1 LEARN THE BASICS OF GOOD WRITING

Good writing places your thoughts in your readers’ minds in exactly the way you want them to be there. Good writing tells your readers just what you want them to know without telling them anything you do not wish to say. That may sound odd, but the fact is, writers have to be careful not to let unwanted messages slip into their writing. Look, for example, at the passage below.

Recent articles written on the subject of information warfare have had little to say about the particular problems dealt with in this paper. Because few of these articles focus on the defensive role of information warfare.

Chances are, when you reached the end of the second “sentence,” you sensed something missing, a gap in logic or coherence, and your eye ran back through both sentences to find the place where things went wrong. The second sentence is actually not a sentence at all. It does have certain features of a sentence—a subject, for example (few), and a verb (focus)—but its first word (Because) subordinates the entire clause that follows, taking away its ability to stand on its own as a complete idea. The second “sentence,” which is properly called a subordinate clause, merely fills in some information about the first sentence.

The sort of error represented by the second sentence is commonly called a sentence fragment, and it conveys to the reader a message that no writer wants to send: that the writer either is careless or, worse, has not mastered the language. Language errors such as fragments, misplaced commas, or shifts in verb tense send up little red flags. The result is that readers lose some of their concentration on the issue being discussed. They become distracted and begin to wonder about the language competency of the writer.

Although they may seem minor, the fact is that the sort of language errors we are discussing—often called surface errors—can be extremely damaging in certain kinds of writing. Surface errors come in a variety of types, including misspellings, punctuation problems, grammar errors, and the inconsistent use of abbreviations, capitalization, or numerals. These errors are an affront to your reader’s notion of correctness, and therein lies one of the biggest problems with surface errors. Different audiences tolerate different levels of correctness. You already know that you can get away with surface errors in, say, a letter to a friend, who will not judge you harshly for them, while those same errors in a job application letter might eliminate you from consideration for the job. Correctness depends to an extent upon context.

Blogs and e-mail have relatively loose standards for spelling and grammar. Yet I often see posters ridiculed for misspellings and misuse of words such as to and their. If you wish to be taken seriously on a blog, and why would you post there if you do not, then take the time to write as if you were writing for serious publication. If you maintain your rigor in informal arenas, you will be less likely to slip into mistakes in serious writing.

Another problem with correctness is that the rules governing correctness shift over time. What would have been an error to your grandparents’ generation—the splitting of an infinitive, for example, or the ending of a sentence with a preposition—is taken in stride today by most readers. So how do you write correctly when the rules shift from person to person and over time? Here are some tips.

1.1 Consider Your Audience

One of the great risks of writing is that even the simplest of choices you make regarding wording or punctuation can sometimes prejudice your audience against you in ways that may seem unfair. For example, look again at the old grammar “rule” forbidding the splitting of infinitives. After decades of counseling students to never split an infinitive (something this sentence has just done), composition experts now concede that a split infinitive is not a grammar crime. But suppose you have written a position paper trying to convince your city
council of the need to hire security personnel for the library, and half of the council members—the people you wish to convince—remember their eighth-grade grammar teacher’s outdated warning about splitting infinitives. How will they respond when you tell them, in your introduction, that librarians are ordered “to always accompany” visitors to the rare book room because of the threat of vandalism? How much of their attention have you suddenly lost because of their automatic recollection of an outdated rule? It is possible, in other words, to write correctly and still offend your readers’ notions of language competence.

Make sure that you tailor the surface features of your writing to the level of competency that your readers require. When in doubt, take a conservative approach. The same goes for the level of formality you should assume. Your audience might be just as distracted by contractions as by a split infinitive.

1.2 Aim for Consistency

When dealing with a language question for which there are different answers—such as whether or not to place a comma after the second item in a series of three—always use the same strategy. If, for example, you avoid splitting one infinitive, avoid splitting all infinitives.

1.3 Have Confidence in What You Know

It is easy for unpracticed writers to allow their occasional mistakes to depress them about their writing ability. The fact is most of what we know about writing is right. We are all capable, for example, of phrasing utterances that are grammatically sound, even if we cannot list the grammar rules by which we achieve coherence. Most writers who worry about their chronic errors have fewer than they think. Becoming distressed about errors makes writing more difficult.

