

# Correct Conventions That Communicate

**What exactly are we talkin' about here?** “Conventions” is the term we use nowadays to describe punctuation, spelling, and grammar. (Some people even extend the term to handwriting and computer formatting, but we won't be talking about those things here.) We used to call these things “mechanics” but I think “conventions” is a much better term because it more accurately describes what these things are. (To me, writing correctly is hardly a “mechanical” process; it takes a lot of human thought and ingenuity to do it well.) The so-called “rules of writing” are not really rules at all, they're agreements between people in a society as to how written communication should look. These agreements began being hammered out officially in the 19th century and they are still changing slightly even today. Many “rules” change depending on who publishes the final copy. (This is referred to as “publisher's style,” the collection of rules a particular publisher uses so that all the writing they produce will be consistent.) With writing of any length or complexity, one could debate endlessly about whether a piece is completely correct. I think I write correctly, but I'm sure many people could find many “mistakes” right here on this page. Whether something is considered right or wrong often depends on who is doing the considering.

**Correctness counts.** There are two important reasons why it matters that your writing be regarded as correct by your readers: **(1)** When readers encounter what they think of as mistakes, they find it hard to read your writing. They may completely misinterpret something because they become confused, and even if they can figure out what you're saying, the energy and effort they expend in the process takes away much of their enjoyment; it's just not any fun to read writing that has many mistakes in it. **(2)** If your writing has errors, readers may place a negative judgment on you and your ideas. This is not fair but it is common. There's a perception in our society, however inaccurate it may be, that people who do not write correctly are not very smart, and that people who are not very smart are not worth listening to. In my opinion, both of these prejudices are wrong, but they exist nonetheless, and all writers should be aware of them.

**Conventional wisdom.** Personally, I do not think there is any definitive answer to the question, “How do I know for sure that my writing is correct?” If I worried about figuring that out, I'd never have energy left to write. (Of course, if I didn't write, I wouldn't have to worry about making mistakes. Hmm...) So I try to handle the situation by doing three things: **(1)** I learn what I can about the “rules” and try to apply them with consistency. **(2)** I work hard to understand and live up to the expectations that my audience has for correctness. **(3)** I do my best to make sure the meaning of my writing is as clear as it can be to the greatest number of potential readers.

Last but not least, I think of my all-time favorite quote about correctness in writing: “The writer should not follow rules, but follow language toward meaning, always seeking to understand what is appearing on the page, to see it clearly, to evaluate it clearly, for clear thinking will produce clear writing.” It was written by a man named Donald Murray in a book he wrote called *A Writer Teaches Writing*. It's the best piece of conventional wisdom I've ever heard.

# Punctuation, Inside and Outside

**“Outside” punctuation that shows where ideas begin and end.** Writing is all about communicating ideas; sentences are how we package them. Each sentence contains a complete thought, one chunk of information the writer has written that the reader has to understand. But readers can’t understand that chunk if they can’t figure out where it begins and where it ends. This is what “outside” punctuation is for. I call it “outside” punctuation because it is used on the outside parts of sentences. (A more technical term for it is “terminal” punctuation.) Outside punctuation includes the initial capital letter that shows the beginning of a sentence and the period, question mark, or exclamation mark that shows the end.

In *Chores*, the writer has done a good job with outside punctuation. To my ear, every sentence reads clearly and correctly; I never find myself confused as to where one idea ends and the next one begins. Interestingly, there are two parts of the piece where the writer is using “sentence fragments,” groups of words punctuated as complete ideas even though they are not complete sentences. (“Chores! Chores! Chores!” in the first paragraph; “Toilets!” in the second.) Personally, I like sentence fragments as long as they make sense and are clearly separated by correct outside punctuation from other complete sentences. When we speak we often speak in fragments, and I think they give writing more of the natural rhythm and flow of everyday human speech, which I tend to enjoy. Some people feel that sentence fragments are inappropriate in certain writing situations. As with so many things in writing, this is a matter of purpose and audience and not a hard and fast rule. In order to use sentence fragments effectively, you have to do two things: **(1)** Make sure the fragment has the correct outside punctuation so readers are sure where it begins and ends; and **(2)** Make sure the fragment has a clear and unambiguous meaning that readers will not misunderstand. In *Chores*, when the writer uses fragments, she has taken care to do both of these things well.

