

This Tip Sheet presents a short style guide for writing. Suggestions are offered on how to say it simply. Media-related terms are defined. Gender problems are sorted out. Misspelled and misused words are reviewed. Finally, tips are presented on using abbreviations, numbers, capitalization, punctuation, compound words, hyphens, plurals and singulars.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 7:

A WRITER'S STYLE GUIDE

BY

John A. Giachino
Chair, FWEA Public Education Committee

To some, writing come naturally. It is a struggle for others. When it comes to composition, one must first know the rules to break them. So knowing the rules of usage and principles of composition that are most commonly violated should help the writer. A classic reference book for up-and-coming writers is *The Elements of Style: A Style Guide for Writers* by William Strunk, Jr. The following good writing suggestions are culled from this excellent source. Although you are on your own to develop inspiration, these style tips should make writing a less excruciating experience for you. Always try to apply Strunk's Rule #12, which says, "Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, non-committal language," while striving to say it simply.

Say It Simply

Good writing is simple wording that expresses ideas clearly and succinctly. Follow these guidelines.

- ◆ Be clear.
- ◆ Write in a way that comes naturally.
- ◆ Plan what you want to say -- and hold to it.
- ◆ Omit needless words.
- ◆ Avoid using qualifiers.
- ◆ Avoid injecting opinion, except when it is appropriate to do so.
- ◆ Do not overwrite; do not explain too much.
- ◆ Do not overstate.
- ◆ Use the active voice.
- ◆ Put statements in positive form.
- ◆ Use definite, specific, concrete language.
- ◆ Express like ideas in similar form.
- ◆ Keep related words together.
- ◆ Keep to one tense.
- ◆ Place yourself in the background.
- ◆ Write with nouns and verbs.

- ◆ Use preferred spellings (appears first in a dictionary).
- ◆ Avoid constructing awkward adverbs.
- ◆ Use figures of speech sparingly.
- ◆ Avoid foreign phrases or terms.
- ◆ Revise and rewrite.

Media-Related Terms

Since we often communicate with or about the media in our industry, here are some related pointers.

The media are plural. A newspaper is a *medium*. Newspapers and magazines are *media* (not medias). References to *the media* should be used carefully and only in limited cases where generalizations apply to about all forms of communication media (print, broadcast, internet-related). In most cases, it's better to be more specific. Refer to the *news media, newspapers, radio, television*, etc.

Public relations workers are *practitioners*. PR (no periods) is acceptable as a second reference or as an adjective, but is never a verb.

Spell out television in first references. TV is acceptable as a shortened second reference. Spell advertising and advertisements correctly. The term ad is acceptable, but make sure that the meaning is clear.

Use italics to indicate the title of books (e.g. *The Elements of Style: A Style Guide for Writers*). Use underlining if italics are not available.

Use quotation marks around the titles of TV or radio shows, movies, plays, poems, songs, or works of art as in "60 Minutes."

Capitalize and punctuate the titles of media works according to the official title. Short articles, conjunctions and pronouns generally should be lower case.

Gender Problems

Do not use masculine pronouns (*he, his, him, himself*) when the person could be either male or female. Consider these options:

- ◆ Rewrite the sentence to eliminate the pronoun.
- ◆ Use a genderless word (person, one, individual).
- ◆ Use the in place of his or hers. As an example, a journalist uses the skills instead of his skills.
- ◆ Or use the (sometimes awkward) phrase he or she.

Don't mix singular and plural to avoid a gender-specific pronoun.

Wrong: The instructor is responsible for ordering books for their class.

Right: The instructor is responsible for ordering books for the class.

Avoid gender references in job titles. Write news persons, not newsmen.

Beware of other unintended gratuitous or stereotypical descriptions of people based on gender, age, ethnicity, handicap or sexual preference.

Misspelled Words

Always spell-check -- and proof read. I'll say it again. *Always spell-check -- and proof read.* Watch for these commonly misspelled words:

accede, adherence, advertise, adviser, accommodate, afterward (no s), anyone, benefiting, berserk, blond (male), blonde (female), buses, cigarette, consensus, controversy, descendant, disastrous, dissension, divisive, embarrass, fulfill, goodbye, grammar, hemorrhage, indispensable, innocuous, irresistible, judgment, liaison, likeable, liquefy; marshal, miniature, minuscule, occasion, occurred, parallel, pastime, permissible, personnel, picnicking, politicking, pompons, privilege, questionnaire, queue, recommend, reconnaissance, restaurateur, sacrilegious, seize, separate, siege, sizable, specter, strict, supersede, toward (no s), tumultuous, vacuum, vice versa, weird, wield.

