Musings from the grammar police #1
...just for fun

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Clean, crisp writing

Celia M. Elliott is a physics department staffer who co-teaches Physics 496, “Introduction to Scientific Research.”

P496 puts significant focus on communication skills, including writing.

Fun references, from Celia:

“Ms. Particular's Micro-Lectures on Style and Usage”
“Fluff in Scientific Writing”

There are more... see links towards the bottom of this page.
Parallel construction

Here’s what I mean. Compare these two sentences:

1. “I enjoy reading, cooking, and to travel.”
2. “I enjoy reading, cooking, and traveling.”

The second is better. Keep the same form for all elements in a list.

The same thing applies to verbs in long sentences.

1. Proper preparation of unpainted wood surfaces includes sanding with fine-grit sandpaper and the application of a water-based uncercoat.
2. Proper preparation of unpainted wood surfaces includes sanding with fine-grit sandpaper and priming with a water-based undercoat.

The second is better.
Comprise vs. compose

Loads of people get this wrong! The whole comprises its parts. The whole is composed of its parts.

Right:

“The United Nations General Assembly comprises 193 member states.”

“The United Nations General Assembly is composed of 193 member states.”

Wrong:

“The 193 member states comprise the United Nations.”

“The United Nations General Assembly is comprised of 193 member states.”

Ms. Particular’s hint: “comprised of” is ALWAYS incorrect. [1]
The subjunctive tense

The subjunctive tense is nearly gone from modern English usage. It is (still) in use in Romance languages. Loosely: it expresses desire.

French:
Ma femme sait que je suis intelligent, mais elle veut que je sois beau.
(My wife knows I am intelligent, but she wishes I were handsome.)

“Were” is the present subjunctive of the verb “to be.” It is not the conditional, and it is not a past tense. It is tempting to use “was” in place of “were,” but that is incorrect.

Can anyone offer an example in Spanish?
Why bother?

Clarity is important. Written expression is different from speech.

Also: there’s something lovely about a perfectly crafted sentence. Here’s an example, which opens the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* It sketches the entire life of one of the book’s characters.

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967; trans. Gregory Rabassa) [2]
References

http://people.physics.illinois.edu/Celia/MsP/MsParticular.htm.