**“Inside” punctuation that shows where parts of ideas begin and end.** When we talked about sentence fluency, we talked about how sentences are often made up of parts. Writers use “inside” punctuation (also called “internal” punctuation) to show where those parts begin and end within a single sentence. The important marks of inside punctuation are the comma, the semicolon, the colon, the dash, the apostrophe, parentheses, and quotation marks.

In *Chores*, the writer doesn’t use very much inside punctuation. In the first three paragraphs, her sentences are very simple, they don’t need to be split into parts in order to be more easily understood. Later in the piece, her sentence structure becomes a bit more complicated. She uses several commas correctly in the fourth and fifth paragraphs, and she uses a colon correctly in the fifth paragraph as well. Inside punctuation can be very tricky. *Chores* is a good example of how a writer can communicate clearly and effectively with simple sentences that don’t require a lot of complicated conventions.

# Capitalization and Paragraphs

**Capitalization for names, places, and things that are one of a kind.** When alphabetic writing was invented there were no lowercase letters. (There weren't any vowels either but that's another story.) Unfortunately, lowercase letters came along in plenty of time to give 21st century writers plenty to think about in the area of capitalization. The basic thing to remember is this: Capital letters indicate that some words are more important than others. Which words are more important? Words in names, places, and things that are one of a kind. (We also capitalize the first word of a sentence, of course, because it marks the beginning of a new idea; that's important, too.) In truth, capitalization is not this simple. At times, it seems like there are dozens of rules we use when capitalizing the titles of stories, the titles of people, newspaper headlines, and abbreviations, not to mention the seemingly random use of capital letters in advertising and the use of ALL CAPS formatting when people want to emphasize something or "shout" in an e-mail.

So how does the writer of *Chores* do with capitalization? She does well. I don't find any errors. But then, the only capitalization rules she needs to know for this piece are the capital for the beginning of a sentence and the capital for the word "I."

**Paragraphing that shows groups of related ideas.** A sentence is a single idea. A paragraph is a collection of one or more sentences in which the ideas are closely related. Paragraphs are extremely useful to readers because they break the piece into small, manageable chunks, and because they highlight the organizational structure. *Chores* is a perfect example of this. As we noted earlier, each paragraph, excluding the introduction and conclusion, is devoted exclusively to a particular sub-topic in the piece: all the sentences in paragraph two, for example, are about cleaning toilets; the sentences in paragraph three are about cleaning sinks, and so on. Most pieces don't have this kind of one-topic-one-paragraph arrangement. Often, it takes several paragraphs to cover something adequately. Each paragraph, then, holds a small number of sentences that can be grouped together as a separate unit within the topic being covered.

Something I hear from time to time in school is that a paragraph is supposed to have a certain number of sentences. Some people say five, others say four, some say that you have to have at least three. This has even been printed in books. It's simply not true. A paragraph can contain one sentence or a hundred and one (though most have between three and seven). Different types of writing tend to have different lengths of paragraphs. Novels tend to have shorter paragraphs than reference books. Newspaper stories have many paragraphs of only a single sentence. In general, longer paragraphs are harder to understand, they also slow down the pace. But they are perfect for focusing a reader's attention on something important. Shorter paragraphs are easy to understand and when we encounter several in a row, we feel the pace of the piece quicken. Shorter paragraphs are also easier to skim for readers who only want to read selected parts of a document. This is one of the reasons why newspaper stories have so many one sentence paragraphs, they are designed for efficient skimming because many newspaper readers do not like to read entire articles.

# Spelling and Grammar

**Spelling that makes your writing easy to read.** Just a few hundred years ago, English spelling was a mess. Nobody could agree on much of anything and it seemed like every other word had an extra “e” on the end of it. Then along came Noah Webster in the 19th century and he got it all straightened out — sort of. English spelling is absolutely ridiculous. And yet we all have to toe the line and spell our words just like Mr. Webster thought we should. As difficult as this can be at times, it just makes sense. Spelling is the rare area in writing conventions where there’s pretty much a clean cut right or wrong answer for just about every situation. That’s why spell checkers in word processing programs are so helpful.

