

**Grammar Session  
Copy Editors Workshop  
July 13, 2005  
Professor Jan Johnson Yopp**

**Topics generated from your questions**

**Refresh the usage of lie/lay**

***Lie is intransitive vs. lay transitive (as is rise/raise and sit/set).***

*I lie down. You lie down. She lies down.*

To use *lay*, we have to lay something down.

*I lay Allison down for her nap every day at 2 p.m.*

*Lay* takes the past tense *laid*.

*I laid her down every day last week for a nap.*

*Lay* is also the past tense of *lie*.

*I lay on the ground for 15 minutes to stretch out my back. I have lain here for six hours, and my back still hurts.*

**Dangling modifiers**

Does the modifier actually modify the noun next to it?

*Covered in plastic, Gov. Joe Manchin said the dome's restoration will be completed in October.*

*A University junior, the Fourth of July is her favorite holiday.*

Rewrite the sentences.

**Punctuation**

**Colons: When to use them.**

- In direct quotes, with two sentences or more.

*Bush said: "The attacks in London underscore the importance of a national terrorism strategy. We must be ever vigilant. We can never let down our guard."*

•Not with include.

*The committee includes Jane Marks, Harry Luce and Wanda Fleming.*

When to use **semicolons**? Sparingly. Use them in a series, as noted below.

*The Board of Trustees added three new members: Fred Mills, of Raleigh, president of a construction firm; Dr. Irvin Roseman, an endodontist from Wilmington; and David Young, a Realtor from Asheville.*

As punctuation in a sentence, a semicolon separates related independent clauses or clauses of equal weight.

*Consider yourself lucky to have a job; thousands of North Carolinians were laid off last year.*

### **Commas and quotation marks**

*He believes a key reason for the program's success is "when you come here, you have made a huge commitment. You have to uproot yourself, it costs a lot of money."*

The writer asked: Should a period replace the comma after *yourself*. Yes. The comma is not strong enough between these independent clauses. Yes, you could use a semi-colon.

*Frank Gallo, a sales manager, fills his book, "Graduation! Now What?", with advice he wished he had when he was starting out.*

*His books include "Graduation! Now What?", "You're OK; I'm OK!", "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" and "Believe It or Not."*

All the above are punctuated correctly.

### **Possessives**

Do you need apostrophes?

*Cubs pitcher Jerome Williams won the game.*

*The Cubs pitcher is Jerome Williams.*

*13-run inning caps Yankees wild rally (headline)*

*13-run inning caps wild Yankees rally (headline)*

Check out *The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation*.

AP says if the word or phrase is descriptive, no apostrophe. Also, if you can use *for* or *by* instead of *of* in a longer version, then no apostrophe is needed, such as *pitcher*

*for the Cubs* or *rally by the Yankees*. Following either of those rules, none of the above requires apostrophes.

As to possessives in general, *When Words Collide* notes:

If a singular noun does not end in *s*, add *'s* such as *the newspaper's circulation*.

If the noun ends in *s*, add *'s* unless the next word begins with *s*. If the next word begins with *s*, add *'* only: *the hostess' salary*.

If a proper noun ends in *s*, add *'* only: *Davey Jones' locker*.

### **Parallel construction**

Do you need *to* more than once: *Memorials may be made to the American Lung Association, to the LaSalle rescue squad or to a fund for their children*.

No.

Watch the construction, however: *Marriage, divorce and having a baby are tops on the stress-producing inventory*.

Parallel nouns needed: marriage, divorce, baby.

### **Subject-verb agreement**

Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs. The key is to determine which noun is the subject.

Compound subjects and singular/plural verbs.

*The preacher and his family (they) are leaving the congregation next year.*  
*Time and date are subject to change.*

Neither/nor and either/or (they) depend on the noun closest to the verb.

*Neither the teacher nor the students want to watch the ballgame.*  
*Neither the students nor the teacher wants to watch the ballgame.*  
*Either the prosecutor or the defense lawyers object when questions about a potential juror arise.*

*Neither* always takes a singular verb.

*Neither sister wants to give up horseback riding lessons.*  
*Neither of the students has retaken the course.*  
*Neither of the copy editors knows the rule for possessives that end in "s."*

Quantity/amount/number/variety/bunch/pack/group:

*A large quantity of cigarettes was stolen.*  
*A bunch of grapes always reminds me of my eighth-grade art class.*  
*A number of people have been there.*  
*A pack of wolves roams through the campsite every night.*  
*A group of copy editors wants to write a book on subject-verb agreement.*

In the sentences above, the verbs are singular for quantity, bunch, pack and group.

Number, majority and total are singular if preceded by *the* but plural if preceded by *a*.

*A number of people believe he is innocent.*  
*A majority of residents want the town to reduce the recreation fee.*  
*A total of 15 people show up for the town's scheduled public hearings.*

But: *The number of residents who signed the petition has grown.*

One copy editor asked about “notional agreement.” A new one on me, but here’s what he described:

*Five inches of rain has fallen.*

The strict rule of grammar, as he noted, says a singular subject takes a singular verb and plural a plural verb. So that would mean *Five inches of rain have fallen*. What happens if a prepositional phrase follows the subject? How does that affect the verb tense? Does it?

