Writing With Style

An Editor's Advice for RPG Writers

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CREDITS

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Introduction

This guide doesn't teach you how to write or edit roleplaying games. It won't show you how to structure adventures, design monsters, build stat blocks, or create a world. What it—

Hey, wait! Come back!

What it *will* do is share tips and advice on simple ways you can improve your writing. I've edited RPGs for more than twenty years and frequently encounter the same kinds of errors and issues, whether working with rookie freelancers or industry veterans. Not everything in this guide is specific to RPGs, but it's presented through the lens of gaming to show how to apply these suggestions to your RPG work.

You won't find details here that are specific to any particular game, setting, or company. When you're writing RPGs for a publisher, you should follow the company's preferred style guide (like the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *Associated Press Stylebook*) and dictionary for basic grammar and spelling, and its house style guide for terms and concepts that are specific to the game. Different publishers have different ways to express, say, damage taken by a player character, and most have different document styles or formats. The same is true if you're self-publishing—you've probably got your own style guide (and if you don't, you should make one).

So I don't cover any of those topics in these pages. Instead, I stick to general suggestions that apply regardless of content, purpose, or audience. Little polishes that can make your writing cleaner and clearer. Tips for tightening your text so it moves along and doesn't seem bloated. Some of the tips are covered in more detail in style guides like *Chicago* and the *AP*, if you want to explore further.

Most of these tips are simple and easy to implement. In fact, you might read them and think, "What's the big deal?" And you'd be right. None of the tips, taken on their own, will likely cause your work to be accepted or rejected. But together, they can help you prepare a stronger manuscript. If you're submitting a project to a developer or editor at a publishing company, it's a good idea to make their job as easy as possible. If you deal with all the small stuff in this guide, they can spend more time improving your text in more significant ways.

Some tips in this guide present before-and-after examples, but there's rarely just one way to construct a sentence. Two people can revise the same sentence in two wildly different ways, and they can both be right. For that

matter, the *same* person could edit a chunk of text one way on Monday and another way on Friday, depending on their mood. So my examples don't presume to give the only possible solutions—just options to consider.

Do you have to follow all of these tips all the time? Nope. It's fine to break them to add variety to your writing. In fact, you should. Don't hammer all the flavor or voice out of your text to rigidly adhere to guidelines. Just be sure you understand the rules before you break them. (See the Breaking the Rules sidebar on page 39.)

Writers who are just starting out or have only a little experience might get more out of this guide than battle-scarred authors do (though a refresher never hurts). But I hope that everyone finds at least a few things they can put to good use. If nothing else, the tips might make you more aware of issues that pop up in your writing so you can address them however you choose.

Alphabetization

Whether you're writing a bunch of spells, descriptions of cybertech items, equipment found in an explorer's kit, or the many varieties of worms in a corner of the world, it's useful to present them in alphabetical order. It's simple and easy to understand. When readers skim the list looking for one particular entry, they know where to find it. This is helpful in short bulleted lists, and it's essential in sections that run for multiple pages.

Example: The alphabet goes A, B, C, D, E . . . aw, you know the rest.

That said, sometimes you might have a good reason to deviate from alphabetical order. Maybe you're giving a tour of the regions of the land, moving geographically from west to east. Maybe you're explaining historical events chronologically. Maybe you're running through the causes of a war and want to explore them in order of importance. All perfectly fine. But leave a note for your editor explaining why the items are in the order you've chosen. Otherwise, the editor might not notice what you've done and put them in alphabetical order instead.

Style Guide

Most RPG publishers have their own style guides. If you're given one, follow it religiously. If its rules conflict with the tips in these pages, the publisher's guide takes precedence. It's essential for items such as:

- What language to use for attacks, skill checks, saving throws, and other mechanics
- Whether to say "5 damage," "5 points of damage," or something else
- Which terms are capitalized, italicized, or bold
- How to refer to player characters, nonplayer characters, and players
- Basically everything related to the specific game or setting

If a publisher doesn't have a style guide, look at their existing books and take notes on how they handle things so you can create your own guide. Share it with the publisher—they'll probably be glad to have your help. They might even pay you to create a complete style guide.

CAN VS. MAY

You've probably heard the old joke where a kid in school asks the teacher "Can I go to the bathroom?" and the teacher quips "I don't know, *can* you?" or "Sure you can, but not now." The teacher is grammar-shaming the kid for not using the word "may."

Don't do this in real life. Everyone knows what you mean when you say "can." But in RPGs, it's worth distinguishing between the two words.

In general, the word "may" is used to convey that something is allowed or possible.

> "Yes, you may leave class and go to the bathroom."

> "It may rain tomorrow."

In RPG writing, "may" is fine in narration and story text. Personally, I recommend using "might" or "could" in place of "may" when expressing the possibility of future action. "May" often has the connotation of permission, whereas the other terms make your meaning more clear.

When you're writing game mechanics or rules text, "can" is almost always the better choice. "Can" conveys that the subject (whether a character, a creature, or an object) has the *ability* to do something.

> **Before:** The thief may use her lockpick tools to break the window.
> **After:** The thief can use her lockpick tools to break the window.

> **Before:** A soldier in combat gear may still swim, but at reduced speed.
> **After:** A soldier in combat gear can still swim, but at reduced speed.

One place you can do away with either word is when describing what happens when a character uses a magic item, casts a spell, or otherwise triggers an effect. If a PC casts a spell that produces a storm of mothballs, they are already choosing to use the spell. The description of the effect assumes that it's taking place. So instead of saying they *can* do it, just say they *do* do it.

> **Before:** The spell can create a storm of smelly mothballs.
> **After:** The spell creates a storm of smelly mothballs.

CAPITAL LETTERS

No one loves capital letters like RPG writers do. Capital letters just seem to lend weight, importance, *gravitas* to all those important terms! This sentiment might derive from the abundant use of capitalized words in fantasy fiction.

Follow your publisher's style guide. If the name of a certain ability, weapon, race, vehicle, or whatever is supposed to be capitalized, then by all means do it. But when you're creating your own material, I recommend defaulting to lowercase. If a tinkerer in your adventure invents a new item that cleans out your nose, call it a nostrilator, not a Nostrilator. (On second thought, don't call it either of those things.)

In addition, fight whatever instincts tell you to capitalize every noble title, rank, and organization. Capitalize them when they're paired with a specific name, but lowercase them when used without a name or in a general sense. Examples:

- Petitioners before the archduke can plead their case, but Archduke Billy Bob rarely grants favors.

- The Cult of Kookoo takes notice of the player characters. If the PCs aren't careful, they can make an enemy of the cult.

- The Entertainers' Guild is the most powerful in the city; the guild and its leaders work the council like puppets.

Direct address is an exception. When person 1 speaks directly to person 2, using the rank or title of person 2 in place of their name, that rank or title is treated like the name and capitalized. Examples:

- "Greetings, Ambassador. What a fine day!"

- "Excuse me, Professor, but do your fellow professors know that you're a gorilla?"

- "Look, Sergeant, I don't know what sergeants do where you come from, but around here, we hang the toilet paper rolls *under*."

My suggestion to default to lowercase doesn't apply to proper nouns (unique people, places, or things), whose names should be capitalized, including the names of religions, deities, and languages.

COUPLE OF

When RPG writers use the noun "couple," they're typically referring to a pair or a small number of something. They'll describe a couple mercenaries who kill a couple orcs and earn a couple coins for the trouble. But swap in the word "pair" or "group"—would you say a pair mercenaries who kill a group orcs? No. (Or maybe you would, and that's why editors exist.) Just like you should say a pair *of* mercenaries and a group *of* orcs, you should say a couple *of* coins.

