

GUIDELINES FOR WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS — PART 2 OF 3

WRITING TIPS

Based on experience with a large number of student papers over many years, a number of common errors appear regularly. The most common errors, and how to avoid them, follow.

1. Their, there, and they're.

- **Their** is a possessive pronoun.
*The agency representatives sent **their** proposal for review.*
- **There** is an adverb indicating location.
*The meeting will be held **there** next week.*
- **They're** is a contraction for they are.
***They're** satisfied with the results of the test.*

2. Possessives. (') or (no ') There are more than a dozen rules involving possessives; the following are the most common:

“Its” only involves an apostrophe when used as a contraction for it is.

- It's** a difficult assignment.*
- Its** market share is falling.*

Add 's for singular nouns, unless the noun ends in s and the next word begins with s.

- The pricing policy is the **product's** downfall.*
- The witness arose from the **witness'** seat.*

Add only an apostrophe for plural nouns, unless the nouns do not end in s.

- The workers agree on the process, and it's the **workers'** decision.*
- The alumni have given generously. This account holds the **alumni's** gifts.*

3. Hyphenation. (-)

Use hyphens to avoid ambiguity especially when forming a compound adjective.
a **first-quarter** profit, an **Anglo-American** company, a **better-qualified** employee

4. Numerals.

Decades are stated without the apostrophe before the s: the 1990s or the '90s.

Spell out whole numbers below 10, but use figures for 10 and above.

Don't begin a sentence with a figure. Either spell out the figure or rewrite the sentence.

Percentages should use figures without the % symbol: 10 percent, 1.5 percent.

5. Incomplete sentences (sentence fragments).

A sentence has a subject and verb, a complete meaning, and can stand on its own.

Fragment: *Advertising rates being expensive. The department opted for direct mail.*

Correct: *Advertising rates being expensive, the department opted for direct mail.*

6. Run-on sentences (comma splices and fused sentences).

Avoid sentences that are overly complicated or too long.

Comma splices are formed when two independent clauses are joined by a comma but have no coordinating conjunction.

Comma Splice: *The presentation was informative, we discussed it later that day, we're not sure how it'll fit into the overall program.*

Correct: *The presentation was informative, and we discussed it later that day, but we're not sure how it'll fit into the overall program.*

Fused sentences occur when two independent clauses have neither punctuation nor a conjunction between them.

Fused Sentence: *He did not see that his business was failing, he was unaware of declining profit margins.*

Correct: *He did not see that his business was failing; he was unaware of declining profit margins.*

NOTE: A semicolon is still used if the second clause is preceded by an adverb such as therefore or thus, unless the clauses are very short or conversational in tone.

Correct: *Market research was analyzed from the seven key trial cities, but consumer preferences were inconclusive; therefore, product development was halted.*

7. Commas

Use commas to set off an *interruption* to the flow of a sentence and to avoid ambiguity.

Parenthetical phrases:

The brand manager may approve the project, unless forecasts are wrong, by the end of the year.

Nonrestrictive clauses or phrases that are ***not essential*** to the meaning of the sentence. Such elements do not limit or define the subject, but add something and are often used with *which*, *when*, and *where*.

The target market, which was poorly researched, proved to have no need for our product.

Do ***not*** use commas in the following situations:

Between compound elements where the subject is the same for both clauses and expressed only once:

They went to the distributor and checked the inventory list.

After ***like*** and ***such as***:

Marketing communications such as sales promotions and advertising are an essential part of a company's business strategy.

NOTE: If the sentence contains a restrictive (essential) clause, use commas to set off the expression. A restrictive clause cannot be eliminated without changing the meaning of the sentence. A nonrestrictive clause provides more information about something, but the reader would not be misled if the information were not there.

Marketing communications tools, such as direct mail or personal selling, can be more effective than advertising for reaching specific target markets.

8. Subject/verb agreement.

A singular subject takes a singular verb (the verb usually ends in *s* or *es* in the present tense), and ***a plural subject takes a plural verb***. Be aware that some subjects seem plural but are actually singular (a singular entity).

Management suggests we move into new markets.

The managers suggest we move into new markets.

A singular subject remains singular even if other nouns are connected to it by ***with***, ***as well as***, ***in addition to***, ***except***, ***together with***, and ***no less than***.

