

2010 Style Q&A

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Q&A no. 1: this Q&A document

Q: What is this?

A: This is a collection of questions I, Denise, have received on 2010 styles and my answers. I referred to Web sites and other writing guides in this Q&A that I found helpful in answering specific questions to specific people. I tailored my answers to the person asking the question based on his level of understanding of the rewrite scope, general specification writing, English, and the law. Inclusion of a Web site or writing guide in this document does not mean that all of the styles described at the site have been adopted. The example specifications may not reflect the latest versions; they are only examples for styles, not technical content.

Q&A no. 2: if vs. when

Q: When do I use *if*, and when do I use *when*?

A:

Term	Explanation
if	Turns clause following the "if" condition on or off. If on, it's on everywhere all the time. If off, it's nowhere . . . ever.
where	It's there. Perform the clause following the "where" condition where the where condition says to . . . nowhere else.
wherever	It may be there . . . it may not . . . but if it is there . . . in those locations the where condition describes, perform the task described in the clause that follows.
when	It's going to happen. When it does . . . and only during the time it does, perform the task that follows the when clause.
whenever	It may happen . . . it may not . . . but if it does . . . at the time described, perform the task described in the clause that follows.

We will have no consistency in the 2010s. We may consider adding consistency in the 2014s. We can consider creating consistency for the following terms. For the 2010s, you can use any of them.

Wherever=Anywhere=Any place=At any location

Whenever=Any time

Also . . . don't hesitate using "while" . . . "during this period of time" do x.

We are writing the Standard Specs as if they are being interpreted for the contract at hand. This is why we are changing *when* to *if* and similar in some specs. We used to say *when* because we were writing the Standard Specs for any contract . . . in some contract, we know x is going to happen . . . at some time . . .based on experience, we know it happens now and then . . . "when" it does, they have to do y. For the 2010s, we are writing it for this contract, it changes some of the *whens* to *ifs*. . . because it may not happen for this here contract.

Q&A no. 3: abbreviations

Q: Do I need an abbreviation for this?

A: <http://projdel/env/epub/files/OTRsept2001.pdf>

Keep acronyms and abbreviations to a minimum

CEQA, NEPA, FHWA, APE, MOU, NOI, RTIP, SHPO, HPSR, VELB, PM-10, dBA — the list could go on and on. But could your reader identify these terms? And even if you spelled out the term and identified the acronym early in your document, could your reader still remember what the term stood for some 40 pages later in your document? Probably not. Some acronyms, like FHWA for Federal Highway Administration, do not even make sense. All the terms become alphabet soup to your reader.

To help your reader along, try to use as few acronyms and abbreviations as possible. Spell out the terms. If you are afraid of repeating a long term too many times, try using a shorter version of the term. For instance, for Valley elderberry longhorn beetle (acronym = VELB), just say beetle in later references, if you are talking about only one beetle in a passage. Or for the State Historic Preservation Officer (acronym = SHPO), later just say the preservation officer. But there is nothing wrong in spelling out the entire term. You won't use a lot of extra paper or space. Plus, the extra printed words will help the reader read the document faster and more efficiently, with no need to refer to previous paragraphs where the term was introduced or to a list of abbreviated terms elsewhere in the document.

Q&A no. 4: tables

Q: Will you give me some example tables?

A:

The test batch must have a slump of at least 7 inches at the time of testing shown in the following table:

Test Batch Slump Requirements

Time required to place the concrete ^a , T	Time of testing
T ≤ 2 hours	after 2T has elapsed
T > 2 hours	after T + 2 hours has elapsed

^aAs described in the pile installation plan

The plastic slat material properties must have at least the values shown in the following table:

Plastic Slat Material Property Requirements

Property	Test method	Value
Melt index	ASTM D 1238	0.24
Density	ASTM D 1505	0.951
Low temperature brittleness	ASTM D 746	-76 °F
Tensile strength	ASTM D 638	3,700 psi

When tested under California Test 682, CIP inserts must withstand the minimum ultimate test loads shown in the following table:

CIP Insert Sustained Tension Test Load

Stud diameter (inches)	Ultimate tensile load (pounds)
1-1/4	25,000
1-1/8	19,800
1	16,000
7/8	11,600
3/4	7,200
5/8	6,600
1/2	4,200

Use the following equation and friction coefficients in calculating friction losses in tendons

[Equation deleted.]

Friction Coefficients

Type of steel tendon	Type of duct	Length of tendon, L (feet)	μ
Wire or strand	Rigid or semirigid galvanized steel sheet metal	$0 \leq L < 600$	0.15
		$600 \leq L < 900$	0.20
		$900 \leq L < 1,200$	0.25
		$\geq 1,200$	0.25^a
	Plastic	All	0.23
	Rigid steel pipes	All	0.25^a
HS bar	Rigid or semirigid galvanized steel sheet metal	All	0.30

^aWith the use of lubrication

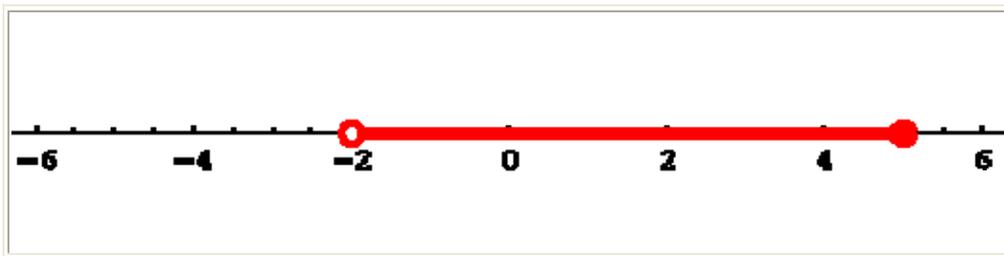
Q&A no. 5: between

Q: What does *between* mean?

A: From <http://www.sosmath.com/algebra/inequalities/ineq02/ineq02.html>:

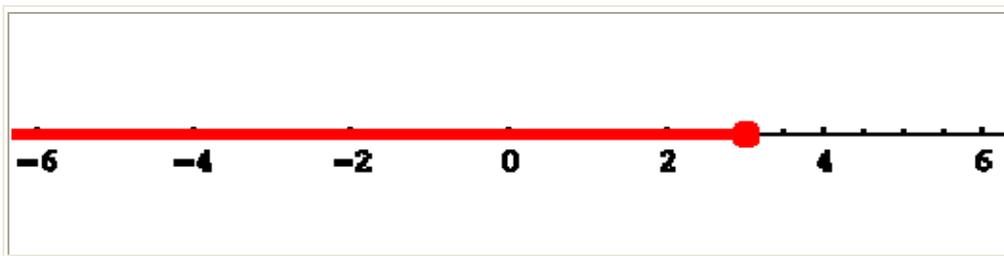
We visualize a set on the real number line by marking its members.