Webster's notes that dropping the "of" is acceptable in informal speech or writing, where you might ask your buddies to order a couple drinks. But most RPG writing intended for publication is not informal, so when the PCs go to the tavern, they should order a couple *of* drinks.

If you think "a couple of" sounds stilted, another easy fix is to use "few" instead. And if that's not ideal because you do mean exactly two, say "a pair of" or even just "two." In fact, specificity is preferred when writing rules and adventures. (See Specificity on page 36 for more on this topic.)

EXPLETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Sorry—this tip is not about swearing. Expletive constructions are filler phrases like "there is" and "there are" that add no meaning to a sentence. They hide the subject, and they often appear at the start of a sentence. But they're easy to fix.

Before: There is an old wise man who watches over the children.
After: An old wise man watches over the children.

The subject is "old wise man," but the expletive "There is" obscures that. The revision is a stronger sentence.

You might have heard the recommendation to avoid starting sentences with "There is" and "There was," but "It is" and "It was" also fall into this category. They too are expletive constructions.

Before: It is unlikely that the PCs will defeat the necromancer.
After: The PCs are unlikely to defeat the necromancer.

As usual, feel free to start sentences (or clauses) with expletive constructions judiciously for effect. Just don't do it too often.

Before: There are a handful of caves that are well known to explorers.
After: A handful of caves are well known to explorers.

Before: Just outside the asteroid belt, there is a hideous creature watching over a graveyard of wrecked ships.
After: Just outside the asteroid belt, a hideous creature watches over a graveyard of wrecked ships.

Before: It was Queen Jojo who led her people to the promised land.
After: Queen Jojo led her people to the promised land.

Before: It's not obvious what is causing the smoke.
After: The cause of the smoke is not obvious.

Finally, not all expletive constructions are alike. Sometimes it's perfectly appropriate, even preferred, to start a sentence or clause with those words.

Example: There is no reason to worry about the dragon in the mountains.

Can you change that to "No reason exists to worry about the dragon in the mountains"? Sure, but does that sound better? You could revise it to "Don't worry about the dragon in the mountains," but that makes the sentence imperative (a direct command) with an implied "you" (as in "Hey, you—don't worry about the dragon"), which might not fit the context.

Find Yourself

Characters in RPGs find themselves doing all sorts of things. It's an occupational hazard. But you can make them a little more self-aware by cutting unnecessary variations of this phrase.

Before: Julane found himself drawn to her beauty.
After: Julane was drawn to her beauty.

Before: The heroes find themselves teleported to another dimension.
After: The heroes are teleported to another dimension.

Before: After chugging the elixirs, the PCs find themselves feeling sleepy.
After: After chugging the elixirs, the PCs feel sleepy.

A related tip involves *other* things that can be found.

Before: Bestial mercenaries can often be found guarding the area.
After: Bestial mercenaries often guard the area.

Before: Morduk can be found wandering the streets at twilight.
After: Morduk sometimes wanders the streets at twilight.

There are legitimate reasons to use "can be found," such as when you're specifically referring to the location of an item.

Before: The alien drone's heart can be found in a locked case on the lower deck.

But you can revise that away too if you wish:

After: The alien drone's heart lies in a locked case on the lower deck.

Empty Words

When writing, it's easy to use empty words that are unnecessary. Watch out for the following words and phrases, and cut them out when possible.

actually	endless	merely	obviously	simply
certainly	fairly	naturally	quite	usually
countless	many	note that	really	very

Future vs. Present Tense

Adventures and scenarios must be open to possibilities. You, as the writer, don't know when or if the PCs will explore the dungeon, follow the trail to the undersea laboratory, or play footsie in the woods. Sometimes that leads writers to cast everything in the future tense and use a lot of *will* verbs: the PCs will do this, the NPCs will do that. But too much of that can rob your sentences of immediacy. I recommend replacing *will* with the present tense as much as possible.

Before: The seer will occasionally pretend to read the future in the pattern of fallen leaves.
After: The seer occasionally pretends to read the future in the pattern of fallen leaves.

Before: If the PCs open the box, they will find a wrapped bundle of rubies.
After: If the PCs open the box, they find a wrapped bundle of rubies.

Before: Anyone who will volunteer to join the caravan will get an extra share of rations.

After: Anyone who volunteers to join the caravan gets an extra share of rations. *(You could keep the second "will" if you want to emphasize that the rations are doled out in the future, but I don't think it's necessary—the context probably makes that clear.)*

This tip is especially important when writing adventures, as you want to convey the sense that the action is happening "now."

See also Player Character Actions, page 32, for more on writing to accommodate PC actions.

Game Terms

When writing, be careful not to use game terms in regular text. If "Strength" is the name of an ability, don't say a character has a lot of strength if you really mean he has moxie, confidence, mental determination, or personal resources. Readers might think you're referring to the ability Strength. Similarly, if "colossal" is a category on the size chart, avoid describing something as colossal unless you mean to apply that size category to it.

Rules Grammar

The language of game rules and mechanics often comes with its own unique grammar. As an example, for years the Dungeons & Dragons game used "bonus to" when referring to a bonus on a static modifier and "bonus on" when referring to a bonus on a variable modifier. These weren't arbitrary—each had a specific meaning. When games create their own language rules, it's your job to follow them, so be sure you have (and understand) the publisher's style guide. And just as important, keep up with changes to a game's rules grammar, especially when styles evolve. The D&D game dropped the "bonus to" and "bonus on" distinction years ago.

Gender-Specific Language

When referring to an NPC of a standard race or a monster that has a personal name, use "he" or "she" as appropriate. When referring to genderless characters/creatures or to unnamed monsters, you can use "it" (the traditional option) or "they" (if your publisher allows it; see below).

All of the following examples are correct:

- Frank the hobgoblin draws his spear.
- The hobgoblin draws its spear.
- The vampire boards up the windows of the house where it sleeps.
- Matilda the vampire boards up the windows of the house where she sleeps.
- The marshmallow elemental Tumtum makes its lair deep in the mountain.

In that last example, the creature has a name, but the elemental has no gender. If you're writing for an established setting, the publisher's style guide should note which critters fall into this category. If you're creating monsters, you can decide which ones should be beyond gender. Would an extraplanar, incorporeal manifestation of a color really go by "he" or "her"?

Speaking of "he," avoid using it as a generic pronoun. You're probably aware of this issue and familiar with various options, but I'll run through three common solutions.

Original sentence: If a traveler goes down that road, he is likely to be ambushed.

What's the problem? The traveler might not be male, so "he" is not the best choice.

Solutions:

- *Make it plural:* If travelers go down that road, they are likely to be ambushed.
- *Remove the pronoun*: A traveler who goes down that road is likely to be ambushed.
- *Use singular "they"*: If a traveler goes down that road, they are likely to be ambushed. *(Singular "they" is becoming more common—I've used it in this very guide!—and one day will probably be fully accepted. Until then, check your publisher's style guide to see whether it's allowed.)*

I don't recommend alternating "he" and "she" or using a clunky term like "s/he." Those options distract readers. And using nontraditional pronouns like "ze" and "zir" might go too far, unless that's what your publisher prefers.

