

Grammar and Punctuation¹

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This publication covering proper grammar and punctuation for news media writing is the third of a five-part series on news media writing. This series also covers an introduction to news media writing, news writing for print, news writing for television and radio, and interviews for news stories.

Introduction

Any news story *must* be well written. The story should be as free of grammar and punctuation errors as possible. *Grammar* is a system of rules that defines the use of the language. Most of the grammar and punctuation rules you have learned in school will be the same as Associated Press Style, which is covered in the second of this five-part EDIS publication series on news media writing, but there are some differences. Because you will be using Associated Press Style for journalistic writing, you should refer to the *Associated Press Stylebook's* section on punctuation for assistance. This publication covers some common grammatical and punctuation issues for journalists.

Grammar

A sentence fragment is a group of words that does not express a complete thought. It may lack a subject, predicate, or a complete thought. Every sentence in a news story should be a complete sentence.

Fragment: Finding a dependable and inexpensive car to use.

Complete: Finding a dependable and inexpensive car to use is becoming more difficult.

A *run-on sentence* is really two sentences joined without proper punctuation. Run-on sentences are corrected in one of three ways:

1. Break the sentence into two sentences by using a period.
2. If there is a close relationship between the two sentences, insert a semicolon to join them.
3. Connect the two sentences with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and*, *but*, *or*).

Run-on: *The turnpike is a better road it has less traffic.*

Correct: The turnpike is a better road. It has less traffic. (Break the sentence into two sentences.)

Correct: The turnpike is a better road; it has less traffic. (Insert a semicolon.)

Correct: The turnpike is a better road, and it has less traffic. (Insert a comma and conjunction.)

Comma splices occur when a sentence uses a comma instead of a period. As with a run-on sentence, you can correct comma splices by using a period, inserting a semicolon in place of the comma, or adding a conjunction after the comma.

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Comma splice: The rain ruined our vacation, we couldn't go to the beach.

Correct: The rain ruined our vacation. We couldn't go to the beach.

Agreement refers to singular and plural references. In *subject/verb agreement*, single subjects take single verbs; plural subjects take plural verbs. In *noun/pronoun agreement*, a singular noun takes a singular pronoun, and a plural noun takes a plural pronoun.

False subjects occur when a sentence does not begin with a real subject. Most sentences beginning with a false subject—for example, *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, *there were*, *there will be*, *it is*, or *it was*—can be rewritten and made stronger.

False subject: There is a class in my school that teaches writing.

Better: A class in my school teaches writing.

Parallelism refers to words or phrases that are of equal rank in tone or tense. Do not mix unequal elements in a phrase or series.

Mixed phrases: He *enjoys* books, movies, and *driving his dune buggy*.

Correct: He enjoys *reading* books, *going* to movies, and *driving* his dune buggy.

Correct: He enjoys *books*, *movies*, and his *dune buggy*.

Mixed tenses: He *walked* the dog and *works* with the horses.

Correct: He *walked* the dog and *worked* with the horses.

Dead wood is any word that is just extra to a sentence and does not add to it. Eliminate any words that would only add “dead wood” to your sentence.

Dead wood: It is *really* necessary to return the library book *very* soon. (How much more necessary is “really” necessary? How soon is “very soon”?)

Correct: It is necessary to return the library book soon.

Gender-neutral language should be used in your writing. Primarily, this avoids using “man” for “people.” Avoid job titles that refer to gender, such as *policeman*, *fireman*, and

postman. Instead, use *police officer*, *firefighter*, and *postal carrier*. Use plural pronouns to get around having to use “his/her” in sentences.

Awkward: A reporter should edit his/her article.

Better: Reporters should edit their articles.

Prepositional phrases should be kept to a minimum. If you see several prepositional phrases in a series, try to rewrite the sentence. Prepositional phrases are not bad, but they do add unnecessary words.

Awkward: The FFA meeting was led by the president of the chapter in the classroom.

Better: The FFA chapter's president led the meeting in the classroom.

Dangling modifiers do not modify the correct word. Be sure the modifier modifies the right noun.

Dangling modifier: Walking through the rows, the corn nearly filled the rows. (Sounds like the corn was walking through the rows.)

