Grammar Tips, Part II: Notes from the trenches

Don't space out: use one space after a period.

Once upon a time, in the long-ago days of the typewriter, fonts were monospaced, meaning that each character occupied the same amount of space—and each letter was the same width. Because of this, two spaces were required after a period to create a visual break between sentences. With the advent of computers, however, came proportional fonts, meaning that an "l," for example, is narrower than a "w." As such, only one space is now needed after a period.

Old style, monospaced font, Courier (two spaces after a period):

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Our students work closely with our admission counselors.  Together,
they find the college that's the right fit for each student.
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Current/new style, proportional font, Arial (one space after a period):

Our students work closely with our admission counselors. Together, they find the college that's the right fit for each student.

Both *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *AP Stylebook* recommend the use of one space after a period.

What's the deal with dashes? Hyphen, en and em.

While dashes may seem like a small thing—some smaller than others—they actually make a huge difference, so you want to be sure you're using them correctly. Here's the lowdown on the three different types of dashes:

- Hyphen (-): (short in length) Used for the hyphenation of words, e.g., college-level, co-worker, in-depth. [Use the keyboard key for this.]
- En Dash (–): (medium in length) Used to convey a range, particularly for numbers, e.g., 3PM–5PM, grades K–12. [PC keyboard: ALT + 0150. Mac keyboard: Option + dash key.]
- Em Dash (—): (long in length) Used to convey a pause in thought, a parenthetical statement or an afterthought. [PC keyboard: ALT + 0151. Mac keyboard: Shift + Option + dash key. Microsoft Word AutoCorrect: two hyphens, no spaces (like--this) will convert to em (like—this).]

Example:

Students in grades 9–12 experience the long-lasting effects of our academic program for years to come—and succeed in all future endeavors.

Be active about passive voice.

You've probably heard teachers or editors say it a hundred times: get rid of passive voice. But what does that mean, exactly? And how do you know if you're using it? To understand passive voice, you must also have a handle on active voice. The two are explained below.

Active voice: When you write in active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action.

Example:

The students choose the right colleges. [In this sentence, the students are the subject, and they perform the action. 'The right colleges' are the objects that the students act upon].

Grammar Tips, Part II (continued)

Passive voice: When you write in passive voice, rather than performing the action, the subject is acted upon.

Example:
The right colleges are chosen by students. [In this sentence, 'the right colleges' become the subject of the sentence, rather than the students, as it's the colleges that 'are chosen'—the fact that students make the choice is a mere afterthought.]

How to spot passive voice: In many cases, sentences written in passive voice are wordier, indirect and/or more vague. Passive voice can often include versions of the "to be" verb, followed by a more descriptive verb, e.g., colleges are chosen, the meeting was run, the team is led.

In some instances, it's okay to use passive voice—after all, you don't want all of your sentences to sound, or read, the same. But if you do use it, do so sparingly, and with intent. In other words, if you're going to be passive, be active about it.

Less really is more. No, really.

When you glance at direct mail, a website, an admissions brochure or a development campaign piece, how much of the copy do you actually read? Be honest. The headlines? The first paragraph? A smattering of sentences here and there?

This should go without saying, but when you write a marketing piece, no matter the form, you must think like a reader. This is easier said than done, of course. When it's your campaign or event that you're marketing, it's tempting to include as much information as possible on a single piece. Unfortunately, too much information—too many words—can be a turn-off.

So, in short, keep it short. Edit your writing. Remove repetitive words and sentences. Ask someone else in your department to read over it and offer suggestions. Take advantage of your web presence and refer people to your site for more information. If, say, you've hired a copywriter, and he/she sends you copy that you choose to edit, maintain the same word count.

Example:

Wordy:
We need your support. Donor support of this campaign is extremely vital. It provides key assistance to the students of today, wherever they need it, creates a wonderful feeling of community on our campus and among our alumni out in the world, and increases the ranking of our college on a national scale.

Not wordy:
Your support provides direct assistance to our students, builds community and improves our national standing. Visit www.ourcollege.edu for more information.