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# PRINTtips

## A Guide to... Effective Writing



**TechneGraphics** INC  
Professional Printing Providers

2002 Ford Circle Suite D  
Milford, Ohio 45150

513.248.2121

Fax: 513.248.5141

info@techgra.com

www.tgiconnect.com

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**H**ave you ever thought about how much of each day you spend writing? Not just writing copy for marketing materials, a newsletter, or other business-related activities, but changing text on web sites, sending e-mails, blogging, texting, and perhaps even handwriting an old-fashioned thank you note. Since much of what used to be oral phone conversation is now written, and marketing is done online, the need for more writing is evident.

This has increased the pressure on everyone within an organization to write well, from customer service representatives using e-mail to communicate with customers, to marketing executives developing content for printed materials, and the company web site. Bad writing calls attention to itself, causing the reader to miss the point of the communication. It also conveys an unflattering picture of the individual, and by extension, the business.

Why is it so hard to write well? Because writing requires a coordinated effort involving memory (to correctly apply the rules of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation); language ability (grammar, vocabulary, word order, and sentence structure); and higher-order cognitive skills (planning, organizing, reasoning, logic, and abstract thinking). All three must be developed equally and used simultaneously for good writing to result.



### The mechanics of writing, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization

The effectiveness of any written communication, from the most sophisticated marketing piece to an e-mail, will be compromised if it has errors in the mechanics — spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Some readers may even form an opinion about the writer or the business (sloppy, doesn't care, unprofessional) based on these errors. So the first way to become a better writer is to spell words correctly and to follow commonly-accepted rules for punctuation and capitalization.

### Spelling

A spellchecker is a useful tool for finding misspelled words, typos, and oversights. But it will not find a word that is spelled correctly yet used incorrectly. The English language is

## A Guide to... Effective Writing (cont.)

filled with word pairs that sound alike but have different meanings — like its and it's or who's and whose. Become familiar with the most common (see the Tips & Tricks section of this newsletter), and know when to use each.

### Punctuation

Punctuation has two functions: to convey intended meaning, and to provide tone and nuance. For example:

- A period shows that a thought has been completed.
- A semicolon indicates that two thoughts are closely related.
- A colon indicates that an explanation of a previous thought is coming.
- A comma signals a pause and keeps thoughts from becoming confusing.

Misuse of punctuation can completely change the meaning of a thought, as in these examples:

- Don't stop. Don't. Stop.
- Eats shoots and leaves. Eats, shoots, and leaves.
- Let's eat, Grandma. Let's eat Grandma.
- A woman without her man is nothing. A woman: without her, man is nothing.

### Capitalization

Capitalization makes reading easier by indicating the beginning of a sentence, and separates proper nouns (names, specific places, and things) from other words. Without capitalization, sentences can run together, making reading slower and more difficult.

It is customary to capitalize:

- the first word of a sentence;
- proper nouns and the adjectives derived from them (Alaskan from Alaska);
- the major words in a headline or title;

- personal titles when combined with a person's name (Mrs. Patterson, Dr. Adams); and
- all letters in an acronym (NASA).

### Language skills: grammar and vocabulary

Grammar is the set of rules governing the way the sentences of a language are constructed. Closely related is syntax, the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences.

Regardless of the type of writing — a sales letter, a blog post, or a newsletter, for example — the rules of grammar and syntax apply. Here is a brief review:

- **Parts of speech:** these are the building blocks of grammar; each part has a specific function in a sentence. The eight parts of speech are nouns, pronouns, articles, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunction, and interjections.
- **Sentences:** sentences are composed of three parts: a noun, a verb, and a complement (such as a direct or indirect object).
- **Sentence types:** sentences may be simple, compound, or complex.

Word choice is a crucial part of good writing.

To avoid ambiguity and confusion, readers need the writer to select words that convey meaning precisely and are appropriate in the context. A strong vocabulary enables this function, promotes effective communication, and strengthens the power of persuasion. Good writers tailor their vocabulary to the audience and the circumstances.

