

Professional Writing for the Public Sector

Writers in the public sector should aspire to two distinct but complementary standards: correctness and clarity.

I. CORRECTNESS requires compliance with the conventions of standard English. Some of the most generally applicable (and regularly violated) conventions are:

A. Commas

(1) Use a comma to separate two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction

(a) Use a semicolon, not a comma, to separate two independent clauses joined by a word other than a coordinating conjunction; for example, "however".

(b) Do not use a comma or a semicolon to separate the parts of a compound predicate.

(2) Use a comma to separate items in a list of three or more; the serial comma is optional (see III. A. below).

(3) Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause, except a prepositional phrase of fewer than five words.

(4) Use two commas to set off parenthetical (nonessential) information in the middle of an independent clause.

(5) Use a comma to set off a parenthetical (nonessential) phrase or clause at the end of an independent clause if the phrase or clause might be understood as essential.

B. Agreement

(1) Conjoined subjects (joined by "and") require a plural verb.

(2) If two subjects are disjunctive (joined by "or"), the proximate subject determines the number of the verb.

(3) An object of a preposition cannot be the subject of the sentence even though an object of a preposition might be the proximate noun.

(4) A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, case, and gender.

C. Sentences

(1) Avoid run-on sentences.

(2) Avoid sentence fragments (a group of words without a verb).

II. Some "rules" to unlearn:

A. Do not split an infinitive.

B. Do not end a sentence with a preposition.

C. Do not begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.

III. Some best practices in institutional settings where numerous writers work subject to deadlines:

A. Use the serial (Oxford) comma.

B. Avoid the pointless passive (passive voice with the subject included in the sentence).

C. Do not omit subordinating conjunctions, especially if more than one subordinate clause modifies the same thing.

IV. CLARITY requires going beyond the conventions to make it as easy as possible for the reader to understand exactly what the writer meant. Some writing practices that contribute to greater clarity:

A. Be very careful with pronouns, especially if the proximate noun is not the antecedent.

B. Reduce the number of prepositional phrases whenever possible.

C. Be wary of omitted prepositions.

D. Do not dilute the verbs.

E. Do not hide the ball, or yourself, in passive voice.