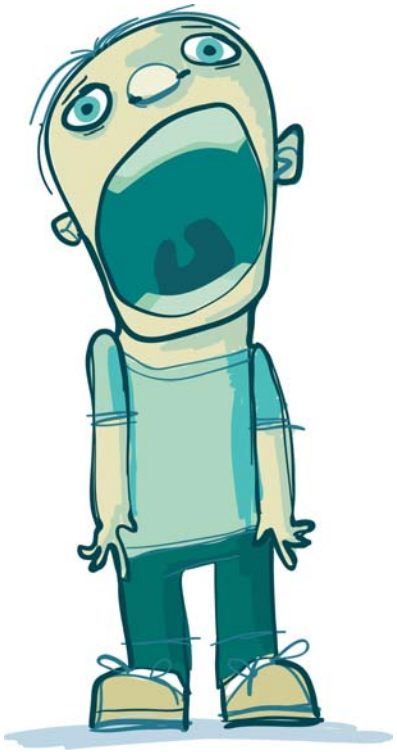
# Help! Is it it's or its?

All the punctuation and grammar you need to know to get you through your working day.



# Contents

# 1.0 Introduction: Bumph about this ebook

Want to get to the juicy stuff? Feel free to skip this bit and go straight to page 6.

## Who's this ebook for?

1. You work in an office and you come out in a cold sweat when you have to write letters, emails, reports and presentations.

2. You're a small business owner and you have to write your own sales letters, press releases and blog posts – but you think you kind of suck at punctuation and grammar.

3. You left school ages ago and you've forgotten everything you ever learnt in English class.

4. You left school last year and you have qualifications in sports psychology, media relations and business studies but you have no idea what an adverb is. That's probably because your teacher didn't know either.

5. You never question spellchecker or grammar checker even though you think that sometimes it might be wrong.

## What this ebook doesn't cover

If you want to know about the present perfect continuous tense or an infinitive clause, you'll have to go elsewhere. 'Cos you ain't gonna find the answer here. No sireee Bob.

But you know what? You don't really need to know that stuff do you? Not for every day writing. You need the basics. You're not writing perfect prose here. This is business writing. Keep it simple.

## What this ebook does include

This ebook will show you how to remember the difference between its and it's – so you don't look like a dufus.

It will explain what an adjective is. (So when your boss yells at you to 'cut down on the flowery adjectives' you won't look at him with a blank expression.)

It will show you the difference between lose and loose. Yes there is a difference.

And it will do it in a way that's not at all serious or stuffy.

## How this ebook is set out

This ebook covers English English. You know. The language spoken in England. However, well-known American spellings, grammar or punctuation differences have been flagged (ha ha) with an American flag.

Tips and important bits are marked with an exclamation mark.

Enjoy.

# 2.0 Mini glossary
# (Stuff you once knew but may have forgotten.)

This is the stuff you kinda shoulda know. But hey. These days our heads are full of strategy meetings; mortgage payments; and tax returns. It's easy to forget what the hell an adverb is.

It's worth taking a quick look at this as most of these words are referred to in the rest of the ebook.

After verbs, nouns and pronouns there's a bit more bumph about the types of verbs, nouns and pronouns they are. Now don't freak out about this. You don't need to remember what a transitive verb or concrete noun is. They're just in there as a point of interest.

## Acronym

An acronym is a word formed by the initial letters of each word in a phrase. Use sparingly in your business writing.

AWOL: Absent without leave.
PDQ: Pretty damn quick.
TLA: Three letter acronym.

## Adverb

An adverb shows how, when, and where something is done. (Adverbs are italicised in the examples.)

Sarah writes *beautifully.*
His co-worker worked *slowly*.
He waited *patiently* to get on the train.

## Adjective

An adjective describes a noun or a pronoun. (Adjectives are italicised in the examples.)

Andrew's instant coffee was *terrible*.
She had a *large* glass of chardonnay after work.
He had a *packed* diary this week.

## Antonym

An antonym refers to a word meaning the opposite of another word. Examples of antonyms:

Decisive: *hesitant*
Apathetic: *enthusiastic*
Remarkable: *ordinary*

## Clause

A clause is a phrase within a sentence that contains a subject and a verb. The main (or independent) clause can stand alone. A subordinate (or dependent) clause relies on the rest of the sentence for it to make sense.

*I've got to get into work today,* (main clause) even if it *is bloody snowing.* (Subordinate clause).

*The client's in at 9.00am tomorrow (subordinate clause)* so *I'll need you in the office at 8.30am.* (Main clause).

## Cliché

A cliché is an overused, hackneyed, cheesy expression. Use sparingly (if at all) in your business writing.

We're on time and on budget.
Saving for a rainy day.
No job too big or too small.

## Conjunction

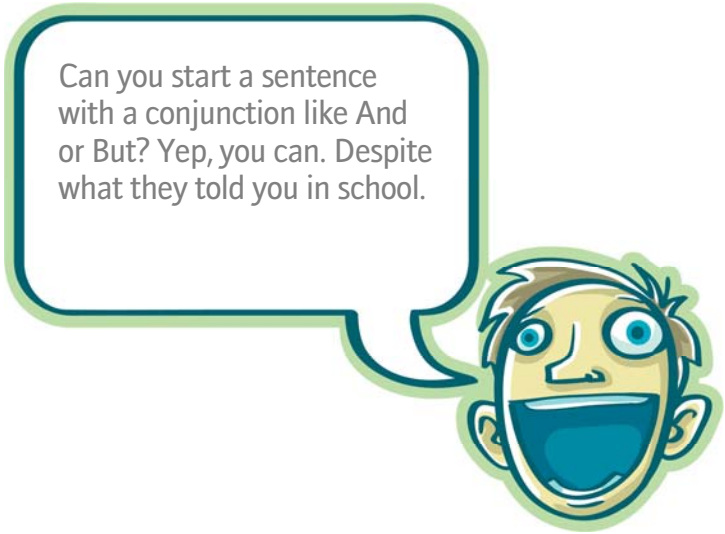
A conjunction joins together words, phrases or clauses. (Conjunctions are italicised in the examples.)

She earned a lot *yet* was still broke.
He called Jackie *and* told her to meet him in the bar after work.
Have you got an iPhone *or* a Blackberry?

## Contraction

A contraction is a shortened form of one or two words; an apostrophe takes the place of the missing letter or letters. (Contractions are italicised in the examples.)

Do not cross the line: *Don't* cross the line.
If I had known he was speaking at the conference I might have gone: If *I'd* known he was speaking at the conference I *might've* gone.
Sharon will not listen to me: Sharon *won't* listen to me.




## Homonym

Homonyms are words which look or sound the same but have different meanings. Take care with these as your spellchecker won't pick 'em up. Examples of homonyms:

Written differently but pronounced the same.

Weight (in gold) / Wait (for me)
Right (turn) / Write (the words)
Bear (with me) / bare (hands)

Written the same but pronounced differently.

Lead (weight) / Lead (down the garden path)
Wind (down)/ Wind (beneath my wings)

Written and pronounced the same but different meanings.

Green (colour) / Green (environmental stuff)
Hack (to cut or chop) / Hack (break into a computer)

## Metaphor

Metaphors compare two things which are not alike but have one thing in common. Go easy on these in business writing. (Metaphors are italicised in the examples.)

