

Matters Magazine: Style Sheet

[Revised through 3/02]¹

– *A* –

"About the writer:" See TAG.

absent the...: The eye trips over this; it's syntactically confusing (is "absent" the adjective or the verb?) and is easily misread for *absinthe*, a mind-rotting alcoholic beverage favored by French decadents. Use "In the absence of..." instead.

anyone/anybody: singular, not plural. See NUMBER, GRAMMATICAL

ARTWORK: See under PHOTOS.

as/like: See under like.

– *B* –

back yard: When used as a *noun*, two words; when used as an **adjective**, run in. (But bathroom is one word whether adjective or noun.)

BANG or **SCREAMER:** See EXCLAMATION POINT.

black (= of African descent): lower case **b**, not initial-cap.

BOLDFACE: Use sparingly. If the article is a "roundup" in which there are several places or events, boldface may be used; otherwise, or if you're in doubt, use italics – and itals, *not* bf, should be used whenever a word in the text must be emphasized, as in the clause above.

BREVITY (a.k.a. **the soul of wit**): Less is more; brief is punchy. Tighter stories make livelier reading; if yours runs a little short but has some real impact, so much the better – and all the more room for pictures.

But: If it's the first word in the sentence, do not follow it with a comma (unless a separate clause follows it: "But, and it's a big but, there is a difference between private devotion and nailing the Decalogue up over public school blackboards.")

– *C* –

CAPITAL LETTERS (caps): Avoid all-caps names except when something is a bona fide acronym such as EHEU (Editors Horrified at Egregious Usages). First use of such acronyms in an article should be accompanied by the full name in parens, as above (or, better, spelled out with the acronym in parens) except when the acronym is so well known (UNICEF, IRS, etc.) that this is clearly unnecessary.

COLON: If what follows could be a complete sentence in its own right, AP style says use initial cap ("I am a fool: My keys are in my car."); if followed by a phrase only, use lower-case ("I know where I left my keys: in my car.") For quotation marks at colons, see QUOTATION MARKS below.

COMMAS: Associated Press style dictates that serial commas be used for all but the last *two* items in a series when these are connected by and: "Winken, Blinken and Nod" (where MLA style would have "Winken, Blinken, and Nod.") However, if there's no and, insert a comma between all elements of a series, as when the examples given are meant to imply other possible ones as well: "Behind the bar are arrayed several dozen colorful bottles of exotic liqueurs: Crème des Poubelles, Uísge-Manannán, Krepalé Helleniké." (But: "The bar serves a notorious syllabub called the United Noggin, or UN, a toxic combination of Crème des Poubelles, Uísge-Mananán and Krepalé Helleniké.")

Normally, no comma follows *But*, *Or*, *So*, and *Yet* when any of these is the first word in a sentence, unless a free-standing clause follows.

Quotation marks, single or double, always go *outside* commas: “fare ‘adjustments,’ i.e. increases” (and not “fare ‘adjustments’, i.e. increases”); *see more at QUOTATION MARKS*.

cookbook: run-in as one word, not two.

D

DASHES: If submitting text in hard copy, indicate a dash by **two** hyphens (-- thus), not one; if submitting on disk, use an en-dash (a.k.a. *nut-dash*) – like this. (The keystroke for this is ALT-0150.) Do NOT use an em-dash — like that (ALT-0151). Do not run in, but leave a space before and after. Although some publishers prefer an en-dash to separate contrasting words presented as a boxed set (*either-or*), *Matters* would use a hyphen; but a slash is even better (*either/or*).

DATES: Double check these – both the number and, if applicable, the day of the week after you’ve typed them into the body of the story; *MM* gets serious egg on its face if we publish a wrong one. **Note that in an every-issue column, deadlines for the next issue need to be updated every issue.** (Summer ’99 carried a calendar deadline date for the summer edition – i.e. for itself! Can’t have that.)

different: *from*, not different *than*.

E

e-mail: lower-case *e*, and hyphenated, not run-in.

everyone/everybody: singular, not plural. *See* NUMBER, GRAMMATICAL

EXCLAMATION POINTS: Use *very* sparingly. A good rule of thumb: If you count more than four in your article, that’s too many. Excitement is better conveyed to (and elicited from) the reader through use of colorful adjectives and brisk verbs.

F

fewer: *See less/fewer*.

G

gingerly: an adjective; for the adverb, use *tentatively*, *cautiously*, etc. *See also likely*.

’graf: newspaper slang for PARAGRAPH, which see below.

graffiti: two *f*s, one *t* – and plural (*graffiti are*, not *graffiti is*).

