

2nd
EDITION

Public Policy Writing

That Matters

David Chrisinger

Foreword by Katherine Baicker

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A Style Guide for Policy Writing

When I started working at the Harris School of Public Policy, one of the first things I did was put together this style guide to help students write correctly, consistently, and clearly. It provides guidance on those style issues—including capitalization, punctuation, and word usage—most relevant to public policy.

Have you ever wondered or worried, for example, about what was correct:

- Periods or punctuation for bulleted lists?
- “Which” or “that”?
- % or “percent”?

If so, you’re in luck. What follows provides quick answers to these sorts of questions.

Consistently following a style guide like this one will help give your writing a uniformity that conveys professionalism. Inconsistencies in style or misused words can cause readers to question the accuracy of your data, analysis, and conclusions. Nobody wants that.

Are what follow hard-and-fast rules? No. This is a style guide—not a rule book. Many of the “writing rules” we grew up memorizing are not really rules as much as they are preferences perpetuated by grammarians, teachers, and editors. If you have a question that isn’t covered in this guide, or if there is a topic you’d like to know more about, here are three online references that are worth consulting:

- *Chicago Manual of Style*
- *U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual*
- *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*

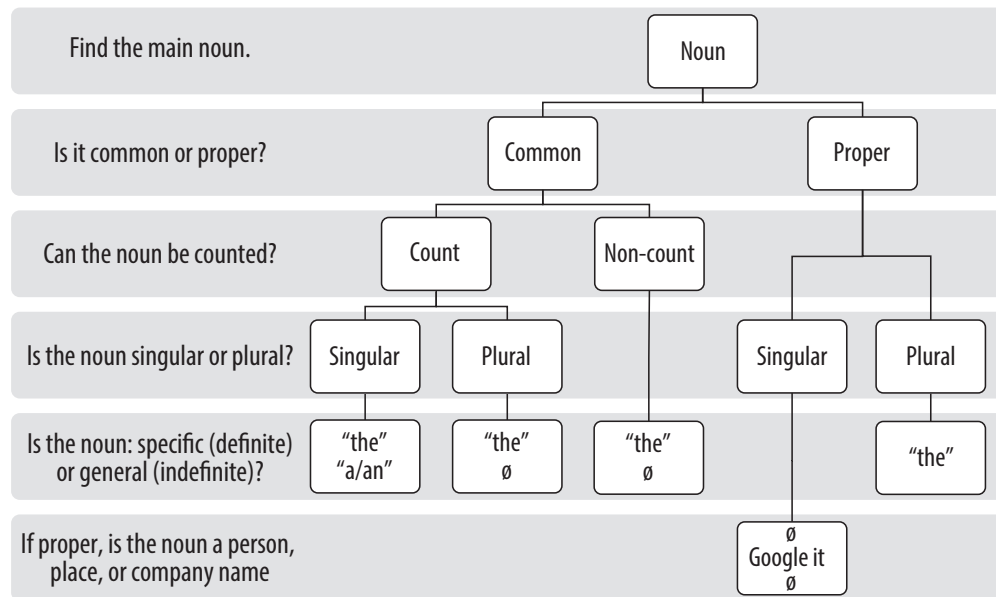
ABBREVIATIONS

- General Rules
 - Use as few abbreviations as possible.
 - Do not use an abbreviation before it has been introduced parenthetically.
 - To introduce an abbreviation, spell out the term you want to abbreviate, and follow it with its abbreviation in parentheses.
 - *Example:* Department of Education (Education)
 - Reintroduce abbreviations in report appendixes. Because of the brevity of most appendixes, it is customary to reintroduce abbreviations only once for all appendixes.
 - Consider including a list of abbreviations, and what they stand for, in longer policy reports.
- Punctuation
 - Omit periods and spaces in the acronyms of government agencies, programs, and other organizations (e.g., GAO, DOD, and FDIC).
 - Omit periods in “Washington, DC.”
 - Use periods when abbreviating units of time, measurement, and first and middle names.
 - *Examples:* a.m., lbs., and J. M. Jones (note the space between the first and middle initials).
- Organizations and Programs
 - In titles, headings, and executive summaries, use only familiar acronyms such as IRS and NASA.
 - To make an abbreviation plural, add “s” (e.g., HMOs).
 - Form possessives as you would with a word (e.g., DOD’s status, the HMO’s representative). If the last letter of an abbreviation is “s,” form the possessive by adding an apostrophe and “s” (e.g., HHS’s regulations, not HHS’ regulations).
 - Do not use “the” before an abbreviation (e.g., according to DOD, not according to the DOD).
 - *Exceptions:* abbreviations used as adjectives (e.g., the FAA data) and abbreviations that are generally preceded by “the” in common usage (e.g., the FBI).

- Geographic Terms
 - Spell out “United States” whenever it is used as a noun (e.g., laws of the United States). Use “US” only as an adjective (e.g., US law).
 - Spell out the names of states and territories in text.
 - May use postal abbreviations in tables and figures (e.g., CA or FL).
- Latin Abbreviations
 - Latin abbreviations may be used in parenthetical expressions, but in text, use English terms:
 - “that is” instead of “i.e.”
 - “for example” instead of “e.g.”
 - “and so forth” instead of “etc.”
- People’s Names and Titles
 - Spell out civil and military titles preceding a full name or a surname alone.
 - Senator A. B. Smith; Senator Smith
 - Chief Justice John Marshall; Chief Justice Marshall
 - Secretary of State John Foster Dulles; Secretary Dulles
 - Rear Admiral Jane Doe; Rear Admiral Doe
- Miscellaneous
 - Write out “fiscal year” in text; “FY” may be used in figures and tables as long as the abbreviation is defined in a footnote or legend.
 - Do not abbreviate “miles per hour” in text.
 - In contexts where dollar-based currencies need to be identified, do not use periods: US\$20, C\$30 or Can\$30, NZ\$40, A\$50. Also: 3 million British pounds or £3 million; 150 euros or €150
 - Spell out “company” and “corporation” if they are part of a company’s name (e.g., XYZ Corporation).

