Writing Tips and Traps for Professional Engineers

Course No: K04-011
Credit: 4 PDH

Richard Grimes, MPA, CPT.

Continuing Education and Development, Inc.

P: (877) 322-5800
info@cedengineering.com

CONTENTS

COURSE OVERVIEW

Let me be clear about something before we go any farther (or is it "further"): this WILL NOT be a rehash of that dry English grammar class you probably skipped in college as often as possible. There are too many reference books – either in paper or digital form – that you could use which would be more comprehensive. (And it is a lot cheaper, too, but you couldn't get three professional development hours of credit for them.)

The design of this course is based on the Pareto Effect - where 20% of a universe account for 80% of the impact. Although I admit I have no scientific basis, I intuitively sense that 20% of grammar rules and spelling errors account for 80% of the grammatical problems we see in everyday business writing. After all, we each tend to have our favorite phrases, buzz words, professional jargon, and communications styles, and it is reasonable to think that our errors will tend to repeat if we are not aware of them.

It will be a useful guide targeted at those few significant rules of grammar and key misspelled or misused words. It is written for professional engineers seeking to be as careful and accurate in writing as in work. The quality of your writing speaks volumes about your self-image and career aspirations. Maybe you are familiar with the phrase "don't dress for the job *you have* but for the job *you want*!" The same rationale works for your writing.

This will identify many common traps in grammar, sentence construction, and word usage that surround us daily in a workplace of people who feel it is sufficient to be simply understood rather than grammatically correct. After all, they reason, how many people write well enough (or is it "good enough") in today's workplace to notice the difference? They have a very legitimate, but sad, argument.

I *avoided obscure phrases* and *minimized tedious rules*.* I tried to include (or is it 'tried AND include') samples that you could see any day at work. We even get into digital communications because more and more workplace dialogue occurs there.

Finally, there is a bonus section that is closely associated with well-written documentation. It is a strategic model for a financial presentation. Although a well written justification will not guarantee approval, a poorly written one will certainly not help it.

With all of that going on, may I suggest you print this and keep it handy at your desk? Thank you for selecting this course. I hope it is useful and helps to win a few arguments for you! (Or is it "…helps to win YOU a few arguments?)

Dick Grimes, Houston, Texas

*This is *parallel construction,* and we will talk about it in a little while.

This would be funny if it weren't so sad!

(Or is it "Wasn't so sad"?)

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants in this self-study course will be able to:

- Avoid stepping into the most common grammatical traps found in so much of today's verbal and written communications
- Confidently construct sentences with parallelism for greater effectiveness and color in their writing
- Write confidently knowing why certain words and phrases are used beyond "they just sound good"
- Use colons and semicolons correctly
- Review a written document and quickly find grammatical errors and recommend solutions
- Use a successful model to create a financial proposal presentation with high chance of approval
- Avoid the use of common troublesome words and phrases in business writing
- Take a self-test to determine their current writing skills level
- Write more professionally and effectively in today's digital communications world

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience of this course is (or is it "are") professional engineers who want to be defined as much by the quality of their writing as by the quality of their work.

It is also for someone who must review the written work of others – not technical specs but written documents in support of those specifications – before it passes on to an executive or client. "Review" meaning a high-quality work-related document going out; not as if editing for a novel.

Finally, it is also for anyone in search of genuine self-development regardless of whether it may lead to a promotion or career advancement. Remember, you will never know who will see your writing, and if it reflects a high quality of thought and execution, doors of opportunity may open that were never there before.

A GRAMMAR SKILLS ASSESSMENT

In case you are still not sure whether this course will be useful, take a few moments to read this fictional update on a project. Underline all the grammatical errors or improvement opportunities you see and make a small note to yourself explaining why you made the correction. The answers begin on page 33 if you want to compare your results.

If you find more than fifteen errors, this course may not be very beneficial. However, if you cannot find that many, you have made a wise investment! (Note: there are no spelling errors.)

To: Logan Grant, VP Construction Operations

From: Cindy Richards, Project Manager

Before going any further, please except my apology for being late with this report.
Although me and my team promised it would be in your hands by 5:00PM yesterday, we are not using the fact that the project servers went down for five hours as an excuse. If I was able to get it to you quicker, I certainly would have.

Here is the current status on these project topics:

- ***Project Interns:*** *Alex and myself have finished the interviews of the six finalists and are submitting our recommendations for the two open positions in the attached memo.*
- ***Portable Toilet issues*** *– I talked with Steve Jones, the vendor for the portables on site, about how badly their units by the Admin building smell. He promised a solution to me this afternoon by 2:00PM. I will call him if he doesn't call me.*
- ***Visitor Guides*** *– A group of supervisors from Tom Jackson's area have volunteered to act as guides for the Chamber of Commerce visitors next Tuesday*
- ***Copier upgrade*** *– The vendor that handles our project copy equipment will give me a new quote by the 1st of the month.*

- ***Fire inspection reports** – Sue has been out for the past week and didn't leave word who I should send them to. I'll hold on to them until she gets back.*
- ***IT budget revisions** – The final numbers are in they're about 2.5% more than expected.*
- ***Messenger vehicle repairs delayed–** Don Trucks thinks the cost of all the repairs were more than his budget would allow for this quarter.*
- ***Break room refrigerator** – The housekeeper tells me there is usually some bag lunches left in the fridge over the weekend that she always has to throw out on Monday. My team and me will take care of cleaning out the fridge every Friday afternoon.*
- ***Quality Issues –** The number of errors increase as we speed production at the end of every month. Maybe we should look at some upstream process modifications. As a point of reference, before we began our policy of speeding month-end production, we averaged 6.2 less errors per shift.*
- ***Headcount overage** – HR tells me my headcount is wrong. I have 6 in design and 4 in fabrication. How can I be over? Six and 4 are ten. My headcount for that group (I thought) is ten!*
- ***Paneling samples** – There was several samples of paneling that our team liked. Looks like this may be a harder decision than I thought.*
- ***Entrance bridge capacity** – According to the site engineer, one truck or three cars is the limit of the site entrance bridge capacity.*
- ***Landline upgrade in the conference room**– I have asked our telecommunications vendor for a proposal on cost and time to upgrade the audio equipment to better hear all participants on conference calls.*
- ***Next Project Team meeting** – The team are meeting again in the conference room at 9:00AM on the 15th.*

Well, how did you score?

Did you find all twenty intentional errors or fall a long way short? If we use the 70% pass criteria required on the quiz associated with this course to earn your PDH credits, you must get at least fourteen correct. Did you?

FUNDAMENTALS OF SPEECH

I promised this would not become your boring English grammar course from college, and I intend to make sure that it does not. However, I cannot assume every student purchasing it shares the same understanding of speech fundamentals. Therefore, we must go over a few items first to make sure we all start from the same point. (Unfortunately, I cannot think of an elegant or clever way to present these terms, so we may as well just get started.)

"Speech" is a collection of words strung together in a particular order to convey a specific message. Since the building block of speech is a word, it is essential to remember that a word can be used as different parts of speech depending on the message the speaker (or writer) wants to convey.

> *"You are the student"* – "You" is the **subject** of the sentence and used as a **noun.** A **noun** can be a person, place, thing, or idea..
>
> "*The student is you"* – Here, "you" is a **pronoun** taking the place of the noun in this sentence, the word "student". The sentence is about the student. The student happens to be you.
>
> *"The course content surprised you."* – "You" is now a **direct object** because something happened to 'you': i.e., you were surprised by the subject of the sentence – the course content.

Here is another example of the same word being used as different parts of a sentence depending on the message we are trying to convey.

> **Noun** – "Did you have an easy **drive** coming in to work today?"
>
> **Verb** – "Did you **drive** the potential bidders away with your strict quality requirements?"
>
> **Direct Object** – "I have more **drive** lately since I've been getting more sleep."

