Grammar Tips

Adverbs

Tricky adverbs

Bad or badly? Sweet or sweetly?
If the verb being modified refers to using the eyes, nose, mouth, or hands (see/smell/taste/feel), use the –ly word.

*Roses smell sweet/sweetly.* The roses aren’t smelling with their noses, so *sweet* is correct.

*The woman looked angry/angrily.* We aren’t talking about how she used her eyes, so *angry* is correct.

*The woman looked angry/angrily at the spot on the carpet.* The woman is using her eyes, so *angrily* is correct.

*She feels bad/badly about the news.* She is expressing emotion, not feeling with her hand, so *bad* is correct. But: We performed *badly.* Describes how we performed.

*The fish tastes different/differently today.* (Different because the fish is not tasting anything)
*Don’t take it personal/personally.* (Personally because we are modifying take, not it)

Useless Adverbs

Adverbs have their place, but you can improve your writing by pruning repetitive adverbs. *She smiled happily* is redundant, as is *frowned morosely* and *jumped up and down excitedly.* Only an unusual smile needs the highlighting of an adverb—a crafty smile or a resigned smile may merit a descriptor. Cut these out: *extremely, clearly, definitely, truly, obviously, very,* and *really.*

Misplaced Adverbs

Adverbs often get misplaced when a sentence has two verbs and one adverb.

*She was looking at the man running thoughtfully.* Here, *thoughtfully* could modify two verbs: *was looking* and *running,* so the sentence could mean she was looking thoughtfully at the man, or she was looking at the man who was simultaneously running and pontificating.

Most readers would assume that *thoughtfully* goes with the closer verb, in this case *running.*

*She was looking thoughtfully at the runner.*
*She was looking at the man who was running thoughtfully.*

Never drop the –ly when using comparisons.

Talk *quietly.* Talk more *quietly.* Not: Talk quieter.

Sentence Modifiers

Are you modifying an entire sentence? Use –ly words: *importantly, similarly.*

If what you have to say next is an important thing to convey, drop the –ly.

*Most important, put a lid on the pot before the popcorn kernels start to pop.*

Similarly, the plaintiff in Jones also refused a breathalyzer test.

When using a compound modifier, do not use a hyphen to link any adverb ending in –ly with the word it’s modifying: *a recently hired executive, freshly baked bread, a newly minted coin,* and so on.

Only

The adverb *only* often gets stuck in the wrong place. If you say, *Candace only edits on Tuesdays,* you are suggesting that the only thing Candace does on Tuesdays is edit; she doesn’t write, she doesn’t sleep, she doesn’t eat. She only edits. The right place to use only is almost never before the verb.

Better: *Candace edits only on Tuesdays.*
Which or That?
Restrictive Clause—use that
A restrictive clause is just part of a sentence that you can't get rid of because it specifically restricts some other part of the sentence.

Would you say *Movies, which star Johnny Depp, make me happy*, or *Movies that star Johnny Depp make me happy*? Leaving out a restrictive clause changes the meaning of the sentence. If you mean to say that not all movies make me happy—just the ones starring Johnny Depp, the correct sentence is *Movies that star Johnny Depp make me happy*.

Nonrestrictive Clause—use which
A nonrestrictive clause is something that can be left off without changing the meaning of the sentence. You can think of a nonrestrictive clause as simply additional information. Here's an example:

- Diamonds, which are expensive, often elicit forgiveness.
- There was an earthquake in China, which is bad news.

Was vs. Were
Verbs have moods. The mood of the verb to be when you use the phrase *I were* is called the subjunctive mood. Use it when talking about something that isn't true or you're being wishful.

*I wish I were more perceptive*—that sentence is wishful.

Although it is not always the case, sentences that start with *if* are often also wishful or contrary to fact. Example: *If I were in charge, I would declare every Friday a holiday.*

Note that the part of the sentence following the subjunctive verb contains a word such as *would* or *could*. Those wishful words are also a clue that you might need the subjunctive mood.

But *if* and *could* and similar words don't always mean you need to use *I were*. For example, when you are writing about something that *might* be true, use the verb *was*.

