Writing and Style Manual

Writing Educational Resources for Home Base

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

2015 Edition

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INTRODUCTION
Writing for An Audience of North Carolina Educators

Emerging writers are taught that their first consideration when planning a piece of writing is audience. Your first question is answered, though, because you know you are preparing high quality resources and assessments for North Carolina public and charter school educators. If you were asked what to consider next, you might say that your writing must consider the reader's education. Educational backgrounds are certainly a factor in understanding an audience of educators. It's for that reason readers should expect to find the NCDPI/Home Base resources grammatically concise, clear and also a quick read.

But since your writing will bridge the gap between the teacher and Home Base resources, you can, likewise, consider that attitudes color how the teacher approaches written instructional materials. A teacher who has already embraced technology may react differently to using Home Base than a fellow teacher uncomfortable with using Internet technology for classroom management.

While considering education and attitudes, needs are the next consideration. One teacher who is recently certified and installed as a teacher for the first time will need to find certain basic information quickly — how do I login to Schoolnet? What are my roles? How do I access PowerTeacher GradeBook? A seasoned teacher experienced in performing class assessments and organizing classes for benchmarks may need a specific instructional resource and an organized system for finding it quickly. A superintendent may have different needs entirely.

This style guide is intended to provide basic parameters for the revision of the NCDPI/Home Base resources. (Oh, and that's the first thing you should know — the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction or the NCDPI is preceded by the article "the". More on educational acronyms and how to find them later.)

While this guide will cover basic writing style for Home Base and the NCDPI, it only covers common style issues and mistakes and a basic AP reference sheet; investing in a desk copy of *The Associated Press Stylebook* is strongly recommended.

The first guideline provides you with information for writing simply and improving pace.

EFFECTIVE WRITING

Effective writing responds to the interests and needs of our readers, the Home Base stakeholders. Needs were discussed briefly in this guide's introduction. Effective writing is also clear, concise, correct and appropriate in tone. In the case of the educator seeking instruction or a quick reference document, effective writing that explains the use of Home Base or explains its navigational tools saves time and contributes to the user's opinions or attitude toward integration of Home Base into the classroom.

The questions below will help you evaluate the document you are reviewing for its effectiveness.

A. IS IT CLEAR?
- Is the document's purpose stated clearly?
- Will the reader know what response you expect or understand precisely what you say?
- Is it clearly organized? (Chronological order, sequence, by subject, etc.)
- Are the ideas organized in a way that will persuade the reader to accomplish the purpose or understand the sequence of events?
- Have you used language the reader can effortlessly understand and speedily navigate?
- Are simpler words chosen over complicated or technical jargon?
- Are specific words chosen over generalizations?

B. IS IT CONCISE?
- Paragraphs should briefly explain the process.
- Look for the weakest paragraph and consider whether or not it should stay. If one fact can be moved to another paragraph to eliminate an unnecessary paragraph, then do so. This practice strengthens the document.
- Eliminate unnecessary information, choosing language that supports your reader's ability to understand and act on the purpose.
- Eliminate redundant or repetitive words and phrases.
- Delete words that don't add to the reader's understanding.

C. IS IT CORRECT?
- Check the accuracy of your document for spelling and grammar. Remember that spell checkers and grammar checkers miss errors. Example: The bare eight berries in the forest. (Notice that the spell checker doesn't spot the misspelled "bear" or "eight".)
- Keep a desk copy of an academic writing handbook nearby. Used writing handbooks can be purchased online. (These are examples, but there are as many as there are college English teachers: *A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Resource* by Elaine Maimon, *The Little Brown Handbook* or *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*, and many others.)

D. IS IT COMPLETE?
- Are any steps skipped in the instructions? Did you personally review the process inside the testing environment to assure all information is included?
- Did you click through the links to be sure they're live and unbroken?
- Is the stated purpose supported completely?
- Do you know the subject matter well enough to know it's accurate, or can you ask someone to review it for correct content?

- All documents, including Power Point presentations, must be saved to PDF version before publishing.

E. IS IT APPROPRIATE IN TONE?
- Is the tone appropriate in relation to the reader's needs and the communication's context?
- Is a friendly/accessible, lively style employed? Example: *The teacher's Gradebook is accessed through a specified login algorithm . . .* (a bureaucratic tone) vs. the more accessible — *You can use the single sign on login provided for you by your school's technical director . . .*
- Avoid stilted or formal directives, using instead, accessible, simple language.

