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Basic Writing Tips - Some Controversial, All Correct

By David J. Clapham

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As a previous article ("Making Better Word Choices - 4 Examples") explained, writers can take steps to prevent simple, and common, errors from degrading their writing. Five areas of writing that cause authors problems are discussed in this article.

Split Infinitives

First let us exam the famously frowned upon split infinitive. Maybe some readers do not know, or do not remember, what a split infinitive is exactly. To understand split infinitives readers must first remember what constitutes an infinitive. An infinitive is a phrase that includes a verb preceded by the word "to," such as, "to play" or "to investigate." Now that we know what an infinitive is maybe we remember our English teachers lecturing us against "splitting" them. Simply put, a split infinitive is when a writer puts a word between the word "to" and the associated verb. Therefore, a split infinitive would look something like the following examples:

He was going to quickly investigate the theft.

Tommy likes to neatly color in his book.

These two examples would be re-written as shown below.

He was going to investigate the theft quickly.

OR

He was quickly going to investigate the theft.

Tommy likes to color neatly in his book.

OR

Tommy likes to color in his book neatly.

Splitting infinitives is not criticized to the degree it has been in the past. As many reputable sources explain, occasionally splitting an infinitive is acceptable. Even some progressive English teachers will agree with this idea. Compact Oxford Online Dictionary explains that the rule for not splitting infinitives

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was based on an analogy to Latin, a language that writes infinitives as one word, such as *bibere* 'to drink.' The decision to argue with an English teacher about the acceptance of splitting infinitives is your decision to make. As Oxford states, "...in standard English the use of split infinitives is broadly accepted as both normal and useful."¹ If you do decide to argue with an English teacher, feel free to point out that people such as John Donne, William Wordsworth, and Benjamin Franklin split infinitives at will. The larger problem occurs when a writer consistently splits their infinitives. If splitting the infinitive helps with emphasis or the statement flows better go ahead and split the infinitive.

Superlatives and Comparatives

Writers should also strive to use superlatives and comparatives correctly. Some cases of incorrect use may sound okay, but if the author remembers the rules that they learned for using superlatives and comparatives they will realize that they have made the error. For example when a sentence is written

as below it sounds correct, but it is not.

One of the most common mistakes a cook makes is not using fresh ingredients.

In this example, the lack of fresh ingredients is either a common mistake or it is the most common mistake; there generally cannot be two, or more, most common mistakes. A case where there can be two "mosts" is in an exact tie. For example, if 20 mistakes are made and two of them occur six times each (making up 12 of the 20 mistakes) and the remaining eight mistakes are all different, then the two mistakes that occurred six times each could be labeled as the most common mistakes.

The sentence below shows another way that a comparative can be written incorrectly.

Of the three dogs, the bulldog was the smaller.

To use a comparative there needs to be something compared to something else. The bulldog either was the smallest of the three dogs or was smaller than another dog in the group. Both sentences below are written correctly.

The bulldog was smaller than the German shepherd and the St. Bernard.
The bulldog was the smallest of the three dogs.

A third sentence, shown below would also be correct.

The bulldog was smaller than the other two dogs.

This is written correctly because the bulldog is compared to a pair. It is clear from the sentence that the other two dogs, by being grouped together, are larger than the bulldog.

Comma Use

The use of commas can be confusing for many writers. Three rules for using commas are addressed here. The first rule involves comma use when a series is given, such as in the example below.

I bought carrots, peas, and watermelons.

Some readers may consider this rule controversial; some teachers and editors may say the final comma is not necessary, in my opinion the use of the final comma is more appropriate than not. If, for some reason, your teacher or editor tells you the final comma is unnecessary then ask them to explain why, I do not have an explanation as to why some have a preference for not using the final comma. Do not use a comma when only two items are in the series, such as in the sentence below.

I saw birds and fish at the pet store.

The second rule for use of commas is to use a comma before the "and" when a wholly correct clause is introduced. The way to determine if the clause is wholly correct is to ask if it makes sense on its own, such as having its own subject(s) and verb(s). The example below shows two clauses separated by "and," along with a correctly used comma.

We went to the store, and Joan bought some juice.

The third rule is an extension of the second rule; do not use a comma to separate a sentence from text that could not be a complete clause on its own. The example below shows an incorrect use of a comma in this situation.

We are going home, and sleep.

The ending of the example sentence ("...and sleep") is not a complete sentence on its own, therefore, a comma should not be used before "and."

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Completely spell out acronyms and abbreviations the first time they are used. Once a writer decides to use an acronym or abbreviation they should be used throughout the remainder of the text, switching back and forth between the full spelling and the acronym or abbreviation should be avoided.

Using "etc.," "i.e.," and "e.g."