ARTICLES

Articles (a, an, the) precede nouns. Choosing the right one can be pretty tricky because article usage depends on the noun itself and its meaning in the sentence. There is a six-step method to for choosing the appropriate article.



Decision tree for choosing the appropriate article. Source: Adapted from Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman, *The Grammar Book: An ESL/ELL Teacher's Course*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1999)

1. Find the noun.
 - A noun is a word used to identify a person, place, or thing (common noun) or to name a one of these (proper noun).
2. Is the noun in this instance common or proper?
 - Common nouns are everyday nouns (e.g., data, memo, program).
 - Proper nouns start with a capital letter and are names or titles (e.g., President Obama, Microsoft, US Congress).
3. Is the noun countable?
 - A countable noun names something that can exist in a discrete, individual unit and be made plural (e.g., officials, laws, landowners).
 - A non-count noun is thought of as a whole and cannot be broken into parts (e.g., education, weather, information).

4. Is the noun singular or plural?
 - Pay attention to collective nouns (like committee) as some collective nouns, depending on context, can be considered either plural or singular.
5. Determine if the noun's meaning is specific (definite) or general (indefinite).
 - This step is one of the most difficult because the noun's intended meaning should dictate specificity, not the noun's definition. For example: "The data analysis we conducted should help us develop both short-term and long-term strategic recommendations. In this sentence, the meaning of "data analysis" is definite because we are talking about the specific data analysis that we conducted. "Data analysis is never easy," on the other hand, refers to data analysis in general, not specifically to our work.
6. If the noun is proper and singular, then decide what the name denotes. Is it a person, place, or company?
 - Singular names of people typically do not use an article (e.g., Dean Kate Baicker).
 - A singular name of a place may use an article, so Google the name to check (e.g., the Willis tower, Merchandise Mart).
 - Singular company or institutional names usually do not require articles (e.g., Apple, Google), though sometimes they do (e.g., the University of Chicago, the Harris School of Public Policy).

LISTS

Some bulleted lists are introduced by a phrase, and the items in the list are also phrases:

- The introductory phrase and the bulleted items together must read as a complete sentence.
- Lowercase the items and separate them with commas (or semi-colons if at least one of the phrases has internal commas).
- Insert "and" or "or" after the penultimate item and place a period after the last item.

- *Example:* The agency could
 - cancel the agreement immediately,
 - extend the agreement past its expiration, or
 - develop a new agreement.

Other bulleted lists are introduced by a complete sentence, and the items are either all phrases or complete sentences. For both kinds, end the sentence introducing the list with a colon.

When the listed items are phrases:

- If the list is composed of phrases, lowercase the phrases and separate them using commas (or semicolons if at least one phrase has internal commas).
- Insert “and” or “or” after the penultimate item and a period after the last item.
- *Example:* Possible actions include the following:
 - maintaining the status quo;
 - amending the scope, methodology, and strategy; or
 - devising a new approach.

When the listed items are complete sentences:

- If the list is composed of complete sentences, treat each sentence as you would in regular text by capitalizing the first word and place a period or question mark at the end.
- *Example:* Possible actions include the following:
 - The bureau could reevaluate its strategy.
 - The task force could devise a new approach.
 - The director could reconfigure the work group.

When the listed items are fronted by numbers instead of bullets, keep in mind the following points:

- If numbered items are used, a period follows the numeral.
- All items—even phrases—begin with a capital letter.
- *Example:* Use three performance measures:
 1. Percentage of the US population.

2. Number of communities taking actions.
3. Potential property losses, disaster, and other costs.

Here are some tips for creating lists:

- With lengthy bulleted items covering a range of topics, consider beginning each item with a topic heading (i.e., a word or brief phrase, set off in italics or bolded type) that helps readers quickly identify the topic.
- Maintain parallel construction for each item in a list. For example, use all gerunds, commands, nouns, or complete sentences for each item in the list. Do not mix and match.

CAPITALIZATION

- General Guidance
 - Capitalize the full and shortened names of administrative, deliberative, judicial, and legislative bodies, as well as departments, bureaus, and offices.
 - Bureau of the Census; Census Bureau
 - Department of State; State Department
 - United Nations Security Council; the Security Council
 - House of Representatives; the House
 - Use lowercase nouns when used in place of the names of governmental bodies.
 - agency
 - committee
 - department
 - office
 - Use lowercase “federal,” “state,” “act,” and other shortened forms of official names.
 - the federal government
 - the act passed in 1996
 - the food program
 - Use lowercase for “presidential” and “administration.”
 - Capitalize people’s titles when the title precedes their name.

