

Writing abilities are among the most important business skills for a CIO, senior IT manager, or any IT person seeking a promotion. Yet the rules of good writing are often elusive. This list covers the critical areas you should know when writing anything from a lengthy business report to a memo, letter, or e-mail. Just follow this checklist, and your final copy will shine.

1 Plan your writing

A large amount of time is actually spent planning and researching. First, determine your purpose and your primary audience. Decide what information you need to give your audience and what information you don't. Figure out the best way to convey your message. Focus on being objective and convincing so that your message appeals to both the receptive and resistant members of your audience.

2 Do your homework

Research, so that you are not relying only on opinion. Collect and analyze data. Use visual aids (charts, graphs, tables, photos, etc.) when appropriate.

3 Write drafts

Don't expect perfection in the beginning. Concentrate on the content of the writing, and be sure—above all—that it is accurate.

4 Revise for style, correct grammar, and spelling

Writers who fail at this step lose credibility with their readers. Buy a good grammar handbook and dictionary and use them whenever you have doubts about punctuation and spelling. When in doubt, call on a trusted colleague to look over your work.

5 Choose effective wording

Use language that is concise and familiar rather than verbose and academic.

Examples:

Use, not utilize; shortage, not paucity. Avoid clichés, slang, and buzzwords.

6 Watch out for commonly confused words and phrases

Many words are easily mixed up, such as accept/except, advice/advise, affect/effect, its/it's, lay/lie, passed/past, personal/personnel, moral/morale, sit/set, real/really, your/you're, and their/they're/theirs/there. Learn to use these words correctly.

7 Be precise

Use specific, concrete words.

Examples:

Three, not *several*; *boat or car*, not *vehicle*. Watch out for words such as *recently*, *substantial*, *a few*, and *a lot*. Try to be more exact. Give your reader a specific mental picture of what you mean.

8 Write concisely

Businesspeople are too busy for wordy writing. Keep your reports, memos, and other business documents as brief and clear as possible.

9 Avoid redundancy

Many repetitive phrases can be tightened into one word.

Example:

History, not *past history*; *plan*, not *plan ahead*; *sum* or *total*, not *sum total*.

10 Vary your sentence structure

Mix up simple, compound, and complex sentences. Use both short and long sentences to keep your writing interesting.

11 Use active voice

Active voice makes your writing more powerful and direct. In an active voice construction, the subject of a sentence acts or does something rather than being acted upon or done to.

Example:

Sam Grey audited the books last month.

Not:

The books were audited by Sam Grey last month.

Exception:

Passive voice may be permissible if the receiver of the action is more important than the doer of the action.

Example:

Transportation to the other buildings on campus will be provided.

12 Avoid sentence fragments

A sentence fragment can be the result of poor grammar or a careless mixture of sentences and phrases:

Example:

Couple of things. First, make sure you disconnect the power supply.

Exception:

What should you expect if you bring in the project under budget? A promotion. As long as you know what you're doing, and it's not likely to be misunderstood, this is permissible.

13 Avoid run-on sentences

A run-on sentence contains two independent clauses that are incorrectly separated by only a comma. Instead, they should be connected by a semicolon, or a period, or by both a comma *and* a conjunction. This does not relate to the length of a sentence, just the improper connection between the clauses.

Examples:

The network is down; call the administrator.

Or:

The network is down, so call the administrator.

Not:

The network is down, call the administrator.

14 Do not overuse commas

A pause in reading is not always a good reason to use a comma. You should use less punctuation if you can reasonably do so; however, there are many times when a comma is required. For example, you must use a comma when using conjunctions (*and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so*) to connect two independent clauses. And you must use a comma to separate a series of adjectives. Also use a comma with a date and a year.

Example:

On July 4, 1776, Congress signed the Declaration of Independence.

Without the specific date, don't use a comma:

July 1776 was one of the most eventful months in our history.

Check your grammar handbook for the correct use of commas and other punctuation.

15 Write unified and coherent paragraphs

A paragraph has unity if all its parts work together to explain a single idea logically. It is coherent if each sentence links smoothly to the ones before and after it. Transitional words can help, such as *first, next, then, and finally*. Another way to achieve coherence is to use pronouns that are standing in for nouns or names that were used earlier in the paragraph.

