

Basic Prose Style and Mechanics

Dr. Craig Waddell
Houghton, Michigan
© 2015

Introduction

This booklet is designed to introduce you to, or remind you of, the basic principles of prose style and mechanics. The basic prose style section describes 13 basic principles of good prose style and illustrates most of these principles with examples. Since many writers and editors agree about the importance of these basic principles (see the list of works cited), I have drawn from a wide variety of sources. However, I would especially recommend two texts: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White and *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace* by Joseph Williams.

All 13 principles described in the style section are based on one overriding principle—that the essence of good writing is rewriting. You may attend to some of these principles spontaneously when you compose your first draft, but stylistic considerations become more deliberate concerns when you work on second, third, and fourth drafts. Remember that good writing is hard work, and as Samuel Johnson said, “What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.”

The basic punctuation and mechanics section presents rules that govern the approximately 50 most common problems with punctuation and mechanics. Most of these rules are illustrated with examples, and many are cross-referenced with other rules with which they are frequently confused. This section is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th edition, generally considered the definitive reference on questions of punctuation and mechanics. For journalistic writing, I have indicated situations in which advice offered in *The Chicago Manual of Style* differs from that offered in *The Associated Press Stylebook*.

Contents

Basic Prose Style

1. Write in the Active Voice (4)
2. Avoid Nominalizations (5)
3. Express Parallel Ideas in Parallel Grammatical Form (7)
4. Place the Emphatic Words at the End of the Sentence (7)
5. Express Statements in Positive Form (8)
6. Vary Sentence Patterns (9)
7. Choose Your Words Carefully (10)
8. Avoid Overusing Word Modifiers (12)
9. Clarify the Logical Relationships among Your Ideas (13)
10. Prune Deadwood (14)
11. Avoid Redundancy (14)
12. Avoid Phrasal Verbs (15)
13. Use Metaphor to Illustrate (15)

Basic Punctuation and Mechanics

1. Commas (17)
2. Semicolons (18)
3. Colons (19)
4. Dashes (19)
5. Parentheses (20)
6. Ellipsis Dots (20)
7. Hyphens (21)
8. Apostrophes (21)
9. Italics (22)
10. Titles (22)
11. Numbers (22)
12. Quotation Marks (23)
13. Punctuating Quotations (24)
14. Introducing Indented Quotations, Vertical Lists, and Formulas (24)
15. Punctuating Vertical Lists (25)
16. Question Marks (26)
17. Exclamation Points (26)
18. Multiple Punctuation (26)

Works Cited (26)

Basic Prose Style

1. Write in the Active Voice

Unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, always choose the active, rather than the passive, voice. With the active voice, the agent (the person or thing carrying out the action expressed by the verb) is the subject:

John opened the door.

There are two types of passive voice constructions. In one, the agent is identified, but the person or thing toward which the action is directed (rather than the agent) is the subject of the sentence:

The door was opened by John.

In the second type of passive voice construction, the agent is not identified at all:

The door was opened.

(Note: The verb “to be” [am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been] often flags the passive voice.)

In addition to being less natural, less direct, and less vigorous, sentences that fail to identify an agent can raise ethical questions, since they fail to attribute responsibility for the action they express. The passive voice can, however, be an effective means of doing at least three things:

- a. Focusing attention on the thing acted upon:

The bus was destroyed by a freight train.

- b. Describing action when the agent is unknown or unimportant:

The building was demolished over fifteen years ago.

- c. Placing the agent at the end of a clause where he, she, or it can more easily be modified by a long modifier:

The house was built by John Hanson, who went on, years later, to become president of the Continental Congress.

Many science and technical writers once considered passive voice more objective than active voice and, hence, more appropriate to their writing. As the quotations below suggest, however, the traditional preference for passive voice in scientific and technical writing is changing:

We cannot object to this use of the passive construction in itself. We **can** object to its **abuse**—to use almost to the exclusion of all other constructions. When the passive is

used as a rule, not as an exception to obtain a particular effect, writing soon begins to seem forced and uncomfortable.

— John Kirkman, *Good Style: Writing for Science and Technology*

The active is the natural voice, the one in which people usually speak or write, and its use is less likely to lead to wordiness or ambiguity. The passive of modesty, a device of writers who shun the first-person singular, should be avoided. *I discovered* is shorter and less likely to be ambiguous than *it was discovered*. The use of *I* or *we*. . . avoids dangling participles, common in sentences written in the third-person passive.

— Council of Biology Editors, *CBE Style Manual*, 5th ed.

[Passive voice] implies that events take place without any one doing anything. Moves files, desks, and ideas without any assistance from a human being. Makes readers wonder whether they should be doing something or just sitting there waiting for the system to perform. It turns actions into states of being. It's somewhat mystical, but tends to put readers to sleep. . . .

To get more active, say who does what. Assign responsibility to the system or to the program or, if necessary, to the reader. If you have to tell readers to do something, don't pussyfoot around—tell them. (Are you slipping into the passive because you don't dare to order readers around?)

