Hoover’s Hobgoblins

Things to Avoid in Good Writing

The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph.
excerpt from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”

These are few of my personal hobgoblins with respect to style. I recognize that some of these are hopeless cases – too many people violate these precepts – but one of the privileges of being a teacher and an editor is having a platform from which to fight for lost causes.

I am an unrepentant prescriptivist with respect to language. Of course, descriptive linguists are correct that language is, in some sense, the common property of the people who use it. Its evolution cannot be stopped. That is true, but it misses my point. There are always implicit rules, even if there are not explicit rules. Were that not so, we would never be able to communicate, as we would never know how to put together words in a way that we could count on being understood. Language is a powerful tool. The point of codifying rules is not to stop linguistic evolution but to sharpen the tool and to make it more effective. It is also to make it more beautiful. Many of my “hobgoblins” are not violations of rules of grammar; rather they sin against semantic precision and fine prose style. There are so many ugly things in the world, that we ought to go out of our way to make the ones with our control beautiful: in the end, the point is aesthetic; and, if some people take that word to mean trivial, impractical, or dispensable, they are very much to be pitied.

Acronyms: Acronyms should be used only when they are helpful to reader. That means when the phrase that they describe is unusually awkward or both long and so frequently used that the reader prefers the acronym or when they have become cast-iron idiom (U.S., NATO, OLS). The test is what the reader prefers. Unless an acronym is very well known or used so frequently that the reader won’t struggle to recall what it means, readers will generally prefer the full words. They should never be used just for the convenience of the writer. The writer can use acronyms to his heart’s content in the initial draft, but then he should employ the magic of search-and-replace to restore them to ordinary language. Except in rare cases, acronyms should be defined on first use: e.g., “United States Army Air Force (USAAF).” They should never be used for names (not JMK for Keynes nor F&S for Friedman and Schwartz), except infrequently in citations. Multiple authored works should still be referred to by the authors’ names (e.g., “Friedman and Schwartz” or “Dorfman et al.” for Dorfman, Samuelson, and Solow). Sometimes a name or concept is too complex to constantly refer to in full, but still a shortened version is to preferred. Thus, the Wealth of Nations is to be preferred (at least after first use) to either An Inquiry in the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations or INCWN or even to WN.

Aggravate vs. Irritate: To aggravate is to make worse. To irritate is to annoy, make someone impatient or angry, or to cause inflammation or physical discomfort. Irritate has a variety of synonyms: vex, exasperate, provoke, among others. But aggravate and irritate are not synonyms. One may, of course, aggravate someone’s irritation, which may account for the common confusion of the two terms.

AM/PM/Noon/Midnight: AM is an abbreviation for ante meridian, that is Latin for “before the meridian”; PM is an abbreviation for post meridian or “after the
Ambiguous Antecedents: Every pronoun has a noun or name to which it refers – the antecedent. Too often writers fail to be clear about which noun is the correct antecedent. “Bob fought with John, and he dealt him a fatal blow.” Who is the killer and who the killed? Often the writer is reluctant – but should not be – to repeat a noun or name in order to maintain clarity. Thus, “Bob and John fought, and Bob fatally struck John” is perfectly clear. Of course, the point is not to avoid all pronouns only unclear ones: “Bob picked up Mary’s ball and threw it to her” is perfectly clear.

Anxious/Eager: Often, but wrongly, used as synonyms, anxious means worried, troubled, uneasy, especially about something fervently desired. It is the adjectival correlative of anxiety. Eager means full of desire, impatient. The confusion arises because one may be anxious and eager about the same thing: “Eager to please, she was anxious about the interview.”

Begs the Question: “Begging the question” is the logical fallacy petitio principii – that is, reasoning in a circle or assuming the very thing to be demonstrated. It does not mean “cries out for an inquiry,” a situation for which the phrase “raises the question” is adequate.

Citations: Citations to sources in academic writing (e.g., in footnotes) are not window dressing, but an aid to your argument and to other’s scholarship. Where quite specific points are being supported, it is essential to provide specific page or section numbers within the cited works, unless the works themselves are very short and on a single point. What is a reader to make of “Commodus was among the most pernicious Roman emperors (see Gibbon Decline and Fall),” when Gibbon’s history of the Roman Empire runs to six volumes? The point is to help the reader, not to set him a puzzle or to begin a game of hide and seek. (See Respect for Readers.)

Comprise: The whole comprises the parts; the parts constitute the whole. Thus, “the State of North Carolina comprises one hundred counties” is correct; while “the State of North Carolina is comprised of one hundred counties” is incorrect.

Continuous/Continually: Continuous should be used to indicate unbrokenness: “a continuous flow of water quenched the fire.”
Continually should be used to indicate regular repetition: “the fire alarm had gone offContinually in the days before the fire, though all but the last time proved to be false alarms.”

Could Care Less: the correct phrase is couldn’t care less – i.e., one cares so little that there is no less care one could give. The all-too-common could care less is illogical and pointless. Anyone who cares a great deal could also care less than he in fact does; so what’s the point? (See Eggcorn.)

Critique: Critique should not be used as an all-purpose synonym for criticism nor ever used as a verb. Critique implies a thorough and systematic investigation. Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason illustrates an appropriate use; Bill O’Reilly’s critique of Obama’s budget plans, an inappropriate one.

Dangling Prefixes: A prefix should not be left dangling, but needs to be tied to its root. For example, don’t write macro model; it is usually best to connect a prefix to its root directly (macromodel) or, usually less desirably, by a hyphen (macro-model). The hyphen is preferred only when omitting it would interfere with properly understanding the resulting word – that is, rarely.

Diagrams: see Figures, Diagrams, Tables.

Datum/Data: Data is the plural of datum – “The datum is . . . ; the data are . . .”

