BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT: VOL. 1

Written Communication

Your Guide to Professional Editing, Proofreading and Grammar
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Creating Polished Business Documents

by Fred Kniggendorf

PART I

Introduction

Since most of us spend more time communicating verbally than we do in writing, it’s tempting to treat our emails, letters, memos and reports the same way we treat our personal conversations: casually. Many times we can get away with that; in fact, business writing is becoming more conversational and less stilted than in the past.

There’s a growing awareness of how people read: They “sub-vocalize,” or sound out the words on the page in their heads. If a document doesn’t “sound” conversational, it won’t resonate as well with the reader.

For example, take a close look at the so-called junk mail letters you probably receive regularly. They’re actually well written and, when read aloud, sound personal—as if the writer were speaking to you directly and effortlessly. However, they only sound casual. Like most well-crafted documents, they’ve been heavily edited, often undergoing several revisions before they’re published. The end result is that the writing is more polished than a transcript of off-the-cuff remarks.

Many times you’ll be advised to “write like you talk,” a well-intentioned way to remind you to make your writing sound conversational. This advice breaks down, however,
because it doesn’t take into account that when we’re speaking to someone, we have a set of communication skills at our disposal that aren’t available to us when we write. Such things as body language and tone of voice contribute to how we can help the receiver of our spoken message understand what we’re trying to say. Additionally, a listener can notify us immediately, with or without words, if he or she doesn’t understand what we’re trying to say—that’s called “back-channel communication.”

When we write, of course, there’s no immediate feedback from our readers. We have to make assumptions about their needs and look for ways to make our writing clearer, since we only get one chance to get our message across. It does take some effort, and if you’re starting to think it’s preferable to communicate face-to-face, you’ll find many people who will agree with you.

Yet written communication has several advantages:

- It’s the same no matter who receives it
- It’s permanent
- It can be reviewed
- It gives the writer distance in time and space
- There’s no “telephoning” effect
- Accents are undetectable.

The obvious downside: Spelling and punctuation are issues, poor grammar becomes more obvious, and it can wind up in the hands of “secondary,” or unintended, readers unbeknownst to the writer.

The bottom line is that, unless you’re making a speech (which is a form of mass communication that combines many of the elements of writing with those of speaking), writing has to be more precise, correct and concise than speaking.

That’s where Creating Polished Business Documents can help. This special report shows you how to publish better documents by explaining the fundamentals of editing and proofreading, pointing out common mistakes and providing tips on how to fix or avoid mistakes altogether.

**Key editorial concepts**

**The writing process**

Good writing involves a process that normal conversation doesn’t. There are four steps in the writing process: pre-write, draft, revision and editing/proofing.

1. **PRE-WRITING:** In this stage, you’re gathering the raw material for your document, using techniques such as brainstorming, clustering, researching and interviewing. Think of it as coming up with the clay that you’ll start molding in the next step.

2. **DRAFT:** This is where you take the raw data from the pre-writing step and begin forming sentences and paragraphs that are organized to some degree.
3. REVISE: Here is where you shuffle, add or delete sentences, and organize your document so it flows logically and smoothly. Does each paragraph deal with one thought? Does each sentence contribute to that thought? Have you transitioned from one thought to the next?

4. EDIT and PROOFREAD: This stage is the same as sanding, staining, varnishing and polishing a new piece of furniture. It’s the fine-tuning stage of a document’s development, and when it leaves you, it’s in the form all readers will see.

**Adjust your style to your reader**

We do this instinctively when we speak in a face-to-face conversation. For example, you wouldn’t use the same tone with your spouse that you’d use with a total stranger, and your word choice with a 2-year-old child and a job applicant would undoubtedly be different.

But notice what happens if you were to make a speech in front of 100 people. Given the likely diversity of the audience, you’d probably make your words more general, your tone more neutral, and your information more understandable because all speeches have a specific goal: to inform, persuade, explain, announce and so on. It’s the same when we write: An email to a longtime colleague will be more relaxed and informal than a report to the whole organization.

**Keep a precedent within reach**

In case anyone questions the way you write something, it’s helpful to have resources available to back up your decisions. Have a style guide (Gregg Reference Manual, Chicago Manual of Style or Associated Press Stylebook) and a collegiate dictionary handy to guide your decisions when it comes to editing and proofing. (See more details on page 18.)

**Note:** Be careful with some of the online resources you’ll come across because they may be unreliable.

**Don’t be misled by the terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ writing**

When applied to writing, the word “formal” simply means the writing is in a form, preferably one shared and understood by writer and reader. Forms facilitate understanding by raising expectations and meeting them.

The traditional form of salutation in a business letter begins with “Dear” followed by the reader’s name; the traditional complimentary close begins with “Sincerely” (or some variation) followed by the writer’s name.

When we deviate from a traditional form—for example, by omitting the “Dear” in the salutation and just using the reader’s first name while omitting the compliment in the close and simply writing our first name—the writing is said to be “informal” because it violates the traditional form. But it still creates a certain expectation in the reader—in this case that the document will be more *personal* and *casual* than a standard formal letter.
Respect professional tradition

Although the trend in most business writing appears to be away from traditional “formal” toward the nontraditional “informal,” some professions (law, medicine, government, accounting, clergy, academia) maintain traditional forms of writing that, while difficult for most lay readers to understand, attest to the stability and conservative nature of those professions. That may help explain why only those who’ve been trained in those professions are able to readily interpret those documents.

The point is that if you’re writing for certain audiences, remember their expectations are met only by established forms of writing that have been used for years.

Respect your organization’s tradition

In almost every case, let the preferences of your boss or your organization guide the way you edit and spell, even if you may not agree with it, unless it’s patently incorrect and potentially embarrassing—and you’re able to prove it. That’s why having resources such as a dictionary and a reference manual is so important.

In any case, if you’re told that it’s perfectly OK to write in a more casual style—e.g., with contractions—but you think your boss or organization “would never allow that,” check to make sure that really is the case.

Get objective distance

It’s difficult to edit our own writing for the simple reason that we know what we meant and assume the reader also will; we’re too close to it. There are a few ways to deal with this problem:

- One is to wait 24 hours before editing and proofing to let the document get “cold.”
- Unfortunately, most people don’t have the time to wait so, if possible, give it to someone else to look over. He or she will likely see things you didn’t notice and can offer suggestions for improvement.
- You could also read it out loud. This will force you to hear how it will sound to your readers, who will sub-vocalize it (sound out the words mentally) when they read it. Also, reading it out loud will slow you down enough to catch mistakes you may otherwise miss by simply reading it to yourself.

