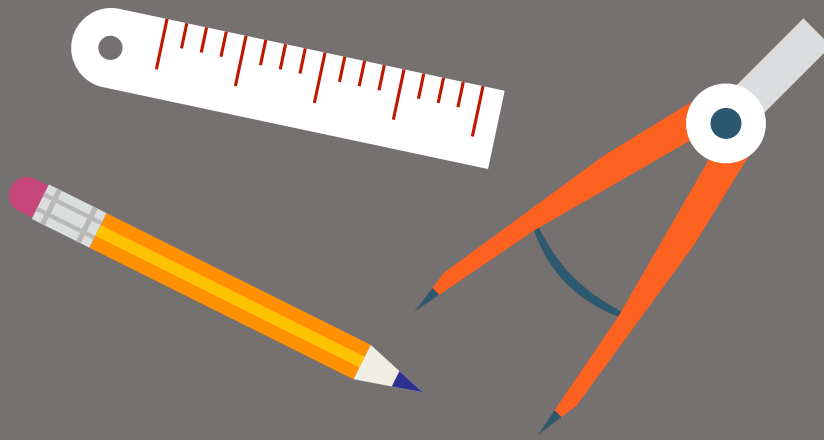


11 Common Grammar Mistakes To Avoid

(and 4 You Can Bend)



PRACTICAL TOOLS

11 Common Grammar Mistakes To Avoid (and 4 You Can Bend)



The majority of mistakes business people make when writing involve simple grammar errors.

When we have a lot to say or feel rushed, it's easy to slide into usage and structure mistakes that distract from what we're saying. The reader might get the thought behind our words, but the mistakes make us look silly.

Avoid these basic grammar offenses

1. Confusing subject-verb agreement

It's easy to throw in the wrong verb when something separates the subject and the verb. Check to see the verb matches the "voice" it corresponds with, not the one directly before that verb.

For example:

- Instead of: *One of our managers **are** getting promoted.*
- Write: *One of our managers **is** getting promoted.*

If the sentence has more than one noun as a compound subject (joined by "and," "or," or "nor"), the rule is the verb agrees with the subject that's closest to it. For example:

- Instead of: Neither the president nor the vice-president **are** attending the meeting.

- Write: Neither the president nor the vice-president is attending the meeting.

2. Making common usage mistakes

This also results from a tendency to write how we speak. What might sound correct when we speak could be off the mark when written. Relying on how we speak makes our writing look unprofessional. For example:

- Wrong: *Our manager said we **could of** taken the day off if the weather was bad.*
- Right: *Our manager said we **could have** taken the day off if the weather was bad.*
- Wrong: *We've **got to** train our newest employees to file more efficiently.*
- Right: *We **have to** train our newest employees to file more efficiently.*

3. Misusing apostrophes/possessive voice

Apostrophes are often misused in pluralized forms of nouns when they should be used only when indicating possession or when using contractions. For example:

- Wrong: *Some **employee's** were affected by the budget cuts.*
- Right: *Some **employees** were affected by the budget cuts.*

Also, make sure the apostrophe is applied correctly to denote singular or plural possession:

- Wrong: *All the **manager's** seats were taken around the conference table.*
- Right: *All the **managers'** seats were taken around the conference table.*

4. Incorrect pronoun-antecedent agreement

This means matching the pronouns with the nouns they refer to both in number and gender. For example:

- Instead of: *Each manager was asked to turn in a status report from **their** department.*
- Write: *Each manager was asked to turn in status reports from **his or her** department.*
- Instead of: *Every visitor is required to present **their** ID badge to the front desk.*
- Write: *Every visitor is required to present **his or her** ID badge to the front desk.*

5. Confusing 'I' and 'me'

The thing to remember is 'I' is typically the subject in a sentence (before the verb) and 'me' the object (after the verb). The easiest way to get this right is to switch your sentence around and see if it makes sense. Consider the sentence:

*It would be more efficient **if you and I** go over the figures together.*

*It would be more efficient **if you and me** go over the figures together.*

Switch it around: If you and I go over the figures together, it would be more efficient. (This sounds more correct.)

