
Holy Mother Grammatica's Guide to Good Writing

by [Holy Mother Grammatica](#)

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"Punctuation, grammar, and spelling are not things that only happen to other people." --Terry Pratchett



Good writing doesn't just happen. "Well, duh," you say? And well you may, as long as you put it in quotation marks and punctuate it correctly. A surprising number of writers don't know how to do that. Many either don't know or don't care about the rules of grammar or of writing fiction.

Now, you say, "Rules of writing fiction? What rules?" The rules that I am about to tell you, of course. That's why you're reading this, right?

Who am I? I am Holy Mother Grammatica, dispenser of the rules, advisor to writers seeking guidance. I do not work alone. Among my colleagues are Mr. Exposition and Auntie Continuity. Together, we will attempt to help interested writers gain new skills and polish those they already have. We will start with general rules, and move on to specific errors. Let us begin.



PLOT

Many writers of fan fiction labor under the mistaken belief that their stories do not require a plot. Holy Mother Grammatica (hereafter known as HMG) would like these writers to know that, without a plot, what they have is a fragment, or perhaps a scene in search of a story. These scenes can be well-written, even beautifully so, but they are not stories. A story has a beginning, middle, and end. A story has direction; it is going somewhere and the reader is along for the ride. The parts can be broken down as follows:

Beginning: This is where at least one main character is introduced, along with the setting. It is usually a good idea to describe both characters and setting, so that the readers know who and where these people are and can picture

them in their own minds. Writing about characters established on a television show or in other stories does not mean that the author should skip descriptions. There is always the chance that someone who has never seen the show before will read the story. Besides, HMG is very fond of descriptions of delicious young anthropologists and handsome, muscular sentinels.

The beginning is also where the plot should be introduced, preferably as soon as possible. The shorter the story, the earlier the plot needs to begin. Try to draw the readers in by starting with something that grabs them and **makes** them keep reading. Which of these examples would make you want to keep reading?

Blair lay in bed, remembering what had happened that day, how Psycho J. Killer had held the gun to his head and threatened to kill him in front of Jim.

Psycho J. Killer jammed the gun into Blair's temple, gripping his arm so hard that Blair's fingers went numb. "I'll kill him, Ellison!"

Middle: This is where most of the stuff happens. This is where the characters are developed along with the plot, where we get the details, the conversations, the relationships, and the clues. In a longer story, this is where you can slow down and show the readers what you want them to see at a pace that you set. This is where you build up the readers' expectations, make them wonder and guess, keep them in suspense. This leads to...

Climax: The climax should be the most exciting part of the story. This is the payoff, the hold your breath or break your heart. In the climax, Jim catches the murderer or rescues Blair from Psycho J. Killer at the last possible moment, or Blair finally has that emotional breakthrough you've been building up to all along. It can be a quiet breakthrough, but the readers have to know that this is what they've been waiting for.

It is almost always a bad idea to have the climax happen off-stage. If you go to all the trouble of setting up a murder investigation, showing the readers the victim(s), following Jim and Blair as they question the suspects and search for clues, then toss an offhand, "Oh, by the way, Chief, while you were in the hospital, the murderer confessed: the butler did it," your readers will not be happy or satisfied. They may form a lynch mob, and HMG will cheerfully be a part of it.

End: The end is where everything winds down, where loose ends are wrapped up, hugs are given and received, and bad jokes are made. This is where you tell the readers what happened after all the excitement was over. If you feel like it. It is quite possible to simply end the story directly after the climax and never tell the readers another thing. The end can be as abrupt or as long as you wish, but

it is advisable to avoid boring the readers with too much information or confusing them with too little. Though not always possible, coming up with a final sentence that's just as good as the opening sentence is a Really Neat Thing.

In the case of stories posted on the Internet, HMG has found it necessary to write the words "The End" after the last sentence of the story. This avoids what seems to be inevitable confusion and is therefore reluctantly recommended.



EXPOSITION

You all know Mr. Exposition. He's the character who says, "Well, Jim, as you know, the Chopec are a people who live in Peru but occasionally take ocean voyages to Cascade in order to seek out the heads of corporations that are destroying their lands." His is a thankless job, that of explaining to the readers who a character is and exactly what is going on, or of giving background information. Sometimes, she is Ms. Exposition, or Dr. Exposition, but the job is always the same. In bad writing, Mr. Exposition has no other purpose as a character than to dispense information. He is not really a person at all, but a walking encyclopedia. In the worst writing, Mr. Exposition is not a character, but the writer himself, giving the readers lots of information in blocks of not very interesting prose. This is also called info-dump.

