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Style and Substance

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Gawking at our gantlet

This headline caused a ruckus: “At Amazon, Gantlet for New Hires.” The article referred to the e-commerce company’s “gantlet of people, dubbed ‘bar raisers,’ who must sign off on would-be hires.”

The reader howling began immediately. “It’s GAUNTLET ! Not GANTLET ! WSJ” was a typical comment online. (No need to yell, dear readers!) Other readers defended us.

We stood by our spelling, while conceding that it is understandable that many people aren’t used to it. A “gantlet” is a group that is set out to flog you, literally or figuratively. *Gauntlet* is the medieval glove that gave us the phrase “throwing down the gauntlet.”

Amid the outcry, our [Brian Fitzgerald tweeted](#): “I’m amazed and heartened by the healthy debate among WSJ visitors over gantlet v. gauntlet. People care about words.” Reporter Greg Bensinger says he received more than 30 emails from readers. But no one threw down a gauntlet.

One Scotch, one whisky, one ruling

Scotch whisky aficionados have long complained about our edict (shared with the AP) that the words, when separate, are to be rendered as scotch (lowercase) and whiskey (with an e). Taking their protests (along with research by editor John Edwards on prevailing style) to heart, we’ve decided that Scotch should retain its uppercase S in all references, and references to the Scotch, Canadian or Japanese varieties should be spelled whisky (and plural *whiskies*)—since doing otherwise is as jarring to experts in the field as, say, spelling “base ball” as two words. In the same vein, retain the spelling *whiskey* (plural *whiskeys*) for all others, such as bourbon, and when discussing the broad category of such brown spirits.

Rulings & reminders

- Janet Yellen is to be *chairwoman* of the Federal Reserve, in our style. She is going with “Chair” as her title but that isn’t an option in WSJ style. Given the choice between chairman and chairwoman, she prefers the latter so we’ll stick with it.

- *Prekindergarten*, not pre-kindergarten with a hyphen, is the way we spell it. One recent paper had one spelling in U.S. News and another in GNY. But it is pre-K on second references.
- A recent article properly spelled *microorganism*—yay! —with no hyphen. That is correct, right from Webster’s, despite the double-o.
- Fiat SpA and Chrysler Group LLC are now *Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV*.
- *Argentine*, rather than Argentinian, is our preferred noun and adjective for the people and things of Argentina. We prefer *Argentine peso*. But Argentinian(s) is also acceptable, according to the stylebook.
- *Mikheil Saakashvili*, the former president of the nation of Georgia, uses that spelling for his first name, not the Russian spelling Mikhail.
- *Bagram Air Field* and *Kandahar Air Field* are now our style, matching the preference for Air Field announced by AP after talking to military brass. We otherwise use one word on airfield.
- *Junk bond* no longer needs quotes around the term. But an explainer is often still a good idea, as spelled out in the stylebook.
- Criticism alert: We’ll never be royals.... In the WSJ, we don’t use “sacked” for fired, or “in hospital.”

War correspondence

With the 100th anniversary of the start of *World War I* approaching this summer, we remind you that we spell out the name in that way. *WWI* is the spelling if you use the abbreviation, but do so sparingly.

Drilling down on oil-field lingo

Something to keep in mind when writing captions about oil fields, points out the business desk’s Lisa Vickery: If you see a piece of equipment that looks a little bit like a gargantuan grasshopper, it isn’t drilling for oil. It is a pump jack, and it is bringing the already drilled oil to the surface—as readers have pointed out when we’ve incorrectly indicated that oil drilling was going on. (A Reuters caption in our GAMS art system recently steered us wrong.) Oil rigs tend to look like towers of scaffolding. When in doubt about the equipment, ask our energy-bureau experts in Houston and Dallas.

‘From a year earlier’

Tight-editing tip: The phrase “from a year earlier” implies that it is the same time period, so it may be redundant to say, as we sometimes do, “from the same period a year earlier.”

Cato’s concern

A recent correction that we published should be kept in mind: Cato Institute successfully argued that we were wrong in calling it a conservative think tank. They make the case that we should describe it as a *libertarian think tank*.

Hyperbole alert

As Paul Martin reminded us [in 2008](#), in times of economic anxiety, it is tempting to use scary words to try to dramatize the situation. But we should curb the urge.

“Plummet? A highway-tax revenue decline of 3.7% is a plummet?” a reader asked in 2008.

Indeed, words like plummet and plunge—and soar and skyrocket, for that matter—quickly lose their shock value when they are overused. Much better to save the overextended verbiage and use the space to impart actual facts. Rather than ventilating that “Stocks plunged sharply in a bloodbath,” it serves readers much more to say, in about the same space, “Stocks fell 2%, the sharpest drop in a year...”

