CHAPTER 5
SYNTAX

SECTION 1: USING WORDS AND PHRASES CORRECTLY

English has a very rich vocabulary and provides us with the opportunity to choose just the right word to express our ideas. The downside is that so many of our words have such subtle nuances in meaning that copy editors often run into words and phrases that are used imprecisely. If these editors aren’t sure about these words and phrases, they look them up. You should, too.

The first place to look is in the Associated Press Stylebook. If what you need isn’t there, try Webster’s New World Dictionary. It’s the standard desk reference at most news organizations.

Use your dictionary for more than spelling. Dictionaries list synonyms and discuss idiomatic usage of many words. You may find a word that would better suit the story. Keep a thesaurus handy, too.

Become familiar with other guides such as The Elements of Style by Strunk and White or any of Theodore M. Bernstein’s books including The Careful Writer, Headlines and Deadlines and Watch Your Language. You might prefer newer books such as Working With Words by Brian Brooks and James Pinson or When Words Collide by Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald. They provide a much more thorough discussion of grammar and word usage than you’ll find in general editing texts.

A poorly placed modifier can make a sentence have two meanings:

Students who cheat frequently were expelled from school.

Does the sentence mean that the school frequently expelled students who were caught cheating? Or does it mean that students had to be caught cheating many times before they would be expelled?

Guard against non sequiturs, which are modifiers that don’t seem related to the sentence:

Non sequitur: Born in Indiana, Jones became a skilled mountain climber.
Related: Born in Utah, Jones became a skilled mountain climber.
Related: Born in Indiana, Jones had played basketball all her life.

Non sequitur: An accomplished mathematician, Jones refused to eat Twinkies.
Correct: An accomplished mathematician, Jones taught statistics to the other reporters.
Or: A health enthusiast, Jones refused to eat Twinkies.

Reporters sometimes write non sequiturs because they are trying to pack too much information into a sentence.

Born in Montana, Jones has a wicked curve ball.

Being from Montana has little to do with pitching. The editor might see whether Jones’ birthplace might fit better somewhere else in the story.

Parallelism requires that words connected by conjunctions such as and and or be in the same grammatical form. In the first example that follows, reading novels is a participle phrase and Nintendo is a noun. The sentence can be made parallel by using either two participle phrases or two nouns:
Not: Reading novels (phrase) and Nintendo (noun) kept the team busy on the long bus ride.
Two phrases: Reading novels and playing Nintendo kept the team busy on the long bus ride.
Or two nouns: Novels and Nintendo kept the team busy on the long bus ride.

Another example:

Not: The ordinance would allow police officers to ask people for their phone numbers (noun) and where they lived (clause).
Two nouns: The ordinance would allow police officers to ask them for their phone numbers and addresses.
Or two clauses (grammatically correct but wordy): The ordinance would allow police officers to ask them what their phone numbers were and where they lived.