English Grammar & Punctuation

A Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Grammar should be like the background music in a film. If it's good you hardly notice it. If it's bad, it jars and distracts you and does not allow you to focus on what's important. We write to communicate our ideas, opinions and discoveries. If the way we write obscures these goals in any way, then we must rethink our approach. Some people think grammar is unimportant, being a secondary issue to the main thrust of their writing. However, if your use or misuse of grammar leads your reader to stumble over your meaning, you have failed. Grammar is important.

Some rules of grammar and punctuation are quite simply non-negotiable. Failure to apply these will make your writing to appear incomprehensible and will make you, the author, look uneducated, lazy or just plain silly.

Everyone finds writing a challenge but one of the reasons why some many people, even those at university, find writing difficult is because they feel they can't write 'properly.'

This lack of confidence, when it comes to grammar and punctuation, is perceived as a significant barrier to being able to write effectively. Whole books are written on English grammar and punctuation, and I cannot hope to distil several years of schooling into this short Study Guide. However, the commonest problems that people face when it comes to grammar and punctuation are relatively few, so let's focus on those, and let's begin by talking about commas.

FIVE USES OF A COMMA

The comma is the most commonly used punctuation mark and probably the most poorly and inconsistently applied. I think commas tell you when to pause and breathe. Some people don't agree with that functional definition, but if that's not what commas are for, why are they there? I like commas, probably because I write the way I talk. When you talk, you have to take breaths, and that's where I need my commas. Others write the way they read and, because there are no natural pauses in that mental flow, there are no obvious places to put commas, and they run into difficulty.

Some writers pepper their prose with a liberal dusting of commas leaving them where they fall with no regard for the rules of punctuation. Clearly, this is not the right way to go about it. Simply inserting commas into your text willy-nilly, because you think good writing has commas, just creates confusion.

Almost as bad, but not quite, is the approach of using no commas at all. This strategy is adopted by those writers who lack confidence in punctuation, and who feel that the best thing to do in the circumstances is to leave them out altogether in case they use them incorrectly. A minimalist approach to commas is acceptable, but a nihilistic one is not. There are some places where it is compulsory in good, grammatical English to use a comma and many places where it is desirable, but you certainly can't get by with none at all.

Having said all that, perhaps suggesting that you simply put a comma where you need to breathe may not be the best strategy for teaching the use of the comma.

There are rules and many of them are simple, although some are far from hard and fast. What follows are five important uses of a comma.

1. Lists

Commas are used to separate items in a list. If you are listing more than two items, you should use a comma to separate them.

Example:

- The journal article was written by Smith, Jones and Black.

If you are American, you will also insert a comma between the second last item and the 'and' or the 'or'.

Example:

- We were given access to papers, books, abstracts, and reports.

This is known as an Oxford, Harvard, or Serial Comma. Commas in lists are compulsory, but serial commas are a matter of choice and house-style. As with many acceptable variants in punctuation, the acceptability is largely dependent on your consistency. In other words, pick a style and stick with it.

2. Coordinate adjectives

When we use more than one adjective to describe a noun, we insert a comma between each. There are some exceptions to this, but as a rule of thumb if you can insert the word 'and' or 'or' between the adjectives, and if you can reverse the adjectives with no loss of meaning, the adjectives are known as coordinate and a comma is appropriate; if you cannot, then the adjectives aren't and it isn't.

Examples:

- This is a short, easy assignment. (coordinate adjectives)
- The pristine, unpublished manuscript lay on the table. (coordinate adjectives)
- The author wore a white linen suit. (non-coordinate adjectives)
- The streets were covered in the crisp winter snow. (non-coordinate adjectives)

3. Conjunctions

A comma should be inserted before the seven, so-called, co-ordinating conjunctions (*and, but, so, for, nor, yet, or*) to separate two independent clauses.

Examples:

- He argued the case eloquently, and he managed to convince the jury.
- She took charge of the situation, but she did not enjoy the task.
- They presented us with an ultimatum, so we had no choice.

A common mistake is to place the required comma after, rather than before, the conjunction.

Example:

- We purified the protein and, our colleagues analysed it. [Incorrect]

An exception to this is when the clauses are both short. Then, it is considered acceptable to omit the comma completely.

Example:

- We tried and we succeeded.

Remember *Because* is a conjunction but it isn't a co-ordinating one, and this means that the comma rule highlighted above does not apply. However, many writers incorrectly insert a comma before any phrase beginning with the word *because*.

Examples:

- The teacher was irate, because this was the third time it had happened. [Incorrect]
- The student achieved a distinction because she had worked hard. [Correct]

There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule where a comma should be used to avoid confusion.

Examples:

- We did not take this course because we wanted an easy ride.
- We did not take this course, because we wanted an easy ride.

The former means that we *did* take the course irrespective of its difficulty, while the latter explains why we *did not* take the course. The single comma here makes all the difference.

4. Introductory words or phrases

Commas should be used to insert a pause between an introductory word or phrase that comes before the subject of the sentence**.**

Examples:

- When these difficulties arise, speak to your line manager.
- Given the circumstances, his actions were appropriate.
- Clearly, these are not the most important problems we face.

However, if the phrase is very short, or if there is little danger of confusing your reader, you may omit the comma.

Examples:

- After the ceremony we celebrated.
- Soon we will be leaving.

Some introductory words such as *However*, *Well, Now, Yes* or *No* are always followed by a comma to separate them from the rest of the sentence.

Examples:

- Well, what did you think of that?
- 'No, I can't come over,' he said.
- Now, in order to answer this problem, we must first examine the variables.
- However, the blood glucose results were not consistent with the diagnosis.

5. Separation of dates, addresses, degrees and direct speech

When dates are written in the American format of month/day/year, it is important to insert a comma between the number of the date and the number of the year to avoid confusion.

Example:

- He was born on February 15, 1962.

When dates are written as day/month/year or just as month/year the convention is to omit the comma.

Examples:

- The election took place on 27 January 2010.
- The sales figures for March 2012 were impressive.

The elements of an address are often separated by commas, but this convention is not extended to the addressing of envelopes, where no punctuation should be used. Who says so? The Royal Mail and the US Postal Service, that's who.

Examples:

- He lived in Dallas, Texas.
- The offices were in Sydney, Australia.
- The incident took place on City Road, London, W12.

Degrees designated by letters after one's name are set apart by commas inserted before and after.

Examples:

- John Smith, PhD, gave the keynote address.
- Maria Jones, MD, FRCPath, was the first expert witness to be called.

