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The Writers Network News

No Rules; Just Write!

Editor: Bobbie Christmas

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MEET FELLOW WRITERS

Do you live in or visit metro Atlanta? Sign up for notices of local (but sporadic) meetings today! Send your name and email address to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com).

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Writer's Quote of the Month

The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas. –Linus Pauling (1901 – 1994)

Pauling was an author and also a chemist, peace activist, and educator. He won both a Nobel Prize in chemistry and a Nobel Peace Prize.

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ONE: FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: EGO

Dear Fellow Writers:

Lord knows we all have an ego, that not-so-quiet voice that wants to say, "I'm here, and I'm right!" All around me I see the signs of ego, and sometimes the signs are good; sometimes they are not as good.

On the Good Side

When I attended a recent Atlanta Writers Club meeting, the tables were marked with genres, and attendees could sit at a table with other writers of their genre. Most of the people stood and chatted with others, rather than sitting down, and most of the chairs around the various tables were empty. The one exception was the table marked Nonfiction: Memoirs. Almost everyone who was seated chose to sit at that table. Extra chairs had been pulled up, and the table was crowded with writers. Obviously most of the writers attending the club meeting were writing about their own lives. Ergo ego. Ego is good in this case. We're told to write what we know, and we all know our own life's stories. Obviously many of us want to share those stories with the world.

Not-So-Good Side

On the not-so-good side, ego rarely has a place in things other than memoirs. Ego often gets in the way of strong writing.

The first way I see ego thwarting writers is when they refuse to accept advice. Some writers balk at editorial changes, even when those changes could improve the marketability of a manuscript. One writer I knew said, "I only write for myself; I don't want anyone else's opinion." Why bother to write, though, if you don't want anyone else to read your work?

Ego sneaks in through many doors. For example, I recently edited a magazine article that was supposed to be an interview of an athlete. Instead of sounding like an interview, though, the article read like a personal memoir. For anonymity I will compose my own example. A typical interview might go something like this:

John James earned the title of Most Valuable Player in last week's game. A humble man, he says, "I couldn't haven't done it without my teammates."

The writer turned it into a personal memoir that went something like this:

Recently I had the opportunity to sit down with John James, who earned the title of Most Valuable Player in last week's game. I found him to be quite humble. He told me that he couldn't have done it without his teammates.

Alas, unless the writer of that alleged interview was a famous person himself, readers don't care about him and what opportunity he had or what he thinks. They want to read about John James. An interview is about the interviewee, not the interviewer. Ego, get out of the way!

Ego jumps in when we least expect it, and it's always lurking, waiting to show the world who we are and what we think. Writers have the opportunity to express their opinions in print, but unless you're writing essays or memoirs, remember to keep your ego at bay. If you write magazine articles, make sure your articles are about the subject at hand, rather than the writer. If you write fiction, give your opinions to one of your fictional characters. If you write essays or memoirs, however, give your ego free reign. In addition, no matter what you write, be open to suggestions from folks who know more than you do.

Have you learned ways to restrain your ego in your writing? Let me know, and I'll share your tips with fellow writers.

Yours in writing,

Bobbie Christmas [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com) or [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com)

Author of two editions of WRITE IN STYLE, owner of Zebra Communications, director of The Writers Network, coordinator of the Florida Writers Association Editors Helping Writers service, and senior editor of Enjoy Cherokee Magazine

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TWO: ASK THE BOOK DOCTOR

CHICAGO STYLE ISSUES

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: I belong to a writer's group, and every week we debate grammar and word usage rules, including the following:

- 1) Using an extra "s" after the possessive form of a word that ends in "s" (I watched the Jones's dog for them.)
- 2) Using the word "said" in almost every sentence of dialogue
- 3) Using commas in general: in a series or to set off introductory phrases, etc.

We get in heated debates over these issues. I'm aware that The Chicago Manual of Style is often used by book publishers, but others swear by The Elements of Style. Still others follow AP style. Rules have changed since I was in school. What rules should we follow?

A: Rules are one thing; guidelines are another. Each style has its own set of guidelines, and the information often conflicts among style manuals. One way to end the debates in your group is for all members to agree on what style manual the group will follow. Once you have a consensus on style, you can settle debates by checking the appropriate style book. The Associated Press style, set forth in AP Stylebook, is intended for magazines, newspapers, and other periodicals. If your group is writing fiction or nonfiction books, its members should refer to The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS). Because I am a book editor, that's the style I follow and the one I will use to answer your questions.

