

Fish & Wildlife Service – National Conservation Training Center
Critical Writing/Critical Thinking Follow-up Web Series
GPO Refresher—Review of Grammar and Style Reference Works

Speakers: Michelle Baker (MB) Karene Motivans (KM)

[audio start]

MB: We're going to be talking today about some of the reference works that we had the chance to only briefly touch on during the class itself. So today we're going to take a closer look at some of the grammar handbooks that can be excellent references for your offices. We're going to look at the difference between a grammar handbook and a style manual. And we're going to talk about the style manual that is most relevant to your work, which is the GPO. So we're going to do a brief overview of the GPO. We're going to look at some of its online features. And then we're going to conclude today's discussion with a GPO scavenger hunt that you can do on your own time.

So, if everyone's ready to go, let's get started. We're here on our PowerPoint Presentation, and the first thing that I'd like to do is to remind us all of the difference between style and grammar. So here on this little map, you'll see that in my imaginary world, I work down here on Route 44, and I have several options that I can take to go home at the end of my day. If I like the scenic route, then I can take Route 44 and turn left onto 17 and kind of wind my way through the countryside as I make my way home.

If I prefer a more direct route, then I can take 44 straight through. But if you remember the Writer's Triangle, which is set against the circle of Context, then you might recall that there could be some context on this road that would prevent me from taking it. Maybe, for example, there tends to be a lot of traffic on Route 44, or there are some speed traps set up on this road. So the context might make me prefer Route 17.

On the other hand, if I need to stop at the store before I go home, I have a purpose. And that purpose is probably going to lead me to choose Route 44, regardless of the context. This, road map home, is very much like the style when we write a document. When we sit down to write a letter or a paragraph, we have a variety of subjects that we can choose from, any of which can become the subject of our first sentence, kind of like my decision to go straight or turn left when I leave work. On the other hand, regardless of which route I choose, there are still rules that I have to follow on the way home. For example, I have to behave myself and stop at all the stop signs and yield at all the yield signs, I have to keep my car on my side of the road, and travel the speed limit. In the same way, there are grammar rules that I have to follow or I run the risk, not of getting pulled over and getting a ticket, but of misunderstanding, people not getting my message.

So that set of rules, we refer to as grammar. Later in today's session, I'm going to ask you folks to define style yourself. So you may want to grab a pen right now and jot down a couple of thoughts based on what we just talked about. But for right now, we're going to take a look at how this would apply to a writing situation.

What I'm going to do now is open up a question for all of us. You'll be able to answer the question on your own computer by selecting one of the four answers. You're writing a letter to a local organization denying their request for a refuge activity. How would you close that letter? Would you say, very truly yours? Or, sincerely? Would you give the person your regards? Or sign off with warmly?

You've got about two minutes to select an answer on your own computer, and then we'll be able to look at everyone's results together.

Most of you selected B, that you would respond "sincerely." But, this is actually a style question. Your choice is going to depend on several different factors. For example, your relationship to the organization or the specific person who made the request. Also, the tone of your letter. If you were trying to be warm and friendly then something like "very truly yours" or "warmly" might serve your purpose better. You may also have either a personal preference or a supervisor's preference for how you're supposed to close the letters in your office. So essentially this is a style question, and the answer to it is going to depend on all the elements of the writing triangle: author, audience, purpose, and context.

Let's try this again with a grammar question this time. So here's your question. Does the following sentence require a comma? Two choices—yes or no. "The service prefers not to make decisions without adequate research, and we have not had sufficient time to conduct testing according to the latest scientific standards. Now I'm not going to ask you where the comma should go. Just, does it need one? And I'll give you a few minutes to answer.

And, believe it or not, we have a nearly equal tie between yes and no.

We're still working out some of the technology here, so I'm trying to send the poll results to all of you. I'm not sure whether you're going to be able to see those or not.

By the way, in case you're interested, the answer is yes. The sentence does require a comma. And it requires a comma right here, between the words "research" and "and." The reason for that is because this sentence has two independent clauses. In other words, it's two complete sentences that have been joined together with a coordinating conjunction.

