

Grammar Girl's™



Quick
AND Dirty
Tips™

FOR
BETTER
WRITING

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Chapter 7

INTERNET INTERVENTION

THE GENERAL PUBLIC DIDN'T START using the Internet until the National Center for Supercomputing Applications released the Mosaic Web browser in 1993, and even then you could hardly call users the general public—students and serious tech geeks would be more accurate. (I was both, thank you!) Even though I lived before the Internet, I can't imagine life without it anymore. Nevertheless, along with all the power and wonder came a great gnashing of teeth as writers (and programmers) tried to wrangle this new stuff onto a page. Building new conventions takes time, and even though we've now had about fifteen years to sort it out, much of what I can offer you are still just recommendations—style—rather than hard-and-fast rules.

BRAVE NEW WORDS

With so many new things to talk about, it's no surprise that a lot of new words emerged to talk about them. Some words are completely new (*Internet*), some are old words that take on a new meaning (*zombie*, a computer that is taken over by hackers), and some activities are referred to with competing words or phrases (*log in*, *log on*). Here are a few of the words I am asked about most frequently.

LOG ME IN, COACH; I'M READY TO PLAY: LOG IN VERSUS LOG ON

Log in, *log on*, *log out*, and *log off* are all considered phrasal verbs. In other words, they are two-word verbs. *Log in* and *log on* are interchangeable, as are *log out* and *log off*. In certain cases, the two parts of the word can be split: *She logged Grammar Girl off the system.*

If you use these words as adjectives (for example before a noun), use a hyphen: *I hate the flashing graphics on the log-in page.*

ON LINE VERSUS ONLINE

Online is all one word. When you're on the Internet, you're online; and when you're buying stuff on eBay, you're conducting an online transaction. (There's a separate discussion about people saying they are standing on line instead of in line in chapter 1, "Dirty Words.")

NO MATTER WHAT BUSH SAYS, IT'S NOT CALLED THE INTERNETS

Remember from the capitalization chapter (chapter 5) that words are capitalized because they are proper nouns, not because they are important or new.

So to understand why we capitalize *Internet* (or not), we have to decide whether the Internet is one specific thing or not. Most language

experts believe the Internet is one big but specific thing—when you talk about the Internet, there is only one thing you could be referring to—so *Internet* is a proper noun and gets capitalized.

Web, which is short for “World Wide Web,” is also generally considered to be one specific thing, so it also gets capitalized. I’ve heard the arguments that it looks antiquated to capitalize *Internet* or that the Internet isn’t special anymore so it shouldn’t be capitalized, but those arguments miss the underlying grammatical rationale for why we capitalize words in English.

On the other hand, *Web site* or *website* is trickier. There are hundreds of millions of websites on the Web. If you use the open compound (*Web site*), the Web part gets capitalized, because *Web* is still a proper noun, but *site* is not. If you close the compound (*website*), the entire word is a common noun because it is not a name for one specific thing, so it is lowercased.

Whether you use the open or closed compound comes down to a matter of style; *Web site* is nearly twice as common on the Internet as *website*. (A Google search for “Web site” yielded approximately 1.6 billion hits, whereas a search for “website” yielded approximately 0.9 billion hits.)

Bear in mind that many people use *Internet* and *Web* interchangeably, but they are two separate things. (I made this error myself once in a Grammar Girl podcast and boy, did I hear about it!)

The Internet is an international network of computers that use the IP and TCP protocols to find each other and exchange information. Protocols such as HTTP and FTP run on the Internet.

The World Wide Web (Web) is made up of all the files that are accessible on the Internet by using the HTTP protocol.

MAY I HAVE YOUR ADDRESS?: UNIVERSAL RESOURCE LOCATORS (URLS)

Web addresses are strange beasts; they seem more like equations or long numbers than words. All the rules for how to handle uniform resource locators (URLs) in documents are matters of style, but some styles make more sense than others.