Finally, avoid gender-specific terms. The table below lists common examples and alternate terms to consider, based on the specific situation. The first column doesn't include every variant of each term (chairwoman, craftswoman, policewoman, etc.), but try to avoid those too. Of course, if a term is meant to describe only men in context, a gendered term might be appropriate. For example, if you're writing about a tribe whose members are exclusively male, referring to them as "tribesmen" is fine, though you can still use the gender-neutral term if you prefer.

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS
airman	pilot, aviator
alderman	councilor, council member
barman, barmaid	barkeep
bellboy	bellhop
bowman	archer
businessman	businessperson, merchant
caveman	cave dweller, primitive
chairman	chair
chambermaid	housekeeper, house cleaner, servant
charwoman	janitor
con man	con artist, hustler, swindler
Congressman	member of Congress, senator, representative
councilman	councilor, council member
countryman	fellow citizen
craftsman	crafter, artisan
crewman	crew member
crossbowman	archer (wielding a crossbow), arbalester
fireman	firefighter
fisherman	fisher
forefathers	ancestors
foreman	supervisor
freeman	free person
guardsman	guard, sentry
handyman	maintenance worker, helper
hangman	executioner
headmaster	head, director, principal
henchman	accomplice, cohort, flunky, lackey, sidekick
horseman	rider
huntsman	hunter

WRITING WITH STYLE

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS
journeyman	apprentice, artisan, worker
lizardman (and similar)	lizard folk, lizard person
longshoreman	dockhand, dock worker, stevedore
lumberjack	forester, logger
madman	maniac, lunatic (or more colorful terms like crackpot, kook, nut, etc.)
maintenance man	maintenance worker, helper, janitor
man (as a verb)	operate, pilot, crew, staff, etc.
man at arms	mercenary, soldier
man on the street	commoner, average person
mankind	humankind, humanity
man-made	handmade, manufactured, artificial
manpower	labor, workers, workforce
marksman	sharpshooter
midshipman	sailor, seafarer, mariner
nobleman	noble, member of nobility
patrolman	guard, sentry, police officer
policeman	police officer
rifleman	sharpshooter
seaman	sailor, seafarer, mariner
seamstress	tailor
spaceman	astronaut, space traveler
statesman	politician, elected official
stewardess	flight attendant
tradesman	trader
tribesman	tribe member
waiter	server
watchman	guard, sentry
workman	worker

Great

Many things in RPGs are Great. No, not *great*—capital-G *Great*. It's always the Great Cathedral, the Great Door, the Great Tower, the Great Pit, the Great War, the Great Culling, the Great Stairs, the Great Path, the Great Contest, the Great Pumpkin, the Great Grate (a really nice fireplace), the Great Grating (the festival of shredding cheese), and so on.

The word "great" has many synonyms. Try a few! Better still, find a word that conveys a more precise meaning. Are you using "great" to refer to size? Importance? Prominence? Excellence? Something that is celebrated or plentiful or extensive? See if a more specific word meets your need.

(You might have heard advice that a writer should never use a thesaurus. I agree that you shouldn't use one to dig up an obscure word that you wouldn't ordinarily choose, but feel free to use a thesaurus to find a more precise substitute for a word that's not quite right.)

Human

In plenty of RPG settings, humans are one race among many. Yet writers still fall into the habit of using the words "human" or "mankind" to mean "people in general." It's better to use "humanoid" (if the other races truly are humanoid) or other terms that fit your setting—perhaps something like "the civilized races" or just plain old "people."

The same applies to the use of "inhuman" as an adjective. If one troll is horrified by the barbaric actions of another, it wouldn't refer to those actions as inhuman, and neither should you.

Intellectual Property

The following tip is not legal advice. Okay, now that we've got the "don't sue me" part out of the way, RPGs have a long history of borrowing concepts from fiction, history, folklore, movies, TV, comics, video games, and so on. Working a tidbit into your adventure can be a fun Easter egg for players to find. But use common sense. Where's the line between "a disfigured, armored, megalomaniac monarch of a small rural nation who wields science and magic" and Doctor Doom? Feel free to take inspiration from the things you love, but try to make them your own as well.

A more specific concern: not every monster you know is in the public domain or part of the Open Game License (a public copyright license for

using game content; research it online for details). For example, Wizards of the Coast has identified displacer beasts as their intellectual property, which means there are restrictions on using that critter in material not published by Wizards. Other game companies might have similar restrictions. Check with your publisher to see what is and is not allowed, and ask specific questions ("Can I use X monster?").

"-LIKE" SUFFIX

Some things are like other things. (I know—mind: blown.) If you want to describe a subterranean monster that's similar to a bear, you can call it "bear-like" and the reader will get the basic idea. But many writers use the suffix "-like" too often, even multiple times in the same sentence. Try to cut down by recasting the description.

> **Before:** The moat is full of eel-like and crab-like creatures.
> **After:** The moat is full of creatures similar to eels and crabs. *(Or, better yet, describe them.)*

> **Before:** The tiger-like beast has bat-like wings and sharp talons on its bird-like feet.
> **After:** The beast resembles a tiger, but it has wings like a bat's, and sharp talons extend from its bird-like feet. *(It's fine to use the suffix once in a sentence. But not three times.)*

> **Before:** The gray mass looks rock-like but has a sponge-like consistency.
> **After:** The gray mass looks like rock but is spongy to the touch. *(A small rewrite helps.)*

A related question is whether to hyphenate the suffix. If the noun ends in the letter L, always hyphenate (eel-like, bell-like, owl-like). If the noun doesn't end in L, it could go either way. Follow the dictionary. That is, if the dictionary includes an entry for "catlike," that's the preferred form of the word. If the dictionary does not include a closed entry, the preferred form is hyphenated. Thus, if it has no entry for "batlike," use "bat-like."

Following this rule can result in sentences that use both forms, such as "The first cage holds a catlike creature, and the second holds a beast with bat-like wings." That could look inconsistent to readers who aren't up on their grammar rules (the heathens). You might opt to use hyphenated forms consistently or use closed forms consistently (though the latter leads to ungainly terms like "hippopotamuslike"). Consult your editor, publisher, or style guide for advice.

Commonly Confused Words

When you type quickly, it's easy to miss a letter and end up with the wrong word, especially if your software tries to "fix" your writing. Worse, the new word might be incorrect but still a real word, so it won't be caught by a spellcheck. No list of commonly confused words can cover all possible errors, but below are examples I often see when editing RPG text. I included notes where appropriate.

active/activate

adventure/adventurer

adverse/averse

> Adverse means hostile or unfavorable. Travelers are slowed by adverse weather conditions.

> Averse means having a feeling of dislike for something. A lazy bum is averse to hard work.

affect/effect

alter/altar

angle/angel

automaton/automation

born/borne

breath/breathe

> Breath is a noun; breathe is a verb. When you breathe, you take in a breath.

chose/choose

compose/comprise

> Compose means to make up or constitute. The town council is composed of ten elders.

> Comprise means to contain or include. The town's populace comprises a hundred laborers.

> A simple mnemonic to help you remember the difference: comprise has the letter "i," which is the first letter in the word "include."

cord/chord

devise/device

discreet/discrete

> Discreet means unobtrusive or showing good judgment. A spy follows her mark discreetly.

> Discrete means distinct or separate. A complex machine has many discrete parts.

form/from

hangar/hanger

> A hangar is a shelter, usually for aircraft. The pirate's blimp is housed in a hangar.

> A hanger is a device for hanging something. Only golden hangers touch the king's robes.

heath/hearth/health

hoard/horde

> A hoard is a stockpile (a dragon's hoard); it can also be a verb (the dragon hoards gold).