It is standard to agree on the following conventions: To **include** an endpoint, we "bubble it in." To **exclude** an endpoint, we use an "empty bubble". Here is the set of all real numbers greater than -2 and less than or equal to 5:

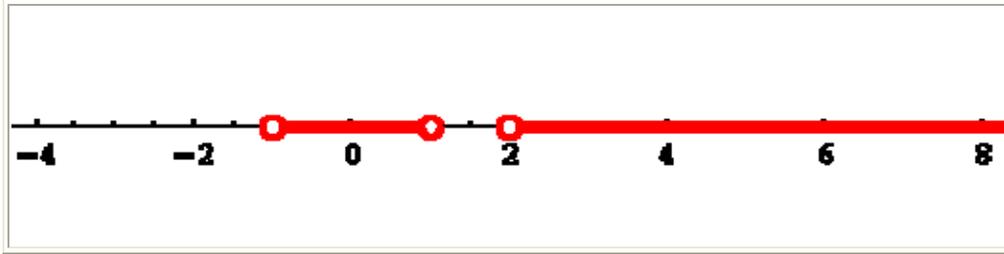


The number -2 is excluded from the set, so you see an "empty bubble"; the number 5 is included in the set, so the bubble at 5 is "filled in."

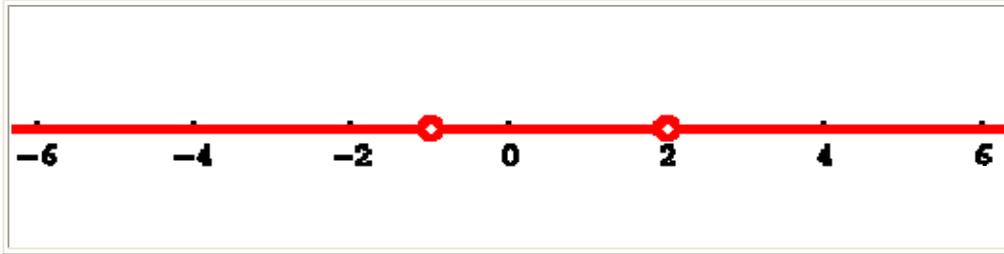
Next comes an unbounded set, the set of all numbers less than or equal to 3:



The set does not need to be "connected." The following graph depicts all real numbers which are either greater than 2 or strictly between -1 and 1.



The following is a description of the set of all real numbers with the exception of -1 and 2:



Q&A no. 6: so that vs. such that

Q: When do I use *so that*, and when do I use *such that*?

A: From <http://www2.yukawa.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~ptpwww/eng-note/e-note.html>:

3. "such as" vs. "so as" vs. "such that" vs. "so that"

These four expressions are quite often confused. While their meanings are somewhat similar, in general they cannot be used interchangeably. Below I discuss each.

(i) "such as" is used to introduce examples:

(1) However, these effects can be neglected in all but some very unusual situations, such as when $|\omega_1 - \omega_2| < \epsilon^2$.

(2) During the experiments, a thick layer of insulating material was wrapped around the tube to minimize certain undesirable effects, such as the loss of heat to the external environment.

While "such as" and "for example" are very similar in meaning, there is a slight difference in nuance. More than simply indicating that those things which follow are examples, the former also includes the implication that they are somehow representative of a certain *class* of things that share some characteristic by virtue of which they are all examples.

(ii) "so as" means "for the purpose of" or "in such a manner that":

(3) During the experiments, a thick layer of insulating material was wrapped around the tube so as to minimize the loss of heat to the external environment.

Note that this expression is almost always used in front of an infinitive verb form (here "to minimize"). [Grammatically, in general a phrase "so as + (infinitive clause)" acts as an adverb (a so-called *adverbial phrase*. Here the infinitive clause can consist of an infinitive verb alone or something more complicated.)] In the present case "so as to minimize" modifies the verb "wrapped." Usually, the meaning of such a sentence is changed little if "so as" is deleted, but in general it serves to express the idea that the action in question was carried out in a particular *manner* chosen to bring about the desired result.

(iii) "such that" is used in the modification of nouns. It is usually used to mean something like "of a type that":

(4) During the experiments, a thick layer of insulating material was wrapped around the tube in a manner such that the loss of heat to the external environment was minimized.

Here note that "such that..." modifies the noun "manner." [More precisely, "such" is an adjective modifying "manner," and it is joined to the complementary subordinate clause "the loss of..." by the conjunction "that."]] The implication is that this manner in which the insulating material was wrapped is of some particular type specifically designed to minimize heat loss. In the above sentence, it is important to note that "such that..." does not modify "wrapped." This is a common misconception, and it results in some very strange sentences, such as the following:

(5*) In our preliminary study, we ignored the convection term such that we could easily determine the behavior in the small γ regime.

Here, the intended meaning is that this term was ignored to allow for determination of the behavior in question, but since grammatically "such that..." modifies "term," the actual meaning of the sentence is quite strange. The simplest way to fix this sentence is to replace "such that" by "so that." If this is done, the phrase "so that we..." acts correctly as an adverb, modifying "ignored."

(iv) "so that" is usually used to express a meaning similar to "for the purpose of," "therefore" or "with the consequence that":

(6) During the experiments, a thick layer of insulating material was wrapped around the tube, so that the loss of heat to the external environment was minimized.

Here, the meaning of "so that" is quite similar to "and therefore," but there is also an implication of purposefulness; that is, the insulating material was wrapped around the tube with the purpose of obtaining the stated result. Note that the meanings of "so as" and "so that" are similar, but grammatically they are not interchangeable. [The expression "so as" is used to introduce a to-infinitive adverbial clause, while "so that" introduces a finite adverbial clause.]

Q&A no. 7: requirement vs. specification

Q: Can I use the word *requirement*?

A:

From the glossary of The Project Resource Manual—CSI Manual of Practice:

Specifications define the requirements for products, materials, and workmanship upon which the contract is based and requirements for administration and performance of the project.

Specifications define the qualitative requirements for products, materials, workmanship, and administrative requirements upon which the project is based.

