

COFFEE + CRUMBS

EDITING GUIDE



EDITING: LEARNING TO LOVE IT

When I was in 10th grade, we had to read *A Separate Peace*. I still remember the story, but that's largely due to what happened during the final exam on the book. At the top of our test, we had to write the title, and our teacher gave an automatic C to anyone who didn't spell "separate" correctly.

Nearly half the class spelled it "seperate," and more than one student ended up failing the exam because of missing just a couple questions in addition to that one small (yet large) spelling mistake. It was my first memorable lesson that grammar—proper spelling, punctuation, and syntax—matters.

Good grammar is a lot like traffic rules. You sort of take it for granted, until you drive somewhere without any laws. Most everything we read has accurate spelling and grammar and punctuation. There's a lot to say for poetic devices and figurative language and beautiful images, but a full page of beautiful imagery without a lick of punctuation won't actually be that beautiful.

Thanks to the internet, you have many wonderful grammar resources at your fingertips. I know that some people (most people?) do not love grammar, mechanics, or even spelling. However, as writers, our job is to effectively tell a story and convey a message. Grammar provides the framework for us to accomplish this task. If our readers are confused because of our comma splices or our misplaced semicolons, they aren't engaged in the depth or emotion of the story. Good grammar and excellent punctuation allow for readers to seamlessly enter our written world, and our stories are better received as a result.

Now, as a writer, you do have some creative freedoms to play around with form and structure; however, it is important to demonstrate to your readers (and your editor) that you know how to use proper grammar before you strategically break the rules.

Have you ever had a terrifying Uber or taxi cab





experience? I have, and I spend the entire ride pressing my right foot down on an imaginary brake and throwing the mom-arm over my husband. You see, when a driver is changing lanes unexpectedly, passing dangerously, and stopping abruptly, the passengers think the driver is inept, and they feel scared. However, if the driver was following all conventional traffic rules, and then swerved intentionally to avoid hitting a cat, for example, the passengers would appreciate the brief deviation from the “rules” and actually feel safer.

The same goes for rules of writing. Show your readers that you know how to drive, and then they’ll stay with you when you choose to strategically swerve.

FAVORITE RESOURCES

[Grammar Girl Website & Podcasts](#)
[The Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#)
[6 Common Punctuation Mistakes That Drive Us Crazy](#)
[Pocket Style Manual](#)
[Strunk & White’s Elements of Style](#)

QUICK AND DIRTY GRAMMAR TIPS

PUNCTUATION

Unless a publication specifically requests otherwise, always single-space after punctuation. Do not double space. *Ever*: Also, punctuation always goes inside the quotation marks.

Example:

I said, "I don't think I can go to the mall." **RIGHT**
I said, "I don't think I can go to the mall". **WRONG**

PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE VERBS

Simply speaking, a sentence with an active verb means that the subject is doing the action.

Example: **The dog bit the boy.** (*Who did the biting? The dog.*)

With passive verbs, the subject has the action done TO them.

Example: **The boy was bitten by the dog.** (*The boy didn't do the biting, he was the recipient.*)

Use as many active verbs as you can when writing. Your prose will read more cleanly and with less ambiguity.

It's especially easy to slip into passive voice when you're writing in past tense.

Example: **I was sitting on the couch while the baby was napping in his crib and the toddler was playing with blocks on the floor.** *PASSIVE*

Example: **I sat on the couch while the baby napped and the toddler played with blocks on the floor.** *ACTIVE*

An easy way to remember and correct this is to choose verbs that end in -ed rather than -ing. While not a hard-and-fast rule, this will generally ensure your verb usage remains active, rather than passive.



WHEN TO USE A COMMA

- In a list: **The American flag is red, white, and blue.**
- Between coordinate adjectives that can be flipped and can be joined by *and*: **Sam is a small, white dog.**
- Between two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction: **Jane played in the yard, and Thomas stayed inside.**
- In sentences that start with subordinating conjunctions: **Although I was tired, I stayed awake all night.**
- To emphasize contrast: **Mary was hungry, despite eating lunch an hour ago.**
- With conditional sentences starting with *if* clauses: **If you have any questions, let me know.**
- With nonessential appositives: **Amy's sister, Cynthia, came for a visit.**
- With nonessential clauses and phrases: **Diamonds, which are expensive, are often used in wedding rings.**
- After interjections: **Oh, you're right after all.**
- In a direct address: **Emily, please pay attention.**
- With dates: **They got married on March 14, 2009, on the beach.**
- In numbers more than 999: **2,304**
- With cities and states: **They traveled to Aspen, Colorado, to go skiing.**
- After *e.g.* or *i.e.*: **She doesn't like card games, e.g., rummy or poker.**
- To introduce dialogue: **John said, "I'm headed to bed."**

AVOID COMMON MISTAKES

COMMONLY MISSPELLED WORDS

Yes, a quick run of Spell Check will catch every one of these, but here are some of the most commonly misspelled words (even for adults).