> A horde is a crowd. The town was besieged by a horde of goblins.

illusion/allusion

immoral/immortal

imply/infer

> When you imply, you suggest or hint at something.

> When you infer, you deduce a meaning that is often left unsaid.

> The sender of a message can imply, and the receiver of the message can infer.

lair/liar

lead/led

> Sometimes when a writer uses the past tense, "lead" is mistakenly used in place of "led" because the two words have the same pronunciation. A mental hiccup. It happens less often when using the present tense, because in that case "lead" is pronounced like "reed."

lighting/lightning/lightening

loath/loathe

Loath is an adjective meaning unwilling or reluctant. A paladin is loath to break her vows.

Loathe is a verb meaning to detest something. A paladin loathes evil.

lose/loose

marital/martial

meditation/mediation

mucus/mucous

Mucus is a noun. It's the gross secretion produced by mucous membranes.

Mucous is an adjective that means related to or containing the substance known as mucus.

nauseated/nauseous

"Nauseated" means "sick" and "nauseous" means "causing nausea." Some people insist on enforcing this distinction. They'll tell you to say that you're nauseated by the nauseous pile of rotten garbage. And technically, they're right (maybe). But the distinction has all but disappeared in modern usage. If you wish, you can observe it in your writing; if not, don't worry about it.

parlay/parley

Parlay is a verb meaning to bet or exploit. The gambler parlayed her winnings into a fortune.

Parley is a verb meaning to discuss terms (often, with an enemy). The generals of the two armies parleyed in an attempt to avoid battle.

peak/peek/pique

Peak is a noun, usually meaning the top of a hill or mountain, or the highest level of something.

Peek is a verb meaning to look furtively or glance, or a noun of the same (take a peek).

Pique is a noun meaning anger or resentment (after being booed, the singer stormed off in a fit of pique) or a verb meaning to excite or arouse (the sound piqued my curiosity).

plane/plain

prophecy/prophesy

> Prophecy is a noun (you interpret the seer's prophecy). Prophesy is a verb (the seer prophesies a terrible war).

rein/reign

rogue/rouge

sign/sing

silver/sliver

straight/strait

steam/stream

taut/taught

though/through

> I see this all the time. It's not that writers don't know the difference between these words—just that it's very easy to type the wrong one, and spellcheck won't catch it.

vicious/viscous

weather/whether

Modifiers: Misplaced

When a modifier appears in the wrong part of a sentence, leading to confusion about what is being modified, that's a misplaced modifier.

Dangling modifiers are the most common. A dangling modifier (sometimes called a dangling participle if it includes an *–ing* word) is a phrase that intends to modify a noun, but the noun isn't present. It's implied, but that's not enough for the modifier, so it's left dangling.

> **Before:** Fighting through the dungeon, the sickening odor grows worse and worse.

"Fighting through the dungeon" is the dangling participle. What's fighting through the dungeon? The only candidate is the noun "odor." Is the odor fighting its way through the dungeon? Presumably, the PCs are fighting through the dungeon and noticing the stench. Fortunately, it's easy to fix dangling participles: just add the implied subject.

After: Fighting through the dungeon, the PCs notice that the sickening odor grows worse and worse.

Here's a misplaced modifier that's not quite dangling because the noun is present but in the wrong place. One solution is to revise so the noun appears in the right spot for the modifier to work.

Before: Sailing through the storm-tossed sea, the waves threaten to capsize the ship. *(The waves are not sailing through the sea.)*
After: Sailing through the storm-tossed sea, the ship risks being capsized by waves.

You don't always have to leave the modifier as is. Sometimes the best solution is to revise it.

Before: Having been broken in battle, the warrior must get her spear fixed.

After 1: Her spear was broken in battle, so the warrior must get it fixed.

Or, if you don't want a pronoun to appear before its antecedent (see page 35), you could go with this:

After 2: The warrior's spear was broken in battle, so she must get it fixed.

Believe it or not, there's also something called a squinting modifier. Because of how it's placed, it can modify what comes before it or what comes after it, changing the meaning of the sentence.

Before: The thugs who insulted police officers recently were found dead.

The placement of "recently" is the problem. Does the sentence mean the thugs who recently insulted the police officers were found dead? Or that the thugs who insulted the police officers (maybe long ago) were recently found dead? To clarify your intent, just move the modifier as desired.

After 1: The thugs who recently insulted police officers were found dead.
After 2: The thugs who insulted police officers were recently found dead.

Whoa!

When you need to stop a horse, want to express surprise, or are Keanu Reeves, the word you want is "whoa." Don't use "woah" or "whoah" or any other such abomination. If you take nothing else from this guide, please take that.

Modifiers: Redundant

Sometimes the words used to describe things have redundancy baked right in. For example, RPG writers love to refer to things as single:

Before 1: Each building holds a single family of nobles.

Before 2: The monster has a single stripe down its back.

Before 3: A single flux capacitor sits on the table.

It's fine to use "single" when pointing out that there is typically more than one of something. If a creature usually has two eyes but the PCs are fighting one that was careless with a spear, you might say, "The creature has a single eye." And if you're writing prose for dramatic effect, or to call out something as worthy of notice, feel free to say, "A single beam of moonlight pierces the darkness." But most of the time, you don't need to point out that something is single.

After 1: Each building holds a family of nobles.

After 2: The monster has a stripe down its back.

After 3: A flux capacitor sits on the table.

Redundant modifiers aren't always as easy to spot. Other examples:

• The floor beneath his feet creaked with every step. *(Where else would the floor be?)*

• A chandelier hangs from the ceiling above. *(The ceiling is above? You don't say.)*

• She felt her heart beating in her chest. *(I hope that's where it is.)*

• The spell robs the PC of her past memories. *(But it leaves her future memories alone.)*

• The exact same footprint is found on the scene. *(As opposed to the exact different footprint?)*

• Sensors give an advance warning of intruders. *(Next-day warnings aren't as helpful.)*

• The portal is completely destroyed. *(Just "destroyed" is usually good enough, though in cases where, say, a monster can regenerate from scraps, there might be value in stressing that it is "completely" or "utterly" destroyed.)*

Microsoft Word Tips

Use a single space, not a double space, after the punctuation at the end of a sentence.

Don't type a bunch of spaces to get something to line up where you want it. Set a tab and use it—once. Don't use multiple tabs either. Your editor will have to undo all of that.

Word can sort a list for you. Select the text and click the Sort icon, which looks like a down arrow alongside an A over a Z. Then choose whether to sort alphabetically or another way. (Depending on which version of Word you have, the Sort icon could be in different places.)

Use smart (curly) single and double quotation marks, not straight ones. In the Proofing options, you can tell Word to fix them automatically as you type. And if you want to search for them in an existing document, search for "^039" to find only the straight single quotes, and search for "^034" to find only the straight double quotes. (In both cases, the number is preceded by a caret.)

The direction of the single quote is important. Don't say **'tis** when you really mean **'tis**. You might need to change single quotes manually and flag them for your editor so they get laid out correctly.

Use SHIFT-F3 to change selected text to initial caps, all caps, or all lowercase.

Find out if the publisher bolds a colon in a header or leaves it roman.

Example1: This is the default Word behavior. It doesn't select the colon if you double-click "Example1" and make it bold. The colon remains roman.

Example2: Some publishers prefer to make the colon bold too, as shown here. To do this, you must select it manually. Double-clicking on "Example2" won't select it.

These tips should work with recent Windows and Mac versions of Word or Office. Keep in mind that some of them might not suit your needs. For example, smart quotes translate into some programs oddly, in which case straight quotes might be preferred. Always check with your editor or publisher.

