

**Style and Usage Guidelines  
for Written Communications  
Administrative and Business Services**

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## Introduction

Anyone in Administrative and Business Services who writes letters, reports, or “ZotMails” (electronic communications for campus-wide distribution) needs to write well. Writing skills are important because the ability to use persuasion -- rather than directives or authority -- determines how effective we are in our jobs.

These guidelines,<sup>1</sup> although not as comprehensive as a style manual, are designed to help Administrative and Business Services employees write excellent reports and communications. These guidelines are also intended to save time -- both rewriting time and editing time -- in that they focus on problems frequently observed in Administrative and Business Services draft documents.

Written materials should leave Administrative and Business Services error-free -- a standard that is not arbitrary in view of expectations for the correct use of language in a distinguished university. Moreover, poorly written material sent from our organization could find its way to the bulletin board as an example of the "illiteracy of the administration," and impair our ability to serve the University.

Only a few comments on grammar and usage are included. For additional guidance consult Fowler<sup>2</sup> or the University of Chicago style manual.<sup>3</sup>

## Common Grammar and Usage Problems

### Frequently Misused Words

affect and effect	efforts	irregardless	prioritize
appraise and apprise	federal	less than	sanction
adverse and averse	feel	myself (yourself)	strategic
compare	freshmen	none	verbal
comprise	hopefully	only	which and that
data	imply and infer	overview and oversight	who's

**Affect** and **effect** both have verb forms and noun forms; all four meanings are different. Use these words with care.

**Appraise** is often used when the word intended is **advise** -- which means to notify or inform. An "appraisal" is an estimate of the valuation of a tangible item or a judgment of the merit or significance of an abstract concept.

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<sup>1</sup> This guide has borrowed (with permission) from the style manual of the President's Office of the University of Rochester, and it has benefited from the contributions of Catherine Reynolds, UC Irvine's Administrative Policies Coordinator.

<sup>2</sup> *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, H.W. Fowler, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> *The Chicago Manual of Style*, The University of Chicago Press.

**Adverse** and **averse** are frequently confused, which is not surprising since these adjectives share the same Latin root. "Adverse" means contrary, opposing, unfavorable, or harmful; "averse" refers to repugnance, distaste, or disinclination. "Risk-adverse" is frequently used when the intended meaning is "risk-averse." However, "adverse results" is correct usage.

**Compare** is misused when the wrong preposition is chosen. "Compared with" suggests that the objects under comparison are similar or that they share common characteristics; "compared to" suggests that the comparison intends to contrast differences between the objects under consideration.

**Comprise** means "to be composed of." Therefore, "comprised of" contains an element of redundancy. Use "comprise" in its transitive form -- for example, "In 1940 the United States comprised forty-eight states," or "a quartet comprising four movements."

**Data** is the plural of "datum," and as such it requires a plural verb form. On the other hand, "statistics" can be either singular or plural depending on whether one is referring to data or to the body of knowledge known as statistics.

**Efforts** is needlessly vague and weak, especially if "accomplishments" or "endeavors" can be used. Letters or announcements that praise someone's "efforts" can send a mixed message.

**Federal** is not capitalized when used as an adjective, such as "federal government." Whether "state" is capitalized or not varies according to the capitalization guidelines discussed later on.

**Feel** is often used when a better word would be "believe." To write "we feel that our enrollment projections are accurate to within five percent" is not incorrect, but it is needlessly imprecise. "Feeling" is often used where "belief" or "opinion" would be a better choice.

**Freshmen** cannot function as an adjective. Although "freshman class" is correct, "freshmen class" is not.

**Hopefully** is too frequently used to modify a sentence rather than a subject. The resulting sentence may make no sense. To say "The candidate listened hopefully to the election returns" (where "hopefully" is an adverb modifying "listened") would make sense; but to say "hopefully, the new draft will be ready by Thanksgiving" is incorrect. Try saying, "I hope that" instead.

**Imply** means to suggest indirectly or to hint at, while **infer** means to draw a conclusion from what someone else has said. A speaker will imply by a remark, but the listener infers from the remark. Implications are made by the sender of a communication and inferences are construed by the receiver: "The Chancellor implied that my experience was limited; I inferred that she would not offer me the job."

