

Writing Tips

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1. Abbreviations

1.1 Latin Abbreviations

Latin abbreviations are sprinkled throughout texts we read everyday.

Abbreviation	Latin	English
cf.	confer	compare
e.g.	exempli gratia	for example
et al.	et alii	and others
etc.	et cetera	and so forth, and so on
i.e.	id est	that is
N.B.	nota bene	note well
P.S.	post scriptum	postscript

N.B. Be careful not to confuse "e.g." with "i.e."

1. Latin abbreviations are appropriate in footnotes, bibliographies, and informal writing (**e.g.**, in parentheses).
2. In formal writing, use the English equivalent of the abbreviation.
3. Many communication tools can be used to promote the launch of a new store, **for example**, flyers, press releases, radio announcements, **and so on**.
4. Because these Latin abbreviations are commonplace in the English language, it is not necessary to italicize them.

2 Numbers

2.1 Expressing Numbers

1. Spell out the whole numbers one through nine. Write other numbers using digits. (In humanistic works, you may choose to spell out all whole numbers less than 100.) Treat ordinals in the same way as cardinal numbers.
 - I met seven people.
 - John met 14 people.
 - I was the eighth person.
 - John was the 15th person.
2. Always spell out numbers at the start of a sentence. Reword sentences to avoid spelling out large numbers.
 - Incorrect: 16 cars were parked on the street.

- Correct: Sixteen cars were parked on the street.
- Incorrect: 2134 children attended the school last year.
- Incorrect: Two thousand one hundred thirty four children attended that school last year.
- Correct: Last year, 2134 children attended that school.

3. Spell out round numbers and approximations.

- The tree is about sixteen feet tall.
- I have told you a thousand times not to do that.
- The car is worth less than six thousand dollars.

4. Round numbers and approximations greater than one million may be expressed with a combination of words and digits. Exact figures should be expressed using digits.

- The city was home to 3 million inhabitants.
- The city was home to 3 256 092 inhabitants.

5. Use digits for numbers used as nouns, exact measurements, decimal fractions, and percentages.

- Multiply the result by 5.
- The screws are 4 inches long.
- The best price for 4.5 m is \$23.50.
- The sales tax was raised to 9%.

6. The International System of units (SI units), commonly known as the metric system, requires that digits be used with abbreviated units, and spelled-out numbers are used with spelled-out units.

- Incorrect: The road was 2 kilometers long.
- Correct: The road was 2 km long.
- Correct: The road was approximately two kilometers long.

7. Related numbers should be expressed consistently.
 - Incorrect: He worked 40 hours the first week, and only seven the second week.
 - Correct: He worked forty hours the first week, and only seven the second week.
 - Correct: He worked 40 hours the first week, and only 7 the second week.

8. When two numbers are adjacent, spell out one of them. Usually, the one with fewer letters is spelled out.
 - The couple had their choice of two 3-bedroom apartments.
 - Another couple had to decide between 3 two-bedroom apartments.

3 Punctuation

3.1 Double vs. Single Quotation Marks

1. Double and single quotation marks are sprinkled throughout the texts we read every day. More often than not, however, the use of single quotation marks gives people trouble.
2. In Canadian and American style, use double quotation marks to
 - Enclose direct quotes.

Example: "Concern for the fate of Chinese characters extends well beyond the interest of artists alone," writes Tracy Pomerinke.
 - Enclose titles of newspaper and magazine articles, poems, short stories, songs, episodes of television and radio programs, and chapters or subdivisions of books.

Example: "Does Globalization Spell Trouble for Technical Writers?" is the latest Business Word article by Peter Zvalo.
 - Set off words used as words, words used ironically or as slang, words that are particularly significant, and words that may be unfamiliar to the reader.

Note: Italics may also be used to set off words in these cases.

Example: The words "effect" and "affect" are often confused.

3. Many people often incorrectly use single quotation marks in the last example. In Canadian and American style, use single quotation marks to

- Enclose a quotation within a quotation.