Editing basic sentence structure

Complete sentences

To be considered complete, a sentence generally needs at least a noun and a verb, as in “I see.” But it can get a bit more complicated. Sentences are made up of clauses and phrases. A clause contains both a noun and a verb, while a phrase contains either a noun or a verb but not both.
Independent clause—has a noun and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence:

*I understand.*

Dependent clause—has a noun and a verb but can’t stand alone as a sentence:

*Although I understand*

A dependent clause must be attached to an independent clause to become part of a stand-alone sentence:

*Although I understand, I disagree.*

Run-on sentences

Many people mistakenly think a run-on sentence is one that’s too long, but that’s not necessarily the case. By definition, a run-on sentence is made up of two complete sentences joined together without a conjunction or punctuation mark:

*I understand I disagree.*

To correct a run-on, add a conjunction (or joining word) or punctuation:

*I understand, but I disagree.*

*I understand, although I disagree.*

*I understand. I disagree.*

*I understand; I disagree.*

Sentence fragments

A fragment is a dependent clause not attached to an independent clause:

*Although I disagree.*

Correct this by attaching it to an independent clause:

*Although I disagree, I understand.*

Comma splices

A comma splice is the result of two complete sentences joined together by a comma:

*I understand, I disagree.*

To correct this, separate the sentences with some form of terminal punctuation (period, question mark, exclamation point), a semicolon or a conjunction:

*I understand! I disagree.*

*I understand, yet I disagree.*

Note: There are seven conjunctions that should catch your attention when you’re proofreading a document. *Reason:* When they’re used to connect two independent clauses
(complete sentences), they need to be preceded by a comma. They’re called “coordinating conjunctions,” and they’re easy to remember because they can be arranged to spell the word “FANBOYS”:

, for
, and
, nor
, but
, or
, yet
, so

**Transitions**

Does the sentence contain transitions so it has a logical flow? Transitions are words and phrases that perform the same function as the turn signals on an automobile: They tell others where you’re headed. *Examples:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitional words:</th>
<th>Transitional phrases:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>therefore</td>
<td>on the other hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>however</td>
<td>having said that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nevertheless</td>
<td>as you can see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moreover</td>
<td>by the way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>although</td>
<td>unfortunately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Troublesome hot spots**

**Intensifiers**

Intensifiers are adverbs we use to modify adjectives in sentences. We do this frequently when we speak because we naturally tend to use more words when we speak than when we write.

If we use intensifiers in our writing, however, they serve only to add clutter to our sentences while adding little information; therefore, you should edit them out of the document. *Examples:*

- It was a **very** good year for us.
- She was **really** disappointed.
- I **highly** recommend this.
• It’s an extremely overrated project.
• The room was incredibly cold.
• That will give us a huge problem.

Resist the temptation to use intensifiers throughout your document. That way, when you finally do use one, it will have more impact on your reader.

**Redundancies**

Redundancies are wasted words because they are mindless repetition of another word. For example, you may have heard the expression “plan ahead for the future.” When we analyze that phrase, it’s obvious how many useless words are there. Any time you plan, it’s going to be for the future, and you can’t plan behind, so you can easily get rid of four words simply by writing “plan.” Here are some more:

• Revert back  
• Meet together  
• Small in-size  
• Lift up  
• Past experience  
• Advance preparation  
• A half an hour

**Smothered verbs**

A verb is considered “smothered” if a writer attaches a suffix to a root verb. The resulting word often becomes a noun and requires more words to help it make sense in a sentence. For example, I can write, “I appreciate your concern,” but if I’m more concerned with trying to make my writing sound more sophisticated, I might write, “I have appreciation for your concern.” When I add the –tion suffix, I make the root verb and the sentence longer and it loses conciseness as a result. Here are some more common examples:

• Give recognition to (recognize)  
• Perform an analysis of (analyze)  
• Begin implementation of (implement)  
• Make a generalization (generalize)

**That/which/who**

Any time you come across one of those three words when you edit a document, stop and try reading the sentence without them. If the sentence makes sense grammatically, delete them. For example:

• The expense account that he turned in was falsified.  
• The man who is in the next office used to be an astronaut.
• The papers which were on my desk weren’t signed yet.
• The chair that’s in the hall is mine.
• I’m not sure that my boss will go along with that.

Note: In most circumstances, which refers to things, who refers to people, and that can refer to either things or people.

Pet peeves

When you’re proofreading someone else’s document, it’s helpful—and important—to remember that the goal of proofreading is to ensure the document looks like it was intended to look when it gets published. That means you need to resist the urge to rewrite it to sound like you had written it.

For example, many people aren’t comfortable with contractions in business writing, although they’re becoming more common as the tone of business writing is trending toward conversational. If you take out all the contractions in another writer’s document and replace them with the longer form, you run the risk of changing the tone to something the writer hadn’t intended.

Similarly, some writers have a problem with the practice of adding the prefix “-pre” to words that don’t need it, such as printed, cooked, sliced, and heat. They believe it to be grammatically suspect, since “pre” means “before” in the same way “post” means “after.” Yet, if you were proofreading a cookbook and changed the instruction “preheat the oven to 350 degrees” to “heat the oven to 350 degrees,” while it may make more sense grammatically, it would violate a reader’s expectation: We’re used to seeing the word “preheat” in cookbooks, not “heat.”

Here’s the point: Your goal as a proofreader/editor is to connect with the reader by making the document as easy to read and understand as possible, not necessarily to teach them a thing or two about proper grammar as you understand it.

Idiosyncratic words and expressions

Like pet peeves, idiosyncratic words and expressions are highly personal stylistic choices we make—consciously and unconsciously—in our use of language. Often, we’ve been using them for so long that we don’t realize they don’t make sense until someone points that out to us. When we use them in speaking, we can gauge by the listener’s response if we’re not making any sense—something that’s not possible when we write.

Another problem is that spell-check won’t help if correctly spelled words are used unconventionally. For example, if a person is in the habit of using the expression “ceases to amaze me” when she really means “never ceases to amaze me,” spell-check won’t catch it, and the document will look unprofessional and sloppy.

Here are some more:

• I’m not for sure. This phrase seems to be a collapsing of “I don’t know for sure” and “I’m not sure.” Avoid.
• Aren’t I? This literally means “Are not I?” and is nonsense. Try “Am I not?” instead.

• On accident. It’s logical since we say “on purpose,” but then English isn’t a logical language. It should be “by accident.”

