Put Your Best Grammar on the Page

Step 7

Overview

Recognize the value of proper grammar.

Review basic punctuation.

Learn essential grammar rules.

Avoid common word usage errors.

Who cares if you omit a period or whether your noun agrees with your verb? You’re dealing with more important issues like budget projections, operational efficiency, and social media analytics. Just say what you need to say and don’t worry about a minor detail like grammar!

If only it were that easy. While one misplaced comma won’t ruin your career, emails and texts laden with poor punctuation, misused words, and inconsistent tenses will distract readers from your message. Worse, you may be perceived as ignorant, sloppy, or lazy—even if you don’t possess any of these unfavorable traits.

A simple spelling or grammatical mistake can lead your clients or potential partners to think twice about working with you. The Internet is littered with compilations of grammar errors on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter—to the hilarity of online scavengers, the dismay of English teachers, and the ire of social media managers. So, even with the speed of online communications, a grammar faux pas can leave a lasting impression.

Using correct grammar makes your text easier to read and understand. And while no one expects you to be a perfect grammarian, you should be able to apply the key rules and avoid common mistakes. Your grammar should be like referees in professional sports—the less you notice them, the better.

Even those confident in their grammar skills can use the occasional refresher. But if you struggle with grammar, study the rules and examples that follow. They won’t address more advanced aspects of grammar (such as gerunds, participles, and nonstandard verb phrases), but they will explain how to determine what’s right and wrong in your business communication.

Pointer

Using correct grammar makes your text easier to read and understand.

In many cases, you don’t need to memorize grammar rules; just use common sense. For rules not addressed in this step, consult a grammar website, such as www.grammarbook.com, or Google the issue.

Punctuate It Right

Let’s start by reviewing punctuation marks you probably use hundreds of times a day in your business and personal communication.

Period

Inserted at the end of a complete sentence: She led the time management training.

Not repeated if the last item of the sentence is an abbreviation that ends in a period: Meet Claire at 10:30 a.m.

Not used if question marks or exclamation points are at the end of the sentence: Your team was outstanding!

Comma

Separates independent clauses (complete sentences) joined by a conjunction: I’ll help you with the benefits analysis, but I don’t have time to call the client.

Separates an introductory phrase or clause: Given the complexity of the report, we should get additional help.

Sets off a phrase describing the subject: Chen Lee, hired three months ago, has become an asset to our team.

Is always placed inside quotation marks: “The last shipment was three days late,” she told her boss.

Sets apart items in a series: The senior partner discussed new practice areas, marketing strategies, and operations.

The last comma before the conjunction and—the serial or Oxford comma—is either required or omitted depending on your preferred style guide. The Chicago Manual of Style is for it, while the Associated Press Stylebook excludes the comma unless it’s essential to avoid confusion. See this example:

The mechanical engineer met with three senior executives, two vice presidents and one division head.

Did the engineer meet with three executives—two who were vice presidents and one who was a division head? Or did the engineer meet with six people—three executives, two vice presidents, and a division head? If it was six people, then the serial or Oxford comma needs to follow vice presidents for clarification:

The mechanical engineer met with three senior executives, two vice presidents, and one division head.

If you don’t believe commas matter, compare the two meanings in each of these pairs of sentences:

Let’s eat Aunt Margaret (What?)

Let’s eat, Aunt Margaret. (That’s more like it!)

Rachael Ray finds inspiration in cooking her family and her dog. (Is she serious?)

Rachael Ray finds inspiration in cooking, her family, and her dog. (Much better!)

While Tails magazine correctly inserted the commas in its article about celebrity chef Rachael Ray, a parody of this statement went viral on the Internet a few years ago.

Colon

Indicates a stop followed by an explanation: He figured out how to impress his boss: Complete the web analytics report one week early.

Indicates a stop followed by a list: The HR executive explained the keys to success: hard work, flexibility, and collaboration with the team.

Never directly follows a verb.

The ADDIE instructional design method includes: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. (Wrong)

The ADDIE instructional design model includes analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. (Right)

Semicolon

Joins two sentences with a similar construction: Her audit report last month was 20 pages; this month’s document was only 12 pages.