As various composition theorists have pointed out, the word grammar has several definitions. One meaning is “the formal patterns in which words must be arranged in order to convey meaning.” We learn these patterns very early in life and use them spontaneously, without thinking. Our understanding of grammatical patterns is extremely sophisticated, despite the fact that few of us can actually cite the rules by which the patterns work.

2 Avoid Errors

If just thinking about our errors has a negative effect on our writing, then how do we learn to write more correctly? Perhaps the best answer is simply to write as often as possible. Give yourself practice in putting your thoughts into written shape, and get lots of practice in revising and proofing your work. And as you write and revise, be honest with yourself, and be patient. Chronic errors are like bad habits; getting rid of them takes time.

You probably know of one or two problem areas in your writing that you could have eliminated but have not done so. Instead, you have “fudged” your writing at the critical points, relying upon half-remembered formulas from past English classes or trying to come up with logical solutions to your writing problems. You may have simply decided that comma rules are not learnable or that you will never understand the difference between the verbs lay and lie. And so you guess, and get the rule wrong a good part of the time. What a shame, when just a little extra work would give you mastery over those few gaps in your understanding and boost your confidence as well.

Instead of continuing with this sort of guesswork and living with the holes in your knowledge, why not face the problem areas now and learn the rules that have heretofore escaped you? What follows is a discussion of those surface features of writing in which errors most commonly occur. You will probably be familiar with most if not all of the rules discussed, but there may well be a few you have not yet mastered. Now is the time to do so.

2.1 Apostrophes

An apostrophe is used to show possession; when you wish to say that something belongs to someone or to another thing, you add either an apostrophe and an s or an apostrophe alone to the
word that represents the owner. When the owner is singular (a single person or thing), the apostrophe precedes an added s:

According to Vice President Moore’s memo, the faculty is not allowed to speak to the media.

The same rule applies if the word showing possession is a plural that does not end in s:

The women’s equity council endorsed the latest draft of the ethics statement.

When the word expressing ownership is a plural ending in s, the apostrophe follows the s:

The new regulation was discussed at the chairs’ conference.

When a word that is singular ends in s, form its possessive in one of two ways:

1. By adding an apostrophe and an s: Socrates’s execution.
2. By adding only an apostrophe: Socrates’ execution.

Remember to be consistent with the style you choose.

There are two ways to form the possessive for two or more nouns:

1. To show joint possession (both nouns owning the same thing or things), the last noun in the series is possessive:
   
   Dr. Barnes and Dr. Reeve’s paper on symbolic logic made little sense to its audience.

2. To indicate that each noun owns an item or items individually, each noun must show possession:

   Plato’s and Xenophon’s accounts of Socrates’ trial took different approaches to the same event.

The importance of the apostrophe is obvious when you consider the difference in meaning between the following two sentences:

Be sure to pick up the dean’s mail on your way to the airport.

Be sure to pick up the deans’ mail on your way to the airport.

In the first of these sentences, you have only one dean to worry about, while in the second, you have at least two!

2.2 Capitalization

When to Capitalize. Here is a brief summary of some hard-to-remember capitalization rules.

RULE 1. You may, if you choose, capitalize the first letter of the first word in a full sentence following a colon. (But remember to use whichever style you choose consistently.)

Correct: Einstein’s position is unmistakable: The sensation of mystical experience is crucial to science.

Also Correct: Einstein’s position is unmistakable: the sensation of mystical experience is crucial to science.

RULE 2. Capitalize proper nouns (nouns naming specific people, places, or things) and proper adjectives (adjectives made from proper nouns). A common noun following the proper adjective is usually not capitalized, nor is a common adjective preceding the proper adjective (such as a, an, or the):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proper nouns</th>
<th>Proper adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Methodist officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>the Iraqi ambassador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>an Aristotelian concept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Proper nouns include

- **Names of famous monuments and buildings**: the Washington Monument, the Empire State Building, Graceland

- **Historical events, certain eras, and certain terms concerning calendar dates**: the Civil War, the Roaring Twenties (but: the sixties), Monday, December, Martin Luther King Day

- **Parts of the country**: North, Southwest, Eastern Seaboard, the West Coast, New England. [Note: When words such as north, south, east, west, northwest are used to designate direction rather than geographical region, they are not capitalized: “We drove east to Boston and then made a tour of the East Coast.”]