The Information Superhighway

An argument for not capitalizing *Internet* is to use the National Highway System as an analogy for the Internet. Much like the Internet, the National Highway System is a network of interconnected lines—traffic lines instead of data lines. *National Highway System* is capitalized because it is a proper noun that refers to one big network, yet when I write “Let’s take the highway,” *highway* isn’t capitalized because I’m using the word *highway* as a common noun to refer to a small part of the National Highway System. I’m thinking about hopping onto I-80, whereas someone in Seattle could use *highway* to refer to I-5, and someone in New York could use *highway* to refer to I-84. The reason the National Highway System is not a perfect analogy for the Internet is that different lines of the Internet aren’t named and in the public consciousness in the same way as individual sections of the National Highway System. When someone in New York and someone in California talk about “getting on the Internet,” they are both thinking of the same entity.

URLs and Terminal Punctuation

URLs always have internal periods and often are scattered with other punctuation marks too, so what do you do when one shows up at the end of a sentence? Should you include the period or other terminal punctuation mark at the end of the sentence as you normally would, leave off the period so the reader doesn’t mistakenly include it in the address, or do something funky such as put quotes around the Web address? As you’re weighing your options, first consider whether you are writing online or in print.

Print

If you’re writing for print, Web addresses don’t need special treatment. Put the period, question mark, etc., at the end of the sentence just

as you would if the sentence ended with a word or a number. You may choose to highlight the URL in some way, such as making it bold or blue, but it isn't necessary.

Online

When you're writing a URL in a blog, e-mail program, or other online environment and the link will be active, you have to be sure the terminal punctuation won't be included in the address when someone clicks on it or quickly copies it and pastes it into their browser. Many e-mail and instant messaging programs, for example, automatically make everything following *http://* active until a space is reached—meaning the terminal punctuation will be included in the address, resulting in a broken link. Thus, unless you can control exactly how the address will be rendered, it's best to leave off the terminal punctuation. (I know! It makes me crazy to leave off the punctuation too, but I've had enough people complain that a link I posted or sent them didn't work that I've changed my mind and decided that functionality beats traditional sentence structure.)

The Full Monte: Full URLs Versus Abbreviated URLs

Some people prefer to write out the entire address including the *http://* and *www* parts, whereas other people prefer to write the shortest address that will still work when you type it into a Web browser. Whether you should write out the full URL is also a matter of style, but for the reasons that follow, I recommend writing out the complete address every time.

- Most—but importantly, not all—websites will come up in a browser if you leave off the *http://www*. If you opt to use an abbreviated address, always test it in a browser first; don't assume it will work.

- Not every address uses *www*. For example, the direct Grammar Girl Web address is <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com>. It's best to include the *http://* in these kinds of addresses because people may be confused if you just write *grammar.quickanddirtytips.com* and try to insert a *www.* in front of it.

The bottom line is that although an abbreviated address may look smoother and more tech savvy, it's not going to work every time, so you're going to end up writing the *http://* sometimes. Since you have to write it sometimes, it makes your style more consistent to use it all the time.

Long URLs

The next problem you are likely to encounter is what to do with a long URL. You know what I mean: one of those dynamically generated URLs that seem to go on forever with equal signs and question marks and lots of numbers.

The most important thing is that if you have to break a URL across two lines, don't insert an extra hyphen at the line break. That will definitely confuse people because it's common for URLs to have internal hyphens. And if there is a hyphen in the address, don't make the line break right after it; that will confuse people because they won't know whether you are improperly inserting a hyphen to mark the break or the hyphen is part of the address.

Instead, if you have to wrap the URL to a new line, find a natural break like a slash, a number sign, or other symbol. Again, use common sense: don't break a URL right after a period or readers may think the period marks the end of the sentence. If you must break at a period, make the break before the period so it starts the new line.