Disinterested: Disinterested properly means lack of an interest in the sense of a stake in the matter. E.g., to say that a judge is disinterested implies that he does not stand personally to gain or lose from the outcome of the legal case – a highly desirable quality in a judge. It should not be used to mean “failing to engage our attention” or “boring.” Uninterested captures that sense correctly.

Disingenuous/Ingenuous: Ingenuous means open, frank, innocent, artless (like an ingénue). Disingenuous is its opposite and implies deceptiveness, insincerity, and secret motives. Each term is too frequently used where the other would be correct.

Doubtful/Dubious: Doubtful may refer to one’s state of mind (“I was doubtful about my ability to play the game.”) or to something external to oneself (”Without Jones, the outcome of the game was doubtful.”) Dubious refers to something external and not to one’s state of mind and carries pejorative overtones (“His case relied on a dubious distinction”; but “I was doubtful [not dubious] about the strength of his case.”).

Eager/Anxious: see Anxious/Eager.

Eggcorn: a misheard or misunderstood word or phrase that sounds like the correct word or phrase (but typically makes no sense at all) and is substituted for it. The word “eggcorn” is autological (i.e., it provides an example of its own meaning): it is “acorn” misheard. “Tow the line” is an eggcorn of “toe the line.” “Could care less” is an eggcorn for “couldn’t care less.” Avoid eggcorns by making sure of the meaning of a word or phrase.

Emphasis: The standard typographical convention is to indicate emphasis with italics (replaced on old fashioned typewriting or in manuscript by underlining). Underlining, boldface, or other changes of font may in special circumstances be used when distinctions among emphasized text are needed (e.g., when there is a mixture of emphasis, say, in italic in the original and additional editorial emphasis, which may be indicated, for example, in bold). Underlining and boldface type are especially aggressive forms of emphasis and should largely be restricted to posters and advertising: academic prose rarely requires such breathlessness. All forms of emphasis should be used sparingly. Overuse diminishes the force of emphasized text. Similarly, exclamation points should be used sparingly. Quoted text should be reported verbatim, so academic prose rarely requires such breathlessness. All forms of emphasis should be used sparingly. Overuse diminishes the force of emphasized text. Similarly, exclamation points should be used sparingly. Quoted text should be reported verbatim, so the default position should be that, when emphasis occurs in the quoted text, it was also present in the original. Thus, there is no need to note that the emphasis was, in fact, in the original. In contrast, whenever emphasis is added to highlight a point and is not found in the original, it should be noted parenthetically with (“emphasis added,” “author’s emphasis,” “my emphasis,” or some similar phrase).

Envy/Jealousy (Envious/Jealous): Related terms, but not synonyms. Envy is the admiration or resentment of the fortune or advantages of another. A man might envy another’s wealth; a woman might envy another’s beauty. Jealousy involves the additional notion of rivalry, especially in matters of love or passions. A man might be
jealous of another who marries the woman whom he himself had hoped to marry. The loser envies the winner, to be sure; but he also sees the winner as a rival. One may also be jealous to protect anything that is one’s own from a perceived threat. Even God is described as jealous in this sense (“I am a jealous god; thou shalt have no other gods before me”), but never as envious.

Epicenter: Epicenter has a precise meaning and should not be used simply to describe the middle or center of action – literally or figuratively. The epicenter of an earthquake (the primary usage) refers not to the source of the earthquake, which is typically deep underground, but to the projection of that source onto the surface of the earth—the apparent or virtual center in the reduction of three dimensions to two. Outside of geology, almost every use commonly found of epicenter in recent prose would be better replaced by center. Instead of “Chicago is the epicenter of the transportation network” write “Chicago is the center of the transportation network.”

Epigraphs: Epigraphs are the ornamental quotations that are sometimes placed at the head of books or essays (or chapters in books). Epigraphs are dispensable and not part of the main text (the point of the prefix epi). It is, therefore, usually best not to refer to them directly in the text. They are used to set a tone or mood for the reader and may have no direct bearing on the subject of the text. But they should be striking – beautiful, funny, clever, provocative, perhaps enigmatic, but never dull or prosaic. Shorter is usually better; and one is usually enough.

Examination/Exam: Exam is the common abbreviation of examination and is perfectly fine for informal speech, but should not be used in formal writing.

Famous: see Infamous/Famous.

Fewer/Less: Fewer is used with countable things; less with continuous things. “There were fewer students in class this week than last.” “There is less water in the pond this year than in 2003.”

Figurative/Literal: see Literal/Figurative below.

Figures, Diagrams, Tables: Figures, tables, diagrams and other visual devices do not speak for themselves and should not be simply plopped down in the middle of written text. If a visual aid is added to a text, it generally should be referred to in the text in support of some point or other. What is more, good visual aids are richer than the text itself. Thus, while it is pointless to re-present fully the material in figures or tables in words (if it can be done clearly and concisely, why bother with the visual?), the reader of the text should always be taught how to read them correctly. It should be clear what they represent and how to extract information from them. Thus, a reference to some important information in a table that points out both where to find the information (e.g., by column and row with the concepts that govern the columns and rows) and instructs the reader so that further information can be extracted at will. Similarly, with a diagram that can be manipulated to gain information – for example, a supply and demand diagram in economics – illustrating a characteristic manipulation (e.g., what makes a supply curve shift and what consequences can be read from the diagram as a result) brings the figure to life. As far as possible, all visuals should be clearly labeled (with units of measurement where appropriate) and, generally, made to “stand on their own bottoms,” as one of my bosses used to say. If it is feasible (and it is not always), a visual ought to be understandable without the text (explanatory legends are frequently helpful) – and this notwithstanding my earlier claim that the text should instruct us on understanding the visual. There is no contradiction here. The ultimate goal is to make both the text and the visual as effective and as complementary as possible.

