A BREVIARY OF ENGLISH USAGE

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Seventh Edition
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TABLE OF SYMBOLS

When an essay is returned, several of the preceding symbols will often appear in the left-hand margins next to the line or lines in which the corresponding errors of usage have occurred. Such errors may be grammatical, logical, or rhetorical. The symbols are thus keys to improvement in all parts of the *Trivium*. Two additional symbols are used in the instructor's commentary, usually found in the right-hand margins: the letter *q* (from the Latin *quod)* is an abbreviation for "which"; and the Greek letter *theta* (θ) signifies "the".

AGREEMENT

The parts of a sentence must correspond to one another both logically and grammatically. The logic of a sentence is a matter of CONGRUENCE (described below). Grammatical correspondences concern the agreement or harmony of one's forms. Common errors of agreement include 1) shifts in number between nouns or pronouns and the verbs they govern and 2) shifts in number between pronouns and their antecedents (often under pressure from the partisans of so-called inclusive language).

Examples of Error:
1. Each of the students write well.
2. Every student must strive to develop their mind.

Corrections:
1. Each of the students writes well.
2. Every student must strive to develop his mind.

CASE

Problems with case occur most frequently 1) with the relative pronouns "who" and "whom", 2) in the use of personal pronouns, 3) when indicating possession, and 4) in the use of gerunds.

1. The relative "who" (and its compounds "whoever" and "whosoever") is either the subject of the state of being or the performer of the action indicated by the main verb in a relative clause; "whom" ("whomever", "whomsoever") is always the object or receiver of that action, or the object of a preposition. The case of the relative pronoun is determined by its use in its own clause, not by its antecedent.

    Examples of Error:
    A. I know who you mean.
    B. I can guess whom he thinks is guilty.
    C. I saw who you got the book from.
    D. I shall give this umbrella to whomever needs it.
    E. "Whom do men say that I am?" (Mk 8:27, KJV).

    Corrections:
    A. I know whom you mean.
        "Whom" is the object of the verb "mean".
    B. I know who he thinks is guilty.
        The relative pronoun is the subject of "is guilty", not the object of "he thinks", and it must therefore be "who"; the object of "he thinks" is the entire clause "who is guilty".)

C. I know whom you got the book from.
   "Whom" is the object of the preposition "from".
D. I shall give this umbrella to whoever needs it.
   "Whoever" is the subject of the verb "needs"; the relative clause as a whole is the object of the preposition "to".
E. "Who do men say that I am?" (Mk 8:27, RSV).
   "Who", a predicate nominative, complements "I" in the clause "who am I?".

2. First and third person, singular and plural personal pronouns change form to indicate the nominative (subjective) and accusative (objective) cases. The nominative case (I, he, she, we, they) must be used whenever the pronoun is the subject of a state of being or the performer of an action; the accusative case (me, him, her, us, them) must be used whenever the pronoun is the object or receiver of the action signified by a verb, or the object of a preposition.

   Examples of Error:
   A. I looked, and it was him.
   B. Between you and I, this is a secret.

   Corrections:
   A. I looked, and it was he.
      "He" is a predicate nominative; if "he was it", then "it was he".
   B. Between you and me, this is a secret.
      "Me" is an object of the preposition "between".

3. The genitive, or possessive, case is normally indicated either by using the preposition "of" (*e.g.*, The Gospel of John) or by adding an apostrophe and the letter "s" to singular nouns (*e.g.*, The Lord's Prayer) and an apostrophe to plural nouns ending in "s" (*e.g.*, The Apostles' Fast).

4. The subject of an English gerund is always in the genitive case. Important distinctions between gerunds (verbal nouns ending in "-ing") and certain participles (verbal adjectives) ending in "-ing", otherwise identical in form, can be preserved only by using the genitive. Compare the following:

   Father does not approve of the coach's teaching sex education.
   "Coach's", a possessive and a gerund subject, casts the emphasis on "teaching", a gerund; the object of Father's disapproval is the teaching of this subject, not the coach.

