part 1 IMPROVING IMMEDIATELY

Introduction

Most professional and student mass communicators enjoy games that test their skills in using words effectively. That explains why their friends and their family members buy them holiday gifts like Scrabble, Scattergories, and Boggle. These devotees of word play undoubtedly are pleased to receive the games, but they dislike reading and learning a long list of rules as much as anyone else. They want to start playing immediately and learn as they go.

Part 1 of this book has four chapters designed with impatient people in mind. It begins with 25 writing tips and examples that are quick and simple to learn and can be put to use immediately. Chapter 1 is supplemented by three new ones that present and solve common problems in making distinctions between similar word pairs, in avoiding potentially embarrassing language lapses, and in removing the guesswork from several annoying choices we must make in our everyday writing and broadcasting.

The chapters in Part 2 require some rule reading and review. They cover parts of speech, sentence functions and structures, and syntax. Punctuation follows in Part 3, and Part 4 returns readers to the immediate satisfaction tract, providing quick reference checks for spelling, vocabulary, irregular verbs, wordiness and trite expressions, and words sometimes hyphenated and sometimes used as one or two words.

When used as a reference, the book—or parts of it—can be read in any order and to any extent readers choose. Even when the book is used as a textbook, the parts can be interchanged to suit the needs of teachers and students. The extensive table of contents and the index enable readers to locate quickly whatever they want to check, review or study.

chapter 1

25 WAYS TO IMPROVE WRITING IMMEDIATELY

Although most language skills problems cannot be solved instantly, journalists and other mass communicators share some common errors that can be corrected quickly. If you want to gain immediate improvement, the opportunity is provided in the following pages. You can put these simple guidelines to work as soon as you read them.

1. Omit *On* before a Day of the Week and before a Month and Date

The preposition ***on*** is rarely needed before a day of the week or a month and date.

(Avoid) City Council will meet at 7 p.m. ***on*** Tuesday.

(Better) City Council will meet at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

(Avoid) County commissioners will vote ***on*** March 20.

(Better) County commissioners will vote March 20.

2. Avoid *Holding* Meetings/Conferences/Parties/Conventions

Although some mass communicators are not bothered by the use of ***hold, held*** or ***holding*** when reporting about meetings, conferences, parties or conventions, other writers and broadcasters think such use is unnecessary and even silly. A person can ***hold*** another's hand, a fork, a baby or any number of other objects, but how does one ***hold*** a meeting?

(Avoid) City Council will ***hold*** its meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

(Better) City Council will meet at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

(Avoid) The commission ***held*** its meeting last week.

(Better) The commission met last week.

3. Don't *Invite, Urge* or *Welcome*

In objective news articles, writers and broadcasters should not ***invite, urge*** or ***welcome*** readers and listeners to do anything. To do so is to editorially endorse the activity. (Of course, such remarks may be attributed to sources. Then the endorsement comes from the sources and not from the journalists.)

(Avoid) The public is ***invited.***

(Better) The event is open to the public.

(Avoid) Volunteers are ***urged*** to give blood between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. today at the Red Cross Center.

(Better) Volunteers may give blood between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. today at the Red Cross Center.

(Acceptable) Margaret X. Beatty, director of the Winchester County Red Cross Center, **said she is *urging*** people to give blood because reserves are almost depleted.

(Avoid) The public is ***welcome*** to attend.

(Better) The event is open to the public.

4. Avoid *Talking Inanimate Objects*

The president's press conference will be postponed one week, ***the White House said*** today.
Acme University asked the attorney general for a legal opinion.
The First Johnson National Bank disclosed today that it will lower interest rates by half a percentage point.

Even though they know that the White House, Acme University and the First Johnson National Bank can't talk, journalists commonly attribute remarks to these and other inanimate objects. However, only in uncommon situations is this practice necessary or justifiable.

The first choice is to use the name of a legitimate spokesman or spokeswoman (the White House press secretary or an assistant secretary, an administrator or press officer at the university, or an officer of the bank). In rare instances in which a person cannot be referred to by name, ***spokesman, spokeswoman*** or ***representative*** may be used, although not one of these is a desirable substitute.

