not likely to misunderstand these sentences, they really are substandard usage. The writers are actually saying "problem = when" and "property = when." The best way to avoid this difficulty is simply to make it a rule not to use the construction *is when*.

3. Subject + verb + mismatched object.

   These theories intimidate the efforts of amateur players.
   The company fired positions which had been there only six months.

In these sentences, the writers have not thought about the limitations they put on themselves when they used the verbs "intimidate" and "fired." Both verbs have to apply to people (or at least creatures). You cannot "intimidate" an "effort" or "fire" a "position." Again, notice that if they had used concrete instead of abstract words as objects, they probably would not have gotten into the problem.

Probably most writers who have problems with predication are not looking at the sentence structure of their first drafts as carefully as they should. One of your concerns when you read that draft should be checking your verbs to see that you have matched them with logical subjects and complements. And although there are no rules to follow to avoid getting yourself tangled in predication knots, I can suggest one guideline for avoiding problems: use personal and concrete subjects whenever you can, and connect your verbs to specific and concrete terms. If you do this and write agent/action sentences (see p. 177) you will eliminate most predication errors.

The Conventions of Verbs

You can check the definitions of the different kinds of verbs in the Glossary, p. 273.

Subject/Verb Agreement /agr

1. When a sentence has two or more subjects joined by *and*, the verb of the sentence should be plural.

   CORRECT: Building a savings account and lowering one's tax bracket *are* two benefits of a tax-sheltered annuity.
   INCORRECT: Continued inflation and a high interest rate affects the housing industry.
   CORRECT: John, Alan, and he *play* in the band.
   INCORRECT: Margery and she *goes* to the opera often.

Exception: If the subject is a group of words considered as a unit, use a singular verb.

CORRECT: Scotch and soda *is* a popular drink.
CORRECT: "Law and order" *was* the candidate's campaign promise.

2. When a sentence has two subjects joined with *or* the verb should be singular.

   CORRECT: Dr. Margaret Woods or Professor Janice Green *is going* to be our next president.
   INCORRECT: Either John or I *are* going to be nominated.

3. Any modifier that comes between the subject and verb of a sentence does not affect the subject-verb relationship; single subjects still take singular verbs and plural subjects still take plural verbs.

   CORRECT: Skiing or backpacking, two of the area's most popular sports, *is* sure to be included in the trip.
   INCORRECT: The best one among so many options *were* hard to choose.
   CORRECT: Students who come from another country *are* frequently *ignored*.
   INCORRECT: The arrangements that he made without my permission *was* not satisfactory.

4. In sentences that begin with *there* or *here* followed by a linking verb, the verb should agree with the subject that *follows* the verb.

   CORRECT: There *are* many pieces of evidence to consider.
   INCORRECT: There *is* numerous objections to his plan.
   CORRECT: *Are* there many opportunities for development there?
   INCORRECT: Here *is* the guidelines we should consider.

5. In sentences that follow a subject/verb/noun complement pattern, the main verb should agree with the *subject* of the sentence.

   CORRECT: The chief drawback of going to Paris *is* high prices.
   INCORRECT: Literary agents *is* a necessary evil.
   CORRECT: Bikers *are* a menace in that town.
   INCORRECT: One characteristic of the disease *are* headaches.

6. When the subject of a sentence is a collective noun, such as *team, majority, group, committee,* and so on, you should consider how you are using the word and make your decision about verbs accordingly. If the subject seems to act as a single unit, use a singular verb; if you want to indicate that the individual parts of the group are acting separately, the verb should be plural.

   CORRECT: The number of people involved *increases* every day.
   CORRECT: A number of the people *are protesting* the decision.
   CORRECT: The team *have voted* 11–14 to drop out of the conference.

CORRECT: The team *is headed* toward the conference championship.
CORRECT: The majority *indicate* that they are satisfied.
CORRECT: A two-thirds majority *is needed* to confirm.

7. In a sentence or clause in which the subject is a pronoun, the verb must agree with the pronoun in number. Those pronouns that sometimes give trouble are the ones that seem to refer to numbers of people, but technically refer to only one. For instance, *everyone, no one, anybody, anyone, nobody,* and *everybody*.

   CORRECT: Everybody *is* responsible for the report.
   CORRECT: She thinks that everyone *sees* her as a failure.
   INCORRECT: Everyone at the meeting *are* agreed on two points.
   INCORRECT: Nobody in the company *think* worse of him for it.

The pronouns *each, either,* and *neither* also take singular verbs.

