Get it Right:
A cranky editor's easy to understand, no-frills tips
for usage, style and punctuation
By Maureen Milliken

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest gifts we've been given as humans is the ability to express ourselves. We're lucky enough to live in a time when we can do it with the written word faster, more efficiently and in more ways than ever before.

Even so, the basic rules of writing that first began to form when a caveman put charcoal to wall still exist: If the message isn't clear, no one is going to listen.

This is true whether it's a novel, blog post or a newspaper story.

Grammar, word use, punctuation and style can be daunting. Don't be afraid, it's really very simple. The rules of writing exist to make your message clear. Once you know this, they make sense and are easy to understand.

When I was a young reporter, I had an editor who used to say, "If you want a hug, visit your mother. If you want to get it right, listen to me."

Newsrooms, both yesterday and today, don't have time to worry about writers' self-esteem and don't have the luxury to be sloppy. Clarity, accuracy and thoroughness — the foundation of news writing — are basic for all good writing, whether it's that sci-fi novel you've been laboring over for a decade or breaking news that you have to get on the web five minutes ago. There's no better boot camp than a newsroom for learning how to write and how to get it right.

With that in mind, this book offers tips that anyone who aspires to write can understand. It's not a total writing guide and doesn't cover all aspects of usage and grammar — for instance, you won't find everything you need to know about commas — but you will find the common mistakes and pitfalls I see most frequently. Commas included.

This book isn't about quantum physics or how to bake a soufflé. I don't know anything about those things. But I do know this stuff. The knowledge behind these tips comes from thirty years in the trenches. The delivery may be blunt at times. That's okay, right? You want to be a better writer.

You know where to go if you want a hug.

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CHAPTER 1: Some Basics of Good Writing

Have something to say

Writing a sci-fi novel? A magazine article? A poem? A newspaper story? It doesn't matter. If you don't have something to say, few people will listen.

Make sure your idea is well-developed and you know where you're going with it. Ask yourself why someone would want to read it. Even the most brilliant writers can't get by on great writing alone — they all have something to say.

Care enough to work at it

If you want someone to care about what you write, you need to care about it, too.

That means paying attention to and respecting the craft and following the rules.

Computers and the Internet make it a lot easier to write than the good old days when typewriters, pens, pencils, erasers, white-out and reams of paper were the tools of the trade. But the fact that it's easier to get the words down isn't a license to be lazy. Just as having spell check doesn't mean you get a pass on knowing how to spell (more on that later), having a computer doesn't give you a pass on using your noggin and working hard to make what you are writing worthwhile.

Care enough to get it right

So you think grammar, punctuation and spelling is for the other guy? Your genius can't be reined in by The Man's uptight rules?

Think again. No one wants to read something that's sloppy, no matter how brilliant it may be. Again, the rules exist to clarify what's being said. The less clear your message, the less anyone will get it.

Put it this way: If your home is a mess — dirty dishes in the sink, dirty clothes in the living room, smelly, dog hair everywhere — people aren't going to want to visit, no matter how much they like you.

The same goes for what you've written: no one's going to want to read it if it's a mess.

Read, read, read

No writer who is not a reader is good, no matter what kind of writing he or she does. It confounds me as an editor that someone can send me a 200,000-word manuscript and proudly say "And I've only read four or five books in my life!" Gosh, I never would have guessed.

It astounds me how many writers I've edited remark on how little they've read. You can't be a good writer if you don't see writing in action. This goes for good writing and bad writing alike. The good writers show you how it's done; the bad writers show you what not to do.

Omit unnecessary words

Strunk & White said it first; editors, writing instructors and writers who have written books about writing have repeated it for decades. I know, I know. Every word you write is golden. Sorry, not. Cut, slice and trim as we used to say at the newspaper. Sounds harsh? It is.

But you know what's worse? Being a reader and slogging through snowdrifts of adverbs and adjectives, overblown descriptions and huge blocks of exposition in an attempt to find the story buried underneath.

Think you're done? Sorry, it's just a first draft

One of the biggest issues I see as an editor, both of manuscripts and newspaper stories, is that what I'm looking at is not finished.

Rarely is the first way you wrote something the best way. You must go through, tighten, revise. Look at every sentence, every word — yes, every word — and ask yourself, "Is this really how I want to say this?"

Spell check is no substitute for your brain

Don't rely on spell check to do the work for you. Spell check is good as far as it goes, but know whether you want where, wear, we're or were. You certainly don't want minuets instead of minutes (this has appeared many times in books I've edited).

I used to edit a reporter who constantly wrote indicated instead of indicted. He blamed spell check. I blamed him.

Make sure when you use spell check that you are not ignoring what you've written.

When I lived in Manchester, N.H., I was running one day when a woman stopped her car next to me and asked where St. Anselm College was. We were about fifty yards from the front gate, which I pointed out to her. She then told me that couldn't be right, because her GPS showed it on another street.

Yeah. Okay.

See where I'm going here? Some people rely on the technology so much they forget to think. Use spell check, but don't expect it to do your thinking for you.

And there's nothing wrong with looking up a word in a good old-fashioned dictionary when you're not sure.

Context: The most important forgotten thing

You'll see this word a lot in this book, but won't hear it a lot in discussions about editing and good writing. Too bad.

Context is important for everything from what words you use to what those words say. One reason people avoid it like the plague is that recognizing its necessity means you're in for some hard work.

To be sure you have context, or that it's accurate, you have to be sure of what you're writing. Know your subject matter, the background, the characters, the setting. The more confident you are of your subject matter, the better your context will be and the more consistent it will be. News writing, fiction, a memoir for your family — context can make it or break it.

You've heard of the five Ws: who, what, where, when and why?

If your article has all of those, it has the basics. If it has why, it also has a start on having context. Don't forget about that last W.

For more on context, see the final chapter.

Chapter 2: Punctuation

Before we start: Go easy with the punctuation, okay? It's there to help clarify, but too much makes what you're writing an obstacle course for the reader. If a sentence is loaded with punctuation, chances are it's a bad sentence.

Apostrophe

The apostrophe in a contraction tells the reader "there should be a letter here, but there isn't."

Is not? Isn't. Do not? Don't.

It's also used in a possessive: Suzy's book.

Apostrophe mistakes occur most frequently not when they're forgotten, but when they're used when they shouldn't be.

The possessive of its has no apostrophe. The dog buried its bone.

It's? It is. It's time to go.

But "The dog needs a walk, get its leash." No apostrophe.

Other possessives that don't come with an apostrophe are hers, his, ours, yours.

In other words, proper nouns (Ted's fish) have an apostrophe when they are possessive. Pronouns (his fish) don't.

The apostrophe is one of the most misused punctuation marks. Some people believe whenever something ends in an S that normally wouldn't, it must have an apostrophe.

They are wrong

The sign on your neighbors house says "The Smith's." If it means the house is the Smith's, okay. But we all know they're more likely announcing the Smiths live here. The Smiths. No apostrophe.

Colon

Don't use this as much as you want to.

The most common use in a sentence is with an independent clause (a part of a sentence that could stand alone as its own sentence).

Jen's favorite fruits were all citrus: grapefruit, oranges, lemons and tangerines.

The list at the end of the sentence elaborates on the beginning of the sentence (the independent clause).

Another frequent use with an independent clause is an example or explanation that comes after the clause.

The rules of the game were simple: Don't let anyone take your flag.

The premise is the same for both uses: The colon is used when an independent clause is followed by something specific to that clause.

The colon is also used to introduce a topic, like a salutation, date or lead-in item on a resume. It's also used in reference formatting in academic papers, to separate hours from minutes in the time of day, Biblical citations and other similar, specific instances.

Don't use it where it doesn't belong.

For instance, many writers use colons in dialogue as a substitute for attribution.

Instead of:

Mary said, "Start the car"

They write:

Mary said: "Start the car."

That's improper use, so don't do it.

If what follows the colon can stand as its own sentence, the first word is capitalized. If it can't, it's not.

Comma

A comma is another way to separate clauses in sentences, usually dependent clauses. That is, those clauses that wouldn't make sense without the rest of the sentence.

Look at the first sentence in the previous paragraph. The stuff that comes after the comma wouldn't make sense without the first part, so it's a dependent clause.

The second sentence in the first paragraph shows how a comma is used to link an introductory clause (that is).

A comma can also separate a clause in the middle of a sentence.

John, who was three years older than Bill, always got the biggest piece of pie.

You don't need the part of the sentence about him being older than Bill, but it adds some meaning to the sentence.

Commas can also separate a list of things in a sentence.

