The Ten Commandments of Correct Writing
(as faithfully received by Prof. Kate van Liere, Department of History, Calvin College)

1. Do not confuse its (possessive pronoun) with it’s (contraction for it is).
   - The difference is easy to grasp if you observe the patterns among words in both categories:
     - **Possessive pronouns:** its, his, hers, ours, theirs, etc. (None has an apostrophe!)
     - **Constructions:** it’s, that’s, what’s, etc. (All have apostrophes!)

2. Do not use an apostrophe to form a plural, nor omit the apostrophe when forming a possessive.
   - An apostrophe **always** indicates either a contraction or a possessive, **never** a plural.
     - **Both wrong:** Petrarch admired the Romans’. Petrarch admired the Roman’s.
     - **Right:** Petrarch admired the Romans and the Romans’ achievements.

3. Provide an antecedent for every pronoun, and make sure it matches in gender and number (sing/plural).
   - **Wrong:** Rome conquered many of their neighbors. (‘Rome’ is singular, but ‘their’ is plural.)
   - **Right:** Rome conquered her neighbors. Its emperors expanded their power.

4. Honor the hyphen, and use it when forming a two-word adjective out of two words.
   - The twelfth-century Renaissance occurred in the twelfth century.
   - The company provides first-rate service. This was their first rate increase all year.

5. Honor the semicolon; use it when needed to avoid run-on sentences.
   - **Wrong:** The situation was dire, he had no idea what to do. (Run-on sentence.)
   - **Right:** The situation was dire; he had no idea what to do.

6. Do not misuse adverbs like ‘however’, ‘therefore’, and ‘nevertheless’ as though they were conjunctions.
   - (Adverbs **cannot** be used to join two independent clauses. Conjunctions do that.)
   - **Wrong:** He wanted to rebel, however he was afraid to. (A conjunction is missing.)
   - **Right:** He wanted to rebel, but he was afraid to. (‘But’ is the needed conjunction.)
   - **Or:** He wanted to rebel; fear, however, held him back.
     - (Here the semicolon joins the clauses; ‘however’ simply serves as an adverb.)

7. Do not change verb tenses in the middle of a sentence or paragraph.
   - **Wrong:** Marx believes the workers were being exploited. He urged them to revolt.
   - **Right:** Marx believes... and urges... OR Marx believed... and urged...

8. Spell out numbers fully (except for years or numbers over 100).
   - **Wrong:** The 16th-century reformer Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses in 1517.
   - **Right:** The sixteenth-century reformer Luther posted his ninety-five theses in 1517.

9. Do not use a plural verb with a singular subject or vice-versa.
   - **Wrong:** One of Luther’s targets were ecclesiastical abuses.
   - **Right:** One of Luther’s targets was papal indulgences. (The subject is “one”.)
   - **Wrong:** Simony and corruption in the Church was rampant.
   - **Right:** Simony and corruption in the Church were rampant. (The subject is plural.)

10. Do not dangle your modifiers.
    - (A participial phrase must have the subject as the main clause that follows it.)
    - **Wrong:** Studying ancient history, the Egyptians seem to have been highly inventive people.
    - (No, the Egyptians were not studying ancient history!)
    - **Right:** Studying ancient history, we see how inventive the Egyptians were.
      - (Here the subject of “studying” is correctly the same as the subject of “see”.)
    - **Or:** Ancient history shows how inventive the Egyptians were.