**[http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=
http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/affect-versus-effect.aspx&title=Effect + Versus + Affect](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/affect-versus-effect.aspx&title=Effect+Versus+Affect)**

(right because it breaks between letters)

**http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://
grammar.quickanddirtytips.
com/affect-versus-effect.aspx&title=Effect+Versus+Effect**

(wrong because it breaks at a terminal punctuation mark)

**http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://
grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/affect-
versus-effect.aspx&title=Effect+Versus+Effect**

(wrong because it breaks at a hyphen)

Active Links

Some word processing programs annoyingly make a link active when you type the full address. I find that almost as annoying as Clippy, the old Microsoft pop-up helper. If your document will only be read in print, there's no reason to make the link active; it will just show up underlined in the printout, which is unnecessary. You can remove the link by following the instructions in the sidebar.

On the other hand, if your document will be on the Web or in an e-mail message, do make the link clickable so it's easier for your readers to visit the page.

Removing Active Hyperlinks

How to remove the active hyperlink in an Open Office document on a PC or a Mac:

- 1. Highlight the text.**
- 2. In the Format menu, choose Character (or hit the key sequence Alt-O-H on a PC).**

3. In the Hyperlink tab, delete any text in the URL box.

4. Hit OK.

How to remove the active hyperlink in an MS Word document on a PC or a Mac:

1. Put your cursor anywhere on the link.

2. Press Control-K (Command-K for a Mac) to bring up the Edit Hyperlink menu.

3. Click Remove Link in the bottom left corner of the menu.

Click Here and Underlining

When you're turning words into links on a Web page, apply the link to the words that best describe the destination page. For example, link the words *Grammar Girl Homepage* instead of linking generic words such as *click here*. Using meaningful link text also helps your site rank well in search engines and makes it easier for people with visual impairments to navigate your site. (They may be using software that reads only the link text to them.)

Also, it's best to avoid underlining things for emphasis on websites because underlining is the style for hyperlinks on the Web. I know it's possible to make links any style you want if you fiddle with the code, but underlining is the default style, so if you underline text, some people will think it's an active link.

CAMELCASE

CamelCase (also known as medial capitals, intercaps, humpbacking, CapWords, and BiCapitalials, among other names) is the practice, that has now become trendy, of promoting a letter in the middle of a word to uppercase. Most often the medial capital letter seems to result from squishing two words together that would normally be separated by a space (e.g., PageMaker), but occasionally the capital just seems to pop up at a convenient syllable (e.g., OutKast).



Leave the camel at the zoo.

Although the phenomenon can be traced back to at least the '50s, it gained steam among computer programmers (probably because spaces are often discouraged or disallowed in programming) and then caught on with marketers as a trendy way to make a company name stand out.

If a formal company name uses CamelCase (e.g., MySpace, YouTube, PayPal, TiVo), use that form in your writing. But other than honoring official names, leave the camel at the zoo—don't go around calling a plain old help desk a HelpDesk. It's just so unnecessary!

E-MAIL DOES NOT STAND FOR EVIL-MAIL: SOME SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING YOUR E-MAIL MESSAGES

Today, everyone is a writer. In the past people picked up the phone and called each other, but now we are more likely to write an e-mail or text message. It's not uncommon to spend hours (and thousands of written words) swapping messages with colleagues or customers you hardly ever talk to and may never meet. Your e-mail messages are often the primary means people use to form their opinions about you. Are you stuffy? smart? fun? considerate? professional? Your e-mail messages need to have a metaphorical firm handshake and be dressed for success if you want to get ahead in today's world.

Formal or Informal

Questions about e-mail often get me thinking about overarching language rules and how they depend on whether a specific situation is formal or informal. For example, people have asked me if it's OK to start a sentence with a conjunction such as *and* or *but*, and my answer is that it's OK in informal settings but should be avoided in formal settings. Similarly, when you're writing an e-mail message, take a second to think about the purpose of your writing. Is it formal or informal?

- **A formal setting** is something such as a cover letter for a job application, a letter to a client, a book report for school, or an e-mail message to a new client or your boss' boss' boss.
- **An informal setting** is something such as an e-mail message to a friend, something you would say in casual conversation, or a text message.
- **Some things fall in the middle;** you have to just use your own judgment. Is a text message to your boss a formal or informal communication? Only you can decide. It depends on the nature of your relationship with your boss and your corporate culture, but if there is any doubt, it's better to assume it's formal.

