The Importance of Grammar, Punctuation, Spelling, & Capitalization

A panda walks into a cafe. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and proceeds to fire it at the other patrons.

"Why?" asks the confused, surviving waiter amidst the carnage, as the panda makes towards the exit.

The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. "Well, I'm a panda," he says. "Look it up."

The waiter turns to the relevant entry in the manual and, sure enough, finds an explanation. "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

From "Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation" – by Lynn Truss

An interesting and perhaps unanticipated result of the growth in social media for marketing is an increased need for good writing skills. Blogs, drip marketing, opt-in electronic newsletters, and other "new media" require both useful content and good writing to attract and keep readers.

The elements of good writing are simple: grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. By mastering the rules and conventions, you will make your writing easier to understand and more enjoyable to your readers.

Grammar

Grammar explains the forms and structure of words (called morphology) and how they are arranged in sentences (called syntax). In other words, grammar provides the rules for common use of both spoken and written language so we can more easily understand each other.

The building blocks of grammar are the eight parts of speech:

- *Verbs* express actions, events, or states of being.
- *Nouns* name a person, animal, place, thing, or abstract idea.

- *Pronouns* take the place of nouns or another pronoun.
- *Adjectives* modify nouns or pronouns by describing, identifying, or quantifying them. An adjective usually precedes the noun or the pronoun which it modifies.
- *Adverbs* modify a verb, adjective, another adverb, a phrase, or a clause and indicate manner, time, place, cause, or degree. Adverbs can be recognized because they answer the question *how, when, where,* or *how much.* Adverbs often end in *ly.*
- *Prepositions* link nouns, pronouns, and phrases to other words in a sentence and usually indicate a relationship of time, space, or logic.
- *Conjunctions* link words, phrases, and clauses.
- *Interjections* are added to a sentence to convey emotion and are usually followed by an exclamation point.

Every complete sentence has two parts: a subject (who or what the sentence is about) and a predicate (what the subject is doing). The subject is a noun or a pronoun; the predicate is a verb. To identify the subject of a sentence, find the verb and ask who or what. The answer is the subject.

Modifiers, phrases, and clauses add information about the subject and predicate and make the writing more interesting and clear. A single word acting as an adjective or adverb is called a modifier; two or more words without a subject and predicate and acting as an adjective or adverb is called a phrase; and two or more words acting as an adjective or adverb and having a subject and predicate is a clause.

Whether single words, phrases, or clauses, modifiers should appear close to the word or words they modify, especially if the reader might mistake what is being modified. Here is an example of a misplaced modifier:

John could read the sign easily written in French.

In this example, it is unclear whether the adverb easily is meant to modify the way John reads the sign or how it is written. By moving the modifier closer to the word it is modifying, the meaning becomes clear:

John could easily read the sign written in French.

Clauses are the basic building blocks of sentences. When a sentence is formed by a single clause, it is known as a simple sentence. Simple sentences are the most common type for spoken language, but can make writing seem childish. Simple sentences can be made more interesting and informative by adding modifiers and can be effective for attracting the reader's attention when used sparingly.

Two or more clauses that are joined by a conjunction such as and, but, and, or form a compound sentence. Compound sentences create balance or contrast between thoughts, ideas, or information of equal importance:

Improve your writing by varying the types of sentences you use. To grab a reader's attention, use a short, simple sentence. To emphasize balance and equal thoughts, use a compound sentence. To show the relationship between different information, use a complex sentence.

Spelling
The availability of spell checkers in word processing programs greatly reduces the likelihood of spelling errors – except for homonyms. A homonym is a word that is pronounced the same as another, but is spelled differently and has a different meaning. Here are some examples of homonyms:

- **affect** (to have an influence on), **effect** (a result). Affect is generally used as a verb (to affect) while effect is generally used as a noun (the effect).
- **capital** (seat of government) and **capitol** (a building)
- **lie** (recline) and **lye** (used in making soap)

- **principal** (head of school) and **principle** (a truth, law, rule, or standard)
- **scene** (setting) and **seen** (past participle of see)
- **whine** (complain) and **wine** (an alcoholic drink)

Punctuation
Punctuation helps convey the precise meaning of a sentence – and in fact can even change the meaning, as in this well-known example:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Here is a brief description of how punctuation is used:
- *A comma* tells the reader to pause and assimilate information. They are also used to separate the items in a series.
- *A semi-colon* links independent clauses that are closely related in meaning when they are not linked by a conjunction.
- *A colon* introduces a list or a summation. It can also be used to link an idea that has been introduced in an independent clause.
- *End punctuation* – period, question mark, and exclamation mark – denotes the end of a sentence.
- *Parentheses* enclose words that are not directly related to the main thought of the sentence but provide important information, or to provide examples.
- *A dash* signals a sudden change of thought or break in a sentence. Dashes can also be used in place of parentheses to emphasize information.
- *Quotation marks* indicate direct speech. All punctuation marks are enclosed within the quotation marks except for semi-colons, colons, and question marks when they are not part of the quotation.