- Assistant Director Jane Does
 - Vice President Joe Biden
- Use lowercase when a title is part of a descriptive phrase or preceded by “the.”
 - former president Kennedy
 - the then secretary of state George Shultz
- Use lowercase titles when they follow someone’s name (an appositive) or appear in isolation.
 - Xi Jinping, president of China
 - the secretary of state
 - members of Congress
 - the chief justice of the United States
 - the director
- Capitalize the first word after a colon when it begins a question or when a colon introduces two or more sentences.
 - The study’s findings focused on a single issue: Should the agency be restructured?
- Items in a bulleted list begin with capital letters only if each item is a complete sentence that ends with a period.
- Titles and Headings
 - Lowercase “to” even when used with an infinitive.
 - Lowercase articles (i.e., “a” and “the”), prepositions (even long ones such as “through” and “between”), and coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, or, but, for, so, nor, yet).
 - Capitalize all adjectives, adverbs, nouns, pronouns, subordinating conjunctions (e.g., although, because, that, where, whether, therefore), and verbs.
 - Capitalize the words following a hyphen, except when what comes in front of the hyphen is a prefix that cannot stand alone as a word.
 - Only the first letter in “Anti-intellectual” and “E-commerce” should be capitalized.
 - Both “One” and “Third” would be capitalized in “One-Third of the Agencies Agreed”
- Regional Terms
 - Regional terms are generally capitalized (e.g., Northwest, South, and East), but adjectives and nouns derived from

those terms are usually lowercase (e.g., northwesterner).

Other examples:

- central New York
- the Continent (Europe) but the continental United States
- Great Plains, northern plains, plains
- Northern California, Southern California
- New York State, Washington State
- West Coast, East Coast
- western states, Western world

NUMBERS

- General Guidance
 - Spell out zero through nine.
 - In general, use numbers for 10 and higher.
 - Ordinals follow the same general rule as numbers.
 - words for “first” through “ninth”
 - numerals for “10th” and higher (usually)
- Exceptions
 - Spell out any number that begins a sentence, and try to revise awkward sentences by preceding the number with a word.
 - “Twenty-four hours later . . .”
 - “The year 2020 brought many changes.”
 - Use numerals for all common elements in a series if any element includes a number that is 10 or higher. Treat numbers consistently within the same context (i.e., sentence, paragraph, or section).
 - An average of **32 children** in five schools lived in two different counties. Of these children, **5** did not live near a bus route.
 - Use numerals for parts of a publication:
 - figure 7, table 4
 - footnote 3, volume 6
 - page 2, section 9
 - Use may use numerals before units of measure (area, distance, length, mass, percentages, pressure, temperature,

time, and volume). It is also acceptable to use numerals for for time and ages—no matter how small.

- Other examples

2 years old, a 1-year-old	3 hours 2 minutes
a 3-year-old treaty	10:00 a.m.
4 miles, second mile	6 months, 2 years
8-mile radius, 7 acres	3 fiscal years
5-foot-wide entrance	the 1990s
3 feet 5-1/4 inches tall	30-day period
80 cents, \$12.50, \$100	four decades
\$1 million	in any one year
1 percent, 0.2 percent	5 degrees Celsius
4 gallons, 30 psi	6 watts, 8 volts

- Fractions

- Follow the same general rule as with numbers.
 - Use numerals for 1/10 and smaller fractions (e.g., 3/20 of an inch), but spell out larger fractions (e.g., one-half, three-quarters).
- Spelled-out fractions are hyphenated both as nouns and adjectives:
 - two-thirds of the class
 - a two-thirds majority
 - Use numerals for any number that includes a decimal and place a zero before decimal fractions smaller than one (e.g., 1.3 and 0.02).
- Use the same measure throughout a passage. For example, do not use “one-quarter of the children and 50 percent of the adults.”

- Punctuation

- When a month and date appear before a year, the year is preceded and followed by a comma, but when no date appears between the month and year, no comma is needed.
 - The January 12, 2011, letter said that . . .
 - The January 2011 letter said that . . .
- When a number is the first element of a modifier, hyphenate the compound:
 - 7-inch square
 - four-engine plane

- Dollar figures and percentages are not hyphenated when used as modifiers:
 - the \$5 million request
 - a 5 percent increase
- Hyphenate numbers appearing before the word “ratio”:
 - a 10-to-1 ration
 - a ratio of 10 to 1
- Place a space after the first hyphen in a dimension used as a modifier:
 - an 11- by 17-inch sheet of paper
- Omit the apostrophe when writing decades (e.g., 1990s).
- Other examples:
 - 1 month’s pay
 - 2-1/2 times
 - 2 hours’ work
 - 40-plus people
 - uranium-235
- Ranges
 - When “from” precedes the first item in a range, follow it with “to” or “through,” as appropriate.
 - Negotiations were held from 2002 to 2010 [i.e., for at least part of 2002 and 2010].
 - Negotiations were held from March 15 through June.
 - When “between” precedes the first item in a range, separate the items with “and.”
 - The meeting was held between noon and 4 p.m. *Note:* “Between” indicates an interval (e.g., of time or space) or separation. It is often not the clearest choice when expressing a range of years; instead, “from . . . to/through” is more precise.

PUNCTUATION

Apostrophe

- General Guidance
 - Form the possessive of most singular words and acronyms by adding an apostrophe and “s.”

- witness's
- HHS's
- Arkansas's
- Director Burns's
- secretary-treasurer's
- *Exception: Marine Corps'*
- Form the possessive of almost all plural nouns by adding an apostrophe only.
 - the presidents'
 - First and Sixth Divisions'
 - the taxpayers'
- Joint versus separate possession
 - If elements in a series are considered a single unit or encompass joint "ownership," the possessive falls on the last element.
 - Minneapolis and St. Paul's transportation system
 - If the elements' ownership is separate, make each element possessive.
 - New York's and Chicago's transportation systems
- When *not* to use an apostrophe
 - Do not use an apostrophe to form
 - the plural of spelled-out numbers (e.g., twos and threes)
 - or
 - the plural of acronyms (e.g., five HMOs).

Brackets

- Bracket any clarifying words you add to a quotation.
 - "Despite [the panel's] report, the agency still supports the program."