CORRECT: Each of the participants *is* eligible for credit.
INCORRECT: Either Davis or Nelson *are* going.
CORRECT: Neither of the couple *admits* that he or she might be wrong.

The pronouns *any* and *none* may take either singular or plural verbs.

CORRECT: None of the problems *is* serious.
CORRECT: He decided that none of the contestants *were* right.
CORRECT: Any of my students *is* qualified to write the proposal.
CORRECT: *Are* any of the applicants women?

Controlling Verb Tenses /t

1. If you have more than one verb in your sentence, try to keep the tenses of all of them consistent.

   CONSISTENT: As the day *progressed,* Jones *became* surlier.
   INCONSISTENT: As the day *progressed,* Jones *becomes* surlier.
   CONSISTENT: When the main event *was* over, the spectators *cheered*.
   INCONSISTENT: When the main event *was* over, the spectators *cheer*.

Exception: If you are making a prediction in part of your sentence, you can mix present and future tenses.

CONSISTENT: When the war *is* over, James *will come* home.

2. In general, use the present tense consistently in writing about books or famous documents; this tense is traditionally called the "historical present."

The Magna Carta *guarantees* an individual's right to petition the king.

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot gently satirizes the pretensions of the English middle class.

3. In general, keep your verbs in the same tense throughout a piece of expository writing unless the logic of your discourse requires that you shift.

The Subjunctive Mood /mo

Although fewer and fewer people seem to bother with using the subjunctive form of verbs in their writing, careful writers should at least know what the subjunctive forms are and when they should be used.

1. The subjunctive forms of the verb are used when one wants to express a point conditionally or to express wishes. For example:

   If Castle *were* in charge, he *would* handle the protesters well.
   I wish I *were* not involved in that proposal.
   If that *should* happen, the admiral *would want* to know.
   You *would be* a great help if you *were to join* us.

2. Occasionally *had* is combined with another verb to talk about events that didn't take place. For example:

   Had I thought of it, I *would* have written.
   Had he known what he was getting into, he *would* have been appalled.

3. The subjunctive form of a verb should be used in clauses beginning with *that* when the main verb expresses desires, orders, or suggestions. For example:

   The lawyer requested that her client *be given* a new trial.
   We suggest that there *be* a recount of the votes.

Pronouns

Look in the Glossary for definitions of the various kinds of pronouns: demonstrative, indefinite, interrogative, reciprocal, reflexive, and relative.

There are three key terms used in discussing conventions for the use of pronouns: *agreement*, *case*, and *reference*.

When a pronoun is substituting for the noun that is its antecedent, it must *agree* with that antecedent in gender, person, and number. So after the sentence "Mazie is our new neighbor," a pronoun referring to Mazie would have to be feminine, in the third person, and singular.

Pronouns have three *cases*.

Subjective pronouns serve as subjects and subject complements (*I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they, who*).

Objective pronouns serve as objects (*me, you, him, her, us, you, them, whom*).

Possessive pronouns show possession (*my, mine, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs, whose*).

Except in idiomatic expressions like "It is raining" or "It will be a long time," a pronoun must refer to an identifiable antecedent in the same sentence or the previous one.

Problems with Agreement /agr

1. Pronouns that refer to singular subjects must be singular; pronouns that refer to plural subjects must be plural. Two subjects joined by *or* are considered single; two subjects joined by *and* are considered plural.

   CORRECT: The students are encouraged to submit *their* work.
   INCORRECT: Harvey or George will bring *their* cars.
   CORRECT: Harvey or George will bring *his* car.
   INCORRECT: Every individual should be given *their* rights.

2. The indefinite pronouns *anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, each, nobody, no one, either,* and *neither* are singular, and any pronoun that refers to them should also be singular.

   CORRECT: *Everyone* believes *his* own ideas are best.
   INCORRECT: *Everybody* who came in brought *their* drawings.
   CORRECT: *Neither* of the children had a chance to tell *her* story.
   INCORRECT: *Anybody* who thinks *their* problems are unique is wrong.

3. The indefinite pronouns *both, all,* and sometimes *none* are plural, and any pronoun that refers to them should be plural.

   CORRECT: *Both* of the girls took *their* degrees in psychology.
   INCORRECT: *Both* of the women told *her* story.
   CORRECT: *None* of the customers expect *their* money to be returned.
   CORRECT: *All* of the graduates have received *their* diplomas.

4. Since collective nouns may be considered either plural or singular depending on the context of the sentence, choose your pronoun according

to that context. If the group named by the collective noun is acting as a unit, use singular pronouns; if it is acting as separate individuals, use plural pronouns.

