

Lynn Wright's Tips for Writers

At the risk of being thought a know-it-all, I am publishing corrections for some of the errors I often find when editing. And before you're through with the subject be sure to read Linda Barth and Jessie Gurner's COMMON PITFALLS IN FANFIC and RULES OF GRAMMAR . They're both invaluable.

* "Is it all right to use alright? Despite the appearance of alright in the works of such well-known writers as Flannery O'Connor, Langston Hughes, and James Joyce, the merger of all and right has never been accepted as standard...you will undoubtedly come across alright in magazine and newspaper articles. But if you decide to use alright, especially in formal writing, you run the risk that some of your readers will view it as an error."(1) It's just as easy to write all right. Why not do it right?

* "Peruse has long meant "to read thoroughly" and is often used loosely when one could use the word read instead. Sometimes people use it to mean "to glance over, skim," as in I only had a moment to peruse the manual quickly, but this usage is widely considered an error."(2) It means to read, not to look at anything else but a book or other reading matter.

* The difference between it's and its is really very simple. "It's" is a contraction of "it is". "Its" is the possessive form, like "his" or "hers". You wouldn't say "hi's" or "her's".

"It's true that the dog chases its tail." Now substitute "It is" for both.

"It is true that the dog chases it is tail."

It should be clear which one is correct. When in doubt, substitute "It is" in your head. It will quickly tell you which is right.

* It's "rein in" as in stopping a horse, not "reign in"; reign means "Exercise of sovereign power, as by a monarch."(2)

* "In regards to is both Substandard and Vulgar"(1) It's "in regard to"

* Every new speech by a character requires a new paragraph, except when that speech is interrupted by a phrase of description.

"I really don't want to work tonight," Catherine said. "I'll put it away until tomorrow."

"Good," replied Vincent, "We'll go below, have a meal, and then we can talk, if you wish." As he turned to climb over the balcony wall he added, "I'll meet you below your building in fifteen minutes."

"Wait,wait!" Catherine laughed, "I won't be ready in fifteen minutes! Please, let's make it half an hour."

* There is some confusion about when to use “he, she” and when to use “him, her”.

He and she walked along the tunnel, hands joined. As they walked, a large rock forced him and her apart, making their hands drop.

This may look a little bit awkward, but it’s correct. (‘them’ would be better.)

The way to tell is this: substitute just one pronoun

a large rock forced he apart

a large rock forced she apart

This makes it clear that the pronoun is incorrect, it should be ‘him’ and ‘her’

Don’t substitute both pronouns:

a large rock forced he and she apart

That may look OK to you. Just use one, and you will see that it’s not right.

General observations:

* Use your spell checker, for pity’s sake.

* Don’t use the same word twice in the same paragraph, unless you are doing so for added impact.

* Use your thesaurus. Just use it in general, it will enrich your writing vocabulary.

Dialogue is of the greatest importance in writing fiction. Pages and pages of exposition do not do the job, and may bore the reader. Dialogue is always more interesting, and can tell more to the reader about the people speaking than pages of description.

Mouse was a person who didn’t speak much, and when he did, he spoke in strange ways, although he was cheerful and happy.

Mouse’s face broke into his blinding grin. “OK good, OK fine, Mouse can do that!”

* Remember that the people reading your stories are familiar with the BATB story. You don’t need to go into the past history of V&C at length. We know it.

* Sometimes people have a tendency to write in the present tense: “Catherine walks across the room and picks up a book.” Although we often talk this way, one cannot write fiction this way. It must be past tense. “Catherine walked across the room and picked up a book.” Unless you are writing stage direction in a script. Then present tense is called for.

Quotes in bold are from:

(1)The American Heritage® Book of English Usage

(2)The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language

You will find both listed here: <http://www.bartleby.com/reference/>

Grammar Guide

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>