

What's the right amount of leaning in?

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 23 June 2023 05:11



The phrase “lean in” may be a corporate buzzword, but it’s worth discussing. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg immortalized the phrase when she wrote a best-selling book entitled “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead.” What does “lean in” actually mean?

It’s all about posture. If you’re slumped down in your chair at work, whiling away until the five o’clock whistle blows, you’re not leaning in. Not only are you physically disengaged, but your attitude also suggests that you don’t care. However, when you lean forward in your chair, you’re more alert and likely to be listening with rapt attention and prepared to insert your own great ideas. That’s what leaning in is all about — you’re ready to interject your awesomeness into your organization.

Italicized words are the “leaning in” of language. When it comes to fonts (or typefaces, if we’re being fancy), “Roman” letters refer to the default, upright letters we type into our emails and word processing software, while “Italic” letters are slanted to the right. When you put certain phrases in italics, it draws attention to them as key words you want to separate for emphasis. These words are literally *leaning in*.

What happens when you lean in too much? You fall on your pants pockets (which is a diplomatic way of saying you bruise your *derrière*—pardon my French). I’m suggesting that if you constantly give 110%, you’ll likely experience burnout. In the same way, if you put your entire email in italics, your reader will have trouble discerning what’s important from what’s ordinary. I highly recommend healthy margins — on paper and in your work/life balance.

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Aside from emphasis, when should you use italics in your writing? Surprisingly, AP style suggests that you don't use italics in titles of magazines or newspapers; instead, simply capitalize them (e.g., Sports Illustrated). The AP dictates that books, films, TV shows, songs, albums, speeches, works of art, etc. don't get italicized, either; instead, surround them with a warm pair of quotation mark hugs (e.g., "To Kill a Mockingbird").

Sacred books, including the Bible or the Koran, do not get italics or quotation marks. So, what gets italicized in AP style? Nothing. Just the facts, ma'am. The Chicago Manual of Style and the MLA Handbook suggest that you italicize major works instead of using quotation marks.

I have a hard time with the AP's italics rules. Because my column appears in newspapers, I abide by the quotations-around-titles rule. However, I prefer to italicize words for emphasis, as well as non-English words (like *derrière*), words reproduced as sounds (e.g., Bees go *bzzzzz*.), or words as words (e.g., I challenge you to use the word *indefatigable* in a sentence.). AP style dictates that we should put quotations around words as words, but I prefer to put them in italics.

If you want to make a big splash at your company, lean in at the right time on the right project. If you want to emphasize certain words in your writing, lean in by italicizing key phrases.

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