Colon

- Use a colon to introduce statements, questions, or explanatory material. If a question follows a colon, begin the sentence with a capital letter. When an incomplete sentence follows a colon, lowercase the first word unless it normally would be capitalized.
 - Only one question was discussed: What policy should be adopted?

- The board consists of three officials: a chair, vice chair, and a recorder.
- Use a colon to introduce a bulleted list. The introductory statement must be a complete sentence.
 - We recommend that the commissioner of the IRS do the following things:
 - Evaluate the act's provisions.
 - Monitor taxpayer compliance.
 - Inform Congress of actions taken.

Comma

- Use commas to separate three or more items in a series, including the last word before “and.” However, if a series contains internal punctuation, separate the major items with a semicolon.
 - The report went to the senator, EPA, and state committees.
 - Unsafe conditions included leaking oil; deteriorated, damaged, or missing railings; and improperly stored chemicals.
- Set off introductory phrases, parenthetical expressions, and dependent clauses with a comma.
 - According to the officials, the agency has certified few inspectors.
 - The database, the secretary reported, will be validated by June.
 - After the hard drive crashed, the data were retrieved from the file server.
- If a subject has two predicates, a comma is usually not needed between the predicates.
 - FAA has few inspectors but plans to roll out a new training program.
- Enclose a state with commas when it follows a city. *Note:* The state may be omitted for major cities.
 - The task force inspected the Rockville, Maryland, branch but not the Boston headquarters.
- When an exclamation point or a question mark appears at the end of a quotation where a comma would typically appear, omit the comma.
 - “Why is the program ineffective?” the official asked.

- The title of a work that ends in an exclamation point or a question mark should be followed by a comma if the grammar of the sentence would typically call for one.
 - The Beatle’s most popular albums—*A Hard Day’s Night*, *Help!*, and *Yellow Submarine*—continue to sell well.

Dash

- Use *em dashes* to indicate sudden changes in tone, a thought interrupting a sentence, or to set off a series.
 - To emphasize a contradiction between ideas:
 - He said—no one contradicted him—that the battle was lost.
 - To insert parenthetical commentary while emphasizing its importance (parentheses tend to diminish the importance of what’s enclosed in them):
 - We visited the three DOE sites—Hanford, Savannah, and Idaho National Laboratory—that store spent nuclear fuel.
 - To connect ideas to each other:
 - To feed, clothe, and find shelter for the needy—these are real achievements.

Ellipsis

- An ellipsis is used to indicate an omission in quoted material.
- Technical matters:
 - Place a space between all ellipsis periods.
 - In a three-period ellipsis—indicating material has been omitted from the middle of a sentence—also place a space on either side of the end periods.
 - When the last part of a quoted sentence is omitted, use four periods.
 - Ellipsis periods are not used before the first word of a partial quotation.
 - When formatted, ellipsis periods should always appear on the same line.

- Examples:
 - “DOD officials denied the investigators access . . . for several reasons.”
 - “DOD officials denied the investigators access. . . . Later, after videotapes were released, the officials apologized.”
 - DOD officials said the videotapes “did not include footage from the participants’ discussion.”

Exclamation Point

- Generally avoid using the exclamation point unless you are quoting material that contains one.

Parentheses

- Use parentheses to set off expressions from surrounding material. Note the placement of the period in the following examples.
 - The increase amounted to \$2.5 billion over 5 years (as shown in table 4).
 - The increase amounted to \$2.5 billion over 5 years. (Table 4 shows the program’s annual expenditures.)
- Use a pair of parentheses to enclose numerals designating items in a list.
 - The task force (1) approved the work plan, (2) began collecting data, and (3) organized committees to validate the data.

Period

- Do not use periods with acronyms (generally). Abbreviations with uppercase and lowercase letters require them:
 - Lt. Gen.
 - Brig. Gen.
 - Dr.
 - Ms.
 - Jr.
 - Pub. K. No.
- For people’s initials, place a space after each period (e.g., I. M. Johnson).

Quotation Marks

- Do not use quotation marks to enclose any matter preceded by “so-called.”
 - The workers’ attendance was recorded in the so-called captain’s log.
- Place punctuation inside or outside quotation marks as follows:
 - Commas and periods go inside closing quotation marks.
 - Colons and semicolons follow closing quotation marks.
 - Other punctuation marks are placed inside quotation marks only if they are a part of the quoted matter.
 - We asked, “What are the program’s biggest challenges?”
But: Why call it a “gentlemen’s agreement”?

Quotations

- A long quotation running multiple lines is indented from the left margin and a line space is placed above and below the quoted text. A quotation set off this way is not enclosed in quotation marks. To show author-added emphasis, such as italics, use brackets.
 - Postal Service officials made the following comment:
When we build or leave new facilities, we install the appropriate level of security technology, such as *electronic access controls* and *closed-circuit camera systems* [emphasis added], based on the requirement specified in our physical security regulations.
- For quotes that include more than one paragraph, indent the first line of the second paragraph and any others.
 - Postal Service officials made the following comment:
When we build or lease new facilities, we install the appropriate level of security technology, such as electronic access controls and closed-circuit camera systems, based on the mandatory requirements specified in our physical security regulations.
For existing facilities, we work with local managers to prioritize their security needs and develop cost-effective solutions to increase compliance with security requirements.