- **Words referring to race, ethnicity, religion, sacred books, or nationality**: Islam, Muslim, Caucasian, White (or white), Oriental, Negro, Black (or black), Slavic, Arab, Jewish, Hebrew, Buddhism, Buddhists, Southern Baptists, the Bible, the Koran, the Analects, the Book of Mormon, American, Latino, Hispanic

- **Names of languages**: English, Chinese, Latin, Sanskrit

- **Titles of corporations, institutions, businesses, universities, organizations**: Oracle Systems, the National Endowment of the Arts, Ace Hardware Stores, Fordham University, the Thoreau Society. [Note: Some words once considered proper nouns or adjectives have, over time, become common: french fries, pasteurized milk, arabic numerals, italics, panama hat.]

**RULE 3.** Titles of individuals are capitalized if they precede a proper name; otherwise, titles are usually not capitalized:

- Professor Irwin Corey
- the professor from New York

**When Not to Capitalize.** In general, you do not capitalize nouns when your reference is nonspecific. For example, you would not capitalize the phrase the senator, but you would capitalize Senator Smith. The second reference is as much a title as it is a term of identification, while the first reference is a mere identifier. Likewise, there is a difference in degree of specificity between the phrase the state treasury and the Texas State Treasury.

The meaning of a term may change somewhat depending on capitalization. What, for example, might be the difference between a Republican and a republican? When capitalized, the word refers to a member of a specific political party; when not capitalized, the word refers to someone who believes in the representative form of democratic government that limits majority rule with a bill of rights and a constitution.

Capitalization depends to some extent on the context of your writing. For example, if you are writing a history of philosophy paper for the Kant Society, you may capitalize words and phrases—the Philosopher of Königsberg—that would not be capitalized in a paper written for an undergraduate class. Likewise, in some contexts it is not unusual to see titles of certain powerful officials capitalized even when not accompanying a proper noun:

The Philosopher was the term Thomas Aquinas used when referring to Aristotle.

Another way that context affects capitalization is when someone capitalizes, or does not capitalize, to make a political or cultural statement. The African American feminist bell hooks chooses not to capitalize her name. You should respect her wishes.

**2.3 Colons**

We all know certain uses for the colon. A colon can, for example, separate the parts of a statement of time (4:25 AM), separate chapter and verse in a biblical quotation (Psalms 3:16), and close the salutation of a business letter (Dear Mr. Limbaugh:). But there are other uses for the colon that writers sometimes don’t quite learn, yet that can add an extra degree of flexibility to sentence structure. The colon can introduce into a sentence certain kinds of material, such as a list, a quotation, or a restatement or description of material mentioned earlier:

- The committee’s research proposal promised to do three things: (1) establish the extent of the problem, (2) examine several possible solutions, and (3) estimate the cost of each solution.
• In his speech, the chair challenged us with these words: “How will your research foster
civic and service learning?”
• Ahead of us, according to the provost, lay the biggest job of all: convincing our students
and their parents of the benefits of online courses.

2.4 Commas

The comma is perhaps the most troublesome of all marks of punctuation, no doubt because so
many variables govern its use, such as sentence length, rhetorical emphasis, or changing notions
of style. The most common problems are outlined below.

The Comma Splice. A comma splice is the joining of two complete sentences by only
a comma, which is an inadequate break between the two sentences:

The argument from ignorance is a common informal fallacy, you must never assume a
claim is true simply because it has not been proven false.

One foolproof way to check your paper for comma splices is to read carefully the struc-
tures on both sides of each comma. If you find a complete sentence on each side, and if the
sentence following the comma does not begin with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor,
or, so, yet), then you have found a comma splice.

Simply reading the draft through to try to “hear” the comma splices may not work,
since the rhetorical features of your prose—its “movement”—may make it hard to detect this
kind of sentence completeness error. There are five commonly used ways to correct comma
splices:

1. Place a period between the two independent clauses.
2. Place a comma and a coordinating connective (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) between the
sentences.
3. Place a semicolon between the independent clauses.
4. Rewrite the two clauses of the comma splice as one independent clause.
5. Change one of the two independent clauses into a dependent clause by beginning it with a
subordinating word (for example, although, after, as, because, before, if, though, unless,
when, which, where), which prevents the clause from being able to stand on its own as a
complete sentence.