You wouldn't begin an e-mail message to a professor with "Hey, Dude"—please, tell me you wouldn't!—so it's not too hard to figure out that you probably shouldn't write to your boss that you're sorry you're L8 to the mtg & will brb. (For the uninitiated, you're sorry you're late to the meeting and will be right back.)

The Subject Line

I have received countless e-mail messages that bear no relation to the subject line or that refer to some vague meeting or decision I can't decipher. It makes me wonder: does the author only attend one meeting

each week, make one decision per month, or never have to go back and find a message later? I call this a context problem.

It's often easier (and more appropriate) to reply to a message than to compose a message from scratch without including the old messages that came before your response, but when you reply, e-mail programs automatically insert the same subject line text with an *RE:* in front of it. If your topic drifts over time, you can end up sending a message that is completely unrelated to the subject line. Although you are writing about meeting for dinner after the conference, the subject line may read "Revisions to the revenue slide."

The first problem with the mismatch is that your readers are expecting something other than what they get when they open the message, and the second problem is that if you have to go back later and look for messages you sent about the revenue slide, you'll have to look through a bunch of garbage about the dinner.

The quick and dirty tip is to make sure your subject line matches the message content.

WHEN A "DEAR JOHN" LETTER BECOMES A "HI, JOHN" LETTER

Now that you've written a meaningful subject line, it's time to write the salutation. You've probably never even thought about this, but technically those messages you're writing should begin *Hi, John*—with a comma after *Hi*. You see, *Hi, John* is actually different from *Dear John* because *hi* and *dear* are not the same kinds of words. *Hi* is an imperative, and *dear* is an adjective that modifies *John*. In *Hi, John* you are directly addressing John, which means the punctuation rules of direct address apply. From a comma-rules standpoint, *Hi, John* is no different from *Thank you for the flowers, John*.

This is a tough one though. The rules are clear, but in the real world almost nobody follows them. I estimate that less than 1 in 10,000 e-mail messages I receive use the comma correctly. People seem to think *dear* sounds too formal and they can swap in *hi* to be more friendly, so I end

up feeling pedantic and stuffy when I do it right, especially when I am responding to someone who has already left out the comma. On the other hand, I also feel a moral obligation to set a good example.

You have to use your own judgment on this one and decide whether you want to be technically correct or go with common usage.

Dear John, (correct)

Hi, John. (correct)

Hi John, (common usage but not technically correct)

Other Salutation Questions

The plural of *Mister (Mr.)* is *Messieurs (Messrs.)*. It is common to use abbreviations when writing a letter, so if you were writing to multiple men, this is the correct way to format your salutation: *Dear Messrs. Affleck and Pitt*.

The plural of *Mrs.* is *Mmes.* (short for *Mesdames*), and the plural of *Miss* is *Misses*. The plural of *Ms.*, which originated in the 1950s, is less clear. Various sources report that the plural of *Ms.* can be *Mses.*, *Mss.*, or *Mmes.*

In American English, a period is required after the abbreviations; in British English, no punctuation is required after the abbreviations.

Context

Like writing a meaningful subject line, it is a good idea to give your reader context in the actual e-mail message. Even if you include the text of every previous message that led to your message, don't force your reader to sift through it all to figure out what you mean. Spell it out for them. It doesn't take much extra time to write, "Here is the revenue slide with the new chart you requested," instead of "Here it is."

Formatting

Have you ever noticed how much harder it is to read a thousand-word message with long paragraphs than a twenty-word message or a long message that is broken up into short paragraphs? Give some thought to how you format your message. Reading on a computer screen is different from reading on paper, and a long, text-dense e-mail message is just as hard to read as a long, text-dense Web page. If you can't distill your message down to one or two short paragraphs, consider using the same formatting tricks that make websites easier to read:

- Use bulleted lists when possible.
- Use subheadings to separate different sections of your message.
- Use bold formatting to highlight the most important points in your message such as the first sentence of each paragraph or first point in your bulleted list, as I've done here.
- Use regular capitalization and punctuation. Writing with all capital letters is the equivalent of shouting, and not capitalizing the first word of a sentence is lazy and makes it look as if you don't care about your reader or your message. Also, don't overdo ellipses. (See pages 109–111 for further discussion of ellipses in e-mail messages.)