Joins items in a series with commas to avoid confusion: Our event planner visited potential conference sites in Charleston, West Virginia; Portland, Maine; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Spokane, Washington.

Hyphen

Joins two or more words that serve as an adjective modifying a noun: The division head wants the second day of the annual meeting to be divided into three-hour sessions.

Without the hyphen between three and hour, your meaning may be unclear. Are they three sessions of one hour in duration? Or are they several sessions, each three hours long?

Em Dash

Sets off a dependent clause that might be confusing with a comma: After the negotiation stalled, Carrie asked her client what stood in the way of saying yes—a technique she learned from 15 years in the manufacturing industry—and ultimately sealed the deal.

Sets information apart with emphasis: When he asked the client for feedback, Josh received a glowing compliment—an unexpected outcome given the number of complaints in the previous quarter.

En Dash

The en dash Is longer than hyphen and shorter than an em dash.

Connects values that are related or are part of a range: The board approved the initiative with a 5-4 vote. Learn more about this topic on pages 16-19.

Parentheses

Sets off information that shouldn’t be emphasized: The team spent three consecutive days proofreading the recently completed documents (including purchasing analyses and quarterly reports).

Should be inside the periods unless it’s a complete sentence: Shelly drove eight hours to attend the trade show. (She prefers driving to flying.)

Should immediately follow what’s being referred to:

Please research several dining options for Thursday’s lunch with the regional managers (such as Italian, Chinese, or American). Wrong

Please research several dining options (such as Italian, Chinese, or American) for Thursday’s lunch with the regional managers. Right

Apostrophe

Shows possession: Margo’s proposal was excellent, explaining every step and anticipating obstacles.

Is inserted in a word or between two words to take the place of letters that have been dropped: Jamal and Shelly don’t (do not) understand the objectives.

Should not be used if you’re explaining that an it possesses something: This company spent six months developing its mission statement.

Should be used once or twice depending on joint versus separate possession (explanation below).

Two people (or things) can own something together or separately—which determines whether you use one or two apostrophes. For example, you would refer to Jennifer and Ron’s wedding since both “own” the same wedding. But if they were regional managers who submitted separate budget reports, you might say this: Please review Jennifer’s and Ron’s budget reports (each owns a separate report).

Follow Key Rules

Let’s take a look at some of the time-tested grammar rules, most of which you might recall from English classes when you were younger. While exceptions in grammar usage do exist, you should follow these rules to avoid confusing your reader or sounding unprofessional.

Make Sure Pronouns Agree With Nouns

A pronoun takes the place of a noun. Examples include subject pronouns (I, he, she, we, they), object pronouns (me, him, her, us, them), and relative pronouns (who, whom).

The most common distinction between pronouns is singular or plural. If the subject is singular, then the pronoun must be singular, and similarly for a plural subject:

Singular: The newest branch manager was happy with her commission check.

Plural: All three branch managers were happy with their commission checks.

When referring to a company, be sure to use the singular pronoun its:

Wrong: After increasing market share by 40 percent in just one year, ZYC Corp. gave all their employees a generous bonus.

Right: After increasing market share by 40 percent in just one year, ZYC Corp. gave all its employees a generous bonus.

While their may sound better, ZYC Corp. is singular and thus requires its, a singular pronoun.

Sometimes, matching up subjects and pronouns can be tricky.

Wrong: The managing partner discussed several strategies to build the firm’s forensic accounting practice, the one area that hasn’t grown in the past year. This included a strong focus on social media marketing.

Right: The managing partner discussed several strategies to build the firm’s forensic accounting practice, the one area that hasn’t grown in the past year. These included a strong focus on social media marketing.

While This may appear right, the correct pronoun is the plural These, which agrees with the plural noun strategies in the prior sentence.

One of the latest changes to grammar rules—which may help avoid a frequent error—is the approved use of they as a personal pronoun by the Chicago Manual of Style and the Associated Press. Here’s an example:

Tell the next candidate that they need to reschedule for next week.

Before the rule change, he or she would’ve been required instead of they.

