



# GWU Clinical Research Administration Program Newsletter

## Writers Clinic: The Editor's Curse...

Even when I'm not working, I am cursed with an inability to turn off the editor part of my brain. In my defense, however, I'm not the only one. None of the editors I know -- and I know dozens of them -- is able to turn it off.

Once, I even saw one of them write corrections in a library book (we all do it to our own books). We shudder at the misplaced apostrophe in "ham and egg's" on a menu. We roll our eyes at misspelled words on roadside signs.

We may chuckle upon reading "Investigators and their staff may omit an adverse event from a case report form," and ask "All those investigators and one staff?"

### The Curse in Action

Lately I've taken to talking back to television and radio sets. I groan when the weatherman says that tomorrow's high will be "between 80 to 85."

"Oh, yeah," I mutter, "and last night at the movies I sat *between* Rich to Edith."

"Both?" I ask the announcer who begins a news story by *saying*, "Both the police, the courts, and the victims . . ."

"The word *both*," I tell the car radio with a *sneer*, "is used with *and* to indicate that each of two things... is included" ([www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com)). Two things, not three, not four.

The guy next to me at a stoplight has been known to give me a quizzical look -- that, too, is part of the curse.

As for my own writing? I'm my most critical editor. Take my recent column on obstacles to clarity. When I got my copy of the newsletter, I asked myself, "How could I have left out my favorite example of a dangler?" The one imbedded in my brain in 1951 by my freshman

English professor at Seattle University. The one that clearly demonstrates the confusion imparted when "a descriptive clause or phrase . . . is in the wrong part of the sentence" (<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/copyXediting/Grammar.html>): Completely stewed, she took the prunes from the stove.

### Preserving Clear Expression

The editor's curse is only part of the reason I get worked up when English gaffes are printed in respected publications and spoken with authority on radio and television. What really bothers me about publishing sloppy writing is the deleterious effect it has on clear expression in the rest of the population.

When people repeatedly see and hear substandard language, it begins to look normal to them. When illogical phrases are seen as normal, people begin, subconsciously, to use them as models. As I wrote in an earlier column, students who make it a point to read critically "won't assume that getting into print necessarily makes a passage lucid and logical."

### Meeting Grading Criteria

A number of CRA faculty members use the words *clarity* and *logic* in their grading criteria. Here are some ideas that can improve the odds that faculty will see your writing as clear and logical.

**Plan ahead.** Try to complete writing assignments two or three days before they are due. Then, set the paper aside for 24 to 48 hours, read it again with a fresh eye, and make changes -- some will leap out at you -- to improve its logic and clarity.

**Read aloud.** A valuable step is to read your paper aloud and really listen to what it says. When you use the word *versus*, does it still make sense when you

substitute *against*? When you use comparative words, ask yourself "Faster than what?" "Larger than what?"

**Enlist family and friends.** Ask a colleague or family member to read your paper. Choose someone who is curious and outspoken, someone who will read a sentence back to you with a puzzled look on her face and ask, "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

**Learn from mistakes.** Even when your paper earns a high grade, you'll probably receive some faculty comments to think about. Noting them carefully can help guide your next writing assignment.

**Read critically.** Be alert and "listen" for logic whenever you read anything. Learn to smirk knowingly when you spot illogical nonsense, such as, "Standing in the doorway, the pot roast smelled delicious."

### We Learn in Different Ways

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of grammar, usage, and style books are available. APA's *Publication Manual* (on pages 369-370) lists 10 excellent books on writing style. Half of them -- dog-eared and bristling with yellow stickies -- are on my shelves. Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* (on pages 223-225) lists discipline-specific style manuals. Find reference books you are comfortable using. then refer to them frequently.

Clear, logical, concise, engaging writing can not only help you shine academically, but can also improve your job performance and prospects for promotion.



~Jane Ganter