Commas should also be used to separate off direct speech.

Examples:

- The chairman said, 'The motion is carried.'
- 'Place your bets,' said the croupier.

If the direct speech is interrupted, we again use commas to separate it.

Example:

- 'What did you mean,' he asked, 'when you said that?'

FIVE MISUSES OF A COMMA

Commas have a habit of cropping up in sentences where they have no right to be. Omitting your commas is one thing; putting them where they are trespassing is another. And the latter can be a very clear signal to your reader that you are not in full control of your writing and, by extension, your thoughts. Therefore, it is just as important to know when not to use a comma, as it is to know its rightful place.

1. Asides

A pair of commas may be used to set off an aside or an interruption in a sentence. Such an aside is called a parenthetical element and could also be encased in brackets. Importantly, the aside is part of the sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.

Examples:

- Stonehenge, one of the most important archaeological sites, is found in Wiltshire.
- RMS Titanic, the most famous liner of the twentieth century, was built in Belfast.

One of the most common mistakes to make is to forget to include the second comma. This is especially common when the aside in question is lengthy.

2. Descriptor/Name commas

I noted above that some writers like to dust their prose with a sprinkling of commas. One of the commonest forms of dusting is to insert unnecessary commas between names of things and their descriptions. Let me illustrate.

- I read the book, ‘The Double Helix’, for my course, ‘History of Science’.

This should be correctly punctuated:

- I read the book ‘The Double Helix’ for my course ‘History of Science’.

At least that is the way unless the only book ever written was ‘The Double Helix’ and if the only course was ‘History of Science’.

This may not seem immediately obvious, but it illustrates an important and very common misuse of commas. Here, we are mentioning a book and a course. In each case, if there is only one book and only one course, then no further information is required to identify them unequivocally. However, as there are many books and many courses, you need to identify them, and the additional information you provide by naming them is considered essential and should not be set off from the rest of the sentence using commas.

If we had written:

- I read James Watson’s 1968 book on the discovery of the structure of DNA, ‘The Double Helix’, for course S203, ‘History of Science’.

then the commas can stay because now the additional information is non-essential as Watson only wrote one book in 1968 on DNA structure, and the precise course is now specified. Thus, the additional names can now be set off from the rest of the sentence.

Consider the following further examples.

- The salt, sodium hydroxide, is an alkali. [Incorrect]
- The planet, Neptune, has an interesting orbit. [Incorrect]
- The first man, Adam, lived in the Garden of Eden. [Correct]

In the first two examples, there should be no commas because the identifier is insufficient on its own, and the names ‘sodium hydroxide’ and ‘Neptune’ are essential, additional pieces of information. In the third example, the identifier is sufficient for the reader to know who is being talked about, and the addition of the name is non-essential information.

3. Splicing

‘Comma splicing’ is what we do when we join or link two independent clauses with only a comma. Independent clauses are those that could stand alone as sentences because they contain a subject and a verb.

Example:

- We conducted the experiments successfully, now we have analysed the results. [Incorrect]

The comma here has been used incorrectly to join the sentences, but this can be sorted in several ways:

- We conducted the experiments successfully. Now, we have analysed the results.

- We conducted the experiments successfully; now we have analysed the results.
- We conducted the experiments successfully, and now we have analysed the results.

Any of these solutions is acceptable and grammatically correct, and which you choose is a matter of personal preference and style.

4. Compound predicates

The kind of compound sentence created above when we replaced the comma splice with a conjunction such as *and* or *but* presents a further complication when a single subject has two verbs.

Example:

- He was very suspicious of the witness, and doubted her statement. [Incorrect]

The rule is that when a single subject has two or more verbs and those verbs are separated by a conjunction, we omit the comma. The sentence should be written:

- He was very suspicious of the witness and doubted her statement. [Correct]

If the subject were to pop up a second time after the conjunction, then it would be correct to insert the comma, thus:

- He was very suspicious of the witness, and he doubted her statement. [Correct]

In short, if the subject is not included before the second verb, leave out the comma.

5. Changing the meaning

Sentences can have their meaning turned upside down by the inclusion of an errant comma. The most celebrated example was used by the journalist Lynne Truss for her book on grammar, 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves'.

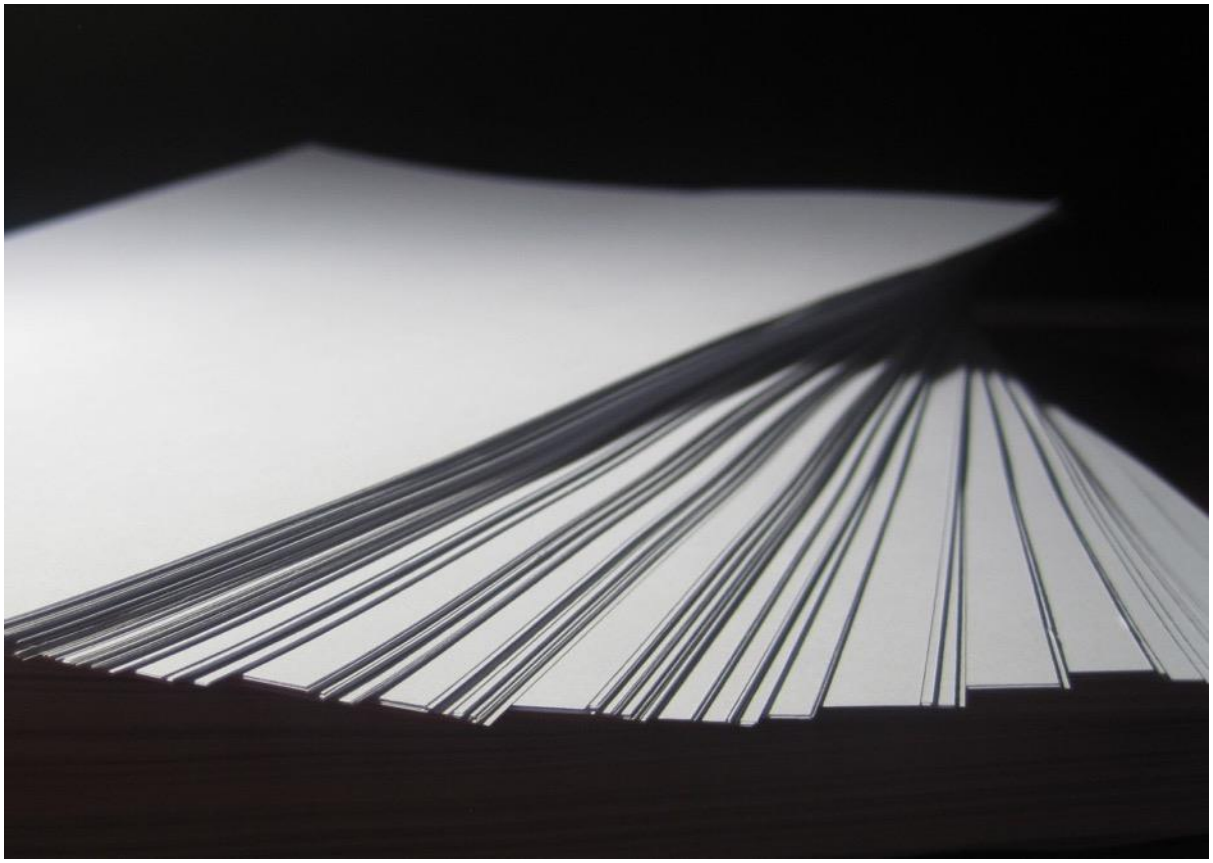
'The panda eats shoots and leaves,' might be a perfectly inoffensive zoological description, but insert a comma thus: 'The panda eats, shoots and leaves,' and we have turned the docile herbivore into a gun-toting menace.

