

Formatting, Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn further areas on which to focus your attention when polishing your professional writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Formatting and Facts

Format is an important part of the revision process. Format involves the design expectations of the author and audience.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If a letter format normally designates a date at the top, or the sender's address on the left side of the page before the salutation, the information should be in the correct location.

Formatting that is messy or fails to conform to the company style will reflect poorly on you before the reader even starts to read it. By presenting a document that is properly formatted according to the expectations of your organization and your readers, you will start off making a good impression.

Another key part of the revision process is checking your facts.



DID YOU KNOW

News organizations and magazines employ professional fact-checkers. These workers are responsible for examining every article before it gets published and consulting original sources to make sure the information in the article is accurate.

While you can't be expected to have the skills of a professional fact-checker, you do need to reread your writing with a critical eye to the information in it. Inaccurate content can expose you and your organization to liability, and will create far more work than a simple revision of a document.

So, when you revise a document, ask yourself the following:

- *Does my writing contain any statistics or references that need to be verified?*
- *Where can I get reliable information to verify it?*

2. Spelling

Correct spelling is another element essential for your credibility, as errors will be glaringly obvious to many readers. The negative impact on your reputation as a writer, and its perception that you lack attention to detail or do not value your work, will be hard to overcome.

In addition to the negative personal consequences, spelling errors can become factual errors and destroy the value of the content. This may lead you to click the "spell check" button in your word processing program, but computer spell-checking is not enough. Spell-checkers have improved in the years since they were first invented, but they are not infallible. They can and do make mistakes.

Typically, your incorrect word may in fact be a word, and therefore, according to the program, correct.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Suppose you wrote, "The major will attend the meeting" when you meant to write, "The mayor will attend the meeting." The program would miss this error because "major" is a word, but your meaning would be twisted beyond recognition.

Likewise, there is no more embarrassing error in business writing than to misspell someone's name.

➞ **EXAMPLE** To the writer, and to some readers, spelling a name "Michelle" instead of "Michele" may seem like a minor matter, but to Michele herself it will make a big difference.

Attribution is one way we often involve a person's name, and giving credit where credit is due is essential. There are many other reasons for including someone's name, but regardless of your reasons, you need to make sure the spelling is correct. Incorrect spelling of names is a quick way to undermine your credibility; it can also have a negative impact on your organization's reputation.

3. Punctuation

Punctuation marks are the traffic signals, signs, and indications that allow us to navigate the written word. They serve to warn us in advance when a transition is coming or the complete thought has come to an end.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A period indicates the thought is complete, while a comma signals that additional elements or modifiers are coming.

Correct signals will help your reader follow the thoughts through sentences and paragraphs, and enable you to communicate with maximum efficiency while reducing the probability of error.

The table below presents some common punctuation marks that you will likely encounter or need to use in your professional writing.

| Punctuation | Example |
|-------------------|--|
| Apostrophe | <i>Michele's report is due tomorrow.</i> |
| Colon | <i>This is what I think: You need to revise your paper.</i> |
| Comma | <i>The report advised us when to sell, what to sell, and where to find buyers.</i> |
| Dash | <i>This is more difficult than it seems— buyers are scarce when credit is tight.</i> |
| Ellipsis | <i>Lincoln spoke of "a new nation... dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."</i> |
| Exclamation Point | <i>How exciting!</i> |
| Hyphen | <i>The question is a many-faceted one.</i> |
| | |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Parentheses | <i>To answer it (or at least to begin addressing it), we will need more information.</i> |
| Period | <i>The answer is no. Period. Full stop.</i> |
| Question Mark | <i>Can I talk you into changing your mind?</i> |
| Quotation Marks | <i>The manager told him, "I will make sure Renée is available to help you."</i> |
| Semicolon | <i>Theresa was late to the meeting; her computer had frozen and she was stuck at her desk until a tech rep came to fix it.</i> |

It may be daunting to realize that the number of possible punctuation errors is as extensive as the number of symbols and constructions available to the author. Software programs may catch many punctuation errors, but again, it is the committed writer that makes the difference.