CORRECT: The *tribe* moved *its* headquarters to a higher mesa.
CORRECT: The *tribe* asked for better schools for *their* children.
CORRECT: The *team* won *its* first game with no trouble.
CORRECT: The *team* voted 5–4 to buy a new car for *their* manager.

5. When you are using a relative pronoun in a clause, choose *who* or *whom* when referring to a person, *which* or *that* when referring to an animal or thing. Although many writers find *that* an acceptable pronoun for referring to people, conservative grammarians still prefer *who* or *whom*.

INCORRECT: The members of the first brigade are the ones *which* got leave.
ACCEPTABLE: The people *that* were recognized had more than 30 years' service.
CORRECT: It is the students on scholarship *who* will benefit.

However if you take the conservative view that *who* and *whom* should be used only to refer to people, you run into problems when you need an impersonal possessive pronoun. There is no possessive form of *which* or *that*, and saying "of which" sometimes gets awkward. For these reasons it is acceptable to use *whose* to refer to animals or objects.

ACCEPTABLE: That is the football field *whose* lights can be seen for ten miles.
AWKWARD: That is the football field the lights *of which* can be seen for ten miles.

Problems with Case /ca

You should decide whether to use the subjective, objective, or possessive case of a pronoun according to the function that pronoun serves in the sentence.

1. If a pronoun acts as the subject of a sentence use the subjective form.

CORRECT: McLaughlin and *I* will take care of getting permissions.
INCORRECT: Barton and *him* are going to be in charge.
CORRECT: The Watkins and *we* are going to be honored at the ceremony.
INCORRECT: The Maloneys and *us* were brought to court.

Notice that the plural subject is causing the problem in the incorrect sentences. Few people would say "Him is going to be in charge" or "Us were brought to court." Thus when you want to test your construction, try your sentence using just the personal pronoun as a subject.

2. If a pronoun acts as the subject of a clause, use the subjective form.

CORRECT: Jackson asserted that *she* will be the new chairman.
CORRECT: We will have to change our plans if *he* is not accepted.

It is when one must choose the right pronoun to use in a relative clause that the old *who/whom* problem comes up. Many people think the distinction is no longer important, but if you want to be sure you get the right form, use these guidelines.

Check whether you should use *who* or *whom* by rephrasing the clause with another pronoun. If your sentence is "Carson is the man (who/whom) we have chosen for the job" ask yourself, "Would I write, 'we have chosen *he* or *him*'?" Obviously you would use *him;* therefore use *whom* in your clause. If your sentence is "One must admire a woman (who/whom) can be trusted," ask yourself, "Would I write *'her* can be trusted or *she* can be trusted'?" Since your answer is *she,* you should use *who* in the clause.

CORRECT: Carl is a person *who* has made a great impression.
CORRECT: Cochran is the woman *who* people believe will win. (Notice that inserting "people believe" does not affect the clause.)
INCORRECT: Carrington is the person *whom* we think will win.

3. If a pronoun is part of an appositive phrase or clause that modifies the subject, use the subjective case.

CORRECT: The originators of the plan, Bowden and *I*, are going to make a report.
CORRECT: Rogers, *who* is head of the firm, has three degrees.
INCORRECT: The committee members—Westbrook, Douglas, and *me*—have decided to resign.

4. If a pronoun is acting as a noun complement for a linking verb, or is part of the modifier of that complement, use the subjective case.

CORRECT: The winners of the contest are Jones and *she*.
CORRECT: This is *she* speaking.
INCORRECT: The qualified people are Hawkins and *me*.
CORRECT: Canfield is the person *who* belongs.

5. If a pronoun is acting as the object or indirect object in a sentence, or phrase, use the objective case.

CORRECT: McElroy decided to give Sheila and *me* another chance.
CORRECT: When you have finished, send the results to Fox and *me*.
INCORRECT: The army sent my husband and *I* to Japan.
CORRECT: Keats is the person *whom* you saw with the president.

6. If a pronoun comes after a preposition, use the objective case.

   CORRECT: We have plenty of opportunities for both Walter and *her*.
   CORRECT: The choice will be between Carlotta and *him*.
   CORRECT: Kate is the person to *whom* I spoke yesterday.
   INCORRECT: Hanson divided the work between Jerry and *I*.

Notice that problems with choosing the right pronouns here are probably caused by there being more than one object. A person would probably not write "The army sent I to Japan"; therefore, *I* should not be used as an object just because it is paired with another word.

7. If a pronoun is used as an appositive or modifier with a direct or indirect object, it should be in the objective case.