*If Bill was to come over for coffee (as he does every Sunday), we would talk about football.*

This sentence is not contrary to fact, presupposed to be false, or wishful. It indicates what will happen if Bill comes over.

Passive Voice
Passive sentences aren't incorrect; it's just that they often aren't the best way to phrase your thoughts. Passive voice can be awkward, vague, and wordy, so you tighten your writing if you replace passive sentences with active sentences.

When you put sentences in passive voice, it's easy to leave out the person or thing doing the action. *Amy is loved* is passive. We don't know who loves Amy. Politicians often use passive voice intentionally to obscure the idea of who is taking the action. *Mistakes were made. Bombs were dropped. Shots were fired.*

Sometimes passive voice does have advantages. For example, if you truly don't know who is taking the action, then you can't name the person. A police officer might write, *The store was robbed*, because nobody knows who the robber was. Check your readability statistics on Word, and keep the passive voice at 5% or less.

Who vs. Whom
*Whom* is the objective case of the pronoun *who*, used when *who* is an object in a sentence instead of a subject. For example, you would use *who* in *Who loves you, baby?* because *who* is the subject of *loves*. But you'd use *whom* in *Whom do you love?* because *whom* is the object of *love*—the object of affection. *Who do you think did it?* Because there are two verbs—*think* and *did*—at first, you might think it should be *Whom do you think did it?*. Who isn't the subject of the verb *think*, but it is the subject of the verb *did*. Since it is in the subject position, the correct choice is *who*. 
Whoever vs. Whomever
Take a clause like whoever did this. We use whoever because it is the subject of did. Now take a clause like whomever I hire. We use whomever because it is the object of hire. Whoever did this and whomever I hire are noun clauses—clauses that act just like nouns. Suppose the noun clause whoever did this is part of a sentence like I want to speak to whoever did this. Uh-oh, you may think, whoever is the object of to, and it should be whomever. But you’d be wrong— whoever was the right choice when we were thinking about the clause whoever did this by itself, and it’s still the right choice now. What about that to in I want to speak to whoever did this? The answer is that the object of to is not whoever. It is the entire clause whoever did this. It is a noun clause because the whole thing acts like a noun and, in this case, the whole thing is the object of to.

Let’s look at this sentence: Whomever I hire will start immediately. What is the subject of will start immediately? It’s easy to trick yourself again, and turn that whomever into a whoever because it looks like the subject of the sentence. But again, we made the right choice when we looked at whomever I hire in isolation, and it’s still the right choice. The subject of will start immediately is the entire noun clause whomever I hire. So to choose between whoever and whomever, look only at the noun clause in which it appears, and disregard the rest of the sentence.

Like whom, the pronoun him ends with m. When you are trying to decide whether to use who or whom, ask yourself whether the answer to the question would be he or him. If you can answer the question with him, use whom. If you could talk to anyone, who/whom would you talk to? Here it’s clear that whom is correct, because you’re dealing with an action verb and would answer the question, I would talk to him.

When in doubt, rewrite
To avoid the whoever/whomever problem altogether, you could rephrase it as the person who or the person whom, or even just the person. So instead of I want to speak to whoever did this, you would have I want to speak to the person who did this. Instead of Whomever I hire will start immediately, you could write The person I hire will start immediately. When you are faced with a difficult whoever/whomever choice, you can dodge the issue by simplifying your sentence.

You or Your?
Which sentence is correct?
We appreciate you contacting the office.
We appreciate your contacting the office.

Both are correct, but they have slightly different meanings. If you appreciate that someone contacted the office (the act of contacting), use your. It’s roughly equivalent to We appreciate that you contacted the office. If you appreciate the person who contacted the office, use you. Typically, you want the possessive pronoun: We appreciate your contacting the office.

Regard or Regards?
The correct phrase is in regard to.
Many people believe both phrases are unnecessary business jargon. Better options, depending on the particular sentence, include concerning, regarding, about, in, and with.

