Writing Tips (and common pitfalls)
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[updated: Wednesday, June 3, 2009]

"Marketing is not an isolated function; it is the whole business seen from the customer's point of view."
---Peter Drucker (1909-2005)

Preface

In general, the word "syntax" refers to structural elements such as spelling and grammar. In general, the word "semantics" refers to holistic elements such as interpretation and meaning. Business professionals need to be highly proficient at both.

English is a difficult, and occasionally, inconsistent language. English is also an extremely rich language in the sense that there is almost always more than one way to say something. This richness comes with a price; you must practice and refine your writing skills in order to both overcome the inconsistencies in the language syntax and cultivate the innate beauty inherent in the language semantics.

English is especially difficult for English-as-a-Second-Language learners, partly because in addition to the language syntax and semantics, some students come to English later in life when the physiological/cognitive skills that language skills require have already been formed.

General Writing Tips

1. **Understand that your writing is your marketing "face."** Professors and supervisors do not tend to judge motives. Often, we evaluate results or outcomes. Occasionally, we evaluate productivity. If your writing is poor, it will matter little that your "effort" is "brilliant." Also, motivated professionals strive to improve their writing (or rather, re-writing). It is just that even purposeful professionals don't tend broadcast that learning objective vocally and widely.

2. **Make sure you answer the question.** This is difficult to do for homework and even more difficult to do on an exam. You need to read the question more than once.

3. **Only use words for which you personally know the meaning.** Not everyone knows what the word "facet" means or what the word "theory of liquidity preferences" means. It is perfectly acceptable, and often preferred, for some types of writing, just make sure you know what the term means (and can explain it if you are asked). This can get tricky in "group" assignments, because often, a

selected individual studied and completed "that part" of the "group" work. A group member's challenge, therefore, is to learn from each of the other members of the group. This is much easier said than done. And moreover, doing this well requires different skills (such as "active listening" and "emotional intelligence") than simply researching a topic and summarizing it in a written artifact. Successful student professionals need to be good at both sets of skills.

4.   **Be consistent in your professional deliverables.** Also, for business presentations, use the same terms in your oral deliverable (e.g., MS-PowerPoint presentation) as you do in your written deliverable (e.g, MS-Word).

5.   **Don't write like you speak**. This is a common trap. Writing, or rather, re-writing is part art, part science. Take your time. Start each project early and leave enough time to review and rewrite. If you rush, you are more likely to write like you speak. Speaking is important and there are some overlapping characteristics with successful writing. However, speaking is typically less formal and less precise than writing. You need to do well at both types of communication.

6.   **Matching Tenses**. Be careful to match tenses (past, present, and future) within sentences and within paragraphs. Often, one tense is used for the entire paper. In general, errors with tenses are best caught and rectified by systematic re-reading of the text.

7.   **Spend extra time around "connecting" words, such as "and," "but," "yet," "although," and "therefore."** For example, put a comma before "but," but not between two parts of sentence connected by a single "and." It is extremely easy to make a "comma-splice" error in English. If you are unsure of your writing, consult a dictionary.

8.   **Always spell out abbreviations once.** The exception to this is when you are absolutely, positively sure of your target reader. And even then it is probably still sub-optimal. In a globally-connected economy, you must be precise. If you have a question about assumptions you should make in any particular writing assignment, ask the instructor.

9.   **The "Internet."** "Internet" (upper case) is different from "internet" (lower case). You probably mean the former (i.e., the global connectivity platform), not the latter (i.e., a locally-connected set of computers).

10.   **In general, try not to end sentences with the words "of," "for," or "to."** Actually, I think it is fine in management writing if the use and placement of the term improves clarity. But for different writing, say, for the CSUN Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam (a *very* important exam), you might want to avoid the use of those terms at the end of the sentence (if for no other reason than

I believe that academics, especially English teachers, grade the exam). Remember—find out how to be successful and then do those things.

11.   **First Person (me), Second Person (you), Third Person (someone)**. Be consistent. Occasionally, an assignment will be in first-person. Management writers don't often write in the second person. Management writers usually write in the third-person, but don't make your words sound indifferent, impersonal, or passive.