(Avoid) ***The First Johnson National Bank*** disclosed today that it will lower interest rates by half a percentage point.

(Better) Interest rates will decrease by half a percentage point at the First Johnson National Bank, ***a company spokesman said*** today.

(Best) Interest rates will decrease by half a percentage point at The First Johnson National Bank, ***according*** to an announcement today by ***Robert J. Straun, company president.***

5. Put the *Name before the Verb* in Attribution

As a rule, use ***Jones said*** in attribution instead of ***said Jones.*** Said Jones is awkward. It's not the way people talk; therefore, it seems unnatural in news stories, broadcasts, advertisements and public relations material.

(Avoid) The bridge will be completed on schedule, ***said Jones.***

(Better) The bridge will be completed on schedule, ***Jones said.***

However, using ***Jones said*** can be awkward when identifying material is inserted between the two words. In such an instance, putting ***said*** before ***Jones*** may be more desirable, although substituting ***according to Jones*** is a better solution.

(Avoid) The bridge will be completed on schedule, ***Robert T. Jones,*** deputy director of the State Highway Department, **said.**

(Better) The bridge will be completed on schedule, ***said Robert T. Jones,*** deputy director of the State Highway Department.

(Best) The bridge will be completed on schedule, ***according to Robert T. Jones,*** deputy director of the State Highway Department.

6. Be Cautious about Using *According To*

Many journalists avoid using ***according to.*** They consider ***said*** to be shorter and more straightforward. They especially avoid starting a sentence with ***according to*** because it shifts the emphasis to the source instead of to the subject matter.

The best advice may be to use ***according to*** when referring to inanimate objects (The president will veto the bill, ***according to The Washington Post***) and ***said*** when referring to a person (The president will veto the bill, his ***press secretary said***).

An example of how to use ***according to*** when referring to a person may be found above in **Put the *Name before the Verb* in Attribution.**

7. Don't Interchange *Feel, Think* and *Believe*

Feel, think, and ***believe*** are not interchangeable.

Use ***feel*** to refer to your sense of touch (The new material ***feels*** soft) and to refer to your health or state of being (I ***feel*** good today, or I ***feel*** uneasy about spending so much money).

Use ***think*** to express an opinion (The senator said she ***thinks*** the bill will pass).

Use ***believe*** to refer to a conviction or a principle (The judge said he ***believes*** every citizen has a right to a fair trial).

The delegate said he ***thinks*** (**not** ***feels***) his bill will be approved.

The minister said she ***believes*** **(not** ***thinks*** **or** ***feels*****)** there is life after death.

The applicant said she ***thinks*** (**not** ***feels***) her interview went well, and she ***feels*** good about her chances of getting the job.

8. Don't *Read Minds* or *Make Predictions*

Journalists don't know what their sources are thinking or planning unless their sources tell them. However, journalists sometimes write or broadcast as if they have the power to read minds or make predictions. Avoid this problem by inserting ***he/she said.*** Let your readers or your listeners know the statement came from the source and not from you, the journalist.

(Avoid) Trager ***thinks*** he has enough votes pledged to get his bill passed.

(Better) Trager ***said he thinks*** he has enough votes pledged to get his bill passed.

(Avoid) McRae ***will announce*** Tuesday that she will seek re-election.

(Better) McRae ***said she will announce*** Tuesday that she will seek re-election.

9. Don't *Give Orders* to Readers/Listeners

Without consciously meaning to, journalists sometimes order their readers and listeners to do one thing or another. By avoiding second-person writing in these instances, journalists can eliminate the problem.

(Avoid) To apply for a low-interest student loan, ***go*** to the business office before 4 p.m. Friday.

(Better) Applications for low-interest student loans ***may be made*** at the business office until 4 p.m. Friday.

(Avoid) ***You must bring*** a statement of your annual income and a list of ***your*** dependents when ***you*** apply for the loan.

(Better) ***Applicants are required*** to provide a statement of annual income and a list of dependents when ***they*** apply for the loan.