   CORRECT: Coles blames the failure on three people: Marshall, Karen, and *me*.
   CORRECT: We are going to see Justin, *whom* you know.
   INCORRECT: Gifford loves his army buddies, Clark and *I*.

8. *If a pronoun comes before and modifies a gerund, use the possessive case.*

   CORRECT: I hope they will not object to *my* leaving early.
   CORRECT: *Their* buying another car was an extravagance.
   INCORRECT: The professor did not object to *us* leaving early.

Problems with Ambiguity /amb ref

Readers should never have to guess about the antecedent of a pronoun. They should never have to say "What does the *it* refer to?" or "Who is *he?*" To avoid this problem, try to keep these guidelines in mind.

1. Keep your demonstrative pronouns—*that, this, those, these, it,* and *which*—close to their antecedents. Usually the antecedent for a pronoun should be in the same sentence or the previous sentence. If it strays much farther than that, your reader may become confused.

2. When you use *which, it, this,* or *that* as the subject of a clause, check what precedes it to be sure that the reader has a clear antecedent to fit with the pronoun. If the antecedent is missing or vague, you may have to rewrite the sentence. For example,

   UNCLEAR: Didion is a very moralistic writer, *which* is the basic theme of her books.
   CLEAR: The basic theme of all Didion's books concerns morality.

   UNCLEAR: The general public worries about falling scores on achievement tests, but they don't want to pay for *it*.
   CLEAR: Although the general public worries about scores on achievement tests, they don't want to spend money to improve those scores.
   UNCLEAR: Plato wrote an elitist book about running a government, and I don't believe in *that*.
   CLEAR: I do not believe in the elitist theory of government that Plato wrote about in his book.

3. If there are two possible antecedents for a pronoun, make it clear which word the pronoun refers to.

   UNCLEAR: The doctor told Jacques that *he* was a lucky man.
   CLEAR: The doctor told Jacques to consider himself a lucky man. Or, The doctor told Jacques, "You are a lucky man."
   UNCLEAR: My father knew Whitburn when he lived in New York.
   CLEAR: My father knew Whitburn when the latter lived in New York. Or, When Whitburn lived in New York my father knew him.

4. When the antecedent for a pronoun is the indefinite pronoun *one,* you have a choice of corresponding pronouns. For example,

   CORRECT AND FORMAL: When *one* is applying for medical school, *one* must have persistence.
   CORRECT AND INFORMAL: When *one* comes to Cornell, *she* had better be prepared for cold weather.
   COLLOQUIAL AND UNSUITABLE: When *one* takes a vacation, *you* need lots of money.

Reflexive Pronouns /refl

The accepted forms are *myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves,* and *themselves*. The forms *hisself* and *theirselves* are nonstandard. Reflexive pronouns have only two functions.

1. Reflexive pronouns can act as intensifiers; that is, they add emphasis to a statement.

   I did it *myself*.
   They took care of the problem *themselves*.

2. Reflexive pronouns can indicate reflexive action; that is they indicate the subject of the sentence is also the object of the verb.

   John injured *himself* severely.
   Claudia takes *herself* very seriously.
   The debaters talked *themselves* into a corner.

3. Reflexive pronouns should *not* be used as a substitute for pronouns used as objects.

INCORRECT: The mail brought Wayne and *myself* good news.
INCORRECT: She wants us to put Janice and *herself* on the program.

Mechanics

Numbers /n

Editors' attitudes about numbers in a manuscript have become more flexible in recent years, and there are no longer strict conventions about how numbers should be written. Traditionally, numbers are not written out when they are used in the following circumstances.

1. Use figures for dates.

January 16, 1785.
October 1–5, 1981

2. Use figures to indicate page numbers, chapters, references and such.

Chapter 12	Corinthians 14:32
page 7 (or p. 7)	pp. 33–48

3. Street numbers.

1903 Harris Avenue	Route 1, Box 70
29310 Cayman Boulevard	Apartment 6A, 213 Cedar Street

4. Time

12:30 A.M.	1530 (military or European usage)
5:15 P.M.	

Some people write out a number when it precedes *o'clock*, but the form is not mandatory.

5. Money, except when talking about round sums.

$24.95	five thousand a year
90¢	a million dollars
$13,500	

6. Figures of three digits or more. Some people prefer to write out all figures under 100; others write out all figures below 20. Neither choice is necessarily right. The point is that a writer should be consistent about his or her method. Don't write *25* one place in a report, and *twenty-five* in another. I prefer to write out only figures below 10 and to use figures for all other numbers whenever possible. My reason is that the reader can understand numbers more readily if they are written in numerals, and I think that the reader's convenience is more important than traditional forms.