So, how’s the spelling in *Chores*? Perfect, I think. (At least Microsoft Word said it was perfect when I ran it through the spell checker; I don’t always trust myself to know for sure.) Interestingly enough, the little girl who wrote *Chores* was an abysmal speller, one of the worst I’ve ever worked with. When I started working with her at the beginning of the school year, her writing had one or two spelling errors *per sentence*. A small percentage of the population (about 1 in 10 people, I think) lack the visual memory capabilities to memorize the correct spellings of the thousands of words most of us have in our vocabularies. This writer was one of these people. So how did she end up with perfect spelling in this piece? She worked at it — hard. She started by circling any words she wasn’t sure of. Then, she used a number of different strategies to get them corrected including using word resources on the walls in her classroom and a dictionary. And, what’s more, she did most of the correcting with pencil and paper before she used a spell checker. Her teacher and I were incredibly proud of her.

**But what about grammar?** What for do we have to study grammar? If we were not speaking the way others spoke this would be a problem, yes? Is why we need rules because people can’t understand each other?

Did you get all that? You probably did. But it probably sounded a bit unusual. That’s because the grammar I was using was probably different than the grammar you grew up listening to and speaking when you were a baby.

In the United States, at the beginning of the 21st century, the grammar most people in school and in the business world would like you to use when you write is called “Standard English” grammar, or “Common Standard English” (CSE) as it is known more officially. If you grew up speaking this way, this won’t be too hard for you. But if you didn’t, you will probably need someone to check your writing and help you learn to fix it.

The grammar of *Chores* conforms to the grammar of Common Standard English. The writer did have a couple of grammar errors in the piece initially (“Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and *is* not fun at all.”) But with help, she fixed them.

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**Why do we need conventions?** Writers use conventions to enhance and clarify the meaning of what they write. Conventions allow writers to specify the exact way a word or phrase should be interpreted by the reader. They help the reader understand exactly what the writer had in mind. When you can't be there to read your writing to someone else, conventions can help do the reading for you. Whenever you write something, you hear it in your head first. You know exactly how it should sound, but the reader doesn't. Conventions guide the reader through your writing by telling the reader when to stop, when to go, when to speed up, when to slow down, and so on. They make your writing sound just the way it sounded to you when you wrote it down.

Without conventions, writing would be a mess. If we didn't put a space between each word, everything would run together. Without the convention of correct spelling, writers could never be sure if readers would be able to read the words they had written. And even if we all spelled each word the same way, without the convention of punctuation, writers would still have trouble getting their message across. Without conventions we might be able to communicate very simple ideas and emotions in our writing, but we wouldn't be able to capture the rich rhythms of human speech. Our voices would be muted because we'd never be able to make what we write match the way we talk.

At first, conventions can seem like a big hassle. But the more you work with them, the more you'll be able to make them work for you. Conventions are a powerful part of writing and you can tap into that power with something as simple as a comma or a pair of quotation marks. Your ideas are important. They deserve to be read and to be understood exactly the way you intend.

**Think of conventions as tools, not rules.** Some people, when they think about conventions, think about rules. But that's not exactly right. Conventions are tools, not rules. They help us hammer out a precise idea, nail down a topic, and chisel away at ambiguity. If all this sounds a bit serious, don't worry, conventions have a lighter side, too.

Cole Porter probably wasn't thinking too much about the importance of conventions when he whipped up a hit song in 1929 called *What is This Thing Called Love?* But that doesn't mean we can't do a little of the thinking for him. One of the most successful song writers of his day, Porter wrote literally dozens of hit songs. Think about how many more he could have written had he used a little "conventional" wisdom.

What? Is this thing called love?  
What is *this* thing called, love?  
"What is this thing?" called Love.  
"What? Is this Thing?" called Love.

What *is* this thing called, love?  
What is this *thing* called, love?  
"What is this?" Thing called. "Love?"  
"What is," this thing called, "love?"