MODIFIERS: STACKING

When you string a lot of modifiers together before a noun, the reader can get lost.

> **Before:** In the distance is a black, cone-like, glowing, approximately 100-foot-tall metal tower.

That sentence throws a bunch of adjectives at you before it gets to the noun. Writers sometimes frontload modifiers like this, perhaps in an attempt to be efficient and stay within their word count. But don't sacrifice clarity. An easy solution is to rewrite a bit to move the stacked modifiers around, which helps readers stay on track and can make the sentence more interesting.

> **After:** In the distance is a black, glowing metal tower about 100 feet tall that's shaped like a cone.

Another option is to split the sentence into two or more shorter sentences.

> **Before:** The figure appears to be a poorly sculpted, giant-sized, damaged white marble statue of a female elf.
> **After:** The figure appears to be a giant-sized statue of a female elf. It's been poorly sculpted out of white marble and is damaged.

Long sentences aren't the only ones with stacked modifiers. Here are shorter examples.

> **Before:** Its body is thin, scaly, and wormlike.
> **After:** Its wormlike body is thin and scaly.

> **Before:** The PCs find large, oval, putrid, translucent eggs.
> **After:** The PCs find large oval eggs that are putrid and translucent.

This tip mainly applies to situations where a noun is modified by three or more adjectives. If you have only a few adjectives, it's fine (usually preferred) to put them in front of the noun. That's where you can be most efficient without losing clarity.

> **Before:** A chest sits in the corner of the room. It is locked and made of wood.
> **After:** A locked wooden chest sits in the corner of the room.

Bonus: The revision eliminates potential confusion caused by "It" in the second sentence of the original. Does "It is locked and made of wood" refer to the chest or the room? The answer might be obvious to you, but perhaps not to all readers.

Clichés to Avoid Like the Plague

You probably see certain phrases all the time in RPGs. Try not to use them too often. A few examples:

- gaping maw
- forbidden tome
- forgotten lore
- flickering torchlight
- anything "massive" (the word is massively overused)
- anything "looming"
- the living stone
- the very rock
- well aware
- torn asunder
- untold years
- scrabbled for purchase
- glowing runes
- ancient as a synonym for "old"
- feel/hear your heart beating in your chest
- saying that people went to a place but never returned
- describing someone or something as "chosen" or "destined"
- using "lair" as a verb ("the dragon lairs near the town")
- using words like "shadow," "blood," and "dark" in names (the Shadow Emperor, the Blood Fields, the Dark Church)

Names

When you create people, places, and things, you can name them whatever you want. But consider the following.

- Is the name pronounceable? It might have more than one valid pronunciation, but all of them should be easy to articulate. So consider: Does the name contain more than one X? Does it include a Q followed by a letter other than U? Does it have lots of consonants and not enough vowels? Does it include hyphens or apostrophes? Worse, does it include *multiple* apostrophes? These might be signs that the name relies on fantasy clichés. That might be fine in a novel, but in an RPG, most information is conveyed to players through speech, so the names should be pronounceable. Don't make people try to say "Xarrxit'oqim-j'pxaie."

- Is it comically close to a well-known name from fiction or the real world? Calling your villain Garth Vader or Okra Winfrey might not be as amusing as you think.

- Does it end in S? If so, you'll end up with possessives like "Orcus's wand" or "Jeranamus's heart" that could seem awkward if used many times. Your editor might revise some of those phrases to "the wand of Orcus" and "the heart of Jeranamus" and the like. If you don't want that to happen, tweak the name so it doesn't end in S.

- Don't make up irregular plurals. If you create a critter called a glorkoose, would a group of them be known as glorkooses or glorkeese? Is it one slarsi, two slarso, or the other way around? And if the plural of frawtch is frawtch, that can lead to confusing sentences. Feel free to use irregular plurals occasionally for flavor, but don't be too quick to discount the tried-and-true method of adding "s" or "es" to a singular noun.

After you come up with the perfect name, write it on a list, and refer back to that list throughout the project so you don't misspell the name later. If you christen an NPC "Lelyriane" and type the name over and over, chances are good that you'll misspell it as Leylriane, Lelyrine, Lelyrane, Lelyriaen, Lelryiane, Leylaine, and so on. It's hard to notice these as you write or proofread, and spellcheck might not save you—it

probably serves up hundreds of suspect words, and unless you pay close attention, you might not notice that the name appeared three times with slightly different spellings.

Also consider adding your names to your word processor's dictionary. That way, the correct spellings will be accepted, and the misspelled versions will be flagged.

What if you didn't make a list of names as you went along? The following tips can help.

- Spellcheck, of course. If you pay attention, you'll find the variant spellings and can fix them.

- Search the file for the most likely typos. This works best on short words that have only a few variants. For example, if there's a creature named a woig, search for wiog and wogi.

- Search the file for partial forms of the word. For the name Lelyriane, search for "Lely" and make sure that all the subsequent letters are correct. (This doesn't help if you spelled "Lely" wrong.)

- Highlight all instances of what you know to be the correct spelling and change the color. Then in your final read-through, if you spot an uncolored name, you know it's wrong.

Fear the Dawizard

Some typos are legendary. While working at TSR in the 1990s, a few friends and I were leafing through hot-off-the-press copies of Encyclopedia Magica, Volume I. "Hey," one of us began, "why does it say this weapon does 1d6 points of . . . dawizard?" *Flip flip.* "Here's another spot that talks about dealing dawizard." *Flip flip flip.* "This page says if you look in the mirror, you see a dark iwizard."

To match TSR's house style, an editor had run a global search-and-replace on a file to change all instances of "mage" to "wizard." He hadn't thought about the effect on words like "damage" and "image." Only a portion of the book was affected, but the dawizard had been done.

You can guess the moral of the story. If you run a global search-and-replace in your file, check and approve each change. Yeah, it takes longer, but it's better than having your face turn wizardnta if you publish a book full of legendary typos.

Numbering

Numerous RPG writers use various vague terms for numbers in countless situations. (See what I did there?) Words like "numerous," "various," "countless," "endless," "multiple," and "many" are overused. Of course, they can be handy in the right circumstances. For example:

Example 1: The tundra is inhabited by predators.

Example 2: The tundra is inhabited by various predators.

What's the difference between these two sentences? I think Example 2 does a better job of emphasizing that the area has a wide range of things that can kill you. (You could also change it from a passive sentence to an active one: "Various predators inhabit the tundra." See Passive Voice on page 30 for more on this topic.)

Example 3: The shop brings in customers throughout the day.

Example 4: The shop brings in numerous customers throughout the day.

In this case, the word "numerous" adds little, since "throughout the day" already suggests that the shop gets a lot of foot traffic. To me, Example 3 is better. And you can improve it further by providing a more specific number: "The shop brings in dozens (or scores or hundreds) of customers throughout the day."

One generic phrase to avoid is "a number of" when used to mean "some." The same goes for variants like "a fraction of." Replace the vague term with a more specific one that will also help readers visualize the scene.

Before: A number of smaller towers surround the central spire.
After 1: A circle of smaller towers surrounds the central spire.
After 2: A circle of nine smaller towers surrounds the central spire. *(Specificity is good.)*

If visualizing the scene is not important, you might be able to replace "a number of" with a term like "several" or just delete it.

Before: The moon base has a number of shops where the heroes can buy supplies.
After 1: The moon base has several shops where the heroes can buy supplies.
After 2: The heroes can buy supplies at several shops in the moon base.

