

Got Grammar?

(A Usage Guide)

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

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Foreword

This handbook focuses on grammar and usage. You won't find entries on AP style (which you'll be expected to use in assigned writing) or on punching up your ledes, creating a good nut graf or tightening your sentences.

Instead, what follows is a list of words and constructions commonly misused, misspelled or mispunctuated — some drawn from the grammar section of the J-School's entrance exam, others included to reflect errors seen over the years by professors, coaches and the Career Services folks.

The list is far from comprehensive. It skips the basics of punctuation and sentence structure, for instance. So if you have questions not addressed by these entries, be sure to bring them up with the school's writing coaches (Tim Harper and Deborah Stead), your professors or — if English is not your first language — our ESL coach, Diane Nottle.

You might also want to buy or borrow one of the usage guides listed on the last page. (Our library has copies.)

Consult this booklet throughout the first semester (and beyond, if you need to). Your Craft I professor may elect to quiz you periodically on its contents.

AFFECT/EFFECT

- To affect (verb) is to influence or have an impact on.
European diplomats said the WikiLeaks disclosures would not affect relations with the U.S.

- An effect (noun) is a result or an impact.
Jack's pleading had no effect on Maria.

- "Affect" is commonly used as a verb, "effect" as a noun. But occasionally:

"Affect" is used as a noun (and pronounced AF-fect) to mean "emotion."
Shown the crime-scene photos, the suspect exhibited no affect, the detective said.

"Effect" is used as a verb to mean "to cause" or "to achieve."

The blackout helped him effect his escape.

AGREEMENT (SUBJECT-VERB, NOUN-PRONOUN)

- **Here and There**

In sentences starting with "Here (is) (are)" or "There (is) (are)," the verb agrees with the subject, *which comes after the verb.*
There are only two U.S. newspapers covering the turmoil in Mali.

Here's [Here is] the point: Don't editorialize in a news article.

For tighter writing, recast sentences starting with "there is/there."
Just two U.S. papers cover the turmoil in Mali.

- **Every, Everyone, No One, Nobody, Each**
All of these take singular verbs and singular pronouns (*its, his or her*).
Every student must file his or her [not "their"] story at the start of class.

Hate the clunky "his or her"? Rewrite using plurals.
Students must file their stories at the start of class.

- **Either Or/Neither Nor**
Use a singular verb if two singular subjects appear between *either/or* (or *neither/nor*).
Use a plural verb for two plural subjects.
Neither Thomas nor Phil knows how to drive.
Either potatoes or noodles come with that dish.

Weird but true: If one of the subjects is singular and the other plural, the one nearest the verb determines the verb form.
Put the plural subject last; it sounds better.
Neither rain nor snowstorms deter our UPS guy.

- **Company, Government, Group, Team**
These are singular nouns in American English.
The company just filed its [not "their"] 10K with the Securities & Exchange Commission.
- **Prepositional Phrases (Watch Out For)**
Don't let a prepositional phrase confuse you

when you're looking for the subject. In the following sentences, "One" is the subject:
Only one of the poems rhymes.
One of the committee members has a shady past.

BUT: When a prepositional phrase is followed by "who" or "that," things change: The "who" or "that" refers to the *last word* of the prepositional phrase. If that is a plural, you must use a plural verb.

This is one of the poems that rhyme.

[Of the poems that rhyme, this is one.]

He is one of the committee members who have a shady past. [Of the committee members who have a shady past, he is one.]

- **None**
Grammarians differ. But AP has a rule. From the AP Stylebook: [*None*] usually means 'no single one.' When used in this sense, it always takes singular verbs and pronouns: "None of the seats was in its right place." Use a plural verb only if the sense is 'no two' or 'no amount': "None of the consultants agree on the same approach. None of the taxes have been paid."

ALLUDE/ELUDE

To allude means to refer to indirectly or hint at.

He only alluded to the scandal, calling it "our problem."

To elude means to escape or avoid.

The fugitive eluded capture by altering his appearance.

ALUMNUS/ALUMNI

"Alumni" is the plural, so don't refer to someone as "an alumni."

AMUSED/BEMUSED

If you're amused, you're entertained. If you're bemused, you're perplexed or bewildered. Someone with a "bemused" expression is puzzled.