• Center around. This is a collapsing of “center upon” and “revolve around.” We hear it so often it’s starting to sound normal, but it’s wrong. Instead, say “center on.”

• That sounds fun. This is the same as writing, “That sounds a plan” or “This looks trouble,” instead of “That sounds like a plan” or “This looks like trouble.” It should be “That sounds like fun.”

These last two don’t require any explanation:

• Get your ducks in a road.
• It’s a doggy-dog world.

Clichés

Often, certain expressions are so witty and sparkling they become popular. Unfortunately, this popularity is the undoing of many otherwise interesting and useful word strings because they become overused and trite.

Sometimes, we even come up with new clichés to replace old clichés: “When the dust settles” becomes “when all is said and done” becomes “at the end of the day.” A good rule of thumb: Even though it can be efficient to use a cliché in place of an original expression, it’s best to favor originality to make your document stand out.

Business gibberish

Business gibberish refers to common clichés we frequently find in business writing. In most, but not all cases, if you wouldn’t say it to someone, don’t write it to them. Here’s why: As we’ve said, when we read, we tend to sub-vocalize, or sound out the words in our heads, regardless of what words we’re reading.

For example, it’s unlikely we’d ever begin a conversation with “Further to our discussion I would like to respond,” so why is it we begin a written message like that? There may be a couple of reasons. First, we’ve seen it so often we think it’s normal in business writing. Second, using a cliché is much easier than writing something original. Yet the English language is so rich that it’s usually not difficult to write something that means the same thing as a cliché, but sounds more human.

Consider how these phrases could easily be replaced with “here is”:

• As per your request
• Enclosed herewith attached please find
• Pursuant to your request I’m pleased to offer

And instead of writing, “If you have any further questions, feel free/do not hesitate to call me,” why not simply write, “Give me a call if you need more information”?
Jargon

Jargon refers to linguistic shortcuts we use with others who can readily understand their meaning, such as “apps” for “applications,” “veggies” for “vegetables” and “PSAs” for “public service announcements.” But using jargon can get us into trouble, obviously, if we’re writing for someone outside our linguistic circle.

For example, the U.S. government in general, and the military in particular, use jargon frequently as a way to communicate more efficiently with colleagues. And so Air Force personnel can open a document with “UNODIR” if they’re writing to their colleagues. However, if there’s a chance that the document will be read by civilians, it would be wise to write “unless otherwise directed,” which is what UNODIR means.

Threatening/hostile language

We all feel the urge occasionally to lash out at someone in writing. But since what we write doesn’t disappear as easily as what we say, it’s hard to deny having written it. In a face-to-face conversation we can immediately tell if a listener is offended, surprised or misunderstands something we’ve said, and we can make appropriate adjustments to our message. But if we write an angry message, it could (and usually will) come back to bite us. That’s another reason to let important documents “rest” before we begin the editing process.

Here are just a few examples of “fight” words to avoid:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You must</th>
<th>You people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You’d better</td>
<td>You claim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to</td>
<td>Stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed</td>
<td>Mistake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obviously</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One final caution: Most of us are aware that anything profane, vulgar, sexist, racist—in short, anything that can be construed as tasteless, tactless or that victimizes groups of people—has no place in business writing.

Perkiness

At the other end of the spectrum, bubbly language is best reserved for text messages generated by middle-school cheerleaders. This includes punctuation, specifically the exclamation point!!!!!!!!!! Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awesome!</th>
<th>Congrats!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thrilled!</td>
<td>☺</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrific!</td>
<td>♥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yay!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is not to say enthusiasm has no place in business writing—it does. But it’s never a bad idea to consider the importance of writer credibility, which could be undermined by a message that can come across as gushing, especially by a skeptical reader.

**I and me**

Little children who are still figuring out how to use language usually—and rightfully—get corrected when they make a mistake. One of the biggest seems to be beginning a sentence with “me,” as in “Me and Bobby are going outside.” A well-intentioned adult will frequently rush in and remind the child that it’s “Bobby and I are going outside” and finish with “and you always put yourself second.” This goes on until the poor kid finally gives up and starts doing it correctly out of self-defense. Mark Twain would compare this phenomenon to a cat that mistakenly jumps on a hot stove and never jumps on a hot stove again, nor will it ever jump on a cold one, either.

The point is that once we’re conditioned to say “Bobby and I,” many people don’t stop doing it no matter what the grammatical rule is, as in “The boss gave it to Stephanie and I to work on.” In this sentence, it’s correct to write “Stephanie and me.” An easy way to remember this is to take the other person out of the sentence. How you’d word it without (”The boss gave it to me to work on”) is how you’d word it with the other person back in the sentence: “The boss gave it to Stephanie and me to work on.”

**Myself/ourselves/yourself**

We’ve all seen messages that end with “If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to call Cynthia or myself.” This is another situation when you should take the other person out of the sentence, figure out how you’d write it (“call me”), and then use the same pronoun when you put the other person back in: “If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to call Cynthia or me.”

You’ll rarely use a compound pronoun (“myself,” “ourselves,” “yourself”) in business writing, unless it’s “I myself wouldn’t do that,” “We shot ourselves in the foot this time,” or “Do yourself a favor.”

**Numbers**

In general, spell out the numbers nine and under, and use a numeral for 10 and above. **Note:** Whenever you begin a sentence with a number, always spell it out. “Thirty days is a long time for a vacation,” not “30 days is a long time for a vacation.”

**Active/passive voice**

In the active voice, the subject does the action: “Mr. Farley decided to fire four people today.” Mr. Farley is the subject, and fire is the verb. In the passive voice, the action happens to the subject, and the word “by” is sometimes, but not always, in the sentence. “The decision was made by Mr. Farley to fire four people.” Decision is the subject, and was made is the verb. The action happens to the subject.
What this means to an editor: If you’re trying to make the writing more concise, the active voice achieves that goal. In the examples above, the active voice was three words shorter than the passive voice. On the other hand, if you were to remove the phrase “by Mr. Farley” in the passive example, you’d eliminate three words, the message would be essentially the same, and you’d be able to obscure the identity of the person who made an unpopular decision: “The decision was made to fire four people.”

Parallelism

When you compose a list or a series of items, it helps the reader if the items are parallel. For example, here’s a list of action items that aren’t quite parallel:

- Purge your in-box
- Prepare the conference room for the 2:00 meeting
- Really clean the stockroom
- Print my itinerary

Notice that the third bulleted item doesn’t begin with an action verb, as do the other three. While the reader will probably understand the meaning, the non-parallel item disrupts the list’s flow. Here’s what the same list would look like with all items parallel:

- Purge your in-box
- Prepare the conference room for the 2:00 meeting
- Clean the stockroom thoroughly
- Print my itinerary

Similarly, when there’s a series of action verbs in a sentence, make sure they all have the same endings (-ing or -ed):

The wrong way: “At lunch today I purged my in-box, prepared the conference room, was cleaning the stockroom and printing my boss’s itinerary.”