10. Put Long Titles *after* the Person's Name

Journalists usually capitalize brief titles used directly ***before*** a person's name (***Mayor*** Johnson, ***Coach*** Ridgeway, ***Dr.*** Walker). However, they usually use lowercase letters for titles—brief or long—when they ***follow*** a person's name (Ralph B. Hastings, ***associate director of the United Fund Campaign;*** Saul T. Levine, ***president of the Colonial Historical Society***).

There is considerable disagreement about when and when not to capitalize titles. Because journalists use informal language in their publications and broadcasts, they capitalize less frequently than people who write textbooks, legal documents, master's theses and doctoral dissertations.

One guideline you may find helpful is to use titles ***before*** names ***only*** if you would address those individuals that way if you passed them on the street. You would feel comfortable saying hello to ***Dr.*** **Wong,** ***Coach*** **Menendez** or ***Mayor*** **Wysong.**

But you wouldn't even consider addressing someone as ***Professor of Anthropology and Sociology*** **Wong,** ***Head Basketball and Assistant Track Coach*** **Menendez** or ***Mayor of the City of San Francisco*** **Wysong.**

Long titles fit more comfortably ***after*** names where capitalization usually is unnecessary.

11. Make *Quotations* Count

Inexperienced journalists sometimes quote routine information that should be paraphrased. A direct quotation should have an impact on the reader or listener because of its importance, human interest or impressive phrasing.

(Ineffective) "We'll just have to try again next week to get enough votes to pass the bill," Sen. Sandra W. Wiggins said.

(Better) Sen. Sandra W. Wiggins said she and other supporters of the bill will try again next week to gain enough votes to pass it.

(Ineffective) "The program will begin at 7 p.m. Friday with an address by Sen. R.M. White, and it will wind up Sunday afternoon with the other principal speaker, Walter P. Grassley, president of Unity State University," Beverly J. Robinson, program director, announced.

(Better) The three-day conference will start at 7 p.m. Friday with an address by Sen. R.M. White and will close Sunday afternoon with a speech by Walter P. Grassley, president of Unity State University. *(Attribution is unnecessary if the writer/broadcaster is certain the information is correct.)*

Of course, if reporters can err by quoting information that should be paraphrased, they also can make the opposite mistake—paraphrasing something worth using as a quotation.

(Ineffective) The mayor commended city employees for clearing streets during the three-day snowfall.

(Better) "Our street crews worked courageously and tirelessly during the dangerous snowfall, and they deserve the thanks of every citizen for keeping our roads safe to drive on," the mayor said.

12. *Quickly Identify* the Person Being Quoted

If a quotation continues beyond one sentence, routinely identify the source in the ***first*** sentence. Why make the reader or listener wait to find out who is being quoted? At its best, failing to identify the speaker in the first sentence is an annoying practice; at its worst it's confusing, especially if more than one person is quoted in the article.

(Avoid) "Our members will strike at midnight unless the company meets our demand for an 8 percent wage increase. We've reduced our offer to the lowest point possible," ***Tarkenton said.***

(Better) "Our members will strike at midnight unless the company meets our demand for an 8 percent wage increase," ***Tarkenton said.*** "We've reduced our offer to the lowest point possible."

Please notice that when attribution is given in the first sentence of a direct quotation, none is needed in the second.

Another instance in which identification of the person being quoted should be made as quickly as possible is when a paragraph ends with a quotation from one person, and the next paragraph starts with a quotation from another individual. If the second person isn't identified immediately, readers or listeners will think the first person is still being quoted.

(Avoid) "I am thrilled to have been selected for the Pendelson scholarship," ***Hairston said.*** "It's something I've been working for all my life."

"Nothing could be more satisfying. The entire student body of Acme High School is happy about it," ***Principal Randall B. Smithson said.***

(Better) "I am thrilled to have been selected for the Pendelson scholarship," ***Hairston said.*** "It's something I've been working for all my life."

Principal Randall B. Smithson said, "Nothing could be more satisfying. The entire student body at Acme High School is happy about it."

13. *Doctor*—a Title, not a Profession

Avoid writing or broadcasting that a person is a ***doctor.*** Refer instead to that person's profession (physician, minister, dentist, professor, and so forth).

