21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability
Spring 2008

Rather than write the equivalent of a novel in your margins, I have reduced my difficulties with bad prose to a few headings. The kinds of infelicities listed below will produce difficulties for the reader, ranging from a momentary pause (after which the reader may puzzle out the meaning, but a series of such pauses taxes one's powers of attention) to downright bafflement. Please attend to these markings and think about what has caused me to inscribe them.

awk: awkward construction.

circle drawn around a comma: delete comma

cont: contraction. Do not use contractions in expository prose.

coord: faulty coordination. The grammar indicates an unintended opposition or an unintended equality of importance, with consequent distortion of sense. The opposite of faulty parallelism. See below.

cs: comma splice; two sentences joined by a comma.

frag: sentence fragment; not grammatically a sentence, although written as one.

gram: straightforward lapse of grammar

lex: [also "**word**" and "**diction**"] faulty lexicon; word or phrase is inappropriate, producing vagueness or ambiguity, or perhaps the wrong meaning.

metaphor: inappropriate or banal metaphor; possibly a cliché

mod: faulty, confused or misleading adjectival or adverbial modification.

opaque: unclear. Also ["**vague**"]

org: failure of organization in a passage, a paragraph, etc.

punct: faulty punctuation.

red: redundant; hence misleading--the reader expects more meaning than there is and invents it, to the detriment of sense.

ref: reference (of a pronominal form, such as "this") is unclear.

rep: repetitive; not the same as redundant, as a little thought will show

rhetoric: rhetorically odd; though not quite a failure of lexical choice, the word is contextually inappropriate--e.g., overblown, pompous, a piece of slang or jargon, etc.

sp: spelling error

split: split infinitive

sub: faulty subordination; either there is no subordination when there should be (conjunctions have been used instead; cf. **coord**, above) or else the wrong word, phrase, or clause has been subordinated grammatically to the right one. This is a subcategory of poor organization but is purely grammatical and therefore deserves an entry of its own.

trans: puzzling transition.

usage: what is written is grammatical but not properly English. An important instance is the use of the wrong category of verb to introduce direct or indirect quotations. Thus "The story reveals that…" is OK, but "the story highlights that . . ." or "The story expresses that . . ." are not.

//: faulty parallel; the grammar fails to indicate an intended opposition or an intended equality of importance, with consequent distortion of sense.

?: I don't get it

!: a sign of astonishment--usually either at the silliness of what you have said or at its brilliance. You will have to figure out which is intended.

Some general rules:

1. Do not split infinitives.

2. Do not use "this" unaccompanied by a noun.

3. Do not use "different than". "Different" (and "differently") conjoin with the word "from".

4. Do not use the word "lifestyle" as a synonym for the phrase "way of life". Do not use "referenced" as a synonym for "referred to"

5. "On the other hand" must be proceeded by "on the one hand"; it is *not* a synonym for either "in contrast to" or "at the same time"("just the same").

6. The word "so" introduces a comparative (e.g., "so tall that . . ."); it is not a conjunction. For the conjunction use either "so that" or "and so".

7. Avoid contractions and exclamation points in expository prose. Do not resort to italics simply to lay emphasis on a word; the typographical form must have a better reason for its use.