Diction Dude

The Diction Dude Summary of Grammar, Usage, Style & Voice

This document identifies weaknesses in writing that consistently manifest among professional scribes. It is intended to help other writers and editors improve narrative flow. The contents listed below have been compiled from various notes accumulated by the author over almost two decades of working on the Web, in a newsroom and as a small-press leader. It was originally intended for non-fiction writers—particularly those who write or edit technology and finance content for the Web—but has subsequently been expanded, lightly, to also address creative non-fiction and fiction prose.

Most **usage** entries are accompanied by a bracketed code. This code identifies an authoritative source as well as a relative severity score. The key for this code is printed in the footer of every page. The authorities cited here represent recognized expertise in usage and syntax. If no code is present, then the entry is merely a suggestion based on this author's sense of the language.

Good writing rarely distills to correctness. Some errors, rendered with rhetorical subtlety, improve the reader's comprehension more than wooden-but-pristine prose does. And, because English usage is neither fixed in time nor governed by a binding panel of experts, judgment about whether any given construction "works" sometimes admits to disagreement. Nevertheless, a prudent writer will favor conservative usage—to offend the smallest number of readers—by avoiding both generally acknowledged error and weak writing that's technically correct but otherwise fails to bring clearer understanding to the targeted audience.

Rely on prescribed stylebooks for authoritative advice in corporate or freelancing settings. This manual assumes the writer intends to avoid fluffy, advertorial prose.

— *Jason E. Gillikin*
The Diction Dude

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Usage

ability. Avoid describing an inanimate object (like a computer) as "giving you the ability" or "including the ability" to do something. It's generally better to assert the feature rather than identifying that feature as a nebulous "ability." For example, instead of writing "An oven gives you the ability to bake your cookies," write "Bake cookies in the oven."

actual. Usually unnecessary when used as an intensifier. [F2]

allows. To *allow* implies agency, which an inanimate object lacks, so restrict usage to when the sentence subject is a conscious agent of some kind. Avoid using this verb to relay *capability* instead of *permission*. For example, "Bob allows the cat to play" makes sense, because Bob grants permission, however circumspectly. However, "The Internet allows you to send email" is less defensible, because the Internet isn't making choices about email—the verb merely asserts capability, a task for which different words are better suited. [W2]

always. Avoid unless *literally* true. [W1]

and/or. *Or* often logically entails *and*. If precision is required, use "X or Y or both" instead of a slashed construction. For example, saying "Sue likes chocolate or vanilla" is equivalent to saying, "Sue likes chocolate and vanilla," because either flavor (or both!) is acceptable to her. In technical contexts, a precise distinction may be necessary, but in most ordinary prose, it's not. Don't write with slashes except for transcribing computer code, delineating poetry verses, abbreviating units of measure and summarizing tabular data. [G1]

any. Usually superfluous bureaucratese, misused for *their* or *your*—e.g., strike it in sentences like: "Ask your guests to notify you of any food allergies."

as soon as possible. Often used to signify that something should be addressed expeditiously, although such advice is almost always unnecessary given context and signifies an inability to prioritize relative urgency—e.g., "Update your antivirus as soon as possible" is better rendered as the simpler "Update your antivirus." [G2 (implied)]

as well as. A simple *and* will usually suffice.

attempt to try. Either *attempt*, or *try*, but do not *attempt to try*.

back. Omit this term in reference to dates. For example, don't write, "It happened back in 2011."

benefit. Best used as a noun. When used as transitive verb, it means "to do good" and as an intransitive verb, it means "to receive advantage." [W4] Often over-used as an abstract, positive word in marketing prose, when no concrete advantage is obvious—select a more targeted, less advertorial verb instead.

be sure to/ensure. Strike in all instances; the construction is *always* unnecessary. For example, avoid "Be sure to read the instructions" in favor of "Read the instructions."

can be/is used. Avoid this construction; it's depressingly common. For example, instead of writing, "The cable can be used to charge the device," write either "Charge the device with the cable" or "The cable charges the device."

cause. In most cases, it's better to emphasize solutions than causes, in part because the language tends to flow more naturally. For example, instead of writing, "Cat hair covering the air intake can cause overheating issues," write instead, "Keep the air intake free of cat hair to reduce the risk of overheating."

chance. Although this word does, indeed, admit to usage as a synonym for *risk*—in the sense of *taking a gamble*, not *increasing exposure*—it's frequently used when *risk* is the more appropriate term. For example, avoid constructions like, "Cook the pasta on low heat to reduce your chance of scorching the noodles." Reserve *chance* for defining a probability and use *risk* to describe the potential adverse outcome of an event. [W3]

click on/type in. Omit the preposition. For example, write, "Click the box to type the word," instead of, "Click on the box to type in the word." [W4, implied by examples, see PREPOSITIONS AND ADVERBS OF MOTION]

comes with. Avoid this colloquialism as a synonym for *includes* or *ships with*.

constantly. Misused for *continuously*. [G2]

copy and paste. Use either term, individually, as context merits, or use *paste* on the assumption that you cannot paste without first having copied. [G3, implied, see REDUNDANCY]

critical. Use *important* instead. This word implies judging, so don't use it to suggest relative significance. [W1]

desired/preferred. It's usually unnecessary to add *if desired* or *if preferred* tags to a procedural statement. For example, avoid: "Set the document margins to 1.5 inches, if preferred." The reader rarely needs to be invited to act out of personal preference. If there's value to explicitly identifying that the reader should make a choice based on preference, recast the sentence. For example: "Set the margins to match your document's style."

don't worry/don't panic. Even in writing that prizes colloquial accessibility, instructing readers to avoid worry or panic comes off as inauthentic and condescending. People in a state of true panic likely won't read your content.

easily/makes it easy. Usually superfluous and occasionally misleading when stripped of context: e.g., "Use WD-40 to easily unfreeze a bolt." Assessing relative ease remains the reader's prerogative; as a writer, forego the assertion.