H

hoi polloi: not “*the hoi polloi*,” as *hoi* means “the” already. A bit of borrowed Greek better avoided anyway, like *myriad* (see under NUMBERS).

home town: as noun; but *hometown* as the adjective.

http:// do not use in URLs beginning *www*.

I

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE: Unless the group of people being talked about is exclusively and by definition of one gender only (e.g., expectant moms, gay men, Boy Scouts, Sisters of Mercy), pronouns should not exclude either gender. It is expected that an editor will do his or her job well in catching and fixing slips of this sort which writers, in their fallibility, may make. As the previous sentence shows, it is sometimes less clumsy to resort to plural nouns and their gender-neutral associated pronouns than to be always *him-or-herring*, for which the

reader's appetite, no matter how politically correct, is sated very soon. *See also* NUMBER, GRAMMATICAL.

INFINITIVES: Though the rule against splitting them is not considered so hard-and-fast as it once was, it is still a good idea to keep the two parts together for clarity's sake. However, sound may prevail so long as sense is not damaged: e.g. *to faithfully serve you*, anathema in Grandma's day, is perfectly reasonable English today where *to serve you faithfully* or *faithfully to serve you* might be ambiguous: One can imagine a sentence such as "The Earl of Barking came to faithfully serve you hoping his pack of beagles would do likewise." Here the adverb, removed to either side of the infinitive, would materially alter the meaning. (But it's almost always possible to tweak one's syntax to avoid this sort of problem altogether.)

ITALICS: Used for titles of major works (see more at TITLES); used – sparingly – for emphasis in text, in preference to boldface. Also used for writer's ID tag at end of article. (*See more at TAG.*)

J

judge, but **judgment** (no e).

K

kudos: Not a plural of (nonexistent) "kudo" but a singular noun (pl. *kudois*), from Greek.

L

less/fewer: quantity vs. number: "I ate fewer pretzels and drank less beer than he (did)."

like: Introduces a noun alone: *like water for chocolate*. If there's a verb, use *as*: "Knife and fork he never lays/Crosswise, to my recollection, As I do, in Jesu's praise."²

In constructions such as "offers a variety of contact sports *like* football and rugby," use *such as* instead.

likely: an adjective, as in *a likely story*. For an adverb, *probably* serves perfectly well.

M

Maplewood Village: The area around the railway station, with a capital V.

Matters [Magazine]: Italicize, as with any other periodical.

MISPLACED MODIFIERS: "Being a quarterly, I don't find it at all hard to write for Matters Magazine in between my schoolwork" is an example of a misplaced modifier; readers, who parse sentences in their minds as they read them, would expect the opening phrase to refer to the subject of the sentence – which it patently and ludicrously does not. Misplaced modifiers are "eye-stumblers" which force people to stop and reread who would rather move right along to the next 'graf. At best, such howlers amuse (at the magazine's expense, making us look like bumpkins); at worst, they annoy readers needlessly; we want our audience to get the point of what we write and publish, and not get bogged down simply trying to make sense out of our sentences. We all may expect editors to be vigilant (that's their job); but even those of us who write just the way we speak ought to proofread our articles before submission, turning an especially pitiless glance on every clause that reaches beyond its own boundaries to modify something else in the sentence so as to assure ourselves that it is indeed pointing at its intended target and not at some innocent bystander.

N

New Jersey Transit: Spell out on first use; thereafter, OK to abbreviate as *NJT*.

NUMBER, GRAMMATICAL: nouns and the pronouns referring to them are either singular or plural, and should agree; when the subject of a sentence is the singular noun “nobody...” the pronoun in apposition to it can’t be “they,” and the verb has to remain singular. This rule tends to go by the board in spoken (people can, and do, say things such as “If everybody aren’t plural by now they should be”) but in print – even print trying to sound vernacular and not stuffy – it just won’t do. *See also* INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

NUMERALS: Spell out fractions (e.g. *three fifths*, no hyphen when used as noun, but hyphenate when used as adjective: *a three-fifths majority*), zero, one through nine; give 10 and up as figures when used as such, but “hundreds of people attended,” not “100s...,” and so with “thousands.” *Myriad* means “10,000” and should be used as such, if at all: “Over the centuries, architects have suggested myriad ways to stop chimneys from smoking” (not “a myriad of ways”).

O

Oh: so spelled in preference to archaic/poetical “O.” (“Oh, no – it’s Yoko!” he said.)

Or: If it begins the sentence, a comma shouldn’t follow it (unless, e.g., in a quotation: “Or,” added Harris, “we could publish some fake statistics saying that the states whose inhabitants bought the largest number of Edsels were Delaware and Rhode Island.”³ But no comma if the quotes come later: “Or we could publish,” added Harris....)