Sign-offs and Signatures

Sincerely is a good formal sign-off for business letters to people you don't know well or don't correspond with often, but *Sincerely* can sound too formal for someone you write to regularly. On the other hand, *Cheers* and *Later* are quite informal and should be reserved for people you feel very comfortable with, and *Namaste*, *Love*, *Hugs*, and *Yours Truly* are quite intimate and should be reserved for close friends or family. If you

are in extreme doubt about which closing to use, it is acceptable to leave out the closing in e-mail and simply sign with your name or e-mail signature. Also, it is customary to leave off the closing in messages to people you correspond with frequently.

An e-mail signature should consist minimally of your full name and a way to contact you—ideally a phone number and an e-mail address. Even if you write to people regularly and you think they have your contact information, it is polite to include it so they don't have to look it up if they want to contact you while they are reading your message. It's also fine to include a physical address or Web address in your signature, but don't make your signature an overwhelming marketing message that contains everything from your work projects to personal blogs and social networking links. (It may be necessary to have different signatures for different parts of your life; for example, you may need a work signature, a family signature, and a personal projects signature if you want different people to contact you in different ways or you want to highlight different projects.)

P.S. I Love You

P.S. is an abbreviation for the Latin words *post scriptum*, which mean “after writing.” A *P.S.* has traditionally been used to add a thought after the writer has finished writing the main body of a letter. Because it is so easy to go back and edit an e-mail, some people object to using the *P.S.* format in e-mail. Despite these objections, a *P.S.* can serve a legitimate purpose in an e-mail message, particularly in denoting that the statement is an afterthought and perhaps unrelated to the main point of the e-mail message. On the other hand, it is conceivable that occasionally readers will miss reading the *P.S.* because they will fail to scroll down beyond the final signature.

Although it is common to see additional levels of *P.S.*'s written as *P.S.S.* and *P.S.S.S.*, they would be more correctly written as *P.P.S.* (*post post scriptum*) and *P.P.P.S.* (*post post post scriptum*). But the need for multiple layers of post scripting is a sure sign that your original message is

not well conceived, and multiple post scripts should be avoided in all but the most informal writing. In short, more than one *P.S.* makes you look scatterbrained.

Unsend

There is no “unsend” button for e-mail. It’s tempting to think that the message you are sending will only be seen by the person you are writing to; tempting, but not realistic. E-mail messages get forwarded, people accidentally hit the “reply to all” button instead of “reply,” and people snoop on other people’s computers. Before you hit Send, imagine how you would feel if your message were posted on the office refrigerator or shown to your mom. Make edits as necessary.

TEXT MESSAGING IS NOT BOOK WRITING

Formal or Informal

You don’t need to completely abandon abbreviations such as *brb* (be right back) and *lol* (laughing out loud) for text messaging, but as with e-mail, you do need to be aware of the purpose of your writing. Is it formal or informal? What are the expectations of your recipient?

I checked with the Quick and Dirty Tips etiquette expert, the Modern Manners Guy, and he said it’s rude to use text messaging abbreviations when the person on the receiving end won’t understand them, but he said that it may also be rude *not* to use them when you are sending a message to someone you know will understand the abbreviations and is reading your message on a tiny cell phone screen. If you write everything out, the recipient will have to do a lot more scrolling to read your message. Again, the underlying theme is to consider the specific situation.

Twitter

I’m not a big text messenger (probably because I have a lame cell phone), but I do use Twitter, a Web social networking tool that lets me

write posts about what I'm doing at any given time. I love how it helps me keep in touch with lots of people throughout the day while I'm working at my computer. If you use Twitter too, you can follow me directly. My username is GrammarGirl.