[...] this question does have a right or a wrong answer. A wrong answer would run the risk of misunderstanding or miscommunication. And the right answer can be discovered in a number of different places. We refer to these as grammar handbook, and there is simply a huge selection available on the market today. What I've done is to select four of the most popular top sellers that have been around for a really long time so you can be assured that they're credible and that they're going to be there with updates in a few years, not some fly-by-night organization.

We have all of the bibliographic and online information for all four of these resources, and we will share that with at the end of today's webinar. So you'll be able to download this material. It is also available right here in a Word document form, and this is how you'll receive it at the end of today's webinar. What I'm going to do with you at this point is share with you some of the online features that these four grammar handbooks have to offer. So I'm going to switch to show you my desktop here in Shepherdstown. You're actually going to be able to see my computer as I navigate it. And what you should see be able to see right now is an Internet Explorer browser with a large number of tabs open. The page that we're on is Heinle Cengage Learning. And you should also be able to see the video down in the bottom right hand corner. If anybody has difficulty with that, use your chat feature to send a message to Karene, and Karene can let me know.

So let's get started with our first, which is Hodges' Harbrace Handbook. The difficulty with Hodges' online is very simply that their URL is a beast. And so I did not put it in that Word document. Instead, I put in the home page for Heinle Cengage, and I'm doing a search for Hodges' Harbrace Handbook. Once I get to the page, and at this point, I'm going to turn the video off so that you can concentrate on the screen, I'm selecting the companion site to the faculty edition. Most of these online websites have been designed so that students and instructors can communicate with one another via the internet. So a lot of these have log-in sections for students and instructors. But you don't have to be registered or logged-in in order to make use of the resources that are here.

You'll see that the entire Hodges' Harbrace Handbook is listed by chapter in a drop-down box. We're going to visit Chapter 14, the Semicolon, so you can get a taste for how these different tools operate. The animated example offers little more than the content that is actually in the Harbrace in a slightly interactive way. So you see, there are two ways that the semicolon is normally used. And when I select both of them, there's a textbox with a little bit of animation around it. The next feature that Hodges' offers is "Beyond the Rules," which gives a little history of the semicolon. While grammar geeks like myself might be interested in that kind of detail, I doubt that very many of us have time on the job for it. What you're probably more interested in is the composition interactive, which is where there's a nice online exercise. You'll see that in this box there is an example sentence. And I'm supposed to figure out where my semicolon belongs. As I scroll down, there are a set at the bottom of selections that I can make.

So, I'm going to click in my box, and I'm going to select that comma, and immediately the website tells me that that comma is fine just the way it is, and it does not need to be replaced with a semicolon. The other thing I can do is select here, and put my semicolon in the box, hit enter. You'll see that it placed the semicolon there almost like an editing mark. And then if I select answer, it will tell me that that was correct. So this chapter has five exercises altogether, and they all work pretty much this same way.

Another option that you can consider is the Hacker Writer's Reference. Again, most of these websites are designed to accompany books that have been sold to college freshman. So Hacker's Writer's Reference and all the other grammar handbooks include basic writing sections—material, for example, on how to prepare a paper, how to create a calendar for your research. Most of that material is too introductory for your needs. Hacker is one exception. She has writing exercises on her website that are geared toward the Writer's Triangle and that can help you if you've got a case of writer's block or if you need assistance with tone. Hacker does request a login, but you can click "cancel" and bypass that process.

I'm going to select the first exercise, which is for purpose and audience. And as it loads, you'll see that it asks you a context-oriented question: which passage would be more effective in a campus newspaper article criticizing the food in a cafeteria's vending machine? The first answer, "first and foremost," or the second answer, "when I turned to the machine." When I select the second option, I'm immediately given my feedback. This answer is "correct." And it gives me the reason why, a little explanation. If I go to the next, and select the wrong answer, it also provides me with an explanation, not just the fact that my answer was incorrect. So for this reason a lot of people like Diana Hacker's Writer's Reference website.