P

PARAGRAPH LENGTH: *Matters* is printed in a narrower column than your typescript. Paragraphs should be no longer than five lines in manuscript, for even that will run to two column-inches in the magazine. If necessary, break up longer ’grafs into shorter ones. *See more at* *homily on STYLE* (Attachment 1).

PERIODS: If a sentence ends with a parenthetical phrase which is not itself a complete sentence, the period goes *outside*: “He wants to be respected (i.e. feared).” But if the parenthetical is a complete sentence, the period goes *inside*: “And people remarked that he muttered, ‘Oh, dim!’ / (I often say ‘dim!’ myself.)”⁴ Don’t add a period *after* a complete-sentence parenthetical which has already ended with one inside the close-paren.

PHOTOS: If you take and submit photos for an article, try to get as many different poses of your subject in different attitudes, or if architecture, from both closeup and wide-angle views. Many stories need at least two (and often more) pictures to work well visually in the allotted space, and the more variety to choose from, the better the article will look.

POSSESSIVES of words ending in S: *Charles* > *Charles’s sweetheart*; *keeping up with the Joneses* > *keeping up with the Joneses’ pack of beagles*. This should even be so for double-s endings: *Tass’s Washington bureau*, *the top brass’s arrogance* (but *the low brasses’ oompahs*.)

PROOFREADERS’ MARKS: *See* Attachment 2.

Q

Quotation marks: Normally double; if a quote within a quote must be used, the inner ones should be single. Quotes within *that* are double, and so on: “They said, ‘If

the door you would only slam/Or if, Papa, you would once say “Damn!”/Instead of merely roaring “Avast!”/Or boldly invoking the nautical blast....”⁵

Commas, periods, question marks and exclamation points should always go inside quotation marks where these occur. With colons and semicolons, the modern tendency is to put the punctuation mark inside the quotes if the quote is a complete sentence – “I said ‘I do;’ I meant every word of it.” If, however, the quoted words are merely a single word or short expression, nowadays they go *inside* the colon or “semi”: That’s an example of it.

R

realtor, realty: no vowel after the l

restaurateur: no n.

S

SCREAMER: *See* EXCLAMATION POINT.

Shingle Style: two words, whether used as adjective and noun, and both with initial caps.

SHIRTSLEEVE: *See* TAG.

So: If the first word in the sentence, it is not normally followed by a comma: “So the ancients concluded that the earth rested on a giant turtle.” (But one *could* say, “So, the ancients concluded, the earth must rest on the back of a giant turtle.”)

South Orange: Spell out; do not abbreviate as S. Orange or So. Orange.

STREET NAMES: Maplewood has a great deal of near-redundancy in its street names, to the despair of many postal patrons, e.g. Boyden Parkway and Boyden Parkway South are forever being confused with each other and with Boyden Avenue, into which they run. This is one area where the writer must double-check rigorously, and preferably against a map. When giving street names in an article, abbreviate “N... Street” as “N... St.” except when named after a saint: *St. Mary’s Street*.

STYLE: For a general homily about journalistic style, *see* Attachment 1.

T

TAG, writer’s: Also called a *shirtsleeve* by newspaper veterans of the linotype era, the tag is a sentence appended to the article to identify you to the reader: *Mary Jones teaches English at Rutgers/Newark and lives in Maplewood with her husband, two children, 17 iguanas and a spaniel*. Italicize, indent, and separate from the final paragraph of the story by a single line space.

teepee: so spelled.

TITLES: Italics are used for books, TV series, films, periodicals, major musical works, paintings and sculptures: *Time, Star Wars, The Scarlet Letter, All My Children, The Ring Cycle, Guernica*. Individual poems, short stories, magazine or newspaper articles, or subsections of larger works go inside quotes: “On His Blindness,” “The Gift of the Magi,” “Dewey Defeats Truman,” “The Custom-House,” “The Ride of the Valkyries.”

Town Hall: if Maplewood’s, initial caps; if a generic, lower case. (“You can’t re-roof an entire town hall for \$532.78.”)

train station: lower-case, not initial caps, even when referring to Maplewood’s.

Tudor-style: as adjective, hyphenated, with lower-case s.

U

URLs: When giving a Web. address, underline it. If the URL starts with www, there's not need to precede it by http://

U.S.: for United States with periods, but *UN* (no periods) for United Nations.

V

Village Hall: capitalize both the V and the H.

Victorian-style: adjective, hyphenated, with cap V and lower-case s.

W

Web site: two words. *See also* URLs.