**Irregardless** is a bastardized combination of "irrespective" and "regardless." Proper usage will dictate the use of either of these latter words in a given situation. Keep in mind that "irrespective" must be written "irrespective of," and as a preposition it requires an object. "Irrespective" and "regardless" are not equivalent; "regardless" is an adverb.

**Less than** applies to bulk, not number. "There were less than fifty students at the convocation" is incorrect; say "fewer than" for items that can be counted.

**Myself** is best used for emphasis when preceded by a personal pronoun, such as "I, myself, will prepare the final report." The use of myself for "I" or "me" when in association with someone else ("my supervisor and myself will attend the conference") should be avoided.

**None** is singular. "None of us are going" is incorrect.

**Only** is frequently misplaced. Sentences with different placements of "only" have different meanings: "I only discussed rabbits" means "I did not touch them, kill them, eat them..." whereas "I discussed only rabbits" means "I did not discuss chickens, peacocks, gerbils..." Make sure that "only" is in juxtaposition to the word to which it applies.

**Overview** is never a verb, and it cannot function in the following way: "The steering committee will overview the various committees working on this project." Nor is "provide overview" correct usage, as the word means a summary or a survey, not supervisory oversight. However, the use of **oversight** is not without pitfalls, as its alternate meaning is "a careless omission or error."

**Prioritize** or **prioritize** are worth avoiding -- perhaps the most commonplace example of a tendency to affix the -ize suffix to practically any noun.

**Sanction** is another word with opposite alternative meanings. The *verb* "sanction" means to give formal, authoritative approval. However, when used as a *noun*, "sanction" means a punitive measure to deny a reward or privilege.

**Strategic** is overused in business writing -- often carelessly affixed as though to confer unquestioned importance to the word being modified. As a business concept, "strategic" is usually reserved for actions or plans that achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Use this word sparingly.

**Verbal** means communication using words (oral *or* written), in contrast to communication using graphs, computer printouts, music, or other nonverbal means. "Oral," not verbal, is the opposite of written.

**Which** and **that** are relative pronouns used to introduce a subordinate clause. If the clause is restrictive (essential to the meaning), it is generally introduced by "that" and does not require commas. "The supplies that arrived last week are out of stock." For a nonrestrictive (non-essential) clause that could stand alone, "which" is used and the clause is enclosed by commas. "June Lake, which was dry last summer, has flooded." When the antecedent in the main clause refers to people, rather than things, a personal pronoun or relative pronoun like "who," "whom," or "whose" would be used: "Applicants who send samples of their writing will be interviewed."

**Who's** is the contraction for "who is" -- not to be confused with "whose," the adjective denoting possession.

## Parallel Construction

Elements in a list must be parallel, comprising objects of the same kind and expressed in the same parts of speech. For example, the following is incorrect: "The purpose of this program is to attract better students and for cost reduction." Although, the error is obvious here, it can be subtler. If each element is a verb, each verb should be in the same tense and mood. Attention to parallelism is also important in lists employing numbering or "bullets."

## Commas

Most errors in the use of commas stem from failure to read the sentence and to look at its overall structure. A subject and its verb, for example, can be separated by two commas or none, but not by a single comma.

A comma normally separates the two independent clauses in a compound sentence, but not the parts of a compound predicate. Two independent clauses are usually separated by a comma unless one is so short, and the balance of the sentence so long and complicated, that it is easier to read if one "draws together" the two independent clauses by omitting the comma.

Our practice is to use a comma before the "and" or "or" in a string of three or more objects. This prevents ambiguities -- for example, when the final object in the series includes "and" or "or," such as (the single department) "Distribution and Document Management."

## Capitalization and the "Uniqueness Rule"

The purpose of capitalization is to convey more information than could be conveyed if one did *not* use capitalization. Capitalization probably causes more agony than any other element of style. People tend to *over*-capitalize. If one has never encountered the word "paleontologist," the tendency may be to treat it as a proper noun. A similar mistake is to capitalize words that merely look or seem important.