Father does not approve of the coach teaching sex education.
In this case, "teaching", a participle, functions not as a noun but as an adjective; it describes the coach whom Father disapproves of. The teaching of sex education is not necessarily the issue here; the coach is the problem.

CONGRUENCE

Incongruities occur when two or more words are combined in such a way as to obscure or destroy their logical or idiomatic relationship. Such errors include 1) mixed metaphors, 2) comparison of unlike objects, 3) incomplete comparisons, 4) confusion of categories (especially in definitions), and unwarranted shifts in 5) person, 6) tense, or 7) mood. Note that the following examples are all grammatically sound; look for conceptual inconsistencies, not solecisms:

Examples of Error:
1. The final round of legislation confronted a torrent of criticism.
    This is nasty weather for a boxing match.
2. Unlike the times of Luther, when any thought challenging the church was heresy, philosophers now refute the existence of God with sound arguments.
    Philosophers are neither unlike nor like "the times", whether their arguments seem sound or not.
3. Marx's views are different.
    Different from what? This sentence would be acceptable only in a context clearly stating the other views from which those of Marx differ. "Different" must never be used as a synonym for "unusual".
4. I hope to become a doctor, a type of work demanding long training.
    A doctor is not "a type of work".
5. It is hard, once one has made a decision, to maintain your resolve.
    Change either the third person "one" to second person "you" or the second person "your" to third person "one's" or "his".
6. Francis Bacon thinks that the ancient Greeks were wrong; he argued thus.
    The present tense "argues" belongs with "thinks", or the past tense "thought" with "argued".
7. Children would be produced in batches by a process that will yield thousands of babies from one fertilized egg; as a result, individuality cannot exist.
    The writer shifts from the subjunctive "would" to the indicatives "will" and "cannot"; "will" should be changed to "would" and "cannot" to "could not".

COLORLESS LANGUAGE

Using flaccid or colorless language, such as "It is interesting to observe" or "The *Iliad* is a very important book", is a sure way to bore readers. A

writer should never express only his estimation of a subject, but also his reasons for the estimation. Why is "it" interesting? What makes the *Iliad* so "important"? While there is no easy formula, it is helpful to be familiar with the etymologies of the words one uses. Meaning is more than denotation; words carry with them resonances of their semantic past. To know this past is to understand the subtle shades of significance which give force and depth to one's style.

IDIOM
Watch for constructions that are not natural in English, even though they may be grammatically correct—the kind of phrases typically used by people whose native tongue is not English and who have not yet mastered the language. Careless use of prepositions often results in a violation of idiom. For instance, though a Greek might say that "the ship was launched from the seventh hour", good English requires the preposition "at".

JARGON
The opposite of COLORLESS LANGUAGE (above), jargon is pretentious or ostentatious diction, or technical terminology used out of context. Variety and color should go hand in hand with simplicity. If a thought can be expressed more plainly, it should be. Be wary of compounds with the prefix "self-" or the suffix "-wise" and of trying to sound scientific. Words like "area", "factor", "aspect", "interface", and "facet" are common and conspicuous signs of jargon. Fowler (*The King's English*) is helpful:

> Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
> Prefer the concrete word to the abstract.
> Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
> Prefer the short word to the long.
> Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

Example of Error:
Manifested in my presence are the requisite factors for goal-oriented transition, self-authenticating discourse, and actualized bio-energy potentials.

Correction:
"I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

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LITERACY

The advice of C. S. Lewis is of great value: know exactly what you want to say, and say exactly that. The beauty and power of the language can be maintained only by a writer who is sensitive to distinctions between similar-sounding or similarly spelled words (*e.g.*, flaunt, flout; deprecate, depreciate; ingenious, ingenuous; mitigate, militate) and between words or phrases that express related, but usefully distinguishable, ideas (*e.g.*, mutual, reciprocal; viewpoint, perspective; differ with, differ from; compare to, compare with; necessary, essential). One must resist the confusion of such words as the following:

accept and *except*:

    "Accept" is a verb meaning "to take or receive possession"; "except" may be used as a verb meaning "to omit or exclude", or as a preposition meaning "other than".