Now that we agree a single word can be used in many ways and have different meanings, let's look at the ways words can be used – **and used correctly in your writing**.

ADJECTIVES

Adjectives modify nouns (names of persons, places, things, or ideas) by telling us something about them regarding *which*, *what kind of*, *or how many*?

- We decided to use **that** ("which") **vendor** (noun) for the IT contract.
- The **huge** ("what kind of") **project** (noun) begins next week.
- We gave the vendor a **thirty-day** ("how many") **extension** (noun) to complete the installation.

ADVERBS

Adverbs modify verbs telling us *how, when, or where*. When used to discuss *how*, they typically end in -ly. ("I want the promotion very bad" should read as "I want the promotion very bad<u>ly</u>." *<u>How</u> much do you want the promotion? I want it badly.")*

- The project manager **quickly** ("how") **stopped** (verb) the excessive waste.
- The meeting **will begin** (verb) **soon** ("when").
- The ceiling panel **landed** (verb) **closely** ("where") to the conference table.

AGREEMENT

Agreement occurs when we match a subject (noun) and verb with either tense or plurality like this:

- The **budget was** submitted on time. (<u>Singular</u> budget with <u>singular</u> tense of the verb = agreement = correct grammatically.)
- The **budgets were** submitted on time. (<u>Plural</u> budget with <u>plural</u> tense of the verb = agreement = correct grammatically.)
- The **budgets was** submitted on time. (<u>Plural</u> subject paired with a <u>singular</u> verb ≠ agreement = NOT grammatically correct.)

We touched on this topic lightly now because it is an important concept that we will cover later.

COLONS AND SEMICOLONS

Two of the most confusing parts of written speech are the correct usage of a colon and semicolon. While many scholarly texts spend pages and pages covering nearly every possible use of them and explaining their rules with mind-numbing terms, we will stay with the 80/20 model. So here are the few things to remember for the greatest probable outcome.

SEMICOLONS

Semicolons have two basic functions but only one meets our 80/20 model **– separating two parts of a compound sentence.** It is just as easy as it sounds.

> *The typical professional engineer needs a few more PDH credits before the year ends**;** there are many courses here that can provide them.*

That seems very simple and leads us to ask, "So what is the problem?" The problem may be that it is so simple because *all it is doing is separating two independent clauses making one longer sentence.*

Here's a test: if you can ***replace the semicolon with a period*** and create two complete sentences, you will know you are using the semicolon correctly. That's all there is to it.

> *The typical professional engineer needs a few more PDH credits before the year ends. There are many courses here that can provide them.*

Here are a few examples to reinforce the concept.

CORRECT SEMICOLONS	TWO SENTENCES
The printer is not working; the ink cartridge is empty.	The printer is not working. The ink cartridge is empty.
The project deadline is approaching; we are 14 days ahead of schedule!	The project deadline is approaching. We are 14 days ahead of schedule!
The project meeting has been rescheduled; the meeting room was not available.	The project meeting has been rescheduled. The meeting room was not available.

COLONS

Colons are much more useful than a semicolon. And with greater usefulness come the risk of greater abuse.

Colons are routinely used in these situations:

- Ending a salutation in a letter (*Dear Mrs. Johnson:*)
- Separating minutes from hours in a time reference (*10:45 am*)
- Separating a title from a subtitle (*The NOVA Project: the First 90 Days*)
- Setting off subheadings in a document
  These departments need to submit their holiday staffing rosters:
  - *Accounting*
  - *Purchasing*
  - *Security*
  - *Benefits*
  - *Operations*

A major use of the colon is potentially complex but very effective**: when you use it to amplify an idea.**

*She shocked us with the budget figures**: she used last year's data!***

The key point here is to make sure there is an independent clause <u>before</u> the colon! A self-test would be to try putting a period where you have the colon and see if that is a complete sentence.

She shocked us with the budget figures. (That makes a complete sentence.)

What you have left over after making a complete sentence (*she used last year's data)* does not matter if it is a complete sentence, a sentence fragment, or simply letters. <u>As long as you have a complete sentence before the period, you may use a colon.</u>

- ***The Chair just announced the last quarter's numbers: + 12.2%!*** (There is a complete sentence just before the colon. The numbers after it amplify what came before and they are numbers, not words.)
- ***At lunch today, we heard some great news: a 12.2% increase in profits!*** *(*The same explanation as above but here the portion after the colon is not an independent clause. The use of the colon is still correct.)

Think of the first part of the sentence as setting up a tease and the last part as fulfilling it.

You***: "At lunch today, we heard some great news:"***

Those around you breathlessly: *"What? What? Don't keep us in suspense!!"*

You: ***"A 12.2% increase in profits!"***

A variation on using a colon after the preceding independent clause that has created some expectation is with a list. ***"At lunch today, we heard some great news: Steve, Susan, Ben, and Carl have returned, and now we're back to full staff."***

Don't let the simplicity of using a colon before a list keep you *from making sure an independent clause precedes it.* If there isn't one, you're making an error that someone (usually the person you least want to notice) will find.

For my project team, I want: an IT person, someone from accounting, an operations type, and plenty of support staff.

There is no independent cause here before the colon making its use wrong. The sentence would read better simply removing the colon.

For my project team, I want an IT person, someone from accounting, an operations type, and plenty of support staff.

The advantage of using the colon may be obvious by now:

- a means of creating expectancy within the reader assuring they pay attention to your work
- a means to save a little time by not needing so many words to convey your message

COMMA USE AND ABUSE

The discussion of how, when, and where to use commas properly throughout a wide range of writing can easily become a long, complex, and tedious journey. This is why I promised early on that we would only focus on the most probable situations you will encounter in your professional reports. The 80/20 rule again!

Here are five situations that should cover nearly everything you will write. (I am not implying that you should not go beyond these. Just that if you can rework your sentence into one of these models, you can be assured of it being correct.)

- **Commas with coordinating conjunctions**
  Use the acronym FANBOYS as a way of remembering all of the coordinating conjunctions. They are **f**or, **a**nd, **n**or, **b**ut, **o**r, **y**et, and **s**o.

  Basically, a rule to remember is to place a comma <u>before</u> the coordinating conjunction when the conjunction is joining two sentences. (Think of the comma as a half-hearted period. The writer may feel that two separate sentences may not flow as easily as you stop and restart at the period, as a longer one with a pause – not a stop – between sentences.)

  Here are examples using the comma and breaking the long sentence into two sentences separated with a period.

  - *We have refigured the proposal<u>, for</u> it is critical to making a deal with this client. We have refigured the proposal. For it is critical to making a deal with this client.*
  - *We refigured it two times<u>, and</u> the results were the same. We refigured it two times. And the results were the same.*
  - *We do not want to figure it again<u>, nor</u> do we want to spend any more time talking to them. We do not want to figure it again. Nor do we want to spend any more time talking to them.*

- *We do not want to figure it again, but we do want to develop a relationship with them for future work. We do not want to figure it again. But we do want to develop a relationship with them for future work.*
- *We can figure the proposal again, or we can look for another client. We can figure the proposal again. Or we can look for another client.*
- *We keep reassuring the client we have included everything in the number we have given to them, yet they still insist we have left out something. We keep reassuring the client we have included everything in the number we have given to them. Yet they still insist we have left out something.*
- *We do need them as a client, so we will refigure the proposal for a third time. We do need them as a client. So we will refigure the proposal for a third time.*

- **Commas with introductory elements**
  Introductory elements are words or phrases placed at the beginning of the sentence before the subject and verb. Place the comma after the last word in the introductory phrase.

  If we land this contract, our future will look very bright!