The final rules discussed in this article involve the use of several common abbreviations. The first abbreviation is "etc." This comes from Latin and is an abbreviation for et cetera, which means "and others." First, make sure that a period is included at the end; second, make sure that the "others" have been specified previously. A final note on this abbreviation, if it is used put the letters in the correct order; "ect." is not correct.

The second abbreviation often misused is "i.e." Also from Latin, this is a shortened form of id est which means "that is." When used correctly this abbreviation indicates an alternative way of stating something. The most common error when using "i.e." is not following it with a comma; there should be two periods and a comma in this abbreviation.

The final abbreviation discussed in this article is "e.g." Again, this is an abbreviation for a Latin phrase, "exempla gratia." This is used when the writer means "for example" or "for instance." Some people believe that "e.g." stands for example given, this is not true, but it can be a helpful way to remember that it does have something to do with an example. Similar to the use of "i.e." many writers forget to put

a comma after the second period in "e.g." Below are three correct examples of these abbreviations.

Bob bought a whole bunch of office supplies, pens, pencils, staples, paper, highlighters, and erasers on his way home. He purchased so many things that when he got home he realized that he had forgotten a bag at the store. He had his pens and pencils, but the staples etc. were still at the store.

John is a big person, i.e., he is over six feet tall.

The black horse is fast, e.g., it has won all of its races.

By using the rules above your writing will make more sense and will be correct. Future articles will address other writing errors and provide additional advice.

1 Compact Oxford Online Dictionary. 25 January 2005.
http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/splitinfinitive

David is the owner of Blue Arch Consulting, a proofreading and editing business helping clients worldwide to generate English documents of all types. Their website is at <http://www.blue-arch.net>

I Can't Believe You Said That! Dealing with Controversy

By Ron Sathoff

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There's a very fine line that we all have to walk when we want to make an argument about a controversial subject: On one hand, you want to limit the controversy as much as you can, because too much can lead to a lot of problems, ranging from flaring tempers to hurt feelings to broken noses! On the other hand, controversial subjects are usually the most significant and, many times, the most useful to discuss.

Many people try to handle controversy by simply avoiding it. Unfortunately, this often leads to bland, wishy-washy arguments that really have nothing to say.

Other people face controversial subjects by bluntly stating their opinion, regardless of the situation or the reactions of the audience. These people often call themselves "frank," "candid," "upfront" or "in-your-face" — but, they are about as effective as the people who have nothing to say.

Why? Because, for an argument or a persuasive message to work, there has to be COMMUNICATION. This means there has to be at

least one person talking and one person listening. If a message is too blunt or controversial, then the audience has a tendency to "tune out" what is said — they are too angry, shocked, or outraged to continue paying attention to what you have to say. As soon as they stop listening, communication is over and your message has failed.

How do you prevent this from happening? Well, I have found that the best way to present a controversial subject is to use a method called "proof-to-claim." To use this method, you hold the controversial point of your message (your claim) for the end of your argument, after you have had a chance to present all the information (proof) that supports the claim.

For instance, if you were telling your customers that you were going to have to raise your prices (a controversial subject to all of us who have to pinch pennies!), you would want to talk about the increased service you will be providing, or the increased costs you have been facing BEFORE you say that prices are rising. This allows you to communicate your reasons before your audience gets angry, and therefore, harder to reach. In

fact, by holding off on the controversial claim, your audience may even come to be more accepting of your message by the time you actually have to say those dreaded words — lessening the negative effects to an acceptable level.

Right now, I can hear a lot of die-hard English Teachers screaming, "What are you saying? Your thesis has to come at the BEGINNING of your argument, NOT at the end!" Well, if you feel a little uncomfortable leaving your claim until the end, or if you are afraid that your audience is not going to be able to understand what your argument is about, then you can use a technique perfected by politicians through the ages: Be vague in the beginning.

By "vague," I mean that you can choose to tell your audience what you are arguing ABOUT at the beginning of your message, rather than what you are arguing FOR. For example, let's say that you are speaking to a group of gun owners about gun control — if you say, "I think we should ban all handguns," you probably will not be able to get another word out, and even if you did, the audience would probably not be listening.

However, if you started by saying, "I think something needs to be

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done about gun control" or "Let's talk about the gun control issue," you have let your audience know what your topic is (so they won't be confused) but you have not stated your controversial claim yet (so they won't be upset). By being a little vague at the beginning, you will find you have more of a chance of passing along your information without any "emotional roadblocks" getting in the way.

Remember here that the thinking behind this advice is to encourage communication, NOT trick your audience! The point is that you should structure your message, whether it is a sales letter, web page, or campaign speech, so that your listeners get the information they need to make an informed decision. By holding your controversial material for the end, you are ensuring that the audience gets this information before they have a chance to talk themselves out of it!

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