Twittering is a lot like text messaging because your entries are limited to 140 characters. (Similarly, the Facebook status message is limited to 161 characters and has the further restriction that it automatically begins with your name.) Sometimes I find it challenging to get my point across and still use proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But I'm Grammar Girl, so I have to! I was spending a lot of time trying to decide what was acceptable and what wasn't, and then I realized I needed a Twitter style guide. Fellow Twitterer Cathleen Ritteriser came up with the name: *Strunk & Twite*. The complete *Strunk & Twite* guide is in the appendix; I hope you'll read the guide and join me on Twitter!

ePAIN IN THE A**

God bless eBay—it's one of the few real success stories from the dot-com days, and who doesn't love to score a collectible Pez dispenser—but there's nothing I hate more than facing a sentence that starts with an eSomething (or an iSomething, for that matter. Hi, Steve Jobs!). What do you do when a company insists that their name starts with a lowercase letter? This is a style issue, and a contentious one at that. Many editors hold firm that the first letter of a sentence should be capitalized regardless of what companies prefer. Alternatively, companies themselves start sentences with the lowercase letter to support their trademark and branding (eBay reported record earnings . . .), and many readers (including me) find it jarring to see a name like *iPod* rendered *Ipod*. It just looks wrong!

Although I've heard editors complain about arrogant companies and their %(#@\$ lowercase names, the problem isn't limited to brand names. You can also run across the problem in other areas such as chemistry (e.g., *pH*), surnames (e.g., *de Heer*, *van Bern*), and computing (where variable names may be case sensitive).

The best solution is always to rewrite the sentence so the offending word isn't at the beginning. As a backup, you should select a house style for instances where a rewrite isn't possible. It's like choosing a selling price for a stock in advance—make the decision about how you will handle the situation with a cool head instead of in the heat of the moment.

ARE YOU GOING TO CITE ME FOR THAT?: CITING A WEBSITE

Risks

Citing a website can be dangerous. First, you have to determine whether it's a credible source, and second, you have to worry about whether it will still exist tomorrow.

Determining whether a source is credible can be subjective, but here are a few things to look for and consider:

- **Can you tell who wrote the site?** And if so, do they seem to have any expertise in the area you are researching. The Stanford Cancer Center is a more credible source than Aunt Mary's Kancer Page.
- **Has the website been reviewed by experts; does it bear a seal of approval or adhere to content standards?** For example, health sites wanting to boost their credibility adhere to standards set by the Health on the Net Foundation.
- **Can you tell when the page you are looking at was written?** Something written recently is generally more credible than something that hasn't been updated in years.
- **Does the page cite other credible sources you can check?**
- **Does it sound too good to be true?** If it does, it probably is.

- **Are they selling something based on the information the site is providing?** If so, be wary.
- **Do other credible sites link to the site?** You can find out who links to a site by doing a specialized search on Google. Enter *link: URL* into the search box. For example, you could enter *link: http://www.genetichhealth.com* (a website I helped launch) and find out that sites that link to it include a Japanese genome center, the Lance Armstrong Foundation, and a variety of hospitals.
- **Are there a lot of typos?** If there are a lot of language mistakes, it can mean that there are a lot of factual mistakes too.

Finally, use common sense and evaluate the arguments yourself. It's up to you to determine whether a site's conclusions are actually supported by its statements.

Pages disappearing or changing their Web address are problems that are out of your control. If it is an important source, you should consider printing out the page or saving it on your own computer. If you find that a page is gone and you haven't had a chance to save it yourself, you can sometimes find it at the Internet Archive (also known as the Wayback Machine) at <http://web.archive.org>.

Despite the risks, an abundance of credible information resides on the Web and you shouldn't dismiss a source simply because it is in a convenient electronic format.

Formatting

If you're including a Web address in a list of references and you're using a specific referencing style like that of the Modern Language Association, American Psychological Association, or *The Chicago Manual of Style*, then follow their specific recommendations; but if you're writing an essay or e-mail message, the style is up to you (or your boss or teacher). Just be consistent.

Modern Language Association

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