INCORRECT: Much of Kierkegaard’s writing was not translated until the Twentieth Cen-
tury, his influence was limited until well after his death.

CORRECT: Because much of Kierkegaard’s writing was not translated until the Twenti-
eth Century, his influence was limited until well after his death.

Commas in a Compound Sentence. A compound sentence is composed of two or
more independent clauses—two complete sentences. When these two clauses are joined by a
coordinating conjunction, the conjunction should be preceded by a comma to signal the reader
that another independent clause follows. (This is method two for fixing a comma splice described
above.) When the comma is missing, the reader does not expect to find the second half of a com-
 pound sentence and may be distracted from the text.

As the following examples indicate, the missing comma is especially a problem in longer
sentences or in sentences in which other coordinating conjunctions appear. Notice how the
comma sorts out the two main parts of the compound sentence, eliminating confusion:

WITHOUT THE COMMA: The president promised to visit the hospital and investigate the
problem and then he called the press conference to a close.

WITH THE COMMA: The president promised to visit the hospital and investigate the
problem, and then he called the press conference to a close.

WITHOUT THE COMMA: The water board can neither make policy nor enforce it nor can
its members serve on auxiliary water committees.

WITH THE COMMA: The water board can neither make policy nor enforce it, nor can
its members serve on auxiliary water committees.
An exception to this rule arises in shorter sentences, where the comma may not be necessary to make the meaning clear. However, it is never wrong to place a comma between the independent clauses and before the conjunction. If you are the least bit unsure of your audience’s notions about what makes for “proper” grammar, it is a good idea to take the conservative approach and use the comma.

**Commas in a Series.** A series is any two or more items of a similar nature that appear consecutively in a sentence. The items may be individual words, phrases, or clauses. In a series of three or more items, the items are separated by commas.

- *The professor, her students, and the community at large* were shocked by the guest speaker’s presumption.
- Dr. Courtney expressed contempt for Professor Schnabel’s essay, saying it *fails to cite its sources coherently, never gives historical examples their times and dates, and phrases its thesis poorly.*

The final comma, the one before the *and*, is sometimes left out, especially in newspaper writing. This practice, however, can make for confusion, especially in longer, complicated sentences like the second example above. Without a final comma, the division between the last two items in a series may not be clear. This is the sort of ambiguous structure that can cause a reader to backtrack and lose concentration. You can avoid such confusion by always using that final comma.

**Commas with Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Elements.** A nonrestrictive element is part of a sentence—a word, phrase, or clause—that adds information about another element in the sentence without restricting or limiting the meaning of that element. While the information it carries may be useful, the nonrestrictive element is not needed in order for the sentence to make sense. To signal the inessential nature of the nonrestrictive element, we set it off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

Failure to use commas to indicate the nonrestrictive nature of an element can cause confusion. See, for example, how the presence or absence of commas affects our understanding of the following sentence:

The dean was talking with the philosopher, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature last year.

The dean was talking with the philosopher who won the Nobel Prize for Literature last year.

Can you see that the comma changes the meaning of the sentence? In the first version of the sentence, the comma makes the information that follows it incidental: The dean might not even know the philosopher had won the prize. In the second version of the sentence, the information following the word *philosopher* is important to the sense of the sentence. It’s suggestive; it leaves us with the expectation that we will be told more about the prize or that the dean has purposely engaged this philosopher in conversation. Here the lack of a comma has transformed the material following *philosopher* into a restrictive element, meaning an element necessary to our understanding of the sentence.

Be sure that in your paper you make a clear distinction between nonrestrictive and restrictive elements by setting off the nonrestrictive elements with commas; otherwise, you will create frustrated expectations in your readers.

### 2.5 Fused (Run-on) Sentences

A fused sentence is one in which two or more independent clauses (passages that can stand as complete sentences) have been run together without the aid of any suitable connecting word, phrase, or punctuation. There are several ways to correct a fused sentence:

**Incorrect:** The philosophers were exhausted they had debated for two hours.

**Corrected:** The philosophers were exhausted. They had debated for two hours. [The linked independent clauses have been separated into two sentences.]

**Corrected:** The philosophers were exhausted; they had debated for two hours. [A semicolon marks the break between the two clauses.]
The philosophers were exhausted, having debated for two hours. [The second independent clause has been rephrased as a dependent clause.]

