

TOPIC B: WRITING BASICS 3: GRAMMAR

gram-mar, n.:

1. The study of the way the sentences of a language are constructed; morphology and syntax.
2. An account of these features; a set of rules accounting for these constructions: *a grammar of English*.
3. Knowledge or usage of the preferred or prescribed forms in speaking or writing: *She said his grammar was terrible*.



Many people misspell common words, mix up similarly spelled words, or use the wrong format of a word sounding the same, but with a different spelling. In business, you cannot afford to make simple mistakes. These common grammar mistakes make you look unprofessional and can cost you an opportunity, a customer, or even help put you out of business.

Here are some of the most common mistakes:

1. Subject/verb agreement. Most people know the basics on this one. You match a singular verb to a singular noun and vice versa. For example, you would say, "The man **IS** doing his job." and not "The man **ARE** doing his job." Many people get mixed up, however, when it comes to subjects such as "everyone" or "nobody". These confusing nouns are singular even though they refer to more than one person. So you would say "Everyone **HAS** something important to do." or "Nobody **WANTS** to waste money." rather than "Everyone **HAVE**..." or "Nobody **WANT**..."

2. Mixing up the present and past tenses. This is more of a concern in fiction writing, but it does come up in business correspondence as well. Sometimes product or service descriptions are written in the present tense in order to convey a sense of immediacy. If you do this, make sure that you remain in the present tense throughout the passage of writing. The only exception to this is if you make it clear to the reader that you are now talking about something in the past--i.e. "Even five years ago, people weren't able to instantly get in touch with each other."

3. Not putting the proper endings on past tense verbs. You probably know that most past tense verbs end with -ed : walked, picked, stated, etc. English is riddled with exceptions, however, and it is easy to mess up if you are in a hurry. Always double check your correspondence or have a proof-reader go over it with you. Most importantly, do not forget to add the proper ending to past tense verbs. Sentences such as "Every day he walk past the place across the street without thinking about going inside." sound uneducated, and it is quite simple to catch and fix these errors.

4. Apostrophe errors. Apostrophes are used for two reasons: to show letters that have been deleted from contractions (i.e. can't instead of cannot) or to show possession ("A diamond is a girl's best friend.") It is becoming more and more common for people to misuse apostrophes to denote the plural tense. Do not use apostrophes in this manner. For example, signs at a school should read, "Only teachers may use copiers." not, "Only teacher's may use copiers."

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5. Not using commas correctly. Commas are supposed to be used to tell the reader to take a breath before the rest of the sentence. Some people use them in place of periods, which is incorrect. If the second half of the sentence can stand on its own, either split it into two sentences or use a semi-colon.

In addition to these errors, it is common to mix up the spelling of words that sound alike. Here are five such common grammar mistakes that also make you look unprofessional:

1. Using the wrong form of "there". There are three words that sound alike: there, they're, and their. The first of these words is used as a noun, the second is a contraction for they are, and the third indicates possession.

2. Then and than. Then refers to something happening next, while than is used as a comparative word.

3. Lose and loose. It is becoming common to spell "lose" with two o's; however, this is incorrect. Loose means not tight; lose that extra o when you're trying to say "lose".

4. To, two, and too. "To" is a tricky word; it is used as part of a verb or a preposition. Add an extra o if you mean also, and always make sure you are using "two" to refer to a number.

5. It's and its. "Its" does not follow the rules for possessives discussed above. Instead, the apostrophe is only used if you are contracting "it is". Sentences such as, "Your phone loses its charge easily." should not contain an apostrophe.

Grammar can be complicated and overwhelming. The lists above contain most of the common grammar mistakes that make you look unprofessional; if you learn these rules, you will make a better impression on potential clients and customers than many of your competitors.

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BASIC PUNCTUATION RULES

Period .

Use a period to end a complete sentence.

Examples:

Sara completed her degree last May.

Comma ,

Commas are used to separate a list of items. A comma is included before the conjunction 'and' which comes before the final element of a list.

Examples:

I like reading, listening to music, shopping, and visiting with my friends.

Question Mark ?

The question mark is used at the end of a question.

Examples:

Where do you live?

Exclamation Point !

The exclamation point is used at the end of a sentence to indicate great surprise. It is also used for emphasis when making a point.

Examples:

The surprise birthday party for Jim was a great success!