> Eileen, don't be a *sheep*. Do what you want. (Eileen and the sheep both follow the herd.)
> Mark in the PR department is a real *rock*. (Mark and the rock are both sturdy and supportive.)
> London is a *melting pot.* (Both London and a melting pot are full of various, umm, things.)

## Noun

A noun refers to a person, place, thing, animal or idea. (Nouns are italicised in the examples.)

> He got a new *iPhone* for work. (Concrete noun: can be touched.)
> Steve's promotion filled him with *happiness*. (Abstract noun: can't be touched.)
> I'll bring three *cups of coffee* from Starbucks. (Countable noun: can be counted.)
> The recycling bin was filled quickly with *rubbish*. (Uncountable noun: can't be counted.)
> The greatest city I have ever visited is *London*. (Proper noun: specific person, place or thing. Needs capitalising.)
> He lived in the next *town*. (Common noun: general person, place or thing.)
> I grabbed a *bunch* of bananas from the store for lunch. (Collective noun: describes a group of people, animals or things.)

## Object

The object of a sentence refers to the person or thing affected by the action of the verb. (Objects are italicised in the examples.)

> He slammed *the door* shut.
> Jack was on *Twitter* all day.
> He handed *me* a pile of work to do.

## Preposition

A preposition links nouns and pronouns and describes the relationship between them. (Prepositions are italicised in the examples.)

> I'm leaning *against* the wall of the cafeteria.
> The report is *in* the bin.
> She'll get there *before* me.

## Prefix

A prefix is a group of letters added before a word to alter its meaning and create a new word. Prefix examples:

> *Contra-* meaning opposite as in contradiction.
> *Intra-* meaning inside as in intravenous, intranet.
> *Semi-* meaning half or partly as in semicircle, semiconscious
> *Mis-* meaning wrong or false as in misadventure, mistake

## Pronoun

A pronoun is a word that stands in for other words, normally nouns. (Pronouns are italicised in the examples.)

> I met Rob at a networking event. *He* was pretty loud. (Personal pronoun.)
> Is this *yours* or *mine*? (Possessive pronoun.)
> Hey, make *yourselves* comfortable. (Reflexive pronoun.)

## Simile

A simile is when one thing is compared to another and is said to be *like* something. Use sparingly in business writing. (Similes are italicised in the examples.)

> Steve was as *busy as a beaver* with the new designs.
> The project was *as dead as a dodo*.
> The list of errors in this piece is *as long as my arm*.

## Subject

The subject of a sentence refers to the person, place, idea or thing that is *doing* or *being* something. (Subjects are italicised in the examples.)

> At the meeting, *Simon* did a presentation on Social Media.
> *She* sat quietly.
> *The email* from the client was full of praise.

## Suffix

A suffix is a group of letters added to the end of a word to alter its meaning and create a new word.

> -*able* added to excite to form excitable
> -*less* added to hope to form hopeless
> -*ment* added to postpone to form postponement

## Synonym

A synonym refers to a word that has a similar or same meaning as another word. Examples of synonyms:

> Next: *Closest; Adjoining; Nearest*
> Wit: *Cleverness; Comedy; Banter*
> Outspoken: *Candid; Forthright; Frank*

## Verb

A verb shows action, events or an occurrence. It's known as a *doing* or *being* word. (Verbs are italicised in the examples.)

> I was *asleep.* (Intransitive verb: doesn't need an object.)
> He *picked* the images from iStockphoto. (Transitive verb: needs an object.)
> He *is* a lawyer. (Linking verb.)
> A letter of apology *was written* by Stuart. (Passive voice verb.)

# 3.0 Punctuation

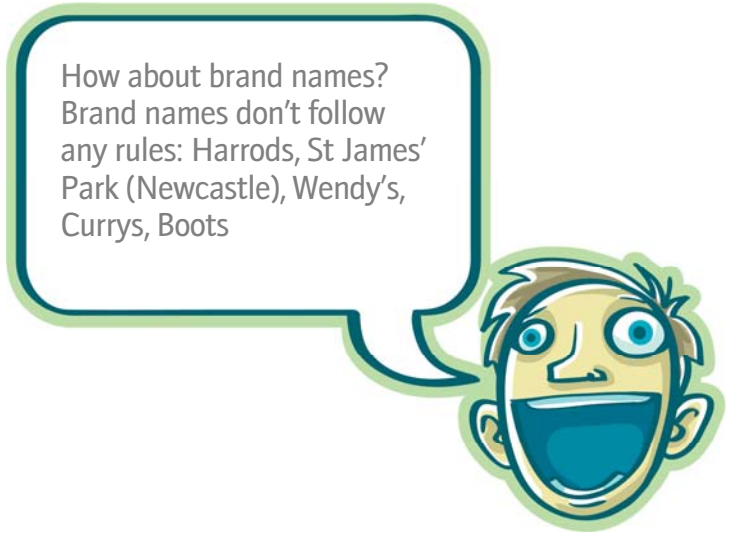
Aaaah punctuation. Can't live without it. Can't kill it.

But punctuation is really important for good written communication.

Let me say that again. Punctuation is *really* important for good written communication. Good punctuation guides your reader through your words. It helps get your message and meaning across. And it removes ambiguity. As Lynne Truss, of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* fame, pointed out, 'extra marital sex is not the same as extra-marital sex.' Indeed.

But what with text messaging, Facebook status updates and tweets, it's easy to forget where commas, apostrophes and semicolons are meant to go. After all, who punctuates their text messages? (That'll just be me then.)

But how about when you come to write a report? Or a sales letter? Or a presentation? Or an enewsletter? Do you really want to send out stuff littered with mistakes? Nope you don't. Nor do you want to spend half your day finding out whether a full stop should go inside or outside of brackets. (Read on!)




## 3.1 Apostrophes. How to use 'em

Right. You need to know where apostrophes go. Nothing makes you look more like a chump than getting one of these in the wrong place.

**1. Use an apostrophe to show where letters have been missed out. (Known as a contraction.)**

- Could've (could have)
- Should've (should have)
- Can't (can not)

- Won't (will not)
- Shan't (shall not)

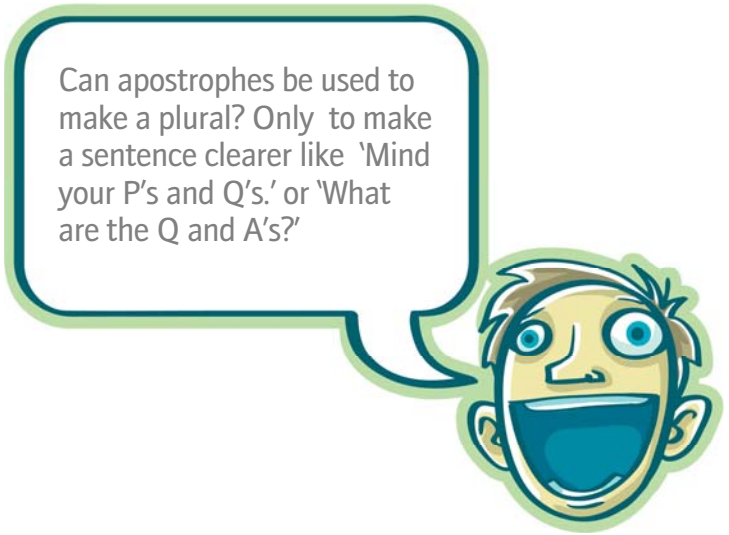
- Andrew's going to the gym at lunchtime. (Andrew is going to the gym.)
- Sarah's funny. (Sarah is funny.)

