

The Authors' Credentials:

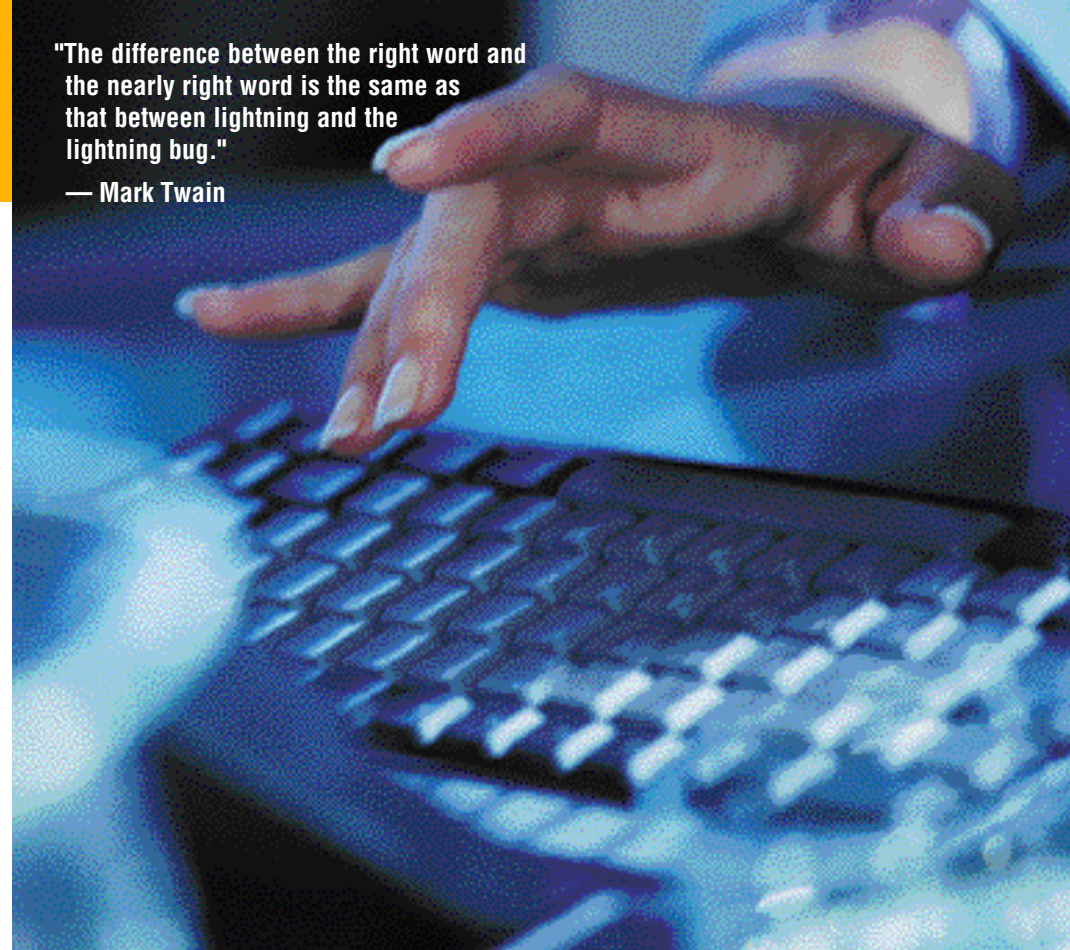
Stephen Wolfe — President of Andover Group Advertising & Marketing in Kansas City, Steve has 30 years of agency experience, including 15 years on Madison Avenue at Ted Bates Advertising and Benton & Bowles. Upon his return to Kansas City, Steve was cofounder of the Horizon Project, a nationally recognized new-product consulting and research company. He is also the author of *Men Are A Joke: Uncensored Humor About Men For Women*/ Pinnacle.

Scott Hooper — During his lengthy career in public relations and marketing, Hooper has provided advice and counsel to companies large and small, including an insurance company facing a hostile takeover, utilities confronting regulatory scrutiny and a national school bus contractor in the aftermath of a fatal accident. An former newspaperman and award-winning business writer, he is the author of numerous articles in business-to-business magazines. Hooper is vice president, public relations and marketing for Andover Group Advertising & Marketing.

Carole Rich — Carole Rich has spent more than 25 years in journalism as a reporter, editor and professor. Rich teaches Journalism at the University of Alaska Anchorage, where she was awarded the endowed Atwood Chair. She is the author of *Writing and Reporting News With Infotrac: A Coach Method*, *Creating Online Media: A Guide to Research, Writing and Design on the Internet* and *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method*. In 1997-98 she was awarded a research fellowship by the Poynter Institute of Media Studies to develop new ways of writing online. Rich has been visiting writing coach at newspapers throughout the United States, taught at the renowned School of Journalism at the University of Kansas and served as a reporter for the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, city editor of the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel and deputy metropolitan editor of the Hartford Courant.

"The difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the same as that between lightning and the lightning bug."

