

# GOOD COMMUNICATION MATTERS.

*A QUICK GUIDE TO BETTER WRITING*

20

helpful **hints**

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**20**  
helpful **hints**

What you write reflects both  
on you and your organization.

To help you avoid some of the  
more common writing problems,  
here are some tips to consider.

# #1 Why is the **active voice preferred** for business writing?

*The director cancelled the meeting scheduled for Tuesday.*

## ACTIVE VOICE

When you want to draw attention to **the doer** of the action in a sentence, **use the active voice.**

Active and passive voices reflect the relationship between the subject and the verb of a sentence.

*The meeting was cancelled.*

## PASSIVE VOICE

When you want to focus **attention on actions** rather than on personalities and avoid drawing attention to the writer, **use the passive voice.**

In a passive sentence, the subject is acted upon.



The active voice uses fewer words, is more direct, and has greater impact.

## #2 What is the difference between **me**, **myself**, and **I**?



*The document had to be signed by both Catherine and myself.*



*The document had to be signed by both Catherine and me.*

Use "me" after a preposition such as by, with, to, from, etc.

Use "I" when you need a subject for your sentence.

Use "myself" when you are emphasizing your own role in a sentence (when you have already used "I" in the sentence).

The confusion about these three pronouns can easily be avoided if you remove the second party from the sentences where you feel tempted to use "myself" or "I" as an object or feel nervous about "me." You wouldn't say, "The government sent the memorandum to I," so you shouldn't say, "The government sent the memorandum to my manager and I" either. And you shouldn't say, "to my manager and myself." The only correct way to say this is, "The government sent the memorandum to my manager and me."

### #3 What are some of the more commonly misused **word pairs**?

Confusing word pairs abound in the English language. Only careful attention to detail and keeping a dictionary handy is a reliable way to completely eliminate errors.

The word "adverse" means difficult circumstances, circumstances that act as an adversary.

*Adverse circumstances during a recession may affect a person's financial well being.*

**adverse**

**averse**

People often confuse this word with "averse," which means having a strong feeling against, or aversion toward.

*People who are **averse** to taking risks will often avoid trying out new ideas.*

Elicit is always a verb.

*The lawyer tried to **elicit** a description of the attacker from the witness.*

**elicit**

**illicit**

**Illicit**, in contrast, is always an adjective describing something illegal or naughty.

Use "infer" when someone is trying to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence.

*When communication is clear, the customer does not need to **infer** its meaning.*

**infer**

**imply**

Use "imply" when something is being suggested without being explicitly stated.

*Her terse response **implied** that she was not satisfied with the board's decision.*

These two words, which originally had quite distinct meanings, have become so blended together that most people no longer distinguish between them.

more...

continued...

### #3A What are some of the more commonly misused **word pairs**?

Generations of teachers have tried to drill this one into students' heads by reminding them,

*"The **principal** is your pal."*



## principal

## principle



Many don't seem convinced. "Principal" is a noun and adjective referring to someone or something, which is highest in rank or importance.

*Their goal was to pay off the interest on their loan quickly so that they could begin paying off the principal.*

"Principle" is only a noun and has to do with law or doctrine:

*The workers fought hard for the **principle** of collective bargaining.*

When something is standing still, it's stationary.

*The market price of uranium has remained **stationary** for the past week.*



## stationary

## stationery



Here's an old mnemonic: let the AR near the end of "stationary" remind you of "at rest" and the E near the end of "stationery" stand for "envelope."

The piece of paper on which you write a letter is stationery.

*It's important that communication to clients is sent on your organization's **stationery**.*

Affect is more commonly used as a verb.



## affect

## effect



Effect is used as a noun.

The way you affect someone can have an effect on her or him.

There are times when effect is used as a verb, such as when you effect change.

*Her change in strategy had a profound **effect** on the project and this **affected** its outcome.*

**It's with an apostrophe** means **it is**  
(or, a little less often and a little less formally, it has).

*It's best to do your research before  
developing an outline for your report.*

**Its without** an apostrophe is a possessive pronoun  
that means **belonging** to it.

*My old computer is on **its** last leg.*



To determine which  
one to use, simply  
substitute "it is."

If it works,  
"it's" is correct;

if not,  
then use  
"its."



To choose correctly among the forms of **who**, re-phrase the sentence so you choose between **he** and **him**.

If you want **him**, write **whom**;

if you want **he**, write **who**.

**Who** do you think is responsible?

(Do you think he is responsible?)

**Whom** shall we ask to be our legal advisor?

(Shall we ask him to be our legal advisor?)



*I have a colleague **whose** email messages are always well written.*



Whose is a possessive form of who.

It means belonging to whom.



Who's may look like a possessive, but it is really the contraction for who is (or who has), as in;

*Bob Geldoff, a well-known musician, is a person **who's** actively involved in anti-poverty endeavors throughout the world.*

## #7 Do I need to be consistent with my verb tenses?



Consistent use of verb tenses conveys a clear sense of how sentence elements relate to one another.



*Yesterday we walked to work but rode the bus home because of the flash storm.*



*Yesterday we had walked to work but rode the bus home because of the flash storm.*

**Had walked**, the past perfect tense should be in the past tense to maintain consistency with the time frame (yesterday); **rode** is past, referring to an action completed before the current time frame.



*Before Ms. George will be granting Mara's request for a temporary leave, it goes to the Director.*



*Before Ms. George grants Mara's request for a temporary leave, it goes to the Director.*

**Will be granting**, the future progressive tense, should be in the present tense to maintain consistency with the time frame; **goes** is the simple present referring to an action taking place in the present (though it does not indicate when the action will end).

### To avoid confusing your reader:

Stay with the same verb tense in a sentence or paragraph.

Avoid unnecessary shifts, unless a real change occurs.

