

Common Issues I See When Editing

** Elliptical danglers: (Two kinds)

1) Danglers attached to the wrong noun. –Ex. “Strolling along the trail, Mt. Rushmore came into view.” The way this sentence is written, Mt. Rushmore was out taking a stroll! It should read, “As I was strolling along the trail, Mt. Rushmore came into view.”

Another Ex. “Fat and lazy, our vet says our cat needs more exercise.” Is the vet fat and lazy? The sentence should read: “Fat and lazy, our cat needs more exercise according to the vet.” Even better would be: “The vet says our cat needs more exercise because she’s fat and lazy.”

2) Danglers that are attached to the right noun but are missing a preposition in order to make sense. – Ex. “Walking to the couch, he sat down.” One can’t sit on the couch while walking to it. *After* must be added to the opening phrase for it to be possible. However, it *is* possible to do some things simultaneously, so a sentence like “Walking to the kitchen, he wondered what he wanted to eat.”

** lightening / lightning – The first one means to lighten, as in color or weight; the second is the accompaniment for thunder.

** peaked / peeked / piqued – Mountains are peaked. A child might exclaim, “No fair! You peeked!” One’s interest is piqued.

** anxious / eager – *Anxious* applies only when anxiety is involved in the wait for something—if the person waiting is afraid of what will happen or otherwise worried about it. *Eager* should be used for all other kinds of anticipation. Also, *anxious* is followed by *about* or *for* and *eager* is followed by *to*.

** blond / blonde – The first is the masculine spelling; the second is feminine.

** fiancé / fiancée – Same as above.

** fewer / less — *fewer* is for things you can count and *less* is for things you can’t count.

** effect / affect — *Affect* is a verb, and *effect* is (usually) a noun. To affect something is to change or influence it, and an effect is something that happens due to a cause.

(The rare exception is when *effect* is used as a verb to mean “adopt or bring about,” as in “to effect a change.”)

** Despite what Alanis Morissette thinks, *irony* does not mean *unfortunate events* or *coincidences*. If Alanis had sung, "Mr. Play-It-Safe was afraid to fly. So he took a train, it derailed and he died" she would have been closer to irony. But a better example is when some know-it-all rudely corrects your grammar or spelling in a Facebook post then makes a mistake in their comment. Or when somebody writes I HATE GRAFFITI on a bathroom wall.

** Shaking or nodding heads – It's not necessary to add *yes* or *no*. You can't shake your head *yes* nor nod your head *no*. In fact, when nodding, you can leave out the head altogether. All that's needed is "She nodded." As we're admonished in *The Elements of Style*, eliminate unnecessary words.

** poured / pored – The first is something liquids do; the second means to look over or examine visually.

** Names that end with the letter "s" (except historical or Biblical names such as Jesus or Ramses) are made possessive by adding an apostrophe plus "s" Ex. "James's eyes were an angry blue." or "Jess's nose was out of joint." And you never, EVER make a word that doesn't end in "s" possessive by just adding an apostrophe. NEVER.

** **Said** and **asked** are beautiful in their simplicity. They are practically invisible when reading. Our eyes recognize them and identify the speaker with zero effort. We glide right over them and KEEP READING.

But when you see that a character **retorted** or **blustered** or **hissed** or—GOD FORBID—**informed**, your brain has to pause and process those words. It's momentary, probably imperceptible, but over the course of an entire book, those pauses add up. And anytime a reader pauses, there's the chance they may stop reading and never start again.

The only exceptions are when you truly need to convey that dialogue is said in a different manner than usual, but remember that **muttered**, **mumbled** and **murmured** do not mean the same things. To mutter means to say something under your breath or to yourself. When you mumble, you speak incoherently. And murmuring is a romantic whisper.

Additionally, if someone is speaking normally and then lowers their voice, it's okay to use **whispered**. The same goes for **shouted**, **yelled** or on RARE occasions, **screamed** or **screached**. Just use these sparingly or they become distracting too.

** This one you'll see used ALL THE TIME by a lot of professional writers and speakers (like newscasters and reporters), but they are all using it incorrectly.

"Thankfully, there were no injuries in the accident."

“Thankfully, the rain came in time to save the crops.”

The *Chicago Manual of Style* says: “*Thankfully* traditionally means ‘appreciatively; gratefully; in a thankful manner.’ It is not a substitute for *thank goodness* or *fortunately*.”

Yes, I know that the CMS is not the only style manual. AP Style doesn’t mention it, but that does not mean it’s condoned. I also do not accept “common usage” as justification for incorrect usage. (See next item and watch Weird Al’s wonderful song “Word Crimes” for a perfect example of my feelings on this!)

** could care less – The correct phrase is “I **couldn’t** care less,” because it means you already care the **least amount possible**. If you *could* care less, you must care at least some. (Probably the way most of you feel about these reminders!)