12.   **Plurals**. English is a difficult, complex language. And one of the most difficult elements of English is getting the singular and plural words correct. Also, be careful of the possessive (that is, the use of the apostrophe at the end of a noun).

13.   **Contractions**. If you are unsure of the correct contraction (such as "don't"), then simply write out the phrase (such as "do not"). Occasionally, this requires a lookup in a standard dictionary.

14.   **Double-Space**. This requirement is typically in the explicit instructions. Double-spacing makes it easier for the instructor (and the student!) to read the work and intertwine comments as required.

Management Writing Tips

15.   **Eliminate the use of the phrase "a lot."** Nobody really knows what is "a lot." Either use some other (clearer) term or simply eliminate the phrase "a lot" altogether. Besides, "a lot" has a specific meaning in the Real Estate industry.

16.   **Try to avoid the use of the term "pretty" as an adjective.** A better term might be "mostly," "relatively" or "fairly." Reserve the word "pretty" for other (more social, less economic) situations**.**

17.   **Long sentences are asking for trouble**. Long sentences run the risk of comma splices and run-on sentences. If you are in doubt, break up one long sentence into two smaller sentences. But yes, you need to vary the length of sentences, particularly for longer essays, in order retain the interest of the reader.

18.   **Avoid "trite" sentences**. This is similar to "don't write as you speak." A trite word is a word that is street slang or nonsensical. Even though other people use the word, that doesn't mean you can use it in your management writing. Trite words don't add additional value to the sentence. Therefore, leave them out. This sometimes just takes experience to know which words to exclude. With forethought and attention to the matter, you'll what to do.

19.   **Use "such as" instead of "like."** The word "like" is both overused and misused. "Like" can be used occasionally, but is symptomatic of superficial (poor) writing

ability. Another alternative for management writing is to use the phrase "similar to."

20. **Be careful with pronouns such as "it," "they," and "we."** In contemporary society where even many pre-teenagers have cell phones and use social software to form/abandon online communities almost on a monthly basis, the definitions of these terms are far too vague. Do not use these words unless the reference is absolutely clear (which, for example, is unlikely to be the case in any type of electronic communications, such as email). If in doubt, use the specific noun and only use the pronoun to change the pace of your writing a bit.

21. **Try to avoid using vague, abstract words such as "get" or "go."** English is a rich language—choose words that are clear and concrete.

Word Processor Limitations

22. **Understand the limitations of a word processor.** While software does indeed improve iteratively and incrementally, the improvements to date do not approach the level needed for quality academic and professional writing. For example, a word processor cannot "process" (i.e., check the validity of) a word if you leave the word out. Also, word processors are not good at either synonyms or antonyms, and more important, have extreme difficulty distinguishing between homonyms at all. In addition to learning the mechanics of your word processor, you need to focus your energy on doing for yourself what the word processor cannot do for you (and is unlikely to do for you in the time required in school before you graduate).

23. **Homonyms are especially tricky.** Homonyms are words that sound alike, but mean different things (such as "there/their" and "weather/whether"). Word processors are often not yet sophisticated enough to catch this distinction—a distinction that reduces the number of points you earn on an essay and will demonstrate your lack of due diligence to a future boss.

24. **Misspelled words are also tricky.** I often see the following misspelled word anomalies—"fist/first" and "on/one." And again, word processors are often not sophisticated enough to catch this distinction.

25. **Missing Periods**. Periods are small and difficult to see on paper (e.g., at approximately 1200 dots per inch) and even more difficult to see on the screen (e.g., at approximately 100 dots per inch). And word processors may not "catch" this error either.

Interpreting My Proofreading Comments

26. **Awkward/Rewrite/Trite.** If I write this on your essay or exam, this means that the sentence doesn't read correctly to me for one reason or another. My

recommendation is to rewrite either that part of the sentence or the entire sentence. Successful student professionals are experts at re-writing their work.

27.   **"Switch."** If I write this on your essay or exam, this means that two parts of the sentence (or two sentences in a paragraph) should be switched. Such a rearrangement would either help with subject-verb-object agreement or improve the overall clarity of the paragraph theme.