Correct: Walking through the rows, I noticed the corn nearly filled the rows.

Active and passive voice refers to the way in which verbs are used. The emphasis is on the subject as the doer of the action if a verb is in the active voice. Passive voice throws the action onto the object. Generally, writers should try to use the active voice.

Passive: The potatoes were passed around the table (by her).

Active: She passed the potatoes around the table.

Punctuation

Commas

Use commas to separate items in a series. However, unlike traditional punctuation rules that you have learned, in Associated Press Style writing, you do *not* include a comma before the conjunction. This is probably one of the biggest differences between journalistic writing and the writing style you have used in composition classes.

Incorrect (according to AP Style): The American flag is red, white, and blue.

Correct (according to AP Style): The American flag is red, white and blue.

Clauses introduced by *when*, *if*, *because*, and *although* are set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

Correct: Although the test was repeated, the results were never the same.

Correct: We could not duplicate these results, although we tried many times.

Set off an *appositive*—a word or phrase that follows another word to explain or identify it—with commas. Be sure you place a comma after the appositive.

Appositive: George Washington, *a Virginia planter*, was the first president of the United States of America.

Do not use a comma to precede a partial quotation.

Incorrect: The mayoral candidate charged that the man was, “a swindler of the lowest order.”

Correct: The mayoral candidate charged that the man was “a swindler of the lowest order.”

Use a comma to precede a complete quotation.

Correct: The defense attorney asked, “How would you like to be sent to prison?”

Semicolons

Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses not connected by a coordinating conjunction.

Correct: DeGraw launched her desperation shot; the ball went through the hoop as the buzzer sounded.

Use a semicolon prior to a conjunctive adverb (e.g., *however*, *therefore*, *nevertheless*) in a sentence. Insert a comma after the conjunctive adverb.

Correct: The first test results were unsatisfactory; however, a simple modification of the questionnaire solved the problem.

A semicolon separates items in a series that contain commas.

Incorrect: We traveled to four of the world’s most significant cities: Paris, France, London, England, Rome, Italy and Vienna, Austria.

Correct: We traveled to four of the world’s most significant cities: Paris, France; London, England; Rome, Italy; and Vienna, Austria.

Colons

Colons are used to separate parts of a sentence and to indicate a list or series.

Correct: The dealer had three cars: a BMW, a Cadillac and a Mustang. (Notice that the comma before “and” is not included. This is correct according to AP Style.)

Do not use a colon to separate a verb and its complement.

Incorrect: A scientist requires: intelligence and diligence.

Correct: A scientist requires two attributes: intelligence and diligence.

Correct: A scientist requires intelligence and diligence.

Do not capitalize the first word that follows a colon, unless the word is a proper noun.

Incorrect: She has three hobbies: Gardening, sewing and reading. (Notice that the comma before “and” is not included. This is correct according to AP Style.)

Correct: She has three hobbies: gardening, sewing and reading.

Quotation Marks

Commas, question marks, and periods go *inside* quotation marks in a quotation.

Correct: He said, “The test was hard.”

Correct: “I thought so too,” she said.

Correct: “Was the test hard?” she asked.

Use a set of double quotation marks first, then single marks within a quotation, for such items as titles that normally require double quotation marks.

Correct: He said, “I read the poem ‘Transformation’ yesterday.”

Use the following sentences as examples of how to punctuate direct quotations.

“The dog ran past the man,” he said.

“The dog ran past the man,” he said, “but it was stopped by the dogcatcher.”

The principal said, “Pasco Independent School District is the best school district in the state.”

Apostrophes

According to Associated Press Style, apostrophes can be used to indicate where numerals are left out.

Correct: The class of '07.

However, do not use an apostrophe for decades.

Incorrect: 1990's

Correct: 1990s

Hyphens

Hyphens are usually used to join words to form adjectives.

Correct: A 7-year-old boy. An off-the-cuff remark. A little-known man. A 3-inch bug.

Hyphens are not used with adverbs ending in *-ly*.

Incorrect: a gravely-ill student

Correct: a gravely ill student

Additional Information

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