

Rookie Mistakes That Even Veterans Make

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Please excuse typos.

ONE OF THOSE

Bob is one of those people who hate cats. That's correct; it's not *one of those people who hates cats*.

Think of the idea logically rather than isolating the subject *he* and assuming the verb has to agree. Bob is not the only person in the sentence who hates cats. The sentence is not saying that Bob (a) is one of those people (whatever that means) and (b), in an unrelated matter, hates cats. It's saying that Bob is a member of a group, that group being those people who hate cats. You know those people who hate cats? Bob is one of them.

As for the subject-verb argument, that works, too, only it's a question of agreeing with the subject of the clause at hand, not with the subject of the entire sentence.

A LOT OF US IS WRONG

Here's another one for the subject-verb sticklers. Is *lot* singular or plural? Singular! So is that headline correct? Of course not. So keep that in mind as you look at similar cases.

A host of problems is blamed on the proliferation of legalized gambling. Is gambling blamed for a host, or is it blamed for the problems? It's the problems, so make it are blamed.

A bunch of women is waiting to use the restroom. Although *bunch* is singular, we're talking about the women.

A group of doctors was discussing the new regulations. This one depends on what *group* means. If it's the American Medical Association, the group *was*. If it's Drs. Hartley, Tupperman and Robinson, the group *were*.

ALL THAT DANGLES

Built by Bugsy Siegel in 1946, gamblers still flock to the Flamingo on the Las Vegas Strip. With temperatures in the 70s, you'll love Las Vegas in April.

Those dangles are pretty obvious. Bugsy didn't build the gamblers. With temperatures in the 70s, you'll die of hypothermia. But they can be tricky. The following headline appeared in The Washington Post:

Lacking GOP support, Senate rejects VA bill

It was the bill, of course, not the Senate, that lacked GOP support.

WHICH, NOW?

An Illinois senator introduced a tax-cut bill last January.

If it's March and you write *last January*, or if it's October and you write *last summer*, I'm basically flipping a coin. Fifty-three percent of reporters would write that and mean the last January that occurred or the last

summer that occurred, but 47 percent would write that and mean January of last year or summer of last year. So say *in January* or, if you mean last year, *in January of last year*.

And what is an Illinois senator? Every time I wave the white flag and decide that no reporter would write that in reference to a state senator, I find just such a reference. Say *a senator from Illinois* if you mean a U.S. senator; say *an Illinois state senator* if you mean that. (Remember: Barack Obama was both.)

A GREAT, WHITE SHARK

Before you insert a comma before the modifier closest to a noun, ask yourself how integral that modifier is. The meaning of *my new blue jeans* is closer to “my blue jeans that are new” than to “my new jeans that are (a) new and (b) blue,” so no comma.

Yes comma:

A big, fat lie. A 5-foot-2, 105-pound woman.

No comma:

A fine young man. A powerful V-8 engine.

QUOTE, UNQUOTE

Carlin called Las Vegas, “dispiriting and soul-deadening.”

What’s that comma doing there? Yes, you introduce quotations with a comma in most cases, but is that the introduction of a quote? I don’t see *said* or any other verb of attribution. To put a comma there is like writing *She called me, fat* instead of *She called me fat*.

When I told him to stop whistling, he responded with, “Make me.”

Same thing. He responded with scorn, not comma-scorn. He responded with “Make me,” not with, comma, “Make me.”

No matter what system you think you’ve mastered, Shackleford said, “Roulette is for suckers.”

There’s no problem with the comma there. But why is *roulette* capitalized? It continues a thought. The attribution interrupts that thought. Lowercase.

When I say, “Marco,” you say, “Polo.”

Technically, that’s right, but it sure is unwieldy. The commas are a nicety; they’re not mandatory. Feel free to drop them if it makes sense to.

When I say, “Jump!” you say, “How high?”

It *really* makes sense to drop the commas there, because while a comma after the exclamation-pointed “Jump!” would be awkward, and possibly even a violation of AP Style, the comma is necessary if you insist on

putting a comma before the quote.

OTHERWORLD-LY

Omit the hyphen when a compound modifier is formed with an *-ly* adverb. That's *an easily remembered rule*. But what about *the early-morning rain* and *a family-run business*? Keep those hyphens. *Early* is not an adverb meaning "in an ear manner"; it's an adjective that just happens to end in *-ly*. "In a fami manner"? Of course not. But there are trickier examples of adjectives that look like adverbs. *Friendly, manly, slovenly*. Apply that test: Does ____/ly mean "in a ____ manner"?

