

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 14th, 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?

Who needs grammar?

Twitter just reminded me that today is National Grammar Day so I shelved what I was going to write (something about nonprofit communications, which I will post later on in the month) so that I could mark this momentous occasion and pay tribute to the power of grammar.

Proper grammar (and punctuation, usage and spelling) makes both written and spoken communication better and easier to understand. Without it, we are left wondering what was meant

exactly. After all, if you're trying to make your point, you wouldn't want to mess it up by using the wrong possessive or contraction. And it would affect your writing if you didn't know the effect of your word choice.

Now, I am no grammar queen. That would be Grammar Girl. I recommend buying (and reading too) her very useful reference book: Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.

Another favorite reference is Eats Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss.

You really need to have at least one grammar book on your shelves or in your electronic library.

Who needs grammar? We all do! Oh, and by the way, March is National Reading Month. If you want to improve your grammar, reading (the more, the better) is the key.

Come learn to blog with me! My next How to Write Your Blog workshop takes place on April 1 in Washington, DC. Get more details and secure your place here.

It's National Grammar Day!

Today, March 4th, is officially designated here in the United States as National Grammar Day. How will you celebrate?

If I may offer some suggestions:

- Read a grammar book or my favorite book about punctuation: Eats, Shoots & Leaves by Lynne Truss

- Mind your apostrophes (here's a hint: apostrophes do not make a word plural)
- Practice gender neutrality, but don't use "they" to signify ONE person.
- Read a well written book, any book.
- Try to effect change by not using big words you don't understand (it affects how people perceive your writing and speaking)

What would you like to see on National Grammar Day?