— Mark Twain



Fat-Free Writing for the Electronic Age:

How to Cut Common Blunders and Bloated Words
in Email, Memos, Faxes, Letters, Proposals
and other Business Writing

Stephen J. Wolfe, Carole Rich and Scott Hooper

Death of an idea:

It's so easy to say no to it.

It's so understandable to want to fix it and make it more conventional and familiar.

It's so reassuring to take the alarming part out of it and smooth the rough edges. And sandpaper it to death.

Oscar Wilde put it this way: "An idea that isn't dangerous is hardly worth calling an idea at all."

It's the shocking part, the frightening part, the unknown element that makes an idea an idea in the first place.

If you feel comfortable with it from the very first, take another look.

It's probably not an idea.

— Anon.



Art direction &
production by Robin Falk

Foreword

The rise of email has been blamed for, among other things, a sharp decline in the quality of business writing.

The problem is that many of us rely on email for the sorts of things we used to say over the phone or around the water cooler. The difference? Those casual comments don't live nearly as long as written comments. And make no mistake: Just because emails are delivered electronically, they're still a form of business writing.

We may wish to believe that electronic communication allows for a whole new level of casualness, that spelling and grammar and punctuation no longer matter. The reality is that all business writing needs to conform to the same basic rules. Your intelligence, experience and professionalism have always been judged by the way you express yourself in plans, proposals and memos. Now they're judging you by the way you express yourself over the Internet. It doesn't seem fair.

To help ensure your survival at work, here are a few tips on using email wisely:

- Beware of humor — one person's joke is another's offensive comment. So watch what you say.
- Think twice — Especially if a message has been written in a fit of emotion, don't send it right away. Let it sit, mull it over, reread it — then send it only if you still feel the need.
- Reread before hitting Send — Even the most casual of messages should be written well, with complete sentences, rational punctuation and as few typos and misspellings as humanly possible. Be sure to spell-check too.
- No spamming — Even mini-spamming, in which you forward something to everyone in your address book or Reply to All.
- Remember where you are — If you're at work, your messages belong to the organization that owns your computer. They can look at them, and they can file them (even after you think you've deleted them).

Preface

How is it that we have trouble with words? After all, most of us have been talking since we were a year or two old, and we've been writing since grade school. The trouble is that the more responsibility we're given at the office, the more we're expected to conform to the rules of proper usage.

Yet English ain't an easy language to learn. As writer Bill Bryson put it, "English is a merry confusion of quirks and irregularities that often seem willfully at odds with logic and common sense."

"This is a language where cleave can mean to cut in half or to hold two halves together; where the simple word set has 126 meanings as a verb, 58 as a noun and 10 as a participial adjective; where if you run fast you are moving swiftly, but if you are stuck fast you are not moving at all."

This book will help you avoid mistakes, write more lucidly — and at the same time, get across what you wish to say quickly and clearly.

If you have ever wondered whether to use bad or badly, who or whom, or many other words, this book can help you.

Fat-Free Writing in the Electronic Age is a little book about big mistakes that are commonly made in business correspondence.

In only a few minutes, you can improve your writing by reading the wrong and right examples of words you may misuse, or learn to avoid errors you may make in punctuation, capitalization, spelling and use of clichés. You

Digital Words, Phrases and Usage are based
on the *Wired Style Book*

can pull this book from the shelf and use it to cut the fat from your email, faxes, memos, letters and proposals by reading how to eliminate such wordy expressions as "due to the fact that" when "because" is quicker and easier to understand.

Take our advice, and your letters and memos will be clearer, more to-the-point and shorter. We assure you that your boss, and your boss's boss, will appreciate that.

Fat-Free Writing in the Electronic Age does not attempt to cover the spectrum of grammar and English usage. We've selected only the most common mistakes that will cause you embarrassment in your business communication. And we've organized our advice to make it easy to find the answer you're looking for.

You never again need to feel bad (not badly) because you will learn to recognize errors that even your grammar and spell checkers may miss.

**Do you want to hire the authors of
*Fat Free Writing for the Electronic
Age* to help create successful
advertising for your organization?**

Authors Steve Wolfe and Scott Hooper are top executives at Andover Group Advertising & Marketing. An agency with impressive credentials in Web site design, direct mail, print advertising, public relations, television/radio commercials and printing.

**To learn more, call:
913-385-5596**



Style vs. grammar

There are some things that we don't cover in this book.

For instance. Should you use a comma before a conjunction in a series? (Apples, oranges and pears vs. Apples, oranges, and pears.) Should you spell out ten and eleven or use the numerals: 10 and 11? Should you capitalize titles (the president of our company vs. the President of our Company)?

It's not that such things don't matter. The reason for learning to write well is to avoid being embarrassed by using the wrong word — or using the right word the wrong way. You can just as easily embarrass yourself by writing "15" when your organization's style prefers "fifteen." Having an opinion about such things would be like having an opinion about the names other people choose to give their children. All we can do is nod, make a note of your choice and get it right the next time.

