



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# *Correspondence Writing Tips*

**A COMPANION TO THE  
MCPS CORRESPONDENCE MANUAL**



ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

## Reining in the wrong metaphor

How would you fill in the following sentence?

The Supreme Court's decision gives corporations and unions free \_\_\_\_\_ to spend unlimited amounts on campaign ads and advocacy.

- A. reign
- B. rein
- C. rain

Okay, option C is a throwaway. But option A, which is wrong, is surprisingly common.

I checked Google News and got 994 results for free rein and 1,540 for free reign. To be fair, a majority of the “news” citations for free reign seemed to be from blogs, which copyeditors rarely, if ever, see before they are posted. Still, people who write blogs under the banners of *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and more—writers who should know better, in other words—are using reign incorrectly.

The Cambridge International Corpus of written and spoken English yields 71 hits for free rein and 18 for free reign. Nine of the latter are from spoken transcripts and the other nine are from newspapers and magazines—not as bad as the result from Google, but the printed offenders include *Harper's*, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Money*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

It's not hard to see how the confusion occurs. Rein and reign are homophones, and “free reign” is a plausible metaphor: the freedom of a monarch to do as he or she likes. But the metaphor is actually from horse breaking: if you give a horse free rein, you slacken the reins and allow the animal to go where it likes.

In fact, the expression give free rein to is just one form of several for this figurative meaning that are cited in The Oxford English Dictionary. The oldest, from 1484, is unmodified, given the rein; others include to give full rein (to); to give rein(s) to; to keep a loose rein on; and the related keep a tight rein on. And of course, there are the reins of power/government.

Rein makes more sense than reign, if you think about the most common collocating verb with the expression, give. You, the rider, give the horse free rein, or not; but who would have the power to give a monarch free reign? Perhaps the high king, granting control over a specific area to a lesser king or prince? Yeah, it's a stretch. ♦

Taken from *Copyeditor.com*.

