

# Department of Corrections

## *In This Chapter*

- Correctness? You be the judge.
- Rules, usage, opinions: your choice.
- Use proofreading tricks, or diligence.
- Practice with the 15 biggies.

## **WHY YOU SHOULD CARE**

Imagine you've been in your new job for two months. You submit a document and your boss points out two grammar errors in your writing. Now imagine you've been there two years. You submit a document and, again, your boss finds the same two errors. Do you really think your boss would be unfair to conclude that you refuse to change because you just don't care?

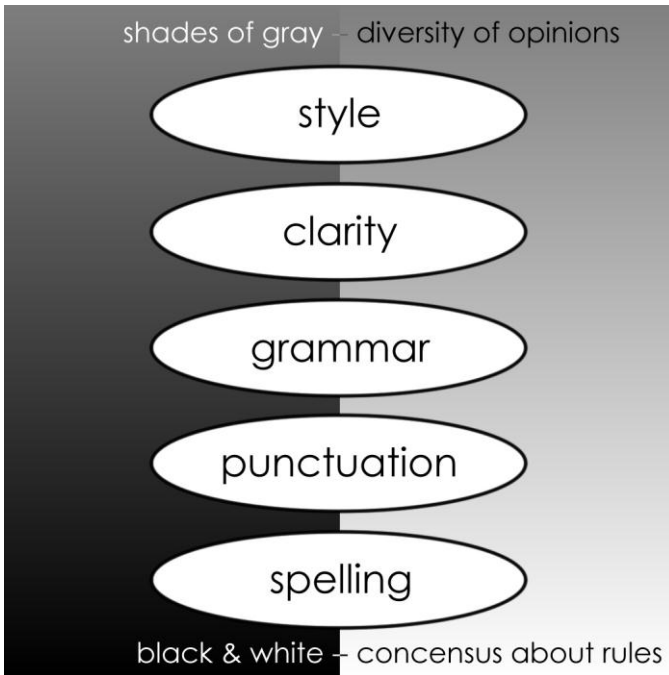
It's simple: your writing must use correct English. It's a requirement for your job. Proofread! Use this chapter to practice—and focus on the things you repeatedly get wrong.

## JUDGE

Other than my boss, whom should I obey regarding my writing? There is no single authority on good writing. Yes, the dictionary spells things out in black and white. But as the topic moves from spelling to grammar to style, rules become opinions with shades of gray.

In this workbook you will find both rules and opinions. They shouldn't be new to you. School teachers presented most lessons as rules, and colleagues are free with their opinions about how you should write.

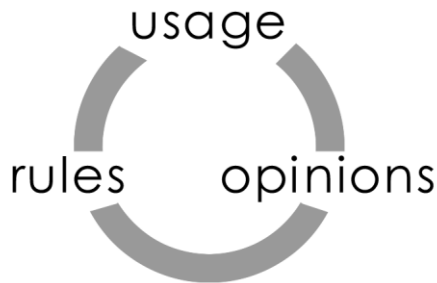
The best thing to do is obey the rules and consider the opinions. It's your writing, so you are the sole judge.



## HIT THE JOB WRITING

However, there is a third source of authority in writing: usage. By this we mean how most people generally use English. And it is not always easy to figure out which authority should be followed. It's like the rock-scissors-paper game:

rock-scissors-paper ↔ rules-opinions-usage



At work, effective communication should outweigh grammatical purity. So, usage usually trumps rules.

Now let's have some fun conjuring clever answers to some brain teasers about rules, usage, and opinions:

Give an example of why the local dictionary is not always the final authority regarding spelling.