So here's what we suggest.

In addition to perusing this book and learning how to use language better, take a look at the writing of other people in your organization — memos from senior management, brochures and other published documents — and see whether your peers have an established style for punctuation, use of numbers and numerals, the names (and capitalization) of people's titles, the names (and abbreviations) of departments and the like. And then conform to it. We'd suggest you make note of those style preferences in the margins of this book.

A couple of tips. First, style varies from organization to organization, and even within an organization. For instance, a very formal corporate style might be appropriate for internal memos, while even the chairman of the board uses a more casual style when he's quoted

in the company newsletter. Second, be aware that other people might not agree with your internal style. One good example would be a news release, where you'll want to switch over to news style, the better to persuade the editor to publish your news. Better yet, ask a free lancer or agency to write the press release for you.

Remember, you would speak differently if you were making a formal presentation to management, talking to your peers around the office or chatting with relatives at a family party. By the same token, you don't want to use the same style in a business memo that you'd use in a letter to Grandma — or vice versa.

What is a **wholesale** advertising agency?

Many smaller advertisers hire a traditional advertising agency with a staff of art directors and account executives. To make a reasonable profit and to cover the costs of salaries for all these employees, traditional "retail advertising agencies" charge substantial fees in order to generate a profit.

There's nothing wrong with that — as long as you're not the one paying the fees. Andover Group doesn't keep specialists on staff and we have a lower overhead — the result is lower fees to our advertising and marketing clients.

To learn more, call:



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a, an

Use your ears when writing, not just when speaking. If a word sounds like it begins with a vowel sound — then it takes the "an." Not just "an elephant" or "an ostrich," but words that sound like a vowel sound. For example: "an honest woman."

abbreviations

Some abbreviations are unavoidable (Mr., Mrs., U.S.A.). Some are pretty well known, though their meaning may be obscure (do you know what "UNESCO" stands for?)

Be careful of the latter, and of abbreviations or acronyms describing trade terms or internal designations — especially for an external audience. Don't assume that everyone knows what "PLCC" means (Plastic Leaded Chip Carrier or Primary Launch Control Center or Private Label Credit Card or Propulsion Local Control Console). As a writer, your job is to make things clearer, not more obscure.

Also: Even if you define an abbreviation or acronym the first time you use it, you might be better off with a descriptive term, using a phrase like "the association" or "the department" or "the product," rather than just repeating the initials.

acid test

A cliché. Avoid like the plague.

activity, facility, vehicle

All perfectly good words, but be wary of using them to excess. "In-store sales activity" doesn't mean anything that "in-store sales" doesn't. And if you know that the facility in question is a building or the vehicle in question is a car, then be specific and say "building" or "car."

affect/effect

Affect means to influence. **Effect** as a verb means to bring about or execute, but it is more often used as a noun, meaning the result of an action. Think of **effect** as **E** for **execute** or the **end result**.

Wrong: The sluggish economy effected the company's earnings, and the affect was a slide in the value of the stock.

Right: The sluggish economy affected (influenced) the company's earnings, and the effect (result) was a slide in the value of the stock.

Right: We need to effect (bring about or execute) some new procedures for improving sales.

aggression, aggressiveness

"Aggression" implies hostility. Your crackerjack salesman may have aggressiveness, but hopefully not aggression.

all right

Two words.

among/between

Among is used for three or more items; **between** is used for two items.

Wrong: The agreement is among our German and British divisions, but the new rules will probably vary between our seven U.S. entities.

Right: The agreement is between our German and British divisions, but the new rules will probably vary among our seven U.S. entities.

ampersand

The ampersand (&) is often used in company names. Where it is, it would be incorrect not to use it. But other than that, it has no place in proper, formal writing.

anyways

This is non-standard English and should be avoided.

apostrophes/words ending in s

For singular possessive words ending in **s**, use an apostrophe and an **s**: **boss's orders, the training class's progress**.

For plural possessive words ending in **s**, use an apostrophe only after the final **s**: **five managers' meetings, investors' money**.

apostrophes/not for decades

Do not add an apostrophe before an **s** for plurals of decades: **the 1990s**, not **the 1990's**. Add an apostrophe **before** the year if you eliminate the decade: the **'90s**, not the **90's**.

Wrong: The 1980's were considered the years of greed.
Right: The 1980s were considered the years of greed.

Wrong: He gained his fortune in the 70's.
Right: He gained his fortune in the 70s.

apostrophes/not for ages

Do not use an apostrophe when adding **s** to ages. She was in her **20s** in the **1980s**. Think of it as any other plural.

Wrong: Ted Turner started his business career with a billboard company when he was in his 20's.
Right: Ted Turner started his business career with a billboard company when he was in his 20s.
Alternative: Ted Turner was in his twenties when he started his business career.

as I said/not like I said

Like I said is a dreadful expression. It should be **as I said** or **as he said**.

