

SkillSharpener Web Extra

Corresponding with customers: 7 common business-writing blunders

The ability to communicate well in writing has become a critical skill for CSRs over the past few years. In some cases, it's the only type of contact a customer has with a company. Sloppy, inaccurate writing conveys an unprofessional image — and makes customers doubt your ability to effectively resolve their issues.

Even if writing is not your strong point, you can improve your ability to communicate by avoiding the most common business-writing errors. The following is a list of frequently occurring mistakes in business correspondence. Eliminating them from your writing will make your messages clear, strong and customer-friendly.

1. Fuzzy message. Make sure the intent of your message is specific, clear and includes all of the necessary details. Try to limit your written communications to a single, key point that you want to get across to the customer. If the customer needs to take action based on your message, use specific language to instruct him or her. For instance, instead of a vague statement, such as: "Please get back to me as soon as possible about your order," include distinct details like: "To receive your order before the September deadline, I must hear from you by August 15th."

2. Wordiness. People often fill their writing with unnecessary words and phrases in an attempt to sound more professional or businesslike. However, the goal in business writing is to convey a message using short, simple, and specific language. Superfluous words and phrases obscure the message. For instance, a phrase like "the question as to whether ..." can be condensed into a single word: "whether." Try to keep your sentences short.

Read your writing out loud — if you need to take a breath in the middle of a sentence, it's too long.

3. Using the passive voice. Using the active voice will make your writing strong and interesting. With the active voice, the subject of the sentence is acting (e.g., "I sent the invoice"). When the subject is acted upon, the verb is passive ("The invoice was sent by me"). Generally, writing in the passive voice will sound awkward and wooden, and the meaning will be less clear. To check your writing for the passive form, look for sentences containing words or phrases such as: is, is being, was, were, will be, has been, have been, or had been.

4. Misused words. Take care with the words you use. Be on the lookout for confusing or incorrect word choice. There are many words that are often misused in business writing, so don't rely on word usage in other correspondence that you may have come across. If you're not certain about the meaning of a word, take the time to look it up in a dictionary. The box on page 2 lists a few of the most commonly misused words.

5. Overly formal tone. It's as important to convey the right tone in your writing as it is over the phone. Create a positive image by writing in a friendly, conversational manner. Try not to bog down your message with overly formal language, company or industry jargon, or a lot of acronyms.





6. Misspelled words. Always spell-check your document before sending it. There is no excuse for not taking this important final step. However, keep in mind that spell-checking software is not infallible. It will not catch words that are spelled correctly but may be used by mistake (e.g., “from” vs. “form”).

7. Sentence fragments. A sentence traditionally has a subject and a verb. Although fragments can be acceptable in conversation, try to avoid them in your writing. In many cases, you can combine a fragment with another sentence that contains the main clause. For instance: “The autumn designer series includes the red, cotton dresses. Which are available in all sizes.” Rewrite it as: “The autumn designer series includes the red, cotton dresses, which are available in all sizes.” ■

10 often-misused words in business writing

Accept, except — “Accept” means “to receive” (The customer will accept the delivery). “Except” is typically a preposition meaning “to exclude” or “excluding” (Contact all of the customers except these three).

Affect, effect — “Affect” means “to influence” (The irate caller did not affect my mood). “Effect” means “to cause,” “to bring about” or “result” (I tried Linda’s active listening technique on the caller. The effect was amazing.)

Alot — “A lot” is two words. There is no such word as “alot.”

Among, between — Use “among” to introduce three or more items (The survey was distributed among customers). Use “between” to introduce two items (Customers could choose between the written survey or an email format).

Farther, further — “Farther” refers to physical distance (Lisa lives farther from the office than Greg). “Further” suggests degree (I will further research the complaint before calling).

Irregardless — There is no such word. Use “regardless.”

It’s, its — “It’s” means “it is” (It’s time for the meeting). “Its” is the possessive (What is its purpose?).

Their, there, they’re — “Their” is the possessive, third person plural noun (Their account has been updated). “There” means “at” (The file is over there). “They’re” is the contraction of “they are” (They’re meeting us at noon).

Who, whom; that, which — Use “who” and “whom” when referring to a person (The customer who called yesterday). Use “that” and “which” for inanimate objects (The company that handled the shipment).

Your, you’re — “Your” means “belonging to you” (That is your file). “You’re” is the contraction of “you are” (I heard that you’re going to the customer’s site).