A third option is the Little, Brown Handbook. Little, Brown has an online set of exercises that are fairly extensive and that provide comprehensive feedback. In order to watch the video tutorials, you do have to place an add-on on your computer that some of your offices might be a little uncomfortable with. But the exercises don't require that. The one drawback to the Little, Brown exercises is that they're presented in groups of ten, and you have to answer all of them in order to get your feedback. So it's a slightly longer amount of time, but the feedback is much more comprehensive. You'll see that I probably would have failed this exercise, since I only got 60% of the answers correct. There are explanations provided. They're not quite as detailed as the ones that are on Hacker, but they probably contain all the information that I need.

Finally, the St. Martin's online website provides quick, top 20 resources such as the following information about spelling. This is a nice resource to have right at your fingertips. It does repeat verbatim the information that's in the text. So if you have your grammar handbook handy, it may be just as easy to open it up and take a look. Also, it doesn't provide the kind of interactive feedback that you may like. In order to get to the exercise section, you do have to register, and only parts of the exercises are available online. So this is a good, quick refresher source.

Alright then. That covers our discussion of grammar. And the reference handbooks that are available to you. Okay. And what I'm trying to do now is to get us back to our PowerPoint Presentation, and we're almost there. Whoops! I got just a little bit ahead of myself.

At this point, I'm going to open up poll number three, and I'm going to ask you to go back to that question I asked earlier, which was, what is your definition of style? So if

you've been jotting down a few thoughts throughout today's discussion, think back to the map that we talked about just a few minutes ago, and think also about the Writer's Triangle. Go ahead and type a quick response, just 15 or 20 words, and send it in. You have about 2 minutes to do that.

Alright. We have just about 2 minutes left on that poll. While you're finishing that up, we're going to review a couple of the common style manuals. I'd like to point out that there are several organizations that publish a lot of documents, often in a specific discipline or area of study. And so those organizations will commonly make collective decisions about style and ask all of their authors and publications to abide by those. So, many of these are associated with professional organizations. For example, the Modern Language Association, which consists of English professors as well as Art Historians and others in the Humanities. Likewise, the formerly Council of Biology Editors. Now I believe they're known as the Council of Science Editors. They have a professional organization, they meet on a periodic basis, and they make decisions about publications in their field. Other styles are dictated by a press, either university or public that frequently publishes writing in a specific discipline. For this reason, there are a lot of Chicago presses that publish works in History, and so we've got the Chicago Style Manual, which is commonly used by Historians. That's also sometimes referred to as "Turabian," although that practice is going out of style since Kate Turabian died about a decade ago.

For all of you though, the style manual that you should be familiar with and that you will be using in most of your documents is the GPO. That is, the United States Government Printing Office Style Manual, and that mouthful is the reason that we more often call it the GPO. Alright, so at this point it looks like everybody's responded to the poll that will respond to the poll. And I'm selecting to share with you the poll results.

Alright, so the GPO is the style manual that you folks should be using. I'm going to go back to the participant list and I'd like to see a little green checkmark, how many of you have actually used the GPO as you're writing a document in your office? Can I see a green checkmark? How many of you? Wow! I see that Grant and Heidi, Jan and Jesse, all kinds of folks have used the GPO in their own writing. But what I'm also seeing is that a lot of you have not, that this is something that you haven't either had the opportunity or been required to use. So, what we're going to do for the rest of today's session is take a look at how the GPO works.

While we did include a CD in your notebook of the GPO, they have updated it just in April of this year, and that's the new 2008 edition. So, we're going to go online and once again, I'm going to share my desktop so that you can see where the online version of the GPO is located. Once again, these links are available to you in a Word document that you'll be able to download at the end of today's webinar. So, the new edition of the style manual, there's a few bullet points right here of the updates that they have made. So if you already have a print copy of the style manual in your office, you may not need to update that with the purchase of a new copy. You might just wish to do a double check online to make sure that the rule is still the same. But if you don't have a copy at

your office, if you're interested in getting one, at this site, you can order the paper version, the hard cover version, or the CD-ROM. So if any of you are interested in having a hard copy of the GPO in your office available for yourself and your co-workers to use, this is the website where you can order it.