The barn was filled with horses, cows, pigs and chickens.

A note on this use: many styles, including AP style used by most newspapers, don't use a serial comma. That's the comma that would come after pigs and before and.

Other styles, particularly Chicago style, which is used by book publishers, do use the serial comma. It's also sometimes called the Oxford comma. Be sure you know which style you need to use for what you are writing (more on style can be found on page 49).

A comma goes inside quotation marks in American punctuation. Fred told the others that Bill said his tummy felt "all squishy," a sure sign of food poisoning.

Dashes

There are two kinds of dash, and the hyphen isn't one of them. They are the em dash (long dash) and the en dash (shorter dash). Both (as well as the hyphen, which again, isn't a dash) have distinct uses and are frequently misused. In other words, they are not interchangeable.

em (long) dash: The em dash is used to separate clauses. Don't overuse it — a comma is usually fine. See what I did there? I used it. It's best used to set off the clause for emphasis. Old school writers still type two hyphens (no long dashes on typewriters), but Microsoft Word changes that to an en dash. If you don't have a key stroke for an em dash, get it from the insert symbol function on your tool bar, then cut and paste.

Never open a clause with an em dash and close it with a comma.

For instance:

Jack — he of magic beans fame, was shredded by the giant.

The right way is:

Jack — he of magic beans fame — was shredded by the giant.

On the other hand, in some instances, one em dash, then a comma, is okay. Do it when the clause comes at the beginning or end of the sentence, like this:

The em dash is frequently misused — it's a hazard of having too many punctuation choices, I think.

en (short) dash: The en dash should only be used to separate ranges and numbers. Don't use it for anything else, particularly in lie of an em dash because that's what your Microsoft Word is "correcting" it to. This is a range:

He coached from 2010–12.

hyphen: .It's not a dash, so you'll find it under hyphen.

Fun Fact

The terms em dash and en dash are printer's terms that go back to when individual lead letters were used on presses. The m or "em" takes up the same amount of space as the long dash, the en takes up the same as the shorter dash. Why em instead of m? Newspapers (and other publications) want to make sure that nothing that shouldn't go into print sneaks in. So words used for production are deliberately misspelled: hed for head, lede for lead, graf for graph.

Spaces are em and en spaces. Old timers used to call those mutts and nuts. The digital age has taken some of the fun out of publishing.

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Ellipsis

Writers love it, but man, are they misused.

An ellipsis is three dots ... that should only be used to indicate missing words. It is no more than three dots.

It should not be used to indicate a pause or any other writing cleverness:

Mary saw John kissing Bertha, and in a flash, she just knew...

It should only be used to show that words were removed.

Hamlet said, "To be...that is the question."

It isn't used at the beginning of a sentence. So you wouldn't write:

Hamlet said, "...that is the question."

You would write:

Hamlet said, "That is the question."

Another note: No bracket is necessary around the T in the above quote to show that it was originally lowercase. You are not misquoting Shakespeare if you start a partial quote with a capital letter instead of a lowercase one. I promise.

Exclamation point

Try to use this as little as possible. Yeah, okay, in a quote. And occasionally to convey irony or jokiness. Never, ever in straight news copy. Very rarely in fiction, except, again irony or jokiness. (Tom Wolfe does this very well, but that doesn't mean if you pepper your writing with exclamation points you are the next Tom Wolfe.) When you're texting or emailing you need that exclamation point to convey emotion. But when you're engaging in serious writing, your words should be good enough to convey whatever emotion is necessary most of the time.

I sometimes find myself doing an exclamation-ectomy on copy. There are rarely any survivors.

It goes outside of quotation marks in a sentence, unless it is part of what is inside the quotation marks, most frequently a title.

Danny fell off the roof when he heard the words "she's at the door"!

They were going to see the musical "Oklahoma!"

And for the love of Pete, do NOT use more than one to end a sentence. Just don't.

And while we're at it, never use the fatal exclamation point/question mark combo. Only one piece of punctuation allowed for the end of a sentence

Hyphen

The hyphen is used for words, either to pull them together or break them apart.

Common uses include splits of words at ends of sentences or linking a pronoun.

Its most common use, however, is to link words that modify a noun.

He was a small-business owner.

Without the hyphen, the reader wouldn't know if he owned a small business or if he was small and owned a business. The hyphen is necessary to make it clear what the writer means. On the other hand, if it's not necessary, don't use it. Too much unnecessary punctuation distracts readers.

It was his first death penalty case.

In this example, death penalty needs no hyphen. Anyone reading the sentence knows it's a case that deals with the death penalty.

You get to decide if the hyphen is really necessary when it's used to modify a noun. This doesn't mean make your own rules, it means make sure what you're saying can be understood without a lot of punctuation fuss.

One of the most common hyphen errors is hyphenation of an adverbial compound. That's when a modified verb is used to then modify a noun.

Federally funded program. Nationally televised game. Easily irritated editor.

No hyphen is used in those instances. Why not? Because there's no confusion. The "ly" at the end of the first word makes it obvious it matches up with the next word. This is a rule, not a suggestion.

But don't think every word that ends in ly carries this rule. If you add ly to the word so it modifies the next word, you have an adverbial compound. If it's just a word that happens to end in ly (family, early), then it may need a hyphen.

I once edited a story in which the reporter had written "primarily-federally-funded."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Which brings up another rule: no multiple hyphen words. One's enough.

And finally, this:

There are many words that are hyphenated when they're an adjective (describing a noun) but not hyphenated in other uses.

The AP stylebook gives this example: *an all-time high*, but *the greatest runner of all time*

I see it a lot describing ages: *he was a three-year-old child*, but *he was three years old*. Not *he was three-years-old*.

Keep an eye out for how you are using the words before you start throwing the hyphens in. If they are not modifying a noun, you probably don't need them.

The same goes for pairings that are sometimes an adjective, sometimes a noun, sometimes a verb. He pitched two *shut-out* innings. He pitched a *shutout*. The visiting team was *shut out*.

Again, modifiers use hyphens, words not modifying a noun (coming before it to help explain it) don't. If it's a verb, it's usually two words.

Period

Ends a sentence. Period.

In a sentence with a quotation, in American punctuation, the period is inside the quotation marks.

 Fred always left with the phrase "good riddance to bad rubbish."

Parentheses

Parentheses are used for something that has less status than a clause. Think of it as an aside in your sentence:

The old station wagon (it was a Rambler) lasted for years.

Parentheses are also used in a quote to include words the person didn't say, to show a word is being substituted for one the person did say, or to correct a wrong word:

"I'm not ready to give up my seat to (city councilor) Fred Smith," the mayor said.

When the mayor said that, he just said "Fred Smith." The writer wants to make sure the reader knows who Fred Smith is (like a good reporter), so she added the parenthetical statement.

When the parenthetical statement comes at the end of a sentence, but is part of the sentence, the period is outside the parentheses:

The mayor presented the award himself after dinner (chicken, of course).

But if the parenthetical statement is a stand-alone sentence, the period is inside the parentheses:

The mayor presented the award himself after dinner, when most of the crowd had left. (They always serve such rubbery chicken at those things.)

Bonus Style Note

Parentheses vs. brackets: With the advent of web writing, brackets, which are square instead of rounded like parentheses, are often used. This is not accurate in print writing: Brackets go inside of parentheses when there is a parenthetical statement within a parenthetical statement. They are most often used that way in academic writing and it's best not to get the two mixed up.

And brackets still don't translate well for many typesetting programs, so AP style requires parentheses for print.

<div align="center">#</div>

Quotation marks

Another unnecessarily overworked and abused member of the punctuation family.

Ideally, quotation marks go around a quote.

"Stop using air quotes whenever you talk to me," Eddie said.

Some people like to use them around phrases that may be uncommon or slang:

"Stop using 'air quotes' whenever you talk to me," Eddie said.

AP style, and most other styles, hold that if the phrase is common usage — if most people are familiar with it — you don't need the quotes.

In American English, quotes inside a quote are single quote marks (as in the second example).

It's also not necessary to use quotation marks when you're reporting what someone said but it's not a full quote:

He said he was going to come by after school.

You would not write:

He said he was going to "come by after school."

The only reason you would put quotation marks around that phrase would be if it were meant ironically. For instance, if he wasn't going to school at all, but playing hooky, and the speaker and listener were both in on it. They both know that he meant something different from what he said.

They are also needed if the writer wants the reader to know that the words being used are right from the horse's mouth, not the writer's. In the following sentence, the reporter wants it to be clear the governor isn't being paraphrased, but he actually said it.