Capitalization
Like punctuation, capitalization helps convey information. The first word of every sentence is capitalized, signaling that a new sentence has begun. Proper nouns – the name of a particular person, place, or thing – are capitalized to indicate uniqueness. However, it is not correct to use capitalization merely to make a word look or seem important.

The Importance of Grammar
Grammar is important because it provides information that helps the reader's comprehension. It is the structure that conveys precise meaning from the writer to the audience. Eliminate grammatical errors from your writing, and reward your readers with clear communication. Let us know if we can help. Please call us at 513-248-2121 for an appointment.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Blog: a contraction of web log. A type of online journal.

Clip: a sample of writing.

Copy: written text.

Copywriter: a person who writes copy, particularly for advertising.

Copyright: laws defining the rights and uses of intellectual property.

Copyright infringement: unauthorized or prohibited use of intellectual property.

Fair Use: a doctrine that defines when copyrighted material can be used without permission or paying royalties.

Homonym: a word that is pronounced the same as another but has a different spelling and meaning. To, too, and two are all homonyms.

Intellectual property: creations of the mind that have been assigned property value.

Morphology: the study of the structure and form of words in language.

Plagiarism: to take and use the words and writing of someone else as if they were your own.

Primary source: a citation that is as close as possible to the original source of information.

Public domain: property rights held by the public at large.

Syntax: the study of the rules for forming grammatical sentences.

Tagline: the name of the writer credited with the story. A tagline appears at the end of an article and may include some biographical information about the writer.

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

THE idea CORNER

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation is a non-fiction book written by Lynne Truss. In the book, published in 2003, Truss bemoans the state of punctuation in the United Kingdom and the United States and describes how rules are being relaxed in today's society. Her goal is to remind readers of the importance of punctuation in the English language by mixing humor and instruction.

Truss dedicates the book "to the memory of striking Bolshevik printers of St. Petersburg who in 1905 demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters," and thereby directly precipitated the first Russian Revolution.

There is one chapter each on apostrophes and on commas; one on semicolons and colons; one on exclamation marks, question marks and quotation marks, italic type, dashes, brackets, ellipses, emoticons; and one on hyphens. Truss touches on various aspects of the history of punctuation and includes many anecdotes which add another dimension to her explanations of grammar. In the book's final chapter, she discusses the importance of maintaining punctuation rules and addresses the damaging effects of email and the internet on punctuation.

Plural and Possessive Nouns

A source of great confusion for many writers is how to correctly form plural and possessive nouns. (A noun is a part of speech that indicates a person, place, or thing.) Nouns can be either singular, meaning one; or plural, meaning more than one. The term possessive indicates ownership.

To form the plural of most nouns, add an s at the end: birds. To form the possessive of most singular nouns, add an apostrophe and an s: the bird's nest. To form the possessive of a plural noun that ends in s, add only an apostrophe: the birds' nest. To form the possessive of a singular noun that ends in s, add either an apostrophe and s or only an apostrophe, depending on what sounds best: the boss's desk; Mr. Jones' car.

The possessive pronouns and adjectives yours, his, hers, ours, its, theirs, and whose do not have an apostrophe. Note that a common error is to use it's for the possessive of it; however, it's is actually a contraction of it is or it has. Similarly, the plural of numerals is formed by adding s, not 's: 100s of drawings (not 100's of drawings).

In his book "The Language Instinct", Steven Pinker demonstrates the importance of correctly forming plurals and possessives:

- my sister's friend's investments (I have one sister and she has one friend.)
- my sisters' friends' investments (I have many sisters and they have many friends.)
- my sisters' friend's investments (I have many sisters and they have one friend.)
- my sister's friends' investments (I have one sister and she has many friends.)

Q. I have always been bad at grammar. Can you help me improve?

A. You are wise to recognize that bad grammar can distract the reader from the information you are providing. Here are some homonyms where one is a contraction:

- **who's** (a contraction of *who is*), **whose** (the possessive form of *who* and *which*)
- **you're** (a contraction of *you are*), **your** (the possessive form of *you*)
- **they're** (a contraction of *they are*), **there** (in that place), **their** (the possessive form of *they*).
- **it's** (a contraction of *it is*), **its** (the possessive form of *it*)

For more help with spelling, grammar, and punctuation, consult these online sources:

Merriam-Webster Dictionary: www.m-w.com
Roget's Thesaurus: www.roget.org
Dictionary Search: www.onelook.com
Grammar Checker: www.grammarly.com

questions and answers