

# Editing Reference Guide

*Academic writing can take many forms, from theses and dissertations to technical reports and journal articles. Professional writing in all of these genres requires close attention to matters of style and usage.*

*The following guide provides definitions, usage guidelines, and examples for some of the terms students and professionals often have questions about while writing and editing. (Terms in boldface have separate entries in this section.)*

## Part I. Recommended Usage

**Active and Passive Voice:** Active voice refers to sentence structure in which the subject of the clause is the actor; passive voice refers to sentence structure in which the subject is the receiver of action. Passive voice occurs when a to-be form of the verb (such as *was*, *were*, *am*, *is*, or *are*) is followed by a past-tense verb.

Active voice example: The research team conducted the follow-up study last year.

Passive voice example: The follow-up study was conducted last year by the research team.

(Note in the passive example that *was* is the to-be verb form, and *conducted* is the past-tense verb. Also note that the subject of the sentence, *study*, does not serve as the actor, but as the receiver of the action.)

**Rule:** While passive voice is used widely in scientific and technical writing, use active voice when possible. Active voice is easier for readers to comprehend and is usually less wordy. Also avoid using *it*, *these*, *those*, *that*, or *there* as sentence subjects in formal writing such as theses, dissertations, professional papers, or journal articles. Use of these words often leads to weak verbs and/or passive voice.

**Agreement:** Refers to correct usage where there is consistency in **number** between a subject and verb, or consistency in **number** between a **pronoun** and its **antecedent**.

*The journal editor and the publisher are* expected to attend the banquet. (Agreement in number between plural subject *The journal editor and the publisher* and verb *are*)

*The journal editor*, as well as the publisher, *is* expected to attend. (Agreement in number between singular subject *The journal editor* and verb *is*)

*The writers* discussed some of *their* strategies at the award ceremony. (Agreement in number between plural possessive pronoun *their* and plural antecedent noun *writers*)

*The committee* will hold *its* annual teleconference later this month. (Agreement in number between singular possessive pronoun *its* and antecedent collective noun *committee*)

*Each* of the graduate students *was* recognized for *his or her* contributions to the project.

(Agreement in number between indefinite pronoun *each* and (1) singular verb *was* and (2) singular possessive pronouns *his or her*)

(See **antecedent**, **collective noun**, and **indefinite pronoun**.)

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**Dr. Mark Tucker** prepared the original text of this document. Amendments were made by **Dr. Larry Miller** to emphasize special cases for formal, scholarly writing.

**Alternate Subjects:** A subject form that results when a subject contains the **conjunctions** *or* or *nor*. In such cases, the verb should agree with the nearer subject.

Tom or the *others are* scheduled to meet with Dr. Miller this afternoon.  
Neither the students nor *Dr. Miller was* aware of the new schedule.

**Antecedent:** The noun or pronoun referred to by a pronoun in a sentence. The antecedent should always agree with its pronoun in **number** and **case**. (See **agreement**.)

**Article:** The words *a*, *an*, and *the* are known as *articles*. To distinguish between *a* and *an*, remember that *an* is used before words that start with a vowel sound.

*A* science editor was needed to prepare the manuscript.  
*An* agricultural editor spoke to the class this afternoon.

**Case:** The correct form, or case, of a pronoun depends on its position and use in a sentence. The three case forms are nominative, objective, and possessive.

**Nominative Personal Pronouns:** *I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they.*

**Objective Personal Pronouns:** *Me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them.*

**Possessive Personal Pronouns:** *My, mine, your, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, their, theirs.*

**Rules:**

Use nominative case for sentence subjects: *He* is the winner. *They* met the deadline.

Use objective case for personal pronouns that serve as objects of a **preposition** or as direct objects:

Let's keep this between *you* and *me*. You should call *him* immediately.

Use possessive case to show ownership. Note in the following example that the possessive form of *it* requires no apostrophe: The organization will hold *its* first meeting next week.

**Clause:** A group of words containing both a subject and verb. *Independent clauses* express a complete thought and can stand alone as complete sentences. *Dependent clauses* contain a subject and verb, but do not express a complete thought. They must be rewritten or correctly joined with an independent clause when used in a sentence.

The study is complete, but she has not reported the findings. (Two independent clauses correctly joined with a **comma** and **conjunction** to form a sentence)

The findings will be published after the study is complete. (An independent clause and dependent clause correctly joined to form a sentence)

She is completing the study and is ready report the findings. (An independent clause and a phrase correctly joined with a **conjunction** to form a sentence)

(See **phrase**.)