F. IS IT ARRANGED LOGICALLY?
- Begin sentences simply, building to the more complex idea.
- Say one thing in each sentence.
- Put the most important idea in each sentence at the beginning.
- A paragraph should contain one main idea that is summarized in the first sentence.

G. IS IT BRIEF?
- You can judge the length of the resource by asking two questions: 1.) Does it say more than needs to be said? 2.) Does it use needless words for the purpose?
- Watch out for nouns, adjectives and adverbs that derive from verbs. Example:

The verbs make, take, give, hold, have and be are used with the noun and adjective forms of words. These words take the place of the basic verbs that might be used in this sentence: When we held the meeting (met), the division chief made the decision (decided) that Mr. Hatcher should take action (act) on the case at once.

Words with overlapping meanings:

Absolutely complete	Complete
Assembled together	Assembled
Each and every	Use either one
Exactly identical	Identical
Repeat again	Repeat
The reason is because	Because

Roundabout prepositional phrases:

Along the lines of	Like
At the present time	Now
By means of	With; by
For the purpose of	For
In order to	To

In the case of	If
In the nature of	Like
In connection with	Of, in , on
In relation to	Toward, to
With the result that	So that
With regard to	About (or leave out)
With reference to	About (or leave out)
Owing to the fact that	Because
Subsequent to	After
On the basis of	by

- Use single precise words instead of wordy phrases. Example: Rather than say, "students who are residents of Wake county," say instead, "Wake county students."
- Avoid the use of oversized or showy words. Example: to do is to effectuate; to issue is to promulgate; prior to instead of before; terminate instead of end; in the event of instead of if; for the purpose of instead of for.

SENTENCE STYLE

Active Voice

- Writing with the active voice happens when active verbs are chosen over passive verbs.
  e.g., "The students were awarded trophies by principals," should be "Principals awarded trophies to the students."
- Active voice is called the subject-verb-object pattern, or S-V-O. When a verb is in the active voice, the subject of the sentence takes the action.
  In the passive voice, the sentence's subject receives the action of the verb. E.g., Active voice — "I shall always remember my first teacher." Passive voice — "My first teacher will always be remembered by me." Uses the passive "remembered by me" verb-subject combination.

Effectiveness

An effective sentence must have unity, coherence and emphasis.

- Unity requires that the sentence express connected thoughts. The relationship of thoughts must be clearly shown.
  Weak: Fred Smith visited me last summer, and he once lived in France.
  Better: Fred Smith, who visited me last summer, once lived in France.
- Coherence requires that the connections between different parts of the sentence be perfectly clear.
  Confusing: Betty returned the book which she had borrowed last week this afternoon.

Clear: This afternoon, Betty returned the book, which she had borrowed last week.

- Emphasis, or force, is given to the main ideas of a sentence by placing them properly in the position of greatest emphasis – the beginning and the closing. Force is given by arranging ideas in order of climax, by repetition of words, by the use of figures of speech, by the addition of modifiers, by conciseness of expression and by variety.
- A more concise expression sometimes adds force. Conciseness, in a statement, may be gained by changes in form or style.
  An appositive may be substituted for a sentence:
   John Doe addressed the meeting. He is our president.
   John Doe, our president, addressed the meeting.
  A participial phrase may replace a clause:
   The man who is standing near the desk is the president.
   The man standing near the desk is the president.
  A participial phrase also may be used to replace a sentence:
   The beautiful building was destroyed by fire. It was completed only a year ago.
   The beautiful building, completed only a year ago, was destroyed by fire.
  A noun clause may replace a sentence:
   George is ambitious. The fact is self-evident.
  That George is ambitious is self-evident.

PUNCTUATION

Commas

Few things will do more to improve your writing than confident, correct use of the comma. Its misuse, on the other hand, can obscure and confound like no other punctuation mark. Gather any number of people in a room. Give them a series of long sentences to punctuate. When the dust clears, half will have used too many commas, the other half not enough. It boils down to two simple facts — when to and when not to. Review these basic guidelines to help you find the balance.

a) Use a comma to separate lengthy, independent clauses in a compound sentence. Ex: They have not responded to our orders, nor do I think they ever will.

b) Use a comma to set off a lengthy introductory phrase or clause (usually a prepositional phrase) from the subject of the sentence. Ex: Although they obviously intend to follow company policy, they have yet to complete their filing for the month.

c) Use a pair of commas to set off a word or group of words which serve to emphasize. Ex: On that occasion, it seems, he was careless. (Remember, it's always a pair of commas.

