

EDITORIAL

GRAMMAR

It is said that back in the 1940's, the following message was prominently displayed at the front of the main chemistry lecture hall at a major university:

“The English language is your most versatile scientific instrument.

Learn to use it with precision.”

In the intervening years, the teaching of proper grammar in the public elementary and high schools fell into disfavor. The inevitable result is that manuscripts submitted to us are often full of grammatical errors, which their authors probably do not even recognize (and often would not care about if they did).

We regard this state of affairs as deplorable, and we want to do something about it. For many years we have tried to correct the grammar of papers that we publish. This is toilsome at best, and sometimes entails rather substantial rephrasing. It would obviously be preferable to have authors use correct grammar in the first place. The problem is how to get them to do it.

One fairly effective way is to provide examples of what not to do; it is particularly helpful if the examples are humorous. We have recently seen several lists of grammatical examples of this type. A few weeks ago we found taped to a colleague's office door the most complete one we have seen. (He tells us it was passed out in a class at Dartmouth—not in English—at the time a term paper was assigned.) We reproduce it here in the hope that it will have some effect.

1. Make sure each pronoun agrees with their antecedent.
2. Just between you and I, the case of pronouns is important.
3. Watch out for irregular verbs which have crepe into English.
4. Verbs has to agree in number with their subjects.
5. Don't use no double negatives.
6. Being bad grammar, a writer should not use dangling modifiers.
7. Join clauses good like a conjunction should.
8. A writer must not shift your point of view.
9. About sentence fragments.
10. Don't use run-on sentences you got to punctuate them.
11. In letters essays and reports use commas to separate items in series.
12. Don't use commas, which are not necessary.
13. Parenthetical words however should be enclosed in commas.
14. Its important to use apostrophes right in everybodys writing.
15. Don't abbrev.
16. Check to see if you any words out.
17. In the case of a report, check to see that jargonwise, it's A-OK.
18. As far as incomplete constructions, they are wrong.
19. About repetition, the repetition of a word might be real effective repetition—take, for instance the repetition of Abraham Lincoln.
20. In my opinion, I think that an author when he is writing should definitely not get into the habit of making use of too many unnecessary words that he does not really need in order to put his message across.
21. Use parallel construction not only to be concise but also clarify.
22. It behooves us all to avoid archaic expressions.
23. Mixed metaphors are a pain in the neck and ought to be weeded out.
24. Consult the dictionary to avoid mispelings.
25. To ignorantly split an infinitive is a practice to religiously avoid.
26. Last but not least, lay off cliches.

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