Semicolon

- Use a semicolon to join two thoughts that could otherwise stand as separate sentences but that are closely linked.
 - The computer engineering firm violated SBA's regulations; for example, it did not inform SBA of the true equity ownership in the firm.
- Use a semicolon to separate three or more phrases or clauses with internal punctuation.
 - If you want your writing to be worthwhile, give it unity; if you want it to be easy to read, give it coherence; and if you want it to be interesting, give it emphasis.
- Do not use semicolons to separate numbered items that contain no internal punctuation.
 - Information can be arranged by (1) time sequence, (2) order of importance, or (3) subject classification.
- Use a semicolon to separate closely related statements.
 - War is destructive; peace, constructive.

SPELLING

Plurals irregular or unusual

- appendix; appendixes
- basis; bases
- criterion; criteria
- curriculum; curricula
- datum; data (e.g., "The data were correctly analyzed.")
- formula; formulas
- memorandum; memorandums
- minutia; minutiae
- money; moneys
- parenthesis; parentheses
- phenomenon; phenomena
- stimulus; stimuli
- synopsis; synopses

Compounds

- Prefixes
 - Nearly all compounds formed with the following prefixes are written as one word.
 - anti-, counter-, infra-, mid-, multi-, non-, over-, post-, pre-, re-, semi-, sub-, trans-, and under-
 - Some exceptions include
 - capitalized words or numerals (e.g., trans-Canada, mid-1998);
 - compounds containing more than one hyphenated word (e.g., non-interest-bearing bond); and
 - compounds with repeated vowels (e.g., anti-inflammatory).

- Commonly Used Compounds

African American	over-the-counter drugs
Chinese American	policy maker
cross section	policy making (n.)
cross-country	policy-making (adj.)
crosscutting	rule making (n.)
cost-effective	rule-making (adj.)
cost-effectiveness	self-determination
data-processing (adj.)	self-reported
decision maker	short-term CD
decision-making (n.)	sole-source procurement
decision-making (adj.)	soon-to-be-released
drawdown (n.)	staff member
draw down (v.)	tax-exempt investment
high-priority (adj.)	well-funded program
high-quality (adj.)	work flow
high-risk (adj.)	work hour
long-standing (adj.)	workday
long-term (adj.)	workforce
online (adj.)	workload
off-line (adj.)	workpapers
off-site (adj.)	workplace
on-site (adj.)	worksheet
out-of-date data	X-ray

- Compound Verbs

- Write compound verbs ending in a preposition as two words. When they are used as nouns or adjectives, typically they are written as one word or hyphenated.

- They were going to lay off 5,000 employees.
- The layoff affected mostly corporate staff.

VERB	NOUN OR ADJECTIVE
back up	backup
break down	breakdown
build up	buildup
check up	checkup
follow up	follow-up
hand out	handout
run off	runoff
start up	start-up
trade off	trade-off

- Plural Forms

- In forming plurals of compound terms that are hyphenated or written as two or more words, make the significant words plural.

- Where the significant word is first:

- ambassadors at large
- attorneys at law
- brothers-in-law
- commanders in chief
- courts-martial
- notaries public
- rights-of-way

- Where the significant word is in the middle:

- assistant attorneys general
- assistant chiefs of staff
- deputy chiefs of staff

- Where the significant word is last:

- assistant attorneys
- assistant commissioners
- assistant secretaries
- deputy sheriffs

- If no word is significant in itself, make the last word plural:
 - hand-me-downs
- Adjectival Compounds
 - Compound adjectives that are hyphenated when they precede a noun, as with color compounds, usually remain open when they follow the noun.

HYPHENATED	OPEN
emerald-green tie	The tie is emerald green
snow-white dress	The clouds are snow white
black-and-white print	The truth isn't black and white
XYZ is a well-managed agency	The agency is well managed
- Computer and Internet Terms

cyberspace	online
database	personal computer; PC
debug	random access memory (RAM)
desktop	read-only memory (ROM)
disk: hard disk, floppy disk	web
download (n. and v.)	webcast
email (n. and v.)	web page
handheld	website
home page	worksheet
hypertext	workstation
internet; the net	World Wide Web
intranet	write-only
keystroke	write-protected
laptop	
off-line	

VERBS

Subject-verb agreement is a rule of writing and speaking where the subject and verb of a sentence agree in number. A *singular subject* (Emily/she) takes a *singular verb* (is). A *plural subject* (they/we) uses a *plural verb* (are). Put simply: once you find the subject, make the verb agree.

Eight rules of subject-verb agreement

1. **Indefinite Pronouns.** Indefinite pronouns—everyone, each one, someone, somebody, no one, anyone, anybody, nobody—use a singular verb.

*Everyone **is** happy about having fewer problems sets.*

2. **Here, There.** When starting a sentence using “here” or “there,” the *subject* comes after the *verb*.

*There **are** so many assignments this week.*

*Here **is** the final paper.*

3. **Units of Measurement.** When discussing distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc. use a singular verb.

*26.2 miles **is** the length of a marathon.*

But when a percentage or a part of the whole is used, the verb becomes plural.

*20 out of 100 students **are** going to get an A.*

4. **Either/Or, Neither/Nor, Or.** When the subjects differ in numbers, the noun closest to the verb dictates if it is singular or plural.

*Neither I nor my friends **are** going anywhere for winter break.*

*Either the dogs or the cat **has** ripped the couch.*

In a compound subject joined by “or,” the number of the noun after “or” determines whether the verb is singular or plural.

*Emily or Dan **is** able to drive the car.*

*Emily and Dan **are** able to drive the car.*

5. **Few, Many, Several, Both, All, Some.** When these determiners are used with a countable noun, the verb is plural.

*Few people **are** turning in the assignment late.*

When they are used with a non-count noun, the verb is singular.

*Some sand **is** missing from the pile.*

6. **Each, Every, No.** If “each,” “every,” or “no” is before the subject, the verb will be singular.