In contrast to the generic notes and symbols on the drawings, the specifications provide detailed requirements for the physical properties, chemical constituents, performance requirements,

and standards of workmanship associated with the manufacture and installation of materials, equipment, and components.

From <http://www.rsmeans.com/dictionary>:

specification A detailed and exact statement of particulars, especially a statement prescribing materials, dimensions, and workmanship for something to be built or installed.

Use *specifications*, but if you are referring to a specific requirement of a specification, use *requirement*. You may see *Requirement* in tables. The information in that table are only requirements. They aren't specifications without a clause specifying what to do with those requirements.

The owners provide requirements—bullets of information for a product.

The spec writers write the specifications—the clauses that relay that information in contractual form.

Q&A no. 8: activity vs. operation

Q: When do I use *activity*, and when do I use *operation*?

A: From Jim Cotey, P.E., Office of Construction Engineering, Caltrans Division of Construction:

Activity - A unit work task or event on a critical path method schedule that is a basic component of a project and contributes to completing the project. Activities have a description, start date, finish date, duration and one or more logic ties showing work sequences and dependencies.

Operation - An informal term used to describe a project element consisting of a group of related activities. Example operations are falsework placement and roadway paving. Project element is the more commonly used term on critical path method schedules to describe a group of related activities rather than operation.

Q&A no. 9: modifiers

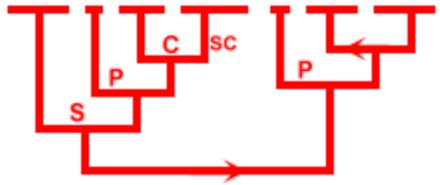
Q: When I shift my passive clause into an active one, where do I place my modifiers?

A: Place your modifiers such that they modify the same words they modified before the shift. If you diagram your new clause, the modifiers must point to the same words. Explanation from <http://facweb.furman.edu/%7Ewrogers/syntax/senmod.htm>

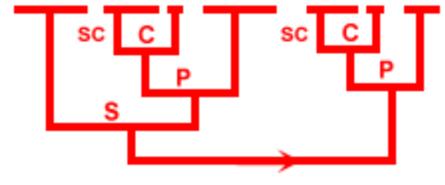
Diagramming Sentence Modifiers

Sometimes modifiers can [modify](#) not just the nouns or verbs that are the heads of their constructions, but entire sentences. An obvious example is the introductory subordinate clause, which in the syntax of English always modifies the whole main clause. The comma that always follows the introductory subordinate clause conveys precisely this information about the structure of modification: the comma indicates that the introductory clause is movable in the sentence, and therefore modifies the *whole* main clause--not just some particular part of it.

When I was single, I lived alone.

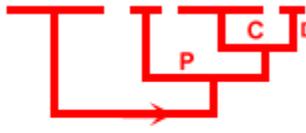


Where there's smoke, there's fire.



Single words can function the same way as introductory subordinate clauses--that is, can function to modify the whole main clause of the sentence. In the traditional grammar, such single words are often called "introductory adverbs" (though they are not adverbial in form), and they should not be confused with [coordinating](#) conjunctions.

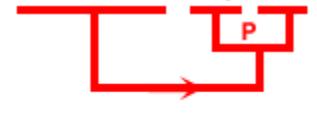
However, we can do it.



Therefore, you need to go.



Nevertheless, they won.

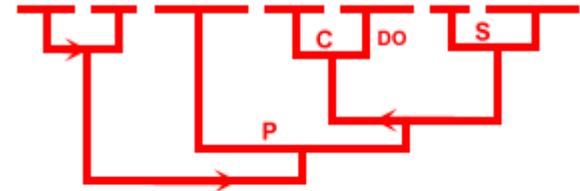


Words that are adverbial in form, or also prepositional phrases, can modify whole sentences. Note that the introductory words or phrases set off by commas in the following sentences are, like introductory subordinate clauses, movable in the sentence.

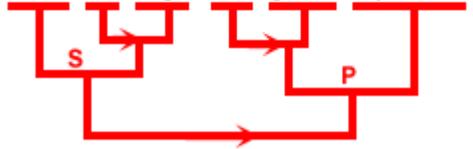
Thoughtlessly, she insulted us.



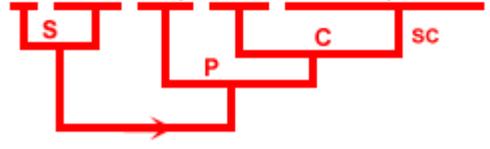
Long ago, farmers used thorns for fencing.



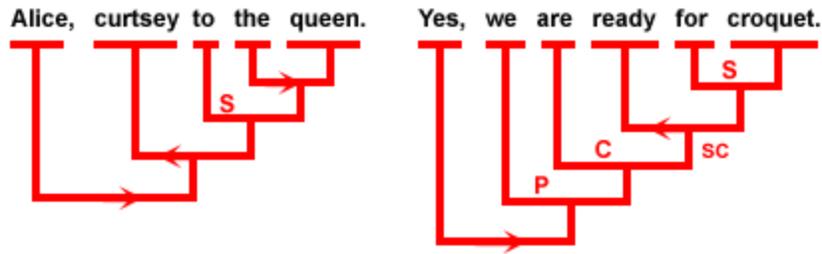
From its cage, the gerbil squeaked.



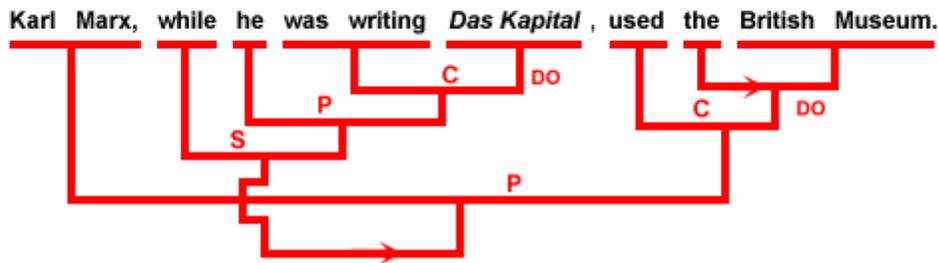
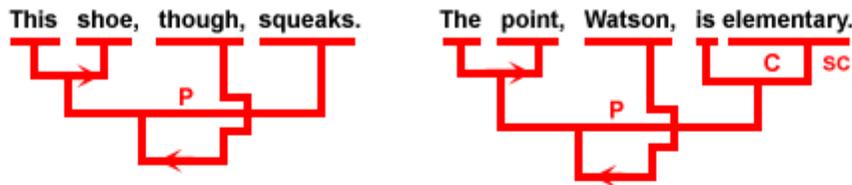
In effect, they were under-capitalized.



