

Boring-but-important advice every reporter should memorize.

Luckily for you, this book won't bog itself down analyzing grammar, syntax and punctuation. Instead, on these two pages we've summarized key principles every reporter should know – adapted from the "Hot 100" tips compiled by Sheryl Swingley of Ball State University.

WRITING LEADS

- 1) Keep leads short. The first paragraph should usually be 35 words or fewer.
- 2) Try to limit leads to one or two sentences.
- 3) Avoid starting leads with the *when* or *where* unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with *who* or *what*.
- 4) Avoid beginning leads with *there*, *this* or *it*.
- 5) Use quote and question leads sparingly.
- 6) The first five to 10 words determine if the lead will be an attention-getter.
- 7) Remember, *what happened* makes a better story than the fact it did. _____

THE REST OF THE STORY

- 8) Vary your sentence lengths. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length. If you notice that happening, try turning one long sentence into two or three shorter ones.
- 9) If you must write a long sentence, try using a short sentence before or after it.
- 10) Avoid using several prepositional phrases in a sentence. Prepositional phrases start with some of the following words: *about, above, against, at, between, by, down, during, for, from, in like, on, over, through, to, toward, under, up, until, upon, with*.
- 11) Remember that short paragraphs encourage readers to continue reading.
- 12) Try to limit paragraphs to:
 - 60 words or fewer, or
 - no more than 10 typeset lines, or
 - one to three sentences.
- 13) Paragraphs should generally contain only one idea.
- 14) Avoid introducing new information at the end of a news story. All aspects of a story should usually be introduced or outlined in the first few paragraphs.
- 15) Transitions – linking words such as *but, and, also, besides, however, meanwhile, subsequently, finally*, etc. – are necessary to show the reader that the writer has a sense of direction. Carefully placed transitions guide the reader from one thought to another.

EDITING AND STYLE

- 16) Eliminate words such as *when asked* and *concluded*. These are weak transitions. Just report what was said.
- 17) Whenever possible, omit the word *that*. **Example:** *The quarterback says he's ready*, not *the quarterback says that he's ready*.
- 18) The correct order for writing *when* and *where* is time, day (date) and place: *The concert begins at 8 p.m. Friday in Fox Hall*.
- 19) For a past event, say it happened *Tuesday*, not *last Tuesday*. For a future event, say it will happen *Monday*, not *next Monday*. Eliminate the words *last* and *next*.

- 20) Use the day of the week for events occurring within six days of a specific day; use the date for events occurring seven or more days before or after a specific day.
- 21) One first reference, identify a person by his or her first and last names. On second reference, refer to the person by his or her last name only.
- 22) On second and all other references, don't use *Miss*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, *Mr.* or *Dr.* unless it's a style requirement of the news outlet you're writing for.
- 23) A long title should follow, not precede someone's name. A title that follows the name should be lowercased and set off in commas.
- 24) Short titles may precede names and usually are capitalized. See *titles* in the AP Stylebook.
- 25) Always double-check the spelling of all names.
- 26) Use the computer's spell-checker. When in doubt, consult a dictionary. The latest edition of "Webster's New World College Dictionary" is the preferred reference.
- 27) For style questions, consult the AP stylebook. If the answer cannot be found there, consult a dictionary or a grammar guide.
- 28) Ask for help. Public library information desk personnel can be resourceful and helpful in person or on the phone. (University librarians are usually better at offering advice face to face.)

RULES OF GRAMMAR

- 29) If *none* means *no one* or *not one*, use a singular verb. **Example:** None was found guilty.
- 30) When you use a pronoun to refer to a team or a group, the proper pronoun to use is *its*, not *they*. **Example:** The team wants to improve *its* record.
- 31) Use parallel construction for verbs in lists or sequences. **Example:** He likes camping, fishing and hunting. NOT: he likes camping, fishing and to hunt. **Example:** The fire killed six people, injured 60 more and forced hundreds of residents to leave their homes.. NOT: The fire killed six people, injuring 60 more, and will force hundreds of resident to leave their homes.
- 32) When using *either...or* and *neither...nor*, the verb agrees in person with the nearer subject. **Examples:** Either the coach or the players are to blame. Neither the players nor the coach is to blame.
- 33) Know the difference between *its* (no apostrophe for possessive pronoun) and *it's* (the contraction for *it is*). **Examples:** The dog has a thorn in *its* (possessive pronoun) paw, and *it's* (contraction) time to remove it.
- 34) Know the difference between *whose* (possessive pronoun) and *who's* (the contraction for *who is*). **Examples:** Whose (possessive pronoun) coat is this? Who's (contraction) wearing it?
- 35) Know when to use *their* (possessive pronoun), *there* (adverb) and *they're* (the contraction for they are). **Examples:** It is *their* (possessive pronoun) project. The project is over *there* (adverb). *They're* (contraction) working on it.
- 36) When making comparisons, *as* and *such as* are generally preferable to *like*. Use *like* as a preposition, not to introduce clauses. **Examples:** It tastes *like* a peach. The farmer grows peaches, *as* he did last year.

WORD CHOICES

- 37) Eliminate lazy adverbs. Let strong verbs do their jobs. Instead of *the radio played loudly*, write *the radio blared*.
- 38) Eliminate lazy adjectives. Let strong nouns do their jobs. Instead of *the gang members created a chaotic scene*, write *the gangsters created chaos*.
- 39) Choose strong verbs that suggest what they mean. Active verbs add pace, clarity and vigor to writing. Avoid *be* verbs.
- 40) Use simple words. Don't send readers to the dictionary. Odds are they won't bother looking up definitions: worse, they might quit reading.
- 41) Words such as *thing* and *a lot* annoy many readers and editors. Choose better synonyms. (Note correct spelling of *a lot*).
- 42) Be careful using the word *held*. Make sure the object can be heal physically. **Weak:** *The Rotary*

Club meeting will be head at noon Monday in Rom 125. Better: The Rotary Club will meet at noon Monday in Room 125.

