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GRAMMAR

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Professional Writing Skills - Additional Resources

Participant Training Manual

Comprehensive Public Training Program



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

VISUAL AIDS IN REPORTS AND PROPOSALS

Visual aids in documents help the audience access information more quickly and efficiently. Tables, graphs, charts, and images are all useful tools in documents, but you should be careful to use only those visual aids that are helpful to the audience and not just decorative.

The best way to ensure that the visual aid placed in the document is appropriate and useful is to ask the following questions:

(1) Is it necessary?

Use only those images that are necessary to clarify or to illustrate the message. Avoid overusing images because the audience may lose the message.

(2) Is it convenient?

Analyze the message and consider the graphic ways to present the information that would help the audience grasp the message quicker and easier; however, make sure the visual aid does not make the audience work harder to get the information.

(3) Is it accurate?

Proofread visual aids to ensure they are correct. Check the information against the text version of the message to ensure that it is not presenting conflicting information.

(4) Is it honest?

Make sure the message that is presented is honest and does not present “accurate” information in a way that gives the audience a false impression. Distorting or over simplifying numbers, graphs, and charts, while accurate, may create a message that is not an honest representation of the information. Maintain ethics when presenting information graphically.

CHARTS AND TABLES IN REPORTS AND PROPOSALS

- ☑ Label all of your columns and units clearly.
- ☑ Include a title that gives the audience a clear idea of what to expect in the graphic.
- ☑ Make sure that bars and lines on graphs are easy to read.
- ☑ Make sure the scales are appropriate for the information and they create an accurate picture of reality.
- ☑ Check the numbers and graphs for accuracy.

USING BULLETS IN DOCUMENTS

- ☑ Beware of overusing bullets. Every statement in the document does not deserve the emphasis of a bullet.
- ☑ Do not use bullets as a substitute for good paragraph structure.
- ☑ Be sure that all bullets in a list use the same grammatical construction.
- ☑ Be certain the ruler is set so the lines indents properly.
- ☑ Bulleted items may be **bold-faced**, *italicized*, or underlined. Don't overuse these tools; otherwise, the emphasis is lost.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PUNCTUATION

Commas - Contrary to popular belief, you do not use a comma when you pause. You do pause when you are reading aloud and see a comma, but you cannot randomly add a comma in a sentence because you want your reader to pause. There are 6 main rules for adding commas.

1. Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, or, nor, for, but, so, yet) to join two sentences.
 - The report has been issued, and its recommendations have been accepted.
 - The new photocopy machine will save us time, but we have to walk to another building to get to it.
2. A comma separates introductory elements from the main part of a sentence.
 - Since Dr. Jones will be lecturing in London this week, Wednesday's meeting has been cancelled.
 - On the other hand, the new vacation schedule is not as bad as we anticipated.
3. A comma separates elements in a simple series. NOTE: In formal writing, use the comma before the and. In informal writing, it is acceptable to not use that comma.
 - The flag is red, white, and blue.
4. Use commas to set off quotations.
 - "The business of America," said Calvin Coolidge, "is business."
 - "Tourists are a large portion of the income in many major cities," Tommy Blue told the press.
5. Use commas to set off nonessential expressions – words, phrases, and clauses that are not necessary for the meaning or the structural completeness of the sentence. TEST: Read the sentence aloud without the information between the commas. If the sentence makes sense without the information, that information should be offset by commas.
 - I will, therefore, cancel our contract for services immediately.
 - The restaurant, located across from our house, was horrible.
 - Reading books is important, I believe.
6. Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives.
 - The tall, swarthy man applied for a job at our agency.
 - The brown, spotted puppy tried to bite me. (Puppy is brown with spots) vs. The brown spotted puppy tried to bite me. (Puppy has brown spots.)

Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when two sentences are joined incorrectly with a comma. To correct this, you must use a comma with a coordinating conjunction OR replace the comma with a semi-colon (;).

- INCORRECT: Mary mailed the envelope, Jeremy received the letter.
⇒ The correct sentence would be: Mary mailed the envelope; John received the letter. OR Mary mailed the envelope, and John received the letter.

Colons

Use a colon to introduce an important statement, a list of items, or a long quotation.

