

TEST YOUR BASIC WRITING SKILLS

by Patricia Schaefer

Do you think you're pretty good at spelling, punctuation and grammar? Many business people do, but the truth is there are some common mistakes that nearly everyone makes time and time again. We've gathered some of the top offenders in each of these three categories and fashioned them each into a quiz for your personal testing pleasure.

Before you begin, keep in mind that a good knowledge of proper spelling, punctuation and grammar can be a real boost to both your business writing and the actual success of your business.

Mispelled ... Oops, I mean: Misspelled Words

Don't laugh; the word "misspell" is one the most commonly "misspelled" words.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Read the following paragraphs and look for the words in *italics*. Ten of these words are misspelled and ten are spelled correctly. See if you can correctly list each group. Answers are provided at the very end of this article:

Since the dawning of the *milennium*, coworkers Al Dente and Brook Trout have been *indispensable* to their employer, Mr. Bill Ding. *Definatly* against their better *judgment*,

Al and Brook started to *harass* one another because they were each *desperate* for superiority. Soon their *embarrassment* over their immaturity *superseded* their need for dominance.

"*Its allright*, Brook," whispered Al, "let's forget about our *preceeding* strife. I really like you *alot* and it's a *privilege* to work with you."

"The *concensus* around here Al," said Brook quite dreamily, "is that you feel I am the *fulfillment* of everything you've ever wanted in a wife."

With an *acknowledgement* of their mutual love and affection, Al and Brook moved *foreword* in their relationship with a *commitment* and soon wed. The *occurrence* of this happy event led Mr. Ding to exclaim, "*Congradulations* you two!"

Punctuation Pratfalls

OK, you made it through the spelling test; now on to punctuation.

INSTRUCTIONS:

In this quiz, you are given eight sentences that contain some of the most common punctuation errors. See if you can find these errors, and when you're done, check to see if your answers match up with our correctly-punctuated version of each of these sentences:

1. Mr. Jones said "Please submit your report by tomorrow".
2. I would like to have a hamburger, pickle, and coleslaw.
3. Who wrote, "*In Cold Blood*?"
4. My report was not up-to-date, I will have to revise it tomorrow.
5. Three months delay led to a needed change in procedures.
6. The U.S. Government has three branches; the legislative, executive and judicial.
7. Politically our candidate has proven to be very skilled.
8. I sent a letter to Jane Jones, 100 Wilkins Ave., Cincinnati OH 45202.

Goofs with Grammar

How do people dislike English grammar? Let me count the ways. They dislike it to the height and breadth and depth their non-grammarians souls can reach. OK, that's enough of that.

INSTRUCTIONS:

For this exercise, examine each sentence and check for grammatical errors. Each sentence is either correct or incorrect. You decide, and then check to see how you scored.

1. Each of the employees are responsible for payment of insurance.
2. After reading the initial report, the subsequent report appears contradictory.
3. The committee is going to give their approval on Tuesday.
4. I want you to without delay inform the writers of their responsibility.
5. "To boldly go where no man has gone before" is part of the introductory voiceover of *Star Trek*.
6. John starts a new project yesterday.
7. Mary's daughter said, "I did really good on my test."
8. Painting in a studio with optimum lighting.

Spelling Quiz Answers:

10 Correctly spelled words: indispensable, judgment, harass, desperate, embarrassment, superseded, privilege, fulfillment, commitment and occurrence.

10 Misspelled words: millennium, definitely, It's, all right, preceding, a lot, consensus, acknowledgment (acknowledgement is acceptable but not preferred), forward, and congratulations.

Punctuation Quiz Answers and Explanations:

1. Mr. Jones said "Please submit your report by tomorrow".

Corrected sentence: Mr. Jones said, "Please submit your report by tomorrow."

Explanation of errors: A comma should be placed before a quote, and a period goes *inside* the end quote.

2. I would like to have a hamburger, pickle, and coleslaw

Corrected sentences: I would like to have a hamburger, pickle and coleslaw.

I would like to have a hamburger, pickle, and coleslaw.