Footnote Numbers: Except in special cases (e.g., technical editorial apparatus used in scholarly editions of classic works), footnote (or endnote) numbers (or other signs) should appear at the end of the sentence and only one per sentence. One reason for this is that they clutter sentences and reduce readability – distracting the reader. A second reason, relevant to any work aimed at publication, is that the house style of many publishers follows this rule. The temptation to place them in mid-sentence arises naturally from the desire to focus the footnote on something specific in the sentence (a particular person or idea or event). Nevertheless, it is better to
craft the note itself to make its reference clear and, if more than one topic is involved, to distinguish those topics in a single note rather than multiply the notes.

First: do not write first or otherwise begin counting or indicating a possible series of points unless you mean to continue to second, and possibly third, fourth, and so forth. This sets up a puzzling expectation for the reader. Any such series needs at least two members. (Compare On the One Hand/On the Other Hand.)

First and Foremost: First is foremost, there is no need for both.

First of All: The “of all” in first of all is just a verbal tic, which adds nothing of value, and ought to be omitted. Its uselessness is compounded in the now not infrequently heard “second of all” and even “third of all.”

Firstly: Adverbial ordinals, firstly, secondly, and so forth, are not ungrammatical and are often found, especially in older writing. If used, they should be used consistently, so that the continuation is thirdly, fourthly, and so forth and not some hybrid such as thirdly, fourth, fifth . . . In any case, first, second, third . . . is always a cleaner and more elegant alternative and is to be preferred.

Footnotes: It is said that footnotes are the nests of pedants. They are a great place for references, if that is consistent with the style of the journal or publisher of a paper or book. But substantial footnotes should be used sparingly. The test for whether material should be placed in a footnote or incorporated in the text can be captured in a thought experiment: If all the footnotes were stricken from the text, would the reader miss anything essential to the argument/narrative. If anything is indispensable to the story, it belongs in the text, which must be perfectly coherent without the footnotes.

Fortuitous: Fortuitous means “by chance” or “by fortune” (as in “the fortunes of war”). It does not mean fortunate. In fact a fortuitous event could be truly unfortunate.

Former/Latter: When items come in pairs and then are referred to subsequently, it is possible to use former and latter as pronouns. Possible . . . but generally not desirable. So, it is not incorrect to say: “John and Mary went to the store. The former went by bus, and the latter by car.” However, it is much better to say John took the bus (to the store), while Mary drove a car to the store.” In almost all cases, a reformulation of sentences involving former and latter will be stylistically preferable. The reason is that using such a construction sets a little puzzle and forces the reader unnecessarily to decode the correspondence.

Foreword/Forward: A foreword is a preface or introduction to a book, often by someone other than the book’s author. Forward is a direction of movement.

Fraction: a fraction is a number expressed as the numerator (number of units) relative to the unit (denominator). Two fifths is a fraction: two units, where the units are one part of a whole divided into five equal parts. In arithmetic, this is written 2/5. Although often fractions are smaller than a whole, any number may be written as a fraction — e.g., one hundred may be written as 500/5. Fractions are, thus, not necessarily small. So, it is not right to say, “He had only a fraction of her intelligence,” meaning that his intelligence was less or much less than hers. Put better: “He had only a small fraction of her intelligence.”

Goes Without Saying: A fatuous phrase: silly to assert that it goes without saying . . . and then immediately to say it. Avoid it. (See Needless to Say.)

Humility: Humility is a useful virtue for a writer. It helps to recall that, even the best writers, do not always write at their best and that we all have much to learn from reading other writers, from seeking out good models for our writing, and being willing to criticize and correct our own prose. This document may seem particularly unhumble, because it is openly prescriptive. But I hope that is not so. It mainly is a compilation of things that I have seen that appear to me to work or not work in writing. And I am constantly adding, revising, and rethinking it. It is not meant to be law; but, I hope useful, reflections, derived from my efforts to improve my own writing and that of students.

I/Me: I is the first-person nominative pronoun used in place of a noun serving as the subject of a sentence; me is the first-person accusative pronoun used in place of a noun serving as the object of a sentence. Hardly
anyone confuses them when used singly. Thus, “I went to the store,” or “She gave it to me.” However, it is now extremely common for people to mix the two up when they are used in conjunction with another noun or pronoun: “Me and Sally went to the store” or “she gave it to Tom and I” have increased in common usage in inverse proportion to the decline in knuckles rapped by fourth-grade teachers with a passion for grammar. My mother used to say that we would make this mistake less often if we would simply suppress our egos and put the other person first: it is harder to spit out “Sally and me went to the store” than “Me and Sally . . .” But, alas, Mom’s wisdom has been overrun by events in our narcissistic and ungrammatical age, and one hears every incorrect combination now in nearly equal measure. (Also see Myself.)

**Icon/Iconic:** An *icon* was originally a picture of Jesus or a saint used as a prompt for religious devotions in the Byzantine church. It came to mean a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of something. Thus, the Eifel Tower is an *icon* of Paris (in a movie, an aerial shot of the Eifel Tower stands for Paris). But mere fame does not make someone or something *iconic*. Brad Pitt is a famous actor, but not an *iconic* one (what is he supposed to represent?). Another common use of *icon* to refer to the small images used on computer desktops to indicate apps and functions uses the term perfectly correctly as a picture of something used to represent something else.

**Impact:** Economists (and not only economists) indulge the bad habit of using *impact* as an all-purpose substitute for “effect” or “affect.” It gives the impression that one doesn’t know the difference between the two and is looking for a place to hide. *Impact* means literally or metaphorically one thing striking another and should be reserved for its literal or metaphorically significant uses: “the impact of the car against the wall,” “the advertisement had real *impact*” or “impact multipliers.”