APOSTROPHES (WHEN TO USE WITH PRONOUNS)

A cruel trick of written English: While we *always* use an apostrophe to signal possession with nouns (*Joe's diner, the Joneses' garage*), we *never* use an apostrophe to signal possession with pronouns.

The cat licked its paws. That book is hers. The fault is yours. Hers is the grandest house. The idea wasn't ours; it was theirs. Whose car was stolen?

Use an apostrophe with a personal pronoun *only* when you're using a contraction — that is, when you mean "it is," "who is," "you are," "they are."

*It's [It is] nerve-wracking to write on deadline.
Who's [Who is] your editor?
I hope you're [you are] enjoying the summer.*

AS IF/LIKE

Use "as if" before a clause. (See **CLAUSE**)

Use "like" before a noun or phrase.

*It looks as if the storm will bypass New York City.
This feels like a dangerous situation.*

BIANNUAL/SEMIANNUAL VS. BIENNIAL

"Biannual" and "semiannual" mean twice yearly.

It's time for my semiannual [twice-a-year] checkup.

"Biennial" means once every two years.

U.S. Representatives are elected biennially.

For better clarity: Avoid these prefixes and just say

"twice a year" or "once every two years."

CAPITAL/CAPITOL

The capital is a country's seat of government or a place considered important in some other way.

Moscow is the capital of Russia.

Aleppo is the commercial capital of Syria.

The Capitol is the building housing a legislature.

Did you take a tour of the Capitol in Washington?

CENSOR/CENSURE

To censor something is to ban or alter it drastically.

In 2009, Russian authorities censored an episode of "South Park," deleting a scene that ridiculed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

To censure is to reprimand (an official, usually).

In 1867, the House of Representatives censured John Hunter (D-N.Y.) for "unparliamentary language."

CLAUSE (DEFINITION)

Review, if you need to, before reading the entry on WHO/WHOM/WHOEVER/WHOMEVER

In the realm of syntax, a clause is any group of words containing a subject and a verb. A clause can be a sentence or it can be part of a sentence.

He stole the documents from the conference room.

This clause is independent — it can stand alone as a sentence. "He" is the subject, "stole" the verb.

Whoever stole the documents is in big trouble.

"Whoever stole the documents" is a dependent

clause *within* a sentence. Its subject is "Whoever" and its verb is "stole." The clause functions as the complete subject of the entire sentence. Here's a breakdown:

[Whoever stole the documents] is in big trouble.
Subject vb. object
----COMPLETE SUBJECT----- vb. prep. phrase

COMPARE TO/COMPARE WITH

When you compare to, you point out similarities.
The poet compared his lover's lips to rose petals.

When you compare with, you are weighing one fact or situation against another.

GDP grew by 1.5% in the second quarter of 2012, compared with 1.3% for the same quarter last year.

COMPLIMENT/COMPLEMENT/COMPLIMENTARY

To compliment is to praise. To complement is to supplement.

My compliments to the chef: The side dishes were a perfect complement to the roast pork.

Complimentary means either "expressing praise" or "given free of charge."

I heard some complimentary remarks about your front-page piece.

Every hotel guest gets a complimentary copy of The Washington Post.

COMPRISE

Comprise means to contain. The whole comprises

the parts, in other words.

*His art collection comprises 110 Renaissance prints.
The research complex comprises 20 laboratories.*

- Don't use "comprise" as a fancy word for are."
The Williams children are [not "comprise"] the top athletes at the high school.
- Comprise is *never* used with "of." Use "composed of" instead.
His art collection is composed of 110 Renaissance prints.

CONVINCE/PERSUADE

People are "convinced of" something and "persuaded to" do something.

Marisa convinced Carla of the plan's feasibility and persuaded her to take the first steps.

CRITERION/CRITERIA

"Criterion" is singular, "criteria" plural.

The school meets Joe's two criteria: It has a renowned physics faculty and co-ed dorms. But Joe doesn't meet the single criterion for admission: a perfect SAT score.

DANGLERS

Introductory words or phrases meant to modify something or someone must be *immediately* followed by the thing or person they describe. Otherwise they create an error known as a dangler (*aka* a dangling modifier or dangling participle).

- To avoid danglers, double check any *-ing* (participial) phrases you write at the start of a

sentence. But be aware that dangles can also occur with past participles ending in *-ed*, with adjectives, with prepositional phrases [*Like, Unlike*] and even with infinitives. (See last example.)