  According to the project manager, we are about two weeks ahead of schedule.

- **Commas with adjective clauses**
  Please take a moment to look back at our discussion about adjectives on page 8 where we described adjectives as describing a person, place, thing, **or** idea. (Did you notice the comma before the coordinating conjunction "or" that we just covered?)

  An adjective clause is simply a few words taken together that also describe a person, place, thing, or idea. A comma is placed *before and after* them when they are within a sentence, or before them when ending a sentence.

  If you aren't sure if it is an adjective clause, read the sentence without the clause to see if it still makes sense. If it does, the clause is non-essential but useful in describing the subject more thoroughly. (It makes sense when you look at it.)

*This contract with GenX, **our third with them in the past five years,** will require us to open a branch office. This contract with GenX will require us to open a branch office.*

*The GenX project manager will be Natalie Murphy, **our most experienced PM**.*

The GenX project manager will be Natalie Murphy.

Here is a caution: adjective clauses beginning with *who, whom, whose, which,* or *that* do not require a preceding comma because it will probably be difficult to remove it from the sentence and still retain coherence.

I know a CAD operator who can have those drawings ready by tomorrow morning.

The adjective clause begins with who and tells us something more about the CAD operator. If you removed everything from 'who' onward, you would still have a sentence – *I know a CAD operator* – but you would not know that he could have the drawings ready in the morning. (I know, it's getting to be more art than science here as we try to discern the nuance of the sentence instead of relying on cut-and-dried rules.)

- **Commas with adverb clauses**

We talked about adverbs earlier on page 8 and described them as telling us more about verbs regarding *how, when, or where*. Just as with the adjective clause above, an adverb clause is a collection of words acting like a larger version of the adverb.

While I was surfing the Net during lunch*, I found this news item about our potential client GenX.*

The adverb clause *"while I was surfing the Net during lunch"* modifies the verb *"found"* and tells us "when" I found it. Also, it is an introductory element and requires a comma after it. The comma after it tells us where the main sentence begins.

But if we reverse the order of words so there is no introductory phrase, we can omit the comma, and it still makes perfect sense.

*I found this news item about our potential client GenX **while I was surfing the Net during lunch.***

- **Commas in a series**

  Maybe this is just me but early in my professional career, I had trouble remembering when to use commas with words in a series. After some embarrassing edits from a mentor, it finally sank in. I put it into a math formula (n-1) where ‘n’ is the number of elements in the series.

  So here for you now is the benefit of that painful experience.

  My favorite breakfast has toast, coffee, bacon, and eggs.

  Here I have four foods and use three commas (“4-1=3”). If we did not put a comma after the bacon, there is a possibility of confusion by reading ‘bacon and eggs’ as a single entity. (I know, this is really a stretch, but it caused me no end of aggravation. Maybe I was over thinking it.)

CONJUNCTIONS

Conjunctions join (*conjoin* – pretty clever, huh?) two groups of words in a sentence and are either **coordinating conjunctions** (words like “*and, but, or*”) or **subordinating conjunctions**. Breaking those down more is beyond the scope of this course so we will just list common single-word conjunctions if you can remember the acronym **FANBOYS:**

For, **A**nd, **N**ot, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, and **S**o.

- The IT department is understaffed **and** can’t keep up with the demand.
- The IT department is understaffed **but** can keep up with the demand.
- The IT department is fully staffed **yet** can’t keep up with demand.

A type of conjunction that can add some elegance to your writing is the **correlative conjunction,** and they come in two-part sets such as *both…and, neither…not, either…or,* and *not only….but also*.

- **Both** Sue **and** Tony were late for the project stakeholder’s meeting.
- Mike, the project manager, later learned that **neither** Sue **nor** Tony <u>was</u> told about the meeting. (Please note the singular form of the verb – “was” – is correct because saying *neither* and *nor* deals with Sue and Tony as two singular subjects. If it were* “neither Sue **and** Tony”, then we are dealing with them as a plural subject and the verb agreement would be *were*.

*Looking ahead, a note on page 34 deals with the hypothetical word “*if*” and the use of the past tense plural – *were*.)

FUSED SENTENCES

Sometimes we get in a hurry or are so excited about a topic that we think much faster than we write. When that happens, there is a high probability of creating *fused sentences.* Before we get too far ahead, we need to begin simply and then move into the more complex.

We must lay a foundation by starting with a **simple** (or complete) **sentence.** It must contain at least a subject and verb. *The engineering **manager** (subject) **laughed** (verb)* is a simple sentence.
A complete sentence is also known as an *independent clause* because it can stand alone with its own subject and verb.

A phrase without a subject and verb is called a *dependent clause* because it cannot stand alone. It ***depends*** on pairing with an independent clause for it to provide either a subject OR a verb.

> *The engineering manager laughed and then left the room.*
>
> As shown above, the simple sentence is *manager laughed* but *then left the room* only contains a verb *(left)*. Since it doesn't have a subject, it is **dependent** on the first part of the sentence – the independent clause – to provide the subject (*manager).*

A **compound sentence** is the combination of two independent clauses.

> *The engineering **manager** (subject) **laughed** (verb), and then **he** (subject) **left** (verb) the room.*
> Each part of the sentence contains a subject and a verb.

A ***fused sentence*** happens when we run two independent clauses together without either punctuation or a conjunction to help us understand the message.

> ***"We need to talk today I am very upset"*** *is a fused sentence and confuses us.*
> *Do we need to talk today or are you angry today? Which is it?*
>
> *"We need to talk today"* clearly states a point. *"Today I am angry"* also clearly states a point but when we run them together without punctuation, we lose that clarity.

NOUNS

We use **nouns** to name a person, place, thing, or an idea. They are broken down farther into two classes: **proper** and **common.**

- The **Rio Grande** ("proper noun") acts as an international border.
- Many other **rivers** ("common noun") act as geographic borders.

They act as the subjects of our sentences. In fact, without a noun (or pronoun) as the subject of a phrase, you do not have a complete sentence. Now that is the simple aspect of nouns: the names of persons, places, things, or ideas. But that is not where the problems with nouns arise: it is from the confusion with their appropriate ***capitalization.***

Specific unique things, places, or people all require capitalization.

- People – all parts of their name unless they choose otherwise
  - Robert B. Parker
  - C.S. Lewis
  - George III
  - Cal Ripken Jr.
  - e.e. cummings
  - k.d.lang
- Foreign people or places follow the conventions of their native land and do not capitalize each word (<u>and it's worth checking first to be sure if you have a foreign client</u>)
  - Former President of France - Charles de Gaulle
  - President of Angola - José Eduardo dos Santos
  - King of Bahrain - Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa
- When civil, military, religious, and professional titles precede a name, be sure to capitalize it but not when used after the name.
  - Major John Brown (John Brown is a major in the US Army.)
  - Doctor Julie White (Julie White is a veterinary doctor)
  - Reverend Steven Tyler (Steven Tyler is a reverend in a local Methodist church)
  - Mayor Robert Plant (Robert Plant is the mayor of a small Texas town.)

- If you use the title to speak directly to the person, be sure to capitalize it.
  - *"Here are the revised drawings for your office, Doctor."*
- If you are not speaking directly to the individual, you do not need to capitalize.
  - *"Mike, these are the revised drawings for the doctor's office."*

As a reminder, capitalize the noun when:

- speaking directly to the individual either verbally or in writing
- using a title to precede their name such as Governor Greg Abbott of Texas but not when used after the name as in: Greg Abbott is the governor of Texas,

Geographic capitalization also causes confusion but there is a simple test we can apply to make sure we are correct.

