Make Your Writing Understandable

The writer’s duty is to ensure that the reader understands what is written. Thus, the writer must understand the definitions, the nuances, and the usages of words, and the details of punctuation.
—Douglas Perret Starr, 2007

A, An, The — articles. A and an are indefinite, general; the is definite, pointing to something specific.

Alot — not a word
A lot — plenty
Allot — distribute

Also — usually unnecessary, particularly following and.
Another — means one more just like the previous. Usually pleonastic, particularly when following and.
Approximations — be frugal in the use of approximations. In general, round numbers can be assumed to be approximations.

As Far As — later in the sentence, it must be followed by “is concerned”
As For — fits better than “as far as”
Apart — not together
A part — included

As Well As — means that what follows is already known to readers. Does not substitute for and. The Equal Rights Amendment applies to women as well as to men. The other way around is incorrect: The Equal Rights Amendment applies to men as well as to women.
Awhile — for a short time; object of a verb
A while — for a short time; object of a preposition

Between — takes an and, not a to, and takes the objective case: between her and me, not between she and I. Between involves two items; among involves more than two.
Biweekly — means both every two weeks and twice a week, so its use is confusing. The same is true of bimonthly. Biannual means twice a year; biennial means every two years.
Can Be Found — pleonastic. If something can be found in a certain place, it is in that place.
**Careen** — involves no forward motion; means to tip a ship onto its side to expose the bottom for cleaning. **Career** means headlong flight.

**Comprise** — consists of everything; transitive verb; requires a direct object, not a prepositional phrase. *The whole comprises its parts.* See **include**.

**Convince** — means to overcome doubt and is followed by of or that. **Persuade** means to influence to action or belief and is followed by an infinitive. *She was persuaded to read the book, which convinced her that she was correct.*

**Continuous** — means constant; **continual** means regularly. *The sun rises continually and shines continuously.*

**Couple** — requires an of: **couple of**

**Crispy** — long spelling of **crisp**.

**Currently** — **is currently** is redundant.

**Degrees** — The names of the degrees are **Bachelor of Arts**, **Bachelor of Science**, **Master of Arts**, **Master of Science**; no s or ’s on Bachelor or Master. Bachelor’s degree, bachelor’s in horticulture, master’s degree, master’s in agricultural development are correct. It depends upon the preposition: The name of the degree contains an of. **Bachelor of Arts degree** is redundant.

**Different** — pleonastic in such usage as *they lived in three different countries.*

**Enormity** — involves a degree of wickedness. **Enormousness** emphasizes size without opinion.

**Ensure** — to make certain, to guarantee. See **insure**.

**Etc.** — does not follow a listing that begins with such as or include.

**Feel** — tactile word; does not substitute for “think” or “believe.” If it is used, it must be followed by a “that.”

**Fellow** — a similar person; redundant when used with such **fellow** words as shipmate and classmate.

**First-Come, First-Served** — note the past tense served. The meaning is that the first to come is the first **to be served**, not the first to serve.

**Font** — for ease of reading on screen, use a 12-point sans serif font, such as Verdana for the PC and Geneva for the Macintosh, which were designed for the screen. Although Arial is a sans serif font, it is too small for the screen or for printing. Do not print in a sans serif font; print in a serif type, such as Century Schoolbook and Times New Roman.


**Here** — vague; cite the place
**Hyphen, En-Dash, Em-Dash** — the hyphen joins words: *long-distance runner*. The *en-dash* joins numerals, scores 21–12, votes 76–24, dates June 12–20. The *em-dash* is a punctuation mark used to indicate a break in the thought: *His job — and it’s important — is to ensure accuracy.*

Note the difference in the three marks:

- **Hyphen**
- **En-Dash** — To form the en-dash: Ctrl minus (on the keypad)
- **Em-Dash** — To form the em-dash: Ctrl Alt minus (on the keypad)

*Include* — lists only part of the total. See *comprise*.

**Infinitive of Purpose** — improper use of the infinitive, as in *she walked to town to arrive exhausted*.” Arriving exhausted is not why she walked town. Recast such sentences.

**Insure** — to contract to be paid money in case of loss. See *ensure*.

**Its** — possessive pronoun of third person neuter; there is no apostrophe in any pronoun (except “tis,” which is slang)

**It’s** — contraction meaning “it is” or “it has”

**Lectern** — an elevated table on which to place notes while lecturing.

**Likely** — to be expected. It is followed by an infinitive: *He is likely to win;* not *He likely will win* or a that: *It is likely that he will win.* See *probably*.

**Local** — everything is local; cite the place

**Locate** — means *to place*; redundant when used to cite a place because the present tense verb is sufficient. If *it is located* there, *it is* there. See *situate*.

**Merchant Marine** — not *Merchant Marines*; these people are seamen, not fighters.

**Only** — opinion word. If *only* must be used, do not place it before the verb.

**Podium** — what you stand on. Pod means *foot*. Lecturers and other speakers stand *behind* a lectern.

**Possessive** — necessary when used with a gerund (a verbal ending in *ing*):

*She objected to his flirting with her friend,* not *She objected to him flirting with her friend.* It was not him that she objected to, it was what he was doing that she objected to.