The governor said the employees are "lazy and overpaid."

On the other hand, if the words being used don't carry any editorializing, there is no need for the quotation marks:

The governor said the employees weren't working hard.

Some writers, particularly those who write signs, use quotation marks to set things off.

Today's special: "Roast Beef"

Not a good idea. If the person reading the sign is like me, he'll start questioning whether the special is really roast beef, or if it's some substitute made to resemble roast beef, and that's why it's in quotation marks.

A similar misuse frequently in news copy I edit:

Three of the selectmen voted "no" and two voted "yes."

The sentence works just fine without those quotation marks. It's clear what's meant, and that's what's important.

And then there are nicknames.

If the person is Thomas "Tuffy" Bing, Tuffy, his nickname is in quotation marks to tell readers his given name is Thomas, but he's known as Tuffy.

I always tell writers that if the nickname isn't necessary in a story, don't use it. If it's necessary for color or character, use it. If everyone knows him by his nickname, use that one, without his given name. You can always write later in the story "His given name is Thomas." Only use quotation marks with the nickname if it's being used Thomas "Tuffy" Bing.

When writing about a pet — She brought her dog, Dewey — the pet's name is not in quotation marks. It's his name, so no unnecessary quotes implying it's not.

Too many unnecessary quotation marks make readers start thinking more about the quotation marks, even if they don't realize it, than what is being said. Part of their brain snags on that unnecessary punctuation and it just can't get away.

CHAPTER 3: Words and Phrases

There is no possible way to cover every word, what it means or how it's misused. This section includes word and phrase mistakes or misuses that I come across frequently. Some of these have a right and wrong. Some are things that I find pointless or idiotic. Some drive me absolutely bughouse, others are just irritants. The ones that really get to me? You'll know it when you see them. Use those at your own risk.

actually: Overused and misused. Only use it for comparison. "He said he was a millionaire, but he actually lived under the bridge." Don't use it in cases where it's not necessary or wrong, as in a news report I recently heard where someone jumped off a bridge "but didn't actually resurface."

adopted: When writing about a child, only use when there's a context. It's the parents' child. Only point out the child is adopted if it's relevant.

allege and all its variations: In news copy, this is necessary if someone is charged with a crime, but hasn't been convicted, or someone is saying someone did something that hasn't been proved. That said, nervous writers use it all over the place and unnecessarily. "He died after the alleged shooting." The shooting itself isn't alleged, he died from it, after all. It's alleged that his buddy, Dave, is the one who shot him. "He was shot, allegedly by his buddy Dave." This is another case of think before you use it. Know what the word means and know what you're writing.

affect/effect: Effect is most commonly used as a noun. A sound effect, the effect of the drug. It's used as a verb when it means to make something happen, for instance, to effect change. Affect is used most commonly as a verb, "The storm affected the quality of the TV picture." When used as a noun, it refers to emotion: "He lacked affect."

agnostic: Agnostic is the belief that the existence of God can't be proved, but that doesn't mean there isn't such a being (as opposed to atheists, who don't believe in God). This word is often used incorrectly as a substitute for indifferent. If someone asks you if Chinese food is okay for lunch and you say you're agnostic about Chinese food, you're saying that Chinese food for lunch can't be proved.

amazing: Overused, mostly for things that, well, just aren't amazing. Find a better word if you want your writing to be exceptional.

anniversary/annual: An anniversary is something that happens yearly (anni from the Latin meaning year). So sorry lovebirds, there's no such thing as a three-week anniversary. For something to be annual, it has to happen every year. So there's no such thing as "first annual" unless it's happened for two years or more.

as: If you're using it to link clauses, you need a better sentence. Or a couple of sentences. As is not a conjunction (and, but, or). "He didn't go to school, as the principal told him he was suspended," would be

better as "He didn't go to school because the principal told him he was suspended," or "He didn't go to school; the principal told him he was suspended," or "The principal told him he was suspended, so he didn't go to school."

associate: As a noun it means a partner or a colleague. People who work for businesses are employees, or workers, not associates. As much as the corporate world would like you to believe the guy making bad money for working bad hours is "an associate," he's not. They can call them that, but when writing, don't
use corporate spin, use what people really are. Worker, employee. Or be specific: steamfitter, waitress, retail clerk, cashier, bank teller.

atheist: An atheist doesn't believe in God. It's not a religion, an association or a proper noun in any way, so it is lowercase.

altar/alter: Altar is at the front of the church. Alter is to change.

anyone, any one, etc.: Any one of you could be president. Anyone here want to be president? See the difference?

begs the question: Everyone uses it to mean "raises the question," but that's not what it means. It's a circular argument. How do you know God exists? The Bible says so. Who wrote the Bible? God. That's begging the question. So only use it for that type of thing.

birth parent: Only to be used when someone else is legally parenting the child and the writer needs to differentiate between that person and the person who fathered or gave birth to the child. Otherwise use of this phrase is inaccurate. For instance, if a child has a stepfather, and that man has not legally adopted the child, it's not correct to refer to the child's father as his "birth father." He's simply the father. If the stepfather adopts the child, then he's the father and the man who biologically fathered the child is referred to as the birth father.

blond/blonde: Blond is the adjective no matter if it's a man or woman (she had blond hair) as well as the noun when it's a man. (Brad Pitt is one hot blond). When it's used as a noun referring to a woman, it's blonde.

bound: When used to refer to something moving, it's part of the verb. He was southbound. Don't write "He was driving southbound." He was either
driving south or he was southbound. However, when it's an adjective, you still need a verb: "He was driving in the southbound lane."

buses/busses: A bus is a vehicle; a buss is a kiss. Buses is the plural of bus; busses is the plural of buss.

canine/K-9: So what's wrong with dog? Just say dog. Canine? So we're speaking Latin? Use K-9 when referring to a law enforcement unit that has it as part of its official name: The Maine State Police K-

9 Unit was on the scene. But only when you have to. Don't say "A K-9 tracked the bank robber through the woods." How about "a police dog tracked the bank robber through the woods"? There, doesn't that feel better?

Canada: When specifying a spot in Canada, use the province the same way you would refer to a state in the U.S. Don't write "He's from Sherbrooke, Canada." That's like writing "He's from Manchester, U.S." Instead, write "He's from Sherbrooke, Quebec (or P.Q.)." Don't know which province the town is in? Look it up. Not being accurate tells the reader, "I don't know anything about Canada and don't think it's important to get this right."

Canada goose: Canada goose, not Canadian goose.

canceled/postponed: If it was supposed to happen, was called off and will not happen at all at any time, it's canceled. If it was called off and will be or is rescheduled for some time in the future, it's postponed. Canceled, but cancellation.

canon/cannon: Canon is church law, or a standard. Cannon is the big gun that makes a big noise.

capital/capitol: Capital is the city, capitol is the building.

carat/caret/carrot/karat: Carat is the weight of a gem; caret is a copy-editor's mark that looks like a little v; carrot is the vegetable; karat is a unit of measure for gold.

cavalry/Calvary: Cavalry are the soldiers on horses who come to your rescue; Calvary is the hill where Jesus was crucified and can often be found in the names of churches.

choke: You choke on something. If someone has his hands around your neck and is squeezing, he is not choking you, he's strangling you.

citizens: Nations bestow citizenship. Towns, cities, states do not. So someone is not a citizen of Boston. It's jargon, anyway, unless there's a context in which it's important to know the person is a citizen of that nation. Better to use resident, person, passerby, attendee, audience member, anything that more specifically describes what the person is.

claim: When used as a verb, this implies what the person is saying is being called into question and can smack of editorializing. Don't write that someone "claimed" something unless there's proper context to it. There is nothing wrong with the word said.

coed: If you're using this as a noun, you've been around for decades, so I can speak frankly to you: stop. It used to mean a female college student back in the good old days when all-male institutions of higher learning opened their doors to women. But now that women don't have to be distinguished as not being men, it's a demeaning anachronism.

comprised of: This is wrong. Comprised means "to embrace" so proper use is "Maine comprises 16 counties," not "Maine is comprised of 16 counties."

concerned: Using it as a verb? "He was concerned"? Be my guest. As an adjective? Don't. The context should tell your audience that the person or people you're writing about was concerned, whether they be parents, petition-signers or town residents gathered for a witch-burning. And one sure way to feel the pain of my red pencil drawing a line through your work is to write "concerned citizens." A reporter recently told me that an angry woman at a meeting insisted he refer to her and her fellow angry residents as "extremely concerned citizens." He wisely decided against that, no doubt picturing the pencil of shame snapping in my hand as I read his copy.

couple: When referring to an amount of something, it's "a couple of." As in, "a couple of days ago it was raining," rather than "a couple days ago it was raining."

