Some Common Grammar Rules

There are several common grammar rules that we often see broken. This white paper explains what they are and how to avoid making these common grammatical errors. We hope you find it useful as a desk reference as you write.

Note: Even though we offer distinctive proofreading services in American, Canadian, and British English, the grammar portrayals here are specific to American English.

Rule 2002-12-02

When to Hyphenate

Is it *wide ranging* or *wide-ranging*? *Vice-president* or *vice president*?

Hyphenate almost all compounds that begin with *all, self,* and *ex* when it means *former*, most that begin with *vice, wide,* and *half,* and all that begin with the kinship term *great.*

This rule is quite reliable for the first three prefixes it lists: *all-important, self-confident, ex-wife*. Still there are exceptions: *sound the all clear, selfsame*. More often than not it holds for the next three: *vice-chancellor, wide-ranging, half-truth*. Permanent compounds like these must be checked in the dictionary; the more common they are, the more likely it is that they do not conform. Those that are not in the dictionary can be hyphenated.

The current Merriam-Webster desk dictionary lists *vice president,* though the somewhat older Merriam-Webster unabridged lists *vice-president;* perhaps the editors of the desk dictionary decided their spelling should reflect the almost invariable *Vice President of the United States* favored by newspapers. *Viceroy* and *viceregal* have long been solid words.

Widespread is one word, though *wide-ranging* is hyphenated. *Widemouthed* is one word, though *wide-bodied* is hyphenated. (Hey! We don't make the rules!)

Compounds formed with *half* are especially unpredictable: *half-dollar* but *half crown, half title* but *halftone.* Many are listed in most dictionaries; those that are not, such as *half-smile,* can be hyphenated, except that in some cases *half* is an adverb–*The fault is half mine; He was half dead*–and other conventions apply. Also, when *half* is a kinship term it does not take a hyphen: *half brother.*

The word *great* usually forms open compounds, such as *great ape* and *great circle,* and sometimes combines solidly, as in *greatcoat* and *greathearted.* But as a kinship term it is always hyphenated: *great-aunt, great-grandfather;* Old North French is one of the English language's *great-ancestors.*

Rule 2002-11-05

Assure, Ensure, and Insure: When to use each

Assure, Ensure, Insure ... How many times have you heard these words in the past few weeks?

The meaning at the core of all three words is to "make certain," but each has its own wrinkle. *Assure* works best when its object is a person. *Insure* is best used when the idea in the sentence is "prevention." *Ensure* (usually followed by "that") works in most other situations.

Examples:

I am hoping that my proposal to eliminate crime will *assure* you that I am a serious candidate for dog catcher. [The object of *assure* is you, a person.]

The platform I am recommending will *insure* us against the threat of lower taxes, cleaner air, and higher employment. [*Insure* is used here because the idea in this sentence is "prevention."]

My recommendations should *ensure* that our city maintains its reputation of having the best politicians money can buy. [*Ensure* is used here because the meaning is to "make certain."]

Remember: You *insure* by using an insurance company. You *assure* by giving assurances to people. (Got one for *ensure*?)

Rule 2002-10-28

i.e. is NOT interchangeable with *e.g.*

The Latin *id est* is always abbreviated *i.e.* It is commonly (and incorrectly!) exchanged for that other Latin confuser, *e.g.,* which means *exempli gratia* or *for example.*

i.e. means *that is to say*, and introduces another way (more comprehensible to the reader, driving home the writer's point better, or otherwise preferable) of putting what has already been said.

It is naturally preceded by a comma; it should not be followed by a comma unless the sense requires one, to introduce a parenthesis for instance. *He berated politicians, i.e. those who had never held a real job,* but *He berated politicians, i.e., it would seem, those who had never held a real job.* (text and examples derived from Fowler's MEU)

Bottom line: Be careful! Don't confuse *i.e.* and *e.g.*

Rule 2002-10-22

The Subjunctive Mood

No matter your mood, good or bad, you can always rely on the subjunctive to lend an elegant hand to your writing.

Although some grammar experts no longer require the use of the subjunctive, its loss cripples the nuancing power of the language. So we advise business writers to use it in two instances: when expressing a condition contrary to fact and when expressing a desire, as in wishful thinking. Examples:

- "If I *were* [not *was*] a better writer, I could qualify for that job." (contrary to fact)
- "I wish I *were* [not *was*] a better writer." (desire)

And from "back in the day" when commercials were written by people who could speak the language,

- "Cause if I *were* [not *was*] an Oscar Meyer wiener, all the world would be in love with me."