- There are three kinds of sleep: good sleep, okay sleep, and no sleep. Which kind of sleep do you get?
- George Eliot tells us: "It seems to me we can never give up longing or wishing while we are alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good. These are the things we hunger for."

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Semicolons

Two rules for semicolons are:

1. Use a semicolon to join 2 complete sentences.
 - Taking a long test can be hard on the brain; Sharon enjoys the long tests because they are challenging.
2. Use semicolons to separate items in a series when one or more of the item has a comma.
 - I want to visit the following locations: Shannon, Ireland; Germany; London, England; and Denver, Colorado.

Hyphens

The hyphen is used to join two or more words to create a single unit. Hyphens join two or more words, but the new word they form usually creates a meaning different from what the individual words mean by themselves.

1. Hyphenate two or more words functioning as a single unit.
 - His never-say-die attitude is infectious. (adjective)
 - His grip was a bone-crusher. (noun)
2. Hyphenate two-word numbers when they are written out.
 - Twenty-one days from now Elizabeth will be here.
3. Hyphenate words that are combined with the prefixes “ex” and “self.”
 - The ex-president felt very self-conscious.
4. Hyphenate prefixes like “anti,” “pro,” and “pre” when the first letter of the next word begins with a capital letter.
 - She was anti-Establishment, but she was also pro-American.
5. Hyphenate words when not to do so would cause confusion.
 - Re-cover (the chair); recover (the wallet)
 - Re-sign (the contract); resign (from office)
6. Hyphenate words that are suspended in a sentence.
 - He will take a two- to four- year leave of absence.

Apostrophes

Use the apostrophe to show ownership (possession).

1. Show possession with an ‘s for singular nouns and an s’ for plural nouns.

Singular Nouns

Manager’s
President’s
Worker’s

Plural Nouns

Managers’
Presidents’
Workers’

2. Show possession with nouns that form their plural in ways other than by adding an “s” by adding an ‘s to the plural of the noun.

Singular Nouns

Man’s
Woman’s
Child’s

Plural Nouns

Men’s
Women’s
Children’s

3. Show possession of singular nouns ending in “s” by adding an apostrophe or by adding an ‘s.

Boss’s Car
Dress’s Button

Boss’ Car
Dress’ Button

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4. To show possession of plural nouns ending in “s,” add an apostrophe to the end of the word.

Boys’ Frame
Writers’ Network

Executives’ Club
Bosses’ Decision

5. To form the possessive of pairs of nouns, add ‘s to the second noun in instances of join possession.

John and Mary’s House
Men and Women’s Pool

Brother and Sister’s Car
Tommy and Jean’s Daughter

6. Add ‘s to each member of the pair in instances of individual possession.

John’s and Mary’s Computers
Men’s and Women’s Pools

Brother’s and Sister’s Cars
Tommy’s and Jean’s Daughters

7. To show possession for group nouns or compound nouns, add ‘s to the end of the unit.

Groups Nouns

Association’s
Team’s
Committee’s

Compound Nouns

Editor-in-Chief’s
Someone Else’s
President-Elect’s

8. To show possession for compounds that form their plural by adding “s” to the first word, add ‘s to the end of the unit.

Editors-in-Chief’s
Sons-in-Law’s
Writers in Residence’s

9. Avoid confusion when adding an apostrophe to some plural words.

- Jackson received two E’s on his scorecard.
- He now has season tickets to the Oakland A’s.

Quotation Marks

Quotation marks may be used to emphasize a word or cite an example, but they have two main functions:

1. To show what someone said.

- Cheryl wrote, “I believe that treating everyone as an individual is very important. That’s how I would want to be treated.”

2. To identify the title of a short story, poem, article, song, chapter in a book, one-act play or any other short piece of writing.

- “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head” is a wonderful song for singing and dancing.

NOTE: Titles of longer works – books, plays, movies, newspapers, and magazine – are commonly italicized or underlined.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences occur when two or more sentences are joined without the correct punctuation. Sentences must be separated by a period or joined by a semicolon or a coordinating conjunction with a comma.

Run-On Sentence: Wallace Stevens was a poet he was also the president of an insurance company.