Wrong: Like Winston Churchill said, "The price of greatness is responsibility."

Right: As Winston Churchill said, "The price of greatness is responsibility."

bad/badly

It's unlikely that you will feel **badly** in business. That means you have a poor sense of touch. More likely, you'll feel **bad** if you lose money. Use **bad** with **feel**. **Bad** describes your feelings or your health.

Wrong: I feel badly about losing your order.

Right: I feel bad about losing your order.

Tip: When you are confused whether you should use **bad** or **badly**, substitute the word **good**. You would not say, "I feel goodly about getting that new business." You would say "I feel good."

between me, him, her, them

Between must be followed by **me, him, her** or **them** but never by **I, he** or **she**.

Wrong: The deal was between he and I.

Right: The deal was between him and me.

Right: The deal was between Jim Jackson and me.

board of directors

A **board of directors** is treated as a singular word. **Board** is the key word; ignore **of directors** for agreement with the verb and pronoun. **Board of directors** should be used with the verbs **is/was/has**, not **are/were/have**, and the pronoun **its**, not **theirs**.

Wrong: The board of directors have their meetings on Tuesdays.

Right: The board of directors has its meetings on Tuesdays.

Alternative: The directors have their meetings on Tuesdays.

capitalization

Many corporate executives prefer to capitalize certain words that, in

How much do you or your agency know about direct marketing?

Few people in Kansas City are true experts in direct marketing. The result is many failed direct marketing campaigns.

We've been doing successful direct marketing for more than 30 years. We created a 16-hour seminar on direct mail that's being used by seminar companies across the US.

When the US Postal Service in Washington saw the seminar, they purchased a portion of the program to be distributed by the Post Office.

Give us a call. We'll show you what works and what doesn't

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normal use, would not be. If your organization's style calls for specific words to be capitalized, please go along (e.g., Board, Department, Facility). If your boss, or your boss's boss, doesn't express such a preference, the rules that follow are for you.

Capitalize regions of the country, not directions. Midwest, Midwestern, North, South, West, Northeast, Northwest, Southwest, East Coast, West Coast and so on (as well as designations like Piedmont, Ozarks and Central Valley). Use lowercase for directions — go west, then turn south.

Wrong: The company's midwest offices are in Emporia, a small town Southwest of Kansas City.

Right: The company's Midwest offices are in Emporia, a small town southwest of Kansas City. (Midwest is a region; southwest is a direction)

Capitalize awards — Specific prizes, honors and awards, such as Entrepreneur of the Year, Nobel Prize, Purple Heart and Pulitzer Prize, are proper names.

Federal and state. Don't capitalize the words "federal" and "state" unless they are part of the official title of the agency: "State Department of Transportation," say, or "Federal Trade Commission." If you are using these words descriptively, as in state agency, federal law or federal agency, use lowercase.

Capitalize the names of religions. Jewish, Catholic, Moslem — and all references to a Supreme Being, such as God or Allah or His. Use lowercase if you are using the term god in a non-religious sense: "He is like a god to his employees."

Don't capitalize seasons. Use lowercase for seasons — spring, summer, autumn and fall. That goes for springtime and summertime, too. However, if the season is part of a formal title — the Winter Olympics — capitalize it.

Wrong: We will have a Spring liquidation sale.

Right: We will have a spring liquidation sale.

Right: The company will sponsor a booth at the Winter Olympics.

Capitalize races. Capitalize the names of races: Native American, Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, African American, but not blacks and whites.

Wrong: The company has hired several asian and hispanic employees but has no Black employees.

Right: The company has hired several Asian and Hispanic employees but has no black employees.

Capitalize business titles. Capitalize people's business titles when they appear **before** a person's name. Use lowercase **after** the name.

Wrong: Turner Broadcasting System chairman Ted Turner was married to Jane Fonda.

Right: Turner Broadcasting System Chairman Ted Turner was married to Jane Fonda.

Right: Ted Turner, chairman of Turner Broadcasting System, was married to Jane Fonda.

CEOs/not CEO's

For the plural of **CEO**, use an **s** with no apostrophe. Use an apostrophe only for possessive use — meaning belonging to the **CEO**.

Wrong: The CEO's of all the computer companies will attend the conference.

Right: The CEOs of all the computer companies will attend the conference.

Wrong: The CEOs orders were to cut back on overtime.

Right: The CEO's orders were to cut back on overtime.

clichés

As a general rule, people use clichés as a way to avoid saying what they really mean. Not only are "between a rock and a hard place" or "adding insult to injury" or "the ball's in your court" tired old phrases that should be avoided, they're not very precise. Instead of seeking out just the right maxim to describe the situation your organization faces, take the time to say what you really mean.

Specificity is always a good idea. Let's say you use "between a rock and hard place" to indicate that your department faces two equally unpalatable choices. If you define those two choices, you not only avoid writing in a trite, hackneyed way — you make your writing more credible.