enables. If you cannot use *enables* without including both an infinitive phrase and *you* as the subject (implied or explicit) of that infinitive phrase, choose a different verb. The repetitive use of *enables* as a main verb, particularly in tech writing, is a sure sign of a sophomoric stylist. Avoid, e.g., "Microsoft Word enables you to print envelopes" in favor of "Print envelopes using Microsoft Word" or "Microsoft Word prints envelopes."

especially. Usually seen, inappropriately, intensifying a binary. Avoid, e.g., "This rule is especially true if … ."

essentially. Often used to signal that the writer is about to summarize something. Omit. If a summation is relevant, introduce it with a proper transition sentence or clause instead. [G2, see SENTENCE ADVERBS]

everything from. Avoid using this term with several categorical examples to imply a range, when you don't *literally* mean *everything*. In general, a range should be expressed in terms of its poles or outside margins, and if the range really incorporates *everything* then exemplars are logically superfluous. For example, instead of "The store carried everything from toothpaste to diapers to cabbage," write: "The store carried such varied items as toothpaste, diapers and cabbage." [W1]

exceedingly. Usually unnecessary when used as an intensifier. [G2, see ADVERBS (B)]

exist. It's better to explain *what* exists, and present it in terms of a value proposition, than to merely assert that something *does* exist. For example, avoid: "Options exist if you need to fix your broken shoelace" and write instead: "Use dental floss or fishing line to fix your broken shoelace."

fact that. Avoid this stylistically weak cliché.

feel. Usually, *think* is preferable, particularly in contexts stripped of obvious emotion. [G2, but F4]

fortunately/luckily. Usually superfluous: e.g., "Fortunately, there's a solution." Asserting the existence or non-existence of Fortune or luck or some other such entity is rarely germane. [G2, see SENTENCE ADVERBS]

fraudster. Used with mystifying regularity as a synonym for *hacker* or some other ne'er-do-well. This word isn't recognized in Webster's. [W1]

gender. Not acceptable as a synonym for *sex*. Nouns have a *gender*; biological entities have a *sex*. It's increasingly acceptable, however, to use *gender* to refer to the sociocultural norms about sexual identities. [F3]

go ahead. You need not give the reader permission to act—and certainly not by the dismissive injunction to "go ahead."

has/have. Avoid the over-use of forms of *to have* as a general-purpose method of ascribing capability or functionality, or denoting action, because such constructions rely on either circumlocutions or flabby phrases to fully flesh out the intended meaning. For example, instead of writing "The router has a capability of transmitting on 2.4 Ghz and 5.0 Ghz," instead write, "The router transmits on 2.4 Ghz and 5.0 Ghz." Similarly, avoid "After you have the text entered, save the form," in favor of the more concise, "Save the form after you enter the text."

if. Use conditionals to branch algorithms. Otherwise, avoid using a conditional statement to hypothesize a reader's intent for engaging with content. [See HYPOTHETICAL LEDES]

if you want. Weak sauce for introducing a conditional procedure. Often, *if you want* pairs with the equally weak *you can*, in litanies of "If you want to do X, you can try Y" sentences that rob the author of his or her authority. This kind of writing also admits to myriad other stylistic weaknesses, resulting in a pile-on of insipid prose. It's best to omit the *if you want* and *you can* altogether. For example, avoid, "If you want to have a new picture on your phone's background, you can utilize the settings to make that change," and instead write, "Use your phone's Settings app to change its background image."

imagine. In the (rare) event that a hypothetical construct aid reader comprehension, don't introduce it by inviting the reader to "imagine" a detailed scenario larded with superfluous detail.

impact. Not preferred as a synonym for *effect*, and best avoided as a verb outside of the context of one object striking another. The only noun reference (3rd lexical entry) that does not relate to collision, indicates the "power of an event to produce changes, move feelings, etc." Often used by marketers in lieu of meaningful facts. [W2]

in an era/age of. These and similar phrases usually introduce vapid sentiments, e.g., "In the era of Facebook, social sharing is ubiquitous." Writers who rely on this type of idiom rarely communicate with authority.

individual. Not an all-purpose synonym for *person*. Use *individual* only to identify one or more specific people who are segregated from a clearly defined, larger group; in the absence of a relative group, use *person* instead. This usage point governs both noun and adjective uses. For example, write, "Your promotion in the team depends on your individual contributions," but also, "Your advancement in life is the result of your personal effort." [W2]

in order to/for. Use a simple *to* or *for* instead, except in cases of serial infinitive phrases. [G1]

instance. Acceptable in the context of "an illustrative example," but in general, prefer *example* instead. Avoid using this term repeatedly as an all-purpose synonym for *example*. [G3] Particularly in tech writing, the word *instance* implies the instantiation of a new or supplemental software environment — e.g., "Click the Firefox icon to start a new instance of the browser" — so using *instance* in this context may prove confusing. Reserve *instance* for actual events and *example* for hypotheticals.

instantly. Almost always hyperbole; genuinely *instant* consequences only follow under the theory of quantum entanglement. This word, and others like it, is often used incorrectly to indicate very small durations of time—e.g., avoid: "Clicking the icon will instantly open the application" and write "Click the icon to open the application" instead. [G1, see GENERIC TIME REFERENCES]

Internet. Capitalize in all uses unless required by a specific style manual. *Internet* is a proper noun. In 2015 the Associated Press favored de-capping the word, but the AP's decision has been widely (and correctly) derided as being syntactically incoherent. [G3, see WEB]

iOS. Refrain from adding an article when you reference Apple's mobile operating system as a noun. For example, avoid, "Game Center was discontinued in the iOS 10."

issue. Never a synonym for *problem*. An *issue* is a situation of public interest; a *problem* is a difficulty or error that requires correction. The two may have overlapping connotations, but they have very different denotations. [G1, see PROBLEM below]

is going to need to be. Never, ever write this phrase. For example, avoid, "The firewall is going to need to be turned off to allow the software download," write instead, "Deactivate the firewall to allow the software download."

is used to. Weak and wordy; fix by emphasizing the correct verb. For example, instead of writing, "The microphone is used to capture sound," write instead, "The microphone captures sound."

it is recommended. Avoid this stilted, impersonal construction. If you're recommending something, own it. If some other authority recommends it, cite your source.