John, in addition to Susan, is involved in the project.

A compound subject with **and** usually takes a plural verb.
The city and the municipality are creating new restrictions.

Everybody, neither, nobody, every one, each and either use a singular verb.
Both departments are involved, but neither takes responsibility.

With **none**, use a singular verb if the meaning is “no single one,” but use a plural verb if the meaning is “more than one.”

Singular: *None of us has seen the report.*

Plural: *None are so fallible as those who are sure they're right.*

HINT: Replace **none** with a singular or plural noun to see if the verb tense agrees with your intended meaning.

9. Verb tenses.

Avoid mixing present and past tenses; relationships between verbs should be logical and consistent.

Incorrect: *I work in the design studio and created the new campaigns.*

Correct: *I worked in the design studio and created the new campaigns.*

NOTE: It's common to accidentally switch verb tenses within paragraphs. Re-read your work carefully to ensure consistency.

10. Like/As.

Use **like** as a **preposition** to compare nouns or pronouns (hint: **like** requires an object)
Jason writes like a professional.

As is a **conjunction** used to introduce clauses.

Jason writes with clarity, as a college senior should.

Just a few more tips...

More than and over.

Over refers to spatial relations, whereas **more than** refers to amounts.

Improper: *The price is over six dollars.*

Better: *The price is more than six dollars.*

United States should be spelled out when using the term as a noun. Use **U.S.** (no space) only as an adjective.

The United States is a global business power.

Global trade talks centered around recent U.S. condemnation of closed foreign markets.

Punctuation

Quotation marks: Always place commas and periods within quotation marks. Dashes, semicolons, question marks and exclamation points fall outside quotation marks unless they refer to the quoted matter only.

“Sleek,” “stylish,” and “sporty” are words used to describe Mazda’s Miata.

The marketing director called the product “the next Nintendo,” the kids called it junk.

Using Parentheses

An independent sentence inside parentheses has its ending punctuation (period, question mark) inside the parentheses, and the first word is capitalized. Otherwise, put the punctuation afterward and do not capitalize the first word (unless it would be capitalized under normal circumstances, such as a person’s name).

Language

Do not use informal language or slang in business communications. Even though many phrases or words have become common in everyday speech, they are inappropriate in formal business communications. One very common example is the expression ‘O.K.’ to imply approval for something.

Incorrect: *He said it was O.K. for us to use calculators in the test.*

Correct: *He said it was in order for us to use calculators in the test.*

Generally speaking, business reports should not be written in the first person. For example, it would be inappropriate to write:

I recommend that we introduce the new product in the Christmas buying season.

It would be better to write:

It is recommended that the new product be introduced in the Christmas buying season.

However, in letters or memos (which, by definition, are ‘personal’) it is appropriate to write in the first person.

PROOFREADING TIPS

An approach to proofreading.

You've just finished your first draft—put your work aside for awhile. Take a mental break before tackling the proofreading challenge.

- Proofread first for punctuation, structure, grammar, and spelling errors.
- Proofread again for content errors.

Read out loud what you wrote. Confusing sentences and awkward structure become more apparent when you read your work out loud. Make clarity your goal.

Get a “neutral” third party to proofread your paper when you have done all of the above.

Detecting spelling errors.

If you're using a computer-based word processing program, use spell-check, but remember: Run spell-check **again** after completing your final edit.

Don't rely on spell-check to catch homonyms (no and know, way and weigh, etc.).

Spell-check only picks up spelling errors, **not context errors**, so don't fail two proof read watt yew rote.

If you don't have spell-check, look for “typos” by reading right to left, then bottom line to top. This technique helps you to avoid reading for meaning or “seeing” words as you want to see them spelled, rather than the way they should be spelled.

Detecting grammar or structural errors.

Detecting structural errors is a difficult task. The best method is to read your prose out loud.

Ask these questions:

- Does it make sense and does it read well?
- Is there a way I can rephrase this to make my meaning more clear?

Computer-based grammar checkers are helpful tools for detecting structure problems, but like spell-check applications, they're hardly foolproof. The English language contains numerous rules for proper grammar, punctuation, and style. These rules are further complicated by context and style. **When in doubt, look it up!**

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