

# 6 copy editing rules to make you a better writer

Today is National Grammar Day, and if there's one group that lives and breathes grammar, it's copy editors. (Note: you will find some that write copyediting and copyeditor as one word, but I decided to follow *Merriam-Webster*, which spells them as two words.)

By cleaning up your sloppy sentences, a copy editor makes your writing clearer. But not everyone has access to a copy editor. The next best thing is to learn what copy editors look for and apply it to your own writing.

**1. Follow a style guide and stick to it.** Whether you have your own organizational style guide or you use a standard guide such as *The Associated Press Stylebook*, be sure to consult it and defer to it. You may want to write "Web site" but your style guide says it's "website." Don't alternate usages. And check stuff that is likely to trip you up such as dates, abbreviations, addresses, and titles.

**2. Be consistent.** Make sure you are using the same spelling and style throughout your document.

**3. Use a dictionary** (and choose your standard). There are a couple big dictionary names: *Oxford* and *Merriam-Webster*. Choose one and stick to it and then use it to make sure that you are spelling [that word] correctly. And more so, does [that word] mean what you think it means?

**4. Watch out for often-confused words.** Commonly confused words sound the same or are very close in spelling, but don't mean the same thing. Some examples are effect/affect, defer/differ, and compliment/complement. You can find exhaustive lists on the internet. Spell check won't catch these mistakes but using the wrong word will most certainly alter the meaning of what

you are writing.

**5. Fact check.** Make sure it's Mary and not Marie and that February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015 was a Saturday and not a Friday. Are you sure that's the correct address? You get the drift.

**6. Pay attention to your commas (and apostrophes, colons, etc.).** Nothing can derail a sentence faster than missing or improper punctuation. Also, take a stand regarding the Oxford or serial comma. Use it or don't, but be consistent.

Want more? Check out Grammar Girl's Editing Checklist for an overview of the various mistakes that copy editors look for, and you can even print it out as reference!

It's easy to get lost in writing your thoughts and not pay attention to the details. However, the details (grammar, style, punctuation, spelling) are what help to make your thoughts clear to your readers.

**How are you celebrating National Grammar Day?**