(Incidentally, we use the accent in the word "cliché," although we recognize that you might not spell the word that way — or ever use diacritical marks, even in foreign words. It's our style, but it might not be yours.)

collusion

It doesn't mean "cooperating" or "collaborating," but "conspiring." Reserve "collusion" for criminal acts.

commas/not between sentences

Never use a comma between two sentences that don't have joining words, such as **and**, **or** or **but**. Use a period or semicolon.

Wrong: We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road, they get run over.

Right: "We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run over."

— Aneurin Bevan, *British politician*

commence

Just say "begin."

complement/compliment

Compliment means to praise. Complement means to complete, strengthen, enhance or supplement.

Wrong: His desktop publishing skills compliment the staff that produces the company newsletter.

Right: His desktop publishing skills complement the staff that produces the company newsletter.

Wrong: If you can't get a complement any other way, pay yourself one.

Right: "If you can't get a compliment any other way, pay yourself one."

— Mark Twain

consensus/not consensus of opinion

Consensus means general agreement. If you add **of opinion**, you're saying it twice. Note the spelling with **s**, not **con**ensus.

Wrong: After five hours of negotiations, union and management representatives reached a consensus of opinion.

Right: After five hours of negotiations, union and management representatives reached a consensus.

council/counsel

A **council** is an appointed or elected group of people who give advice or make decisions. **Counsel** is advice or consultation.

Wrong: We need to get approval from the city counsel for these building plans.

Right: We need to get approval from the city council for these building plans.

Wrong: We need to seek council from our brokerage house before we sign this contract.

Right: We need to seek counsel from our brokerage house before we sign this contract.

En-dashes/Em-dashes and Hyphens

The size of the en and em-dashes is roughly equivalent to the width of the lower case n and m, respectively, for the typeface in which they are used.

En-dashes are primarily for showing duration or range as in 9:00–5:00 or 112–600 or March 15–31. Create en-dashes with Option-hyphen (Mac) or ALT O150 (Windows) – hold down the key and type O150 on the numeric keypad.

Em-dashes (—) are the proper dashes to use in place of single or double hyphens (–) as punctuation. Similar to a parenthetical phrase (like this) the em-dash sets apart clauses in a sentence. Create em-dashes with Shift-Option-hyphen (Mac) or ALT O151 (windows) – hold down the ALT key and type O151 on the numeric keypad.

Hyphens are for hyphenating words and to separate

characters in a phone number (123-555-8977). The hyphen is easily found on the keyboard to the right of zero.

See hyphens for numbers.

data

One day, as our language continues to evolve, perhaps "data" will be universally thought of as a singular, but for now it remains a plural — especially in economic and business use. If it makes you uncomfortable to write "The data clearly show," rather than "The data shows," try substituting "information" or "statistics."

desktop

No hyphen.

disburse/disperse

Both words have the sense of "distribute," but they are used very differently. Disburse means to spend, while disperse means to scatter. You disburse money, you disperse a crowd.

Wrong: "We just want to maintain the peace, fulfill the parade permit and disburse the crowd."

Right: "We just want to maintain the peace, fulfill the parade permit and disperse the crowd."

— Gregg Easterbrook, *The Here and Now*

disc or disk

If you're reading data from one of those shiny round things also used for recording music, it's a compact **disc**. However, a 3.5" floppy is a **disk**.

downsize

No hyphen.

e.g.

E.g. means "for example," from the Latin exempli gratia. Do not use to mean "that is." See i.e.

email

Rather than e-mail or E-Mail. No capitalization unless it begins a sentence or in a headline.

ellipsis

An ellipsis is an omission of words marked by three dots in the middle of a sentence or four at the end (the first one is the period.) Try to avoid it, since it always makes the reader wonder what you left out.

equally as

Redundant. Use one word or the other.

face up to

Wordy. Just say "face."

farther/further

Farther should be used only for distance, as in miles farther. Further involves length of time, quantity or intensity, as in how much more. It is the proper choice in most cases.

Wrong: Their corporate offices are much farther from the city than we thought.

Right: Their corporate offices are much further from the city than we thought.

Wrong: We cannot proceed farther with this proposal until the EPA approves it.

Right: We cannot proceed further with this proposal until the EPA approves it.

full-time/full time

Full-time has a hyphen when it is used to describe something, as in **full-time** job. More rarely, you will use it as two words without a hyphen if you mean: "Are you going to work **full time**?" (Same with part-time and part time.)

Wrong: We have reduced our full time staff.

Right: We have reduced our full-time staff.

The magic words in 2004 advertising are ROI (Return On Investment)

Organizations like yours might create commercials, print ads, Web sites, point-of-sale or catalogs. Some of these programs may work for you – others will not.

Then there's public relations. It's not as costly as many other advertising options. If you sell locally or nationally, nothing boosts your image more than a story in a newspaper, magazine or online.

It's not you and your company boasting about how good you are – it's a third party endorsement.

Andover Group has one of the top public relations executives in the Midwest – Scott Hooper. He's had success getting extensive press coverage for companies large and small.

