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**INSIGHTS FOR BETTER
BUSINESS WRITING**



“I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English...it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don’t let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.”

Mark Twain



“Learning to write in clear, concise English is not that difficult.”


Charlie Martin

Writing Experience of Charlie Martin

- Lots of grammar and spelling from Catholic school nuns!
- More grammar and Latin in high school.
- Latin, Greek and Italian in college and grad school.
- Newspaper reporter and feature writer.
- Writer and editor for statewide golf magazine.
- Twenty years in the public sector writing federal and state grants, transportation plans, economic development plans, etc.
- Twenty years in the AEC field writing proposals, brochures, newsletters, news releases, annual reports and the like.
- Current business providing writing and editing services.



AGENDA

1. A brief review of common errors in grammar.
 2. A look at common words that often get mixed up.
 3. Writing the business letter or cover letter.
 4. Insights on writing that is clear, concise and understandable.
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AGENDA ITEM # 1.

**REVIEW OF COMMON
ERRORS IN GRAMMAR**



Active Voice:


The Active Voice makes sentences stronger.

- *The Chamber of Commerce arranged this meeting.*
- *An architect designed this building.*

Passive Voice:

Passive Voice is O.K., but used much too often in business writing.

- *This meeting was arranged by the Chamber of Commerce.*
- *This building was designed by an architect.*



Sometimes, however, it makes more sense to use the Passive Voice.

- *The team for the next project will be composed of ABC Architects, DEF Engineers, GHI Construction and several smaller specialty firms.*
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Common Mistakes Using Commas

- *Whenever I edit writing, I often notice that the author uses too many commas, and has trouble with spelling, and grammar.*

No commas needed in this sentence at all!

Common Mistakes Using Commas

One of the most common mistakes is **omitting** the comma before the word “and” in a compound sentence.

- *The Chamber of Commerce arranged this meeting, and the staff engaged a caterer for the breakfast.*

The comma is needed before the word “and” in this compound sentence.

Common Mistakes Using Commas

However, a comma is not needed in a sentence with a compound predicate.

- *The Chamber of Commerce arranged this meeting and engaged a caterer for the breakfast.*

Common Mistakes Using Commas

Here are some other common comma mistakes:

- *In 1958, the ABC brothers formed ABC Construction.*

Comma not needed after 1958.

- *Dear Mr. Jones, Use a colon(:), not a comma in the salutation of a business letter. A comma is used in a personal letter.*

Using Commas in a Series of Words or Phrases

There is some disagreement about whether the comma is needed before the word “and” in a series or list of items.

- *At XYZ Construction we handle site work, design, scheduling, supervision, construction and commissioning.*

Whether you use the comma in a series, or not, be sure to be consistent throughout the narrative.

Using Quotation Marks

Rule: Periods and commas **always** go inside the quotation marks.

- *In discussing the problem, John said: “The design should be completed before construction begins.”* **Correct.**
- *...before construction begins”.* **Wrong.**



Using Quotation Marks


Rule: Colons (:) and semicolons (;) always go **outside** the quotation marks.





Using Quotation Marks

Rule: Question marks (?) and exclamation points (!) can go inside or outside the quotation marks.



The Possessive with 'S or S'

1. Decide if the word is singular or plural.
2. If the word is singular, just add 's.
 - *After a brief discussion they decided to use a local printer's proposal.*
3. If the word is plural ending in s, add apostrophe **after** the s'.
 - *The three architects' offices were all in the same part of town.*
4. If the word is plural **not** ending in s, add apostrophe **before** the 's'.
 - *The men's champion at our golf club always gets a special parking place. The women's champion gets one, too.*

Using Hyphens (-) in Compound Modifiers

A hyphen is used with compound modifiers **before** a noun:

- *ABC insurance is a family-owned firm.*
- *The speaker gave a well-prepared presentation.*
- *The team decided on a three-phase scope of work.*

Using Hyphens (-) in Compound Modifiers

Do **not** use hyphens when modifiers are used without a noun.

- *ABC Insurance is family owned.*
- *The speaker's presentation was well prepared.*
- *The scope of work for the project will be three phase.*



AGENDA ITEM #2.

**COMMON WORDS THAT
OFTEN GET MIXED UP.**



affect or effect

Affect is a verb meaning “to influence.”

- *The addition of chlorine affects the taste of water.*
- 

affect or effect

Effect is usually a noun meaning “result.”

- *The addition of chlorine has an effect on the taste of water.*

Effect sometimes can be a verb meaning “to bring about.”

- *The addition of chlorine effects a chemical change in water.*

anymore or any more

Anymore is an adverb meaning “now.”

- *Carolyn doesn't eat hot dogs anymore.*

Use “any more” to emphasize something extra.

- *Downtown Brunswick doesn't have any more stores like Grand City.*



a lot...

- *Morning Chambers has had a lot of these presentations.*

alot...is not a word.



all ready or already

All ready means “all set.”