**Clichés:** Avoid tired phrases and expressions in formal writing.

**Collective Noun:** A noun that is singular in form but plural in meaning such as *committee, group, team, and class*. If the collective noun refers to the entire group as a single unit, which is usually the case, use a singular verb and singular pronouns to ensure **agreement**. If the collective noun refers to separate individuals within the group, use a plural verb and plural pronouns to ensure **agreement**.

The winning team was recognized at the banquet. (The collective noun *team* is used in a singular

sense and requires the singular verb *was*.)

The couple were happy to accept the awards. (The collective noun *couple* is used in a plural sense and requires the plural verb *were*.)

The organization selected its officers for next year. (The collective noun *organization* is used in a singular sense. As an antecedent, it requires the singular possessive pronoun *its*.)

**Comma Splice:** A sentence problem that results when a **comma** is used without a **conjunction** to join two complete sentences or **independent clauses**.

Problem example: The researchers checked for multicollinearity, none was noted.

Corrected version: The researchers checked for multicollinearity. None was noted.

(See **sentence fault** and **semicolon**.)

**Common Nouns:** A class of nouns that refers to non-specific things, qualities, places, ideas, and persons. Writers should be alert to the unusual plural forms of some common nouns. For instance, note that the common nouns *data*, *media*, *criteria*, and *alumni* are plural. As subjects, they require plural verbs and, as antecedents, they require plural pronouns.

The data are available on the Web. These data indicate little attitude change among respondents.

Data are only as good as the methods used to collect them.

**Compound Modifier:** An adjectival construction composed of two or more words where the first word or words modify following words in the phrase, rather than the main noun. Hyphens are used in most compound modifiers placed before the noun.

A two-step process was used to identify study participants. (Note that the adjective *two* modifies *step*, not *process*. Therefore, the compound modifier *two-step* requires a hyphen when used before a noun.)

**Compound Personal Pronouns:** A special type of **personal pronoun** formed by adding *-self* or *-selves*, including *myself*, *yourself*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, *ourselves*, and *themselves*. Do not substitute compound personal pronouns for simple personal pronouns.

Problem example: You may contact Dr. Jones or *myself* if you have any questions.

Corrected version: You may contact Dr. Jones or *me* if you have any questions.

(See **case**.)

**Dependent Clause:** A group of words containing both a subject and verb. Dependent clauses do not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone as complete sentences. They must be rewritten or correctly joined with an independent clause to form a sentence. (See **clause** and **independent clause**.)

**Editorializing:** The result when writers purposely or unintentionally insert their biases or opinions in a manuscript. To avoid editorializing, avoid first-person pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *my*, *we*, and *us* except when used in direct quotation. In formal writing, first-person pronouns are typically not permitted.

Problem example: We found no support for our hypotheses.

Corrected versions: The researchers found no support for the hypotheses. *Or:* The findings provided no support for the hypotheses.

**Note:** To avoid editorializing in theses or dissertations, it is helpful to remember that research should not have an original thought until Chapter 5. Any idea should be accompanied by citations until one comes to Recommendations, Implications, or Discussion sections in Chapter 5.

**False Plural:** Words that appear plural because they end in *s*, but are singular in meaning. False plurals require singular verbs and singular pronouns.

She says *statistics is* one of her major study areas.

*Econometrics was* a difficult subject for me.

The company's *headquarters* held an open house for *its* new customers last week.

**Fragment:** A group of words, often a dependent clause, which is incorrectly used as a complete sentence. (See **sentence fault**.)

**Homophones:** Words that sound alike but have different meanings or spellings, such as *principle-principal* and *it's-its*. To avoid errors, writers must proofread carefully and avoid over-reliance on computer spell-checkers.

**Indefinite Pronoun:** A special class of pronouns that includes *each, none, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, and nobody*. When used as **antecedents**, indefinite pronouns usually should refer to singular pronouns. When they are used as subjects of a sentence, they take singular verbs.

*Each* of the groups submitted *its* proposal.

*Neither* of the reports *is* ready to publish.

Grammatically correct, but sexist: Everyone should always publish his best work.

Awkward structure: Everyone should always publish his or her best work.

Preferred: Researchers should always publish their best work.

**Rule:** Converting singular pronouns and antecedents to their plural forms often allows writers to avoid sexist or awkward phrasing.