keep in mind/remember that/make sure to/be certain to. Delete in most contexts, on the assumption it's counterproductive to instruct a reader to hold to a specific mental state. In some cases, a reader may feel hectored when scolded to *keep in mind* something trivial or obvious. Phrases like these are part of a growing trend among some service-journalism writers to situate their narrative within their interpretation of the readers' mental frame. Rarely does this strategy work well. It's better to assert the statement without the ornamentation. For example, avoid "Keep in mind that software is frequently updated, so you should check for updates weekly," and instead write: "Check for software updates weekly." Tell the reader what to do, not what to think.

malicious. This melodramatic term is wildly over-used as the modifier of choice to describe malware, hackers and other agents of ill repute. Avoid it. [W4]

more. Avoid using the term "and more" to wrap up an example list. Rather, introduce the example and offer a few choice items without postpending an *et cetera* or an *and more* to it.

multiple. Often misused for *several* or, somewhat stupidly, *two*. Its use becomes inappropriate when an exact number is known; e.g. avoid: "The man was shot twice and was later taken to the hospital for treatment of multiple gunshot wounds." Weak writers sprinkle *multiple* liberally in their prose, when a more precise surrogate would lead to more engaging content. In general, reserve use to the 1st lexical entry: "Consisting of **many** parts," and do not use to describe a **small** but unknown or non-enumerated set or to merely indicate *more than one*. [W2]

myriad. Avoid *myriad of*. This word best employed as an adjective, not a noun. [W1]

navigate/surf. A relic of mid-90s slang for the Web. Use *open* or *browse* instead. Avoid nautical metaphors for Web and file-system browsing. [W1; *navigate* has no related denotations and *surf* has an informal one]

need. Avoid using *need* when you really mean *must*. For example, avoid, "You will need to delete the app to remove it from your iPad" in favor of "You must delete the app to remove it from your iPad." Even better—issue a procedural directive instead of an informative statement: "Delete the app to remove it from your iPad."

nefarious. Often used to characterize black-hat hackers. As with *malicious*, it's generally not useful to include emotionally charged adjectives to describe the Web's unsavory side. Simply focusing on the facts without melodramatic adjectives leads to stronger and more authoritative narrative content. [W4]

note that. Assert the item to be noted without commanding the reader to "note" it. The thing to be noted is almost always mundane; in any case, by emphasizing the "note," the focus of the sentence transitions away from the allegedly important fact and toward the reader's own self-reflection. It's better to instruct the reader in a procedure rather than direct a reader's state of mind.

number of. Use *several* or offer a specific number. Construed literally, saying that there's *a number of* something merely indicates that the thing is capable of being quantified. The term itself is useful, but best reserved for large quantities where precision isn't required (e.g., "a number of people filled the baseball stadium"). Pick a stronger term when the population of things is relatively small and capable of straightforward enumeration (e.g., avoid, "There are a number of settings for your digital camera"). [G4]

numerous. Not preferred as a synonym for *more than one*. Reserve use for very large numbers, not for very small numbers (e.g., don't write, "There are numerous ways to slice a pizza"). [G1]

on. Avoid the use of *on* with a participle when an infinitive is required. For example, instead of writing "If you plan on using the bus, raise your hand," write instead "If you plan to use the bus, raise your hand."

once. Usually, *when* or *after* is more precise, particularly in contexts that involve the sequencing of specific procedures. Reserve *once* for situations where an event occurs a single time and isn't dependent on the order of any other action within the narrative. [W2]

out. Use when you're writing about physical motion. Avoid as a weak intensifier. For example, avoid constructions like "Tap out the message on your iPhone."

over. Misused for *more than*. Using *over* interchangeably with *more than* is fully endorsed by Garner but weakly cautioned against by Fowler. The synonymous usage is attested as the 14th lexical entry in Webster's. In 2014, AP allowed the use, to the dismay of stylists worldwide. Nevertheless, avoid the synonymous usage. [F3, G4, W4]

person that/company who. Misused for *person who* or *company that*. In general, reserve *who* for people and *that* for inanimate objects or collectives. Never refer to a company as a *who* or a *they*. [W1]

pre-. An often-unnecessary and confusing particle: e.g., you heat an oven, you don't "preheat" it, and a "pre-owned car" is a car that (logically) has never been owned before. Often used as a shortcut for expressing temporal sequencing or to identify that something has already been completed at least once before. There's no lexical form for *pre-* to support its use as a generic particle beyond compounds already recognized in the dictionary or the AP Stylebook, so don't append this particle to create new terms beyond what's listed in your governing stylebook. [W1, A1]

problem. None of these words is an acceptable synonym for *problem:* Issue, challenge, opportunity, situation. [W2]

quickly/easily/cheaply. Usually superfluous: e.g., "You can quickly fix the error." These adverbs are too generic to provide useful information, and their interpretation is subjective. It's better to assert a specific amount of time, money or effort. For example, write: "Fix the error in two minutes by using a diagnostic program."

random. Misused for *unexpected*. [W1]

rather. Usually superfluous.

said. In fiction writing, a simple *said* is preferable to proliferating synonyms within speech-attribution tags.

seems. Avoid asserting what something *seems* like; perception is in the eye of the reader, not the writer.

since. Frequently confused with *because*. In general, *because* is best reserved for statements of causation alone, while *since* can refer to weaker causation or to the passage time. [A1]

Social Security number. Frequently improperly capitalized. [A1]

software. Avoid *a software*, e.g., "Microsoft Word is a software." Use *application* or *program* instead or drop the article.

thankfully. Delete this useless sentence adverb unless you're writing for Hallmark. [G2, see SENTENCE ADVERBS]

that. Use *that* as an intensifier rarely, and only in content intended to convey a breezy tone. For example, avoid "Use your food app to display that special recipe" unless you're engaged in soft-focused content marketing.