affect and *effect*:

    One produces an "effect" (result) by "affecting" (doing something to) someone or something. One can also "effect" a thing, *i.e.*, cause it to be. Although men can "affect" one another, only God can "effect" them.

infer and *imply*:

    To "infer" is to draw conclusions from admitted facts or axioms, as in geometry and logic; to "imply" is to intend that someone understand your point without your having to state it explicitly. Speakers imply; listeners infer.

like and *as*:

    "Like" compares things, while "as" compares modes of action; *e.g.*, "Nobody can do it as McDonald's can." "Like" functions only as a preposition functions; "as" in these cases acts like a conjunction.

less and *fewer*:

    "Less" applies to continuous quantity (how much), "fewer" to discontinuous quantity or number (how many); *e.g.*, "The fewer the calories, the less the fat."

amount and *number*:

    Here, as in the previous example, a distinction must be maintained between kinds of quantity ("amount" is continuous, and "number" is discontinuous); *e.g.*, "He had a great amount of money because he had a large number of very large bills."

principle and *principal*:
> A "principle" is a beginning and is always a noun (*e.g.*, "The principles of geometry are the definitions, postulates, and common notions"); "principal" means highest in rank and can be either a noun or an adjective (*e.g.*, "Johnny reported to the principal's office, for he had failed to observe the principal rule").

than and *from*:
> Beware of saying or writing "different than". The word "than" is a conjunction and can be used only after a comparative adjective. The correct form is "different from", where "from" functions as a preposition.

quote and *quotation*:
> "Quote" is a verb; "quotation" is a noun. One may quote Dante, but the passage thus recalled is a quotation.

thus and *thusly*:
> "Thus" is already an adverb, meaning "in this way"; there is no word "thusly".

myself and *I*:
> Use "myself" as an intensive pronoun (*e.g.*, "I did it myself") or as a reflexive pronoun (*e.g.*, "I washed myself"), but not as a substitute for "I". "Robert and myself went shopping" should read "Robert and I went shopping".

in terms of and *with respect to*:
> "In terms of" signifies the expression of the same idea in other terms or words, *e.g.*, translating a formulation expressed originally in economic terms into psychological or algebraic terms; the phrase "with respect to" (or "with regard to") is used when one is relating two or more different ideas.

if and *whether*:
> When a clause introduced by "if" implies or contains "or not", one must use "whether". "If" introduces the protasis of a condition; "whether" introduces an indirect question. A blind man might say, "I shall see if the doctor will operate", but a nurse should say, "I shall see whether the doctor will operate".

its and *it's*:
> "Its" is a pronoun in the genitive case, like "his" and "my"; "it's" is the contraction of the pronoun "it" and the verb "is".

compose and *comprise*:

    Parts "compose" a whole, while the whole "comprises" parts. The passive construction "is comprised of" is a common error; change to "is composed of".

lay and *laid*:

    "Lay" is both the past tense of the intransitive verb "lie" (*e.g.*, "Yesterday I lay on the ground; today I lie in my bed") and a transitive verb whose past tense is "laid" (*e.g.*, "Yesterday I laid bricks for twelve hours; today I lay a trap for my boss").

Errors of literacy also include:

1. The unnecessary splitting of infinitives.
2. Using the demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that" to modify adjectives. ("It isn't that bad" should read "It isn't so bad".)
3. The use of contractions in formal prose. Avoid contractions, except for special rhetorical effect. ("It isn't so bad" should read "It is not so bad".)
4. Using nouns as verbs (see SUBSTANTIVAL PHRASE below for the related misuse of nouns as adjectives). He who would "demagogue the issues" or "access information" should be ashamed.
5. The use of absolute descriptive terms as if they were relative; *e.g.*, "The landscape of Perelandra is very unique"; "The *Theotokos* is the purest of creatures". Something is either unique or not, and if pure, it cannot be improved on.

MISPLACED OR DANGLING MODIFIER

In general, locate modifiers, whether words or phrases, as close as possible to the word modified.

