

The Nooks and Crannies of Business Writing

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Introduction

Business writing plays a vital role in business communication. Business communicators are usually judged by the way they write. Writing effective business messages, therefore, is an essential characteristic that all business communicators need to possess. As well as the principles of written business communication, language usage, including parts of speech, sentence structure, punctuation, style, and word choice, should never be neglected by any competent business writer. Guffey (2003, p. A-1) points out that “using the language competently can mean the difference in between individual success and failure. Often a speaker sounds accomplished; but when that same individual puts ideas in print, errors in language usage destroy his or her credibility.”

There are a number of guidelines for common language elements in business writing. These guidelines have proved useful for both native speaker and international business communicators. Novice business writers and students of business writing should be aware of these significant language elements, familiarize themselves with these tools, and ensure their accuracy when producing a business message. As a Thai instructor who has taught English business correspondence and written business communication for several years, I have always emphasized correct language usage in my classes. However, I have observed that most of my students usually made common errors involving certain language elements in their writing assignments.

This article aims at providing some guidelines for crucial language usage in business writing, so that a novice business communicator who follows these guidelines can avoid serious or embarrassing mistakes in his or her business messages. In this paper, however, only two elements of language usage will be focused on, namely punctuation and style. These language elements are among the most frequently asked in my classes.

Guidelines for Language Usage

Punctuation

Punctuation plays an important part in writing. In any piece of writing, punctuation facilitates the reader's understanding of the message. In fact, it tells the reader where one thought ends and the next begins. It also adds emphasis and clarifies meaning. Using punctuation marks effectively enables a business writer to convey his or her meaning unequivocally and eliminate unnecessary ambiguity in his or her message.

Punctuation can be categorized into three main types: terminal punctuation, primary internal punctuation, and secondary internal punctuation (Krizan et al., 2002). The three terminal punctuation symbols (i.e., the period, the question mark, and the exclamation point) are quite simple and are normally used correctly in student writing. Thus, they will not be discussed here. The other two types of punctuation marks, on the other hand, are more confusing to many students and therefore are usually incorrectly used, misplaced, incorrectly omitted, or added when not needed.

Primary Internal Punctuation (The Comma and The Semicolon)

A comma separates thought groups in a sentence. The reader can interpret and understand each thought in a sentence correctly if a comma (or commas) is (are) used effectively.

Calendar Dates When a complete calendar date (a month, a date, and a year) is included in the body of a sentence, we use a comma to set the year apart from the rest of the sentence.

- ◆ On *September 22, 2002*, ASD Company Ltd. launched its new product in the local market.

However, commas are optional when a calendar date consists merely of month and year.

- ◆ In *September 2002* ASD Company Ltd. launched its new product in the local market.
(*September, 2002*, ... is also correct.)

We usually use a comma to separate a weekday from a complete or incomplete calendar date.

- ◆ On *Wednesday, September 22, 2002*, ASD Company Ltd. launched its new product in the local market.

Independent Adjectives When a noun is independently modified by two or more adjectives, the noun phrase has **independent adjectives**. We usually use commas to separate them.

- ◆ The travel agency is offering trips to Nepal, an old *picturesque* country with a *mild, predictable* climate.
(*Mild* and *predictable* independently modify the noun *climate*. It means a climate which is mild and predictable.)

Otherwise, no commas are needed.

- ◆ The travel agency is offering trips to Nepal, a *picturesque old* country with a *mild, predictable* climate.
(*Picturesque* and *old* collectively modify the noun *country*. It means an old country which is *picturesque*.)

Independent Clauses A comma is used to separate two independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, so, etc.*).

- ◆ The report was too difficult to understand, *so* the manager asked his secretary to rewrite it.
- ◆ The company lost more than \$100,000 last year, *but* its executives are still optimistic about its future.

However, do not use a comma between two independent clauses without a conjunction.

- ◆ The company lost more than \$100,000 last year, its executives are still optimistic about its future.
(Incorrect)

Adverbial Clauses When an adverbial clause (a dependent clause) precedes a main clause (an independent clause), a comma is used to separate the two clauses.

- ◆ *Although the merchandise cannot be returned*, we will offer you a 20% discount on the next purchase.

If an adverbial clause follows an independent clause, no commas are needed.

- ◆ We will offer you a 20% discount on the next purchase *although the merchandise cannot be returned*.

However, never write or type a comma at the beginning of a new line. If there is not enough space at the end of a line, always begin a new line with a word.

- ◆ Although the merchandise cannot be returned, we will offer you a 20% discount on the next purchase.
(Incorrect)
- ◆ Although the merchandise cannot be returned, we will offer you a 20% discount on the next purchase.
(Correct)

Series A series is formed when three or more words, phrases, or clauses are combined as one unit and function as a subject, a verb, an object, or a modifier in a sentence. We normally use commas to separate items in a series. The last item in a series is usually preceded by the word *and* or the word *or*. Commas should be used before these conjunctions to ensure clarity.