d) Use commas to divide elements in a series. Ex: She blushed, stammered, sneezed, shook her head and burst into tears. The English language is forever changing; so go with the flow, not against it. Most of us were taught in school not to use a comma before conjunctions (and, but, because & as). In today's writing, comprehension is nudging aside strict adherence to that comma rule. Here's how it works today: If the number of

words following the conjunction are few (1-7) then you do not need to put a comma before the and, but, because or as. (The old way of doing things.) If the number of words following the conjunction are numerous and likely to involve one or more phrases or even a clause or two, a comma before the conjunction helps comprehension. So, use one.

e.) Don't use a comma before the first or after the last member of a series.
EX: (Correct) The forest ranger was looking for tree stumps, fallen branches, trampled flowers and loose rocks. (No comma after for and none before and.)

Spaces

At some point during the past couple of decades, publishers decided that using one space between sentences saved money. How to make our fingers stop typing the double space between sentences became the challenge. The NCDPI uses The Associated Press Stylebook, and AP style dictates only one space between sentences. If the document you're revising is riddled with double spaces, here is an easy fix.
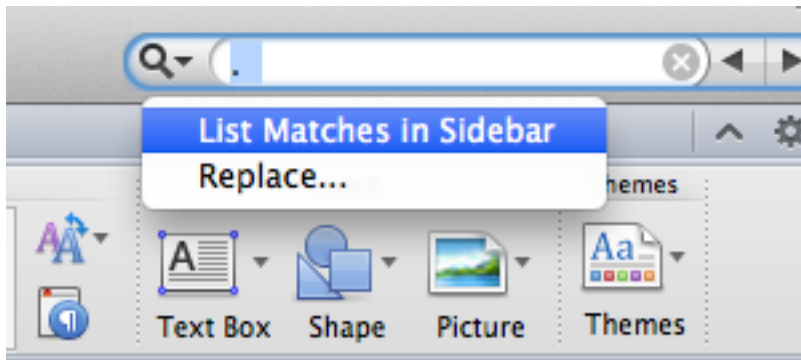
1. Visit the find and replace bar inside Word. (hint: look for the magnifying glass in Toolbar next to the search bar)
2. Type in one period followed by two spaces.
3. Click on the dropdown menu (magnifying glass) next to the search box.
4. If the matches don't appear, click List Matches in sidebar.
5. Go to the sidebar and click on Replace.
6. In Replace, type in one period and one space.
7. Check Replace All, and Accept.

Dashes and Hyphens

Dashes (—) are used differently than hyphens (-) in AP style. Dashes — the longer ones — are used to denote an abrupt change in thought in a sentence. But avoid overuse of dashes to set off phrases when commas would suffice. Dashes are also used in attribution of an author's name and in lists.

Hyphens (-) are joiners. Use them to avoid ambiguity or to form a single idea from two or more words. Use hyphens for compound modifiers that precede a noun, or for compound modifiers used after forms of the to be verbs.
Example: The man is well-known.

Please refer to your desk copy of the AP style manual for more detailed guidelines for using dashes and hyphens.

The goal of punctuation is comprehension. If you have to bend an old rule to make that happen, so be it.

EDUCATIONAL ACRONYMS

The NCDPI provides users with a comprehensive list of educational acronyms. You can access this list by alpha, online here: http://www.ncpublicschools.org/acronyms/

HOME BASE STYLE GUIDE

Home Base provides the NCDPI with a style guide, providing information about the use of its logos. You can click on this link or paste into the url of your browser to access the Home Base style guide:
http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/ready/resources/spring2012/communication-guide-ready.pdf

CAPITALIZATION

Correct capitalization requires common sense and knowledge of basic rules. Following are some capitalization pitfalls most often encountered in government writing.

Titles – Director of when it precedes the name, but not when it follows the name, e.g. Division Director Joe Smith; but Joe Smith, director of the Division of Communications.

Agency descriptions – lower case department, division, section or branch in reference, e.g. work of the division. Capitalize when citing the full name, e.g. Water Measuring Section of the Division of Environmental Awareness.

State – capitalize only when the word is part of a formal title, e.g. The State Parole Commission, the Dept. of Crime Control and Public Safety. Lower case the word at all other times (even if it goes against the grain to do so). Example: state of North Carolina.

EDITING

Writers who've studied professional writing learn quickly that writing is revising. Revising is the art of editing.

Editing is confirming, changing, cutting, expanding or rearranging words. To edit is to polish, to put in the best form possible. The instinct to edit is stronger in some people than in others. Some even turn that instinct into a fetish.