Dad/dad: When using it as a form of address or a proper noun, it's uppercase. "Hey Dad!" "I'm going to give Dad a call." Otherwise, it's lower case. "My dad told me not to screw up." "All the dads please line up by the wall."

damper: Something that deadens. While it's not incorrect, it's such a cliché that if you write "Rain put a damper on..." I will eradicate it from your copy. Won't even think twice. Nothing I edit will have that phrase in it once I'm done.

decided to: Is frequently unnecessary. "He decided to take a nap." Usually "He took a nap" is more direct and tells the story better. Just because he decided to doesn't mean he did. Use it when someone has a choice to make and decides something. If someone is simply doing something, say he did it. Instead of "The district attorney decided to charge him with a felony," write "The district attorney charged him with a felony." See the difference?

Dickensian: Ever read any Dickens? If you're referring to something quaint and old-fashioned as Dickensian or "like in a Dickens novel," you haven't. Or at least weren't paying attention when you did. Dickens wrote about horrific social conditions, the plight of the poor and the indifference to both by those in power. If you're writing about something like that, then it's Dickensian.

die/dead: Particularly for news writers: he died. He didn't perish, pass on, pass away, leave for heaven, get tired and get carried to heaven by Jesus or any other euphemism. He died. He's dead. There's nothing wrong with writing that.

disabled/handicapped: Someone with a disability or handicap should not be labeled disabled or handicapped. Instead, the disability should be referred to in context. "He walks with crutches after he was hit by a car" or "she

was born with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair to get around." AP describes this as people first, and it's a good way to write no matter what you're describing. AP also advises writers to stay away from words that connote pity: "She's *afflicted with* multiple sclerosis." "He's *confined to* a wheelchair." It's always best to think hard about what you're writing and what it means, and it's also important to avoid

using clichés. When you think about what your words mean and how you can best describe a person, you are a better writer.

disinterested/uninterested: Disinterest means impartial, uninterested means not interested.

drinking the Kool-Aid: Try to avoid this idiotic cliché. If you understand its origin, you know almost 1,000 people died when they "drank the Kool-Aid." If you don't, it's still overused. And idiotic. Find better words. And anyway, it was Flavor-Ade.

Doctor and other titles: If the fact the person is a physician is not relevant, you don't use the title. If it's a reference to a person with a doctorate, the title is generally not used in news writing unless there's a context for it. In other words, don't write, "The school's principal, Dr. John Smith, called a snow day." I'm not a big fan of titles if there is no reason for them to be in the story. And if a person has an honorary doctorate? Sorry, they never get to be called Dr. That's not just me, that's a fact.

Elderly: Overused and unnecessary. Almost every time I see this adjective in the lead of a story, I delete it. "An elderly driver crossed the center line and hit a tree on the other side of the road." The reader will find out shortly that the driver was 87, or whatever. Pointing it out with an adjective puts an emphasis on the person's age that may be unfair or inaccurate. Also, elderly is relative. I edited a story recently where a 60-year-old was described as elderly. Says who? If you use the right words in the first place, no adjective is necessary to illustrate the person's age.

Election Day: Only capitalized when referring to the first Tuesday of November.

emigrate/immigrate: You emigrate from, you immigrate to. My grandmother emigrated from Italy. My grandmother immigrated to the United States.

Every day/everyday: Only one word when it's an adjective. It's an everyday occurrence. Otherwise, it's two words. I see this used incorrectly every day.

fallen: A cliché adjective that makes my skin crawl. Fallen hero. Fallen soldier. Fallen officer. Way overused in an attempt to be solemn, dramatic and grave. Usually the context of the person's death is enough to convey all that without this gratuitous adjective getting in the way. Adjectives like this make the words trite and thereby do the opposite of what the user intends.

farther/further: Physical distance is farther. To expand on something is further.

famous: As an adjective, pointless to the point of ridiculousness. If you have to tell people he's famous, then he's not. If he's famous, you don't have to tell people. When I see this in a story, the first thing I think is that the writer has never heard of the person and is assuring himself and the readers that the person is famous. I recently read three articles in three different newspapers on the same day that referred to architect Charles Bulfinch as "famous architect Charles Bulfinch." Not only did that tell the reader nothing about the man, but my guess was the reporters all got it from the same press release and didn't know who he was and were too lazy to find out. Some simple research would have revealed that he

designed the Massachusetts statehouse, and therefore would have given the story, which was about Maine's statehouse, some context. The use of "famous" in those news stories was not only pointless, but a missed opportunity to use better words to make a better story.

father/pastor: These are not titles and in news writing should only be used as such in a quote: "Father Bob Mahoney won the football pool," said the principal. If it's not a quote, it's "the Rev." on first reference. Same goes for pastor. So the writer would write, "The parishioners were thrilled when their pastor, the Rev. Bob Mahoney, won the football pool and said he'll use the money to fix the steeple." On second reference, he's just Mahoney. No title. You won't go to hell. I promise.

female: This is the correct adjective — rather than "woman doctor," it's "female doctor." But think for a minute. Why are you writing that? If it's "she's the first female doctor to work at the remote hospital," that's fine. If it's "He was old fashioned and didn't want a female doctor treating his hemorrhoids," that's fine, too. If it's "The female doctor treated the accident victim" and her gender has nothing to do with the story, don't write it. Those days are long gone, fellas. I read a headline in a news story recently that referred to "a female bicyclist" and scanned the story for any reason her gender had to be pointed out. I couldn't find one. And her gender-specific name was in the second paragraph, making it clear she was a woman. Just like elderly, black, and a lot of other unnecessary adjectives, this one says something the writer probably doesn't want to say if used incorrectly.

fiancé/fiancée: One e for a guy, two for a woman. But stay away from this term. People are either married or they're not. If a couple's house burns down and they're married, you refer to them in the story as husband and wife. It's okay if they're not to refer to them as boyfriend and girlfriend but in a lot of cases, it's not necessary to the story to spell out the relationship. And frankly, people refer to themselves as being a fiancé or fiancée when they're not because they're either uncomfortable with other labels related to non-married cohabitation or they're living in a dream world. If there's a set wedding date and the story refers to the
fact they're getting married and the reference is in that context, use it. Otherwise, it's an unnecessary label.

flaunt/flout: Flaunt is to show something off; flout is to have contempt for.

flier/flyer: Brochures and pilots are fliers. Flyer is used as a proper noun from everything to a wagon (Radio Flyer) to a sports team (Philadelphia Flyers).

flounder/founder: Flounder as a noun is a fish and as a verb is to flop around like a fish. Founder is to become disabled or sink, like a ship.

fortunately/unfortunately/thankfully: These pointless words are a TV news staple. "Fortunately, no one died in the fire," or "Unfortunately, they all died in the fire." Really? No kidding. Use them in fiction writing sparingly. In news writing, unless they're in a quote, don't use them.

fractions: Ugly little things, aren't they? Try not to use them. It's "three quarters of the audience was asleep before he was halfway through his speech." Never use a numerical fraction in that context. "One half of the building was used for the restaurant, the other for the dance hall." No fraction.

funds: If you mean money, write money. Why is everyone so afraid to use the word money? "The governor said state money will be used to pay for the repairs." Not "the governor said state funds will be used to pay for the repairs." Just because politicians and bureaucrats talk like they have sticks up their butts doesn't mean we have to write that way. If you're writing about money, call it money.

gentleman: The only time you should write this word is if you're making the point that someone is truly a gentleman. Somewhere along the line cops started using it to describe criminals, probably to be funny or ironic, and now everyone is doing it. "I saw the gentleman who robbed the bank run into the woods," the bank customer will tell you. Just because he says it (watches too many cop shows) doesn't mean you write it. Write "the customer saw the robber run into the woods." And if you're not quoting someone, for the love of Mike,
don't use it. They're not gentlemen. They're bank robbers. Or bar brawlers. Or alley urinators. Think about your words instead of using clichés, particularly silly ones.

ghetto: A part of the city a group is forced to live in by the government. It's not the slums or the poor part of town. Don't use it unless you're writing about a real ghetto. Look up the Warsaw ghetto for a good example of what a ghetto is.

Go missing/gone missing/went missing: Bad grammar. Pointless cliché. Overused. Ridiculous. Bad writing. So awful I can't even write a complete sentence about it. This gets the red pencil 100 percent of the time. Nothing wrong with disappeared.