In deciding between I or me, determine whether the pronoun is replacing a subject or an object within the sentence.

Wrong: After meeting with the CFO, Suman told Pedro and I to begin ZY Partners’ consulting report.

Right: After meeting with the CFO, Suman told Pedro and me to begin ZY Partners’ consulting report.

Suman is the subject and Pedro and me is the object. If you can’t remember the subject-object rule, remove the other name (Pedro) and say it out loud: You’d say Suman told me (not I).

Here’s another example:

Wrong: I want to be sure that Larry, Carla, and me get to Denver by Tuesday afternoon.

Right: I want to be sure that Larry, Carla, and I get to Denver by Tuesday afternoon.

Again, remove the other names and say it out loud: I want to be sure that I (not me) get to Denver by Tuesday afternoon.

One of the most difficult pronoun distinctions is who or whom. Who is the equivalent of he or she, whereas whom is the equivalent of him or her.

Here’s an example where who is correct:

Wrong: For the annual meeting, whom should be appointed team leader?

Right: For the annual meeting, who should be appointed team leader?

As the equivalent of he or she, who is the proper pronoun, because you would say, She (not Her) should be appointed team leader.

And here’s an example where whom is correct:

Wrong: The operations manager who I want to hire isn’t available for the next three months.

Right: The operations manager whom I want to hire isn’t available for the next three months.

Referring to the operations manager, you would say, I want him or I want her, not I want he or I want she.

Another distinction is whether the subject is human, in which case the relative pronoun who is correct, or nonhuman, calling for which or that:

Wrong: Laron was thrilled about meeting with ZYS Industries, who offered him four weeks’ vacation.

Right: Laron was thrilled about meeting with ZYS Industries, which offered him four weeks’ vacation.

Make Sure Subjects Agree With Verbs

Singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs.

Wrong: There is too many social media posts to read.

Right: There are too many social media posts to read.

When choosing a singular or plural verb to agree in number with the subject of a sentence, disregard any phrases that follow the subject. The word immediately before the verb determines the number of the verb only if it’s really the subject. Don’t be fooled by how it sounds—double-check which word is the subject of the sentence. In the following examples, the subjects and verbs are in italics.

Wrong: The team of customer service reps are committed to success.

Right: The team of customer service reps is committed to success.

Wrong: Each of the branch managers agree that work schedules should be more flexible.

Right: Each of the branch managers agrees that work schedules should be more flexible.

Wrong: The new cybersecurity procedures, which offer much-needed protection, has been difficult for most employees to learn.

Right: The new cybersecurity procedures, which offer much-needed protection, have been difficult for most employees to learn.

Keep Tenses Consistent

Past, present, and future tenses are easily muddled in business writing. The goal is not to shift tenses in the flow of the sentence. Here are some sample pairs of sentences, one wrong and one right:

Shifted tense: As soon as she completed the mobile analytics report, she walked out of the room and takes a taxi to the local pub to join her co-workers. The shift here is from past (completed, walked) to present tense (takes).

Consistent tense: As soon as she completed the mobile analytics report, she walked out of the room and took a taxi to the local pub to join her co-workers.

Shifted tense: If Steve would pay more attention to his direct reports, he can be an excellent manager.

Consistent tense: If Steve pays more attention to his direct reports, he can be an excellent manager.

Shifted tense: Last year, the CEO said she is fed up with the accounting errors.

Consistent tense: Last year, the CEO said she was fed up with the accounting errors.

Write Complete Sentences

Incomplete sentences, or sentence fragments, can sometimes be obvious, such as disguising phrases like “going to my next meeting” or “working on the last few pages of the report” as sentences. Others can be harder to spot.

Comma splice: Serena, the procurement manager, was born in Baltimore in 1972, it was far different then, before the Inner Harbor was developed.

A comma splice is when a comma has been used to join two independent clauses. We have three options to make this grammatically correct:

Make it two sentences: Serena, the procurement manager, was born in Baltimore in 1972. It was far different then, before the Inner Harbor was developed.

Use a semicolon: Serena, the procurement manager, was born in Baltimore in 1972; it was far different then, before the Inner Harbor was developed.