Another example is the restaurant menu that listed the ingredients of its Goats' Cheese Salad as 'lettuce, tomato, goats, cheese'. Suddenly, all because of a comma, the vegetarians are saying, 'No, thank-you.'

And, perhaps a little more subtly:

- The students, who could not attend the lecture, were asked to visit the course website.

Here the commas parenthesise an aside ('who could not attend the lecture'). As we saw above, an aside can be removed from a sentence without changing its meaning. In this case, the sentence means all the students were asked to visit the website. If we omit the commas, then we mean only that subset of students who could not attend were invited to visit the site.



FIVE THAT ARE EASY TO CORRECT

This set of common mistakes includes the commonest of all and, I believe, the easiest to fix. Each relies on a simple rule, which is neither contentious nor debatable. The rule in each case can be quickly learned and applied, thus solving at least some of our problems with relative ease.

1. Apostrophes

An apostrophe is used for two main purposes. First, it is used to indicate a possessive, i.e. that something belongs to someone or something. Second, it is used to indicate the deletion of one or more letters.

An example of the first would be: the cat's pyjamas or Halley's comet.

The only complexities that arise are when we make a plural possessive or when a word already ends in the letter *s*.

If the pyjamas in question belonged to more than one cat, we put the apostrophe on the other side of the *s*, the cats' pyjamas, to clarify this. If the word we wish to turn into a possessive already ends in the letter *s*, then there is some debate, and indeed lack of consistency, on what we should do. Is it St James's or St James'? Is it Charles's or Charles'? By convention it always seems to be Moses' and Jesus', but as for the others, you can take your pick. In London, you can stroll through St James's Park, while in Newcastle upon Tyne you will cheer at St James' Park, the

football stadium. As always, whenever there seems to be no grammatically right approach, make sure that you are consistent in yours.
The other use of an apostrophe is to indicate that letters have been removed in a contraction. Didn't is a contraction of *did not* and the apostrophe indicates that the letter *o* is missing. Similarly, can't is a contraction of *cannot*, so this time we are missing an *n* and an *o*, and should've is a contraction of *should have* with the apostrophe denoting the missing *ha*. Thus, the apostrophe can indicate the deletion of one or more letters.

The biggest faux pas when it comes to apostrophes is the use of an apostrophe *s* to denote a plural. 'Carrot's 50p a pound,' the greengrocer's window will exclaim, but will do so erroneously. Using an apostrophe *s* to make a plural of any normal word is always wrong. Now, sometimes people mistakenly think they should make an abbreviation plural by adding an apostrophe *s* rather than just an *s*, e.g. PhD's. This is trying to be too clever and just causes confusion. What such people are thinking is that they need this to be an apostrophe because they're missing some letters. In reality, it merely makes it look like a possessive. Whenever we are using abbreviations consisting of capital letters or numbers, we can make the plural, quite unambiguously, by adding just a letter *s*, e.g. DVDs, 1980s, MDs, 100s, PCs.

While extra apostrophes may be a sure sign of grammatical ignorance, missing apostrophes should also be highlighted. Tesco, the supermarket chain, was berated by Bill Bryson, no less, for its signs that declare *Mens Magazines* and *Girls Toys*. The 2003 Hugh Grant and Sandra Bullock film, *Two Weeks Notice* could also have benefitted from an apostrophe, as could Christopher Eccleston's movie of the same year, *Revengers Tragedy*. Some apostrophes are missing, but others seem to be mislaid. In January 2012, the bookshop chain *Waterstone's* decided to delete its apostrophe, but it's not clear when *Barclays* or *Harrods* or *Boots* lost theirs. However, the apostrophe police are out in force and looking into it.

A word about pronouns: *Your's*, *her's* and *our's*, are not words. No apostrophe is needed in each case because these pronouns are inherently possessive.

Some argue that apostrophes are unnecessary and that we do not need them to make our sentences clear. Oh, really? How about, *Those are my sons?* Does that mean the same as, *Those are my son's* or *Those are my sons'*? No, apostrophes clear up a lot of little confusions, and if they are used correctly and consistently, they do what any punctuation mark is designed to do: they add clarity to the written word.

2. Loose / lose

For some inexplicable reason people mix these up. 'Loose' is an adjective meaning not tight or firm, or a verb meaning to release, and 'lose' is a verb meaning to misplace, and they are pronounced differently. Make sure you don't use them interchangeably.

Example:

- If your writing is loose and undisciplined, you may lose your book deal.

3. Try and / Try to

We can get away with the informal *try and* in speech but in formal writing always use the *try to* form.

Example:

- Try to remember that 'try and' is only for speech.

Try and is not wrong, just loose and colloquial—the kind of thing you find in speech and song titles, like *Try and Love Again* by the Eagles.

4. Transposed spellings

Trial and *trail*, *for* and *fro*, *causal* and *casual*, *from* and *form*. It is easy to mistype the word *trial* as *trail* or *from* as *form* and importantly, because the misspelling is still a correctly spelt word, it will not be picked up by an automated spell checker. You will find these mistakes even in published books, so look out for them by proper and thorough proofreading. Most importantly, you should read your text out loud rather than in silence, and in this way, you will pick up many errors that you would otherwise miss. If it doesn't sound right, it probably isn't grammatical.

