

# WRITING RESOURCE MANUAL

*Are you looking to step-up your editing game or feeling stuck and trying to find inspiration?*

*This manual has everything from style tips and a punctuation guide to a handy resource list where you can get even more writing support.*

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# FREQUENTLY CONFUSED WORDS

## **advice, advise**

Advice is an “opinion about what should be done.” Example: She gives good advice.

Advise means “to recommend.” Example: Please advise me on which college to attend.

Note: “please be advised” and “please advise” are considered old-fashioned, stilted and unnecessary. Passing on knowledge and asking for instruction are not the same as giving or requesting advice.

## **affect, effect**

Most commonly, affect is used as a verb that means “to influence” and effect as a noun that means “a result.”

Examples: Do not let the loss affect you. The loss did not have an effect on me.

Remember: If something affects you, it has an effect on you.

However, sometimes affect can be a noun to mean someone’s mood, and effect is used as verb meaning “to bring about.”

Examples: He has a flat affect. We want to effect change on campus.

## **assure, insure, ensure**

To put someone’s mind at rest, you assure that person of something.

Right: “I assure you that we will handle this problem.”

Wrong: “We want to assure the best possible outcome.”

You insure something to be prepared in case something bad happens. You take steps to ensure that something will (or won’t) happen:

Examples: “I insure my house against water and fire damage.” “I carry snacks in the car to ensure that I will have snacks if I get stuck in traffic.”

Remember: You insure to protect. You ensure to make sure.

## **aw, awe**

Aw is what you say about something cute. Awe is reverential respect.

Example: “Aw, that’s adorable. I’m in awe of how clever you are.”

## **ball, bawl**

A ball is a round object. To bawl means to sob furiously.

Example: “I bawled my eyes out when the ball hit me in the knee.”

# **FREQUENTLY CONFUSED WORDS CONTINUED:**

## **different from, different than**

Preferred style is different from. If you consider “is different” (be verb plus adjective) equals “differs” (verb), then from is natural – as in this differs from that, it is different from that.

## **fewer, less**

Fewer refers to items you can count individually. Use less to refer to a quality or quantity that is not counted individually. The only way something has “less calories” is if all the calories are operating at decreased capacity.

Example: She baked fewer pies than I did.

Example: The plate has less pie on it now that I ate a piece.

## **homophones**

Often when we type, we spell things phonetically or use a homophone (sound-alike word) rather than the correct word. Be careful with words like “threw/through” and “know/no.”

## **it's, its**

It's is the short form of “it is.” Example: It's (it is) in the dog house.

Its is a pronoun that shows ownership or possession. Example: The dog has its (belonging to it) own house.

Remember: the apostrophe shows that a letter – “i” – has been omitted. It's is always it is.

## **Nauseated, nauseous**

Nauseated means your stomach is upset. Something nauseous causes nausea.

Example: I am nauseated from standing next to a nauseous odor.

## **principal, principle**

A principal is the head of a school. A principle is an important fact or law.

Examples: The principal spoke to us today. The principle of democracy is important to us.

Remember: your principal is your PAL.

## **site, sight, cite**

Site means “location.” Sight means “something seen.” Cite means to quote or reference something.

Examples: They are shooting the movie on a great site. What a sight her face was! You will need to cite an example of how that works.

## **stationary, stationery**

Stationary means to be “standing still.” Stationery means “writing materials.”

Examples: Please remain stationary. They went to the store to buy some stationery.

Remember: “e” is in “letter” and in “stationery”; “a” is in “stand” and “stationary.”

## **FREQUENTLY CONFUSED WORDS CONTINUED:**

### **suppose, supposed, supposedly**

Suppose means “to guess or assume.” Supposed can mean “alleged,” or as a verb can mean “should.” There is no such word as “supposably,” – it’s “supposedly.”

Example: I suppose you think I’m gorgeous.

Examples: The supposed genius flunked his managerial accounting test. You are supposed to pay attention.

### **their, there, they’re**

Their is the possessive form of “they” that shows ownership. Example: Their flowers are gone.

There describes where something is. Example: Their flowers are there on the table.

They’re is a short form of “they are.” Example: They’re going to buy flowers.

### **weather, whether**

Weather means “conditions outdoors.” Example: The weather is terrible.

Whether is an expression of choice between two options. Example: I do not know whether I will stay home or go to school.

Note: you do not need to say “or not” with whether. It is implied. Example: “I don’t know whether to go.”

### **who’s, whose**

Who’s is a contraction for “who is.” Example: “Who’s coming with us?”

Whose means “belonging to whom.” Example: “Whose book is this?”

Remember: This is tricky. You note that apostrophes show possession, so it’s easy to think that who’s is possessive. Replace whichever form you use with “who is.” If it sounds right, then use who’s; if not, use whose. So, “Who is coming with us?” is right. “I don’t know who is this is” is wrong.