Add a prepositional phrase and commas: Serena, the procurement manager, was born in Baltimore in 1972 at a time when it was far different, before the Inner Harbor was developed.

Another common error is using however as a conjunction.

Incorrect conjunction: The senior executives said that Gary’s proposal was well written and compelling, however they agreed that many key details were omitted.

Again, we have three choices for constructing a complete sentence:

Create two sentences: The senior executives said that Gary’s proposal was well written and compelling. However, they agreed that many key details were omitted.

Use a semicolon, and a comma after however: The senior executives said that Gary’s proposal was well written and compelling; however, they agreed that many key details were omitted.

Replace however with but: The senior executives said that Gary’s proposal was well written and compelling, but they agreed that many key details were omitted.

One last point: In some cases—as a reaction to another sentence—it’s OK to use a sentence fragment for dramatic effect:

The marketing team has pledged to be more careful when recording figures. Every last digit.

What will it take for the southwest division to exceed its sales goals? A lot more effort.

The only caveat about sentence fragments: Use them sparingly.

Don’t Dangle Your Participle

I don’t like to use grammar-speak, but I’ve got to do it here. A participle is a word that has the features of both a verb and an adjective, and a phrase that includes a participle usually modifies a noun. A participial phrase is said to “dangle” when it’s not located immediately before the noun it describes:

Wrong: Being an avid NASCAR fan, a ticket to the qualifying heat thrilled Andy.

Wrong: While driving to a business meeting, Megan’s car overheated and she arrived an hour late.

See the problems? A ticket is not a NASCAR fan (Andy is), and Megan’s car wasn’t driving to the meeting (Megan was). The problem is that the descriptive phrase immediately precedes the wrong word. Let’s correct those danglers:

Right: Being an avid NASCAR fan, Andy was thrilled with a ticket to the qualifying heat.

Right: While driving to a business meeting, Megan found that her car was overheating and she arrived 60 minutes late.

You may find it easier to rewrite the sentence without the introductory modifying phrase, as in this example:

Right: Megan’s car overheated on the way to the new business meeting, so she arrived 60 minutes late.

Don’t Leave Out and to Clarify Connections

Omitting the word and in a sentence where it would identify relationships among items is a common mistake. Here’s an example:

Incorrect: We chose Santa Fe for its delightful climate, its large number of skilled workers, the local government’s willingness to build roads, malls, and communication systems.

The conjunction and is needed to show that there are three reasons for the choice of Santa Fe. The “missing and” problem happens most often when you’re enumerating a set of structurally parallel items (in the previous example, the reasons for choosing Santa Fe). To avoid the problem, begin by listing the items:

delightful climate

large number of skilled workers

local government’s willingness to build

roads

malls

communication systems.

With that list, you see there are three reasons (climate, workers, and willingness to build). The third reason has three items within it (roads, malls, and communication systems). When you know what your sentence includes, it’s simple to write it clearly and accurately:

Correct: We chose Santa Fe for 1) its desirable location; 2) its large number of skilled workers; and 3) the local government’s willingness to build roads, malls, and communication systems.

Don’t Put Words or Phrases in the Wrong Positions

Never force the reader to guess at your meaning. See these two examples and instructions for fixing them:

Confusing: Faye closed the deal with a real estate firm using an innovative approach to web marketing.

Who had the innovative approach to web marketing, Faye or the real estate firm? To clarify that Faye was the innovator, revise the sentence:

Clear: Using an innovative approach to web marketing, Faye closed the deal with a real estate firm.

In the revised version, moving the phrase using an innovative approach to web marketing to the beginning of the sentence ties it directly to Faye.

In the following example, the phrase last month is poorly positioned:

Confusing: The sales team that was reviewing the most recent leads last month suggested that account reps target only prospects in Ohio and Indiana.

Did the sales team make the suggestion last month, or did they review the leads last month? This clarifies it:

Clear: After reviewing the most recent leads from last month, the sales team suggested that account reps target only prospects in Ohio and Indiana.