As for scary nouns, remember that a *crash* is generally considered a drop of 20% or more in a short period. That would be 3,200 Dow points at the current level. We can fully describe the market for our readers without whipping out the usual, sensational labels in place of helpful facts.

Heads above the rest

- “Airbus’s Long, Strange Trip to a Simpler Name,” by Gary Ricciardi
- “Big Board Scores One for the Humans,” by Russell Adams, referring to the dwindling band of stock traders who still breathe at the exchange.
- “It’s Not You, Olympics, It’s Me / NHL Casts Doubt on Sending Players to South Korea in 2018; Talk of a Hockey ‘World Cup’ Instead,” by Sam Walker

Heads that make you go ‘hmmm’

- “Health Signup Faces New Test.” *Sign-Up*
- “Taking on the Bridge Case.” *Taking On*. This is a good example of when we uppercase “on,” if it is an integral part of the verb.
- “For Corporate America, Risk Is Big Business.” We still dislike phrases such as Corporate America and Big Pharma, which are clichés that imply that corporations or industries talk with one voice. [See discussion in 2011.](#)

Kiev or Kyiv?

How to spell the capital of Ukraine? We know the country is adamant that it is called Ukraine, not “the Ukraine”—which sounds like something less than a country—but many people there also prefer the media use the Kyiv spelling. But AP and most Western media outlets have stuck with Kiev since it is the most recognizable to English speakers.

Hyphen harumph

Page One’s Dan Kelly rightly points out that we sometimes put in unnecessary hyphens such as in “most-aggressive executive.” There is no reason to.

However, there is reason to put a hyphen in “more” passages when they can be misread. “There were more elaborate displays at the fair this year” is ambiguous, Dan says, because it could mean either there were more displays that were elaborate, or that the displays were more elaborate than in the past. If it means the latter, it needs a hyphen: “more-elaborate displays.”

Guitar mistake, we fret

When is a bass guitar a guitar? Basically, never.

After some debate, we went ahead and ran a correction recently after calling a bass—a Rickenbacker 4001, specifically—a *guitar*. Savvy readers noticed that one really shouldn’t call a *bass guitar* (which has four strings) simply a guitar (which usually has six to 12). You can call it either a bass or a bass guitar.

Quiz (a dozen flubs to find)

1. Recent progress in dampening those sounds, he says, has forced manufacturers to lower noise levels.
2. Shawn Johnson, top, a student at the Texas A&M School of Law in Ft. Worth, Texas, opposes tuition subsidies.
3. Workers cleaned the stage at the Detroit Auto Show Thursday.
4. Frozen or Raw—Which is best?
5. When Melinda Wedde took her daughter Zoey to see “Frozen” for the second time, she faced a challenge: Convincing the four-year-old not to sing every song out loud.
6. An email from a Port Authority police captain adds, “Concerns were made to no avail (sic) locally.”
7. During an address to the National Economists’ Club in November, Mr. Painter’s mind raced and his fingers flew.
8. That allows them to create portraits of roughly 2 million people’s habits as they have gone about their daily lives.
9. “Why don’t we tell the soldiers how much they can spend on cable TV?,” he says.
10. The reclusive imam lashed out Monday at his one-time partner, Turkey.
11. Cowboys are nearing the end of a six-month journey driving 18,000 cattle across more than 1,200 miles of Australian countryside.
12. Mr. Gates’s memoir, entitled “Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War,” is being released Jan. 14.

Answers

1. *damping*.
2. *Fort Worth*. We always spell out Fort.
3. *on* Thursday. As we’ve asked before, please include the “on” before the day of the week when the preceding word is uppercase, lest we seem to create new entities (such as White House Wednesday).
4. Which is *better*? As a reader pointed out, we made a comparative statement, and *better* could better have been used, not the superlative *best*.

5. *4-year-old*. Numerals for ages of people and animals. (And *persuading* is the word we wanted, not convincing.)
6. Sic, which we use for quoted matter to note that something is being spelled in its original form, should have brackets, if it's "our" sic. Parentheses means it was in the original document.
7. Dangler alert. Doubt his mind ever did public speaking.
8. *Two million*, not a numeral, for people (but numerals for dimensions or distance, like 2 million miles). In addition, "to create" should be followed by *they go about* not "they have gone about.")
9. No comma is called for after a question mark.
10. *onetime*, meaning former. One-time, with a hyphen, means for a single time.
11. As former grammarians will tell you, *head of cattle* is the better term. There isn't literally a single "cattle."
12. *titled*, not entitled. But good job on the proper possessive of *Gates's*.

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