that/which. Use *that* to introduce a clause necessary to the meaning of the sentence as a whole; use *which* for clauses that could be deleted without affecting the coherence of the sentence (or which could be separated into a second sentence). For example: "Helen broke the vase that her grandfather gave her." But: "Helen broke the vase, which shattered into dozens of shards." [G2]

they/their. These pronouns are inappropriate as references to companies or to single humans of indeterminate sex (or to single humans who wish to make a political statement about their gender identity). Despite widespread usage to the contrary, *their* should not be used with singular antecedents to avoid the appearance of sexist prose—use *he* with a singular antecedent, or recast the sentence to use plurals. Many authorities support the careful alternation of *he* and *she* within a narrative to effect balance, as well. [A2] [See GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE]

there is/are. Sentences in the form of "there are X that Y" are usually more efficiently rendered by lopping off the "there are"—these existential clauses suggest sloppy writing when used to excess. [G2]

third party. Misused as an all-purpose synonym for *alternative* or *someone else* or *non-native* or *vendor-supplied*. Confine usage to legal contexts referencing some other actor who is not a signatory to a contract—e.g., "Use a third-party driver for your scanner" is better as "Use a vendor-supplied driver for your scanner." In most cases, the adjective may be safely omitted altogether as being unnecessary to the meaning of the sentence; readers can usually infer the difference between native and non-native solutions. Webster's offers no definition for *third party* that supports a synonym of *non-native*. [W1]

this. Using *this* without a direct noun antecedent creates the all-too-common general-reference error. Fix it by supplying a noun. Often, the implied antecedent is a concept implied by the previous sentence. These errors are common in short-form how-to content. For example, avoid, "You must change your display driver. To do this, open the Control Panel," (to what noun does *this* refer?) and instead write, "Change your display driver by opening the Control Panel." [See GENERAL OR VAGUE REFERENCES]

this means. Find better ways to restate a point other than this sloppy idiom. For example, avoid writing "Scissors are sharp. This means you could get cut," and write instead, "Because scissors are sharp, you could get cut."

those that. Better as *people who* to avoid unnecessarily stilted prose.

to be able to. Usually superfluous. For example, "Bakers need flour to be able to make cookies" is better as "Bakers need flour to make cookies." It's unnecessary to assert the capability to do some action if you can just assert that action directly.

traditional. Improperly used to mean *antecedent* or *older* or *conventional* or *typical*, particularly in tech writing. In general, confine usage to cultural practices that span generations—e.g., avoid: "Windows 8 replaces the traditional mouse with a touch interface." In almost no scenario is *traditional* an acceptable term to describe consumer technology. [W1]

types of. Avoid invoking a "type" when you're not differentiating based on discrete feature sets—e.g., instead of "Many types of blenders will chop your parsley," write instead, "Many blenders will chop your parsley."

ubiquitous. Often misused for *common* or *frequent* or *prevalent*—none of which words are a viable synonym. [W1]

unique. Only the weakest of writers employ this meaningless word.

up. It's unnecessary to supply an *up* with words like *straight* or *speak.* Also, avoid the idiom of using *up to X or more*, a construction that's profoundly illogical. For example, writing "Lose up to 20 pounds or more" is incoherent because you could lose 20 pounds, less than 20 pounds or more than 20 pounds—basically, any amount between zero and infinity—so the 20 is a meaningless or even disingenuous benchmark of performance. [G1]

used. Define something by what it does, not by what people use it for. For example, avoid, "A microwave is used to heat food" in favor of "Microwaves heat food."

users. Avoid referring to your readers as *users.* For example, "Users should reboot before attempting additional troubleshooting" is better as, "Reboot before attempting additional troubleshooting." Or, more warmly, "You should reboot before you try the next set of more aggressive troubleshooting steps." To refer generically to computer users, call them *people* or use second-person ("you") constructions instead. Reserve *users* to technical prose about user accounts or info-sec practices.

utilize. Prefer *use* in all instances. Competent writers will **never** use this term except in reference to classical Utilitarian theory in academic moral philosophy (where relative benefit-and-harm calculations employed a *util* as the discrete unit of measure, hence the calculation thereof was *utilization*). [G2]

versus. Use this term to refer to explicit head-to-head matchups, not to relative comparisons. Avoid *versus* as a synonym for *compared to*. Do not abbreviate as *vs* except in sports reporting and legal citations.

very. Almost always unnecessary and non-specific when used as an intensifier. Delete.

via. Strictly, the word relates to physical movement (e.g., "He crossed town via Main Street"). Often improperly used as a synonym for *through* or *using*—e.g., "Open the Control Panel via the Start button" is better as "Open the Control Panel using the Start button"—although Garner notes ongoing dispute about this point. [G3]

virtually. Not preferred as a synonym for *almost*.

want/you will want. Avoid using *want* as an all-purpose synonym for *intend* or *should*. For example, instead of writing, "You'll want to open your umbrella if it starts to rain," write instead, "You should open your umbrella if it starts to rain" or "Open your umbrella when it starts to rain."

Web. Capitalize as stand-alone term; lower-case "web-" as a single-word compound; capitalize as hyphenated compound—e.g., "Use a Web browser to open the website of the Web-savvy developer." Garner retains a prohibition on lower-casing the term; the AP reversed itself in 2016 and now bans caps. [G2, see INTERNET]

when it comes to. Often introduces trite slogans, e.g., "When it comes to pitching, Justin Verlander is in a league of his own." Avoid this blasé prose.

when *X*-ing. Often, *for* is preferable to this construction, because it reduces the inherent confusion of using a participle without an explicit grammatical subject. For example, instead of writing, "The camera flash provides more light when taking photos," write instead, "The camera flash provides more light for photos." (The photographer, and not the camera, is taking the photos.) If the subject of the main clause is an implied *you*, then you should rewrite to include a definitive grammatical subject and to reduce the stubby, impersonal stiltedness of the prose. For example, instead of writing, "Clean the vent when using the clothes dryer," write, "Clean the vent before you dry your clothes."

whether or not. *Whether* is a conditional term, so the *or not* is implied and need not be expressed. Nevertheless, Fowler permits the use of the phrase as an idiom. [F2]

while. The usage of *while* as a synonym for *although* is defended by both Fowler and Garner as being permissible, but both authorities recognize that more conservative audiences don't currently accept this usage. [F4, G4]

will. Modals are rarely necessary in procedural prose. For example, avoid, "Clicking the print button will send the document to the printer" and instead write, "Clicking the print button sends the document to the printer."

would be. Don't use *would be* when *is* should govern. For example, avoid: "Another example would be Bob's persistent lateness for work on Monday mornings."

you can. Instead of telling a reader that "you can do X," instruct the reader to "do X." The *you can* construction is tantamount to asserting that a reader enjoys *an* option. Is it the only or the best one? Avoid this structural ambiguity—especially in how-to content—by dropping the endless litany of *can* in favor of a simple imperative.