I bet you KNEW this was the way to go, but perhaps you just didn't know what it was called. Now you do! It's the subjunctive. Use it today!

Rule 2002-9-30

Do not confuse "you and I" with "you and me"

Too many business writers (and far too many speakers) misuse *you and I*.

Some examples of incorrect usage:

- *Between you and I*, there is no problem.
- He is tall, just like *you and I.*
- The president has invited *you and I* for lunch Thursday.

Both *between* and *like* are prepositions that take an object. The verb *has invited* also requires an object. Words following them should be *you and me.*

Here are ways the phrase *you and I* is handled correctly:

- *You and I* are going to see the president tomorrow.
- I realize that *you and I* deserve the award.

In the first case, the phrase *you and I* serves as the subject of the sentence, and in the second case, it serves as the subject of the *that* clause.

Note: Some readers might argue that *I* is the correct word following *like*, because the phrase means *smart just like you and I are smart.* Not so. *You and I* would be correct if the preposition *like* had been replaced by the conjunction *as.*

Rule 2002-9-16

Irregular Verbs

Most verbs are regular; they form their past tense and past participle by adding *-d* or *-ed*.

Example: verb: *hope*; past tense: *hoped*; past participle: *have hoped* or *had hoped*. Irregular verbs, on the other hand, do not follow this simple rule. Here are some of the irregular verbs that give people the most trouble:

VERB	PAST TENSE	PAST PARTICIPLE
arise	arose	arisen
begin	began	begun
bring	brought	brought
burst	burst	burst
choose	chose	chosen
get	got	got or gotten
go	went	gone
lay (place)	laid	laid
lead	led	led
lie (recline)	lay	lain
raise	raised	raised
rise	rose	risen
shrink	shrank	shrunk
speak	spoke	spoken
wring	wrung	wrung

Rule 2002-09-09

That vs. Which

Use *that* when the words following it are necessary to identify the word *that* refers to.

Example: "The river *that* flows by my door is rising."

You cannot remove the *that* clause, because you wouldn't know which river is being referred to. The sentence would simply read: "The river is rising."

Use *which* when the words following it are not necessary to identify the word it refers to.

Example: "The Red River, *which* flows by my door, is rising."

You can remove the *which* clause, because you would know which river is being referred to–the Red River. The sentence would read: "The Red River is rising."

Note: When using *which*, use commas to separate the clause. When using *that*, don't use commas.

Rule 2002-7-30

Possessives Before Gerunds

A gerund is a verb form used as a noun; it usually ends in *-ing* as in *walking, swimming, talking*. When a noun or pronoun comes immediately before a gerund, it must be in the possessive case.

Examples:

- "*Jerry's* (not *Jerry*) borrowing money was a last-ditch effort."
- "Grace disliked *his* (not *him*) talking during meetings."

Caution: Don't confuse gerunds with participles–verb forms that sometimes end in *-ing* but don't serve as nouns. Note the difference in the following:

- "Jack's *talking* annoyed others." (Here the emphasis is on the act of talking, a gerund.)
- "We saw Jack *talking*." (Here the emphasis is on Jack. *Talking* is a participle, not a gerund.)

Rule 2002-7-12

Don't ordinarily hyphenate adjectival combinations of adverb + adjective or adverb + participle unless the adverb does not end in *ly* and can be misread as an adjective.

Adverbs that do not end in *ly* but cannot be mistaken for adjectives

Too, very, almost, always, seldom, not, and some other common adverbs do not end in *ly*, but they cannot be adjectives either. They do not normally require hyphens when used in compounds: *too loving parent, very comprehensive report, almost forgivable sin, always polite manner, seldom simple rules, not unwelcome guest.* They can be used in multiple compounds, still without hyphens: *too seldom loving parent, almost always comprehensive reports,* and so on. They do require hyphens in unusual compounds, such as *too-many-cooks situation,* in which the noun phrase *too many cooks* is used as an adjective.