- This letter is in regard to your message dated January 5. (correct)
- This letter concerns your message dated January 5. (better)

Because
Get rid of the many wordy phrases that mean because. There are quite a few: due to the fact that, owing to the fact that, on account of, and on the grounds that, for example. Using because instead can save up to four words. A redundant but romantic windbag might say, The reason I love you is because of your kindness. Be concise and romantic instead. Just say, I love you because you are kind.
**Comprise or Compose**

To comprise means to contain, as in *The house comprises seven rooms.* In other words, this house has or contains seven rooms. When you use comprise, you are talking about all the parts that make up something. Usually, the important thing to remember when you’re using comprise is that the item that is the whole shebang comes first in the sentence; second come the items that are its parts. For example, you might say, *A full pack comprises 52 cards.* The pack is the whole shebang, so it comes first in the sentence. It would be wrong to say, *Fifty-two cards comprise a full pack.* Likewise, America comprises 50 states, not fifty states comprise America. America is the whole shebang, so it comes first in the sentence. The whole comprises the parts.

To compose means to make up, as in *Many ethnic groups compose our nation.* Notice in this sentence that the parts come before the whole. If you wanted to start the sentence with the words our nation, you would use comprise: *Our nation comprises many ethnic groups.* The parts compose the whole, but the whole comprises the parts.

**Is Comprised Of and Is Composed Of**

One of these phrases is allowed, and one is not. You can use is composed of, so you could say, *Our nation is composed of many ethnic groups.* On the other hand, most grammar sources agree that is comprised of is an incorrect phrase.

**Myself**

*Me* is the Object Pronoun

It’s common to hear people say things like this: *Please contact Sue, Bill, or myself with questions.* Here’s why that is wrong: the position of Sue, Bill, and the incorrect myself in the sentence is the object position, and me is the object pronoun you use to refer to yourself in a sentence like that.

Think about how you would say the sentence without Susie and Bill. You would probably say, *Please contact me.* Once you figure it out with just one person, simply add in the other people: *Please contact Sue, Bill, and me with questions.*

*I* is the Subject Pronoun

*Amy and myself will quench the fire* is incorrect because Amy and the incorrect myself are in the subject position, and I is the subject pronoun you use to refer to yourself. Again, try the one-person-limit test. The sentence is *I will quench the fire.* Start adding in other people, again, keeping yourself last in the list: *Amy and I will quench the fire.*

*Myself* is the Reflexive Pronoun

The word myself is a reflexive pronoun. Think about looking in a mirror and seeing your reflection. You might say, *I see myself in the mirror.* You see your reflection, and myself is a reflexive pronoun. Other reflexive pronouns include himself, herself, yourself, itself, themselves, and so on.

Reflexive pronouns refer to the subject of a sentence again, later in the sentence. For example, you could say, *I see myself playing marimbas,* or, *I am going to treat myself to a mud bath.* In both these cases you are the object of your own action; the subject is I and you use myself to refer back to that I.

*Myself* is also an Intensive Pronoun

Reflexive pronouns can also be used to add emphasis to a sentence. If you witnessed a murder, you could say, *I myself saw the madman’s handiwork.* It’s dramatic, but it’s also grammatically correct. If you want to emphasize how proud you are of your new artwork, you could say, *I painted it myself.* Myself just adds emphasis.

**Insure, Ensure, and Assure**

The verbs assure, ensure, and insure all have the general meaning to make sure, but their usage depends on context:

**Assure** is something you do to a person, a group of people, or an animal to remove doubt or anxiety, as in *Sue assured Amy that she planned to attend the party.* **Assure** can only be used with things that are alive; only things that are alive can feel doubt or anxiety, so only they can be assured.

**Ensure** is something you do to guarantee an event or condition, as in *To ensure there would be enough alcohol, Amy ordered twice as much beer as last year.*

**Insure** can be done to a person, place, or thing, but it's reserved for limiting financial liability, most commonly by obtaining an insurance policy.

