CB's Pet Writing Peeves

'This' with Unclear Referent: See Finkel/LeBlanc

Basically rule is don't use 'this' as pronoun, use only as demonstrative adjective.

Split Infinitives

I think split infinitives just sound clunky and uneducated and careless.

*** To carelessly split infinitives is clumsy.**

Sedulously to avoid splitting infinitives can be pompous.

It is almost never hard to write around a split infinitive; when it is hard it's probably not worth the trouble unless you're writing for CB.

Personal Pronouns and Politics

*** A writer shouldn't let his politics distract his readers.** *political*

*** A writer shouldn't let his or her politics distract his or her readers.** *political and clumsy. (likewise his/her, (s)he, etc. etc.)*

*** A writer shouldn't let their politics distract their readers.** *ungrammatical*

In my experience this sort of thing is *never* hard to write around.

Writers shouldn't let politics distract their readers.

It's best to write apolitically.

Which and That

Some writers only use "which" (especially some British writers). In fact, in my experience "which" is rare in proper scientific writing. Also in my experience nobody ever mistakenly substitutes 'that' for 'which'.

Zeroth order rule: always use "that" unless the result sounds terrible.

*** The language, that I learned yesterday, is a PERL variant.** *ugh.*

First order rule: if a comma before it sounds OK and means the same, it's "which" (of course watch for changed meaning).

Real Rule: As in Finkel/LeBlanc. 'Which' clause is nonrestrictive – it assumes a known referent and tells you more about it. 'That' clause is restrictive – it picks the referent out of a set of potential others.

The algorithm, which we all understand, is elegant. *There is one algorithm and you know which one it is by the time you read 'The algorithm'. Further, we all understand it, and it's elegant.*

The algorithm that we all understand is elegant. *There is more than one algorithm, but there is exactly one we all understand and it's elegant.*

*** The algorithm which we all understand is elegant.** *Probably the second meaning is intended but it could be the first...ambiguity.*