- ⇒ Correct Sentence: Wallace Stevens was a poet. He was also the president of an insurance company.
- ⇒ Correct Sentence: Wallace Stevens was a poet; he was also the president of an insurance company.
- ⇒ Correct Sentence: Wallace Stevens was a poet, but he was also the president of an insurance company.

Parallel Construction

Parallelism means using the same grammatical structure for all the items in a sentence that have the same function. Parallelism not only hold sentences together, it adds emphasis, provides flow, expresses thoughts more clearly, makes reading more pleasurable, takes up less space, and makes what we say easier to remember. This is why so many quotations are in parallel forms:

- ☑ I came, I saw, I conquered.
- ☑ A penny saved is a penny earned.

Faulty parallelism occurs when the second or successive items in a parallel series do not fit the pattern established by the first item. For example:

- ☑ Eating is time-consuming, expensive, and it makes you fat.
 - ⇒ The proper construction for this sentence is:
- ☑ Eating is time-consuming, expensive, and fattening

To correct faulty parallelism, put all the related items into the same grammatical form.

Active and Passive Voice

In sentences written in active voice, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb; the subject acts.

- ☑ The dog bit the boy.

In sentences written in the passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. Sometimes the use of the passive voice can create awkward sentences. The passive voice is generally accompanied by the following words: am, is, was, were, are, or been. Also, the phrase “by the...” after the verb is another hallmark of the passive voice.

- ☑ The boy was bitten by the dog.

In most nonscientific writing, active voice is preferable to passive voice. Sentences in active voice tend to be shorter, clearer, and more direct than those in the passive voice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GENERAL GRAMMAR

Noun-Pronoun Agreement

Pronouns, which are substitutes for nouns, have two things in common with nouns: number (singular or plural) and gender (masculine, feminine, and neuter). What they don't have in common is person. Some pronouns are first person ("I," "we"), some are second person ("you"), and some are third person ("he," "she," "it," "they," "one," "some," "none," "all," "everybody," and "somebody").

A pronoun in any sentence must agree with the noun it refers to in person, number, and gender.

- Person: "The President assigned some salespeople to the project, but she knew it wouldn't help."
⇒ The neuter pronoun "it" cannot refer to "people." The correct pronoun is "they."
- Number: "The testing of the new security devices should be nearing their final stage."
⇒ The plural pronoun "their" cannot refer to the singular noun "testing." The correct pronoun is "its."
- Gender: "The old car did her best, but the hill was too much."
⇒ The feminine pronoun "her" should not be linked to a neuter noun. The correct pronoun is "its."

1. Avoid mismatching nouns and pronouns in number. A singular noun requires a singular pronoun. A plural noun requires a plural pronoun.
 - Everyone, everybody, anybody, and anyone* take singular verbs and should be referred to as singular pronouns.
⇒ Anybody who wants to enter has to pay his/her fee by Friday.
2. *All* and *some* are singular or plural depending on the context in which they appear. Both words are often followed by "of." If what comes after the "of" is a mass or bulk of something, the pronoun is singular.
 - Some of the material lost its color.
⇒ If what comes after the "of" refers to a number of things or persons, the pronoun is plural.
 - Some of the agents lost their notebooks.

Modifiers

A modifier is a word that changes or in some way alters the meaning of another word. For this reason, modifiers should be placed as close as possible to the words they modify. To put them somewhere else can cause readers to understand something different than intended. These modifiers are called dangling modifiers.

- The building, old and in disrepair, was purchased for a reasonable price.
- Each salesperson renewed their dedication to increase sales.

Tense

Most verbs are written in the present, past, or future tense. Sometimes, however, writing requires a shift from one tense to another. If, for example, we are contrasting past action with present action or demanding action in the future based on what is taking place in the present, we need to shift tenses. Errors occur when we don't change the tense of the verb to fit the action we are expressing. Here's an example:

- I asked the manager where I could get a copy of the report, and he tells me I will have to see the president.
⇒ This sentence unnecessarily shifts from the past tense to the present tense with the word "tells." The correct way to write this sentence is: I asked the manager where I could get a copy of the report, and he told me I would have to see the president.