### Effective writing: clear, concise, organized, and elegant

Effective writing requires an understanding of the audience, knowledge of the subject, and the ability to bring the two together in a clear, concise, and organized manner. Good writing begins with a purpose — a thesis or argument — that the writer explains, supports, and logically develops using good language skills.

Clarity in writing means choosing specific, descriptive words to convey meaning and activity. Using action verbs instead of forms of to be, active

*“Punctuation has two functions:”*

*“Capitalization makes reading easier...”*

*“Effective writing requires an understanding of the audience...”*

## A Guide to... Effective Writing (cont.)

instead of passive voice, and avoiding unclear pronoun references contributes to clarity.

Concise writing avoids wordy phrases when a single word can convey the same meaning (allow, give, or let, in place of provide an opportunity to); uses shorter, simpler words (so instead of accordingly); and eliminates redundancy (concluded for arrived at the conclusion).

Good writing follows an organizational structure:

- An introductory paragraph that sets out the thesis
- Paragraphs that support the thesis
- A concluding paragraph that provides a summary, draws a conclusion, makes a prediction, or does a combination of these.

Similarly, each paragraph has a topic sentence representing its controlling idea. All other

sentences in the paragraph are related to and advance the idea of the topic sentence. Within the paragraph, sentences are structured so that the important words and ideas stand out.

Finally, good writing is elegant. The writing flows gracefully in a smooth rhythm and pace. The thoughts are coherent and logically developed with appropriate emphasis and style.

### Writing is an important business skill

Understanding the elements of good writing has many benefits. Besides helping you improve your writing skills, it will make you a better editor and a better communicator. The expansion of writing from printed materials and correspondence to the digital world means that customers and prospects have more opportunities to form an impression about your business based on your writing. Even if writing is not central to your business model, it is one measure of your company's professionalism.

*“Good writing follows an organizational structure.”*

## When to Use What...

**E**nglish vocabulary contains many easily-confused word pairs or trios that are commonly misused because they sound alike, look alike, or have similar meanings. Test yourself on these:

- Accept/except: accept is a verb meaning to consent to receive. Except is a preposition that means excluding.
- Affect/effect: affect is a verb meaning to alter or influence. Effect is a noun meaning result. Occasionally effect is used as a verb meaning to bring about.
- Good/well: good is an adjective that describes a noun (someone, something, or someplace) that is good. (Bob is a good student.) Well is an adverb that comments on how an action is performed. (Bob did well on his test.)

- Imply/infer: imply is a verb meaning to suggest. Infer is a verb meaning to intuit or assume.
- \* Farther/further: Farther refers to additional distance. Further refers to additional time, amount or other abstract matters.
- It's/its: it's is a contraction for it is. Its means belonging to it.
- Lie/lay: lie is a verb meaning to recline. Lay is a verb that transfers action to something else. Further confusion results from the fact that lay is the past tense of the verb to lie.
- 1980s/1980's: the apostrophe indicates possession (ownership). Lack of an apostrophe indicates more than one (i.e., plural).

*“Further confusion results from the fact that lay is the past tense of the verb to lie.”*



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## QUESTION:

Can you suggest ways to build my vocabulary?

## ANSWER:

- **Step 1: Read.**

Reading provides the opportunity to encounter new words. Sometimes you can tell the meaning from the context; sometimes you'll need to consult a dictionary.

- **Step 2: Listen.**

Children increase their vocabulary by listening to others talk. You can do the same thing. Again, you may be able to tell the meaning from the context, or you may have to consult a dictionary.

- **Step 3: Write down new words.**

As you read and listen, write the new words down in a notebook or put in your smart phone.

- **Step 4: Consult a dictionary.**

Use a dictionary to determine the meaning of each word in your notebook or smart phone, then write the definition in a vocabulary notebook. Also, enter a phonetic spelling of the word so you remember how to pronounce it.

- **Step 5: Use it.**

To help you remember the new word, use it several times in conversation as soon as you can.



*"...use it several  
times in  
conversation..."*