Good Samaritan: AP and I differ on this one. AP says lower case "good." I say it's uppercase. Why? Because the Good Samaritan was a character in the Bible. If you lower case good, you are talking about someone who's good and from Samaria. The fact AP and I differ isn't a big deal because I eradicate this from every story I see it in, unless it's a quote and then I grit my teeth, break my pencil and upper case the G. The guy in the Bible was helping his enemy, which is never the case when it's used in news copy. This cliché has come to mean anyone who helps a stranger. Just say a passerby helped her. Or a fellow customer at the grocery store. Or a neighbor. Or a stranger. Pick specific over a cliché and your writing is better every single time.

grisly/grizzly: It's a grisly discovery, not a grizzly one, unless a grizzly bear made the discovery. That's the only time you use grizzly. Or if you're referring to something that's "grayish or flecked with gray," according to the American Heritage Dictionary. But you weren't, were you? So it's grisly.

guest: Corporate America can pretend the people who use its services, eat its food, drink its drinks are "guests," but if I'm a guest, why am I paying?
They can call us what they want, but when you're writing, you need to call us customers.

historic/historical: Historic is a thing or moment in or from history. Historical is something that has to do with history (a historical society).

housecleaning/housekeeping: When using as a metaphor, housecleaning means people are getting fired and everything's changing. They're cleaning house! Housekeeping is getting things straightened up. "We're just doing some housekeeping," the CEO said when he hired the auditors to go over the books.

hysterical: Means uncontrolled fear, panic or crying. Not interchangeable with hilarious.

imply/infer: To imply is to signal that something means something; to infer is to discern the meaning. So when you're giving the meaning, you're implying. When you're looking for the meaning, you're inferring.

in: Drives me nuts when I see this innocent little word used to construct a bad sentence. "The Red Sox had one of the best catchers ever in Carlton Fisk." Awkward! How about "The Red Sox had one of the best catchers ever, Carlton Fisk." Or "Carlton Fisk of the Red Sox was one of the best catchers ever."

incident: A weak word. Too general. Say what it was: an assault, an accident, a fire, a kerfuffle, an argument, a barroom brawl, a shouting match.

indicated: If he used hand signals, pointed, hinted, he indicated. But usually this is used where "said" works just fine. If he said it, he said it. Nothing wrong with said. It's a good word and lets the reader use his brain for the more important parts of the sentence.

informational: Useless adjective in most cases. Informational meeting? Informational brochure? Unless it's being used to delineate between another kind (the union had an informational picket, it wasn't on strike), don't use it as an adjective unless there's a good reason. If the brochure isn't informational, shame on the group that's distributing it.

instinctively: Overused, useless. Once in a while the distinction needs to be made that something was being done on instinct, but usually the situation speaks for itself.

interesting: Oh yeah? Says who? This adjective should be used carefully and rarely and almost never by a news writer.

into: He turned himself in to police. He did not turn himself into police. He turned himself in. Not into.

Ireland: It's a nation. Northern Ireland is a separate country. Two separate countries. Northern Ireland is not simply the northern part of Ireland.

ironic: Try not to use it to describe something. First, it's usually a coincidence, not ironic, so it's being used incorrectly. Second, if the situation is ironic and you use your words well, it speaks for itself

and the reader will say, "Wow, how ironic." Starting off a sentence with, "Ironically" even if it's correct and the situation is ironic, makes for weaker writing. Show, don't tell. By the way, if you don't know, irony is saying the opposite of what's really meant or a circumstance that's a contradiction of what should happen. Anyone see "The Wire"? Season Five? When the editor calls out to the reporter as she's getting in the elevator, "What's irony?" And she gives a spot-on definition? A beautiful moment for newspaper editors all over TV land.

its/it's: Its is possessive: "The car showed its age." It's is a contraction: "It's (it is) time to get a new car. Spell check or your smart phone will try to change its to put that apostrophe in, so know the difference and be on the lookout.

jail/prison: They are not interchangeable. Jails are usually for lesser crimes, misdemeanors or holding prisoners for a short time and the host is the city or county. Prisons are a higher level of security, the inmates have longer sentences, more serious convictions and are usually the wards of the state or federal government. Know which one you're writing about, both in news and fiction.

late: When using as recently died, use it correctly. "She was pining for her late husband." Don't use it for someone who died a while ago. I recently edited out of a story the phrase "the late President John F. Kennedy." Right. Late by about fifty years. Also, it's not used to refer to something the person did when he was alive. "The late George Jones drove a tractor drunk." George Jones, who died recently, did drive a tractor drunk. But if you refer to him as late, you're saying he was dead when he did it.

lay/lie: You lie down (think of the same i sound as in recline); you lay something down; in the past tense it's he lay down; it was laid down.

literally: It really happened. So no, your head didn't literally explode. You didn't literally die laughing. You didn't literally jump out of your skin. Get it? If it didn't really happen — and if you don't have to make the point it really happened — don't use this.

local: Local resident? Just say resident. Local hospital? Just say hospital. Usually only needed to differentiate between something that's local and something that's not.

lockout/strike: These are not the same thing. A lockout is when management keeps the workers from coming to work. A strike is when the workers walk off the job. Know which one it is before used the term.

mantel/mantle: Mantel is the thing over the fireplace. Mantle is a cloak or cape and also one of the greatest home run hitters of all time.

Marine: When referring to a member of the U.S. Marine Corps it is uppercase. He is a Marine. Never refer to Marines as soldiers.

mentally ill: As with disabled, be sure what you're writing about before using this label. If possible, be more specific. Be careful about referring to people with disorders such as OCD, ADHD, PTSD as

mentally ill. A disorder does not necessarily make a person mentally ill. And don't use references to disorders lightly or jokingly. They are serious stuff for people who have them. Unless the person you're writing about has been diagnosed and there's a context to it, don't write, for instance, "He was all OCD about checking to see if the door was locked." Or "He swears so much, it's like he's got Tourette's." References like that are insulting to people who have to live with those disorders.

midnight: Midnight is the end of the day previous, not the beginning of the day that follows. Always best in news writing or other writing that requires preciseness to refer to the actual time: "The robbery was at 12:08 a.m." What day something happened on can get confusing if midnight is bandied about.

Mom/mom: When used as a salutation, it's uppercase. "Hey, Mom." Or "Mom, what's for supper?" Otherwise, it's lowercase. "My mom told me not to come." When referring in news copy to a female parent, use mother, not mom.

mysterious: A disappearance is by its nature mysterious, so don't use this as an adjective with disappearance.

native: If someone is a native, it means he was born there or it's where his family lived when he was born and where he spent most of his life. For instance (one of my biggest peeves), I frequently read former Red Sox catcher Carlton Fisk is a native of Vermont. His family lived in New Hampshire, but he was born in Vermont because that's where the closest hospital was. While he was technically born in Vermont, when he was taken home from the hospital, he went across the border to New Hampshire. So he's a New Hampshire native.

Native American: This is okay, and so is American Indian. What's better is to refer to the person by his tribe. He's a member of the Penobscot tribe. Never ever ever use clichés like "pow-wow," "smoking the peace pipe," "squaw," etc., when writing about Indians or Indian issues. Those terms are offensive.

nauseated/nauseous: If you feel sick, you are nauseated. If something makes you sick, it is nauseous. You may also have nausea.

naval/navel: Naval has to do with the navy; navel is a belly-button or orange.

obtain: While this is usually used correctly, or almost correctly, meaning "to gain possession of," it's a stick-up-the-butt word and I hate it. I usually change it to get, got, receive, or something less uptight and/or more appropriate.

older: Older than what? Don't use this simply to describe someone you consider elderly (and look up elderly for my thoughts on that). If the context is "he is older than my brother" or something like that, fine. Used as an adjective? "An older woman stopped the robber." Not fine.

one of their own: Cliché. Gets my red pencil every time. See "fallen" for the rest of this rant.

orientated: It's oriented.

palate/palette/pallet: Palate is in your mouth; palette is what an artist puts paint on; pallet is a bed or platform made from boards.

positively identified: I'm on a campaign to change this to "officially identified." Since identified is a positive (it would need not in front of it to mean the opposite), then it should stand alone. But since the context is that the body has been officially identified, why don't we say that? We do in stories I edit, unless it's in a quote.

purposely/purposefully: Purposely is to do something on purpose. "He purposely kicked my chair as he walked by." Purposefully is to do something with purpose. "He purposefully made his way through the crowd across the room to the open bar." On purpose, with purpose. If you don't understand the distinction, don't try writing for a living.

