

The Quick 'n' Dirty Handbook for Writers



By Pam McLagan and Jan Madraso

Introduction

Most Americans learn spoken English at their mothers' knees. And then they learn written English when they go to school. For a number of years, many schools focused on "expression" and paid scant attention to writing conventions. But the academic and business worlds demand written prose with few, if any, mechanical errors.

The pages of this little book represent problem areas for many writers of English. In this expanded and revised version, you'll find not only simplified guidelines for correct written prose, but also computer and conventional proofreading tips to help you put your best writing forward!

Pam McLagan and Jan Madraso

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Spelling

“I’m a pathological speller!” someone once complained. English spelling can be tricky, but most of us manage to learn other tricky skills and to do them well. Why not spelling? If you have spelling (or typing) problems, try one of these tips.

COMPUTER TIP: Use the spell-check function on your computer. But remember that the computer won’t recognize two as a misspelling if you’ve typed tow!

PROOFREADING TIP: Read your work backwards— word by word. You will have to go slowly, so you are likely to pick up misspelled words

Many writers have trouble with
 capitalization
 apostrophes
 homophones/ homonyms/ sound alike

Capitalization

In Standard Written English, we capitalize

1. Names of particular

People:	George Washington Susan Hardwick, M.D. Budi Hartono
Places:	Mount Hood Pacific Boulevard Crater Lake the Middle East/ the North
Historic events:	the Six Day War the Reformation
Organizations:	Crescent Valley High School St. Andrew Lutheran Church the Elks

Academic courses: Spanish (language)
Math 101/ Business 204
(but not my math class)

3

Religions, deity, race, nationalities:
Catholic/ Buddhist/ Islam
Almighty God/ Allah
Caucasian
American/ French

Days, months, holidays:
Wednesday
July
Yom Kippur/ Christmas
(but not spring, winter)

2. The pronoun I

3. The first word in a sentence.
The little boys rode their bikes.

4. The first word in a dialogue.
"When will we go to Hawaii?" asked Jan.
Joe responded, "Probably next year."

5. Titles of literary and art works.
The Nine Tailors (book)
Hamlet (play)
"The Road Not Taken" (poem)
"I Wanna Hold Your Hand" (song)
the Potato Eaters (painting)

Note that book, play, and movie titles are generally italicized (or underlined when hand written), and poems, songs, short stories, and articles have quotation marks around them.

Apostrophes are used in English spelling to indicate that something has been left out. We use them in contractions to show that letters have been left out and in possessives to show that whole words have been left out.

1. Contractions are shortened forms of words used in everyday speech. Normally, contractions are not used in semi-formal or formal academic or business writing. However, since **contractions** are part of our speech, we need to know how to spell them correctly. [Note: the apostrophe is placed where the letter(s) is left out.]

can not	can't
should not	shouldn't
and	'n'
it is/ it has	it's

2. Apostrophes are also used to **show possession**.

the books belonging to the boy
becomes
the boy's books

*Words not ending in s form possessives by adding 's.

girl	girl's book
child	child's chair
day	a good day's work
women	women's coats
men	men's shoes
children	children's socks

*Singular words ending in s also form the possessive by adding 's.

Marie Jones's car
Dickens's story "A Christmas Carol"
bus's tires

Plural words ending in *s* form the possessive by adding only the apostrophe.

two cats	cats' tails
the ladies	the ladies' room
some flamingos	some flamingos' beaks

NOTE: Some handbooks indicate that we should form the PLURAL of numbers, letters, or words by adding 's. This practice can be confusing since we assume that apostrophes always take the place of missing letters or words.

INSTEAD, underline such elements or put them in italics and add *s* without an underline or in normal type.

My name has two *Ms* in it.
Her *5s* look like *2s*.
That sentence has too many *shes* in it.

PROOFREADING TIP: Scan your writing for every word ending in *s*. Check to see if it is a plural or a possessive. Some words just end in *s* and are neither plural nor possessives

Example: bus gas grazes

Don't be confused about possessives. Keep in mind that the possessive words will nearly always function as adjectives in sentences—they modify nouns.

