



Don't abuse the comma

Treat the noble comma with the respect it deserves



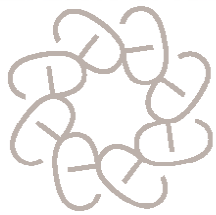
Ban the bull

The Department of Health under the spotlight



Quick tips

Perfecting your proofreading



emphasis
business writing trainers

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Write Away e-bulletin

May 2010

Students plagued by poor grammar



University students' writing is plagued by poor grammar and punctuation and a lack of consensus on what constitutes a clear writing style, new Emphasis research has found.

This inaugural research project, which marks the launch of the Emphasis Research Centre, suggests that today's graduates – tomorrow's business writers –

aren't being encouraged to write in a clear, straightforward manner that will serve them (and their future colleagues and clients) best in the world of work.

The results, compiled from an online survey of academics and lecturers from 37 UK universities, reveal a range of problems – from poor grammar and punctuation

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Ban the bull

Good intentions may or may not pave the road to hell, but evidently they can sometimes be wrapped up in some seriously bewildering prose.

On its website, the Department of Health outlines its Skilled for Health programme. This aims to make sure people with lower levels of literacy, language and numeracy skills are as able to access everything the health service has to offer as anyone else.

Fantastic stuff.

Unfortunately, on the site, the DoH goes on to describe one of the aims of Skilled for Health like this:

Enhanced engagement in learning

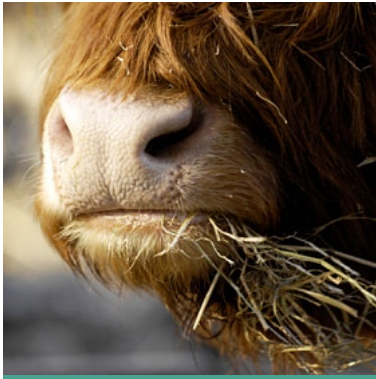
to use health improvement topics that embed Skills for Life learning as an incentive to engage and recruit individuals who do not traditionally participate in adult learning initiatives, with a view to supporting them to progressing into other learning opportunities – including, where appropriate, a Skills for Life qualification-based outcome.

Trying to wade through that may

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be enough to make anyone question their literacy skills.

Since the goal is to encourage people to do something, using 'doing' words (verbs) is a good start. Instead of 'enhanced engagement in learning', try 'engaging people in learning'. Rather than 'a Skills for Life qualification-based outcome', how about 'earning a Skills for Life qualification' or, simply, 'learning with Skills for Life'?

Consider swapping large, unwieldy words like 'traditionally' and 'participate' for more everyday versions, like 'usually' and 'take part in'. And don't try to do in one sentence what is better done in two. Remember: one sentence, one idea.



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www.writing-skills.com/blog

Imagine one of the people behind the programme was asked by an interested associate or friend to explain the aims of the venture over a cup of coffee.

If they expressed it as above, by the time they had

finished, their acquaintance would be none the wiser and their coffee would probably be cold.

Writing more as we speak – though not universally appropriate – makes our writing more 'human', as well as easy to understand in just one reading.

In fact, back in the cafe, it would probably go something more like this:

Engaging people in learning

to encourage people who don't usually take part in adult learning initiatives to do so, by engaging them on topics of healthy living and Skills for Life. Ideally, this could include supporting them in further learning opportunities, including earning a Skills for Life qualification, if appropriate.

Calling all Write Away readers: we need your bull

Whenever you trip over any truly turgid or baffling business-speak, think of us. (You know what we mean, don't you?)

Send in any examples for us to unravel, and you'll receive a free copy of our style guide, *The Write Stuff*. And don't worry, we can leave names out of it if you would prefer.

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Pause for commas

Compared with pondering the placement of the much less familiar semi-colon or the enigmatic apostrophe, the ubiquitous comma might seem hardly worth worrying about. They're ten a penny, aren't they? Why not just sprinkle them at will or leave them out entirely?

Unsurprisingly, we don't recommend doing either. They may seem a common or garden item of punctuation, but – just like the elderly in society – we can learn much from commas and should treat them with respect.

So, use them:

- to denote a natural pause, such as if you were reading aloud

Unfortunately, commas are often underrated.

- after a secondary clause that's been put at the beginning of a sentence

Although the comma had been left out of the speech, he still paused for dramatic effect.

