

Get a Grip on Grammar: Practical Tips to Hone Your Skills

By Judy Griffin

The written word is often the first opportunity you have to make a favorable impression on your colleagues, customers, and potential clients. It's in your best interest, therefore, to use those words wisely. While the content of your message is certainly key to successful communication, equally critical is the correct use of the language itself—the grammar and mechanics of your message.

So what's the big deal if there's an error or two in your writing? As errors pile up, readers typically stop reading for content and begin editing. They cease to grasp your message and begin to scrutinize the mechanics of your language, which is not exactly the outcome you had in mind.

Grammatical blunders can distract, confuse, and even annoy your reader, but more importantly, any grammatical error—large or small—can diminish the credibility of both you and your company, not to mention create potential liability. The following two tips can help you hone your grammatical skills, giving you the razor-sharp edge you need in business today.

Tip 1: Don't Dangle or Misplace Your Modifiers

Can you spot the errors in the following ads?

For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with a

round bottom for efficient beating. (Ouch!)

For sale: An antique desk suitable for a lady with thick legs and large drawers. (Oops!)

These two advertisements suffer from the dreaded misplaced modifier. No doubt, you've heard about this affliction, along with the dangling modifier, but exactly what are they, how can you purge them from your writing, and why should you bother?

To refresh your memory, a modifier is a word or phrase that gives more information about the subject, verb, or object in a clause. A modifier *dangles* when the word it modifies is not in the sentence. A modifier is *misplaced* when a phrase, clause, or word is placed too far from the noun or pronoun it describes, as in the two ads above. Dangling and misplaced modifiers can confuse or mislead your reader and are often unintentionally humorous, something you want to avoid, of course, unless you are a comedian.

Quick Fixes

Try these surefire techniques to avoid ambiguity: Correct a dangling modifier by providing a noun or pronoun to which the dangling construction can be attached. You can accomplish this by rewriting the modifier as a subordinate clause or rewriting the main clause so the dangling phrase can modify a subject or an object.

1. Ambiguous: Strolling into the office, the fire alarm blared.

(Undoubtedly, the fire alarm was not strolling into the office. Identify who was, and get it in the sentence immediately after the comma or in the phrase itself.)

Clear: Strolling into the office, Bertie heard the fire alarm blare.

Clear: As Bertie strolled into the office, she heard the fire alarm blare.

2. Ambiguous: Whining, grinding, and belching smoke, the CEO watched helplessly as the photocopier shredded her report. (That's one out-of-control CEO!)

Clear: Whining, grinding, and belching smoke, the photocopier shredded the report while the CEO watched helplessly. (Much better.)

Clear: As the photocopier started whining, grinding, and belching smoke, the CEO helplessly watched it shred her report. (Another good option.)

3. Ambiguous: While still being held by the UPS driver, Natasha could see the package was for her.

Clear: While the package was still being held by the UPS driver, Natasha could see it was for her.

4. Ambiguous: Do not sit in the chair without being fully assembled.

Clear: You should not sit in the chair unless it is fully assembled.

For misplaced constructions, move the modifier as close as possible to the word or phrase it is describing.

Magazine

5. **Ambiguous:** Please take time to look over the marketing report that is enclosed with your colleagues. (Are your colleagues enclosed with the report?)

Clear: Please take time to look over the enclosed marketing report with your colleagues.

6. **Ambiguous:** The manager read from the marketing report wearing glasses. (Was the marketing report wearing the glasses?)

Clear: Wearing glasses, the manager read from the marketing report.

Clear: The manager, wearing glasses, read from the marketing report.

Tip 2: Avoid Commonly Misused Word Pairs

Use the correct word to avoid unintentionally confusing or humoring your reader. Sure, using the wrong word will get you noticed, but it's the kind of attention we all can do without.

The following words are often misused in business writing:

Accept-Except

Use *accept* when you mean to take; use *except* when you mean to leave out.

Examples:

Please **accept** the company's sincere apology.

Everyone attended the meeting **except** for Sylvita.

Affect-Effect

Most of the time *affect* is used as a verb and *effect* is used as a noun.

Examples:

The lack of sleep **affected** his ability to think clearly at work.

The **effect** of a good night's sleep on work performance is clear.

Occasionally, it is appropriate to use *effect* as a verb when meaning *to bring about*.

Example:

The sleep researcher **effected** a change in his insomnia.

Farther-Further

Use *farther* when you mean distance that can be measured; otherwise, use *further*.

Examples:

The new office was three miles **farther** than I realized.

They have agreed to go no **further** with their investigation.

Fewer-Less

Use *fewer* with items you can count; otherwise, use *less*.

Example:

Eric received **fewer** job offers and **less** praise than he expected.

Good-Well

Use *good* as an adjective to describe a noun; use *well* as an adverb to describe a verb.

Example:

With a knack for managing projects **well**, George was considered a **good** employee.

Stationary-Stationery

Use *stationary* to mean at rest; use *stationery* to mean writing supplies, especially paper and envelopes.

Examples:

During his lunch break, Harold rode a **stationary** bike at his health club.

You can order all your **stationery** supplies online.

Implementing these two grammar tips can enhance your business writing, making you more credible to those you wish to influence. This is, after all, the whole point of effective business communication.

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