

# How to Write and/or How Not to Write

By David McHam

In writing, bad habits are easy to form. Good habits are difficult to identify and hard to follow. Embrace good habits. Eschew bad habits. If we only knew the difference....

The items in this list are arranged randomly. Some of the items I feel most strongly about are near the beginning. This can be misleading, however. I feel strongly about everything in the list.

1. Never, never, never -- that is, don't ever -- begin sentences with *there* and *it*.

2. Use *that* with dependent clauses and *which* with constructions in which (in which is an exception, of course) commas are used. Leave the *that* out when you can.

3. Use *said* as the verb of attribution.

4. Set every story in time and place and use verb tenses that conform to that setting. This means that most stories will be in past tense -- including attribution.

5. Don't clutter up attribution with ... anything. Keep attribution simple. Don't say "... *said the 29-year-old mother of two who has red hair and drives a 1996 Toyota pickup truck with a bumper sticker that says 'Support Your Local Police' and was born in Wink.*"

6. Stay away from elegant variation in all forms. Don't use synonyms for a person's name on second and subsequent references: the coach, the minister, the 21-year-old, the eight-year-veteran, etc, etc, etc.

7. A group, team or whatever is singular. A group of students is singular. The prepositional phrase (of students) does not affect agreement

8. Each is singular. Each of us is going. Neither is singular: Neither of us is going. None can be singular or plural depending....

9. Use the apostrophe carefully: Parents' Weekend, Reader's Digest, New Year's Day.... The Smiths' cat... The Jones' cat...

10. It's *it's* and *its*. And *who's* and *whose*.

11. The shorter version of dates is '60s, or '68. No apostrophe is necessary in ages: He's in his 60s.

12. Master the hyphen. When two words work in unison to modify a noun they are often hyphenated: five-year plan, part-time job....

13. But sometimes they are not -- hyphenated, that is. It's Sunday school teacher or state high school debate champion. But, it's a man-eating shark (unless, of course, it is a man eating shark).

14. ly words aren't hyphenated: slightly elevated driveway.

15. A wonderful construction involves the suspensive hyphen: The 6- and 7-year-olds... full- and part-time faculty.

16. Be sure you have the pronouns down: It is I. This is between him and me. If I were he. She and I.

17. Don't use *hopefully* in speech or writing. While you are at it, stay away from other floating adverbs: *interestingly, fortunately* ....

18. Do your best to avoid obvious transitions: however, on the other hand, in fact, etc.

19. If for some reason you are beginning a sentence with a participle, be absolutely certain that what's in the participial phrase is in sync with the main part of the sentence. Here's an example of a phrase out of sync: Believing that food plays a major part in health, animal studies .... P.S.: Don't begin sentences with participles.

20. Don't use the *not only* construction. If you are editing someone who has used *not only*, be sure they have a *but* also. Not only/but also is a parallel construction.

21. Use *while* only when two actions are occurring at the same time.

22. Some words aren't words and so, don't use them: momento, reoccur, reoccurrence, irregardless.

23. Some words don't mean what you might think they mean: disinterested, anxious.

24. Watch especially oral and verbal. Here's the dumbest example, too often found on sports pages: verbal commitment.

25. Don't put -wise ending on words, as in weather-wise.

26. Don't use *following* as a synonym for *after*.

27. Don't use *over* as a synonym for *more than*.

28. Don't use cliché words in speech or writing: prior to, due to, in order to, at that point in time ....

29. It's centers on, not around. It's revolves around. Avoid both.

30. Don't even think about using continue on, even if your partner handles the mike on Southwest Airlines flights.

31. New record is redundant.

32. Be sure you know what parameter means before you use it.

33. Use miles an hour.

34. Be sure you know the difference in sit and set. Practice using them in your speech until you are absolutely certain of the correct use: Sit is intransitive, meaning that it doesn't take an object. In the construction sit down, down is an adverb. The principal parts of *sit* are sit, sat, sat, sitting. The principal parts of *set* are set, set, set, setting.

35. Be sure you know the difference in *lie* and *lay*. Lie is intransitive. The principal parts of *lie* are lie, lay, lain, lying. The principal parts of *lay* are lay, laid, laid, laying. When the transitive verb *lay* is used, it will have an object: Lay the baby on the bed. By the way, some uses of *lie* and *lay* are colloquialisms: lie of the ball, lay of the land.

36. *Affect* is a verb, *effect* a noun except to effect a settlement.

37. *Principle* is the verb. *Principal* is mostly an adjective except for money and the head of the school. The saying is: The principal is your pal.

38. Do not ever under in circumstances use *allegedly*. Of all the points in this treatise, this is the one that I'd rate out and out stupid. Using this tells me everything about the person using it. You can allege all you want. The point in all this: You need to have a source for what you say and you need to attribute what you say to that source.

39. Don't use *reportedly*. If you are in a position of reporting, report. Don't say well I don't know this for sure, but someone mentioned it to me and I'll just pass it along to you in the event it might be right.

40. Be careful with *apparently*, as in He apparently died ....

41. Write simply, clearly.

42. Write in such a way that your writing can be read aloud with ease.

43. Colloquialisms are okay. Use them when they are applicable. Don't shy away from them.

44. The same goes for unusual words. If a certain word is the best word, use it. Somebody is going to know what you mean and is going to be appreciative of you.

45. Don't apologize for unusual words by putting quotes around them.

46. Almost never use partial quotes: He said he was "lucky" to be alive. The only time you'd want to do that is when you need to emphasize that this was the exact word that was used.

47. On leads, don't start with quotes or questions.

48. On leads, don't say that when so and so was growing up she or he never dreamed of doing what they are doing now.

49. On leads, don't say that so and so doesn't look like whatever they are or whatever they do.

50. People who know better judge others by the language they use. Practice using good language in speech. You will find that good habits are formed that way. These good habits will translate to your writing.