Info-dump is to be avoided whenever possible. Yes, some information does need to be given straight out, but a good writer tries to find an interesting way to do that. MOST information should be woven into the story in such a way that the readers are not consciously aware that they have been sucking it into their brains. It is more fun for the readers to believe they have discovered such tidbits on their own than to have info-dump forced upon them in large, unpalatable chunks. This leads us to the most important rule in fiction writing:

SHOW, DON'T TELL

No fooling. This is serious. Don't **TELL** the readers what is happening or what the character is feeling, **SHOW** them.

Bad writer: Blair really felt terrible about lying to Jim.

Good writer: Oh, God. Blair put his head in his hands, tears stinging his eyes. How could he have lied to Jim?

Bad writer: Jim was so angry that Blair was afraid.

Good writer: Jim grabbed the front of Blair's shirt and slammed him into the wall. Blair fought to breathe, his heart hammering.

Draw the readers in, make them a part of what is happening. Try to avoid "While you were gone" summaries of scenes you should have shown. Don't tell them, "Earlier that day, Blair had gone to the university and run into Suspect J. Student, who had said something incriminating that Blair now waited anxiously to tell Jim." **SHOW** the scene at the university, show Blair's conversation with Suspect and his subsequent anxiety. Get them involved, give it dramatic impact, show them What's Happening Now.



CONTINUITY

Auntie Continuity (Those who pronounce "aunt" as "ant" will get the joke. Those who pronounce it properly may not.) has a demanding job. She polices plots for holes, and descriptions for unexplained changes. She is the one who notices when Blair's beautiful blue eyes suddenly become green, when the loft magically acquires an extra bathroom, and that Lefty could not possibly have done it because in Chapter Three, Jim said the guy was right-handed, and Lefty is missing that particular limb. Writers who do not have an Auntie Continuity will have to do the job themselves. Or find good beta readers to do the job for them.



POINT OF VIEW

HMG has one basic recommendation regarding point of view: **Pick one and stick to it.**

This does not mean you have to use one character's pov for the entire story. This **does** mean you have to use one character's pov for an entire scene. What is a scene? Well, technically, scene is a term used in plays, films, or television. When HMG says "scene", she means a bunch of paragraphs and dialogue strung together between breaks. In other words, a section of your story wherein the action and/or dialogue occurs without a break, and usually without a change of location.

For those who may not know what pov (point of view) is--and HMG knows there are some of you out there--she will explain. Point of view is the means by which the readers see the scene you have written. Point of view is the camera lens through which they peer. While it is possible to use an "omniscient" pov, in which the viewpoint character is the author (also known as God) and therefore knows everything that goes on in every character's head simultaneously, it is preferable to use the pov of one character per scene. This means that the readers see only

what the pov character sees, and know only what the pov character knows. This also means that the readers are placed directly into the mind of the pov character and can see his thoughts. The writer must remember that, unless he is telepathic, the pov character cannot hear the thoughts of another character; and that, unless he is gazing into a mirror, the pov character cannot see himself. Switching back and forth from one character's head to another as the scene progresses is confusing to the readers. **Don't do it.** Oh, and don't do the mirror thing, either, it's a dreadful cliché. If you need to describe how the character looks, use someone else's pov in the next scene or rethink whose pov you want to use in the current one.

Bad: Blair looked at Jim, wondering what was going on in his partner's head. Jim glared at him and he blushed, his blue eyes looking away. Was Jim mad at him?

Worse: Blair wondered what was going on in Jim's head. Jim glared at Blair, and the kid blushed, his blue eyes looking away. Was Jim mad at him?

Good (Blair's pov): Blair wondered what was going on in Jim's head. Jim glared at him, and he looked away, his face burning. Was Jim mad at him?

Good (Jim's pov): Blair was giving him the puppy-dog gaze again. Forget it, Sandburg, you're not getting out of this one that easily. Jim glared at him, and the kid blushed, blue eyes sliding away.

Final note. Unless you are using the omniscient pov, **never** use any variation of "Little did he know". This includes, "He would soon wish." If the pov character doesn't know it, right now, **you can't say it.** And if you can't find some other way to build suspense, HMG will whap your knuckles with a ruler.



TENSE PERSONS

Two basic rules together:

1. Stories are best written in the past tense. Scripts are written in the present tense. If you are writing a script, do it that way and you will be fine. **Stories** written in the present tense almost never work. Use the past tense. **Use it all the time. No arguments.**

2. Stories are best written in either 3rd or 1st person.

HMG has yet to see this in TS fan fiction, but occasionally, a writer will take it into her head to write a story in the second person. This is a strange and terrible thing. Never, ever do it. Use third person, "he, she, it" or first person, "I". It is possible to mix the two, if you draw clear lines between scenes using first person and scenes

using third, but it is not easy and often looks badly put together. HMG does not recommend it.