Julie's dress has a floral print.
Jonathan's car is in the garage.

COMPUTER TIP: Use the Search function to check for misplaced apostrophes. Type in an apostrophe. The computer will stop for each one. Evaluate its correctness.

Homonyms/ Homophones/ Sound-alikes

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Some words are misspelled because they sound like other words which have different meanings.

to/ too/ two	through/ threw
their/ there/ they're	patients/ patience
its/ it's	weather/ whether
no/ know	who's/ whose
affect/ effect	peace/ piece
do/ due/ dew	passed/ past
accept/ except	except/ accept
break/ brake	clothes/ cloths

These are among the most commonly confused words, but the list is certainly not exhaustive. If you already know that you tend to confuse these or other words, you will need to pay close attention in your writing so that you will use them correctly. The Spell Check on your computer will not highlight them for you if you have used them inappropriately, only if you have spelled them incorrectly.

COMPUTER TIP: Using the search function, key in a homophone you frequently misuse. The computer will stop at each. (You will have to key in each variation separately.)

PATTERNS OF PUNCTUATION

Simple Sentence

1. Independent clause.

Pattern: Complete thought. (Subject + verb)

Example: Cara ran. Cara ran down the road. Cara and Pat ran down the road. Cara and Pat ran and skipped down the road.

2. Independent clause: A, B, C.

Pattern: Complete thought with list or series.

Example: Tabitha and Bryce bought three kinds of candy: chocolate creams, lemon drops, and licorice. [NOTE: the colon does NOT go after the verb]

Compound Sentence

1. Independent clause; independent clause.

Pattern: Two related, independent clauses linked together with a semi-colon.

Example. Marcos studied biology; he liked his classes.

2. Independent clause; conjunctive adverb, independent clause.

Pattern: Two independent clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb with a semi-colon before the conjunctive adverb and a comma after the conjunctive adverb. This pattern shows an obvious, logical connection.

Example: Filipe has a good driving record; consequently, his insurance rates were lowered.

Conjunctive adverbs:

accordingly	anyway	also
besides	certainly	consequently
finally	further	furthermore
hence	however	incidentally
indeed	instead	likewise
meanwhile	moreover	namely
nevertheless	next	now
otherwise	similarly	still
then	thereafter	therefore
thus	undoubtedly	

3. Indep. Clause, coordinating conjunction Indep. clause.

Pattern: Two related, independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction with a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Example: Alex coordinated the stage direction, and Don concentrated on the sets.

Coordinating conjunctions:

and	but	or	nor	for	so	yet			
Hint---									
BOYSFAN:	but	or	yet	so	for	and	nor		

4. Indep Clause, correlative conj. Indep. Clause.

Pattern: Two independent clauses joined by a correlative conjunction with a comma before the second correlative conjunction.

Example: Either the team will play tonight, or they will play on Thursday.

Correlative conjunctions:

both...and	either...or	neither...nor
not only... but also	whether...there	

Complex Sentence

1. Dependent clause, Independent clause.

Pattern: A dependent clause with a comma following the dependent clause that separates it from the independent clause.

Example: Although the band members are tired, they will play the second concert at 8 P.M.

2. Independent clause Dependent clause.

Pattern: A complete thought followed by an incomplete thought with no punctuation between the two clauses.

Example: They will play the second concert at 8 P.M. even though the band members are tired.

Subordinating conjunctions:

after	although	as
as if	because	before
even if	even though	if
in order that	once	rather than
since	so that	than
that	though	unless
until	when	whenever

3. Interrupter pattern

Independent, Interrupter, clause

Pattern: An independent clause interrupted by either a dependent clause, a phrase, or a single word.

Example: Tom, who led the trek, sang as he hiked.
 Tim, always musical, hummed to himself.
 Tammy, however, whistled in harmony.