Explanation of error: Either one of the above punctuated sentences is correct, although most writers prefer to omit the serial comma (the comma before the "and" in a series of items). The error frequently made is when a writer sometimes uses the serial comma and at other times does not. Whatever choice is made, it must be used consistently in your writing.

3. Who wrote, "In Cold Blood?"

Corrected sentence: Who wrote "In Cold Blood"?

Explanation of errors: Incorrect placement of question mark inside quotation marks. Question marks go outside the final quotation mark if the entire sentence asks the question. The question mark goes inside the final quotation mark if just the quoted material asks the question; i.e., Tom asked, "What's wrong?" There is also no need for the comma in the sentence; it breaks up the thought.

4. My report was not up-to-date, I will have to revise it tomorrow.

Corrected sentences: My report was not up-to-date, so I will have to revise it tomorrow.

My report was not up-to-date; I will have to revise it tomorrow.

Explanation of error: Comma Splicing. This occurs when you use a comma to join two complete sentences without placing either a semicolon or appropriate joining word between them.

5. Three months delay led to a needed change in procedures.

Corrected sentence: Three months' delay led to a needed change in procedures.

Explanation of error: Missing apostrophe in a possessive (a word that shows possession).

6. The U.S. Government has three branches; the legislative, executive and judicial.

Corrected sentence: The U.S. Government has three branches: the legislative, executive and judicial.

Explanation of error: Use of a semi-colon instead of a colon to introduce a list.

7. Politically our candidate has proven to be very skilled.

Corrected sentence: Politically, our candidate has proven to be very skilled.

Explanation of error: Missing comma after a set-off word.

8. I sent a letter to Jane Jones, 100 Wilkins Ave., Cincinnati OH 45202.

Corrected sentence:

I sent a letter to Jane Jones, 100 Wilkins Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45202.

Explanation of error: There is often confusion on where to place commas to separate parts of addresses. Commas are needed after the name, street, and city.

Grammar Quiz Answers and Explanations

1. Each of the employees are responsible for payment of insurance premiums. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: Each of the employees is responsible for payment of insurance premiums.

Explanation: Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs. The subject *each* is singular and requires a singular verb.

2. After reading the initial report, the subsequent report appears contradictory. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: After reading the initial report, I found the subsequent report to be contradictory.

Explanation: Be careful of the dangling modifier, which is a word or phrase that modifies another word or phrase not clearly stated in the sentence, possibly causing confusion with regard to the speaker's intended meaning. In the first sentence, it is implied that the subsequent report read the initial report; this we know is not logical.

3. The committee is going to give their approval on Tuesday. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: The committee is going to give its approval on Tuesday

Explanation: *Committee* is a collective noun and acts as a unit, so the singular pronoun is called for.

4. I want you to without delay inform the writers of their responsibility. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: I want you to inform the writers of their responsibility immediately.

5. “To boldly go where no man has gone before” is part of the introductory voiceover of *Star Trek*. (Correct)

Explanation: The first sentence contains what’s called a split infinitive. An infinitive is the form of a verb that begins with the word *to*. Splitting an infinitive means placing another word or words between *to* and the infinitive; in this case, the word *inform*.

The old rule of never splitting an infinitive is now accepted in instances where it sounds and looks acceptable, the most famous and accepted exception being the *Star Trek* split infinitive.

6. John starts a new project yesterday. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: John started a new project yesterday.

Explanation: *Starts* is an incorrect verb tense; the verb should be in past tense.

7. Mary’s daughter said, “I did really good on my test.” (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: Mary’s daughter said, “I did really well on my test.”

Explanation: *Good*, an adjective, should be used to describe someone or something; i.e., Melanie is a good artist. *Well*, when used as an adverb, describes an action.

8. Painting in a studio with optimum lighting. (Incorrect)

Corrected sentence: I enjoy painting in a studio with optimum lighting.

Explanation: The incorrect sentence is actually a sentence fragment, not a sentence. A fragment may be missing a subject or verb or both; in this case the fragment is missing both.