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 good nut grafos or tightening your sentences.

Instead, what follows is a list of words and constructions commonly misused, misspelled or mis-punctuated — 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 (who review students’ cover letters).

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 professor may elect to quiz you periodically on its contents.

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**ADVERSE/AVERSE**

Don’t confuse these two adjectives.

“Adverse” (pronounced AD-verse) means unfavorable or harmful:

> Statins control cholesterol but can cause adverse reactions – muscle pain, for instance.

“Averse” (pronounced ah-VERSE) means having a strong feeling of opposition. “Averse to” means hostile to, against, reluctant:

> A former CIA agent, he is averse to providing any details about his career.

“Odd Push in Drug-Averse Norway: LSD IS O.K.”

*(Headline, The New York Times, 5/05/2015)*

**AFFECT/EFFECT**

“Affect” is commonly used as a verb; “effect” is commonly used as a noun.

- 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.
AGREEMENT (BETWEEN SUBJECTS AND VERBS AND BETWEEN NOUNS AND PRONOUNS)

• 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 book you ordered.

For tighter writing, recast sentences starting with “there is/there are.”

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”] stories 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 singular subjects appear between either/or (or neither/nor). Use a plural verb if plural subjects are involved.

Neither Thomas nor Phil knows how to drive. Either potatoes or noodles come with that dish.

Note: If one of the subjects is singular and the other plural, put the plural subject last and use a plural verb:
Neither rain nor snowstorms deter our UPS guy.

• Company, Government, Group, Team
These are singular nouns in American English. The panel published its [not “their”] report.

• 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 candidates] 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’s a plural, you must use a plural verb.

This is one of the poems that rhyme. [Of the poems that rhyme, this 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
To allude to means to refer to indirectly or hint at. It’s not a synonym for “say.”
He only alluded to the scandal, calling it “our problem.”

ALUMNUS/ALUMNI
Alumni is the plural, so one person cannot be an “alumni.” One person is an alumnus (male) or an alumna (female).

AMUSED/BEMUSED
If you’re amused, you’re entertained. If you’re bemused, you’re bewildered. Someone with a “bemused” expression is puzzled, not chuckling.
You seemed bemused by my question; should I explain what I mean?

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.

BASIC – “On a (daily) (weekly) (regular) basis”
Avoid this clunky phrase. Instead:
He filed stories daily.
I talk to my aunt once a week (or weekly).
We don’t visit much, but we write often.

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.

Better: Avoid these terms and just say “twice a year” or “once every two years.”

CAPITAL/CAPITOL
A capital is a seat of government—or a place that’s considered important for another reason.
Moscow is the capital of Russia.
Des Moines is Iowa’s capital.
Aleppo is the commercial capital of Syria.
Rome, Milan and Paris are Europe’s fashion capitals.

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.

Whoever stole the documents is in big trouble.

"Whoever stole the documents" is a dependent clause within a sentence. It can’t stand alone as a sentence, but it’s still a clause. 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. [----COMPLETE SUBJECT----] VERB PREP. PHRASE

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.

• Don’t use it 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.

CRITERION/Criteria
“Criterion” is singular, “criteria” plural.

The college 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 (AKA DANGLING MODIFIERS)**

Introductory words or phrases meant to describe (“modify”) something or someone must be immediately followed by (first) a comma and (then) the things or people they describe. Otherwise they become examples of an error known as a dangling modifier.

- Danglers can occur with introductory words ending in –ing, with past participles ending in -ed, with introductory adjectives, with introductory phrases starting with Like, Unlike and even with infinitives. (See last example.)

Below, some examples of danglers (with suggested corrections). Why so many? Because it’s easy to fall into the dangler trap.

**Wrong:** Jogging at night, the moon lights our way.  
[Why wrong: 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.  
[Why wrong: 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.  
[Why wrong: The refrigerator door isn’t a new parent.]

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

**Wrong:** Just 17 when he tried to enlist, the Army recruiter told Ted to come back with his parents.  
[Why wrong: The recruiter isn’t “just 17.”]