random: Another overused adjective. Don't use it unless necessary.

reach out: When did people stop calling, texting, emailing, knocking on the door? Now everyone is "reaching out." A touchy-feely jargon cliché that has no place in writing of any kind. Reaching out means extending a hand either literally or figuratively. If someone is making a phone call to ask a question, it's a phone call to ask a question, it's not reaching out.

reticent/reluctant: Reticent means hesitant to talk; reluctant means hesitant to act. So, he was not "reticent to jump into the quarry." He was reluctant to. I see this being misused more frequently and it has to stop.

ridiculous: This means worthy of ridicule. It does not mean awesome or really cool or really big or anything else that doesn't mean worthy of ridicule.

said: A fine word and usually the best one to use when someone said something. No need to get fancy. Also, no need to overuse. For instance, "She went to school in a one-room schoolhouse" is fine. No need to write, "She said she went to school in a one-room schoolhouse" unless there's a reason we may think it's shaky information. Too much attribution when it's not needed makes it sound like the reporter is questioning the person's facts. If it's obvious in an article the facts are coming from that person, and those facts aren't in dispute, laying them out as facts without saying "she said" every sentence is okay.

serial killer/mass killer: A serial killer kills a lot of people over a period of time. A mass killer kills a bunch of people at once. Jack the Ripper and Ted Bundy were serial killers. Charles Whitman and Adam Lanza were mass killers.

simple/simplistic: These words are not interchangeable. Simplistic means to over-simplify to the point of making it silly. "His explanation of the problem was simplistic, so no one bothered to listen."

singular: Does not mean single. It means unique. It's also a verb tense.

spinster: Once an accepted term for an old woman who never married and presumably never had the pleasure of a sexual relationship. These days it's considered not only old-fashioned, but insulting. Don't use it.

suspect: When police have someone in custody, or think they know who committed the crime, he is the suspect. He's suspected of doing it. When writing about the crime, if no one's been caught, it's the robber, the burglar, the killer, the car thief. He's not a suspect until he's caught.

taxpayers' money: Cliché, politically loaded and frequently incorrect. If using it in a quote, fine. But reporters should not refer to public money as taxpayers' money. As in "The park will be paid for largely by taxpayers' money." The park will be paid for by public money, city money, state money. It's a good idea, too, to be specific about what type of public money: the city's rainy day fund? A federal block grant? Taxpayers' money is inaccurate. Usually public money is a mix that comes from a lot of sources, not just from Tommy Taxpayer's pocket. And the phrase is frequently used to make a political point. And it's a cliché. All good reasons for good writers not to use it.

that/which: Okay. Deep breath. We're going to use some fancy grammar terms here, but I'll walk you through it nice and easy.

That is used for an essential clause: **The car that crashed into the house was stolen**. An essential clause is one necessary to the sentence — the sentence needs it if you're going to say what you mean to say. You want the person to know that the specific car that crashed into the house was stolen.

Which is used for non-essential clauses. **The car, which crashed into the house, was stolen.** In this case, you are making the point that the car was stolen, and the fact it crashed into the house wasn't the important part of the sentence. Non-essential. The car was stolen. Oh, by the way, it crashed into the house.

If you can take the clause out and still say what you intended to, you use **which**. If you need those words in there, you want to make it clear that it was the car that crashed into the house that was stolen, you use **that**.

Tip: If you need a comma, it's usually which.

that/who: If it's a person, it's who. "The boy who wins my heart will have to be special." Not "The boy that wins my heart..."

there's nothing worse than: Yes there is. There's always something worse than. Cliché. Don't use it.

tribe: Lowercase. The Penobscot tribe.

unidentified: If the police don't know who the body floating in the river used to be before he jumped off the bridge, he's unidentified. If they know, but aren't telling the reporter, he is NOT unidentified. In other words, the reporter should write, "The police wouldn't release the name (identify,

say who, etc.).” If it's the reporter who doesn't know the name, he does not write, “An unidentified man jumped off Memorial Bridge and drowned.” See **unknown** for more on this.

unique: There's only one. There's no other like it. If there are, don't use this. And never use “very unique,” “extremely unique,” “kind of unique,” or anything that would modify the uniqueness. If it's unique, it's unique.

unknown: In general, use unknown in news copy only when it can be argued that no human being knows the detail in question, such as whether intelligent life exists on a planet orbiting some distant star, or how many snowflakes fell in the blizzard of 1978. Reporting that the name of a person or place is unknown is incorrect, unless the writer specifies who doesn't know the information. (A tip of the red pencil to colleague Joe Owen for that excellent explanation).

A huge peeve of mine is when a photo caption says something like “An unknown woman makes her way across the street.” She isn't unknown. The photographer simply didn't get her name. (And why didn't he, by the way? Another peeve). Just write “a woman makes her way across the street.” Or better, yet, get her name and use it.

In news stories: “An unknown person was hurt in the fire.” Are we saying no one knows who the person is? Say so. More often, we're saying we weren't told who the person was. In that case, “authorities wouldn't (or couldn't) identify the person hurt in the fire.”

utilize: Change this to use.

vehicle: Was it a car? A truck? A bus? Say what it was. Vehicle is too general.

versus: Spell it out in a sentence. “It was the Democrats versus the Republicans when the bill came to the floor.” The abbreviation vs. can be used in short phrases, “Ali vs. Frazier.” But avoid the cliché, made so popular by the TV show “ER,” and now in widespread use everywhere that the accident was “car vs. pedestrian,” or “bicyclist vs. tree.” It's okay for cops and emergency room workers, not okay for reporters.

very: Use this less than you're tempted to.

Veterans Day/Memorial Day: Veterans' Day, observed on November 11, honors all war veterans. Memorial Day, observed the third Monday of May, honors war dead.

whose/who's: Whose is possessive. “Whose woods these are? I think I know.” Who's is a contraction of who is or who was. “Who's that poet who wrote that poem about the woods?”

witness: Use it only in reference to witnessing a crime, and preferably as a noun. “He was a witness.” Don't use it as a verb in place of “see.” I like a story a lot better when it reads “He saw the robber pull the gun on the clerk” rather than “He witnessed the robber pull the gun on the clerk.” He witnessed the crime, he saw what happened.

would: "Johnny hit a single in the first inning and a grand slam in the fourth." Not, "Johnny hit a single in the first inning. He would hit a grand slam in the fourth." It's not so much wrong as weak writing.

Would is best used to describe something that happens repetitively: "He would take off his shoes before he went in the house." In other words, it was his habit to do it.

It's also okay in instances like, "I would do it if I had the time."

Fun Fact

Every year the Associated Press updates its style manual, including changes to how some words are used. It always catches the press and public off guard and it usually takes a few years for everyone to catch up. Style changes in recent years include cellphone and underway each going from two words to one and email losing its hyphen. One that was hailed in newsrooms across the country came in 2012, when AP gave in and accepted "hopefully" as meaning "I hope," rather than restricting style to its original meaning "to hope." Previous sole allowed use: "Editors hopefully waited for the day of that style change." New allowed use: "Hopefully, the editor knows about the style change and my story doesn't get shredded."

#

CHAPTER 4: Usage

There is no possible way here to cover all the ways language is used, abused, misused and confused. Keep in mind is that clarity is key. Simple is okay. There is nothing wrong with a simple declarative sentence.

This chapter covers common usage issues. It's only the tip of the iceberg.

Adverbs/adjectives

Writers who lack confidence think they need a lot of these to make their writing good. They don't. In fact, use too many and it has the opposite effect. The previous chapter has a lot of words that are bad or overused adjectives or adverbs.

It's always best to work hard on your other words and how you want to express your thought. If the other words are good, the adjectives and adverbs are less important. In news writing, the story can tell itself if it's good enough, even if the words aren't fancy. In those cases, particularly in the cases of tragic or heartwarming stories, let the situation speak for itself. Don't let the words get in the way.

Too many adverbs and adjectives also mean the writer is telling, not showing. Good writing, whether it's news writing or fiction, or any other kind of writing, should use words to show.

Showing:

She opened the letter and read it. Her face crumpled and her hands began to shake. She sank to the floor, sobbing.

Telling:

She opened the letter and read it. As she read, her tear-stained face and shaking hands were evidence of her sadness.

In the first example, there's not one adverb or adjective. Which story would you rather read?

Adverbs, particularly ones that end in ly, are overused and often not necessary at all.

If something is an absolute: engulfed, destroyed, totaled (these are a few of many that come to mind), then adverbs like completely shouldn't be used. If it's destroyed, that's complete.