"I was leaving the store when I heard someone yell 'Nobody move!'"
explained Carla.

4. In the case of further quotations within quotations, alternate with double and single quotation marks. British practice is usually the reverse: single quotation marks are used first and double quotations marks are used second. With the exception of a few publishers, this style is no longer popular in Canada

3.2 Series Commas

1. Many writers are not aware that full punctuation for a simple series (three or more elements) includes commas after every element in the series, including the last. That is:

... First, second, and last, ...

2. The comma preceding the conjunction is considered dispensable by many authorities. NIVA house style always retains the second comma, because we believe that its value as a signal to the reader outweighs the tiny typesetting gain from its omission.
3. On the other hand, the final comma is dispensable in most cases, being retained only where its use injects additional clarity into a text. The final comma is also the only comma typically used in a simple series of two.
4. Some Examples of Good Series Punctuation

- a. Use no commas in a simple series of two:

- We ate apples and pears.
- We ate apples and drank iced tea.

- b. Use full commas in a simple series of three or more:

- We ate apples, pears, and grapes.

- c. Apply the same rules to embedded series:
- We ate apples, Bosc pears and Bartlett pears, and grapes.
- d. When the sentence continues beyond the end of the series, the reader will appreciate the visual clue provided by a final comma:
- We ate apples and pears, and tossed the cores to the squirrels.
- e. But, the usefulness of a final comma may be overridden by more pressing grammatical demands (in this case, a restrictive clause):
- We watched the ducks paddling on the lake and ate apples, pears, and grapes that we had bought at the local market.
- f. A two-element series consisting of two lengthy independent clauses sometimes requires a separating comma:
- We ate apples, pears, and grapes that we had bought at the local market, and we drank iced tea that Ann had prepared that morning.
- g. Shorter two-element series do not need punctuation:
- We ate and we drank our fill.
- h. The conjunctions but, while, and yet represent a break in thought that may require a preceding comma even in a simple series of two:
- We sat in the shade, but got sunburned anyway.

3.3 Placement of Punctuation and Quotation Marks

1. In a technical or legal work, where accuracy is essential, we recommend the British practice of placing periods and commas within quotation marks only when they are part of the quoted material.
2. A direct quotation is set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. Do not use a period to end a sentence quoted within another sentence.
 - Bill said, "I just got back from my trip, and I had a good time."
 - "I just got back from my trip, and I had a good time," said Bill.
 - "I just got back from my trip," said Bill, "and I had a good time."

3. In the British and technical style, it is clear that we do not quote the entire sentence.
 - British: Bill said, 'I just got back'.
4. The comma is used and the quote is capitalized even when the quotation marks are absent.
 - Alice thought, Will I see him again?
5. A comma is also used after a dash to set off a quotation from the rest of the sentence.
 - "I don't think that she—," he began to say.
6. If the quotation is used as a part of speech (subject, predicate nominative, restrictive appositive, etc.) it is not set off by commas.
 - "In a minute" was his standard reply.
 - Ellen was reminded of the saying "To each his own."
7. If single quotation marks are used to signify a special term, the period is placed outside the quotation marks.
 - Doug was not familiar with the word 'apposition'.
8. When a statement ends in a quotation that is an exclamation or question, a question mark or exclamation mark is placed inside the quotation marks, and a period is not used. When a question or exclamation includes a quoted question or exclamation, the punctuation of the quotation is dropped, and the appropriate punctuation for the sentence appears outside of the quotation marks.
 - He asked, "Will you be leaving soon?"
 - He shouted, "Never!"
 - Did he say "I am late"?
 - I can't believe he whispered "I am afraid"!
 - Did he ask "Will you be leaving soon"?
 - Did he shout "Never"?
 - I can't believe he asked "Will you be leaving soon"!

