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## Common English Usage Errors in Business Writing

 By [Anuja Aggarwal](#)
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What will you do, if you find yourself sitting in a toilet in Japan with the following warning in front of you?

**"When you sit on the seat the cold water automatically flow. Wait for the 'off' lamp to wash. When you get on the seat 'standby' lamp starts flashing. If you press button upon seating you may have cold water spray."**

Panic for sure!

**Amazing how some of us do not pay even minuscule attention to what we write**, and leave it on the intelligence of the reader to make sense out of it. No matter how refined in other respects the person may be, if he uses words wrongly and expresses himself in language not in accordance with the proper construction he has to take a back seat, while some one with much less ability gets the opportunity to come to the front because he can clothe his ideas in ready words and talk effectively.

**In order to speak and write any language correctly, it is important that the fundamental principles of the grammar be mastered**, for no matter how much we may read of the best authors, no matter how much we may associate with and imitate the best speakers, if we do not know the underlying principles of the correct formation of sentences, we will be to a great extent like the parrot, that simply repeats what it hears without understanding the import of what is said.

**It is important that we write in a way that creates a favorable impression of our company**. This means writing in a friendly tone and avoiding impersonal, bureaucratic language that might alienate the readers.

**The problem with most of us is that we are not open to criticism**. Do not resent it but rather invite it and look upon those as friends who point out your defects in order to remedy them.

As a content writer I spend days correcting all the commonest of errors. Through this article I wish to list the major English usage errors committed by us. I hope that the readers will try to keep these in mind

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and try not to commit them in their day-to-day communication activities.

### Company name usage

The company name should always be quoted in full on any external literature. It should not be abbreviated. While quoting names of other firms, be careful about the name usage. Always use it when you refer to a company and not they.

For example: XYZ is among the fastest growing IT companies in the world. It offers its services ...

### Shortened words

Thanks to SMS, chat, and e-mail; language has got corrupted. Of course, programmers are used to writing in short forms. Some of the common short forms are: thru, condn, mgmt, ref, lib among others. Please write the full words instead of such short forms in all official communication.

Use the word 'very' sparingly. If you write about a very fast printer, what do you mean by the word 'very?' It shows lack of accuracy. Instead, be specific and say -- this printer prints 30 pages in a minute! What is fast in India may be considered slow in Japan. While writing customer benefits in your case studies give actual numbers, for e.g., client's cost was reduced by 70% through our solution.

### Repetition of words

Repetition of the same word in one sentence or adjacent sentence irritates the reader. Example: file the file in the file folder.

### Use of ampersand (&)

We should not indiscriminately use "&" for "and". Avoid use of ampersands unless they are part of a name (e.g., AT&T) or accepted abbreviations (R&D). Do not provide white space between the letters.

### Use of bold

Bold text is like shouting. You do this only when it is absolutely essential. Do not needlessly emphasize words by making them bold, try to italicize them instead. There are legitimate stylistic uses for bold. Use bold correctly.

### Use of Title Case

Do not go on capitalizing all the technical terms; use title case only for proper nouns such as names of products, technical processes, abbreviations, etc. Do not capitalize common nouns even if they seem very important to you.

### Punctuation

We all have our own style of punctuation but the general rule is to use just enough for clarity. The most straightforward approach is to read a sentence aloud to yourself and add punctuation to explain the pauses you would make if you were speaking. Some rules are:

- Use commas and periods inside quotations.
- Use commas to separate elements in a series, and to separate ideas or clauses.
- Use correct punctuation in abbreviations; e.g., for example i.e., that is etc., et cetera
- Do not use multiple punctuation marks, for example: !!! ... ???, etc.

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**Punctuation of lists and tables**

When you have a bulleted or numbered list, the grammar is a little different. If there are short phrases, a period would not be required. The worst mistake is when you make up a list with seven items - three with periods and four without periods. If you have long sentences in your list in which you have used other punctuation marks too, then it is advisable to put a period at the end of each sentence.

**Hyphen and dash usage**

Remember a hyphen is used to connect two words (web-enabled) while a dash is used to separate two words (Linda Simpson - the president's most trusted economic advisor - will resign her office during today's press conference.)

**Confusion between its and it's**

It's a well-known fact that this error is common. Its (the error's) origin is due to the fact that people think that this possessive needs an apostrophe, whereas, it does not require one. So remember: "it's" stands for "it is", and "its" stands for possession.

**Use of apostrophe**

Do not leave out the apostrophe ('). It becomes extremely difficult for readers to comprehend the writer's meaning. Use of apostrophe in ours, yours, and theirs is wrong. There is no need to put an apostrophe while writing the plural form of an abbreviation or a year, for e.g., COOs, IITs, 1990s. Use apostrophe only when it denotes possession, for e.g., the CEO's office or the CEOs' offices. Use apostrophes in the following situations:

- Indicate a possessive in a singular noun The boy's hat.
- But when the possessor is plural, then the apostrophe follows the 's' The companies' CEOs
- Indicate omission of figure or words The summer of '69 We can't go to B'lore

**Numbers**

- Spell out single numbers in full, from one to nine; use figures for 10 upwards.
- Always use figures with commas and decimal points. (Format: Use 1,000 separators - x,xxx,xxx.xx). It is preferable to use M or K for millions or thousands instead of many zeroes. Spell out large numbers if necessary; e.g., one million instead of 1,000,000. Try to use either all numerals or all spelled numbers for a list of numbers.
- Spell out ordinal numbers: first, second, third. Do not add ly to them. For example, firstly, secondly, etc.
- Spell out and hyphenate common fractions; e.g., three-fourth share.

**Dates**

- Write dates with the number only and not with 'th' 'nd' or 'rd'; e.g., February 28 rather than February 28th.
- Use MM-DD-YYYY format wherever you need to document a full date - May 8, 2003.
- Use month and year for documents that change frequently; e.g., collateral material - May 2003.

**Articles**

The use of articles "a", "an", and "the" was taught to everybody in school! However, very few people pay attention to it. Use of "an" is not all that simple because the sound of the vowel comes into play. Should you say "a Unix machine" or "an Unix machine?" Should you say "a unique idea" or "an unique idea?" A unique idea would be to write about a Unix machine!

**Avoid complex and unusual words**

There is absolutely no need to use words of "learned length and thundering sound." Short, simple words are understood by all and remove doubts. If you have to use a technical term that your reader may not understand, explain it briefly in non-technical language.

**Abbreviations and acronyms**

Do not abbreviate company names, unless they are well known and used regularly. The first time you write an abbreviation or an acronym, you should always write the name in full with the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses afterwards. After that, you can abbreviate it. This includes abbreviations that may be very familiar to you, but not necessarily to your readers; e.g., enterprise application integration (EAI); straight through processing (STP), and technical application request (TAR).

**Use active voice**

Most verbs can be used in the active or the passive. By using active verbs, you will keep the word order

simple and avoid using extra words. Try to use verbs in place of nouns. Many nouns are formed from verbs, such as completion and provision. Using the verb is often more direct than using the noun. Cut out nouns where a single verb will do.

### Do not switch tenses very often

I have often come across content in which every third sentence has a different tense. If you start writing a document in past tense, then stick to it. It creates confusion if tenses are not followed correctly.

### Proofread for accuracy

After you finish writing the first draft, let the article rest for some time. Print a hard copy and go over it with a fine toothcomb for simple errors such as the ones listed above.

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