**Presently** — means *in a little while, soon*. *Is presently* is ridiculous.

**Probably** — designates a chance: *He probably will win,* or: *It is probable that he will win.*
Redundancies

**Future plans** — all plans are in the future
**Past experience** — all experience is in the past
**Past history** — all history is in the past
**Is currently** — two words meaning “is”
**Is now** — two words meaning “is”
**Now currently** — two words meaning “now”

**Reflexive Pronouns** — those ending with *self* — *myself, yourself, herself, himself, itself, yourselves, ourselves, themselves* — do not substitute for the objective pronouns: *me, you, her, him, it, you, them, us.* Reflexive pronouns show that the person acting and the person acted upon are the same: *I myself did the job.* The reflexive pronoun is incorrect after a preposition: *Give it to Noelie and me,* not *Give it to Noelie and myself.*

**Reserve** — the organization is the Reserve: Army Reserve, Naval Reserve, etc.; people in the reserve are reserves or reservists. You join the Reserve (the organization). If you join the reserves, you join a group of people.

**Situate** — redundant; if something is “situated in,” it is “in.” See locate.

**Someday** — vague, unnecessary

**Sometime** — pleonastic in such usage as *sometime next month.*

**Somewhere** — pleonastic in such usage as *somewhere in North Texas.*

**Species** — a class or classification; it is always singular. *The United States has four kinds of highway* [not highways]: interstate, national, state, county. The farm produced several varieties of cabbage [not cabbages].

**Such As** — do not include *etc.* as part of the group, as in: *The price includes such items as meals, trips, etc.* Make it: *The price includes such items as meals and trips.*

**That** — refers to things, animals without names; *who* applies to humans, animals with names. See who.

**That** — introduces an essential clause: *The lawnmower that is broken is in the garage.* **Which** usually follows a comma and introduces a nonessential clause: *The lawnmower, which is broken, is in the garage.* See which.

**The Scene** — pleonastic in such usage as *fled the scene.* The scene is the only place anyone can flee.

**The Year** — redundant in *the year 2004.* 2004 is a year.

**Tragic** — opinion word. Requires attribution.

**Try** — is followed by an infinitive, a to, not an and. *Try to win,* not *try and win.* Try and win doubles the verb. It says that the person will try and will win.
Very — opinion, unnecessary.
Whenever — means each time. Does not substitute for when, which means a specific time. Whenever and when are not synonymous.
Which — usually follows a comma and introduces a nonessential clause: The lawnmower, which is broken, is in the garage. That introduces an essential clause: The lawnmower that is broken is in the garage. See that.

While — means at the same time. It does not provide the contrast that though and although provide, and it does not substitute for and.
Who — refers to people; that refers to animals without names and things. See that.
Will be ...ing — progressive tense; not needed; use simple past, present, future tense

Grammar

Appositive — a word or phrase that means the same as another word or phrase. Appositives require two commas, one before and one after. Dr. Eddie Davis, interim president of Texas A&M University, delivered the welcome address.

Attribution — state fact, attribute opinion. Do not arbitrarily put attribution at the end of the statement. Instead, put attribution where it hides, usually at the first break in the sentence:

The president said read my lips, no new taxes.
Read my lips, the president said, no new taxes.
Read my lips, no new taxes, the president said.

The most important parts of any sentence, paragraph, book are the beginning and the end. The middle supports both ends. The most important information in what the president said is no new taxes; in a story about the president, the most important information is not the speaker, it is what the speaker said. So, do not weaken the power end of the sentence with the president said.

In writing research articles, cite literature reviews in the past tense and use the verb wrote.
Defining Clause — a complete thought unit that follows an introductory phrase frequently requires a that for clear writing. The sheriff said when he entered the room, he saw the body means that the sheriff made that statement upon entering the room. The sheriff said that when he entered the room, he saw the body means that he made that statement later. The sheriff pointed out the man had stolen the money is awkward. The sheriff did not point out the man, he pointed out what the man did. Correct: The sheriff pointed out that the man had stolen the money is clear.

Quoting One or Two Words — quoting one or two words may change the meaning of the word(s): The sheriff said two “women” were arrested. He described the prostitute as a “good mother.” If the sentence reads the same with and without the quotations marks, omit them.

Punctuation — all periods and commas are inside all close quotation marks. All colons and semicolons are outside all close quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points go inside or outside close quotation marks according to the sense of the sentence. Only one space after periods.

Comma — separates items in list, and separates two thought units joined by a conjunction: “and,” “but,” etc.

Semicolon — separates two thought units not joined by a conjunction
All Periods, Commas — place inside all close quotation marks
All Colons, Semicolons — place outside all close quotation marks

Sentence Structure — do not change the structure of sentences without valid reason. Changing to prevent boredom in readers does not work because boring writing is boring writing regardless of the structure.

Subjunctive — a verb mood that indicates a condition contrary to fact or a condition of doubt. If I were you, I would get a master’s degree.

Suspensive Hyphenation — dropping the common noun in all but the last of a series of hyphenated words. Note the space after the comma and before the and and the to. The 11-, 12- and 13-year-old boys were given 5- to 10-day suspensions.

Synonyms — there are no true synonyms; each word has additional meanings, nuances that apply in certain situations that, if used inappropriately, change the meaning of the sentence. To ensure and enforce understanding, repeat key words. Arbitrary changing of words results in confusion.
Caution

Never use any word whose definition and usage you have not looked up in the dictionary. Dictionaries at the collegiate and higher levels provide usage of words of similar but not interchangeable meaning. Such listing of words follows SYN in boldface italics after all of the definitions. If SYN is at the bottom of a list of definitions, look up that listing and select the proper word according to the usages listed.

In a Collegiate Edition dictionary, see deny and disprove and comprise and include, and compare the usage of similar words in each listing.

Epilogue

Brevity in writing is essential. Get to the point.

Delete unnecessary words.

Read loud and listen to what you wrote. Rewrite as many times as needed.

— DPS —