This could be changed two ways, and both would be acceptable:

“At lunch today I purged my in-box, prepared the conference room, cleaned the stockroom and printed my boss’s itinerary,” or “At lunch today I was purging my in-box, preparing the conference room, cleaning the stockroom and printing my boss’s itinerary.” Each of these means the same thing, and each has the same number of words.

Note: Editors often disagree about whether to use a comma before the “and” preceding the final item in a series, as in “At the party there were many types of desserts: pie, cake, chocolate mousse, and ice cream.” Whether or not you choose to use a comma (after mousse in this example), either way is acceptable as long as you do it consistently throughout the document.
Stuff our teacher told us

“Don’t end sentences with prepositions.”

There’s actually no rule like this in grammar books. It’s sometimes described as “student folklore” because it gets repeated so often that people begin to take it as truth.

For example, we might say, “Will somebody please give me something to write with?” but only a grammatical stickler would say, “Will somebody please give me something with which to write?” Consider “That’s something I’d never think of,” versus “That’s something of which I’d never think.” Blind adherence to this rule that doesn’t really exist makes your sentences sound stilted and unnatural.

*Here’s an exception:* “Where’s it at?” In this case, “where’s” is a contraction of “where is,” but if we were to write (or say), “Where’s it?” that would sound strange. To avoid this, we naturally add an “at” to the end, but that makes it redundant. In this case it would be better to avoid the contraction and write (or say), “Where is it?”

“Don’t split infinitives.”

All verbs have an infinitive form, which is the root verb preceded by the word “to,” as in “to know,” “to run,” “to see.” We split the infinitive form by inserting a word, usually an adverb, between the “to” and the verb, thus: “to really know,” “to quickly run” and “to actually see.”

The average reader, however, wouldn’t notice these grammatical “errors” and may even be put off by reading these phrases without the split infinitives: “really to know,” “to see actually.” We split infinitives frequently when we speak, so there’s little justification for not doing it when we write.

“Don’t use contractions in formal documents.”

Once again, the decision to use contractions or not is based on the preferred style of the organization or the author. Most readers are comfortable with them in day-to-day writing.

“Read backward to catch mistakes.”

This is an old proofreading technique. When you read a document backward—that is, from right to left, starting in the bottom-right corner of the page—it will force you to look at words individually without regard to context or meaning. However, spell-check is already doing that for you, so you don’t need to duplicate the effort.

“Form the possessive of words ending in ‘s’ by adding an apostrophe.”

This is true to an extent. A useful rule to remember: If a word is plural ending in “s,” add an apostrophe (“the doctors’ offices”); if it’s singular ending in “s,” add an apostrophe and an “s” (“my boss’s car”). Ultimately, what should guide you is the way you’d naturally say it.
For example, the names Dennis and Denise both end in the “s” sound, although only Dennis ends in an “s” when it’s spelled. In each case the average person would form the possessive for each name by adding an apostrophe and an “s” because that’s how we’d likely pronounce it when speaking.

Skills practice exercises

Test your skills on the points discussed in this report by doing the following two exercises. Practice I contains common mistakes that could be corrected by proofreading. Practice II requires editing skills. Possible corrections to both (“possible” because often there can be more than one acceptable correction) appear below the exercises.

Practice I

1. If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to call Tina or myself.
2. I see no reason to stop now, please continue as planned.
3. The meeting was help just for rosemary and I.
4. The party is over yet, who knows.
5. I am going to read a book, write some checks and will be calling home.
6. It lasted 6 hours.
7. Each of the managers are gone today.
8. It will be a tough road to hoe.
9. Nether the list or the books is available.
10. I could be wrong, I’m not for sure.

Practice II

It took a whole lot of advance panning on our part but, by the time we gave consideration to all of the factors that were obvious to the eye we were able to make a through analysis of the troublesome problem. Although, we have to do this on an annual basis. To often were faced with the choice of waiting moving forward or to stall while weighting other factors.

Corrections: Practice I

1. Please call Tina or me with your questions.
2. I see no reason to stop now; please continue as planned.
3. The meet was held just for Rosemary and me.
4. The party is over, yet who knows?
5. I’m going to read a book, write some checks and call home.
6. It lasted six hours.
7. All of the managers are gone today.
8. It will be a tough row to hoe.
9. Neither the list nor the books are available.
10. I could be wrong, although I’m not sure.

**Corrections: Practice II**

We planned a great deal, but after considering all the obvious factors, we were able to analyze the problem thoroughly, although we have to do this annually. Too often we’re faced with the choices of waiting, moving forward or stalling while weighing other factors.
Developing a Style Guide, Proofreading With Perfection

From the editors of Business Management Daily

I. Why you need an in-house style guide

You’ve dealt with “old” school grammar, “new” school grammar and everybody’s “own rule” grammar. Maybe it’s time to put everyone on the same page.

Are your co-workers arguing whether to put a comma before the word “and” in a series? (Is it “red, white and blue” or “red, white, and blue”?) When typing numbers, do you know when to use figures and when to use words? Should we write “email” or “e-mail”? Does anybody know whether our company’s division in Peoria has an ampersand in its title?

Do you have a general reference guide, a grammar reference book and a dictionary, but still don’t know what the preferred organizational usage or style is?

We thought so. Your organization needs its own style guide. A company stylebook provides everyone with a concise reference of grammar and style usage particular to your organization. It should be the first point of reference when writing a report or when usage questions arise.

With one central “bible” that lays out writing rules, you’ll spend less time going back and forth about whether a word should be hyphenated, capitalized or abbreviated. And, instead of searching through a large reference book, people can find the most important guidelines they need in a few dozen pages or less.

Style manuals are particularly helpful for long documents that several people will work on over time. If each team member is responsible for writing a single chapter for a manual, everyone’s adhering to one style will speed the editing process when the chapters are assembled.

Where to start

Before putting together your style guide, take these steps:

1. Ask colleagues to devise a list of vexing style questions. After several weeks, collect the list and start compiling a rough draft of your stylebook.
2. Find answers to your most common style questions in an existing stylebook. Refer to one used in your industry or to one of the most popular: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The Associated Press Stylebook*, the *GPO Style Manual* from the U.S. Government Printing Office or *The Gregg Reference Manual*.