*Every table and chair **has** to be put back in the right formation.
No student **is** allowed to skip a final exam.
Each person **is** required to sign in.*

7. **Collective Nouns.** For collective nouns, such as “population,” “audience,” “family,” and “group,” subject-verb agreement can be tricky because it depends on the writer’s intent.

*The group [as a unit] **was** late to the field trip*

*The group [of individuals] **are** late to the field trip.*

8. **Subject and Verb Separated by a Phrase.** When the subject and verb are separated by a phrase (as well as, along with, besides, not, etc.), the verb should always agree with the subject, even if the phrase contains a noun whose number does not match the subject’s.

*Mayor Pete, along with staffers, **is** coming to speak at the Harris School.*

*Politicians (along with an aide) **are** coming to visit the Harris School.*

Using the correct verb tense

English verb tenses are sometimes difficult to get right. The verb tense you use should remain consistent, throughout sentences, throughout paragraphs, and throughout the entire body of whatever you are writing—unless you have a good reason to change it. For example:

- **Incorrect:** When my roommate **goes** to the store, she **bought** a treat for everyone. *Goes* is in the present tense and *bought* is in the past tense, and there is no good reason to change the tense in the sentence.
- **Correct Option 1:** When my roommate **goes** to the store, she **buys** a treat for everyone. (Both verbs are in the present tense.)
- **Correct Option 2:** When my roommate **went** to the store, she **bought** a treat for everyone. (Both verbs are in the present tense.)

Here's a quick overview of the different tenses in English and how to use them correctly.

- **Present tense** indicates that an action is taking place at the time you express it or that an action occurs regularly.
 - We **study** for exams at the library.
- **Past tense** indicates that an action is completed and has already taken place.
 - My family **moved** to Chicago in 2015.
 - During the whole quarter, he **wondered** how learning analytical politics would help his career in the future.
- **Future tense** indicates that an action will or is likely to take place.
 - Later today I **will work** on my programming assignment.
- **Present perfect tense** indicates that an action is taking place at the time you express it or that an action occurs regularly.
 - I **have spoken** with my academic advisor about my course selection.
 - She **has donated** extensively to the University of Chicago [an action that began in the past and extends into the present].
- **Past perfect tense** indicates an action occurring before a certain time in the past.
 - By the winter of 2018, she **had completed** all the credits required to graduate.
- **Future perfect** indicates that an action will be finished by a certain time.
 - By Thursday, we **will have finished** this problem set.
- **Present progressive tense** indicates that something is happening at the time you express it.
 - Robert **is working** hard, and his teammate **is watching** lazily.
- **Past progressive tense** indicates two kinds of past action.
 - His lecture **was becoming** increasingly boring and difficult [a continuing action in the past].
 - One guy interrupted the professor multiple times today while she **was introducing** the class material [an action occurring at the same time in the past as another action].

- **Future progressive tense** indicates a continuing in the future.
 - The TAs **will be grading** all assignments.
- **Present perfect progressive tense** indicates action continuing from the past into the present and possibly into the future.
 - Students **have been waiting** for their grades for over two weeks.
- **Past perfect progressive tense** indicates that a past action went on until another occurred.
 - Before her promotion, she **had been working** on introducing quiet study space in school.
- **Future perfect progressive tense** indicates that an action will continue until a certain future time.
 - On Tuesday I **will have been working** on this paper for six weeks.

WORD USAGE

Here are some words commonly misused with respect to their meaning:

- **Aggravate** means “to make worse.” It does not mean to “annoy.”
- **Anticipate** means “to prepare for a contingency.” It does not mean just “expect.”
- **Anxious** means “uneasy,” not “eager.”
- **Blackmail** means “to extort by threatening to reveal damaging information.” It does not mean simply “coerce.”
- **Cohort** means “a group who attends something.” It does not mean a single accompanying person.
- **Comprise** means “to include.” It is not synonymous with “constitute.”
- **Continuous** means “without interruption.” It is not synonymous with “continual,” which means an activity continued through time with interruptions.
- **Disinterested** means “neutral.” It does not mean “uninterested.”
- **Enormity** has the meaning of something “hugely bad.” It does not refer to large size neutrally.
- **Fortuitous** means “by chance.” It does not mean “fortunate.”

- **Fulsome** means “sickeningly excessive.” It does not mean just “much.”
- **Notorious** means “known for bad behavior.” It does not mean “famous.”

Check to see that you use the following words in the right context.

Admission, admittance

- “Admission” implies enrollment or access to rights or privileges.
 - His admission to the society shows his standing.
- “Admittance” is limited to actual physical entrance.
 - He could not gain admittance to the grounds.

Affect, effect

- “Affect” as a verb means to influence. “Effect” as a verb means to bring about or to accomplish. “Effect” as a noun means result or consequence.
 - The bill cannot affect us, although it may effect great change as soon as the law goes into effect.

Among, between

- “Among” indicates a relationship for three or more things or an undetermined multitude (“honor among thieves”).
 - The treaty divided the land among the Navajo, Hopi, and Ute tribes.
 - Poverty is common among those with little education.
- “Between” indicates a one-to-one relationship, usually involving two elements (“between you and me”). However, “between” is also appropriate for more than two objects if multiple one-to-one relationships exist (“trade between members of the European union”).
 - An agreement between the Senate and the House was reached.
 - He could not distinguish between morning, noon, and night.
 - Negotiations between DEA, the FBI, and the CIA are at an impasse.

