



WRITING TIPS TOOLKIT

**CPS/CAP[®] Study Course
Bryan-College Station Chapter
International Association of
Administrative Professionals[®]**

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“Logical ideas are the first step toward clear writing.
Simple words are the next.
Clean sentence construction is next.”

Hutchison, Standard Handbook for Secretaries,
Eighth edition, p. 111.

It is important to remember that we write differently than we speak.

ACRONYMS

When using acronyms, at first mention, both the full name of the entity and the acronym should appear together.

Texas A&M University (TAMU)
The Texas A&M University System (TAMUS)
American Medical Association (AMA)
United States Postal Service (USPS)

CAPITALIZATION

Capitalize

- the first word in a sentence,
- the first word in a direct quotation,
- the first word after the colon if a colon introduces more than one sentence,
- the first word after the colon if a colon introduces a formal and distinct statement,
- first, last, and principal words in headings or titles,
- proper names,
- academic titles when accompanying a personal name (Professor Jane Doe),
- academic degree or honor (John Doe, Ph.D., Jane Doe, Regents Professor),
- military title or rank when accompanying a personal name,
- trade names and commercial products (Coca-Cola, Xerox, etc.)
- directions when used as the name of certain sections of the country (out West, in the East, from the North, the Deep South, etc),
- titles of works (books, periodicals, screenplays, etc.), and
- components of written material (chapters, sections, etc.).

COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS [*sic*]

Some of the most frequently confused terms are listed. [*sic*]

Accept – a verb meaning “consent to receive”

I am pleased to *accept* your generous offer.

Except – usually a preposition meaning “not including”

Everyone *except* Ursula has made reservations.

Advice – a noun meaning “guidance”

May I ask your *advice* on a personal matter?

Advise – a verb meaning “offer suggestions”

We were *advised* to take an alternate route.

Affect – a verb meaning “influence”

The rise in gas prices has *affected* our travel plans.

Effect – a noun meaning “the result or consequence of an action”

The rise in gas prices has had an *effect* on our travel plans.

Effect – a verb meaning “cause to occur”

Exactly what circumstances have *effected* these rising gas prices?

Already – before now

Evelyn *already* fixed the leak.

All ready – completely ready

Are you *all ready* to leave?

All right – satisfactory, correct, without a doubt.

The paint job was *all right*.

Don't worry, I'll be there *all right!*

Alright – adverb meaning *all right*—a spelling not yet considered acceptable

Any way – in any one way

...not interested in *any way*.

Anyway – in any event

Anyway, we are not interested.

Biannual – occurring twice a year (semiannually; every 6 months)

Biennial – occurring every two years as “biennial elections”

Complement – that which completes

His knowledge and her writing skills are *complementary*.

Compliment – praise, a greeting with a gift, free

Compliments of the management.

Register for a *complimentary* facial.

Peak – a point, the top

Pike's *Peak*

Peek – to peer or peep

Peek through the keyhole.

Pique – to interest

The title of the presentation *piqued* my curiosity.

Pick up – a verb

Pickup – a vehicle

Pole – a rod

Telephone *pole*

Poll – a survey

Poll the participants...

Principal – an adjective meaning “most important.”

Our *principal* concerns are food and shelter.

Principal - a noun referring to a person in charge or to a sum of money on which interest is paid.

The *principal* of Franklin High School is Mr. Barnes. [person]

I still owe most of the *principal* on my student loan. [money]

Principle – a noun meaning “rule” or “basis for conduct.”

He strictly adhered to the *principles* of his faith.

Some time – a period of time

Some time lapsed.

Some time ago.

Sometime – at an indefinite time

Sometime in the near future, I will build the house.

Sometimes – now and then

We *sometimes* go to Florida during the winter.

Stationary – in a fixed position (think “a” – “stay”)

A *stationary* bicycle...

Stationery – writing materials (think “e” – “letter”)

A&M *stationery* usually bears the university seal.

There – an adverb meaning “at that place”

The tomatoes are over *there*.

Their – a possessive pronoun meaning “belonging to them”

I wonder if they still have tomatoes in *their* garden.

They're – the contracted form of “they are”

I wonder if *they're* going to grow tomatoes in their garden over there.

Who – used as a subject

This is the woman *who* found your wallet.

Whom – used as the object of a verb or preposition

For *whom* did you make the card?

Your – the possessive form of “you”

Why is Owen wearing *your* coat?

You’re – the contracted form of “you are”

If *you’re* going home now, I’ll lock up.

