

E-mail: Common problems and how to avoid them

Poorly written messages can neutralize the speed and power of e-mail. If your reader has to write another e-mail to get a clarification on the one you sent, that's time lost.

To maximize your use of e-mail, avoid these common errors.

Overcrowded message. Limit yourself to one topic per e-mail. Your reader can then focus on that topic. If you have two topics to discuss, send two separate e-mails. Use a different subject line tag for each, so your reader can easily recognize, save, and retrieve your message when needed.

Vague subject tag. Get your main message into your subject line. A subject tag with action words captures the reader's attention and conveys the nature of your message. "Need feedback on XYZ contract" is clearer and more compelling than "XYZ contract."

No reference. When sending a reply, quote a portion of the previous message so the reader knows the context of your response. To answer "yes" presumes too much and may force another e-mail asking, "Yes, what?" But "Yes, I'll attend Friday's meeting" is much clearer.

Unclear directive. Make sure your reader knows what to do with your message. Know why you are sending this message and what action you want the reader to take. Let the reader know your purpose and expectation.

Too long. Limit your e-mail message to one screen, about 25 lines of text. Each line should be no more than 70 characters. Put the main point at the beginning. Break the text into short paragraphs, to make reading easier. Keep your sentences short and to the point.

Muddled format. Avoid formatted text and special characters, such as bullets. Don't use italics, boldfacing, and underlining, as not every mail reader can translate these.



A Reader Asks...

"Is a comma required before the *and* in a series such *red, white, and blue*?"

Some handbooks consider the comma before the *and* optional. Many magazines and newspapers almost always omit it. But sometimes the comma is needed to prevent misreading, especially when the items in the series are more than single words. For example:

Misread? The department installed new computers with larger capacities, software designed for a variety of applications and new policies.

Without the comma, the sentence may be misread as ... *software designed for...new policies*. The comma forces a pause that prevents even the possibility of misreading:

Clear: The department installed new computers with larger capacities, software designed for a variety of applications, and new policies.

Rather than fuss over whether the sentence may be misread, or whether the comma is in or out, form the habit of using the comma before the and in all series.

(If you have a question on communication, send it to me at dreff@aol.com.)

Watch Your Language: Build a powerful working vocabulary

Each of us has two vocabularies, one for reading/listening and one for writing/speaking. Because we understand many more words than we use, our writing/speaking vocabulary, which we'll call a working vocabulary, is generally smaller,

A strong vocabulary is not ornamental. By expanding your working vocabulary, you magnify your ability to communicate precisely and persuasively.

To build your working vocabulary, take note of words you find striking or particularly effective. You might hear one at a meeting or see one in a memo. At the first opportunity, use the word in your own speaking and writing. Then it's yours.

Shop for words in the business press. *The Wall Street Journal* is a wellspring of strong words. Here are a few taken from a single *WSJ* page:

- *enmeshed* in a dispute
- *massive* job growth
- an *aversion* to lawyers
- *disgruntled* owners
- *crank out* letters

We're not pitching long, grandiloquent words. We're suggesting you use more of the words you recognize—red-blooded words that can strengthen your communication without a taint of affectation.

When you need...

... a quick edit, review, or rewrite of a document, contact The Document Doctor, Cos Ferrara, at 201-391-0178 or dreff@aol.com, or visit my Website: www.cosferrara.com

Presenting: Be your own best critic—and tutor



For a better performance, critique your presentation—before you give it. Tape yourself on audio or video, or both. Review the tape, judging your performance on these criteria.

1. **Did your message convey a “call to action”?** That is, did your words produce a clear concept of what you expect from the audience?
2. **Did you support the call with specific points?** Did you give the audience the detail and motivation needed to act? 3. **Did you speak up?** If the tape didn’t pick up your voice, neither will your audience.
4. **Did you choose words carefully,** matching your words to the setting, content, and audience? Don’t be overly formal at a meeting of your bowling group or too colloquial in front of senior man-

agement.

5. **Did you avoid speaking in a monotone?** Perk up your presentation manner by emphasizing key words, primarily nouns and verbs (“Let’s *drive* the business”). And place crucial words at the ends of sentences (“The problem with this plan is its *lack of vision*”).
6. **Did you avoid distracting verbal habits,** like “um,” “ya know,” “OK”?

If you can videotape yourself, extend your critique.

7. **Is the presentation free of distracting gestures?** If you’re waving your arms excessively, leaning to one side, or playing with your collar, people will pay more attention to the gesture than to your words.
8. **Did you speak to your audience, not**

to your notes or slides? If you believe in your subject and know your stuff, you’re more likely to look your audience in the eye.

Hearing and seeing yourself on tape can be a humbling experience. But it can also be the foundation for a self-help program that will make you a much better presenter.

(For a comprehensive tutorial on presentation skills, see *Powerful Presentations*, by Cos Ferrara. Order it on CD-ROM directly from MicroMash at 1-800-272-7277, ext.4150, or www.micromash.net)

Mechanics: I or me, she or her, he or him and other pronoun problems

Toys ‘R’ Us has gotten away with the pronoun error in its name. But what comes off as “cute” in the store’s name may be deemed sloppy in a business letter or e-mail.

Try your pronoun knowledge in this test. Choose the correct form in each grouping.

1. Jackson and (*I, me*) did the research.
2. Responsibility fell to Lopez and (*I/me*).
3. (*We, Us*) managers share the work.
4. The supervisor asked (*she and I, her and me, she and me, her and I*) for advice.
5. Wilson has more experience than (*she, her*).

Answers: 1. *I* 2. *me* 3. *We* 4. *her and me* 5. *she*

Here’s Why

In English, most personal pronouns change forms depending on their use in the sentence. A pronoun used as a subject of a verb takes the subjective form. A pronoun used as an object of a verb or preposition takes the objective form. Here’s the difference:

Subjective Form

I, he, she, we, they

Objective Form

me, him, her, us, them

This rule holds true whether the pronoun is used alone or with another word:

Alone

We share the work.

Responsibility fell *to me*.

The supervisor asked *me* for advice.

With another word

We managers share the work.

Responsibility fell *to Lopez and me*.

The supervisor asked *her and me* for advice.

When the Verb Is Understood

After the conjunctions *than* and *as*, use the subjective form if the pronoun is subject of a verb that is understood.

Wilson has more experience than *she* [has].

Don’t assume that every time the first person singular pronoun is used with another word, the correct form is *I*. If the pronoun is used as an object, the correct form is *me*.