5. Parallelism in lists

All lists should be written in a way that ensures the items in the list are in parallel or agreement. If you don't do this, your lists may be confusing as well as being grammatically incorrect.

Example:

- To conduct this experiment, you will need a glass beaker, a pipette and to arrange for supervision.

The list appears to consist of three items, but the first two are things while the third is an action. As a consequence, the list will jar the reader. A better version would be:

- To conduct this experiment, you will need a glass beaker and a pipette, and you will need to arrange for supervision.

An important form of list in a variety of documents is the list of bullet points. Here, as in other list forms, it is important that each item in the list is consistent with the others and begin with the same part of speech, e.g. if each bullet point is an action, then each should begin with a verb of the same tense.

Examples:

- Fill the kettle
- Boil the water
- Pour into the cup
- Brew the tea

And not:

- The kettle should be filled
- Boil the water
- After stirring, put the water in the cup

- The tea should now be brewed

FIVE THAT ARE IMPORTANT BUT NEED A LITTLE THOUGHT

This set of common mistakes includes ones that abound on the pages of many students and professionals alike. In each case, a little more attention is required to get it right, and in some cases the rules are not that straightforward and can lead to confusion.

1. Semicolons and colons

The author Kurt Vonnegut advised, 'Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.' Semicolons can certainly be overused, and their use at all is perhaps a simple indicator that you know they exist. Many elementary schoolteachers rue the day when they introduce their young charges to this punctuation mark. Immediately afterwards, every written piece of work will be liberally and inappropriately sprinkled with the little beasts.

A semicolon should be used to separate two parts of a sentence that are closely related; not so closely related that a comma will do to separate them, but too close to be made into two sentences.

Examples:

- To err is human; to forgive divine.
- He became a lawyer; I became a doctor.

A semicolon then, like a comma, offers a breathing space, but if a comma is a quaver a semicolon is a crotchet or a longer pause. In turn, the colon is an even more substantial pause—now we are in semibreve territory.

Fowler noted 'the colon…has acquired a special function, that of delivering the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words.' While amusing, perhaps a little more explanation would be useful. Semicolons tend to separate clauses of roughly equal importance and weight. Colons, on the other hand, often serve to separate some form of introduction from its conclusion, and it is most often used to introduce examples.

Examples:

- There were several kinds of apple available: red, green and yellow.
- His appearance could be summed up in a single word: shabby.

Colons will also be found in several other settings. One will be inserted between numbers where we are indicating a ratio or proportion, e.g. *5:1*, for five to one. We frequently find them between hours and minutes on a digital timepiece, e.g. *13:30*, for half past one. Americans also often use a colon after the salutation on a letter, e.g. *Dear Mr Smith:* while in British English we would either use a comma for that purpose or preferably nothing at all.

As our sentences become more complex to reflect the branching and fluidity of our thoughts, we need these punctuation marks to pace the development of the idea before a full stop brings it to an abrupt close. Indeed, Ben Dolnick, writing in the *New York Times*, says of the semicolon, 'No other piece of punctuation so compactly captures the way in which our thoughts are both liquid and solid, wave and particle.'

But, if you are still in doubt about when to use these punctuation marks, perhaps you should after all follow Vonnegut's advice and avoid them altogether.

2. Dangling or misplaced modifiers

We often use some form of modifier to expand on the description of a noun. The problem comes when we misplace this modifier in the sentence, and the noun to which it applies is mistaken by the reader. This can sometimes result in hilarity, but rarely does it lead to serious misunderstanding. However, it will indicate to some readers that, once again, your grammar, and, perhaps by extension, your work is not quite up to scratch.

Example:

- As the biggest single cause of lung cancer, we must tackle smoking.

Here the sentence structure suggests that 'we' are 'the biggest single cause of lung cancer'. To correct this, we could reword as follows:

- We must tackle smoking, which is the biggest single cause of lung cancer.

3. i.e. vs e.g.

These are abbreviations for Latin expressions that are useful tools in modern English. However, they do not mean the same and are not interchangeable. The

abbreviation *i.e.* stands for *id est*, which means *that is*. You will use *i.e.* when you could otherwise have used the phrase 'or in other words'.

Example:

- He is a campanologist, i.e. a bell-ringer

The abbreviation *e.g.* stands for *exempli gratia*, which means *for example*. You will use *e.g.* when you would otherwise have used the phrase 'for example'.

Example:

- He considered a number of instruments, e.g. the piano and the guitar.

So, not really rocket science, and difficult to see how these two little Latin abbreviations get so mixed up, but they do, every day.

Two other important points about their use are worth mentioning. First, it is most people's convention to write *i.e.* and *e.g.* rather than *ie* or *eg*. Most abbreviations that consist of lower-case letters are written with periods after each letter. Second, you should insert a comma before *i.e.* or *e.g.* for all the good reasons outlined above in the use of commas section.

4. Run-on sentences

This is a very common error that seems to be committed by those who either don't write or don't read very much. It seems to occur because people are transcribing their speech into pseudo-sentences without paying attention to the basic rules of grammar.

Run-on sentences are two or more separate sentences that are spliced together as a single sentence. As we saw above, this splicing is most often done with a comma.

Example:

- We studied the problem, we came to the following conclusion.

This is high on the list of grammatical sins and should either be properly written as two separate sentences.

Example:

- We studied the problem. We came to the following conclusion.

or, perhaps more simply rewritten using a conjunction such as *and*.

Example:

- We studied the problem, and we came to the following conclusion.

Occasionally, run on sentences will be created with no punctuation at all. Here, thoughts will just be bolted together in some form of stream of consciousness. This might a good way to get your initial ideas down on paper and certainly some authors would advocate it highly as a technique. The problem comes, however, when that author does not take the time to rewrite the text in correct grammatical English.

If you are prone to this problem, you must take steps to correct it and the easiest thing you can do is to read your text aloud and exaggerate the pauses, making a full

stop twice as long as a comma. Does it sound right? If not, think again, otherwise your finished text will look very 'first draft'.

5. Who / Whom

This one flummoxes many and perhaps not surprisingly so. There is a formal grammatical rule to be followed, but it requires us to be more aware than usual of the state of our pronouns. *Who* and *whom* are both pronouns. *Who* is a subjective pronoun, used when the pronoun is the subject of the clause. *Whom* is an objective pronoun, used when the pronoun acts as the object of the clause. However, that's the kind of explanation that gives grammar guides a bad name.