### **your, you’re**

Your is a form of “you” that shows ownership. Example: Your car is new.

You’re is a short form of “you are.” Example: You’re going to the store.

Remember: the apostrophe shows that a letter has been omitted. Replace the phrase with “you are” and see which one works.

### **complement, compliment**

Complement means “to make complete.” Example: This hat will complement my new outfit.

A compliment is something said in praise. Example: Thanks for the compliment on my dress.

Remember: “I” like compliments. “Complement” comes from “complete.”

### **than, then**

Than means “in comparison with.” Example: He is bigger than I am.

Then means “next.” Example: After going home, he then started his assignment.

## Period [.]

### 1. Use a period to show the end of a sentence.

Gator football is a popular sport in Tallahassee.

### 2. Use a period after certain abbreviations.

It is 4 p.m. in Pittsburgh right now.

*Note:* AP style is to punctuate times without “:00” after the number: 4 p.m., not 4:00 p.m. When you use the month and day, abbreviate longer months (Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec.), and use only the number, not “-nd” or “-st” or “-th” after the number: Sept. 1, not September 1st. It’s a good idea to include the day of the week too: Monday, April 8.

## Question Mark [?] and Exclamation Mark [!]

### 1. Use a question mark at the end of a sentence to show a direct question.

How many Carnegie Mellon students does it take to screw in a light bulb?

### 2. Use an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence to show surprise or excitement.

We won the national championship!

## Comma [,]

### 1. Use a comma to show a pause in a sentence.

Therefore, not everyone will be attending.

### 2. Use a comma with quotation marks to show what someone has said directly.

“I can tell you how I did it,” she said, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

### 3. Use commas for listing three or more items.

Thank you for your support of our faculty, staff and students.

*Note:* AP style is to punctuate serial commas as A, B and C, not A, B, and C. Other styles differ. Choose one and be consistent.

### 4. Use commas around relative clauses that add extra information to a sentence.

Patricia, who is the vice president’s administrative assistant, is widely known for her patience and diplomacy.

# **PUNCTUATION CRASH COURSE CONTINUED:**

## **Apostrophe [']**

**1. Use an apostrophe to show ownership of something. For nouns in plural form, put the apostrophe at the end of the noun.**

Examples: These are the professor's books. (books that belong to the professor)  
These are the professors' books. (books that belong to professors)

**2. Add apostrophe plus s ('s) to form the possessive of singular words except when pronunciation would be difficult. Then, put an apostrophe at the end of the word (s').**

the car of Ms. Jones = Ms. Jones's car  
the dial on a phone = a phone's dial  
a vacation of one week = a week's vacation  
Exceptions: Jesus' teachings, Charles' xylophones

**3. Use an apostrophe to show letters that have been left out of a word.**

*Note:* Do not use apostrophes to show plural – "Ham's are on sale today" or "The Smith's live here." The Smith family = The Smiths. Their house is the Smiths' house. But Mr. Meyers and his family are the Meyerses, which sounds awkward. Best to go with the Meyers family.

## **Quotation Marks [“ ”]**

**1. Use quotation marks to show what someone has said directly.**

Examples: Pee Wee Herman said, "If you love fruit salad so much, why don't you marry it?"  
"I thought I had mono once," Garth said, "but it turns out I was just bored."

*Note:* Be careful not to "overuse" quotation marks. They do not "add" emphasis. They only "distract" from readability.

## **Colon [:]**

**1. Use a colon to introduce a list of things after a complete sentence.**

Correct – George Forman has four sons: George, George, George and George.  
Incorrect – George Forman's four sons are: George, George, George and George.

**2. Use a colon to introduce a long quotation.**

Barney has been known to sing this song: "I love you. You love me. We're a happy family."

## **Semicolon [;]**

**1. Use a semicolon to join related sentences.**

Homecoming is one of my favorite events; I just love it when they crown the queen.

**2. Use a semicolon in lists that already have commas.**

Our children are Ryan, 25; John, 20; Melody, 13; and Merry Glynn, 11.

# **PUNCTUATION CRASH COURSE CONTINUED:**

## **Dash [-]**

### **1. Use a dash before a phrase that summarizes the idea of a sentence.**

Fat, bald and boring – that is how I'd describe my old boyfriends at my class reunion.

### **2. Use a dash before and after a phrase or list that adds extra information in the middle of a sentence.**

He will come back – I promise you this – but not until you refill the freezer with ice cream.

## **Hyphen [-]**

### **1. Use a hyphen to join two words that form one idea.**

Blue-eyed boy, fire-resistant toy

*Note:* do not hyphenate such phrases if they come AFTER the noun.

She is a long-legged girl. But... The girl is long legged.

I want an up-to-date report. This report is up to date.

The three-year-old house fell apart. The house is three years old.