Note also that this guideline goes out the window with modifiers of more than two words:

The AP Stylebook's easily-remembered-rule shtick.

THE 'THE'

Welcome to *The Washington Post* newsroom. Thank you, but no. *The* goes with *newsroom* there; it doesn't go with *Washington Post*.

Fallon is the most affable of "The Tonight Show" hosts. Same idea. *The* goes with *hosts*.

From one "The Tonight Show" host to another, O'Brien wished Fallon good luck. Feel free to drop the *The* in modifiers. It's not sacred. It's "The Tonight Show," but people can be "Tonight Show" hosts.

THAT THAT

Omitting needless words isn't a bad idea, but think hard about what words are truly needless. *That* is often a victim of the Strunkwhite mantra. It seldom hurts anybody, and it often helps.

Racketeering investigators said they believed Siegel . . .

Oh, they believed him!

. . . had lied.

D'oh!

Mirage announced the new hotel tower . . .

Oh, cool!

. . . was being canceled.

Sigh. Avoid sending the reader down the wrong path. They believed *that* Siegel had lied. Miraged announced *that* the new hotel tower was being canceled. Even when there's no ambiguity, it's often smoother to spend the extra words. Rookie mistakes *that* even veterans make.

THERE ARE NO SUSPECTS

Cop-speak is an occupational hazard of the police-beat reporter. Dogs become *K-9 units*. People are never taken to hospitals; they're *transported* to *local* hospitals. But the worst example of cop-speak is the use of the word *suspect* to mean, essentially, subject. The word means "person suspected of committing a crime," but the cops use it in descriptions of the actual criminal, even in cases where they have no suspects.

As journalists, we sometimes bend over backward to avoid libel, and that is probably another factor in our parroting of the cop-speak suspect. But we're actually, technically speaking, backing into a libel case when we do so. If you write that *the suspect* did this and did that, without attributing those statements to anybody, and then you write that the suspect is Harvey Baxter, you're kind of libeling Mr. Baxter. The robber robbed the store. Mr. Baxter may or may not be that robber. The robber is the robber; Baxter is the suspect. (But it's safer to write *a suspect* on first reference. The definite article tends to reinforce the idea that *suspect* means *culprit*.)

I SHOT THE (UPPERCASE) SHERIFF

We know that President Obama is *the president*, not *the President*. Pope Francis is *the pope*, not *the Pope*. But we often slip when it comes to the sheriff or the U.S. marshals or the U.S. attorney or the attorney general. The same principle applies: Lowercase the word if it's not being used as a title directly before a name.

The *U.S. attorney* case is more understandable than the others, because that term could mean *American lawyer* just as easily as *federal prosecutor*. There's nothing wrong with writing *U.S. attorney*, but it might be a good idea to slip in *federal prosecutor* at least once, for the uninitiated. And beware of calling such prosecutors *attorneys* in headlines and second references. While they are attorneys — lawyers — to simply call them that would be like referring to a Supreme Court justice as *an attorney*. The generic term for a prosecutor is *prosecutor*.

ANTI-CHILD ABUSE PLANS

I'm a stickler on hyphens. I'd even hyphenate *high-school student*. Would that really hurt anybody? But I know I'm in a small minority there. Your publication probably doesn't hyphenate *high school student*. Mine sure doesn't. But there's a *but*.

He got reacquainted with his non-high school friends.

So he has a lot of school friends, but only some of them are not high? Once you invite one hyphen to the party, you have to invite the rest. *High school friends* is fine, but the others are *non-high-school friends*. Write *child abuse plans* if you must, but once you decide to clarify that those plans are anti-, they have to be *anti-child-abuse plans*. Unless they're abuse plans that are against children, of course.

1-2-3, LIFTOFF!

Just as your favorite team might lose 2-1, not 1-2, legislation is defeated 52-48, not 48-52.

Yes, a lost set in tennis is written backward, but that's only in the context of a full (frontward) score:

Borg beat McEnroe, 4-6, 7-6, 6-3.

Borg lost the first set, 6-4.

A tangent: Your publication's style may or may not be to use a comma before a score, but keep in mind that in some cases it would be out-and-out wrong to do so.

Borg won the second set, 7-6, but the third set wasn't as close.

The comma before that score indicates that the score is non-essential. The sentence works with or without it. But take it out and you get this:

Borg won the second set, but the third set wasn't as close.

So the score *is* essential to the meaning of the sentence. It illustrates a close set to contrast it with a less-close set. Therefore, no comma:

Borg won the second set 7-6, but the third set wasn't as close.