DIALOGUE

Ah, dialogue. Sit back and relax, this will take a while.

1. Know your characters. If you have invented your own characters, you may have them speak any way you like, as long as it sounds natural for the time and place in which they exist. If you are using someone else's characters, take care to use them properly. Study them. Learn their speech patterns. If you are writing a contemporary story, the characters will use contractions when they speak. Listen.

Bad: "Jim, you are not communicating effectively," Blair said. "I cannot comprehend your meaning."

Good: "Jim, man, you're not making any sense," Blair said. "I can't understand what you're talking about."

2. Every time someone different speaks, start a new paragraph.

Bad: "Jim, are you sure?" Blair asked. "Yeah, I'm sure." "Really?" "Yes, Sandburg, really."

Good:

"Jim, are you sure?" Blair asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Really?"

"Yes, Sandburg, really."

(HMG understands that sometimes html formatting does strange things to paragraph breaks, and forgives writers for problems over which they have no control.)

3. Make sure the readers know who is talking. But don't overdo it. If only two people are talking, you need only identify them occasionally, so the readers can keep them straight. If more than two people are talking, you need to tell the readers who is saying what when. Examples:

Two people:

"Jim, I don't get it," Blair said.

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Don't get what, Chief?"

"This case, man. It doesn't make any sense."

"Here it comes. Sandburg, what part of 'case closed' don't you understand?"

Three people:

"I don't get it," Blair said.

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Don't get what, Chief?"

"This case, man. It doesn't make any sense."

"Here it comes," Simon groaned. "Sandburg, what part of 'case closed' don't you understand?"

4. "Said" is a perfectly good word. It tells the readers what they need to know. It is not necessary to rack your brain trying to find a substitute for "said", or for "asked". It is not even necessary to use "said", except to tell the readers who is speaking (see 3), or to provide a pause between dialogue. Use words other than "said" **only** when you find it necessary to describe to the readers **how** the words are being spoken because the dialogue itself does not make that clear. And please remember, if you must use "replied", that your character can only reply if he is answering a question. Examples:

"Don't do that," Blair said.

"Don't do that," Blair pleaded.

"Don't do that," Blair ordered.

"Don't do that!" Blair screamed.

Okay, HMG cheated with the exclamation point. But that leads us to...

5. Punctuate, punctuate, punctuate. Here's how, in six easy lessons.

A. When you describe how the dialogue is spoken, that description is part of the same sentence as the dialogue. When the description comes after the dialogue, end the dialogue with a comma, and put a period after the description. When the description comes before, put a comma after the description.

Bad: "I don't want to." Blair said.

And Blair said. "I don't want to."

Good: "I don't want to," Blair said. **Or** Blair said, "I don't want to."

Good 2: "Blair, you are the most beautiful man I have ever seen," she said. (**Notice "she" is not capitalized here, because it is part of the same sentence as the dialogue.**)

B. If the dialogue is a question or an exclamation, the same rule applies to the description.

Example: "Leave me alone!" Blair screamed.

Or Blair screamed, "Leave me alone!"

Example 2: "What are you doing?" he asked.

Or He asked, "What are you doing?"

C. If what comes before, after, or between the dialogue is not a description of how the words are spoken, it must be treated as a separate sentence, and the first word must be capitalized.

Bad: "You can't do that," Jim walked away from her.

Good: "You can't do that." Jim walked away from her.

Or "You can't do that," Jim said, walking away from her.

Bad: "I like that," the anthropologist smiled, "It feels good."

Good: "I like that." The anthropologist smiled. "It feels good."

Good 2: "What is that?" She peered into the box, and screamed, "Oh, my God!"

Or (since it should be obvious from the dialogue how she is saying it) "What is that?" She peered into the box. "Oh, my God!"

D. Don't overuse exclamation points! Never, ever do this! If you do it too often, the readers will cease to become excited by them! Use them only when you have to! And **never** use more than one!!!

This also applies to using **bold**, *italics*, or underlining for emphasis. Too much, and they no longer mean anything.

E. Dashes and ellipses. Ellipses are used when the dialogue is trailing off. If the dialogue trails off, then picks up again, use three periods. If the dialogue trails off without an end, use four periods. Dashes are used when there is an interruption, or a hesitation. Of course, ellipses can also be used for hesitation, so...well.... What HMG usually does is think of ellipses as "soft" hesitation and dashes as "hard". If that makes any sense....