Here, we will provide details on how to avoid mistakes with three of the most commonly used punctuation marks:

- The comma
- The semicolon
- The apostrophe

3a. Commas

The comma is probably the most versatile of all punctuation marks. This means you as a writer can use your judgment in many cases as to whether you need a comma or not.

It also means that the possible errors involving commas are numerous. Commas are necessary some of the time, but careless writers often place a comma in a sentence where it is simply not needed.

Commas are used to separate two independent clauses joined by a conjunction like "but," "and," and "or."

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The advertising department is effective, but don't expect miracles in this business climate.*

Commas are not used simply to join two independent clauses. This is known as the comma splice error, and the way to correct it is to insert a conjunction after the comma.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The sentence "The advertising department is effective, the sales department needs to produce more results" should be corrected to "The advertising department is effective, but the sales department needs to produce more results."

Commas are used for introductory phrases and to offset clauses that are not essential to the sentence. If the meaning would remain intact without the phrase, it is considered nonessential.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *After the summary of this year's sales, the sales department had good reason to celebrate.*

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The sales department, last year's winner of the most productive award, celebrated their stellar sales success this year.*

Commas are used to offset words that help create unity across a sentence, like "however" and "therefore."

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The sales department discovered, however, that the forecast for next year is challenging.*

Commas are often used to separate more than one adjective modifying a noun.

➞ EXAMPLE *The sales department discovered the troublesome, challenging forecast for next year.*

Commas are used to separate addresses, dates, and titles; they are also used in dialogue sequences.

➞ EXAMPLE *John is from Ancud, Chile. Katy was born on August 2, 2002. Mackenzie McLean, D. V., is an excellent veterinarian. Lisa said, "When writing, omit needless words."*

3b. Semicolons

Semicolons have two uses. First, they indicate relationships among groups of items in a series when the individual items are separated by commas.

➞ EXAMPLE *Merchandise on order includes women's wear such as sweaters, skirts, and blouses; men's wear such as shirts, jackets, and slacks; and outerwear such as coats, parkas, and hats.*

Second, a semicolon can be used to join two independent clauses; this is another way of avoiding the comma splice error mentioned above. Using a semicolon this way is often effective if the meaning of the two independent clauses is linked in some way, such as a cause-effect relationship.

➞ EXAMPLE *The sales campaign was successful; without its contributions, our bottom line would have been dismal indeed.*

3c. Apostrophes

The apostrophe, like the semicolon, has two uses: It replaces letters omitted in a contraction, and it often indicates the possessive.

Because contractions are associated with an informal style, they may not be appropriate for some professional writing. The business writer will - as always - evaluate the expectations and audience of the given assignment.

➞ EXAMPLE *It's great news that sales were up. It is also good news that we've managed to reduce our advertising costs.*

When you indicate possession, pay attention to the placement of the apostrophe. Nouns commonly receive "'s" when they are made possessive.

➞ EXAMPLE *Mackenzie's sheep are ready to be sheared.*

But plurals that end in "s" receive a hanging apostrophe when they are made possessive.

➞ EXAMPLE *The parents' meeting is scheduled for Thursday.*

Also keep in mind that the word "it" forms the possessive ("its") with no apostrophe at all.

➞ EXAMPLE *We are willing to adopt a dog that has already had its shots.*

4. Grammar

Learning to use good, correct standard English grammar is more of a practice than an event, or even a process. Grammar involves the written construction of meaning from words and involves customs that evolve and adapt to usage over time.

Because grammar is always evolving, none of us can sit back and rest assured that we "know" how to write with proper grammar. Instead, it is important to write and revise with close attention to grammar, keeping in mind that grammatical errors can undermine your credibility, reflect poorly on your employer, and cause

misunderstandings.

4a. Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject and verb should agree in the number under consideration. In faulty writing, a singular subject is sometimes mismatched with a plural verb form, or vice versa.

➞ EXAMPLE *The president appreciates your hard work and wish {wishes} to thank you.*

4b. Verb Tense

Verb tense refers to the point in time where action occurs. The most common tenses are past, present, and future. There is nothing wrong with mixing tenses in a sentence if the action is intended to take place at different times.

