

## 10 Frequently Asked Business Writing Questions

- 1. When are "state" and "federal" capitalized?** *State* and *federal* are capitalized when part of a proper name such as the name of a federal agency, act, etc. (for example *Federal Reserve Bank* but *federal, state, and local laws*). The terms *federal government* and *government* (referring specifically to the United States government) are now commonly written in small letters. In government documents, however, and in other types of communications where these terms are intended to have the force of an official name, they are capitalized.
- 2. How are "I," "me," and "myself" used?** Use *I* as a subject [Louise and I submitted our reports yesterday.] and after *than* in comparisons or with understood verbs [She is a faster typist than I (am).] Use *me* as an object of a verb [Please put Lila and me on the expense account.] and as the object of a preposition [David assigned the project to Sam and me.] Use *myself* when *I* has already been used as the subject—intensively [I, myself, will handle this.] or reflexively [I hurt myself playing tennis.].
- 3. What is the difference between "than" and "then"?** *Than* is a conjunction used in comparisons; *then* (which rhymes with *when*) is an adverb indicating time. [He is older than I am. I will see you at dinner and will return your book then.]
- 4. Why shouldn't sentences begin with "It is" or "It is important to note that"?** Meaningless openers weaken the power of a sentence. Readers look to the beginning of sentences—the subject position—for key ideas and to the verb position for key actions. Therefore, eliminate weak openings such as *It is* and *There are* and meaningless introductory phrases such as *It is important to note that*.
- 5. May a business writer begin a sentence with "because"?** Many writers remember learning the rule, "A group of words that begins with *because* is not a complete sentence." That is, "Because of increased account activity" is not a sentence. However, that rule does not mean "Do not begin a sentence with *because*." For example, the following is a correct sentence: "Because of increased account activity, we have hired an additional customer service specialist." Writers may begin a sentence with *because*. In fact, doing so allows them to use the very persuasive "Sell and then tell" sentence pattern in which reasons and benefits are presented at the beginning of the sentence.
- 6. When is the semicolon used?** Use semicolons sparingly in business writing. Wherever possible, to prevent too-long sentences, turn a semicolon into a period, and use two separate sentences. With that qualification in mind, use a semicolon to join:
  - Two closely related sentences not already joined by a conjunction such as *and* or *but*. [Some employees have not taken their vacation days; some have not taken their personal days.]
  - Two independent clauses when the second begins with a conjunctive adverb such as *however*, *otherwise*, or *therefore*. [Monday is a holiday; therefore, my bank will be closed.]

- Items in a series when one or more of the items include commas. [The project manager, Ann Davies; the lead engineer, Sue Black; and the technical consultant, Bob Smith, attended the meeting.]

**7. When is a comma used before "and"?**

- Use a comma when you use a coordinating conjunction (for example, *and*, *but*, or *or*) to join closely related sentences. [The largest conference rooms are in Building A, and Marty Wood is your contact to make a reservation.]
- A comma is optional, but recommended for clarity's sake, with *and* before the last item in a series. A series is a list of three or more items. [Please ship us six boxes of paper clips, two boxes of file folders, and the new order forms.]

**8. Is "staff" singular or plural?** *Staff*, a collective noun like *committee* and *team*, denotes a group of people. Whether it takes a singular or plural verb depends upon whether *staff* refers to the group as a unit or to its members as individuals. [The staff is meeting to review safety procedures. The staff are specialists, recruited from all over the world.]

**9. What's the difference between "e.g." and "i.e."?** The abbreviation *e.g.* (*exempli gratia*) means *for example*; the abbreviation *i.e.* (*id est*) means *that is*. Do not use these terms interchangeably. The sentence "Use only company-approved shipping vendors, e.g., Star Shipping and Guaranteed Overnight Delivery" provides two examples of acceptable shippers; there are others. "Use only company-approved shipping vendors, i.e., Star Shipping and Guaranteed Overnight Delivery" limits the reader to using only the two shippers mentioned. Because many readers do not know the difference between *e.g.* and *i.e.*, prefer the English words to the Latin abbreviations.

**10. Why should writers proofread their documents when they can use computer spelling and grammar checkers?** Spelling and grammar checkers alert writers to many errors, but some errors still slip through. For example, a typographical error may produce a new word that is grammatically correct in its context, but that changes a sentence's meaning. For example, in the sentences that follow, can you spot the error that slipped by the computer spelling and grammar checker?

*The Post Office has changed its operating hours to better serve the community. The window will not be open from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 6:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m., Saturday.*

Did you spot the "not" that should be "now"? In these same sentences, the writer should also double-check the numbers to make sure that the times are accurate. Transposed numbers are a common error that slips through spelling and grammar checkers.

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