Grammar

adverbial participles. Adverbial participles (i.e., constructions with a verb with an -ing ending that modify the sentence as a whole) use the subject of the main clause as the implied subject of the participial phrase. If the main clause also has implied subject, the reader may become confused, because it's not clear who's actually doing the work within the sentence. Revise the sentence to include an explicit subject. For example, never write something like, "When baking cookies, close the oven door." Instead, write: "When *you bake* cookies, close the oven door." Any phrase in the form of "When X-ing …" that doesn't include an explicit subject or actor can lead to ambiguity.

agreement. Pronouns must modify their antecedents in case, number and gender. **No exceptions.** [G2]

comma with conjunction. Do not use a comma between compound verbs that share the same subject when those verbs are joined with a conjunction. In general, if several verbs in a sentence have the same subject—even if it's an implied *you*—use a conjunction without a comma. However, except for very short sentences, use a comma to separate the elements of a compound sentence if each part of the whole is a complete statement.

comma with restrictive element. If a phrase or subordinate clause provides necessary context for the main clause, do not set it off with commas. For example, write, "People who want hamburgers often opt for fast food." However, also write, "Bob, who was in charge of the meeting, spoke first." In situations like this, the idea of *necessary context* is situational. In the first example, the *who want hamburgers* clause limits the scope of *people*, so it's necessary and therefore does not need commas. In the second example, *who was in charge of the meeting* might be useful information, but the clause doesn't limit Bob relative to his ability to speak, so it's offset by commas.

dangling modifier. Watch for words or phrases at the beginning or end of a sentence that otherwise aren't attached to any explicitly written word within in that sentence. For example, avoid "Get a prostate exam every year if over 50" and instead write, "Get a prostate exam every year if you're over 50."

delineating options. Avoid enumerating a list of example items if that list contains all possible values. For example, avoid: "The shirts come in three sizes including, for example, small, medium and large."

existential clauses. A statement in the form of "There are X that Y." The construction is unnecessarily verbose; find ways to slim down the sentence. For example, "There are some laptops that have large touch screens" is better as "Some laptops feature large touch screens." (*see* THERE IS/ARE, above)

faulty parallelism. Elements in a series should be structured in grammatically identical ways. For example, avoid: "The candidate promised to deliver cleaner water, an election win and ramping up missile defense." Such sentence is better cast as: "The candidate promised to deliver cleaner water, a stronger election victory and better missile defense."

general or vague references. Pronouns require a clear, single antecedent. Avoid using *this* or *that* or equivalents without a noun when the antecedent is a concept nebulously implied by the previous sentence. For example, avoid: "Running with knives may lead to injury. *This* could also get you into trouble." Instead, write: "Running with knives may lead to injury. *This behavior* could also get you into trouble."

hyphenated compounds. Do not hyphenate adverbs. Hyphenate adjectives when the two are used as a unit to modify a noun. Do not hyphenate adjectives when they independently but serially modify a noun.

prepositions or adverbs of motion. A verb that implies action or motion rarely requires an accompanying modifier unless that modifier usefully completes the meaning of the verb. These words, often free-floating prepositions, are logically redundant. For example, "He went down the stairs" is fine (although "He descended the stairs" is better), but avoid "She grasped on the handlebars" or "He climbed up to the top of the mountain." Grasping implies you're holding *onto* something; climbing implies that you're going *up*. No need to belabor the point.

progressive-aspect verbs. Verbs in the progressive aspect relate ongoing action and consist of a form of *to be* plus a participle. Usually, perfective-aspect verbs (verbs indicating completed action) make more sense. For example, instead of writing, "If you are needing new shoes, buy the ones on sale," write instead, "If you need new shoes, buy the ones on sale."

quotation marks. Avoid scare quotes; only use quotation marks to indicate a direct-speech attribution or to set off a term used as a term. Preferably, set off term-as-term constructions with italics only, but the use of quotes is acceptable. In U.S. fiction writing, do not use single quotes to indicate direct speech or mental speech. In general, single quotes should only offset quote-within-a-quote prose or, as needs require, for quotes or term-as-term references in headlines or metadata.

Style

Some of these style suggestions tie to specific usage deficiencies noted above. Forgive the redundancy.

acronyms. Spell out a term on first reference and use the acronym on second and subsequent reference unless your style guide for a specific writing project stipulates otherwise. As a matter of logic, ***it's never necessary and almost never appropriate to identify an acronym in parentheses***, and rarely necessary to explicitly identify the acronym even as an appositive. For example, avoid: "The Jet Propulsion Laboratory, or JPL, is home to some truly amazing science." Skip the "or JPL"—especially if there isn't a later reference. AP disfavors use of the parentheses, but an Ask the Editor ruling notes that a comma appositive isn't banned. Nevertheless, avoid the apposition regardless of punctuation and simply follow the standard rule, with the caveat that some publications, e.g. many scientific journals, irrationally require parenthetical acronyms on first reference.

assertion of capability. Avoid "You can …" sentences; it's rarely necessary to assert a reader's capability. Instead, trim the "you can" and proceed to the verb, or recast the sentence to emphasize the action instead of the capability.

assertion of possibility. Don't fall into the "fortunately, you have options …" trap. Instead, outline the options instead of merely asserting that some undefined number of them may exist.

avant-garde* formatting.** Some literary journals eagerly embrace transgressive capitalization, punctuation and pronoun usage. ***Most don't. Unless a market clearly signals an openness to alternative formatting approaches, err on the side of well-established formatting standards. The *Chicago Manual of Style* remains the literary gold standard.