**Indent Paragraphs:** In most cases the first line of paragraphs should be indented (a common standard is five spaces). The purpose is to indicate paragraph breaks clearly. Simply marking paragraphs by blocks of text can be ambiguous – and not visually very striking – especially when a paragraph ends at the bottom of a page: does a line that begins the next page continue that paragraph or start a new one? (A similar problem arises with the text that follows inset quotations or equations.) There are other options – for example, an extra blank line between paragraphs – but these are less desirable, as they do not always eliminate ambiguity and, because they are less visually striking, do not convey the organization of the text as readily to the reader as does the indented paragraph.

**Infamous/Infamy:** *Famous* means widely known and carries a positive connotation. *Infamous* also means widely known but carries a negative connotation. Einstein is a *famous* scientist; Putin is an *infamous* dictator. *Infamy* is the state of being *infamous*. “Yesterday, December 7th 1941 – a date that will live in infamy. . .” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

**Interesting:** *Interesting* is one of the weakest words in expository writing. The reader wants to know what makes something interesting; and, if the writer succeeds in providing adequate evidence – and too often writers do not – then it insults the reader’s intelligence to instruct her that she should find the evidence or conclusion *interesting*. A good writer gives the reader good reasons to find things interesting, and then leaves it up to the reader to make the judgment.

**Irony/Ironic:** *Irony* is a) the rhetorical move of expressing one’s meaning by stating or tending to the opposite, for example by simulated adoption of another’s viewpoint; or b) using language that has a hidden meaning for insiders and another for outsiders; or c) a desirable event or situation that occurs with such timing or such circumstances as to mock the fitness of things. *Irony* is not an all-purpose synonym for *coincidental or interesting.*

**Jealousy/Envy:** see Envy/Jealousy.

**Justification:** Among typesetters, *justification* refers to the vertical alignment of text to form a straight edge along the left or right margins. In most printed books, the text is both left- and right-justified. To achieve an aesthetically pleasing look on the page, traditional typesetters would adjust the spacing between words and the kerning (i.e., the very small spacing between letters) to
achieve right-justification. In the days of writing by hand or with a typewriter, right-justification was almost impossible to achieve in a manuscript. Now, however, word processing programs can impose it automatically. Unfortunately, they are typically not as artful as human typesetters had been, and right-justified texts too often have overly wide spacing between words and other infelicities of layout. Psychological studies have also shown that the ragged right edge of an unjustified text actually improves comprehension (perhaps because it makes it easier to distinguish one line of text from another and, so, not to lose one’s place as the eyes scan one line and transition to the next). In any case, I strongly advocate not right-justifying word-processed texts.

Lay/Lie: Lay is a transitive verb describing action: “she laid the book on their table.” (Or in Dorothy Parker’s one liner: “If all the girls who attended the Yale prom were laid end to end…I wouldn't be a bit surprised.”) Lie is an intransitive verb describing a state: “let the ball lie.”

Like/As: Like is used for direct comparisons, as for enumerations. Correct: “The boy was so like his maternal uncle it was uncanny.” “He had a fist like a hammer.” “We supply a variety of fruit, such as [not like] apples, oranges, and pears.” But “Olallaberries are like blackberries.”

Literal/Figurative: Literal means used in conformity with the exact, true, or prosaic meaning of words; figurative means used as a figure of speech or symbolically, emblematically, or poetically. Literal can be used to qualify a report of an action to emphasize that, despite improbability, the action really did occur as described: “I literally ate four hamburgers for breakfast” – a distasteful thought, perhaps, but asserted to be true. In contrast, “I literally ate a horse” simply shows that the user does not know the difference between literal and figurative. Unfortunately, the overuse of literal as an accurate qualifier has led some people to mistake it for an intensifier: “I have literally told you a billion times” is, of course, wrong; but its function is something like replacing “billion” with, say, “billion billion” or “quadzillion.” So, it amounts to a figurative use of literal, which is very much to be deprecated and avoided.

Legendary: Legendary means grounded in legend. It does not mean famous or well known. Legends typically refer to old stories or myths with a presumption that they are not actually true. We rarely misuse it when we write about places: It is common to refer to Atlantis, but not Hawaii, as a legendary island. We tend, in contrast, to be overly promiscuous applying it to people. Is Clint Eastwood a legendary actor/director? No, just a famous and accomplished one. A real figure may be surrounded by legends, so that there is a sense in which legendary could be literally true of him or her. And legendary could be used metaphorically. In fact, it is so overused for any famous public figure that it is in danger of losing its distinct meaning and collapsing into the bundle of indistinct terms thrown at actors, sports figures, and politicians. No legend, no legendary.

Mathematics/Math: Math is the common abbreviation of mathematics and is perfectly fine for informal speech, but should not be used in formal writing.

Me/I: See I/Me.

Memorandum/Memo: Memo is the common abbreviation of memorandum (plural, memoranda) and is perfectly fine for informal speech, but should not be used in formal writing.

Meteoric Rise: A bad metaphor made palatable by constant repetition. Meteors, in fact, fall; they do not rise; they do not even look like they are rising (in contrast to the sun, which also does not rise in fact, but appears to do so). They do move very fast and then fizzle out. A better metaphor is a rocket (or skycricket). Its main drawback is that it does not form an adjective as cleanly as does meteor turned into meteoric: rocketic? rocketlike? – I don’t think so. But still one should be able to find a better way of expressing the point.

Militate/Mitigate: Militate refers to opposition or factors operating against a cause, result, or desired outcome. Thus, “The CEO’s intransigence militated against the success of the merger” is correct. Mitigate means to soften or ameliorate a negative: “His charitable works mitigated the misanthropy of his writings.” While militate is rarely used where mitigate would be appropriate, too frequently mitigate is used where militate
would be appropriate.