16 Make company names singular

Example:

Ernst & Young ordered some computers for its new office.

17 Be sure subjects and verbs agree

Use a singular verb or pronoun with a singular subject, and a plural verb or pronoun with a plural subject.

Examples:

The four workers have copies of their assignments.

Or:

The CEO was late for her appointment.

18 Use parallel words or phrases in lists and series

If you have a list or a series, be sure each item in the series starts with the same kind of word—with a noun, a verb, or an -ing word.

Examples:

The first example uses nouns, the second uses -ing words.

- The training program will include:
- Oracle databases
- Novell suites
- Microsoft certification
- Retention of customers (not Retaining customers)
- Workspace management (not How to plan Workspaces)

The new IT manager's job description includes:

- Planning for new projects
- Attending meetings
- Conducting staff meetings
- Interviewing and hiring new personnel
- Working with marketing to keep the Web site focused

19 Use bullets

As illustrated in the examples above, bullets are the easiest way to separate items in a series. Bullets make a series much easier to read, so use them if you have three or more items to list. Don't use punctuation with bulleted items unless each bulleted item is a sentence, and then place a period after each one.

20 Use plural nouns and pronouns

Examples:

All managers must evaluate their subordinates annually.

Not:

Each manager must evaluate his or her subordinates annually.

21 Capitalize correctly

In general, you should only capitalize at the beginning of sentences and with proper nouns. Don't capitalize to emphasize words or show their importance. Instead, use italics and bold lettering for emphasis. Job titles are not necessarily capitalized.

Examples:

Our president, John Rodriguez

Or:

President John Rodriguez

Or:

John Rodriguez, president

22 Write numbers correctly

Spell out numbers from zero through nine; however, if you must begin a sentence with a number greater than nine, spell it out. Write figures for numbers 10 and over.

Examples:

The first three pages are blank.

We received 10 complaints.

Ten people attended the meeting.

She has 120 employees.

23 Write with confidence

Your message should have a confident attitude, so avoid phrases such as *I hope*, *If you agree*, *If you'd like to*, or *I know you are busy, but...*

24 Use a courteous and sincere tone

Avoid being trite, condescending, or offensive

Examples:

By paying your bill before May 15, you will maintain your excellent credit history with us.

Not:

Companies like ours can't survive unless you pay your bill.

I have forwarded your complaint to the shipping department. You should hear from them within the week.

Not:

You sent your complaint to the wrong department.

25 Use nondiscriminatory language

Make no assumptions about any group of people and treat everyone equally. In general this means:

- Don't use first names (unless everyone's name is used that way).
- Don't make references to females as ladies or girls.
- Don't use -man occupational titles (such as *foreman*, *chairman*) if you can avoid them.
- Don't use derogatory words (such as *gyp*, derived from gypsy).
- Don't use job titles that imply that only men or only women hold certain jobs. E.g., use "personnel" rather than "manpower."
- Don't use demeaning or stereotypical terms.

26 Avoid abbreviations in a narrative

Spell out the names of states.

Example:

The company has offices in Illinois, Missouri, and Kentucky.

Not:

The company has offices in IL, MO, and KY.

In a narrative, spell out all common nouns that you might be tempted to abbreviate.

Examples:

Accountant, not acct; association, not assoc.; building, not bldg.; company, not co.

27 Proofread and use spell checker

The more you reread and spell-check your writing, the more mistakes you will find—and correct. If you lack confidence in your editing abilities, do it anyway (it's good practice for you), but have someone else you trust proofread it as well.

28 Turn in your report or mail your letter

If you have followed this list, you should feel confident that your document is correct, accurate, and effective.

Additional resources

- TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) [XML](#)
- Sign up for our [Downloads Weekly Update](#) newsletter
- Sign up for our [IT Career NetNote](#), delivered on Mondays and Thursdays.
- Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- ["Organization offers guidance for consultants with tech writing skills"](#) (TechRepublic article)
- ["Ten skills that can help you land an IT manager job"](#) (TechRepublic download)
- ["Five tips for developing the soft skills IT pros need"](#) (TechRepublic article)

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