And, or, and/or

- “And” joins two or more items.
 - I will have cream and sugar in my coffee.
- “Or” indicates an alternative between two items but does not necessarily exclude one from the other.
 - Will you have cream or sugar in your coffee?
 - The weather forecast calls for rain or sleet tomorrow.
- “And/or” is not a term used in standard English. It is a legalism meaning “x or y, or both x and y,” as in:
 - She will go to Paris, Athens, or both.
- Do not use “and/or” unless using a direct quotation that includes the term.

Assure, ensure, insure

- “Assure” implies the removal of doubt from a person’s mind and must have a personal object.
 - To assure the auditors of the facts, I gave them the records.
- “Ensure” indicates the making certain of an outcome and refers to events.
 - Directors ensure that report information is accurate.
- “Insure” means to guarantee against loss by a contingent event.
 - Jane insured the package she mailed.

Based on, on the basis of

- Best uses for “based on”:
 - as a transitive verb: “They based their position on military precedent.”
 - in an adjectival sense: “a sophisticated thriller based on a Mark Twain story.”
- Avoid using it as an adverb: “Rates are adjusted annually based on the 91-day Treasury bill.” Instead, use “Rates are adjusted annually on the basis of the 91-day Treasury bill.”
- Be wary of using “based on” at the beginning of a sentence. If it doesn’t modify the subject, a dangling phrase is the result.
 - *Wrong*: Based on our recommendations, the board voted for the plan. (The board isn’t based on the recommendation.)

- *Better*: The board, following our recommendations, adopted the plan.
- If the subject is not based on something, try “because of,” “from,” “according to,” “in light of,” “given,” or a different construction.
- Instead of “on the basis of,” use the more concise “on,” “by,” “after,” “because of,” or “from,” as appropriate.

Beside, besides

- “Beside” means by the side of.
 - Beside the screen was a knob to control the contrast.
- “Besides” means in addition to.
 - Besides outlining the weaknesses, the report summarizes the strengths.

Both, each

- “Both” means two considered together.
 - Both cost \$10.
- “Each” means any number taken one at a time.
 - Each of them costs \$5.

Compare to, with

- “Compare to” is used when the intent is to liken things that are dissimilar.
 - Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? (Shakespeare)
- “Compare with” is used to compare or contrast.
 - Compare this year’s progress with last year’s.

Comprise, constitute

- The whole comprises the parts.
 - The committee comprises five subcommittees.
- Several parts constitute the whole.
 - Five subcommittees constitute the full committee.
- *Note*: Do not use “is comprised of.” Use “consists of” or “is composed of” instead.
 - The committee consists of (or “is composed of”) five subcommittees.

Continual, continuous

- “Continual” means periodically recurring, with pauses or breaks. “Continuous” means continuing without interruption.
 - The weather forecast was for continual cloudiness with periods of sunshine.
 - Without aspirin, his pain was continuous.

Copyright and trademark

- Instead of trademark names, use generic product descriptions.
 - For example, use “cotton swabs” instead of “Q-tips.”
- Only use a trademark name when it is necessary to refer to a particular product brand. In those instances, the trademark name should be used as an adjective, followed by a general description of the product.
 - “Q-tips[®] cotton swabs”; “Scotchgard[®] fabric protector.”
- Use the symbols only one time in a document unless there is enough distance between the first and subsequent uses. For reports, if a symbol appears on the highlights page and in the report text, use it in both places since the highlights page is intended to be freestanding. If a symbol appears in a footnote first, use the symbol there but also use it on first reference in the text (readers may not have read the footnote).
- Registered trademarks may be found on the websites of the US Patent and Trademark Office and the International Trademark Association.

Different from, than

- Only use “different from.” Do not use “different than.”
 - The program was different from what it was 10 years ago.
 - The respondents in Denver are different from those in Detroit.

Disinterested, uninterested

- “Disinterested” means to be neutral or unbiased. “Uninterested” means to be indifferent, to lack interest in.

- The agency needed disinterested officials to monitor the results.
- I am uninterested in politics.

Due to, because of

- “Due to” is one of the most misused terms in government writing. Do not use “due to” in place of “because of,” “owing to,” “on account of,” “stemming from,” and similar phrases.
 - Grammatically, “due” is an adjective that should be attached only to a noun or pronoun.
 - *Wrong*: The program failed due to insufficient funding. (“Due” does not modify the noun “program.”)
 - *Permissible*: The program’s failure was due to insufficient funding. (“Due” modifies “failure.”)
 - *Better (more active and concise)*: The program failed because of insufficient funding.

E.g., i.e.

- The Latin abbreviation “i.e.” means “that is” and “e.g.” means “for example.”
- In regular text, use the English words, but the Latin abbreviations may be used when they appear inside parentheses or in notes.

Either . . . or, neither . . . nor

- “Either . . . or” and “neither . . . nor” are correlative conjunctions, which means they join two terms that should be parallel in form. In these constructions, the verb should agree with the nearest subject. When plural and singular terms are involved, it is usually smoother to place the plural term second.
 - Either the coach or the players have to go.
- Avoid joining three or more terms with “either/or” and “neither/nor.” Here, for example, simply use “or.”
 - The official planned to visit BLM, DOE, or EPA.

Farther, further, furthermore

- “Farther” expresses physical distance.
 - I can walk no farther.
- “Further” means to a greater degree or extent.
 - Expect no further assistance from me.
- “Furthermore” means in addition or besides and is generally used at the beginning of a sentence.
 - The legislation did not make the mandate clear. Furthermore, the agency did not have enough resources to complete the task.