**Note:** Sometimes, you won’t find a definitive answer. For example: *The Associated Press* does not use a serial comma before the last item in a series—“red, white and blue”—while *The Chicago Manual* does. Take your pick; just be consistent.

**Elements to cover**

Here’s what your internal style guide should cover:

- **Departures from established style.** If your office generally follows a published style guide but has decided, for example, to omit the serial comma (last one before the “and” or “or” in a series), note that exception here.

  Are certain words that are indigenous to your industry always hyphenated or abbreviated? Do you always use percentage signs? Include these in the style guide.

- **Frequently used terms.** Highlighting the most important terms and rules in your brief guide saves users time when learning the style.

- **Unique situations.** How does your organization style its name? How does it handle terms particular to its field? Do you follow a particular citation style?

- **Emerging issues and examples** of how other organizations are handling them. (Are your clients and competitors favoring a particular style?) This will help you settle any disputes about which way to proceed.

**How to subdivide your style guide**

While organizing your style guide alphabetically is good, dividing it into subsections can make it even more user-friendly.

Structure your stylebook using the section headings below. Under each section, list items alphabetically so people will be able to find what they need quickly. Use plenty of examples when explaining grammar rules to illustrate your points.

**Stylebook sections**

- **Abbreviations and acronyms.** *Example:* Can “company” be shortened to “co.”? What acronyms, if any, are familiar enough to your audience to use without spelling them out on the first reference?

- **Capitalization.** *Example:* Is it “Work/Life Task Force” or “work/life task force”?

- **Grammar.** *Example:* Guidelines on when to use “lie” vs. “lay.”

- **Numerals.** *Examples:* Do you write “ten” or “10”? “One hundred” or “100”?

- **Punctuation.** *Examples:* Is it “a.m.” or “am”? “I.R.S.” or “IRS”?
• **Spelling.** Include an A-to-Z list of commonly misspelled words.

• **Internet guidelines.** *Example:* “Website” or “web site” or “website”?

• **Guidelines** that relate to your industry.
  Remember to leave space to add items as more questions arise.

Prior to publishing the final product, ask HR and other departments to review it and provide any suggestions. Then post the stylebook on your organization’s intranet so others can search online by word or phrase. That puts everyone on the same page.

### 2. Proofread with caution: tricks of the trade

Working quickly is a virtue—unless you’re proofreading. You’ll likely glide over grammar errors and speed past misspellings. Instead, slow down and follow these tips:

1. **Read it aloud.** Reading aloud helps you hear grammar errors, in particular.

2. **Print out the document.** It’s easier to see the gaffes when they’re in print. Use a ruler to slowly follow each line.

3. **Team up with a buddy** to “cross-proof.” Often, you can’t see your mistakes, but someone else can.

4. **Play this mind game:** Each sentence has an error, and it’s your job to find it. Find and destroy the error, and you win a trip to Paris.

5. **Take a 15-minute break** from the document, then resume with fresh eyes.

6. **Print draft documents** in a larger size for proofreading. Viewing text at about 130% of its normal size makes errors easier to spot.

7. **Proofread in spurts.** If you’re reviewing a long document, limit your proofreading to about 10 minutes at a time. If you force yourself to muddle through too much in one sitting, your eyes may tire and you’ll miss mistakes.

8. **Catch more errors** by proofreading the last section of a document first. More errors likely lurk at the end, so reading that part when you’re fresh increases the likelihood of spotting mistakes.

9. **Be careful with phone numbers.** Prevent a disaster by proofreading every digit in every phone number carefully. *Cautionary tale:* One wrong digit in a phone number in a press release recently had recipients dialing a phone sex line instead of the intended company. If you’re unfamiliar with a number, dial it yourself to check.

10. **Boost your proofreading accuracy** by scanning for one thing at a time. Professional proofreaders take several passes through a document, each for a specific problem. Scan the document first for spelling and typos, then again to check numbers and dates, and again to find grammatical errors and incorrect sentence structure.
3. **Find the devil in the details: use the right tools**

A good dictionary is an essential proofreading tool. But if your desk copy is 10 years old, it’s a better doorstop than a reference tool. Ideally, a dictionary should be no more than five years old, says Ellie Abrams, president of ESA Editorial and Training Services Inc.

If you’re thinking, “But a dictionary is a dictionary,” consider this: Abrams and her son had the same titled dictionary, but her older version did not include the word “Internet,” and his newer edition did. An up-to-date dictionary and a grammar reference are a proofreader’s indispensable tools, says Abrams.

When selecting a grammar guide, look for a good index and good examples, says Abrams, author of *Abrams’ Guide to Grammar*. Make sure everyone uses standard proofreading symbols (*see chart on page 23*). And customize your computer’s spell-check dictionary to reflect your in-house style guide: for example, if your style is to use “advisor,” not “adviser.” Don’t simply use the spelling and grammar checks that are programmed on your software. Of course, there’s no substitute for the eye and judgment of a careful proofreader.

**Coordinate the changes**

If several people need to review the same document, use different colors to mark changes, making it easier to track. If you’re editing online, after you accept the final changes, read another hard copy, Abrams advises. “You’ll be surprised what you find the fourth time through.”

When you proofread a document, “one time [reading through the piece] will never do it,” says Abrams. You should not be checking style when you’re checking spelling. In fact, it’s difficult to check headers at the same time you’re checking footers, she adds.

**Take your time**

You can’t proofread a document at the same speed you read a novel, and you definitely can’t proofread while talking on the phone. To slow yourself down on short pieces, read the piece word-for-word backward, from end to beginning. On longer pieces, slow yourself down and catch more errors by reading through a magnifying ruler one line at a time.

When someone presses you to proofread a document quickly, Abrams says to let the person choose between two options: “You can have it quick and dirty—or slow and clean.”

Finally, when a co-worker catches an error you missed, don’t be defensive or angry, Abrams says. Be thankful that someone caught it.