Example: "But, Jim," Blair said, "I really thought you should know about...." Oh, what was the use? Jim wasn't listening.

Example 2: "Jim, I--I can't." Blair looked away.

Example 3: "Jim, look out! It's--"

As with exclamation points, be careful not to overuse dashes or ellipses. Most of the time, your characters should be able to finish their sentences.

F. If you break your dialogue in the middle of a sentence, do not capitalize the first word when you resume.

Example: "The problem," Jim said, "is that we don't know her."

Until recently, HMG herself was ignorant of this rule. As she forgives herself, so she forgives others for their lapses. She is trying very hard to remember this one.

Internal Dialogue: This is what you have when your character talks to himself in his head. There are various acceptable ways to indicate internal dialogue. The most common is italics.

Example: *Why am I so stupid?* Blair thought. *How could I have told Ellison he was a throwback to pre-civilized man?*

Example 2: *Why am I so stupid?* Blair shoved his hair back. *How could I have told Ellison he was a throwback to pre-civilized man?*

You can also use quotation marks, either double or single.

Example: "Brilliant, Sandburg," Blair thought. "You just drove your dissertation subject out of your life in under five minutes."

Example 2: 'Sandburg.' A wicked grin spread across Blair's features. 'It's payback time.'

Using quotation marks requires treating the internal dialogue as though it were spoken out loud, with the same rules of punctuation and capitalization, and the ubiquitous "he thought" generally inserted somewhere in order to make it clear to your readers that the character is not, in fact, speaking aloud. Italics do not necessarily require "he thought", and can be intermingled with non-italicized actions, as shown.

It is not necessary to use any of the above to indicate internal dialogue. Quotation marks can be confusing, and the overuse of italics becomes not only annoying, but meaningless. Also, in these modern times, stories in html or e-mail often lose their italics (not to mention bolding, underlining, or any other fine and fancy indications of emphasis you may use). It is perfectly possible to indicate internal dialogue simply by changing tense, by wording the internal dialogue as you would spoken dialogue, or by changing from third to first (or second) person.

Example: Why am I so stupid? Blair shoved his hair back. How could I have told Jim he was a throwback to pre-civilized man?

Example 2: Why was he such an idiot? How could he have done that? Man, I've had it, now. Ellison's never

gonna work with me. I'll be lucky if he doesn't rip my head off right here.

Example 3: God, he was so stupid! First, he lied to get Ellison in here, then he told him he was some kind of cave man. You idiot, Sandburg. You've completely blown it. Now what are you gonna do?



NAMES, PRONOUNS, DESCRIPTIVE PHRASES

As with "said", names are perfectly acceptable words. They are useful, as they allow the readers to know who you are talking about. It is not necessary to find new and wonderful descriptive phrases to identify your characters at every turn. Generally, their names do the job.

Pronouns can be confusing, especially if everyone you are talking about is of the same gender. If the pronouns are not enough, use the characters' names to identify them. If the sentence is still confusing, rewrite it. If this is not possible, then try a short descriptive phrase, but only as a last resort. The rule is clarity above all else. If the readers can follow the action, you are doing your job as a writer.

Bad: He grabbed his arm and slapped him. He struggled to raise his bound hands.

Good: Lash grabbed Blair's arm and slapped him. Blair struggled to raise his bound hands.

Bad: He grabbed his arm, lifted his hand, and slapped him.

Good (Lash's pov): Lash grabbed Blair's arm, lifted his hand, and slapped the struggling man.

Good 2 (Blair's pov): Lifting his hand, Lash grabbed Blair's arm and slapped him.

Bad: He grabbed his arm and slapped him. Lifting his hair away from his neck, he gagged him.

Silly: Lash grabbed Blair's arm and slapped him. Lifting Blair's hair away from Blair's neck, Lash gagged Blair.

Good (Lash's pov): Lash grabbed Blair's arm and slapped him. Lifting the brown curls away from Blair's neck, he gagged the struggling man.

Good 2 (Blair's pov): Lash grabbed Blair's arm and slapped him. Lifting the hair away from Blair's neck, Lash gagged him.

Why are the first examples from Lash's point of view? Because Blair would not think of himself as "the struggling man", now, would he?



FRAGMENTS

As a general rule, sentence fragments are bad things. They are acceptable in dialogue, because people do not always speak in complete sentences. To be absolutely correct, however, fragments should not appear in your narrative.