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**ANDOVER
GROUP**

Wrong: We did not want too many people working full-time and getting overtime pay.

Right: We did not want too many people working full time and getting overtime pay.

goes without saying

If it does, then why say it? This is an expression often found in corporate speeches and memos. Avoid such expressions.

he or she

When you refer to people in general terms, it's considered sexist to use just a masculine pronoun. One obvious solution is to use both — his or hers, for instance, instead of his. But that often leads to really awkward sentences. A better solution is to change the sentence to use plural words.

Right: "How people play the game shows something of their character; how they lose shows all of it."

head over heels

Not only a cliché, but a fairly silly one. Hard to imagine someone whose head isn't over his or her heels.

high tech

Avoid high-tech, hi-tech and Hi-tech

horses

"Beat a dead horse" and "Put the cart before the horse" are clichés to be avoided. Besides, talking about beating a dead horse is just plain yucky. (When you consider how long ago horses were replaced by cars, you realize just how outdated these particular clichés are.)

hopefully

Who is doing the hoping? This is another misused word in business communication. I hope is a more accurate way to express yourself.

hyphens/not with ly words

Do not use a hyphen to join words ending in ly.

Wrong: closely-af filiated firm; totally-integrated service

Right: closely af filiated firm; totally integrated service

hyphens/joining words

Use a hyphen to join two or three words if they all act as one word to describe something (except **ly** words). For example, **first-quarter sales**. But if the term is used alone without describing anything after it (i.e., as a noun, not an adjective), do not hyphenate: Sales are up for the **first quar ter**.

Wrong: This no risk offer is yours for 30 days.

Right: This no-risk offer is yours for 30 days.

Right: We offer this at no risk to you for 30 days.

(Don't hyphenate since it doesn't describe a word that follows.)

hyphens for numbers

Use a hyphen after all numbers that end in **y** in compound numbers, from **twenty-one** to **ninety-nine**. Do not hyphenate compound numbers that do not end in **y**: **one hundred twenty-two**, **four hundred**, **three thousand**. Figures are preferable for large numbers.

I/me

I does the action; **me** receives it. Don't use **I** after **to**, **with** or **for**. Use **me**. If other words come before **me**, try reading the sentence without them.

Wrong: He gave the report to the advertising director and **I** for review. (Try reading this as "He gave the report to I.")

Right: He gave the report to the advertising director and me for review.

Wrong: The art director is planning to go to the seminar with you and I.

Right: The art director is planning to go to the seminar with you and me.

i.e.

i.e. means "that is" (from the Latin *id est*). Do not use to mean "for example." See **e.g.**

if I were/not if I was

If should be followed by **were**, not **was**. For example: **If I were, if he were, if she were, if there were** .

Wrong: If I was very lucky, I wouldn't have this job.

Right: "If I were very lucky, I wouldn't have this job."
— Ronald Reagan

in regard to, with regard to

Clichés, and stodgy-sounding ones at that. Try "regarding."
Or "about."

imply/infer

"Imply" means to hint or suggest, while "infer" means to deduce. The speaker implies, the listener infers.

in spite of the fact that

Wordy. Just say "although."

inter/intra

Inter means between; **intra** means within. An **interoffice** memo goes between offices; an **intraoffice** memo is distributed to employees within the same office.

Wrong: If you have intrastate business, you must abide

by the laws in other states where you operate.

Right: If you have interstate business, you must abide by the laws in other states where you operate.

Wrong: If you have interstate business, you will deal with other firms within your state's borders.

Right: If you have intrastate business, you will deal with other firms within your state's borders.

Intercapping

That's the annoying way high-tech companies throw capital letters into the middle of their name. It's obvious these people didn't major in English. They make too much money. But these companies chose their names, so we generally should honor their preferences.

Internet

The worldwide hookup of which the Web is a part. Use it when speaking broadly about computer-based information services — and if you do use it, capitalize it.

in the amount of

Wordy. Just say "for" or "totaling."

irregardless

Regardless of what you may have heard, **irregardless** is not correct usage. Use "regardless" instead.

it's/its

It's means **it is** or **it has**. **Its** without the apostrophe is possessive, meaning belonging to it. (A tip: You wouldn't put an apostrophe in the middle of "his" or "hers," would you?)

Wrong: Its always worthwhile to make others aware of their worth.

Right: "It's always worthwhile to make others aware of their worth."

Right: "It is always worthwhile to make others aware of their worth."

— *Malcolm Forbes, publisher*

Wrong: Every company's greatest assets are it's customers.

Right: Every company's greatest assets are its customers.

join/not join together

Can you join something apart? Adding **together** is superfluous.

Are you paying too much for printing?

Printing may be your biggest advertising and marketing expense. But many companies print hundreds of pieces each year, without getting competitive bids.

We offer printing at wholesale rates – which means you can save hundreds or thousands of dollars a year when you print with Andover.