It does have an online search feature that can be helpful. There are just two limitations that I'd like to point out to you. If you enter a broad search, like for example, comma rules, the first hit that you get on the website is for Chapter 19, the Congressional Record. There's a special set of comma rules for hearings, reports, and things that come out of Congress. Likewise, Chapter 13 on Tabular Work has a different set of comma rules, and it's not about commas as they appear in sentences, which is probably what you're looking for. So what you really need is Chapter 8, Punctuation. But you probably could have figured that out by doing a browse function and the search comma rules may not really be that helpful to you.

The second caution that I would have is if you have a very specific search, like for example the word workforce. The dictionary says that the word workforce can be spelled three different ways. It can be two words with a space between "work" and "force." It can be one word, compounded. Or it can be a hyphenated word. So the way you choose to spell it is dependent on your style manual. But when you type in the word workforce, the two hits, Chapter 16, and then the Query Report, which is the summary of the search you just did, are both irrelevant to your search. So, search feature is helpful, but it does have a couple of limitations. What most of you would probably use if you're accessing the online version is the browse feature.

Now, you may be wondering how or if this is any different than owning the CD-Rom version. The primary difference is this. When you're working with the online, each one of the Adobe Acrobat files opens as a separate file; whereas if you're working with the CD-Rom version and you open one chapter, it opens the entire Style Manual in a frame, so that the table of contents for the whole book is in a frame on your left hand side, and whichever section you're trying to scroll through is in a larger frame on your right hand side. It makes both your browse and your search features a lot easier to use than the online version. Still, if you're comfortable working online, there's nothing wrong with the freely available material that's here. It's exactly the same as what you're going to get in the printed copy.

What I'd like to do first is give us just a quick overview of the sections in the GPO. There are then a few sections that I'd like to look at in some detail, and then we're going to look at some examples. So, Chapter One, Advice to Authors and Editors, and Chapter Two, General Instructions both concern information that's more relevant to formatters and typesetters than to the general audience. There's information in here about how wide your margins need to be, the size of the paper that you should use, the quality of the paper. Information like the use of widows and orphans, a printing term that many of us haven't heard before. So you probably don't need any of the information in either one of these two chapters. The one exception to that is in Chapter One. Section 1.22 provides a list of common proofreading marks that you might wish to

print out, post next to your desk, and have available for you and your co-workers to start using on a regular basis. These are the marks that most editors, professional editors, use on a regular basis. And it could streamline your writing and revision processes if you were to use these on a regular basis. So section 1.22 is something that you might want to print out, post next to your computer, circulate around on your office, and start practicing in your own writing.

Back to our overview. Chapters 13 and 14, Tabular Work and Leader Work. Chapter 13 refers to the use of tables in text and again it contains information that is really relevant only to your copy setters and your printers. It has information like the width of lines separating columns, the level of darkness that it should be. Leader work refers to places like the Table of Contents where you have a series of dots between an item and a number. So these are two chapters that you're probably not going to need.

On the other hand, Chapter 17, Useful Tables, surprisingly enough for those that are familiar with the government definition of useful, actually has some useful tables. For example, the United States Presidents and Vice Presidents, as well as the years of their service. A list of all the countries in the world, including the type of legislative body they have, the type of government that rules them, and what they call their chief of state, president, prime minister, king, etc. There's a list of all of the currencies that are in use around the world. And finally, it contains a very helpful section on metric conversions. So Chapter 17, Useful Tables, does have a lot of sort of eccentric information that could be very helpful to you.

Another section that's a little bit eccentric but potentially helpful is Chapter 18. Chapter 18 includes the geologic terms for the various eras of the earth, including the Eon, the Era, and the Period. So if you're ever confused about those distinctions... It also includes a list of all of the physiographic divisions of the northern hemisphere, correlated to the province in the United States where they are located. Other items in Chapter 18 include rivers of North America and their lengths, the states and all of their capitals, as well as the number, type, and names of all of the state's principle divisions, whether they have counties or provinces or districts. So chapters 17 and 18 include some, a strange collection I guess you could say of some useful and interesting information.