As and Like

Do not use *as* in place of the preposition *like* when making a comparison.

Not: Natalie, *as* her mother, stands tall.

But: Natalie, *like* her mother, stands tall.

Like and Such

Like means similar to.

Such means of the same class, type or sort.

Not: We depend on people *like* you to support public television.

But: We depend on people *such* as you to support public television.

COMPOUND ADJECTIVES

A compound adjective is a single term formed from two or more distinct words. As a general rule of thumb, the compound adjective is hyphenated where it is followed by the modified noun.

The university has *state-of-the-art* technology.

The university’s technology is *state of the art*.

Exception: when the first part of the compound adjective is an adverb that ends in –ly.

The woman who met us in the lobby was beautifully dressed.

A beautifully dressed woman met us in the lobby.

DATES

It is unnecessary to use –st, –nd, –rd, –d, or –th in dates unless the day is written before, or separated from, the month.

On January 20, 2008, the...

On the 20th of January, 2008, the...

By the 20th of January...

In the May 28 issue...

...from June 2 to 23...

May 5 to July 15, 2008

Never: On January 20th, 2008, the....
In the May 28th issue...
...from June 2nd to 23rd
May 5th to July 15th, 2008

Do not abbreviate a date in text, as 1/7/08, 1-7-08, or 01-07-08, unless it is in tabulated or statistical work.

Years may be abbreviated as
In the winter of '07
Spirit of '76
Class of '59
In the 40s and mid-50s

Note – there can never be a “first annual” anything. *Annual* means yearly (not the “intent” of a yearly event).
Better choice – *inaugural*, *first*, or do not attach such a designation until the “second annual”.

HEADERS/FOOTERS

Headers and footers are identifiers placed at top and bottom of a document, providing important background information about it. They can include page numbering, title, author name, chapter number, and date.

Headers and footers can greatly increase the usability as well as enhance the professional look of the document.


Headers may be used to identify the title of the document and subheadings. The title of the document is typically inserted on even-numbered pages; the subheading is typically inserted on odd-numbered pages. Exceptions: When a new subheading begins on an even-numbered page, the title of the work may be omitted. When a new subheading begins on an odd-numbered page, the subheading or chapter may be omitted.

Footers may be used to identify the office of preparation, title of document, page number and date of preparation or presentation.

Example of footer on the page preceding the body of a report -

 Office of Employee Services
Writing Tips Toolkit 1 February 14, 2008

Example of footer in a multi-page document -

 Office of Employee Services
Writing Tips Toolkit 1 of 13 February 14, 2008

The use of headers, footers and page numbers in a document can save the day should loose pages of the report be dropped and scattered.

JUSTIFICATION – LEFT, CENTER, RIGHT, OR FULL

Example of full justification (flush right and left margins) -

“A written message must be complete, coherent, and logical so that the receiver will be able to understand the sender’s intended meaning of the message. The receiver has limited opportunity to ask questions if ideas presented are not clear. Improper word choice, sentence and paragraph construction, and parallelism affect the presentation of clear, understandable messages. Language must be used that will evoke clear mental images as the message is being read.”
Schroeder and Graf, Office Administration, Fifth edition, p. 189.

MISPLACED ADJECTIVES, PHRASES AND CLAUSES

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase or clause that is not positioned close enough to the word it is supposed to modify. It will seem to the reader that a different word is being modified.

Misplaced: There was an outbreak in our school of chicken pox.
(This wrongly implies that there is “a school of chicken pox.”)

Correct: There was an outbreak of chicken pox in our school.
In our school there was an outbreak of chicken pox.
Our school experienced an outbreak of chicken pox.

Misplaced: I was stopped by a policeman without a driver’s license.
(This wrongly implies that there was “a policeman without a driver’s license.”)

Correct: Driving without a license, I was stopped by a policeman.
I was stopped by a policeman, and I did not have a driver’s license.

Misplaced: Classified Ad – For Sale – Electric hand saw.

Correct: Classified Ad – For Sale – Hand-held electric saw.

NUMBERS

Generally, numbers between one and ten are spelled out. Numbers above ten are written in figures. The most common problem associated with the spelling of whole cardinal numbers is punctuation. Numeric amounts that fall between twenty and one hundred are always hyphenated. No other punctuation should appear in a spelled-out whole number, regardless of its size.

26 twenty-six
411 four hundred eleven
758 seven hundred fifty-eight
6,500 six thousand five hundred
33,003 thirty-three thousand three

Note: The word “and” does not belong in the spelling of a number. For example 758 should not be spelled out “seven hundred and fifty-eight.”

