

Reference Sources: English Grammar and Usage, Plain Language

General reference sources are my bread and butter. As a law librarian, I respond to all types of questions—including those about language, often involving English grammar, usage, or style. Not surprising since a large part of an attorney's bread and butter is legal writing. Whether your legal writing is analytical or persuasive, sources of English grammar and style or materials on plain language may be of use to you. Quick reminders of the grammar rules are especially helpful in this age of text messaging. Outlined below are selected web-based sources and guides that I find useful when answering these types of questions.

First things first. What's your starting point? We're so used to jumping on our favorite search engine and typing a phrase with expectations of finding exactly what we had in mind, but those expectations are often frustrated. How can you locate these electronic sources? Using a search engine is one way—although you'll probably find, un-

less you've been very specific, that a free text search will yield thousands of results. Or, alternatively, the information you're seeking isn't recognized, found, or indexed by a search engine and may be part of the "invisible web."

Start with a website that has done some of the work for you already: the Librarians' Internet Index [LII],¹ MeL internet,² or Internet Public Library³ are good search tools for general reference sources. Each of these subject collections provides annotated links to sources of English grammar, style, and citation using specific categories such as "Language & Linguistics," "Writing," and "English." Library research guides are another starting point. Academic and other research libraries often provide guides to specific areas of research for library users. While these guides may focus on particular library holdings, they can help you identify recognized sources or treatises in areas with which you may not be familiar. For example, the San Antonio College Library & Medial Services "Writing & Research Guides"⁴ supply links

to grammar, citation, style, and "how to" sources. The University of Washington's Gallagher Law Library "Legal and General Writing Resources"⁵ list print and online sources of grammar, usage, dictionaries, legal writing guides, and online tools.

What exactly do these subject collections and general writing guides include? Well, if you were never exposed to diagramming sentences during your academic career, have at it at the Guide to Grammar & Writing.⁶ Learn basic sentence parts or sentence types. Or take a look at Common Errors in English,⁷ which lists selected words in alphabetical order with a brief explanation of how they are often misused. Following that list is a list of "non-errors," common misspellings, and related resources. Another often cited website is Bartleby.com,⁸ which publishes reference, literature, and nonfiction classics—often titles in the public domain. Their "English Usage, Style & Composition" offerings include *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* and Strunk's 1918 *The Elements of Style*.

But what about more legal-centric interests? Legal writing sources and materials abound on the web. One area of inquiry is plain language. Plain language sources include links to and references from associations such as the Plain Language Association International,⁹ the Center for Plain Language,¹⁰ bar associations, and the federal government. Both the American Bar Association (ABA) and the State Bar of Michigan have articles or columns on plain language. ABA materials include *How Business Lawyers SHOULD Write*,¹¹ articles in *Business Law Today*,¹² and other section publications. State Bar¹³ materials include the "Plain Language"

columns. PlainLanguage.gov¹⁴ includes materials on the what and why of plain language, “how-to” tools, resources, and examples, as well as the use of plain language in various sectors, including the legal profession. References to plain legal writing books and web-based articles are provided. Plain language tools are also available at the Office of the Federal Register¹⁵ to facilitate compliance with plain language in government writing. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) also provides its *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents*¹⁶ on the web.

If these web-based materials are just not doing it for you or you’ve identified a title that you need to locate, remember that MeL, the Michigan Electronic Library, provides access to FirstSearch/WorldCat, which can help you determine whether a specific title is available at your public or academic library. Also available but still in the developmental stage is Open WorldCat¹⁷—an opportunity to search for library-owned materials via Google,TM GoogleTM Scholar, or Yahoo! Search. Of course, you can always consult your librarian! ◆

Jan Bissett is a reference librarian with Dickinson Wright PLLC and an advisory member of the State Bar Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications. She also performs research for Information Navigators, LLP, which provides library and nonlegal research services.

FOOTNOTES

1. <http://www.lii.org>.
2. <http://web.mel.org>.
3. <http://www.ipl.org>.
4. <http://www.accd.edu/sac/lrc/john/writing.htm>.
5. <http://lib.law.washington.edu/ref/writing.htm>.
6. <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>.
7. <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/index.html>.
8. <http://www.bartleby.com>.
9. <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org>.
10. <http://centerforplainlanguage.org>.
11. <http://www.abanet.org/buslaw/newsletter/0026/materials/05.pdf>.
12. <http://www.abanet.org/buslaw/blt/>.
13. <http://www.michbar.org>.
14. <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>.
15. <http://archives.gov/federal-register/write/plain-language/>.
16. <http://www.sec.gov/news/extra/handbook.htm>.
17. <http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/open/tryit/default.htm>.