Generally speaking, if you begin writing in one tense, stay in that tense. If you have to change, consider beginning a new paragraph every time you shift tenses. A new paragraph alerts the reader that a change may be coming, and a new paragraph helps your reader understand your message more clearly.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Capitalization

Capitalization is determined by convention. Unless you have a specific reason for not doing so, obey the conventions. Here are some guidelines that can help:

- Capitalize the first word of every sentence.
- Capitalize the proper names of people, places, and things: Bob, New York, the White House.
- Capitalize words derived from proper nouns: American, Edwardian.
- Capitalize the days of the week: Monday, Tuesday.
- Capitalize the months of the year: February, March.
- Capitalize the names of holidays: Christmas, Labor Day.
- Capitalize historical documents: Declaration of Independence.
- Capitalize historical events and ages: Reformation, Industrial Age.
- Capitalize common nouns when used as place names: Mississippi River, Fifth Avenue.
- Capitalize the main words in titles: Moby Dick, The House of Mirth.
- Capitalize the words “president” and “governor” without a name if they refer to the President of the United States or the Governor of a state.
- Capitalize the names of family members when used with a name: Uncle Paul, Grandma Josephine.

Numerals

Numbers in writing are governed by convention. Here are the standard guidelines:

- Use the number for numerals above 10 unless the word for that number is shorter or easier to read than the number itself:
 - ⇒ There were 14 people at the meeting.
 - ⇒ He sold the company for a million dollars.
- Do not begin a sentence with an Arabic numeral:
 - ⇒ Six hundred employees work for Acme, Inc.
- Spell out numbers under 101 when they are used as adjectives:
 - ⇒ In the early twentieth century, there were fewer four-year colleges.
- Do not spell out dates or numbers that are part of a series:
 - ⇒ March 30, 1980
 - ⇒ Chapter II
- Use Arabic numbers with a.m. and p.m. Use o'clock and morning or afternoon when the number is in script.
 - ⇒ The meeting went to 7 p.m.
 - ⇒ The meeting went to seven in the evening.
 - ⇒ The meeting went to seven o'clock in the evening.

Who vs. Whom

When deciding to use *who* or *whom* in your sentence. Remember this easy formula.

- Who = He
 - ⇒ I believe William Faulkner is a wonderful writer, who is dedicated to telling wonderful stories.
 - ⇒ Read the sentence as following: I believe William Faulkner is a wonderful writer; he is dedicated to telling wonderful stories.
- Whom = Him
 - ⇒ Whom would you ask to speak at graduation this year?
 - ⇒ Read the sentence as following: Would you ask him/her to speak at graduation this year?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Synonyms

Do not confuse certain possessive pronouns with contractions and other phrases that sound like the possessive pronouns.

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| its (possessive) | it's (it is OR it has) |
| their (possessive) | they're (they are) |
| theirs (possessive) | there's (there is OR there has) |
| your (possessive) | you're (you are) |

Do not confuse whose (the possessive form of who) with who's (a contraction meaning "who is" or "who has").

- Whose shoes are you wearing because they stink?
- Who's going to pick up your friend after work?

Either or Neither

"Either" and "neither" are both singular adjectives meaning "one or the other of two." "Neither" of course means "not the first one and not the second one." In formal writing, we usually use a singular verb because "either" and "neither" signal that one of the following nouns is the subject, but not both:

- Either Bill or Bob is going to the conference. (One or the other is going, but not both.)
- Neither Joan nor Jane likes sushi. (= Joan doesn't like sushi. Jane doesn't like sushi either!)

Notice that we say "either...or" and "neither...nor." In informal English, most people would say "Neither Joan OR Jane LIKE sushi." That's all right in conversation, but in formal documents you should prefer the formal usage. Of course we have a confusing exception to this rule. You can use a plural verb if you have a plural noun next to the verb:

- Either Joan or the Kennedy's are going to the conference.
 - ⇒ But put the singular noun closer to the verb, and it goes back to singular!
 - ⇒ Either the Kennedy's or Joan is going to the conference.
- It is the same with "neither."
 - ⇒ Neither Jane nor her brothers like sushi.
 - ⇒ Neither her brothers nor Jane likes sushi.