Also don't write he quickly ran, he suddenly fell, he instinctively ducked away from the falling piano, he thoughtfully brushed the lint from her shoulder.

If the action implies what the adverb is saying, the adverb isn't necessary. Maybe he slowly ran because his leg hurt. Slowly is necessary because running is associated with fast.

Falling is a sudden action. So suddenly falling is as redundant as quickly running.

Beginning to get it?

Any time you use an ly adverb, think twice about whether you need it.

When using adjectives, be sure you have the commas right. Commas separate adjectives of equal importance:

He was a tiny, yappy dog.

But when one carries greater weight, when it's necessary to give full weight to the noun, the comma isn't used:

He was a vicious guard dog.

No comma between guard and dog.

It was a crumbling brick building. No comma.

It was a poor African country. No comma.

She was a quiet, attentive caretaker. Comma.

Tip: If you can add the word "and" and have the same result, you need the comma. If it makes the sentence silly "it was a poor and African country," then you don't need the comma.

Capitalization

The biggest rule is know the style guide that's being used by the publication for which you're writing, because it will set out the rules. Writing news? Check the AP Stylebook. Writing a book? Check the Chicago Style Manual. Other publications have their own style guides or tell you which one to use.

Here are the most frequent mistakes I see:

When someone's title comes after his name, it's lowercase. John Smith, director of surgery.

When something is not a proper noun, do not capitalize it. It's state of Maine, not State of Maine. He's a professor, not a Professor.

God, when referring to the single deity is up; gods, as in Greek or otherwise, is down. When referring to God, any pronouns (he, his) are lowercase.

In the news biz we have a saying: When it doubt, keep it down.

Clauses

Some information on clauses can be found in the punctuation and words section (that/which). This is more general.

Clauses add dimension and information to sentences, and for that we love them. But they can also make a sentence weak, turgid or unwieldy.

Some general rules:

Think carefully before starting a sentence with a clause. This can weaken a sentence at best and confuse it at worst. If your sentence starts with the word "for," you may want to rearrange it.

For Pete, it was another miserable birthday.

Try:

It was another miserable birthday for Pete.

You also want to make sure the clause refers to the right subject in the sentence.

An example from a newspaper story I edited illustrates this well. The original read:

Owned by 187 member governments, and with 15,000 staff members from 168 countries, Smith explained the bank's goals are to open global markets.

As written, the opening clause refers to Smith, which means that he is owned by 187 governments and all that other stuff. That's not what the writer intended.

Here was my rewrite:

The bank is owned by 187 member governments and has 15,000 staff members from 168 countries. Smith said its goals are to open global markets.

Had it with had

I won't get into a complicated explanation of voice, verb tense, subject/verb agreement or any of that other fancy stuff. I'll explain it simply.

He didn't have his arm broken (unless he asked someone to break it). His arm was broken.

I see brutally annoying variations of this every day and it drives me nuts.

Get this right and you are a better writer.

Sorry, but here's a tense reference. When using the past perfect tense, be sure you need it. Past perfect goes something like this: **When he had thought about it, he knew it was the wrong thing to do. Nowadays, he never thought about it at all.**

The word "had" is necessary to show that something in the past is being compared to the present. If it said "when he thought about it" the sentence would be unclear.

But there are plenty of times when referring to the past that it's not needed.

When he was a young boy, he thought about it a lot. Nowadays he never thought about it at all.

The sentence itself makes the distinction clear.

As always, think about what you're writing and what you want to say.

Jargon

This is epidemic not only in news writing, but in all writing.

In most cases it's always best to use clear, normal language (with the exception of academic and medical writing, where jargon is not only expected, but celebrated. I can't do anything about that).

I tell reporters that just because the cops talk that way, doesn't mean we have to write that way.

Instead of writing "The police apprehended the subject as he exited the pharmacy," write "The police caught him as he left the pharmacy."

This not only goes for your own words, but also when quoting the police, government officials, professors, someone in the medical profession or anyone else who speaks in jargon.

I tell reporters to clarify what people say. Don't change their quotes, obviously, but paraphrase them in the simplest possible terms if they're jargony. Our job is to tell the readers what's going on so anyone can understand it, not to be the personal biographers for the people we cover. If you can't figure out how to paraphrase what the person said, chances are you don't understand it yourself and need to ask that person for clarification.

In fiction writing, there's also no excuse. Too much jargon and stilted language makes your book less readable at best and amateurish at worst.

Don't use words that people don't normally use when they're talking (unless, of course, you have a character who has a major stick up his butt and talks that way). Exited instead of left, or got out of, or any other normal way of saying it, is something I see all the time. Who talks like that? Utilize , facility, subject (instead of person), citizen (instead of person), apprehended, obtained, perpetrator. I could go on. Where's that red pencil?

Pronouns

He, she, they, it.

Number one rule: Be sure it's obvious which subject the pronoun is referring to before you use it. I constantly edit stories in which it's not clear which "he" the writer means. This is not only confusing, but also may cause a serious problem if the meaning is misinterpreted.

Another common error is to use "they" when a singular pronoun is called for. "If someone falls in the quarry, they'll drown."

Most people write that because they don't want to use the clunky "he or she." AP and other style guides say it's okay to use "he" in general circumstances, but not in specific ones in which there's an assumption an individual is a he.

If you're not comfortable with using "he," rewrite the sentence: Anyone who falls in the quarry will drown.

This is such an ingrained habit that everyone does it and it may be impossible to avoid. But we can try, can't we?

A similar error is referring to a business, corporation, or some other entity that should be "it" as a plural person: McDonald's is offering a new item, they're calling it McBreadsticks.

Technically, the sentence should be: McDonald's is offering a new item, it's calling it McBreadsticks. But that sounds bad. Almost as bad as McBreadsticks themselves would be if there were such a thing.

Try this: McDonald's is offering a new item, McBreadsticks.

Quick Tip

Get me rewrite! Any time a sentence is giving you trouble because it's tough to write it within the proper usage rules, that's a sign you start over and restructure the sentence. Come at it from a different angle and you'll find it will be a lot easy to write.

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CHAPTER 5: Use Your Noggin

You can know all the rules of grammar and punctuation. Or not. What really matters is that you think about what you're writing. Do your words make sense? How about your sentences? Are you getting the point across clearly? Is there something better you can say?

The physical act of writing is so much easier than it used to be. Computers, the Internet, spell check — the tools make it almost effortless.

The mental act, though, is still as hard as it was when that caveman (remember him from the first chapter?) put charcoal to wall.

The most important tool you have is your brain. Use it. Don't think because it's easy to put words on paper (or computer screen) that what you're doing is easy. Have some respect for both the writing and your readers. It will pay off.

Plagiarism

The worst sin you can commit as a writer is to plagiarize.

Plain and simple: If it's not your creation, don't put your name on it.

It's easy with the Internet to cut and paste into what you're writing. If you need to borrow something from another writer, attribute what you're using to that writer. This includes quotes. If someone told that writer something and you take the quote for your own story, attribute it to the writer or publication.

For instance:

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," the governor told the Kennebec Journal.

If you use someone else's words and don't give that person credit, you are stealing.

Reporters using information from a news release must attribute the information to that news release.

And keep in mind, a news release is a starting point for pursuing a better story. When a reporter simply rewrites a release (or doesn't rewrite it, just plops it under his byline), he's not being a reporter. At best he's a transcriber. At worst, he's plagiarizing.

When I was looking for a way to explain this to reporters,, I asked my dad, a long-time newspaper editor, for his thoughts. His time in the industry preceded the Internet, but the bottom line is the same. Here's what he said:

If you see information in another publication that interests you, you contact the source, confirm the information, get your own quotes and do a better reporting/writing job than the other guy did. Regarding a website (for which the old-days equivalent would have been a press release, promotional leaflet, company brochure, etc.) there is a legitimate prima facie expectation that you can quote directly from it, with attribution. Always attribute to the source publication. But I would prefer directing the reporter to confirm the information with the source and conduct independent reporting and use new, original wording in the story.

Be bold and brave

You won't get anywhere with your writing if you're a wallflower. You must ask questions, seek out information, think it through, then ask more questions. That's rule number one for reporters, but fiction writers need to dig deep, too. Sure, there's a lot of cool stuff going on in your brain, but you need to feed the brain for that stuff to grow.

