

## BECA 370 WRITING FOR ELECTRONIC MEDIA

### Writing Mechanics Guide: Errors that Should Never Happen in BECA 370 (Or Anywhere Else!)

Your job as a media writer is to write exactly what you mean, clearly and unambiguously. Certain common errors can lead to confusion and misleading sentences.

#### End Punctuation

There is no such thing as a sentence without end punctuation of some kind.

- **Statements:** These must end in a period or exclamation point even if they indicate uncertainty. For example, “I wonder if he likes me.” “I don’t know where the mall is!” These are statements, not questions. Even one-word sentences need end punctuation. For example, “Whatever.” “
- **Exclamations:** Even exclamations that are nonsense words or just sounds need end punctuation. For example, “D’oh!” “Hmph.” “Tsk!” “Psst!” “Eew!”
- **Questions:** These must end in a question mark even if they are slang or meant to be inflected as statements. For example, “What’s up?” “Hey, how’s it goin’?”
- **Interruptions:** If a person is cut off before finishing a sentence, end the sentence with a long dash (“—“). For example, “You don’t know what you’re —“ means that the person got interrupted before he could say “doing.” The dash counts as the end punctuation.
- **Unfinished thoughts:** If a person trails off without finishing a sentence, use “. . .” For example, “I wonder if. . .” The ellipsis counts as end punctuation. However, if the thought is a question, it should also have a question mark: “What the. . . ?”
- **Run-on sentences:** Commas do not do the same job as periods. Use correct end punctuation even if someone is speaking very fast so that several lines sound like one long sentence. For example, “Are you crazy, what are you doing, that’s highly flammable gas!” should be “Are you crazy? What are you doing? That’s highly flammable gas!”
- **Don’t double up!** Every sentence should have one, and only one, piece of end punctuation. Avoid “?!” and “!!!” Don’t insert punctuation where it doesn’t belong, for example: “And then she shocked me (!!!) by saying she wanted to break up!”

### Commas with Direct Address

Any time a sentence directly addresses someone (refers to them by name, nickname, title, etc.), the addressee is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas. Sometimes the addressee is mentioned last in the sentence:

- Good night, **Mom**. Thank you, **everyone**. What's the diagnosis, **doctor**?
- No problem, **dude**. Hasta la vista, **baby**. Don't have a cow, **man**. Hurry up, **slowpoke**!
- Hi, **folks**. Hey, **man**. Bye, **Joe**. How are you, **Jane**?

Other times, the addressee is mentioned first in the sentence:

- **Dude**, that's messed up. **Man**, I can't wait to party tonight. **Baby**, I love you.
- **All you people out there**, listen up! **Those of you who won**, congratulations!

And sometimes the addressee is in the middle of the sentence:

- Please, **Mom**, can I go out and play? Hey, **man**, what's up?

Terrible things can happen when the comma is left out. Compare these sentences:

- It's all over, **Bob**. / It's all over Bob.
- We'll get through this, **baby**. / We'll get through this baby.
- I don't know, **Jack**. / I don't know Jack.

### Slang

Slang is fine in media writing, because you're often trying to capture the way people speak naturally. Keep in mind that there are correct ways of writing slang:

- **Contractions of "ing" words:** Where's he **goin'**? What's he **doin'**? What's the big **freakin'** deal?
- **Phonetic spellings:** Common words include **gonna** (going to); **whatcha** (what are you); **gotta** (got to). Sounds include **eew**, **ooh**, **ugh**, **hmp**, **psst**, **tsk**, **um**, **uh-huh**, **uh-uh**.
- **Combo contractions/phonetic spellings:** **hecka**, **hella**, **dammit**, **ain't**, **grr**, **woof**.
- **Familiar nonsense words:** **Okely-dokely**, **yee-haw**, **blech**, **d'oh**.
- **Profanity:** The FCC prohibits certain types of profanity, but some cable networks and on-line venues permit it and even encourage it. Use your best judgment to avoid writing an unsellable/unproducible script.

## Apostrophe Catastrophes

You'll see these mistakes all the time in newspapers, on signs, etc., but that's no excuse!