— Jonathan Price, *How to Write a Computer Manual*

2. Avoid Nominalizations

Unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, avoid nominalizations. A nominalization is a noun derived from and communicating the same meaning as a verb or adjective. It is usually more direct, vigorous and natural to express action in verbs and qualities in adjectives.

no: *Our expectation was that we would be rewarded for our efforts.*

yes: *We expected to be rewarded for our efforts.*

no: *There was a stuffiness about the room.*

yes: *The room was stuffy.*

Nominalizations frequently crop up in noun strings. A noun string, a series of nouns that modify one another, is often concise but ambiguous. If the noun string is short, it can usually be tamed with a few judicious hyphens:

no: *The test area probes were delivered last week.*

yes: *The test-area probes were delivered last week.*

Longer noun strings, however, are often confusing, and it is generally best to unstring them by converting nominalizations back to verbs or by adding a few strategic articles and prepositions:

no: *Missile guidance center office equipment maintenance is performed weekly.*

yes: *The office equipment in the missile guidance center is maintained weekly.*

Like passive voice, nominalizations can serve some useful purposes:

a. Nominalizations can facilitate smooth transitions between sentences by serving as subjects that refer back to ideas in previous sentences:

Susan refused to accept the five-stroke handicap. Ultimately, this refusal cost her the match.

b. Nominalizations can be effective when you choose to desensitize a statement by converting the more vigorous and direct verb form into the less vigorous and direct noun form. Thus,

He is scheduled to be executed on Monday.

becomes

His execution is scheduled for Monday.

c. Since nouns often name material things, they have a certain status in our culture, where the concrete often seems more real (hence, more credible) than the abstract. Therefore, although nominalizations often result in pompous and convoluted prose, they occasionally can be used to make the abstract seem more concrete and, perhaps, more convincing. Thus,

The colonists would not tolerate being taxed.

becomes

The colonists would not tolerate taxation.

Joseph Williams neatly sums up these first two principles (write in the active voice and avoid nominalizations): “Try to state who’s doing what in the subject of your sentence, and try to state what that who is doing in your verb. . . . Get that straight, and the rest of the sentence begins to fall into place” (*Style*, 1st ed., p. 8)

3. Express Parallel Ideas in Parallel Grammatical Form

Parallelism is the principle that units of equal function should be expressed in equal form. Repetition of the same structure allows the reader to recognize parallel ideas more readily:

no: *This could be a problem for both the winners and for those who lose.*

yes: *This could be a problem for both the winners and the losers.*

no: *Output from VM appears in the output display area. The input area is where commands typed by the user are displayed.*

yes: *Output from VM appears in the output display area. Commands typed by the user appear in the input display area.*

Note that any two (or more) units of discourse—words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters—can be made parallel with one another. Note also that, although it is a powerful rhetorical device, parallelism is only one of many factors writers must consider as they compose. Hence, parallelism is occasionally overridden by other, more-pressing considerations, such as clarity and variety.

4. Place the Emphatic Words at the End of the Sentence

Joseph Williams offers two complementary principles of order and emphasis (*Style*, 1st ed.):

1. Whenever possible, express at the beginning of a sentence ideas already stated, referred to, implied, safely assumed, familiar—whatever might be called old, repeated, relatively predictable, less important, readily accessible information.

2. Express at the end of a sentence the least predictable, least accessible, the newest, the most significant and striking information.

no: *Peter Laslett writes about how family structure has changed in his article, “The World We Have Lost.”*

yes: *In his article, “The World We Have Lost,” Peter Laslett writes about how family structure has changed.*

In the first version, the emphasis is on the title of the article; in the second version, the emphasis is on the substance of the article. Note that according to the two principles above, what justly needs emphasis in a sentence generally depends upon what has already been said or what is already known; that is, it depends upon the given information. When the given information is placed at the beginning of a sentence, it is understated and serves as a transition or introduction to the new information in the sentence, which is thereby emphasized.

What Haviland and Clark call the “Given-New Strategy” not only creates proper emphasis within a sentence, it also creates cohesion between sentences since the new information of one sentence often becomes the given (or old) information of the next. Schematically, the movement of given to new information in a series of sentences might look like this:

AB. BC. CD. DE.

Look, for example, at the following pair of sentences:

Lines that contain printer-control characters will not look right-justified on your screen. They will be right-justified, however, when you print them.

In the first sentence, the given information is lines (A), and the new information is right-justified (B). In the second sentence, the given information is right-justified (B), and the new information is when you print them (C).

Although the end of the sentence is generally the most emphatic position, as Strunk and White point out in *The Elements of Style*, “The other prominent position in the sentence is the beginning. Any element in the sentence other than the subject becomes emphatic when placed first: *Deceit or treachery he could not forgive.*”

A little bit of this inverted style, however, goes a long way—use it sparingly.

5. Express Statements in Positive Form

The positive form of a statement is generally more concise and straightforward than the negative:

no: *Don't write in the negative.*

yes: *Write in the affirmative.*

no: *Disengagement of the gears is not possible without locking mechanism release.*

yes: *To disengage the gears, you must first release the locking mechanism.*

As Joseph Williams points out, “To understand the negative, we have to translate it into an affirmative, because the negative only implies what we should do by telling us what we shouldn't do. The affirmative states it directly” (*Style*, 1st ed.).