In faulty or careless writing, however, they are often mismatched illogically.

➞ EXAMPLE *Sharon was under pressure to finish the report, so she uses {used} a shortcut to paste in the sales figures.*

4c. Split Infinitives

The infinitive form of verb is one without a reference to time, and in its standard form, it includes the auxiliary word "to," as in "to write is to revise." It has been customary to keep the "to" next to the verb; to place an adverb between them is known as splitting the infinitive.

Some modern writers do this all the time (e.g., "To boldly go..."), and since all grammar is essentially a set of customs that govern the written word, you will need to understand what the custom is where you work. If you are working with colleagues trained across the last fifty years, they may find split infinitives annoying.

For this reason, it's often best to avoid splitting an infinitive wherever you can do so without distorting the meaning of the sentence.

➞ EXAMPLE *The marketing department needs assistance to accurately understand our readers {to understand our readers accurately}.*

4d. Double Negatives

A double negative uses two negatives to communicate a single idea, duplicating the negation. In some languages, such as Spanish, when the main action in the sentence is negative, it is correct to express the other elements in the sentence negatively as well.

However, in English, this is incorrect. In addition to sounding wrong (you can often hear the error if you read the sentence out loud), a double negative in English causes an error in logic, because two negatives cancel each other out and yield a positive.

➞ EXAMPLE *Jeri could not find no {any} reason to approve the request.*

4e. Irregular Verbs

Most verbs represent the past with the addition of the suffix "ed," as in the way that "ask" becomes "asked."

Irregular verbs change a vowel or convert to another word when representing the past tense. Consider the irregular verb "to go;" the past tense is "went," not "goed."

➞ EXAMPLE *The need arised {arose} to seek additional funding.*

4f. Commas in a Series

A comma is used to separate the items in a series, but in some writing styles, the comma is omitted between the final two items of the series, where the conjunction joins the last and next-to-last items. The comma in this position is known as the "serial comma."

The serial comma is typically required in academic writing, but typically omitted in journalism. Other writers omit the serial comma if the final two items in the series have a closer logical connection than the other items. In business writing, you may use it or omit it according to the prevailing style in your organization or industry. Know your audience and be aware of the rule.

➞ EXAMPLE *Lisa is an amazing wife, mother, teacher, gardener, and editor.*

4g. Faulty Comparisons

When comparing two objects by degree, there should be no mention of "est," as in "biggest," as all you can really say is that one is bigger than the other. If you are comparing three or more objects, then "est" will accurately communicate which is the "biggest" of them all.

➞ EXAMPLE *Between the twins, Mackenzie is the faster of the two. Among our three children, Mackenzie is the tallest.*

4h. Dangling Modifiers

Modifiers describe a subject in a sentence or indicate how or when the subject carried out the action. If the subject is omitted, the modifier intended for the subject is left dangling or hanging out on its own without a clear relationship to the sentence.

➞ EXAMPLE *Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, celebrations were in order.*

Who is doing the seeing in this sentence? A modifier needs to be added.

➞ EXAMPLE *Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, we decided that celebrations were in order.*

4i. Misplaced Modifiers

Modifiers that are misplaced are not lost; they are simply in the wrong place.

➞ EXAMPLE *Trying to avoid the deer, the tree hit my car.*

As in the above sentence, the unfortunate location of misplaced modifiers is often far from the word or words they describe, making it easy for readers to misinterpret the sentence. To correct a misplaced modifier, move it close to what it is describing.

➞ EXAMPLE *My car hit the tree when I tried to avoid a deer in the road.*



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how to edit written business communication for proper formatting, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. First, check for **formatting and facts**, to be sure your document meets the expectations of your audience and contains accurate information. Next, check for **spelling** and **punctuation** errors, including your use of **commas**, **semicolons**, and **apostrophes**. Finally, check your writing for any **grammar** errors, including issues with **subject-verb agreement**, **verb tense**, **split infinitives**, **double negatives**, **irregular verbs**, **commas in a series**, **faulty comparisons**, **dangling modifiers**, and **misplaced modifiers**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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