**2. Use an apostrophe followed by an 's' to show something *belongs*. (Known as a possessive apostrophe.)**

- We rely on Dave's computer skills.
- I'm having the manager's special for lunch at the pub.

**Even if the word ends in an 's' (and is singular).**

- They're near Chris's desk.
- Don't touch James's stapler.
- It's Bob Davis's department, I think.




**Even if the word is a plural word (but it doesn't end in an 's').**

- I'm writing children's books.
- We publish women's magazines.
- Where is the men's bathroom?

**But. If the word is plural and already ends in an 's' just add an apostrophe.**

- The managers' boardroom.
- I'm owed two weeks' work.
- Give it to me in six months' time.

**So is it it's or its?**

Nothing gets people confused as quickly as the its/it's thing. So ignore all the rules above for a moment and remember this:

***It's* is a contraction of *it is*.**

- It's going to rain. (It is going to rain.)
- When's the meeting? It's at 10.30am. (It is at 10.30am.)

***Its* means belonging to it.**

- The document is in its folder on your desk.
- The company has lost its value.

Tip: Ask yourself, could I write *it is* instead? If you can, choose *it's*. If not choose *its*.

## 3.2 Brackets (and why they're so handy)

Round brackets, also known as parentheses, enclose extra information that's not essential to the sentence. As a test you should be able to take out the stuff between the brackets and the sentence would still make sense.

- I've enclosed six swatches (all different colours) for your presentation.
- Can you let me know by next week (by 'phone or email) when you want this delivered?

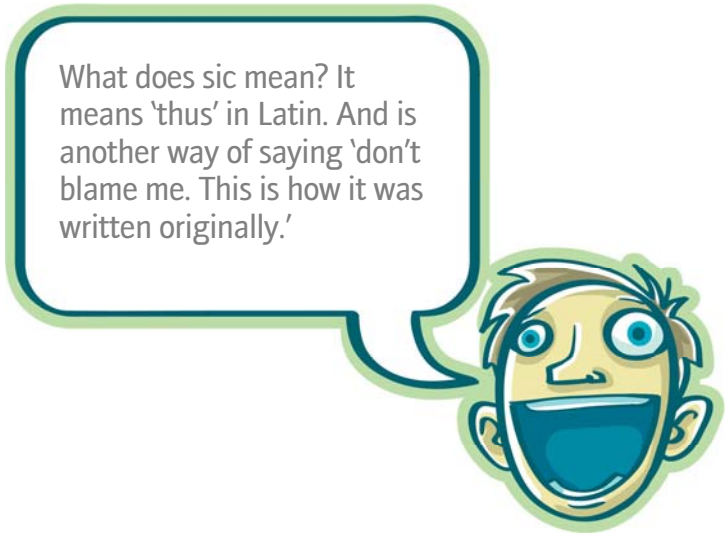
Square brackets are used to show where a change has been made to a quote or where extra information has been added.

- She told me she was definitely going to attend the [client] meeting next week.

And where an error has been made which is not the writer's.

- "Lunatic bloggers can have the blog sphere [sic] all to themselves as our people are far too busy driving down the cost of air travel."

  *Yes, the good people at Ryan Air really did say this.



# 3.3 Colons: How to avoid colonic irritation

Hands up. What do you use a colon for? (No toilet jokes please.) If you didn't put your hand up don't worry. Most people have no clue. But using a colon correctly will amaze your friends and impress your colleagues. Oh and please note: a colon is never followed by a hyphen like this:-

Colons have two main uses:

**1. To let you know what follows is an explanation or an elaboration of what comes before.**

- The Manchester office has a major problem: staff turnover.
- He suggested a new role for the intern: Social Media executive officer.

Occasionally the explanation comes first.

- The end of year figures; the report on company vehicles; and the bad debt analysis: all need bringing to the next meeting.

**2. To introduce a list.**

- You need to bring three things to the meeting: a note pad, a pen, and a sense of humour.
- Several issues need addressing: tardiness, attitude, and inappropriate internet use.

Tip: The words before a colon must form a complete sentence. Put a full stop instead of a colon to check the sentence can stand alone.

Capital letters after a colon? Yes, in the US (if it's a complete sentence). But not often in the UK.

# 3.4 Commas. Good for lists, separating bits, and marking things off

There are a zillion uses for commas. Ok, there are quite a few (although pausing to breathe isn't one of them.) As with all punctuation, commas should be used to clarify meaning.

Ok, are we ready? Eyes down.

**1. Commas are used in lists.**

- For lunch I'll have a hot chocolate, a bag of prawn cocktail crisps, a tuna sarnie, and a KitKat.
- You need to bring three things to the meeting: a note pad, a pen, and a sense of humour.

What's an Oxford comma? An Oxford comma (or serial or Harvard comma) is a comma before the *and* in a list of three or more things. Despite some people feeling superstitious about this, it's perfectly ok to do if it adds clarity.

- On his CV his interests included reading, walking on Hampstead Heath and cooking.

Cooking on Hampstead Heath? Is that allowed? Better would be:

- On his CV his interests included reading, walking on Hampstead Heath, and cooking.

- Thank you for this award. I'd like to dedicate it to my children, Peter and Mark Thomas the MD.

Wow. She's the mother of Mark Thomas? And Peter? Better would be:

- Thank you for this award. I'd like to dedicate it to my children, Peter, and Mark Thomas the MD.

Oxford commas are mostly used in the US. E.g. the flag is red and white, and blue. And not in the UK e.g. the flag is red, white and blue. For some reason the Oxford comma on either side of the pond is not used in journalistic circles.

**2. To separate a main clause from a subordinate clause.**

- I've got to get into work today, even if it is bloody snowing.
- I looked for that spreadsheet on your desktop, but I couldn't find it.

**3. As a bracketing device used to mark off the not-so-essential part of a sentence. (To check you've used bracketing commas correctly, remove the words between the commas and the sentence should still make sense.)**

- The managing director, leaning back in his chair, broke the bad news.
- The industry award ceremony, usually held at The Dorchester, was a proper knees-up.

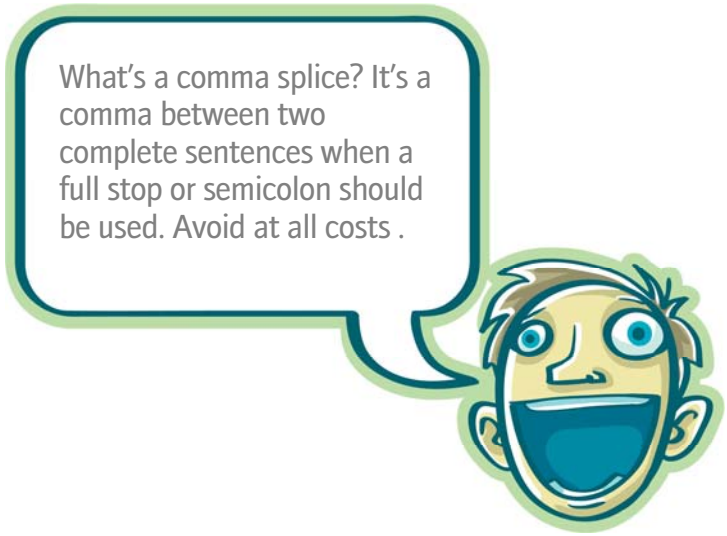
Bracketing commas can also be 'invisible' if used at the end or the beginning of a sentence.

