

## Helpful Hints for Writing Reports

Sometimes, our words convey other than what we intended. For example, from a church newsletter ad:

The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.

We rarely see such humorous, unintended distortions in your SARE reports. But occasional mistakes often confound the meaning. Our review of reports submitted in the past couple of years (we do read them all, every word) found these unintended errors:

- Instead of *chaff*, the author wrote *chafe*.
- *Bare* turned out as *bear*.
- *Farming* became *fanning*.

We in agriculture sometimes *chafe* at the hard work. Indeed, it's a *bear* of a job. And *fanning*, as in a soft breeze, is nice on a hot day of farming. A few minutes spent reading over your report can catch mistakes like using *coarse* instead of *course*, *plating* instead of *planting*, *night* instead of *right*, *bad* instead of *had* and *arc* instead of *are*. Spell check would not have found any of these mistakes. Only a careful reader.

Misused words are but the tip of the editing iceberg. For your convenience, we've compiled a list of frequently misused words or phrases, mined from SARE reports and common to many. The answers to many of these questions are in the dictionary. We recommend *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*.

- **Internet**, upper case
- **website**, one word, lower case; (it can also be used as **Web site**; just be consistent)
- **email**, one word, no hyphen
- **data** is plural, for example, the data are correct; **datum** is the singular
- **database** is one word
- **PowerPoint** is a registered trade name with upper case p's
- **summer, spring, fall and winter** are lower case
- **groundwater, aboveground and belowground** are all one word
- **fact sheet** is two words
- **% or percent**, either is okay, just be consistent
- **online**, one word
- use **toward**, not **towards**, which is British
- a **compliment** expresses esteem, **complement** fills up or completes
- **it's** is a contraction for it is or it has, **its** is the agent or object of an action
- **affect**, a verb, is to influence; **effect** as a verb means to bring about or execute; as a noun, the more common usage, effect means result
- **break even** is two words as a noun, it is hyphenated as an adjective – the business will break even; it hit the break-even point last year
- **overwinter**, one word, to survive the winter

## Hyphens

Hyphens probably give writers more trouble than about anything else. Misuse can change meaning. Remember the ladies at the church and their “cast off clothing.” Had it said, “The ladies of the Church have cast-off clothing of every kind...” with *cast-off* becoming a hyphenated compound modifier instead of an active verb, the clothing, and not the undressed ladies, would have been on view in the basement of the church.

Is it *follow up*, *follow-up* or *followup*? Consulting the dictionary can give you answers to this and other questions regarding hyphens. Also, consider these thoughts on hyphens:

- Theodore Bernstein in *The Careful Writer* notes that rules guiding hyphens are populated with exceptions, so hyphen use is often left to the judgment of the writer. His advice: Use hyphens only as needed to clarify meaning.
- Use a hyphen or hyphens when a phrase used as an adjective modifies a noun. For instance, *grower-oriented symposium* or *year-to-year differences*.
- Do not use a hyphen in a compound modifier using an adverb ending in -ly. For example, *environmentally sound practices* or *widely used test*.
- Avoid hyphens in the use of chemical terms, such as *sodium chloride solution*.

Here are examples of hyphens, used correctly, from Western SARE reports:

- season-long experiments
- late-season reduction
- site-specific management
- value-added marketing
- hands-on experience
- small- to medium-scale project
- three-year project
- two-day seminar
- 1,300-foot-long hedgerow
- drought-resistant cultivar

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

Overuse of abbreviations can be confusing to readers unfamiliar with your subject. Try to avoid abbreviations. Their use may save space but retard comprehension. Abbreviations, meanwhile, can be useful with measures. Just be consistent. Some common examples:

ac for acre  
ha for hectare  
lb for pound  
oz for ounce  
ft for foot  
in for inch  
bu for bushel

p for pint  
q for quart  
mm for millimeter  
cm for centimeter  
m for meter  
km for kilometer  
cc for cubic centimeter

l for liter  
approx for approximate  
> for less than  
< for greater than  
C for Celsius  
Fahr for Fahrenheit

Abbreviations for chemicals are also useful, including N for nitrogen, P for phosphorus and K for potassium.

