LORRAINE EDEN'S TOP 40 GRAMMAR TIPS

Business today is driven by the need to communicate with others, most often in writing through memos, proposals, training materials, etc. Lack of high-quality writing skills is a major handicap to finding a well-paying, interesting career. Over my years of teaching, I have learned that student papers typically have the same spelling and grammatical errors. I hope this short note listing the key problems will be helpful not only in my course, but more generally as you move out into the work force.

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1. **MAY versus CAN: MAY** involves permission to do something. **CAN** means having the capability to do something. If you ask, "**May I** ….." that means "Do I have permission?" If you ask "**Can I**…?" that means "Do I have the ability…?"

2. **AFFECT** is almost always a verb (except in organizational behavior where psychologists "study affect in the workplace"). **EFFECT** is almost always a noun. When in doubt, use affect for verbs, effect for nouns.

3. **IT'S is always (not sometimes, but <u>always</u>!) a contraction of "it is."** Anything else is a mistake.

4. Apostrophes are used for possessives; put the apostrophe after (before) the "s" when the noun is plural (singular). Examples: "heroes' welcome" (many heroes) and "arm's length" (the length of one arm).

5. **IMPACT** is a noun, not a verb. IMPACTFUL is a buzz word. Better to avoid both.

6. **MOOT** does not mean superfluous; it means in dispute or open to discussion. MOOT POINTS are in dispute.

7. **Use CONTINUAL** when you mean occurring with stops or gaps; **CONTINUOUS** if occurring with no stops or gaps.

8. Use **WHETHER** when there are two or more alternatives; use **IF** there are no alternatives.

9. Use **FEW** when you can count the items; use **LESS** when you cannot quantify them.

10. Use **SINCE** when referring to time; use **BECAUSE** when implying causation.

11. Use **DISINTERESTED** when you mean impartial; use **UNINTERESTED** when you don't care.

12. [WHO/WE/THEY/HE/SHE] is the **subject** of a sentence; [WHOM/US/THEM/HIM/HER] is the **object** of a sentence**.**

13. **WHO** is for people. Keep WHICH and THAT for organizations (firm, MNE).

14. **None IS singular. Data ARE plural.**

15. **SINGULAR verbs go with SINGULAR nouns. PLURAL verbs go with PLURAL nouns.** Do not mix them up. Write "the MNE has." Do not write "the MNE have" or "the MNEs has."

16. **A firm is an IT, not a THEY.** <u>Singular</u> nouns (firm, MNE) get <u>singular</u> pronouns (it), **not** <u>plural</u> ones (they, them) e.g., Toyota is an IT not a THEY.

17. Put a comma before **WHICH** because WHICH introduces a relative clause. Do NOT put a comma before **THAT**. WHICH qualifies; THAT restricts**.** If the sentence reads like it needs a comma, use WHICH. If not, use THAT.

18. **LAY** is a transitive verb that requires a subject and object. (I lay the pencil down.) **LIE** is an intransitive verb. (I lie down.) LAID is the past tense of LAY and LAY is the past tense of LIE. (I laid the pencil down, but I lay myself down.)

19. "e.g." is a **Latin abbreviation** meaning "for example." "i.e." is a Latin for "that is." Use a comma afterwards.

20. **Write out numbers below 10.** The correct format is **NINE** and **12.**

21. **Don't end a sentence with a preposition (of, by, for).**

22. In the USA, a trailing comma, period or question mark is **always inside quotation marks**. (She said, "Let's go.")

23. If a clause is inserted in a sentence, it needs **PAIRED COMMAS –** one starting the clause and one ending the clause. **Don't forget the second paired comma!**

24. **Periods go inside parentheses (brackets) only if** the entire sentence is inside the parentheses.

25. Use **semicolons** to help define long lists that include both groups and subgroups. Use semicolons between the groups;

commas between the subgroups.

26. A **pronoun** ("it", "they") always refers to the **noun** closest to and located before the pronoun. Check each pronoun for the closest noun to ensure you have the right noun. If in doubt, use the noun not the pronoun.

27. If possible, do not start a sentence with a pronoun ("it", "they") because the reader has to hunt for the noun.

28. Watch out for **misplaced modifiers** – phrases that are placed awkwardly in a sentence so they modify the wrong noun. "People who laugh rarely are sad" should be "People who rarely laugh are sad."

29. **Capitalize** a formal title when it is a direct address as in "the Conference Board" or "the Department of Economics", but do not capitalize the title when used after or instead of a name ("the board" or "the department").

30. **In the TITLE of your paper, capitalize** nouns, pronouns ("it", "we"), verbs (including forms of "to be" such as "Are" and "Were"), adjectives and adverbs. **Do not capitalize** articles ("a"), prepositions ("among", "between") or coordinating conjunctions ("and"). If the word is three letters or less do not capitalize it unless it's a verb or pronoun. Use the "search and replace" function in WORD to find the differences and fix them. Always capitalize the first word in a title.

31. **SIMPLE IS BETTER**. Get rid of all unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, especially at the beginning of a sentence. Strip the sentence down to its essence. Leave the "flowery stuff" out. **When you have a choice, go with simpler.**

32. If possible choose the **active voice** ("I did x") rather than passive voice ("X was done"). Readers prefer active voice.

33. I**f a sentence runs onto a fourth line, the sentence is too long. No sentence should be longer than three lines.**

34. **If a paragraph runs on for more than one-third of a double-spaced page, the paragraph is too long.** Chop things up into "bites" that your reader can follow. Paragraphs should start with a new idea or change in thought.

35. **Consistency throughout a paper is important.** Be consistent in (1) capitalization, (2) spelling, (3) hyphenation (e.g., use either "first-tier supplier" or "first tier supplier", but not both), and (4) formatting.

36. To help find the grammar mistakes and typos in your paper, **print out the paper and read the printed version.** It is much harder to find the mistakes on the computer screen. In addition, if you read out loud to yourself what you have written, **you can hear the mistakes** and are less likely to make them. So, **print your draft paper and read it out loud to yourself**. Fix the mistakes on the printed paper, and then enter the corrections into the computer.

37. Add an editing software program such as **Grammary** (basic version is free) or **Stylewriter (not free**) to your word processing program and email and use them.

38. Give yourself a **grammar test** to see what level you are at and then purchase a **grammar workbook** to improve the areas where the test shows you need help:

   o http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/Home.aspx
   o http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/Tutorials
   o http://www.grammar-monster.com/free_grammar_tests.html
   o http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar_quiz/grammar_mastery.asp

39. For remedial help, I recommend a grammar workbook such as Hacker and Van Goor's *Bedford Basics: A Workbook for Writers.* Diane Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* is a useful desk reference. I also recommend the book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss as a "fun" introduction to English grammar rules. I also recommend regular reading of *The Economist* and the *Harvard Business Review* as examples of well-written prose.

40. There are lots of grammar rules on the Internet. Check Google. See, for example:
   • http://www.grammarbook.com
   • http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/

Beautiful English writing is one of the last bastions of civility in an uncivil world!