# Putting it All Together

**So many things to think about.** If you go back through the last 20 pages or so, you could count 30 different things about good writing (31 if you count grammar) that need to be present in every piece in order for it be successful. How can anybody concentrate on all that and have any brain power left over to write? In truth, nobody can. That's why the best writers concentrate only on certain things at certain times.

**First things first.** Where does good writing begin? Long before the pen hits the page, or the computer keys start clacking, a piece starts to percolate in the heart and mind of its creator. It starts with a good topic, something you really care about, and the important things you want to say about it. Good writing begins with the writer's voice. If you're having trouble with a piece, especially in revision, this is the place to start.

**A solid foundation.** Along with voice, a writer's ideas and organization form the foundation of every successful piece. When you have a good topic, and you know have good things to say about it, getting your ideas down and arranging them effectively is the next order of business. In revision, after making sure that your voice is solid, focus on your ideas and the order you've arranged them in.

**Where to from here?** If your voice, ideas, and organization are in good shape, you may find that you already have a fairly strong piece in front of you. At this point, you have two choices: You can move ahead and take a closer look at your sentence fluency and word choice, or you can skip those altogether and just go right to editing for conventions.

**All qualities are not created equal.** Some qualities are more important than others. Voice and ideas, for example, are significantly more important than word choice and sentence fluency. You can use all the wonderful words and smooth sentences you want, but if you don't have anything interesting to say, no one is going to read your writing anyway. Conventions are important to just about everyone, so most writers have to spend a lot of time here. However, conventions are the one part of writing you can always find someone to correct for you. It's relatively easy for someone else to correct any errors you may make in conventions. It's much harder for someone else to fix problems you may have with voice, ideas, and organization.

**Working on some things also improves others.** There's a very good reason why it makes sense to focus on certain qualities in a certain order: improving some things improves others as well. Improving your voice improves your ideas. Getting clear about your ideas improves your organization. Voice and ideas together often determine your word choice, especially if you're displaying strong feelings and using a lot of "showing" detail. Fixing up your conventions, particularly your "inside" and "outside" punctuation, will have a positive effect on sentence fluency. Focus on things in the best order. You'll get more done in less time and with better results.

# Good Writing From the Ground Up

## (6) Conventions

- (A) Have you used “outside” punctuation to show where ideas begin and end?
- (B) Have you used “inside” punctuation to show where parts of sentences begin and end?
- (C) Have you capitalized the beginnings of sentences, the word “I”, names, places, and things that are one of a kind?
- (D) Have you used paragraphs to group related ideas and to highlight the organizational structure of your piece?
- (E) Have you spelled words correctly?
- (F) Is your grammar appropriate for your purpose and audience?

## (5) Sentence Fluency

- (A) Do your sentences have different beginnings?
- (B) Do your sentences have different lengths and structures?
- (C) Is your writing easy to read with expression?
- (D) Does your piece sound good when you read it out loud?
- (E) Are your sentences constructed so they’re easy to understand?
- (F) Are you using any “sound” effects? (Not Required)

## (4) Word Choice

- (A) Are you using strong verbs to show how actions are performed?
- (B) Are you using adjectives and adverbs to make your writing more specific?
- (C) Have you included any memorable words or phrases?
- (D) Are you using words that are correct and accurate?
- (E) Is your language appropriate to your purpose and your audience?

## (3) Organization

- (A) What will catch your audience’s attention at the beginning and make them want to read more?
- (B) What will make your piece feel finished and give your audience something to think about?
- (C) Are the parts of your piece arranged in the best order?
- (D) Are you spending the right amount of time on each part?
- (E) Is your piece easy to follow from part to part?

## (2) Ideas

- (A) What’s the one most important thing you want your audience to know?
- (B) What interesting “key” details have you included to help your audience “unlock” your main idea?
- (C) Have you included any “showing” details?
- (D) Why did you write this?
- (E) Have you included anything surprising or unusual? (Not Required)

## (1) Voice

- (A) Why do you care about this topic?
- (B) Do you know enough about it to have personal opinions?
- (C) What are your strongest feelings about it?
- (D) What honest statements can you make?
- (E) Who is your audience?
- (F) What questions do they want you to answer?