Williams goes on to point out that we needn't translate every negative into an affirmative, for (as this sentence illustrates) we sometimes have a special reason to emphasize not, no, or never. The negative is especially effective when used as a means of denial, contradiction, or antithesis:

Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

6. Vary Sentence Patterns

A series of sentences that follow the same general pattern (e.g., a series of three or four simple sentences or a series of three or four compound sentences) can be tedious. Avoid monotony by varying sentence patterns.

One of the best ways to avoid a tedious series of simple sentences is to use subordination (or embedding) to combine the information presented in these sentences into a single, complex sentence. For example,

FLIST is a utility program used to assist in file management. FLIST displays a scrollable, full-screen list of selected files. The user may execute any CMS command from this list.

becomes

FLIST, a utility program used to manage files, displays a scrollable, full-screen list of selected files from which the user may execute any CMS command.

Another way to avoid a series of simple sentences is to use coordination (the tying together of language elements that have equal rank, such as independent clauses) to combine several of these sentences into a single, compound sentence. For example,

You can initialize CADAM from any System E terminal. You can invoke CADAM only from the 3178 terminals.

becomes

You can initialize CADAM from any System E terminal, but you can invoke CADAM only from the 3178 terminals.

Compound and complex sentences can themselves, however, become tedious. And sometimes, they're just plain awkward or confusing. Don't overload your sentences or your readers. If you find a sentence is becoming too long and confusing, or if you've used three or four complex sentences in a row, reverse the process described above and break your sentence up into several shorter sentences.

Note that although sentence variety is illustrated here only in terms of sentence type, this same principle applies to other sentence features, such as sentence openings and sentence length.

One of the best ways to discover problems with sentence variety is to read your writing aloud. Human language is primarily oral/aural and only secondarily graphic/visual; hence, most of us have a better ear for language than we have an eye for it. In fact, reading your writing aloud can help you discover problems not only with sentence variety but also with order and emphasis, parallelism, coherence, redundancy, syntax, rhythm, and grammar.

7. Choose Your Words Carefully

Linguists estimate that the English language includes over one million words, thus providing English speakers with the largest lexicon in the world. From this vast lexicon, writers may choose the precise words to meet their needs. The list below describes some of the factors you might consider in choosing, from among a number of synonyms or near synonyms, the word or phrase most appropriate to your purpose. Notice that the distinctions between these factors are not always sharp; some might properly be considered subsets of others. For example, tone, formality, and intensity might be considered subsets of connotation.

a. Connotation: While the literal or explicit meaning of a word or phrase is its denotation, the suggestive or associative implication of a word or phrase is its connotation. Words often have similar denotations but quite different connotations (due to etymology, common usage, suggestion created by similar-sounding words, etc.); hence, you might choose or avoid a word because of its connotation. For example, although one denotation of rugged is “strongly built or constituted,” the connotation is generally masculine; hence, you might choose to describe an athletic woman as athletic rather than rugged. Likewise, although one denotation of pretty is “having conventionally accepted elements of beauty,” the connotation is generally feminine; thus, most men would probably prefer being referred to as handsome.

b. Tone: While the denotation of a word expresses something about the person or thing you are discussing, the tone of a word expresses something about your attitude toward the person or thing you are discussing. For example, the following two sentences have similar denotations, but very different tones:

The senator showed himself to be incompetent.

The senator showed himself to be a fool.

c. Level of Formality: Some dictionaries indicate whether a word is formal, informal, vulgar, or obscene; most often, however, your own sensitivity to the language should be sufficient to guide you in making the appropriate choice for a given context. In writing a report about the symptoms of radiation sickness, for example, you would probably want to talk about “nausea and vomiting” rather than “nausea and puking.”

Be aware, however, that achieving an appropriate level of formality is as much a question of choosing less formal as it is of choosing more formal words. As Strunk and White point out, “Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready, and able.” And Joseph Williams adds, “When we pick the ordinary word over the one that sounds more impressive, we rarely lose anything important, and we gain the simplicity and directness that most effective writing demands” (*Style*, 1st ed.).

You might, for example, replace *initiate* with *begin*, *cognizant* with *aware*, and *enumerate* with *count*. Williams offers the following example and translation of inflated prose:

Pursuant to the recent memorandum issued August 9, 1979, because of petroleum exigencies, it is incumbent upon us all to endeavor to make maximal utilization of telephonic communication in lieu of personal visitation.

As the memo of August 9 said, because of the gas shortage, try to use the telephone as much as you can instead of making personal visits.

