

The Seven Deadly Writing Sins

Are you making these mistakes in your writing?

By Jakki Bendell



"Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words."

-Mark Twain



Introduction

We all make mistakes, even professional writers (and writing coaches, for that matter). Some errors, though, appear time and time again in letters, emails, business reports and job applications.

Does it matter? If we all make the same mistakes, does anyone really care? OK, there are a few pedants out there who moan about the falling standards of the English language. You'd think they could find something better to do.

Well, maybe. But...

Writing is all about communication, and how we say things is just as important as the message itself. If a speaker keeps stumbling over his words, he will (rightly or wrongly) give the impression he is hesitant or weak – a phenomenon perfectly demonstrated in the film *The King's Speech*.

So it is with writing. Our grammar and punctuation mistakes will jar with some readers, and give the impression we are sloppy, uneducated, or simply don't care about them. Whether or not these things are true, our errors will undermine our message.

In this report, I've done the research so you don't have to. As well as trawling through my own experience as a writing coach, I've spoken to business professionals, recruiters and blog readers. Here are seven of the common mistakes that irritate readers the most, so you can recognise them and avoid them in your own writing.

1. Overuse of capitals



Too many capital letters make a document hard to read. I've seen documents with eight capital letters in the first line, looking like a row of telegraph poles. Instead of highlighting certain words, the effect is just overwhelming.

The reason is that the 'rules' around capital letters are not set in stone, and are really more like guidelines. The following words *normally* start with a capital letter.

Normally with capitals	Example
The first word at the start of a sentence, including a direct quote within a sentence	She said, "Bring me the handbag."
Proper nouns (names, places)	England, London, Mary Shelley

Normally with capitals (...cont)	Example
Names of companies, institutions, agencies	Virgin Atlantic, Debt Management Office, the US Government
Points of the compass when they refer to a specific geographical area – but not direction.	He's travelling to the East. She comes from Southern Spain. Scotland is north of England.
Registered trademarks	Diesel (jeans), Lycra, Persil
Abbreviations of words with capitals	MP, MBA, MD
Titles of books, newspapers, articles etc (first and last words and minor words over four letters)	The Seven Deadly Sins of Writing
Official titles preceding a name	Professor Smith, President Obama

As a rule, the reason for using capitals is to distinguish a unique, named thing, place or person where there's a risk of ambiguity. His jeans are made by Diesel (the company) as opposed to diesel (oil). The current President as opposed to presidents in general. We went to Lake Windermere, not just any old lake.

If you've applied the guidelines above and you still aren't sure, avoid using capitals.

2. Run-on sentences



Run-ons aren't just overlong sentences (although those can be pretty annoying as well).

A run-on sentence is when you have two independent clauses, or complete thoughts, that aren't separated by punctuation or a conjunction (a joining word like *and*, *so*, *but*, *yet*, *for*, *or*, *nor*).

Run-on: This offer is for a limited time only you must order by 30 June to take advantage of the great discount.

Corrected: This offer is for a limited time only. You must order by 30 June to take advantage of the great discount.

Run-on: Please feel free to contact me my direct line is printed at the top of this letter.

Corrected: Please feel free to contact me. My direct line is printed at the top of this letter.

For a related problem, see ‘the comma splice’ in point 7 below.

3. Subject-verb disagreement



This sounds very technical, but all it means is this:

Subject-verb disagreement: The book *are* on the table. (Single subject, plural verb).

Corrected: The book is on the table. (Single subject, single verb)

This error is actually a lot more common than you’d expect because complex sentence structures can obscure the subject of the sentence. Take this example:

Disagreement: Promoting a book and marketing it *is* difficult for authors. (Plural subject, single verb)

Corrected: Promoting a book and marketing it are difficult for authors. (Plural subject, plural verb)

4. Sound-alikes



Otherwise known as heterographic homophones, but don’t let that put you off.

These words sound the same but are spelt differently and have different meanings – like there /their /they’re and two /too /to.

They are common mistakes because spellchecker doesn’t pick them up. Other sound-alikes that crop up frequently as errors are:

advice	advise
elicit	illicit
loose	lose
choose	chose
affect	effect
accept	except

stationary stationery

5. Misplaced apostrophes



Ahh... the dreaded apostrophe. I could write a whole book on the problems this little punctuation mark causes. But let's try to keep it simple.

Most people are OK with the apostrophe that signifies missing letters in contractions (shortened words) like aren't, hasn't, should've, let's.

The main problem is the possessive apostrophe, used to show ownership, sometimes with the letter s.

Misplaced apostrophe: Sallys' suitcases are in the hall.