Ever and *never* are special cases. They do not end in *ly* and they cannot be adjectives, but they usually should be hyphenated in compounds before the modified word: *ever-polite manner, ever-loving parent, never-simple rules, never-comprehensive reports.* Often they should be hyphenated in compounds after the modified word as well, depending on whether they can be read as modifying the verb in the sentence. Thus *His mother was ever-loving* needs the hyphen, because in the common compound *ever-loving* the adverb *ever* clings to the participle; *His mother was never loving* should not have a hyphen, because *never* more naturally modifies the verb *was.* Note, however, that sometimes *ever* is used when *always* might be expected, and then the hyphen should not be used: *His mother, though ever loving, never allowed him to drive her motorcycle.* The ear is generally a good judge of whether to hyphenate such compounds; if they run together, they should be hyphenated. Some compounds with *ever* have solidified into single words: *everblooming, everlasting.*

Rule 2002-6-12

Do not separate two predicates with a comma unless the comma has a valid function.

We checked the books, and notified the lawyers contains two predicates: *checked the books* and *notified the lawyers.* The comma after *books* has no function. In this simple sentence the functionless comma does no harm, but nevertheless, commas that have no function should be omitted, just as words that have no function should be omitted.

In some sentences, such an unnecessary comma can cause confusion. *I told her that we'd checked the books and notified the lawyers* is unlikely to be misunderstood–I told her two things, that we'd checked the books and that we'd notified the lawyers. *I told her that we'd checked the books, and notified the lawyers* could mean that too, or it could mean I told her we'd checked the books and, in a separate action of mine, I notified the lawyers; the comma makes it uncertain whether the subject of *notified* is *I* or *we.* The

reader expects the comma to signal something and is likely to invent a signal if none was actually intended. In the example, the reader may pick up the false but quite plausible signal that *notified the lawyers* is unlike *checked the books*–it does not connect to *told her that we'd* but to *I.* The reader then will consider the sentence equivalent to the unambiguous compound sentence *I told her that we'd checked the books, and I notified the lawyers.* Omitting the comma does not completely prevent misreading, but it makes misreading much less likely.

Rule 2002-5-15

Write in whole sentences, not in fragments.
Sentences beginning with *and* or some other conjunction

And, but, or, for, so, yet, and other so-called coordinating conjunctions are often used to begin sentences, despite an older rule, still sometimes heard, that a sentence should never begin with a conjunction because the conjunction makes the sentence a fragment. It is true that a sentence that begins with a conjunction–something joining its thought to the thought of the preceding sentence–can hardly be anything but a fragment of the complete thought, but that is no justification for such a rule. After all, in a well-written paragraph each sentence should add its thought to the thoughts of the preceding sentences whether or not it begins with a conjunction.

Sentences that begin with conjunctions are now accepted in very formal writing. To avoid them we must either

(1) actually connect the sentence to the preceding sentence, which may be undesirable for a variety of reasons;
(2) replace the conjunction with a conjunctive adverb or adverbial phrase (such as *in addition* for *and, however* for *but, alternatively* for *or,* and *consequently* for *so*), which usually also requires adding a comma after the adverb and may give excessive emphasis to the connection to the preceding sentence;
(3) just drop the conjunction, which may remove a helpful indication of the significance of the statement to come; or
(4) completely recast the sentence.

It is acceptable to begin an occasional sentence with a conjunction; such a sentence is not a fragment. But remember that some people still condemn such use of conjunctions, and it can lead to inept or confusing sentences.

Rule 2002-4-25

Put parentheses in the proper position when they are used with other marks of punctuation, and don't use other marks of punctuation in some circumstances.

The word *proper* in the rule above is significant. The placement of parentheses is governed by their function and is entirely logical. For example, a comma can never directly precede either an opening parenthesis or a closing one and can never directly follow an opening parenthesis, because there can be no logical function for such placements.

Before using parentheses in a given sentence or paragraph, consider whether they are really desirable. Perhaps they could be avoided by reorganizing the ideas in the sentence, the paragraph, or the whole written work. Frequent parentheses give the usually accurate impression that the writer has not put his or her thoughts in order and must constantly correct, explain, and qualify. Within the sentence, pairs of commas or dashes are very often preferable.

When parentheses enclose an entire sentence

The Smiths were giving a loud party. (We hadn't been invited.) At about two o'clock, I began to get annoyed. The enclosed sentence is independent of the sentences before and after it. It begins with a capital letter. It requires a period, which must go within the closing parenthesis; putting the period outside the parenthesis is a very common error, probably more often careless than ignorant.