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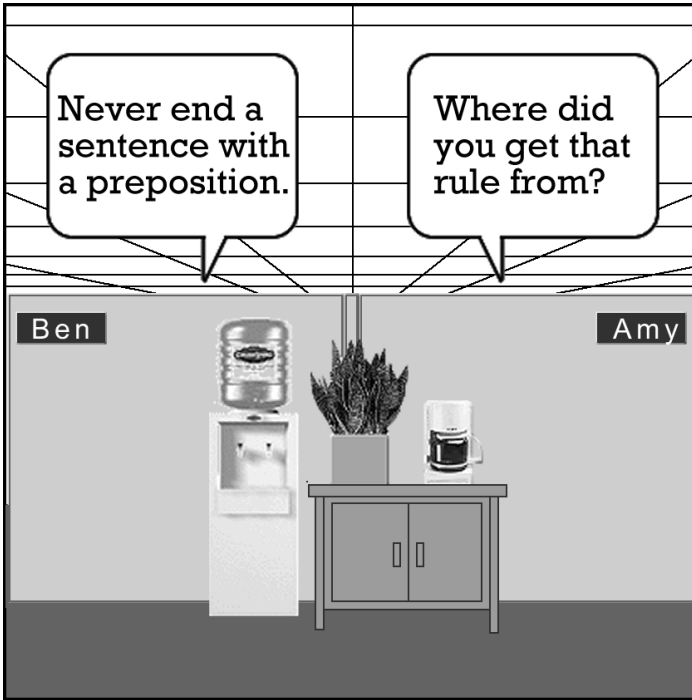
Describe what Winston Churchill meant when he said: "This is the sort of errant pedantry up with which I will not put."

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Explain what is wrong with the following pronouncement: "At work, never use a big word when a small word could be used."

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# HIT THE JOB WRITING



## Solutions

Red is a color in America but a colour in Canada. Also, new words are not in old dictionaries.

Strict adherence to rules of grammar (never end a sentence with a preposition) can make us sound unnecessarily silly.

There are too many exceptions. If we replace "microscopic" with "tiny" our writing becomes less precise.

## PROOFREAD

Proofreading is like combing your hair. If you don't do it, you will look sloppy. Your comb, like a spell checker, is necessary but not sufficient. Your mirror doesn't show every part of your head, so you need to find a way to identify every imperfection.

**Use a straight edge:** Cover up all but the first line of the paragraph below. Circle errors then move to the next line.

I need you're advise. Your my "guru of goop.' Their maybe trouble with the mixture. Should'nt we package it in plastic. Its like mashed potatos. It will travel by plain, than by train.

**Go backwards:** Point at the final word of the paragraph below. Play "follow the bouncing ball" and go left and then up a line, pointing at every word in reverse order. Circle errors you find.

This work enviroment is like a race coarse it's frantic and loud. Wouldn't you like some piece an quiet. This weak we should'nt be hear. But a brake from the action might be to much to ask four.

How many errors did you find using each technique? There are 12 errors per paragraph, evenly distributed among sentences. Some people find the straight edge technique useful for grammar and the backwards technique useful for spelling. But, to be honest, few people find either technique exceedingly useful. Now you know: *there are no shortcuts.*

Two other simple habits can help:

**Use hardcopy:** Editing a document on a computer can cause anxiety; we get tense when we spend a lot of time typing on a keyboard and staring at a screen. We edit better when we are relaxed, and we are more relaxed when we sit back and hold paper as we edit the text printed on it.

**Ask a buddy:** Even the best of friends love to find fault; use it to your advantage.

## WATCH FOR THE BIGGIES

How do you make sure your writing is correct? You can use every trick in the book: straight edge, going backwards, using hardcopy, asking a friend. In the end, however, it is your responsibility, so you should strive to be a careful proofreader, if only to find and fix the most common errors.

Here are the top 15 things people forget to watch out for when writing at work:

### 1. Introductory clauses should be followed by a comma.

Despite a faltering economy AMF bought more bowling centers.

Despite a faltering **economy, AMF** bought more bowling centers.

### 2. Make it obvious what a pronoun refers to.

AMF declared bankruptcy, but its bowling centers remained open. It surprised bowlers.