Because most readers and listeners will think of a member of the medical profession when **doctor** is used, clarification is required when the story is about people who have earned doctoral degrees in other disciplines.

Remember that **doctor** is a ***title,*** not a profession. Therefore, avoid using **doctor** generically. Use Dr. Marianne A. Weston, a *neurosurgeon* at Acme General Hospital, or Dr. Martin N. Reynolds, *professor* of journalism, or Dr. Harold C. Pennington, the newly appointed *minister* at Wyoming Presbyterian Church.

14. Don't Presume Readers/Listeners Know the *Background*

Journalists ***should not presume their readers or listeners know the background*** details of a story even if the subject matter has been reported regularly for several days or weeks. Of course, not everything that has been printed or broadcast can be repeated in each additional story, but sufficient background should be provided to present the news in an understandable context.

(Avoid) Despite increased criticism from school administrators, students and some members of the Legislature, the governor said he will not rescind ***Executive Order No. 2.***

(Better) Despite increased criticism from school administrators, students and some members of the Legislature, the governor said he will not rescind Executive Order No. 2, ***which retains for the state all interest earned on funds allotted to education.***

(Avoid) P. A. Rodriquez, president of ***CROP,*** said the awards dinner will be March 10.

(Better) P. A. Rodriquez, president of the ***Committee to Recognize Outstanding Pupils,*** said the awards dinner will be March 10.

15. Don't Start First Sentence of Paragraph with a *Coordinating Conjunction*

Your English teachers probably told you that starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, yet, so) is improper. However, the practice is generally accepted in journalism ***if the sentence is not the first in the paragraph.*** Why? Because both print and broadcast journalists realize their readers and listeners find shorter sentences easier to understand.

16. Don't *Repeat Major Words* in Same Sentence or Headline

One rule that many writers adopt early in their careers is to avoid repeating **major words** in the same sentence or headline. However, repetition of minor words such as articles (a, an, the), prepositions (on, at, in), and some conjunctions (and, or, nor) is necessary.

17. Place Relative Pronoun Immediately *after* Its Antecedent

A **relative pronoun** introduces a dependent clause, further explains or defines its antecedent (the noun it replaces) from the independent clause, and enables the writer to combine two clauses into one effective sentence. The most common relative pronouns are *who, which* and *that.* Others are *whom, what, whose, whoever, whomever, whichever* and *whatever.*

To avoid syntax problems, writers and broadcasters should ***place a relative pronoun immediately after its noun antecedent.*** When that is not possible, special care must be taken to place the relative pronoun where it will promote understanding and not create confusion or give the sentence an unintended meaning. Consider how correct placement is achieved in the following examples:

(Awkward) The ***library*** in McDonald County, ***which*** used to be a barn, also serves as a meeting place for community groups. (The antecedent of ***which*** is ***library,*** not **County.**)

(Better) The McDonald County ***library, which*** used to be a barn, also serves as a meeting place for community groups.

(Awkward) The ***president*** of the Board of **Trustees, *who*** has three years remaining in his term, said today he will resign at the end of the school year. (The antecedent of ***who*** is ***president,*** not **Trustees.**)

(Better) The Board of Trustees ***president, who*** has three years remaining in his term, said today he will resign at the end of the school year. (No apostrophe is needed after **Trustees** because the term is descriptive, not possessive.)

18. Don't Interchange *Which* and *That*

Even experienced writers and broadcasters sometimes have difficulty deciding whether ***which*** or ***that*** is the appropriate relative pronoun to use to introduce a dependent clause. The solution is to determine whether the dependent clause is **essential** or **nonessential** in making the meaning of the independent clause clear. In other words, can the independent clause stand unchanged in meaning if the dependent clause is removed? Does the dependent clause provide **essential** information, or does it just provide **additional** information?

If the dependent clause is **nonessential,** it is introduced by the relative pronoun ***which,*** and commas are used to set the dependent clause apart from the independent clause. If the dependent clause is **essential,** it is introduced by the relative pronoun ***that,*** and commas are not used to set the dependent clause apart from the independent clause.