That said, HMG is going out on a personal limb in favor of style over rules. In HMG's personal opinion, sentence fragments, **when employed judiciously**, are useful dramatic devices. Please note that HMG specified when employed judiciously. By this, she means that sentence fragments should not be used every chance the writer gets, nor should they be an excuse for sloppy writing. They should not be used by any writer who has not proven a thorough knowledge of the rules of grammar. However, HMG will provide two examples, and allow you to decide which you prefer.

Example 1: Blair gazed down at the bomb. Oh, God, he had to defuse it himself. How? He didn't know anything about bombs. Taggert spoke in his ear, and he lifted the cover off, slowly, carefully, praying he wouldn't set it off.

Example 2: Blair gazed down at the bomb. Oh, God. He had to defuse it himself. How? He didn't know anything about bombs. Taggert spoke in his ear, and he lifted the cover off. Slowly. Carefully. Praying he wouldn't set it off.



SPELLING

Repeat after HMG: **Spelling counts**

It does, too. Incorrect spelling makes reading your story more difficult. It also gives the impression that you don't care enough about your writing to do the most rudimentary checking. If you don't care about your story, why should your readers?

Spellcheck. Make corrections. Spellcheck again. Then read the story to find all those words the spellchecker didn't catch. The spellchecker doesn't know the difference between "there", "they're", and "their", but you do, right? Use a dictionary. When you're done, have someone beta read for you. Someone who knows at least as much as you do about spelling. Okay? Good.



PLURALS, NUMBERS, AND APOSTROPHES

Plurals are, like, really easy to make, dude. Mostly, you just add an "s" to the end of the word. Sometimes, it's "es", but mostly, it's just "s".

Some people think that they have to add apostrophes when pluralizing, especially when pluralizing names. This is not true. To make a name plural, just add that "s" or "es". Like so:

Jim--Jims: How many Jims are there, anyway?

Sandburg--Sandburgs: Blair and Naomi are the only Sandburgs we know.

Banks--Bankses: Simon comes from a long line of Bankses.

The only time you need to use an apostrophe to make a plural is with numbers, and only in numerical form, not written out: 80's, 90's, 100's

You can use apostrophes, or not, with initials or acronyms: How many MA's does Sandburg have?

Speaking of numbers, they should, for the most part, be written out in words.

Bad: 30, 6, 123

Good: thirty, six, one hundred twenty-three

Unless they are dates or addresses: Blair was born in 1969. He lives at 852 Prospect.



PUNCTUATION

"Oh, no!" you cry. "Not that!" Yes, that. The dreaded punctuation section. Trust HMG, it's for your own good.

Periods and exclamation marks: You all know what these are for. They both end sentences, but one gets more excited about it than the other.

Question marks: Question marks end questions. This applies to any sentence that begins with who, what, where, why, or how, as well as many others. Some of you will scoff, but HMG has seen this done incorrectly many times. Correct examples:

Why don't you and Sandburg take the rest of the day off?

Chief, how about we catch a movie?

Commas: Commas are good. Commas give us little pauses, not too long, not too short, and help to make things clear, particularly in long sentences, which can be

confusing, especially if they go on at length because the writer doesn't know when to stop.

Bad: Jim preferred Jack Kerouac books movies and standing on his head while Blair meditated whenever possible.

Good: Jim preferred Jack Kerouac, books, movies, and standing on his head while Blair meditated, whenever possible.

Good 2: Jim preferred Jack Kerouac books, movies, and standing on his head, while Blair meditated whenever possible.

Commas are also used to isolate clauses within a sentence. If you do this, you must use a comma at the beginning and at the end of the isolated clause.

Example: Jim knew, somewhere in the depths of his soul, that he could never have survived this long without Blair at his side.

Dashes: Dashes can also be used for this purpose.

Example: Blair knew--he ought to know by now--that Jim would save his life no matter what the cost.

Semi-colons: Semi-colons are more aggressive commas. They make us stop for a slightly longer time. They are also useful for separating lists of things to make them less confusing.

Example: Blair was Jim's backup; he was supposed to watch his back.

Example 2: Blair's favorite things were his bracelet, handmade by the Kombai; his long-sleeved, red Henley shirt; and his worn, brown leather backpack.

Colons: Colons are used before lists, when you want a full stop to take a breath before beginning the list.

Example: This is also a use for a colon, but not the one HMG just told you about.

Example 2: This is what I want: a helicopter, ten million dollars, and an anthropologist.



COMMON ERRORS

Most of these are two (or more) words which have been confused with each other regularly. HMG will try to put them in alphabetical order, by the first word in the pair.

affect/effect: This is a toughie. Many people find these two words confusing. HMG can only ask you to remember

that when something affects you, it has an effect. (One can also effect change, but that is a much less common usage.)

