

25 Hiccoughs of Guidance that Ruin Writing Style

Those of us in position to offer guidance about English usage do more harm than we realize when we state half-truths as rule. The damage usually begins innocently enough, in elementary school, with *The principal is your pal* and “*A*” precedes a consonant; “*an*” precedes a vowel. When we package guidance in such ways – tidily, definitively – we make it easy to remember, an important efficiency when we are contending with the flitful attention of third graders. Use “*i*” before “*e*” except after “*c*.” Put in a comma where you’d take a breath.

The damage is in the aggregate

This advice is oversimplified, but inexperienced writers don’t know that, and they regard it as rule. What’s the big deal? Well, the problem is cumulative. By the time people enter the workplace, where they should be writing stuff that’s instantly clear, many have had their thinking cluttered – in some cases, their judgment ruined – by a number of far more destructive generalizations. *Avoid the passive voice. Inanimate objects can’t act. Don’t use pronouns. Vertical lists don’t belong in formal writing.*

They pick up these unhealthy ideas in school, in college, and on the job from people in positions of authority. Over the years, they accumulate a magnificent heap of dogmatic quips that have the power of rule. These quips undermine writing in two ways: they force the writer to maneuver around the natural way to say a thing, and they provoke structures of language that are strange, distracting, and difficult to understand.

It may be fair to say that all writers struggle if they care about being clear; rarely does clarity of expression appear on the page without effort. But there’s a big difference between expending necessary effort and battling the needless complications that swarm the mind when we try to honor conflicting, contradictory, and oversimplified folklore we believe is rule.

The perils of folklore

By “folklore” here I’m referring to the orthodox hand-me-down nonsense we’ve all had tossed our way at one time or another. Common examples are *Never begin a sentence with “because,” Never end a sentence with a preposition,* and *Don’t repeat words.* Where the seeds of superstition are sown, the flowers of religion bloom. After a quarter-century of teaching writing in the workplace, I can tell you that many professionals regard these sayings as gospel. Let me demonstrate what happens to a writer victimized by this stuff.

John is mid-level professional facing a deadline. He’s trying to finish the executive summary to his report. He needs to write a simple idea, but he can’t figure out how to phrase it in a way that satisfies all the guidance he’s picked up over the years. He can’t

write *The method is explained in Chapter One*, because that's a passive construction, and he's been taught that the active voice is always better. But he can't use the active voice here and write *Chapter One explains the method*, because long ago he was taught that inanimate objects can't do things. And thus of course it would be wrong to claim that Chapter One explains anything. He can't write *I explain the method in Chapter One* because he was once taught that "I" is taboo in formal writing.

And so, as the clock tocks, he sits and frets. Let's look closely at what's going on here.

John has considered and rejected three perfectly clear phrasings. Readers who fancy themselves masters of style can find fault with anything, but those who are interested in his point – his actual readers, the busy executives – would find nothing wrong with any of those three constructions. After five minutes of searching in vain for a simple way to phrase the thought, he gives up and writes something on the order of *A complete description and analysis of the methodology informing the research is in Chapter One*. He realizes that the sentence is three times as long as it needs to be and puts an unnecessary burden on the reader. He's not terribly happy with it. But it complies with what he believes are rules – and anyway it's the kind of writing he sees every day in his organization, and it's the style his manager apparently prefers. (She, of course, has had her thinking poisoned by the same rigmarole.)

And none of this is necessary – not the wasted time, not the fretting about correctness, and certainly not the overly difficult language the reader ultimately gets. None of it would occur had the writer not been subjected to half-baked guidance in the first place.

Others have written about this matter, but previous discussions merely point out that experts say the taboos aren't really taboos. That's a start, but such discussions don't explain *why* these "rules" are merely folklore. Without further ado, here's a list of what I believe are the most common (and thus the most harmful) erroneous beliefs about good style and "correct English."

1. Don't use the passive voice. Writers must hear, once and for all, that their intended emphasis dictates voice. Their job is to decide what they intend to emphasize, use that word as their grammatical subject, and then write a sentence that is clear on its own or is clarified by context. *The lion killed the warthog* emphasizes the lion, and *The warthog was killed by the lion* emphasizes the warthog. Both constructions are perfect; one of them is what the writer wishes to convey. Only the writer knows what he intends to emphasize. He must have the freedom to choose.

