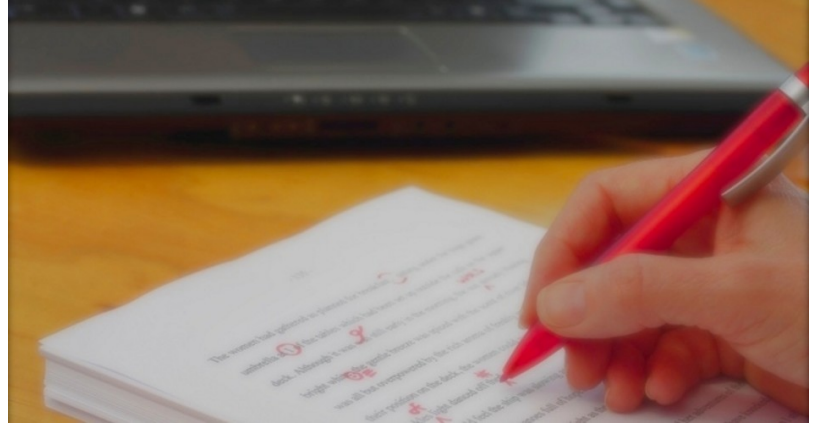




CIA Style Guide: Using Good Grammar to Describe Despotism

When explaining how and why they violate constitutional protections of fundamental rights, leaders of the federal intelligence apparatus insist it be done with style.

National Security Counselors, an organization devoted to the lawful acquisition from the federal government of material related to national security matters and the distribution of those documents to the public, obtained a copy of the Directorate of Intelligence's Style Manual & Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications. Although the document was released last year, it was first posted to social media only recently.



In this guidebook, CIA chiefs set out the writing standards it expects agents and analysts to follow.

While the CIA is infamous for [twisting the truth and encouraging others to do likewise](#), it imposes strict rules of plain speaking (or writing) in reports sent to its "customers": operations officers and lawmakers.

The foreword to the style guide begins, explaining, "Good intelligence depends in large measure on clear, concise writing. The information CIA gathers and the analysis it produces mean little if we cannot convey them effectively."

Among the minutiae, CIA spooks are told to use "crisp and pungent" language "devoid of jargon."

Furthermore, they should not use unapproved titles, and should use a lower case "w" when mentioning the "undeclared" Vietnam war.

In order to understand the bent of the minds that authored the CIA style guide, the blog Quartz has posted a few of the more noteworthy rules and approved definitions listed in the manual. Some of the sample sentences and phrases used in the book are chilling and reveal, albeit unintentionally, the attitude of those currently involved in the support of the regime at home and the toppling of others abroad. Here are a few favorites:

- "Keep the language crisp and pungent; prefer the forthright to the pompous and ornate."
- "Do not stray from the subject; omit the extraneous, no matter how brilliant it may seem or even be."
- "regime: has a disparaging connotation and should not be used when referring to democratically elected governments or, generally, to governments friendly to the United States."
- "while: as a conjunction, usually has reference to time. While the President was out of the country, the Army staged a coup. It can, with discretion, also be used in the sense of although or but. While he hated force, he recognized the need for order. Avoid using while in the sense of and."



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on July 12, 2014

- “number of: a phrase that is too imprecise in some contexts. A number of troops were killed. (If you do not know how many, say an unknown number.)”
- “casualties: include persons injured, captured, or missing in action as well as those killed in battle. In formulating casualty statistics, be sure to write “killed or wounded,” not “killed and wounded.” (See injuries, casualties.)”
- “nonconventional, unconventional: Nonconventional refers to high-tech weaponry short of nuclear explosives. Fuel-air bombs are effective nonconventional weapons. Unconventional means not bound by convention. Shirley Chisholm was an unconventional woman.”
- “disinformation, misinformation: Disinformation refers to the deliberate planting of false reports. Misinformation equates in meaning but does not carry the same devious connotation.”
- “celebrity copycatting: can lead one up the garden path because those emulated are not always pure of speech. A venerable newscaster persists in mispronouncing February (without the first r sound) and has misled a whole generation. Another Pied Piper of TV is given to saying “one of those who is” — joining many others who are deceived by the one and forget that the plural who is the subject of the verb (see one). The classic copycat phrase, at this point in time, grew out of the Watergate hearings and now is so firmly entrenched that we may never again get people to say at this time, at present, or simply now (see presently).”
- “Capitalize the W in October War or Six-Day War because either term as a whole is a distinguishing coined name, but 1973 Middle East war or 1967 Arab-Israeli war is distinguishing enough without the capital W. Avoid Yom Kippur war, which is slangy. Do not uppercase the w in Korean war, which was “undeclared”; the same logic applies to Vietnam war and Falklands war, and a similar convention (if not logic) to Iran-Iraq war.”
- “die: is something we all do, even writers who relegate world leaders to a sort of Immortality Club with phrasing like the President has taken steps to ensure a peaceful transition if he should die. Reality can be recognized by inserting in office or before the end of his term, or even by saying simply when he dies.”
- “Free World: is at best an imprecise designation. Use only in quoted matter.”

Regardless of how good the grammar, government intelligence agencies are indeed shrinking the boundaries of the Free World (or is it “Free World”?). It is telling (and damning) that the CIA is committed to making sure its agents keep a copy of this guide at hand and that they not stray from its strictures, while the Constitution gets no such reference and respect.

Joe A. Wolverton, II, J.D. is a correspondent for The New American and travels nationwide speaking on nullification, the Second Amendment, the surveillance state, and other constitutional issues. Follow him on Twitter @TNAJoeWolverton and he can be reached at jwolverton@thenewamerican.com.



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