Fewer, less

- Use “fewer” for people and items you can individually count.
 - Fewer than 100 respondents reported the problem.
 - Fewer accidents were reported.
 - *Note:* If there is only one item, use, for example, “one response fewer.”
- “Less” is used for things not considered discrete items.
 - periods of time (e.g., less than 10 years ago).
 - amounts of money (e.g., less than \$10 million).
 - quantities that must be measured (e.g., less than a teaspoon).
 - percentages (e.g., less than 5 percent of the respondents).
 - extent (e.g., less effort was required).

Hopefully

- “Hopefully” means in a hopeful manner or “with hope” but is frequently misused in the sense of “we hope” or “it is hoped.”
 - *Wrong:* Provisions were enacted to increase the limits on defined contribution plans, a step that hopefully might spur employers to save more.
 - *Right:* Provisions were enacted to increase the limits on defined contribution plans, a step that officials hoped might spur employers to save more.

Imply, infer

- Speakers, writers, or facts imply: they attribute one thing to another.
 - Smoke implies fire.
 - He said the high response rate implied success.
- Readers or listeners infer something: they conclude or surmise.
 - The staff inferred from the memo that the director wanted them to take action.

Percent, percentage

- In text, use a numeral with “percent.” Use the percentage sign (%) only in tables and figures.
- Do not mix fractions and percentages in the same context.
- Distinguish between “percent” as denoting a specific quantity and “percentage” as denoting an unspecified quantity:
 - The program was cut by a large percentage.
- “A 5 percent difference” and “a 5 percentage point difference” do not mean the same thing.
 - A difference that amounts to 5 percent of the total is a “5 percent difference.”
 - The difference between 4 percent and 8 percent is “a 4 percentage point difference.” (Note that “percent” is repeated with each numeral.)

Practical, practicable

- “Practical” applies to persons and things and relates to actual practice or action, rather than theory: knowledgeable as a result of practice, useful, and sensible.
- “Practicable” applies to something that has not yet been worked out or fully tested but that seems feasible and usable or can be put into practice.
 - An official can be practical but not practicable.
 - The election will be announced as soon as practicable.
 - A suggestion can be both practical and practicable.

Principal, principle

- “Principal” is a noun and an adjective that denotes the chief person or thing that has controlling authority or is of primary importance.
- “Principle” is a noun that denotes a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption.
 - The principal member of the board reminded us of the principles of committee conduct.

Quality

- Avoid using “quality” as an adjective. It is best used strictly as a noun.
 - *Avoid:* “XYZ is a quality program.”
 - *Better:* “The program is of high quality.”

Scientific names

- Capitalize genus but lowercase species.
- Both genus and species are italicized: *Ficus bengalensis*, *Pan troglodytes*, *Homo sapiens*.
- However, when the Latin names have been turned into English nouns or adjectives, the names should not be capitalized or italicized:
 - Epidemic strains of pneumococcus are common, but penicillin is effective against most pneumonia organisms.

That, which

- “That” introduces restrictive clauses that cannot be removed from a sentence without destroying its meaning.
 - Ships that are unseaworthy should be scrapped.
- “Which” introduces nonrestrictive clauses, which are set off by commas, to show that the clauses can be lifted from a sentence without destroying its meaning.
 - The agency’s policy, which expired in June 2011, may be renewed.

- *Common mistakes with which and that:*
 - The year which our daughter was born was a great year. (wrong; restrictive)
 - The year that our daughter was born was a great year. (correct)
 - This book, that was written last November, is a great read. (wrong; unrestrictive)
 - This book, which was written last November, is a great read. (correct)
 - Any book which gets him reading is worth having. (wrong; restrictive)
 - Any book that gets him reading is worth having. (correct)

Then, than

- Use “then” when you’re talking about something that has to do with sequence or consequence. For example:
 - I couldn’t answer the phone because I was in class then. (at that time)
 - We got gas and then set off on the road trip. (next in time)
 - First you need to get your master’s degree, and then you can find a job. (in addition; moreover)
 - If the weather is bad, then my flight will get canceled. (in that case; accordingly)
- Use “than” when you’re making a comparison between people, things, etc. For example:
 - Spring quarter is better than winter quarter.
 - She works faster than I do in the Coding Lab.
- *Common mistakes with then and than:*
 - He has less chocolate then I have. (wrong; comparative)
 - He has less chocolate than I have. (correct)
 - I would rather eat then sleep. (wrong; comparative)
 - I would rather eat than sleep. (correct)
 - I would prefer to eat sooner rather then later. (wrong; comparative)
 - I would prefer to eat sooner rather than later. (correct)

This

- For clarity, give “this” a noun for a partner.
 - *Draft*: This complies with GAO regulations.
 - *Revision*: This project complies with GAO regulations.

Toward, towards

- “Toward” is favored in the United States
- “Towards” is favored in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Under way, underway

- The adverb “under way” is two words.
 - The project is under way
- “Underway,” an adjective, is rare and usually awkward: “an under-way refueling.”

Via

- “Via” means “by way of,” not “by means of.”
 - *Right*: Flying to Paris via London.
 - *Wrong*: Sent via email.

Vis-à-vis

- “Vis-à-vis” is usually best avoided. The term means “face to face” or “in relation to,” but it is often misused to mean “concerning.”
 - *Right*: Figures should be checked for appropriateness vis-à-vis the text.
 - *Wrong*: The case demonstrates the court’s attitude vis-à-vis age discrimination in employee benefit plans.

Who, whom, that

- Use “who” in reference to persons and “that” in reference to things.
 - Who returned the questionnaire?
 - We contacted the two agencies that did not respond to the survey.

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- When a person is the subject of a sentence or clause, use “who.”
 - The official who provided the document did not work for the program.
- When a person is the object of a sentence or clause, use “whom.”
 - Whom did you interview?