Numerals and other symbols should never begin a sentence.

19 students have become mentors.

Should be:

Nineteen students have become mentors.

6:00 is the earliest I can leave.

Should be:

Six o'clock is the earliest I can leave. or

The earliest I can leave is 6:00.

2009 is the year we plan to implement our goals.

Should be: We plan to implement our goals in 2009.

In formal writings, ordinals (first, second, third...) are spelled out up to "one hundredth." In informal writings, ordinals are often written entirely in figures.

Formal - the sixth floor
on Fifth Street
a first edition

Informal - between the 6th and 15th floors
the 35th anniversary
in the 1st, 8th, and 12th editions

PARALLEL STRUCTURE

Parallel (grammatically equal) sentence elements regularly appear in lists and in series. Faulty parallelism disrupts the balance for parallel structure. Balance nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs.

Awkward –

To enhance writing skills, one should

- determine the purpose,
- select an appropriate format,
- gather information,
- outline the message,
- prepare a draft,
- read for clarity, and
- someone knowledgeable to proofread the work.

[parallel: ask (verb) someone knowledgeable to proofread the work.]

PLURALS & POSSESSIVES

Names

Form plurals of family names that end in "s" by adding "es."

Right: The Jameses live in College Station.

Right: The James family lives in College Station.

Form plurals and possessives of proper names that end with "s," "x" and "z" like this:

Right: Burns' poems

Right: Marx's theories

Right: Savitz's holdings

Words

To form a plural of a common noun ending in a sibilant (hissing) sound (s, ss, sh, ch, x or z) add *es* -

buses	businesses	dishes	boxes
actresses	lunches	taxes	buzzes

Words ending in silent "s" do not change form in the plural. In pronunciation the plural may be indicated by sounding the "s".

two corps	many Mardi Gras	several faux pas
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Form plurals of the following by added "s" alone -

dos and don'ts	CDs	M.A.s and Ph.D.s
the three Rs	the early 1920s	several YMCAs

Form plurals of the following by adding " 's" -

S's, A's and M's	X's and O's	SOS's
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Possessives

Singular words ending in "s" and "z" – add an apostrophe. If several "s's" occur together, the apostrophe alone is used.

Adams'	princess'	boss'
Mardi Gras' legend	Strauss' waltzes	Diaz' leadership

Plural Possessives

Form the plural of the word first, then add the possessive. If the plural ends in "s", all that is needed is an apostrophe. If the plural does not end in "s", an " 's" is needed.

children's games	women's votes	boys' and men's interests
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PRONOUNS

One of the chief confusions concerns the form to be used when pronouns occur in combinations –

for *him* and *me*
to *her* and *them*
by *us* and *him*

The simple test to determine the form of these pronouns is to make each pronoun stand alone.

Not: This is for *you* and *I* to learn.
(*I* could not stand alone in this construction. Not "This is for *I* to learn."
Therefore, *me* must be used.)
Correct: This is for *you* and *me* to learn.

Not: The report was intended for John and *I*.
Correct: The report was intended for John and *me*.

Possessive pronouns show ownership and never have an apostrophe.

The word *it's* is the contraction of *it is* or *it has*—not the possessive form of *it*.

Possessive: Life has its ups and downs.
Contraction: It's good to see you.

PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is an essential element of good writing because it makes the writer's meaning clear to the reader. While punctuation styles may vary among published sources, there are a number of fundamental principles worthy of consideration.

Comma – the most used and misused mark of punctuation in the English language. Commas cause the reader to pause and add clarity to sentences.

The most typical functions of the comma are the following:

- to separate the clauses of a compound sentence when there are two independent clauses joined by a conjunction
 - o Example – *It never occurred to me to look in the attic, and I'm sure it didn't occur to Rachel either.*
- to set off an introductory phrase
 - o Example – *In the beginning, they had very little money to invest.*
- to set off words used in direct address
 - o Example – *Listen, people, you must evacuate now.*
- to separate two or more coordinate adjectives (those that can be joined with *and*)
 - o Example – *The horse was tall, lean, and sleek.*
But not with cumulative adjectives (those not able to be joined with *and*)
 - o Example – *She wore bright yellow rubber boots.*
- to separate three or more items in a series
 - o Example – *Charlie, Melissa, Stan, and Mark will be this year's soloists in the spring concert.*
- to set off a title after a person's name
 - o Example – *Jane Doe, Ph.D.; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered the address.*