Example: The ear flushing affected Jim's hearing. This had an unfortunate effect on his temper. One of the side-effects was increased irritability.

all ready/already: The first means that everyone or everything is ready; the second means "so soon" or "now".

Example: We're all ready to go, Simon. Is it time already?

all right: There is no other word here. All right is two words. It is never one word. Never. No matter what you may see elsewhere. All right?

all too: It's all too easy to use this expression all too often. HMG recommends saving it for special occasions; otherwise, it becomes all too annoying. Especially when one could as easily have said: It's easy to use this expression too often. HMG recommends saving it for special occasions; otherwise, it becomes annoying.

any more/anymore: Any more means some more; anymore is one word meaning now, nowadays, or any longer, and is used negatively. You wouldn't say, "Do you want somemore?", would you? Of course not. ("Do you want s'mores?" is another question altogether.)

Example: "Joel, do you want any more ostrich chili?" "I've had three bowls, Blair, I don't think I can eat any more."

Example 2: Blair doesn't live in the warehouse anymore. I don't think I should eat chili anymore; it upsets my stomach.

any way/anyway/anyways: Is there any way that HMG can explain this to you so that you will understand? Any way at all? No? Well, I tried, anyway. Anyway, I think you should look this up on your own. By the way, there's no such word as "anyways". So, anyway, the anthropologist said....

bona fide: Not bonified, or bonafied, or any other misspelling.

bound and determined: Not bounden determined.

breath/breathe: A breath is what you take; breathe is what you do. Breath is a noun, breathe is a verb.

Not: "Breath, Sandburg! Breath!"

But: "Breathe, Sandburg! Breathe!"

Got it?

complement/compliment: Complement means to balance, contrast, or offset. Compliment means to praise or flatter.

Example: Molly complimented Blair on how well his blue shirt complemented his eyes.

defuse/diffuse: Defuse is what Taggart does to a bomb. Diffuse is to spread out or disperse.

Example: Blair knew he had to defuse the bomb, or it would blow up and his molecules would diffuse in the air.

discomfit/discomfort: Discomfit is what you do, a verb; discomfort is what you feel, a noun.

Example: Jim knew having to testify would discomfit Blair. Blair was discomfited by the thought.

Example: Blair's discomfort was obvious to Jim. Blair had been tied up, gagged, and hit in the head. He had seldom known such discomfort.

disburse/disperse: Disburse means to pay out; disperse means to scatter.

Example: Simon disbursed the funds from petty cash to a group of officers. When he was done, the group dispersed.

discreet/discrete: To be discreet is to be careful about what you say or do. To be discrete is to be separate and distinct from something else.

Example: Blair knew he had to be discreet about Jim's sentinel abilities. He maintained two discrete careers: police observer and anthropologist.

drag/drug: HMG is shocked--shocked!--by the misuse of these words. A drug is a chemical. To drug someone is to administer a chemical. The past tense of drag is **dragged**. It is not now, nor has it ever been, "drug". Use it and die.

NEVER: Jim drug Blair's unconscious form across the floor.

ALWAYS: Jim dragged Blair's unconscious form across the floor.

either/neither: Just a reminder: it's either/or and neither/nor. They may not be mixed at will.

Used alone, either and neither are always singular. If in doubt, pretend a "one" is in the sentence. Either and neither used with or and nor gets complicated. If both subjects are singular, the verb is singular. If both subjects are plural, the verb is plural. If one subject is singular and one is plural, it depends on which one is closer to the verb. Proximity rules. Really. HMG told you it was complicated.

Examples: Either (one) was fond of Blair. Neither has his attention.

Example 2: Neither Jim nor Blair was able to persuade Simon to pay for a new truck.

Example 3: Neither detectives nor anthropologists were able to determine the origin of the dart.

Example 4: Neither co-eds nor his dissertation means as much to Blair as Jim does.

Example 5: Either HMG or her readers understand this now. With luck, we all do.

farther/further: Another confusing one. Farther refers to distance, further covers everything else.

Example: Blair was exhausted and couldn't go any farther. Further research proved that Jim had a genetic advantage. Jim wouldn't discuss it any further.

formally/formerly: Formally means in a formal manner, usually having something to do with ceremonies, rituals, and that sort of thing. Formerly means used to be.

Example: Blair was formally dressed, in a top hat and tails.