Our policy analysis impressed the committee it also convinced them to reconsider their action.

Our policy analysis impressed the committee and also convinced them to reconsider their action. [The second clause has been rephrased as part of the first clause.]

Our policy analysis impressed the committee, and it also convinced them to reconsider their action. [The two clauses have been separated by a comma and a coordinating word.]

2.6 Misplaced (Dangling) Modifiers

A modifier is a word or group of words used to describe—to “modify” our understanding of—another word in the sentence. A misplaced modifier, sometimes called a dangling modifier, appears either at the beginning or ending of a sentence and seems to be describing some word other than the one the writer obviously intended. The modifier therefore “dangles,” disconnected from its intended meaning. It is often hard for the writer to spot a dangling modifier, but readers can—and will—find them, and the result can be disastrous for the sentence, as the following examples demonstrate:

- Incorrect: Worried at the cost of the program, sections of the bill were trimmed in committee.
- Corrected: Worried at the cost of the program, the committee trimmed sections of the bill.
- Corrected: The committee trimmed sections of the bill because they were worried about the cost of the program.

- Incorrect: To lobby for prison reform, a lot of effort went into the television ads.
- Corrected: The lobby group put a lot of effort into the television ads advocating prison reform. (Often, though not always, the cause of a dangling modifier is the fact that the actor in the sentence is either distanced from the modifier or obliterated by the passive voice verb. It is a good idea to avoid passive voice unless you have a specific reason for using it.)

One way to check for dangling modifiers is to examine all modifiers at the beginnings or endings of your sentences. Look especially for to be phrases (to lobby) or for words ending in -ing or -ed at the start of the modifier. Then check to see if the modified word is close enough to the phrase to be properly connected.

2.7 Parallelism

Series of two or more words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence should be structured in the same grammatical way. Parallel structures can add power and balance to your writing by creating a strong rhetorical rhythm. Here is a famous example of parallelism from the U.S. Constitution. (The capitalization, preserved from the original document, follows eighteenth-century custom. Parallel structures have been italicized.)

Preamble to the Constitution

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, Establish Justice, insure Domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

There are actually two series in this sentence: the first composed of six phrases that each complete the infinitive phrase beginning with the word to (to form, [to] Establish, [to] insure, [to] provide, [to] promote, [to] secure), and the second consisting of two verbs (ordain and establish). These parallel series appeal to our love of balance, of pattern, and give an authoritative tone to
the sentence. The writer, we feel, has thought long and carefully about the matter at hand and has taken firm control of it.

Because we find a special satisfaction in balanced structures, we are more likely to remember ideas phrased in parallelisms than in less highly ordered language. For this reason, as well as for the sense of authority and control that they suggest, parallel structures are common in philosophical utterances.

If the parallelism of a passage is not carefully maintained, the writing can seem sloppy and out of balance. Scan your writing to make sure that all series and lists have parallel structure. The following examples show how to correct faulty parallelism:

**INCORRECT:** Governor Brown promises not only to reform the police department, but also the giving of raises to all state employees. [Connective structures such as *not only* . . . *but also* and *both* . . . *and* introduce elements that should be parallel.]

**CORRECTED:** Governor Brown promises not only to reform the police department but also to give raises to all state employees.

**INCORRECT:** The cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost to renovate the apartment block.

**CORRECTED:** The cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of renovating the apartment block.

**INCORRECT:** Here are the items on the union’s agenda: (1) to discuss the increase in state income tax, (2) to revise the wording on three year contracts, (3) a vote on the elimination of merit increases.

**CORRECTED:** Here are the items on the union’s agenda: (1) to discuss the increase in state income tax, (2) to revise the wording on three year contracts, (3) to vote on the elimination of merit increases.

### 2.8 Pronoun Errors

**Its versus It’s.** Do not make the mistake of trying to form the possessive of *it* in the same way that you form the possessive of most nouns. The pronoun *it* shows possession by simply adding an *s*:

> The prosecuting attorney argued the case on its merits.

The word *it’s* is a contraction, meaning *it is*:

> It’s the most expensive program ever launched by the council.

What makes the *it is/it’s* rule so confusing is that most nouns form the singular possessive by adding an apostrophe and an *s*.