- We always capitalize names of specific places such as the Niagara River, the Texas state line, the Gulf of Mexico or unique regions like the American Southwest, the Upper Peninsula (of Michigan), Southeast Asia, and the Pacific rim.
- In the U.S., we have common regional names such as the North, the South, the East, and the West that we know refer more about culture and history rather than simply compass directions, and we always capitalize them.

  An easy test to determine whether we should capitalize them is to replace their name (remember it is a proper noun) with the word "it" and see if it still makes sense.
  - *The South has an aura of a laid-back lifestyle and great eating.*
  - *It has an aura of a laid-back lifestyle and great eating.*

  Clearly, the "it" sentence still makes sense and indicates South is properly capitalized and used as a proper noun.

  However, look at these two sentences and you will see another use of the "it" test:
  - *Mexico lies to the south of Texas.*
  - *Mexico lies to the it of Texas.*

  Obviously, the second sentence makes no sense indicating the word "south" is not used as a proper noun and should not be capitalized.

OBJECTS-DIRECT AND INDIRECT

Without getting into elaborate rules and esoteric terms, we'll say simply that words which receive action are called direct objects. In short sentences, it is easy to identify them.

"I **bought** some **pizza**."

The action verb is "bought", and the recipient of my action (buying) is the pizza – *the direct object of my action.* That is pretty simple, and you may ask, "so what?"

Here is where it begins to matter. Suppose you wrote a note to your boss saying, ***"I bought my project team pizza for lunch. May I expense it?"***

However well-intentioned you may have been by providing lunch for your project team, you demonstrated your grammatical weakness in your note to your boss. Look closely at that sentence and ask yourself, "Did I buy pizza, or did I buy my project team?" Of course, no one would ever ask that question in real life.

BUT if you want to be seen as a serious writer and a cut above the others with whom you work, you would revise that sentence by putting the recipient of your action (the direct object) close after the verb. Then follow THAT by the rest of the sentence: ***"I bought*** *(verb)* ***pizza*** *(direct object)* ***for my project team*** *(indirect object)* ***for lunch. May I expense it?"***

Take a moment to revise these sentences into grammatically correct versions.

- **Joe gave his boss the revised project schedule.**

- **Donna gave her intern the original drawing to update.**

- **HR gave us the new policy on holiday overtime.**

I hope this helps you understand how a slight edge in your writing skills can have a positive impact on your career *because you never know who else is reading your work!*

PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

When we begin to build sentences beyond simple constructions, our writing becomes more interesting and memorable. But it also becomes more prone to grammatical errors. Sentences constructed of two independent clauses connected with a coordinating conjunction (look back on page 15 if you need a refresher) are said to be **parallel** with each other.

The elements of parallelism can be almost anything: words, phrases, or clauses. This opens great opportunities for the creative writer***.***

But the caution is that the parallel elements on either side of the coordinating conjunction must match – be equal – in the same grammatical category.

Here is an example of faulty parallelism that shows how easily errors can happen.

> *The IT manager loves talking about "tekky stuff" and to troubleshoot PC crashes.*
>
> (First, for ease of discussion here, let's say this sentence has a left and right side with the coordinating conjunction "and" in the middle.)
>
> The left side tells us the *IT manager* ***loves talking*** *about tekky stuff* and the right side tells us ***he*** (understood but not stated) ***loves*** (again, understood but not stated) ***to troubleshoot PC crashes.***
>
> The faulty parallelism comes from trying to match "…loves talking…" with "…to troubleshoot..." Clearly, they are different constructions.
>
> We can fix this in one of two ways:
>
> - *The IT manager loves talking about tekky stuff and troubleshooting PC crashes.*
>   The words *talking* and *troubleshooting* are grammatically alike ending with the –ing.
> - *The IT manager loves to talk about tekky stuff and to troubleshoot PC crashes.*

There are now infinitive phrases – “to talk” and “to troubleshoot” – on the left and right side of the word “and” making this a correct parallel construction.

Take a moment to look back at the Course Overview section (page 1) about midway down, and you’ll see this sentence where I refer to parallelism: *I avoided obscure phrases and minimized tedious rules.*

Now we can look at it critically. The left side has a verb in the past tense (*avoided) and* an adjective pairing (*obscure phrases)*. The right side also has a verb in the past tense (*minimized)* and an adjective phrase (*tedious rules)*.

If it read, *“I avoided obscure phrases and minimized rules”,* I used an adjective on the left side (“obscure”) to modify *phrases* but did not use one to modify *rules*. This becomes faulty parallelism because the elements on either side of the coordinating conjunction are not equal grammatically speaking. (I told you something about the word *phrases* but nothing about the word *rules*.)

Or, if it read *I avoided obscure phrases and minimize tedious rules*, it would still have faulty parallelism because “avoided’ on the left side of the sentence is in the past tense while “minimize” on the right side is in the present tense.

Do you see that each side must have symmetry and balance? That is the concept of *parallelism.*

PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are little words that enrich our sentences. The most common are *of, at, into, on, with, by, from,* and *through.* A preposition + a noun or pronoun is called a *prepositional phrase*. These will be important to recognize later in this course because we will talk about helpful tips to determine which words to use.

- The project meeting will be held **in the conference room** (the preposition" in" + a noun "conference room") and we will hold the follow-up meeting **in there**, too. (The preposition "in" + a pronoun "there" referring back to the noun "conference room".)

  If you really want to polish your speech and writing, make sure you do not finish a sentence with a preposition. Rearrange the words as necessary to retain the meaning but not end with the preposition.

  (Note: I realize among friends in the real world, grammar is not a major concern. But like my baseball coach used to say, "You play like you practice." It would be wise to practice your grammar skills at all times because you don't want to make an error 'in the big game'.
  These commonly heard phrases, however, make a great example.)

  - **"**Hi, Joan! Who did you come **with?** Where did you come **from?"** (Very familiar but not grammatically correct.)
  - "Hi, Joan. **With** *whom* and **from** *where* did you come?" (I know. It sounds very stuffy, and you would never use it among friends, but it is preferred if you were doing serious writing or in an influential group speaking.)

PRONOUNS

Pronouns take the place of a noun, so we don't have to keep repeating the original noun. Let's look at a simple contrast with their use.

- **Mike** started the meeting with a question. **Mike** asked *Cindy, Ben, Sue, and Tony* if their budgets were ready. *Cindy, Ben, Sue, and Tony* all replied their budgets were ready.
- **Mike** started the meeting with a question. **He** (pronoun for "Mike") asked *Cindy, Ben, Sue, and Tony* if their budgets were ready. **They** (pronoun for "*Cindy, Ben, Sue, and Tony")* all replied their budgets were ready.

REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS

Reflexive pronouns are a class of pronouns that are easily identified because they end in –*self* or –*selves.* "Reflexive" means they *reflect* or *bend back* to something – usually the subject in the same sentence.

- *"Don't worry about doing that*," Cindy told me, "**I**'ll do it my**self**." ("Myself" reflects back to "I"). But if Cindy said, "Reggie and **myself** will do it", then the usage is wrong because there is nothing for *myself* to refer back. She should say, "Reggie and ***I** will do it".*
- *"They were tired of waiting and decided to do it them**selves**."* ("Themselves" reflects back to "they").

Look back to "**"The drawings were reviewed by Dave and myself(?)"** on the cover of this course. Now you can see that "myself" is incorrect because there is nothing back to which that reflexive pronoun can" reflect". **"The drawings were reviewed by Dave and me"** is correct. (The test is to use each in a sentence as a standalone with "drawings" as the subject: *The drawings were reviewed by Dave. The drawings were reviewed by me.*
Or, using the names as the subjects: *Dave reviewed the drawings,* or *I reviewed the drawings.* Whether we use the names or the drawings as the subjects, *myself* is wrong in either case.)

The test is to break apart the compound subject, revise the order, and try each in the sentence:

- **"Dave reviewed the drawings himself."** (That is a legitimate sentence.)