- *We are all ready to leave for the cruise.*

Already means something has taken place.

- *The boat already left the dock.*

all together or altogether

All together means “everyone at the same time” or “all in a group.”

- *We are going out to dinner all together.*

Altogether means “all told” or “wholly” or “completely.”

- *That show was altogether cheesy.*

farther or further

Farther is used for physical distance.

- *New York is farther from Maine than Boston.*

Further means “more” or “to a greater extent.”

- *We are not going to discuss this any further.*

assure , ensure, or insure

Assure means “to give confidence to” or to “reassure.”

- *I assure you that all precautions have been taken.*

assure , ensure, or insure

Ensure means “to make sure, safe or certain,” or to “guarantee.”

- *The windows of the limo were bullet proof to ensure the safety of the occupants.*

assure , ensure, or insure

Insure means to procure insurance.

- *It usually makes sense to insure your home and your automobile with the same company.*

Note, however, that the dictionary shows all three of these words as synonyms in their second and third meanings.

Its or it's

Its is a singular possessive pronoun.

- *A construction company usually leaves its major equipment on site.*

it's...is a contraction meaning “it is.”

- *It's normal for a construction company to leave its major equipment on site.*

percent or percentage

percent...is used with a number.

- *About fifty percent of sales are lost because of not listening to the client.*

percentage...is used when there is no number.

- *A percentage of the proceeds will go to charity.*

principal or principle

principal...can be an **adjective** meaning “first in importance.”

- *The principal investigator from DEP did not want to approve the landfill closure.*

principal or principle

principal...can be a **noun** meaning “the main person or thing.”

- *A principal of the firm will be attending the interview.*



principal or principle

principle...is a noun meaning “a fundamental truth or rule.”

- *The principles of bridge design have been developed over a long period of time.*
- 

regardless or irregardless

- *Regardless of what you may think, “irregardless,” like “ain’t,” is not standard English!*

than or then

than...is a conjunction used in comparisons.

- *One firm was more qualified than the other.*

then...is an adverb showing time.

- *In the first phase we will survey the property, then we will begin cutting down trees.*



their, there, or they're

their... is a plural possessive pronoun.

- *Construction companies usually leave their large equipment on the job site.*
- 



their, there, or they're

there...shows place and can also be used to begin a sentence.

- *There are a number of different approaches to the problem.*
- 



their, there, or they're

they're...means "they are."

- *They're one of three firms competing for the top award.*
- 

to, too, or two

to...helps to form the infinitive form of a verb.

- *We hope to design and build this project.*

too...means “also.”

- *We hope to be part of the project team, too.*

two...is the number 2.



your or you're

your...is a possessive pronoun.

- *Your firm was selected.*


you're...means “you are.”

- *You're one of the finalists for this award.*
- 



not only...but also

not only...but also. If you use one you should use the other.

- *Not only will we build your building, but we will also guarantee that it will meet your goals.*
- 

Preposition


The “rule” of not ending a sentence with a preposition...


- *With regard to this rule, there is a story that Sir Winston Churchill was once accused by a Member of Parliament of ending a sentence with a preposition. Mr. Churchill was said to have replied: “This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.”*




AGENDA ITEM #3.

**WRITING THE BUSINESS
OR COVER LETTER**

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- Architects, engineers, contractors, lawyers, insurance agents, accountants, bankers, military officers, government officials, social workers and others often need to write formal proposals to win a job or a grant award.



The business letters or cover letters on these proposals are a big chance to:

- Make a good impression
 - Highlight your key points
 - Separate yourself from the competition
- 



The Deadly Cover Letter!

Here are the opening sentences from the nine proposals submitted to the City of Bath last summer for a study of a possible walking path along the waterfront.



The Deadly Cover Letter!

ABC Company is pleased to submit a Statement of Qualifications for your potential Waterfront Pathway in Bath, Maine.



The Deadly Cover Letter!

We are pleased to submit the attached qualification package to provide the City of Bath with a concept plan for blah, blah, blah.



The Deadly Cover Letter!

DEF Associates in association with GHI and JKL is pleased to submit the following qualifications for blah, blah, blah.

The Deadly Cover Letter!

MNO, Inc. is pleased to submit our qualifications to assist the City of Bath with the development of blah, blah, blah.


The Deadly Cover Letter!

Please find the enclosed qualifications package for the above mentioned project. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. **(That was the entire cover letter!)**



The Deadly Cover Letter!


Thank you for the opportunity to submit this Statement of Qualifications for consultant services associated with blah, blah, blah.





The Deadly Cover Letter!

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your Request for Qualifications with regard to the blah, blah, blah.






The Deadly Cover Letter!

It is with great enthusiasm that PQR and its planning team submits the enclosed Statement of Qualifications for the blah, blah, blah.

