

## Advertising for accuracy

Could our favourite slogans be under threat?

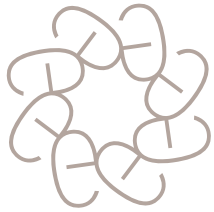


## Avoid the HMRC backlash

How to apologise to customers in writing.

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# Write Away e-bulletin

October 2010

# Could email turn us all into liars?



Email communications: a hotbed for dishonesty?

Recent research shows that we are more likely to lie by email than by pen and paper.

Three separate studies carried out by DePaul University in Chicago each had the same findings: that people are not only more inclined to lie in email, but that they also feel more justified in their decision to do so.

The first two studies tested 48 business students' propensity

for honesty when splitting a (fictitious) pot of money with an anonymous partner, who wouldn't know the exact quantity of cash in the kitty. Each participant was charged with telling their partner how much was available, and how the split would work, either by email or in a handwritten letter.

Of the 26 people who chose email,

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## Me, myself and I (reflexive pronouns explained)

People have some pretty strong feelings about the way our language is used and abused if a recent [Emphasis blog post](#) is anything to go by. One source of irritation that stood out as a real piece of apple skin between the teeth was the incorrect use of reflexive pronouns.

### What are they?

Reflexive pronouns are basic pronouns + 'self' or 'selves', so:

- myself
- yourself
- herself
- himself
- itself
- yourselves
- themselves.

### So what's the right way to use them?

Officially, you should use reflexive pronouns in sentences where the

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## Me, myself and I (reflexive pronouns explained)

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subject (the person or thing carrying out the action) and the object (the person or thing on the receiving end of the action) are the same. For example:

*I patted **myself** on the back for mastering grammar.*

*He dusted **himself** down, then rang her doorbell.*

*She gave **herself** a wink in the mirror and said, 'Go get 'em, tiger.'*

Reflexive pronouns can also be employed for emphasis (where, technically, they could be removed, leaving the sense the same):

*I knitted this whole scarf **myself**.*

*Did you shear the whole flock for it **yourself**?*

*'I think this house is absolutely perfect for **yourselves**.'*

*'I'd be grateful if you could send that information over to **myself**.'*

Whereas what the culprits really mean is:

*'I think this house is absolutely perfect for **you**.'*

*'I'd be grateful if you could send that information over to **me**.'*

These examples make the mistake of using these words as replacements for the basic pronouns (you, me), as if they were some kind of upmarket equivalent. Sadly, there is no such upgrade: it's just plain wrong.



### It's good to talk

A speech writer shares her secrets.

Write On podcast [Click here](#)

It's advisable not to overdo this usage, however, as it quickly becomes overbearing.

### And the wrong way to use them?

Cue much gritting of teeth.

If we, ourselves, have reminded you of anything that really gets your goat – or floats your boat – on the English language front, please join the fun by leaving your comments at [our blog](#) yourselves (sorry).

Emphasis runs a one-day [Essential grammar and punctuation](#) course, which explains all the basics you may not remember from school. Call us on +44 (0)1273 732 888 or [email us](#) to find out more.

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## Avoid the HMRC backlash

You may recall that six million people have – through no fault of their own – paid the wrong amount of tax over the last few years, thanks to a blunder at HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC).

The story dominated the column inches last month, in part because of the way HMRC so unceremoniously delivered this bombshell to its customers (in the form of a standard tax calculation letter) and in part because of the backlash that followed from taxpayers.

### Being customer-centred

Arguably some of the controversy could have been avoided through a large dose of subtlety and a more customer-centred approach from HMRC. And if it had actually taken into account how its customers might receive the news (particularly if you were one of the 1.4 million poor souls who had underpaid).

HMRC was never going to make friends in this situation, but equally it didn't *have* to make enemies. The tone of its letter was on the clinical side at best and unapologetic at worst.

Here's an extract to give you a flavour:

*Dear taxpayer [Name]*

*I have reviewed your income tax liability for the year shown above to see whether you have underpaid or overpaid tax for that year.*

*My calculation is given on the enclosed sheet. The calculation result is given near the foot of that page.*

*The 'See Notes' column refers to the numbered*

*notes in the guidance leaflet 'Understanding your tax calculation', which I also enclose.*

*A copy of this calculation has been sent to [Agent].*

*Part of this underpayment is already being collected through your tax code during [year] and the rest will be collected during [year–year] ...*

*(Source: BBC News)*

Keeping letter writing customer-centred is always important, but probably never more so than when giving bad news. The last thing you want is to exacerbate the situation by not only delivering a blow, but by also sounding like a robot as you do so. To avoid this, try the SCRAP (Situation, Complication, Resolution, Action, Politeness) formula.