1. The general CMOS rule (adding 's to create a single possessive or adding an apostrophe to create a plural possessive) covers proper names as well as common names, including most names of any length ending in sibilants (s or sh sounds): Burns's poems, Marx's theories, Berlioz's opera, the Rosses' and the Williamses' lands, General Nogu's troops, Jefferson Davis's home, Dickens's novels, the Joneses' reputation

2. Overusing the word "said" is a creative-writing issue, but not a rule. Strong writing avoids repetition, so it avoids using "said" as the attribution in too many places. Reducing the volume of "saiDs" leads to stronger writing if handled correctly.

If only two characters are speaking, after the first person is identified either through action or attribution, readers usually know which one speaks, because each new person gets a new paragraph of dialogue. Look at the following example:

"Mary, please sit for a moment," John said.  
"Did I do something wrong?"  
"Do you hope to stay here? That is, do you like your job?"  
"Yes."

That example uses only one attribution, but the punctuation and format tell readers who is speaking after that, because only two people appear in the scene. Read on to learn of an even better way to attribute dialogue to specific characters.

Strong writing uses action for the attribution instead of the word "said" or its alternates, "responded, asked, answered, replied, remarked," etc. Here is an example where action shows who speaks. Notice that the action also adds visual elements, making the scene more powerful.

"Mary, please sit a moment." John stood in front of his desk and pointed to a chair.  
Mary instead slumped across the overstuffed loveseat. Her wide eyes glanced up at him. "Did I do something wrong?"  
"Do you hope to stay here? That is, do you like your job?" John leaned against his desk and tried to look casual. Behind him he gripped the edge of his desk, his knuckles turning white.  
Mary inspected her fingernails. "Yes," she mumbled.

Did you even notice that only one attribution is used throughout? Because of the added action, though, readers clearly see who speaking. Readers also get a hint at what is going on below the surface of the scene.

3. Answering the final question about commas in general requires a long list of guidelines from CMOS. I'll get to the list in a minute. First note that in Chicago style, if the introductory phrase is short (say one to five words) no comma is used unless necessary for clarity.

CMOS says to use commas as follows:

In a series. Red, white, and blue banners hung off the building.

With equal adjectives. He spoke in a thoughtful, precise manner.

With nonessential clauses and phrases. She mimicked her husband, David, often.

The room, which had been painted, smelled of turpentine.

With long introductory clauses and phrases. When he had tired of the pace of New York, he moved to Dubuque.

With conjunctions. She was glad she looked, for a man was approaching the house.

To introduce direct quotes. Wallace said, "She spent six months here."

At the end of a quote followed by an attribution instead of a period. "Rub my shoulders," Martha said. Do not use a comma if the statement ends with a question mark or exclamation point. "Why should I?" he asked.

With names of states and nations used with city names. His journey will take him from Dublin, Ireland, to Fargo, North Dakota.

After yes and no. Yes, I will be there.

In direct address. Mother, I will be home late. No, sir, I did not take it.

Separating similar words. What the problem is, is not clear.

To separate compound sentences. The dog jumped through the hoop, and the trainer rewarded her.

In dates. Commas go after the day in a date and before the year; however, if only the month and year are used, no comma should separate the two. On June 15, 2011, I moved to France. In July 2012, I moved to England.

The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition changed its stance on commas in one case. It now says that generally no comma is needed when the adverbs too or either are used in the sense of "also." I'll take a bagel and some cream cheese too.

Obviously shifting opinions and style differences confuse writers, but one thing remains constant. It's what I call the ABCs of strong writing: Always Be Clear. Critique groups help in that respect. If someone in your group misinterprets someone else's sentence because of lack of punctuation, then add it. For example I recently found the following sentence in a manuscript I was editing: "Saddle up Jeff, let's go downtown." As written the sentence means to put a saddle on Jeff. The correct and clear sentence goes like this: "Saddle up, Jeff; let's go downtown."

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of Write In Style: Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing, and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com). Read Bobbie's Zebra Communications blog at <https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>.

For much more information on these subjects and hundreds of others of vital importance to writers, order PURGE YOUR PROSE OF PROBLEMS, a Book Doctor's Desk Reference Book at <http://tinyurl.com/4ptjnr>.

Bobbie Christmas's award-winning second edition of WRITE IN STYLE: How to Use Your Computer to Improve Your Writing is available from Amazon at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ppcdkd> or buy it directly from me at <https://tinyurl.com/y7p9xkbb>.

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### THREE: SUBJECTS OF INTEREST TO WRITERS

#### MEMBERS WRITE

Lynn Hesse has reason to be proud. She writes, "My short story 'Jewel's Hell' was published in Me Too: Short Stories, An Anthology, edited by Elizabeth Zelvin by Level Best Books on September 3, 2019." Way to go, Lynn!

