Troublesome Words, Common Mistakes

Some words, phrases, and punctuation choices are particularly troublesome. This list provides some cues, in part based on my experience and in part on three sources. If you have not been exposed to Strunk & White in the past, this would be a good time to find a copy. Hart is presented as a separate handout, and Lavin is the core of this handout. All of these espouse the principle that scientific writing is conservative.


Hyphenation

- Do not hyphenate prefixes. (semiarid, nonuniform, subaerial) Spell-checking programs are often wrong with these – use a real dictionary. Exception: hyphenate a prefix attached to a proper name. (non-English, pre-Columbian)

- Hyphenate compound adjectives that consist of two nouns or an adjective and a noun used in an adjectival sense, even if the same compound is occasionally used as a noun without a hyphen. (A finite-element model uses the finite element as the smallest space that can be resolved.)

- Do not hyphenate adverb-adjective combinations where the adverb ends in “-ly.”

- Numbers and units used as adjectives are hyphenated, but only if the numbers and units are spelled out. (A three-mile limit, a two-year-old car.) Do not hyphenate digit-symbol combinations.

- The Chicago Manual has a philosophical paragraph on compound words, in which the drift of language takes the same concept from open compound (snow bound) to closed compound (snowbound) with a brief period of hyphenation (snow-bound). Recent preferences are to use hyphens as little as possible, only when ambiguity is generated by their lack. Hyphenation is difficult – even Hart defers the topic to The Chicago Manual.

Commas, Dashes, Parentheses.

- Use commas between all items in a series, including the one that includes the conjunction. (We sorted out pebbles, cobbles, and boulders.) This differs from nontechnical English by requiring the last comma, because of the need for technical clarity in complicated lists. (We sorted out silt and clay, sand and gravel, and pebbles and cobbles.) If items in a series require commas, use semicolons for the series. (Our groupings were silt and clay; sand, gravel, and pebbles; and
Avoiding the complexity of that last example is also desirable.

• Parenthetic phrases are any phrase, such as this phrase, that can be deleted without destroying the outer sentence. Punctuation is needed around the parenthetic phrase at both ends, unless the sentence ends with the parenthetic phrase.

• Parentheses or dashes may be used on a parenthetic phrase (see how parentheses gave the name to the entire concept) if a greater degree of separation from the text of the sentence is desired, such as when the parenthetic phrase has precious little to do with the main sentence.

• A phrase set off with dashes or parentheses especially should be deletable, in the sense that the surrounding sentence would still be a good sentence if the phrase were deleted entirely.

• Many transitions, incidentally, require a comma around a single word. Avoid putting too many of these in close proximity, however, because they really start to get on a reader’s nerves. Additionally, starting a sentence with a one-word transition followed by a comma should be minimized.

Other Punctuation

• Never use contractions in formal writing.

• The symbol ! is a factorial symbol, used in mathematical contexts. Scientific writing almost never contains exclamation points.

• Periods and commas at the end of a quote are inside quotation marks, but outside of parentheses.

• A quotation longer than four lines should be offset (indented on both left and right sides). If you are using double spacing, single space such displayed quotations. A displayed quotation is not marked with quotation marks.

Troublesome words

• Avoid strings of prepositional phrases. (Water evaporating from a puddle under a tree in the sunshine of an afternoon may be difficult to trace.)

• Never end a sentence with a preposition. Prepositions require objects.

• “Very” is almost unusable, for the same reason that exclamation points are not used – make your results earth-shattering, not your prose.

• Maintain the same tense between subject and predicate. A safe bet in scientific writing is to always use past tense.

• Avoid jargon, slang, and word usages too recent to be in a good dictionary. (Dictionaries are always catching up to usages that have become common in spoken and written English. The principal of conservatism in language is that we...
allow magazines, newspapers, and cable television to establish new words, and they work their way in to scientific text only after they are sufficiently established to enter the dictionary.) (A corollary: you will need a dictionary, not just a spell-checking program.)

- Pay attention to spelling. Spell checkers are useful; they are not yet sufficiently capable to notice most cases where an incorrectly spelled word comes out as the wrong English word. Some of what follows will be caught by a spell-checker, but not all will.
- To, too. (Two does not seem to cause so many problems.)
- Alot is not a word.
- “Must of been” and “must a been” are transcribed pronunciations of “must have been.”
- “It’s” is a contraction for “it is,” and we avoid contractions. “Its” is the possessive form of “it,” and it has no apostrophe.
- The word ‘earth’ is capitalized when referring to our planet, and it is not capitalized when referring to soil, turf, and so on. When referring to our planet, Earth is never plural – we have only one.
- Try to minimize the number of sentences that start with “The,” “This,” “That.” Try to reduce to zero the number of sentences that start with “There are” or “There is.”
- Do not start a phrase or sentence with “it is interesting to note that” or similar constructions. If you think it is interesting, make it interesting rather than bludgeoning a reader with your opinions.
- “Data” is the plural of “datum.”
- Many phrases derived from Latin are listed in the dictionary as words that have been absorbed into English and should not be italicized: in situ, per se, et cetera, ad nauseum. Most of these two-word phrases are considered a single object, despite the space, and should never be hyphenated even when used as adjectives.
- “Etc.” is short for “et cetera” and it means “and so on,” but avoid using it, as it indicates a lack of precision, and never, ever, even once, use “ect.”
- “E.g.” is short for “for example,” “i.e.” is short for “that is.” Use the abbreviations only in parenthetic phrases, always separated from the text by a comma. Spell out the meaning in main sentences. “For example” should not be used as a cheap dodge for “there may be more but I have not found them.”
- In scientific writing, ‘flowery’ prose distracts from conveying information. Try to be interesting without being too enthusiastic, gushy, or poetic.
- Avoid being an ostentatious sesquipedalian.
• Define acronyms on first use, using parentheses. John Wesley Powell was the first director of the United States Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.), and from this point on you may refer to the U.S.G.S because you have defined the acronym.

• Be gender neutral. References to ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ are no longer construed as representing all of humanity equally. (Do not be shocked or surprised by the ubiquity of such references in anything more than 20 years old, nor should you be dismissive of older work that contains such references.)

• Be sure that the subject can really perform the action of the verb.

• Some of the more hilarious mistakes (for a reader) are when “it” seems to replace different objects for the reader than for the writer.

Numbers
• In science, spell out whole numbers of size ten or less, use digits for larger numbers.

• Make exceptions for consistency when numbers refer to the same type of object within a paragraph. (I have 28 students in one class and 7 in the other.)

• Writers outside of science spell out all numbers up to 100, and you may encounter an editor so trained, so be accommodating. This is an accepted difference between science writing, where numbers are ubiquitous, and other writing in which numbers are less prominent. Hyphenate the spelled out form of most numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine.

• Hyphenate most simple fractions and compound fractions that are spelled out and used in an adjectival sense.