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Beyond Spellchecker: Ten Common Content Mistakes (Almost) Everybody Makes

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Use a spellchecker at your own risk! "Satcom" can become "sitcom" in the blink of an eye. (Not far from the truth.) Beyond spelling and basic grammar, there are other writing faux pas just waiting to trip you up. Why should you care if your ezine English isn't perfect? Because your readers do! Errors, typos and improper grammar are little things that make a big difference in how professional you and your ezine look to your audience. And if your ezine's sloppy, what does that say about your other services? I'm not talking "The King's English" here. Good, personalized copy reflects the way we talk and makes liberal use of incomplete sentences and sentences that start with "and" or "but." But there's no excuse for typos. The ten errors listed below are the ones I see often.

1. Horrible, Handy Hyphens

Ezine or e-zine? E-mail or email? Guess what — as soon as you think you know the rule, it changes! Generally, a hyphen is used when needed for clarity. Here's a classic example from a church bulletin: *"Our parishioners have cast off clothing of every kind. They can be seen in the church basement Saturday."* Really? Now that would be something to see! Better to say: *"Our parishioners have donated cast-off clothing of every kind."* Data sheets with lots of product adjectives often go hyphen-hysterical in the name of clarity: *low-cost, high-power, high-quality, small-footprint widgets*. Just remember that new words, such as e-zine and e-mail, start off being hyphenated for understandability, then someone uses the term without the hyphen and before you know it, the hyphen evaporates. If you're not sure whether to drop the hyphen, search the Web for the most common usage and go with the flow.

2. Compound Wordiness

Online or on line (or even on-line?) Log on or logon? Website or web site? New concepts often start out as two words and then get hyphenated, then someone drops the hyphen and we all follow suit (see Rule #1). To decide whether or not to compound, consider how you use the words. If it's a verb, it's usually two words (Set up the system and log on to the site.) but a noun gets compounded (He realized that this was a setup so he changed his logon.).

3. Capitalization Catastrophes

WWW or www? Web vs. web? It all depends on HOW you're using the term. If you're writing about parts of the Web, as in web pages, web sites, web copywriters, it's lower case. If you're referring to the Web, it's a proper noun, so give it the respect it's due. Now as far as capitalizing words for emphasis, remember, less is more.

4. Grammar Goblins

My favorite is "affect" (always a verb) vs. "effect" (sometimes a verb, sometimes a noun). "Good grammar can affect the readability of my ezine. It will have a positive effect." But there's also

the less common use of effect as a verb, as in, "You should effect the grammar rules immediately." (Personally, I've NEVER used effect as a verb. It's simpler that way.)

5. Amazing Apostrophes

It's (a contraction for it is) vs. its (a possessive noun without an apostrophe.) Same possessive-exception rule applies to whose (as in "Whose ezine is this?) vs. who's (a contraction for who is). Aaaaarrggghhh! English sure is an exceptional language!

6. Interesting Italics

The names of *newspapers* and *magazine articles* often appear in italics. But then, so do many other words we want to emphasize. Be a trailblazer. Use italics as it pleases you.

7. Which Hunts

Not witch (a.k.a. Wicca) vs. which (as in which one), but "which vs. that" usage that even editors don't agree on. Good rule of thumb: if the phrase sounds better with commas, or if you can substitute the two-word phrase "that which," use which. Or use "that" whenever possible and then go have a cheese sandwich, which you've made with bread that you bought at the store.

8. Comma, comma, and comma

Do you really need the comma after the word "and"? No (comma), unless it enhances readability. For example (comma), you have a list of rules, a list of groceries, a list of your favorite restaurants, and many things to do today.

9. Qiviut Quotations for Qintars and Qophs

I just had to use words where "Q" is not followed by a "U." My point here is that the last punctuation mark in a sentence is always always always INSIDE the quotation marks, even when it looks stupid, like it does in the previous sentence. This is a typesetter's rule and if you break it, they'll come back to haunt you. (For all you non-Scrabble™ fans, Qiviut is an Eskimo word for musk-ox wool, qintar is Albanian money and qoph is the 19th letter of the Hebrew alphabet.)

10. Absolutely Awful Abbreviations and Acronyms

This isn't really an abbreviation, but it's something I see so often, I have to mention it. In text copy, any number less than ten is spelled out. One, two, three, etc. Over ten and you can use numerals. Talk about a free-for-all (now that's a good example using hyphens), I think organizations should have to apply for an acronym license. From the humble beginnings of television becoming TV, there are now hundreds of thousands of recognized acronyms. For the most mind-numbing list I've even seen, visit the Sensors Directorate Air Force Research Lab Web Site at <http://www.sn.afri.af.mil/acronym.htm> Want to make up your own acronyms? Go to <http://www.acronymfinder.com/buzzgen.asp>? As will many other rules in grammar, use it often enough and it may be the new standard.

Happy Writing!