And it is time to stop objecting to every use of the "imperfect" passive (a construction where no actor appears). *The letter was postmarked on July 2*, *The use of deadly force is authorized*, *It's supposed to rain tomorrow*, *Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin* – these are fine as they are. Any attempt to insert an actor into such constructions would be artificial (done merely for the sake of a specious ideal). Worse, it would destroy emphasis, ignore what the reader already understands, and usher irrelevancy into the

expression. *Abraham Lincoln's mother gave birth to him in a log cabin* and *Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin by his mother* are the kind of thing we get when the writer believes that every sentence requires an actor.

2. Don't repeat words. Deadly advice. It is directly responsible for one of the most bizarre structures of language I've ever seen:

"Shall" is the imperative and will be used.

That guidance comes from a style guide used by an agency of the federal government. It is not the kind of speech act you expect to hear outside the asylum, much less in a style guide. But that's exactly the way it was written, and it wasn't intended as a joke.

This is the twisted expression of thought the reader gets when the writer's judgment is poisoned. In this case, the writer considered the common sense *Use "must" as the imperative* to be inadequate and squalid. After all, he thought, any child could write "must." Grandeur of style required "shall." This attitude is bad enough. But since the writer also believed, because someone once told him so, that he could not repeat words, he was compelled to deliver the terrible guidance in a way that's instantly contradictory. So what we get is bad advice presented in ludicrous style. In a style guide.

Consider another "real" workplace sentence: *Scanning the material would actually take longer than entering the data.* The reader is a sitting duck here, because he believes that the writer wouldn't use two different words for the same thing, and thus he understands that "material" and "data" refer to different stuff. But no. The writer intends both words to refer to the same stuff. His dilemma is that he was taught not to repeat words and not to end a sentence with "it."

Common sense and a moral duty to readers demand that we tell writers *Try to avoid unnecessary repetition, but repeat any word when clarity requires it.* It's much better to repeat words than to set up a false distinction.

3. This, that, and the other thing make your writing "informal." There's no consensus on what "formal" writing is. "Formal" and "informal" have been used so loosely that they've become noises costumed as words, and the concepts do nothing but clutter the writer's thinking. We should stop pretending that these words describe anything, and instead tell writers to make all aspects of their style appropriate to the occasion. There are times to be stiff-necked and times to be relaxed.

Workplace writers are concerned about formality because "informal," they believe, equals "unprofessional." Many of the people I teach have come to believe that ordinary words make their writing informal. This is one reason why we get hair-raising phrasing like *effect a termination of the illumination* for "turn out the lights" and *vertical transportation apparatus* for "elevator."

Furthermore, many workplace writers assume that the patterns of everyday speech make text informal. Thus they discard the homely *We have decided to extend the contract* and deliver unto the reader *We have made the decision to provide an extension of the contract*. Some have been taught that pronouns make writing informal, so they couldn't use "We" in that sentence, and they would write *The decision has been made to provide an extension of the contract*. This is what results when we bark and growl about formality.

4. Inanimate objects can't act. Of course they can't if we take every word literally. But if I said to you, *Stop beating that dead horse*, you wouldn't look around for horse carcass. You'd understand that the dead horse is a figure of speech. And when I write *The report suggests*, I'm using a conventional figure of speech. Readers who are behaving themselves never pretend I'm claiming that the report is actually speaking. Misbehaving readers – we might call them linguistic brats – are the only ones who would.

I would agree that *The corporate dress code disembowels our rights* is bad writing, but it isn't bad because the dress code is doing something. It's bad because of what the dress code is said to be doing. But just because some writers exaggerate, it doesn't follow that we must indict the simple, everyday *This memo explains* and *The policy requires*. These expressions, and dozens like them (*Figure 1 illustrates, the test reveals, the data indicate*, and so on) are part of our everyday idiom. They have long been standard; from the reader's point of view, there is absolutely nothing wrong with them.

Writers who believe that inanimate objects can't act doom their audience to reading overblown expressions. If I think, for example, that an inanimate "company" can't act, I am going to write *It was stated by a spokesperson for the company that* rather than *The company stated*. Both expressions convey the same semantic cargo. Which would we prefer to read?

5. Be brief. I understand the motive for this advice, but the statement is much too broad. It encourages me to write, as a Subject line, the five-word phrase *low blood pressure control rates*. What's wrong with that? Well, what do you understand the phrase to mean? Is the document going to discuss rates of controlling low blood pressure, or low rates of controlling blood pressure? If you think you know, you're guessing. That's what's wrong with it. The clear expression requires six words.

Telling people to "be brief" provokes strings of nouns. In *We must modernize our obsolete nuclear weapons tracking system*, the reader has to guess at whether the weapons or the system is obsolete. The clear expression requires an additional word and a different order of words: *We must modernize our system for tracking obsolete nuclear weapons*. Instead of saying, "Be brief," we ought to say, "Use as many words as you need to make your meaning plain. Just make sure every word counts."