Nouns of direct address and interjections may also be treated as sentence modifiers, as follows.



In all of the examples so far, the sentence modifiers have come at the beginning of the sentence. The sentence modifiers, however, are movable--that mobility is implied, in fact, in the notion of the "sentence modifier." When a sentence modifier comes somewhere in the middle of the sentence, it is necessary to draw a bridge in diagramming, as in the following examples.



Q&A no. 10: Doctrine of the Last Antecedent

Q: Does a comma before a qualifier indicate that the qualifier modifies all the words preceding it?

A: No. The comma makes the qualifier parenthetical.

From <http://dictionary.law.com>

last antecedent rule

n. a doctrine of interpretation (construction) of statutes that any qualifying words or phrases refer to the language immediately preceding the qualifier, unless common sense shows that it was meant to apply to something more distant or less obvious. Example: "The commercial vehicular license shall not apply to boats, tractors, and trucks, with only four wheels and under three tons...", the qualifier "only four wheels and under three tons" applies only to trucks and not boats or tractors.

<http://dictionary.law.com/>

Q&A no. 11: trichotillomania

Q: What are the side effects of the 2010 rewrite project?

A: One of many side effects: You are likely to develop trichotillomania. (I'll let the other side effects be a surprise to you.)

From wordsmith.org:

A.Word.A.Day

with Anu Garg

trichotillomania

PRONUNCIATION:

(trik-uh-til-uh-MAY-nee-uh)

MEANING:

noun: A compulsion to pull out one's hair.

ETYMOLOGY:

From Greek tricho- (hair) + tillein (to pluck, pull out) + -mania (excessive enthusiasm or craze). A related word is [trichology](#) (the word for the study and treatment of hair and its disorders).

USAGE:

"Like many with trichotillomania, Neomie said she got some sense of relief and satisfaction from pulling out her hair."

Michelle Roberts; Women Who Tear Their Hair Out; BBC News (London, UK); Jul 6, 2009.

Q&A no. 12: non-hazardous vs. nonhazardous

Q: Is it *non-hazardous* or *nonhazardous*?

A: Nonhazardous. Prefixes are generally nonhyphenated . . . (pre-fixes?) . . . Chicago describes some exceptions. *Chicago's* hyphenation rules are fairly consistent with other reputable writing guides.

Follow *Chicago Manual of Style* . . . unless industry standards dictate otherwise.

But this doesn't mean if ASTM hyphenates it, hyphenate it . . . or if AASHTO hyphenates it. Note ASTM's writing rules hyphenate a lot more than other guides . . . we don't want to change punctuation just based on one particular guide (i.e., we don't want to hyphenate then unhyphenate because we change from ASTM to AASHTO) . . . but if pretty much the entire industry does it one way . . . go for the industry rather than follow *Chicago*. For *nonhazardous*, no one industry standard exists . . . so go for standard punctuation.

Q&A no. 13: any

Q: Can I use *any*?

A: Do not overuse *any*, but *any* comes in handy for conditionals. Example:
Without *any*:

If the load test and anchor piles are not used as part of the completed structure, you may use Type III cement in the concrete for those piles.

With *any*:

You may use Type III cement in any load test pile or anchor pile not used as part of the completed structure.

I use *any* in when I want to say "if you have this situation" . . . not as a emphasis of the noun it is modifying. We still don't want the emphasis *any* . . . but we allow the "you may or may not have this" *any*.

Q&A no. 14: in addition

Q: Should I use *in addition* to specify additional requirements?

A: No. Explanation:

The ball must comply with ASTM xyz.

The ball must be red.

Not,

The ball must comply with ASTM xyz.

In addition, the ball must be red.

As long as the ASTM doesn't specify a color other than red.

If it did:

The ball must comply with ASTM xyz except that it must be red.

The widget must comply with section 75.

The widget must be round.

Not:

The widget must comply with section 75.

In addition, the widget must be round.

As long as section 75 doesn't specify a shape other than round.

If it did,

The widget must comply with section 75 except it must be round.

The ball must be stripped

The ball must have polka dots.

You have a striped ball with polka dots.

Q&A no. 15: if vs. whether

Q: When do I use *if*, and when do I use *whether*?

A: From <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/if-versus-whether.aspx>:

If Versus Whether

Episode 109: May 30, 2008

Grammar Girl here. Today's topic is whether--**not** rain or sunshine, but whether w-h-e-t-h-e-r, as in whether you like it or not, it's the topic.

[Listener question about *if* versus *whether* and whether you need an *or not* after *whether*]

Well, it's been a while since the listener called in those questions, so I hope people are

speaking to each other by now. But they are great questions.

First, let's figure out when to use *whether* and when to use *if*.

If Versus Whether

Although in informal writing and speech the two words are often used interchangeably, in formal writing, such as in technical writing at work, it's a good idea to make a distinction between them because the meaning can sometimes be different depending on which word you use. The formal rule is to use *if* when you have a conditional sentence and *whether* when you are showing that two alternatives are possible. Some examples will make this more clear.

Here's an example where the two words could be interchangeable:

Squiggly didn't know *whether* Aardvark would arrive on Friday.

Squiggly didn't know *if* Aardvark would arrive on Friday.

In either sentence, the meaning is that Aardvark may or may not arrive on Friday.

Now, here are some examples where the words are not interchangeable.

Squiggly didn't know *whether* Aardvark would arrive on Friday or Saturday.

Because I used *whether*, you know that there are two possibilities: Aardvark will arrive on Friday or Aardvark will arrive on Saturday.

Now see how the sentence has a different meaning when I use *if* instead of *whether*:

Squiggly didn't know *if* Aardvark would arrive on Friday or Saturday.

Now in addition to arriving on Friday or Saturday, there is the possibility that Aardvark may not arrive at all. These last two sentences show why it is best to use *whether* when you have two possibilities, and that is why I recommend using *whether* instead of *if* when you have two possibilities, even when the meaning wouldn't change if you use *if*. It's safer and more consistent.

Here's a final pair of examples:

Call Squiggly *if* you are going to arrive on Friday.

Call Squiggly *whether* or not you are going to arrive on Friday.

The first sentence is conditional. *Call Squiggly if you are going to arrive on Friday* means Aardvark is only expected to call if he is coming.

