

Style and Accuracy in Writing

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Abstract

I'd like to start by focusing on some style bloopers which seem to show up on my desk, and probably yours, so often that I feel compelled to stand here and enlist your help in stamping them out.

Style and Accuracy in Writing

Dorothy Sparer

I'd like to start by focusing on some style bloopers which seem to show up on my desk, and probably yours, so often that I feel compelled to stand here and enlist your help in stamping them out. Beyond that, I'd like to make a pitch for some old fashioned software—the reference book— in an age of new fangled hardware; a pitch for making INFORMED decisions about what's correct and what isn't.

Capomania

Let's start with the bloopers.

The most glaring, most prevalent, I think, is the unnecessary capital letter. It's really the immodest thinking behind it that disturbs me—and probably your reader—the most. Have you ever noticed, for example, that the agronomist who capitalizes *agronomy* in every sentence does not capitalize the equally prestigious occupations of *writing* and *editing*? Or that the person who capitalizes the titles *associate professor* or *director* doesn't capitalize *secretary*, *janitor* or *used car salesman*?

I think this person's message is clear. This capomaniac, as I call him, is telling us he's an elitist. He's self-centered. Capomaniacs enshrine in capitals anything and anyone who's important to THEM, relegating the rest of us to lower case status. At least that's the way a reader would size them up.

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I remember a workshop where I explained that you capitalize only proper nouns—names of people or things—and that you capitalize titles only when they precede a name. Then I mentioned that you don't capitalize the p in pope, for example, unless you're talking about Pope John Paul in particular. *The pope* has no cap P.

Well, the shocked silence that followed that statement was exceeded only by the angry outbursts that came next. What did I mean by denigrating the pope in this way? People were genuinely upset. That capital letter became an emotional issue.

I'm sure many of you find the same thing happening in your offices because academic and institutional pride quite often run as deep as religious feelings, and when you knock down that a in agronomy, someone is going to let you hear about it. You probably hit a sensitive nerve—the status nerve.

When that happens to me, I try to convince the capomaniac that the English language is not governed by whim, by emotions, by professional pride, by religious fervor, or by feelings of personal status. It is governed by rules, and the good Lord made editors like us to enforce and interpret them, knowing that we are committed to protecting the language while we are helping it adjust to changing conditions.

Weasel quotes

Another blooper that's getting all too popular is the unnecessary quotation mark—the weasel quote, as I call it. This one has gotten so bad that people are no longer content to simply add unnecessary quotes to their WRITTEN words. I have seen, and I'm sure you have too, people do this (make quote signs) with their fingers when they're talking. They are putting quotation marks into their spoken words, too!

Now I wouldn't have any quarrel with this at all if those quotation marks were going around quotations as they were intended to do. That would be fine. The purpose of quotation marks, as I'm sure you know, is to enclose something someone said.

The quotes I'm objecting to—the incorrect ones—are the ones that enclose words someone's not too sure of, words the writer is a little uneasy about, maybe even embarrassed about. So this hypothetical writer says to himself, "Hmm . . . Is that the right word? I feel funny about it. But I

know what I'll do. I won't get the blame for it." That's why I call them weasel quotes—because they're used when someone's weaseling out of taking responsibility for a word, when someone's trying to get off the hook.

But you know, you've got to admit that being *on* that hook is what writing is all about. Our job, I think you'll agree, is to find the RIGHT word to say what we mean, even if that entails rummaging around in our brains for a while or getting out the thesaurus. We're not hired to write the ALMOST right word or the questionable word or the maybe word. The reason we're paid so handsomely—those of us who write—is that our large, versatile vocabularies equip us to get right on target when we're trying to express ourselves.

So next time you see a weasel quote in your copy, tell yourself that the quotes are not doing the job they're intended to do, and neither are you. Cross them out and put in the correct word, the better word, the one you're comfortable with.

But what about words used in the ironic sense, I hear somebody thinking. OK, they can be put in quotes, that's true. But if, when you look over your copy, you find it is simply littered with ironic words and phrases—shot through with quotation marks—you might say to yourself, Whoa—maybe I'm applying irony with a shovel instead of a demitasse spoon. Maybe, in other words, I'm being too cute, too self-conscious.

And what about words that are coined, I hear someone saying. What if you're coining the phrase *limited income farmer*, as one of our writers did, and you're calling attention to the fact that this phrase has a special meaning? Can't you use quotes then? No. In cases like that, the correct procedure is to italicize the word or phrase the first time you use it—underline it, in other words, in your typewritten copy—instead of putting quotes around it.

But enough about weasel quotes. Let's move on to one last linguistic eyesore—the hyphen. Winston Churchill had something wise to say about hyphens that sums it all up: "One must regard the hyphen," he said, "as a blemish to be avoided wherever possible." Amen. The words that are most often blemished by hyphens these days are non words—words with the prefix *non* stuck to the front of them.

The hyphen habit

With very little encouragement I could stand here an extra 15 minutes railing against some of the redundant non words

that are invented these days—words like *nonharmful* which someone coined to take the place of the perfectly fine word *harmless* that already existed, or the word *non-IBM* I saw the other day. (I suppose that means everything in the world that's not IBM.) Most of them are clumsy, negative, and unnecessary, but that is another story.