Models of Good Writing: I have long thought that we should write in a manner that we would ourselves like to read. And to know what we would like to read, we need to read and pay attention to the way in which the writers we admire write. Much bad academic writing is perpetuated by copying the most common styles found in academic books and journals. Many write badly, not because they find it good in itself, but because they model their writing on the bad writing of others. Much better to find examples of writing – even if less common – that work for us, giving us pleasure and clarity in the reading, and to seek to emulate those authors, not the tedious and boring ones that we find all around us.

Money/Monies: the common plural of money is money, as in “you owe me a lot of money,” but not “when you have collected the necessary monies, the project can begin.” The term monies should be restricted – if it is not to be abolished altogether – to cases of multiple currencies. For example, “the bank traded in several monies: dollars, yen, yuan, and kroner.”

Myself: “Myself” is the foxhole for cowards who feel that ‘I’ sounds stuffy and ‘me’ sounds uneducated” (attributed to sportswriter Red Smith). Myself should not be used as a generic replacement for I or me. It should be restricted to its correct use as a reflexive: “I did the dishes myself” as opposed to my leaving them for the maid. It is never correct to say, for instance, “Mary and myself went to the store” or “She gave a ride to Tom, Sally, and myself” or “He asked us to split the duties between Joe and myself.” The growing popularity of such locutions seems to derive, on the one hand, from a failure to grasp the difference between the nominative pronoun I and the accusative pronoun me and, on the other hand, the fear that I is too self-centered a word to be introduced into polite speech. In either case, myself seems like a convenient place to hide from grammatical ignorance or social trouble. But in both cases, it is just silly, bordering on illiterate.

Names Reduced to Initials: It is a barbarism to turn the names of individuals into initials. And it is no help to the reader, who won’t mind reading their names multiple times but is likely to be annoyed that he can’t remember what those names are when he sees the initials. It is, perhaps, a help to the writer not to have to write them out. But then that is what search-and-replace tools in word-processors are for. An exception occurs when people themselves adopt initials as a replacement their (typically only their first) name. So, my uncle Ralph Darrel Cubine, was known to one and all as RD. (See Acronyms.)

Needless to Say: Needless to say is a fatuous turn of phrase. If it is truly needless, then saying it actually diminishes the force of what you say and it would be better to follow the implied advice and not say it at all. (See Goes Without Saying.)

Nonplussed: Nonplussed means to be perplexed or baffled, at a loss to know what to do, say, or think. Oddly, many people use it to mean its opposite. That is the unfortunate path by which useful words become useless by no longer drawing a commonly understood distinction.

Notorious/Notoriety: Notoriety is the state of being notorious, and notorious does not just mean noteworthy or famous, but noteworthy or famous in a negative way. Sherlock Holmes is a famous (noted but not notorious) detective; while Professor Moriarity is a notorious (and, therefore, also famous) criminal.

Nobel Prize in Economics: it has become a pattern among many writers on economics to refer to the Nobel Prize in Economics by its full English title, which they typically presume to be The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. This is generally either simply pedantic or arch. In most instances, why is simply the Nobel Prize in Economics not enough? The writer of the full title is usually showing off his knowledge that the economics prize is not one that was originally created in Alfred Nobel’s will. But so what? And why insist so hard? In some cases, it appears to be a way of trying to demonstrate the second-rate nature of the prize or the parvenu status of economics. The difficulty is that the fact of the later creation of the economics prize is already widely known and rarely of much importance in the contexts in
which it is explicitly emphasized. And it fails to recognize that the economics prize, although funded by the Swedish central bank, is recognized by the Nobel Foundation and is treated on par with the older prizes for most purposes, as a quick look at the foundation’s website will show. In any case, the pedants are often quite wrong in their pedantry: the Wikipedia article on the economics prize (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Memorial_Prize_in_Economic_Sciences#Alternative_names) lists twelve official English full names for the Nobel Prize over the more-than-fifty years in which it has been awarded. The pedants rarely bother to find what the name was when it was conferred on any individual economist. The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel has been used only since 2006. The first prize, awarded jointly to Jan Tinbergen and Ragnar Frisch in 1969, was called the Prize in Economic Science dedicated to the memory of Alfred Nobel. If one wants to be a pedant, it helps to be precise.

**Official:** Official refers to an office or office-holder with designated authority, as in an “official policy.” It does not refer to something merely because it is commonly accepted or widely held. “The National Bureau of Economic Research is the official arbiter of recessions in the United States” is incorrect. The NBER is a widely accepted arbiter of recessions; but, as a private institution, it has no designated authority; so its pronouncements are not official – no matter how common or how useful. Simple test: no office/no .

**On the One Hand/On the Other Hand:** These are a coordinate pair used to organize an argument or exposition. Do not use one unless you use the other. (Compare First.)

**Only:** It is common, even among accomplished writers, to place only as in this example: “Mary only walked home because her car was broken.” Yet, placed in that way only seems to target the verb “to walk” rather than the reason. It could be thought of as qualifying Mary’s mode of self-propulsion: she walked, but she could have run and that was because of the state of the car. But that is not what is actually meant. It is both logically more sensible and rhetorically more powerful, to place only close to its target: “Mary walked home only because her car was broken” – that is, had the car not been broken, she would have driven. Similarly, rather than “Tom will only go on vacation if he earns enough working overtime,” it is more logical and rhetorically more powerful to write, “Tom will go on vacation only if he earns enough working overtime.”

**Page Numbers:** a) page numbers should always be supplied in manuscripts; b) when citing a work on a specific point, citations should include exact page number, especially for a book or for long article that is not narrowly focused on a single point; and c) page numbers should always be supplied for a direct quotation (see Citations).