The second sentence is not conditional. *Call Squiggly whether or not you are going to arrive on Friday* means Aardvark is expected to call either way.

So to sum up, use *whether* when you have two discrete choices or mean "regardless of

whether," and use *if* for conditional sentences.

Whether Versus Whether or Not

That last example is also a good lead in to the second part of the caller's question: when do you need an *or not* after *whether*? Why did I say, "Call Squiggly whether *or not* you are going to arrive on Friday"?

Often, the *or not* is just extra fluff and should be left off. In my first example, where I said, "Squiggly didn't know whether Aardvark would arrive on Friday," adding an *or not* wouldn't change the meaning or emphasis. *Squiggly didn't know whether or not Aardvark would arrive on Friday* means the same thing as *Squiggly didn't know whether Aardvark would arrive on Friday*. *Or not* is superfluous, so leave it out.

On the other hand, you need the full phrase *whether or not* when you mean "regardless of whether." It shows that there is equal emphasis on both options.

Call Squiggly regardless of whether you are going to arrive on Friday.

Call Squiggly whether or not you are going to arrive on Friday.

Finally, a listener wrote to say that her boss was driving her crazy by saying "rather or not" instead of "whether or not." So I'll add that "rather or not" is incorrect; *whether* is a conjunction and *rather* is an adverb, and they are not interchangeable. "Whether or not" is the correct way to show that there are two possibilities or you mean "regardless of whether."

Q&A no. 16: introductions to lists—general

Q: How do I shift clause into a list?

A: Lists must be able to be read as complete sentences (with only articles missing).

Example:

The mother baked:

1. Cookies
2. Brownies
3. Cupcakes

is read as "The mother baked cookies, brownies, and cupcakes." (The list clause in section 1 covers the "and.")

Another example:

The teacher asked the mothers to bring one of the following:

1. Cookies
2. Brownies
3. Cupcakes

is read as "The teacher asked the mothers to bring one of the following: cookies, brownies, or cupcakes."

Q&A no. 17: introductions to lists—options

Q: How do I shift clause with a list of options?

A: From Division I: All items in a list apply unless the items are specified as choices.

Original

Widgets shall be red, white, or blue.

Error—changing *shall* to *may*

Widgets may be red, white, or blue.

Interpretation: Widgets may be red, white, or blue OR THEY MAY NOT BE.

Correction: Widgets must be red, white, or blue. (They must be one of these three colors.)

Error—changing to a vertical list with just the addition of *either*

Widgets must be either:

1. Red
2. White
3. Blue

Interpretation: Widgets must be either red, white, and blue.

This is wrong . . . the correlative conjunction is *either--or*, not *either--and*

Correction—just change *shall* to *must* (This is usually all that is required for a 2010 conversion.)

Widgets must be red, white, or blue.

Correction—add numbers if needed for clarity

Widgets must be (1) red, (2) white, or (3) blue.

Correction—if still not clear, use a vertical list with a complete sentence as the introduction (Use for complicated lists only. . . . Don't try to force a sentence into a list by trying to follow the "3-item" guideline.)

Widgets must be one of the following colors:

1. Red
2. White
3. Blue

Q&A no. 18: synonyms

Q: The *Style Guide* says I must use *use* instead of *employ*, but it doesn't make sense in my clause.

A: No it doesn't. Some of the confusion may be coming from how people are interpreting the list of terms in section 6 of the *Style Guide*. In many style guides, the columns are titled **use/do not use**. We had this in a very old version of the guide. But this created confusion because people were switching the words everywhere . . . e.g., they'd use *limits* for *parameters* even when *limits* does not mean *parameters*. We tried to stop this misuse of the table by saying, "Do not use synonyms" instead of just "Do not use" . . . so that people would replace the words only when they meant the same thing . . . or at least close enough that the nuances were not significant enough to justify the use of a different word.

Here's a really dumbed down example of what I'm talking about . . . but it is an easy way for me to explain how to use the table:

Use	Do not use synonyms
zidget	widget

Dictionary

widget

1. a duck
2. a flower
3. a ball

zidget

1. a cup
2. a ball
3. a pen

Without the word *synonyms* in the right column, some people were doing this:

Spec writer: The woman planted a **widget-zidget** in her garden.

Denise: Why did you do that? It makes no sense to plant a cup, a ball, or a pen in a garden.

Spec writer: Because the *Style Guide* says to use **zidget** everywhere I see **widget**.

Add *synonyms* to the right column:

Spec writer: The woman planted a **widget** in her garden. [Okay . . . I'll leave that one alone because **widget** does not mean **zidget** here.]

The boy hit the **widget-zidget** with a bat. [I can change this one because in this context **widget** means **zidget**.]

Denise: :)

Q&A no. 19: voice

Q: The *Style Guide* says I must change all of my passive voice clauses to active voice.

A: No it doesn't. It says this:

1. Write in the active voice.

The passive voice is appropriate when the actor is unknown, unimportant, or obvious.

Do not contort clauses to force them into active voice.

Remember that voice is a property of transitive verbs. Do not add a transitive verb just to force a sentence into active voice. Example:

Bolts are shown on the plans or specified elsewhere.

You want black bolts.

Just say, "Bolts must be black."

Do not add "use" or "furnish" or "provide" (as in "Furnish black bolts"). This action is already covered by the following clause:

~~Furnish the resources, except Department-furnished materials, required to complete the work as described in the Contract.~~

I realize we aren't writing romance novels . . . but the article below contains a good explanation of when passive voice is appropriate . . . same goes for our specs. From http://www.hbarwa.com/content/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120:to-be-or-not-to-be-passive-voice-vs-passive-writing&catid=34:on-writing&Itemid=29:

To Be or Not To Be: Passive Voice vs. Passive Writing

Written by Kay Hudson
Sunday, 29 June 2008 13:00

Have you ever gotten a contest entry back with every instance of the verb *to be* circled and marked *passive voice*? Have you had unkind thoughts about the judge? Me, too. The verb *to be* is not inherently passive. It's not a very exciting verb, but it's a basic building block of the English language (and most others), and you are allowed to use it whenever you need it.

You are also allowed to use passive voice when you need it, but it helps to understand exactly what that means. Passive voice is a technical term. Passive writing is slow, dull, and just plain boring. The two often overlap, but they are not the same.

Our readers should be wooed with the most entertaining writing we can imagine.

