Issues

First, the Bad News

Geraldine Spruell's article "Making It Big Time—Is It Really Tougher for Women" (*Journal*, August 1985), had one misleading flaw. Getting appointed to a corporate board of directors is a far cry from moving up through the management hierarchy.

If the story was all about getting to be a CEO—and thus automatically being on the company's board—mixing these two items would make some sense. As it is, the article shifted constantly from mixing plants and animals in the corporate environment. All the women board members Catalyst tracks are *appointed outside* directors—mainly from the academic, nonprofit or government fields.

On the other hand, I thought the same author's article in the May issue, "Say So Long to Promotions," was very realistic and quoted an assortment of reliable experts on a worrisome upcoming problem.

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Disorderly Houses

I applaud the editorial staff of the *Journal* for including articles on writing skills, such as "Unruly Writing" in the August 1985 issue. However, the article's validity suffered grave damage because of glaring errors of statement by the author.

In discussing a sample sentence ("While none could disagree, no one seemed to have a solution."), the author commented, "The prepositional phrase in the last sentence conveys immediacy, as if the reader were present." Unfortunately, the sentence cited begins with a dependent adverbial clause, not a prepositional phrase.

The author also uses this sentence as a reference: "In an emphatic voice, the CEO declared, 'If we continue to lose profits at this rate, the southern plant will have to close down.'" In her analysis she states, "Only the direct quote begins with a preposition (a good attention-getter)." Again, the quotation she refers to begins with a subordinating conjunction (if), not a preposition.

In addition, the author incompletely defines gerunds as "words ending in 'ing.'" That description applies equally to present participles and progressive-tense verbs. In fact, her example of a gerund ("Showing a loss of 13.5 per cent in gross revenues, the 1985 board of director's report was a disappointment to everyone.") actually shows a participle (an adjective used to describe the noun "report.").

Obviously, readers can benefit from the thesis of this article—that writing should be readable and lively—in spite of lapses such as these. But the author is seriously at fault in not having her own house (and knowledge of the *basics*) in order.

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"Unruly Writing" (August 1985) really is unruly writing. The elements that make fiction work can help transform dry nonfiction into interesting writing. However, Ms. MacManus' examples create fiction.

The three examples of "Saying the same thing—without of course, changing a single word" are flawed. Saying, "The Chairman of the Board decreed this will not do" does not equal "In an emphatic voice, the CEO declared . . .," and both do not equal "The Chairman of the Board grew livid, threatening to . . ."

All three versions do not say the same thing. Ms. MacManus only has to ask the CEO from her company to discover this. Strunk and White, in *Elements of Style*, provide the lesson here: "When you overstate, the reader will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in his mind because he has lost confidence in your judgement or your poise. Overstatement is one of the common faults (pp. 72, 73).

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Since author Yvonne MacManus obviously writes well about writing well, it's ironic to find one grammatical nit to pick with her in "Unruly Writing" (*Journal*, August 1985). At least since 1954, when I was first coached on our language's parts of speech, the word "if" has been a conjunction—not a preposition, as MacManus refers to it in her article.

Regarding the issue of unbiased language, I find comfort in choosing to pair the plural "they" with the singular antecedent "everyone." Incorrect as this practice may be, it seems more palatable than struggling with "his/her" and "she/he," or confining my subjects to their plural form. Perhaps flouting grammatical tradition is the quickest route to channeling indignation at such sport into the generation of a more commonly accepted solution.

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I am deeply concerned about the misinformation presented in the August article "Unruly Writing." As training professionals, we must constantly be aware that precision is an important factor in all of our written materials, from proposals to instructor guides to participant packets. In designing courses, we must be especially careful to provide our participants with clear, precise definitions for the material we cover. Grammatical terms, as presented in this article, are of little value if not used accurately.

The author advocates the use of gerunds and prepositions without understanding what either term identifies. A gerund is the -ing form of a verb used as a noun. Thus, training, the subject of the following sentence, is a gerund: Training is my chosen field.

What the author identifies as gerunds in her article are really present participles. A present participle is the -ing form of a verb functioning as a verb (I am *reading*) or as an adjective (This is good *reading* material). In the following sentences, the italicized words are present participles, not gerunds, as stated in the article:

"*Showing* a loss of 13.5 per cent in gross revenues, the 1985 board of directors' report was a disappointment to everyone. . ."

"*Revealing* a 13.5 per cent loss in gross revenues, the chairman of the board grew livid."

A second term which the author does not understand is preposition. Prepositions are a special class of words including at, on, by, for, up, over, about, in, out, with, etc. A preposition may be followed by a noun or pronoun (along with any modifiers of the noun or pronoun): at the convention; in the dictionary; on a dark and gloomy night.

What the author identifies as prepositions in her article are really conjunctions. The function of a conjunction is to connect clauses. There are two categories of conjunction: the coordinate conjunction—and, or, but, so, yet, for, nor—which connects independent clauses, and the subordinate conjunction—if, unless, when, while, because, although—which connects dependent clauses to independent clauses. Here are examples of subordinate conjunctions misidentified as prepositions:

"*If* we continue to lose profits at this rate, the southern plant will have to close down."

"*While* none could disagree, no one seemed to have a solution."

The author's priorities are confused. In the training profession, if we follow the author's example and use terminolgy imprecisely and irresponsibly, we will gain a reputation of all flash and no substance.

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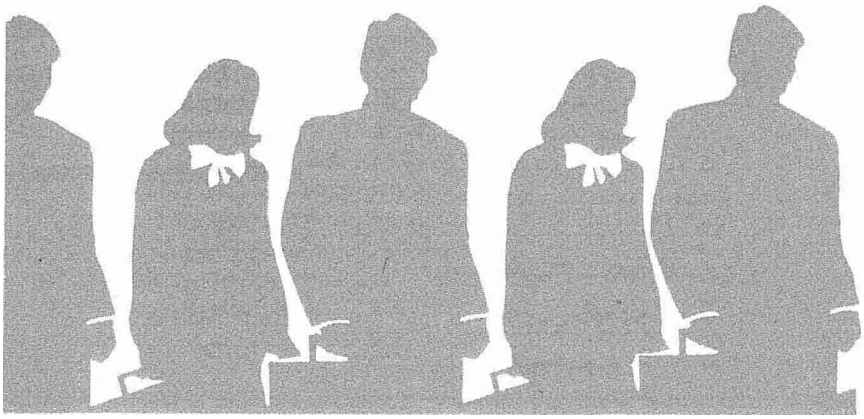

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