

WRITING TECHNIQUES FOR ALL PURPOSES

Writing letters, reports, notes and other communications are important skills for business and personal life. Good letters help to get results, where poor letters fail. People judge others on the quality of their writing, so it's helpful to write well. Here are some simple tips for writing letters and communications of all sorts.

1. Generally, whatever you are writing, get to the main point, quickly and simply. Avoid lengthy preambles. Don't spend ages setting the scene or explaining the background, etc.
2. If you are selling, promoting, proposing something you must identify the main issue (if selling, the strongest unique perceived benefit) and make that the sole focus. Introducing other points distracts and confuses the reader.
3. Use language that your reader uses. If you want clues as to what this might be imagine the newspaper they read, and limit your vocabulary to that found in the newspaper.
4. Using the reader's language ideally extends to spelling for US-English or UK-English. It's difficult on this webpage, or other communications designed for mixed audiences, but when possible in your own work acknowledge that US and UK English are slightly different. Notably words which end in IZE in US English can quite properly be spelled ISE in English, for example: organise/organize, specialise/specialize, etc. Similarly many words ending in OUR in UK English are spelled OR in US English, for example favour/favor, humour/humor, colour/color, etc.
5. Avoid obvious grammatical errors, especially inserting single apostrophes where incorrect, which irritates many people and which is seen by some to indicate a poor education.
Probably the best rule for safe use of apostrophes is to restrict their use simply to possessive (e.g., girl's book, group's aims) and missing letters in words (e.g., I'm, you're, we've).

The following paragraphs attempt to explain some of the more complex rules for apostrophes, and I'm grateful to David Looker for helping me to bring better clarity to this confusing situation. Language is not a precise science and certain aspects, notably rules governing the use of apostrophes, are open to interpretation.

By way of introduction to apostrophes, here are some examples of common mistakes:

- **the team played it's part** (should be: **the team played its part** - its, although possessive, is like his, my, hers, theirs, etc., and does not use the possessive apostrophe)
- **its been a long day** (should be: **it's been a long day** - it's is an abbreviation of it has)
- **your correct** (should be: **you're correct** - you're is an abbreviation of you are)
- **one months notice** (should be: **one month's notice** - the notice is governed by the month, hence the possessive apostrophe)
- **the groups' task** (should be: **the group's task** - group is a collective noun and treated as singular not plural)

- **the womens' decisions** (should be **the women's decisions** - same as above - women is treated as singular, irrespective of the plural decisions)

The purpose of a single apostrophe is to indicate **missing letters**, as in I'm happy, or you're correct, and word constructions like don't, won't, wouldn't, can't, we've, etc.

Apostrophes are also used to indicate **when something belongs to the word (possessive)**, as in the girl's book. This extends to expressions like a day's work, or a month's delay. The possessive apostrophe moves after the S when there is more than one subject in possession, for example the girls' fathers, or the footballers' wives, or three weeks' notice, but not for collective nouns like the children's toys, the women's husbands, or the group's aims.

And take care with the word its, as in the dog wagged its tail, where (as with his and hers) the apostrophe is not used, and should not be confused with it's, meaning it is, which does use the apostrophe according to the missing letters rule.

Apostrophes are generally considered optional but are not 'preferred' (which basically means that fewer people will regard the usage as correct) in **pluralised abbreviations** such as OAPs, and tend not to be used at all in well-known abbreviations such as CDs and MPs. Increasingly, apostrophes in common abbreviations such as CD's and MP's are considered by many to be incorrect, and so on balance are best avoided.

The use of apostrophes is more likely to be preferred and seen as correct where the abbreviation contains periods, such as M.P.'s or Ph.D.'s, although in general the use of periods and apostrophes in abbreviations is becoming less popular and therefore again is probably best avoided. In single-case communications (all capitals, or no capitals - which is increasingly popular in emails and texts) omitting apostrophes in pluralised abbreviations can cause confusion, so forms such cds or CDS should be avoided if possible, although the 'correct' punctuation in this context is anyone's guess.

Grammatical rules change much slower than real life. Other plural abbreviations or **shortened words** such as photos (photographs), mics (microphones), could technically still be shown as photo's and mic's, reflecting older traditional use of the apostrophe in abbreviated words, but these days this is generally considered to be incorrect. The use of apostrophes in **numbers**, such as 1980's or over-50's, is also less popular than a generation ago, and whilst optional, apostrophes in numbers are increasingly regarded as incorrect, so the safer preferred forms for the examples shown are 1980s and over-50s.

The use of apostrophes is still preferred for pluralising **short words which do not generally have a plural form**, such as in the statement: there are more x's than y's, or do's and don't's. The last example makes for a particularly confusing form and is another common spoken term that's probably best avoided putting in print or in any sort of formal communication (because even if you get it right there's a good chance that the reader will think it wrong anyway!)

Aside from the safe recommendations above to generally **restrict apostrophes to missing letters and possessive words**, if in doubt, try to see what rules the reader or the audience uses for such things - in brochures, on websites, etc., and then, unless they are patently daft, match their grammatical preferences accordingly.

6. Use short sentences. More than fifteen words in a sentence reduces the clarity of the meaning. After drafting your communication, seek out commas and 'and's, and replace with full-stops.
7. Write as you would speak - but ensure it's grammatically correct. Don't try to be formal. Don't use old-fashioned figures of speech. Avoid 'the undersigned', 'aforementioned', 'ourselves', 'your good selves', and similar nonsense. You should show that you're living in the same century as the reader.
8. As to how informal to be, for example writing much like normal every day speech (for example I'd, you'd, we've) bear in mind that some older people, and younger people who have inherited traditional views, could react less favourably to a writing style which they consider to be the product of laziness or poor education. Above all it is important to write in a style that the reader is likely to find agreeable.
9. Avoid jargon, acronyms, technical terms unless essential.
10. Don't use capital letters - even for headings. Words formed of capital letters are difficult to read because there are no word-shapes, just blocks of text. (We read quickly by seeing word shapes, not the individual letters.)
11. Sans serif fonts (like Helvetica, Tahoma and this one, Arial) are modern, and will give a modern image. Serif fonts (like Garamond, Goudy and Times), are older, and will tend to give a less modern image.
12. Sans serif fonts take longer to read, so there's a price to pay for being modern. This is because we've all grown up learning to read serif fonts. Serif fonts also have a horizontal flow, which helps readability and reading comfort. (Serif fonts developed before the days of print, when the engraver needed to create a neat exit from each letter.)
13. Avoid fancy fonts. They may look clever or innovative, but they are more difficult to read, and some are nearly impossible. Use 10-12 point size for body copy (text). 14-20 point is fine for main headings, bold or normal. Sub-headings 10-12 bold.
14. Any printed material looks very untidy if you use more than two different fonts and two different point sizes. Generally the fewer the better.
15. If your organisation stipulates a 'house' font then use it. If your organisation doesn't remember to keep it simple and clean.

16. Black text on a white background is the easiest colour combination to read. Definitely avoid coloured backgrounds, and black. Also avoid background graphics or pictures behind the text.
17. Italics are less easy to read. So is heavy bold type.
18. If you must break any of these font rules, do so only for the heading.
19. Limit main attention-grabbing headings to no more than fifteen words.
20. In letters, position your main heading between two-thirds and three-quarters up the page. This is where the eye is naturally drawn first.
21. Use left-justified text as it's easiest to read. Avoid fully justified text as it creates uneven word spaces and is more difficult to read.

Remember that effective written communication is enabling the reader to understand your meaning in as few words as possible.

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<http://www.businessballs.com/writing.htm>