Judgment (not Judgement)

Definitely (not Definatly)

Regardless (not Irregardless)

Disappoint (not Dissappoint)

COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS

"Words are hard," is what my five-year-old told me when he was learning to read, and he wasn't lying. Here are a few of the most commonly mixed up words. Know the definitions of each and make sure you're using them in the right context, especially metaphorically.

Reign/Rein/Rain

Reigning is something a king or queen does.

Reins are the straps you use to control a horse.

Rain is the wet stuff that falls from the sky.

Note: it's free *rein* not free *reign*.

Thrown/Throne

Thrown: Past participle of throw.

Throne: What a king/queen sits on.

There/Their/They're

There: Location (example: Where do they live? Over there, by the river.)

Their: Possessive (example: Whose house are we going to? Theirs.)

They're: A contraction for they are.

Peek/Peak/Pique

Peek: To take a quick look at. (example: She took a peek at the baby.)

Peak: The pinnacle or top of something. (example: Her career hasn't reached its peak yet.)

Pique: To arouse or draw attention to (example: Her comment piqued my interest.)

Were/We're

Were: past tense of are. (example: We were friends for a long time.)

We're: A contraction for we are. (example: We're going to a party tonight.)

Then/Than

Then is mainly an adverb, often used to situate actions in time. For example, you wake up in the morning and then have breakfast.

Than is a conjunction used mainly in making comparisons—e.g., “My breakfast is better than yours.”

Affect/Effect

Affect is as a verb meaning to influence something and effect is the something that was influenced. Effect can be a verb as well, but most of the time you need to use affect.

Further/Farther

Use “farther” for physical distance and “further” for metaphorical, or figurative, distance.



IT'S MORE THAN JUST GRAMMAR

While proper spelling and punctuation are critical to a well-written essay, it's not enough to just run Spell Check and call your editing done. That's really just the first step in the process.

Now it's time to read your essay out loud. It feels a little silly at first, but it's a foolproof way of catching mistakes that you missed on your first pass at editing.

Did you use the word "excited" three times in the same paragraph? Did you stumble over a transition? Realize your dialogue comes across stilted and clunky? Hearing your words instead of just reading them is one of the easiest ways to home in (yep, it's *home* not *hone*) on exactly what needs polishing in the next round of edits.

FIND AND REPLACE: YOUR NEW BFF

The Find and Replace tool in Google docs and Microsoft Word is a quick way to identify and correct your writing Achilles heel(s). Not sure what your weaknesses are? Try reading your work out loud, and chances are you'll see at least one of the items below popping up with regularity.

Adverbs: Is everyone talking loudly, running quickly, and thinking slowly? Cut the modifiers and adjust your narrative. If the wind is whipping through your hair, sweat beading on your brow and an ache developing in your side, I know you're running quickly. *Find and Replace tip: Search for -ly.*

Know Your Go-To Phrases: "The truth is," "And yet," "To be honest" ... most people have a phrase that crops up frequently when they're speaking, which is fine. You want to edit it out of your writing though. *Find and replace tip: Search for the phrases you tend to overuse and remove them all.*

Sentences Beginning with And or But: Yes, your 7th grade English teacher was wrong, and you can technically start a sentence with a conjunction. However, it's something that should be used sparingly and for emphasis. Think: two or three PER ESSAY. Otherwise, it reads very choppy and poorly edited. *Find and replace tip: Search for . And or . But (including the period and space before) so you don't end up sifting through every conjunction in your essay.*

That: Most of the time, you don't need the word "that."

Example: The doctor told her that she would be fine.

The doctor told her she would be fine.

The second sentence reads more cleanly than the first one. *Find and replace tip: Search for that and make sure each one is absolutely necessary. If not, delete it.*

It's also a good idea to proof for starting too many sentences with "I" language and telling instead of showing (don't tell me "It was a hard year," SHOW me it was). When you've made all the edits you can, it's time for the final step: sending it to a trusted friend for feedback.

VARY YOUR SENTENCE STRUCTURE (AN ILLUSTRATION)

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

- Gary Provost