I called the police (they've heard from me before about the Smiths) and made a complaint; not too long afterward (my prominence gives me clout in this town), a cruiser appeared. Each pair of parentheses encloses a complete sentence, but the enclosed sentences fall within another sentence, so no periods are used with them and they do not begin with a capital letter. In the example, pairs of dashes could be used instead of pairs of parentheses. The comma would have to be omitted, because the dash and comma cannot be used together, but it is an optional comma anyway.

Both policemen got out (why should it take two for a minor complaint?) and went up to the house. If the enclosed sentence requires a question mark or an exclamation point, it gets one. Dashes could be used instead of parentheses, and the question mark would remain.

Rule 2002-4-9

Use a comma, or some other mark of punctuation, before or after direct quotations to set off *he said* and similar attributions.

"I'm looking for a job," John said (or *said John*) and *John said, "I'm looking for a job"* show the standard form for attribution. We might consider the comma a violation of the rule against separation of verb and object, since the quotation is essentially the object of *said*. However, the comma represents a pause that is very clearly heard if the examples are spoken, and it is required by convention if not logic. (Of course, conventions are very often deliberately flouted in fiction, particularly conventions that apply to dialogue. Many novelists invent their own conventions.)

The most common verb in attributions is *said*, but there are many others–*he wrote, he shouted, he asked, he whimpered*–and they all follow this rule. Sometimes the verb is poorly chosen: *"Don't come any nearer," he hissed* is poor because there are no sibilant sounds in *Don't come any nearer* to be hissed. Sometimes the verb has nothing to do with spoken or written expression at all but indicates manner or some accompanying action. *"Please come closer," he smiled; "I've never seen you before," he frowned.* This is a kind of shorthand for *he said with a smile* or *he said, frowning;* it is a convenient shorthand and has been in use for generations, but it is not logical and it annoys some readers. One repair is to replace the comma with a period, making what was an attribution an independent sentence: *"I've never seen you before." He frowned.*

Rule 2002-3-22

Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when some of the items already contain commas.

The committee included Smith, Jones, and Brown is a straightforward series of three people. If we make it *The committee included Smith, the treasurer; Jones, the production supervisor; and Brown, the security officer,* we need semicolons to separate the items. Otherwise the series could be understood to list four or five people (not six, since *and Brown, the security officer* has to signify a single person).

I spoke to the chairman, I notified the treasurer, and I wrote an account of the action into the company record is a straightforward series of three independent clauses. If we add a dependent clause to one of the independent clauses, we may still be able to get away without using semicolons: *I spoke to the chairman, I notified the treasurer, who hadn't been at the meeting, and I wrote an account of the action into the company record.* But if we keep adding complications, we soon need semicolons to help the reader grasp the structure of the sentence: *I spoke to the chairman, who told me that he, like other members of the board, disapproved; I notified the treasurer, who hadn't been at the meeting; and I wrote an account of the action into the company record.* If only commas were used, the sentence would still mean the same but would be difficult to read.

Rule 2002-3-8

Form the possessive case of singular words, including words ending in s or z sounds, by adding an apostrophe and s; form the possessive of plural words ending in s by adding the apostrophe alone.

This is the simplest rule that can be given for forming the possessive, and still it has its complications. It is not the only possible rule–some handbooks of punctuation advise forming the possessive of singular words that end in *s* or *z* sounds with the apostrophe alone, some make a distinction between words that end in *s* and those that end in *x* or *z*, some make a distinction between short and long words (usually prescribing an *s* after the apostrophe for words of one or perhaps two syllables but not for longer words), some make a distinction between words that end in *s* and those that end in *ss*, some advise using only the apostrophe after a silent *s* (as in *Descartes' work*), some advise using the *s* only if it would be pronounced in speech (tricky because not everyone pronounces some possessives the same way, though the longer the word is the less likely it is that the *s* will be pronounced), and so on.

Since there is such disagreement among the authorities about words ending in *s* or *z* sounds, each writer is entitled to make his or her own decision about certain possessives, but each should have a consistent policy and avoid inconsistencies such as *Charles's garage is bigger than Miles' house.*

Rule 2002-2-21

In general, use cardinal numbers for days of the month (*June 3*), not ordinal numbers (*June 3rd, June third*), except in dialogue.

We are much more likely to use ordinal numbers for days of the month in speech–*"We're going to Florida on December twenty-third," she said*–though occasionally we do use cardinal numbers. In writing that is not dialogue, however, the convention is to use cardinal numbers, except in wedding invitations and similar special material. *The school will open for registration on September 10th, 2002* has an amateurish look.