## More on Abbreviations

When in doubt, avoid abbreviations, unless they are universally understood and accepted, like USDA for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, EPA for the Environmental Protection Agency and SARE for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. By the way, we prefer the use of Western SARE as opposed to WSARE. Here are a few more to keep in mind:

- Use United States as a noun, U.S. as an adjective. Avoid US or USA.
- The use of state abbreviations is trending toward two capital letters – CO for Colorado, HI for Hawaii etc. In naming places, it's okay to use the traditional style, Davis, Calif., or Davis, CA. Choose a style and stick with it.
- Months of the year should be spelled out when they stand alone in a sentence. In a date, they can be spelled out or abbreviated: Jan. 1, 2007, or January 1, 2007. Just be consistent.
- Days of the week are typically spelled out.

## Capitalization

In general, avoid unnecessary capitalization. Consider these guidelines:

- Capitalize proper nouns.
- Capitalize the first word in a complete sentence.
- Capitalize the major words in titles, books and articles. Conjunctions, articles and prepositions are not considered major words.
- Capitalize extension when it's part of an official name (Utah State University Cooperative Extension Service). Otherwise, lowercase (the extension agent ran). Likewise, do not capitalize Federal unless it is part of an official name (Federal Bureau of Investigation).
- Capitalize nouns followed by numbers or letters that are part of a series (Experiment 4, Plot 7, Table 3, Group B)

## Punctuation

Punctuation marks are the signposts for your readers, directing their path through your report. Bad punctuation can change meaning or cause readers to lose direction – and interest – in your report.

- Commas in a series, as in wheat, barley and oats. The comma before *and* may be excluded, as shown, or included, as in wheat, barley, and oats. Settle on one style and stick with it.
- Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks – “I like SARE.”
- The colon is typically used at the end of a sentence to introduce lists, tabulations, etc. Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or begins a complete sentence.

## Numbers

Numbers are frequently used – and misused – in Western SARE reports. Guidelines for number usage can vary widely. As suggested above, your report will be better understood if you adopt a style for using numbers and stick with it. Here are some options that you may want to consider:

- In general, use words for numbers zero through nine and numbers for 10 and above. As an exception to this guideline, use numbers for measures. Measures include weight, volume, distance and size.
- When using numerals over 999, it's preferable to use a comma after the first digit, for example, 5,427 instead of 5427.
- When using numbers less than 1, it's preferable to use a zero before the decimal point, for example, 0.137 instead of .137.
- Use numerals when the numbers represent ratios (a ratio of 4:1), percentages (33%), fractions (1/3 of a pint), decimals (0.33 of the total) or mathematical functions (multiplied by 4).
- When a number begins a sentence, use words. Four men came. Fifty-five rows were weeded (note that fifty-five is hyphenated).
- With numbered plots, samples, experiments, etc., use numerals and capitalize the noun, for example, Plot 7, Sample 4, Experiment 1.
- To form the plurals of numbers, add s or es without an apostrophe, for example, eights and sixes, 1950s, 10s and 30s.
- There is no need to express a number twice, as in one (1) per person.

## A few more thoughts

Based on your Western SARE reports, we offer these points to ponder:

- Watch for wordsandsentences without spaces. For some reason, this is a frequent occurrence with the online reports.
- Read your work for missing words, especially articles (a, an, the) and prepositions (of, by, in, etc.).
- When you're filling out the boxes in the electronic format, don't forget to delete the instructions that automatically appear in each box.
- As stated at the beginning, relying on automatic spell check or grammar check programs can miss errors. Proofread your report, or ask a friend or spouse to read it, to avoid errors like this: "However, there our more questions to be answered."

This is not meant to be a complete writing guide, just some thoughts on the most frequently noted writing missteps found in Western SARE reports over the last couple of years. Contact Ron Daines, Western SARE communications specialist, with your questions about writing your reports, [rjdaines@msn.com](mailto:rjdaines@msn.com) or 435.755.5749.