Some Specific Guides to Better Writing

In reading more than 150 manuscripts in the past 18 months, I’ve noted a number of errors that writers frequently make. Some may seem trivial, but because we have a choice of being correct or being in error, we ought to choose to be correct.

So here’s a list of some specific suggestions from my observations. Like most grammatical rules, there may be exceptions to some of these.

• Spell correctly. When a word like judgment/judgement can be correctly spelled either way, I prefer the shorter version.
• Use active, rather than passive, voice as much as possible.
• Use positive, rather than negative, forms. “Do not use the negative form.”
  Avoid double negatives, too.
• Avoid split infinitives. Colleen Schuh and I tend to usually disagree on how awkward a sentence must be before we’ll allow a split infinitive to remain.
• Be sure subject and verb agree in number. I’ve found two plural nouns—data and criteria—give many writers problems. Their singular forms are datum and criterion.
• Distinguish between effect (which, as a noun, means result and, as a verb, means to bring about) and affect (which, as a noun, means an emotion and, as a verb, means to influence).
• Avoid using etc. It frequently leaves the reader feeling the writer couldn’t think of anything else to add.
• Distinguish between its and it’s.
• Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition.
• Avoid substituting myself for me.
• When referring to persons, use the pronoun who rather than that. “Authors who write for understanding” not “Authors that write . . . .”
• Proofread carefully.

Keep some writing tools handy—a dictionary, a word book, a handbook of style/grammar, and a thesaurus. Use them.