### Situation

Begin by explaining the situation (or 'where they [your readers] are'). By doing this, your readers will realise you understand and empathise with them.

In the case of HMRC, this could have involved briefly summing up (and owning up to) mistakes in the PAYE system, and suggesting it was at least aware of the worry this might cause to its customers.

*As you may be aware, HMRC has recently found that some taxpayers have paid the wrong amount of tax through the PAYE system over the last two years. We understand that many people will now be concerned about how this may affect them.*

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# Avoid the HMRC backlash

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## Complication

Introduce the idea that there's a problem readers need to solve or a request they need to fulfil ('why they can't stay there').

Here, of course, this will be the money taxpayers owe (or are due). It would also be wise to reinforce this with an apology.

*I'm very sorry to tell you that you have been undercharged by £X for the year X-X, as the enclosed calculation shows.*

## Resolution

State your resolution to the problem or request. Your readers may well be relieved that you're offering a ready-made way of fixing things.

(In the case of HMRC, such relief would unfortunately elude those taxpayers finding themselves seriously out of pocket.)

*We are now in the process of collecting underpayments. For those who have underpaid by less than £2,000, like you, we will do this by altering your tax code to reclaim the money in monthly instalments over the next X year[s].*

*We would also like to assure you that from now on, we will be using a new computer system that will minimise the risk of such a mistake happening again.*

## Action

Suggest what action the reader can or should take. In some cases, this will be what further action you are going to take. Make sure that this follows on logically from the resolution.

HMRC has been criticised for not being entirely open about taxpayers' possible rights to appeal. If these were made clear at this point, it might avoid being bombarded with letters of appeal sent on the off-chance.

*You don't need to do anything at this point: your new tax code will be applied automatically. The additional tax taken each month will be £X.*

*If, however, you feel that you provided all the necessary information for us to tax you correctly, you may be entitled to appeal. Please see the enclosed leaflet for details on whether this applies to you and how to contact us.*

## Politeness

Finally, end with a polite sign-off. And, in this example, a second apology.

*I hope you understand why we need to take this corrective action. Once again, I'm sorry for the effect that our mistake may have on your financial situation.*

*Yours sincerely*

*[name]*

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## Apologise like a human

No-one likes to admit they've made a mistake, but owning up when it's justified will always have a better reception from your reader than trying to wriggle out of it. And, while 'I apologise' is better than nothing, 'I'm sorry' is much better: it sounds more sincere – and more personal.

The language of 'we apologise for any inconvenience caused' has been dubbed 'professionalese' by Daniel H Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*.

Pink advises avoiding the phrase entirely, because it makes the author seem like they're distancing themselves from the mistake. 'We speak human at home and "professionalese" at work,' he explains. 'And that might be hurting our businesses more than we realise.'

In childhood we're often told to say we're sorry and mean it. And it seems that remains the best advice at every level. In his book *The Upside of Irrationality*, Dan Ariely found that a simple 'I'm sorry', uttered following a mistake, stopped the other person from getting annoyed and retaliating in some way. Say, for example, refusing to pay back tax.

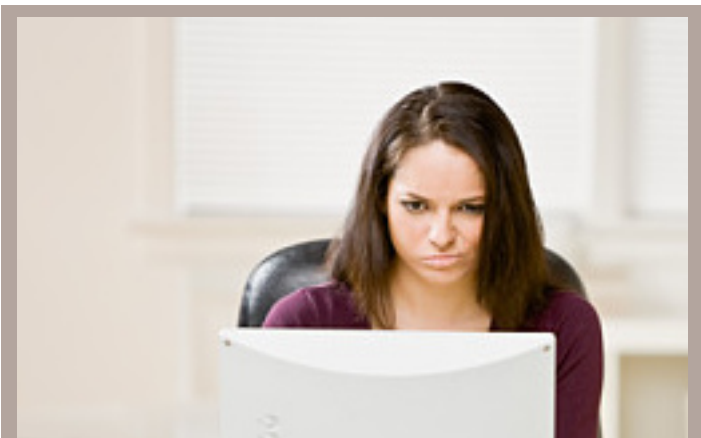
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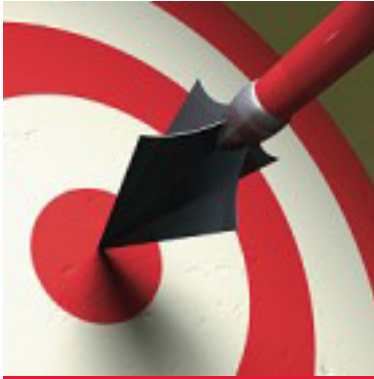
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## Advertising for accuracy