- to separate items in a list

My job involves typing, proofreading, answering the phone and stocktaking commas.

I'm looking for a tall, dark, handsome lover of punctuation.

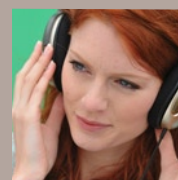
- to make it clear exactly how items are split (to avoid confusion, usually when the word 'and' is involved in the list)

The courses on offer were Introduction to colons, Intensive comma revision, Hyphens and dashes, and Figures and numbers.

- in pairs, for information additional to the main point (that could be lifted out to leave a sentence that still makes complete sense)

The phone call, which lasted ten minutes, was mostly about Mary's incorrect use of punctuation.

However, the information contained by the two commas has to be 'non-defining' (not vital to the overall gist of the sentence); if it is 'defining', you would use no commas at all



It's good to talk.

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www.writing-skills.com/podcast

The phone call that was about Mary's poor punctuating was full of awkward pauses.

- to introduce short quotes

He said, 'Let's take a short break here.'

Changing sense

Given the often ambiguous nature of our language, it is important to give pause to where you place your commas. Otherwise you may end up saying something other than you intended, or leaving your

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Pause for commas

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reader rather confused. Compare:

However, you might feel the report is irrelevant [and we may take that into consideration]

with

However you might feel, the report is irrelevant [your opinion doesn't really matter].

Or

I donated, myself, to that charity [I, like you, am a philanthropist]

and

I donated myself to that charity [not sure how much use they'll have for me].

Or even

The Wombles of Wimbledon Common are we [that's why the Common is so tidy]

and

The Wombles of Wimbledon, common are we [can't move for wombles while watching the tennis].

Commas can make subtle distinctions too. Observe the nuances:

Our boss, who is based in Basingstoke, will be at that seminar

and

Our boss who is based in Basingstoke will be at that seminar.

In the first example, there is only one boss. He may be based in Basingstoke, but that is not vital information (it is 'non-defining'). The main point is that he'll be at the seminar. In the second example, there are presumably several bosses. But it is specifically the one lucky enough to be based in Basingstoke who will attend the seminar.

We've said it before and we'll say it again: punctuation matters. Particularly if you want your writing to end up meaning what you meant it to.



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We've helped hundreds of organisations produce first-class business writing – from government departments and law firms to manufacturers and blue-chip companies.

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Quick tips: how to proofread



Taking the time to proofread is the only way to ensure that your work is free from potentially embarrassing errors.

Fortunately, it will take you next to no time to find out exactly how to do it.

Give her three minutes and our writing expert and trainer Kathy Gemmell will reveal key guidelines for keeping your writing gaffe-free.

Visit www.writing-skills.com/resources/knowledge-bank and look under 'audio tips'.

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Students plagued by poor grammar

to an inappropriate style. But the real problem may well be the inconsistent advice handed down from lecturers.

The survey reveals a lack of agreement on what constitutes a good writing style: there is a gulf between the plainer language tutors claim to prefer, and the typically opaque, multi-syllabic language of academia.

So it isn't the case that the problem is going unrecognised or being ignored. Rather there is just a need for a unified – and uniform – support system.

'University lecturers are keen to help students overcome worrying deficiencies in their writing,' says Emphasis CEO, Rob Ashton. 'But a lack of familiarity with the building blocks of a clear, plain style makes that goal hard to achieve.'

To read the full report on this research, visit the Emphasis Research Centre at www.writing-skills.com/resources/research-centre/. And watch out for further projects being added in the future.

□ *Other research has recently highlighted the link between low levels of literacy and a lack of success in the workplace. The report, published by the National Literacy Trust, found that one in six adults has levels of literacy lower than that expected of an 11-year-old. Two-thirds of men and three-quarters of women with poor reading and writing skills had never received a promotion.*

Write Away – to go

We know how it is. Sometimes Write Away pops up in your already crammed inbox and you only have time to read one article.

Perhaps you'd like something other than the newspaper to flick through on the train journey home. Or maybe you'd like to pick up some business-writing tips while simultaneously harking back to a simpler time: of village newsletters, summer fêtes and jam pots topped with gingham.

That's why we've decided to produce Write Away in PDF format. You'll also find links to the PDF version on each page of the e-bulletin.

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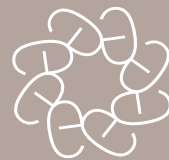
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