Remember, as Abraham Lincoln said, “You can fool all of the people some of the time, and you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” The more sophisticated your audience, the more likely they are to be put off, rather than impressed, by inflated prose.

d. Intensity: Intensity is the degree of emotional content of a word—from objective to subjective, mild to strong, euphemistic to inflammatory. It is common, for example, for wildlife managers to talk about harvesting deer rather than killing them. Choosing a less intense word or phrase can avoid unnecessarily offending or inciting your readers; however, it can also be a means of avoiding responsibility or masking the unsavory nature of the situation. As George Orwell says in “Politics and the English Language”: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. . . . Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness.”

Achieving the appropriate level of intensity is as often a question of choosing the more intense as it is of choosing the less intense word. Ultimately, you must rely upon your own sensitivity to the language, to your topic, and to your audience to guide you in making the appropriate choices for a given context.

e. Level of Abstraction: According to Strunk and White,

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on anyone point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers. . . are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

For example, if we move down in the hierarchy of abstraction from *thing* to *plant* to *tree* to *birch* to *gray birch*, we can see that each step offers the reader a clearer picture of what’s being discussed.

The general and the abstract *do* have their place. There are times, for example, when we want to talk about “humankind” or “life on Earth,” but it’s often wise to support the general with the specific, the abstract with the concrete: “Carl Sagan’s research suggests that a nuclear winter would destroy all life on Earth—every tree, every flower, every child.”

f. Sound: All other things being equal, you may want to choose one word rather than another simply because you like its sound. Although what you’re writing may never be read aloud, most

readers do “hear” what they read via an inner voice. Hence, the “sound” of your writing can add to or detract from its flow and, thus, influence the reader’s impression of what you’ve written.

g. Rhythm: Although rhythm is quantifiable, most writers rely on their ear for language to judge this aspect of their sentences. Like sound, rhythm in prose is often an “all-other-things-being-equal” consideration. That is, you wouldn’t want to choose the wrong word simply to improve the rhythm of your sentence. However, rhythm can contribute to the flow of your writing, and a sudden break in rhythm can create emphasis. Hence, you may choose one synonym over another simply because it has more or fewer syllables and, thus, contributes to the rhythm of your sentence. Even an occasional bit of deadwood may be justified if it contributes to the rhythm of your sentence.

Finally, note that rhythm is especially important in parallel structures and is often a factor in sentence-to-sentence flow; that is, you must read a sequence of sentences in context to judge their rhythm.

h. Repetition: Using the same word to refer to the same thing or idea is desirable when it contributes to transition and coherence. For example, substituting *commands* for *translators* in the second pair of sentences below provides a smoother transition:

This section describes the commands used for translating programs written in the four languages mentioned above. These translators create object-code files with a filetype of TEXT from programs written by the user.

This section describes the commands used for translating programs written in the four languages mentioned above. These commands create object-code files with a filetype of TEXT from programs written by the user.

Sometimes, however, repeating the same word can become awkward, tedious, or confusing. Alternating between a pronoun and its antecedent is one obvious way of avoiding the tedious repetition of the same word to refer to the same thing. You can usually help to avoid confusing your readers by not using the same word (or variations of the same word) to mean two different things in one sentence or in two closely related sentences:

no: Output from VM is displayed in the output-display area.

yes: Output from VM appears in the output-display area.

8. Avoid Overusing Word Modifiers

Avoid overusing adjectives and adverbs. These modifiers have their place, but in the most vigorous prose, action is expressed in verbs, and the agents of that action are expressed in nouns. This principle applies to both ornate, pompous modifiers and to such commonplace intensifiers as *really*, *pretty*, and *very*.

One of the best ways to avoid overusing modifiers is to select specific, self-modified nouns and verbs—ones that don't require adjectives and adverbs to supplement their meaning. For example, you might replace *long black car* with *limousine* or *ran very quickly* with *sped* or *bolted*.

9. Clarify the Logical Relationships among Your Ideas

In order to make your writing coherent and the transitions between your ideas smooth, you must clearly express or imply the logical relationships between your ideas. If you fail to do so, one idea is simply juxtaposed with another, and readers are left to make the logical connections for themselves. In this situation, experienced readers will suspect that you have not clarified the logical relationships between your ideas because you *don't know* what those relationships are—or worse, because there *aren't* any.

There are a variety of ways to express or imply logical relationships; some of the smoothest and most subtle use the very structure of the sentence. For example, you can use the principle of order and emphasis (see #4) to indicate that one part of the sentence is more important than another; you can use subordination (see #6) to indicate that one idea is less important than (or *subordinate* to) another; and you can use parallelism to indicate that two or more ideas are of equal importance.

You can also use punctuation to indicate the logical relationships between ideas. For example, you can use a colon to indicate that what follows is a further explanation of what's just been said; you can use commas to indicate whether or not a clause restricts the meaning of the sentence; and you can use dashes to indicate that the enclosed material is important to the discussion and should be emphasized.