- Based in a trendy part of the East End of London, Green Frog is a full service design agency.
- Green Frog is a full service design agency.

- The company has decided to use Social Media, including Twitter and Facebook.
- The company has decided to use Social Media.

**4. To mark off dates, titles and places.**

- Dave Johnson, graphic designer, Green Frog, attended the meeting.
- He started the business on 18th July, 1972.
- The leaving do is on Friday, 19th September.
- They live in Cheam, Surrey.
- He comes from Los Angeles, CA.




**5. To show a contrast.**

- He was only too willing to help, unlike his PA.
- I said 9.30am, not 9.45am.

**6. To mark off questions.**

- He's really leaving, is he?
- She'll still be able to attend, won't she?

**7. To mark off meanwhile, however, nevertheless.**

- Meanwhile, back in the London office, Jim was getting the job done.
- However, she still felt she should have got a pay rise.

- Nevertheless, he was back at his desk by 9.00am the following morning.

Take care with this though. *However* doesn't always have a comma.

- However you look at it, he was right about the new project.

**8. In numbers over four figures.**

- The website had 6,000 unique visitors this month.
- The new software would cost in the region of $10,700.

There are some other uses of commas. But seriously, we'd be here all day. The ones above are a good start.

## 3.5 Dashes and hyphens – what are they?

There are two types of dashes: the em dash (the width of an *m*) and the en dash (the width of an *n*). Hyphens, on the other hand, tend to be shorter and thicker than dashes. But to be honest, with different fonts, programs and keyboards it's often hard to tell the difference.

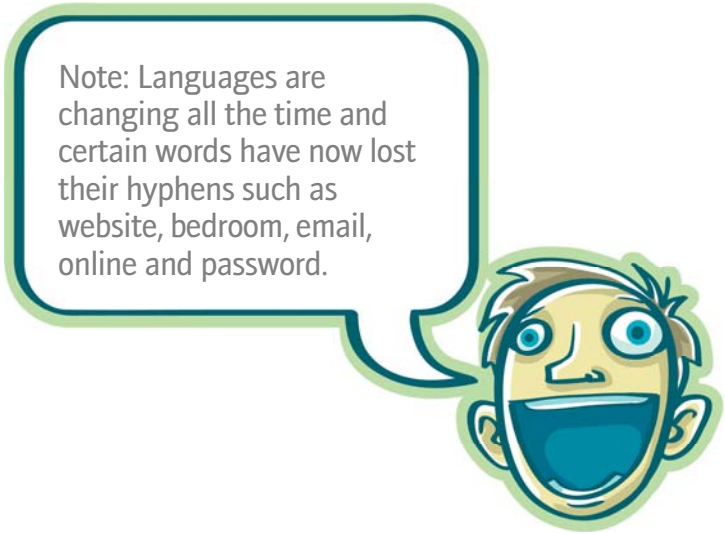
William Strunk Jr. of *Elements of Style* describes a dash as "a mark of separation stronger than a comma, less formal than a colon, and more relaxed than parenthesis." Well quite.

Em dashes are used to show a break in the sentence or an interruption of thought. They have white space either side and they're quite informal. So use sparingly in business writing and if possible use bracketing commas, brackets or a colon instead.

- I'm off to a meeting at the client's office – the one on Broad Street – for 3.30pm.
- See you later at the bar – yes, the one next to the station!

Use an en dash for dates and sequences.

- He worked 9-5 most days.



- The conference is June 18-20th.
- Use the A-Z rather than your Sat Nav.

Use a hyphen to join words together.

- We operate in non-EU countries.
- Her promotion was all very hush-hush.
- Steve in the marketing department is such a know-it-all.

In the US dashes sometimes appear as two hyphens --

## 3.6 Ellipses. . .for stuff left out. . .

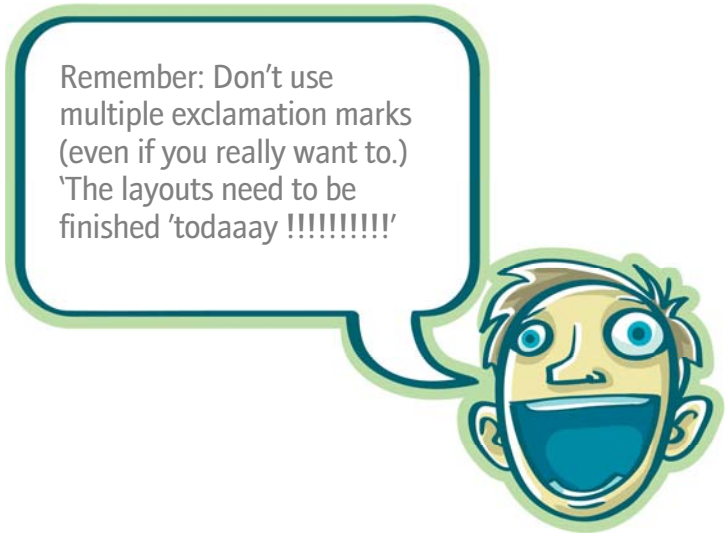
Ellipses (sometimes known as omission marks) are three dots, and are used to show where words have been left out.

> "Many companies are under pressure to keep their earnings in line with analysts' forecasts…we intend to steer in the opposite direction." Larry Page, co-founder, Google.
>
> *(The entire quote reads: "Many companies are under pressure to keep their earnings in line with analysts' forecasts. Therefore, they often accept smaller, predictable earnings rather than larger and less predictable returns. Sergey and I feel this is harmful, and we intend to steer in the opposite direction." Larry Page, co-founder, Google.)*

## 3.7 Exclamation marks! Yay!

Use an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence to express strong emotion.

- Get into my office now!
- The layouts need to be finished today!




## 3.8 Full stops. Period.

Also known as a period, there are a number of uses for a full stop.

**1. Use a full stop at the end of a complete sentence.**

- Use the Twitter exporter to automatically post your Facebook status updates to Twitter.
- If I ever finish writing this blog post it will be a miracle.

**2. After abbreviations.**

- Ibid.
- E.g.
- No.7.

**3. Inside a bracket if it's a complete sentence.**

- She thought the presentation on SEO went pretty well. (Even Jim looked interested.)

**4. Outside a bracket if the sentence is incomplete.**

- She thought the presentation on SEO went pretty well (and even Jim looked interested).

**5. Outside quotation marks if the full stop is not part of the quote.**

- Jack Dorsey, Twitter founder, remarked that his company was “fond of constraints that inspire creativity”.

  *(The entire quote reads: “We’re fond of constraints that inspire creativity. Constraints inspire us in how we approach the press, how we approach business relationships, how we do everything.” Jack Dorsey.)*

In the US a full stop is placed inside the quotation mark, whether it belongs or not.

Don’t use a full stop:

**1. When there’s another punctuation mark there already.**

- Hooray! Huh?

**2. For abbreviations like:**

- Dr, Mr or St

**3. For acronyms or abbreviations if the word is well known.**

- BBC, NATO, UK

**4. In titles, headings or sub-headings.**

- Using Social Media to grow your business
- How to attract high-value clients

**5. If a title or abbreviation has its own punctuation.**

- It was in a report by Which?

In the US, Mr., Dr., and St. all have a period. The U.K. and the U.S.A. are often punctuated as well.