Before: The ore is mined from a number of sites across the wasteland.
After: The ore is mined from sites across the wasteland.

The related phrase "any number of" is different. Use it when you want to emphasize the variety or amount of something, but the exact number is not important.

> **Example 1**: If the PCs are caught infiltrating the cultists' temple, they might face any number of grisly dooms.

> **Example 2**: The saboteur can come up with any number of reasons to justify her crimes.

In these sentences, changing "any number of" to "some" or "several" changes the meaning. So when that sort of unknown variety is important, stick with "any number of."

Participles ("-ing" Verbs)

By design, this guide is mostly free of grammar jargon. I want to keep the advice simple. But we need to talk briefly about present participles, and I'll boil it down to the basics. A participle is a verb form that also fills the role of an adjective, and a present participle is one that ends in "-ing." If you say "The heroes see a squid riding a scooter," the word "riding" is the present participle form of the verb "ride." The phrase "riding a scooter" is sort of like a verb, but it's also sort of like an adjective because it describes a noun (the squid).

How does this apply to your writing? Go through your text and look for all forms of the verb "be" that are followed by a present participle—an *-ing* verb. In many cases, rewriting the sentence in the simple present or past tense (in other words, getting rid of the "be" verb and the *-ing* verb) makes that sentence stronger.

Here are some common forms of this construction and ways to revise them.

Present tense "be" verbs: am, are, is

> **Before:** The old curmudgeon is hoping to sire an heir.
> **After:** The old curmudgeon hopes to sire an heir.

Past tense "be" verbs: was, were

> **Before:** Her heart was hammering in her chest as the spotlights were sweeping the room.
> **After:** Her heart hammered in her chest as the spotlights swept the room.

(deep breath) Present perfect progressive tense "be" verbs: has been, have been

>   **Before:** The shaman has been leading the tribe for the past twenty years.
>   **After:** The shaman has led the tribe for the past twenty years.

Note that in each case, you're changing the *-ing* verb (hoping, hammering, sweeping, leading) to the present or past tense (hopes, hammered, swept, led), which packs a little more punch.

It's not a rule that you should avoid using "be" verbs with *-ing* verbs. In some cases, this construction works well. But it's extremely easy to overuse without realizing it. Skim your text to see how often it shows up, and consider whether switching a few to past or present would make your sentences stronger.

Party Time

When referring to the player characters as a party, remember that "party" is a singular noun. If you're writing in American English*, the word takes a singular pronoun ("it").

>   **Before:** When the party arrives, they find the halls deserted.
>   **After:** When the party arrives, it finds the halls deserted.

If you find "it" clunky, change the noun to "party members" or something similar and use a plural pronoun:

>   **After:** When the party members arrive, they find the halls deserted.

The same is true of similar terms like "group," "band," "company," "troop," and so on.

Another option is to avoid using words like party or group in narrative text. Instead, refer to the characters, the PCs, the heroes, or whatever plural term is preferred.

*In British English, a collective noun like "party" can be considered singular or plural, depending on context. Thus, when writing in that style, you can say "the party is" or "the party are."

Passive Voice

A sentence uses active voice when the subject of the sentence is doing the action, and it uses passive voice when something else is acting upon the subject.

>   **Active**: The dwarf chopped down the tree.
>   **Passive**: The tree was chopped down by the dwarf.

Sometimes people think the word "was" is always a signal of passive construction. Not necessarily! In the following sentence, the subject (the dwarf) is still doing the acting (was happy):

Active: The dwarf was happy after chopping down the tree.

There's nothing wrong with writing in the passive voice. The key is to use it sporadically, appropriately, so it has the desired effect.

For example, perhaps you want to emphasize the thing being acted upon instead of the thing doing the acting. Maybe you want to hide who or what is performing the action ("If the characters venture into the scientist's lab, they are attacked"), or maybe you want to focus on the recipient of the action ("Lord Krelgar, first of his name, leader of the free peoples, and unchallenged ruler of the Concrete Throne, was killed by a rabid mouse"). Another reason to use passive voice is to vary your sentence structure.

Overuse of passive voice, though, can weaken your writing. If you see many instances of it, determine whether they are necessary. More examples:

Passive: It was determined by the elders that the child was cursed.
Active: The elders determined that the child was cursed.

Passive: The PCs are asked by the ship's captain to find the stowaway.
Active: The ship's captain asks the PCs to find the stowaway.

Passive: The royal decree will be opposed by the rogue knights.
Active: The rogue knights will oppose the royal decree.

Passive: It may not be known by the heroes what the motivation behind the attack was.
Active: The heroes might not know what motivated the attack.

By Zombies

Rebecca Johnson, a professor with the US Marine Corps, came up with a neat trick to identify the passive voice. Add "by zombies" after the verb. If the sentence still makes grammatical sense, it is passive.

Before: The boy was chased through the graveyard.
After: The boy was chased by zombies through the graveyard.

The sentence didn't lose its meaning, so it's passive.

Before: The constable threw the ruffians out of town.
After: The constable threw by zombies the ruffians out of town.

That doesn't make sense, so the original sentence was active, not passive.

PLAYER CHARACTER ACTIONS

The players get to decide what their characters do in adventures. That's the whole point. So when writing adventure text, don't assume that the PCs take certain actions.

> **Before:** When the PCs open the vault door, the gas trap goes off.

What if they don't open the door? The simplest and most obvious solution is to use "if" instead:

> **After 1**: If the PCs open the vault door, they set off the gas trap.

But are the PCs the only ones who might open the door? What if the underground vault is also inhabited by a tribe of fun-loving koala priests? If one of them opens the door, would that also set off the gas trap? Probably (unless the trap was designed to target only the characters). So you can take the revision one step further and write something like this:

> **After 2**: Opening the vault door sets off the gas trap.

That gives the game master the information needed to determine what happens if the PCs, a koala priest, or anyone else opens the door.

A harder-to-spot version of this problem is assuming that nothing happens or even exists unless the PCs trigger it. For example:

> **Before:** If the characters break out of prison, there is a hidden tunnel in the yard that leads to the forest.

What if they fail to break out of prison? Does the tunnel magically disappear? No, it's still there, albeit undiscovered by the PCs. Write your text to account for the fact that things happen and exist in the world regardless of what the heroes do.

> **After:** A hidden tunnel in the yard leads to the forest. If the characters break out of prison, they might discover the tunnel and use it to escape.

"You Do This" — "No, We Don't!"

Here's a tip that involves two topics: player text and player character actions. When writing text that the GM will read aloud to players, don't dictate PC actions.

> **GM (reading aloud):** You enter the docking bay and see crates of spilled cargo. As you examine the crates—
>
> **Players:** No way! We don't go near the crates!

Write read-aloud text that describes the scene and perhaps entices characters into performing certain actions, but don't prescribe what the PCs do (or don't do).

Player Text vs. GM Text

First I'll state the obvious: some text is meant for the game master to read aloud to the players, and some is written for the GM's eyes only. A player description of a room might say, "A colorful mural covers most of the south wall," whereas the GM description might add, "The mural hides a secret hatch that leads to the airport's master control panel."

It's easy to recognize the distinction on big issues like where a secret hatch is found or whether the friendly woodcarver is actually a murderer. The GM can tell what information to share with the players and what to withhold. But it can be harder to spot on smaller issues. Here's a player description meant to be read aloud:

> **Before:** A path of stepping stones leads across the wide stream, but the slippery rocks aren't stable.