**When to leave out that**

*The turkey sandwich I ate yesterday had too much mayonnaise* and *The turkey sandwich that I ate yesterday had too much mayonnaise* mean the same thing, so it's fine to omit *that.*

**That can help sentence flow**

When you're deciding whether to keep or omit your *that,* consider how your sentence flows. Many times, including *that* is a matter of personal preference. Cutting unnecessary words is important, but keep *that* if it helps the rhythm of the sentence.

**Sometimes that is necessary**

If your sentence already has another *that* or two, you might not want to complicate it more by adding yet another *that.* Use *that* when your sentence could be ambiguous or misunderstood. Avoid garden-path sentences—sentences that seem to mean one thing but then turn out to mean something else. Garden path sentences are bad because readers have to re-read the beginning of the sentence to figure out its meaning. Sometimes, keeping a *that* can help you avoid such problematic sentences.

Amy maintains Sue's yard is too big.       Amy maintains that Sue's yard is too big.

Without *that,* the reader is initially led to believe that Amy maintains (as in mows) Sue's yard. If you add in *that,* it is clear from the beginning that Amy just has an opinion.

**Whether vs. If**

Although in informal writing and speech the two words are often used interchangeably, in formal writing, the meaning can be different depending on which word you use. Use *if* when you have a conditional sentence and *whether* when you are showing that two alternatives are possible.

The two words could be interchangeable in the following sentences:

*Sue didn’t know whether Amy would arrive on Friday.*
*Sue didn’t know if Amy would arrive on Friday.*

In either sentence, the meaning is that Amy *may or may not* arrive on Friday.

Here are some examples where the words are not interchangeable.

*Sue didn’t know whether Amy would arrive on Friday or Saturday.*
There are two possibilities: Amy will arrive on Friday or Amy will arrive on Saturday.

Now see how the sentence has a different meaning when with *if* instead of *whether:*
*Sue didn’t know if Amy would arrive on Friday or Saturday.*

Now in addition to arriving on Friday or Saturday, there is the possibility that Amy may not arrive at all. These last two sentences show why it is best to use *whether* when you have two possibilities.

**Whether vs. whether or not**

*Call Sue whether or not you are going to arrive on Friday.*

Often, the *or not* is just extra fluff and should be left off.
Sue didn’t know whether or not Amy would arrive on Friday means the same thing as Sue didn’t know whether Amy would arrive on Friday. Or not is superfluous, so leave it out.

On the other hand, you need the full phrase whether or not when you mean regardless of whether. It shows that there is equal emphasis on both options.

Call Sue regardless of whether you are going to arrive on Friday.
Call Sue whether or not you are going to arrive on Friday.

**Hopefully**
The Associated Press now allows writers to start a sentence with the word hopefully to mean I am hopeful that something will happen, or I am hopeful that the next part of the sentence is true. As in Hopefully, you understand what a big deal this change is. There is one problem with hopefully as a sentence adverb; it can be ambiguous.

Hopefully, Sue asked her dad if they can go to Disneyland.
This sentence could mean the writer is hopeful that Sue asked, or it could mean that Sue asked in a hopeful manner. Usually, context makes the meaning clear, and if there is an instance where confusion will ensue, just don’t use hopefully.

Hopefully, the expedition will be approved. Nobody is going to think the expedition is hopeful. Using hopefully as a sentence adverb will annoy some readers, so avoid using it in formal writing.

**Dashes, Parentheses, Colons, and Commas**

**Dashes add drama**
Dashes and colons can both be used to introduce the next part of a sentence, and the difference between the two marks is subtle. A dash is a stronger and more informal mark than a colon. Think of a colon as part of the sentence that just ambles along. Sue has two hobbies [and, now I’m going to tell you what they are, colon] playing jokes on Amy and cooking.

A colon informs the reader that something more is coming along. The words after a colon define or clarify what came before the colon. The two hobbies before the colon are defined after the colon as playing jokes on Amy and cooking.

A dash also introduces extra or defining material, but, well, a dash is quite a dramatic punctuation mark. A dashing young man is certainly not an ordinary young man. A dash interrupts the flow of the sentence and tells the reader to get ready for some important or dramatic statement. Normally, you don’t want to follow a dash with something boring or mundane.