6. Never write a one-sentence paragraph. To learn the principles of unity and coherence, children must write 3- or 4-sentence paragraphs. That's true. It's also true that the job of a typical paragraph is to develop a topic. But in the workplace, readers want clear visual signals about the relative importance of an idea. Format provides these signals. When the reader sees a single sentence presented as a paragraph, he understands – before reading it – that the thought is significant. The writer has given the sentence what we might call “paragraph weight.”

The one-sentence paragraph is very effective when used judiciously. No, we do not want five of them on every page; effect diminishes with repetition. But rather than tell writers never to write one, we should explain the circumstances that justify one.

7. Never begin a sentence with “because.” This may be fitting advice for second grade children who have not quite grasped what a complete sentence is. You might be surprised at how many professionals continue to accept this remark as rule. The result, of course, is that they begin their sentences with cluttered phrases like *In consideration of the fact that*, *In light of the fact that*, *In view of the fact that*, *Given the fact that*, and so on. Another frequent result is that they invert their intended emphasis, and rather than write the cause-effect idea they need to write, they write an artificial effect-to-cause structure. This usually ruptures coherence. Both outcomes burden the reader.

8. Never use “since” if you mean “because.” Let's agree that “because” has only one meaning and that “since” has two. Let's also agree that our readers are intelligent enough to distinguish, without effort, the different ways we are using “since” in *Since 2007, we have been studying the problem* and *Since you have not responded, we assume you are no longer interested in the position*. Chances for confusion here are slim. The fun begins in earnest when the writer believes he cannot use “since” for “because” and cannot begin a sentence with “because.”

9. Never begin a sentence with “and” or “but.” Occasions vary. Propriety of tone varies as occasion does. It's true that starting a sentence with “and” or “but” lends a conversational tone to the text, but sometimes that's what we want. Sometimes, in fact, the semantic equivalents (*moreover*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, *however*, and so on) are simply too stiff for the occasion. Readers expect a stiff-necked tone in a mortgage contract and a promissory note, but there is no need for starched-collar airs in a memorandum. In correspondence, writers should use common sense and take their cues from the occasion and audience. One thing is certain: writers who are comfortable starting a sentence with “and” and “but” can write shorter sentences. Their readers thank them.

10. Never end a sentence with a preposition. It is much better to tell writers that when they end a sentence with a preposition, they've probably been imprecise, and that they should look for a precise verb. If I write, *We have made the changes you asked for*, I

should change *asked for* to *requested*. If I write *Smith is the only candidate we have not heard from*, I could have been more precise with *who has not responded*.

What we do not want is *We have made the changes for which you asked and Smith is the only candidate from whom we have not heard*. But that is the kind of thing the reader gets when the writer has heard only that ending a sentence with a preposition is wrong, and hasn't been instructed to look for the precise verb.

Furthermore, there are plenty of times when (without being overly casual), it's perfectly natural – and thus appropriate – to end a sentence with a preposition. *What are you hoping for?* certainly sounds more like English than *For what are you hoping?* And I'm sure that most people would be distracted by *We must be careful about that about which we generalize*. Common sense and compassion for the reader require *We must be careful in what we generalize about*.

11. Put in a comma where you take a breath. Countless writers have had their understanding of commas ruined by this flippancy. This is why we see *All employees who have not given blood, are encouraged to do so by Friday*. The writer suspects he might need to breathe after “blood.” It's also why we see *When do we eat Mom?* The writer suspects he would not breathe after “eat.”

Writers capable of logical thinking – that is, adults in the workplace – are delighted to hear that they really need to understand only two basic issues in order to use commas well. They need to be able to recognize a dependent clause, and they need to understand the distinction between a restrictive and a non-restrictive expression. If we can get them to understand the distinction in meaning between *The pilot who bailed out over Turkey has been rescued* and *The pilot, who bailed out over Turkey, has been rescued*, then the most serious error in comma-use will disappear.

12. Don't use the serial comma. This is backwards. If we must generalize about this comma, then we should be telling people to use it consistently. The serial comma is the last comma in a simple list, the one before the “and” or the “or,” as in *On her visit to D.C, she visited the White House, the National Air and Space Museum, and the National Cathedral*.

If we tell people to omit this comma, we get *This book is dedicated to my parents, Mother Teresa and God*. We get *This week's program includes interviews with Tony Blair, a 60-year-old cardiologist and a dildo collector*. Is this really what we want?