One simple way to work it out is to replace the *who* with another subjective pronoun, such as *he*, *she*, *it* or *we*.

Example:

- Who visited you? (She visited you.)

And, replace the *whom* with another objective pronoun, such as *him*, *her*, *it* or *us*.

Example:

- I visited the friend whom I met on holiday. (I visited her.)

If after all that, you're still stumped, just use *who*—a *who* in the wrong place never sounds quite as bad as a misplaced *whom*.

FIVE THAT ARE DIFFICULT AND MANY PEOPLE GET WRONG

Some rules of grammar and punctuation are more challenging, and errors in their application are very common, even in the work of relatively sophisticated writers. Those who would never misplace an apostrophe can get some of the following wrong and not even know they are doing it.

1. Fewer and less

These words that both describe quantity are often used interchangeably, but they shouldn't be. The word 'fewer' should be used for things you can count, while the word 'less' should be used for things whose quantity is more hypothetical.

Examples:

- There are fewer than 5,000 tigers left in the wild.
- The team has been less successful this season.

2. Singulars and plurals

Some pronouns cause a lot of problems as to whether they should be followed by singular or plural forms of verbs, especially when the pronouns in question seem to denote several people or things.

The pronouns, *each* and *every* should routinely be followed by a singular verb form.

Examples:

- Each of these cheeses is delicious.

- Every ship launched was torpedoed.

Pronouns such as everybody, everyone, nobody, no one and none are more controversial. Is it better to use singular or plural forms here?

Examples:

- Everyone brought their coats to school. [Plural form]

or

- Everyone brought his or her coat to school. [Singular form]

Technically, the latter is more correct, but is often thought to be a bit clumsier than the former. Rather than get heated over this, it is often better to circumvent the problem by rewording the sentence, e.g. The children brought their coats to school, especially if you want to avoid using *his or her* every time and if you want to avoid any gender specifics in your writing.

3. Different from/different than/different to

You can be bigger than, better than and faster than something or someone, but in each case, this will make you *different from* them. There may be some special cases when you can get away with *different than* and it is certainly prevalent in American English, but as a safe, general rule always use *different from*. The construction *different to* is even more controversial and is best avoided altogether.

4. Hyphens and dashes

Hyphens and the different forms of dashes are often used interchangeably especially by those who do not know how to word process properly. A hyphen is the shortest and looks like this, -. An en-rule dash is a bit longer and an em-rule dash is the longest of all and looks like this, —.

Em-rule dashes, but not hyphens, are often used in place of commas, colons and semi-colons in less formal styles of writing. Again, your technical writing will be formal, and you should avoid the dash as much as possible. If you do wish to include dashes, take the time to learn how to insert them. Don't simply use hyphens with spaces on either side and hope for the best. On Macs the hard key is shift+opt+hyphen, and on PCs, it's ALT-0150. Alternatively, you can also use your Word menu: Insert/Symbol/Special Characters.

Hyphens, on the other hand, are essential, and they are used primarily to join two or more words to make a single expression.

Examples:

- Up-to-date
- Prayer-book
- Golf-course
- Anglo-German
- Boogie-woogie

We also hyphenate words to avoid misunderstandings or to make them easier to say, because of the juxtaposition of two similar sounds. Examples of the former

include re-cover and re-form, which do not mean the same as recover and reform. Examples of the latter are *semi-independent*, *sword-dance* and *post-traumatic*.

How we hyphenate words, and indeed if they need hyphens at all, is a matter of fashion as much as anything else. Often new compound terms are hyphenated and as they become more commonly used, they lose their hyphen. The compound terms *bio-medical* and *radio-activity* have long since become *biomedical* and *radioactivity* and I newer words, such as *e-mail*, are already losing their hyphens in many texts.

5. Lay vs Lie

Fowler's Modern English Usage says of this one, '…confusion of the two is taken to be certain evidence of imperfect education…' So, we better get this one cleared up if we don't want to get our *alma mater* in trouble. Lay is a transitive verb needing a direct subject and one or more objects. Lie is an intransitive verb and needs no object. The present tense of lay is *lay*, and its past tense is *laid*. The present tense of lie is *lie*, and its past tense is *lay*. And that's probably where the confusion comes from.

Examples:

- Please lay the table.
- I laid the table yesterday.
- I'm tired and I need to lie down.
- You lay down yesterday, so please lay the table today.

The most common mistake is confusing the past tenses of lay and lie.

Example:

- You laid down yesterday. [Incorrect]

FIVE THAT MAKE YOU LOOK SILLY

These mistakes are common but shouldn't be. They are quite elementary bits of grammar that everyone learned when they were being taught to read and write in elementary school. Nevertheless, they crop up time and again in student essays, dissertations, and first and sometimes second drafts of PhD chapters. The common thread here is that making any of these mistakes, especially if you do so consistently, will make you look silly.

1. It's and Its

Now, come on, this one isn't hard. *It's* is a contraction of it is or it has, so whenever you are using it in this sense it has an apostrophe. If *its* is being used in the possessive sense, i.e. belonging to it, then you don't use an apostrophe even although you might think that it should have one. This is simply to avoid confusion. This is one that certainly makes you look like a fool if you regularly get it wrong.

2. Should've/could've/would've

The expressions, *should have*, *could have* and *would have* may be contracted in informal English to *should've*, *could've* and *would've*. Now, when we use these contractions in speech, as we all do, they sound as if they have the word *of* after each, instead of the contraction *ve* standing in for the *have*. The problem comes when a writer mistakenly transliterates this speech form back into writing. Who would do this? Well, one of my students did it 23 times in the course of a 12-page assignment. 'The patient could of…' and, 'these results would of…' jarred my reading to the point that I couldn't see anything else. There were probably good

parts to the work, but I didn't get that far. This one is very easy to fix, unless of course you don't know you're making a mistake. Now, you do.

3. There/their/they're

This is one that you were taught in elementary school and if you get it wrong now it's either because you've got a short memory or because you don't proofread your work. *Their* is a possessive, meaning belonging to them, while *There* indicates a place. *They're* is a contraction of they are and has nothing to do with either of the other two except that it sounds the same, at least the way some people say it.

Example:

- 'Put the cakes over there,' said their father. 'They're for later.'

4. Your and You're

This is the most common mistake made when writing online. It is so common that I suspect many writers think these words are interchangeable. They are not. 'You're' is a contraction of you are. It is acceptable in informal writing and, of course, speech. 'Your', on the other hand, means that which belongs to you.