Capitals /cap

Because only a few college students seem to have trouble deciding when they should capitalize words, a quick review of the most important rules should suffice here.

1. Capitalize the first word of each sentence.
2. Capitalize the days of the week, the months, and the name of official holidays: the Fourth of July, Memorial Day.
3. Capitalize proper names: Mary Carter, George Wills.
4. Capitalize the names of towns, cities, states, countries, oceans, rivers, and mountains, and the words derived from them: Denver, Mt. Ranier, Brazil, French class.

Italics /ital

When you underline a word in a paper or report you indicate that you would want that word to appear in italic or slanted type if your work were printed. Italics generally serve one of four purposes.

1. Use italics to highlight the names of books, plays, magazines, movies or plays, long poems, or musical compositions, and often for the name of special planes, or trains, or ships: Shaw's *Pygmalion,* Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue, The Christian Science Monitor, Queen Elizabeth II* Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle,* Homer's *Iliad.*

Increasingly, however, writers are putting titles in all capital letters rather than in italics; that seems quite acceptable: Tschaikowsky's SWAN LAKE, Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN

2. If you use foreign words or phrases that are not commonly used in English, put them in italics: *cuisine minceur, deus ex machina, angst, mano a mano, habeas corpus.*

3. You may use italics to highlight a word or phrase to which you want to call attention.

The women's movement has given a new meaning to the word *chauvinism*.
In England a lawyer is a *barrister* or a *solicitor*, not an *attorney*.

4. You may use italics to emphasize a word.
Affirmative action and equal opportunity are *not* the same thing.

Use the device of italicizing words for emphasis sparingly, or it will lose its effect.

Punctuation

Commas /,

Commas are the weakest mark of separation used in writing; thus we use them to indicate a slight pause that will help readers to better understand what they are reading. Ideally, writers should not have to think about the rules for commas but would insert one when they felt the need for a pause. However, the standard guidelines are fairly easy to remember.

1. Use commas to set off items in a series.

   She spent most of her money on food, books, and bus fare.
   France, England, Sweden, and Spain have all joined the Common Market.

2. Use commas to set off interrupting, nonessential phrases or clauses in a sentence. If a phrase is not necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence, set it in commas; if it is essential to the meaning of the sentence, omit the commas.

   NONESSENTIAL PHRASE: Johnson, for all his problems, was an effective president in many ways.
   ESSENTIAL CLAUSE: The person who is elected in November will be the 37th president.
   NONESSENTIAL CLAUSE: Commuting students, many of whom have full-time jobs, make up 90 percent of the student body.
   ESSENTIAL CLAUSE: Students who have jobs get better grades.

At times, though, you may have trouble deciding if a clause is essential or nonessential. For instance, a sentence like "Meats which have high fat content are forbidden on some diets" could be interpreted two ways. You will have to decide how to punctuate it in order not to confuse your reader.

3. Use a comma before the conjunction that joins two independent clauses.

   The advertising whetted her interest, and she was determined to go.
   Charles will finish his report tonight, and we will take a new case in the morning.
   Either they sign the contract, or we close down the mill.

4. Use a comma to set off an introductory qualifying word or phrase in a sentence. However, if the meaning is clear without the comma, it is not necessary.

   Unfortunately, John is not as bright as he thinks he is.
   On the whole, the crowd took the bad news fairly well.
   Nevertheless the cost spiral seems to continue.

This rule is no longer a strict one, and you may disregard it if you think the meaning would be clear without the comma.

5. Use commas to set off interrupting phrases or clauses within a sentence. Nonessential appositives, which clarify but do not change the meaning of the subject, are set off with commas.

   Graham, *chairman of the board*, lives in Bermuda.
   Mark Twain portrays Merlin, *Arthur's court magician*, as a comic figure.

So are transition words or phrases that point or qualify.

   The salmon, *for instance*, is a game fish.
   It can be said, *however*, that Eleanor never admitted defeat.

So are terms of address.

   Miss Cinderella, your coach is waiting.
   If you will pardon me, *Mr. Gulliver*, I'll cut these ropes.

6. Use a comma to set off a subordinate clause at the beginning of a sentence.

   Although Jim had never earned much money, he enjoyed life.
   When the touchdown was made, Molly kicked the extra point.

But a subordinate clause at the end of a sentence does not need to be separated by a comma.

7. Use a comma when you want to mark a contrast or separation point clearly.

   Modern cowboys ride pick-ups, not broncos.
   It is not independence he wants, but security.