Dashes interrupt your sentence in a way that parentheses or commas don’t.

They fled through the woods, and then George—dear, sweet George the accountant—jumped out from behind a tree and stabbed them.
The dashes to remind the reader that the attacker has unexpected qualities—that he’s dear, sweet George the accountant.

It’s fine to use one dash alone to introduce an important or exciting statement, or a statement that already has commas in it. You could write

There was only one thing missing from the pirate ship—pirates.

The second sentence just doesn’t have the same wild feeling as the sentence with the dash. A colon is a more stoic, buttoned-up punctuation mark than a dash.

**Capitalization after a Colon or Dash**
A dash doesn’t require any extra thought regarding capitalization. You treat the first word after a dash the same way you would treat it if it followed a comma.
On the other hand, you sometimes have to make a decision about capitalization when you use a colon. If the words that follow the colon aren’t a complete sentence, you lowercase the first word after a colon unless it’s something that would be capitalized anyway, such as a name. But if the words that follow the colon are a complete sentence, you can choose to capitalize the first letter of the first word like you would in a stand-alone sentence. It’s a style choice; the key is to pick a style and be consistent.

If what follows the colon is a series of sentences, then capitalize the first letter of the first word in them all.

Susan had three demands: She wanted cake. She wanted ice cream. She wanted presents.

In general, you can think of parentheses, commas, and dashes as a continuum of marks. Parentheses are the quiet whisper of an aside, commas are the conversational voice of a friend walking by your desk, and dashes are the yowl of a pirate dashing into a fray.

**Parentheses**

Use parentheses to surround something that seems a bit out of place in the sentence—an aside, a clarification, or a commentary. When you edit your drafts, you may find that you can rewrite the sentence to include the parenthetical information or simply delete the things in parentheses. Here’s an example of one way to use parentheses to add additional information:

> The 30th anniversary of the eruption of Mount St. Helens (May 18, 1980) brought back vivid memories of ash and darkness.

The date (May 18, 1980) is something you want to tell the reader, but it isn’t a necessary part of the sentence. If you leave it out, the reader still gets the whole point you wanted to make. The date isn’t enough of a dramatic statement to merit dashes, and if you want to leave it in, another good reason to use parentheses is that the date already contains a comma between the day and the year, so to surround it with commas would make the sentence difficult to read. No excitement. Already has an internal comma. That leaves parentheses as the obvious choice.

Here is one that is a little different:

> I’m heading out (movie night!), but I’ll call you in the morning.

*Movie night!* is more of an aside or comment than a clarification. *Movie night!* is so far removed from the flow of the sentence that you wouldn’t want to use commas around it. It doesn’t seem like enough of an interruption or a dramatic statement to merit dashes, but it’s a judgment call. Parentheses seem right here.

**Commas**

Commas don’t interrupt your sentence, so use them when the words you’re enclosing are a natural part of your sentence and not some comment from left field or flamboyant statement. Commas are generally used for appositives, for example, which are defining or clarifying statements after nouns. Here’s an example of an appositive set off with commas:

> My middle daughter, Meghan, will be visiting soon.

*Meghan* just tells you who my daughter is. You could set her name off with dashes as we did in the earlier sentence about George the accountant, or with parentheses like we did with a date earlier, but there’s no reason to in a sentence like this one. Commas are also used to set off non-restrictive elements such as *which* clauses.

> Diamonds, which are expensive, aren’t something I buy very often.

**Is Impact a verb?**

Many people maintain that *impact* is only proper as a noun, it only means *to hit*, and any other use is just irritating jargon. Usually, when you are tempted to use *impact* as a verb, *affect* is the better choice:

> Cutting prices will impact our revenue.

> Cutting prices will affect our revenue.
If you can put an article such as an or the in front of impact, you are using it in the most proper way—as a noun. *He wondered what the impact of the changes would be.*

### Formatting Lists

**Bulleted lists**

Bullets are just big dots, and you can use them to make a bulleted list when the order of the items doesn't matter.