Example of Error:

    Eating with the dog, the little girl found her kitten.

Correction:

    The little girl found her kitten eating with the dog.

Note how the position of the modifier—in the following case, the adverb "only"—can affect the meaning:

    Only St Paul saw Christ on the road to Damascus.
    St Paul only saw Christ on the road to Damascus.
    St Paul saw only Christ on the road to Damascus.
    St Paul saw Christ only on the road to Damascus.

Worse than the MISPLACED MODIFIER (like "eating with the dog" above), the DANGLING MODIFIER is a word or phrase, not just separated from the thing it modifies, but lacking a definite subject altogether:

Examples of Error:
1. When six years old, my father took me on my first fishing trip.
   "My and "me" are the only signs of the writer's true meaning; the sentence should have read, "When six years old, I went on my first fishing trip with my father."

2. Speaking of theology, the church's picnic is next week.
   Here there is no sign of the subject of "speaking", for neither picnics nor weeks can talk. The subject is instead the "I" that is responsible for the sentence itself.

SUBSTANTIVAL PHRASE

The use of a noun or nouns to modify another noun or other nouns, this error is reinforced by the journalism of our day (*e.g.*, "Peace Resolve Announced at World Disarmament Summit") and often appears, in its most impersonal and luciferian form, in the world of business and bureaucracy (*e.g.*, "Personnel are being asked to submit, in triplicate, their 1996 Drug Alcohol Test Authorization Forms"). Nouns are not adjectives and should not be treated as such. Most substantival phrases can be corrected by the subordination of ideas and the use of prepositions. Note the ambiguity in the following:

Examples of Error:
1. A large vehicle fleet was halted by the storm.
2. Several Baptist college students were dismissed.

Corrections:
1. A large fleet of vehicles was halted by the storm; or A fleet of large vehicles was halted by the storm.
2. Several students of the Baptist college were dismissed (presumably without regard to their ecclesial affiliation); or Several Baptist students of the college were dismissed (but the Catholics and Presbyterians were spared).

PUNCTUATION

The rules for punctuating, for using the comma in particular, are the most complex in all of English usage. Reading an essay aloud is always helpful: where the voice naturally pauses, a punctuation mark is probably needed; the longer the pause, the heavier should be the mark. The following rules may be mentioned:

1. Close all sentences with correct terminal punctuation (periods, question marks, and—very rarely—exclamation points).

2. Separate independent clauses within a sentence either by a comma plus a coordinating conjunction (*e.g.*, and, but, or, for) or by a semicolon. Be careful to distinguish coordinating conjunctions from conjunctive adverbs (*e.g.*, consequently, furthermore, however, indeed, nevertheless, therefore). The latter cannot be used to connect independent clauses unless they are preceded by a coordinating conjunction or a semicolon. Failure to observe this distinction results in one type of "run-on" sentence (see SYNTAX below).

3. Separate all non-restrictive subordinate clauses from main clauses by a comma or commas. Compare the following:

   > The deity, who created the universe, is omnipotent.
   > The deity who created the universe is omnipotent.

   From the first sentence, we conclude that there is only one God and that He is omnipotent; the fact that He created the universe is gratuitous information, serving only to illustrate the greatness of His power. We infer from the second sentence, however, that there are at least two gods; the absence of the commas before and after the relative clause, "who created the universe", tells us that the clause is restrictive or defining; *i.e.*, the information the clause contains is necessary in order for us to know which deity, of several possible, is omnipotent.

4. In lists, place a comma after each item, except when items are understood as a unit (*e.g.*, "Genesis tells about God, Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden").

5. In general, separate all introductory words (*e.g.*, furthermore, moreover, thus), all introductory prepositional phrases, and all introductory subordinate clauses (*i.e.*, clauses beginning with the conjunctions "when", "since", "because", "after", *etc.*, or with participles) from the main clause that follows by a comma.

6. Prefer the comma to the dash (—).

7. Be consistent in the positioning of commas and periods. American convention always places them inside quotation marks; in British convention (as in this breviary), the position reflects the sense of the quoted material.