# 3.9 Quotation marks. Sometimes they're like "this". Sometimes like 'this'

Also known as inverted commas and speech marks, quotation marks are used to surround a direct quotation.

- So the client replied "if you think I'm paying for that you've got to be kidding."
- "What the heck is that?" asked John.

Double or single quotes?

You can use either. Just be consistent. If you do a quote within a quote use the mark you haven't used yet.

- John made his case for the IT department. "As Bill Gates once said 'be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one.'"
- The MD continued. 'The end of year figures are "challenging". I hope we do better in the first quarter of next year.'

In the US "double quotes" are preferred. In the UK 'single quotes' are preferred.

Where does punctuation go? Punctuation goes outside of the quotation mark unless it's part of the quote.

- "I love that!" said Jackie.
- David told her to 'get on with it'.

In the US a full stop is placed inside the quotation mark, whether it belongs or not.

## 3.10 Question marks? What are they for?

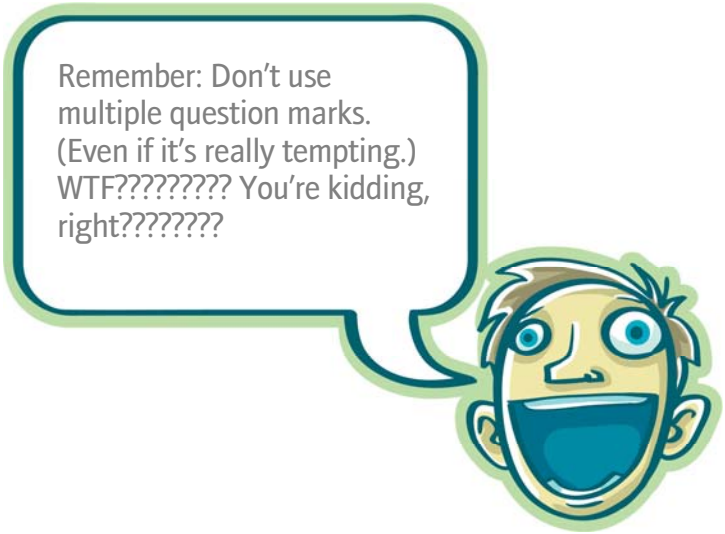
Easy one this.

**1. A question mark is used at the end of a sentence which is a direct question.**

- Who's stolen my coffee cup?
- Need help filling in your form?
- What are you talking about?

But not at the end of an indirect question.

- Andrew asked what we wanted for lunch.
- Our manager enquired as to what time we left the office last night.




**2. A question mark surrounded by a bracket can also be used in the middle of a sentence if you're unsure about the fact.**

- Rob started working for us in 1996 (?) and left in 2009.

## 3.11 Semicolons. Useful bits of punctuation; really, they are

If it was possible to have a favourite bit of punctuation this would be it. The glorious semicolon. Much maligned, misunderstood and misused; it's probably one of the handiest bits of punctuation around.

Semicolons have two main uses:

**1. To join two complete sentences which are closely related and of equal weight.**

- Lesley in accounts loved the flowers; the florist delivered them today.
- The first report will be ready by 4.30pm; the second one will be some time in the morning.
- I think I can find an answer to this; Mike's idea is obviously not going to work.

Tip: Both sides of a semicolon need to form two complete sentences.

**2. To separate a long list of items.**

- There will be a number of people attending: Simon Jones, account manager, Braithwaite's; Sarah Turner, copywriter, Turner Ink; Miles Gibbons, art director, Creative Hub; and Dave Johnson, graphic designer, Green Frog.

Tip: Use a semicolon before the last 'and' in a long list.

- There are a number of reasons why this project failed: a lack of training; an unrealistic budget, due to cutbacks from head office; and not enough commitment from the sales team.

# 4.0 Grammar

Grammar schmammer. What is it? And why do we need it?

Well, basically, grammar is a record of the rules we should follow when it comes to words. But the rules aren't totally set in stone; so as our language develops so do the rules and regulations.

So this section explains only the most useful points of grammar. And ones that are likely to stay the same (at least for the next few years anyway).

## 4.1 Active voice over passive voice. Who can shout the loudest?

What do we mean when we say active and passive voices?

With an active voice the subject *does* the action and the object *receives* the action.

- The trainers (*subject*) compared (*verb*) the results of the two departments (*object*).
- The receptionist was helping the customer.
- Employees need good online skills to succeed here.
- You should tell him.

With a passive voice the subject does nothing; it is now acted upon. And can sometimes disappear altogether if it is unimportant or unknown.

- The results of the two departments were compared (by the trainers - the original subject now the object).
- The customer was being helped (by the receptionist).
- Good online skills are needed (by employees) to succeed here.
- He should be told.

Wherever possible, use an active voice over a passive voice. It makes your writing shorter, more direct, and propels readers through the sentence. Whereas a passive voice can be long-winded, less lively, and make you seem unsure of your ideas.

- Passive: The workshop on ‘creating videos’ is being run by Sophie.
- Active: Sophie is running the ‘creating videos’ workshop.

- Passive: This blog is being read by most of the company, apparently.
- Active: Apparently, most of the company is reading this blog.

Be careful of starting a sentence in an active voice and then shifting to a passive voice.

- Active/passive: People using the staff canteen found the lasagne tasteless, but it was still ordered frequently.
- Active/active: People using the staff canteen found the lasagne tasteless, but they still ordered it frequently.

- Active/passive: He tried to act cool when he slipped over in the office, but he was still laughed at by his co-workers.
- Active/active: He tried to act cool when he slipped over in the office, but his co-workers still laughed at him.

## 4.2 Agreeing the subject and the verb. ‘I is aren’t I?’

The basic rule is that a singular subject takes a singular verb while a plural subject takes a plural verb.

So:

**1. When the subject of a sentence is made up of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by *and*, use a plural verb.**

- She *and* her co-workers *are* at Starbucks.

**2. When two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected by *or* or *nor*, use a singular verb.**

- I think the spare charger *or* the new battery *is* in the drawer.

**3. *Doesn't* is a contraction of *does not* and should be used only with a singular subject. *Don't* is a contraction of *do not* and should be used only with a plural subject.**

- Make sure *the meeting room doesn’t* get booked.
- The *sales guys don’t* like their new laptops.

However there is an exception to the rule. In the case of the first person and second person pronouns *I* and *you* the contraction *don't* should be used.

- *I don't* think that's a great idea.
- *You don't* want to go to the gym at lunchtime?

**5. Don't be misled by a phrase that comes between the subject and the verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.**

- *One* of the boxes *is* open.
- *The MD*, as well as the rest of the employees, *is* anxious.
- *The guy* with all those files on his desk *needs to come* to the 'getting things done' meeting.

**6. The words *each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one* are singular and require a singular verb.**

- *Each* of these PCs *needs* cleaning.
- *Everybody knows* Tony in the office.
- *Either is* correct.

**7. Nouns such as scissors, tweezers and trousers require plural verbs. (There are two parts to these things.)**

- Ouch! *These* scissors *are* sharp.
- *Are* your new work *trousers* made of wool?

**8. Collective nouns are words that imply more than one person but are considered singular and take a singular verb, such as: group, team, committee, class, and family.**

- The *committee decides* how to proceed.
- The *group has* to work together on this.
- The *staff is* in agreement with the new terms and conditions.