- **"I reviewed the drawings myself."** (This, too, is an acceptable sentence.)
- **"Myself reviewed the drawings"** is clearly wrong.

TROUBLESOME WORDS, PHRASES, ODDS AND ENDS

These are a few traps awaiting writers who get so caught up in the message they overlook the details of the content. (And DO NOT rely on your software's spell-checking program to protect you.)

Accept, Except:

Accept is a verb meaning to receive.

I will accept all the vendors except that one.

Except is usually a preposition meaning excluding (notice the 'ex' in each of them).

Except is also a verb meaning to exclude.

Please except that vendor from the list.

Affect, Effect:

Affect is usually a verb meaning to influence.

Effect is usually a noun meaning result. (Remember the letter 'E' in effect comes after the letter 'A' in affect reminding you the cause – affect – comes before the effect – the outcome.)

The drug did not affect the disease, and it had several adverse side effects.

Effect can also be a verb meaning to bring about.

Only the project manager can effect such a permanent change.

Allusion, Illusion:

An allusion is an indirect reference.

Did you catch his allusion to the project's lagging timeline?

An illusion is a misconception or false impression

His name dropping is meant to create the illusion he's well-connected with the local politicians.

Ask me or Axe me

"Ask me" involves a question while "axe me" probably involves murder.

Capital, Capitol:

Capital refers to a city, *capitol* to a building where lawmakers meet.

Capital also refers to wealth or resources.

> *The capitol has undergone extensive renovations.*
> *The client added more capital to the budget so we could keep working.*
> *The residents of the state capital protested the development plans.*

Climactic, Climatic:

Climactic is derived from climax, the point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events.

Climatic is derived from climate; it refers to meteorological conditions.

> *The climactic period in the dinosaurs' reign was reached just before severe climatic conditions brought on the ice age.*

Comparative and Superlative

Use a comparative word when dealing with two people or references.

> *I took a smaller piece of pie than he did.* (We are talking about two people here.)

Use the superlative with three or more subjects.

> *Although I took a smaller piece of pie than he did (still talking about two people here), she took the smallest piece of anyone.* (This implies there are at least three people eating pie.

Elicit, Illicit:

Elicit is a verb meaning to bring out or to evoke.

Illicit is an adjective meaning unlawful.

> *The purchasing agent was unable to elicit information from the vendor about illicit materials that were included in our order.*

Emigrate from, Immigrate to:

Emigrate means to leave one country or region to settle in another.

> *In 1900, my grandfather emigrated from Russia.*

Immigrate means to enter another country and reside there.

> *Many Mexicans immigrate to the U.S. to find work.*

Hints:

Emigrate begins with the letter E, as does Exit. When you emigrate, you exit a country.

Immigrate begins with the letter I, as does In. When you immigrate, you go into a country

Good vs. Well

These two cause problems most often when we are discussing some kind of behavior. We must remember that good is always an adjective that tells us something about a noun (which, what kind of, how many) while well is an adverb telling us something about a verb (how, when, where) but can also be used as an adjective.

Did you do good in your interview yesterday?

If good is always an adjective, what is the noun that it modifies? It isn't interview because we're talking about your behavior (how you did), we're not talking about the interview.

Since 'do' is the verb, we must use 'well' to tell us something about how you did, and it becomes this:

*Did you do **well** in your interview yesterday?*

You can also ask, *"Did you do a **good job** in your interview yesterday?"* Here, 'good' modifies the noun 'job' and is used correctly.

Principle, Principal:

Principal is a noun meaning the head of a school or an organization or a sum of money.
Principle is a noun meaning a basic truth or law.

The principal taught us many important life principles.

Than, Then:

Than is a conjunction used in comparisons
Then is an adverb denoting time.

*That IT quote is more **than** we can afford.*
*Carl laughed, and **then** I recognized him.*

That before an indirect quote

Use 'that' as an indicator you are paraphrasing someone.

*Logan, our intern, said **that** the copier is working again.*

If this were a direct quote of Logan's, we would use quotation marks:

Logan said, "The copier is working again."

There, Their, They're:

There is an adverb specifying place; it is also an expletive.

Adverb: *You can lay the drawings on the desk over **there***.

Expletive: ***There** are two plums left*.

Possessive pronoun - *Fred and Jane finally washed **their** car.*

Contraction of *they are* - ***They're** later than usual today.*

To, Too, Two:

To is a preposition; too is an adverb; two is a number.

Too many of your tee shots faded to the right, but the last two were right on the mark.

Your, You're:

Your is a possessive pronoun; you're is a contraction of you are.

***You're** going to catch a cold if you don't wear **your** coat.*

Hints:

Trying sounding out 'you are' in the sentence. If it works, it can be written as *you're*. If it sounds awkward, it is probably supposed to be *your.*

EXAMPLE: You're shoes are muddy. *"You are shoes are muddy"* does not work, so it should be written as "*Your shoes are muddy."*

CONFUSING WORDS

Lie, Lay:

Lie is an intransitive verb meaning to recline or rest on a surface. Its principal parts are lie, lay, and lain. *I lie down when I am tired*.

Lay is a transitive verb meaning to put or place. Its principal parts are lay, laid.

Chickens lay eggs. Lay the proposal on the edge of my desk.

Set, Sit:

Set is a transitive verb meaning to put or to place. Its principal parts are set, set, set.

*She **set** the proposal on the edge of my desk.*

Sit is an intransitive verb meaning to be seated. Its principal parts are sit, sat, sat.

*The car **sat** in the hot sun all day.*

More about Who, Which, That:

Do not use *which* to refer to persons; use *who* instead.

The PM who approved the budget just came back.

The budget which the PM approved is on the edge of the desk.

That, though generally used to refer to things, may be used to refer to a group or class of people.

Where is the copier that needs repairs?

Which or That:

Use *which* if the sentence doesn't need the clause introduced by the word *which*. If it does need the clause for clarity, use *that.* Let me explain with a couple of examples.

Our office, which has two hundred employees, is located in Houston.

Our office that has two hundred employees is located in Houston.

These sentences are not the same. The first sentence tells us that you have just one office, and it's located in Houston. The clause which has two hundred employees gives us additional information, but it doesn't change the meaning of the sentence. Remove the clause and the location of our one office would still be clear: Our office is located in Houston.

The second sentence suggests that we have multiple offices, but the office with two hundred employees is located in Houston. The phrase *that has two hundred employees* is essential because you can't remove that clause without changing the meaning of the sentence.

PROBLEM PHRASES

Bated breath

The term "bated" is an adjective meaning suspense. It originated from the verb "abate," meaning to stop or lessen. Therefore, "to wait with bated breath" essentially means to hold your breath with anticipation. The verb "bait," on the other hand, means to taunt, often to taunt a predator with its prey. A fisherman baits his line in hopes of a big catch.

By in large

The phrase "by and large" was first used in 1706 to mean "in general." It was a nautical phrase derived from the sailing terms "by" and "large." While it doesn't have a literal meaning that makes sense, "by and large" is the correct version of this phrase.

Case and point

The correct phrase in this case is "case in point," which derives its meaning from a dialect of Old French. While it may not make any logical sense today, it is a fixed idiom.

Deep-seeded

This should be "deep-seated," to indicate that something is firmly established. Though "deep-seeded" might seem to make sense, indicating that something is planted deep in the ground, this is not the correct expression.

Do diligence

While it may be easy to surmise that "do diligence" translates to *doing something diligently*, it does not. "Due diligence" is a business and legal term that means you will investigate a person or business before signing a contract with them, or before formally engaging in a business deal together. You should do your due diligence and investigate business deals fully before committing to them.