- **Contractions:** Apostrophe replaces omitted letters/spaces/numbers: **it is** becomes **it's**; **cannot** becomes **can't**; **what is** becomes **what's**; **1970s** becomes **'70s**.
- **Possessives:** If the cat has a toy, then it is the **cat's** toy (singular possessive). If **cats** have a toy, then it is the **cats'** toy (plural possessive). Odd plural possessives: **children's**, **people's**, **women's**, **men's**. One tricky singular possessive: **its** (no apostrophe). This is to keep **its** (possessive) distinguishable from **it's** (contraction of "it is").
- **Plurals:** Apostrophes are NOT USED to create plurals! Get used to writing plurals without apostrophes: **CDs**, **DVDs**, **1970s**, **The Simpsons**.

## Hyphenating Compound Modifiers

Any time you combine two or more words to make a compound modifier that **comes before** the thing you're modifying, you need to link those words with hyphens. For example:

- He's a **good-looking** man. Other examples: **middle-class** families; **role-play** games; **high-stress** job; **one-way** street; **low-budget** film; **anxiety-producing** experience; **sleep-deprived** students; **broken-down** car; **good-for-nothing** jerk.
- She has a **six-month-old** baby and a **three-year-old** son. (But: Her baby is six months old; her son is three years old.)
- I followed the **step-by-step** instructions. (But: I followed the instructions step by step.)

There is no limit to the number of words you can link up as modifiers:

- He's a **low-down, good-for-nothing, only-wants-one-thing** kind of man. (Notice that in a list of hyphenated adjectives, commas are used to separate the individual modifiers.)
- It was a **lie-in-bed-reading-the-newspaper-and-dozing-off** kind of Sunday. (Don't panic if your modifier gets really long; use as many hyphens as you need.)

Some compound modifiers that have more than one word are NOT linked with hyphens:

- **Adverbs:** a **highly motivated** individual; a **frequently photographed** celebrity; a **widely known** fact; a **relatively simple** matter; a **randomly chosen** number.
- **Comparatives and superlatives:** a **less busy** street; the **least attractive** option; a **more popular** person; the **most creative** costume; a **better written** paper; the **best dressed** woman; a **higher scoring** player; a **lower budget** film (note "lower" is comparative, so there is no hyphen; but "low" is not comparative, so it's "lower budget film" but "low-budget film")

## Miscellaneous Bugaboos:

- Broadcast & Electronic Communication Arts is abbreviated as **BECA** (not “Beca”).
- Use abbreviations in scripts only if you want the audience to hear the abbreviation rather than the full word or phrase. For example, it’s fine to write **U.S.** instead of “United States,” **ASAP** instead of “as soon as possible,” **TV** instead of “television,” **I-80** instead of “Interstate Eighty,” **Y2K** instead of “the year 2000,” etc., if that’s what you want the speaker to say.
- Don’t use abbreviations that can’t be pronounced by the speaker. If you want the speaker to say **miles per hour** don’t write “mph.” Similarly, don’t use “St.” for **Street**, “Ave.” for **Avenue**, “Oct.” for **October**, “Sat.” for **Saturday**, “lbs” for **pounds**, etc.
- No symbols! Never use “&” for **and**, “@” for **at**, “%” for **percent**, “\$” for **money** or **dollars**, “+” for **plus**, etc. Don’t use superscripts (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>); spell out **first, second, third**. (If your computer does this automatically, turn this function off in the Preferences menu.) Never use e-mail or text-messaging style (“u r” instead of **your/you’re**, etc.).
- Numbers: In scripts, it’s usually easier for the actor/speaker to read numbers spelled out: **one, three-point-five, nine-tenths, twelve o’clock, fifteen dollars, twenty-five cents, fifty percent, three hundred and fifty-four, ten million billion trillion**. Exceptions include years (**1969, 2007**) but not dates (**December thirty-first**), and familiar or official numbers such as **1040, 401k, I-80, 911**. (This is different from APA Style and academic rules—the point is to avoid making things confusing or difficult to read *out loud*.)
- Abbreviate “television” as **TV**, not “tv” or “teevee”.
- Use **OK** or **okay**, not “ok” or “o.k.”
- Use **yeah**, not “ya” (you’ll sound Scandinavian) or “yea” (this is Old English for “yes”)
- Know the difference between **your** and **you’re**; **then** and **than**; **there**, **their** and **they’re**!
- If you ever aren’t sure how to write something, use your best judgement: choose the way that is clearest and easiest for someone to read out loud.