If you doubt that, type something and purposefully make mistakes in usage, punctuation or spelling. Tape it to your office door and see what happens. Long before the paper can become faded with age, some mysterious person or persons will have come by and marked up your words – confirming, changing, cutting, expanding or rearranging.

Editing requires knowledge of grammar and basic sentence structure, insight into what the writer intended to say, and the ability to improve the author's writing. Editing embraces a little of everything in this guide. The principles of sentence structure, punctuation, spelling and writing style – they all apply to whatever is being edited. In our work as information processors, two basic types of editing are involved – copyediting and substantive editing.

Prior Knowledge
• Check the resource first for spelling of names and titles, facts, dates and figures.
• Know the purpose, the audience, the timetable for production and the intended use of the material before you begin to edit.

Copyediting

Copyediting is the most common editing process. It simply means to review a manuscript for grammar, spelling and punctuation. That's usually the most attention we give to our writing or to that of others.

Copyedit with confidence and accuracy and most of the bad grammar will evaporate. But, if you're still reading this manual and need help on communicating beyond accuracy, the next step opens the door to creativity.
Copyediting does not mean rewriting or reorganizing what someone else has written. That's called substantive editing.

Substantive Editing

Substantive editing, also called developmental editing, involves writing, editing and proofreading. It is the whole ball of wax. Substantive editing can include copyediting, rewriting, reorganizing, writing transitions and/or summaries, eliminating wordiness, reviewing content for accuracy and logic, and developing a consistent tone and style. It can even expand to planning the publication and supervising the production, but your team leaders will direct that part of the process.

Once substantive editing has been completed, be sure to review the result with your leadership – before line editing begins.

Line Editing

Line editing follows substantive editing. Now your grammar skills, punctuation skills and mental spellchecker are tuned into spotting fine mistakes. The line edit is the final pass

before the resource is published. Your writing leaders will inform you of their process at this stage of editing.
Editing Methods

• Editing is not easy. It requires concentration, an instinct for spotting errors, a conviction to make words work properly and a determination to make the copy simple and clear. Of all the above, none is more important than concentration.
• Read the copy through one time without turning on tracking changes in Word (or printing and using a pen, if that's your method). A first reading will let you know the degree of editing that will be needed. You most likely will spot some obvious errors that proofreading will take care of later.
• Keep a note pad handy to jot down points to raise with your writing job manager.
• As you edit, play each sentence very simply – subject, verb, object. Don't be misled by flowing prose. Hidden somewhere in there is a subject, verb and object. Any one of them may be implied from a prior sentence, but they still exist for the sentence with which you are working.
• Look for active, strong verbs in anything you edit. If they don't exist, it's your responsibility as a substantive editor to create them for the author. Passive expression not only wastes paper/web page space, it lulls the reader into boredom.
 Example: Rather than say, "The meeting was called by the secretary," be more active by saying, "The secretary called the meeting." Recognize the difference?
• Watch constantly for syntax pitfalls: misplaced modifiers; noun strings; subject-verb tense mismatches; personal pronouns that don't match; split infinitives; dangling participles; redundancies; or wordy clauses that run on and on and say nothing.
• Keep spelling and punctuation in mind at all times.

Final Editing Tips

1. Concentrate. Good editing cannot be rushed; nor should it be. Develop a routine that allows for isolation or as few interruptions as possible. Distractions while you are editing often allow mistakes to float by without being recognized.
2. Trust Your Instincts. As you read, listen to that alarm bell going off in your head, then stop and check it out. (Keep a current dictionary handy and be cautious when using the spell check feature of your computer — Word spellchecker is notoriously wrong.)
3. Talk to the writing team leader if you can't understand what you are editing. If you can't understand it, neither will the reader.
4. Look for the obvious: misspelled words, spelling of names and titles, punctuation and acronyms that go unexplained.
5. Use any and all reference guides you need as you edit (AP Stylebook, writer's handbook, dictionary, thesaurus). Let them be the final authority – not what someone swears is right or wrong.
6. Don't change anything unless it is "broken." The copy originates with the author. The author wants you to get it in the right shape, not alter the facts or change the purpose.
7. Ask someone unfamiliar with the copy to take a cursory look at your editing job. They may see something you've missed. Feel free to partner up with one or two others in your writing cohort group who agree in advance to swap work as fellow editors.

Writing and revision is first done in isolation, but improved and strengthened in community.