**Independent Clause:** A group of words containing both a subject and verb. Independent clauses express a complete thought and can stand alone as complete sentences. (See **clause** and **dependent clause**.)

**Jargon:** The specialized words and language of a profession or discipline that should be avoided in formal writing. If jargon or technical terminology cannot be avoided, provide a brief definition on first reference.

**Libel:** A false written statement that damages an individual's personal or professional reputation. Writers and editors should understand basic principles of libel to avoid editorial and legal problems.

**Non-parallel Structure:** (See parallel structure.)

**Number:** Number refers to whether nouns, pronouns, and verbs are used in singular or plural form.

Always check for consistency in number between (1) a subject and verb, and (2) a pronoun and its antecedent. (See **agreement**.)

**Numbers, Usage and Reporting of:** Formal research writing often involves reporting quantitative and statistical information. Several rules govern the use of numbers in these contexts.

1. Always spell out numbers that start sentences – do not use Arabic numerals.  
Problem example: 45 of the individuals did not return a questionnaire.  
Corrected version: Forty-five of the individuals did not return a questionnaire.
2. In the main text of the manuscript, spell out whole numbers less than 10; use Arabic numerals for double-digit (or higher) numbers.  
The researchers administered two versions of the questionnaire.  
Dr. Bowen has had at least eight students in his summer class over the past 10 years.  
Responses were received from 24 counties in the two-state area.
3. Although many computer statistical software programs print data to four digits beyond the decimal, writers should not necessarily report data in this form. In fact, one could argue that the precision of measurement in the social and behavioral sciences does not warrant such preciseness. When analysis involves a series of steps and the final answer is to be in tenths, perform all preceding operations in hundredths and round to tenths at the final step.

As a general rule, report **one more** digit than the original data. For instance, if data are whole numbers, such as 10, 17, or 22, then report means to one decimal (e.g., 10.3).

**Use the following rounding guidelines:**

To the nearest whole number:  $7.2 = 7$ ;  $7.8 = 8$

To the nearest tenth:  $7.17 = 7.2$ ;  $7.11 = 7.1$ ;  $.09 = .1$

To the nearest hundredth:  $7.177 = 7.18$ ;  $.674 = .67$ ;  $1.098 = 1.10$

In rounding numbers, the general rule is that if the last digit is less than five, then it is dropped; if the last digit is more than five, the preceding digit is raised to the next higher digit. A complication arises when numbers end in five. In such a case, if the number preceding the five is an odd number, raise this digit to the next higher one; when it is an even number, drop the five.

[Material in this section is based on Downie and Heath (1970). Refer to this source for additional guidance on usage and reporting of numbers.]

**Parallel Structure:** Sentence construction in which clauses and phrases are grammatically structured in a consistent form.

Problem example: Finals week often brings stress, increased anxiety, and working late hours.

Corrected version: Finals week often brings stress, anxiety, and long hours.

(See **sentence fault**.)

**Parts of Speech:** Words in the English language can be classified into one or more of eight groups known as the *parts of speech*.

1. **Adjectives** are descriptive words that modify nouns or pronouns.  
He said *research* papers and abstracts are *important* indicators of productivity.
2. **Adverbs** modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.  
We *barely* finished the paper by the deadline date.

The book chapter was *well*-written.

3. **Conjunctions** are connectors that join words or groups of words.  
Students *and* professors agreed on the new policy.  
He submitted the article, *but* has not yet heard from the editor.
4. **Interjections** show strong or intense feeling or emotion. They are followed by one **exclamation mark**. Interjections are often used with a separate, clarifying sentence, as shown in the second example.  
Stop!  
Wait! You left your disk in the computer.
5. **Nouns** represent a person, place, thing, idea, or quality.  
Please place the *camera* and *film* on the *desk* in my *office*. (**Common nouns**)  
*Dr. Sherman* will serve as moderator for the focus groups. (**Proper noun**)  
The *committee* was recognized for its progress this year. (**Collective noun**)
6. **Prepositions** show the relation between an object and another word in the sentence.  
The journal offers a special subscription rate for new members. (In this example, *for* is the preposition, and *members* is the object of the preposition. The words *for new members* form a prepositional phrase.)  
You should collaborate with Gary and me. (In this example, *with* is the preposition; *Gary* and *me* are objects of the preposition. The words *with Gary and me* form a prepositional phrase.)
7. **Pronouns** substitute for nouns and can be used in the same position in the sentence. Among the different types of pronouns are personal pronouns, indefinite pronouns, and compound personal pronouns.  
*We* have attended the convention for the past three years. (**Personal pronoun**)  
*Anyone* can join our study group. *Everyone* is welcome. (**Indefinite pronouns**)  
It is difficult to teach *yourself* the new statistical techniques. (**Compound personal pronoun**)  
(Also see **agreement**, **antecedent**, and **case**.)
8. **Verbs** express action, being, or state of being.  
The editor *encouraged* us to submit our manuscripts. She *answered* all of our questions.  
In formal writing, such as in a dissertation or thesis, writers should generally use past-tense verbs rather than present tense.  
Problem example: Hendrix (1999) states a moderate relationship existed among the variables.  
Corrected version: Hendrix (1999) stated a moderate relationship existed among the variables.  
(Also see **verbals** and **voice**.)

