



Learning Impact NG

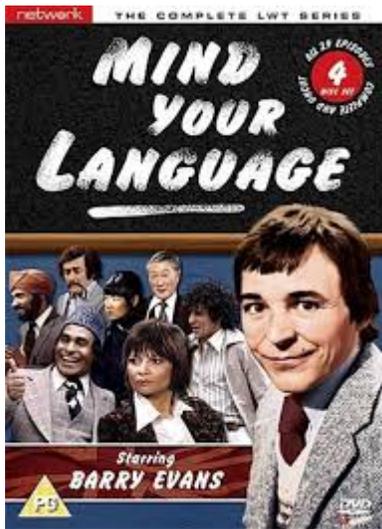


Getting the Write START

Enhancing Writing Skills of Professionals

Mind Your Grammar

By Omagbitse Barrow FCA



Whenever the subject of speaking and writing properly in the English language comes up, a few people in the Afro-centric school of thought challenge our emphasis on the English Language.

Our simple answers are: 1) There aren't sufficient literary works in our indigenous languages to provide the breadth of learning that we require across a variety of knowledge areas - *Do we have books in Itsekiri, Billiri and Ebira on Leadership, Creativity and Strategy, for example?* 2) English is the language of global business and commerce, and if our organizations and professionals are to remain relevant and competitive, we must be communicating in English. 3) Until one of our African languages can be so developed as to satisfy the criteria in (1) above, then we are left with no other choice but to communicate in English and be very good at doing so.

This is the focus of this paper - how to improve our use of the English language in our everyday writing, especially in the workplace. I am no master of the language myself, but we learn new things each day. I will be sharing some of the most important lessons that I have learned, put into practice, and try to teach others when I facilitate workshops on Business Writing. We will be looking at three areas: 1) Applying the basic rules of punctuation; 2) Creating grammatically-correct sentences; and 3) Using a number of basic grammar rules. Let us start with the basic rules of punctuation.



Basic Rules of Punctuation

There is often some confusion about when we should use a comma and when we shouldn't; what the difference between a colon and a semicolon is; and the difference between the dash and the hyphen. Most of us are comfortable with the use of question marks and full stops, so we will focus on the comma, colon, semicolon, hyphen and dash.



Comma

- Separates independent clauses (complete sentences) joined by a conjunction. *I enjoy Nigerian food, but I don't like seafood.*
- Separates introductory phrase or clause from the rest of the sentence: *Knowing her deadline was tight, she worked the entire weekend*
- Sets apart items in a series: *The report included ideas on marketing, operations, and customer service (the comma before the conjunction "and" indicates that the two items are separate).*
- Sets off a phrase that describes a subject but is not necessary to complete the sentence: *Gbenga Ojo, who was hired six months ago, has done an excellent job.*
- Is always placed inside quotation marks: *"I'll be happy to see you", said Nike*

Colon

- Indicates a stop followed by an explanation: *He figured out how to impress his boss: develop an internet marketing plan*
- Indicates a stop followed by a list: *She placed three items on her desk: a stapler, magnifying glass, and a stuffed yellow lizard*

Semicolon

- Joins two sentences that have similar construction: *Last year's annual report was 50 pages long; this year's report was only 35 pages.*



- Joins items in a comma-separated series to avoid confusion: *The sales team's hectic month included trips to Maiduguri, Borno; Funtua, Katsina; and Damaturu, Yobe.*

Hyphen

- Joins two or more words that serve as an adjective modifying a noun. The manager suggested that the Conference be divided into three-hour sessions. Without the hyphen in three-hour, the reader might assume the manager suggested three 60-minute sessions.

Dash

- May be used in place of commas to set off a long phrase. *The first-line manager's proposal - which explained how to use the new investors tool kit that's designed to double the number of new investment opportunities in six months - was embraced by all the board members.*
- Sets information apart with emphasis: *By speaking up to the boss, the investment promotion officer was nominated to travel on the tour - a totally unexpected outcome, given the supervisor's track record on tours.*

Now that we have learned a few things about use the of punctuation marks, let us move on to the construction of grammatically correct sentences based on the rules of subject and verb agreement.

Sentence Construction - Subject and Verb Agreement

This is the area where most people struggle in their written communication - creating grammatically correct sentences. In order to build sentences, there must be agreement between the subject of the sentence and the verb that connotes the action of the subject. The agreement is based on the following:

- Where the subject is in plural, the verb will be in singular;
- Where the subject is singular, the verb will be in plural
- Where the subject is a collective noun, the verb will be in singular.



It is very important to identify the subject properly. The subject is the central idea and focus of a sentence. Using this formula requires a lot of practice which we typically offer in our Business Writing Skills Workshops - you can find out more by visiting www.learningimpactmodel.com. We will end our learning on improving our grammar by looking at a number of grammar rules and offer you a chance to learn a few commonly misused words and phrases.

Basic Grammar Rules

There are a number of basic grammar rules that are often times applied wrongly by people in everyday written communication

Rule	Explanation
Split Infinitives	Do not place an adverb between “to” and the verb which follows.
Participles	Phrases using participles are acting as adjectives and must include the noun that they are qualifying.
Singular Collective Nouns	When thinking of a group as a whole, use a singular verb. When thinking of individuals forming the group, use a plural verb.
Prepositions	Do not end a sentence with a preposition.
Either/Neither/Every	Should have singular verb agreements.
Each	When “each” precedes the word to which it refers, it should be followed by a singular verb. When “each” follows the word to which it refers, it should be followed by a plural verb.



Do you know the difference between these commonly misused phrases and words? Take time to check the dictionary for their proper meaning and usage:

Accept/Except
Advice/Advise
All ready/already
Among/Between
Composed/Comprised
Device/Devise
Discreet/Discrete
Ensure/Insure
Good/Well
Into/ in to
It's /Its
Lose/Loose
Precede/Proceed
That/Which
Their/There/They're
Your/You're

So, we have looked at some of the most important areas of the use of English in our business writing - the rules of punctuation, sentence correction, basic grammar rules and commonly misused words/phrases. There is always so much to learn about the English Language, but to conclude I have four things I will encourage you to do always:



Mind Your Language

4 Tips to Improve your Use of English



◆ Use a Dictionary

◆ Spell-Check

◆ Get a Grammar App

◆ Keep Learning



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- 1) Always use a dictionary, and thankfully with the internet you can access a variety of on-line dictionaries to ensure you use words and phrases in their correct context.
- 2) Use the spell checker on your computer as you type and pay attention to the corrections and suggestions given - do not just hurriedly conclude that it is "American" English or that the computer is wrong.
- 3) Get one of these grammar correcting apps like Grammarly or White Smoke (I believe they are free). They integrate with your word-processing software and ensure your writing is always correct.
- 4) Do not be arrogant or ashamed (two extremes) regarding your knowledge of the English Language. It may be a foreign language to you but stay positively motivated to learn more about the proper use of English and apply your learnings each day to your writing tasks at work.

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