

Ten Common Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling Errors to Avoid in Business Writing

“When will I ever use this?” you may have thought as you sat in that high-school English class. Now, all grown up, you find yourself writing far more than you ever would have expected. E-mails, proposals, letters, and résumés - the written word is everywhere, even in the electronic age.

Writing might not be your strength, but the way you write still says a lot to employers, clients, and co-workers. Like coming to a job interview in torn jeans and a stained sweatshirt, sending out poorly dressed written communication (with misspellings, grammar errors, and misplaced punctuation) will cause others to think less of your ability to do your job well.

Though grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors abound in our culture, “Everybody else is doing it” won’t fly as an excuse with your employer or clients any more than it did with your mother when you were a teenager. And while some grammar rules are changing (such as the ban on starting a sentence with “and”), rules don’t always change simply because a multitude of people break them. Some common errors can completely change the meaning of a sentence; others simply make the writer look sloppy. Even a few errors can make the difference between an outstanding presentation and a “No, thank you” from a potential client.

Just in case you spent more time in your English class checking out the cutie next to you than you did learning the rules of language, here are ten common errors to avoid when you write your next business communication:

1. “Its” and “It’s” are two different words. The former is a possessive, meaning it shows that one thing belongs to another. The latter is a shortened form of “it is.” Incidentally, contractions, such as it’s, they’re, and I’d, are perfectly fine for informal writing and are becoming more acceptable in formal writing. To be cautious, however, you may want to write out the longer form of what you want to say.

2. “They’re,” “their,” and “there” are also different words. The first means “they are,” the second means “belonging to them,” and the third means “that place away from here.” The same goes for “you’re” (you are) and “your” (belonging to you).

3. Avoid using “they” and “their” when talking about one person. The grammar rule that applies here is that all the nouns, verbs, and pronouns in your sentence have to agree. In other words, if one is plural, they all should be. Most people remember this rule from English class (even if they failed to pay attention), but misusing “their” has become a popular solution to the problem of offending someone by saying “his” whenever a person’s

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gender is unknown. Instead of saying, “Each person submits their own time card,” it is correct to say “Each person submits his or her own time card.” Using “his or her” does get awkward in longer documents, so it is better to reword the sentence to avoid the pronoun: “Each person submits a time card” or (where accurate) to make other nouns and verbs plural: “The people all submit their own time cards.”

4. Simple plurals do not require an apostrophe. This rule is basic but frequently broken. How often do you see a sign on a house that says, “The Brown’s?” If the Browns live there, it should either read “The Browns” (a label) or “The Browns’” (short for “The Browns’ house”). Products for sale often violate this apostrophe rule, so an apostrophe within a plural is sometimes called “the greengrocer’s apostrophe.” “Apple’s for sale” is grammatically incorrect. The phrase needs to lose an apostrophe or gain a possession: “Apples for sale” or “Apple’s core for sale.”

5. Quotation marks are needed less often than you might expect. In general, they should be used for quotations (the exact words someone said), direct references to a phrase, word, or letter (the letter “s”) and irony or euphemisms (she was “sick” on that sunny day when she missed work). A sign that misuses quotation marks (“Apples” for sale) suggests that those apples aren’t really apples but something else that looks like them.

6. A complete sentence requires a subject and a main verb. Somebody does something. If you are missing a subject or a main verb, you have a phrase. A phrase should not have a period at the end of it. “Submitting my work” is a phrase. “I am submitting my work” is a sentence.

7. Job titles should not be capitalized unless they are used directly before a name, as part of the name. Capitalized job titles are so common that when you start writing them correctly, with lowercase letters, you can almost be certain someone will tell you it is wrong. A few exceptions do exist (such as the President of the United States of America), but most titles used in sentences should be written like this: “The president of XYZ Company spoke today.” If you say, “XYZ Company President Xavier Y. Zelinsky spoke today,” the title is appropriately capitalized.

8. “This” should nearly always be followed by a noun. Frequently, after describing a complex idea, writers will say something like, “This is not what we want.” Sometimes it is clear what “this” means, but usually the previous sentences have so many nouns that the reference is too vague to be useful. It could mean “this concept is not what we want” or “this effect is not what we want” or even “this color is not what we want.” Specify what you mean by adding a noun after every “this.”

9. Avoid overusing passive voice. “Mistakes were made” is not much of an apology because it does not accept responsibility. “I made a mistake” is much better grammatically. To discover how often you use passive voice, search your document for the words “are,” “were,” “was,” and “is.” If any of these sentences include the word “by” or could include it (“Mistakes were made by both of us”), they are written in passive voice. Rewrite each sentence so that the subject takes responsibility for the action. Passive voice does have a few legitimate uses, such as when the person or thing responsible for an action is unknown or irrelevant, but many mediocre writers use - and overuse - passive voice without cause.

10. Spelling counts. At least one cash register has a sign beside it that says, “No checks excepted.” That sign suggests that the business will take any check you write - it makes no exceptions. What the owners really meant to say is “No checks accepted.” This example is just one of many where the meaning of our written language can be completely changed by one mistake.

Do run your computer’s spelling and grammar checks, but don’t count on them to keep your writing error free. Sometimes these tools miss spelling errors or tell you that your grammar is wrong when it is not. If writing is not your strength, ask someone who paid attention in English class to proofread your business writing. Better yet, brush up on your written language skills by reading a book or two on the subject. Many, such as *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss, make English more interesting to those who aren’t naturally fascinated by words and sentence structures.