

X TOP 10 ELEMENTARY RULES OF USAGE

Last topic in this part of the course dedicated to style and writing is the Top ten list of elementary rules of usage, a kind of top ten list of basic **grammatical rules** in English, or most common mistakes that people usually make. Our source for this is also the previously mentioned book *Elements of Style* written 100 years ago by *William Strunk* and enlarged some half a century ago by *Elwyn White*.

RULE 10 Form the possessive singular of nouns with 's
Follow this rule whatever the last consonant is, so even when a name ends with *s*. Thus write, Charles's friend and Burns's poems. The only exception are the possessive forms of ancient proper names in *-es* and *-is*, the possessive Jesus', and such forms as for *consciences'* sake, for *righteousness'* sake. Possessive forms of ancient names are thus commonly expressed in a form the heel of Achilles, the laws of Moses or the temple of Isis.

RULE 9 In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last
For example: *red, white, and blue*
He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents

By the way, this seems to me to be preferred in American English and not universal. Thus, whether you use or don't use a comma before the last term, make sure to at least be consistent.

RULE 8 Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas
This rule is rather difficult to apply, because it is often hard to decide whether a single word, such as *however*, or a brief phrase, is or is not parenthetical. If the interruption to the flow of the sentence is only slight, we can safely omit the commas. But if the interruption is not slight, we must never omit the comma.

My dad, a former CIA agent, speaks English, French, and Thai.
The man who opened the door was my uncle.
In 1769, when Napoleon was born, Corsica had but recently been acquired by France.

RULE 7 **Do not join independent clauses by a comma**
A very good example is: *Let's eat Grandma* and *Let's eat, Grandma*.
Omitting a comma in the first example makes grandma being eaten for dinner.

RULE 6 **Use a semicolon instead of a comma when appropriate**
If two or more clauses are grammatically complete and not joined by a conjunction are to form a single compound sentence, the proper mark is a **semicolon, not a comma**.

Mary Shelley's works are entertaining; they are full of engaging ideas.
It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.

Using a semicolon can be quite effective, as this can signal a break or a transition that is less forceful than a separate sentence, and still stronger than comma, which is often very useful.

RULE 5 **Using a colon**
Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation. A colon tells the reader that what follows is **closely related to the preceding clause**.

RULE 4 **Place a comma before "and" or "but" introducing an independent clause**
*The early records of the city have disappeared, **and** the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed.*
*The situation is perilous, **but** there is still one chance of escape*

RULE 3 **Do not break sentences in two**
In other words, **do not use periods for commas**.
Have a look at these examples:

I met them on a train several years ago.
Coming home from Liverpool to New York.

*He was an interesting talker.
A man who had travelled all over the world,
and lived in half a dozen countries.*

In both cases, the first **period** should be **replaced by a comma**, and the following word begun with a small letter.

RULE 2 Subject-Verb Agreement

This rule prescribe that the number of the subject determines the number of the verb.

The bittersweet flavour of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – is not soon forgotten.

Use a singular verb form after the following: *each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone.*

Everybody thinks he or she has a unique sense of humour.

A compound subject formed of two or more nouns joined by and almost always requires a **plural** verb.

When both halves of the subject is singular, so is the verb.

When half of the subject is singular and the other half plural, focus on the subject **nearest** to the verb.

If both halves are plural, then so is the verb:

Ties or ascots are required.

RULE 1 A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject

This is too often mistaken that it requires particular attention.

*In the sentence "Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children." the word **walking** refers to the subject of the sentence, not to the woman.*

To make it refer to the woman, you must **recast** the sentence:

He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.

Participial and adjective phrases also come under the same rule if they are at the beginning of the sentence:

On arriving in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.

Again, this reads as if the friends have just arrived, and the appropriate form is thus:

When he arrived in Chicago, his friends met him at the station.

A soldier of proved valour, they entrusted him with the defence of the city.

A soldier of proved valour, he was entrusted with the defence of the city.

If you tame these 10 rules, you will probably avoid many common mistakes in using or writing in English. Thus, good luck!

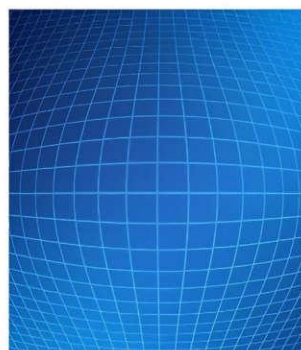
THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Strunk and White

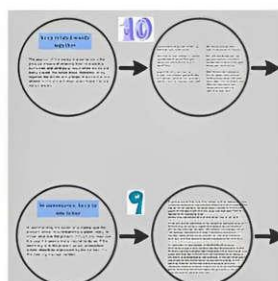
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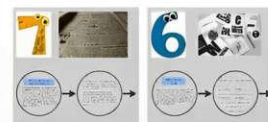
Keep related words together



In summaries, keep to one tense



Omit needless words
Avoid a succession of loose sentences



Headline 4



3 Use the active voice



2