> **Here is what I want everyone to bring to the beach party.**
>  o Chocolate bars
>  o Graham crackers
>  o Marshmallows
>  o Pointy sticks

List the items alphabetically or in some other way that seems to make sense. Often you will want to put your most important item first.

**Numbered lists**

Numbers are reserved for instances where the items in the list need to follow a specific sequence. You could use numbers to list the step-wise tasks that are required—in order—to start up a piece of machinery, for example.

> **To turn on your old laptop**—
>  1. Open the cover.
>  2. Push the start button.
>  3. Make tea while all the applications load.

**Lettered lists**

Letters are useful when items don't need to follow a specific sequence, but you want to refer to an item later.

> **Punctuation in lists can be tricky. You have to consider (a) colons; (b) semi-colons; (c) commas; and (d) periods.**

Letters make sense with this list because the order doesn't matter. Bullets would work just as well, but if you wanted to refer to the items again later, using letters could help readers easily find the list item when they look back through the text. If you mention a letter later in your text, enclose it in parentheses.

**Introductory colons**

After you've decided what kind of list to use, the next decision you'll face is how to punctuate the statement that comes right before your list. If your lead-in statement is a complete sentence, use a colon at the end to introduce your list. On the other hand, if your lead-in statement is a sentence fragment, don't use a colon. If you wouldn't put a colon between the introductory element and the list items if they were together in a sentence, you shouldn't put one there just because it's a vertical list.

**Capitalization**

If your list item is a complete sentence, capitalize the first letter. If your list item isn't a complete sentence, you can choose whether or not to capitalize the first letter—it's a style choice. The only thing that is important is to be consistent. It's easier to remember “capitalize everything” than it is to remember “capitalize complete sentences and use lowercase for sentence fragments.”

**Parallelism**

Make sure list items are parallel. They should all be fragments or they should all be complete sentences. If you start one bullet point with a verb, then start every bullet point with a verb. Here's an example of a list that uses parallel construction:

*For Michelle, a vacation involves*
  o Attending lectures
  o Reading books
On the other hand, even though the following list is grammatically correct, it’s considered poor writing because the list items aren’t parallel.

*For Michelle, a vacation involves*

- Attending lectures
- Books
- Many trips to famous destinations

**Two weeks’ notice**

The correct way to give possession to time and money is with an apostrophe:

- One year’s time
- Two weeks’ notice
- Ten dollars’ worth

**E-mail or Email?**

The editors of the Associated Press stylebook recently created a stir by announcing a change in their recommended spelling: *e-mail* is now *email*. On the other hand, other sources still use *e-mail*.

**Quotation Marks**

In the U.S., we always put periods and commas inside terminal quotation marks.

If the whole sentence, including the quotation, is a question or an exclamation, then the question mark or exclamation point goes outside the closing quotation mark; but if only the part inside the quotation marks is a question or exclamation, then the question mark or exclamation point goes inside the closing quotation mark.

*Did she ask you whether you enjoyed the song “Ode to Joy”?*

*I love the song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”*

**Quotation marks with semicolons and colons**

Semicolons, colons, asterisks, and dashes always go outside the closing quotation mark.

*I love “Ode to Joy”; it’s insightful and moving.*

*“Ode to Joy”: A Moving and Insightful Song*

*My favorite song is “Ode to Joy.”*

*I love “Ode to Joy”—it’s insightful and moving.*

**Do you need a comma before Jr.?**

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established in 1983, and older style guides usually called for a comma before the *Jr*. Most newer style guides, however, recommend omitting the comma.

Omit commas in names that are followed by *Jr*. or a numeral. If someone is referred to as *the third*, you can use either the Roman numeral (III) or the Arabic numeral (3rd) after the name.

- Thurston Howell III
- Thurston Howell 3rd
- John Kennedy Jr.

**Making names plural**

Don’t change the base spelling of formal names and brand names to make plurals. For example, you make *blackberry*, the fruit, plural by changing the *y* to *ies*; but you make *BlackBerry*, the phone, plural by simply adding an *s* to the end: *BlackBerrys*. Similarly, *Kennedy* becomes *the Kennedys*. Names that end in *s*, *x*, *z*, *ch*, and *sh*, need an *es* to become plural:

- The Joneses invited you to hold ladders while they hang lights.
- The Foxes decorated four Christmas trees.

