



Lapsing Into a Comma: A Curmudgeon's Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print and How to Avoid Them
by **Bill Walsh**. \$14.95 paper, 246 pages, Contemporary Books, 2000.

By Laura Brown

Every copy desk should have a copy of this book, or several copies, so those who need to look something up won't have to fight over it with those who are reading it for pleasure.

Bill Walsh, copy desk chief for the Washington Post business desk, started a list years ago of style issues that interested him. Some weren't covered by the AP stylebook; others were, but some writers and editors dismissed the stylebook's advice for some reason. Eventually he developed his own answers to those style questions on his own Web site, The Slot (www.theslot.com). Much of the wisdom of that site has been gathered into this book.

While the contents of this book are no longer on the Web site, it's worth a visit; Walsh has made many additions there since the book was published. Walsh isn't a curmudgeon in the sense that he believes style rules are inflexible, set in stone and to be memorized and followed unquestioningly. Nor is he in the sense of humorlessness; the book's title and cover, with a drawing of a distressed woman lying on a fainting couch, are the first clues that humor permeates the book. If he's a curmudgeon at all, it's in the sense that he has little patience for blindly following style rules without engaging the critical thinking skills to understand the reasoning behind a rule and to decide how to apply it.

As he says in the first chapter, "Be skeptical of stylebooks. ... It's relatively easy to pick up a stylebook, any stylebook, and learn the rules it imposes. It's harder to apply those rules correctly and consistently, and harder still to truly understand the reasons behind the rules < and therefore know when they should be ignored." The first half of the book is divided into short chapters on using a dictionary intelligently; being vigilant against letting Internet trends become standard usage; demanding specificity in language; common math errors; political correctness; handling quotations; dos and don'ts of headlines and cutlines; and fine points of punctuation (including more than six pages on commas).

Roughly the second half of the book is "The Curmudgeon's Stylebook," with alphabetical entries on things you mostly won't find in the AP stylebook. Some entries help with individual words (bemused, coed, effete, hopefully, ironic, presently, reverend) or easily confused pairs of words (bologna/baloney, frig/ fridge, gender/sex, loan/lend, may/might, prostate/prostrate).

Some deal with brand names and proper nouns (Adidas, Cliffs Notes, Doc Martens, Internet, Smithsonian).

Some discuss things like fractions, time references and grammar. Throughout the book are occasional micro-essays, many with catchy titles (“The ‘The’: Put That Down!” on whether to capitalize “the” when it’s part of a company’s or publication’s name; “I’m a Member of the Media, But I’m Not a Medium” on how the word “media” is sometimes singular; “Passive Aggression” on why passive voice is sometimes better than active; and the self-explanatory “Dirty Mind, Clean Copy: Why Every Copy Desk Could Use a 13-year-old Boy”).

A thorough index concludes the book. Those reaching for this book to answer a style question will find authoritative answers that explain why a rule should be applied or why some ancient fussy English-teacher rule should be retired. Those reading it for pleasure will find something many stylebooks lack: A personality with a distinct voice, who can speak on both standard rules and pet peeves without sounding peevish.

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