# 4.3 Capital punishment. When to use CAPS

Capital letters are mostly used to mark the beginning of a sentence and to identify a proper noun.

**Use capital letters for:**

The first letter of a sentence:
- It was there

Days of the week and months:
- Monday, July

Personal pronoun:
- I

Proper names:
- Sarah, London, River Thames

Brand names:
- Microsoft, Sony

Countries:
- England, Australia

Languages:
- French, German

Job titles if the title comes before a name:
- Vice-President Jeff Atkins

Salutations:
- Dear Sir

Acronyms and abbreviations:
- BBC, UN

Holidays and festivals:
- Christmas, Easter

In titles of books and films:
- Confessions of a Shopaholic, Crime and Punishment

When you're shouting:
- HOW HAS THIS HAPPENED?

Tip: Web and Internet can be upper or lower case. But website is lower case.

**You don't need a capital a letter for:**

The seasons:
- summer, winter

When a country appears as part of a well-known phrase:
- danish pastries, french windows, english muffins

Relatives:
- mum, dad, aunt (unless they're my Mum, my Dad or my Aunt)

Compass points:
- Drive east on the A3, he lived on the north coast of France

Job titles if it comes after a name:
- Gordon Brown, the British prime minister named worst-dressed man by GQ

In the US capital letters are used for every word in a heading apart from prepositions (*to, over), conjunctions (and, but)* and articles *a* and *the. E.g. The Simple Power of a Killer Offer. Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself.*

# 4.4 Etc., e.g., i.e., et al. What have the Romans ever done for us?

As a general rule of thumb don't scatter your writing with too much Latin like *de facto, ad nauseam* and *caveat emptor*. (Unless you're a lawyer or a doctor, in which case it comes with the territory.) But there are a few bits of Latin which we all use. (And frequently get wrong.)

**1. Etc. is an abbreviation of e*t cetera* which in Latin literally means *and the rest of such things*. A comma should precede an *etc*.**

- Let's talk about Social Media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.
- Yeah, bring your whole department to the company outing: Andrew, Sarah, Jack, Kevin, etc.

**2. E.g. is an abbreviation of *exempli gratia* which means *for example*. E.g. is always punctuated with full stops.**

- Use another browser other than IE6 e.g. Firefox, Safari or even IE7.
- Use easy to read fonts on your website e.g. Verdana.

**3. I.e. is an abbreviation of *id est* and means *that is* or *in other words*. I.e. is always punctuated with full stops.**

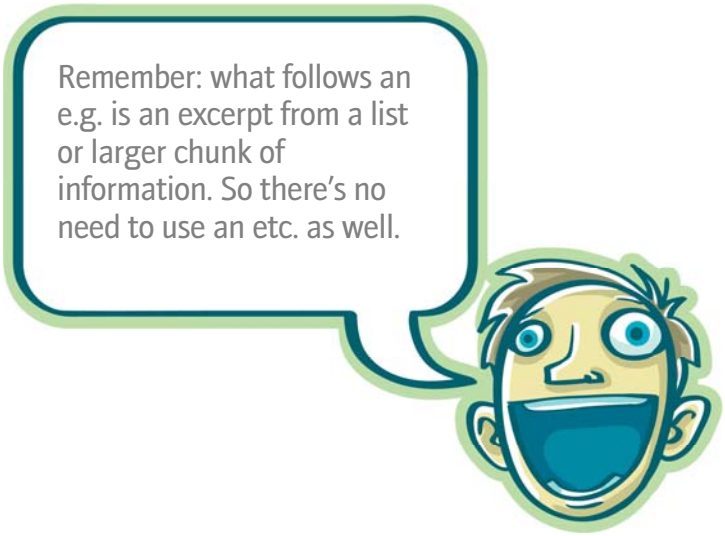
- We're going to run the same ad campaign from last summer i.e. the one with the cat in it.
- We'll give you your usual discount i.e. 10%.

Tip: E.g. or i.e.? E.g. means 'EGsample'. And i.e. means 'InEtherwords'.

**4. Et al. is an abbreviation of *et alii* which means *and others*.**

- The seminar was presented by Usbourne, Clark, Garratt et al.

In the US a comma is used after the abbreviations e.g., and i.e.,



## 4.5 Fewer or less. Or a bit more perhaps

Nearly every single grocery store gets this wrong. How many times have you seen a sign at a till which says '11 items or less'? (And then the person in front of you has an entire month's shopping, goddamit.)

**Less means *not as much.***

- This printer uses less ink than the last one.
- As it's Christmas Eve, there was less traffic on the road this morning.

**Fewer means *not as many* (countable).**

- This printer uses fewer cartridges than the last one.
- As it's Christmas Eve, there were fewer cars on the road this morning.

## 4.6 Me, myself and I. And anyone else who wants to join in

People often use *I* because they want to come across as being polite. Or a bit posh. Wrong!

The absolutely easiest way to remember if it's *Me* or *I* is to simply take the other person out of the sentence.

- Jack and I/me went to the Online Marketing Show at Olympia.
- I went to the Online Marketing Show at Olympia.

- The complaint letter was signed by John and I/me
- The complaint letter was signed by me.

So, when do you use *myself*? Only use *myself* when you have used *I* earlier in the same sentence.

- Euggh. I'm not particularly fond of organic tofu myself.
- You know all that filing you were going to help me with? I finished it off myself.

Never write I, myself. Unless you're a politician.

## 4.7. Splitting the infinitive. Boldly going and all that

Lordy, this sounds like fun. When can we start? Splitting the infinitive or putting an adverb between the *to* and the verb is seen in some grammar circles as an absolute no-no. But to be honest, it's a rubbish rule. And if splitting the infinitive makes the sentence clearer to understand then just do it.

- To *boldly* go.
- He had to *fully* understand the project brief.
- Dave wanted to *quickly* finish this email before leaving.

## 4.8 Starting a sentence with a conjunction. Because you're worth it

Can we start a sentence with a conjunction like *And, But, Because*? Yes, we can, despite what you may have been taught at school. It's not a modern invention either. The King James Bible, Shakespeare and Chaucer all have sentences beginning with *And*. And that's ok.

- Because I had to get the coffees on the way to work, I was late getting in.
- We offer all this. And more.
- Our 200g hot chocolate is a good price. But our 500g jar is even better value.

## 4.9 Tenses. Why they can cause headaches

Euugh tenses. Who can remember learning tenses in French at school? Present progressive. Past perfect. Conditional simple. Horrible. This section will be as simple as poss. Basically, tenses show the time an event has occurred:

**Simple Present:**

- They talk all the time.

**Present Perfect:**

- They have talked about this today.

**Simple Past:**

- They talked last week about this.

**Past Perfect:**

- They had talked at some length prior to the meeting.

**Future:**

- They will talk about this some time next week.

**Future Perfect:**

- They will have talked about this before the presentation.

Phew. And they're just the easy ones.

**1. For every day use you need to remember the following: if the actions you're describing occur at the same time, keep the verbs in the same time.**

- When the overhead projector broke, the meeting ended. (All past tense.)
- The company is bankrupt and the receivers are in. (All present tense.)

**2. If the actions occur at different times, use tenses which make sense.**

- We didn't go to the theatre on our last business trip to New York, but we will go there this time. (Past tense and future tense.)
- Although they will soon be moving offices, they have enjoyed working at Canary Wharf. (Future tense and present tense.)