That gives the players information their characters don't have—that the stones are slick and will be difficult to cross. Instead, convey the scene more descriptively (After 1) or just keep it simple (After 2).

> **After 1**: A path of stepping stones leads across the wide stream. The rocks, which are wet enough to reflect the sunlight, have not yet been worn smooth by the rushing water.
>
> **After 2**: A path of stepping stones leads across the wide stream.

In the After 2 example, if the PCs inquire further about the stones, the GM can provide more details that you included apart from the read-aloud text.

Player vs. Character

Some games use the terms "player" and "character" synonymously. Most draw a distinction between the player (the person sitting at the game table) and the character (the fictional persona run by the player). Setting and rules text should refer to "the characters," and metatext about the game itself should refer to "the players."

> **Before:** Have the character roll a d20.
> **After:** Have the player roll a d20.

> **Before:** The players should stock up before assaulting the keep.
> **After:** The characters should stock up before assaulting the keep.

> **Before:** If the station commander wins, she kills all the players.
> **After:** If the station commander wins, she kills all the characters.

Also take note of the publisher's preferred terms for in-game characters. Should you use "characters"? "Player characters"? "PCs"? "Heroes"? "Adventurers"? Any or all of those?

Power

The word "power" in all its forms is overused in RPG writing. I see sentences like these all the time:

- The staff is powered by an embedded ruby, granting its wielder the power to teleport once a day.

- A powerful aura of peace keeps the dark powers of this region of space at bay and reduces their power over the nearby settled worlds.

- The mayor is the most powerful person in town, though her powers don't extend to control of the dogcatcher, who is quietly amassing his own power base among the canines.

Power/powerful can have different meanings depending on the context, so mix things up a bit with synonyms. Here are some to get you started.

Power (physical): brawn, heft, might, prowess, strength, vigor, vitality

Power (influence): authority, clout, control, influence, potency, prestige, standing, stature

Power (the ability to do something): ability, capability, capacity, means, potential; and don't forget you can rewrite the sentence (from "The staff gives you the power to teleport once a day" to "The staff allows you to teleport once a day")

Powerful: ascendant, authoritative, commanding, compelling, controlling, dominant, forceful, formidable, hale, influential, mighty, potent, puissant (bonus: RPG writers love that word!)

Powered: charged, energized, fueled, sustained

Pronouns and Antecedents

Don't refer to something before you've identified it. For example:

> **Before:** As soon as she realizes that they have infiltrated her castle, the evil tyrant sets a trap for the heroes.

In the first part of the sentence, who is *she*? Who are *they*? You don't know what those pronouns refer to until you finish the sentence. In this case, "she" refers to the evil tyrant (the antecedent for the pronoun "she") and "they" refers to the heroes (the antecedent for the pronoun "they"). The prefix "ante" (which means "before") might help you remember that the antecedent should come first, just like an antechamber is a waiting room that comes before the main room.

> **After:** As soon as the evil tyrant realizes that the heroes have infiltrated her castle, she sets a trap for them.

Here's another example.

> **Before:** Years ago, to protect his people from its stench, the king had the polluted lake drained.

At first you don't know what "its" refers to. The antecedent lags behind.

> **After 1**: Years ago, to protect his people from the stench of the polluted lake, the king had it drained.

Moving "the polluted lake" so it appears before the pronoun helps. But the pronoun "his" still appears before its antecedent. Let's fix that one too.

> **After 2**: Years ago, the king had the polluted lake drained to protect his people from its stench.

RUN-ON SENTENCES

Most likely, you learned about run-on sentences in school. But many writers still have an aversion to periods (or an unhealthy love of commas). Perhaps long sentences are your style. Just keep in mind that when the goal is to be understood, sometimes by a reader who is skimming the text, it might help to break up long, elaborate sentences into several shorter ones.

> **Before:** Any tourists who don't have a stamped writ of passage must register with the city watch to be assigned quarters in the converted asylum, known as "the Nuthouse" by the townsfolk, a ramshackle dormitory run by the duke's flunkies, who keep a constant eye out for spies from Kolarum or goons from the Rutabaga Ruffians to prevent such undesirables from worming their way into the city.
>
> **After 1**: Any tourists who don't have a stamped writ of passage must register with the city watch to be assigned quarters in the converted asylum, known as "the Nuthouse" by the townsfolk. This ramshackle dormitory is run by the duke's flunkies, who keep a constant eye out for spies from Kolarum or goons from the Rutabaga Ruffians to prevent such undesirables from worming their way into the city.
>
> **After 2**: Any tourists who don't have a stamped writ of passage must register with the city watch to be assigned quarters in the converted asylum. Known as "the Nuthouse" by the townsfolk, the ramshackle dormitory is run by the duke's flunkies. They keep a constant eye out for spies from Kolarum or goons from the Rutabaga Ruffians to prevent such undesirables from worming their way into the city.

Ideally, don't have too many short, declarative sentences in a row, and don't have too many long, complex sentences in a row. Vary sentence length so your writing has a flow, a musical quality to it, and is more interesting to read.

SPECIFICITY

Since RPG content is meant to convey information to the reader, specific details are usually better than general descriptions. This is especially true when writing GM material. Don't describe a structure as "a huge tower" if you can call it "an 80-foot tower." Don't say that a planet's crater is home to a handful of space spiders if you can say it contains six space spiders. The GM might not share every detail with the players as the game unfolds, but the more specifics the GM has, the better.

In addition, watch out for overuse of "some," and try not to use that word without another noun too often.

Before: Some in the land are not happy.

Some what? Some peasants? Some weasels? Some turnips?

After: Some residents of the land are not happy.

Context is important. If a reader can reasonably infer what "some" refers to, maybe you don't need to change it. Turnips lack the capacity for being unhappy (unless your RPG setting is *really* interesting), so that noun is out of contention. But in general, if you can be more specific, do.

The Terrible TOs

This section covers variations on a theme: *able to, going to, manage to, seem/tend to,* and *serve to.* In many cases, cutting or recasting them will tighten your text.

ABLE TO

The phrase "able to" is often used when not necessary.

Before: Some of the peasants have been able to master the art of woodworking.
After: Some of the peasants have mastered the art of woodworking.

Before: The investigator is able to scale the sheer walls of the skyscraper.
After: The investigator can scale the sheer walls of the skyscraper.

Before: If the PCs are able to spot the impostor in time, they will be able to head off her schemes.
After: If the PCs spot the imposter in time, they can head off her schemes.

Is it wrong to use "able to" in a sentence? No. But much of the time, it's not needed.

GOING TO

Check to see if "going to" is overused. It's appropriate when moving from one place to another ("The heroes are going to the docks"). But when the phrase refers to a future event, you often can replace it with the correct form of "will."

Before: That's not going to do him any good.
After: That won't do him any good.

Before: It's going to be hard to balance an ogre on your head.
After: It will be hard to balance an ogre on your head.

Before: Someday she's going to go too far.
After: Someday she'll go too far.

Rule of thumb: If "going to" is followed by a verb, that usage can probably be tightened. In the examples above, "going to" is followed by verbs (do, be, go). But if you say "I'm going to the laundromat," the next word after "going to" is not a verb, so that example is not a good candidate for rewriting.

MANAGE TO

Heroes and NPCs have it rough. They don't just do something; they *manage to* do it. They don't break down a door—they *manage to* break down a door. "Manage to" is appropriate when you want to emphasize that a task is especially challenging. But writers often overuse the term. Your sentences might be stronger without it.