Remember back in elementary school (a long time ago for some of us) when we learned the parts of a sentence? Some of us even learned to diagram them on the blackboard, but I won't make you do that. Just remember that a complete sentence consists of a subject and a verb, with or without an object. We can pile on as many modifiers and phrases as the market will bear, but it's the relationship between subject, verb and object that determines active or passive voice. (Golly gee, I think I smell chalk dust.)

The dog (subject) *chased* (verb) *the ball* (object) -- this is active voice. The subject of the sentence is performing the action. *The ball was chased by the dog* -- this is passive voice. The ball is now the grammatical subject of the sentence, but it is not the active agent -- that's still the dog.

Voice is as simple as that. If the subject of the sentence performs the action, whatever that may be, we have active voice. If the subject of the sentence is acted upon, the voice is passive. (Aha, chalk dust is smelled by me.)

Confusion over voice probably stems from the fact that it's just about impossible to construct a sentence in the passive voice without some form of the verb *to be*. *Is, are, was, should be, has been* -- good old *to be* shows up every time.

To be has many other uses, even if it isn't the most exciting verb around. Sometimes it's still the best choice. *The woman we were looking for was blonde, not brunette. We were walking in the park when the elephant stepped on George. We are writers.*

We are writers of commercial fiction, and we can usually find a stronger, more active, more interesting verb than *to be*. And nine times out of ten (at least), active voice is more interesting, more involving, and more descriptive (without the need for the dreaded adverb) than passive voice.

Here is a horrible example of passive gone wild:

The room was entered by a man. A woman was found in the room by him. Clothing was removed by them. Love was made. Cigarettes were smoked. The door was opened by her angry husband. His pistol was fired. The lovers were missed by the gunfire. The mirror was broken by a bullet. Bad luck was had by all.

As a grammar joke, pretty funny. As serious narrative, pretty much unreadable. A good argument for avoiding the passive voice. (We'll talk about sentence fragments another time.)

We can't always avoid passive voice; we don't always want to. In some situations passive voice is useful, even necessary. The choice often depends on what information you want to include, and what element you want to emphasize.

When the action is important and the agent performing it is unimportant or obvious: *Rain is predicted for this afternoon.* (By the weatherman, or some computer -- they usually get it wrong anyway). *Maxwell was arrested for murder.* (We don't need the arresting officer's name - it's the arrest that's important.) *The mail was delivered before noon.*

When the agent performing the action is indefinite or unknown: *That tree was cut down before we ever decided to build here.* (We don't know who cut it down, and it doesn't matter.) *My bicycle was stolen last week.* (This is technically passive, but it still seems more to the point than *Someone stole my bike last week.* Or, depending on your mood, you might go with *Some colorful adjective obscenity stole my expletive bike!*)

When we want to emphasize the agent by putting it at the end of the sentence: *My all-time favorite love story was written by Marjorie Romancewriter.* Now, if Marjorie wrote something less predictable, we might want to put *that* at the end: *Marjorie Romancewriter wrote the screenplay for my favorite slasher flick.*

In nonfiction, passive voice is sometimes used to maintain an air of detachment, often as part of a very long sentence guaranteed to put the reader to sleep. We are writers of commercial fiction; let's avoid this one entirely. After all, our readers should be wooed with the most entertaining writing we can imagine.

The long-standing advice to use active voice as often as possible still holds, especially in commercial fiction, where clarity and fast pace are always important. But don't be afraid to use passive voice now and then when it serves your purpose. Don't be afraid to use *to be* when you need it. Like *said*, *to be* is nearly invisible; now and then the verb is not the most important part of the sentence.

Passive writing has no technical definition, but we all know it when we see it, in the books we don't finish, in the manuscripts we are hard pressed to critique without a total rewrite. As for that judge, she may have been wrong about passive voice, but she may have recognized passive writing. Take another look before you toss that entry in the back of the closet.

We are converting only true passives into active voice. What we don't want to do is change the meaning of a clause by trying to force a stative passive into active voice. From <http://www.rit.edu/ntid/rate/sea/passivevoice/ps06stative.html>:

Grammatical Summary

STATIVE PASSIVES VERSUS TRUE PASSIVES

There exists an adjectival construction that resembles the passive voice superficially but is different in meaning; and it is important that teachers of deaf students recognize it. It is a construction using the verb **to be** with an adjective that is identical in form to a past participle. Note these examples:

1. The bank **was closed** all day yesterday. (= not open)
2. I **was married** for ten years. (= not single)
3. When I entered the room, I noticed that the chair **was broken**. (= not intact)

Although these constructions look identical to passive voice constructions, they do not express an action carried out on the subject of the sentence, they do not contain an explicit or implied agent, and they cannot be rewritten in the active voice. They merely describe the state or condition of the subject of the sentence.

Because they describe the state or condition of the subject of the sentence while resembling passive constructions superficially, some linguists call these constructions "stative passives" (Celse-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983).

Most stative passives have true passive counterparts as well, as in the three examples below:

1. The bank **was closed** at exactly 3 o'clock. (= Somebody closed it.)

This sentence clearly describes an action and can include a by-phrase, as in "The bank was closed at exactly 3 o'clock by the manager." Its active counterpart would be "The manager closed the bank at exactly 3 o'clock."

2. I **was married** in that chapel. (= Someone performed my wedding ceremony.)

This sentence also describes an action and can accept a by-phrase. "I was married in that chapel by a justice of the peace." Its active counterpart would be "A justice of the peace married me in that chapel last year." These are true passive voice constructions.

3. The chair **was broken** by the weight of the sumo wrestler when he sat down on it. (= He broke it.)

The active counterpart would be "The weight of the sumo wrestler broke the chair when he sat down on it."

Another explanation from http://www.tutorgig.com/ed/English_passive_voice

Stative passives

The passives described above are all *eventive* (or *dynamic*) passives. *Stative* (or *static*, or *resultative*) passives also exist in English; rather than describing an action, they describe the result of an action. English does not usually distinguish between the two. For example:

- The window was broken.

This sentence has two different meanings, roughly the following:

- [Someone] broke the window.
- The window was not intact.

The former meaning represents the canonical, eventive passive; the latter, the stative passive. (The terms *eventive* and *stative/resultative* refer to the tendencies of these forms to describe *events* and *resultant states*, respectively. The terms can be misleading, however, as the canonical passive of a stative verb is not a stative passive, even though it describes a state.)

Some verbs do not form stative passives. In some cases, this is because distinct adjectives exist for this purpose, such as with the verb *open*:

- The door was opened. ? [Someone] opened the door.
- The door was open. ? The door was in the open state.