**3. When something happens in the past but still continues in the present you have to show it.**

- She had been interviewed for her PR job in 1994 whilst working at the Red Lion, a pub near Charing Cross Station. (Past tense and present tense.)

# 4.10 Words that everyone screws up

## 1. Accept or Except?

**Accept** means to receive or to approve.
Example: I accept your offer of £5,000 for this ebook.

**Except** means excluding or leaving out.
Example: He liked everything about her CV except her time as a lap dancer.

## 2. Advice or Advise?

**Advice** means counsel; guidance; specific information; hint.
Example: I gave her good advice about her career options.

**Advise** means help with information or knowledge.
Example: I'll advise him to read the email correspondence prior to the meeting.

## 3. Affect or Effect?

**Affect** means to influence.
Example: Talking on your iPhone when driving can really affect your performance.

**Effect** means a result.
Example: The hilarious blog post had the desired effect.

Or **effect** can mean causing something to happen.
Example: The local council need to effect changes to make the town centre safer.

## 4. All Ready or Already?

**All ready** means fully prepared.
Example: The boys in the office were all ready for their big night out.

**Already** means previously.
Example: The leaving do was already over by the time she arrived.

## 5. Allusion or Illusion?

An **allusion** is an indirect reference or hint.
Example: Did you catch my allusion to Bill Gates?

An **illusion** is a misconception or false impression.
Example: The glasses gave the illusion she was clever.

## 6. Alternate or Alternative?

**Alternate** means every other one or taking in turns.
Example: For lunch this week, I'll alternate between sushi and sarnies.

**Alternative** means another option.
Example: I didn't like the venue for the presentation and had to find an alternative.

## 7. Among or Amongst?

Both are correct and mean the same. But among is more common.

## 8. Compliment or Complement?

**Compliment** means admiration or praise; free of charge.
Example: He complimented me on my speech. A complimentary glass of wine. A compliment slip.

**Complement** means to make complete, go well together.
Example: The new designer complemented the rest of the design team. We have a full complement of players for the quiz night.

Tip: Complement with an E means complete.

## 9. Bored by or Bored with?

Both are correct. But avoid bored of.

## 10. Cannot or Can not?

Actually, both are ok. But cannot is more widely used.

## 11. Continual or Continuous?

**Continual** means indefinitely without interruption.
Example: I was living in continual fear that I'd get fired.

**Continuous** means unbroken, uninterrupted.
Example: I received a continuous stream of rude phone calls from some weirdo.

## 12. Dependent or Dependant?

**Dependent** means reliant on.
Example: She was dependent on her colleague when it came to creating PowerPoint presentations.

**Dependant** means someone who depends on someone else.
Example: She has three dependants living with her. And a cat.

In the US dependent (with an E) is used for both.

## 13. Discreet or Discrete?

**Discreet** means careful, reliable, without wanting to cause embarrassment.
Example: Can we rely on him to be discreet with the sales figures?

**Discrete** means separate or distinct.
Example: The whole process will be broken down into discrete stages.

## 14. Dissatisfied or Unsatisfied?

**Dissatisfied** means being unhappy with a person, thing or situation.
Example: I was dissatisfied with the awful service.

**Unsatisfied** means needing more of something.
Example: He bought her a slap-up meal in Pizza Hut but she was left feeling unsatisfied.

## 15. Disinterested or Uninterested?

**Disinterested** means impartial or neutral.
Example: Her boss was disinterested in her progress within the company.

**Uninterested** means bored and lacking in interest.
Example: He was totally uninterested in the conference and fell asleep at the back of the hall.

## 16. Elicit or Illicit?

**Elicit** means to draw out.
Example: We managed to elicit from him how he got hold of details of the document.

**Illicit** means illegal, not allowed.
Example: Terry from sales and Doreen from HR were having an illicit affair.

## 17. Everybody or Everyone?

**Everybody** and **everyone** are interchangeable.
**Anyone** and **anybody** are also interchangeable.

## 18. Farther or Further?

**Farther** refers to physical distances.
Example: From the UK, India is farther away than Spain.

**Further** refers to quantity, time, or degree.
Example: They progressed further with the project than they thought they would.

## 19. Fictional or Fictitious?

**Fictiona**l means made up like an article, novel or tax return.
Example: The characters in this movie are fictional and not based on real people.

**Fictitious** means not true, a lie.
Example: His account of events was totally fictitious.

## 20. Illegible or Eligible?

**Illegible** means hard to read.
Example: My handwriting is so scribbly, it's illegible.

**Eligible** means having the right to do something.
Example: He was eligible to ask for a pay rise after two years.

## 21. Immanent or Imminent?

**Immanent** means inherent.
Example: Greed is immanent in human beings.

**Imminent** means something is about to happen.
Example: They were in imminent danger of getting fired over the office party shenanigans.

## 22. It's or Its?

**It's** is a contraction of it is.
Example: It's going to rain. (It is going to rain.) When's the meeting? It's at 10.30am. (It is at 10.30am.)

**Its** means belonging to it.
Example: The document is in its folder on your desk.

## 22. Licence or License?

**Licence** means a permit to do something.
Example: I've passed my test! I've got my driving licence now.

**License** means allowing someone to do something.
Example: The judge licensed the landlord to sell alcohol until 3am.

In the US license (with an S) is used for both the verb and the noun.

## 23. Lie or Lay?

**Lay** means to place or set down. It always takes an object.
Example: Lay the story boards (object) on my desk. I have laid the bike (object) under the tree.

**Lie** is a verb meaning recline or rest. It does not take a direct object.
Examples: I will lie down this afternoon for a nap.
Yesterday, was so stressful, I lay under my desk.

Tip: Careful with Lay and Lie; they often get muddled. It's confusing as the present tense of To Lay (lay the storyboard…) is the same as past tense of To Lie (yesterday, I lay under my desk…)

## 24. Lose or Loose?

**Lose** means to misplace.
Example: I keep losing my keys.

**Loose** means not firm or tight.
Example: I've dropped a few pounds, so my skirt is a bit loose.

Tip: Lose is four letters the same as lost. Lose my keys, lost my keys.

## 25. No-one or No one?

Either but never noone.

## 26. Practice or Practise?

**Practice** means a repeated exercise; a professional workplace.
Example: I need to go to football practice tonight. He took the cat to the vet's practice. Our best practice is to give a full refund.

**Practise** means a repeated activity to get really good at something.
Example: I'm practising my typing. She needs to practise her speech for the presentation.

In the US practice (with a C) is used for both the verb and the noun.

## 27. Principal or Principle?

**Principal** means head of something.
Example: He was the principal of my old school.

**Principal** also means the most important.
Example: Our principal aim is to give a good service.

**Principle** means a moral code, a guide.
Example: We mustn't abandon our principles.

## 28. Programme or Program?

**Programme** means a schedule of events, an agenda, a TV or radio show.
Example: That programme on BBC1 last night was so interesting. I'll buy a football programme at the stadium.

**Program** means instructions or data within an IT context.
Example: There's a new anti-spam program I need to install on my PC.

In the US only program is used. (Program was prevalent in the UK until the 19th Century when the UK decided to copy the French spelling and use programme. Go figure.)

## 29. Stationery or Stationary?

**Stationery** means materials to write with, office supplies.
Example: On the stationery order I asked for red paperclips.

**Stationary** means to be still.
Example: The other car was stationary when I drove straight into it.

Tip: I buy my stationery (with an E) from the stationers (with an E).