Punctuation

Punctuation helps us clarify our words for our readers. It helps us as readers understand the message of the writer by showing us where sentences begin and end and which words need to be separated from others.

Punctuation falls into three categories: end, transitional, and mid-sentence punctuation.

End punctuation

Conventions for Standard Written English demand punctuation at the ends of sentences.

1. Use a **period [.]** at the end of a statement or a command which would not be an exclamation.

The team lined up in punt formation.
Set the table.

2. Use a **question mark [?]** at the end of a direct question.

How many games has our team won?

COMPUTER TIP: Using the Search function, key in question words, such as how, who, and what. The computer will stop at each one. Check to see if the sentence is a direct question. If it is, make sure it has a question mark.

3. Use an **exclamation point [!]** to show emphasis.

We really won the game!
Wow!

4. Use periods after abbreviations.

Feb. a.m. (or A.M.) Dr. M.A.

Americans also use a period after abbreviations such as these:

Mr. Mrs. Ms. Jr. Sr.

Transitional punctuation

Colons and semi-colons are items of punctuation which form bridges. They need not cause problems.

1. Colon

In written text, a colon follows an independent clause and signals that what follows is an example or explanation of what went before.

Noah is taking four courses this term: math, composition, biology, and Spanish.
NOT—>Noah is taking: math, composition, biology, and Spanish.

Noah is taking four courses this term: his mother insisted.

2. Semi-Colon

Standard Written English recognizes two major uses of semicolons. Semi-colons can be impressive when used correctly and rarely!

1. Use a semi-colon between independent clauses forming compound sentences when a coordinating conjunction is NOT used.

The band was learning a new song; they needed practice!
The band was learning a new song; obviously, they needed practice.

2. Use a semi-colon between items in a series when the items themselves have commas in them.

Dan and Tim attended schools in Mentone, California;
Salem, Oregon; Bandung and Sentani, Indonesia; and Corvallis, Oregon.

Commas

Many people would like to do away with commas altogether, but then we might have to guess at meanings of sentences. Most comma use falls into five learnable categories. NOTE: Commas are VISUAL cues to the reader and have little or nothing to do with “where you take a breath!”

1. Use a comma plus a coordinating conjunction to separate independent clauses forming a compound sentence.

Coordinating conjunctions are **and but or nor for so yet**

Tim likes to play football, **so** he signed up for the city league.

2. Use a comma to set off introductory material from the rest of the sentence.

The introductory material may be a single word.

Therefore, he will sing at the dinner.

It may be a prepositional or other type of phrase.

Under the bridge, the water swirled around the rocks.

It may be a subordinate (dependent) clause.

After he rolled down the bank, he fell into the water.

3. Use a comma to “set off” elements which interrupt the flow of the sentence.

It may be a relative clause beginning with who or which if the modified word is clearly named or identified.

Sylvia Gonzales, **who lives next door to me**, is a teacher at our school.

Cessna Corporation, **which builds small aircraft**, does not make single engine planes any more.

It may be an appositive, a noun or phrase which explains, renames, or supplements a noun.

The newcomer, **an exchange student from Korea**, is on the track team.

It may be a single word or expression which interrupts the flow of the sentence.

I would, **however**, like to thank all the parents who came to the show.

He is, **of course**, going to Oregon State University.

Mr. Ruiz, **as Martha noted**, is an avid fisherman.

It may be the name of the listener or reader.

Phil, will you please set the table?

Let's go, **Rachel!**

****NOTE: For this category of comma use, you should be able to remove the expressions set off by commas, and the sentence would still make sense.*

4. Use commas after items in a series. (The Oxford Comma)

These might be a listing of more than two items of any sentence part.

The main ingredients in a Tin Roof sundae are **ice cream, chocolate syrup, and Spanish peanuts.**

They might be parts of an address.

I used to live at **Route 2, Box 678, Oregon City, Oregon.**

Her address is **56 Hidden Valley Drive, Meriden, CT.**

They might be coordinate adjectives—adjectives which relate equally to the noun they modify.