Exceptions

Certain holidays are customarily expressed with ordinal numbers, which are spelled out and capitalized: *July Fourth; the Fourth of July.*

When the month does not occur in the expression of a date, an ordinal number must be used: *He was hired as a clerk on May 17, and on the 24th he was appointed to the board of directors.*

Rule 2002-2-12

Don't normally use the apostrophe to form the plural of a number in figures.

The 1890's is an unnecessary use of the apostrophe; the plural number is just as clear without it: *the 1890s.* The apostrophe with the plural is necessary in a few situations–for example, to form the plural of lowercase letters, as in *p's* and *q's*–but not to form the plural of numbers.

Plurals of numbers usually can follow the rule that numbers to 100 and round numbers beyond 100 can be spelled out. *He was in his fifties; He started counting heads but gave up somewhere in the two hundreds.* Sometimes plurals of numbers have to be spelled out, even in work that uses figures whenever possible: *One bacillus dividing under optimum conditions can number in the thousands in a matter of hours.* We cannot write *in the 1,000s,* which would be read *in the one thousands.*

Rule 2002-1-30

Don't overuse contractions; when you do use a contraction, put the apostrophe in the proper place.

Contractions such as *don't* for *do not* are natural and convenient in speech. They are also natural in writing–in fact, they come too easily, for when they occur frequently they give the written work more informality than may be intended. It is important to read over any written work, except the most casual letter or note, to check for excessive use of contractions.

The contractions *don't, won't, wouldn't, aren't,* and others based on the combination of a verb with *not* are often incorrectly spelled *do'nt, would'nt,* and so on.

The contraction *it's,* meaning *it is,* is sometimes misspelled *its,* which is the possessive of the pronoun *it.* The opposite mistake–using *it's* for the possessive–is more common.

The contraction *who's,* meaning either *who is* or *who has,* is often misspelled *whose,* which is the possessive of the pronoun *who.*

The contractions *should've* (meaning *should have*), *I'd've* (meaning *I would have*), and others formed by contracting *have* to *'ve* are often misspelled *should of, I'd of,* and so on. Usually the mistake is of ignorance; the writer does not know the correct form and is misled by the similarity in sound of *of* and *'ve*. Some writers use *of* for *'ve* deliberately to add flavor; *should of* and *I'd of* have a drawled look that the more clipped *should've* and *I'd've* lack.

Rule 2002-1-15

Use commas to set off names and similar words in direct address.

I am writing, Mr. Smith, to confirm our agreement and *Tell me, my friend, whether this is a sensible course* are typical examples of forms of address that interrupt the course of a sentence. If the commas are omitted in the first example, *Mr. Smith* becomes the indirect object of *writing* and the meaning of the sentence changes completely. If the commas are omitted in the second example, there is no change in meaning, but the pauses that would be very clearly heard before and after *my friend* are not indicated and the sentence is quite hard to read; *Tell me my friend whether this is a sensible course* looks like gibberish at first glance. The interjection of a form of address is actually a parenthetical construction, so commas should be used.

If the name or other form of address occurs at the beginning or end of the sentence, it is, of course, set off with only one comma: *Mr. Smith, I am confirming our agreement; Tell me whether this is a sensible course, my friend.*

Exception

But officer, I wasn't speeding and *Oh my friend, what a fool I've been* omit the first of the parenthetical commas. The omission indicates the way the sentences would be spoken. It is quite proper to omit the first comma when quoting speech and in some cases when trying to give written words some of the immediacy of speech, but in writing that is meant to be read rather than imagined as spoken, the rule should apply.

Rule 2001-12-28

Make a subject and its verb agree in number.
Subjects that look plural but may be singular

Physics is almost always a singular, as in *Physics was his field,* but *The physics of the device are sophisticated* is correct. Similarly, *statistics* is singular if it means the field of study, plural if it means a collection of information. There are many such words. They can move back and forth from their singular to their plural meanings quite freely, even in different clauses of the same sentence: *Physics is my field, but the physics of this device baffle me.*

Five boys is certainly a plural–what could be more plural than a plural noun modified by a number larger than one? Yet *Five boys is not enough for a scrub game* is correct. In that example, the plural *are* could be used too, but sometimes it cannot be. *Five dollars are too much* is wrong, or at best unidiomatic; a sum of money is thought of as singular. Usually we know without thinking about it whether a noun modified by a number is really plural, as in *Five boys were enrolled for soccer*, or just a unit that is plural in form. We can switch back and forth freely: *Seven silver dollars were exposed on his grubby palm, but seven dollars was not enough for a motorcycle.*

More than one can only be plural in meaning but nevertheless often takes a singular verb, either modifying a noun or standing alone: *More than one child was crying; More than one was crying.* This and similar illogical uses (such as *One or two was hostile)* are idioms.