## 30. Then or Than?

**Then** is a description of time.
Example: I'm off to the meeting then I'm going for lunch.

**Than** describes a comparison.
Example: He was faster at typing than she was.

## 31. While or Whilst?

Both can be used.

While tends to be used in the US and whilst in the UK.

## 32. Your or you're?

**Your** describes something belonging to you.
Example: What is your name? Can I pinch your pen?

**You're** is a contraction of you are.
Example: You're going to have to finish that later.

Tip: Ask yourself: can I say 'you are' instead? If you can it's 'you're'. If not it's 'your'.

# 5.0 Free bonus tracks

These bonus tracks are part of the How to… series on the Turner Ink blog. (www.turnerink.co.uk/copywriting-blog)
Follow these and you'll be laughing. Seriously, you'll be hysterical.

## 5.1 How to write: An easy peasy 7 step process

We've all been there. It's called blank page syndrome. It's that feeling you get when you've been asked to write a report, a press release, a case study or a sales letter. But after 20 minutes you've only typed two words on the page. And that was your name.

So where do you start? What technique can you use to get those creative juices flowing? What plan can you use to ensure you include all the information you need? What system can you use to make sure your writing is sharp, concise and error free?

I'll tell you. It's called The Process. And it consists of 7 simple steps. Check it out.

**Step 1: Think about your audience**
Ask yourself: who am I writing this for? What do they do for a living? What do they want to read? What do they worry about? What makes them happy? Type a description of this person at the top of your page. Give them a name. This is the person you're going to write for.

**Step 2: Think about your objectives**
Ask yourself: what do I want this document to do? What's its purpose? To inform? To get somebody excited? Create a buzz? Convince?

What you want your document to do is known as the 'function statement'. Type at the top of your page: 'I want this piece to confirm/identify/highlight/announce/compare/clarify/ summarise/notify/recommend'.

**Step 3: Brainstorm**

Ok, I know the word brainstorm is not PC. But you get the drift. What's the one thing you absolutely must include? What do you need to tell your reader to convince, persuade, reassure them? This is your key message. Type it on your page.

Then write anything that comes into your head: ideas, words, sentences, false starts. This helps you get in the writing 'zone'.

**Step 4: Write an outline**

Once you've got all your information, start to organise and evaluate. Write your headings and number them. Be logical about this. Remember you need to make your document as easy as possible for your reader to understand. Your headings might not be used in the final document, but they'll help you with your planning.

**Step 5: Write the first draft**

Get writing. Take a look at your outline and notes and start to write a first draft. It's sometimes easier to write the summary and conclusion, or the introduction and call to action first, and then fill in the middle chunk afterwards. Don't agonise over grammar and punctuation at this stage. Just get it down. Let the words flow.

**Step 6: Edit your draft**

This is the fun bit. And probably the most important part of the process. Firstly, take a break. Ideally overnight. But certainly a couple of hours if you can. This will help you look at what you've written with a critical eye.

Print out your document; it's easy to miss something on screen. Read carefully through your work. Really read it. Does it do the job? Remember the objective you typed at the top of the page earlier.

Check your structure. Have you got the information in the right order? Is it logical? Does the story flow? Move sentences and paragraphs around so your points are made more clearly.

Check your sentence length. Can that sentence be shorter? Shorter still? (On average your sentences should be 15-20 words.) Make sure there's only one idea per sentence. Remember the message you're trying to communicate. Remember the people you're talking to.

Check your punctuation. Check your grammar. Check your facts. Make sure you've used an active voice. Use plain English.

How's it looking? Print it out, check it, and edit again.

**Step 7: And finally…proofread your work**

You're nearly done. The last part of The Process is proofreading. See below for tips on proofreading.

Phew. Done? Print it out and check it again.

# 5.2 How to proofread: 12 top tips for getting it right

So you've planned, done an outline, written a first draft and edited. Are you done? Not quite. The last thing you need to do is proofread. And here are some of the easiest ways to do it and some of the things to look out for.

**1. Take a break**

Preferably not a three hour one down the pub. But even a 15 minute break will refresh your eyeballs and help you spot errors more easily.

**2. Print out your work**

Yeah, I know it doesn't do much for your carbon footprint. But it's essential you print out a hard copy. It's just so much easier to find errors reading from paper than a screen. It just is. Dunno why.

**3. Read out loud**

Read your work out loud. And slow-ly. This will make you read each word individually and make it easier to find mistakes and poor sentence structure. Remember, if you're stumbling over the words chances are your reader will too. Warning: you may have to stand in the corridor or boardroom for this one.

**4. Read backwards**

Your brain is really clever. No, really it is. So it will always try and make sense of what you're reading. So take the word out of context by reading your document from the bottom backwards. This will confuse your poor ol' grey matter and make it easier to spot errors.

**5. Work with a ruler**

Keeping the ruler just below the line you're reading will force you to slow down and focus on each word individually. Good news: you'll find mistakes. Bad news: you'll look like a six year old. But who cares if you produce perfect copy.

**6. Touch each word**

By touching each word with the tip of a pencil you'll have to read really really slowly. Again, this will make it easier to find those pesky typos.

**7. Check dates**

PCs have an annoying habit of autocorrecting dates when you're not looking. So make sure you check your dates carefully for consistency.

- 28th July 1972
- 28 July 1972
- 28.7.72
- 7.28.72 (US)

**8. Check names and titles**

Check the spelling of people's names. And check titles. Is a person doing the same job throughout your document? And remember, titles shouldn't have capitals unless they're before the person's name.

- Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke today about the economic crisis.
- Vice-President Jeff Atkins presented the latest company figures.

Titles should be lower case if there's no name attached or if they appear after the name.

- The president of the company is an Oxford graduate.
- The managing director is on holiday.
- Gordon Brown, the British prime minister named worst-dressed man by GQ.

**9. Check for abbreviated company names**

At the beginning of a document, a company name should be spelt out in its entirety, unless it's something well known like the UN or the BBC, followed by its abbreviated form in brackets.

- Structural Analysis Service Solutions (SASS) had a £100,000 turnover in August.

The company can then be referred to in its abbreviated form throughout the rest of the document.

Watch out for odd brand names like Harrods, Currys and Boots (which are now all 'apostropheless').

**10. Check for the second brackets or quotes**

If you've "quoted" somebody or put something in (brackets) make sure the final speech mark or bracket is there.

**11. Check formatting**

Check your spacing between paragraphs, between lines (single or 1.5?) and between sentences. Old school typists leave a space between sentences.  Like this.  You shouldn't.

Check headers and sub heads. Are they all in bold, same colour, same font?

Check fonts. Size, type and colour. Are they all the same?

**12. Get someone else to read it**

And finally, if you can, right before your document 'goes to press', get someone else to read through your work. Annoyingly, they'll probably spot an error straight away. But it does mean you'll get perfect copy.

# About Turner Ink

Turner Ink is me, Sarah Turner, a freelance copywriter based in London.

I work with a range of clients from creative design agencies, SEO consultants and web developers, to multi-nationals and SMEs. But I especially like working for clients who give me free stuff.

Is there anything missing that you think should be in the next edition? Let me know at hello@turnerink.co.uk.

T: 020 8549 5515
M: 07940 313 655
Email: sarah.turner@turnerink.co.uk
Skype: turnerink
Website: www.turnerink.co.uk
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/turnerink
Follow me on Twitter: www.twitter.com/turnerink

TURNER INK