



## Myths, Misconceptions and Murky Matters in Copy Editing

By [Bill Walsh](#)

### 'SUSPECT'

It means "person suspected"; it does not mean "perpetrator" or "criminal." Use "suspect" to avoid a libel suit, among other things, when naming an actual *suspect*, but do not use it willy-nilly the way the police do.

*Police are looking for the man who has robbed three downtown jewelry stores in the past month. The **suspect**, who was taped during the robberies by the stores' security cameras, is described as a tall, thin white man in his mid-30s with dark hair and blue eyes.*

**Wrong.** The person on tape doing the robbing is the *robber*. If someone is arrested, however, that person will be a *suspect*. Libel concerns aside, he may or may not be the person on tape. It could be his twin.

*An 18-month-old girl was reported missing by her mother Friday, and police believe she was taken by woman's ex-boyfriend. The **suspect**, John Robinson, is described as is described as a tall, thin white man in his mid-30s with dark hair and blue eyes.*

**Right.** Police *suspect* Robinson took the baby. We don't know whether he really did.

*Organizers of the International Gem Show at the Waterfront Convention Center discovered that a six-carat diamond was missing Saturday night. Visitors reported seeing a man visit the display several times that evening, and police believe it was that man who stole the diamond. The **suspect** is described as a tall, thin white man in his mid-30s with dark hair and blue eyes.*

**Right.** Even though it's an unnamed person, we're simply talking about someone who was seen in the vicinity of the crime. The same story, however, could correctly say, "Police said the robber got to the diamond by breaking the glass." The story should say that, of course, even if police actually said "the suspect."

*The **robber** is also suspected of stealing jewelry from **safety deposit boxes** at a downtown bank.*

**Partially right.** *Robber* is correct unless police are talking about a specific suspect. But this was a tricky one: The issue here is actually that *safety deposit boxes* should be *safe-deposit boxes*. "Safe" and "de" together sound like "safety," and that tricks people into thinking that *safety* belongs in the phrase.

### ONE OF THOSE

*Buchanan said Clinton is one of those people who believes his own lies.*

**Wrong.** The pundit is making the point that Clinton is one of any number of people who *believe their own lies*. Don't be confused by *one* being the subject of the clause; look to the immediate clause, of which *people* is the subject. Think about it: Why is *people* in the sentence if the assertion is purely about Clinton? To put it another way, *of those people who believe their own lies, Clinton is one*. At least according to Buchanan.

## COMPARE TO, COMPARE WITH

Forget the old axiom that *compare to* is for similarities and *compare with* is for differences. The thing to remember is that *compare to* means *liken to*, period. Comparisons that actually weigh either similarities or differences point by point are comparisons *with*.

## A, AN

*A* is for consonant sounds; *an* is for vowel sounds. Spelling doesn't matter. The ever-popular *an historic* is incorrect, at least for American speakers. Even those Americans who pronounce it "an istoric" will admit that they say "historic," with the consonant *h*, when the word stands alone. You don't go altering your pronunciation of a word in order to change the article you use before it.

## SERIAL COMMAS

Generally, newspapers don't use a comma before *and* in a series. It's *Crosby, Stills and Nash*, not *Crosby, Stills, and Nash*. But the serial comma should be used with long, unwieldy items or when one item in a list contains the word *and*. Sometimes it's more than a matter of style; note the ambiguity in *the departments of sanitation, conservation and recreation and parks*.

## ATTORNEY, LAWYER

*Lawyer* is almost always safe, except when a non-lawyer is acting as his own attorney. *Attorney* means "person representing." So you can be *an attorney for the defendant* or *the defendant's attorney* or *an attorney in the case*, but you can't be *a Wilmington attorney* or *a patent attorney* or *an attorney at the law firm*. Think of it this way: *Attorney* is to *lawyer* as *rescuer* is to *lifeguard*.