Example 2: Jim was formerly in Vice; now, he works in Major Crimes.

gonna/gotta/wanna: These contractions of "going to", "got to", and "want to" may be used, sparingly, in dialogue. Sparingly, do you hear? Don't overdo, or your characters will sound uneducated. And we wouldn't want that, now, would we?

gorilla/guerilla: A gorilla is a large ape. A guerilla is a military fighter whose tactics are based on secrecy.

Example: Under Jim's leadership, the Chopec became expert guerilla fighters. Under King Kong's leadership, the gorillas broke out of the zoo and took over New York.

hanged/hung: People who are executed by means of suspension with a rope around the neck are hanged. Pictures, and men who have large generative organs, are hung. Please do not confuse the two. HMG will not give you an example; don't ask again.

impact: Impact is a noun, not a verb. One does not impact something, one has an impact.

its/it's/its': Its is the possessive pronoun, "belonging to it". It's is a contraction of "it is" or "it has". Its is just like hers, yours, and ours. It takes no apostrophe. Its' is just silly. The plural of it is "they".

Example: The panther's in a bad mood. It's a good thing Jim didn't try to take its dinner away. It's got an antelope and it's very protective of its food.

lead/led: The past tense of lead--as in guide or go in front- is led. Pay no attention to the past tense of "read"; it doesn't work the same way.

Example: As Jim's Spiritual Guide, Blair can lead him anywhere he wants. This has often led to trouble.

lets/let's: Lets means allows. Let's is a contraction of "let us".

Example: Hey, Jim, let's take off and go to the game this afternoon. Only if Simon lets us, Chief.

lie/lay: This one confuses a lot of people. A subject lies; one lays an object down. (Chickens and sexual acts do not count.) However, the past tense of lie is lay, just to make things difficult.

Examples: Lie down, Blair. Blair laid his backpack on the table and lay down on his bed. Lying there, Blair thought about a time when he had lain in one position for three days, with only his teddy bear lying next to him. He lay there contemplating the meaning of life. Sometimes, Blair lays his papers on the floor, but Jim doesn't like it. He lies on the couch a lot, and he doesn't like to see anything lying on the floor.

literally: A friend of HMG's said it best: Literally means that what you are describing is not a metaphor, but is exactly what happened. It is not a term implying extreme emphasis. If someone's head "literally exploded", you are not saying he was particularly upset, or had an extremely bad emotional reaction or a severe headache. You are saying there was brain goo and bone shrapnel splattering the walls.

loose/lose: Something that is loose is not fastened tightly. To lose something is to misplace it.

Example: Simon, that button on your cuff is loose. Better sew it, or you might lose it. You know how losing buttons makes you lose your head.

nauseated/nauseous: HMG is positively nauseated by the number of writers who refer to their characters as being nauseous. If Blair is feeling ill, he is nauseated. If he is nauseous, he makes other people ill. HMG doesn't want to discuss this any longer.

obfuscate: Contrary to popular belief, this does not mean "to lie". It means "to muddle, confuse, or bewilder". So, if Blair is obfuscating, he is not lying, he is deliberately confusing the issue.

of: A perfectly nice little word, which sometimes sneaks into places where it does not belong, such as between an adjective and a noun.

Bad: How big of a mistake was it? How long of a wait will it be?

Good: How big a mistake was it? How long a wait will it be?

Or after such words as could, should, and would. It is **not** could of, should of, would of, it only **sounds** like that when people don't enunciate properly. What you are actually hearing is could've, should've, would've, which are contractions of could have, should have, and would have. For the proper use of "would have", see **would**.

overdo/overdue: To overdo is to do too much; overdue means late.

Example: Don't overdo the studying, Sandburg. You know how tired you get if you overdo it. Besides, I thought those books were overdue at the library. Simon's helicopter is overdue.

phase/faze: One goes through a phase. If something doesn't bother one, one is not fazed.

Example: Daryl's going through a phase, but Simon doesn't let it faze him.

precede/proceed: To precede is to go before. To proceed is to continue, or to begin and then continue.

Example: Jim preceded Blair through the door, and proceeded to interrogate the suspect.

rack/wrack: A rack is a torture device. Something that is racked is tortured, twisted, or strained. Wrack is debris from a shipwreck. Something that is wracked is destroyed.

Example: Blair racked his brain. He was racked with guilt after the nerve-racking shootout.

revere/reverie: To revere is to hold something in high esteem, awe, or fear; reverie is daydreaming.

Example: All the detectives in Major Crimes revere Jim for his incredible arrest record.

Example 2: Blair was in a reverie, his mind filled with images of Chris, Sam, and Molly.

sight/site: A sight is something you see: a view, a spectacle, a thing worth seeing. A site is a location, the place where something is or something happened.