**Personal Names:** a) in professional, academic writing it is inappropriate to refer to individuals, except in direct quotation, by personal, pet, or diminutive names. One should use the names that the individuals referred to use professionally. Thus, it is Robert Lucas and not Bob Lucas. (Of course, some people do use names that might appear to be personal or informal as their preferred names – for example, publishing under Jimmy rather than under James Earl. In such cases, one should follow their practice – each is entitled to his own name.) The trend toward the inappropriate use of personal names is most commonly displayed in the acknowledgment section or footnote to academic papers and books. The thinking seems to be that one is thanking one’s friends and, in that context, it is OK to use their personal names. But even here it is inappropriate for the same reasons: First, the point of using a name (even in an acknowledgment) is to convey information to the reader. If one thanks Buzz when the professional identity is William, then the reader has no way of identifying and locating the person referred to. Second, and related, the use of personal names conveys a sort of clubiness – especially, when the people referred to are relatively prominent. It says, “I’m a member of a select group and you, dear reader, are not.” Such implicit tribalism is to be deprecated in academic writing.

b) an increasingly common, but unfortunate, habit of modern email/letter writing is the salutation requesting acquiescence in the use of personal names rather than titles plus surnames: “Kevin (if I may?).” Well, no,
you may not or, at the least, please do not ask. Yes, we live in informal times. But there are times to be more formal. We generally know when we are on a first-name basis with someone and really do not need to ask. One asks, only when one is trying to establish a personal connection that does not actually (yet) exist. And it is deeply awkward. First, while many people welcome the informal address; few are offended by being addressed formally. And if one errs by addressing someone more formally than he desires, then it is up to him to make the first move. The egregious “Kevin (if I may?)” puts the recipient in the awkward position of either acquiescing when he would rather not or seeming unfriendly by replying “No! Mr. Hoover will do.” (My own solution is simply to ignore the request and to begin my reply, “Dear Ms. Jones.”) What is more, personal names are tricky. My father was christened Wilbur Charles, but loathed his first name, though it was used for official purposes. He tolerated the use of “Wilbur” from only one elderly cousin – and not even from his mother. To everyone else he was “Chuck.” It is quite impossible to know, if we are not actually well-acquainted with someone, what name they would like us to use. Leave it up to them, and do not push the matter in search of false bonhomie. And naturally one can always announce one’s willingness to be on a first-name basis less aggressively by simply signing a letter or email with one’s first own first name.

**Point in Time:** *Point in time* is almost always pleonastic, and either *point* or the nearly synonymous *time* should be used instead. “At what *point* did you decide to leave school?” “At that *time* he was still rich.” *Point in time* should be restricted to those cases in which it is necessary to distinguish the temporal use of point from the spatial use or an interval of time from an instant. But these cases are rare.

**Presently:** classically *presently* means “in the near future” not “now.” “I will be with you presently” means that you will have to wait a bit; “Presently, a plot will hatch” means that it has not hatched yet. The confusion arises, of course, because *present* does, in fact, mean now. Such idiosyncrasies are one of the joys of the English language. When *now* is intended use *at present* or *currently* or, for that matter, *now* and retain *presently* for its traditional meaning.

**Principle/Principal:** *Principle* is a rule or a precept; *principal* is an adjective indicating the main thing and not something secondary.

**Prior to:** there are few, if any cases, in which *prior to* is to be preferred to the simpler *before.*

**Pronouns:** a) Pronouns have become a big topic in academic circles of late. On top of the much older debate over whether the usage around generic pronouns was sexist, there is the more recent campaign to render all pronouns personal – a matter to be chosen to match whatever seems to be one’s personal “gendered” identity (see **Scare Quotes**). In an earlier version of this document, I announced that I was “happy to take the conservative course and to continue to write *he* or *his* as generics, trusting that readers will credit my good faith and lack of sexism – though I know that some readers do have their indignation on autopilot and will call me out whenever they come across such usage.” And I eschewed all objections to affirmative action for pronouns. I had not the least problem with anyone who preferred to use *shelher* as generic. I did object to the awkward (the repetitive use of “he or she”), to typographically ugly, unsayable, and unreadable forms (e.g., *(s)he)* and to replacing masculine and feminine pronouns with the neuter *(it)*. But I reserved my deepest objection for using the plural *their* as if it were a singular pronoun. While I still personally find it an unattractive usage, I have noticed that most of the other proposed solutions have fallen by the way in the last few years and that the singular use of *their* has become so common that resisting it is probably a lost cause. Often today, one finds constructions such as “*For a child to thrive, they* must be allowed to let their imaginations roam freely.” The ancient grammarian in me bristles at the mismatched number – the singular child connected to the plural *they* and *their.* But I am afraid that I must bend to the general will on this one and accept it as just one of those many idiosyncrasies that both frustrate and delight us in language. There are analogues in other languages: in German the pronoun *Sie* or *sief* may mean you, *she* or *they,* depending on context and capitalization.
b) Making pronouns a matter of personal choice is a more problematic. Simple politeness suggests that we should strive not to offend people and, if I know someone’s preferences, I would try to follow them. But the idea that pronouns are personally chosen is rather odd and, if insisted upon, defeats the purpose of pronouns. Pronouns stand for nouns, including proper names. The least important reason is that there is an efficiency in not constantly repeating the noun. We usually say, “The bird flew into the window; but it was not hurt.” But we could say, “The bird flew into the window; but the bird was not hurt.” A more important reason is that a pronoun frequently stands for something unknown. We can ask, “What was it that hit the window?” To make pronouns so personal that one has to learn the choices of each person to whom we ever wish to refer pronominally is clearly infeasible. It is hardly any different from asking everyone to know every other person’s name, except that there are fewer pronouns to choose from. My prediction is that the practice of choosing one’s pronouns will fade in much the way that many briefly fashionable coinages and phrases fade. If it endures, it will be because, the speakers of English find it functional and want it to. Language is, after all, our most democratic institution, with votes being lodged each time any of us speaks and is and is understood.