8. Use commas to mark off divisions when you are writing titles, dates, and addresses.

   The feast of the Great Pumpkin started on October 31, 1965.
   Classes will begin on Tuesday, September 4.
   Wright Morrow, Dean of Humanities, will address the club.
   Rose lives at 13 Washington Square, Austin, Texas.

9. Use commas to mark off direct quotations in a dialogue.

   "Take what you want and pay for it," Max said.
   "Leave that where it is," Clark shouted, "and get out."

Don't Use Commas /omit comma

1. Commas are not used to join independent clauses. When you have two or more groups of words, each of which could be a separate sentence, you need to join them in some way that will show their relationship. A comma is too weak to perform that task, and you will wind up with a comma splice. See page 247.
2. Do not use a comma as a punctuation mark in the middle of a phrase or clause. A comma always interrupts, and thus you should not use it when you want an uninterrupted flow of thought.

Semicolons /;

The semicolon is a separating mark that is stronger than the comma but not quite as strong as the period. Used judiciously, it can tighten your writing and provide good transitions. Here are its chief uses.

1. Use a semicolon to join independent but closely related clauses.

   Jane was disgusted; Jack was merely bored.
   In 1920 women got the vote; now they want equality.
   If nominated I will not run; if elected I will not serve.

2. Use a semicolon before a transition word that joins independent clauses.

   James has no interest in buying the Taj Mahal; nevertheless, he will participate in the negotiations.
   Joan was wearing a splendid new jogging suit; however, she collapsed during the second mile.

3. Use semicolons as separation marks when you want to connect several clauses or phrases that have internal punctuation.

   The people who gathered at the swimming pool were Grant Rock, a former Harley-Davidson rider and bongo drum player; Mondy Koonz, who was a disco queen in the '70s; Sam Santos, who did great imitations of Woody Allen; and Lily Lopiano, the rodeo sweetheart from Laramie.

Colons /:

The colon is a device that gives the reader a signal to anticipate more information. It has six uses:

1. The colon signals an illustration at the end of an independent clause.

   One attribute is necessary for living in Mexico: patience.
   Our throw-away culture makes a mockery of old fashioned virtues: thrift and self-restraint.

2. The colon signals a list.

   To make gazpacho, throw the following ingredients in your Cuisinart: onions, tomatoes, green pepper, cucumber, garlic, and tomato juice.
   These clubs contributed to the relief fund: Rotary, Optimists, Kiwanis, Bluebonnet Belles, and the Thanatopsis.

However, do not use a colon after a linking verb that precedes a list.

   WRONG. The Texas towns listed are: Bug Tussle, Muleshoe, Honey Grove, Dime Box, and Roan's Prairie.

Do not use a colon after a preposition that precedes a list.

   WRONG. "Middle-aged Crazy" is a song about: 40-year-old men, 20-year-old women, disappointments, hangovers, and frustrations.

3. The colon signals an amplification of a statement.

   New Yorkers are mad for Texas chic: they love cowboy boots, chili parlors, Lone Star beer, and Texas performers like Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker.

4. The colon signals a subtitle that explains the main title.

   The Serial: A Year in the Life of Marin County.
   Creative Separation: The Dividends of Splitting.

5. The colon signals a quotation.

   One of Galbraith's statements illustrates my point: "Faced with the choice of spending time on the unpublished scholarship of a graduate student or the unpublished work of Galbraith, I have seldom hesitated."

6. Colons and double colons are used to indicate relationships in an analogy.

   typewriter:author::brush:painter
   exercise:body::thinking:mind

Dashes /——

Dashes are so handy for punctuating sentences that often writers are tempted to rely on them rather than worry over making decisions about commas and semicolons. But a writer who uses too many dashes gives the impression of being sloppy and undiscriminating; therefore, you should probably use dashes for only limited purposes.

1. Use dashes to set off a qualifying or contradicting segment of the sentence, either within or at the end of a sentence.

   Barrel racing—and the contestants are always women—is one of the most dangerous rodeo events.
   Charles is always willing to support a good cause—unless it is unpopular.

2. Use a dash to indicate a sudden shift in the direction of a sentence; used this way, dashes sometimes serve to emphasize irony.

   As a staunch country girl, Lucy loves barbecue, kicker dancing, beer in bottles—and air conditioning.
   The market for new novelists is overcrowded and underpaid—unless you are in science fiction.