### **2. Use a hyphen to join prefixes to words. A dash separates, a hyphen connects.**

Examples: anti-American, non-contact sport

*Note:* typographically, a dash is called an “em dash” and is made up of two hyphens, two “en dashes,” just like the letter “m” looks like “n” plus “n.”

## **Parentheses and Brackets [ ] ( )**

### **1. Use brackets when you need to include a phrase within them that uses parentheses.**

This situation happens mostly in scientific writing or references/citations. If you need them in regular prose, and things are that complicated, you probably need to rewrite your sentence.

### **2. Use parentheses to enclose words or figures that clarify or are used as an aside.**

Examples: Please pay me five hundred dollars (\$500). She sat down (after realizing her dress was ripped) and lost her balance on the chair.

*Note:* AP style discourages using parentheses to reference an abbreviation immediately after the full name – for instance, American Bottle Club (ABC). Oddly, some writers use the abbreviation then never refer to the entity again in their article. Usually readers are smart enough to figure out what the abbreviation is after you've named the entity, but this issue is a style preference. If you like it, leave it in. If you don't, leave it out.

Also, parentheses slow down a reader, so if you don't need them, don't use them. The second example could just as easily use commas.

# WORDS YOU ~~ALMOST NEVER~~ RARELY NEED

1. **"In order** to complete the project, collect plenty of specimens."  
What's lost if you leave out "in order"? Same for "in an effort to" and "is designed to."
2. "They serve 20 **different** kinds of pancakes."  
Of course they're different. "Kinds" means different.
3. "I **personally** have not had this experience."  
What does "personally" add? The contrast is implied: I haven't but others have.
4. "She spoke to **both** the fathers and the mothers of her students."  
At first, it sounds like "both the fathers," as in two fathers. It's not necessary; "both" is implied with "and."
5. **Intensifiers** define the degree of an adjective or another adverb and precede the adjective or adverb they modify: very, so, somewhat, quite, rather.
  - Instead of using an intensifier, strengthen the adjective or adverb: "speak aimlessly" becomes "jabber."
  - If it's cold, it's cold. "Very" cold doesn't make it seem any colder than just plain "cold" does. One newspaper editor suggests using "very" as you would "damn."
  - "So" should not be used as an intensifier. If you use it to show cause and effect, you also need a "that" (explicit or implied) clause:  
  
*Right:* The story was so depressing (that) I didn't even want to finish reading it.  
*Wrong:* Thank you so much.
6. "My favorite parts of **the** football games are the heat and **the** loud noises."  
Most of the time you can eliminate "the" in front of a plural noun – not always, but most of the time. Try it.
7. **"Per** our conversation, enclosed please find an application form."  
How about, "As we discussed, I am sending you the enclosed application form."
8. **That said, that having been said, with that having been said, at the end of the day.**  
At the end of the day, trendy is no substitute for clarity of thought – just so we're on the same page and thinking outside our boxes and comfort zones.
9. **Literally, extremely.**  
Literally means exactly, truly. It does not mean very. Extremely means to an extreme extent and thus has a negative connotation. It does not mean very. For instance, if Susan is extremely cautious in traffic, she probably will end up causing a wreck rather than preventing one.



The following list contains a few commonly mispronounced words:

## 1. Forte

"Public speaking is not my **forte**."

– Although it's not incorrect to pronounce this "FOR-tay," the preferred pronunciation is "FORT." "FOR-tay" is a musical dynamic meaning loud; "FORT" (still spelled with the silent "e") means "strong suit."

## 2. Mischievous

"Her little son is **mischievous**."

– The correct pronunciation is "MIS-chi-vus," not "mis-CHEE-vee-us." Remember the word comes from mischief (MIS-chuff).

## 3. Sherbet

Orange, lime and raspberry ice cream is "**sherbet**" not "sherbeRt." Remember: it's a sure bet. Sorbet (sor-bay) is another type of frozen deliciousness.

# SOME COMMON PITFALLS

## 1. Typos

To achieve perfect, typo-free articles, National Geographic editors proofread each article seven times. Did you proofread your paper more than once? Spell check isn't enough. "Public" and "pubic" are both words, but you don't want them confused.

To proof a paper follow these steps: read it out loud, read it backwards, then read it one line at a time. If you're brave, have someone else read it.

## 2. Not following directions and formatting instructions:

Make sure all letters are in the organizational template (margins, type face, point size).

## 3. Subject/verb agreement

To check out if what you have is correct, remove the extraneous phrase and replace the subject with a pronoun. If you use "they," then the verb is plural. If you use "it" or "s/he," then the verb is singular.

Example: "The loyalty and pride you have shown is an inspiration to us all."  
Take out the phrase "you have shown." What you have left is: "The loyalty and pride... (they) ARE..."