Extract revenge

To "extract" something is to remove it, like a tooth. The correct expression is "exact revenge," meaning to achieve revenge.

First-come, first-serve

This suggests that the first person to arrive has to serve all who follow. The actual phrase is "first-come, first-served," to indicate that the participants will be served in the order in which they arrive.

Honed in

First, it's important to note that this particular expression is hotly debated. Many references now consider "hone in" a proper alternate version of "home in." That said, it is still generally accepted that "home in" is the more correct phrase. To home in on something means to move toward a goal, such as "The missile homed in on its target." To "hone" means to sharpen. You would say, "I honed my résumé writing skills." But you would likely not say, "The missile honed in on its target." When followed by the preposition "in," the word "hone" just doesn't make sense.

I could care less

"I couldn't care less" is what you would say to express maximum apathy toward a situation. Basically you're saying, "It's impossible for me to care less about this because I have no more care to give. I've run out of care." Using the incorrect "I could care less" indicates that "I still have care left to give--would you like some?"

Make due

When something is due, it is owed. To "make due" would mean to "make owed," but the phrase to "make do" is short for "to make something do well" or "to make something sufficient." When life gives you lemons, you make do and make lemonade.

One in the same

"One in the same" would literally mean that the "one" is inside the same thing as itself, which makes no sense at all. The proper phrase is "one and the same," meaning the same thing or the same person. For example, "When Melissa was home schooled, her teacher and her mother were one and the same."

Peaked my interest

To "pique" means to arouse, so the correct phrase here is "piqued my interest," meaning that my interest was awakened. To say that something "peaked my interest" might suggest that my interest was taken to the highest possible level, but this is not what the idiom is meant to convey.

Perks of the new job

The correct word is *perquisite* meaning an incidental payment, benefit, privilege, or advantage over and above regular income, salary, or wages:

Among the PM's perquisites were free use of a company car and an expense account for entertaining key project clients.

Piece of mind

This should be "peace" of mind, meaning calmness and tranquility. The expression "piece of mind" actually would suggest doling out sections of brain.

Shoo-in

"Shoo-in" is a common idiom that means a sure winner. To "shoo" something is to urge it in a direction. As you would shoo a fly out of your house, you could also shoo someone toward victory.

Slight of hand

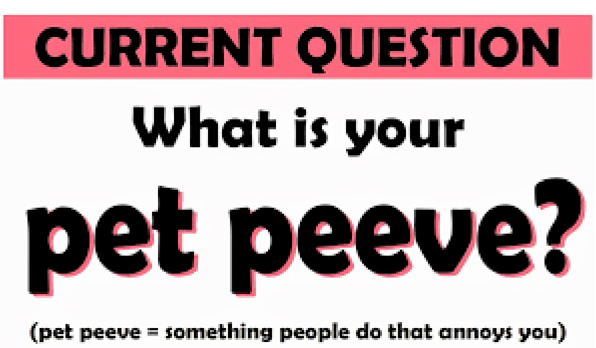
"Sleight of hand" is a common phrase in the world of magic and illusion, because "sleight" means dexterity or cunning, usually to deceive. On the other hand, as a noun, a "slight" is an insult.

Sneak peak

A "peak" is a mountain top. A "peek" is a quick look. The correct expression is "sneak peek," meaning a secret or early look at something.

Wet your appetite

The correct idiom is "whet your appetite." "Whet" means to sharpen or stimulate, so to "whet your appetite" means to awaken your desire for something.



Take a moment to list a few of the words and phrases you wonder about and list them here. It's a good chance to get the confusion resolved "once and for all."

ODDS AND ENDS

Supposed to: Do not omit the d. *Suppose to* is incorrect.

Used to: Same as above. Do not write *use to*.

Toward: There is no s at the end of the word.

Anyway: Also has no ending s. *Anyways* is nonstandard.

All walks of life: Not *woks of life.* This phrase does not apply to oriental cooking.

Chest of drawers: Not *chester drawers.*

For all intents and purposes: Not *intensive purposes*

Irregardless: THIS IS NOT A WORD! Regardless is the correct usage meaning "having no regard".

More here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_commonly_misused_English_words

GRAMMAR SKILLS ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Now let's analyze that report to the project manager and see how well you did.

"To: Logan Grant, VP Construction Operations

From: Cindy Richards, Project Manager

*Before going any **further,** please **excep**t my apology for being late with this report.*

*Although **me and my team** promised it would be in your hands by 5:00PM yesterday, we are not using the fact that the project servers went down for five hours as an excuse. **If I was** able to get it to you quicker, I certainly would have.*

Farther refers to a defined distance. Remember the word FAR contained within it - FARther. "He lives 2 miles farther down the road."

Further refers to an imaginary but understandable "distance." "Don't bother me any *further* today." There is not a defined time distance in this example, but we both understand that it means going forward for an undefined length of time.

In the example in this report, it should be "farther" because the defined distance ends immediately after the word (farther) and the apology begins.

Although **except** and **accept** sound nearly alike, their meanings differ greatly. **Except** is the root word of "exception" meaning something excluded. "Take all the chairs **except** mine."

Accept means receiving such as "Please receive (**accept)** my apology."

"**Me and my team**" should be "**My team and I**" because "I" is the subject form of the personal pronoun while "me" is the direct object version used when "I" receives some action.

"**I** was hit by the tennis ball" describes something about the subject "I".
"The tennis ball hit **me**" is written to describe what action "I" received.

(Also, mentioning the other person ahead of you is considered grammatically proper and socially polite.)

A sentence that begins with a hypothetical word such as **if** or **suppose** requires a verb in the plural past tense when used with a singular subject. Think of the song title, "*If I <u>were</u> a carpenter*". The singular word "I" seems to require the singular "was", but it sounds (and is grammatically) wrong saying "If I was a carpenter."

Naturally, using a plural subject and saying "if we were carpenters" sounds perfectly correct and is as written.

Therefore, the line should be, "**If I were able** to get it to you…"

Here is the current status on these project topics:

- ***Project Interns:*** *Alex and* ***myself*** *have finished the interviews of the six finalists and are submitting our recommendations for the two open positions in the attached memo.*

  "Myself" is called a reflexive word and must always refer back (or 'reflex' back) to its reference word. For example, "I finished the interviews *myself."* Here the reference word is "I" and *myself* refers back to it. "Alex and myself" is wrong because there is nothing to which "myself" refers.

  "Alex and I have finished the interviews" is the correct phrase.

- ***Portable Toilet issues*** *– I talked with Steve Jones, the vendor for the portables on site, about how badly their units by the Admin building* ***smell.*** *He promised a solution to me this afternoon by 2:00PM. I will call him if he doesn't call me.*

  This is a common error but easily fixed when you take time to think about the process involved with stinking and smelling. **Smelling** involves one of the five senses of humans that pick-up odors in the environment. **Stinking** is a foul version of an odor.

  In the example above, the portable toilets are not living objects with the sense of **smell**. However, they certainly possess foul odors which **stink.**

  The portable toilet units **stink,** and someone has complained because they **smell** them.

  (Note: "Stink" is commonly used with negative situations. Positive or pleasant odors are still called smells such as "those chocolate chip cookies smell" good.)

- ***Visitor Guides*** *– <u>A group</u> of supervisors from Tom Jackson's area* ***have*** *volunteered to act as guides for the Chamber of Commerce visitors next Tuesday*

  Another common error happens when we are distracted by the closest noun preceding the verb.

In this case, the subject (noun) is "group" while "of supervisors" simply tells us something about the group. The word "supervisors" by itself is a plural noun and is closer in proximity to the verb "have" than the word "group". This becomes a distraction and makes the writer think the verb "have" must agree with the plural noun "supervisors".