## DIFFERENT FROM, DIFFERENT THAN

*Different from* is correct when it makes sense to use it. But sometimes it doesn't make sense. Observe: *Clinton is a different man than he was during his presidency*. Nothing wrong with that sentence. It could be *Clinton is a different man from the man he was during his presidency*, but that would be an unnecessary and awkward rewrite.

## ACTIVE VOICE, PASSIVE VOICE

The active voice is better when it makes sense to use it. But sometimes it doesn't make sense. Sometimes the person or thing doing the acting is unimportant or even unknown. Observe: *The winning numbers in the \$7.4 billion Powerball lottery will be drawn tonight. Louis was born in Detroit. Wilmington-based Delmarva Enterprises Inc. will be sold to a small Japanese*

*manufacturing company*. The last one is a close call, but a Wilmington newspaper would want to lead with the "passive" Wilmington company rather than the "active" buyer.

## PARTIAL QUOTES

Partial quotes should stand on their own; they should not be used to introduce full quotes.

WRONG: *The report describes "a catastrophic failure in the intelligence-gathering process. The United States was caught off guard in a tragic and embarrassing way."*

RIGHT: *The report describes "a catastrophic failure in the intelligence-gathering process."*

*"The United States was caught off guard in a tragic and embarrassing way," it says.*

## THE THE

Even if you capitalize *The* in something like *The New York Times*, that doesn't mean that every *the* that adjoins *New York Times* should be up. Note that *the* goes with *newsroom* in this sentence: *The article was often discussed in the New York Times newsroom.*

## THAT, WHICH

You've probably heard the difference described in terms of non-restrictive vs. restrictive clauses or non-essential vs. essential clauses. If you don't quite grasp all that, an easy memory aid is that *which* should be preceded by a comma or a comma equivalent (an open parenthesis or a dash).

WRONG: *Michigan leads Ohio State in the rivalry, a fact which Schembechler is quick to note*

RIGHT: *Michigan leads Ohio State in the rivalry, which Schembechler is quick to note.*

RIGHT: *The rivalry, which is considered one of college football's most significant, continues to pack stadiums in Ann Arbor and Columbus.*

RIGHT: *A rivalry that is considered one of college football's most significant continues to pack stadiums in Ann Arbor and Columbus.*

Note, however, that occasionally a comma will end up before a *that*.

RIGHT: *The attention the rivalry attracts is sometimes resented at the other teams, including Penn State and Iowa, that make up the Big Ten Conference.* The Penn State-Iowa clause interrupts a phrase that correctly reads *the other teams that make up the Big Ten Conference*, not *the other teams which make up the Big Ten conference*.

## COMPOSE, COMPRISE, CONSTITUTE, ETC.

All of the following are correct:

*The Big Ten is made up of 11 universities.*

*The Big Ten is composed of 11 universities.*

*The Big Ten consists of 11 universities.*

*The Big Ten comprises 11 universities.*

*Eleven universities make up the Big Ten.*

*Eleven universities constitute the Big Ten.*

## A WHILE, AWHILE

*Awhile* (one word) means *for a while* (three words). *A while* (two words) means *a while* (two words). You can *stay awhile*, or you can *stay for a while*.

## PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

You'll often see sentences like this: *Compared with the old water-treatment plant, the new one is smaller, cleaner and handles 500,000 more gallons per day.*

The construction is not parallel. The lack of an *is* before *cleaner* means that *is* is implied before the third item in the series as well. But *and is handles 500,000 more gallons* makes no sense. So make it either *is smaller and cleaner and handles* or *is smaller, is cleaner and handles*.

## HELPING VERBS AND HEADLINES

The main verb of a headline may be omitted. *Kennedy Assassinated* is understood to mean Kennedy *was* assassinated. But in headlines that begin with a *says* attribution, *says* becomes the main verb and therefore the helping verb must be left in: *UPI Reports Kennedy Shot* may be understandable, but to those trained, consciously or unconsciously, in headline conventions, it raises the question *Kennedy shot whom?*

**RIGHT: Analyst Says Eagles Excel.** *Excel* is a verb with no helping verb; it works just fine this way.

**WRONG: Analyst Says Eagles Hopeless.** It should be *Eagles Are Hopeless*. Readers will expect a verb, and *hopeless* is not a verb.

