

## Common Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation Errors

As a manager, you will often need to write memos, letters, and reports. Therefore, being able to write clearly and succinctly is a very important skill. However, I would venture to say that keeping your writing relatively free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors is probably even more important. The following are some of the most common errors made by students in my classes.

### IT'S vs. ITS

- IT'S means it is
- ITS means belonging to it
- There is no such thing as ITS'

#### Examples:

- IT'S: The grocery store is just around the corner. It's the third store on the right.
- IT'S: That piece of equipment belongs on the main floor. It's used for cutting grooves in metal.
- ITS: Because its industry is in the maturing stage of the lifecycle, the firm has adopted a low-cost strategy.
- ITS: The saw would not cut through walnut. Its blade was dull.

### THERE IS vs. THERE ARE

- THERE IS is singular.
- THERE ARE is plural.

#### Examples:

- THERE IS: There is one reason why this can occur.
- THERE IS: In system software for personal computers, there is one dominant market share leader: Microsoft.
- THERE ARE: There are several reasons why this can occur.
- THERE ARE: In the competition ski boat industry, there are four major competitors.

Frankly, "there is," "there are," and "it is" are all passive construction; your writing will be much improved if you avoid such constructions whenever possible.

### EFFECT vs. AFFECT

- EFFECT is usually used as a noun, meaning consequence or result (NOTE: effect can also be used as a verb, which means to cause to happen; for example, to effect change)
- AFFECT is usually used as a verb, meaning to influence or to produce an effect on (NOTE: affect can also be used as a noun, meaning an emotional state)

#### Examples:

- EFFECT: One effect of the GM strike will be lower profits for the company this year.
- EFFECT: Switching from one supplier of nuts and bolts to another will have few effects on firms in this industry.
- AFFECT: The goal of the UAW is to affect management's policies regarding safety and compensation.
- AFFECT: Washing used motor oil into drainage ditches typically affects the local water supply.

### FEWER vs. LESS

- FEWER means a smaller number of persons or things
- LESS means more limited in quantity or a smaller proportion

#### Examples:

- FEWER: After the layoff, the company had fewer employees.
- FEWER: Our company has fewer managers than yours, although we have more employees.
- LESS: My father cries at sad movies. My mother is less emotional.

- LESS: Although John has been at the company twice as long as Alice, he has had less training than she has.

### **NUMBER vs. AMOUNT**

- NUMBER means the total of individuals or units taken together
- AMOUNT means the total quantity

#### **Examples:**

- NUMBER: A number of employees called the human resources department to complain about the new compensation and benefits packages.
- NUMBER: The management team came up with a number of alternatives for dealing with the complaints.
- AMOUNT: A large amount of cyanide has to be used in mining gold.
- AMOUNT: While we know the courts imposed a fine on Smithfield Foods, the amount of the fine is confidential.

### **i.e. vs. e.g.**

- i.e. stands for id est, which means that is in Latin. You use this when you are going to further explain a comment you have just made. It is typically used within parentheses. A comma should immediately follow it and immediately precede the explanation.
- e.g. stands for exempli gratia, which means for example in Latin. You use this when you are going to provide one or more examples of something you have just said. It is typically used within parentheses. A comma should immediately follow it and immediately precede the example(s).

#### **Examples:**

- i.e.: You should evaluate the company's strengths and weaknesses (i.e., those things at which it excels and those things at which it does not excel) as well as the opportunities and threats in its outside environment.
- i.e.: Environmental activist organizations (i.e., those whose agenda is primarily focused on environmental issues) spend lots of time and money lobbying members of Congress.
- e.g.: Environmental activist organizations (e.g., Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation) spend lots of time and money lobbying members of congress.
- e.g.: Professors from some of the top business schools in the country (e.g., Harvard, Wharton, Darden) are studying environmental ethics as they pertain to business strategy.

### **QUOTATION MARKS**

- Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks.
- Question marks, semicolons, and colons go inside quotation marks when they are part of the quote, but outside when they are not part of the quote.
- (NOTE: Other English-speaking and -writing countries do not follow the same rules as the U.S. in this regard.)

#### **Examples:**

- PERIOD: Chris said, "Corporate mission statements can help set the tone for the corporate culture."
- PERIOD: Unethical treatment of employees can sometimes be due to a culture of "corporate greed."
- COMMA: Although the professor referred to his students as "lazy and unmotivated," many of them worked part-time jobs and didn't have time to get enough sleep each night.
- QUESTION MARK: Do you think your company's culture is one of "corporate greed"?
- QUESTION MARK: Myesha asked, "Do you think corporate vision requires a long-term focus?"
- COLON: Many managers succumb to the "Peter Principle": they are promoted to a level at which they become incompetent.

### **CONSCIOUS vs. CONSCIENCE vs. CONSCIENTIOUS**

- CONSCIOUS means being aware of oneself and one's environment
- CONSCIENCE means the faculty that allows you to distinguish between right and wrong
- CONSCIENTIOUS means thorough and painstaking; careful

#### **Examples:**

- CONSCIOUS: Companies must be conscious of the effects their competitors are having on the marketplace.
- CONSCIOUS: The manager of our department is always conscious of the impact of our long work hours on our families.
- CONSCIENCE: After dumping toxic chemicals into the New River, the plant's manager had a guilty conscience and confessed to the EPA.
- CONSCIENCE: Cheating on an exam should weigh heavily on your conscience.
- CONSCIENTIOUS: Jennifer is a conscientious employee who always does a complete and timely job.
- CONSCIENTIOUS: Conscientious students are those who devote a significant amount of time to their homework and their class projects.

### **DOMINANT vs. DOMINATE**

- DOMINANT is an adjective meaning exercising the most influence or control; having more power than all others
- DOMINATE is a verb meaning to exercise control by using one's power and/or authority

#### **Examples:**

- DOMINANT: The dominant player in PC operating system software is Microsoft.
- DOMINANT: The company in this industry which is able to develop high-tech products the most quickly will be dominant.
- DOMINATE: The company in this industry which is able to develop high-tech products the most quickly will dominate its competitors.
- DOMINATE: Virginia Tech dominated most of its competitors in football last year.

### **COMMAS AND CONJUNCTIONS**

Place a comma before a conjunction (e.g., “and,” “but”) when it joins two complete sentences (each with its own subject and verb). Do not place a comma before a conjunction unless what follows the conjunction is a complete sentence. (Exception: place a comma before a conjunction when it precedes the last item in a list.)