The following examples illustrate the use of ***which*** with dependent clauses that are **nonessential** and ***that*** with dependent clauses that are **essential.**

(Nonessential) The reporter covering the circus decided to write a feature story about elephants, ***which*** he found to be fascinating.

The dependent clause, **which he found to be fascinating,** is not needed to make the meaning of the independent clause clear. It just provides additional information. Therefore, ***which*** is used as the relative pronoun to introduce the dependent clause, and a comma is used to set the dependent clause apart from the independent clause.

(Essential) The elephant (***that***) the reporter rode this morning will perform in the matinee.

The dependent clause, **that the reporter rode this morning,** is needed to make the meaning of the independent clause clear. It tells which elephant will perform—the one that the reporter rode. Therefore, ***that*** is used as the relative pronoun to introduce the dependent clause. No commas are used to set the dependent clause apart from the independent clause. ***That*** is placed in parentheses to indicate it does not have to be used. It is understood.

19. Don't Report *Opinions* and *Accusations* as *Facts*

Journalists sometimes inadvertently report opinions or accusations as facts by using careless wording. Such wording may be not only inaccurate but also unfair.

(Avoid) The university's ***inferior*** science program is the main reason Acme State has failed to gain approval to start a medical school, the student body president said today.

(Better) The student body president of Acme State today ***described the university's science program as inferior*** and said it is the main reason approval has not been granted to start a medical school.

or

Acme State University has failed to gain approval to start a medical school because of its ***"inferior science program,"*** the student body president said today.

(Avoid) The state's ***bad*** labor-management relations will make recruiting industry difficult, a candidate for the State Senate said today.

(Better) A candidate for the State Senate said today that recruiting industry will be difficult because of what ***she described*** as the state's bad labor-management relations.

The problem with these faulty sentences is that they fail to make clear that sources are relating their **opinions** about the quality of the university's science program or the state's labor-management relations. These assessments are not indisputable; they are opinions or accusations and should be presented as such.

20. *Think* before Ending Words with *ize*

If you read in a newspaper or heard during a radio or a television news report that the mayor had been *hospital**ized (confined to a hospital),*** the use of ***ize*** at the end of *hospital* probably would not trouble you. *Hospital**ized*** is a word used so frequently that it has become generally accepted. You would doubtlessly be taken aback, however, if you read or heard that after being *hospital**ized*** for a week, the mayor was released but would be *hous**ized (confined to his house)*** for a month before he could return to work.

Obviously, no one says or writes *hous**ized.*** But the principle is the same. If you can form such ***ize*** words as *hospital**ize,*** *institutional**ize*** and *victim**ize,*** what is so illogical about saying or writing *hous**ize*** or *school**ize?***

You get the point. We injure our language by carelessly attaching ***ize*** to the end of any word we choose. Your school news medium or your mass media company may have guidelines concerning such words. If not, you will have to decide for yourself whether you find acceptable such words as *internal**ize,*** *external**ize,*** *traumat**ize,*** *actual**ize,*** *maxim**ize,*** *priorit**ize,*** *compartmental**ize,*** *depersonal**ize*** and *politic**ize.***

21. *Resist Using* Nouns as Verbs

Some verbs formed from nouns are used so frequently that they have become generally accepted. Examples include *jail**ed,*** *journey**ed*** and *hous**ed.*** Many argue that

turning nouns into verbs is useful and harmless. Others, however, think the practice should be avoided. They have in mind such substitutes as *author**ed*** for *wrote, host**ed*** for *was host for* or *served as host for,* and *impact**ed*** for *affected.*

Mass communicators would be wise to resist using nouns as verbs unless the words have become commonly accepted.

22. *Avoid* Gobbledygook and Words That Are Not Self-Explanatory

Gobbledygook refers to pompous, wordy, needlessly complicated writing or speaking used to impress or to confuse.

> "We facilitated the excavation of the traumatized male child."
>
> ***Translation:*** "We dug under the collapsed building and saved the scared boy."

A mistake frequently made by beginning journalists and occasionally by professionals is to use **a word or a term not generally known or self-explanatory.** The error occurs most often when journalists repeat words from news sources who use language generally understood only by their colleagues.

