Don’t write merely to be understood.
Write so you cannot possibly be misunderstood.

Robert Louis Stevenson

As Experts for Life, we in the Alabama Cooperative Extension System have much information to offer the people of Alabama. Our message covers many program areas: agriculture; forestry and natural resources; urban affairs and new nontraditional programs; family and individual well-being; economic community development; and 4-H and youth development. We can make sure that our message is clear by tuning up our writing skills and writing right.

Why is it important?

Common to all types of writing is the need for accuracy, correct spelling and grammar, and consistency. Why are these important? The answer is credibility. Inconsistency in these areas may lead your readers to believe that you are inconsistent with your content—the facts.

This publication covers some of the basic elements of writing and grammar that can help you improve any type of writing. Remember that it is not a shame not to know how to spell a word or what usage is correct. It is a shame not to be willing to look it up. Keep reference books and dictionaries handy, and use them often. Your writing will reflect your careful attention.

Style

The style guide for Extension’s numbered publications is *The Chicago Manual of Style*. For news releases and other material from the News and Public Affairs staff, we use *The Associated Press Stylebook*. Valuable tools for you include a good dictionary; we recommend *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* and its desk version, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

Also keep on your desk a good writing handbook such as *The Rhinehart Handbook for Writers* or *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers*.

How to Sharpen Your Writing

- Keep your reader in mind.
- Determine your purpose.
- Focus on your idea.
- Don’t use jargon.
- Avoid long sentences and long paragraphs, especially when writing for the Web.
- Break long thoughts into shorter segments.
- Prune excess words.
- Use the active voice.
- Express, don’t impress.
- Remember the five *w’s* and the *h*: who, what, when, why, where, how.
- Don’t editorialize.
- Avoid intensifiers such as *very, really, truly*.
- Check and double check your facts.
- Ask yourself: Is there a better way to say this?
- Be specific. Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and a lightening bug.”
- Choose concrete words, not generalizations. They make your writing more meaningful and your meaning more specific:
  - Example of general: *The workman placed his tools into a big container.*
  - Example of concrete: *The plumber placed two monkey wrenches, a blowtorch, and a pipe threader into a large steel toolbox.*
- Avoid dangling modifiers.
Example of dangling construction: Climbing the mountain, the town came into view.
(The town appears to be performing the action of climbing the mountain.)

Example of correct construction: Climbing the mountain, we saw the town come into view.

- Use language appropriate to the situation.
- Don’t repeat a word or words unnecessarily.

Too wordy: One of the clerk’s responsibilities is the compiling of time and attendance reports. These time and attendance reports go to the branch chief, who verifies that the information on each time and attendance report is accurate and complete. (38 words)

Better: One of the clerk’s responsibilities is to compile time and attendance reports. These go to the branch chief, who verifies them for accuracy and completeness. (25 words)

- Get your ducks in a row by making similar elements parallel. Items in a sequence must have the same grammatical construction.

Consider the following instructions on baking a good cake:

1. Sift flour
2. Cream sugar and eggs
3. Add vanilla
4. A golden brown topping

Make each step a verb phrase and see how much easier it is to follow:

1. Sift flour
2. Cream sugar and eggs
3. Add vanilla
4. Bake until golden brown

- Authorization to authorize
- Performance to perform
- Documentation to document
- Realization to realize

- Be aware of subject-verb agreement: singular subjects require singular verbs, and plural subjects require plural verbs. It sounds simple but in practice can be tricky. Sometimes it is hard to decide whether a subject is singular or not. Keep a reference guide handy.

A few examples:

- Subjects joined by and always take a plural verb: The teacher and the student enjoy afternoon breaks.
- Subjects preceded by each or every are always singular: Every reporter is to be given a press pass.

In inverted sentences, the subject follows the verb, but the same rules apply: Included in this report are stories, statistics, and examples.

Test agreement by putting the subject before the verb: Stories, statistics, and examples are included in this report.

Punctuation

The purpose of punctuation is to make the author’s meaning clear. Proper punctuation helps readers anticipate, link, separate, stress, emphasize, and characterize ideas. Misuse of punctuation can distort meaning.

Common uses of commas include the following:

- In a series
- Between independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction
- After introductory prepositional phrases, verbals, or dependent clauses.
- With coordinate conjunctions
- Around transitional expressions
- With dates
- With city and state
- With numbers
- With direct quotations
Semicolons:
- Between independent clauses
- Between items in a series that contain commas

Colons:
- Point ahead and separate
- Must be preceded by a full independent clause
  Examples of mistakes with colons are as follows:
  - Items on the menu include: roast beef, pork, and chicken.
  - The book includes chapters on: mountain climbing and hiking
  - We saw many trees including: maples, oaks, and elms.

Capitalization
We use capital letters to signal the beginning of a sentence and to designate proper names and official titles, according to *The Rhinehart Handbook for Writers*. Authorities disagree and conventions change. Use a standard, up-to-date dictionary or handbook.

Capitalize the following:
- First word of a complete sentence
- A formal statement after a colon
- Items in a list
- Proper names and proper adjectives
- Titles that precede names. Don't capitalize titles that are primarily occupational descriptions.

Proofreading
Why bother?
"Every time a reader finds even a tiny mistake, the author looks slightly less in control."
*Longman's Handbook for Writers and Readers*

Readers who stumble over inconsistencies in style and format as well as errors in grammar and spelling may conclude that the author is inconsistent and, therefore, less trustworthy with the facts in the content of the material. Catching errors can also save money and embarrassment.

**Proofreading Tips:**
- Focus on each word.
- Read your information aloud.
- Read backward (from right to left).
- Check numbers in lists.
- Don’t forget to check headlines and subheads.
- Check Web sites to be sure they are still available.
- Correct all errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Pay special attention to names, addresses, and figures.
- Check definitions and quotes.
- Don’t proofread on the computer. Print out the document, and read the hard copy.
- Let others read your material.

**Avoid Sexist, Derogatory, and Discriminatory Language**
- Avoid demeaning characterizations.
- Avoid gender-stereotyping roles and occupations.
- Beware of male terms used generically.

**Spell Checkers: Friends or Foes?**
- Realize that they can alert you to potential errors.
- Don’t use them blindly.
- Understand how they work.
- Consider carefully before choosing offered alternatives.

**Advantages of Computerized Dictionaries**
- Less bulky
- Are updated frequently
- Can be personalized

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability. New Dec 2007, EX-76A

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