Misplaced apostrophe: Sallys suitcase's are in the hall.

Corrected: Sally's suitcases are in the hall.

How do you know which word and position the apostrophe goes in? There are a lot of different ways of remembering, but this method works best for me and for most of my clients:

First, reword the sentence with 'of' or 'belonging to' to identify the owner(s).

The suitcases of/belonging to Sally are in the hall. (The owner is the word after of/belonging to).

Sally doesn't end in s already, so we add 's and plug it back into the original sentence. Sally's suitcases...

So how about this one?

The houses of/belonging to the residents are falling down.

Here the owners (the residents) are plural and end in s already, so we just add an apostrophe and drop the second s.

The residents' houses are falling down.

Why drop the s after the apostrophe? Because we don't say *the residents's*. It just sounds wrong.

6. Jargon



Strictly speaking, using jargon isn't an error, but I've included it because it really annoys readers.

It's also very easy to forget that not everybody knows the words you use daily at work. I was pulled up on this myself recently when I was pitching for some writing skills training with a potential client (kind of embarrassing...)

I wrote:

I faced similar problems with QA at my last company and at RD for that matter.

The client replied with something along the lines of:

I'm sure that's very interesting, but I have no idea what you're talking about.

Few of your readers will give you such honest feedback. But trust me, if you're writing to the average citizen about guaranteed insurability options, leveraging assets, transferability, best-of-breed solutions or price/sales ratios, you're not actually communicating with at least 50% of them.

Even within specialized industries, jargon can mean different things to different people. Just because you mean FSA to stand for Financial Services Authority (as opposed to Food Standards Agency, Federal Security Agency, Farm Security Administration, Farm Service Agency, Fast Statistical Alignment...I could go on) can you 100% guarantee your reader has the same understanding? Maybe you think they *should*, but that's no guarantee.

One of the most common objections I hear when I train people is, "But my reader will be insulted if I explain the jargon." Really?

I've never met anyone who complained when a writer made the effort to explain an acronym or technical term. They just skim if they know it already. But I do hear from many people who say they resent jargon. So, if you want to connect with your reader, avoid it, or explain it, just once, the first time you use it – like this:

Please refer to the website of the Financial Services Authority (FSA).

7. Misuse of or missing commas



There are four basic rules about where to use commas, and none of them has anything to do with pausing for breath. You can find the rules on the Better Writing Tips website <http://www.better-writing-tips.com/comma-rules.html>.

Commas separate bits of the sentence to avoid ambiguity. You can avoid the majority of comma mistakes by keeping your sentences short (15-20 words on average). Here are some of the most common mistakes:

Missing commas between listed items

Missing commas: I like vanilla chocolate and coffee ice cream.

Corrected: I like vanilla, chocolate and coffee ice cream.

Note that British English avoids the comma before the last list item (before the 'and') but American English prefers it to be there.

The comma splice

Comma splice: This offer is for a limited time only, you must order by 30 June to take advantage of the great discount.

Corrected: This offer is for a limited time only, and you must order by 30 June to take advantage of the great discount.

Remember - you can't join independent clauses in a single sentence with a comma. Commas aren't sticky. Use a conjunction (joining word), a semicolon or a full stop (period).

Separating subjects and verbs

Misplaced comma: He said that eating, drinking and sleeping, were his main hobbies.

Corrected: He said that eating, drinking and sleeping were his main hobbies.

Conclusion

Annoying or confusing your reader is not a good way to communicate. Poor punctuation, spelling and grammar are perceived as lazy at best, disrespectful at worst. Not a good start if you're applying for a job or trying to woo a customer.

If you check your writing against these seven deadly sins, I can't guarantee your document will be perfect. But you will have avoided some of the most common pitfalls.

Useful Resources

Alan, Robert, ed. *Pocket Fowler's Modern English Usage*, 2nd rev. ed. New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008

Bly, Robert W. *Webster's New World Letter Writing Handbook*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2004

Venolia, Jan. *Write Right*, 4th rev. ed. Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2001

Seely, John. *Oxford Guide to Effective Writing and Speaking*, 2nd rev. ed. New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar> : huge reference site for all things grammatical.

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html> : useful free guides on grammar, punctuation and jargon busters.

Writing Services

<http://www.better-writing-tips.com> : this is my hobby site and on it you'll find free advice on punctuation, grammar, letter writing, business writing and more.

I also offer **writing services** such as proofreading and copywriting, **training workshops**, **elearning** and **one-to-one coaching** in all aspects of business writing. To find out more, visit my commercial website <http://www.jakkibendell.co.uk> or send me an email at contact@jbendell.com.



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