Break Some Old Rules

Regardless of what your English teachers may have told you back in grade school, high school, or college, it’s OK to start a sentence with a conjunction or preposition like and, or, but, or because. These words can provide context for what you’re about to write and can help you make a less abrupt transition from one sentence to another or from one paragraph to another. (If you still don’t believe me, check out any newspaper or online news site.)

Pointer

It’s OK to start sentences with and, or, but, and because.

Using certain conjunctions or prepositions to begin your sentence may enhance the natural rhythm of your words. Here are some examples:

Because to give context: Because we’ve received so many customer complaints, I suggest a meeting on February 12 to review procedures for handling calls.

And to unify sentences: Over the past 12 months, our company has been able to increase revenues while two of our major competitors have dropped out of the market. And we’re poised to continue this success for the next five years.

Note that the two sentences in that example are too long to combine into one sentence joined by and. Beginning the second sentence with And carries the thought forward, while adding a dramatic pause.

But to contrast thoughts:

For a three-year period, online marketing had proven to be highly successful. In that time, we increased market share by 12 percent. Everyone, including the CFO, expected this trend to continue.

But over the past two years, the number of new leads from online marketing has fallen off dramatically. The CFO said we need to shift strategies to appeal to mobile users.

Starting the second paragraph with But over the past two years provides a logical transition from the previous paragraph’s discussion of the successful Internet marketing program.

Avoid Common Word Usage Errors

Beyond the cut-and-dry rules of grammar comes the issue of word choice. Perfect grammar surrounding the wrong word won’t fix your mistake. Often, the errors occur because different words are spelled similarly. In other cases, it’s simply a matter of not knowing the correct meaning of words you’re trying to use. (See Tool 7-1 for a list of commonly misused words and examples of correct usage.) A couple of them deserve a more detailed explanation:

Affect vs. Effect

You can diminish the confusion between these two by recognizing that, in most common uses, affect is a verb and effect is a noun.

Wrong: Poor morale negatively effects the bottom line.

Right: Poor morale negatively affects the bottom line.

Wrong: Poor morale can have a devastating affect on the bottom line.

Right: Poor morale can have a devastating effect on the bottom line.

There are, however, two occasions when those words change places. Affect becomes a noun when describing a person’s visible emotion:

The psychiatrist observed his affect during the cognitive tests.

Effect becomes a verb when it means “bring about”:

With her policies, the new CEO hoped to effect meaningful change in the company.

Those less-common uses of affect and effect seldom occur in business text, but it’s good to be prepared.

i.e. vs. e.g.

If you mean “for example,” use e.g. Use i.e. only if you mean “in other words” or “that is.” These abbreviations have come to English from Latin: e.g. is the shortened form of exempli gratia and i.e. is the shortened form of id est. Both are common in business communication and used most often in parenthetical clauses. Be sure to insert a comma after the second period in each of these abbreviations. Here are two examples of proper usage:

Wrong: Carmen prefers brochures with bright colors (i.e., orange, red, and green).

Right: Carmen prefers brochures with bright colors (e.g., orange, red, and green).

Wrong: Your blog posts should be short (e.g., 200 words or less).

Right: Your blog posts should be short (i.e., 200 words or less).

Tool 7-1

Commonly Misused Words and Phrases

Accept, Except

Accept means “to agree to,” “to acknowledge,” or “to tolerate”: She accepts your offer.

Except is typically a preposition that specifies what’s excluded: Each report was delivered on time except last quarter’s sales analysis.

Advice, Advise

Advice is a recommendation for a certain action: Fang’s advice helped me complete the project faster.

Advise is “to inform” or “to notify”: We advise new hires to study the company’s mission statement.

Aggravate, Irritate

Aggravate means “to worsen”: Al’s frequent lateness aggravated the tension among his colleagues.

Irritate means “to annoy”: Mary’s attitude irritated the senior staff.

All ready, Already

All ready means that everybody or everything is ready: After three rounds of edits, the activity report was all ready for the supervisor’s review.

Already refers to something that occurred previously: By the end of the second quarter, the marketing budget was already spent.

Among, Between

Among is used when referring to three or more items: The CEO expects cooperation among the 12 departments.