AMF declared bankruptcy, but its bowling centers remained open. **The bankruptcy** surprised bowlers.

### 3. In a compound sentence with a conjunction, also use a comma.

Fred Schmidt invented the pinspotter in 1936 and two years later he was hired by AMF.

Fred Schmidt invented the pinspotter in **1936, and** two years later he was hired by AMF.

### 4. Check spelling for words that sound the same or sound similar.

They drank beer, but it didn't effect there score.

They drank beer, but it didn't **affect their** score.

## HIT THE JOB WRITING

### 5. Optional modifying words should be set off with commas.

AMF after its reorganization became profitable again.

AMF, **after its reorganization**, became profitable again.

### 6. In a compound sentence with a comma, also use a conjunction.

AMF's pinspotter debuted in 1946, it sparked a revolution in the bowling industry.

AMF's pinspotter debuted in 1946, **and** it sparked a revolution in the bowling industry.

### 7. Watch for the tricky apostrophes with plural possessives.

Most bowling center's revenues kept growing, as did participation in childrens leagues.

Most bowling **centers'** revenues kept growing, as did participation in **children's** leagues.

### 8. Avoid shifting from one verb tense to another.

More than 100 million people will bowl each year, so bowling was a good business.

More than 100 million people **bowl** each year, so bowling **is** a good business.

### 9. Avoid shifting from one kind of pronoun to another.

When one first enters an AMF bowling center, you are impressed by the colorful décor.

When **you** first **enter** an AMF bowling center, you are impressed by the colorful décor.

### 10. Make the verb match the subject in number.

The bowlers on our team is sure to win. Each of the bowlers practice once a week.

The bowlers on our team **are** sure to win. Each of the bowlers **practices** once a week.

## HIT THE JOB WRITING

### 11. Use commas to separate all items in a series.

AMF operates bowling centers around the world: 36 in Australia, 9 in Mexico and 5 in Japan.

AMF operates bowling centers around the world: 36 in Australia, 9 in **Mexico, and** 5 in Japan.

### 12. Make each pronoun match its noun in number.

Each of the 518 bowling centers will operate on their regular schedule.

Each of the 518 bowling centers will operate on **its** regular schedule.

### 13. The possessive for *it* does not use an apostrophe, but *it is* does.

Its good that its bowling centers remained open.

**It's** good that its bowling centers remained open.

### 14. Follow an introductory modifier with the thing it actually modifies.

Bowling in a league, scores improve if beer drinking is limited.

Bowling in a league, **you** improve if beer drinking is limited.

### 15. Keep parallel things parallel.

The league bowler arrived early, drinks beer, and has fallen over.

The league bowler arrived early, **drank** beer, and **fell** over.

Note: Admittedly there is some repetition between this activity and other lessons in this book. That's not a bad thing. Practice makes perfect.



## Exercise

A coworker is writing a report on the Professional Bowlers Association (PBA). She has asked you to proofread two paragraphs from her first draft. Find and fix all mistakes in her prose, editing for correctness only.

Entrepreneurs from Microsoft bought the PBA and they soon made significant changes. To start with, they recruited new corporate sponsors, including Motel 6, Denny's and Ace Hardware. Three other big changes were made by the PBA: it rewarded winners in a unique way, it increases tournament prize money, and it expanded it's membership. Top bowlers excepted stock options. Wanting to entice new members, the overall prize fund grew to \$9 million. Membership grew to 4,250, and sources say they will soon exceed 5,000. Also, sideline coaching was banned, the dress code was relaxed. This upset some bowlers, who had assumed that this would not change.

What would it be like to bowl in the PBA Open? To begin with you must pay an entry fee of \$500. To compete, you need skills similar to those of top bowlers. These competitors, the best in the world typically score above 200. You need precise control to conquer the flat oil pattern on the lanes. To win, you need a miracle, though its most bowler's dream. When one makes it to the final rounds, your called a casher, because than you have been competing for the \$375,000 in prize money. The top four players in the tournament is shown live on ESPN.

