

8 common grammar mistakes to avoid in business writing

When you're writing for business, you want to put your best foot forward, but when grammatical errors litter your writing, it can leave you looking less than polished.

While perfect grammar is difficult to achieve for even the most highly skilled and published writers, you can avoid some common grammatical mistakes with practice.

The following are common errors writers make, and if you can avoid these 8, you're one step closer to being a more polished writer.

Mixing up "then" and "than"

Only one letter separates the words "then" and "than," yet they have drastically different meanings.

"Then" is used to express a time frame. For example, "She has to complete the assignment, then she will go to lunch."

While "than" is used to compare. For example, "Her current assignment is shorter than the previous one."

While most people who read the words in context will be able to decipher the meaning, it's still best to avoid this mistake altogether.

Adding prepositions to the end of a sentence

Using a preposition at the end of a sentence in everyday speech is common. However, it is technically incorrect and you should avoid doing so in your business writing because it makes your writing more informal.

Prepositions are words that establish a relation between the subject and object in the sentence. Examples of common prepositions include: under, of, off, on, to, from, by, in, below, at, above, around, down, and with.

For example, instead of asking "where are they going to?" you can simply ask "where are they going?"

If you find it challenging to write a sentence without putting the preposition at the end, rewrite it, so it doesn't include the word.

Using the incorrect version of "they're," "there," or "their"

These 3 words sound identical in speech, but they have different spellings in writing. It's necessary to differentiate between the different meanings to use them properly.

"They're" is a contraction for "they are." Ex: They're my favorite clients to support.

"Their" refers to something owned by a group. Ex: We are using their data in the presentation.

“There” refers to a place. Ex: Do you want to go there for the retreat?

Once you have a solid understanding of the difference between the three, be sure to double-check your writing when using them since they’re easy to mix up.

Writing in a passive voice

Passive language is another common grammatical mistake to avoid in your business writing. Essentially, your writing is passive when the subject of the sentence is acted upon by the verb. In contrast, active writing is when the subject performs the action stated by the verb and follows the subject + verb + object formula. When you don’t utilize that formula, your writing lacks clarity, as is the case with writing in the passive voice.



Here’s an example of passive vs. active writing.

Passive sentence:

The presentation was created by Bobby.

In this example

Object (Presentation) + Verb (Created) + Subject (Bobby) is the incorrect formula.

Active sentence:

Bobby created the presentation.

In this example

Subject (Bobby) + Verb (Created) + Object (Presentation) is the correct formula.

Using “they” instead of “it” when referring to a company

A company is a singular noun. Therefore when referring to it in your writing, you want to use the word “it” instead of “they.” While you might think about a company as including various people and want to reflect the people in the company by using “they,” “their,” or other plural words when referencing it, doing so is inappropriate grammatically.

Incorrect: We enjoy the airline because they can accommodate our last-minute flight needs.

Correct: We enjoy the airline because it can accommodate our last-minute flight needs.

Using “Who,” “Whom,” “Whose,” and “Who’s” inappropriately

There’s no doubt that these 4 words are similar; however, they carry different meanings that you want to differentiate between in your writing.

Here’s an overview of what they mean.

“Who” refers to a living noun: “Who is attending this afternoon’s meeting?”

“Whom” usually refers to someone who receives something: “To whom will you address this letter?”

“Whose” refers to ownership of an item or other noun: “Whose team earned the highest numbers last quarter?”

“Who’s” is a contraction for “who is” and identifies someone doing something: “Who’s taking over the data analysis for Tanya?”

Using the word "Alot"

"Alot" isn’t actually a word. At least not with that spelling or in the way you typically use it.

When referring to a large number, you want to write the words separately “a lot.” For example, “I have a lot of candidate applications to review today.”

Another similar-sounding word is “allot,” but this refers to setting aside an amount of an item for a particular reason. For example, “I will allot the team \$1,000 to get this project off the ground.”

Inaccurate subject-verb agreement

The subject and verb of a sentence should either be plural or singular. You can’t have a singular subject and a plural verb or vice versa.

Incorrect: The best employees tries their best to get the job done well.

Correct: The best employees try their best to get the job done well.

In the above example, “employees” is a plural subject, and the verb “tries” is a plural verb.

Don't count on spellcheck to catch everything

Thankfully, technology makes it easier to identify and correct these common grammatical mistakes and many more. Artificial intelligence developed by spelling/grammar checkers in word documents and websites like Grammarly allows you to scan your business writing for the errors you don’t even know you’re making.

But, since you can't rely entirely on technology, understanding these mistakes independent of these grammar tools can help you put your best foot forward in your writing.