Semicolon ;

A semicolon is used to separate two independent clauses.

Examples:

Steve enjoys playing music; he can't get enough of band practice.

Colon :

A colon can be used to provide additional details and explanation.

Examples:

John had many reasons for choosing the car: the price was right, the color was his favorite, and he could get the rebate offer immediately.

WRITING BASICS 4: APPROPRIATE WORD USE

“Using the appropriate word in your communications is crucial for good writing!”

Words are the symbols for what we perceive with our thoughts. They communicate what we think, feel and do. The more complex the idea or thought, the more difficult it is to express it precisely in words.

Plain language writing emphasizes the use of the clearest words possible to describe actions, objects and people.

The choice of words you use should be based on what will be clearer for your reader. Have your document read and reviewed by a person you trust and someone who is likely to use it. To help you draft easy to understand documents, here are some guidelines on your choice of words.



Use Simple, Everyday Words

Use simple, familiar words instead of unfamiliar words.

Write as if someone is asking you what you mean. If you are writing for a diverse audience, sometimes you must be an interpreter as well as a writer.

Here are a few examples of simple words and phrases you might substitute:

Instead of:	Use:
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out, distribute
endeavor	try
expedite	hasten, speed up
facilitate	make easier, help
formulate	work out, devise, form
in lieu of	instead of
locality	place
optimum	best, greatest, most
strategize	plan
utilize	use

Cut out unnecessary words

Here is a sample list of some alternative words for common, wordy expressions:

Instead of:	Use:
with regard to	about
by means of	by
in the event that	if
until such time	until
during such time	while
in respect of	for
in view of the fact	because
on the part of	by
subsequent to	after
under the provisions of	under
with a view to	to
it would appear that	apparently
it is probable that	probably
notwithstanding the fact that	although
adequate number of	enough
excessive number of	too many

Avoid using jargon

Using jargon can cause problems because your reader may not understand it. Also, be wary of trendy, fashionable expressions such as "level playing field", "downtime" and "touch base". The fact that they are trendy will also mean that they will soon date your writing. Avoid them!

Instead of:

You will receive reactivation and assistance consistent with your requirements.

Use:

You will get the amount of help you need.

Whatever!



Avoid or explain technical words

Whenever possible, avoid words that your readers do not know. Every occupation and interest group has special terms. These terms become a problem only when you can't distinguish between terms that are necessary work tools and terms that are jargon.

If you must use a technical term define it - either by giving a definition or by giving an example.

Glossaries are more difficult to use if they are placed at the end of a book or booklet. Try placing a box defining the words on the same page as where the word is first used.

Instead of:

Economic espionage may be defined as the illegal or clandestine acquisition of critical Canadian economic information and technology by foreign governments or their surrogates
Canadian Security Intelligence Service Public Report, 1992

Use:

Economic espionage means foreign governments or their agents illegally obtaining critical Canadian economic and technological secrets.

Don't change verbs into nouns

Nouns created from verbs are hard for the reader to understand and give the sentence an impersonal tone. When you write a noun that is derived from a verb, see if you can turn it back into a verb.

Instead of:

The *requirement* of the department is that employees work seven and one-half hours a day.

Use:

The department *requires* employees to work seven and one-half hours a day.

Instead of:

You will work on the *establishment* of goals for the hiring, training and promotion of designated group employees.

Use:

You will *establish* goals for hiring, training and promoting employees from designated groups.

Avoid chains of nouns

Chains of nouns are strings of two or more nouns used to name one thing. They are often difficult for a reader to understand.

Noun chains take some effort to untangle. They lack connecting words such as **of, for, about, in** and the possessives that would clarify how the nouns relate to each other.

Instead of:

World population is increasing faster than world food production

Use:

The world's population is increasing faster than its food production.

Choose your words consistently

Be consistent in what you call something. Avoid using two or more names for the same thing.

Do not be afraid to repeat the same word or the same idea if it is important.

Use acronyms carefully

Acronyms are formed from the first letter of words which they represent. Remember that not everyone may know what the letters stand for. Put the acronyms in brackets the first time you use the proper term. Then you can use the acronym in the rest of your text. Some acronyms like U.S.A. or U.S.M.C. may be so well known that they need no explanation.

But, when in doubt, spell it out.

The above tips and suggestions offered by PlainTrain, Inc.