8. Never use the virgule (/) in formal prose.

9. Use parentheses sparingly. They are often a sign of poor organization. Rewrite and make the parenthetical remark a subordinate clause or a separate sentence.

10. Always use square brackets, [ ], not parentheses, to insert a comment within quoted material.

11. Underline (or italicize) all foreign words (*e.g.*, *Logos*) and phrases (*e.g.*, *a priori*) and all abbreviations of foreign terms (*e.g.*, *e.g.*).

12. Use periods properly when indicating ellipses (*i.e.*, when deleting material from a quotation). Always be certain that all quotations, though shortened, remain not only grammatically intact but logically and rhetorically consistent with the context afforded by your own prose.

    A. Internal ellipses are signified by three periods, which are preceded, separated, and followed by one space. Thus, if one wished to shorten the original sentence "Elves and goblins inhabit magic forests and enchanted gardens", one might write, "Elves . . . inhabit . . . enchanted gardens."

    B. Initial and terminal ellipses do not need to be indicated. Thus, one might shorten the same original sentence to "Goblins inhabit magic forests". (Note that "Goblins" would be capitalized, even though spelled with a lower case "g" in the original, so that the quoted sentence might be stylistically consistent with its new context.)

    C. When one omits material at the end of a quoted sentence that precedes another quoted sentence, four spaced periods—the first of which follows the preceding word without a space, the last of which precedes the following word with a space—should conclude the shortened sentence. One would write, "Elves and goblins inhabit magic forests. . . . Trolls, on the other hand, always live in caves."

13. Two procedures are typically followed in giving credit to the source of quoted material.

    A. When references to sources are footnoted, the corresponding numeral should follow the closing quotation marks, and the quotation marks should enclose whatever terminal punctuation the sense of the quotation demands. One might write:

According to Kant, "A new light flashed upon the mind of the first man . . . who demonstrated the properties of the isosceles triangle."[1]

The footnote, which may be placed either at the bottom of the page on which the quotation appears or as an endnote at the conclusion of the essay, should include the following information:

i.   author's name (first name first), followed by a comma,

ii.   title of article or chapter (if quoting from a journal or anthology), enclosed in quotation marks and followed by a comma,

iii. title of book (underlined or italicized),

iv. particulars of publication, enclosed in parentheses: place of publication, followed by a colon; name of publisher, followed by a comma; date of publication; a comma follows the second parenthesis,

v.   page number from which the quotation is taken, followed by a period.

Example:
Kallistos Ware, "Eastern Christendom", *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 127.

If the work has a traditional numbering system—*e.g.*, Homer (books and lines), Shakespeare (acts, scenes, and lines), or Plato (lines)—give the citation in the standard form for the work, followed by a period.

Example:
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.58-92.

B.   On the other hand, one might choose, whether in succeeding references to the same source or as the general method of an entire essay (in which complete information is provided by a bibliography), to include brief references to sources in parentheses within the body of the essay itself. If this procedure is selected, and if the punctuation required by the quotation is a period, the period should not be enclosed in quotation marks, but should follow the closing parenthesis after the quotation. Thus, one would write:

Krishna counsels Arjuna, "Close down the doors of the senses, and place the mind in the heart" (*Gita*, VIII.13-14).

Quotations requiring terminal punctuation other than the period should always include this punctuation within the quotation marks, and a period should be placed after the parentheses enclosing the quotation's source:

Christian inquired, "Is not your name Mr By-ends of Fairspeech?" (*Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 137).

PARALLELISM

Thoughts that are parallel in meaning should be parallel in form. Special care must be taken with clauses containing the following constructions: either . . . or; neither . . . nor; not only . . . but also.

Examples of Error:
1. You are either going or I am.
2. To be is better than not being.
3. Catherine stands out as an individual and hardworking student.
4. He loves not only his parents but also is a good husband.

Corrections:
1. Either you are going or I am.
2. To be is better than not to be; or Being is better than not being.
3. Catherine stands out as an individual and as a hardworking student.
4. He not only loves his parents, but also is a good husband; or He loves not only his parents but also his wife.