Do not shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action is the same.

**Shift tenses** when you want to *indicate a change in time* from one frame to another.

*Before they even began deliberations, many jury members had reached a verdict.*

**Began** is past tense, referring to an action completed before the current time frame; **had reached** is past perfect, referring to an action from a time frame before that of another past event.

Misplaced commas can lead to confusion and misinterpretation.  
To avoid misplacing commas, follow these rules:

Never use a comma to separate a subject from its verb or a verb from its object.



*A financial institution, may have numerous branches throughout the world.*

The comma erroneously separates "*institution*" from its verb "*may have*."

Do not place commas after coordinating conjunctions.



*A communications guide is a useful tool and, it provides valuable information.*

The **comma** is unnecessary.

When placing commas in a series, place them after each item and before the coordinating conjunction that precedes the last item.

*Written communication in government organizations can come in the form of letters, emails, proposals, reports, memos, and email messages.*

Nowadays, this last comma is considered optional.

# #10 When is it appropriate to use semicolons?



Semicolons are used for two purposes:

(1) to link independent clauses

Connector:

*CIDA is an excellent agency; it supports sustainable development, helps to reduce poverty and provides humanitarian assistance.*

(2) to separate sentence elements that already contain commas

Separating items in a series:

*Some members of The Beatles included Ringo Starr, drummer; Paul McCartney, singer; and George Harrison, bass player.*

Semicolons are misused when sentence parts of different grammatical structure are connected.



*New CIDA offices are opening in four countries; having many already in other parts of the world.*



*New CIDA offices are opening in four countries; many are already established in other parts of the world.*

## #11 Is it wrong to begin a sentence with **and** or **but**?

There are many conflicting views regarding starting sentences with “and” or “but.”

Some believe that these words make a sentence more forceful. But it does make your writing less formal.

If you open with “and” or “but” you usually don’t need a comma.

Others believe that a sentence ought to express a complete thought that can stand by itself. And coordinating conjunctions are used to connect/join words, phrases and clauses of equal importance in a sentence.

## #12 Is it alright to use **abbreviations/short forms and jargon**?

In this high-tech age of blackberries and email, it's tempting to take shortcuts.

Don't assume your reader understands your short forms and your jargon.

Your best bet is to take the extra moment

and  
**spell  
it out.**

Misuse of these abbreviations runs rampant in all types of documents.

# e.g.

"e.g." is short for *exempli gratia*, and means "**for example**".

Use "e.g." when you want to give an example (or several examples) of something just mentioned.

*A poor economy will affect many businesses, e.g., real estate, restaurant, retail, lending, brokerage, airlines, etc.*

# i.e.

"i.e." is short for *id est*, and means "**that is**".

Use "i.e." when you wish to explain briefly or to clarify what you just said, or to say the same thing with different words.

*Email communication can be problematic, i.e., it can be difficult to understand when it is not well written.*



## #14 Where is it best to place a **modifier**?

Misplaced modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that are not located properly in relation to the words they modify.

They lead to illogical sentences that are difficult to follow.

You need to place them as close to the word(s) they modify.



*The two-day training session was held on November 7 and 8 on the use of the new commercial software.*



*The two-day training session on the use of the new commercial software was held on November 7 and 8.*

*On the use of the new commercial software* was placed in the second sentence right after training session, which it modifies/describes.

It's easy to see why positive language is more effective than negative. Consider the following:

*I can't meet with you until Tuesday.*

*versus*

*I look forward to meeting you on Tuesday.*

The language of the second sentence denotes a positive impression and is almost always preferable. Instead of saying what can't be done, say what can be done.



When delivering bad news, try softening the blow with positive language. It can make a difference.

Negative language is indirect and can be misleading, sometimes even patronizing.

## #16 For whom should I be writing? **My reader or me?**

While it's great to take pride in your writing, the purpose of your written communication is to get your point across to others.

If you keep that in mind, you'll be more effective.

## #17 What's the difference between using **that** and **which**?

The basic difference is that “that” precedes essential clauses while “which” precedes non-essential clauses.

For example:

*They will only shop at stores that specialize in organic foods.*

Without the clause “*that specialize in organic foods*”, we would not know the type of stores being discussed.

*The store specializing in organic foods, which is around the corner from their home, is very large.*

Since we have identified the type of store, the word “*which*” begins a non-essential clause.



The best way to slim down your writing is to avoid wordiness and redundancy.

For example, in the expression “basic fundamentals” “basic” is pointless and should be omitted. The word “fundamentals” already implies “basic”.

There is no reason to use two or more words when only one is required.



*We must remind the opposition leader that the election was influenced by a number of ungovernable forces outside his control.*



*We must remind the opposition leader that the election was influenced by a number of ungovernable forces.*

## Wordiness:

Words are not to be wasted, especially in written communication. Why say in three words what you can say in one? As you write, ask yourself the following questions about each word:

Is it needed?

Is it vital?

Does it contribute or interfere with the meaning of the sentence?

## #19 Can I **rely on spell check** to ensure my writing is correct?

Spell check looks for misspellings,  
not misuse of words.

For example, if you write an email to a colleague about a **“message”** but inadvertently type **“massage”**, spell check will not catch the error, because massage is spelled correctly.



To save yourself  
embarrassment,  
proofread first.

## #20 Will **pretentious writing** impress my reader?

The short answer is **no**. The best writing doesn't draw too much attention to itself. Flowery language and wordy prose have no place in business writing.



Keep it simple and get  
your point across.

Now that's impressive.



## Some Final Thoughts for Improving Your Writing:

Eliminate redundant words and phrases.

Avoid double negatives.

Use specific language.

Keep in mind for whom you are writing. It's your audience.

To save yourself embarrassment, proofread first.

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