3. Use a dash to indicate a statement that will summarize material already given.

   Too much sausage, too many jalapeños, too much beer—all contributed to his sleepless night.
   Danger, excitement, challenge, strenuous exercise—these are the attractions of white-water canoeing.

4. A dash is used to indicate that a sentence is breaking off.

   If one tries to reason with such people—well, we all know what happens then.

Remember not to mix dashes with commas, periods, or semicolons: if you are going to use them in a sentence, be consistent. Mixing them is like mixing a parenthesis with a quotation mark.

To write a dash, make a line about twice as long as a hyphen. To type a dash, type two consecutive hyphens and do not leave any space either before or after the dash.

Dots /. . .

Anytime you quote from someone else's writing and omit any part of it, you should use separated dots, or *ellipsis points*, to indicate that something has been omitted. If what you are omitting is within a sentence, signal the omission with three separated dots: . . . Use four separated dots to signal an omission at the end of a sentence or the omission of a whole sentence or paragraph.

PART OF A SENTENCE OMITTED: Watching television, you'd think we lived . . . surrounded on all sides by human-seeking germs, shielded against infections and death only by a chemical technology that enables us to keep killing them off.

Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell*

COMPLETE SENTENCE OMITTED: In 2000 B.C., when Ishmael found himself in need of a horse, Allah sent him a mare from the heavens. But King Hassan didn't call on Allah. . . . He called instead on Hugh Roy Marshall, who lives on the largest Arabian horse farm this side of Mecca—in suburban Houston. Now the royal stables are thriving again, thanks to five Houston-bred Arabians Marshall sold to Hassan for about $190,000.

The Texas Monthly, October 1978

Parentheses /( )

Parentheses are used to separate out a portion of writing that is either explanatory or that adds information that is incidental to the main point being made.

At least it is usually possible in English to avoid the generic *he* altogether or to alternate *he* or *she* to strike a balance as Dr. Spock has done in the latest (1976) edition of *Baby and Child Care*.

Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women*

Migraine is something more than the fancy of a neurotic imagination. It is an essentially hereditary complex of symptoms, the most frequently noted but by no means the most unpleasant of which is a vascular headache of blinding severity, suffered by a surprising number of women, a fair number of men (Thomas Jefferson had migraine, and so did Ulysses S. Grant, the day he accepted Lee's surrender), and by some unfortunate children as young as two years old.

Joan Didion, *The White Album*

Brackets /[ ]

Brackets are related to parentheses, but the two are not interchangeable. Brackets have the special function of signaling that the writer is inserting an explanation into a quotation and that the portion enclosed in brackets is not part of the original.

> Brooks said, "I think she [Emily Dickinson] was the finest poet of her time."

It is customary to use the term *sic*, set off by brackets, to explain that an error in a quotation is part of the original and not the responsibility of the person giving the quote.

> The researcher wrote, "This manuscript is attributed to Shakspeer [*sic*]."

When you need brackets and the typewriter you are using does not have them, you can either put them in by hand after you finish your paper or go through the awkward business of constructing them from the slash mark and the underlining mark on your typewriter.

Quotation Marks /" or '

Quotation marks have two chief purposes: first, they enable writers to signal that people are speaking, and second, they enable writers to indicate that some part of their writing have been written by other people. There are also some other, less important uses for quotation marks.

1. *Spoken words*. To indicate dialogue or oral discourse, put quotation marks around all spoken words.

> "This has been a fabulous summer," Joannie said.
> Jimmy replied, "What in the world does that mean?"

When you are quoting within a quotation, use single quotation marks for the interior quotation.

> "I always remember your saying to me, 'Everything takes longer than you think it will,' " Carter said to his mother.

2. *Quoted sources*. Anytime writers use the actual words of material that is not their own, they are obligated to indicate that they are *quoting*. For short quotations (usually 25 words or less), the quotation marks can be put on either side of the passage in the main text, as in:

> Hawkins claims in his book, "The childish side of the American character surfaced during the post-war period." He does not, however, go on to support this claim with evidence.

If you are using a longer quotation, you may indicate that someone else wrote it by indenting it to set it off from the main body of your writing, and giving the name of the author and the source.

> One encounter in particular threw these questions into focus. Each of the women's lives we have studied, including those in this book, gave us tentative answers—clues. But close to home we came to know a woman who expanded her own extraordinary insight into the relationship of class and struggle for identity. Through her we were able to tether our abstract theories to the actuality of two lives: a woman and her employer.
>
> Robert Coles and Jane Coles, *Women of Crisis*

Other uses of quotation marks. Writers often use quotation marks to set off words to which they want to call special attention. Sometimes they use the marks to indicate that they are using the word ironically, and sometimes they use them to indicate that the reader should pay special attention to that word.

