



The Grammar Police

As many of you know, I spend far too much time participating on various photographer and creative-related forums. In that capacity, I get the chance to read a lot of your writing. I have to say, too much of what I see

is very concerning.

Yes, I'm aware that posting on forums lends itself to a looser form of English than the formal business letter, but the sort of errors I see are probably in your business correspondence too. They're definitely on your websites. I know, I've read them.

How you write is a vital part of how you are seen. It's part of your brand--the image you project to the buying world. Think about all the written work you actually have to produce regularly--proposal letters to accompany estimates, all of your marketing materials (mailers, websites, etc.), emails to your clients, and so much more. Are you sure you're expressing yourself clearly and correctly?

When you make mistakes, you project a lack of attention to detail. When someone is spending thousands of dollars on images, they want to make sure the person they're working with is detail-oriented. See the incongruity?

What can you do about it? A couple of things. One is to learn what words you are most likely to misuse and keep them on a list, with examples, to make sure you use the right word. Some of the "favorites" I see are:

affect/effect--affect is a verb: "This affected the outcome," and effect is a noun: "The effect was significant;"

lose/loose--"If you lose weight, your pants get loose;" the first is a verb, the second an adjective--think "loose goose" and you'll get it right;

they're/their/there--the first is a conjunction between They and Are, the second is a possessive pronoun (like "mine"), and the third is referring to location: "They're in their house over there;"

its/it's--this one gets everyone wonky because the version WITHOUT the apostrophe is the possessive: "What's that monkey holding? It's its tail;"

there is/there are--the first is singular, the second plural: "There is a reason for this" versus "There are many reasons for this."

plurals--plurals are never made by adding apostrophes...ever (almost). This is a big one. In most cases all you need to do is add an "s": cats, 1980s, WMDs, CDs;

possessives--these are almost always made by adding apostrophe s or just an apostrophe--cat [singular]->cat's [singular possessive], cats [plural]->cats' [plural possessive]: "We have two cats. The cats' litterbox is in the garage."

The big exception is for possessive pronouns: mine, yours, his, hers, theirs, ours, its.

By the way, the plural/possessive confusion is really bad these days. Just recently I read someone's post online that wanted to know something about "the companies product." Ack!

What the writer meant was “the company’s product” so the writer not only screwed up the possessive part of the word, it was pluralized when (from context) it was clearly meant to be singular.

The other, much more important thing you can do is to hire a professional. In this case, I mean either hire a copywriter or, at the very least, a professional proofreader. Remember, you are a visual creative, not a writer. You expect to be hired by clients who shouldn’t do their own photography even if they have the tools to make images, because you are a professional. You bring something more to a project. So does a copywriter.

A good copywriter can make your website sing and can increase the effectiveness of your other promotional tools significantly. You may love to write, but that doesn’t make you an effective writer. Hire a pro.

Unfortunately, you probably can’t afford to hire a pro for each estimate or email you send. For the day-to-day writing, you need to sharpen your skills. Many larger cities have wonderful community college programs--take an English writing course. If you can’t get into an English writing course, then try a business writing course. Why not go immediately for the business writing course? Because often those courses are taught by business pros, not language pros. When you want to learn best, go to the right pro for the lesson; business pros are best at teaching courses dealing with finances, marketing, and everything else “business-y,” but they are not specifically trained in language.

Lastly, even though all your friends may use it and even some of your clients might, do not, ever, send anything written in text-message-ese. U R not going 2 B understood by a good chunk of your targets, and it looks like you don’t know any better. The only reason ever to use that form of language, professionally, is if you are sending a text message and are limited to too small of a message size to write in correct English. Even then I would suggest splitting the message in two over using the abbreviated language.

And if you are over 35, don’t ever use it no matter what. Sorry, but you’ll look like you’re trying too hard to be young and trendy.

Remember, your brand is only as strong as the *last* impression you leave with any target. Imagine having a great meeting with an accountant who wants your business. Later you get this thank you note:

Thanks 4 taking the time to meet with me. I was glad I could visit you their in your studio. I understand your need’s better and look forward to working with you.

No matter how great this person is with numbers, I would never hire him/her. A note with mistakes like that tells me that s/he doesn’t pay attention to details and I want an accountant who pays attention to details.

Buyers want photographers who pay attention to details too. You can’t use being an artist as an excuse. You’re a businessperson first, write like one.

Leslie is available for consulting, coaching, and speaking events. Give her a call at 619.961.5882 or email her at leslie@burnsautoparts.com.