

Ten Helpful Grammar and Style Tips

The following is a distillation of rules pertaining to what are perhaps the ten most common mistakes we see in business writing. These rules, combined with the intuition of an excellent copy editor, will stand you in good stead when it comes to producing a perfectly written business document. When you disregard these rules, mistakes will occur.

Not everyone will notice your mistakes. *But the people who will are probably just the people you are trying to reach and persuade.* Always have someone with greater editing skills than yours look your paper over before you publish it to your coworkers, your company, or the world at large.

1. Plural Nouns and Singular Verbs

Nouns that are plural in form but singular in meaning usually take singular verbs. In all doubtful cases, consult a good dictionary. *News travels faster than ever in this age of satellite communications. Economics is a fascinating subject.*

2. Capitalization in Heads

Here are some guidelines for capitalization in headings and titles. Capitalize **nouns**, **pronouns**, **verbs**, **adverbs**, and **adjectives**. Lowercase **articles** (a, an, the), **conjunctions** (and, or, but, nor), and **prepositions** (of, with, to, on, before, into, over, about). *Note:* AP and some house styles capitalize prepositions of four or more letters, whereas others may capitalize multisyllable prepositions, such as “above” and “beyond.”

3. Hyphen with -ly Words

When a unit modifier contains an adverb ending in -ly no hyphen is required (highly regarded book).

4. A Little Dash Will Do You: Hyphen or dash (-)

A hyphen or dash is used for end-of-line breaks or in compound words that are hyphenated. **En dash (–)** An en dash is slightly larger than a hyphen. An en dash is most commonly used to separate numbers in a range. **Em dash (—)** An em dash is approximately twice the size of an en dash. Use an em dash to set off nonessential clauses in a sentence.

5. I before E Except after C

The “i before e except after c” rule applies for most words with ei/ie combinations in them (*fierce, hygiene, niece; deceit, perceive, receipt*). One exception is if the c has a “sh” sound, then the c will probably be followed by ie (*ancient, deficient*).

6. accept, except

Accept means to receive, e.g., *I accept your kind offer.* *Except* means to exclude, e.g., *I will take all of the plants except the pink one.*

7. among, between

Among is used when there are more than two persons, e.g., *We are among friends.* *Between* is used when there are two persons or entities, e.g., *This is between you and me.*

8. bad, badly

Bad is an adjective, and is used properly with verbs relating to the senses of smell, sight, feeling, etc., e.g., *I feel bad.* *Badly* is an adverb (it describes a verb, usually) and means poorly, e.g., *He limped badly.*

9. Punctuation with Quotation Marks

There are two simple rules to follow: Periods and commas should be set inside quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points only go inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quoted material.

10. e.g., i.e.

E.g. is short for the Latin *exempli gratia*, meaning for example. I.e. is short for the Latin *id est*, or “that is [to say].” Both are always followed by a comma.