Also, "of supervisors" is a prepositional phrase and ***the subject of a sentence is never a prepositional phrase.*** The correct sentence should read "*A **group** of supervisors from Tom Jackson's area **has** volunteered…"*

- ***Copier upgrade*** *– The vendor* ***that*** *handles our project copy equipment will give me a new quote by the 1st of the month.*

  We use "who" when referring to people and "that" when referring to non-people. In this case, the vendor **who** handles our project copy equipment will provide the quote.

- ***Fire inspection reports*** *– Sue has been out for the past week and didn't leave word identifying* ***who I should send them to****. I'll hold on to them until she gets back.*

  There is an error here when the first sentence ends with a preposition; the word "to". This may be getting beyond the realm of reasonable business writing but rewriting the sentence may make a big impression upon a closest grammarian reading your work.
  The correct reading is "*Sue has been out for the past week and didn't leave word identifying **to whom** I should send the reports."*

- ***IT budget revisions*** *– The final numbers are in they're about 2.5% more than expected.*

  These are two sentences run together and can be corrected in one of several ways:

  - Use a period to break them into two sentences. *The final numbers are in. They're about 2.5% more than expected.*
  - Use "and" to join two independent sentences into one long one. *The final numbers are in, and they're about 2.5% more than expected.*
  - Use a colon to join two independent sentences into one long one. *The final numbers are in: they're about 2.5% more than expected.*

- ***Messenger vehicle repairs delayed–*** *Don Trucks thinks the* ***cost*** *of all the repairs* ***were*** *more than his budget would allow for this quarter.*

  This is like the "visitor guides" sample above (page 34) dealing with non-agreement between the subject and verb because of a plural proximity distraction from the word "repairs".

In this example, we are talking about the singular subject "cost" of repairs. And the cost of repairs WAS (not were) more than his budget would allow.
The correct reading is*, "Don Trucks thinks the **cost** of all the repairs **was**…"*

- ***Break room refrigerator** – The housekeeper tells me **there is** usually some bag lunches left in the fridge over the weekend that she always has to throw out on Monday. **My team and me** will take care of cleaning out the fridge every Friday afternoon.*

  This is a problem with "there is" and "there was" sentences. (Technically, these are called existential constructions, but we will never ask you to remember that.) We seem to think the word 'there' is some kind of a subject in the sentence and should have 'is' as a singular verb. (Their proof is that it "sounds ok".)

  The solution is to recognize that "there is/there are" sentences require us to look at the noun after the linking verb ("is") to decide what form of the verb to use. In this case, the word "lunches" is plural and requires a plural verb.

  The correct sentence is, "The housekeeper tells me ***there are*** usually some bag lunches…"

  "My team and me will take care of cleaning out the fridge every Friday afternoon" is an example of the hyper-casual speaking style from social media that permeates the business world. The test of using this compound subject ("team and me") is to use each word independently to see if the correct use is revealed.

  Which of these examples is correct?

  - "**My team** will take care of cleaning out the fridge…." (That sounds good – no problem here.)
  - "**Me** will take care of cleaning out the fridge…" (Clearly that is wrong.)
  - "**I** will take care of cleaning out the fridge…" (That also sounds good – no problem here, either.)

  The correct sentence with compound subjects should be – "**My team** and **I** will take care of the fridge…"

- ***Quality Issues –*** *The* ***number of errors increase*** *as we speed production at the end of every month. Maybe we should look at some upstream process modifications. As a point of reference, before we began our policy of speeding month-end production, we averaged* ***6.2 less errors*** *per shift.*

  Look back at "Visitor Guides" on page 34 for the explanation of the first problem in this section. It should read "The number of errors **increases….**"

  The second error deals with the "fewer-less" comparison. We use 'fewer' when we are dealing with specific quantities or values and "less" when we have obvious but not specific differences. "There are **10 fewer ounces** of water in the glass on the left than in the glass on the right."
  "It **looks like there is less** water in the glass on the left than in the right."

  If we can specify the amount ("10 ounces"), then we use 'fewer'. If we can't give a specific amount but can make a non-specific observation ("it looks like…), then we use "less".

  This section should read, **"We average 6.2 fewer errors per shift."**

- ***Headcount overage*** *– HR tells me my headcount is wrong. I have 6 in design and 4 in fabrication. How can I be over? Six and 4* ***are*** *ten. My headcount for that group (I thought) is ten!*

  As strange as it may sound, sums and products of mathematical processes are expressed as **singular** and require **singular** verbs. "(The sum of) six and four **is** ten."

- ***Paneling samples*** *– There* ***was*** *several samples of paneling that our team liked. Looks like this may be a harder decision than I thought.*

  Look back to the bag lunches in the refrigerator on page 36. Once again, the solution is to recognize that "there is/there are" sentences require us to look at the noun after the linking verb (it is "were" in this sentence) to decide what form of the verb to use. In this case, the word "samples" is plural and requires a plural verb.

  The correct sentence is, "There **were** several samples of paneling…"

- ***Entrance bridge capacity** – According to the site engineer, one truck or three cars **is** the limit of the site entrance bridge capacity.*

  Here we are confused with a compound subject where one is singular (“one truck”) and the other plural (“three cars”) and aren’t sure whether to use a singular or plural verb (“is” or “are” the limit).

  In this case, we match the verb to the closest subject (“three cars”) and use the plural verb to make the sentence read this way: “…one truck or three cars **are** the limit…”

  If we said, “…three cars or one truck…”, the sentence would read as “…three cars or one truck **is** the limit…”

- ***Landline upgrade in the conference room** – I have asked our telecommunications vendor for a proposal on cost and time to upgrade the audio equipment **to better hear** all participants on conference calls.*

  An infinitive is a combination of the word “to” and a “verb” and should never be separated.

  The sentence should read “…upgrade the audio equipment **to hear** all participants **better**…”

- ***Next Project Team meeting** – The team **are** meeting again in the conference room at 9:00AM on the 15th.*

  You probably got this one correct. Although “team” is a collection of people, it is a singular unit (like the group of visitors back on page 34) and requires a singular verb.

  “The team **is** meeting again…….”

There were twenty errors in that passage.

BONUS SECTION: A FINANCIAL PRESENTATION STRATEGY

When thinking about putting together a proposal to a group where you will ask them for something, start off with making it about **WHAT IS IN IT FOR THEM**? (Why should they act on your proposal?)

Burn this into your memory chip: ***Do not think your need to have what you're asking for carries any weight with them unless it somehow benefits them, too*!**

You have a greater chance of success with your proposal if you focus on demonstrating how your ideas will help them:

1.) Save money
    a) By not spending new money (cost savings)
    b) By spending less money (cost reduction)
2.) Save time
    a) By reducing overtime (cost savings).
    b) By reducing the time it takes to complete a process (increased productivity).
    c) By reducing the number of people needed to accomplish something (cost savings).
    d) By reducing the time needed for rework or error correction (increased productivity).

Naturally, when you help them look good, your reputation improves too!

Your proposal should use words or phrases to increase their confidence in what you are proposing. These words and phrases are known as "hard references" which carry greater weight in their mind than do "soft" ones.

For example, saying, "It will cost <u>exactly</u> $43,123.87" carries greater weight than saying, "We <u>estimate</u> it should cost about $43,000."

A MODEL FOR YOUR FINANCIAL PRESENTATION

This is a successful proposal from a bank's data processing center asking for new software. (Circa 2003)

The introductory "hook" that captures the approver's attention.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We can reduce our IP headcount and meet Fed deadlines earlier with changes in sorter software. We can also achieve a check micro line read rate increase from 48% to 70+%.

The "transition" connects the hook to the existing situation that you are trying to change.