REFERENCE

Personal, demonstrative, and relative pronouns must refer clearly to definite antecedents. Expository prose should never force re-reading. Note the ambiguity in the following:

Examples of Error:
When Tamara insisted that Helen was wrong, I was forced to believe her mistaken.
Who is "her"? Who was mistaken, Tamara or Helen?

In Traherne's *Centuries*, he prays to God.
The word "Traherne's" is not a noun, but a case formed from a noun and having the function of an adjective. It cannot be the antecedent of "he"; rewrite: "In his Centuries, Traherne prays to God."

Perhaps not every show will be distinguished, but that's what we'll be aiming for.

The missing antecedent of "that's" in this advertisement prompted The New Yorker *to comment, "Ever thought of raising your sights?".*

God would, in his anger, destroy all of mankind, which would be destroying His creation.

The reader expects "which" to refer to "mankind", or even to "anger"; instead it refers to the unexpressed "act of destruction" implicit in the verb "destroy". But the unexpressed does not an antecedent make.

SYNTAX

Syntax concerns the marshalling of grammatical units. Syntactical errors are of three kinds, from bad to worse to worst:

1. Awkward phrasing: Syntax that stumbles and lurches is usually caused by the division of closely connected thoughts, by the inadequate subordination of secondary to primary ideas, or by an injudicious use of the passive voice.

Example of Error:
   Burt said that Joan, because of what was done after dinner and before we went to the movie by her little brother to her new hat, cried.

Correction requires disconnecting, reconsidering, reassembling.

2. Fragmentary Sentence: A "sentence" lacking a subject, a predicate, or both, such as this one. Except for special effect, fragments should be avoided in formal prose.

3. "Run-on" Sentence: The improper conflation of two or more independent clauses.

Example of Error:
   Experience is the foundation of human knowledge, moreover the subject of epistemology is considered a branch of philosophy.

Correction:
   Experience is the foundation of human knowledge, which is the subject of epistemology. Epistemology is considered a branch of philosophy.

SPELLING

Whenever in doubt, consult your dikshunairy. Few things so spoil the beauty and clarity of one's writing as slovenly spelling.

TRANSITION

A good essay depends not only on grammatical consistencies (see AGREEMENT) but also on logical and rhetorical connections. The counterpart to CONGRUENCE, transition concerns such connections not within but between sentences. Conjunctions in particular (*e.g.*, since, because, yet, for), but also several adverbs (*e.g.*, thus, therefore), are the ligaments that give one's writing strength. One common error of transition involves the ordering of ideas in a series. Phrases like "another point raised by Dostoyevski" are vague and clumsy. If several points are to be made, organize them into the most appropriate sequence and enumerate them with such words as "first", "next", and "finally".

WORDINESS

Superfluous word or words.

Examples of Error:
1. Many people in the world today believe that . . .
2. The two terms are mutually related to each other.
3. To the best of my recollection . . .

Corrections:
1. Many believe that . . .
2. The terms are mutually related.
3. I think . . .

TYPOGRAPHICAL OR MECHANICAL ERROR

Such errors include:

1. The omission, transposition, or doubling of letters.
2. Incorrect syllabification (hyphenation) of words.
3. Indentation of an essay's opening paragraph. To indent the first line of a paragraph is to mark a break in thought; but one cannot break what has not yet begun.
4. Incorrect presentation of longer quotations (over two lines). Each line should be indented twice the space of the first line of each paragraph, and quotation marks should not be used.
5. Improper spacing: space once after commas, colons, semicolons, question marks, exclamation marks, and periods. Do not space before—or after—dashes, but do space (once) before the first sign and after the second sign in every pair of parentheses.

Neither can his mind be tho't to be in tune
whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame
whose sentence is preposterous.

Ben Jonson

With gratitude to my mentor John Crossett, master of the *Trivium*, for
the inspiration supplied by his own *Breviary of English Usage*
and for permission to use material from the same.