Folks also responded to my column about clichés.

Libby wrote, "One cliché that I hate to see is when someone is barefoot, that they padded. 'When Mary heard a noise in the garden, she padded down the stairs.' Of course no book should have a barefoot woman in a nightgown investigating strange noises in the dark. That is a plot cliché."

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"My favorite story regarding clichés," wrote Susan Lindsley, "is the student who criticized Shakespeare for his constant use of clichés. As an aside, as kids my sister and I liked to call Shakespeare Billy Tremblesword."

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Another writer said, "You encouraged us to send in examples of errors in English. Here's a funny one from Ikea. It took a Swedish cliché and translated it on this gravy packet, making it a grammatical disaster. 'Allemansratten is everyone's right to field, forest, and fine meal with savoury sauce.'"

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Al Reynolds sent in this juxtaposition manuslip that made it into print, although I doubt the Kennedy Space Center left Florida and is orbiting the earth. "While meteorologists are still trying to figure out exactly when and where Hurricane Dorian will make landfall, NASA and NOAA are keeping track of this massive storm from space as it potentially threatens the Kennedy Space Center currently orbiting around the earth."

Al also sent in a wonderful word, shown below. It solved a mystery for me. I could never understand why people say "nother," which is not in the dictionary. I didn't realize speakers were using a tmesis. Al added, "I am personally fond of 'absodamnlutely.'"

#### TMESIS

The separation of parts of a compound word by an intervening word or words, heard mainly in informal speech (e.g., a whole nother story; shove it back any-old-where in the pile).

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EDITING TIP

Which of these words and/or spellings is correct?

Acknowledgment or acknowledgement

Amid or amidst

Among or amongst
Canceled or cancelled
Jewelry or jewellery
Judgment or judgement
Toward or towards
Traveled or travelled
Unknown or unbeknownst

Answer: All the words and spellings are correct, depending on your audience.
American English writers should use the first choices of all the words above.
British English writers intending to market works in England, Canada, Australia, or India, however, should use the second choice of each spelling.

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EASY ACCESS TO BOBBIE'S BLOGS

Read creative writing tips as well as some of my personal experiences. Access the Write In Style blog here:  
<https://www.zebraeditor.com/blog/>

On the other hand, for my relationship-related blog, see my blog titled "Neurotica: Crazy Stories of Love, Lust, and Letting Go." If you like to read about disastrous dates and ridiculous relationships, I've got a ton of them, and they all happened to me. Some are funny, some are a little sexy, some are sad, and all true. My latest addition is a little scary, because it happened when I was only six years old. Read it here: <https://neuroticastories.blogspot.com>.

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LOGLINE: What is it, why do you need one for your book, and how should you write one?

<https://pressbooks.com/2016/11/22/book-marketing-101-whats-a-logline-and-why-you-need-one/>
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CMOS ONLINE Q & A

This month someone posed the following question to The Chicago Manual of Style Online:

Q. Does "plus" function like "and" in making two nouns a plural subject? For example, would you say, "This idea plus others like it are gaining traction" or "is gaining traction"?

To get the answer to this question and many more based on Chicago style, go to
<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html>.

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE sets the standard in book publishing for issues such as punctuation, capitalization, and much more. If you write fiction or nonfiction books, you will want to know about Chicago style or be sure to use a professional book editor intimately familiar with Chicago style.

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BOBBIE'S TEN COMMANDMENTS OF CREATIVITY

New report available! If you want a copy, send me an email: [bzebra@aol.com](mailto:bzebra@aol.com).  
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HOW TO BECOME A BOOK EDITOR

<https://bookriot.com/2019/07/11/how-to-become-a-book-editor/>
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FOUR: CONTESTS, AGENTS, AND MARKETS

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The purpose of The First Line is to jump start the imagination--to help writers break through the block that is the blank page. Each issue contains short stories that stem from a common first line; it also provides a forum for discussing favorite first lines in literature. The First Line is an exercise in creativity for writers and a chance for readers to see how many different directions we can take when we start from the same place.

We pay on publication: \$25.00 - \$50.00 for fiction, \$5.00 - \$10.00 for poetry, and \$25.00 for nonfiction (all U.S. dollars). We also send you a copy of the issue in which your piece appears. You'll receive your money and issue at the same time. Carefully read and follow submission guidelines.

Deadline: November 1.

[http://www.thefirstline.com/submission\\_Winter\\_2019.htm](http://www.thefirstline.com/submission_Winter_2019.htm)

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ROOT LITERARY

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Deadline: 18th of each month.

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