

Henry Tilney's twenty-four "nice" tips on writing style, keyed by numbers in your margins.

1. Hyphens can be used to clarify some compound words. The dictionary is the best place to distinguish open compounds (*high school, running shoes, student teacher*) from closed compounds (*notebook, birthrate, courthouse, website*). Compounds tend to be coined as open, evolve to hyphenated, and end as closed (*on line, on-line, online*). In cases where one element of the compound is itself an abbreviation, preserving the hyphen clarifies the etymology (*e-mail, p-value, h-bomb*). Use hyphens when constructing adjectives in age terms (*a three-year-old child*), colors (*blue-green algae*), fractions (*a half-hour lesson*), and numbers (*a 250-page book*). Do not use hyphens in noun compounds (*a quarter mile*), but do use them in adjectival compounds (*a quarter-mile race*). When spelling out numbers hyphenate *twenty-one* through *ninety-nine*, but leave all others open, e.g. *eighteen fifty-five*. Likewise hyphenate times when used as adjectives but not nouns (*at two thirty* but *a two-thirty appointment*). Likewise centuries are hyphenated as adjectives before a noun but not afterwards and never when used as nouns (*the eighteenth-century novel*, but *a novel from the eighteenth century*).

2. There's hardly ever the need to open or close a complete quotation with an ellipsis (. . .) since the quotation marks themselves indicate that you've taken the passage out of some other source. The same is true of a block quotation where no quotation marks are needed, a passage set apart from the text with line breaks and continuous indentation. And if the block quotation ends grammatically, there is no need to close it with an ellipsis either.

3. Use italics (or underline) for titles of collections of poetry, of long poems published separately, of plays, films, operas, books, newspapers, periodicals, paintings, drawings, and statues. Titles of short stories, short poems, songs, TV shows, articles, parts of a book, and unpublished works are represented in roman type and surrounded by double quotation marks. The exception to this rule is the Bible and the titles of its constituent books. These are capitalized but neither italicized nor contained in quotation marks.

4. Don't confuse plurals with possessives (and plural possessives). Possessives require an apostrophe (except *its*—"the dog ate *its* food"—hers, yours), just as do all contractions (including *it's*—"it's about time"). Don't elide the apostrophe in possessives (with the exception of *its*), or plural possessives (with the exception of *theirs* and *ours*).

5. In American usage, commas and periods go inside double quotation marks.

6. Independent clauses (clauses with both a subject and a verb, clauses that could thus stand independently as sentences) separated by a conjunction (*but, while, and*) require separation by a comma as well. By contrast a dependent clause does *not* require separation by a comma.

7. Lead is either a present-tense verb with a long *e* vowel sound (*Billy, will you lead the pledge?*), or a noun with a short *e* vowel sound referring to a metallic element (*Don't suck on the lead in your pencil!*). The past tense of the verb *to lead* is spelled *led*.

8. When introducing a quotation, bring the grammar of your sentence into concord with that of the passage so that together they read coherently. Don't introduce quotations that aren't grammatically complete unless you supply what they need in your introduction or followup.

9. Don't just repeat the assignment in your title. You need a functional title. No paper is complete without one. To create a title is a more complex, demanding business than you may think. It requires you to summarize, digest, and epitomize in a few snappy words, the thrust of your essay as a whole. A title is an intellectual construct, not just a marketing tool. A paper without a focus should reveal itself as such when you come to giving it a title.

10. When citing the title of an important work for the first time, include the date of publication in parentheses. This helps your reader anchor your argument historically.

11. Don't just list ideas with connectives like "another." Form more explicit connections between the sentences. Any time the reader sees "another," the question will arise about what determines the order of this list, what logical sequence is at work. Pre-empt that question by making the logic explicit.

12. To lay is a transitive verb meaning to put something in its place. It always requires an object. You lay *something* down where it lies. The intransitive verb, to lie, means to be in that place. "I lie in bed where they laid *me* after my fall."

13. A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined with a comma but no conjunction. Simply reformat the clauses as separate sentences, if no conjunction logically unites them.

14. An infinitive is a single grammatical unit consisting of the marker *to* plus the simple form of the verb and should be treated as a unit. Relocate the modifier to avoid splitting the infinitive.

15. There are two idiot words common in modern English: "impact" and "myself." The former, "impact," is written when people don't know whether to say "affect" or "effect." To claim that A will "impact" B is safer than saying it will affect/effect it. In fact A will "affect" B, if it has some influence on it (common). A will "effect" B, if it causes it (less common). We no longer hear the difference between "affect" and "effect," so we say things will "impact" other things. Like the other two, "impact" can be either a verb or a noun. As a verb it means to crash into, like meteors on the moon. To claim that A "impacts" B when it merely "affects" B is an overstatement. "Myself" is used when the writer doesn't know whether to use "me" or "I." "The document had to be signed by both Susan and myself." Simple grammar will tell you how to avoid this. "I" is nominative (subject), and "me" is accusative (accusative). If you didn't learn grammar in school, start now. It hasn't changed.

16. In dates the apostrophe is used when you remove the century, as in '70s or '80s, but the plural form does not use an apostrophe: 1500s or 1970s.

17. Try to avoid closing a paragraph with a quotation. It is your responsibility to tie up the issues considered in the paragraph. You cannot in justice turn over that responsibility to some source or commentary. If you need to make a quotation here, follow it up with a few observations on its most salient points in relation to your thesis. Don't automatically start a new paragraph after a quotation.

18. Numerals between one and ninety-nine are generally spelled out, unless they occur in a sequence where the numeric representation would be less cumbersome, as in the prime numbers 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, and 23 (vs. the prime numbers seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-three).

19. If closing a sentence with a quotation and parenthetical citation, omit the terminal punctuation in the passage (unless it's ? or !), replace it with a comma, close the quotation, open the citation, close it, and end with a period unless the context of your sentence requires a question mark. For example, how can Diderot call Erasmus "Europe's leading sage" (*Encyclopedia* [1739] 6:120)?

20. Don't confuse *affect* (employed most often as a verb, it means to have an influence on-- more rarely as a noun it designates an emotional response) with *effect* (usually a noun meaning "consequence"-- rarely a verb meaning to bring about). I would hope to *effect* your confession, because accepting responsibility will *affect* us all. Confession is the first *effect* of accepting responsibility, though it may temporarily damage your *affect*.

21. *It's* is the contractive form of a subject and verb (*It is... It's time for lunch*), not the possessive. *Its* is the possessive modifier (*he sat in its shadow*). Make a note to yourself to catch this in the future.

22. Participles are verb forms that usually end in *-ing* and often open a sentence. Functioning thus as adjectives they have a notorious tendency to be forgotten from the sentence's syntax and never get connected with the elements they are supposed to modify. They are thus called dangling modifiers or dangling participles. When you discover a dangling participle, revise your sentence to ensure that the object it modifies is grammatically present. Alternatively convert the dangling participle to a clause not dependent on the absent object.

23. Whenever you write *this*, it should be extremely clear from context what the referent is. If any ambiguities remain, as here, try specifying *this...[what]*. Don't let *this* serve as a kind of vast net for a whole congeries of concepts. Make its reference explicit.

24. Presently does not mean *at present*. *Presently* means *soon*, literally "at a time that will soon be present." *At present* means *now*. "*At present* the sun is shining but *presently* it will set."