Rule 2001-12-17

Don't hyphenate most compounds ending in *down, fold, less, like, over, wide,* and *wise*; connect them solidly to the base word. Do not hyphenate most compounds ending in *designate, elect,* and *free.*

Shakedown, manyfold, conscienceless, workmanlike, pushover, countrywide, and *crosswise* are typical examples of compounds with suffixes that connect solidly. Hyphens are used to avoid undesirable combinations of letters, as in *once-over*, or impossible combinations, as in *thrill-less* and *bell-like*. They are also used when the base word is a proper noun, as in *France-wide* and *Eisenhower-like,* and when the compound is multiple, as in *income-tax-like levy* and *twenty-two-fold increase.* They can be used in any unfamiliar compound that the writer believes will be difficult to read as a solid word–for example, *period–like* is used to describe the points used in abbreviations and in ellipsis.

Chairman-designate and *president-elect* are standard. When the suffixes are combined with a two-word compound, as in *county clerk-elect,* the compound may be difficult to read, but often it cannot be conveniently avoided. It would seem helpful to insert another hyphen–*county-clerk-elect*–but this is not done.

Duty-free is standard. One occasionally sees solid compounds such as *sugarfree* in advertising copy, but they are not supported by the dictionary.

Rule 2001-11-28

Don't misuse adverbs as adjectives, and don't misuse adjectives as adverbs.

Adjectives that should be adverbs

She drives really good is wrong because *good* modifies the verb *drives* and thus should be the adverb *well*. *She drives real well* is wrong because *real* modifies the adverb *well* and thus should be the adverb *really. She drives real good* is, of course, a double error.

Most of us are unlikely to use adjectives as adverbs except when being deliberately slangy. Note that *I drive slow in town* is not an error. Some common adverbs have two forms; both *slow* and *slowly* can be adverbs, though the only adjectival form is *slow*.

Don't automatically correct an "adjectival" form that seems idiomatic as an adverb; check the dictionary–it may be a legitimate adverb too. In fact, *real* is very frequently an adverb in casual speech and is accepted as such by dictionaries–it means *very* rather than *genuinely* or *veritably* and hence is distinct from *really*–and therefore *she drives real well,* condemned in the preceding paragraph, has been granted some license.

Rule 2001-11-07

Never capitalize *east, west,* and similar terms when they indicate a direction rather than a region or location, and don't invariably capitalize them even when they do indicate a region or location.

He traveled nine miles East is a very common error. Here the word *east* is merely a compass point or direction; there is no reason to capitalize it. *He left the East in 1849 and followed the Gold Rush west, but found the West a disappointment and headed east again* is correct, and though the apparent inconsistency in capitalization may seem glaring when attention is called to it, it would go unnoticed by most readers, who are accustomed to the distinction between region and direction.

Capitalizing terms such as *the North*, meaning the Northeast and part of the Midwest of the United States during the War Between the States, a somewhat larger part of the United States today, or the North of England, depending on the context, is helpful. However, such capitalization is not helpful if a convention for capitalizing the term has not been well established. *In southern Nebraska the growing season is longer than in the North* is apt to distract readers, who, even though they may understand what is meant, can't help but think of irrelevant contexts in which they might expect the capitalized word–the Yukon, the U.S. Northeast, or whatever. When writing about a region unfamiliar to most readers, a writer can establish capitalization conventions that are appropriate to the region, but must do so carefully, making sure the reader can follow and is given immediate significant information to associate with the capitalized terms: *The region from the capital to the coast–the North–has been called the country's breadbasket. The South is almost entirely nonarable, though it is well populated.*

Rule 2001-10-22

Don't capitalize titles of most officials unless the title occurs directly before a name, and sometimes not even then.