The amount of checks we present nightly to the Federal Reserve from our three processing centers is determined by two primary factors:

- *The amount we can clear either mechanically via the sorters or manually by clerks keying data.*
- *The volume of work received.*

This is the "existing situation" that you are trying to change with your proposal.

Atlanta and Birmingham have old systems with outdated, non-Windows software while Florida is comparatively new complete with industry standard Windows NT software. This older equipment is at its maximum capacity and cannot expand while Florida still can.

Atlanta and Birmingham consistently have higher labor and maintenance costs per unit volume of work processed than does Orlando. Our labor and sorter maintenance costs will continue to increase with our work volume if we do not act soon to change the present conditions.

These are the recommendations that you are proposing.

We recommend two major changes in our present situation.
Upgrade the software in the Birmingham and Atlanta sorters to XXXX that we use in Orlando. It is a proven platform that will allow us to expand our capacities in Birmingham and Atlanta. This will also decrease our non-productive "downtime" as shown in attached comparisons between centers and give us a uniform platform across all three centers.

Second, that we install "Speed-read" software in all three centers to increase our sorter "read rate" from an average 48% of checks to over 70%. This will have a dramatic decrease in the amount of manual labor required to process checks plus allow us to meet more Fed deadlines earlier.

The amount this proposal will impact our overall budget this year.

We budgeted $900,000 this year for this project based on vendor estimates. Unanticipated installation wiring code changes in our city require an additional $85,000. This results in an impact of $85,000 more than we had budgeted.

This is your specific request for action.

We request approval to spend $900,000 that was budgeted and an additional $85,000 for the local building code for a total of $985,000.

This is how we will pay for it over time.

We will recover this within 5 years from labor and maintenance savings.

Use this summary model to make sure you have addressed most of the issues that will probably come up when you present your proposal to an executive. Remember that there is no "cookbook" that will guarantee success every time. This will help you cover the most likely issues.

Hint: Take a prewritten approval form that the executive(s) can sign on the spot in case everyone says, "Yes!"

You must be ready to "strike while the iron is hot" and not waste the opportunity. You can use this signature to get things moving now even if you must wait for a formal signature later.

The "HOOK"

Your "headline phrase" should get the approver's attention and make him/her want to find out more about making this a reality. This can get the approver thinking toward "YES!" before you say the first word!

"We can reduce our Items Processing headcount and meet Fed deadlines earlier with changes in sorter software. We can achieve a CAR read rate increase from 48% to 70+%" will get executives focused on potential savings while you explain the costs associated with buying new technology to achieve those savings.

The "TRANSITION"

The transition phrase gently leads the approver from the highly desirable situation you describe in the hook into the current situation that you want to change.

THE "EXISTING SITUATION"

You should explain briefly and objectively why the current situation requires your proposed improvement. (Try to keep it under 100 words.)

YOUR RECOMMENDED SOLUTION

Clearly, specify WHAT you want to do here. Explain the why, how, where, and when in your proposal. Remember that this is just an executive summary.

CAUTION #1: Be sure you can you explain clearly why this recommendation is the best choice in case the approver wants to know why you recommend this particular action and not something else.

CAUTION #2: Also, make sure you have available a list of YOUR REFERENCES. Do not provide this unless asked (it may be distracting to your proposal). List the names, titles, and telephone numbers of people (employees or vendors) from whom you collected data or who can offer additional information if needed.

THE BUDGET IMPACT

How much above or below what we had budgeted for this? If we budgeted $50,000 last fall for this budget year and it only cost $45,000, the IMPACT is +$5,000 ($5,000 that we can free to spend elsewhere or save.). If it now costs $55,000, the impact is -$5,000 ($5,000 that we have to take from somewhere else or go over budget.)

WHAT ACTION DO YOU WANT FROM THE EXECUTIVES?

Do you clearly know what decision you want?

TELL THEM HOW IT WILL PAY FOR ITSELF. (Add a spreadsheet here)

Make sure it is a one- or two-line summary. Leave the details in the financial section.

E-TEXT CAUTIONS

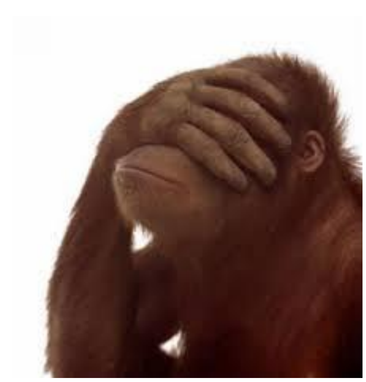
The advancement of digital communications (we're calling it "e-text" in this section) technology has given us great gifts of speed and choice in how we communicate with each other.

- Do we write a lengthy email with sophisticated attachments or just send a Tweet conveying the gist of our response?
- When answering an email, do we just respond to the writer or hit 'reply all' and tell a dozen people at once?
- Do we answer on some Facebook page for the entire world to see although we only meant it for one individual?

With every gift of speed, though, there is also a risk of remorse. If we can shoot back a hot reply in just a few seconds using e-text shorthand and emoticons, there is a strong possibility we will regret it once our emotions have cooled a little. The old saying of "you can't unring a bell" has never been more appropriate.

Compared to the age of the written word in English where we have had centuries to compile and argue over rules and usages, we've only had a relative instant in which to develop digital communications protocols.

Since there is no central authority that we can all use as a reference to settle arguments, e-text has developed through trial-and-error. *"If it doesn't blow up on you and cause embarrassment, then it must be OK"* seems to be the universal guideline.



Even though e-text is in its infancy, it will always be with us and the distinction between "hard copy" and its digital version will increasingly blur. This will present more opportunities for that face-palm moment when we wish we could un-ring some career-damaging bell.

CAPTAIN OBVIOUS

This will not be a long section because it deals with common sense *once you take time to think about it.* We joke about Captain Obvious in many work-related situations but, unfortunately, he always seems to show up AFTER WE HAVE MADE THE OBVIOUS MISTAKE.

"Well Captain Obvious, maybe you shouldn't have blasted him/her back with that hot email/text/tweet until you knew a little more about what really happened" could be said about many of us in today's digital world. As I said, Captain Obvious only seems to appear AFTER we have made the mistake.

Back on page 22, I referenced a baseball coach I had as a youth who always told us: *"You'll play like you practice. Practice doesn't make perfect, only* ***perfect practice does!"***

I mention him again because the speed and agility that e-text affords us also makes it easy to practice short cuts and bad habits with informal business communications but increases the risk of carrying them over to "The Game" when it's time to be serious.

So in an effort to make sure you practice perfectly and are ready at any given moment to be called off the bench and into the Game with no warning, Captain Obvious and my old baseball coach give you these pointers:

1. **Choose to avoid "text speak" even in casual messages to friends, family, and close business acquaintances and practice what you've learned in this course.**
   Here is a link to over 1,400 texting shortcuts with their translations if you want to get a feel for what we're talking about http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp
   I am sure this list is growing every day.

2. **Especially avoid abbreviations, misspelling, and emoticons in your text speak.**
   Once again, please practice like you want to play. Resist the easy ways as much as you can.

3. **Don't put your faith in spelling and grammar checkers in your software**.
   I'll let this link to messaging fails make my point so much better than I ever could:

   http://www.smosh.com/smosh-pit/photos/hilarious-facebook-grammar-fails

4. **Do not overuse keyboard characters!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

LAST WORDS

Regardless of how well you think you have crafted your message or document, always find time to read it over again SLOWLY. Look at each word and concentrate on what you are reading without distractions around you.

From personal experience in writing nearly fifty of these business skills courses, I can recall many times when I got so caught up in the message I was trying to convey that I did not realize I skipped words or let the spell checker change a word from what I wanted into something it 'thought' I meant.

Let the world see that the quality of your writing is equal to that of your work.

Once again, thank you for taking my course!