Now we can prove we can save you money. Our Printing Audit program will provide you with costs for various printed pieces. Compare our costs to what you're currently paying.

How's the quality? Our clients include Hallmark, Yellow Freight and Commerce Bank, companies that demand high-quality printing.

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Wrong: Our cost-cutting efforts will not succeed unless we all join together in a spirit of cooperation

Right: Our cost-cutting efforts will not succeed unless we all join in a spirit of cooperation.

layof fs/lay off

"Layoffs" is one word when used as a noun — no hyphen. If you must lay off people, you must do it in two words. (We could just as well have said, "If you must lay people off," in which case two words would clearly be the only way to go.)

Unless you're writing for an internal audience and want to put the brightest face on things, incidentally, remember that a layoff implies that those laid off will one day be recalled. If you're downsizing, rightsizing or just flat-out firing people, you're not really laying them off.

Wrong: Even the most profitable discount chains have had massive lay-of fs.

Right: Even the most profitable discount chains have had massive layof fs.

Wrong: He plans to layoff 20 people.

Right: He plans to lay off 20 people.

like I said

Never use. See as I said.

media

Media is a plural word. If you only use one **medium** to advertise, such as television, that's singular.

Wrong: The media was insisting on an explanation from the CEO about the oil spill.

Right: The media were insisting on an explanation from the CEO about the oil spill.

Right: The only advertising medium the CEO wanted to use was the local radio station.

more perfect

Yes, even the founding fathers make mistakes. The phrase is used incorrectly in the preamble to the constitution. "Perfect" is an absolute. There's no such thing as "more perfect." Or "more unique."

mutual cooperation

Redundant. Just say "cooperation."

needless to say

If it's needless, don't say it.

Net/net

Capitalize when referring the "the" Net. An abbreviation for the Internet.

off/not off of

Do not use **off of**. Ever.

Wrong: We will take 10% **off of** the regular price.

Right: We will take 10% **off** the regular price.

online

Rather than on-line. the *Wired Style Book* recommends closing up words like online.

past experience

Redundant. Just say "experience."

PC

Means any personal computer, even a Mac.

place the emphasis on

Wordy. Just say "emphasize."

principal/principle

Principal is a person with authority in rank — spelled as your **pal**. It is also a sum of money. A principle is a fundamental truth, law or rule. A **principle** is a thing; it cannot be used to describe another word.

Wrong: The **principle** goal of this company is to become the leader in the market.

Right: The **principal** goal of this company is to become the leader in the market.

Wrong: It's easier to fight for **principals** than to live up to them.

Right: "It's easier to fight for **principles** than to live up to them."

— Adlai Stevenson
Presidential candidate

prior to

Stodgy, wordy. Use "before."

proved/proven

Proved is the past tense and past participle of the action verb "to prove." You **proved** or **have proved** you are a great leader. **Proven** can only be used to describe someone or something: You are a **proven** leader.

Wrong: He has **proven** he can do the job.

Right: He has **proved** he can do the job.

Wrong: This product is a **proved** bestseller.

Right: This product is a **proven** bestseller.

quotation marks

Quotation marks are the double ones that look like "this." Use the single quote, which is also the apostrophe, only for quotes within quotes, something that comes up only rarely in business writing. Other punctuation goes inside the quote marks ("I hope that clears up the confusion," he said.) — with the exception of colons and

semicolons. If the quotation is a question, the question marks goes inside the quotes. But if the quote is a statement or phrase that is part of a question, the question mark stays outside: Do you agree that his remarks should be considered "not for attribution"?

quotation marks/not for emphasis

Do not use quotation marks around words for emphasis. Instead, use **italics** or **boldface** type for the words you want to emphasize. Using all capital letters to emphasize words is acceptable but not preferable. Use this technique sparingly.

Wrong: To celebrate our first anniversary, "**everything**" in our store will be on sale.

Right: To celebrate our first anniversary *everything* in our store will be on sale.

Right: To celebrate our first anniversary **EVERYTHING** in our store will be on sale.

quotation marks/unusual words

Enclose expressions or words that might be unfamiliar to your reader in quotation marks: **We are planning to "rightsize" the staff** . If you refer to words or expressions as definitions, enclose them in quotes.

Wrong: I have an idea that the phrase weaker sex was coined by some woman to disarm the man she was trying to overwhelm.

Right: I have an idea that the phrase "weaker sex" was coined by some woman to disarm the man she was trying to overwhelm.

— *Ogden Nash, humorist*

quotation marks and italics for titles

Use **quotation marks** for articles, songs, television shows, chapters of books or other works that appeared

within a publication. Also use quotation marks for titles of speeches and programs. For example, if your organization is sponsoring a program, "**Failsafe Investments**," use quotation marks.

Use **italics** for titles of **separate** publications, such as books, plays, movies, magazines and newspapers. Underlining, which is a substitute for italics, is a typewriter convention; with the advent of the computer, italics are preferable.

