Grammar Rules

Fundamentals of Journalism - JR 102
Emerson College - Fall 2012
Value

• Impeccable grammar and clean copy along with an understanding and adherence to AP Style will make you tremendously valuable and set you apart throughout your career.
Exceptions

- There is always going to be exceptions to the rules.

- As a general rule for all of these following slides, don’t do it.
Sentences

• Aim for tight sentences.

• If a sentence can be two, make it two.

• Make sure a sentence is actually a sentence. (Subject and verb.)
  • Rare exceptions for emphasis.
    – Example: He called out. No reply.
Sentences

• As a general rule for all of these “exceptions,” don’t do it.

• Try to mix up sentence length and structure.
  – Don’t start every sentence with a clause.
  – Don’t have every sentence be short or long.

• Use active voice.
• Makes your writing stronger.
Concise

• Omit needless words.
  – Vigorous writing is concise.

• *Elements of Style*: “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”
Concise

• Elements of Style says “[As] a rule, it is better to express a negative in positive form. … not honest > dishonest; did not remember > forgot; did not pay any attention to > ignored.”

• In journalism, we are all about saying it as tightly – in as few words/characters – as possible. Use the shorter way to say it.
Concise

• Ask yourself, “Can I say this in fewer words (or even characters)?”
  – If the answer is yes, do it.
  – Almost always, you’ll find the shorter way is stronger.
Agreement

• Make sure your verb refers to your subject.
  – Each, None = singular
  – Group, family, team = singular
  – Pluralizing incorrectly is far more common.

• Make sure your pronoun refers to your subject.
  – The freshmen were talking about the books they had read. They were bored.
    • As written, “they” refers to the books.
  – As a general rule, try to limit use of pronouns such as it and they. Reference the subject specifically.
Agreement

• Make sure participial phrases refer to your correct subject.
  – Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children. (Here walking refers to him.)
  – He saw a woman, walking slowly down the road, accompanied by two children. (Here walking refers to her.)
Clauses

• Commas with clauses – before and in the middle of sentences.
  – Common words that start clauses: if, when, where, because, due to, since, whenever, wherever, in, as, although, for, while

• Often a sentence can be rewritten with the clause coming at the end. If so, the clause will not need a comma.
  – When it rains, people bring out their umbrellas.
  – People bring out their umbrellas when it rains.
  – Often the sentence will be stronger with the clause at the end.
Clauses

• Separate independent clauses using commas.
  – Better yet, make them two sentences.
    • The candidate stopped in 18 cities, and he made speeches in each one.
    • The candidate stopped in 18 cities. He made speeches in each one.

• One clause per sentence.

• Do not use clauses in compound sentences.
Clauses

- Restrictive relative clauses are not set off by commas. (The clause is necessary for definition.)
  - The girl who was injured in the crash later died.
  - The girl, who was 7, lost her mother in the accident.

- Don’t start every sentence with a clause.

- Avoid starting leads with a clause.
Parenthesis

• Try to avoid use of parenthesis.
  – Hard news does not contain asides.

• Parenthetical expressions can usually be set off by commas.

• Ask, “Can this be included as a clause within the sentence? Can this be its own sentence?”
  – Often the answer is yes.
More Punctuation

• Commas go before conjunctions (i.e. and, but)

• No comma before “and” or “or” in a list.

• Punctuation inside quotation marks.
More Punctuation

• Avoid semicolons. Only use should be in a list where necessary for clarification.
  – Example: The guest list included her mother; her father; the mayor, who is her cousin; his brother, who the mayor defeated in the primary; and numerous friends.

• Avoid overusing colons.
  – As a rule, colons are not that common.

• Do not use exclamation points!
Paragraphs

• Journalism paragraphs are a bit different.

• Look at an entire story as following the paragraph format you have likely been taught.
  – Topic sentence = lede
  – Supporting sentences = supporting graf
  – Final/concluding sentence = closing graf

• Also, hard news stories may or may not have traditional conclusions.

• Features should have conclusions.
Paragraphs

• One idea per graf.

• Grafs generally should be no more than four sentences.

• One sentence grafs are fine.
  – Of course, not every graf should be a single sentence.
Tense

• Make sure tense is consistent.

• Avoid using present tense.
Elements of Style

• Learn/memorize the “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused” and “Words Often Misspelled.”
Additional

• Learn the correct use of ironic/irony.

• Know the difference between critical, crucial and vital.

• Who vs. Whom vs. That

• U.S. = adjective. United States = noun
Additional

• Limit adverbs.

• One space after a period.

• Do not end sentences with prepositions.

• Contrary to what you may have been taught, it is OK to begin sentences with “And” or “But.”
  – However, do this sparingly.
Additional

• Two words = verb, one word = noun
  – shut out v. shutout

• Do not to split verbs.
  – Avoid: She opted to just go to the bank.
  – Use: She just opted to go to the bank.

• Limit use of contractions.
  – it is vs. it’s; they are vs. they’re
Know

- its vs. its
- there vs. their vs. they’re
- you’re vs. your
- affect vs. effect