In this case, the prepositional phrase does not determine verb tense. What you have to consider is the notion or idea that the inches are a collective unit and therefore take a singular verb. We are not writing one inch of rain fell, then a second inch of rain, then an inch and a half, etc. We are referring to the entire amount: *Five inches of rain has fallen*.

The prepositional phrase here has no bearing on the verb tense.

### **Percent and prepositional phrases**

How do prepositional phrases after the subject affect the verb tense? Generally, NOT.

*The committee of six men and three women meets every Thursday.*

*One in four students has agreed to participate in the fall reading program.*

BUT

*Sixty percent of women residents of Boston were interviewed for the poll.*

The verb agrees with the noun in the prepositional phrase when *percent* is used.

What happens to a collective noun that ends in *s*, such as the Beatles. Using a singular verb can sound awful to the ear.

*The Eagles is my favorite band.*

That's correct, though it sounds strange.

Rewrite it, if that's more pleasing to the ear: *My favorite band is the Eagles.*

### **Compound adjectives**

To hyphenate or not: *Early morning fire*

From Mike Lewis: He lists the following compound adjectives as not being hyphenated in the in-house stylebook at the *Anchorage Daily News*.

Do you agree?

A much needed vacation

An often frightening experience

The once popular singer

The already dangerous highway

The now defunct organization

An ever expanding vocabulary

A very scary story

A sometimes difficult task

Their somewhat ludicrous proposal

The almost completed project

The much talked about play

Which punctuation is reader friendly? Or is it reader-friendly? Can some words be deleted?

Rene Cappon in *The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation* notes, "The hyphen's main job is to tell readers when combinations of two or more words should be understood as a single concept." Some that require hyphens for clarity, he says: hard-working man, small-business operator, 150-odd soldiers, secret-weapons ban. But some that don't: high school teacher, income tax return, Social Security legislation, heart transplant surgeon. Hyphens are commonly used in compound adjectives such as drought-stricken, rain-swollen, life-threatening, far-reaching.

## **Pet Peeves and Odds and Ends**

**Sometime:** *The crime was committed sometime between 3 and 6 p.m.* This editor says delete sometime.

**Include:** Don't use when all the items are listed.

**Citizens:** Often used in place of residents, but many of those included are not citizens.

**May/might:** *May* connotes permission while *might* connotes possibility. Often *may* and *might* are synonymous.

**That vs. who:** Plants, animals and minerals are *that*. People are *who*. Animals with names (Fifi, Tobi) are *who*.

**Currently** and **now** are redundant in present tense sentences.

**To be or not to be:** *McCarley said the FBI did ask CardSystems to not release details that might compromise the investigation—but she denied that the FBI had asked the company to not disclose that the intrusion occurred.*

Easy to resolve: Don't split prepositional phrases with *not*. More emphasis is placed on *not* when it precedes the infinitive as well.

**Further/farther:** Farther is distance (easy to remember because both have an *a*.) So why *look no further*, a copy editor questions. It's an idiom and does not imply distance.

### **Like/such as**

When to use *like* and when to use *such as*. The following sentences submitted all used *like*. Use *like* as equal to or similar to; *such as* means include.

*“Star Wars” has become an important and cherished part of our shared cultural heritage, like Starbucks and Pez.* Awkward sentence, so better to say *as have Starbucks and Pez* rather than either *like* or *such as*.

*The jury foreman—who is Hispanic, like the accuser's mother—said he was put off when she singled him out.*

*Michael Jackson sat like a statue listening to the accusations against him.*

*That leaves few options for guys like Bell.* Here *like* should be changed to *such as*.

*When children like Marty Strong's former pupils become interested in conservation, it has the long-term impact of helping them become attached to and caretakers of the environment, he said.*

### **You/your**

*I was shocked by your (or you) leaping off the couch and running out of the room.*

I am more affected by the leaping than I am by you. So here use *your leaping*.

### **If/whether**

*Government scientists were unsure if/whether a few extra months of life outweighed the serious side effects.*

*If* is used for conditions, that is, if X happens, then Y. *Whether* is used for choice. In the above sentence, use *whether*, and you can leave off *or not*.

### **Staff/staffs**

*The group hopes to sit in on either a Senate or Assembly session and meet with the staffs of state Sen. Winner or Assemblyman O'Mara.*

Question: Should the word used be *staff* or *staffs*. Here the sentence means two separate staffs for two separate Congress members, so use *staffs*.

### **Each other/another**

In a cutline for a story about flex space below a photo that shows employees seated at pods within a huge open room: *It's important to the company that all employees be able to see each other.*

For more than two people in the room, use *one another*.

## **Recommended Resources**

*The Associated Press Stylebook*, both print and online versions  
Edited by Norm Goldstein

*The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation*, Rene J. Cappon

*The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White

*The Careful Writer*, Theodore Bernstein

*Webster's New World College Dictionary*

*When Words Collide: A Media Writer's Guide to Grammar and Style*, Duncan McDonald

*Words on Words*, John Bremner

*Working with Words: A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors*, Brian Brooks, James L. Pinson, Jean Gaddy Wilson