13. The serial comma is “optional.” When we tell people that something is “optional,” they understand that they have a choice. *We have received proposals from Tanner and MacLeod, Winston and Fuller and Lynch*. And there we have the fruit of “optional.” The writer exercised his option to omit a comma after *Winston*. Readers

unfamiliar with the firms involved cannot be expected to understand that *Winston* is the name of a second firm and that *Fuller and Lynch* is the name of a third firm. A comma following *Winston* would have made the relationship clear.

Good writers – those who understand what readers need – benefit from hearing that the serial comma is **discretionary**. That word strips all whimsy from the debate because it implies that judgment is required. In rudimentary lists, the individual entities are often clear and the serial comma may be safely omitted. *The salad consists of apples, bananas and raisins. They wore costumes of red, white and blue. We will be represented by Ted Jackson, Maureen Wills or Frank Green.*

14. The word “and” takes the place of the comma. Teachers and instructors fling this idea around to explain why the serial comma isn’t necessary. But “and” takes the place of the comma only when we have a series of adjectives that come before a noun. *It was a hot and humid day* could be *It was a hot, humid day*. This instruction is handy in explaining why there’s a comma in *long, tedious argument* and *crisp, clean style*, but it is treacherous (and simply wrong) when used to justify omitting the serial comma.

15. Don’t split an infinitive. This is one of the most common English-teacherisms out there. In reality, most of the adult writers I train have forgotten what an infinitive is (though they haven’t forgotten the rule against splitting one, and this does nothing except make them paranoid). Those who remember what an infinitive is usually take pains not to split it – they aren’t sure why, but they know they shouldn’t – and what the reader gets is awkward, strange-sounding stuff like *To assess realistically the problem, we must visit the site* and *Her doubts led her to question consistently the method*. What the reader wants is unobtrusive style, and here, *to realistically assess* and *to consistently question* are natural and would have been fine.

It’s much more sensible to tell writers to put every modifier where it describes what they intend it to describe. If I write, *The state trooper scolded me for driving too fast loudly*, my “loudly” is in the wrong place, but we never hear anyone contend that it’s wrong to end a sentence with an adverb. If I write, *Howling at the moon, my daughter listened to the wolves*, my opening phrase is in the wrong place – I intend the howling to come from the wolves – but we never hear anyone say that we can never begin a sentence with a modifying phrase. All that matters is that the modifier describes what the writer intends it to describe.

Yes, the word order of *to thoroughly become disgusted* is flimsy, and should be *to become thoroughly disgusted*. If a word’s in the wrong place, it’s in the wrong place, and it should be moved. That’s true of the little space between the *to* and the verb. But it’s just as true of every other position in the sentence.

16. Don't split a verb phrase. In *The client is requesting that we supply more supporting data*, “is requesting” is a verb phrase. Many writers are taught never to put a word between the two verbs. (This is probably seepage from the rule against splitting an infinitive.) Surely, *The client is today requesting* sounds stilted, but *The client is now requesting* would not distract any reader. It's the same with all phrasal verbs. Whether intruding words are awkward depends on exactly what those intruding words are. *We have been with nonstop effort attempting to identify the errors* is unduly difficult, but *We have been rigorously attempting* is fine.

17. Don't use “I.” This advice results in *This engineer is of the opinion that* instead of the clear *I think*. Which would you rather read? When we tell people to avoid “I,” one of two things happens. Either they invent euphemisms for “I” and write *this reporter, this observer, this attorney, this office, this desk*, and so on, or they cast the idea unemphatically in the passive voice. An example of the latter problem is *You will be met by a representative of this organization upon your arrival* rather than *I will meet you when you arrive*. Which would you rather read?

18. A semicolon is a sign of lazy thinking. Sometimes it is. If I write, *The proposal failed for one reason; indirect costs were too high*, that semicolon is weak because clarity and coherence call for a colon. A colon would be better there because – in this case – the second clause answers the question raised by the first. But if I write *Fannie Mae stock rose \$1; Freddie Mac stock rose \$1.15*, no one should dispute the semicolon.

The writer has not only the right, but the responsibility to emphasize ideas in the way he chooses to emphasize them. More to the point, the real problem with semicolon-overuse in today's workplace writing is that writers often present readers with a 7-inch paragraph consisting of one sentence with ten semicolons in it, rather than presenting those ten ideas in a vertical, bulleted list.

19. Parentheses signal a careless mind. Sometimes they do. We have all seen them overused by writers who believe that every passing thought is worthy of inclusion in their argument. But the danger of indicting all parentheses is that the writer often needs them for clarity. In the sentence below, readers not intimately familiar with the situation in Iraq understand that there are three foes.

We expect more confrontations with Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, and the Red Jihad.