9. A colon or semicolon is always placed outside quotation marks. When the enclosed material ends in a colon, the colon is omitted.
 - Three themes can be found in "Morgan's Dilemma": hope, courage, and heroism

3.4 Punctuating Lists and Enumerations

When deciding how to punctuate lists and enumerations, apply these rules:

1. Punctuate each list on its own merits, not according to some arbitrary scheme decided in advance for all lists in a particular publication.
2. Always use "natural" punctuation, that is, the same punctuation that would be applied were the list to be run into the body of the text.
3. Because some aspects of punctuation are a matter of editorial preference, the same list could possibly be punctuated differently by different persons. Therefore, all decisions on stylistic preferences for one publication (or publication series) should be made by the same person.
4. Punctuating List Items - With one exception, each item in a list should be punctuated by a comma, a semi-colon, or a period, depending on the "natural" flow of the items.
5. Use commas and semi-colons when the list items, as a group, complete the sentence begun by the lead-in. That is, use the same punctuation that you would use if the list were a run-in sentence. Use commas when the individual list items are simple and contain little or no internal punctuation. Use semi-colons when one or more of the list items is complex, containing an internal series or several phrases that also require commas or stronger punctuation marks.

4 Word Usage

4.1 Affect Vs. Effect

1. Affect and effect are two words that are commonly confused.
2. "Affect" is usually a verb meaning "to influence".

Example: The drug did not affect the disease.

3. "Effect" is usually a noun meaning "result".

Example: The drug has many adverse side effects.

4. "Effect" can also be used as a verb meaning "to bring about".

Example: The present government effected many positive changes.

4.2 Misplaced Limiting Modifiers

1. Limiting modifiers, such as only, even, almost, nearly, hardly, merely, scarcely, simply, and just are frequently misplaced. Often, the misplacement suggests a meaning the writer did not intend.

For example:

Nancy almost ate the whole pizza by herself.

Manfred has nearly insulted all his co-workers.

In the first example, the placement of almost suggests that Nancy meant to eat but did not. In the second example, the placement of nearly suggests that Manfred meant to insult all his co-workers, but did not.

4.3 The Word "Not"

1. Some technical writers, when faced with the necessity of presenting an idea that involves negation, simply insert the adverb "not" into a positive sentence. Inserting a "not" is the least graceful method of expressing negation and should only be used as a last resort.
2. "Not" is an enemy of clear expression. A small word, it can easily be overlooked by a hasty reader, with more or less disastrous consequences. Sometimes, a careless writer will add a "not" to a sentence that expressed negation to begin with, producing a subtle double negative, an error not strictly of grammar, but of readability. For example: The command didn't fail.
3. The English language contains a vast repertoire of words that express absence, lack, or negation directly, so that "not" need only be used when a direct, graceful alternative is unavailable [as opposed to "not available"]. Here are some other examples:

For: The accounting software does not perform consolidation unless there is evidence that

Prefer: The accounting software performs consolidation only on evidence that

For: This warning does not apply to all sections in the division.

Prefer: This warning applies only to selected sections in the division.

For: If the client doesn't respond to the server when

Prefer: If the client fails to respond to the server when

For: A product that does not have supporting documentation is

Prefer: A product that lacks supporting documentation is

For: You shouldn't include the Cancel button in this dialog.

Prefer: You should omit the Cancel button from this dialog.

For: To start the software and not display the logo,

Prefer: To start the software, bypassing the logo,

For: It is not advisable to edit the options in the .INI file.

Prefer: Editing the options in the .INI file is inadvisable.

For: That procedure does not relate to the situation at hand.

Prefer: That procedure is unrelated to the situation at hand.

For: When you don't have any reasonable alternatives, use "not".

Prefer: When you have no reasonable alternatives, use "not".

Even better: When no reasonable alternatives exist, use "not".

4.4 "Will" and "Shall"

1. The verb will is used to form the simple future. According to traditional British grammatical rules, you should use shall in the first person (singular or plural) to form the simple future, and use will in other persons as shown below.