Adjectival passives

Adjectival passives are not true passives; they occur when a participial adjective (an adjective [derived](#) from a participle) is used predicatively (see [Adjective](#)). For example:

- She was relieved to find her car undamaged.

Here, *relieved* is an ordinary adjective, though it derives from the past participle of *relieve*,^[14] and that past participle may be used in canonical passives:

- He was relieved of duty.

In some cases, the line between an adjectival passive and a stative passive may be unclear.

Passives without active counterparts

In a few cases, passive constructions retain all the sense of the passive voice, but do not have immediate active counterparts. For example:

- He was rumored to be a war veteran. ? *[Someone] rumored him to be a war veteran.

(The asterisk here denotes an ungrammatical construction.) Similarly:

- It was rumored that he was a war veteran. ? *[Someone] rumored that he was a war veteran.

In both of these examples, the active counterpart was once possible, but has fallen out of use.

Q&A no. 20: there is and there are

Q: Can I use *there is* and *there are* in my specs?

A: You can, but avoid them. From <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/concise.htm>:

Avoiding Expletive Constructions

This sounds like something a politician has to learn to avoid, but, no, an *expletive construction* is a common device that often robs a sentence of energy before it gets a chance to do its work. Expletive constructions begin with *there is/are* or *it is*.

There are twenty-five students who have already expressed a desire to attend the program next summer. It is they and their parents who stand to gain the most by the government grant.

Twenty-five students have already expressed a desire to attend the program next summer. They and their parents stand to gain the most by the government grant.

Further information about expletive constructions is available on our page on [The Verb "To Be"](#).

Q&A no. 21: casual language

Q: Does plain language mean casual language?

A: Keep the tone of your specs formal. Plain language does not mean casual language. You are writing contract specifications, not e-mail or a letter to a friend.

Q&A no. 22: capitalization

Q: Do I capitalize *Biologist*?

A: No. Do not overcapitalize. Capitalize only as described in the *Style Guide*. Note that "Chicago generally prefers a 'down' style--the parsimonious use of capitals." (Chicago 8.2)

Q&A no. 23: articles

Q: Can I dump my articles?

A: Only at the beginning of items in lists if they are not needed for clarity. Use standard English everywhere else. Say, "Notify the Engineer if you change the plan," not "Notify Engineer if you change plan." For dumping articles in lists, see *Style Guide* section 29.

Q&A no. 24: colons

Q: CSI-based specifications use a colon in place of *shall be*. Can we do this also?

A: Do not add your own style. The adoption of new styles came gradually--see brief history below. Each new style was approved by the 2010 decision makers (steering committee or Division 100 committee). If you have questions on whether or not we adopted a certain writing style, read sections 1-9. Other than a few differences (e.g., passive voice for payment clauses; structure; several exceptions to the *Style Guide* requested by legal), the technical sections must be written similarly.

First we were changing from passive to active voice. The sentences remained in indicative mood.

Then we introduced imperative mood and added the "sentences in imperative mood are written to the Contractor" clause. Sentences were still complete, but changing to imperative mood allowed us to dump "The Contractor shall/must."

We were saying "as shown on the plans and specified in the special provisions." We cut this down to "as described in the Contract" . . . (recently to "described"--see below).

We began items in lists with articles. Then the lawyers said we can dump articles at the beginning of each item in a list.

We added the "as approved by the Engineer" and "in writing" clauses and began dumping "by the Engineer" and "in writing" throughout.

Early in the project, the following format was rejected by the decision makers. People didn't want to go there yet.

Bolts: black
instead of
Bolts must be black.

Other styles were presented, but rejected or postponed. New styles will not be considered for the 2010s.

Q&A no. 25: payment clauses

Q: Will you provide me with example payment clauses?

A: Sure:

52-1.04 PAYMENT

The payment quantity of bar reinforcing steel is the calculated weight of the reinforcing bars. Reinforcing wire used as reinforcing steel is measured and paid for as specified for bar reinforcing steel.

The weight of epoxy coating is not included in the weight of reinforcement.

The payment quantity of bar reinforcing steel includes the lap of bars for splices including splices where you use a continuous bar where a splice is shown.

The payment quantities are based on the following:

[Deleted table]

The cross sectional area of reinforcing wire in hundredths of square inches is equal to its W-size no. The density of reinforcing wire is 0.2833 lb/cu in.

The payment quantity of welded wire reinforcement is the measured area covered by the reinforcement based on measurements taken of the area covered by the reinforcement and does not include laps.

If alternative transverse deck reinforcement placement details are shown, the payment quantities are based on the detail that shows truss bars.

The lengths of bar reinforcing steel used for headed bar reinforcement include the heads.

The payment quantities for bar reinforcing steel (bridge) and bar reinforcing steel (epoxy coated) (bridge) are based on the bar reinforcing steel involved in the bridge work as described in the special provisions.

Bar or wire reinforcement extending beyond the limits for epoxy-coated reinforcement shown is paid for as bar reinforcing steel (bridge).

75-1.06 PAYMENT

Miscellaneous metal materials are determined from scale weighings except for:

1. Final-pay-item miscellaneous metal materials.
2. Manhole frames and covers. The payment weight is 435 lb for a frame and cover for a deck and 235 lb for a frame and cover for a sidewalk.

A frame and cover pair is 1 unit. A frame and grate pair is 1 unit.

The weight of nonmetallic materials for restrainer units are not included in the weight of miscellaneous metal for restrainers.

Bridge joint restrainers are paid for as miscellaneous metal (restrainer) of the type shown in the verified Bid Item List.

The weight of epoxy and grit for a nonskid surface is not included in the weight of miscellaneous metal materials.

80-1.07 PAYMENT

The fence payment quantity does not include the width of openings.

The fence is measured:

1. Parallel to the ground slope
2. Along the fence

Q&A no. 26: commas

Q: I want to pause; can I use a comma?

A: Do not use it for a pause only. Only use technically necessary commas. Be careful with commas. When I QA, I am going to assume you intended to make adjectives coordinating (vs. cumulative) and clauses nonrestrictive (vs. restrictive) by your placement of commas.

Q&A no. 27: adjectives

Q: Is it a *little old lady* or a *little, old lady* or *old little lady*?

