REMINDERS ABOUT STANDARD ENGLISH GRAMMAR (WHICH IS NOT THE ONLY KIND AROUND BUT IS PRIVILEGED BY MAINSTREAM COLLEGES)

1. In the United States, periods and commas accompanying final quotation marks always go inside the quotation marks. (NO: When you are uncertain, consult Grantham’s “Reminders”. YES: When you are uncertain, consult Grantham’s “Reminders.”)

2. Coordinate or independent clauses (same as whole sentences) are joined by a comma and a conjunction, or by a semicolon, or by a semicolon and a conjunction. (NO: I am concerned about the war but I will not protest in public. YES: I am concerned about the war, but I will not protest in public. YES: I am concerned about the war; I will not protest in public. YES: I am concerned about the war; but I will not protest in public.)

3. Compound predicates (one subject, two verbs) are joined only by the conjunction, without the comma. (NO: I am concerned about the war, but will not protest in public. YES: I am concerned about the war; but will not protest in public.)

4. I prefer that articles, adjectives, and pronouns agree in number with their nouns (but this “rule” is fading fast). (NO: From every single lamppost, someone was hanging by their neck. YES: From every single lamppost, someone was hanging by his or her neck. YES: From every single lamppost, someone was hanging by the neck. YES: From all the lampposts, people were hanging by their necks.)

5. A hyphen (-), which links, is not a dash: a dash, which separates, is made with two hyphens (--) and without spaces before, between, or after. Most computer word processing systems today offer a way to make a real dash—an extra-long hyphen; check yours. (NO: The Cassini space probe launched in October of 1997 carried 72.3 pounds of Plutonium-238 - enough to give everyone on earth fatal lung cancer. YES: The Cassini space probe launched in October of 1997 carried 72.3 pounds of Plutonium-238—enough to give everyone on earth fatal lung cancer.)

6. Most Dartmouth work is spelled the Standard English way (which is not the only way). Use Spellcheck, read your piece over, or try reading backwards from end to beginning, which is sometimes helpful (if dizzying).

7. Ninety-eight out of a hundred sentences beginning “There is” or “There are” can be rearranged to have a clear subject and a strong verb. (NO: There are only two options I see. YES: I see only two options.)

8. I prefer that “I” and “me” not be used interchangeably (though this “rule” is also withering.) (NO: The idea that cow’s milk may not be healthy for humans is inconceivable to Richard and I. YES: The idea that cow’s milk may not be healthy for humans is inconceivable to Richard and me. TRICK: Try the sentence without the other person and let the ear tell you which case to use: “inconceivable to me.”)

9. I prefer that the verbs “to lie” (recline) and “to lay” (place an object) not be used interchangeably (although this “rule” is also dying). (NO: Did we expect Hussein to lay down and die? YES: Did we expect Hussein to lie down and die? NO: Has he laid down and died? YES: Has he
lain down and died? TRICK: “To lay” *sounds* regular [I lay, I laid, I have laid]; “to lie” *sounds* irregular [I lie, I lay, I have lain].
10. “Then” (about time) and “than” (about comparison) are not interchangeable. (NO: A high-fat, high-protein, low-fiber diet is less healthy than one low in fat, low in protein, and high in fiber. YES: A high-fat, high-protein, low-fiber diet is less healthy than one low in fat, low in protein, and high in fiber.)

11. Apostrophes are not usually used to form plurals (although the practice is so widespread that this “rule” too is wavering.) (NO: Late in the 1980’s high-heels came back into fashion. YES: Late in the 1980s, high-heels came back into fashion. NO: The blue clapboard house belongs to the Miller’s. YES: The blue clapboard house belongs to the Millers.)

12. The possessive pronoun its, like all possessive pronouns (his, hers, yours, ours, theirs, etc.), takes no apostrophe; the contraction of “it” and “is” (it’s) needs one. (NO: The caterpillar drew back it’s head and pooped in my hand. YES: The caterpillar drew back its head and pooped in my hand. It's [it] messy.)

13. “To affect” is to cause a change in; “to effect” is to accomplish (but the distinction is being blurred on every hand). (Does your sprain affect your golf swing? He can effect a change in behavior if he seriously repents.)