- Below, some examples of dangles (with suggested corrections). Why so many? Because it's easy to fall into the dangle trap.

Wrong: *Jogging at night, the moon lights our way.*
[*The moon isn't jogging.*]

Right: *Jogging at night, we count on the moon to light our way.*

Wrong: *Injured during practice, the game was off-limits to Eli.* [*The game wasn't "injured."*]

Right: *Injured during practice, Eli sat out the game.*

Wrong: *As new parents, Felipe and Joan's refrigerator door was plastered with baby photos.*
[*The refrigerator door isn't a new parent.*]

Right: *As new parents, Felipe and Joan plastered their refrigerator door with baby photos.*

Wrong: *Just 18 years old when he applied for a marriage license, the clerk gave Ted a skeptical look.* [*The clerk isn't "just 18 years old."*]

Right: *Just 18 years old when he applied for a marriage license, Ted got a skeptical look from the clerk.*

Wrong: *After studying all night, the couch looked pretty inviting to Deirdre.* [*The couch wasn't studying.*]

Right: *After studying all night, Deirdre thought the couch looked pretty inviting.*

Wrong: *At the age of six, my aunt took me to Mexico.*
[*Your aunt wasn't six at the time.*]

Right: *At the age of six, I went to Mexico with my aunt.*

Wrong: *Like Carmela, Doug's copy is always clean.*
[*Doug's copy isn't "like" Carmela.*]

Right: *Like Carmela's, Doug's copy is always clean.*
OR: Like Carmela, Doug always files clean copy.

Wrong: *Unlike my father, my preference is for oatmeal rather than eggs.*
[*Your preference isn't "unlike" your father.*]

Right: *Unlike my father, I prefer oatmeal to eggs.*

Wrong: *Talented and hardworking, Reuters was quick to hire Raj.* [*Reuters isn't "talented and..."*]

Right: *Talented and hardworking, Raj was snapped up by Reuters.*

Wrong: *To understand how to use the software, the manual must be read.* [*The subject of "to understand" is "you" (implied), not "manual."*]

Right: *To understand how to use the software, read the manual.* [*the subject "you" is implied.*]

OR: To understand how to use the software you have to read the manual.

DISINTERESTED/UNINTERESTED

Disinterested means impartial. Uninterested means not interested.

*A disinterested industry expert settled the dispute.
Uninterested in fashion, she got another internship.*

DUE TO/BECAUSE

Use "due to" when you can substitute "caused by" or "attributable to." (Use it as a modifier of nouns, in other words.) Do not follow "due to" with "the fact that ..." or any clause. Better: Use "because."

No: *Due to the fact that he's arrogant, he is unpopular.*

Yes: *His lack of popularity is due to his arrogance.*

Yes: *He's unpopular because he's arrogant.*

EACH OTHER/ONE ANOTHER

Use "each other" for pairs. Use "one another" for more than two people or things.

*The team members looked out for one another.
Romeo and Juliet loved each other.*

ENORMITY/IMMENSITY

Enormity means heinousness or wickedness. It has nothing to do with huge size (immensity).

*Citing the enormity of the crime, the judge sentenced the defendant to life imprisonment.
English teachers cringed when Joe Biden praised the "enormity" of Obama's mind.*

FAMOUS/INFAMOUS

Both mean well-known, but use "infamous" to connote a negative quality.

*My aunt is famous for her pies.
Don Juan was an infamous seducer.*

FARTHER/FURTHER

Use farther for physical distance, further for figurative distance or degree.

*You must go farther up the mountain if you want to see the Buddhist temple.
I won't discuss it any further.*

FAZE/PHASE

To faze is to bother, disturb or upset. A phase is a stage or development.

Nothing fazes Eliza. Her flexibility and sense of humor got her through her son's stubborn phase.

FEWER/LESS

Use "fewer" for plural nouns you can "count" (peas, calories, nickels). Use "less" for nouns that are not "countable" (meat, fat, money). Think of it this way: "Fewer" stresses number. "Less" stresses amount.

*I'm taking fewer courses, so I'm under less stress.
He's trying to consume fewer calories by eating fewer meals, but his doctor said he should just eat less fat.*

FLAUNT/FLOUT

To flaunt is to show off or call attention to.