Example: Blair couldn't wait to see the sights of Peru. He was especially interested in visiting the site of the Chopec village Jim had told him about. He had found a site on the web with pictures, but he wanted to see for himself, even though he didn't have Jim's sentinel sight. He wished he

had seen Jim when he lived among the Chopec. What a sight that would have been!

sneak/snuck: The past tense of sneak is sneaked. There is no such word as "snuck". Yes, people use it, and HMG will allow you to get away with it in dialogue, if you must. But you may not use it in narrative.

Example: Jim sneaked to the refrigerator, hoping to get the last of the Cherry Garcia without waking Blair. He had sneaked a spoonful earlier, but he wanted it all.

straight/strait: HMG will quote her friend again: Straight means without bend or curvature. It also means "not gay", as in heterosexual. Strait refers to something narrow, tight, or constrictive. Someone in bad circumstances is in dire straits. An anthropologist getting by on grants is in financially straitened circumstances. Someone old-fashioned morally or ethically is strait-laced. And psychiatric patients in need of restraint are confined in straitjackets.

suddenly: Bad word. Bad, bad word. Don't use it. Find some other way to indicate something that happens abruptly or without warning.

Bad: Blair crept through the old house. Suddenly, he heard boards creak. He was suddenly aware that he was not alone. Suddenly, a hand grabbed him.

Good: Blair crept through the old house. Above him, boards creaked. His head jerked up. Oh, God, he wasn't alone. A hand gripped his arm, yanking him back.

suicidal assignation attempts: Malaprops are caused when you use an incorrect word that sounds like the word you should have used. They are often unintentionally hilarious, and can ruin the mood of your story. With apologies to whoever wrote this, HMG has appropriated her favorite recent example as an identifier of such malapropisms.

The author of the above phrase was not talking about extremely dangerous romantic liaisons, but about murders that would result in the deaths of the killers as well as the victims. The author meant, of course, to say "suicidal assassination attempts". This mistake occurred twice during the course of the story, escaping the attentions of at least five beta readers. HMG highly recommends the use of dictionaries. Even the best beta reader can miss things.

suppose/supposed: When you are obligated to do something, you are supposed to do it. You are not "suppose" to do it. If you "suppose", you are thinking or imagining something.

Example: What was he supposed to do now? Jim was supposed to be at the warehouse, but there was no sign of

him. Blair sighed. "Well, I suppose I can sit here and wait."

there/their/they're: There is where it is, and a lot of other things HMG won't attempt to define. Their means belonging to them. They're is a contraction of "they are".

Example: They're late. There isn't any sign of them. There they are! Where? There! Do they have their guns with them? No, they're unarmed.

thought to himself: This is another favorite. If your character is thinking, it is a given that he is thinking to himself. It is therefore not necessary to tell the readers that. Unless your character is telepathic, "he thought" will do nicely.

tiramisu: Not "tiara misu". There are no rhinestones on this particular Italian dessert.

unique: If something is unique, there is nothing else like it. It is one of a kind. You cannot say "very", "almost", or "sort of" unique. It is either unique, or it isn't.

viscous cycle: Something that is viscous is sticky, like glue or honey. The correct term is "vicious circle".

who's/whose: Who's is a contraction of "who is". Whose means belonging to who or whom.

Example: Whose dart is that? Incacha's. Who's he?

would: Would is a perfectly good word. It does not, however, belong after "if" and before "have", no matter what you may have heard. Had will do nicely.

Bad: If Jim would have asked Blair, he would have done it.

Good: If Jim had asked Blair, he would have done it.

Good, but old: Had Jim asked Blair, he would have done it.

your/you're: Your means belonging to you. You're is a contraction of "you are".

Example: Sandburg, is this your sandwich? You're not going to eat that, are you?



RESOURCES

There are many resources you can use to help you be a better writer. The most important of these is a dictionary. Any reputable dictionary will do.

For those in search of synonyms, a thesaurus is a useful tool. **Roget's** is the best known thesaurus. However, HMG

cautions against running to the thesaurus to find unusual replacements for perfectly useful, simple words. There is really no need to say "gangle-shanked" when "tall" will do.

There are numerous books that teach grammar and style. The best known are **Elements of Style** by Strunk and White, and **The Chicago Manual of Style**. A recent release, which HMG has found most useful, is **Woe Is I** by Patricia T. O'Conner. Your local bookstore or the reference section of your library should have a selection of such volumes.

This concludes Holy Mother Grammatica's lessons in good writing. Should you have any questions, HMG would be happy to answer them for you. She can be reached at the following e-mail address: holyvg@hotmail.com