Word, WordPerfect: Two electronic formats in which *MM* can accept submissions; for other formats, query Karen. Whatever format you use should include first-line-indent, no spaces between paragraphs, and no headers, footers, or page numbers.

XYZ

Yet: If it's the first word in the sentence, do not follow it with a comma: "Yet how could one get through the day – as the emperor Claudius once wondered aloud while addressing the Roman senate – without an occasional snack?"⁶

¹ This list will be update with other items suggested by subsequent issues of *MM*. "Watch This Space....".

² Robert Browning: "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

³ A cross-cultural adaptation of a sentence in Jules Romain's slapstick novel *Les Copains* ("The Buddies").

⁴ W. S. Gilbert, "Emily, John, James, and I," from *The Bab Ballads*, published one per week during the early 1870s in the magazine *Fun*, and arguably both apprenticeship and rob file for his later operetta librettos.

⁵ Edith Sitwell, "En Famille," from *Façade*, her startling collaboration with the composer William Walton.

⁶ I didn't make this one up, honest: It's in Suetonius, "Claudius," in *The Twelve Caesars*, as translated by Robert Graves and one of the principal sources for his *I, Claudius*. –NDH✂

Attachment 1:

Some Thoughts on Journalistic Style

"If truth were self-evident," said Cicero, "rhetoric would not be necessary." Content is what we want to say; style is what determines how we say it and whether it will be heard.

Journalistic style is fundamentally different from the sort of exposition one learns in academe. For one thing, the physical structure of the page means narrower columns with shorter paragraphs (the equivalent of five lines of typescript or less) easier on the reader's eyes.

For another, scholarly exposition starts with a topic paragraph and builds down from it, whereas feature news stories usually start with a short eye-grabber, then an explanation of it, and then – two or three 'grafs down – a so-called *nut 'graf* which contains the nut, or kernel, of the story (the equivalent to the scholar's topic paragraph). The nut 'graf, by convention is no lower

than the fourth 'graf because (1) the reader must be engaged enough to have some sense of what the story is about by this point and (2) if the story starts on one page but makes a jump to another (as happens particularly often in newspapers) the reader had *better* have some idea of what the story is about; otherwise, in either case, he or she will simply not turn the page.

A third difference between journalism and academe is that in school you write this stuff because you have to, and your hapless instructor has to read it because that's part of what your tuition is paying for. Hence, alas, student writing can afford to be boring as long as it is thorough and scholarly and has a lot of footnotes. But the two most devastating features editors can (and do) ask writers are "But Is It News?" and "Who Cares?" The writer needs to have a resounding yes, to both of them, built right into the story and self-evident by the nut 'graf. Sometimes it's a stretch; if the headline is going to read "Arts Center Season Debut Draws Expected Full House," there may be little the reporter can do to keep the story from being a yawn-maker (though not for want of trying, and one can learn a lot from reading other publications' stories critically to see which had some real meat to start with and which had to be fleshed out from just skin and bones.)

The fourth difference – a corollary of the third, really – is audience. *Matters* serves a particular purpose: We are by definition the publication that brings good news to our area. This means that certain stories may simply be off limits if there's no way we can put a positive spin on them (we leave burglaries and assaults to the *News Record*, in hopes that it will cover them competently and professionally) – though there are few clouds without silver linings, and this is the sort of town where, if there is a problem, bright and enthusiastic people often can and do solve it in creative ways. (See our Summer '99 story on the train station murals.) We're also constrained by being a quarterly; previews or reviews of one-shot events are generally out of our time frame, though they may be alluded to in the course of a story covering a longer-term trend or a going concern.

Matters style should reflect this audience and attitude: We want to be upbeat without being fatuous, to promote our community (realtors give copies of *MM* to prospective homebuyers, often their first glimpse in print of what this town is all about), to help people feel good about living here. We mustn't write down to them – many residents are college-educated, and not a few have advanced degrees – but we shouldn't put on airs either. Journalism is, after all, a profession of explainers and demystifiers; people read *MM* not just for entertainment but to be informed, to learn something about their town and their neighbors that they didn't already know.

Good style is born of trial and error, preferably in a dialectic with good editors, rather than being something one learns from a book. Yet there *are* some books every writer should own: Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, a good desktop dictionary (*Webster 10* is a standard lexicon in the book trades, though the *American Heritage Dictionary* is more reliable in settling questions of usage authoritatively, and moreover includes a first-rate etymological appendix) and another helpful work: the U. of Chicago Press *A Manual of Style* (now in its 14th edition, but even a used 13th or 12th is of considerable value for basic grammatical and punctuation rules). –

NDH✂