Many writers use 'Your' in place of 'You're' because it sounds the same—it is a homophone, a bit like should of and should've—but a little care should avoid this error.

Example:

- You're going to get into trouble if you let your dog loose.

5. Me, myself, I

Is it *me*, *I* or *myself*? This seems to lead to a lot of confusion with some writers and even in normal speech. Part of the problem is undoubtedly because we see these words as personal pronouns that all mean the same thing and believe that they are interchangeable. They're not. Is it, 'The Nobel Prize was awarded to Albert and me' or '...Albert and I'?

The way to decide is to remove the other person from the sentence and see what sounds right. We would never say, ' ...awarded to I', so the correct form is Albert and me. Some people mistakenly think 'I' must be correct because it sounds more formal, but it is not. Of course, some mistakenly think one way out of this dilemma to use *myself* and *yourself*.

Example:

- 'The Nobel Prize was awarded to Albert and myself'. [Incorrect]

This is equally wrong. Myself should only be used in two very restricted situations. When you are emphasising or contrasting two people.

Example:

- Albert was pleased, but I myself was overjoyed.

or when you are doing something to yourself,

Example:

- I cut myself shaving.

FIVE THAT GET SOME PEOPLE EXCITED BUT DON'T MATTER

Of course, with a subtitle like this I am bound to raise the hackles of many who hold the rules of grammar close to their hearts. The problem is that many so-called rules of grammar are nothing more than conventions or house-styles that have acquired the authority of a rule. Moreover, some rules of grammar are so imprecise or at least debatable that alternatives are widely accepted.

In some circumstances, there may be more than one 'rule' to follow. First, you should be consistent in your approach. Varying your approach from sentence to another or sometimes even within the same sentence is distracting to the reader and looks as if you don't really know what you're doing. Second, you should adhere to any house-styles of the publisher or your institution. If they want it one way when another way is acceptable, that's what they get, without deviation or argument. You are the piper and, because they are paying, they call the tune.

1. Split infinitives

This is probably the single most contentious rule of grammar. There are those who are simply incandescent when they stumble upon a split infinitive, and there are those who not only think there is nothing wrong with splitting the infinitive but argue that it is better to do so. So, what's all the fuss about? The infinitive is the two-word version of a verb, e.g. to run, to think, to split. We 'split' it by inserting an adverb between the two, e.g. to quickly run, to actually think, to wilfully split.

Everybody who has ever written about split infinitives is unable to resist the temptation to refer to Star Trek's opening monologue. Now, although I'm as ardent a trekkie as the next man, I will save you from this, because as an argument it's weak. Just because (the fictional) Captain James T. Kirk split his infinitives does not, necessarily, make it right.

2. Inverted commas

What about speech marks, quotation marks or inverted commas? All three terms mean the same and will be used in several settings.

You will use inverted commas to indicate direct speech.

Example:

- The London group said, 'We have discovered a new approach to the problem.'

Now, where the rest of the punctuation goes here depends on which side of the Atlantic you reside, so I suggest you follow what you were taught and allow editors to change it to their house-style. Generally, any punctuation marks that are part of the quote should be included in the quotation marks.

Example:

- She asked, 'What time is it?'
- He shouted, 'Help me!'

Full stops at the end of quotations are a particularly fraught issue. Which of the following are correct?

- He said, 'I am here.'
- He said, 'I am here'.

Generally, if the full stop belongs to the quote, then it should be included in the inverted commas, and if it belongs to the sentence as a whole it should go outside. In the example above, if 'I am here' was all he said and is in itself a complete sentence, then the full stop belongs to the quote. If what is being reported is only part of the quote, then the full stop belongs to the sentence and is rightly placed outside the inverted commas. British and American English, however, do disagree on this and this is one instance where you need to consult the style guide of your publisher or be content when they move all your commas and full stops.

What about the issue of single or double inverted commas? Single inverted commas are conventionally used for a single quotation and double inverted commas for a quotation within a quotation.

Example:

- He said, "The witness said, 'No'".

This convention of singles inside doubles is reversed in American English. Again, whatever approach you take, consistency is the key to acceptability.

If you are using a term in an unusual sense, you may wish to indicate that by enclosing it in inverted commas.

Example:

- The cells' 'hunger' for calcium ions was evident in their rate of utilisation.

If you wish to indicate irony you may enclose a word or phrase in inverted commas, when otherwise you may precede it with the word so-called.

Example:

- The 'team' was nothing more than two old men and a dog.

Irony, however, should not figure prominently in your technical writing.

Finally, remember that inverted commas also come in two forms: curly (') and straight ('). Which you use really doesn't matter, but you must be consistent throughout your writing, or it will betray your tendency to cut and paste from different documents.

3. That / which

The words, *that* and *which* are used virtually interchangeably by many writers, but there is a difference. We use these words to introduce extra information that may either be essential or non-essential. If the information is essential, the clause is called a restrictive clause and may be introduced by either *that* or *which*.

Examples:

- He analysed the sample that she collected
- He analysed the sample which she collected.

Here, the *that* and the *which* are serving the same purpose in introducing the restrictive clause that provides us with essential information about the sample in question.

If the clause contains non-essential information that could be omitted from the sentence without affecting its meaning or its structure, then we should only use *which*.

Examples:

- I bought the reagents, which I will store in the fridge.
- He failed to attend, which was annoying.

Such a non-restrictive clause should be preceded by a comma to show that it is extra information.

You will find some differences in the use of *that* and *which* on different sides of the Atlantic. At least one US grammar website I consulted stated that "UK English uses 'which' in most situations". I do not think this is so, but in most cases there is no ambiguity of meaning if either *that* or *which* are used, and as *which* may be used correctly in introducing both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, you will be able to get away with it.

4. Data *is* / Data *are*

Well, this is contentious. The *UK Office of National Statistics* says data are plural and take a plural verb. The *Guardian* newspaper says:

“It’s like agenda, a Latin plural that is now almost universally used as a singular. Technically the singular is datum/agendum, but we feel it sounds increasingly hyper-correct, old-fashioned and pompous to say ‘the data are.’”

And the *Wall Street Journal* sitting squarely on the fence recently stated:

‘Most style guides and dictionaries have come to accept the use of the noun data with either singular or plural verbs, and we hereby join the majority.’

When you delve a little deeper, you find that everyone agrees that data is a Latin plural, but that common usage reclassified it as a singular, akin to a collection of information rather than many pieces of individual information. However, there is a difference between common usage and specialist usage in technical writing. ‘Data’ is also one of those words that is used as a shibboleth. When reading a scientific paper many reviewers who come across the phrase, ‘The data is...’ will roll their eyes and start making assumptions.