6. Switching grammatical structures

This is also called "parallel structure" and refers to keeping to the same grammatical pattern when your sentence contains successive ideas. For example:

- Instead of: *The manager generally oversees the **screening** of new applicants, the **reviewing** of job descriptions and the **recommendation** of candidates for hiring.*
- Write: *The manager generally oversees **screening** of new applicants, **reviewing** job descriptions and **recommending** candidates for hiring.*

7. Dangling participles/phrases

Make sure phrases are attached to the nouns they modify in a sentence. Otherwise, you end up with dangling participles, which should only begin a sentence if used. For example:

- Instead of: *To motivate his team, a spotlight reward system was set up **by the manager** to acknowledge individual employees.*
- Write: *To motivate his team, **the manager set up** a spotlight reward system to acknowledge individual employees.*

8. Splicing commas

This happens when two independent phrases are strung together with a comma, without a conjunction. It makes writing sound clunky and incomplete. Fix it with either a period to make two sentences or add a conjunction to the comma. For example:

- Instead of: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider, we're going to present them at the meeting next month.*
- Write: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider, **so** we're going to present them at the meeting next month.*
- OR: *The company has two employee bonus structure options to consider. We're going to present them at the meeting next month.*

9. Using quote marks for emphasis

When you need to emphasize a word or phrase, use boldface or italics to make the word stand out. Quotations are usually used to quote specific words or identify titles, so it can confuse the reader when they're used otherwise. For example:

- Instead of: *Participation in the company wellness program isn't "mandatory."*
- Write: *Participation in the company wellness program isn't **mandatory**.*
- Instead of: *Employees are encouraged to use the "new" name for the business.*
- Write: *Employees are encouraged to use the **new** name for the business.*

10. Misplacing punctuation

All punctuation should go inside quotation marks even if the comma or period isn't part of the quote itself. This applies even to titles of books or articles when referenced. For example:

- Instead of: *The CEO stressed that teamwork "was the most important part of our yearly success".*
- Write: *The CEO stressed that teamwork "was the most important part of our yearly success."*
- Instead of: *The secretary suggested titling the memo "Fourth-Quarter Expenditure Goals".*
- Write: *The secretary suggested titling the memo "Fourth-Quarter Expenditure Goals."*

11. Using excessive punctuation

It's tempting to try to over-emphasize points we want to stress with multiple punctuation marks. But this should be avoided. Stick to the rule of one; if you're using an exclamation point at the end of a sentence, that sentence should be the baseline for high emphasis.

- Instead of: *Management wants to let you know how proud we are of our sales team for doubling its goals met for the month! This resulted in an increase of 80% of our valuation!!*

Make the last sentence the most emphatic for maximum impact:

- Write: *Management wants to let you know how proud we are of our sales team for doubling its goals met for the month. This resulted in an increase of 80% of our valuation!*

The same goes for question marks. Using two or three rather than just one at the end of a question sentence doesn't make it more emphatic than the others. For example:

- Instead of: *Why did last year's calendar not include scheduling flexibility? And how will this affect production in the next quarter??*

Use one question sentence to make a more emphatic impact:

- Write: *Why did last year's calendar not include scheduling flexibility, and how will this affect production in the next quarter?*

And a few grammar rules that are OK to bend

1. Using “and” or “but” to begin a sentence

You were probably taught that this was a no-no, but when used correctly it meets grammatical standards and can make writing sound more expressive. For example:

- *The assistant said she'd given her manager the report. But she was still waiting for his response.*
- *Contributions to the company's pension plan remained stable. And as such, there was no need to redo the budget.*

2. Ending a sentence with a preposition

Though this was always a cardinal rule, using a preposition at the end of a sentence makes writing sound more conversational, helping you avoid a stiff, awkward tone. And most of the time, using an end preposition makes the most sense. For example:

- Old way: *We need to find out **from where the pricing mistakes are coming.***
- New way: *We need to find out **where the pricing mistakes are coming from.***
- Old way: *The other managers wanted to know **at what information the CEO was looking.***
- New way: *The other managers wanted to know **what information the CEO was looking at.***

3. Using sentence fragments

A sentence fragment can be used to emphasize a point or to make information stand out. For example, you could write:

- *The department hadn't come close to breaking the company record for most repeat sales until this year.*

It makes the point, but if you wanted to emphasize that the department met an important milestone, consider this way:

- *The department hadn't come close to breaking the company record for most repeat sales. Until this year.*

4. Using contractions

Many business writers avoid using contractions because they worry their writing will sound less official or important. But working contractions into business writing makes even complex subjects easier to read and more conversational. For some examples, notice how these sentences with contractions are easier to understand:

- Instead of: **We will** be visiting our new headquarters this week.
- Write: **We'll** visit our new headquarters this week.
- Instead of: **He shall** acknowledge the consultant's input at the meeting.
- Write: **He'll** acknowledge the consultant's input at the meeting.