Notes on Mechanics of Writing

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This document summarizes some common mistakes that I see in student papers, and indeed in articles submitted for review to conferences and journals. They are mostly related to grammar, punctuation and technical notation. They may seem trivial, but if you get them wrong you will distract, mislead, and slow down your readers.

Constructs that are grammatically correct may still not be optimal for clarity and concision.

1 Pairs and Snares

See the article in Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* [?] with this title.

**affect and effect**: The affect of Network load was hard to measure.

Background noise effected the quality of your results.

**stationary and stationery**: You can use \LaTeX{} to print your own stationary.

**complement and compliment**: I complemented the professor as his TA.

**alternate vs. alternative**

**imply vs. infer**: see Dupré §64.

**deduce, induce and infer**: *ibid*

**Count nouns and mass nouns**: How much water do we have? I had fewer money than my friend.

2 Clear Writing

**Latin** is best avoided. *et al.* is OK if you like it; if you use “and colleagues”, do so consistently between text and bibliography.

**Jargon** is endemic, e.g., “We had a high-bandwidth conversation with our users”. How do you spot it?

**Numbers**. See Dupré §24 and 34. Writers normally spell out whole numbers less than 10, but use numerals for units of measure, time, dates, page numbers, chapter numbers, percentages, money, proportions, part of a series of larger numbers. But strive for clarity: twenty 100-Mbit ethernet ports.

0.5 inches vs. one-half inch — what’s the difference?
We mean a single article, or a specified number of single articles, we cannot do without pair(s) of (Get me a pair, or two pairs, of scissors). The less familiar words are, however, not so insistent on being treated as plurals as the more familiar. No one would say Hand me that trowsers, but some might say Hand me that shears. For other difficulties with words plural in form but singular in meaning see PLURAL ANOMALIES and SINGULAR S.

pact. See HEADLINE LANGUAGE.

pairs and snares. Of the large number of words that are sometimes confused with others a small selection is here given. It will be noticed that nearly all are of Latin origin; the confusion arises largely from the Englishman’s natural failure, if he has not learnt Latin, to realize instinctively the force of suffixes that are not native. Those who have any doubts of their infallibility may find it worth while to go through the list and make sure that these pairs have no terrors for them; under one or other of most of the pairs in its dictionary place they will find remarks upon the difference, and usually proofs that the confusion does occur. While the Englishman’s vagueness about Latin suffixes or prefixes is the most frequent cause of mistakes, it is not the only one. Often the two words might legitimately have been equivalents, or actually were in older usage, and the ignorance is not of Latin elements but of English idiom and the changes that DIFFERENTIATION has brought about. And again there are pairs in which the connexion between the two words is only a seeming one. To exemplify briefly, contemptuous and contemptible are a pair in which suffixes may well be confused; masterful and masterly one in which differentiation may well be overlooked; and deprecate and depreciate one of the wholly false pairs.

The list is as follows: acceptance and acceptance; advance and advancement; affect and effect; alternate and alternative; antitype and prototype; apologue and apology; ascendency and ascendant; autarchy and autarky; ceremonial and ceremonious; comity and company; complacent (-ency) and complaisant (-ance); compose and comprise; consequent and consequential; contemptible and contemptuous; definite and definitive; deprecate and depreciate; derisive and derisory; discreet and discrete; disinterested and uninterested; e.g. and i.e.; euphemism and euphism; fatal and fateful; forceful and forcible; fruition and fructification; immovable and irremovable; infer and imply; impassable and impassible; inflammable and inflammatory; ingenious and ingenuous; judicial and judicious; laudable and laudatory; luxuriant and luxurious; masterful and masterly; mendacity and mendicacy; militate and mitigate; observance and observation; perspicacity (-acious) and perspicuity (-uous); policy and polity; precipitate and precipitous; predicate and predict; prescribe and proscribe; proportion and portion; purport and purpose; regretful and regrettable; resource, recourse, and resort; reverend and reverent; reversal and reversion; seasonal and seasonable; sensual and sensuous; titillate and titivate; transcendent and transcendental; triumphal and triumphant; unexceptionable and unexceptional. See also MISPRINTS.

pajamas is the American word for the garment known to us as pyjamas.

palace. Educated usage is exceptionally divided between the two pronunciations pálás and pálís. In spite of Milne’s well-known lines They’re changing guard at Buckingham Palace; Christopher Robin went down with Alice, the speak-as-you-spell movement will probably secure the victory of the first.

palaeo-, palæo-, paleo-. The first is recommended; see ἀ, ἡ.

Pall Mall. See MALL.

calpable. The work that has yet to be done is palpable from the crowded paper of amendments with which the House is faced. A good illustration of the need for caution in handling dead metaphors.

Figure 1: Pairs and snares from Fowler’s Modern English Usage
Three (or more) is not Two. Mergesort is faster than Quicksort, but

Choose between two alternatives, but among three or more possibilities. I had difficulty choosing among the two different paint colors.

Citations are not nouns. Check by reading out loud: In [? ], we see the first use of proof by non-existent reference. Dunmore [?] was the first to name this popular proof technique.

“Such as” vs. “Like”. See Dupré §27.

3 Basic Grammar

Singular & Plural depend on the words chosen, not the thing that they describe. This set of guidelines are useful . . .

None of the available programs works

The operating system is the first bastion of defense against the hacker. Keep them up to date.

Articles The choice between “A” and “An” depends on the sound, not the spelling, of the noun:

a university, but an honour. This works for abbreviations too: an MP, but a member of parliament. Adjectives change the sound, so they change the article too:

“This” can be ambiguous: Reducing the number of service queues increases average delay and reduces the number of idle periods. This affects the recovery subsystem.

Parallel constructions Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

Laser light is monochromatic and coherent: it is composed of a single wavelength and which is emitted in a narrow beam.

Word placement. Above and below follow the word that they describe: The below item is frequently ignored, to the detriment of clarity. Dupré (§48) argues that we should instead use more precise terms. Only qualifies the word that immediately follows. Read and digest Dupré §5! Consider: “Yesterday I hit the man in the eye.”

Lists are assumed to be complete, unless you indicate otherwise. Programming environments — Eclipse, XCode, BlueJ, etc. — improve programmer productivity.

Examples of programming environments are Eclipse, Xcode, BlueJ, etc.

Which and that are not interchangeable. See Dupré §17, and Fowler “that, rel. pron. 1”

Splitting infinitives is bad (but the alternative is sometimes worse).

To boldly go where no adverb has been before.

It is not good policy to incessantly criticize your students.

See Dupré §38 and Fowler “Out of the frying pan”.

4 Technical English

The solidus (/) means “per” or “divided by.” Don’t use it in text.

Input/output operations are time-consuming.

His/her productivity should be improved if he/she adopts the new tool.

See Dupré §117.
Quotations should either be in quotes or in a different font. In the USA, a printers’ convention holds that commas and periods that logically follow a quotation are moved inside the closing quotation mark. (British usage is to punctuate according to sense.) This is problematic when you are quoting computer input. Type “rm *,” then press “return”.

Dashes. You will probably use four different dashes: mathematical minus \((x - y)\), the hyphen, the en-dash (pages 218–221 in Dupré), and the em-dash—which I think looks best with a hairline space on either side. Know how to type each in your chosen tool!

5 Further Reading

These examples are based on a set of PowerPoint slides called l05Mechanics. Read over the sides and consider adding to this document. [http://www.cs.pdx.ued/~black/ScholarshipSkills/LectureNotes/l05Mechanics.pdf](http://www.cs.pdx.ued/~black/ScholarshipSkills/LectureNotes/l05Mechanics.pdf)