- ◆ The committee will *meet, discuss the problem, and come up with effective solutions*.
- ◆ In our club, you will enjoy *a variety of food, enchanting music, and glamorous exotic performances*.

A **semicolon** separates two independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction. The two independent clauses can be written as two individual sentences. Nevertheless, when joining them with a semicolon, a business communicator can create a smoother writing style.

- ◆ Please sign and return the enclosed form; it requires no postage.
- ◆ Susan is in charge of the Customer Service; please send her the customer's complaints.

(In each of the above examples, the two clauses are closely related and no conjunction is used.)

In addition, a semicolon can be used to separate items in a series where other items within the series need to be separated by commas. In this way, confusion will be eliminated.

- ◆ While in South East Asia, the president will visit *Bangkok, Thailand; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Jakarta, Indonesia*.

With only commas being used, the sentence would be unclear.

- ◆ While in South East Asia, the president will visit *Bangkok, Thailand, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Jakarta, Indonesia*.

Secondary Internal Punctuation

The secondary internal punctuation includes a number of punctuation marks used within sentences to enhance clarity, ensure emphasis, and create variety. In this article, only one of the most problematic punctuation marks in this category will be discussed: the colon.

The **colon** is often used to introduce a *list*, an *explanation*, or an *example*. The colon can be followed by words, phrases, or complete sentences, which may be displayed as part of the paragraph text or as a vertical list.

- ◆ The manager's reason for canceling the meeting was clear: He had a more important meeting to attend outside the company. (When displayed in paragraph form, a complete sentence following a colon begins with a capital letter.)

- ◆ Several factors need to be considered: budget, time, and cost-effectiveness.
(When common nouns are used in a list after a colon, no capital letter is used.)
- ◆ The decision will be based on the following factors:
 1. The budget that the company has set aside
 2. The timeframe of the project
 3. The cost-effectiveness of the project
- ◆ Three factors need to be considered: (1) Adequate budget would be needed. (2) The timeframe of the project is not realistic. (3) The proposed project is not cost-effective.
(When presented in a list, items always begin with a capital letter. They may be numbered in either style. However, for consistency, only one form should be used in a document.)

Style

Apart from punctuation, *style* also plays an important role in business writing. *Style* involves many different things in business writing. Krizan et al. (2002, p. 596) refers to *style* as “the basic rules for number display, capitalization, word division, and abbreviation that apply to business writing.” In this paper, only one major type of these rules will be elaborated on: numbers.

Numbers are used to represent, describe, and locate people and objects. Business writers should know how to express numbers appropriately. The following guidelines will be useful for business communicators who have to use numbers in their writing. These guidelines have frequent application in business correspondence and reports.

Write whole numbers greater than ten in figures.

- ◆ Please confirm your reservation *two* days before your arrival.
- ◆ A wrong order may be returned within *30* days after receipt.

Write round numbers in figures, in words, or as a combination of the two. Use words to reduce the emphasis placed on a round number. Use figures for emphasis. You may combine words and figures to enhance clarity.

- ◆ The new factory produced 540,000 units this year.
- ◆ The huge marketing team has met more than *four thousand* prospective customers around the world.
- ◆ We expect that our sales this year will exceed \$20 *million*.

Use words to begin a sentence with a number.

- ◆ *Ten* employees will be candidates for “the Best Employees of the Year.”
- ◆ *Fifty thousand* baht will be transferred to your account tomorrow.

However, a large number might be awkward, so you may use figures instead.

- ◆ *Thirty-five thousand six hundred eighty-seven* tickets have been sold this quarter.
(Awkward)
- ◆ The airline has sold 35,687 tickets this quarter.
(Better)

Write numbers consistently. Use only figures when *related* numbers greater than ten and less than ten appear in the same sentence.

- ◆ The department is planning on recruiting 3 full-time workers and 15 part-time workers.

However, when numbers are unrelated, follow the guidelines provided.

- ◆ The department is planning on recruiting 15 part-time workers who have at least *three* years of work experience.

To achieve clarity, use punctuation and spacing when two numbers are adjacent to one another. Write the first number in words.

- ◆ The program includes *two* 90-minute shows.

Use only figures when the first number is large or cannot be expressed in one or two words.

- ◆ The club has 183 35-year-old members.

Use a comma between two unrelated numbers to enhance readability.

- ◆ By 2005, 12 branches will have been opened in some other provinces of Thailand.

Conclusion

The guidelines provided in this article are just the nooks and crannies of business writing, but they can make business messages more readable and effective. These language elements can perfectly complement a well-developed business document. Students or novice business writers should observe these rules (and other rules not mentioned in this paper) as they compose or revise their business messages. A careful and skillful business writer will ultimately lead a life of a successful businessperson.

References

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