Wrong: *Pursuing Fast-Paced Innovation* is my favorite chapter in Tom Peters' book, "**Thriving on Chaos**."

Right: "**Pursuing Fast-Paced Innovation**" is my favorite chapter in Tom Peters' book, *Thriving on Chaos*.

reason why

Redundant. Use one word or the other, but not both.

refer back to

Wordy. Just say "refer."

repeat again

Wordy, redundant. Just say "repeat."

sadder but wiser, seeing is believing

Clichés. Avoid.

semicolons

Semicolons are used incorrectly so often that a safe course is never to use one

sexism

See he or she.

should have/not should of

Should have is correct. **Of** should never be used as a verb. Also wrong: **could of, would of** .

Wrong: You should of received your order yesterday.
Right: You should have received your order yesterday.

spreadsheet

One word.

stationary/stationer y

Stationar y means staying the same or standing still;
stationer y is the paper you use for your business letters.

takeover/take over

If you plan to **take over** a company, you need two words to describe the action. If your company is the target of a **takeover** , as a noun or descriptive word (adjective), it's one word.

Wrong: In the take over business, if you want a friend, you buy a dog.

Right: "In the takeover business, if you want a friend, you buy a dog."

— Carl Icahn

tend, tendency

Use "tend," not "have a tendency to," and save a few words.

than/then

"Than" is used for comparison (as in T. Boone Pickens's line, "I'm always looking for people who can do a job better than I can."). "Then" is used only for time.

their, there, they're

The spelling of these words is often confused. Use **their**

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to mean belonging to them. Use **there** for a place or a word to start a sentence. Use **they'r e** as an abbreviation for **they are** .

Wrong: Their are no traffic jams when you go the extra mile.

Right: "There are no traffic jams when you go the extra mile."

— Anonymous

Wrong: Several CEOs say their willing to take risks in they'r e businesses.

Right: Several CEOs say they'r e willing to take risks in their businesses.

to, two, too

"To" is used many ways to mean **toward** or **until**, or to link verbs, as in **to run**. **Two** is the number. **Too** means **also**, **very** or **more than enough**. It is this last **too** that causes the most trouble in spelling. Think of it as meaning just **too** much — with an extra **o**.

Wrong: To much of a good thing can be wonderful.

Right: Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.

— Mae West

Wrong: Between too evils, I always pick the one I never tried.

Right: Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried.

— Mae West

under the gun, under the wire

Clichés. Avoid.

unique

If it is **unique**, it is one of a kind — incomparable. You cannot have something that is **more unique** or **most unique** or **very unique**. (See **more perfect**.)

Wrong: Our new environmental safety policy is the most unique in our industry.

Right: Our new environmental safety policy is unique in our industry.

Right: Our new environmental safety policy is the most carefully thought out in our industry.

utilize

The sentence will almost always sound better if you simply say "use."

Web/web

Short for the World Wide Web or WWW. Capitalize.

Lower case when it's in a combining form: webcam, webcast, webmail, webmaster, webzine.

Web site

Rather than web site or Web Site.

where . . . at

"Where" with "at" is not correct English.

Wrong: Where is she at?

Right: Where is she?

who/that

Generally, you should use "who" to refer to people, "that" to refer to things.

who/whom

Use **who** whenever you can substitute **he** or **she**. Use **whom** when you can substitute **him** or **her**. Read the sentence from the point where **who** or **whom** is used, and then substitute **he** for **who** or **him** for **whom** to see which is correct. When **who** or **whom** is in a question, turn it into a statement, and try the same tip: To **whom** did you give the memo? You gave the memo to **whom (to him)**.

Wrong: Jason Markle, the auditor whom worked for us last year, retired.

Right: Jason Markle, the auditor who [he] worked for us last year, retired. (You wouldn't say him worked for us last year.)

Wrong: Whom should I say is calling?

Right: Who should I say is calling? (Read it as: I should say who [he] is calling.)

who's/whose

Who's is a contraction for **who is** or **who has**. **Whose** is a possessive — who owns something.

Wrong: Whose the employee with the best sales record?

Right: Who's the employee with the best sales record?
(Who is)

Wrong: Who's briefcase is that?

Right: Whose briefcase is that? (Who owns the briefcase?)

with regard to

Wordy. Just say "about" or even "regarding."

www

Lower case when used in a URL.

your/you're

Your is possessive word meaning belonging to you. **You're** is a contraction for you are. The two are often confused.

Wrong: Never rest on you're oars. If you do, the whole company starts sinking.

Right: "Never rest on your oars. If you do, the whole company starts sinking."

— Lee Iacocca

Wrong: Just remember, once your over the hill, you begin to pick up speed.

Right: "Just remember, once you're over the hill, you begin to pick up speed."

— Charles Schultz, cartoonist

ZIP Code

ZIP should be all in capital letters and the first letter in **Code** should be in upper case. It's a trademark of the U.S. Postal Service, and it stands for Zone Improvement Program.

How much does your advertising provider know about marketing?

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