The **long, twisting, muddy** road led to the cabin by the shore.

(All the adjectives modify road.)

5. Commas set off quotations from words used to introduce or explain the quotations. A comma following a quotation goes inside the quotation marks.

"We leave in 10 minutes," Seth said.

Sarah replied, "I'll be ready!"

Do NOT use a comma if the quotation is introduced by **that**.

Anderson said that "all children need touch."

Quotation marks

Quotation marks come in pairs and are signals to the reader.

1. Use Quotation marks to note direct words of a speaker or material which is being copied verbatim.

“Carmen, will you please close the door?” asked Bob.
According to Anderson, “children should be seen and not heard.”

***Note: When quoting material from another source, be sure to copy it EXACTLY as it is written – mistakes, punctuation, everything – enclose it in quotations marks, and cite the source. If the original has spelling or punctuation errors in it, you may signal to your reader that this is the way you found it by placing [sic] after the error.

2. Quotation marks are used for titles of songs, poems, essays, chapters within books or periodicals, and for titles of all unpublished works.

(song)	Dan sang “Bingo” in preschool.
(poem)	I like Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.”
(essay)	We used “The Bad Word,” her essay on censorship, in class last week.
(chapter)	Leah read “Leap into Darkness,” which is the first chapter in that book.

Sentence Structure

We all know that we can communicate with gestures, grunts, and single words, but for academic and business writing, we need whole sentences. English sentences need a subject and a predicate: a subject and a verb.

Simple sentences – Subject + Verb
(Independent clause)

Susan ran.

Between meets, Susan ran every day, rain or shine.

Jim and Jessica ran and jumped

Between meets, Jim and Jessica ran and jumped every day at the track, rain or shine.

Imperative sentences – a command (subject understood) + Verb

(You) Run!

(You) Set the table.

(You) Please be seated.

Compound sentence –

Subject + Verb, coordinating conjunction Subject + Verb
(Independent Clause) (Independent clause)

Juan ran to the store, and Luis followed.

Complex Sentence –

A complex sentence contains two (or more) [S + V] clauses, but one depends on the other for completion of its meaning; therefore, it is dependent or subordinate to the other. A complex sentence may be organized in several ways.

1. (Dependent clause), (Independent clause)

When she saw the car, Janelle fainted.

2. (Independent clause) (Dependent Clause)

Janelle fainted **when she saw the car**.

3. (Independent [dependent clause] clause)

Janelle, **when she saw the car**, fainted.

Agreement

Subjects and Verbs

In Standard Written English, subjects and verbs must agree with each other in number and person in the present tense.

1. Singular subjects need singular verb forms.

The cow grazes in that field.

Molly plays in the tree house.

She plants tomatoes every year.

2. Plural subjects need plural verb forms.

The cows graze in that field.

Children play in the tree house.

They plant tomatoes every year.

3. Singular indefinite pronouns used as subjects need singular verbs.

Indefinite pronouns are these: anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, neither, nobody, none, no one, and one.

Each of the band members is going to Disneyland.

Nobody wants to drive the van.

Everyone in the cars is asleep.

COMPUTER TIP: Using the Search function, type in the indefinite pronouns. The computer will stop at each one. If it is used as a subject, check the verb agreement.

Pronouns and referents

Pronouns are words which we use in place of nouns. Because they are indefinite words, they require a referent or antecedent. Usually this word appears earlier in the sentence or passage. Pronouns must agree with their referents in number.

1. *If a noun is singular, it needs a singular pronoun.*

Each **girl** should bring **her** swimsuit to the pool.

Each student should sign **his** name on the roster

her
his or her

2. *If the noun is plural, it needs a plural pronoun.*

The **girls** should bring **their** swimsuits to the pool.

The **students** should sign **their** names on the roster.

***NOTE: If a writer wants to avoid the his or her bulkiness when dealing with groups of people of both sexes, using plural nouns and pronouns can be an agreeable solution.

Instead of this:

Each employee should bring his or her own lunch to his or her designated eating area.