Of the various means of establishing the logical relationships between ideas, the most blatant is the use of transitional devices, such as *therefore*, *thus*, *however*, and *hence*. These devices are more prevalent in analytical writing—where logical relationships are more important—than they are in narration or description. There is a point, however, at which such devices begin to be abused. Properly used, transitional devices signal logical relationships—they do not create them. In fact, there is no transitional device in the English language that can wrench two ideas into a logical relationship that simply doesn't exist. The table below (taken from the *Harbrace College Handbook*) lists eight logical relationships and some of the transitional devices that may be used to indicate each of them:

1. Addition: moreover, further, furthermore, besides, and, and then, likewise, also, nor, too, again, in addition, equally important, next, first, second, third, in the first place, in the second place, finally, last

2. Comparison: similarly, likewise, in like manner

3. Contrast: but, yet, and yet, however, still, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, even so, notwithstanding, for all that, in contrast to this, at the same time, although this may be true, otherwise

4. Place: here, beyond, nearby, opposite to, adjacent to, on the opposite side

5. Purpose: to this end, for this purpose, with this object

6. Result: hence, therefore, accordingly, consequently, thus, thereupon, as a result, then

7. Summary, repetition, exemplification, intensification: to sum up, in brief, on the whole, in sum, in short, as I have said, in other words, that is, to be sure, as has been noted, for example, for instance, in fact, indeed, to tell the truth, in any event

8. Time: meanwhile, at length, soon, after a few days, in the meantime, afterward, later, now, in the past.

10. Prune Deadwood

Deadwood is material that adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence, words that serve only as filler. When you edit your writing, eliminate any words or phrases that can be removed without damaging the meaning of the sentence or paragraph:

no: *I spent my first six weeks on the job in a state of shock, but today I have a completely different perspective on the company in general, as compared to when I first started.*

yes: *I spent my first six weeks on the job in a state of shock, but today I have a completely different perspective on the company.*

Occasional exceptions to this principle may be justified for the sake of emphasis or rhythm.

11. Avoid Redundancy

Redundancy, the *unnecessary* repetition of information, is a subset of deadwood, but one that is important enough to deserve separate mention:

no: *Brackets are used in a command format description to indicate that the enclosed parameter is optional and, therefore, may be supplied or not at the user's discretion.*

yes: *Brackets are used in a command format description to indicate that the enclosed parameter is optional.*

Occasional exceptions to this principle may be justified for the sake of emphasis or coherence.

12. Avoid Phrasal Verbs

In *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White advise writers to “omit needless words.” One of many ways to do this is by replacing several words with a single word that has an equivalent or nearly equivalent meaning. A common example is substituting a more descriptive verb for a phrasal verb. Unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, consider making such substitutions.

With phrasal verb (in italics)	Possible substitution
In <i>going over</i> the books, I came across an error.	<i>reviewing</i>
In reviewing the books, I <i>came across</i> an error.	<i>discovered</i> or <i>found</i>
He asked me to come up with a solution to the problem.	<i>develop</i>
You’ll have to <i>ask for</i> an exemption.	<i>request</i>
They’ve <i>gone into</i> the village.	<i>entered</i>
Sadly, they <i>turned down</i> my application.	<i>rejected</i>
Did he <i>bring up</i> the money he owes me?	<i>mention</i>
We need to <i>figure out</i> what happened.	<i>determine</i>
Please <i>put together</i> a proposal for the committee to consider.	<i>create, develop, or devise</i>
We have to <i>cut down on</i> waste.	<i>reduce</i>
Please <i>sign up for</i> the car wash.	<i>register</i>
The new regulation has <i>taken away</i> that option.	<i>eliminated</i>

13. Use Metaphor to Illustrate

Metaphor may be broadly defined as an imaginative comparison, expressed or implied, between two generally unlike things, for the purpose of illustration. By this definition, similes (expressed comparisons) are a subset of metaphor. In prose (as opposed to poetry), metaphors are most often used to illustrate, and thus make clear, abstract ideas: “When two atoms approach each other at great speeds they go through one another, while at moderate speeds they bound off each other like two billiard balls” (Sir William Bragg).

Whenever you use figurative language, be careful to avoid clichés—trite, overworn words or phrases that have lost their power to enliven your writing. If you can’t think of a fresh, imaginative way to express an idea, it’s better to express it in literal terms than to resort to a cliché. Hence,

Solving the problem was as easy as pie.

becomes

Solving the problem was easy.

Note that even solitary nouns, verbs, and modifiers can be clichéd. For example,

He's such a clown.

I've got to fly.

The competition was stiff.

Often such clichés are what George Orwell calls “dying metaphors”—words and phrases that were once used figuratively, but that now border on the literal. That is, we’ve used these terms so often that we now scarcely consider their figurative implications.

As with tone, rhythm, and many of the other stylistic considerations discussed here, you must ultimately rely upon your own sensitivity to the language to guide you in determining when a word or phrase is clichéd.

Finally, according to Collett Dilworth and Robert Reising, the golden rule of writing is “to write to be read fluently by another human being . . . the most moral reason for observing any specific writing convention is that it will shape and facilitate a reader’s understanding, not simply that it will be used ‘correctly’.” So as George Orwell says in “Politics and the English Language”:
“Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

Basic Punctuation and Mechanics

1. Commas

1.1 (a) Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, yet, so) that joins two independent clauses (compare 2.1). (An independent or main clause is a clause that can stand by itself as a separate sentence.):

The children escaped the fire without harm, but their mother was not so lucky.