A Great Opening Sentence in a Cover Letter

The Bath waterfront is as the heart of the City's history and an important asset in the Town's (sic) future. The new path under consideration has the potential to help the community achieve its goal of developing a waterfront that is a destination for a variety of uses. The new path will provide a valuable link from the waterfront to the visitor center and the downtown, increase public access, and help to enhance Bath's reputation as a truly walkable city.....WOW!!



**Avoid using those
words that everyone
uses!**

The following words were found throughout all of the proposals to Bath.

- highly experienced staff
- highly experienced professionals
- highly qualified individuals
- highly qualified personnel
- demonstrated expertise
- unusually well-qualified staff
- extensive experience
- demonstrated experience
- broad experience
- thorough knowledge



Note:

Whether you win the job or not, it is very instructive to go back and review all of the proposals submitted. This can usually be done with public agencies. The differences among proposals are amazing. Reviewing proposals gives you an understanding of what the competition is doing, and it can provide you with lots of new ideas on how to improve your own proposals.

Other Insights from the Proposals to the City of Bath

- Bath is a **City**, not a **Town**.
- Bath has a **wharf** on the waterfront, not a **warf**!
- One cover letter had an 18-line, single-spaced paragraph!
- Three proposals had no cover...just began with cover letter.
- Five proposals were stapled in the top left corner.
- Four proposals were nicely bound.
- All of the bound proposals had color pictures of Bath on the cover.
- Two proposals used tab dividers to separate sections.



AGENDA ITEM #4.

**INSIGHTS ON
WRITING THAT IS
CLEAR, CONCISE AND
UNDERSTANDABLE.**




In the Request for Proposals (RFP), the City of Bath asked the competing firms to respond to this question:



Does your firm have the staff available to handle this project?



Typical Lengthy Response



ABC, Inc. is a multidisciplinary firm that has regional offices with sufficient staff to satisfy the project requirements. For this assignment, it is expected that key personnel will be assigned at the outset of the project and will continue to devote whatever time is required to meet project milestones. These individuals will be supported whenever it is necessary by other staff. The present and anticipated workload of our firm will not interfere with committing the resources necessary to meet the City of Bath's timeline. ABC's internal project management system is designed to make sure that each of our projects has the staff it needs. We review these staff assignments weekly so that we can keep up with any changes in workloads or schedule.

Another Response with a Major Error


DEF, Inc. has an internal project management system which involves weekly meetings to review scheduling requirements for the next two-week period and to assign appropriate personnel to specific projects. At points **were** (sic) the workload or project schedule intensifies, additional staff assignments are made consistent with the level of work required.



Simplify!

Rewrite #1.


We want to assure the City of Bath that we have the staff resources needed to complete your project on time.





Simplify!

Rewrite #2.




At ABC, Inc., we have a policy of not taking on new assignments unless we have the staff available to provide our clients with the kind of service they have come to expect from us. We want to assure you that we have the staff available for the Bath Waterfront Pathway Project.



Simplify!

Rewrite #3



With a staff of more than 150 people in several regional offices we want you to know that we have the resources needed to meet the milestones set by the City of Bath for this project.



In the Request for Proposals (RFP), the City of Bath asked the competing firms to respond to this question:

What are your plans for public involvement in this project?





One of My Favorites


We recommend the stakeholders be involved early on with a presentation of the intention of the project to receive input on expectations and then a second meeting to present our alternative findings and receive feedback to see if expectations have been met and a consensus on a preferred alternative can be achieved. **(One Sentence!)**



Simplify!

Rewrite #1.


In all of our projects we recommend holding an early presentation to explain the project and to hear the concerns and views of the general public. At a later meeting we will present our findings and see if we can reach consensus on a preferred alternative.





Simplify!

Rewrite #2.




We are firm believers in the need to have public participation at the very earliest stage of a project. We consider the information from the public meeting when we are looking at alternatives. We then schedule additional public meetings to explain our findings before deciding on our final recommendation.



Simplify!

Rewrite #3.




A public discussion of project alternatives is one of the best ways to assure the success on any project. We propose holding a series of public meeting to explain the project, receive suggestions from those attending, and present several alternatives.

Beware of English that Sounds like It Is Translated from Caesar's Latin!


Translation from Latin

Having defeated the enemy, and having marched to new territory, and having tied up the horses, and having unloaded the baggage, Caesar set up camp on the shore of the lake.



Beware of English that Sounds like It Is Translated from Caesar's Latin!

**Engineering Report Written in the Same
Style!**




Having visited the water treatment plant, and having reviewed the operational records, and having compared these records to the records of similar plants, and having talked with the plant operator, we have concluded that the plant needs major improvements.



Simplify!

Possible Rewrite



At ABC engineering our first step on a project like yours is visit the water treatment plant and talk with the operator. We then observe the operation of the plant on a typical day. We then gather the operational records for a full year, review them and compare them to the records of similar-sized plants. Before our conclusions and recommendations are presented to you, we review them one more time with an independent team of engineers in our Water Division.



AGENDA ITEM #5.

QUESTIONS