**Hint:** If you find more than 18 errors, you could be accused of being overzealous.

## Solution

Entrepreneurs from Microsoft bought the **PBA, and** [3] they soon made significant changes. To start with, they recruited new corporate sponsors, including Motel 6, **Denny's, and** [11] Ace Hardware. Three other big changes were made by the PBA: it rewarded winners in a unique way, it **increased** [15] tournament prize money, and it expanded **its** [13] membership. Top bowlers **accepted** [4] stock options. Wanting to entice new members, **the PBA** [14] **increased** the overall prize fund to \$9 million. Membership grew to 4,250, and sources say **it** [12] will soon exceed 5,000. Also, sideline coaching was **banned, and** [6] the dress code was relaxed. **The ban on coaching** [2] upset some bowlers, who had assumed that this would not change. {9 errors}

What would it be like to bowl in the PBA Open? To begin **with, you** [1] must pay an entry fee of \$500. To compete, you need skills similar to those of top bowlers. These competitors, **the best in the world,** [5] typically score above 200. You need precise control to conquer the flat oil pattern on the lanes. To win, you need a miracle, though **it's** [13] most **bowlers'** [7] dream. When **you make** [9] it to the final rounds, **you're** [4] called a casher, because **then** [4] you **are** [8] competing for the \$375,000 in prize money. The top four players in the tournament **are** [10] shown live on ESPN. {9 errors}

## FINAL COMMENTS

Proofread? Who has time to to proofread? I send out dozens of emails every day. I send out even more replies, though their usually brief. I write a detailed status update every few days. And I write weakly progress reports. It should be enough that the software I use checks for errors in spelling and grammar as I type. Apparently its not.

How far into that paragraph did you get before you realized what was going on? There's a mistake in every other sentence.

That software you rely on isn't all-knowing, so you can only trust it so far. Your mind isn't perfect, so your eyes will deceive you. Solicit the assistance of another sense: read it out loud. And if it's really important stuff, beg a friend and coworker to embarrass you by finding all the errors.

## FAQs

**Q:** *Whenever I'm not sure about grammar, I pull out my old school books. When the topic is style, I refer to this new book I bought. I also use a dictionary and a thesaurus. It's a lot of books to deal with. Why isn't there a single book I can refer to for most issues?*

**A:** Actually, there is. Go get a copy of *The Gregg Reference Manual*. Some people look at it and think, "Oh, that's just for secretaries and typists." They are wrong and small minded. It is as comprehensive and authoritative as it gets. If you've got money to burn, go buy a new copy of the latest version. Otherwise, a second hand copy of the ninth or tenth edition will do. The latest versions are typically different because of changes in technology available to people writing at work. You don't need that. What you need is the timeless advice

about all those writing topics:

Part 1: Grammar, Usage, and Style

Punctuation . Capitalization . Numbers . Abbreviations  
. Plurals and Possessives . Spelling . Compound Words  
. Word Division . Grammar . Usage

Part 2: Techniques and Formats

Editing . Proofreading . Memos . Email . Reports .  
Manuscripts . Notes and Bibliographies . Tables . Other  
Business Documents . Forms of Address

Part 3: References

Glossary of Grammatical Terms . Pronunciation  
Problems . Rules for Alphabetic Filing . Index

The most useful section is the last: this 600-page book has a 20-page Index where each page has three columns and all the text is small but readable.

**Q:** *I wrote this report. High-level people are going to read it. I did my best and proofread it. I even asked a friend to help and she did. But I'm wondering, is it okay to pay someone to proofread it for me? Or is that somehow cheating?*

**A:** No, it's not cheating. It's your life. It's your job. It's your money. Many companies hire independent proofreaders for important documents. If you do, then you're saving your company money.