backstory. Much backstory may be profitably removed from any work of fiction or creative non-fiction; likewise, backstory in the form of an extended hypothetical within service-journalism content also warrants the knife. Backstory, in the hands of inexperienced writers, constitutes a commingling of character sketches and universe-building notes with the story proper. In general, any facts about the story's setting or context that aren't necessary to the development of the conflict or the advancement of the plot should be removed. Large data dumps are rarely helpful and often distract from a reader's experience. From the perspective of line editing, backstory that consists of sentences or clauses interwoven within the story should be referred to a developmental editor for review. For example, sentences like the following should raise alarm bells if they occur with any noticeable frequency: "Sharon noticed Ken's limp as he lurched off the recliner. She didn't realize that the limp was an old war wound, the fragment of a shell casing from Ken's time in Vietnam."

bait-and-switch. Stories that incorporate plot twists, or which conclude with a complete pivot from the story as it had unfolded, tend to alienate readers if such devices are used in genres that don't typically employ them. For example, although horror stories admit to end-of-the-story plot twists, most literary-fiction stories do not. Similarly, service-journalism articles that lead with a procedure, but then wrap that section with a note that the procedure "is not recommended, do this next one instead," litter the Web with perplexing frequency. Ensure that in technical non-fiction, the premise of the content's title and metadata receives a full and accurate answer at the beginning. Don't outline less-relevant, or not-recommended, content merely to make a point.

business-speak. Corporate communications tend to rely on fuzzy euphemisms instead of direct communication. For example, no one has "problems," they merely have "challenges," and few people make bold statements, instead relying on passive-voice "it is recommended" statements. Corporate jargon rarely serves the interest of clear communication. Resist the temptation to write in that stilted, opaque English dialect known as *Bureaucratese*.

bold declarations of the blindingly obvious. Omit sentences that contain a sentiment too obvious to warrant mention, or which assert a slogan that's utterly devoid of useful meaning. For example, avoid: "The Internet is getting bigger every day" or "With the right tools, you can do any job" or "Knowing how to fix an issue will save you time and money." Similarly, do not simply assert statements that are logically true (or logically false) but otherwise convey no actionable information. Employ the double-whiskey test: If, after having enjoyed a double, you were to boldly declaim the sentence to a bartender, strike the sentence if the bartender cuts you off.

consistency. Stories set in invented universes may follow any physics they like, but whatever physics they adopt must be honored consistently throughout the story.

definition ledes. Except in rare contexts, starting an essay or an opinion column with a definition results in uninspiring prose that, structurally, proves susceptible to weakly developed arguments. In particular, avoid definition ledes that *literally* paste citations from the dictionary or Wikipedia.

descriptions/show-don't-tell. In fiction writing, the deployment of descriptions is more of an art than a science. However, two general points govern. First, the front-loading of description tends to draw a reader out of the story and facilitate "purple" prose. For example, avoid: "Gabrielle sighed, brushing her shoulder-length auburn hair over one shoulder and squinting her hazel eyes. Her face, round and tan, telegraphed her frustration just as cleanly as the tapping of her two-inch-long lacquered nails did, upon the desktop. She straightened her blouse—a white silk short-sleeved garment she acquired on sale from Macy's a week before—and smoothed the lines from her black linen slacks." In addition, resist the temptation to "tell" instead of to "show." For example, instead of writing: "Nellie was a fat old woman who rarely bathed," write: "Nellie was so focused on folding her walker as she spilled into both handicap seats that she was unprepared for the sudden forward lurch of the bus. She grabbed wildly for the armrest. Bob would have laughed at the sight of her wrinkled arms flailing in the air had he not been overwhelmed by the stale, pungent odor released from her armpits as she struggled."

ellipses. An ellipsis denotes omitted content. The use of ellipses in fiction to indicate a trail-off in speech is wildly overdone. It's rarely necessary to signal a trail-off in speech; allow the reader to infer this point. In those rare cases where the author *must* indicate a trail off, do so in narration: "'I'm not sure what I think,' Amanda said, her voice fading into a whisper." As a rule of thumb: Use an ellipsis no more than once every 50k words of fiction.

empathetic ledes. Avoid contrivances that speculate or assert the reader's emotional or mental state; they may strike enlightened readers as vapid or condescending. For example, avoid: "You may be frustrated if your blender doesn't work, but fortunately, there's an easy solution."

false absolutes. Use necessary and appropriate qualifications to avoid false assertions that are false solely because the statement is presented as an absolute. For example, "Hackers want to steal your identity" is better as "Some hackers want to steal your identity."

fragments. In fiction, sentence fragments can sometimes be used to great effect, particularly in dialogue, but their use should be minimized in narration. Stories larded with fragments are often difficult to read.

gender-neutral language. Although from a strictly conservative view of the language, masculine pronouns used with antecedents of mixed or unknown sex aren't considered *masculine* pronouns (the masculine gender is used

because English lacks a common gender, and this common-gender usage strips the male-ness from the masculine gender), many contemporary readers resist the syntactically proper but culturally dated use of the masculine-preferred construction. To avoid alienating these readers, it's acceptable to use approaches including the alternation of masculine and feminine pronouns, pluralizing sentences, or avoiding the use of pronouns altogether. Stylistically, each of these solutions presents positives and negatives; the writer's job is to effect prose that's easy to parse, without euphemism or circumlocution or cumbersome pronoun pairings. It is *not* acceptable, however, to employ plural pronouns with singular antecedents. For example, avoid "When a student gets sick, they must report to the nurse." Acceptable alternatives include, "When students fall ill, they must report to the nurse," or "When a student gets sick, he or she must report to the nurse." Alternating masculine and feminine pronouns should be done with care; this technique works best at the level of discrete paragraphs or section blocks, rather than a sentence level, to avoid confusing the reader. Repeated use of "he or she" is now considered inartful when written to excess, although it's acceptable in one-off situations featuring a single pronoun reference. Likewise, relying on *she* alone is just as problematic as relying on *he* alone. It's no longer considered appropriate in any context to use slashed constructions like *s/he* and it's not yet standard English to use alternative pronouns like *xe*.