Never use an apostrophe to make a name plural. Apostrophes are for possessives.
The Joneses’ dinner was a success.

The Foxes’ house was beautiful.

Why Veterans Day doesn’t have an apostrophe
The U.S. government gave the holiday its official name, and they chose to write it without the apostrophe, but it’s grammatically correct with or without an apostrophe.

Since many people are confused, you’ve probably seen Veterans Day written three ways:

- The right way: Veterans Day
- Another potentially right way: Veterans’ Day
- The wrong way: Veteran’s Day

If you omit an apostrophe at the end of Veterans, you’re using the word as an adjective that modifies Day. Just as tree tells you what kind of farm I’m talking about in the phrase tree farm, Veterans tells you the kind of day in the phrase Veterans Day.

Parentheses and brackets
Parentheses mainly enclose information that is not vital to a sentence. No matter what you put within parentheses, your sentence must still make sense if you delete them and everything inside.

You may put both partial and complete sentences within parentheses.

If what’s inside your parentheses is a complete sentence, a terminal punctuation mark, such as a period, question mark, or exclamation point, goes inside the closing parenthesis: Joe refused to drive fast. (I knew he wouldn’t want to do that.) If the parentheses contain only a partial sentence, put the terminal punctuation outside instead: I moved to America when I was 12 (in 1980).

Let’s say you want to add the complete sentence I can’t believe it! inside parentheses within another complete sentence. I ate the whole donut (I can’t believe it!). Make sure you have a reason for putting it in parentheses. It may be better to make the sentence inside the parentheses a complete sentence on its own that follows the first sentence.

Square brackets
Square brackets enclose comments, corrections, explanations, interpolations, notes, or translations that were not in the original text. For example, if the original quotation reads, “This enterprising paleontologist discovered a new species of plant eater,” you shouldn’t change it to [Bob Jones] discovered a new species of plant eater. You would quote the material this way: This enterprising paleontologist [Bob Jones] discovered a new species of plant eater. Don’t use a parentheses around the name you add, because it would seem—incorrectly—that the parenthetical appeared in the original text. Brackets differ from ellipses, which show that you have deleted words from a quotation.

Uncluttering your sentences
Get rid of single-word modifiers that don’t enhance your meaning, such as very, really, totally, quite, actually, already, fairly, and much. Words like very are unnecessary and redundant: If something is unique, then by definition it is one-of-a-kind; it can’t be more one-of-a-kind.

Examine your verbs. Are your helper verbs truly helping? Watch out for constructions such as you can, you can choose to, you can decide to, and you need to. Some examples include

- If you want to survive smallpox, you will need to get medical care from Calamity Jane and Doc Cochran.

Replace those “you” phrases with infinitives, imperatives, and other sturdy verbs, or rewrite the sentences:

- To survive smallpox, get medical care from Calamity Jane and Doc Cochran.
Ellipses
The most common way to use an ellipsis is to show that you’ve omitted words. Here’s a quote from the book *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens: *I cannot help it; reason has nothing to do with it; I love her against reason.* Shorten it to this: *I cannot help it . . . I love her against reason.* Taking out the middle part doesn’t change the meaning and saves seven words.

Integrity is essential when using ellipses this way. It's acceptable to tighten a long quotation by omitting unnecessary words, but it's important that you don't change the meaning.

**How to make an ellipsis**
An ellipsis consists of exactly three dots called ellipsis points—never two dots, never four dots—just three dots. Type period-space-period-space-period. Make sure your dots don't end up on two different lines. Usually there is a space on each side of an ellipsis. The ellipsis is typically standing in for a word or a sentence, so just imagine that it's a word itself, and then it's easy to remember to put a space on each side.