- I shall find out tomorrow.
- He will find out tomorrow.
- We shall meet next week.
- You will meet next week.

2. Use will in the first person to indicate a choice or intention; use shall in other persons.

- Both are nice, but I will purchase the blue car.
- Both are nice, but she shall purchase the blue car.

3. **Points to remember**

If you change person when reporting a sentence, do not change from will to shall or from shall to will.

- He told me that I will fail. (He told me, "You will fail.")
- He said that he shall fail. (He said, "I shall fail.")
- Use shall in any person to indicate a command or duty.
- You shall respect your elders.

4.5 "Whether or Not"

1. The pertinent article acknowledges that "whether or not" can be a legitimate contraction of "whether it will or will not". Nevertheless, you should avoid the construction, as it is less often used than abused. There are three scenarios to consider when avoiding the use of "whether or not".

1. **Where the alternatives are immaterial:**

- Whether or not literature is available on computer, readers are likely to continue to cherish books.
- Prefer: Regardless of whether literature is available on computer, readers are likely to continue to cherish books.

2. **Where a simple alternative exists:**

- What the government decides to do depends on whether or not the bill passes.
- Prefer: What the government decides to do depends on whether the bill passes [fails].(Explicitly state the alternative on which you wish to place the most emphasis.)

3. **Where emphasis on both alternatives is desired:**

- Whether or not Canadians agree, tax revenues must increase.
- Prefer: Whether Canadians agree or [whether] they don't, tax revenues must increase.

4. Avoid at all costs:

- Whether or not you drive or take the bus, the trip will take 30 minutes.
(Clearly wrong, as "or not" cannot apply to the other alternative, which is both positive and explicitly stated.)

4.6 "Whether" Vs. "If"

1. The word "if" is often mistakenly used as a substitute for the word "whether".
2. Use the following rules to guide your word choice:

Use "if" to express a condition.

You may borrow my car if you are careful with it.

Use "whether" to express alternatives.

She did not know whether to say yes or no.

4.7 Corrupted Words

1. Watch for commonly used corruptions of existing words that were perfectly acceptable before writers started meddling with them. Below, the first usage is correct; the second is the "meddled" version:
 - preventive vs. preventative
 - prioritize vs. priorize
 - use vs. utilize
 - dependence vs. dependency

4.8 "Which" Vs. "That"

1. The choice between "that" and "which" is not one of formal versus informal style. "Which" is a non-defining relative pronoun, and "that" is a defining relative pronoun. Use "that" to introduce a clause that identifies the person or thing (e.g., "Each made a list of books that had influenced him"); and use "which" to give a reason or add a new fact (e.g., "I always buy his books, which have influenced me greatly.").
2. When used as a pronoun, "which" must have a clear antecedent. In "We could save a few hours, which would make things easier", there is no antecedent.

The sentence should read: "We could save a few hours; the extra time would make things easier".

4.9 The Word "Both"

1. Some words in the English language appear so innocent as to escape the scrutiny of even the most careful copy editor. The word both is one such word. Despite its virtuous appearance, it can be seen in erroneous constructions such as those described below.
2. Placement with an Awkward Correlate - Both is most often found with its partner (correlate) and. Therefore, one of the easiest errors to spot is the use of both with an awkward correlate, such as as well as.
3. For example:
The peace talks are being sponsored both by Britain as well as by the United States.

In most cases, replacing *as well as* with *and* solves the problem.

The peace talks are being sponsored by both Britain and the United States.

4.10 The Word "Any"

1. Consider these typical examples found in technical writing:
 - If any text is selected when you click <command>, the Format dialog opens.
 - Any file can be printed using the Print dialog.
2. In Sentence 1, the "any" is clearly unnecessary. Something happens when text is selected. That the amount of text is determinate or indeterminate is beside the point. Drop the "any".
3. In Sentence 2, on the other hand, the "any" is clearly vital. Every file, without restriction (as to size, format, etc.), can be printed. Keep the "any"

4.11 The Word "Following"

1. The word following can act either as a noun or as an adjective. When used alone, it presumably is acting as a noun. In many cases where following

appears alone, however, the writer clearly means to use the word adjectivally.