**Right:** Just 17 years old when he tried to enlist, Ted was told to come back with his parents.

**Wrong:** After studying all night, the couch looked pretty inviting to Deirdre.  
[Why wrong: 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.  
[Why wrong: 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.  
[Why wrong: 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, NBC was quick to hire Raj.  
[NBC isn’t “talented and...”]

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

**Wrong:** To understand how to use the software, the manual must be read.  
[the subject “you” is implied.]

**Right:** To understand how to use the software, read the manual.  
**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” only when you can substitute “caused by” or “attributable to.”

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.

“ESSENTIAL” & NON-ESSENTIAL” CLAUSES
Use “that” to introduce “essential” clauses — those that help identify exactly what person, place or thing you’re talking about. Use “which” for “non-essential” clauses, which simply give extra info about a person, place or thing already identified.

The car that I bought in Sweden never stalls.
[The “that” clause tells the reader exactly which car is being discussed. NO COMMA BEFORE OR AFTER “THAT”]

The Gettysburg Address, which takes three minutes to recite, is as eloquent as it is brief. [The “which” clause just adds additional info about the Gettysburg Address.] NON-ESSENTIAL] CLAUSES ARE SET OFF BY COMMAS.

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.

FAZE/PHASE
To faze is to bother or upset. A phase is a stage.
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.
Carla likes to flaunt her success; she drives a new Mercedes and always wears diamonds.
At 13, Harry flouted just about every school rule.

HISTORIC/HISTORICALLY
Use “historic” to describe something claiming an important place in history — something momentous.

Use “historical” or “historically” to discuss a fact or development 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.” So don’t add an extra “virus” after “HIV.”
The goal is to start a mobile clinic for people with HIV.

HOME IN/HONE [Why “hone in” is wrong]
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. [Just “hone” – no “hone in”]
I hone my bargaining skills by going to flea markets.

“IMPACT” AS A VERB . . .
. . . is business jargon. Instead, use “affect,” “influence,” “have an impact on” or “have an effect on.” Avoid, too, the dreaded “impactful.”

IMPLY/INFERENCE
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.
(Implying is pitching; inferring is receiving.)

She kept glaring at me, 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” randomly or 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.)

Employ it only to make clear that you are using a term in its exact, rather than its figurative, sense.
Below, 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, farming) 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.]

NOTORIOUS
Like “infamous,” “notorious” means well known in a bad way.
Bernard Madoff is a notorious swindler.
ONETIME/ONE-TIME

The onetime gang member now counsels teens. Applicants must pay a one-time fee.

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.

On Jan. 12, 1906, excited investors learned that the Dow Jones industrial average had peaked (at 100.25).

PUNCTUATION WITH QUOTATION MARKS
In American English:

• Commas and periods always go inside the quotation mark.
  
  Calling the article “libelous,” Henderson vowed to sue. President Obama told a reporter that Omar Little was 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 person who owns or runs a restaurant. (No “n.”)

STATIONARY/STATIONERY
Stationary means fixed or standing still.

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

Stationery (with an “e” -- think “letter”) is writing paper.

TORTUROUS/TORTUOUS
Torturous (think of the two r’s in “torture”) means horribly painful.

The procedure was torturous, but it saved his life.

Tortuous means winding, full of twists and turns. That road is so tortuous it adds 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 the subject of this clause. It happens to be an independent clause, aka a sentence. (The verb is uses.)

  Whoever was here left a mess.
  Whoever is the subject of the dependent clause “Whoever was here.” (Was is the verb.)

  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:

  BREAKDOWN OF THE ENTIRE SENTENCE:
  I will give $35 to [whoever can name . . . ]
  subj. vb. obj. prep. [object of the prep. “to”] of vb.

  BREAKDOWN OF THE “WHOEVER” CLAUSE:
  [whoever can name all 44 U.S. presidents]
  Subj. verb object of the verb “name”

   \[Y\]ou is the subject.]
Now, an example of how to use “whomever” correctly:

I will give $25 to whomever you select.

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

BREAKDOWN OF THE ENTIRE SENTENCE:
I will give $35 to [whomever you select].
subj. verb obj. prep. [object of the prep.”to”]
of vb.

INSIDE THE “WHOMEVER” CLAUSE:
[whomever you select]
object 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.),
Bryan 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
[EXPERTISE FROM A FORMER NYT JOURNALIST]