43) Avoid using words that qualify how someone feels, thinks or sees. Qualifiers include the following: *a bit, a little, sort of, kind of, rather, around, quite, very, pretty, much, in a very real sense, somewhat.*

44) If you use jargon that won't be understood by a majority of readers, be sure to explain each term used.

45) Writing *yesterday* or *tomorrow* may be confusing to readers. Use the day of the week. (*Today* may be used with care.)

46) Give a person's age if necessary for identification or description; it's preferable to saying *teenager* or *senior citizen*. Write *Jim Shu, 30*, instead of *30-year-old Jim Shu*.

47) For suicides, until the coroner completes his or her investigation, it's best to say the person was *found dead* or *fell* or *plunged to his death*. (Some papers avoid using the word *suicide*; check with your editor.)

48) For arrests, write *arrested in connection with*, *sought in connection with*, *charged with* or *arrested on charges of*.

49) For murders, write that arrests are made *in connection with the death of*. Do not report that a victim was murdered until someone is convicted of the crime. In obituaries, it may be said the victim was *killed* or *slain*.

50) For fires, write that a building is *destroyed*, not *completely destroyed*. Buildings also are damaged *lightly, moderately* or *heavily*. A fire may *gut* or *destroy* the interior of a building. To *raze* a building is to level it to the ground.

NONSEXIST, NONAGEIST, NONDISCRIMINATORY WORD CHOICES

51) Avoid words that reinforce ethnic, racial, gender or ageist stereotypes.

52) Avoid referring to someone's ethnicity, race, gender or age unless it's essential for the clarity of the story. (Race might be relevant when a criminal is at large; referring to ethnicity, race, gender, age or disability might be appropriate when an achievement or event is a first.) Use the substitution test: If you wouldn't say it about a Caucasian man, then don't say it about a woman, people of other races or people with disabilities.

53) Use *he* or *she* instead of *he*. Women do notice the difference. If using *he* or *she* or *him* or *her* is awkward, try a plural pronoun: *they, them, their* or *theirs*.

54) Substitute asexual words for sexist *man* words. For example:

| Questionable | Better | |
|--------------|------------------|--|
| mankind | people, humanity | |
| man-made | synthetic, manu- | factured |
| manpower | workers, work | force, staff, |
| personnel | | |
| | founding fathers | pioneers, colonists, patriots, forebears |
| | anchorman | anchor |
| | cleaning woman | housekeeper, custodian |
| | coed | student |
| | fireman | firefighter |
| | foreman | supervisor |
| | housewife | homemaker |
| | postman | police officer |
| | salesman | salesperson |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| stewardess | flight attendant |
| weatherman | meteorologist |
| the girls (for women over 18) | the women |

55) Respect people with disabilities:

| | |
|----------|------------------|
| crippled | impaired, |
| | disabled – or be |
| | specific: |
| | paraplegic |

| | |
|------------|----------------|
| deaf and | hearing – and/ |
| dumb, deaf | or speech- |
| mute | impaired |

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| crazy, insane, | mentally ill, |
| half-witted, | developmentally |
| retarded | disadvantaged, |
| | disabled or |
| | limited – or be |
| | specific: |
| | emotionally |
| | disturbed |

Separate the person from the disability.

| | |
|----------------|------------------|
| Mary, an | Mary, who has |
| epileptic, | epilepsy, had |
| had no trouble | no trouble doing |
| doing her job. | her job. |

Examples adapted from an International Association of Business Communicators book called "Without Bias."

PUNCTUATION

56) No comma should appear between time, date and place. **Example:** *The fire started at 4:32 a.m. Monday in the kitchen of Bob's Bakery.*

57) In a series – *red, white and blue* – a comma is usually not needed before *and* unless the series is complex or confusing.

58) Use a comma with *according to*. **Example:** *Dogs are becoming more intelligent, according to*

researchers at Penn State University.

59) Avoid comma splices: joining two independent clauses with a comma. **Example:** *Half the company's customers lost power after the ice storm, power was restored to most of them quickly.* (A period or semicolon should replace the comma.)

60) Another common problem: adding a comma between the subject and verb. **Example:** *About half of the company's customers, lost power after the ice storm.* (The comma is not needed).

61) When in doubt about using a comma, leave it out.

62) Quotation marks always go outside commas (",") and periods ("."). They always go inside semicolons (";") and colons (":"). They may go inside or outside of question marks. Check the AP stylebook.

63) The dash is a long mark (–) most often used to separate a list or series in sentences where extra commas might be confusing. **Example:** *All these punctuation marks – commas, periods, dashes, hyphens – have their own peculiarities.* Dashes also provide a way to insert interruptions or dramatic phrases. **Example:** *All these tips – don't worry, we're nearly done – are important to know.*

64) The hyphen is a short mark (-) used in hyphenated modifiers (*two-week workshop, well –read student*), in words that break at the end of a line of type (like this *hyphen-ated* word here) in telephone numbers and Social Security numbers. Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in "ly" paired with adjectives: *It's a freshly painted room, not a freshly-painted room.*

65) Use an exclamation point only after brief expletives. **Examples:** *Fire! Run! Goal!* Exclamation points often demonstrate a lack of control (or excess of emotion) on the writer's part. Use them sparingly.

66) If you ever catch yourself overusing a particular set of punctuation marks – dashes, parentheses, semicolons – force yourself to stop. Remember, sentence structures are always best.