When proofreading, any time you come to the word *it’s*, substitute the phrase *it is* while you read. If the phrase makes sense, it’s in the correct form.

**Vague Pronoun References.** Pronouns are words that stand in place of nouns or other pronouns that have already been mentioned in your writing. The most common pronouns include *he, she, it, they, them, those, which, who*. You must make sure that each pronoun reference is clear—in other words, that there is no confusion about the reference. The word that the pronoun replaces is called its antecedent. To check the accuracy of your pronoun references, ask yourself, *To what does the pronoun refer?* Then answer the question carefully, making sure that there is not more than one possible antecedent.

Consider the following example:

Several special interest groups decided to defeat the new regulation governing the forwarding of electronic mail. This became the turning point of the government’s reform campaign.

> To what does the word *This* refer? The immediate answer seems to be the words *new regulation* toward the end of the previous sentence. It is more likely the writer was referring to the attempt of the special interest groups to defeat the bill, but there is no word in the first sentence
that refers specifically to this action. The reference is unclear. One way to clarify the reference is to change the beginning of the second sentence:

Several special interest groups decided to defeat the new regulation governing the forwarding of electronic mail. Their attack on the bill became the turning point of the government’s reform campaign.

**Pronoun Agreement.** Remember that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in both gender and number:

Crito said that *he* appreciated Socrates’ willingness to explain his decision not to flee from Athens.

The following words, however, can become troublesome antecedents. They may look like plural pronouns but are actually singular: *everybody, nobody, everyone, no one, somebody, each, someone, either, anyone*. A pronoun referring to one of these words in a sentence must be singular too:

**INCORRECT:** Each of the women in the support group brought *their* children.

**CORRECT:** Each of the women in the support group brought *her* children.

**INCORRECT:** Has everybody received *their* ballot?

**CORRECT:** Has everybody received *his or her* ballot? [The two gender-specific pronouns are used to avoid sexist language.]

**CORRECT:** Have *all* the delegates received *their* ballots? [The singular antecedent has been changed to a plural one.]

**Shift in Person.** It is important to avoid shifting unnecessarily among first person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third person (*she, he, it, they*). Such shifts can cause confusion.

**INCORRECT:** Most people [third person] who read philosophy find that if *you* [second person] read only a few pages at a time, *you* [second person] will comprehend more than if *you* [second person] read one hundred pages the night before a test.

**CORRECT:** Most people who read philosophy find that if they read only a few pages at a time, they will comprehend more than if they read one hundred pages the night before a test.

### 2.9 Quotation Marks

It can be difficult to remember when to use quotation marks and where they go in relation to other marks of punctuation. When faced with a gap in their knowledge of the rules, unpracticed writers often try to rely on logic rather than referring to a rule book. But the rules governing quotation marks do not always seem logical. The only way to make sure of your use of quotation marks is to memorize the rules.

**When to Use Quotation Marks.** Use quotation marks to enclose direct quotations that are not longer than four typed lines:

Near the end of the dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates tells Euthyphro, “If you had not certainly known the nature of piety and impiety, I am confident that you would never, on behalf of a servant, have charged your aged father with murder.”

Longer quotes are placed in a block of double-spaced indented prose—without quotation marks:

Moreover, a growing number of theorists who work for various government and civilian agencies have begun to refute Blankenship’s findings and even sound a note of alarm, if not of contempt, as this typical rejoinder indicates:

To argue against gun control shows a lack of sensitivity to the recent events in Newton and the hardships endured by the families of those students. But even worse is the gall demonstrated in advocating a position any reasonable person would abandon given the ease with which firearms are acquired in the United States. The rights of personal property and self defense are not absolutes to be maintained against all government regulation. (Graybosch, 64)
Use single quotation marks to set off quotations within quotations:

“I intend,” said the philosopher, “to use in my article a line from Hamsun’s poem ‘Island Off the Coast.’” [Note: When the interior quote occurs at the end of the sentence, both single and double quotation marks are placed outside the period.]

Use quotation marks to set off the following kinds of titles:

- Titles of short stories
- Titles of articles or essays
- Titles of songs
- Episodes of television or radio shows

Use quotation marks to convey irony:

The “neutral” parties covertly contributed funds to the zoning commission.

