

GRAMMAR AND SPELLING IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Why is it that so many business documents contain errors in grammar and spelling? Business people may not need to know the nuances of every principle of grammar to do their jobs well, but they do need the basics. When it comes to spelling, most business people would be wasting their time trying to learn the exception-ridden rules of spelling.

USEFUL RULES

Rule 1.

Avoid sentence fragments and run-on sentences.

A group of words is a complete sentence when it has a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. Conversely, a sentence fragment is a group of words that does not express a complete thought. It should not be allowed to stand by itself, but should be kept in the sentence of which it is a part.

As we discussed in our telephone conversation of December 21, 2008, in which I requested a photocopy of a check drawn on the public assistance account, to research how the check was applied.

As we discussed in our telephone conversation of December 21, 2008, in which I requested a photocopy of a check drawn on the public assistance account, I need to research how the check was applied.

In the incorrect example, the writer got so carried away with all the details that he or she forgot to include a subject and a verb. The subject is "I" and the verb is "need".

When a comma is used between two complete sentences, the result is referred to as a "run-on" sentence. One sentence is permitted to "run on" into the next.

The Tribune has six stackers, they have ordered two more.

The Tribune has six stackers, and they have ordered two more.

The Tribune has six stackers and has ordered two more.

You could also solve the problem by putting a semicolon between the two clauses.

The Tribune has six stackers; they have ordered two more.

Run-on sentences using "however" are especially common.

Orders are increasing rapidly, however, our inventory is low.

I went to see our sales manager, however, he was out of town.

Orders are increasing rapidly; however, our inventory is low.

I went to see our sales manager; however, he was out of town.

The "however" in each of these sentences is the first word of the second independent clause. It is not a parenthetical "however" as in the sentence "Tom, however, will not be promoted."

Is there a correct use for a sentence fragment? Yes. Sentence fragments can be dramatic, attention-getting tags to thoughts. Maybe that's why the advertising world is so fond of them. For example, one newspaper's slogan is "We cover your world. All of it." Of course, "all of it" is, technically, a sentence fragment. But it still provides added force to the slogan — greater force, perhaps, than a complete sentence would.

Our advice is to reserve the use of sentence fragments for appropriate situations (e.g., sales letters or advertisements) and even then to use them sparingly, if at all.

Rule 2.

Avoid dangling modifiers.

To modify is to limit. A modifying phrase or clause must sensibly define or limit the meaning of a word or phrase in a sentence. If we wrote, "As constructed, the agreement doesn't protect you", the modifying phrase "As constructed" clearly modifies *the agreement*.

When the phrase or clause doesn't modify the subject of the sentence, then the modifier is "dangling". In the following example, "As a new citizen" at first modifies "I".

As a new citizen, I'd like to welcome you to our shores.

This is correct only if *you* are the new citizen. If the new citizen is the person you're welcoming, say:

I'd like to welcome you as a new citizen to our shores.

Many dangling modifiers can be corrected simply by making the second half of the sentence active.

Having found the missing report, the search was ended by the secretary.

Having found the missing report, the secretary ended the search.

In this sentence, the phrase "the search" could not have found the missing report. If you change the sentence to the active voice, the word "secretary" becomes the subject of the sentence and is capable of finding the missing report. Here's another example:

After agreeing to stay late, the cluttered file drawer was cleaned out by the new employee.

This sentence makes it seem as if the cluttered file drawer agreed to stay late. By making the sentence active, the writer eliminates the dangling modifier.

After agreeing to stay late, the new employee cleaned out the cluttered file drawer.

Some dangling modifiers can be corrected by rephrasing the introductory clause.

Rule 3.
Know the basic rules of spelling.

Unlike the consistent, orderly punctuation rules, the rules of spelling are not always logical. The best spellers we know are the people who rigorously learn every word they catch themselves misspelling, not the ones who rely on rules.

Having said this, we'd like to give you the (abbreviated) rules, anyway. Aside from being a useful reference, they will help you understand the relationship between the rules and the types of misspellings that result from the exceptions to these rules.

'i' before 'e', except after

In *ie* combinations, *i* almost always precedes *e*: niece, achieve. But use *ei* when the letters are preceded by *c* or when pronounced "ay": ceiling, receive; neighbour, weigh. (There are exceptions, such as *leisure*, *either*, and *weird*.)

Suffixes

A suffix is one or more letters or syllables added to the end of the word to change its meaning. The suffix in *grievance* is *-ance*; *-ly* is the suffix in *absolutely*.

Drop the final silent *e* before a suffix beginning with a vowel:

grieve — grievance;
receive — receiving.

Retain the final silent *e* before a suffix beginning with a consonant:

absolute — absolutely;
care — carefully.

Exceptions: true + *-ly* = truly; argue + *-ment* = argument; judge + *-ment* = judgment; acknowledge + *-ment* = acknowledgment.

Double the final consonant before a suffix that begins with a vowel (like *-ing* or *-ed*) if one of the following conditions exists: 1) the word has only one syllable (like *cut* or *run*); 2) the word ends in a single consonant preceded by a single vowel and the accent is on the last syllable (like *rebel*):

sit — sitting;
plan — planning;
submit — submitted;
regret — regretted.

If the accent of a two-syllable word is on the first syllable, do not double the final consonant before a suffix beginning with a vowel:

cancel — canceled;
offer — offering.

In words ending in *-y*, change the final *y* to *i* if *y* is preceded by a consonant:

justify — justified;
beauty — beautiful;

Exception: if the suffix begins with *i*, retain the final *y* before the suffix: carry — carrying.

Rule 4.
If there are variant spellings, use the preferred one.

When a word may be spelled in more than one way, use the preferred spelling (i.e., the first spelling listed) in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*:

acknowledgment, not acknowledgement;
adviser, not advisor;
benefited, not benefitted;
canceled, not cancelled;
catalog, not catalogue;
dialogue, not dialog;
judgment, not judgement;
programmer, not programer;
sizable, not sizeable;
toward, not towards.

Rule 5.
Keep a list of the words you repeatedly misspell.

The spelling rules are helpful, but nothing is quite so helpful, especially to shaky spellers, as committing to memory those words they misspell frequently.

Since most people misspell only a small and predictable percentage of the words in the English language, it's not difficult to pinpoint the words that are most often misspelled.

For example, the majority of business writers misspell "supersede". People tend to put a "c" in place of the second "s". This isn't just coincidence; almost all words with that sound end in *-cede*. Also misspelled are these ten common words: judgment, canceled, accommodate, embarrassed, receive, occurred, beginning, guarantee, occasion, and develop.

By keeping a list of words you misspell, you'll be confronting most of the spelling problems you're likely to face on the job.

References:

1. Hubbard S., Sweetman J. GCSE English. Letts Educational Aldine House, London, 1995.

09852 — газета «English»
+ газета «Deutsch»

Вартість передплати на 1 міс. — 33,90 грн

