editor's page

Some Specific Guides to Better Writing

In reading more than 150 manuscripts in the past 18 months, I've noted a number of errors that writers frequently make. Some may seem trivial, but because we have a choice of being correct or being in error, we ought to choose to be correct.

So here's a list of some specific suggestions from my observations. Like most grammatical rules, there may be exceptions to some of these.

- Spell correctly. When a word like judgment/judgement can be correctly spelled either way, I prefer the shorter version.
- Use active, rather than passive, voice as much as possible.
- Use positive, rather than negative, forms. "Do not use the negative form." Avoid double negatives, too.
- Avoid split infinitives. Colleen Schuh and I tend *to usually disagree* on how awkward a sentence must be before we'll allow a split infinitive to remain.
- Be sure subject and verb agree in number. I've found two plural nouns—data and criteria—give many writers problems. Their singular forms are datum and criterion.
- Distinguish between *effect* (which, as a noun, means *result* and, as a verb, means *to bring about*) and affect (which, as a noun, means *an emotion* and, as a verb, means *to influence*).
- Avoid using *etc.* It frequently leaves the reader feeling the writer couldn't think of anything else to add.
- Distinguish between its and it's.
- Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition.
- Avoid substituting *myself* for *me.*
- When referring to persons, use the pronoun *who* rather than *that.* "Authors *who* write for understanding" not "Authors *that* write . . . ."
- Proofread carefully.

Keep some writing tools handy—a dictionary, a word book, a handbook of style/grammar, and a thesaurus. Use them.

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