Use quotation marks to set off a technical term:

To “equivocate” is to use a term, consciously or unconsciously, with at least two different meanings that are essential to the persuasive power of an argument. [Note: Once the term is defined, it is not placed in quotation marks again.]

**Quotation Marks in Relation to Other Punctuation.** Always place commas and periods inside closing quotation marks:

“My fellow Americans,” said the president, “we are on a peace mission in Serbia.”

Place colons and semicolons outside closing quotation marks:

In his speech on Afghanistan, the president warned against “mission creep”; he was referring to being drawn into a civil war between hostile factions of the population.

There are several victims of the government’s campaign to “Turn Back the Clock”: the homeless, the elderly, and the mentally impaired.

Place question marks, exclamation points, and dashes inside or outside closing quotation marks depending upon context. If the punctuation is part of the quotation, it goes inside the quotation mark:

“When will free enterprise advocates recognize that government built the Internet?” asked the president’s spokesperson.

The demonstrators shouted, “More free condoms!” and “No more general education requirements at the university!”

If the punctuation is not part of the quotation, it goes outside the quotation mark:

Which philosopher said, “Always act so that the maxim of your action can become a universal law”? [Note: Although the quote was a complete sentence, you do not place a period after it. There can only be one piece of “terminal” punctuation (punctuation that ends a sentence).]

### 2.10 Semicolons

The semicolon is another little used punctuation mark that is worth incorporating into your writing strategy because of its many potential applications. A semicolon can be used to correct a comma splice:

**Incorrect:** Socrates faced death with equanimity, his arguments had convinced his disciples.

**Correct:** Socrates faced death with equanimity; his arguments had convinced his disciples.
Write Well

**Corrected:** Socrates faced death with equanimity; his arguments had convinced his disciples.

**Incorrect:** Several guests at the fundraiser had lost their invitations, however, we were able to seat them, anyway.

**Corrected:** Several guests at the fundraiser had lost their invitations; however, we were able to seat them, anyway.

Conjunctive adverbs like however, therefore, and thus are not coordinating words (such as, and, but, or, for, so, yet) and cannot be used with a comma to link independent clauses. If the second independent clause begins with a however, it must be preceded by either a period or a semicolon.

As you can see from the second example above, connecting the two independent clauses with a semicolon instead of a period strengthens the relationship between the clauses.

Use semicolons to separate items in a series when the series items themselves contain commas. Avoid misusing semicolons. For example, use a comma, not a semicolon, to separate an independent clause from a dependent clause:

**Incorrect:** Students from the college volunteered to answer phones during the pledge drive; which was set up to generate money for the new library.

**Corrected:** Students from the college volunteered to answer phones during the pledge drive, which was set up to generate money for the new library.

Although they are useful, too many semicolons in your writing can distract your reader’s attention. Avoid monotony by using semicolons sparingly.

### 2.11 Sentence Fragments

A fragment is an incomplete part of a sentence that is punctuated and capitalized as if it were an entire sentence. It is an especially disruptive error, because it obscures the connections that the words of a sentence must make in order to complete the reader’s understanding.

Students sometimes write fragments because they are concerned that a particular sentence is growing too long and needs to be shortened. Remember that cutting the length of a sentence merely by adding a period somewhere along its length often creates a fragment. When checking your writing for fragments, it is essential that you read each sentence carefully to determine whether it has (1) a complete subject and a verb, and (2) a subordinating word before the subject and verb, which makes the construction a subordinate clause rather than a complete sentence.

Some fragments lack a verb:

**Incorrect:** The chairperson of our department, having received a letter from the newspaper editor. [Note: The word having, which resembles a verb, is here being used as a present participle introducing a participial phrase. Watch out for words that look like verbs but are being used in another way.]

**Corrected:** The chairperson of our department received a letter from the newspaper editor.

Some fragments lack a subject. They are simply continuations of a sentence:

**Incorrect:** Our study shows that there is broad support for improvement in the health care system. And in the unemployment system.

**Corrected:** Our study shows that there is broad support for improvement in the health care system and in the unemployment system.

Some fragments are subordinate clauses:

**Incorrect:** After the latest edition of the newspaper came out. [This clause has the two major components of a complete sentence: a subject (edition) and a verb (came). Indeed, if the first word (After) were deleted, the clause would be a complete sentence. But that first word is a subordinating word, which acts to prevent the following clause from standing on its own as a complete segment.]