4. **Quiz: Foreign phrases are a ‘sine qua non’**

The English language contains a mélange of many foreign words and phrases. Even though you should set most foreign terms in italics, that’s no longer necessary for many familiar words universally accepted in English. (Often that’s a judgment call and may depend on your audience.)
Here’s a list of commonly used foreign phrases, their correct spelling and their meaning. But it’s up to you to match them with their meanings. *(Answers to the quiz appear below the list.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ad hoc</td>
<td>a. a daily allowance or something done by the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. bona fide</td>
<td>b. a deal in which one thing is given for another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. carte blanche</td>
<td>c. a false step or blunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. de facto</td>
<td>d. a person trained or advanced by a prominent or influential person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. de rigueur</td>
<td>e. a summary of accomplishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. e.g.</td>
<td>f. all together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. en masse</td>
<td>g. an accomplishment of great skill or strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. en route</td>
<td>h. and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. esprit de corps</td>
<td>i. and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. et al.</td>
<td>j. as things are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. et cetera (etc.)</td>
<td>k. because of the office or position held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. ex officio</td>
<td>l. by the fact, an inevitable result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. faux pas</td>
<td>m. common spirit and devotion of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. forte</td>
<td>n. compared with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. ipso facto</td>
<td>o. for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. quid pro quo</td>
<td>p. formed to address a specific purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. non sequitur</td>
<td>q. full power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. passé</td>
<td>r. in reality, even if not formally designated so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. per diem</td>
<td>s. in reverse order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. pro forma</td>
<td>t. on the way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. protégé</td>
<td>u. outdated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. résumé</td>
<td>v. required by fashion or custom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. status quo</td>
<td>w. sincere or genuine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. tour de force</td>
<td>x. someone’s strong point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. vice versa</td>
<td>y. something done as a formality or to provide information in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. vis-á-vis</td>
<td>z. something that doesn’t follow logically from what preceded it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bonus:** Sine qua non = something essential

### 5. When to use dashes, parentheses, commas

Trying to decide how to set off a phrase within a sentence? As you edit a document, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Long dashes elevate the importance of what appears between them.
- Parentheses indicate optional information.
- Commas keep the information neutral.
Examples:

“You’re the person—the only person—who offered to help.”

“He finally answered (after taking two minutes to think) that he didn’t understand the question.”

“I am, as you have probably noticed, looking forward to the weekend.”

6. Backslash vs. slash: an important distinction

Although technically not a grammatical error, confusing the backslash for the slash can seriously distort your message, especially when directing readers to websites.

Use backslashes to describe a file’s location on a computer or network.

I saved the file in C:\mydocuments.

Use slashes in almost every other case: in normal writing and in describing locations on the web.

I asked the writer/editor to look it up on www.research.com/asia.

7. Why did you put that in quotes?

The grammar police are applying full force to the rampant misuse of quotation marks. At least one website (unnecessaryquotes.com) and The Book of “Unnecessary” Quotation Marks are documenting the sometimes hilarious application of quotations in inappropriate places.

Examples of publicly posted signs:

Please leave lights “on.”

Closing early for the “snow.”

“Authentic” handmade gorditas.

In every case, the author seems to want to highlight the word or words in quotes—rather than underlining or boldfacing.

Sometimes, the writer puts the punctuation around words to imply sarcasm. Example: “I was surprised to see a mistake in Bob’s report, given how ‘highly educated’ he is.”

Best advice: Use quotation marks to enclose only words spoken verbatim by someone else. Use underlining, all caps or bolding for applying emphasis.
## Standard proofreading marks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATIONAL SIGNS</th>
<th>TYPOGRAPHICAL SIGNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delete</td>
<td><em>ital</em> Set in italic type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close up; delete space</td>
<td><em>rom</em> Set in roman type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delete and close up (use only when deleting letters within a word)</td>
<td><em>bf</em> Set in boldface type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let it stand</td>
<td><em>lc</em> Set in lowercase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insert space</td>
<td><em>caps</em> Set in capital letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make space between words equal; make space between lines equal</td>
<td><em>sc</em> Set in small capitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insert hair space</td>
<td><em>w-f</em> Wrong font; set in correct type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterspace</td>
<td><em>x</em> Check type image; remove blemish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin new paragraph</td>
<td><em>v</em> Insert here or make superscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indent type one em from left or right</td>
<td>^ Insert here or make subscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move right</td>
<td>_ Insert comma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move left</td>
<td>__ Insert apostrophe or single quotation mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center</td>
<td>__ Insert quotation marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move up</td>
<td>__ Insert period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move down</td>
<td>__ Insert question mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flush left</td>
<td>_ Insert semicolon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flush right</td>
<td>_ Insert colon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straighten type; align horizontally</td>
<td>_ Insert hyphen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align vertically</td>
<td>_ Insert em dash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transpose</td>
<td>_ Insert en dash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spell out</td>
<td>{ Insert parentheses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Sources:_ The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition; www.chicagomanualofstyle.org
8. Guide to effective emails: protocol tips

One of the most popular tools in any business writer’s toolkit is email. Since this is a relatively new tool in business writing (traditional tools include letters and memos), some of the protocols for using it are still being developed, and “netiquette” is an emerging field.

Here are 17 tips to help you sharpen this tool, provided by Fred Kniggendorf, training consultant and creator of Grammaerobics™:

1. Make it look easy to read with plenty of white space. No matter how complicated the subject matter, readers still prefer writing that appears easy to read. Bullet points are good for this type of communication.

2. Avoid ALL CAPS. We all know that a message written in all capitals is interpreted as shouting by the reader. But it’s also more difficult to read because we recognize letters by their lowercase, with capitals reserved for beginnings of sentences and proper nouns.

3. Stop at “Thank you.” Continuing the email loop by responding with “You’re welcome” only adds to mailbox clutter.

4. Use a “call to action.” Tell your reader what you want her to do with the information you’ve sent and when you want her to do it, because now you’ve given her one more item for her to-do list, and she will need to work it into her schedule (refer to Nos. 5 and 6).

5. Use “FYI only—no need to respond.” This indicates you don’t want your reader to do anything more with your email.

6. Use “Urgent” only for urgent messages. If you cry “wolf” often enough, it loses its impact.


8. Put the subject line to work. This is sometimes called “BLUF,” or “Bottom Line Up Front.”

9. Don’t forward a message without the author’s approval. This is just old-fashioned professional courtesy, and you don’t want to create a precedent that allows readers to forward your emails without your knowing it. On the other hand, see No. 10.

10. Assume anything you send out will be distributed. Craft your message accordingly!

11. Limit emails to one subject. Don’t overwhelm your already overworked reader.

12. Avoid jokes. Jokes are easily misinterpreted and often rely on tone and nonverbals (not available in written communication) to make them funny.

13. Orient your reader. Tell him, in simple language, why you’re writing. Lose the “as per,” “pursuant to,” and “re.” Just say, “Here’s why I’m writing you.”

14. Anticipate and answer your reader’s questions. The goal is to relieve the recipient of the need to call or write back for clarification.
Developing a Style Guide, Proofreading With Perfection

15. **Keep it clean and professional.** Always be aware that emails written on company computers are company property.