Finally, in our overview, Chapters 19 and 20 as I mentioned earlier refer to those people who are preparing records of congressional hearings or meetings. And those have a slightly different set of rules than the other documents the government normally prepares. Most of those will not be relevant for service writers. Edith, I think you might be one of the exceptions to that rule.

Alright then. A couple of little oddities that I'd like to take a quick look at. Chapter 2, sections 35, 36, and 37 include a bizarre rule that I've never come across before that concerns spelling, hyphenation and capitalization all together. It's called letters illustrating shape and form, and it concerns words like U-shaped, A-frame, T-bone, etc. This is a good example of a way that the GPO describes grammatical and mechanical

details in a slightly different way than the rest of the world. So if you're using a grammar handbook like Hodges' Harbrace or Hacker, this is terminology that's going to be completely foreign, and a little difficult, I think, to decipher.

It's also a good example of the fact that throughout the GPO rules are laid out in these little tiny bits of information that are consecutively numbered in a single section. If you're looking up a rule, you would be wise to read all the rules in that section of the GPO, because they list exceptions in a separate point. So if there's an exception to the rule and you don't read the whole section, you probably won't even know that there's an exception. So just a little oddity about using the GPO.

Two others I'd like to point out. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, compounding rules. Compounding is the GPO word for hyphenation. Should these words be hyphenated? Should they be two words? Or should they be one word? The list is a little bit difficult to read. Under this example "city," what you see is that city -born and city -bred, which are both preceded with a hyphen, should be hyphenated. On the other hand, cityfolk and cityscape should be one word. You see how there's nothing between the city and the folk. Finally, city man, that number sign (#) indicates that there should be a space between those two words. So city, space, man. Again, the compounding section is a little different than some of the other grammar handbooks you may come across.

Finally, I'd like to point out a personal quirk that I think is the government's strangest style rule. You might have your vote for your own strange style rule, but this one is my personal favorite. Section 8.49 tells us that when we include a complete date written out in our sentence in the order month, day, and year, we have to put a comma after the year. So you'll see in the first example that there's a comma after the date, and a comma after the year. That, however, is different than the third example, where there is no date given, and so no comma appears after the year. That is likewise different from the fourth sample, where the date is presented in European order so that the day precedes the month which precedes the year. This is an odd little rule that is only practiced to my knowledge in the federal government and that some of you may have become very familiar with. Some of you may have never encountered this before. I can honestly say that is the strangest GPO rule that I have ever seen.

Alright then. That leads us finally back to our webinar section. And just as soon as I can get us back there, I'm going to show you what we have for you today. Again, at the end of our section, at the end of today's webinar, we're going to make available for you to download this GPO Scavenger Hunt, so you can get some actual practice using the GPO online as answers to some of these questions. At this point, let me ask Karene, do we have any questions that we'd like to field at this time?

KM: No. I don't have any on there. If anybody has any last minute questions, please put them in the Q&A box.

MB: We are just about to wrap up today's session. So if anybody has interesting facts that they've discovered while working with the GPO or any questions about what we've

covered today, or maybe what we haven't covered that you wish we had, let us know by using the Q&A feature or the chat.

KM: The question we do have from Heidi is a suggestion, perhaps, for future topics. Tricks and Tools for Using Word Editing. And that is an excellent idea for a topic. Might that be one that you...

MB: I am not particularly good at the track changes feature, but if what Heidi is referring to is the grammar check, I'm not sure if we have enough time to take a quick look at that. Karene, can we?

KM: I'm thinking for a future webinar session.

MB: Okay. Yeah, that would be great.

KM: Okay. Anyone else? Just go ahead and type your question in.

MB: Oh, Jim. I see Jim's question—we live by track changes. Yeah, unfortunately I don't write a whole bunch of collaborative documents.

KM: We can find someone to work on that with us together.

MB: Yeah.

KM: Okay. Well, thank you all again.

[audio end]