If you are omitting something that comes after a complete sentence, meaning that your ellipsis has to follow a period, put the period at the end of the sentence as you normally would, then type a space, and then type or insert your ellipsis. Again, you're treating the ellipsis as if it were the first word of the next sentence. This will result in four dots in a row with spaces between each dot, but this is not a four-dot ellipsis—there's no such thing. It is a period followed by a three-dot ellipsis.

Most style guides don't call for an ellipsis when you omit something at the beginning or end of a quotation.

**And/Or**
Drop and/or and choose either and or or. *This message and the attached files are confidential.*

**Modifiers**
It's acceptable describe a noun with two or three modifiers. In such cases, use hyphens to link together words that describe a noun—if the modifiers appear before the noun. For example, if you want to describe someone’s age, as in *the forty-year-old man*, you need hyphens.

When you join words to describe a noun, you are creating a phrasal adjective: *credit-card statement, over-the-counter medicine, and long-distance phone call.*

Hyphens prevent miscues. Take this ambiguous sentence: *The man eating lion was taken away.* Who got taken away, the man or the lion? However, if we are talking about the lion, we need a hyphen between the words “man” and “eating”: *The man-eating lion was taken away.* If, on the other hand, the modifiers appear after the noun, ditch the hyphens: *The man is forty years old.* You can also get rid of the hyphens if one of the two words describing the noun is an –ly adverb. Do not hyphenate *spiritually inclined* in “*The spiritually inclined woman went to church.*”

**Modify in moderation**
Some writers try to save space by joining up too many words before a noun. Cutting words is a good idea most of the time, but not if you sacrifice clarity: *The system uses a high peak power single frequency low divergent light beam produced by pulsed lasers.* Instead, add a few words to clarify the relationships between the nouns. *The system uses pulsed lasers that operate under high peak power to produce a single-frequency light beam with low divergence.*

*The three-foot-high fence* is no big deal, but *the three-foot-high barbed-wire-covered fence* is a bit much. Instead of cramming too many facts into a small space, consider breaking the sentence into two shorter sentences or get rid of one or more of your modifiers.
Prepositional phrases and misplaced modifiers

Groucho Marx said, "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know."

A misplaced modifier is a phrase or clause that acts on something other than what the writer intended. A prepositional phrase is a short phrase that begins with a preposition. Prepositions include in, at, and through. A prepositional phrase gets misplaced when the writer puts it next to the wrong word.

Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.

We sometimes make errors with our prepositional phrases because we are trying to join up too many ideas at once. It would be better to divide the Lincoln sentence into two sentences: Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg. Because he didn't have paper, he wrote the speech on the back of an envelope.

Spaces between sentences

Use proportional fonts, and add only one space at the end of your sentence. Double-spacing is a holdover from the days of using typewriters. The Chicago Manual of Style, the AP Stylebook, and the Modern Language Association all recommend using one space after a period at the end of a sentence.

That vs. Who

You can use the word that to refer to people, but who is the better choice.

She’s the girl who teaches us grammar.

The AP Stylebook states that it is okay to call an unidentified animal it or that.

Earlier, we reported on a cat that was stuck in a tree.

But once the animal has a name, it may merit a he or she.

The firefighters rescued Fluffy from the tree. She rewarded them with a boisterous meow.

Of

Of is a preposition and although it isn’t an inherently evil word, overusing it can make your writing sound passive and fussy.

BAD: She is the wife of George. BETTER: She is George’s wife.

But of isn't always wrong. You have to write Please bring me a bucket of water to show that you want a bucket that actually has water in it. Please bring me a water bucket has a different meaning.

Of is especially useful when you are dealing with double possessives. For example, if you want to talk about a photo that you own, you shouldn’t say That's my photo because people might think it is a photo OF you instead of a photo that belongs to you. You could say The photo belongs to me, but you could also use an of and say, That's a photo of mine. The of indicates possession as does the word mine, which is what makes it a double possessive. Of can be useful when dealing with a complex trail of possession. He’s the cousin of my neighbor’s brother is easier to understand than He’s my neighbor’s brother's cousin.

Serial Commas

Use them. The flag is red, white, and blue. Mary argued, whined, and begged.