Try this:

Employees should bring their lunches to their designated eating areas. (Also note that the employees have plural lunches!)

Reflexive Pronouns

Pronouns that end in -self or -selves are called reflexive pronouns, and they reflect (like a mirror) something that goes before in the sentences and means the same. Therefore, another word in the same clause (usually a pronoun or proper noun) must ALWAYS precede the reflexive pronoun.

I did it myself. I = myself (Myself is a reflection of I.)

Please send it to me. (Don't use myself. It is not a reflection of any earlier word.)

Josh asked if the note was for him or me.

(Although Josh precedes him, Josh is not in the same clause. Me has no noun or pronoun to reflect either. Him and me are objects of the preposition for. You might say "Josh asked if the note was for him or for me.")

Modifiers: Misplaced/ Dangling

Modifiers are adjectives and adverbs which describe something in a sentence. They identify, locate, set in time, or tell how something happened. In English sentences, the usual place for adjectives is just before the nouns they modify.

The **hungry** children ate the **red** apples.

Adverbs may be used throughout the sentence, not just next to the words they modify.

The children at the party ate the apples **hungrily**.

The children at the party **hungrily** ate the apples.

The children at the party ate **hungrily**.

Most writers have no trouble with single-word modifiers. However, phrases or clauses may be another matter, and sometimes modifiers get misplaced and create awkward sentences.

The woman is my piano teacher who lives next door to you.

(The who clause modifies woman. This modifier is in an awkward position.)

The woman who lives next door to you is my piano teacher.

(Here the who clause is close to the word it modifies.)

Modifiers that dangle are usually introductory phrases which do not correctly go with the subject of the sentence.

As a child, my mother taught me good manners.

(Mother taught manners when she was a child?)

Surprised by the snow, our boots were left at home.

(The boots were surprised?)

Correct dangling modifiers by changing the subject of the sentence so that it matches the modifier or by changing the modifier into a dependent clause.

When I was a child, my mother taught me good manners.

As a child, I learned good manners.

Surprised by the snow, we had left our boots at home.

Style Stuff

1. It's time somebody said it: Of course you can begin a sentence with AND, BUT, and BECAUSE. We were told not to as children for good reasons. AND and BUT are coordinating conjunctions and usually connect ideas that belong in a compound sentence. But as we mature, so do our thoughts and our writing. It is better to begin a sentence with AND or BUT than to have a fifty-word sentence. BECAUSE is a subordinating conjunction. If we use it to start a sentence, we need to be sure to have an independent clause to follow it.

2. Avoid YOU/YOUR in academic writing. Different writing situations have different conventions. In academic documents, writers should generally avoid using you and your. We tend to use you to mean the reader or "people in general," but sometimes, we write you when we really mean he, she, or they.

Many people feel that college athletes should be paid in cash rather than just in scholarships because **you** are so busy practicing and studying that **you** don't have time for a job to pay for incidental expenses.

In each case above, the you seems to refer to college athletes, so the appropriate pronoun would be *they*.

By working to avoid you in academic writing, students find their writing improving because they have to think about what they are writing.

Citing Sources

When writers use sources outside their own heads and experience when composing their work, they need to be careful to cite the source. This simply means giving credit to the original author. Depending on the writing situation, that might mean attributing the author and the work within the context of the essay, or it might mean a formal citation.

Actually, there's no magic to citing sources: it's simply a way to let the reader (including the professor) know where you got the information that you are using. It's a way to say, "I did my homework and didn't make this up."

In the academic world, we find several different traditions and conventions for expressing that information.

Each discipline has its preferred style. However, all styles will require you to have certain information. You'll need the

- title of the book, article, movie, play, journal, periodical, etc.

- author or artist (if available)

- publication date

- publisher and location

- page numbers, scene and line, paragraph number, or other such place reference.

The order in which these details appear will vary with the style. Check with the instructor as to citation style to use, and then check a more complete handbook or do an on-line search for the style you need.