**Passive Voice:** Refers to sentence structure in which the subject of the verb is the receiver of action.  
(See **active and passive voice**.)

**Personal Pronoun:** Includes all pronoun forms that refer to people or things, such as *I*, *me*, *we*, *us*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *they*, *them*, *their*, *it*, and *its*. Personal pronouns may be written in nominative, objective, or possessive case. (See **agreement** and **antecedent**.) (Most quantitative research reports do not use personal pronouns in the first person; however, qualitative research often does permit such narrative writing.)

**Phrase:** A group of two or more words that does not contain both a subject and verb. Phrases do not express complete thoughts and cannot stand alone as complete sentences. (See **clause**.)

**Proper Noun:** A special type of noun that refers to the formal names of specific places, things, organizations, people, and trademarked products. Capitalization is required. Always double-check spellings of proper nouns.

*Dr. Ralph Johnson of the University of Florida was elected president of the Association for Communication Excellence.*

**Sentence Fault:** Any grammatical or structural error that causes a sentence to be awkward, incomplete, or otherwise incorrect. (See **comma splice**, **fragment**, and **parallel structure**.)

**Sexist Phrasing:** Gender-biased words, phrases, and examples that are unacceptable in formal writing.

**Slang:** Non-standard or informal words or expressions usually associated with a certain age group, social class, or region. Avoid slang in all types of professional writing unless used as part of a direct quotation.

**Verbals:** Three special verb forms, or verbals, require careful attention in formal writing.

1. **Infinitives** are verb forms usually preceded by *to*.

Examples: I plan *to submit* an abstract. *To learn* statistics takes time and practice.

Rule: Avoid split infinitives, which are formed by placing a word between *to* and the verb.

Problem example: To really learn statistics takes time and practice.

2. **Gerunds** are verbal nouns ending in *ing*.

Examples: *Writing* a thesis is his goal for the summer. Her adviser has always enjoyed *traveling*.

Rule: Pronouns that precede gerunds usually require possessive form.

Problem example: Dr. Connors appreciated him entering the data.

Corrected version: Dr. Connors appreciated his entering the data.

3. **Participles** are verbs or verb phrases that function as adjectives. Participles and participial phrases used at the beginning of a sentence must modify the grammatical subject of the sentence.

Examples: After analyzing the data, the researchers changed their recommendations. (Note that the phrase *After analyzing the data* contains the verb *analyzing*. But, the phrase acts primarily as an adjective in the sentence, modifying the subject of the sentence, *researchers*.)

Rule: Avoid misplaced, or dangling, participles and modifiers, which result when the modifier is incorrectly modifying a word other than the subject of the sentence.

Problem example: Damaged from years of use, she decided to discard the old disk.

Corrected version: Damaged from years of use, the old disk was discarded.

**Wordiness:** The tendency to use unnecessary words and phrases in writing. Omitting unnecessary words is one of the most important things writers can do to improve their manuscripts.

## Part II. Punctuation

The following guidelines provide a condensed review of punctuation rules. For more detailed information, consult a style manual or other reference recommended by your adviser or editor.

**Apostrophe [ ' ]** This punctuation is commonly used to show ownership. It also is used when expressing plural forms of single letters or numbers and to indicate missing letters or numbers. The editor reviewed Joe's paper. The contributors' names are listed on the back cover. Few of us received A's on Dr. Miller's midterm. The stock market crashed in '29. (Apostrophes are not used in the following constructions: 1990s, ABCs.)

In general, avoid the use of apostrophes in formal writing, and always spell out contractions. Problem examples: The study was conducted to assess teachers' attitudes. The final paper won't be ready until September. Corrected versions: The study was conducted to assess the attitudes of teachers. The final paper will not be ready until September.