Titles such as *president, prime minister, king, senator, judge, governor, mayor, general, pope, archbishop, chairman,* and *professor* are all capitalized when they occur before a name–*President Bush, Professor Waggoner,* and so on–but are all also generic terms, and there is no need to capitalize them when they stand alone.

Other titles are really not titles but simply descriptive terms: *clinical psychologist, head nurse, foreman, author.* The magazine *Time* adopted the eccentric style decades ago of

capitalizing such terms–*Clinical Psychologist John Smith*–and the magazine has been around so long that the style now looks right to many people, but it's not. (*Time* was deliberately flouting convention to achieve a snappy, important look.) It should be *clinical psychologist John Smith*; the word *the* can be dropped, though this tends to make sentences seem hurried and telegraphic.

Note that *Doctor of Laws, Knight of the Garter,* and similar phrases are not titles in the sense discussed in this rule; academic distinctions and noble characters should be capitalized.

Titles used in address

Phrases such as *Mr. President* and *Madam Chairman* (or *Chairwoman* or *Chairperson*) are always capitalized, but there is no need to capitalize titles without *Mr., Madam,* or similar introductory polite forms.

However, capitalize all titles when they refer to specific people. Thus a sentence could be styled *Major Smith found the usual collection of colonels and generals between him and the bar, and an admiral kept sloshing his drink on the Major's freshly pressed sleeve.* It may seem anomalous to capitalize the lesser rank and lowercase the others. Also, one has to decide just when a character or real person has been sufficiently identified to deserve the capital. This is a difficult modification to apply successfully.

Rule 2001-10-08:

Incorrect uses of *were* in past-tense sentences

I wondered if she were single and *If he were rich you couldn't tell it by his clothes* are errors; in both cases the verb in the subordinate clause should be *was*. The subordinate clauses are not subjunctive, they are merely in the past tense to agree with the main verbs, *wondered* and *couldn't,* which are indicative and in the past tense. If we put the main verbs in the present tense, the verbs in the subordinate clauses also change to the present tense and are clearly indicative: *I wonder if she is single; If he is rich you can't tell it by his clothes.* A statement that is subjunctive, such as *If he were rich he wouldn't wear those clothes,* cannot be put in the present tense this way–it already is in the present.

She knew that if she were to graduate she would have to study harder is an error; *were* should be *was*. Again, the sentence can be tested by seeing if it can be put in the present tense–if it can be, it must be an indicative sentence, not a subjunctive one. And it can be: *She knows that if she is to graduate she will have to study harder.*

Rule 2001-09-24:

Don't ordinarily put a comma after a conjunction just because what follows is an introductory word, phrase, or clause. This rule applies not only to coordinating conjunctions such as *and, but,* and *or* but to subordinating conjunctions such as *that, if,* and *when*.

The wind had risen, and, throughout the night, the rain beat against the windows and *The storm was over, but, in its aftermath, the heavy rain continued* are over punctuated. The *and* in the first sentence and the *but* in the second sentence are coordinating conjunctions, connecting independent clauses. There is no reason to have commas after them; a conjunction should not have its joining function contradicted by a comma.

Rule 2001-09-17:

The quotation mark with the semicolon and the dash

He keeps using the word "fail-safe"; I'm not sure what it means has the semicolon after the closing quotation mark; *He gave me a definition of "fail-safe": a system of safeguards that hasn't failed yet* has the colon after the closing quotation mark. This is logical, since the semicolon and the colon are punctuation for their respective sentences, not for the quotations within the sentences; neither a semicolon nor a colon can have any legitimate function at the end of a quotation, since the one is supposed to connect what precedes to what follows and the other is supposed to connect or introduce what follows, and there is no more quotation to connect or introduce. The only way the semicolon or the colon can be used with the quotation mark is outside a closing quotation mark; neither should ever be within a closing quotation mark or, of course, immediately after an opening quotation mark.

Rule 2001-09-10:

Capitalize names of specific political divisions and subdivisions and the names of geographical regions and features; in most cases, also capitalize adjectives derived from such names.

New York City is an official name and *Kansas City* is the only name; there is no question that *city* is capitalized in these examples.

But *Washington state* and *Washington State* both occur, to distinguish the state from the District of Columbia; and *New York state* and *New York State* both occur, to distinguish the state from the city. A workable rule with *state* is to capitalize it when it follows the proper noun but not when it precedes: *Washington State,* but *the state of Washington*. Canadian provinces, however, have the official form *Province of Quebec, Province of Ontario,* and so on.