16. **Proofread, proofread, proofread!** Read it out loud; that’s a great way to catch mistakes and also to know if it sounds like a human wrote it. And *please* don’t trust spell-check to catch everything. It won’t.

17. **Don’t write unless you have to.** Emails are good only if you can’t have a face-to-face or phone conversation, or if you need a paper trail.

9. **Be explicit in your choice of words**

Sometimes, a general word isn’t clear enough when writing email or other correspondence. Use defining words to make sure the reader clearly understands what you’re saying, advises Craig Hogan, author of *Explicit Business Writing*:

- **General word:** the agreement
- **Defining word:** the agreement we signed on Aug. 13

- **General word:** the software
- **Defining word:** the software you described in your email

- **General word:** the paralegal
- **Defining word:** the paralegal who worked on the case with Tracy

10. **Common flaws and fixes**

Here are four sentences that need repair, along with corrections that sharp editors and proofreaders will make:

1. **Subject/verb agreement.** Seek out your true subject to match it to the correct verb.

   **Example:**
   
   *One of the five members of our group, which meets monthly, get to attend the award ceremony.*

   Fix the sentence by using “gets” instead of “get” because it refers to one member of the group, and one takes a singular verb.

2. **Actionless, dull sentences.** Whenever possible, replace “there are” and passive verbs with action-oriented words.

   **Example:**
   
   *There are three awards being handed out this year, and the top award is being given to one of the members of our group, Tom. That is quite an honor, so we congratulate you, Tom.*
Rewrite the sentence this way:

*This year’s award ceremony honors three well-deserving recipients. And the top award goes to Tom, one of the members of our group. What an honor! Congratulations, Tom!*

3. **Negative structure.** Rewrite sentences built around the word “not” to include strong, positive verbs.

   **Example:**

   *Because the copier has not been fixed, I cannot distribute hard copies of the improvement plan to every department manager.*

   Rewrite the sentence this way:

   *When the copier is fixed, I will distribute hard copies of the improvement plan to every department manager. In the meantime, I’m circulating a digital version.*

4. **Comma splice.** Commas help link sentences, but they need help from words like “and,” “but” and “yet.”

   **Example:**

   *John ran out of the office, his boss chased after him.*

   Rewrite the sentence this way:

   *John ran out of the office, and his boss chased after him.*

---

11. **Zoom in on document trouble spots**

Proofreading a document for grammar and spelling mistakes won’t snag every error. And while program features such as automatically updated fields help, they aren’t completely foolproof.

   Take at least one additional pass through the pages to check for errors in these areas:

   **Appearance.** Look at each page and sets of facing pages with a “big picture” view of the layout, spacing and any special headings or fonts. Are styles consistent?

   Look closer at the layout for other errors and visual distractions, such as several lines of type in a row ending in the same word or a hyphen, creating a “stacked” appearance.

   Are words correctly split over lines by syllables? (“Proj-ect” is a noun, “pro-ject” a verb.)

   **Fancy fonts.** Typos love to hide in text formatted differently from the rest of the document, particularly words that are all capitalized.

   **Sequence.** Are the page and chapter numbers in order? Does the information in the table of contents match the document? (Is that the chapter title, and does it start on that page?)

   In lists, does “G” follow “F” and “4” precede “5,” or are they out of order?
Connections. Do footnotes, figures and other illustrations appear on the appropriate pages? Are cross-references within the document in order? If it’s an electronic file, are hyperlinks working correctly?

Adding up. Is the sum of numbers in a row the same as the “total” figure? Do percentages on a pie chart add up to more than 100? (Perhaps you need a footnote explaining they have been rounded.)

Known trouble spots. Keep a list of common types of errors in text that you proofread regularly. And if you find one error, look closer at that section because another error is likely lurking in the same word or sentence.

Boilerplates. Don’t overlook standardized information, such as the description of your organization or its mission, the address and the phone number.

Sense. Finally, question the author about passages or numbers that puzzle you. A section of text may be missing, or transposed numbers or a lost decimal could cause your document to cite gasoline prices of, say, $7.16 or $176 per gallon.
Don’t let errors derail your message

Many people have unpleasant memories of grammar lessons in school. The rules seemed arcane and pointless, since only English teachers really talked that way. What a relief to grow up and join the workforce, where no one corrects your grammar anymore and you can just let the words flow naturally. Or can you?

If you’re still making the same grammatical errors as in grade school, chances are your memos are annoying your co-workers, bosses and customers as they puzzle over what you must have meant.

Here’s what your grade-school teachers never told you: The purpose of grammar is writing so that readers understand your message on the first read. Anything you do to slow down that first, effortless comprehension draws attention to your poor word choice and away from your message.

This section examines 21 common errors in grammar and usage that can derail your message and your credibility. Keep this list within easy reach as you compose emails, memos and reports so that your writing always presents a positive, professional image of you and your business.

Red Flag 1: adverse/averse

Even seasoned writers confuse these two words because they sound alike. But they have different meanings: Adverse means “unfavorable or harmful”; averse means “reluctant or opposed.”

We did remarkably well last year despite adverse conditions.

The boss is averse to taking too many risks.
Red Flag 2: affect/effect
Maybe because so many of us pronounce both words as “uh-FEKT,” it’s easy to mistake one for the other when writing (and your spell-check won’t pick it up). Use this easy-to-remember rule of thumb: Generally, affect is the action (a verb), and effect is the end result (a noun). (Remember: affect = action; effect = end.)

- His negativity doesn’t affect me.
- My optimism has a positive effect on him.

In very formal writing, however, effect can be a verb.

- We will effect a new plan.

If you use these words incorrectly, you can create a puzzler like this:

- How does this effect the proposal? (Did you mean: How does this affect the proposal?)

In medical settings only, you may encounter affect as a noun.

- The patient’s voice has a flat affect.

Red Flag 3: altar/alter
Altar is a platform in a place of worship (noun); alter means to change something (a verb).

- Ever since the boss took his latest trip to the altar, he’s altered his approach to work.

Red Flag 4: among/between
Between indicates two parties in a situation; among indicates more than two.

- Between you and me, I doubt that the board members have even one groundbreaking idea among them.

Red Flag 5: amount/number; fewer/less
In general, use number and fewer to describe items you can count; use amount and less to describe quantities.

- The incredible number of people overwhelmed me.
- The incredible amount of work overwhelmed me.
- We counted fewer attendees than we expected.
- The audience showed less interest in the topic than we anticipated.