Between is used when referring to two items: He tried unsuccessfully to mediate the conflict between the two managers.

Amount, Number

Amount is used when referring to something that can’t be counted: The amount of space for the conference was hardly adequate.

Number is used when referring to items that can be counted: Given the high number of client complaints, we need to improve our procedures.

Any one, Anyone

Any one refers to any single member of a group of people or items: Any one of you could be promoted next quarter.

Anyone refers to any individual, but not to a particular person or group: The company provides laptops to anyone who works at home.

Bad, Badly

Bad is an adjective (modifying a noun): I hope that bad weather doesn’t hurt attendance at the quarterly meeting.

Badly is an adverb (modifying a verb): The client’s receptionist was coughing badly.

Bring, Take

Bring is used for what’s coming to your location: The brand manager asked the account executive to bring the social media report to the meeting.

Take is used for what’s being moved to where you’re going: Take the iPad on your trip to Houston.

Compliment, Complement

Compliment as a noun refers to a flattering remark or best wishes. As a verb, it means “to praise”: The CEO complimented Meg’s outstanding leadership.

Complement, as a noun and verb, refers to an added feature that enhances something or goes well with it: Paul’s attention to detail complements his supervisor’s big-picture thinking.

Compose, Comprise

Compose is “to produce”: Jean asked Alex to compose a history of the firm.

Composed means “made up.” The anthology is composed of five volumes.

Comprise means “consists of”: Canada comprises 10 provinces. (The term “comprised of” is never acceptable.)

Device, Devise

Device is an instrument or object designed for a specific purpose: Sanjay ordered a special device to hold up the screen.

Devise is typically a verb that means “to plan” or “to invent”: Larry devised a plan to promote the firm’s latest electronic gadgets.

Discreet, Discrete

Discreet refers to not attracting attention: During the seminar, Tim made a discreet exit to the lobby to answer a call.

Discrete means “separate” or “distinct”: Internal communications and public relations are two discrete departments.

Elicit, Illicit

Elicit means “to provoke an action” or “to draw out something hidden”: Norah tried to elicit comments from the team about her web analytics report.

Illicit means “illegal”: The IT manager asked all employees to scan their computers weekly for illicit activity.

Ensure, Insure

Ensure is “to make something certain”: Please ensure that your expense reports are completed by the last day of the month.

Insure is “to be covered by an insurance policy” or “to protect against risk”: Small business owners should insure their companies against theft and fire.

Explicit, Implicit

Explicit means “clear” or “definite”: The instructions were explicit in requiring approval from the CFO before moving on to the next phase.

Implicit refers to something that was not stated but understood: Implicit in the email was the importance of getting feedback from employees at all levels.

Fewer, Less

Fewer is used for items that can be counted: He took 10 fewer trips this year.

Less is used for something that can’t be counted: Since she was promoted to senior partner, Candice has spent less time with her direct reports.

Good, Well

Good is an adjective (modifying a noun): Her presentation wasn’t good.

Well is typically an adverb (modifying a verb): The account manager did not perform well in the client meeting.

Imply, Infer

Imply is used when a speaker or writer indirectly suggests something: In her presentation, Laura implied that our chance for a bonus would depend on the company’s net profits.

Infer is used by a listener or reader who determines what the speaker or writer meant but didn’t say: During Laura’s presentation, I inferred that our chance for a bonus would depend on the company’s net profits.

In to, Into

In to can be used as a verb phrase (among other uses): Marcos came back in to remind Bob about his conference call.

Into indicates direction and movement: The chief marketing officer walked into the room about 15 minutes late.

It’s, Its

It’s is the contraction for “it is” or “it has”: It’s time to submit the proposal to YT Partners.

Its is a possessive pronoun that means “belonging to it”: The industry has always respected YC Industries and its senior executives.

Lose, Loose

Lose means “to misplace” or “to have something taken away”: If you don’t respond promptly to clients’ calls, you’ll lose their respect.

Loose means “not tight-fitting” or “imprecise”: I was surprised that this year’s regulations were so loose.

May Be, Maybe

May be refers to a possibility: They may be late for the conference call.