Dash – replaces the usage of parentheses or commas within sentences

- o Example - *On our way to school, we walk past the Turner Farm—the oldest dairy farm in town—and watch the cows being fed.*

Hyphen – has three basic functions

- to join two or more words to make a compound
 - o Example - *...long-range planning*
- to replace the word "to" when a span or range of data is given.
 - o Example – *The ideal weight for that breed of dog would be 75-85 pounds.*
- to indicate a word break at the end of a line. The break must always be between syllables.
 - o Example – *It is important for any writer to know that there are numerous punctuation principles....*

Parentheses – used in pairs to enclose information that gives extra detail or explanation to the regular text

- to separate a word or words in a sentence from the rest of the sentence
 - o Example – *On our way to school, we walk past the Turner Farm (the oldest dairy farm in town) and watch the cows being fed.*

- to form a separate complete sentence
 - o Example – *Please bring a dessert to the dinner party. (It can be something very simple.) I look forward to seeing you there.*

Semicolon – has two basic functions

- to separate two main clauses, particularly when those clauses are of equal importance
 - o Example – *The crowds gathered outside Kyle Field hours before the gates were opened; this was one football game no one wanted to miss.*
- to separate clauses or items in a series or list, particularly when a comma already exists in the clause or list:
 - o *Listed for sale in the ad were two bicycles; a battery-powered, leaf-mulching lawn mower; and a maple bookcase.*

REDUNDANT EXPRESSIONS

~~Absolutely certain~~
~~Absolutely necessary~~
~~Adjacent to~~
~~Advance warning~~
~~Brief moment~~
~~Close proximity~~
~~Completely eliminated~~
~~Estimated at about~~
~~Exact duplicate~~
~~Exact opposites~~
~~False pretenses~~
~~Filled to capacity~~
~~For a period of six months~~
~~Honest truth~~
~~Hot water heater~~
~~Just recently~~
~~Look back in retrospect~~
~~Mutual cooperation~~
~~New innovation~~
~~Nine a.m. in the morning~~
~~Past experiences~~
~~Personal opinion~~
~~Reason why~~
~~Repeat again~~
~~Still remains~~
~~Sufficient enough~~
~~Sum total~~
~~True fact~~
~~Twelve midnight~~
~~Twelve noon~~
~~Usual custom~~
~~When and if~~

SPELL CHECKING

The business rule: Constantly consult the dictionary.
Develop a list and be aware of words that you typically misspell.

Computer software spell check applications are helpful but not definitive. They cannot distinguish if the “proper” word is used.

Example: Enclosed are budge guidelines.
(*Budge* is a perfectly good word—wrong word in this sentence.)

Sentence was supposed to have read
“Enclosed are budget guidelines.”

SPLIT INFINITIVES

Splitting an infinitive is simply placing a word, or several words, between “to” and its verb.

Split infinitives
to harshly criticize
to carefully prepare
to personally supervise

Simple infinitives
harshly to criticize
carefully to prepare
personally to supervise

The commonly suggested remedy is to remove the intervening word and place it before or after the verb, as

Split: He agreed to personally supervise the work group.
Better: He agreed personally to supervise the work group.

STYLE

Pick a style; be consistent.

Be consistent in use of the following:

- alignment
- boldface
- font
- italics
- pitch (size)
- underscore

Consider formatting section headings as small caps in lieu of underscore for ease in readability and emphasis.

Look at the report from an outline perspective—for every *I* there must be a *II*; for every *A* there must be a *B*; for every *1* there must be a *2*. Otherwise, combine ideas into one topic.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Awkward - *When meeting a person, shake hands if they extend their hand.*
Better – *When meeting people, shake hands if they extend their hand.*

Awkward – *Write the names on the backs of each receipt.*
Better – *Write the names on the backs of all receipts.*

Awkward – *All of them had their heads buried in a book.*
Better – *All of them had their heads buried in books.*

WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

A widow is the last line of a paragraph printed by itself at the top of a page.
An orphan is the first line of a paragraph printed by itself at the bottom of the Page. Avoid widows and orphans by careful pagination.

WORDS

The choice of words is of major importance in writing reports and executive summaries. Knowing which words to choose depends largely on knowing how to use synonyms. By exploring synonym choices, writers are likely to keep their writing fresh and interesting.

Synonym – a term that means exactly or nearly the same as another term in the same language

Thesaurus – essentially a book of synonyms – can be an indispensable tool for the writer

Dictionary – an essential tool for correct spelling, usage, and definition. Consult constantly.

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