**Colon [ : ]** This punctuation is commonly used to introduce a list of items or examples. The graduate research classes cover three major areas: data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Do not confuse the colon with the **semicolon**.

**Comma [ , ]** This punctuation is used to provide clarity in writing. Examples include setting off introductory phrases, separating **independent clauses**, and separating three or more items in a series. The final comma in a series is typically included in formal and technical writing. After the meeting, we met to compare notes. Yesterday, he received his acceptance letter. Our adviser cannot attend our meeting tonight, but she will join us tomorrow. All of the data have been analyzed, and the results soon will be published in the journal. He cited the study by Davis, Williams, and Baker. The placement exam is offered in January, February, and March.

**Dash [ – ]** This punctuation is used to set off parenthetical material or to indicate a sudden shift in a sentence. Always insert a space before and after the dash. The speaker will demonstrate the use of two types of software – SPSS and SAS. The findings shocked the researchers – could a mistake have been made in data entry? Most computer software packages provide a special keyboard command or shortcut to construct the dash properly. If necessary, two hyphens (--) may be used to form the dash. The dash should not be confused with the **hyphen ( - )**.

**Ellipsis [ ... ]** The ellipsis is used to indicate missing or purposely omitted text in quotations. Limit your use of the ellipsis in formal writing. Consult your style manual for guidance on when the ellipsis requires three (...) or four (....) periods.

**Exclamation Mark [ ! ]** This punctuation is used to show great emphasis, strong emotions, or surprise. The mark may be placed inside or outside of quotation marks, depending on the intended meaning. "Go!" he shouted. Did the respondent say the methodology was "flawed"? (See **interjection**.)

**Hyphen** [ - ] This punctuation is required in **compound modifiers** used before a noun and in fractions that are written out.

All first-year students should enroll in the seminar.

Nearly two-thirds of the student body voted against the plan.

(See **suspensive hyphenation**.)

**Parentheses** [ ( ) ] Parentheses are used to enclose explanatory words or phrases within a sentence.

They are also used in technical writing when referring to photographs, citations, tables, or figures.

The professor said both methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) are important in agricultural education.

Demographic data for the respondents are reported below (Table 2).

**Period** [ . ] This punctuation is most commonly used to terminate sentences. It is also used in decimal numerals (98.6 degrees) and abbreviations (Stillwater, Okla.). Periods always are placed inside quotation marks. When typing, space only once after a period, exclamation point, or question mark. A period is not used after symbols of chemical elements (N, P, K, Zn).

**Question Mark** [ ? ] The question mark is used at the end of a direct question. Like the **exclamation mark**, it may be placed inside or outside of quotation marks, depending on the intended meaning.

Which method was used?

The reviewer asked, “Why did you select this method?”

When did the reviewer use the term “orthogonal”?

**Quotation Marks** [ “ ” ] These marks are used primarily to indicate the specific words used by a particular source or person. **Commas** and final **periods** should always be placed inside the quotation marks. **Exclamation marks** and **question marks** should be placed inside if they are part of the quotation.

“Here are the data,” she said, pointing to the screen.

The editors questioned our use of the abbreviation “SAE.”

Did she actually say the study was “flawed”?

Quotation marks should not be used to set off slang or clichés, as in the following examples:

He is one of the “best in the business.” This study is going to put us “on the map.”

Consult your style manual on the proper use of single and double quotation marks.

**Semicolon** [ ; ] This punctuation is used to join two closely related **independent clauses** and to separate items in a series when the items themselves have commas.

There was no time to have the papers professionally printed; the deadline was in two hours.

Submitting a paper to the journal is easy; just access the new Web site.

The principal investigators are Dave Moore, Oklahoma State University; Judy Bracht, New Mexico State; and Tammy Binkley, University of Missouri.

The semicolon should not be confused with the **colon**.

**Suspensive Hyphenation** A method of handling hyphenation for two similar compound modifiers used before a noun. It is so named because the hyphen used in the first compound modifier in the set appears to be suspended.

The new tuition rates will apply to first- and second-year graduate students.

(See **compound modifier** and **hyphen**.)

### Recommended References

Portions of this guide were adapted from Burnett, C., & Tucker, M. (2001). *Writing for agriculture: A new approach using tested ideas*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.

The following references are recommended for further instruction in writing and editing.

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