Quantum Leap (or Jump): A misunderstood metaphor. A quantum is a unit quantity that does not exist in intermediate values. Thus, there are only integer values of quanta: one, two, or three quanta, but never 1.35 quanta. In physics, quanta are very, very small. A quantum leap or jump is one that goes from one discrete value to another without ever occupying or passing through an intermediate value. An electron, for example, may orbit on one of a discrete number of shells around the atomic nucleus, and it makes a quantum jump when changing from one shell or orbit to another. Quantum leap should rightly emphasize the discontinuity of a process: “After years of incremental development of the LP, recording technology took a quantum leap with the introduction of the audio CD.” It should not be used to emphasize the largeness of a change.

Quote/Quotation: Quote is verb (except colloquially) and should not be used in formal writing instead of the noun quotation.

Quotations: Writers too often include long blocks of quoted texts. Any quotation – especially if it is inset – breaks the flow of the author’s own prose. It is best to do without quotations and to paraphrase if possible. Eyes glaze over and crests fall at the sight of a long block quotation. Quotations should be used when a) they make a point more aptly, elegantly, or brilliantly than the author himself could. (Be stingy in seeing these qualities in another writer; too much generosity leads to too much quotation. Brilliance usually displays best in short bursts.); b) the text is something that the author wants to place in evidence. One case: the author wants to illustrate that the person quoted actually said or wrote the thing in question when the author might otherwise not be believed. Another: the author wants to discuss or analyze the content of the quotation. In this case, the author should actually discuss the quotation. Be sure, however, to give the reader credit: it is a bad habit to quote and then to paraphrase the quotation; assume that the reader gets it otherwise not be believed. Another: the author wants to illustrate that the person quoted actually said or wrote the thing in question when the author might otherwise not be believed. Another: the author wants to discuss or analyze the content of the quotation. In this case, the author should actually discuss the quotation. Be sure, however, to give the reader credit: it is a bad habit to quote and then to paraphrase the quotation; assume that the reader gets it and move immediately to discussion or analysis. In all cases, when quotations are retained, it is best to try to extract the parts of the quotation that are essential or especially memorable or apt. And, wherever possible, keep the extracted elements short and integrated into the flow or your own prose. Of course, it is not always possible, and sometimes a block quotation will be the right choice.

Redux: The arcane term redux has recently enjoyed a revival, although too often it is misused. Properly used it carries not simply the connotation of something happening again, but of someone or something restored to health or vitality. Trollope’s Phineas Redux (and presumably analogously Updike’s Rabbit Redux) refers to Phineas Finn, last seen in a previous volume in a poor state socially and politically, returned to vigor and status.

Reticent/Reluctant: Reticent means unwilling to share one’s thoughts, reserved, diffident, restrained, or shy. Reluctant means unwilling or doubtful about, for example, taking an action. They are not synonyms.
**Reticent** refers to a state; while **reluctant** refers to an attitude towards an action or implied action. (Thus, one can be a **reluctant** hero. Being a hero is not an action, but it implies a set of suitable actions.) A **reticent** person may be **reluctant** to express her emotions publicly. She may be **reluctant** to speak publicly, perhaps because she is **reticent** or perhaps because she is not being paid (and that is her profession). But in neither case is she **reticent** to speak publicly.

**Respect for Readers**: The golden rule of writing is to respect your readers. One aspect of respect for readers is not to take shortcuts that help you to write efficiently but are inefficient or distasteful to the reader (e.g., see **Acronyms**). Another is to always focus on clear communication and not set up barriers to readers or unnecessary puzzles (e.g., see **Citations**). The easiest way to achieve such respect – as with so much else in life – is to follow the Golden Rule. In the case of writing it specializes to simply asking yourself, “given a choice about style, format, or any other aspect of writing, which would I prefer to read myself?”

**Respectively**: **Respectively** may be used to coordinate lists: “Jack and Jill were tall and short respectively” is accurate, but inelegant and should be avoided. Better: “Jack was tall and Jill was short.” **Respectively** is pointless when there is but one list: “Jack was tall and fat respectively” is wrong. In most cases, constructions using **respectively** pose unnecessary puzzles that the reader is forced to decode. Best not to put stumbling blocks in the path of the reader’s immediate comprehension (see **Respect for Readers**).

**Sic**: The Latin word **sic** (“thus” or “that is so”) is used within direct quotations to indicate that spelling, grammatical, or other errors were in fact in the original source and have not been introduced inadvertently by the quoting author. **Sic** is usually placed within square brackets, a generally accepted method of indicating that interpolations into direct quotations are not part of the original. For example: “Goerge [sic] Washington chopped down the cherry tree.” **Sic** should not be used for emphasis or to indicate surprise.

**Simple/Simplistic**: **Simple** means easy, uncomplicated, or with few elements. In many contexts, it is good to be **simple** – although it can also be used as a shorthand for **simple-minded**, which is not a term of praise. **Simplicity** is the state of being simple – something that many religions and philosophies recommend (“‘Tis a gift to be simple; ‘tis a gift to be free . . .”). **Simplistic** means affected or unjustifiable simplicity or a lack of appreciation for unavoidable complications. It is always a pejorative term (“His simplistic political solutions will bring the country to ruin.”).