I had the privilege of working with a good reporter recently who was anxious to do his job well, get it right and learn how to be better. One of his first assignments was to cover a selectmen's meeting in a town that wasn't used to seeing a reporter, didn't particularly like him being there and didn't want to help him out much. The reporter had the presence of mind to ask some advice about what he could do to write better stories when he covered the town's meetings (by the way, asking for help never hurt anyone who wanted to become a better writer).

Here's part of an email I sent him that should be standard operating procedure for reporters and writers:

It's obviously not our job to tell them how to run their meetings. But it IS our job to get the info. So any questions left nagging at you after one of their lame-ass meetings, or even before it, are yours to ask.

Don't worry about being a pain in the butt. That's your job as a reporter. It's their job to assist you in getting the information out to the community.

I found as a reporter that it was almost useless to rely on meeting coverage for some towns, and that meeting coverage is just a skeleton outline for reporting the town. Take a look at the agenda, go to the meeting, be a pain in the butt at it, but do most of your

reporting the rest of the time, when you aren't at the meeting. It doesn't take a meeting to make news, it takes information.

The lesson? Don't sit back and wait to be inspired or for someone to hand you the information you need. There's nothing wrong with asking questions, seeking information, searching for answers and expanding your knowledge.

You don't have to be a reporter to have a little curiosity about the world around you. The more you dig, seek, ask questions, the better and more interesting your writing will be.

Use your noggin

We are not amoebas. We're not blobs who sit around letting things happen to us.

Particularly those of us who write. Am I correct? Of course I am.

Dull people make for dull writers. So do uninformed people and uncurious people.

I was recently asked by my alma mater, Holy Cross, how my education benefited my career for a feature the alumni magazine did on alumni in the media.

Here's part of my answer:

I'm constantly frustrated by the lack of curiosity and analytical ability I see around me. I'm not necessarily just talking about people I've shared newsrooms with, but people in general. It was great to be in an atmosphere where (analyzing, thinking, curiosity were)expected and rewarded.

I frequently tell people that there's a point to a liberal arts education. It's not to learn a skill or a trade, it's to become a thinking, contributing inhabitant of the world. The ancient Romans and Greeks reserved that education for free men — hence "liberal." Slaves and women didn't have access. Those ancient societies knew that the more educated people were, the less likely they'd stay happy being kept down.

Doesn't it benefit a person to have knowledge, to think, be educated?

That last question is rhetorical. Of course it does. And that goes double if you want to write.

Smart writers seek help

Of course, part of using your noggin is knowing where to find information.

Earlier in this book I mentioned Strunk and White. Their book is "The Elements of Style," and it does such a good job explaining the basics of writing and usage that I don't know a good writer who doesn't own it.

Another really good one is The Associated Press Stylebook. It not only will answer almost every question on word use, but has sections on punctuation, media law, plagiarism, social media, sports style, medical reporting and other topics that are necessary for journalists, but are also great help for all writers.

Fiction and non-fiction book writers should invest in a copy of the Chicago Style Manual. It's expensive, but worth the price. This book covers everything a writer could possibly need to know about style rules for book and periodical publishing.

There are also style manuals for particular kinds of writing — for instance, academic writing. It's always good to brush up on the style of whatever publication you may be writing for, because styles differ.

Part of using your noggin.

Something Nice to Say

Speaking of Strunk and White, White — that's E.B. White — was a fine writer. Reading his work will help you become a better writer. He wrote essays (for you younger folks, think blog only in a magazine) and lived many years in my state, Maine.

In fact, one of my favorite pieces by him is "Once More to the Lake" In that essay, which cam be found in his collection "One Man's Meat," he wrote one of my favorite lines in the English language (and not just because it's about the town I live in):

"Summertime, oh summertime, pattern of life indelible, the fade-proof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweetfern and the juniper forever and ever, summer without end."

The neat thing about his writing is that it's straightforward and elegant and easy to read, and then he comes out with something like "Summertime, oh summertime..." and it's a choir blasting through the acoustic guitar.

And here you were thinking the cranky editor couldn't say anything nice.

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Context and care

When I'm reading stuff by people who aren't E.B. White, I sometimes get worked up about all the avoidable sins being committed.

That spurred this recent blog post, which covers many of the issues I hit upon in this book:

In less than twenty-four hours, I read two different writers refer to someone who is black as "colored."

The day before, I read another writer's reference to a "black nurse" when there was no reason to mention her race.

None of these are period pieces set in some other time or place with a recognition that those words were used deliberately. All three books are self-published memoirs by people presenting their thoughts with a 2012 point of view.

No, I haven't developed a fondness for self-published memoirs (and don't expect to anytime soon). I am a judge in a publishers' self-published book contest and I'm reading fifty of them between now and Aug. 1. Some are good, some are bad. That much immersion, though, in books that largely haven't gone through the kind of editing process they should helps to crystallize some important writing musts.

All three of the writers are in their seventies. The two who used the term colored both live in the South. I know some people would say age and place excuse them — they are a product of their generation or culture and mean no disrespect. I won't go into the fact that now, fifty years after the general population began to recognize a civil rights struggle that had been going on for more than a century, that argument has worn pretty thin.

What I will say is this — whether that excuse is valid or not for someone in casual conversation, it's not valid for a writer.

When we write, two important aspects frequently aren't given enough attention: context and care.

Lack of context is a flaw chronic in every kind of writing, from newspaper articles to novels.

For instance, just today I read a newspaper article about a woman who's head of a respected think tank who's possibly misled everyone about whether she has a Ph.D. Fascinating stuff, but the article never finds out if her claiming to have the Ph.D. has had an impact on her success. For

instance, it cites grants she's gotten for the institution, but never asked those awarding the grants if her credentials made a difference.

Context. The article presented a fact, but never explored how relevant that fact was.

But I digress. Back to adjectives. If you are using "colored" to say something about a time, place or the person using the word, your writing must be skilled enough to make that context clear to the reader.

A reader can't read your mind, only what you put on paper. If the reader doesn't get what you're saying, your words will be lost. Or worse.

In the newspaper industry, editors work every day (not always successfully) to try to make sure adjectives that promote prejudice or stereotypes are struck from copy.

The lead of a story shouldn't be "a black man robbed Cumberland Farms" any more than someone would write "a white man robbed Cumberland Farms." If police are looking for the robber, his description will appear later in the story. Pointing out his race in the lead gives the reader an impression that the writer surely doesn't intend, both about himself and about race in general.

Another adjective I frequently strike from stories and headlines is "elderly." If there's reason to point out the person is elderly — "Phone Scam Preys on the Elderly" — that's one thing. But usually it's something like "Elderly Pedestrian Hit by Car."

The person's age will come out at some point — if the writer is doing his job it will be early — in the story. Using it as an adjective when it's not needed is gratuitous and lazy. Don't even get me started on "female doctor" and "female driver."

Fiction writers, as well as writers of memoir, have more leeway. They are telling a story, not in the linear style of a news story, but creatively. While some writers believe that leeway gets them off the hook, it actually makes context more important. The more creative the writing is, the more the point must be made clear.

There's a lot more to context than I can cover here. The overlying theme though, is that it is about understanding your topic and what you're trying to say and working hard to make sure you're saying what you mean.

Which brings us to care.

Care about what words you choose. Take care in how you use them.

Words shouldn't be chosen casually and thrown down on the page like feed for chickens.

A word you may not have thought about at all may have a huge impact on what you're saying, or trying to say.

All three of the writers referenced here seem to be thoughtful, smart people. The one who used black so carelessly as an adjective is talented. His book is funny, complex (in a good way), entertaining and as professional as anything you'd find on the shelf at Barnes & Noble. He uses "black" effectively two other times in the book to illustrate his own anxieties and prejudices. But it's a big clunker when he refers to the "black nurse." I couldn't even tell you what the sentence was about, because that unnecessary adjective was so distracting.

Reading fifty self-published memoirs in three months only clarifies this more: Writing is hard work. Having a laptop and knowing how to type doesn't make a person a writer. Some people have a natural talent while others struggle. One thing is true for the talented, the strugglers and all of us in between: Writing is a powerful tool and it's hard work to use it thoughtfully and effectively.

(This originally appeared on Pen, Ink & Crimes, the blog for Sisters in Crime New England, June 4, 2013)

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About the Author

Maureen Milliken is a 30-plus year veteran of daily newspapers, first as a reporter, and for the last 20 years as an editor. She is currently the news editor for two daily newspapers in central Maine. She also is a freelance editor of fiction and nonfiction.

She is the published author of The Afterlife Survey (Adams Media, 2011).

Her website, which focuses on Maine crime news and mystery, is www.maureenmilliken.com.

Follow her on twitter **@crankyeditor1**.