Cadbury's Dairy Milk wrappers will no longer bear the long-standing slogan, 'a glass and a half of full-cream milk'. Instead the less-than-lyrical – but doubtless much more scientifically accurate – 'the equivalent of 426ml of fresh liquid milk in every 227g of milk chocolate' will appear in its place.

The makers have clearly picked up on the growing tide of bafflement and rage among the British public at the sheer incongruity of the statement. After all, how the heck did they get a whole glass and a half of milk into one of those little fun-size bars? 'The phrase didn't make sense if the pack stated the bar weighs 49g or 230g,' a spokesman rightly pointed out.

As yet, Cadbury's bid for swear-on-the-Bible-type honesty won't actually affect its advertising campaigns. But could they be next?

And what could this mean for other well-known slogans?..

*Thank Crunchie it's Friday, though neither Crunchie nor Cadbury's can take credit or responsibility for the natural passage of time.*

*Mr Kipling doesn't technically make exceedingly good cakes, because he is a fictitious, never-seen character created purely for marketing purposes.*

*In all honesty, there are times when I wouldn't rather have a bowl of Coco Pops.*

Utterly accurate or not, you can't help but hope that advertisers decide to stick to using at least a little bit of artistic licence. Because they're worth it.

## Emphasis exhibits at CIPD conference

**CIPD ANNUAL  
2010 Conference  
& Exhibition**

It's now just 19 days until the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Annual

Conference and Exhibition. This big event in the HR calendar takes place from 9–11 November 2010 at Manchester Central, and this year, Emphasis will be exhibiting for the first time.

For human resource professionals, the CIPD's annual conference is an opportunity to discover

and discuss the latest thinking about how to get the most from your people. It's also the ideal opportunity to get some expert advice. So, if you're already planning to visit the exhibition – or you're attending as a delegate – come and see us at stand D38.

You can pre-book an appointment through our exhibitor profile (be sure to let us know the day and time you prefer) and order your own personal copy of our updated style guide, *The Write Stuff*, for collection at our stand.

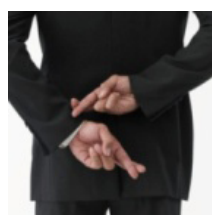
We'll hand it over with one hand and shake yours with the other. We look forward to meeting you.

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## Could email turn us all into liars?



24 lied about how much money there was, while only around half of the letter writers were economical with the truth. Follow-up questionnaires also showed that those sending emails were more comfortable with their decision to fudge the truth than

their pen-wielding counterparts. The researchers' final study further reinforced these findings, even when participants knew their lies would later be revealed to the group.

In the final scenario, 177 managers were divided into 'companies' of three people, each representing a different project, eligible for an unknown amount of extra funding. Only one member knew this figure and was elected to tell their 'colleagues' how much they would each get.

Despite knowing that the truth would later be revealed to others in the group, those corresponding by email felt more justified in lying about the money: on average email

users quoted \$18.4 million, while on paper it averaged out at \$21.24 million (the real total being \$23 million).

The reasons for this apparent moral disparity seem to stem from our ability to psychologically distance ourselves from our actions. Email's perceived informality and impermanence can make taking a holiday from our usual ethics seem both safer and more reasonable. The truth of the matter, of course, is that email is actually very difficult to delete entirely. And once it's out in the electronic ether, it's quite literally out of your hands, while the consequences of its content will almost definitely be on your head.

With the business world and more and more of our daily transactions taking place online, the findings of these studies are something we should all keep in mind.

**The full research findings are published in our white paper, *Lying online: why pen and paper is more honest*. To access the paper, visit the [Emphasis Research Centre](#).**

**Emphasis runs a one-day [Effective email writing course](#), which examines how to write effective emails and avoid common pitfalls. Call us on +44 (0)1273 732 888 or [email us](#) to find out more.**

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