**Corrected:** After the latest edition of the newspaper came out.
Write Well

sentence. Watch out for this kind of construction. It is called a subordinate clause, and it is not a sentence.]

**Corrected:** After the latest edition of the newspaper came out, the chancellor’s press secretary was overwhelmed with phone calls. [A common method of correcting a subordinate clause that has been punctuated as a complete sentence is to connect it to the complete sentence to which its meaning is most closely connected.]

**Incorrect:** Several congressmen asked for copies of the feminist philosopher’s position paper. Because it called for the banning of pornography.

### 2.12 Spelling

All of us have problems spelling certain words that we have not yet committed to memory. But most writers are not as bad at spelling as they believe themselves to be. An individual usually finds only a handful of words troubling. It is important to be as sensitive as possible to your own particular spelling problems—and to keep a dictionary handy. There is no excuse for failing to check spelling. But reread your paper after running spell check, or your paper about historical religion might instead address hysterical religion.

**Commonly Confused Words.**

| accept/except | envelop/envelope | quiet/quite |
| advice/advise | every day/everyday | rain/reign/rein |
| affect/effect | fair/fare | raise/raze |
| aisle/isle | formally/formerly | reality/realty |
| allusion/illusion | forth/fourth | respectfully/respectively |
| an/and | hear/here | reverend/reverent |
| angel/angle | heard/herd | right/rite/write |
| apart/a part | hole/whole | road/rode |
| ascent/assent | human/humane | scene/seen |
| bare/bear | its/it’s | sense/since |
| brake/break | know/no | stationary/stationery |
| breath/breathe | later/latter | straight/straight |
| buy/by | lay/lie | taught/taut |
| capital/capitol | lead/led | than/then |
| choose/chose | lessen/lesson | their/there/they’re |
| cite/sight/site | loose/lose | threw/through |
| complement/compliment | may be/maybe | too/too/two |
| conscience/conscious | miner/minor | track/tract |
| corps/corpse | moral/morale | waist/waste |
| council/counsel | of/off | waive/wave |
| dairy/diary | passed/past | weak/week |
| descent/dissent | patience/patients | weather/whether |
| desert/dessert | peace/piece | were/where |
| device/devote | personal/personnel | which/witch |
| die/dye | plain/plane | whose/who’s |
| dominant/dominate | precede/proceed | your/you’re |
| elicit/illicit | presence/presents |  |
| eminent/immanent/imminent | principal/principle |  |
**Commonly Misspelled Words.**

| acceptable | gauge | peaceable |
| accessible | guaranteed | performance |
| accommodate | guard | pertain |
| accompany | harass | practical |
| accustomed | hero | preparation |
| acquire | heroes | probably |
| against | humorous | process |
| annihilate | hurried | professor |
| apparent | hurriedly | prominent |
| arguing | hypocrite | pronunciation |
| argument | ideally | psychology |
| authentic | immediately | publicly |
| before | immense | pursue |
| begin | incredible | pursuing |
| beginning | innocuous | questionnaire |
| believe | intercede | realize |
| benefited | interrupt | receipt |
| bulletin | irrelevant | received |
| business | irresistible | recession |
| cannot | irritate | recommend |
| category | knowledge | referring |
| committee | license | religious |
| condemn | likelihood | remembrance |
| courteous | maintenance | reminisce |
| definitely | manageable | repetition |
| dependent | meanness | representative |
| desperate | mischievous | rhythm |
| develop | missile | ridiculous |
| different | necessary | roommate |
| disappear | nevertheless | satellite |
| disappoint | no one | scarcity |
| easily | noticeable | scenery |
| efficient | noticing | science |
| environment | nuisance | secede |
| equipped | occasion | secession |
| exceed | occasionally | secretary |
| exercise | occurred | senseless |
| existence | occurrences | separate |
| experience | omission | sergeant |
| fascinate | omit | shining |
| finally | opinion | significant |
| foresee | opponent | sincerely |
| forty | parallel | skiing |
| fulfill | parole | stubbornness |
2.13 Technical and Ordinary Usage of Philosophical Terms

Unlike scientists, philosophers tend to adopt words from ordinary language to express technical meanings rather than introduce new terminology. The following is a list of the most problematic terms. Pay special attention to the ways in which philosophers use them.

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