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Sixth Edition

*rules of*  
**Thumb**

**a guide for writers**

Silverman

Hughes

Wienbroer

**PRICED  
WITH  
STUDENTS  
IN MIND**

# RULES OF THUMB

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## A GUIDE FOR WRITERS

Sixth Edition

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## **Higher Education**

### **RULES OF THUMB: A GUIDE FOR WRITERS**

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Jay Silverman  
Diana Roberts Wienbroer

## THE MEANING OF “RULE OF THUMB”

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**rule of thumb** 1: a method of procedure or analysis based upon experience and common sense and intended to give generally or approximately correct or effective results . . . 2: a general principal regarded as roughly correct and helpful but not intended to be scientifically accurate . . .

—Webster’s Third New International Dictionary  
of the English Language Unabridged. 2002

**rule of thumb** A method or procedure derived entirely from practice or experience, without any basis in scientific knowledge; a roughly practical method. Also, a particular stated rule that is based on practice or experience. [First recorded usage 1692]

—The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed. 1989

## HOW TO USE *RULES OF THUMB*

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This book is for you if you love to write, but it's also for you if you *have* to write. *Rules of Thumb* is a quick guide that you can use easily, on your own, and feel confident in your writing.

We suggest that you read *Rules of Thumb* in small doses, out of order, when you need it. It's not like a novel that keeps you up late into the night. You'll need to read a few lines and then pause to see if you understand. After ten minutes, set the book aside. From time to time, look at the same points again as a reminder.

Part 1, "Correctness," covers the most common mistakes. We put these rules first because they are what most students worry about and will want to have handy. However, when you are writing your ideas, don't get distracted with correctness; afterwards, take the time to look up the rules you need.

Part 2, "Putting a Paper Together," takes you through the stages of writing an essay—from coming up with ideas to proofreading.

Part 3, "The Research Paper," tells you how to conduct a research project with confidence.

Part 4, "Growing as a Writer," will help you to develop a clear, strong style of writing.

You won't necessarily use these parts in order because the process of writing does not follow a set sequence. Generating ideas, organizing, revising, and correcting all happen at several points along the way.

Further help with *Rules of Thumb* is available in several formats. The authors have written *Good Measures: A Practice Book to Accompany Rules of Thumb*, which contains both exercises



and writing activities keyed to each chapter of *Rules of Thumb*. In addition, as a purchaser of *Rules of Thumb*, you have access to **Catalyst, the Premier Online Tool for Writing & Research** at **[www.mhhe.com/rules](http://www.mhhe.com/rules)**, where you can go online to find grammar and usage exercises, writing assignments, a source evaluation tutorial, and documentation help (Bibliomaker software that teaches you how to format information in five documentation styles—including MLA and APA).

*Rules of Thumb* doesn't attempt to cover every little detail of grammar and usage, but it does cover the most common problems we've seen as teachers of writing over the past thirty years. We chose the phrase "rules of thumb" because it means a quick guide. The top part of your thumb is roughly an inch long. Sometimes you need a ruler, marked in millimeters, but sometimes you can do fine by measuring with just your thumb. Your thumb takes only a second to use, and it's always with you. We hope you'll find *Rules of Thumb* just as easy and comfortable to use.

Jay Silverman  
Diana Roberts Wienbroer

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# PART

# 1

## CORRECTNESS

A Word about Correctness

Commonly Confused Words

One Word or Two?

Spelling

Capitalization

Abbreviations and Numbers

Apostrophes

Consistent Pronouns

Correct Pronouns

Vague Pronouns

Recognizing Complete Sentences

Period or Comma? Run-on Sentences and  
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Commas

Semicolons

Colons

Dashes and Parentheses

Quotation Marks

Titles: Underlines, Italics, or Quotation Marks

Shifting Verb Tenses

Verb Agreement

Word Endings: *s* and *ed*

Tangled Sentences

# A WORD ABOUT CORRECTNESS

Too much concern about correctness can inhibit your writing; too little concern can come between you and your readers. Don't let the fear of errors dominate the experience of writing for you. On the other hand, we would be misleading you if we told you that correctness doesn't matter. Basic errors in writing will distract and turn off even the most determined readers. We encourage you to master the rules presented here as quickly as possible so that you can feel secure about your writing. Once that happens, you'll be free to concentrate on what you want to say.

# COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS

A spellchecker won't catch these words. Find the ones that give you trouble and learn those.

---

## ■ WORDS THAT SOUND ALIKE OR LOOK ALIKE

accept	To take, to receive Most people do not accept criticism gracefully.
except	Not including Everybody except the piano player stopped playing.
affect	To change or influence Even nonprescription drugs can affect us in significant ways.
effect	The result, the consequence <i>Effect</i> is usually a noun, so you'll find <i>the</i> or <i>an</i> in front. Scientists have studied the effects of aspirin on heart disease.
brake	The mechanism that stops the vehicle; to halt any motion Brake on the approach, accelerate on the curve.
break	A separation; to shatter or separate into pieces or parts After the break, they resumed the negotiations. Don't break the seal if you plan to return the software.

#### 4 COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS

choose	Present tense (rhymes with <i>news</i> ) Frank Gehry chooses pliable materials for his architecture.
chose	Past tense (rhymes with <i>nose</i> ) Napoleon chose officers based on their ability rather than on their family connections.
conscience	The sense of right and wrong His conscience was clear.
conscious	Aware Flora became conscious of someone else in the room.
it's	It is. Test by substituting <i>it is</i> . It's time to find a new solution.
its	Possessive Every goat is attached to its own legs. No apostrophe. <i>It is</i> cannot be substituted.
lead	A metal (rhymes with <i>red</i> ); to provide direction (rhymes with <i>reed</i> ) Place a lead apron over the patient's body during dental X-rays. For many years, Prospero leads a quiet life.
led	Past tense of <i>lead</i> Ms. Salina led the department for forty years.
loose	Not tight After he lost thirty pounds, his jeans were all loose.
lose	To misplace My father would constantly lose his car keys.

To be defeated

Everyone predicted that Truman would lose.

no, new, now,  
know, knew

*No* is negative; *new* is not old; *now* is the present moment. *Know* and *knew* refer to knowledge.

of, have

Remember: *could have*, *should have*, *would have*—or *would've*—not *would of*

passed

A course, a car, a football; also *passed away* (*died*)

Kirtley passed me on the street; he also passed English.

Saturday he passed for two touchdowns.

The coach passed away.

past

Yesterdays (the past; past events); also, *beyond*

Rousseau could never forget his past romances.

You can't rewrite the past.

Go two miles past the railroad tracks.

quiet

Spike Jones rarely played quiet music.

quit

Mrs. Salvatore quit her job the day she won the lottery.

quite

Hippos move quite fast, considering their bulk.

than

Comparison

I'd rather dance than eat.

then

Next

She then added a drop of water.



their	Something is theirs. Wild dogs care for their young communally.
there	<i>A place</i> Go over there. There is; there are; there was; there were There are several theories to explain Napoleon's retreat.
they're	They are They're not in a position to negotiate.
to	<i>Direction</i> Give it to me. Go to New York. <i>A verb form</i> To see, to run, to be (Note that you barely pronounce <i>to</i> .)
too	<i>More than enough</i> Too hot, too bad, too late, too much. <i>Also</i> Me, too! (Note that you pronounce <i>too</i> clearly.)
two	2
were	<i>Past tense</i> You were, we were, they were.
we're	<i>We are</i> We're a nation of immigrants.
where	<i>A place</i> Where were you when the lights went out?
whether	<i>If—not weather</i> (rain or snow) No one knows whether he was murdered.