
**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme in
association with ProSeminar**

Grammar rules, okay? *What matters in business writing?*

It seems to be a recurring theme - standards of written English are falling. Or so we are told by captains of industry, colonels from the shires and no less an eminence than HRH the Prince of Wales. I wouldn't wish to disagree. Apart from the fear of committing *lèse-majesté*, I have to admit to an interest as I spend a significant part of my time helping professional people in a variety of organisations enhance the effectiveness of their writing skills.

Although we live in a culture that is increasingly dominated by oral communication - telephones, face-to-face meetings, presentations and audiovisual material - much of our business is still in written form and will continue to be so. The paperless office has proved to be a mirage and many managers and executives are faced with huge piles of reports, memo's, letters, promotional and professional literature through which they have to wade.

For some groups, such as consulting engineers, chartered surveyors and management consultants, the written report is their 'hard' product by which the quality of their service and their professionalism will be judged. Effective written communication is essential both for writers and for readers.

But is 'effective' English the same as 'good' English, and are the critics of our standards placing emphasis on the wrong aspects of written communication skills and for the wrong reasons?

Effective writing

An 'effective' piece of writing is by definition one which achieves its objectives. Whatever those specific objectives may be, one primary objective has to be met - the document must get itself read by the intended reader with the attention it requires. Unfortunately, business reading is more often a chore than a pleasure.

The key to effective writing is to make it 'reader-friendly' and that requires writers to put themselves in their readers' shoes. The essential characteristics of 'reader-friendliness' are:

- relevance
- clarity of structure and layout
- clarity of expression.

Some questions

So if you're assessing a piece of writing (your own or anybody else's) you need to ask some searching questions.

1. Does the piece include the information necessary to achieve its objectives and to meet the objectives which its readers will have in reading it?
2. Does it tell them all they need to know to make any decisions required? Is the information factually accurate and adequately precise?
3. Does the piece stick to the point or does it include material which, although relating to the subject, is not relevant to the achievement of the objective?
4. Does it make the relevance of the points presented explicit to the reader? Is it as short as it can be to achieve the objective, or has it been padded-out to impress the reader with the effort invested?
5. Is the material structured in such a way that its relevance is apparent and so that the argument can be followed easily by the reader?
6. Are layout devices - headings, sub-headings and indentations - used consistently to support the structure and make it visually explicit?
7. Is the document visually appealing with plenty of 'white space', or is it so densely typed that the reader's first impression is likely to be that reading it will be a laborious chore?
8. Is the material clearly written so that ambiguity and the scope for misinterpretation have been minimised?

9. Is the choice of vocabulary appropriate to the readership - have jargon and unnecessary pomposity been avoided?

10. Have words been used correctly? Have long and complicated sentences been reduced to a minimum?

Show your readers where you're taking them.

- Headings
- Sub-Headings
- Introductions
- Paragraph topic sentences
- Lists of points to come

Good English

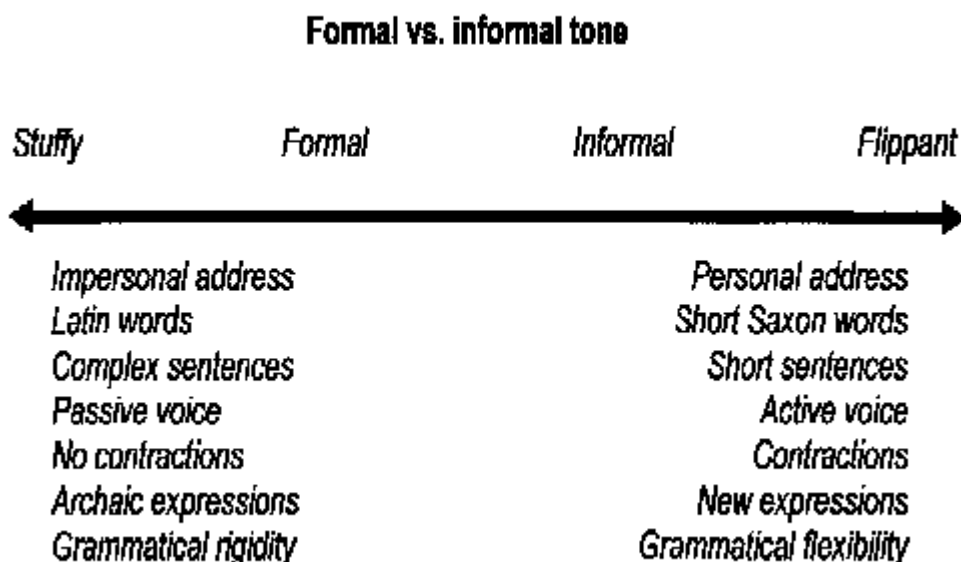
And 'good' English? Well, of course it's important. Bad English can easily distract the reader, create a poor impression and lead to ambiguity. But let's not confuse grammatical conformity with high standards of English. Grammar describes rather than prescribes the way language is used. Language and grammar are dynamic and changing. Much of the rule-breaking about which critics complain is in fact a reflection of that change. Written English tends to be more conservative than spoken English and changes in the former necessarily lag behind changes in the latter. If the rules of written English and accepted usage failed to change, then an ever-widening gulf would grow between the written and the spoken forms. Written English would become a classical form - a kind of dead language. It would be as if modern-day Romans spoke Italian but conducted their correspondence in Latin!

Some of the rules of grammar have no extant linguistic function and are really a form of etiquette designed to promote a social distinction between the educated and the uneducated. Why shouldn't a sentence end with a preposition? Does it matter if an infinitive is split?

The astute (and particularly the irate) reader of this article will already have noticed that it contravenes many of the rules of so-called 'good English'. I've included contractions (I've, it's, -n 't and so forth) and (horror, upon horror) I've begun several sentences with conjunctions (or, but, and). I've even used one sentence, 'And good English?' which doesn't contain a verb! Of course, this article is written in a consciously conversational style and I'm not recommending these practices in all circumstances. However, we should recognise that they represent a legitimate choice a writer can make in blending a style to fit the purpose of the piece and its

potential readership. There is a time and a place for grammatical flexibility as there is a time and a place for grammatical formality.

We must choose a style in line with our readers' expectations and one which provides the appropriate 'gravitas'. But we should not confuse conservatism with correctness, nor dismiss a conversational style as being bad English.



Grammatical errors often reflect a failure of attention rather than a failure of knowledge. Business and professional people can usually spot most of their errors when they take the time to check their work carefully. They do, however, need help in developing proof-reading skills. The key to these skills is being aware of the kinds of mistakes that are likely to occur and looking actively for them. Examples would be misplaced apostrophes, confused words, inconsistency in the use of capital letters for proper nouns, singular subjects commanding plural verbs, singular nouns being replaced by plural pronouns and common punctuation errors. (Poor proof-reading is also often a function of poor time-management - cutting corners in the panic to meet the deadline.)

Editing skills - the key to improvement

Grammatical errors are most often found in long and complicated sentences. Many writers could improve their English by using shorter sentences. This is not to say that all sentences should be short - fluency requires a blend of short, medium and (occasionally) longer sen-

tences. Skilful writers are equipped to spot the long sentences and replace them, when necessary, with less verbose constructions. These skills are the skills of editing. They can be taught relatively easily and impact significantly on writing effectiveness.

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