14. Stand-alone sentences need separating with more than a comma. (NO: I want you to make this meeting brief, I have a ton of things to do tonight. YES: I want you to make this meeting brief; I have a ton of things to do tonight. YES: I want you to make this meeting brief. I have a ton of things to do tonight. YES: I want you to make this meeting brief, because I have a ton of things to do tonight. NO: The news coverage of Cassini was minimal, most people I asked hadn’t heard about it. YES: The news coverage of Cassini was minimal; most people I asked hadn’t heard about it. YES: The news coverage of Cassini was minimal. Most people I asked hadn’t heard about it.)

15. Meaningful, generalizations are buttressed by concrete details. (NO: After 1970, when the CIA and ITT tried but failed to oust Chilean president Allende., the U.S. brought down his government by economic interference. YES: After 1970, when the CIA and ITT tried but failed to oust Chilean president Allende, the U.S. brought down his government by economic interference. The U.S. government prevented loans to Chile, underwrote opposition newspapers and labor unions and political parties, blocked delivery of spare parts to industries, financed and promoted a devastating Chilean truckers’ strike, and trained and funded the army that led a bloody coup in which Allende was murdered.)

16. Historically, “different” is not used with “than” but with “from,” and my mind’s ear is used to that (even though nowadays this “rule” is bent right and left.) (NO: His belly button is different than mine. YES: His belly button is different from mine. NO: He does the tango differently than I do. YES: He does the tango differently from the way I do it. YES: His tango differs from mine.)

17. Pronouns need clear antecedents. (NO: Birth and death have to happen—no one can stop it. YES: Birth and death have to happen—no one can stop them. YES: Life, including birth and death, has to happen—no one can stop it.)

18. He refers only to the male, not to both male and female. Use the more accurate humankind or humanity instead of mankind, and make your pronouns reflect the gender realities of your situation. (NO: Everyone on our street put his name on the petition to outlaw the cruel LD-50 toxicity test. YES: Everyone on our street put his or her name on the petition to outlaw the cruel LD-50 toxicity test. YES: All on our street put their names on the petition to outlaw the cruel LD-50
toxicity test.) Other options in such situations are to toggle back and forth between “she” and “he” as you write or to make a habit of using the less-expected gender pronoun—Some doctor will nod her head. A nurse will often be more generous with his time than a doctor.

19. **Subjects and verbs should agree in number.** (NO: Antics like that Vietnam shit turns my stomach. YES: Antics like that Vietnam shit turn my stomach.)

20. **“A lot” really is two words, like “a bunch” (but it may not be so much longer).** (NO: Meat animals raised on factory farms account for alot of this nation’s water pollution. YES: Meat animals raised on factory farms account for a lot of this nation’s water pollution.)

21. **“All right” is also two words (though it, too, won’t be too much longer).** (NO: That’s alright with me. YES: That’s all right with me.)

22. **Use “literary present” tense** when writing about events in a piece of writing, since they remain locked in present time as long as the book exists. (NO: As Marlow said in Heart of Darkness, “How out of touch with truth women are!” YES: As Marlow says in Heart of Darkness, “How out of touch with truth women are!”)

23. **Avoid pontifical exaggeration.** (NO: It is such an unforgettable novel that anyone who reads it will be affected by it for the rest of his or her life. YES: It affected me deeply. NO: Heart of Darkness exposed me to a time period I knew nothing about. YES: Heart of Darkness taught me things about the nineteenth century I had not known before.)

24. **“Could not help but” is a confusing idiom best avoided altogether.** (NO: I could not help but admire him. YES: I could not but admire him. YES: I could not help admiring him. YES: I admired him.)

25. **“Conscience” (moral inner voice) and “conscious” (awake and alert) are different words.** (NO: I was not conscience of how often I was clearing my throat. YES: I was not conscious of how often I was clearing my throat. NO: Doesn’t your conscious bother you when you lie? YES: Doesn’t your conscience bother you when you lie?)

26. **“Stated” denotes a formal announcement; use it sparingly.** (NO: Then Chris stated, “Let’s go to K-Mart.” YES: Then Chris said, “Let’s go to K-Mart.” Fret not about using said too often; most of the time it’s what’s wanted, and the repetition goes unnoticed, as a glance at any good novel reveals. [Another way to avoid repeating said is to let narrative “stage directions” take its place: Toni stared. “A tattoo?” Her voice was high with disbelief.])