For example:

- a. Your vacation package includes the following:
 - Transportation to the island,
 - Six nights' accommodation,
 - Six breakfasts,
 - Five dinners, and
 - One complimentary cocktail.
- b. The following are the items that were found in her purse:
 - Gilded compact
 - Two dollars in loose change
 - Theatre ticket stub

5 Writing Styles

5.1 Respect Your Audience

1. A writer who wants to lead an audience towards a conclusion must refrain from clipping on a leash and pulling too hard. Being human, the audience is likely to resist being told what to think unless already perfectly in tune with the writer's thinking ... and how often does that happen?
2. A writer who is very close to a subject being written about may fail to notice that the facts presented are open to alternative interpretations. If the writer's interpretation is presented as the only logical or only possible view, readers whose interpretations differ—possibly a considerable majority of the audience—could be irritated, or offended, or worse. As Sherlock Holmes said, in *A Study in Scarlet*, "I ought to know by this time that when a fact appears opposed to a long train of deductions it invariably proves to be capable of bearing some other interpretation."

5.2 Active versus Passive Voice

1. Technical and business writing courses today place much emphasis on teaching participants to avoid the passive voice. Experts often mention overuse of passive constructions as the cardinal sin committed by certain writers of computer user manuals, administrative policies, and committee reports, among other texts. All of this carping has led to a welcome increase in active, vigorous writing. On the other hand, it has also led to near phobia of passive voice in less experienced writers.

2. Like any other tool in the English language, passive voice has its uses. It is most effective for minimizing the role of the person performing an action, or for leaving out the actor altogether, when the action, and not the individual's identity, is the crucial point.
3. Still, "avoid the passive voice" seems to have been translated into "write in the active voice at all costs", with its own pitfalls. Here are some thoughts about two common situations that can arise from phobia of passive constructions.

5.3 Ambiguity

Ambiguity arises in four main ways:

- a. Incorrect placement of a word or phrase,
e.g., "I only lent him a copy of that report" could mean "I gave him a copy, not the original," or "I didn't mean for him to keep it."
- b. Confusion of pronouns and their antecedents,
e.g., "The editor said that she failed the test." Who is "she"?
- c. Use of a word that has two possible interpretations,
e.g., "Much conversation was going on about him" could mean "around" him or "concerning" him.
- d. Incorrect punctuation,
e.g., "Several NIVA employees, including the woman who spoke, the bookkeeper, and the typist, went to the meeting." Is the woman who spoke a bookkeeper? Or did the bookkeeper and the typist accompany the woman who spoke?

5.4 Using the Correct Tense

1. In technical documents, writers must focus on the "here and now" of the material. Keeping most verbs in the present tense is one way to accomplish this goal.
2. When events succeed each other in time, it seems natural to shift verbs from past to present or from present to future to demonstrate the sequence:

Click **OK**.

Mega Merge will compile the form letters using the text file and the address file that you specified.

3. As most computer users (and technical writers) know, there's no "will" about it; the computer immediately begins to hum away at its assigned task. Notice, though, that earlier actions in the procedure are always placed in the past ("you specified").
4. A reader of procedural material is working in "real time". To avoid implying that the machine's response to a user action is less than instantaneous, write all instructions and responses in the present tense:

Click **OK**.

Mega Merge compiles the form letters using the text file and the address file that you specified.

5. A significant passage of time between the user action and the result of the computer response is not a justification for a shift into the future tense. That is, even if it takes 15 or 20 seconds for the form letters to be compiled (significant for a computer operation!), the wording of the procedure should stay the same. You may want to describe the delay to the user. Try to be reasonably precise:

Click **OK**.

Mega Merge compiles the form letters using the text file and the address file that you specified. The compile process may take up to 30 seconds, depending on the number of letters.