

GRAMMAR, MECHANICS AND STYLE FOR THE BUSINESS WRITER

A job seeker's success in the marketplace depends on innumerable variables, but hiring managers say that excellent communications skills are at the top of their lists when searching for new employees.

Business communication should waste no words; the audience should get the message and meaning at once without needing to guess, clarify, or interpret.

Communicating your ideas well requires knowing your exact message, analyzing your target audience, planning a strategy of methodical and persuasive development, choosing language and grammar deliberately, and presenting a flawless document or speech.

Incorrect or sloppy grammar distracts the audience from the content, as does a poorly conceived presentation style without organization, logic, or flow.

Your objective in any communication is to be accurate, concrete, specific, and detailed while also being focused, coherent, smooth, and thorough.

Have someone you trust with excellent writing and grammar expertise review your documents or presentations. You may miss many of your own mistakes which are comfortable, long-standing patterns, so you will need to pay careful attention in what you say and write in order to correct and change these habits.

Also, whether writing or speaking, problems arise from an inexact vocabulary, so use a standard dictionary, not a thesaurus, to choose words precisely.

- ♦ Mix simple, compound, and complex sentences for an elegant professional style, to explain complicated ideas in a rational fashion, and to provide variety and keep the audience's attention.
- ♦ Combine and simplify sentences which have repetitive information. A signal to edit is your use of the same word or phrase more than once in a sentence or in adjacent sentences.
- ♦ Study the use of commas, semi-colons, and colons:
- ♦ Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, for, nor, and so) to separate a compound sentence. A common mistake is using a comma to separate the elements of a compound subject or predicate of only two elements. "Writing and speaking are equally important channels of communication, and both methods take much practice for success."
- ♦ Pay attention to conjunctive adverbs (however, nevertheless, in addition, moreover, consequently, yet, furthermore, then, besides, thus, and accordingly). The correct manner in which to join two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb is to use a semi-colon before the adverb and a comma after. "Content is important; however, grammar is equally critical in producing an excellent document."

- ♦ Use subordinating conjunctions (although, after, because, if, where, than, since, as, unless, before, though, and when) to join sentence elements of varying importance, usually independent and dependent clauses. When the subordinating conjunction begins the sentence, a comma should follow the dependent clause. When the dependent clause beginning with the subordinating conjunction comes at the end of the sentence, do not use a comma to separate the clauses. “Because I use correct grammar, employers respond to my letters. Employers respond to my letters because I use correct grammar.”
- ♦ Write an independent clause, a complete sentence, before the use of a colon: “This report has six sections: an introduction, the case, the problem statement, the recommendation, the discussion, and the conclusion.
- ♦ Avoid a run-on sentence, two or more independent clauses without proper punctuation, by checking for placement of subjects and verbs.
- ♦ Edit for dangling modifiers, verbal phrases (gerund, infinitive, or participle) that do not refer clearly or logically to any noun in the sentence. A misplaced modifier is a phrase or clause positioned near the wrong noun. Place modifiers as close to the desired word as possible. “Running to catch the phone, the footstool tripped me” is wrong; instead, say, “Running to catch the phone, I tripped over the footstool.”
- ♦ Make sure that the reader understands the reference easily when you use pronouns; in fact, eliminating pronouns and reworking the sentence with concrete nouns will improve both clarity and your vocabulary.
- ♦ Check that any indefinite pronoun (any, another, anyone, anything, both, each, either, everybody, few, many, most, much, neither, none, several, some, and such) matches the verb in correct number. “Each of you is expected at the company-information presentation.”
- ♦ Do not use a false subject, a word that fills the position of another word and forces you to use extraneous words; the most common are “it” and “there.” Rework the sentence to use a concrete noun. “This is a report about an analysis of ...” is incorrect; rather, say, “ This report analyzes....”
- ♦ Choose the correct case for pronouns: replace “between you and I” with “between you and me.”
- ♦ Study reflexive pronouns and intensifiers; do not substitute the reflexive pronoun for the subject or object. “I am happy to talk about myself” should be “I am happy to talk about me.”
- ♦ Do not make illogical shifts in the personal pronoun; keep person consistent. “I” or “we” is first person; “you” is second person; and “he,” “she,” “it,” or “they” is third person.
- ♦ Avoid contractions except in an informal exchange (“isn’t, doesn’t, don’t, aren’t, etc.).
- ♦ Write numbers from zero to ten in letters and above ten in figures; however, spell out numbers that begin a sentence.
- ♦ Do not split verb phrases with adverbs. “To correctly spell” should be “to spell correctly” or “I will quickly research the history of your problem” should be “ I will research quickly...”

- ♦ Make sure your use of adverbs and adjectives in business writing is spare and purposeful; do not use “very” at all.
- ♦ Reflect orderly thinking with parallel structure. When sentence elements have the same function, repeat the same construction. “I excel in developing software, in managing team projects, and in providing customer service.”
- ♦ Repeat, when writing a list, prepositions, articles, pronouns, subordinating conjunctions, helping verbs, and the “to” in the infinitive to produce clear, effective meaning.
- ♦ Do not use the passive voice; this verb form produces weak, wordy sentences and, by burying the subject, generally suggests irresponsibility or sleaziness. “Mistakes were made” should be “I made mistakes.”
- ♦ Be aware that professional writing is gender-neutral; use a plural noun or the pronoun “they” rather than “he/she” or “him/her.”
- ♦ Follow the phrase “not only” with “but also.”
- ♦ Use, “the reason is that” instead of the redundant phrase, “the reason is because.”
- ♦ Use the proper phrase “insight into.”
- ♦ Use the word “quality” as a noun, not an adjective.
- ♦ Hyphenate the new word if you make an adjective from two nouns. “I have time-management, marketing-research, and relationship-building skills.”
- ♦ Do not end a sentence with a preposition.
- ♦ Do not use awkward verb phrases by stringing together a verb with several different prepositions. A sample of poor writing is “I need to find out, talk to, and meet with your contact at ABC.” More appropriate business writing is, “I would like to contact your associate at ABC and arrange a convenient appointment.”
- ♦ Do not use “on how to” or “in regards to.”
- ♦ Do not use “hopefully”; say, “I hope that.”
- ♦ Do not use cliches and slang; avoid obscure, trite or informal language in formal documents and speech.
- ♦ Do not use any sequence of words not original to you without quotation marks; that act is plagiarism and theft. Attribute both direct quotations and paraphrased information to the original author.
- ♦ Check for logical transitions between sentences, ideas and paragraphs.
- ♦ Read your work out loud and listen for clumsy words or awkward phrasing. If you stumble or run out of breath, you have clues that you need to edit and rewrite.