To flout is to defy or disregard.

At 13, Harry flaunted his rebelliousness by flouting every school rule.

FLOUNDER/FOUNDER

To flounder is to struggle or thrash about.

To founder is to sink or collapse.

*The Phillies are floundering this year.
Wall Street was stunned when Lehman Brothers founded in 2008.*

HISTORIC/HISTORICALLY

Use “historic” to describe something claiming an important place in history — something that is momentous. Use “historical” or “historically” to discuss a fact or development (maybe important, maybe not) in the context of history.

Despite the Supreme Court’s historic 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education, many public school systems remain segregated.

Historically, the term “tax rate” has meant the average or effective tax rate — that is, taxes as a share of income. (The New York Times, 5/31/2011)

HIV

It stands for “human immunodeficiency virus.” Don’t add an extraneous “virus” to it.

The goal is to start a mobile clinic for people with HIV.

HOME IN/HONE

When people, animals or things *home in*, they zero in on, focus on or move toward a goal.

(Think homing pigeons and missiles.)

The new drug homes in on cancer cells found in certain types of leukemia.

When people hone something — a skill, a stick — they sharpen it.

I hone my bargaining skills by going to flea markets.

IMPACT

Used as a verb, this is business jargon. Use “affect” or “influence” instead. Avoid the dreaded “impactful” for the same reason.

IMPLY/INFER

You imply when you suggest or hint at something as a speaker or writer.

You infer when you “get” that suggestion or hint as a listener or reader.

In other words, implying is pitching; inferring is receiving.

She kept glaring at me, perhaps implying that I was responsible for the failure of the project.

What did you infer from her body language and her remarks?

LITERALLY

Do not use “literally” to mean “really, really.”

(Don’t report that a business was “literally flooded” with orders unless those orders arrived floating in water that inundated the premises.)

Use “literally” *only* to convey that you are using a term in its exact, rather than its figurative, sense.

Here, a good *New York Times* hed about the color of taxis in an eco-friendlier fleet:

New Taxicabs Are Green, Literally

MIXED METAPHOR

A good metaphor creates a vivid image by using words drawn from a specific realm (war, sailing, sports, gardening) to describe something outside of that realm. But watch out for mixed metaphors, which draw from, or “mix” two (or more) realms.

O.K. *That marriage is negotiating the rough seas of middle age -- and Belinda is about to throw Marc overboard. [O.K. because "seas" and "throw overboard" are both drawn from one realm: sailing.]*

NOT O.K. *"We're close to the end zone now," Henderson tweeted, as the company waited to hear about the contract. "But let's not count our chickens before they hatch." [Not O.K., because Henderson is mixing the realms of football and farming. Also not O.K. because Henderson uses clichés. Don't emulate Henderson.]*

NOTORIOUS

Like "infamous," "notorious" carries negative connotations.

Bernard Madoff is a notorious [achieved notoriety as a] swindler.

PARAMETER

Patricia T. O'Conner may have said it best in her grammar guide *Woe Is I*:

There's nothing like a scientific word to lend an air of authority to a weak sentence. ("Let us review the parameters of the issue," said Senator Blowhard.) That's how a word like parameter (a mathematical term for a type of arbitrary constant or independent variable) worms its way into the Official Overwriters' Vocabulary. [Page 127; 2nd Ed.]

The word "parameter," as O'Conner points out, does not mean "boundary," "limit," "outline" or "guideline." Use these perfectly good words instead.

PHENOMENON/PHENOMENA

Phenomenon is singular, phenomena plural.
(See CRITERION/CRITERIA.)

PIQUE/PEAK

To pique is to excite (or to annoy).
Timmy wasn't a great reader, but the Harry Potter series piqued his interest.
The Dow Jones industrial average peaked at 14,164.53 on Oct. 9, 2007.

PUNCTUATION WITH QUOTATION MARKS

In American English:

- Commas and periods always go inside the quotation mark.

Calling the article "libelous," Henderson vowed to sue the newspaper.
President Obama told a reporter that Omar Little is his favorite character from HBO's "The Wire."

- The placement of question marks depends on context.

Why would she call me "arrogant"? [The question isn't part of the quoted material.]
Roberto asked, "Is the piece ready to run?" [The question is part of the quoted material.]