(b) If the clauses are short and closely related, a comma is not required:

Frank typed and Matt watched.

(c) If the coordinate clauses are long or themselves contain commas, you can often avoid confusion by separating them with semicolons:

Paul went to his car, got a gun, and returned to the lake; but Bill, unfortunately, refused to be intimidated.

1.2 Use a comma to separate an introductory element (clause, phrase, conjunctive adverb, or mild interjection) from the rest of the sentence:

If you refuse to leave, I'll call the police. (clause)

To prepare for her exam, Lynn reread all of her notes. (phrase)

Nevertheless, much work still remains to be done. (conjunctive adverb)

Well, I was surprised to achieve these results. (interjection)

1.3 (a) Use commas to set off parenthetical elements or interrupters (including transitional adverbs):

The report, which was well documented, was discussed with considerable emotion.
(nonrestrictive clause)

They were, however, still able to meet their deadline. (transitional adverb)

An important distinction must be made here between restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers. Restrictive modifiers are essential to the meaning of the sentence in that they restrict that meaning to a particular case. Hence, restrictive modifiers are not parenthetical and cannot be removed without seriously damaging the meaning. Since they are necessary to the meaning, restrictive modifiers are not set off by commas:

All soldiers who are overweight will be forced to resign.

Nonrestrictive modifiers are parenthetical. That is, they digress, amplify, or explain, but are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. These modifiers simply provide additional information for the reader—information which, although it may be interesting, does not restrict the meaning of the sentence and can be removed without changing the sentence’s essential meaning:

Sgt. Price, who is overweight, will be forced to resign.

(b) Use commas to set off parenthetical elements that retain a close logical relationship to the rest of the sentence. Use dashes or parentheses to set off parenthetical elements whose logical relationship to the rest of the sentence is more remote (compare 4.2 and 5.1).

1.4 Use commas to join items in a series. **Except Associated Press Style**, this includes a comma before the conjunction that links the last item to the rest of the series:

Before making a decision, he studied the proposition, interviewed many of the people concerned, and tried to determine if there were any historical precedents.

1.5 Although not called for by any of the above principles, commas are sometimes required to avoid the confusion of mistaken junction:

She recognized the man who entered the room, and gasped.

2. Semicolons

2.1 Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses that are closely related in meaning and are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (compare 1.1):

A filemode digit of 3 identifies a temporary file; temporary files are deleted automatically after being read.

2.2 Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses when the second one begins with or includes a conjunctive adverb (nevertheless, therefore, however, otherwise, as a result, etc.) (compare 1.3):

If CMS is waiting, the entry will be processed immediately; otherwise, it will be queued until requested.

2.3 To avoid confusion, use semicolons to separate items in a series when one or more of the items includes commas (see also 1.1c):

This manual also summarizes the Graduate School’s mechanical requirements for theses; discusses the special requirements of students who are submitting computer programs as theses; reviews basic principles of punctuation, mechanics, and style; and refers students to standard references on punctuation, mechanics, style, and usage.

3. Colons

3.1 Use a colon to introduce a list, an example, an amplification, or an explanation directly related to something just mentioned (compare 4.1) and 4.4):

The user may work from one of three modes when typing data into the file area: edit mode, input mode, or power typing. He eventually found that there was only one way to get the quality he expected from the people who worked for him: treat them with respect.

3.2 Use a colon to introduce a formal statement or quotation :

Writers who care about the quality of their work would do well to heed Samuel Johnson's advice: "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."

4. Dashes

If your word-processor doesn't have an em-dash (a dash that is the width of a capital M) in its special character set, use two hyphens (—) to make a dash. Whichever one you use, **except in with Associated Press Style**, you should leave no space between or on either side of the dash itself. Dashes are more widely accepted today than they were in the past; however, many writers and editors still consider them to be somewhat less formal marks of punctuation—use them sparingly.

4.1 Use a dash to introduce a summarizing word, phrase, or clause, such as an appositive (a noun set beside another noun and identifying or explaining it) (compare 3.1):

The strikers included plumbers, electricians, carpenters, truck drivers—all kinds of workers.

4.2 Use dashes to mark off a parenthetical element that represents an abrupt break in thought. Dashes give more emphasis to the enclosed element than do either commas or parentheses (compare 5.1):

Reagan's sweep of the South—he won every state but Georgia—was the most humiliating defeat for Carter.

4.3 To avoid confusion, use dashes to mark off parenthetical elements that contain internal commas:

Seven of our first twelve presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Harrison, Tyler, and Taylor—were from Virginia.

4.4 Dashes can be used as a less formal alternative to the colon to introduce an example, explanation, or amplification (see 3.1).

For more on the use of dashes in journalism, see the entry on dashes in the Guide to Punctuation in the *Associated Press Stylebook*.

5. Parentheses

5.1 (a) Use parentheses to enclose parenthetical elements (words, phrases, or complete sentences that digress, amplify, or explain) (compare 1.3b) and 4.2).