A:

The Order of Adjectives in a Series

It would take a linguistic philosopher to explain why we say "little brown house" and not "brown little house" or why we say "red Italian sports car" and not "Italian red sports car." The order in which adjectives in a series sort themselves out is perplexing for people learning English as a second language. Most other languages dictate a similar order, but not necessarily the same order. It takes a lot of practice with a language before this order becomes instinctive, because the order often seems quite arbitrary (if not downright capricious). There is, however, a pattern. You will find many exceptions to the pattern in the table below, but it is definitely important to learn the pattern of adjective order if it is not part of what you naturally bring to the language.

The categories in the following table can be described as follows:

- I. **Determiners** — articles and other limiters. See [Determiners](#)
- II. **Observation** — postdeterminers and limiter adjectives (e.g., a real hero, a perfect idiot) and adjectives subject to subjective measure (e.g., beautiful, interesting)
- III. **Size and Shape** — adjectives subject to objective measure (e.g., wealthy, large, round)
- IV. **Age** — adjectives denoting age (e.g., young, old, new, ancient)
- V. **Color** — adjectives denoting color (e.g., red, black, pale)
- VI. **Origin** — denominal adjectives denoting source of noun (e.g., French, American, Canadian)
- VII. **Material** — denominal adjectives denoting what something is made of (e.g., woolen, metallic, wooden)
- VIII. **Qualifier** — final limiter, often regarded as part of the noun (e.g., rocking chair, hunting cabin, passenger car, book cover)

 THE ROYAL ORDER OF ADJECTIVES 									
Determiner	Observation	Physical Description				Origin	Material	Qualifier	Noun
		Size	Shape	Age	Color				
a	beautiful			old		Italian		touring	car
an	expensive			antique			silver		mirror
four	gorgeous		long-stemmed		red		silk		roses
her			short		black				hair
our		big		old		English			sheepdog
those			square				wooden	hat	boxes
that	dilapidated	little						hunting	cabin
several		enormous		young		American		basketball	players
some	delicious					Thai			food

This chart is probably too wide to print on a standard piece of paper. If you click

[HERE](#), you will get a one-page duplicate of this chart, which you can print out on a regular piece of paper.

It would be folly, of course, to run more than two or three (at the most) adjectives together. Furthermore, when adjectives belong to the same class, they become what we call coordinated adjectives, and you will want to put a comma between them: the inexpensive, comfortable shoes. The rule for inserting the comma works this way: if you could have inserted a conjunction — *and* or *but* — between the two adjectives, use a comma. We could say these are "inexpensive but comfortable shoes," so we would use a comma between them (when the "but" isn't there). When you have three coordinated adjectives, separate them all with commas, but don't insert a comma between the last adjective and the noun (in spite of the temptation to do so because you often pause there): a popular, respected, and good looking student

See the section on [Commas](#) for additional help in punctuating coordinated adjectives.

Q&A no. 28: common sense

Q: I followed all of the rules, but my clause sounds awkward?

A: You must not have followed this rule:

Interpret each rule as if followed by *unless context and common sense dictate otherwise*. Do not follow a rule if clarity is reduced.

Read what you wrote. In the U.S., plain language is plain English. Plain language is not a different language; it is just a simplified language. After your rewrite, the specifications must still be syntactically correct.

Q&A no. 29: prepositions

Q: Which preposition do I use?

A: Check a reputable English dictionary. This may also help you:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=WgNKAAAAIAAJ&ots=6P70e9y0dn&dq=the%20correct%20preposition&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> [I put a copy in the writing guide folder on the server.]

Q&A no. 30: include

Q: Should we use *include*, *but not limited to*?

A: No. Include is not limiting. Check a reputable English dictionary. Also, From *Black's Law Dictionary*:

include. *vb.* To contain as a part of something. • The participle *including* typically indicates a partial list <the plaintiff asserted five tort claims, including slander and libel>. But some drafters use phrases such as *including without limitation* and *including but not limited to* — which mean the same thing. See NAMELY.

Q&A no. 31: positive writing

Q: When I changed "The Contractor shall not enter area x" to "Enter only areas other than x." I thought I was writing positively, but my QAer said I changed the meaning.

A: Your QAer is correct. You didn't follow the *Style Guide*. Item 6 in section 2 says "Write positively," but this is an item of a section that begins "Follow the principles in the *Federal Register's* Principles of Clear Writing, duplicated in part in this section." "In part" . . . for the rest, you have to go the *Federal Register's* guide, which says:

A negative statement can be clear. Use it if you're cautioning the reader.

DON'T WALK
DON'T SMOKE

But avoid several negatives in one sentence.

Do not change every clause with a not to a positive statement. Many of them are specifications that caution the reader. You are changing the meaning by changing these negative statements into positive ones.

Q&A no. 32: incorporation by reference

Q: But the *Style Guide* didn't say that!

A: See Q&A no. 31. The *Federal Register's* guide was incorporated by reference. Incorporation by reference is fundamental to contract writing. "Comply with x," "follow x," "In accordance with x" bring x right to where you mention it. It brings in . . . or incorporates . . . all of x. If you don't want part of x brought in, you refer to only the specific parts of x you want in your contract, or you specify the exceptions.

Q&A no. 33: context

Q: What do you mean by interpret the *Style Guide* rules and specifications in context?

A: I mean what m-w.com says I mean and what *Black's Law Dictionary* says I mean.

m-w.com:

Main Entry: **con•text**

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, weaving together of words, from Latin *contextus* connection of words, coherence, from *contexere* to weave together, from *com-* + *texere* to weave — more at [technical](#)

Date: circa 1568

1 : the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning

2 : the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs : [environment](#), [setting](#)
<the historical context of the war>

Black's Law Dictionary:

context, *n.* 1. The surrounding text of a word or passage, used to determine the meaning of that word or passage <his remarks were taken out of context>. 2. Setting or environment <in the context of foreign relations>.—contextual, *adj.*

Q&A no. 34: include vs. consists of vs. must consist of

Q: Do I use *include*, *consists of*, or *must consist of*?

A:

Include is part of a whole.

The widget must consist of a bolt, a nut, and a washer. [Various types of widgets exist . . . the widget we want must be made of these parts.]

The widget includes a nut and a washer. [The widget has at least these parts.]

The widget consists of a bolt, a nut, and a washer. [Widgets are made of these parts. It's a description of what a widget is. It's a nonspec. We aren't telling him that they must have these

parts . . . we are telling him these are the parts. It's really close to a definition. A definition would be:

widget: a contraption consisting of a bolt, a nut, and a washer.

We may use all of them . . . "consist of," "must consist of," and "include" in a spec . . . it depends on what you are describing.