MAY, MIGHT

You may (!) have been taught that *may* implies permission while *might* implies possibility, but that's an overblown distinction — and it risks a major pitfall. Once the word *have* comes into the picture, the words are no longer as interchangeable as I just implied they are, and *might* is the one you probably want to avoid. Observe:

She may have been killed! (We hope not, but we're still waiting to hear.)

She might have been killed! (Thank goodness she wasn't.)

(PRESIDENT BARACK) OBAMA

Readers are stupid, but they're not that stupid. Please, please, please, please, please don't follow the letter of the law on style when it would be beyond idiotic.

House Republican leaders launched a broad attack on Democratic priorities Tuesday.

"(President Barack) Obama is misguided at best," House Majority Leader John A. Boehner, D-Ohio, said.

Um, maybe people know who this Obama fellow is? Save the *President Barack* for the second reference. Or, heck, let your hair down and skip it altogether. The republic will survive.

Tangent: I know you've been taught to use *Smith said* rather than *said Smith*, but that Boehner sentence would read a lot better, given the *D-Ohio* interruption, if the *said* came before *House Majority Leader*.

Similarly, you're fine leaving *IRS* alone in a quote and spelling out *Internal Revenue Service* later. Or not at all. With a more obscure agency, spell it out somewhere but try your best to avoid the insertion. If you can avoid a parenthetical — or ellipses, for that matter — in a quote, do so.

Tangent: Those parentheses really should be brackets, but AP has chosen to continue its pre-modern-technology practice of never using brackets. But guess what: You're free to ignore AP style once in a while! This would be a good place to do so. Use parentheses in written quotes to be faithful to the original document, but use brackets to mark your own insertions, if you must make any insertions.

Using bracketed matter right next to a set of ellipses is particularly silly. *He said poverty is “easily curable ... [if] people show some initiative.”* If you’re already going to muck up the quote, why not just preserve the actual quote and do your annotation outside the quotation marks? *He said poverty is “easily curable” if “people show some initiative.”* Yes, partial quotes can be bad. At worst, they make your prose look like an entry from the Zagat guide. But they’re better than the dot-dot-dot-bracket alternative.

YES, YES, WE KNOW

The *[President Barack]* phenomenon is not the only example of overexplaining in the name of style and convention. Yes, we use directions in photo captions to tell readers which person is which, but do you really need them when you’re showing a man and a woman, each with names obviously corresponding to gender? Or when you’re showing a world-famous person next to a complete unknown? Like a rolling stone? Or with *Diana Ross, above, and SpongeBob SquarePants*, as a Washington Post copy editor once wrote? No. Think before you reflexively write *right* or *left*.

Yes, we use the state with a city that isn’t on the AP dateline list, but consider leaving it out in, say, the photo caption if it’s already in the story’s dateline right next to that caption.

Yes, we use time elements, but do you really need to tell readers of Wednesday’s newspaper that a person commenting on Tuesday’s bombing was speaking on Tuesday? (A modest proposal: You may not have the power to do this — I sure don’t — but consider whether you really always need to cram the time element into the lede. You should include it at some point, of course, but maybe the second graf would be just fine. Would any reader really think that suicide bombing you’re breathlessly reporting happened in 1953, or a week ago, or even two days ago?)

E-QUOTES

Different publications have different rules when it comes to “correcting” quotations. Personally, I think it’s insane to put words in people’s mouths (I don’t use dialect spellings or reproduce stuttering or stammering; otherwise, spoken quotes are sacred), but my practice of never altering spelling, capitalization or punctuation from a news release or other written statement is debatable.

E-mails to reporters that are not quoted as written statements are different. Unless the fact that you’re writing about an electronic message is relevant to the story, use *said in an e-mail interview* or *said by e-mail* rather than *wrote in an e-mail* and go ahead and change capitalizations and spellings and punctuation to conform with style and correctness. Do not put words in a person’s mouth, or subtract them without using ellipses, but by all means feel free to publish “ya ... dont think hes gonna win” as “Yeah — don’t think he’s going to win.” To treat the no-capitalization-or-punctuation world of e-mail as sacred would be like reproducing every *gonna* and *hafta* and *nucular* and *Realator* in transcribing a spoken interview.

‘THAT’S THE OFFICIAL NAME’

If you look at your books and CDs and the logos of movies and TV shows, you’ll see a lot of creativity. And that’s great. But most of it has nothing to do with what we do. Typography is not destiny. The album cover may say *G I R L*, but we should write “Girl,” unless it’s pronounced “gee-eye-ar-el,” in which case we would write “GIRL.” Etc., etc. Reasonable people will draw the line at different places, but loose kerning is part of the design, not part of the spelling.