Colons and semicolons always go outside the quotation marks.

*I know why Rosa said the movie "stunk":
Keanu Reeves is her least favorite actor.*

I should stop calling him a "kid"; he's 28 years old.

REIGN/REIN IN

To reign is to rule. To rein in is to restrain.

The Soviet Union began to break up during Gorbachev's reign.

U.S. companies plan to rein in capital spending.

RESTAURATEUR

The word for a person who owns or runs a restaurant. Note: No "n."

RESTIVE/RESTLESS

Restive means stubborn or unruly, not fidgety (that's "restless").

The passengers became restive when the captain announced the delay.

STATIONARY/STATIONERY

Stationary means fixed or standing still.

A cautious child, he always rode the stationary horses on the carousel.

Stationery (with an "e," think "letter") is writing paper.

THAT/WHICH

Use "that" to introduce "essential" clauses — clauses that, if dropped, would alter the meaning of the sentence. Use "which" to start clauses that are incidental to the sentence and set off by commas.

The car that I bought in Sweden never needed replacement parts.

The Gettysburg Address, which takes about three minutes to recite, is as eloquent as it is brief. [The "which" clause just adds extra information to the sentence.]

TORTUROUS/TORTUOUS

Torturous (think of the two r's in "torture") means horribly painful.

Tortuous means winding, full of twists and turns.

The procedure was torturous, but it saved his life.

Take the highway; the other routes are so tortuous they add hours to the trip.

UNIQUE

Unique means "one of a kind." Someone or something can't be "very" or "sort of" unique.

WHO/THAT

Use "who," not "that," for people.

Those who fail can take the test again.

WHO/WHOM/WHOEVER/WHOMEVER

- Be sure you understand what a clause is before reading this entry. (See **CLAUSE**, above.)
- Use "who" and "whoever" when talking about the subject of a clause.

Who uses the newsroom at night?

Who is correct; it's the subject of a clause (that happens to be an interrogative sentence).

Whoever was here left a mess.

Whoever is right because it's the subject of the dependent clause "Whoever was here."

That legislation passed because of Lyndon Johnson, who was a political genius.

Who is correct; it's the subject of the dependent clause "who was a political genius."

- Use “whom” and “whomever” when talking about the object — of a verb or a preposition — in a clause.

Whom do you admire most?

Whom is correct, because it is the object of the verb *admire*. (The subject is *you*.)

That legislation passed because of the political savvy of Lyndon Johnson, about whom Robert Caro has written so compellingly.

Whom is correct because it is the object of the preposition *about* in the clause “*about whom Robert Caro has written so compellingly.*”

- Let’s look at some trickier WHOEVER/WHOMEVER choices:

I will give \$25 to whoever can name all 44 U.S. presidents.

Whoever is correct, because it’s the subject of the dependent clause “*whoever can name all 44 U.S. presidents.*” True, in the sentence, this clause functions as the object of the preposition “to.” But within the clause, *whoever* is the subject. Here’s a breakdown:

THE ENTIRE SENTENCE:

I will give \$35 to [whoever can name . . .]
subj. vb. obj. prep. --object of the prep. “to”—
of vb.

INSIDE THE “WHOEVER” CLAUSE:

[whoever can name all 44 U.S. presidents]
Subj. verb object of the verb “name”

Now, a sentence in which “whomever” is the right choice:

I will give \$25 to whomever you select.

Why *Whomever*? Because within the dependent clause “*whomever you select,*” it is the object of the verb *select*. (The subject of the clause is *you*.)

THE ENTIRE SENTENCE:

I will give \$35 to [whomever you select].
subj. verb obj. prep. --object of prep. “to” ---
of vb.

INSIDE THE “WHOMEVER” CLAUSE:

[whomever you select]
obj. of verb “select” subject verb



Guides Consulted for This Handbook

The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation (10th ed.), Jane Straus [HAS DRILLS AND QUIZZES]

The Elements of Style (3rd ed.), William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

Garner’s Modern American Usage (3rd ed.), Brian A. Garner [ERUDITE BUT NOT STUFFY; ALL EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM JOURNALISM]

Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing, Mignon Fogarty [THERE’S A WEBSITE, TOO]

Woe Is I (2nd ed.), Patricia T. O’Conner