

common sense journalism

A Potpourri of Problems



Doug Fisher

By Doug Fisher

Late summer is the time to stretch out, untangle our lives and relax. So let's take some varied problems in copy and untangle them this month.

If a whistle blows in the off-season, does anyone hear it?

One of my favorite tangles is from a sports story: *NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said he expected the league's competition committee would review the rule that possession could not change because the whistle blew during the off-season, as it has in the past.*

What a whopper of a misplaced modifier. Untangle it: *NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said he expected the league's competition committee would, as it has before, review during the offseason the rule that possession could not change because the whistle blew.*

Get modifiers next to what they modify. I also saved some words with "before" and modified to AP style, "offseason." As for "commissioner," AP says capitalize as a formal title, but a database check shows AP sports doesn't follow its own style. Some usage observers might also suggest "expect ... to" is preferred to "expect ... would."

The hyphen isn't evil

Throw a hyphen among journalists, and they'll scatter like cockroaches. But sometimes a hyphen helps. Really. Like here: *Airline passengers will see fewer nonstop flights, less convenient travel options and possibly higher prices and fees in the coming months.*

Clearer would be "less-convenient travel options." Consider the sentence construction. The first part is quantifier (fewer), adjective (nonstop), noun (flights). So the next time the reader encounters a quantifier (less), he or she is likely to look for the same pattern. But here "less" is not a quantifier but part of a compound adjective, "less-convenient." (Also, were "less" a quantifier, it should have been "fewer" anyhow.)

So, hyphen-phobic styles notwithstanding, don't spare the little mark and sacrifice clarity.

Spelling errors can be embarrassing

This was in a recent story on the history of Carolina Gold rice: *Slaves from this region were highly valued for their rice-growing experience. ... From them, planters learned how to dyke marshes and irrigate their fields.*

Make that "dike."

Another one that's more common was in a magazine that takes pride in being a thought leader: *I finally honed in on Wall Street on a rainy Sunday morning, figuring the financial district would be dead asleep, no traffic, no noise.*

The correct pair is "homed in," as in homing pigeon, homing beacon, etc. Maybe people think because you sharpen, or hone, something, it means getting closer to. Not so.

Take a breath. Put in some punctuation.

As journalists, we fawn over clauses. We love them to insert additional information, afraid, perhaps, that if we used a period the reader would leave at the intermission. Instead, we too often create bloated sentences that have multiple ideas for the reader to digest and turn into hash when numbers are involved.

Exhibit A: *The tornado, rated an F3 on the F1 to F5 Fugita scale of intensity with wind speeds between 136 and 165 miles per hour, snapped or uprooted trees near the intersection of U.S. 78 and S.C. 302.*

That's seven numbers and one relatively complex idea (the Fugita scale) to digest layered onto another fact – where it happened. Split it and reword slightly (and use the AP-allowed "mph" to tighten a bit): *The tornado, with winds between 136 and 165 mph, rated an F3 on the F1 to F5 Fugita scale of intensity. It snapped or uprooted trees near the U.S. 78 and S.C. 302 intersection.* (Or, if you want to emphasize the damage, just put the damage and location first.)

And finally, this was in a story about a teacher who died with \$1.4 million: *She tracked students to their homes, found them shoes, meals, jackets, and returned the truants to their teachers. She never married, never missed children, never missed a day of work.*

The writer probably wanted that strong beat in the second sentence to come through in the first. But two semicolons (another room-clearer) would make it very clear for me as the reader without effort: *She tracked students to their home; found them shoes, meals, jackets; and returned the truants to their teachers.*

By the way, is "and" needed before "jackets?" No. That would be meddling, not editing.

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