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Common Business Writing Mistakes -- and How to Avoid Them

Many people have mastered the functions of desktop publishing, web page design and e-mail communications, but a slick presentation can backfire when it contains language errors. Errors really jump out of a document seen in print or on a display screen.

But once you've hit the "send" or "print" button, it's too late to fix mistakes.

At our company, we cringe at the blunders we see everyday.

Nevertheless, the most common errors business people make actually are easy to avoid. They are:

*** Omitting spell checking.** Running a computer-generated document through a word processor's built-in spell checker takes just seconds, and but since it's a final step, it's tempting to skip it.

Spell checkers are not foolproof, of course. We've all seen those spoof paragraphs full of words the spell checker didn't flag, but this simple step gets rid of many obvious mistakes.

*** Misplaced modifiers.** An adjective describing a noun belongs right before the noun in most sentences.

I recently received a sales mailer announcing great prices on "warm children's coats," even though I'll bet the coats were warm, not the children who might wear them. I've seen seminar announcements stating the "postponed president's speech" would take place on a new date. These are the kind of mistakes an eagle eye -- not a spell checker -- will catch.

*** Unexplained abbreviations.** It's easy enough to define a term by stating the abbreviation in parentheses the first time you use it in a document; this guarantees the reader will know what you're communicating.

Suppose you're selling something. Your potential customer may not know what you mean by PC (personal computer), IT (information technology), DOS (disk operating system), or ASP (Application Service Provider); even insiders can misinterpret jargon. But, if you write "Application Service Provider (ASP)" the first time it occurs in a document, then you're free to use "ASP" as much as you like, and everyone will know what you mean.

*** The abuse of "it's".** "It's" -- with an apostrophe -- is a contraction meaning "it is"; "its" -- without an apostrophe -- is the possessive form which conveys ownership. For some reason, this mistake frequently shows up on web sites. Maybe it's a fine point, but web masters shouldn't overlook its importance.

*** Typeface clutter.** The most important information in a document deserves the most prominent type size and font, while explanations, minor points and supporting material should be formatted in a less eye-catching style of type. This is essential for clear communication.

Sample ballots from election boards seem to be the worst offenders. Recently we received a school election ballot that was so full of big type, bold type, italicized type, underlined type and type enclosed in boxes that you couldn't tell what to read first. It looked like a ransom note with every word shouting at you.

*** Lax proofreading.** Have another person look over the document if possible, particularly when you've revised the project multiple times. Proofreading is especially important when deadlines are tight and it's tempting to rush to production. It's human nature to scan familiar material rather than looking at it critically. Another set of eyes will see things you may have missed.

Remember, even experts need editors.