When APL is on (indicated by the letters APL appearing at the bottom of the screen), no lowercase characters are available.

(b) A parenthesized sentence that appears within another sentence need not begin with a capital or end with a period.

(c) A comma may follow the closing parenthesis (if needed), but one should not precede the opening parenthesis.

5.2 **Except in with Associated Press Style**, use square brackets [] to enclose a parenthetical element within a parenthetical element.

6. Ellipsis Dots

6.1 Use three dots

(a) to signal the omission of a word or words from the middle of a quoted sentence:

A senior White House official again asserted the administration's position: "We will not negotiate any treaty with the Soviets . . . unless it is verifiable."

(b) to signal hesitation or halting speech in dialogue:

"I . . . don't know what to say," he whispered.

6.2 Use four dots

(a) to signal the omission of the end of a quoted sentence:

"Of all our maladies, the most barbarous is to despise our being. . . . For my part, I love life and cultivate it."

— Montaigne

(b) to signal the omission of one or more whole sentences.

Except with Associated Press Style, ellipses dots should be spaced (. . . vs. ...).

7. Hyphens

7.1 To express the idea of a unit and to avoid ambiguity, hyphenate compound nouns and compound modifiers (except those beginning with an adverb ending in *-ly*) that precede a noun:

She was a scholar-athlete.

All-night terminal sessions are counterproductive.

The IBM 4250 printer has all-points-addressable graphics capabilities.

7.2 Use a hyphen between the components of any number (including fractions) below one hundred that is written as two words: thirty-five two-thirds

8. Apostrophes

8.1 Use apostrophe, s ('s) to indicate singular possessive:

Users keep turning on to IBM's VM operating system.

8.2 Use *s*, *apostrophe (s')* to indicate plural possessive:

We found the missing tools in the boys' clubhouse.

8.3 Use apostrophe, s ('s) to form the plural of abbreviations with periods, lowercase letters used as nouns, and capital letters that would be confusing if *s* alone were added:

M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s

x's and y's

S's, A's, I's

SOS's

8.4 When you can do it without creating confusion, use *s* alone to form the plural of letters, figures, words treated as words, and hyphenated coinages used as nouns:

three Rs

four 8s

they came in twos

the 1980s

a dozen ifs

9. Italics

9.1 Use italics (sparingly) to emphasize a word or phrase:

The GET command inserts data *from the current line forward*, so the user must be sure to make the appropriate line the current line before entering this command.

9.2 Use italics to identify a letter treated as a letter or a word treated as a word:

The word *eyes* appears twice in the first line of the poem.

9.3 Use italics to identify foreign words or phrases not yet absorbed into English.

10. Titles

10.1 Italicize (or underline) the titles of books, magazines, journals, newspapers, plays, operas, films, television shows, radio programs, and long poems.

10.2 Enclose in quotation marks the titles of short poems, essays, magazine articles, newspaper columns, short stories, songs, speeches, and chapters of books.

In journalism, see the following entries in the *Associated Press Stylebook*: “composition titles,” “magazine names,” “newspaper names.” In summary, these entries indicate that most composition titles (books, plays, songs, television shows, etc.) should be enclosed in quotation marks but not in italics. Newspaper and magazine titles, however, should neither be italicized nor enclosed in quotation marks.

11. Numbers

11.1 Spell out a number when it begins a sentence.

11.2 Spell out a number that can be written in one or two words (except as noted in 11.3) and 11.5):

three
twenty-two
five thousand
one million

11.3 If numbers that can be written as one or two words cluster closely together in the sentence, use numerals instead:

The ages of the members of the city council are 69, 64, 58, 54, 47, 45, and 35.

11.4 Use numerals if spelling out a number would require more than two words:

350
7,125
4,978,265
5.78

11.5 Use numerals for addresses, dates, exact times of day, exact sums of money, exact measurements (including miles per hour), game scores, mathematical ratios, and page numbers:

55 mph
ratio of 4-to-1
\$6.75
p. 37

In journalism, see the *numerals* entry in the *Associated Press Stylebook*. (Generally, for cardinal numbers, spell out whole numbers below 10, and use figures for 10 and above.)

12. Quotation Marks

12.1 Use double quotation marks to create irony by setting off words you don't take at face value:

The "debate" resulted in three cracked heads and two broken noses.

12.2 Do not use quotation marks to create emphasis (see 9.1).

12.3 Use single quotation marks to enclose a quotation within a quotation:

At the beginning of the class, the professor asked, "What does Kuhn mean by 'paradigm shifts,' and what is their relationship to normal science?"

12.4 If the quotation will take more than four lines on the page, use indentation instead of quotation marks to indicate that the passage is a quotation. Introduce the quotation with a colon, set it off from the rest of the text by triple-spacing (assuming the rest of the text is double-spaced), indent ten spaces from the left margin, and single-space the quoted passage. To indicate a new paragraph within the quoted material, indent an additional three spaces.

12.5 Do not use quotation marks with indirect discourse, or with rhetorical, unspoken, or imaginary questions:

Frank said he was sorry he couldn't be here.