In fact there are only two foes; “Mahdi Army” is just another name for “Sadr's militia.” What the writer meant, but did not write because he thought he couldn't use parentheses, was this:

We expect more confrontations with Sadr's militia (the Mahdi Army) and the Red Jihad.

20. Don't shift tenses. Again, this is just too broad. The professionals I train are unlikely to shift tenses when they shouldn't. The mistake they make is that they fail to shift tenses when they should. And usually the error involves a reluctance to shift into the simple present. They'll write, *Two thousand years ago, some Greeks suspected that matter was composed of atoms*, when they should write *is composed of atoms*. (At least if they believe in the atomic theory.) They'll write, on page 1 of the report, *Appendix A will amplify the distinction*, reasoning that since Appendix A begins on page 20, it'll happen in the future. The problem is that it happens whenever the reader looks at page 20, so common sense requires *Appendix A amplifies the distinction*.

We owe it to writers – and to their readers – to carefully explain the occasions when the simple present is required. And then to let them know that not only is it okay to shift, but wrong not to.

21. When you spell a number, follow it with the numeral in parentheses. In very particular circumstances – usually involving money – it's both conventional and sensible to express a number in both spelled and numeral form. But readers don't need *four (4) changes to the policy*. The reader who has ten (10) proposals to review in six (6) hours quickly loses patience with this widespread practice. I suspect that it springs from two sources: (1) the “monkey-see, monkey-do” behavior stemming from the thought, *I don't know why I do it, but everyone else does, so it must be right* and (2) the maddening confusion about the correct use of numbers. Many writers apparently believe that if they express the number in both ways, they have doubled their chances of getting it correct.

22. Write like you speak. This is excellent advice when people understand that it applies to the drafting or composing stage of writing. I encourage writers to “talk it onto the page” when they're drafting, because that approach liberates them from having to concentrate on perfect grammar, punctuation, and word choice. It lets them get some ideas on the page that they can then shape and polish into readable form.

But “Write like you speak” is terrible advice when taken to apply to the final draft. Even the best speakers are imprecise and wordy, and few of us can get through a day without verbally committing a grammar error of some sort. Furthermore, a speaker can do things with his voice to indicate how he wants something emphasized. The writer can't do that, but must rely on the order of words. Writing should be coherent, concise, and precise – virtues we can't reasonably expect in spoken speech.

That said, what we should encourage writers to do is look at their writing and *read it out loud*. (If they're shy, they can whisper or mumble.) We should tell them that if they'd feel awkward actually speaking what they've written, they need to change the expression to bring it more in line with natural speech.

23. Bulleted lists aren't formal. Whether a vertical list is formal or not is a matter for academics to debate in their journals and symposiums. Readers of workplace writing do not care whether a bulleted list is “informal” by anyone’s definition. When a list consists of three or more items, presenting those items in a vertical format makes them easier to read, reinforces their status as items that belong together, and adds visual interest to the page. It is a practical tactic and an essential device for a good writer.

I agree that using too many vertical lists results in a document that looks like an outline. Good taste – a firm and accurate sense of how a reader reacts to our choices as writers – is essential. But what’s important is that we stop telling writers that bulleted lists are bad style. Most of the time they are helpful.

24. Don't use the same sentence structure twice in a row. Many, many writers – adult professionals – bring this one up in class when I ask whether any instructor gave them advice they never did understand but feel obligated to follow. My response always starts with a long, exasperated sigh.

It’s one thing to encourage beginning writers to vary their sentence structure, and another thing entirely to forbid them to use the same structure twice in a row. What happens is that Jill, who’s unsure exactly what “sentence structure” means but is afraid to use the same one twice in a row, wastes a lot of time moving words around in her sentences. She wrote an active sentence, so now she has to write a passive one, or put a modifying phrase at the beginning, or stick a semicolon in somewhere, or delay her verb, or do any of a hundred other artificial things to make her expression conform to specious advice.

25. Don't end a sentence with “it.” How did this one ever get started? When I was in school, no one ever bothered to tell me that ending a sentence with “it” was wrong. I’ve never been able to learn the basis for this advice. It makes no sense to me.

But what I can report is that many people have heard this “rule” and thus shy away from writing *We have received your proposal and will notify you after we review it*. Instead, of course, they feel compelled to write *We have received your proposal and will notify you after it has been reviewed*. If they have managed to evade the superstition about repeating words but have been exposed to the idea that pronouns are taboo, they write *Subject proposal has been received by this office, and notification will follow after said proposal has undergone review*. When we read this sort of thing, we have no one to blame but ourselves. After all, for it we asked.