Despite the controversy in style guides I recommend treating ‘data’ as a plural unless told explicitly otherwise. The plural form will upset nobody, while the singular form will raise some readers’ blood pressure.

5. Starting a sentence with *And*, *But* or *So*

I was certainly taught at school that I should never start a sentence with these conjunctions. Imagine my horror when I found just about every so-called great author that I read using them liberally.

And begins more sentences in the Bible than any other word, and Shakespeare used it to begin lines of dialogue, as has every major author since. It may be used most effectively to add an important afterthought and is certainly legitimate. As for *But* as an opener, the Oxford English Dictionary says it may be legitimately used to introduce a balancing statement ‘of the nature of an exception, objection, limitation, or contrast to what has gone before…’ The use of *So* is similarly acceptable and well served by distinguished precedent, although there is a growing tendency is speech to start every sentence with ‘So…’, which is not acceptable.

So, if you wish to heed the words of Miss Murgatroyd from elementary school and avoid *And*, *But* and *So* as sentence openers, confining them mid-sentence, there is no problem. However, if you wish to add variety and occasional punch to your prose, by all means put them upfront—just don’t do it all the time.

FIVE THAT DRIVE ME MAD

What is your particular bugbear when it comes to English grammar? What drives you to distraction? What makes you react as if literary fingernails have been drawn across a blackboard? I must confess to several. What follows is a list of five of my most pressing concerns.

1. Exclamation marks

My dislike of exclamation marks in technical writing such as academic papers, reports, dissertations or theses is, I admit, visceral. Nothing in formal writing should be exclaimed. Rather, it should be stated unequivocally, proposed or mooted. There is no place for this particular punctuation mark because there is no place for what it denotes, but alas my students and in some cases my colleagues disagree. I'm with F. Scott Fitzgerald, who said that using an exclamation mark is like laughing at your own jokes. An exclamation mark may also be seen as a cymbal crash or as raising the volume of your words to a shout or a scream. Your work, however, should never be screamed, but written about very much in an indoor voice.

Exclamation marks do find their way into popular culture with alarming frequency. *Oklahoma!* is not the only stage musical with an exclamation mark in its title—*Oliver!*, *Hello Dolly!* and more recently the Abba-fest, *Mamma Mia!* deserve a mention. *Westward Ho!* is the only place name in the British Isles with an exclamation mark—one wonders why we have even one. Another, but this time in Canada, is the

joyously named *Saint-Louis-du-Ha! Ha!* in Quebec, which is the only place name to rejoice in two exclamation marks.

If I should find myself having to write about an amateur production of Oklahoma! in Westward Ho!, I will happily employ exclamation marks, but otherwise I will leave them in the punctuation drawer where they belong. And don't try to hedge your bets by putting exclamation marks in brackets (!) for that's just shouting with your hand over your mouth and is best reserved for text messaging.

There are, of course, places where it is correct to use an exclamation mark, but these locations will rarely be found in your technical writing. If you find yourself writing a formal or technical piece that requires you to include animal noises (e.g. *Grrrr! Quack! Oink!*) I strongly suggest you pause for thought. Either you have misjudged the task in hand, or you need to rethink your profession. Such onomatopoeia will be grist to the mill of the children's author or even the novelist, but rarely does the word *Oink!* appear appropriately in the academic literature.

We may also use an exclamation mark appropriately to raise the volume of our direct speech, or rather our direct shouts, e.g. 'What!' he screamed. Again, while right for the novel, this is unlikely to find a place in the literature review.

I think writers use exclamation marks to add emphasis to their thoughts, or to convey their own surprise or disbelief. While it is important for the technical author to guide his or her reader and to signpost the relative importance of different aspects of their topic, there are better ways to do this than to use exclamation marks. Similarly, if you can't believe what you have read, exclamation marks just sound sarcastic.

In short, there is no situation where an exclamation mark will add to your formal writing. On the contrary, its presence will detract from it and will lead many readers to conclude that you are not in full control of your keyboard and, therefore, by extension, perhaps not in full control of your facts. Doubts about your facts lead inevitably to doubts about your judgement and any conclusions you have carefully carved from your data.

So, exclamation marks in formal, technical writing are nothing short of the first step on the road to perdition. Your intentions may be innocent, even good, but you know what they say about them!

2. Underlining vs Italics

We italicise or underline words to give them emphasis and distinguish them from the text around them. For example, we may italicise the titles of books, foreign words or genus and species names in biology. Alternatively, we may underline these, but we should not do both. In the pre word processor days, when the typewriter ruled the office, italics were not an option and the only way to add emphasis was to underline the words in question. This underlining was used to indicate to the typesetter that italics should be used, and the printed version would replace the underline with italics. Now, that we are effectively our own typesetters we should avoid using underlines and always use italics.

3. Principle/Principal

I work in Clinical Research, where we have local leaders of research projects called *Principal Investigators*. Despite this, in almost every document I have ever proof read written about clinical research, including some from very sophisticated sources, I have had to correct the misspelling of *Principal*.

Principal is usually an adjective and means main or leading but it can also be a noun meaning a leader or a sum of money. Principle, in contrast, is always a noun meaning a standard. How to remember this apparently impenetrable distinction? Try the simple mnemonic I always tell my research staff: 'The Principal Investigator is your Pal (even if he or she isn't).'

4. However as a conjunction

The word 'however' is an adverb, but it is often mistakenly used as an alternative to the conjunction 'but' to join phrases. I suspect some writers believe that 'however' is a rather more sophisticated word than the lowly 'but'. However, when used incorrectly it certainly does not conjure a vision of sophistication, but one of ineptitude.

'However' when used to mean 'nevertheless' may be used at the beginning of a sentence where it will be written with a capital letter and followed by a comma.

Example:

- They thought me an unworthy opponent. However, I surprised them all by winning the competition.

'However' when used to mean 'no matter how' may be used at the beginning of a sentence where it will be written with a capital letter and *not* followed by a comma.

Example:

- However hard he tried, he was unable to win the prize.

If you wish to use 'however' mid-sentence, it should be used in the sense of 'nevertheless' and never as a substitute for 'but'. When used in this way it will be preceded and followed by commas.

Example:

- They came, however, to see me awarded the cup.