> IRONY: Presley's "friends" disappeared when he took bankruptcy.
> SPECIAL ATTENTION: The overused jargon word "interface" comes from computer terminology.

Be careful, however, about putting quotation marks around words in an effort to disclaim responsibility for them. As William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White say in *The Elements of Style:*

> If you use a colloquialism or a slang word or phrase, simply use it; do not draw attention to it by enclosing it in quotation marks. To do so is to put on airs, as though you were inviting the reader to join you in a select society of those who know better.

Many writers also use quotation marks around the titles of articles, short stories, or poems, but such usage is optional.

Other Punctuation with Quotation Marks

The rules about where quotation marks should go are not always logical, but probably you should try to observe them as much as possible. Briefly they are these:

1. Commas and periods are always placed *inside* quotation marks.

> "If Jerry leaves," he said, "that will be the last straw."

2. Colons and semicolons are placed *outside* quotation marks.

   James Gould Cozzens writes about "the man of reason"; ironically his chief theme is that man is not reasonable.

3. Question marks and exclamation points may be placed inside or outside of quotation marks; if they belong to the quoted portion, they belong inside, but if they belong to the sentence as a whole they go outside. (Sometimes it is almost impossible to decide.)

   The intruder cried, "Don't shoot!"
   How can you have a discussion with people who are always "spaced out"?

Apostrophes /'

The apostrophe (') has two major uses and one minor use. Its first major use is to indicate the possessive form of nouns. It does this in two principal ways.

1. Use an apostrophe *plus* an *s* to make the possessive form of both single and plural nouns that do not end in *s:* Jack's apron, the men's soccer team.
2. Use an apostrophe *after* the *s* to form the possessive form of names, singular or plural, that end in an *s,* and of plural nouns that end in *s:* the Foxes' swimming pool, the girls' uniforms

   You can also add an apostrophe plus an *s* to names ending in *s* if you prefer. Thus, the following forms are also acceptable: James's tractor, the Cousins's family tree.

Sometimes you may find that you have written what seems to be a double possessive in a sentence, but you think your phrasing should not be changed. For example, you might want to write, "These three books of Faulkner's have lasting value," and changing your phrasing to read "Faulkner's three books have lasting value" would alter your meaning. In such a case, it is quite acceptable to use the possessive form of nouns or pronouns in addition to the "of" construction.

That temper of hers will get her into trouble.
This plan of John's is insane.

Notice that possessive pronouns do *not* require an apostrophe after them; they are complete as they are: *my, mine, ours, his, hers, yours,* and so on.

The second major use of the apostrophe is to mark the omission of a letter in contractions, either of words or dates:

Family members *shouldn't* read each other's mail.
We're looking forward to an exciting conference.
The president *didn't* anticipate such hostility.
They'll regret having moved to the country.
Sally's scholarship began in the fall of *'79.*

Take care to put the apostrophe in place of the omitted letter or letters: thus the contraction of *would + not* is *"wouldn't,"* not *"would'nt,"* and *they + will* is *"they'll,"* not *"theyl'l."*

A minor use of the apostrophe is as an indicator of the plural form for individual letters and numbers.

Clark habitually slurs his r's.
Eunice writes her 7's with a bar across them.

Hyphens /-

Editors seem to be getting less prescriptive about the use of hyphens just as they are getting less prescriptive about commas. Nevertheless, you should know the guidelines for the four most common uses of the hyphen.

1. A hyphen is used as a mark for indicating where words should be divided when a separation occurs at the end of a line. (Even that use may disappear as modern automatic typesetters have built-in justifiers to take care of the problem.) Remember that there are standard and nonstandard ways to divide words, and when you are in doubt, you should check in the dictionary.
2. It is used as a separation mark in compound nouns: brother-in-law, court-martial, commander-in-chief, 17-year-old, lieutenant-governor.

Guidelines for hyphenating words like these are rather flexible; there is no sound reason for hyphenating mother-in-law and not hyphenating godfather or first lieutenant. If you have doubts about whether you should hyphenate a compound term, and can't find it in the dictionary, the safest course is to use hyphens.

3. A hyphen makes the division between parts of a compound modifier: a blow-by-blow description, a holier-than-thou attitude, his 13-year-old daughter, my end-of-the-semester slump.
4. It is also used as a marker between the prefix *ex* and the word it modifies, and as a marker after certain other prefixes when they come before capitalized words: ex-army officer, ex-wife, pro-Arab sentiments, anti-American.