Why am I doing this? she wondered.

13. Punctuating Quotations

13.1 Do not use a comma to mark the end of a quoted sentence that is followed by an identifying tag if the quoted sentence ends in a question mark or an exclamation point:

“Get out!” he screamed.

13.2 Commas and periods go inside closing quotation marks; semicolons and colons go outside the closing quotation marks:

Peter’s response was “Money is no object,” but the lawyer was still unwilling to accept his case.

The senator announced, “I will not seek reelection”; then he left the room.

13.3 Place a question mark or an exclamation point inside the closing quotation marks only if it belongs to the quotation rather than to the larger sentence:

Lenin’s question was “What is to be done?”

Should the U.S. support governments that it considers “moderately repressive”?

Wherever you use the question mark or exclamation point, do not use a period with it (see 18.1).

13.4 Use square brackets to enclose interpolations, corrections, or comments in a quoted passage. **With Associated Press Style, use parentheses () for this purpose.**

13.5 “If a full paragraph of quoted material is followed by a paragraph that continues the quotation, do not put close-quote marks at the end of the first paragraph. Do, however, put open-quote marks at the start of the second paragraph” (*Associated Press Stylebook*).

14. Introducing Indented Quotations, Vertical Lists, and Formulas

The punctuation immediately following the introduction to an indented quotation, vertical list, or formula is determined by the grammatical structure of the introduction. Essentially, you should follow the same rules described in section 3 and section 1.2 even though the material you’re introducing is set off from the rest of the sentence.

14.1 If the introduction is a main clause (a clause that could stand by itself as a complete sentence), follow it with a colon:

Each member of the expedition was asked to supply the following equipment:

- *a sleeping bag*

- *a mess kit*
- *a propane stove*
- *a backpack*

14.2 If the introductory element is not a main clause, follow it with a comma if one is required by the rule given in section 1.2:

According to Gene Fowler, “Writing is easy: all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.”

14.3 If the introduction is not a main clause and a comma is not required by the rule given in section 1.2, follow it with no punctuation at all:

In Philosophy and Physics, Werner Heisenberg points out that “The change in the concept of reality manifesting itself in quantum theory is not simply a continuation of the past; it seems to be a real break in the structure of modern science.”

14.4 If you’re uncomfortable with an unpunctuated introduction, try converting it into a main clause and using a colon:

In Philosophy and Physics, Werner Heisenberg makes the following observation about the effect of quantum theory on modern science:

15. Punctuating Vertical Lists

15.1 The items in a vertical list may be preceded by sequential numbers or bullets (usually dots or asterisks), or they may stand alone. Depending on their grammatical structure, the items are followed by periods, semicolons, commas, or no punctuation at all. *The Chicago Manual of Style* offers the following simple rules: “Omit periods after items in a vertical list unless one or more of the items are complete sentences. If the vertical list completes a sentence begun in an introductory element, the final period is also omitted unless the items in the list are separated by commas or semi-colons.”

The following minerals are included in this daily supplement:

niacin
iron
potassium
calcium
phosphorus

After six months of deliberation, the committee decided

1. *that the proposed research did not pose a serious health hazard to the surrounding community;*
2. *that the potential benefits of the research significantly outweighed the potential risks; and*
3. *that the research should be allowed to proceed without further delay.*

16. Question Marks

16.1 Use a question mark at the end of an interrogative element within (as well as at the end of) a sentence:

He asked himself, “How am I going to pay for all of this?” and looked hopefully at his father.

17. Exclamation Points

17.1 Use exclamation points sparingly; too many of them will dull your effect (compare 9.1).

18. Multiple Punctuation

18.1 In most cases, when two marks of punctuation are called for at the same location in a sentence, only the stronger mark is used (see, for example, 13.3). An abbreviating period, however, is never omitted unless the abbreviation is immediately followed by a terminating period. Other exceptions include 5.1c.

Works Consulted

Associated Press. *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

Atwill, Janet and James Heffernan. *Writing: A College Handbook*. 5th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

Council of Science Editors. *Scientific Style and Format*. 8th ed. Chicago: U Chicago P. 2014.

Dilworth, Collette and Robert Reising. “Writing as a Moral Act: Developing a Sense of Audience.” *English Journal* 67 (1978): 76-78.

Glenn, Cheryl and Loretta Gray. *Harbrace College Handbook*. 18th ed. New York: Wadsworth, 2012.

- Haviland, Susan and Herbert Clark. "What's New: Acquiring New Information as a Process in Comprehension." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 13 (1974): 512-521.
- Kirkman, John. *Good Style: Writing for Scientific and Technology*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Lazarus, Arnold and H. Wendell Smith. *A Glossary of Literature and Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1983.
- Modern Language Association. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2009.
- Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1945.
- Price, Jonathan. *How to Write a Computer Manual*. Melno Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1984.
- Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. London: Longman, 1999.
- University of Chicago Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Williams, Joseph M. and Joseph Bizup. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 11th ed. London: Longman, 2013.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Harper, 2006.