Technically, "none" is supposed to be singular, since it stands for "not one." So you end up with "none of us is going" which sound funny. Same with "any" (one) – you end up with "is any of you going" or "does any of you know," which also sound funny. Go with the version you're comfortable with.

## 4. Object form of pronouns: Again, take out the "and" part.

Example: "We had dinner with she and her husband on Sunday."  
"We had dinner with she."

# MISPLACED AND DANGLING MODIFIERS

*Think of a magnet. It draws whatever is closest to it. Same with modifiers. Misplaced modifiers are single words, phrases or clauses that do not point clearly to the word or words they modify. As a rule, related words usually should be kept together. Below are six tips for placing modifiers.*

## **1. Limiting modifiers (even, almost, just) should be in front of the words they modify.**

Wrong: You will only need to plant one seed package.

Better: You will need to plant only one seed package. ("Only" modifies "one," not "need.")

## **2. Place modifying phrases and clauses so readers can see at a glance what they modify.**

Wrong: The robber was described as a tall man with a black moustache weighing 150 pounds.

Better: The robber was described as a six-foot-tall man weighing 150 pounds with a black moustache. ("150 pounds" describes the man, not the moustache.)

## **3. Sentences should flow from subject to verb to object without lengthy detours along the way. When adverbs separate subject from verb, verb from object, or helping-verb from main-verb, the result can be awkward.**

Not great: John, after trying to reach the ball, decided to get a ladder.

Better: After trying to reach the ball, John decided to get a ladder. (Subject and verb are no longer separated.)

## **4. Infinitives (= "to" + verb) usually should not be split unless necessary, especially in formal writing. That rule has been greatly relaxed, though. (Notice how "has been relaxed" was just split!)**

Not great: The patient should try to, if possible, avoid going up and down stairs.

Better: If possible, the patient should try to avoid going up and down stairs.

## **5. Dangling modifiers are word groups (usually introductory) that may confuse some people if they fail to refer logically to any word in a sentence. Rewording a sentence may help clarify.**

Wrong: Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter happily pumped Joe's hand. (The recruiter is not deciding to join the navy; Joe is.)

Better: The recruiter happily pumped Joe's hand after learning that Joe had decided to join the navy.

## **6. Repair dangling modifiers by restructuring the sentence.**

Possibly unclear: When watching films, commercials are especially irritating.

a. One option would be to change the subject so that it names the actor that the modifier implies: When watching films, I find commercials especially irritating.

b. Another option would be to turn the modifier into a word group that includes the actor: When I am watching films, commercials are especially irritating.

## 1. Combine sentences.

- Take two sentences and make a compound sentence.
- Insert adjectives or adverbs to combine sentences.
- Use a prepositional phrase to combine sentences.
- List items in a series to combine sentences.

## 2. Vary sentence beginnings and length.

- Use a variety of parts of speech and grammatical forms to vary sentence beginnings.
- Short sentences have three to six words. The average sentence has about eight to 15 words. Long sentences can have 20 words or more.

## 3. Eliminate weak verb-adverb combinations.

An adverb modifies verbs, adjective or other adverbs, answering where, when, how and to what extent. Eliminate adverbs by identifying which question the adverb answers.

- The teacher looked menacingly (menacingly answers how) glared at the disruptive student hooligan.
- He foolishly invested in bad speculated in real estate.

## 4. Avoid “to be” verbs.

- Change the be verb to a strong verb:

Example: is afraid of = fears.

- Eliminate the be verb by writing one or more showing sentence.

Example: Alligators are mean.

The alligator, angry at being disturbed, lurched forward and swallowed the decoy. Unsatisfied, the grouchy gator swam circles around the boat and hissed at the hunters.

- Combine sentences to eliminate the be verb.

Example: The inefficient time manager is unfulfilled. He heads to bed, disappointed, despite having finished his to do list.

The inefficient time manager heads to bed, unfulfilled, having checked everything off on his unprioritized to do list.

## 5. Use strong verbs.

Example: “ate lunch quickly” = “devoured my lunch”

## 6. Pronouns and antecedents must be clear.

Too many pronouns can cause confusion. It’s better to repeat a name or noun than to write unclearly.

# RESOURCES

1. Read Adam Grant's article ["6 Ways to Get Me to Email You Back"](#) for tips on writing compelling emails.
2. Consider the following two articles to learn more about signal to noise ratio:
  - All Out Digital's article ["What is Signal to Noise Ration in Online Marketing?"](#)
  - Seth Godin's article ["Ranking for Signal to Noise Ratio"](#)
3. To learn more about attention spans read Christopher Hooton's article ["Our Attention Span is now Less Than That of a Goldfish."](#)
4. For a comprehensive resource on grammar visit [Purdue Owl's Online Writing Lab](#).
5. See Daniel T. Parker's article ["The Difference between Academic and Journalistic Writing"](#) to learn more about style.