

Q. It looks as if people who write radio commercials, along with the general public, disregard the difference between *farther* and *further* and between *older* and *oldest*, so please discuss them in your column.

A. Thanks to Chicago correspondent Dick Wales for pointing out that many people misuse these two pairs. The adverb *farther*, the comparative form of *far*, is used to describe only the literal, physical distance between two items, and conservative writers argue that *farther* should be used only that way.

Dictionaries disagree, however, pointing out that *farther* can also describe figurative remoteness, as in the phrase “farther from the truth,” which the scholarly Usage Panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary* has pronounced acceptable since at least the 1982 2nd College Edition. The Usage Panel of the AHD points out that writers since Shakespeare have ignored the difference between the two words, so the issue is well settled. (It seems a pity, though, that such a handy and nice distinction may disappear.)

On the other hand, *further* (“more to the fore”) is the more widely used of the pair, being appropriate for distance in degree, time, or space. It is used in phrases like “further in debt” and “further flights of rhetoric,” and it means “additional” in phrases like “further steps are necessary.” As a transitive verb it also means “to advance or promote,” as in “to further the cause.”

The distinction between *older* and *oldest* is that the word *older* is traditionally correct only when the comparison is between two persons or items. For more than two, the superlative *oldest* is correct. However, the comparative form *older* is in danger of disappearing, for the large majority of the public seems to ignore the distinction between the two forms, most people using the superlative form *oldest* for any plural number. Again, however, the loss eliminates a nice distinction, and language becomes more vague.

Both losses are signs of the “leveling” of language; the general public allows language it considers unimportant to disappear from use. It seems unfortunate, however, that language inevitably loses valuable nuances in meaning

when the general public decides it can do without them. Linguists argue that the people who use any language select what they consider they need to express, and as the language evolves, discard unneeded distinctions.

For example, as I write this, I think of the traditional distinction between the words *nauseated* and *nauseous*. Do you distinguish these two adjectives or do you consider them synonyms? If you do not consider these adjectives to be synonyms, you are in a very small minority of English speakers.

The adjective *nauseous* traditionally meant “causing nausea”; thus it would appear in a context like “nauseous fumes.” On the other hand, *nauseated* described a person’s feeling about his or her own condition. So to say, “I am nauseous” would mean “I cause nausea,” not “I am nauseated.” That distinction has been virtually obliterated, and only a few old fussbudgets continue to observe it.

Q. I have received a letter from “attorney John Jones.” In an article, shouldn’t the title be capitalized?

A. The answer depends upon the editorial style of the journal in which the article will appear. The following suggestions come from William Sabin, *The Gregg Reference Manual* (Eighth Edition, 1996). They merely provide a general explanation of how to handle the capitalization issues that may arise. Notice that the exceptions to the rules may seem to outnumber the rules themselves.

Capitalize the individual’s title when it precedes the name of the individual. Thus, it should be “Attorney John Jones”—or “Secretary Jane Smith.” Exception: Do not capitalize the title when the person’s name precedes the title and is separated from it by commas. Then the clause is considered to be “in apposition.” Here are some examples to clarify that grammatical rule:

John Jones, defense attorney, announced that his client would not testify at trial.

Jane Smith, state secretary of the Alumni Club, announced its annual plans.

There are exceptions to that rule, however, when the individuals named are high-ranking national officials, state officials, or international dignitaries. (So write, “the President”; “the Vice President”; and capitalize the titles of cabinet members.) Included are heads of government agencies and bureaus (“the Chief Justice”; “the Senator”; “the Queen of England”).

Generally, titles of lower-ranking federal and state officials and of local government officials are not capitalized—but with another exception: If the distribution of the written document is for a limited readership, and the readers would consider the official mentioned to be of high rank, capitalize the title. For example, “the Chairperson of the School Board”

Do not capitalize titles when they are used as a general term of classification: “a senator,” “a congressman,” “a diplomat.” But—another exception—when the President of the United States is mentioned, because of the high regard for that office, the word “President” is capitalized even when it is used as a general classification: “Every President who has served in office will be present.”

But do not capitalize descriptions like “ex-,” “the late,” or “-elect” (“the late President Roosevelt”). Finally, inside a letter, in the identification block of the letter-writer, and on the envelope, capitalize all titles whether they precede or follow the name: “John Smith, M.D.,” “Joseph Watson, Chief Operating Director.”

As you have probably noticed, this mélange of rules and exceptions to them indicates that the rules themselves are in flux, so the statements about them are by no means unanimous. With few exceptions, *The Federal Lawyer* follows the *AP Style Manual*. **TFL**

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