**RIGHT: Analyst Says Eagles Are Hopeless.**

**RIGHT: Eagles Hopeless, Analyst Says.** Moving *says* will solve your problem.

## INTRODUCING QUOTES

*Springer said, "I regret my arrest."* Right. That's a conventionally introduced quote.

*Springer described his arrest as, "a humbling experience."* Wrong. Partial quotes should be

punctuated as if they are a continuing part of the sentence, which they are. He described his arrest as a humbling experience. No comma, whether or not there are quote marks.

*Reeve credited his partial recovery to the movie, "The Other Side of the Mountain."* Wrong, but for a different reason. The comma would be correct if that were the only movie ever made. Other movies were made, however, and so the comma is incorrect. This is another restrictive/non-restrictive issue.

## APOSTROPHE? COMMA?

Sports people, take note. If you could write *Philadelphia* (not *Philadelphia's*) *quarterback Donovan McNabb*, then you should write *Eagles* (not *Eagles'*) *quarterback Donovan McNabb*. But that *s* seems to fool people. You need the apostrophe only when you have a true possessive. Observe:

WRONG: *Eagles' quarterback, Donovan McNabb, threw an embarrassing interception.*

WRONG: *Eagles' quarterback Donovan McNabb threw an embarrassing interception.*

RIGHT: *The Eagles' quarterback, Donovan McNabb, threw an embarrassing interception.* (That little *the* makes a big difference.)

RIGHT: *Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb threw an embarrassing interception.*

## SPLIT INFINITIVES, ENDING SENTENCES WITH PREPOSITIONS,

## BEGINNING SENTENCES WITH CONJUNCTIONS

Myth, myth, myth. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. If a sentence that commits one of those supposed sins is awkward, that's one thing, but none of those things are necessarily awkward. (Yes, *none are*. It's an AP myth that it must always be *none is*.)

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## The Editor's Bookshelf

Your official style resources — for most, that means the Associated Press Stylebook and Webster's New World College Dictionary — come first, but well-rounded editors should also be familiar with other books on usage. These books won't always agree, but they'll get you thinking about the big usage issues and provide guidance on questions that AP doesn't cover.

(AP says to use quotation marks for book titles "except the Bible and books that are primarily catalogs of reference material." The punctuation or lack thereof below reflects some judgment calls.)

- **The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.** This dictionary's "usage notes" are a good first stop for clear and concise explanations of the big word controversies along with the ruling (usually divided) of a panel of experts.

- Bernstein, Theodore M., "**The Careful Writer.**" The copyright date is 1965, but the advice is timeless. If there's room on your bookshelf for only one of these books, get this one.
- Bryson, Bill, "**Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words.**" Bryson, most well known for his laugh-out-loud travel books, used to be a copy editor on the London Times business desk, and he offers well-reasoned guidance, Bernstein-style, on style and usage matters both major and arcane. (No laughs, though.)
- Fowler, H.M., and Ernest Gowers, "**Fowler's Modern English Usage.**" It's a little dated, a little too British and written in a style that might challenge modern readers, but it remains the most influential book in the genre.
- Garner, Bryan A., **A Dictionary of Modern American Usage.** Exhaustive and rich with citations, Garner's book is the least likely in this list to come up empty on any given question.
- Martin, Paul R., **The Wall Street Journal Guide to Business Style and Usage.**

*Also:* Siegal, Allan M., and William G. Connolly, **The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage.** Martin, Siegal and Connolly are smart, sensible and thorough style gurus.

Keep these new stylebooks on hand to see where American newspapering's leading style authorities depart from the AP guidelines.

- O'Conner, Patricia T., "**Woe Is I**" and "**Words Fail Me.**" O'Conner covers the basics with effortless clarity and wit.
- Walsh, Bill, "**Lapsing Into a Comma.**" Shameless plug. Also, watch for "**The Elephants of Style,**" coming next year.