Maybe, an adverb, means “possibly”: Maybe Steve can approve our budget by Friday.

Precede, Proceed

Precede means “come before”: The project conception phase always precedes the project planning phase.

Proceed means “to begin action”: After Amira emails her approval, proceed with the first step of the audit.

Respectfully, Respectively

Respectfully, an adverb (modifying a verb), means “showing respect”: Mike said that he respectfully declined the invitation.

Respectively means “correspondingly,” matching one item with another in the order given: The laptop computer and laser printer cost about $900 and $400, respectively.

Slow, Slowly

Slow is an adjective (modifying a noun): The annual meeting is always slow to get going.

Slowly is an adverb (modifying a verb): To ensure the assistants understood their responsibilities, Linda spoke slowly during her presentation.

Than, Then

Than refers to a comparison: The presentation ran 45 minutes longer than expected.

Then means “after that”: First review the specifications and then proofread the report.

That, Which

That starts a restrictive clause whose absence would change the meaning of the sentence: The Wall Street Journal is one newspaper that all our managers should read every morning.

Which starts a nonrestrictive clause, something that can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence: The Wall Street Journal, which covers many aspects of business, is extremely well written.

Their, There, They’re

Their means “belonging to them”: Their performance was outstanding.

There means “in that place, “at that point,” or “on that matter”: She explained that there are several options for solving the problem.

They’re is the contraction for “they are”: They’re always on time for meetings and conference calls.

Your, You’re

Your means “belonging or relating to somebody”: Your most important job is to mentor new employees.

You’re is the contraction for “You are”: I appreciate that you’re always the first person to submit monthly expenses.

Whose, Who’s

Whose is the possessive form of “who or which.” Simone is an example of a woman whose career advanced rapidly after her first promotion.

Who’s is a contraction for “who is” or “who has.” Please email me the name of the new manager who’s attending today’s meeting.

Your Turn

Improving your grammar takes practice and the patience to look up the right usage on a website or in a resource book. Though nobody expects you to be perfect, you should avoid mistakes that could make you appear sloppy, lazy, or uneducated. The following exercises will give you some quick practice in correcting common grammatical mistakes.

Circle the correct word for noun–pronoun agreement or verb–subject agreement:

The team of supervisors always exceed, exceeds expectations.

Each of the regional managers agree, agrees that service has improved.

We believe in XR Company and its, their people.

The new cybersecurity precautions, which could offer much-needed peace of mind, has, have met with strong opposition.

Athos, along with four of his co-workers, exercise, exercises every evening after work.

Seth and three of his co-workers exercise, exercises every evening after work.

Circle the word with the apostrophe in the correct position:

The daycare manager misplaced the children’s, childrens’ favorite toys.

Maria lost all the data on her laptop computer when its, it’s hard drive crashed.

The supervisor’s, supervisors’ best asset is his technical knowledge.

The head of operations, whose, who’s subordinates work hard, earned another production award.

It’s, Its hard to keep morale strong during a corporate upheaval.

Please review both proposals—Joan’s and Shing’s, Joan and Shing’s—by June 8.

Circle the correct abbreviation—i.e. or e.g.

Bring back the old peer review systems (i.e., e.g., managers from each division critiquing one another’s performance).

For the European conference, consider some new destinations (i.e., e.g., Brussels, Nice, and Seville.)

The new finance director demands near-perfect quarterly reports (i.e., e.g., no typos).

If you go to Italy, be sure to sample many different dishes (i.e., e.g., lasagna, risotto, and tortellini.).

Grammar answers

1a: exceeds, 1b: agrees, 1c: its, 1d: have, 1e: exercises, 1f: exercise

2a: children’s, 2b: its, 2c: supervisor’s, 2d: whose, 2e: It’s, 2f: Joan’s and Shing’s

3a: i.e, 3b: e.g., 3c: i.e., 3d: e.g.

The Next Step

Writing concise, well-organized, and compelling emails and documents—with correct grammar—enables you to achieve better results. But writing error-free text the first time is rare. To ensure that your message comes out the way you want it to, you’ll need to carefully review your text. We’ll address that in step 8 (Edit and Proofread Effectively).