My main point here is that non words are never, not ever, hyphenated. Neither are words with the prefix *co* as in *coauthor* or, heaven forbid, *cooperate*; neither are mixtures of colors, such as *blueish green*; neither are words with *like* tacked on the end, such as *catlike*; neither are words that are preceded by prefixes like *post* in *postwar*, *pre* as in *preconference*; *over* as in *overworked*; *semi* as in *semiconscious*; and many others.

The fact is that just about any prefix you can think of is *not* hyphenated, with the exception of the prefix *self* as in *self-sufficient*. There are others but they are prefixes you're not likely to use very often. Scientists are particularly hyphen happy, I have found, maybe because they have a secret need to make everything look like an equation. I haven't really figured it out yet. But I do ask for your help in substituting the garden variety English word whenever you see a non word that has been created unnecessarily, and in ferreting out unnecessary hyphens in your writing and editing.

The split

One final note on an atrocity in the making. This one isn't too bad yet, but I see it gathering momentum and I fear the worst. I'm talking here about the split infinitive. How many times have you seen sentences that say something like, "Dr. Hoffer is investigating the mating of horseflies to better understand the process"—or "to adequately explain" or "to efficiently utilize"?

And yet we all know that adverbs were created to *follow* and *modify* verbs, unless you're trying to achieve some special effect. So again, I urge you to remain vigilant. Don't fall into this trap, and help keep your scientists and specialists out of it, too. Maybe we can stop this one before it gets as bad as the rest.

Now if your office is anything like ours, you've probably had some dandy conversations, maybe even arguments, about whether or not there should be a hyphen in *full time* or caps on *county agent* or whether *crossbreeding* is one word or two. Not long ago the editor of our student magazine, a

very sharp young lady, debated at some length about the pros and cons of capitalizing *Tennessee walking horse*. Was it a name? Or a descriptive phase? She debated with herself for some time and finally gave up and looked to me for help. "What do YOU think?" she asked. It really doesn't matter what I think, I told her. My opinion is beside the point. Why don't you look it up in the dictionary? She looked astounded. "I never thought of that," she said. And she's an outstanding student.

I had a similar experience the other day when one of the secretaries in the Horticulture Department called to tell me I had made a mistake editing a manuscript. I had made *morning glory* two words. "It IS two words," I told her. "I checked it in Webster's." But she wasn't convinced. "It's ONE word," she said. "Dr. Woodruff ALWAYS spells it as one word. He LIKES it that way."

I finally made the point that whenever it's a case of Webster versus Woodruff, Webster wins in our office. But it wasn't easy. She too was not used to the idea that you could settle an argument of this kind by simply looking it up.

The point

Now these are not isolated cases. In fact, my point is not so much that we should avoid the bloopers I've been talking about—you already know that. The problem isn't those caps and quotes and hyphens. The problem, as I see it, is that there are quite a few folks who are making up spelling, punctuation, and style as they go along.

And I think the net effect is that ag journalism becomes that much less credible, that much less professional in the eyes of our readers and the people we work with. It gives ag journalism a black eye. It's a stain on our reputations, and it looks shabby, like gravy on your tie. Our language should be as well dressed as we are.

I believe we should be look-it-up, check-it-out people. We should make decisions about what is and isn't correct by citing chapter and verse in some recognized bible of usage. Too often you hear people say, "That's the way my 9th grade English teacher taught me to do it," or "That's the way my boss told me to do it," or worse yet, "That's the way I've always done it." They don't realize, I'm sure, how unprofessional that sounds. You wouldn't try to win a case in court or defend a thesis that way, and yet we continue to have these emotional arguments about style.

I believe all writers need an arbiter of style, a guru, an authority to refer to so that rules can be enforced and exceptions to rules made knowingly and thoughtfully. In our office I've chosen the *Chicago Style Manual* as our style authority because it is the most widely used, most comprehensive, most reasonable, and most sensible style manual, to my way of thinking. For our technical publications I also use the *Council of Biology Editors Style Manual*. Bonnie Riechert, our news editor, uses the *UPI Style Manual* because much of her copy goes to newspapers. And finally we use *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* to settle arguments about the Tennessee walking horse.

The moral

Many of you are probably using other style manuals, such as the *Government Printing Office Manual*, to suit your own circumstances. But for those of you who have your own private set of rules or don't use any style manual at all, I'd like to urge you to repent and reform.

Style in language can't be the same as style in fashion with caps going up and down like hems from one day to the next. Besides, according to all the studies I've seen, the readers of science news are well educated, well informed people. They know a blooper when they see one, and they're likely to suspect that our facts are as inaccurate as our style if they do.

So for the sake of consistency, clarity, the continued good health of the English language and, most of all, for the sake of our readers and our professional integrity, we as communicators should be as fussy about good usage—and as well informed—as our colleagues in magazine and book publishing.

After all, in a world where 500 million people are suffering from severe malnutrition, we have THE most important story to tell.