5. Full stops in abbreviations and contractions

Some abbreviations have full stops and others don't. There are conventions for the use of full stops, but the most important thing is to be consistent throughout your writing, and to obey the house rules of your publisher.

Conventionally, if an abbreviation is composed of capital letters, no full stops are required. If the abbreviation is only lower-case letters, you should use full stops.

Examples:

- BBC and DNA, not B.B.C. and D.N.A.
- UK and UAE, not U.K. and U.A.E.
- a.m. and p.m. , not am and pm
- i.e. and e.g., not ie and eg

These conventions are certainly not rules, and as long as a writer is consistent, he or she will not be at fault. Mixing them up, however, is unacceptable.

Examples:

- The BBC is the broadcasting service based in the U.K. [Incorrect]
- He obtained his BA and his M.D. from Harvard. [Incorrect]

We also use full stops to signify a contraction and here the rule is a simple one: if the last letter of the contraction is the same last letter of the full word, no full stop is needed, but if the last letter of the contraction is different, a full stop is needed.

Examples:

- Mr not Mr. (Mister)
- Dr not Dr. (Doctor)
- Prof. not Prof (Professor)
- Abbrev. not abbrev (abbreviation)
- Chap. not chap (chapter)
- Bk not Bk. (book)

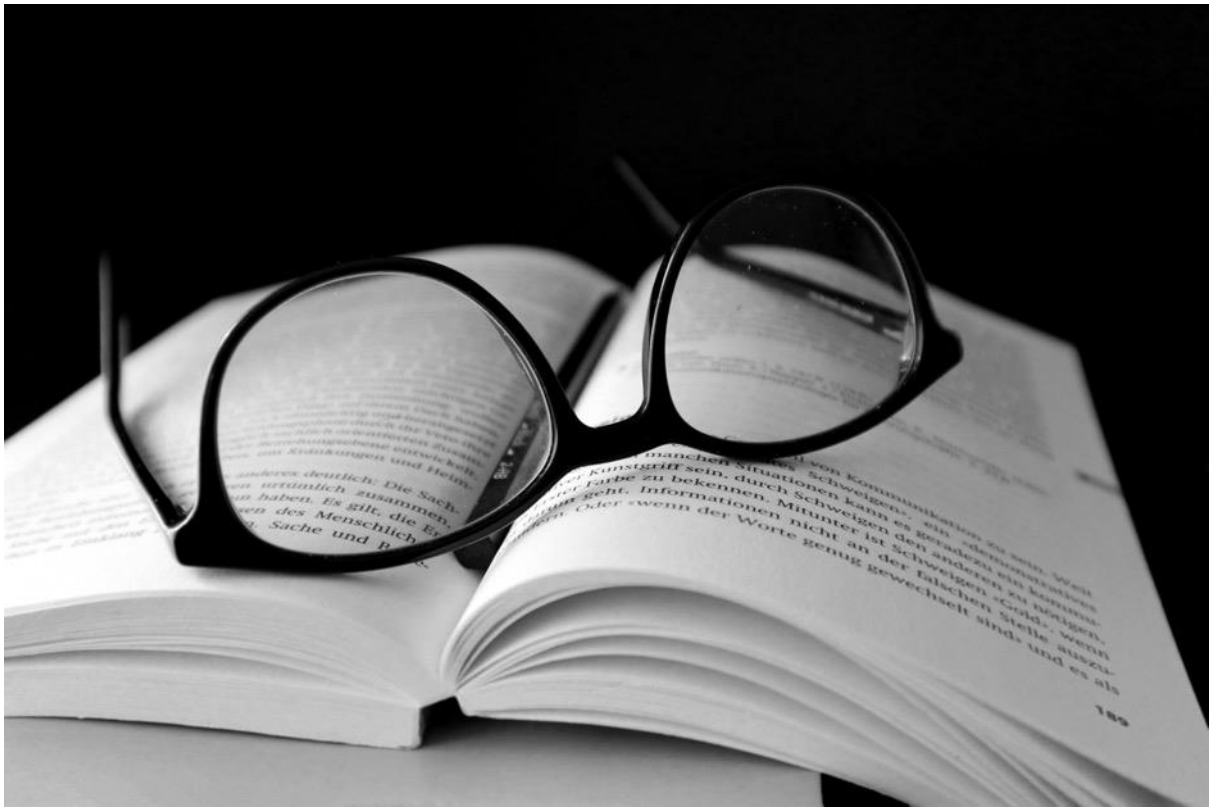
And one final misuse of the full stop. Never use a full stop after a title or a header.

- Introduction. [Incorrect]
- Materials and methods. [Incorrect]
- To Kill a Mockingbird. [Incorrect]
- Romeo and Juliet. [Incorrect]

Having said that President Obama's campaign slogan for re-election in 2012 was 'Forward.' Quite what that full stop was meant to signify has been much debated in the American press, but I suspect it was nothing more than a slip up by someone who should have read a Study Guide like this.

CONCLUSIONS

If this Study Guide has been about anything, it has been about the impression given to your readers by not only what you write, but also how you write it. Silly mistakes make you look silly, and unfortunately there are enough people around who can recognize that a mistake is silly for this to be a concern for any writer. You write to communicate, but you are also being judged. Your arguments are being evaluated, your research appraised, your contributions weighed carefully. Don't allow the balance to be tipped against you because you have forgotten how to use an apostrophe.



FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

There are a lot of books about English Grammar and Punctuation. If you have to write British English, the one piece of advice I would give is to read British guides. It's not that the American ones are wrong, just that some of the rules across the Atlantic are different. Here are a couple that are worth consulting.

Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage. J. Butterfield (Ed). OUP Oxford, 4th edition, 2015.

This is the recognised authority when it comes to any questions relating to written English.

Eats, Shoots and Leaves. Lynne Truss. Fourth Estate 2009.

If you have to relearn your English punctuation, you might as well have fun in the process. Lynne Truss's book was an international best seller, and although presented in a highly accessible and humorous style, it contains many useful examples.

If you want some bite-sized English grammar and punctuation guides in the form of animated videos, check out my You Tube channel:

- **Writing Space** https://youtu.be/J25YJ8FzMxk

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I have worked in academia for over 30 years and for the last ten I have been running courses teaching under graduates, post graduates and academic staff a range of essential academic skills. Amongst these have been writing and presentation skills as well as time management and project management. I have also authored or edited more than 25 books and I write a regular blog entitled: The Business of Discovery which you can access here: www.researchet.wordpress.com You can also follow me on twitter: @ResearchET or visit my webpage: www.allangaw.com

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