**Scare Quotes**: Quotation marks may be used to indicate that a word or phrase is the object of discussion and not the thing that word or phrase refers to. Philosophers call this distinction **mention** as opposed to **use**. Consider two sentences: “He drove the car”; and “The word ‘drove’ has five letters.” In the first sentence “drove” is **used**; in the second, **mentioned**. Quotations marks may also indicate that a word is used with a special meaning: “Here, ‘fast’ is defined to be greater than 100 miles per hour.” A meaning wildly at variance with an expected meaning or a highly abnormal coinage or ironic usage is sometimes also indicated with quotations marks, known in this case as **scare quotes**. “She was ‘pretty’ in a cheap sort of way” uses scare quotes to convey irony. But the irony would be registered even without them, and simply reflects the anxiety of the writer, in the same way that providing an immediate explanation of a joke reflects the fear of the teller that the listeners will miss the point. The English language is highly flexible, and words have networks of meanings, where context is generally enough to convey which one is relevant. **Scare quotes** should be minimized. An abundance of scare quotes is one mark of bad writing, and generally bad thinking. And don’t get me started on **air quotes** (miming quotation marks with two fingers on each hand) . . .

**Stanch/Staunch**: **Stanch** should be reserved to mean checking the flow of something – for example, of blood (“She stanch his wound and saved his life”). **Staunch** should be reserved to mean trustworthy, loyal (“He was the president’s staunch political advisor”).

**Table-of-Contents Paragraphs**: Table-of-contents paragraphs (i.e., paragraphs that read “In section I, I do X and in section II, I do Y . . .”) are a blight – inelegant, unread, nearly useless. With a sound introduction and good transitions between sections to
provide guideposts, they can – and should – nearly always be omitted. McCloskey in *Writing Economics or Economical Writing* (two versions of the same little book) is good on this point. Sadly, some editors and referees insist on such paragraphs and, sometimes, writers must acquiesce against their better judgments.

Tables see Figures, Diagrams, Tables.

That/Who: see Who/That.

Traditional: Traditional means conforming to, derived from, or sanctioned by a tradition. Do not use it to mean commonplace or usual. No tradition, no traditional.

Transpire: A rear-guard action, to be sure, but we should still resist the use of transpire to mean “to occur” or “to happen.” It is best used in its etymological sense to mean “to leak out.” Thus, it has a literal meaning in biology “to emit through the skin or lungs; send off a vapor” or “to pass off a perspiration” and a figurative meaning “to leak out, come to be known.” Best restricted to those meanings and best that the colloquial meanings of “to occur or happen” be avoided. Good: “The meeting was supposed to be secret, but when it transpired that they had discussed treason, all were arrested.” Bad: “It transpired that the airplane crashed.” (That is bad on more than one level: better: “It happened that the airplane crashed;” best: “The airplane crashed.”)

Usual Disclaimer: Many economists for many years have ended footnotes acknowledging the comments on earlier drafts and other forms of assistance from colleagues and referees with the fatuous “I am responsible for any remaining errors.” Who else could be responsible for them? Authorship itself is a claim of responsibility. This statement in its variant forms became so common that authors began to omit it in favor of “The usual disclaimer applies.” Just as fatuous, the usual disclaimer compounds the absurdity and sinks into circularity; since, as it has gained currency, the original disclaimer is seen less and less; so, by now, the truly usual disclaimer is “the usual disclaimer applies.” The best way to avoid both fatuity and absurdity is to make one’s acknowledgments and to leave it to the common sense of the reader to know that an author is responsible for both the truths and the errors of his work – even if none of it is original. Coauthorship allows a slight possibility of qualification: coauthors may in some cases divide responsibility for the parts of a work; so it is not impossible that the coauthors might end acknowledgments with “each coauthor reserves the right to blame the other for any remaining errors.” (see Irony above).

Use/Usage: Don’t use usage when use will do. Usage is best restricted to indicating the manner of use – e.g., “whether to use use or usage is a matter of English usage or style.

Utilize/Use: Don’t use the ponderous utilize when use – elegant in its simplicity – serves just as well. Utilize is a back-formation from utilization, which is derived from use in the first place. Utilization has its uses, even if utilize ought to be shunned – e.g., the capacity utilization rate.

Very: Very is an overused intensifier. Try to avoid it. If on striking it out, a sentence would be understood just as clearly without it, don’t put it back.

Widows and Orphans: Widows are single lines of text or headings that are left at the bottom of a page of text, where the main text of which they are a part or which they introduce appears on the next page. Orphans are single lines of text at the top of otherwise empty page or above a new section of text to which they do not belong. These are printers’ terms, and printers are taught to avoid them by adding line breaks to shift a widow to the next page or to shift additional lines (to provide the orphan company) or to adjust earlier line spacings to draw the orphan back to the page (and reunite her with her textual family). When preparing manuscripts, care should be taken to avoid widows and orphans. The worst case is the widowed heading, which loses most of its purpose when isolated from the text that it heads. (Usage is confused in this case, and some authorities reverse the definitions of widows and orphans.)

Where/In Which: Where is used for a spatial reference. “This is the exact spot where President Kennedy was shot.” Otherwise, use in which: “He read a story in which [not where] Nixon won the 1960 election.” The spatial reference of where may sometimes be metaphorical: It is idiomatic to write, “Please refer to equation (6) where the
variable $S$ is supply and the variable $p$ is price.”

**Who/That:** *Who* and *whom* refers to people; *that* refers to things. “The driver *who* crashed the car is standing by the side of the road.” The car *that* was smashed was taken away by a tow truck.”

**Who/Whom:** *Who* is the proper pronoun referring to the subject of action and *whom* to the object. Thus, “the man *who* wears the crown is king” is correct: *who* here refers to the subject of the sentence – that is, *the man*. And “*whom* do you trust?” is correct: the subject of the sentence is *you*, while *whom* is the object – that is, the person receiving the trust.