One example related to the medical profession will make the point. A newspaper article in an area where coal mining is a major industry related that a physician was quoted as saying "**pneumoconiosis** is decreasing as an occupational health hazard." What the heck is **"pneumoconiosis"?**

The mass communicator must explain to the reader that **"pneumoconiosis"** means black lung disease. If that report is carried by a newspaper in an area in which residents have little knowledge of coal mining, the reporter must additionally explain that **pneumoconiosis** or **black lung** refers to a disease common among miners who for many years have breathed coal dust into their lungs.

No word or term like **pneumoconiosis** should be used without explanation unless the audience is restricted to those who are sure to be familiar with it.

23. *Maintain* Parallel Construction

Strangers have little difficulty finding their way in cities where roads are parallel to one another. If they know all avenues run south to north, all streets run east to west, and each road is numbered consecutively, visitors will need only the address of where they want to go.

Likewise, when writing has the balance, rhythm and consistent direction provided by parallel construction, readers should have little difficulty understanding the message. The following examples will illustrate what is meant by parallelism in writing or in speaking:

(Awkward) The retiring editor of the Acme Gazette said she looks forward to travel**ing** more, sleep**ing** later and more frequent **visits** with her grandchildren.

(Improved) The retiring editor of the Acme Gazette said she looks forward to travel**ing** more, sleep**ing** later and visit**ing** her grandchildren more frequently.

(Awkward) The Fly**ing** Eagles used superior runn**ing,** passes and kick**ing** to defeat the Thundering Mustangs in the state championship football game.

(Improved) The Flying Eagles used superior runn**ing,** pass**ing** and kick**ing** to defeat the Thundering Mustangs in the state championship football game.

(Awkward) The graphic artists **not only** *wanted* to do a good job for their company **but also** to create a unique design.

(Improved) The graphic artists *wanted* **not only** to do a good job for their company **but also** to create a unique design.

(Awkward) The advertising director left three written instructions for the new employee: (1) You must **answer** the phone. (2) **Checking** expired display advertisements. (3) **To proofread** all classified advertisements ordered since 6 p.m.

(Improved) The advertising director left three written instructions for the new employee: (1) You must **answer** the phone. (2) You must **check** expired display advertisements. (3) You must **proofread** all classified advertisements ordered since 6 p.m.

or

The advertising director left three written instructions for the new employee: **Answer** the phone, **check** expired display advertisements and **proofread** all classified advertisements ordered since 6 p.m.

(Awkward) The professor said he *love**s*** teaching and *tolerate**s*** grading papers but *hate**d*** attending meetings.

(Improved) The professor said he *love**s*** teaching and *tolerate**s*** grading papers but *hate**s*** attending meetings.

(Awkward) *Whether **alert** or when he was **tired,*** Jackson was a good interviewer.

(Improved) *Whether **alert** or **tired,*** Jackson was a good interviewer.

24. *Think* before Splitting Infinitives

The advice about splitting infinitives is similar to the recommendations given previously about starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction: Do it only when it improves writing and promotes comprehension. Remember that split infinitives rarely are necessary if you are willing to rewrite the sentence.

Before you split an infinitive, try to move the material you are tempted to place between **to** and the **verb.** You can let your ear be your guide, as the following examples illustrate:

(Bad splits) Some people undergo cosmetic surgery **to *forever* look** young.

The coach tried **to *clearly* demonstrate** how **to *properly* spike** the volleyball.

(OK splits) He wanted **to *radically* change** the method used to determine salary levels.

The president tried **to *virtually* guarantee** the outcome by offering concessions to individual members of Congress in return for their support.

25. Wordiness: Sometimes Never Means *Never*

Saying ***never*** can be risky. An unanticipated exception can prove embarrassing. However, a few of the countless examples of wordiness can be trimmed reasonably safely. One is using **together** after the following words:

assemble
bind
blend
bond
combined
connect
cooperate
entwined
fused
gather
huddle
join
knit
link
merge
mesh
mix
mulch
splice
staple
tangled
tie
weld

More than 250 of the most common examples of wordiness are listed in Reference 4, Wordiness and Trite Expressions, beginning on page 273.