You’d never write fewer interest, of course, but watch out for errors like less attendees.
Red Flag 6: bi-/semi-

Unfortunately, even if you use these prefixes correctly, people still won’t be sure what you mean. Bi- means two or twice, but when used as part of a time period such as biweekly, do you mean twice in one week or once every two weeks? Although some experts say that biweekly always means every other week, it still confuses most people.

Our advice: Avoid using bi- when possible.

The committee will convene once every two months until we reach a resolution.

If you must use bi-, define it on first reference.

The committee will convene bimonthly—once every two months—until we reach a resolution.

Do the same with semi-, which denotes half a period.

I budgeted $300 for dental expenses this year: $150 for one cleaning each six months.

Red Flag 7: composed of/comprise

Compose means “to create or produce by putting together.” Comprise means “to consist of.”

Our company is composed of four divisions.

Four divisions comprise our company.

Rule of thumb: Composed of starts with the group and moves to its components; comprise starts with the components and moves to the group.

Red Flag 8: could of/could have; should of/should have; would of/would have

In each case, have is correct, and of is incorrect.

I could have and should have attended, and I would have if I hadn’t been sick.

Red Flag 9: dangling and misplaced modifiers

The comedian among grammatical errors, a dangling modifier will at least entertain your readers before they begin puzzling over what you must have meant.

Wrong: While planning his next speech, the lectern’s height emerged as one of Bart’s main concerns.
The problem, of course: The lectern couldn’t possibly plan Bart’s speech.

**Right:** While planning his next speech, Bart grew concerned about the lectern’s height.

**Rule of thumb:** If you build a sentence with an introductory phrase, be sure the very next noun is indeed the subject of the phrase.

Less amusing but just as important for clarity: placing modifiers (such as *only*, *just* and *even*) correctly throughout your sentences.

**Rule of thumb:** Place the modifier just before the word you intend to modify.

- *Only he said he respects me.* (I’m not too sure about everybody else.)
- *He only said he respects me.* (I’m not sure what he really thinks.)
- *He said only he respects me.* (From his viewpoint, no one else respects me.)
- *He said he only respects me.* (But he doesn’t like me.)
- *He said he respects only me.* (I am the sole object of his respect.)

**Red Flag 10: feel bad/feel badly**

Without your glasses, you may see badly, and if your hands are bandaged into two big lumps, you may feel badly. But if you’re experiencing a sorrowful emotion, you feel bad.

**Rule of thumb:** Use bad after any forms of the verbs *to be*, *to feel*, *to taste*, *to smell* or *to see*. Easy reminder: Substitute am for the verb. You wouldn’t say “I am badly,” right?

**Red Flag 11: hopefully**

Most of us use hopefully as a synonym for with hopeful feelings, but it isn’t correct.

**Wrong:** Hopefully, my design is going to win an award. (My design is hoping as it goes.)

**Right:** I hope that my design is going to win an award.

Of course, if you really mean with hopeful feelings, use hopefully.

**Right:** Hopefully, I dropped my raffle ticket into the shoebox.

**Red Flag 12: I/me; he/him; she/her; we/us; they/them; who/whom**

In each pair, the first word is the actor form (subject), and the second is the recipient form (object). Confusion comes when a speaker or a writer loses track of his own sentence.
She lectured Dennis, Rachel and me. (Never end such a construction with myself! If you’re ever uncertain which form to use when multiple people are receiving the action, just clear them all out of the way so you can receive the action directly: She lectured me, not myself.)

But what happens when the actor form is simply being restated and no one is receiving an action? Stay with the actor form in both cases.

Hello? … This is he.

**Red Flag 13: imply/infer**

*Imply* is a message that the writer sends out. *Infer* is a message that the reader receives.

I yawned hugely, hoping to imply that it was time to leave. Instead, the boss must have inferred that I needed a cup of coffee because he offered me one.

**Red Flag 14: irregardless/regardless**

Never use *irregardless*, a nonstandard usage. The correct word is *regardless*.

**Red Flag 15: its/it’s; your/you’re**

These spelling errors are the scourges of text today and for no good reason. In each case, the apostrophe holds the place for a left-out letter:

- *It’s* = it is
- *you’re* = you are

*Its* and *your* are simple possessives:

- *The software came with its own user manual. Please give me your feedback on this.*

**Red Flag 16: lay/lie**

If we could stay in the present tense, these two words wouldn’t be so hard to keep straight.

**Rule of thumb:** Use *lay* to denote placing something somewhere; use *lie* to denote reclining action.

- *I’ll lay (place) this sheet flat to dry.*
- *I want to lie (recline) here all day.*
The past and present perfect forms of these words are even more confusing and, unfortunately, the best way to use them correctly is to memorize them:

- Today, I lay the sheet flat. Yesterday, I laid it flat. I have laid it flat each time.
- Today, I lie here. Yesterday, I lay here. I have lain here for hours.

**Red Flag 17: than/then**

Like *affect* and *effect*, these two words are often pronounced alike. Use *than* when you’re comparing things and *then* in every other case.

- Everyone else is better at Excel than I am.
- Then you should take a class! Apply for next week’s session; a seat is available then.

**Red Flag 18: that/which**

*That* introduces essential clauses, and *which* introduces nonessential clauses.

- The report *that* you wrote for the meeting is a real eye-opener. (You’ve written other reports, so it’s essential that you know I’m referring to the one you wrote for the meeting.)
- The report, *which* you wrote for the meeting, is a real eye-opener. (You’ve written only one report, so it’s not essential to the sentence: You wrote it only for that meeting.)

Note that the first example does not have commas around the clause in question, while the second example does.

**Rule of thumb:** *Which* clauses are usually set off by commas; *that* clauses are not.

**Red Flag 19: they’re/their/there**

Even professional writers spell these incorrectly when they aren’t paying attention.

- Use *they’re* as a contraction for *they are*.
  - They’re working on the project.

- Use *their* as the possessive of *they*.
  - Their project work is impressive.

- Use *there* to denote location.
  - I put the voucher there, on your desk.
Red Flag 20: there’s/there are

Be careful when starting a sentence with there’s; a singular noun should follow.

Wrong: There’s a million reasons we should go.
Right: There are a million reasons we should go.

Our advice: Avoid the problem completely—and make your writing more compelling—by eschewing there is and there are whenever you can.

There’s a problem with the new software.
We’re experiencing a problem with the new software.

Both are correct, but the second sentence is more direct and expressive.

Red Flag 21: unique

Unique does not have degrees. Something either is unique or it isn’t.

Wrong: He has the most unique book shot I’ve ever seen.