Misused Words

Choose words carefully and precisely. Avoid jargon or a needlessly technical term or complicated phrasing if simpler wording would do. Beware of these commonly misused words. When in doubt, consult a dictionary.

accept, except	adverse, averse	affect, effect
already, all ready	allusion, illusion	alter, altar
amid (not amidst)	awhile, a while	biannual, biennial
canvas, canvass	composed of, comprised	ensure, insure
between, among	can, may, might	connote, denote
complement, compliment	council, counsel, consul	eminent, imminent
everyday, every day	faze, phase	fewer, less
flier, flyer	former, latter	farther, further
imply, infer	it's, its	lie, lay
like, as	majority, plurality	oral, verbal
people, persons	pretext, pretense	principal, principle
precede, proceed	reluctant, reticent	their, there, they're
underway, under way	who, whom	who's, whose
which, that		

Abbreviations

Generally avoid abbreviations in text. Some exceptions:

- ◆ Abbreviate certain months of the year when used with a specific date: Sept. 19, 1994. But spell out: September 1994. Abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec. Always spell out: March, April, May, June and July.
- ◆ Abbreviate avenue, boulevard and street when used with an address: 123 S. Main St. Spell out: 100 block of South Main Boulevard. Do not abbreviate alley, drive, road, or terrace. Use single letters for address directions: N., E., W., S.
- ◆ Abbreviate states when used with towns or cities: Tallahassee, Fla. But: She lives in Florida. State abbreviations are: Ala., Ariz., Ark., Calif., Colo., Conn., Del., Fla., Ga., Ill., Ind., Kan., Ky., La., Md., Mass., Mich., Minn. Miss., Mo., Mont. Neb., Nev. N.H., N.J., N.M., N.Y., N.C., N.D., Okla., Ore., Pa., R.I., S.C., S.D., Tenn., Va., Vt., Wash., W.Va., Wis., Wyo. Spell out Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas, Utah.
- ◆ Use the full, official name of an organization or unit on the first reference, then shorten it in subsequent references: Example: the Department of Environmental Protection, then the department (lower case preferred). Also spell out the first time any word, name or title that is to be used repeatedly in shortened form. Then use the short form consistently. Example: the Metropolitan Transit Authority, then the Metro.
- ◆ Avoid unfamiliar acronyms by finding an alternative. As an example, write the district, not SFWMD, when referring to South Florida Water Management District. Exceptions might include well-known acronyms: EPA, FSU, NASA, etc.
- ◆ Avoid Mr., Mrs. and Ms. Refer to an individual's last name only. Use these abbreviated titles before proper names in first references only: Gov., Lt. Gov., Rep., the Rev., Sen. Use Dr. only when referring to medical doctors, dentists, or veterinarians.

Numbers

Treat numbers consistently. Generally, spell out whole numbers less than 10, and use figures for numbers of 10 or more. Example: During the first four months, 11 inches of rain fell. Other tips include:

- ◆ Use figures for dates: April 2, 1995. Do not use April 2nd or April second.
- ◆ Use numerals for all addresses: 2 N. Main St.
- ◆ Write from April 10 *to* April 20, not from April 10-20. Similarly, write from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., not from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. (Not 6:00 p.m.). Use a.m. or p.m. (lower case, note periods). Avoid references to *o'clock*, or redundancies such as *in the morning* when a time is given.
- ◆ Write A.D., B.C., 21st century in most uses. Hyphenate an inclusive period of years and don't repeat the century: 1994-95.
- ◆ For monetary amounts of a million dollars or more, use the dollar sign and arabic number, and spell out million, billion or trillion like \$7.6 billion. Write out: \$245,000 (not \$245 thousand). Avoid unneeded decimals for cents: \$2 (not \$2.00).

Capitalization

Use lower case, instead of initial capital letters, whenever possible. Examples include the president, the governor, the university and the company. Capitalize names, such as academic disciplines (Department of Engineering) or units within an organization (Office of Public Information) only when these appear in their full official form. Otherwise use the history department or public information office.

Capitalize an official title if it precedes a name. Use lower case when the title follows the name as in the case of President Ken Rearden or otherwise Ken Rearden, president of FWEA. Don't capitalize unofficial or merely descriptive titles used before a name like in executive manager Holly Hanson.

Punctuation

Always place the period inside the ending quotation mark whenever a quotation is at the end of a sentence: He said, "Of course."

Place question marks and exclamation marks inside or outside of the quotation mark, depending on the way they are used. If the mark refers to the quoted material put it inside. If part of the larger sentence in which the quoted material appears put it outside. As an example, he said, "Of course"? I responded, "Yes!"

Avoid a final comma in a series of three words or phrases, unless the meaning would be unclear. Example: 1, 2 and 3. Use commas sparingly, but insert one wherever necessary to help the reader understand the sentence: ...and a one, and a two, and a three!

Hyphens and Compound Words

The trend in modern usage is away from the use of hyphens. Words beginning with short prefixes, such as co-, de-, pre-, pro-, post- and re- are generally spelled as part of the word they modify, without hyphens. As examples, codependent, devalued, predisposed, etc. With other prefixes, use a hyphen to avoid doubling a vowel or tripling a consonant: Example: hall-like, anti-inflationary.

Use hyphens where two or more hyphenated compounds have a common basic element that is omitted in one or more of the terms. Example: three- or four-member committee. Prefixes that generally require hyphens include: ex-, self-, non-, and quasi-.

Plurals and Singulars

Form the plurals of most proper nouns by adding s; if the name ends in s, add es: Example: The Grays visited the Joneses.

Avoid an apostrophe when forming the plurals of numbers or letters used as words: Example: the 1950s, the ABCs. Exception: Use an apostrophe if the s alone might be confusing: three Ph.D.'s or dot the i's and cross the t's.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>