Before: If the PCs manage to drive off the goblins, they can loot the stored goods.
After: If the PCs drive off the goblins, they can loot the stored goods.

Before: Townsfolk who manage to reach the church roof can stay dry during the flood.
After: Townsfolk who reach the church roof can stay dry during the flood.

Before: The hangman manages to stay busy because the guards arrest people for even the smallest offenses.
After: The hangman stays busy because the guards arrest people for even the smallest offenses. *(Here's a case where you definitely should not use "manages to" because if the guards arrest lots of people, it's easy for the hangman to stay busy. And if it fits the context, you could also change "hangman" to a gender-neutral term like "executioner." See page 11.)*

SEEM/TEND TO

The same goes for "seem to" and "tend to" (in all their forms). Much of the time, when you're simply stating facts, those phrases are unnecessary.

Before: The water in the factory's reservoir seems to have been poisoned.
After: The water in the factory's reservoir has been poisoned.

Before: The giant birds in the area tend to stay close to their mountain nests.
After: The giant birds in the area stay close to their mountain nests.

Sometimes those phrases are useful. In the water example, if you want to convey that the PCs only *think* the reservoir has been tampered with, saying the water "seems to have been poisoned" might be the better choice. Intention is important.

SERVE TO

In RPG writing, things are always serving to do other things. Check your text for excessive uses of the phrase "serve to" (in all its forms) and cut some out.

Before: The massive dome serves to protect the city from meteor showers.
After: The massive dome protects the city from meteor showers.

Before: The illusion served to heighten their sense of foreboding.
After: The illusion heightened their sense of foreboding.

Before: Dabbing on the perfume can serve to keep the swamp muckers at bay.
After: Dabbing on the perfume can keep the swamp muckers at bay.

Breaking the Rules

You've probably heard that you need to learn the rules of writing before you can break them. Once you know what you're supposed to do, it's fine to stretch, bend, or outright break the rules occasionally to achieve a desired effect. For example, if a brand-new writer uses a lot of sentence fragments, it might give the impression that she doesn't know any better. But once she demonstrates her understanding of the rules, throwing in fragments now and then signals that she's doing it intentionally. In other words, learn the craft, and then make it your own.

There are different degrees of rules, too. "End a sentence with some form of punctuation" is a decent rule. "Never use adverbs" is not a rule, though some people will tell you it is.

When you break a rule for a good reason, include a note for your editor. Sometimes it's a way to prevent the editor from fixing your "error." Other times, it's a way to start a discussion. For example, if you design a race of critters that have six genders and you use a series of nonstandard gender pronouns, don't just slip that in without running it by your editor.

Questions to Ask Your Editor/Publisher

You should be given the information below before you start writing. If not, be sure to ask.

- Will you get a contract to review and sign?

- Do you need to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA)?

- Should you use specific styles or formatting in your word processor? How about for headers and subheads? Is there a document template file?

- Is there a publisher or game style guide? If not, are you expected to create one? (If you *are* expected to create a guide, you'll have to ask how to handle game terms, die expressions, numerals, and a million other things.)

- What's the project's word count? Don't assume it's fine to go over the limit, because then the editor has to decide what to cut or revise.

- Is it okay to use singular "they"? If not, how should you handle pronouns?

- Should you leave blank space in the file for art and maps, or is it enough to include an art or map callout (such as a line that says "Map of castle foyer goes here")?

- How should you detail the art and maps needed for the project?

- How should you denote placeholders in the text for page numbers or other information that will be filled in later? XX? ##?

- What's the deadline, and if you miss it, which fingers get chopped off first?

Other Resources

As mentioned, if you're writing for a publisher, get a copy of their house style guide, their preferred general style guide (such as *Chicago* or the *AP*), and their preferred dictionary. Those are required. And it's a good idea to have these resources even when writing for yourself.

Then what? Where else can you turn for assistance? If you search for grammar help online, you'll find a million answers and might not be sure which are correct. Here are some free online resources that I've found to be reliable and easy to follow.

GRAMMAR GIRL
http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

DAILY WRITING TIPS
http://www.dailywritingtips.com

GRAMMARGEDDON
http://grammargeddon.com/
(I've contributed to this blog in the past)

GRAMMARPHOBIA
http://www.grammarphobia.com/blog

GRAMMAR UNDERGROUND
http://www.grammarunderground.com/

CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE HYPHENATION TABLE
http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/16/images/ch07_tab01.pdf

You need a subscription to access most of the CMoS online, but the hyphenation table is available for free. It shows when and how to hyphenate different kinds of compound words.

All links work as of July 31, 2017.

CHECK YOURSELF
BEFORE YOU WRECK YOURSELF

This might go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: before you submit your work to an editor, developer, or publisher, read it over once or twice or ten times. Here are some proofreading tips:

- Read a printout, not on screen. This comes down to preference, but I find it much more effective. You read more slowly and can mark up the pages with corrections and notes. Also, sometimes you get deep into the printout and realize that you marked previous things incorrectly. When it's time to enter your changes in the file, you can ignore those marks rather than undo them.

- That said, have the file open on screen at the same time. When you encounter a word and you're not sure how you spelled it elsewhere in the document, you can quickly search and find each instance.

- If you lose your place easily, put a ruler, a sheet of colored paper, or something similar under each line as you read.

- Read the text aloud. This method takes longer, but sounding words out can help you find errors.

- Treat contractions as speed bumps. Slow down and sound out the full words. When I see "it's," I say "it is" to be sure the contraction is correct in context. Same for you're, they're, and so on.

- Read the text backward. Seeing the words out of context helps you focus on the spelling.

- If you created a list of names or other terms (see page 26), keep it handy for cross-referencing.

- Watch for missing words ("The room is full water") or wrong words ("The room in full of water").

- Check the punctuation. It's easy to mistake commas and periods when reading.

- Run a spellcheck, but don't mindlessly accept suggestions. Most word processor spellcheckers are flawed, but when used well, they're better than nothing.

- If you're using Microsoft Word, don't bother with the grammar check. I've found it to be *worse* than nothing because it offers many incorrect suggestions along with its useless ones.

- If you're self-publishing, do yourself a huge favor and get another set of eyes (whether an editor or a proofreader) to check the final text, even if you have to pay for a professional.

- Most important, give it your best effort, but don't beat yourself up if a few typos slip through. It happens to eveyrone.

About the Author

Ray Vallese has been editing (and sometimes writing) roleplaying games and fiction for more than twenty years, working on projects for TSR, Wizards of the Coast, Paizo Publishing, Monte Cook Games, Kobold Press, inXile Entertainment, RiotMinds, MuHa Games, Malhavoc Press, and other fine purveyors of quality material, both in and out of the games industry. Feel free to look him up on social media or visit www.rayvallese.com.

A Style Guide with Style

Writing With Style: An Editor's Advice for RPG Writers presents 45 pages of concise tips on simple ways to make your roleplaying game writing cleaner and clearer. This guide doesn't show you how to structure adventures, build stat blocks, or create worlds. Instead, Ray Vallese looks at some of the most common and easily fixable grammar and style issues he's encountered in over twenty years of editing RPGs.

Rookie freelancers, industry veterans, and self-publishers alike can benefit from this (mostly) jargon-free guide, which addresses such topics as:

- Recasting passive voice into active voice (and when you might not want to)
- Dangling participles and other misplaced modifiers
- Gender-specific and gender-neutral language
- Commonly confused words, empty words, and clichés to avoid
- Choice and possibility in player character actions
- Final things to check before submitting your manuscript

Tighten and polish your text with these quick and easy tips!