generic statements. Aim for prose that relays facts or value propositions and avoid sweeping or vague claims. For example, in a letter to small-business owners, avoid, "Failing to pay your taxes could get you into legal trouble" and instead write, "Failing to pay your taxes could subject you to felony prosecution leading to incarceration, fines and interest penalties."

generic time references. Constructions like *quickly*, *easily*, *in a flash*, *instantly*, *automatically*, *rapidly* and the like—basically, indicating that something will happen in a short but non-enumerated amount of time—generally aren't helpful. Either quantify the time or strike the otherwise unnecessary modifier.

hypothetical ledes. Avoid painting a scenario to introduce a concept, especially when the scenario is merely sloppy filler that references the reader. For example, avoid: "If you've ever seen an oval icon on your screen, you may be wondering what it means." If the reader's answer is, "Well, not really," then he may well disengage from the content. Hypothetical constructions number among the weakest of rhetorical strategies because they're very difficult to pull off without sounding trite or potentially alienating attentive readers. Furthermore, hypotheticals assert a use case on the readers' behalf, but it's generally better to share information neutrally and let the reader draw his or her own level of relative value from the content.

knowledge ledes. In general, it's not helpful to close an essay's introduction with a generic statement in the form of "Knowing X will help you Y" or "You should know …." In most cases, sentences of that type can be deleted entirely, leading to a more concise overview of your short-form content. (*see* KEEP IN MIND, above)

litanies. Resist the temptation to provide several two- or three-item lists in adjacent sentences, to reduce the sing-song feel to your prose. This instruction applies most fervently to the unnecessarily redundant pairing of synonyms. For example, avoid: "The instant-message or chat address will never need to be updated or changed in your database or spreadsheet."

manuscript formatting. Unless otherwise requested by a particular market, it's considered standard practice to submit manuscripts with 1-inch margins, 11- or 12-point conventional serif fonts (e.g., Times New Roman) and double-spaced. Use a header as needed with a page number, the author's last name and an abbreviated form of the title of the work. Begin the piece on the first page, 1/3rd down, with the title and the author's name. As a rule, it's never acceptable to submit single-spaced documents, documents with very wide or very narrow margins, or documents with non-standard fonts like Comic Sans or—*mon Dieu!*—Comic Papyrus.

marketing spiel. Common patterns of usage shape most inattentive writers' perception of syntactical fitness. The ubiquity of marketing language in recent years has therefore trained writers to compose in manner sometimes inappropriately similar to ad copy. For example, service journalism writers are more willing than they ought to use empty adverbs or assert benefit ("Doing X will save you time and money") absent a factually demonstrated value proposition. Unless you're deliberately writing ad copy, don't write ad copy.

misplaced modifiers. Place adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases adjacent to their antecedents to reduce confusion about your intended meaning or find alternative constructions to eliminate ambiguity. For example, "Sharon placed the coffee cup in the sink without rinsing it" is confusing: Was the cup, or the sink, not rinsed? Better as "Sharon placed the un-rinsed coffee cup in the sink."

navigation. It's rarely necessary to include spatial references to content. For example, a litany of *as mentioned previously* or *read on to learn more* or *in this guide* or *see below* offers little beyond padded word count. If inline navigation aids genuinely prove useful, mark them on the Web through anchor links or in print through admonition blocks.

punctuation in manuscripts. In general, authors should select an authority (e.g., Chicago or the Associated Press) and remain consistent with its rules about punctuation. Most non-fiction writing (journalism, service journalism, technical manuscripts) default to the AP's rules, while some professional writing and creative writing defaults to Chicago. In the AP setting:

- Serial commas (also called Oxford commas) are *not* accepted
- Punctuation falls within quotes
- Single quotes are never used to offset direct or mental speech
- An *en dash* is slightly longer than a hyphen and it's used to represent a range, whereas an *em dash* is the longest dash, which is used for indicating a break or an aside
- Ellipses should be sparingly used, and primarily to indicate omission within direct quotes
- Numbers are spelled out less than 10 (use figures above 10); weights/ages always use figures
- Colons announce a series or a quote or (occasionally) an independent clause
- Italics are used to show emphasis (sparingly) and to offset mental speech

rhetorical questions. As a rule, in short-form non-fiction writing, do not use rhetorical questions. The technique is viewed, with justification, as empty filler.

sexual assault. It's a distressingly common trope for some writers to create tension or conflict by introducing a sexual assault into the plot in the absence of any other mechanism to advance the story. Often, the character assaulted seems to magically get over it by the next scene. ***Sexual violence is never an acceptable literary device for extricating yourself from a plot hole***.

speech attribution. Speech-attribution tags generally aren't optional. For both fiction and non-fiction writing, the general convention is to use a name and then a verb: *"Close the door," Tyrone said.* Avoid using the verb and then the name; for example, do not routinely write: *"I am hungry," said Aki.* In non-fiction writing, quoted speech is usually followed by an appositive identifying the source, in which case leading with the verb is acceptable: *"The president has a full schedule today," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary*. In U.S. fiction writing, however, quoted speech generally follows several standard rules:

- Use a speech tag to reflect changes in speaker unless context alone is sufficient to clearly identify a change in speaker—do not rely exclusively on a nearest-verb rule to convey the speaker's identity.

