



5 Simple Grammar Tips for Better Business Writing

By Paul Falcone

I'm an HR practitioner with a penchant for writing. With a master's degree in literature and nine published books behind me, I can't quite close a blind eye to some very common errors that are pervasive at all levels of management. And I think it's fair to say that I'm not alone in noticing these pesky problems when they surface. The fact is that most business people have a handful of common writing challenges that—once fixed—can strengthen their writing skills immensely. Here are five all-too-common challenge areas and opportunities to spiff up your writing in no time and help yourself stand out among your peers in terms of communicating more effectively every time you open an email or pick up a pen.

1. Apostrophe Marks

The most common error that distinguishes well-trained writers from those who conveniently skipped high school English class can be found with apostrophe marks. Apostrophes are generally used to show possession. Here's how they work:

*Singular: the **boy's** book*

*Plural: the **boys'** books*

The apostrophe comes after the s when plural possessive nouns are at hand, as in workers' compensation, employees' benefits, and unions' collective bargaining agreements.

Okay, easy enough . . . Now here's where it gets a little tricky: When you're writing the plural of an abbreviation, you'll need to use an apostrophe if the abbreviation itself contains periods. (However, if the abbreviation doesn't contain periods, then you can simply add an s to show the plural form.) Therefore, you'd write plural abbreviations as follows:

Apostrophes:		No Apostrophes:
<i>MD.'s</i> (Medical Doctors)	But ...	<i>CEOs</i> (Chief Executive Officers)
<i>PhD.'s</i> (Doctors of Philosophy)		<i>CPAs</i> (Certified Public Accountants)
		<i>RFPs</i> (Requests for Proposal)

In a similarly tricky construct that confuses many business writers, the apostrophe should be omitted when referring to a decade. Therefore, you'd write:

the 1940s

the 2000s

the '90s

2. Commas

Commas are used to separate items in a series. The issue that causes the most confusion is whether you want to use "serial commas" or not. For example:

I've always been interested in recruiting, employee relations, and training.

That comma between the second and third element (i.e., between employee relations and training) is highly recommended. Newspapers have historically omitted the comma between the second and third elements to save space, while books typically include them. As a rule in [business writing](#), include the additional comma and become a "serial comma" enthusiast. It will avoid confusion every time.

Next, use commas between two independent clauses (i.e., full sentences). For example:

I like working out at the gym, and I also enjoy reading in the library.

As you can see, the compound sentence above has two independent sentences that can stand on their own. In comparison, if you write a sentence with a dependent clause (i.e., a partial sentence), then no comma would be necessary. For example:

I like working out at the gym and also enjoy reading in the library.

3. Semi-Colons

A semi-colon can be used to tie two sentences together that are very closely related. As a writer, you have the discretion to create two separate sentences or to connect them via the

use of a semi-colon. If you use a semi-colon construction, however, you've got to get it right. Here's what it might look like:

I've always primarily voted Democrat. However, I will go with a more conservative candidate on particular issues.

I've always primarily voted Democrat; however, I will go with a more conservative candidate on particular issues.

Notice that the word however can be used to begin a totally new sentence or as a connector between two very closely related sentences. If you opt to use the connector semi-colon rather than split your ideas into two separate sentences, just remember that the semi-colon connector is constructed like this:

; however,

The semi-colon ends the first thought and precedes the word however. Following however, a comma is used to introduce the second half of the sentence.

One more thought about semi-colons: they can be used like commas to introduce a list of items when the items themselves require commas. For example:

We have offices in Spokane, Washington; Chicago, Illinois; and Springdale, Arkansas.

4. Hyper-Urbanisms

A hyper-urbanism is a 50-cent word for over-correcting language in order for the writer to come across as super smart or intelligent. Here's where you'll find this problem most:

Our boss gave the assignment to Nina, Sam, and I.

In reality, that sentence should read:

Our boss gave the assignment to Nina, Sam, and me.

People tend to over-correct by saying I at the end of a triple series that includes them even if grammar rules would dictate otherwise. If you break down this sentence into its component parts, here's what it's saying:

Our boss gave that assignment to Nina.

Our boss gave that assignment to Sam.

Our boss gave that assignment to me.

You'd never say "Our boss gave that assignment to I." However, in an effort to sound more educated, writers often overcompensate by saying "I" at the end of the series. Similarly, "Our boss asked Nina, Sam, and me to help put away the tables." is correct and proper English. Don't assume that any time you list yourself as a third element in a series that "I" is the appropriate usage. Ditto for "between you and me," which is correct. There's no such thing as "between you and I" in the world of proper English usage!

5. That versus Which

Okay, this one confuses a lot of people too. Master it and shine among your peers! That is typically used with a clause that is absolutely necessary to the meaning of a sentence (known as a "restrictive clause"):

This is an assignment that will launch your career.

Which, in comparison, is used with a nonrestrictive clause, meaning that the content isn't critical to the point you're making—it's just an element of clarification or a "nice-to-have." Further, when you use the which construct, remember that it generally needs to be set off by a comma like this:

The change control board, which meets every other Tuesday, hasn't addressed this policy change as far as I'm aware.

True, while any one of these grammar and punctuation issues may not upend an otherwise brilliant career, collectively they can create a less favorable impression than you'd otherwise prefer to portray. In fact, small tweaks to your written communications may go a long way in enhancing your reputation for competence and professionalism. Whether these minor errors occur within an email text or—gasp—within a resume you're reviewing, they paint a subtle picture of an individual's level of sophistication and education. No, you don't need to be an English major to compete in the business world. But give yourself every advantage by portraying yourself as a well written professional who's aware of the ins and outs of business writing essentials, and let your communication skills soar.

Paul Falcone is a human resources executive in Los Angeles and has held senior-level positions with Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, and Time Warner. He is the author of a number of AMACOM and SHRM bestselling books, four of which made SHRM's prestigious "Great 8" list: 96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire, 101 Sample Write-Ups for Documenting Employee Performance Problems, 101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees, and 2,600 Phrases for Effective Performance Reviews. His latest AMACOM book, [75 Ways for Managers to Hire, Develop, and Keep Great Employees](#), was released in the spring of 2016. Follow Paul on Twitter at @PaulFalconeHR and his website and blog at www.PaulFalconeHR.com.