

What Is Wrong with These Sentences?

As personal historians, we may decide not to correct a narrator's grammar in a particular passage because we want to capture the authenticity of the narrator's voice, but we must make such decisions knowingly. If our mandate is to present the best writing possible, we should either have a solid grasp of good grammar ourselves or hire someone to check our work.



The following sentences contain examples of types of errors we should not allow to creep into our personal history work. Can you spot them? (Answers below.)

1. Because of the war, less travelers were going to Europe. She wrote about this in *When we Were Young*, an autobiography that was quite unique.
2. I've talked to a fair amount of people who have no idea what Personal Historians do and who tend to believe that there should be less memoirs and less memoir writers.
3. Smoking, gambling and driving automobiles at a time when proper young ladies just did not do those things, her actions and words sold papers. And she was not adverse to publicity.

Answers

1. There are three clear errors in this sentence. "Fewer" travelers were going to Europe (see explanation in sidebar). The "We" in the title should be capitalized (it's short, but it's not a preposition—it's the subject of "were"). And something is either unique (one of a kind) or it is not; it is never "quite" unique or "very" unique.
2. Similarly, "amount" and "volume" apply to quantities in bulk—quantities that can't be counted ("she had a huge amount of work")—but "number" for quantities that can be counted. Make that "to a fair number of people" but "fewer memoirs" and "fewer memoir writers."

LESS AND FEWER. Use "fewer" for things that can be counted; use "less" only when you're talking about mass or volume, which can't be "counted." For example, "Walmart paid female workers less and gave them fewer promotions." Similarly, fewer hours, but less pay; fewer calories, less food; fewer problems, less trouble; fewer clients, less productivity; few people, less of a crowd; fewer questions, less doubt; fewer miles, less mileage, and so on.

3. The modifiers in the dependent clause should modify the subject of the sentence, and they don't. Her actions and words (the subject) sold papers, but they didn't smoke, gamble, and drive automobiles—she did. One possible revision among several: "She smoked, gambled, and drove automobiles at a time when proper young ladies just did not do those things—and her actions sold papers." Also: that should be "averse," not "adverse."

You can find helpful explanations of grammatical principles at sites linked to here:
www.writersandeditors.com/work1.htm

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