- Use double quotes for speech, single quotes for indirect speech (i.e., speech-within-speech), and italics for mental speech; never use single quotes for direct or mental speech.
- Only one speaker per paragraph.
- Speech broken into several paragraphs, but from the same speaker, uses a quote mark at the beginning of each quoted paragraph, but without a closing quote mark until the final paragraph.
- Introduce a speech tag after the first sentence or clause; do not wait until the end of the paragraph.
- Punctuation goes inside the quotation mark—almost no exceptions to this rule.

stereotype. Watch for characters whose personae or roles in a story closely mirror a stereotype about that role or persona. For example, not all obese people are lazy and not all heroes are beautiful. Nor are all villains necessarily cruel.

third person. Avoid unnecessary use of the third person in reference to your readers.

titles. In general, specific titles preceding a person's name are capitalized, but titles used in apposition or without a specific person's name are rendered in lower case. Generic terms like *manager*, *director*, *vice president* and *supervisor* rarely get capitalized; however, terms in titles that refer to specific named entities and are not generic should be capitalized because they're proper nouns. For example, write: "Helen Sanchez, the director of operations, met with Yvonne Washington, the vice president of the Executive Concierge Services department."

unnecessary modifiers. Limit the frequency of adjectives and adverbs unless the words provide genuine context essential to the meaning of the sentence. Most of these words can be removed without affecting meaning.

user-interface positioning. In most short-form, how-to content about consumer technology, it's rarely necessary to specify the location of a user-interface element, because UI design can change (leading to content that's no longer evergreen) and because the user may have customized the application or operating environment in ways not anticipated by the writer. For example, avoid, "Click the *Save* button in the upper-right corner of the screen" in favor of, "Click the *Save* button." The rare exception to this rule rests with content that focuses on changes in UI — e.g., an article explaining the differences between iterations of the Windows 10 Settings app between semiannual feature releases.

verbs. Favor the use of a single, well-chosen verb instead of a simple verb that requires supporting clauses or prepositional phrases to completely express the concept. For example, "Don was killed after having been deliberately pushed out of an open window by an unhappy contributor" is rendered more poetic and powerful as "A disgruntled donor defenestrated Don." Some writers use primarily "ESL verbs," which are verbs that are simple and common and taught in English as a Second Language programs. However, ESL verbs require additional phrases or clauses to fully flesh out meaning. Language that has a very low ratio of concepts to syllables may strike informed readers as being too simplistic, with the attendant risk that the reader will not trust or respect the quality of the writer's work. In your prose, look for each occurrence of *is*, *have*, *can*, *should* and *will* to identify whether an alternative verb offers greater utility.

world-historical forces. Avoid the trope of "as the world evolves" or "as things move faster" or "in an age/era of," as if some sort of world-historical force is in play that secretly governs whatever mundane material is the subject of the sentence. This kind of exposition adds no value and undermines the writer's authority. (*see* IN AN AGE/ERA OF, above)

Voice

agency. The use of metonymy (substituting one object with a related object, as in calling a businessman a "suit") offers plenty of creative opportunity, but when taken to excess, it can create agency errors. Consider this example passage: "The door slammed, sending a loud clang throughout the cellblock. Bob's eyes scanned the room, looking for danger. Suddenly, a knife slashed from between two bars, almost nicking his forearm." The door, the eyes and the knife are inaccurately presented as autonomous agents. This writing might work in specific contexts, but when these tropes appear frequently, the reader (correctly) questions the writers' competence.

appropriation. Drink deeply from the well of your own experiences before you presume to write from the experiences of others. Although all fiction writers invent their narrative universe, realistic fiction demands that the narrative universe cohere to the readers' real-life world. As such, writing from social or cultural contexts foreign to the author can introduce a degree of friction from the imperfect application of that context as mediated by the author. Increasingly, publishers hire "sensitivity readers" to check for signs of cultural appropriation on a deep textual level. Fiction is made up; fiction informed by the author's expertise and experiences tends to be more powerful than fiction informed by stereotype, because the voice is more authentic to the context. Appropriate the experiences of others at your (increasing) peril.

character mediation. In fiction, remain alert for passages where an ordinary fact about the world is presented through a character's senses instead of as an assertion in narration, when the character's perception is irrelevant to the fact being relayed. For example, instead of writing, "She felt herself step on a rock," write instead, "She stepped on a rock." Mediating facts isn't inherently problematic, but the writer's mode of relaying a fact (i.e., through narration or through a character) isn't without consequence, and so should be done deliberately.

character names. English does not admit to infinite coherent combinations of vowels and consonants. Some authors, particularly of sci-fi, horror and dystopian fiction, favor character and place names that "sound" exotic. However, if it's not immediately obvious that there's one right way to pronounce a name, then many readers will be turned off by the discordance. It's okay to sometimes feature characters named *Ted* or *Sally* instead of defaulting to *V'Qishnothhz* or *Aebeailla*. Avoid inventing names unless you're deeply acquainted with modern theories of phonics, and avoid "creative" re-spellings of common names (e.g, *Jayinne* for *Jane*) if you want to be taken seriously as an author.

character voice. Different characters should have distinct voices. A *voice* in this context consists of a pattern of thought patterns, motivations, assumptions, speaking rhythms and emotional responses.

close third-person narration. In a close style of third-person narration, the line between the point-of-view character and the narrator tends to blend. This type of writing is very difficult to execute successfully; most early-career authors have not mastered it. Stories written in a close third person should be carefully edited to disambiguate genuine narration from the POV character's inner speech.

motivation. Almost no real person—and certainly almost no fictional character—does things for just one reason. Master the basics of moral philosophy or moral psychology to craft better-developed conflicts to drive your story. Multivariate motivation remains a deep font of possibility for crafting compelling stories.

narrative intrusion. In literary fiction, watch for the lit-fic version of the info dump: Using the narrator to add occasional sentences that summarize what the POV character thinks or feels, or offers a snippet of backstory. This "David Attenborough narrates the scene" style of writing offers too many distractions from the flow of the scene's action.

speaker's tics. Very few people speak the same way, using the same vocabulary and sentence structure and narrative rhythm. As such, vary the speaking patterns of—at a minimum—main characters, so they develop as genuine characters as well as differentiate from other characters and from the narrator. Avoid, however, intense use of filler words (*um*, *ah*, *okay*) and heavy dialect.

tonal consistency. Aim for characters whose inner dialogue is appropriate to their personality as well as to the situation. A sure sign of an inexperienced author consists in a main character whose inner monologue is consistently witty or sarcastic regardless of the character's circumstances. This phenomenon appears frequently in young-adult fiction, where the underdog hero's mental witticisms while being bullied, for example, aren't aligned to the physical and psychological responses a genuinely bullied child might endure.

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