*Non-unique* nouns are not capitalized. The application of this rule is not always self-evident, but if in doubt one should ask: Is this word designating somebody or something that is unique? For example, "people" is not capitalized, but "Frank Smith" is. Frank Smith is a unique individual; the fact that there could be a number of Frank Smiths does not interfere with our usage of Frank Smith to designate a single, unique individual. This example also illustrates how exceptions can emerge, such as "if all of the Frank Smiths in New York City were assembled in this room it would be a crowded room, indeed." Obviously the capitalization of the "Frank Smiths" in that sentence reflects the more common instance where a single individual is involved.

Two clues are usually helpful: 1) The indefinite article rarely appears before a capitalized word. An exception is where the capitalized word is *derived* from a unique word: "a Bostonian" is an expression derived from "a resident or citizen of the (unique) city of Boston." 2) A capitalized word rarely appears in the plural. Again, exceptions are derivatives like "Bostonians" or "Americans."

This derivative relation in capitalization seems to cause the most trouble. For example, when talking about chemistry departments at various universities in the world, none of these words is capitalized. When we speak of *the* Department of Chemistry at *the* University of Michigan, they are, of course, capitalized. A chemist, or chemistry as a profession, no more warrants capitalization than any other profession. This sentence is appropriate: "We have sent brochures to chemists at universities throughout the country so that the University can attract the best possible graduate students to Chemistry" (in which "Chemistry" is shorthand for "*the* Department of Chemistry at *the* University of Michigan"). If the final word had been uncapitalized, the meaning would have been different; it would have meant "to do our part in attracting students to the chemistry profession." Another example: "Apparently Chancellor Drake disagreed with the other UC chancellors at last week's Council of Chancellors meeting."

These guidelines are not a special style for our organization. The distinction about departments in the preceding paragraph is parallel to saying that "we will drive east" as distinguished from "we will drive to the East." In the former, "east" means "in an easterly direction" and wouldn't be capitalized anymore than other adverbs like "slowly." In the latter, "East" is shorthand for "*the* eastern part of the United States of America," and its capitalization follows from its uniqueness.

Capitalization is not used to connote importance. A notable example is the word "administration," which should never be capitalized if it is being distinguished from uncapitalized groups -- for example, "the faculty thinks so-and-so but the Administration thinks otherwise." Situations in which "administration" should be capitalized are rare.

## **Selected Style Guidelines**

### **Apostrophes**

Apostrophes are frequently misused, although there is only one exception: When writing "it is" in contracted form, the result is "it's." Because of this preemptive use, the possessive form of "it" is "its."

Another frequent error has to do with the possessive case of proper names. One can write "I am going to dinner at the Smiths'" since that is equivalent to "I am going to dinner at the Smiths' home." But to write "I am going out to dinner with the Smith's" is incorrect since "Smiths" is not the possessive.

No apostrophe is used for the plurals of numbers or letters. Form plurals like the following: the 1970s, several POs, a pair of 9s, a shipment of PCs.

### **Colons**

If the material after the colon is a complete sentence, the first letter is capitalized; otherwise, the first letter is normally lowercase.

## **Fonts**

Use business fonts -- Arial, Times, or Times New Roman (for example) rather than Comic Sans, Tahoma, or Helvetica. Do not use more than two fonts in the same document. Use two fonts only if it improves clarity, provides visual cues that help organize the material, and reinforces the logical structure of the content.

## **Gender**

Copy intended to apply to both sexes should be written in a form that neither indicates nor implies gender. When this is not possible, the use of “they” or “their” is preferable to “he or she,” “he/she,” or “she/he.”

## **Numerals**

Do not start a sentence with an Arabic numeral; either spell it out or revise the sentence. Numbers smaller than 10 are ordinarily spelled out. When two or more numbers are presented in the same section of writing, write them as numerals.

## **Quotation Marks**

Periods and commas go inside the quotation marks. Other punctuation appears inside or outside the quotation marks depending on whether it is a part, or not a part, of the material quoted.

## **Underlining and Boldface**

Unless warranted by exceptional circumstances, do not underline *and* boldface a word. Similarly, underlining an italicized word is rarely suitable.

## **Word Division**

Avoid dividing hyphenated words at the end of a line. Divide a word after rather than before a one-letter syllable.

## **Purpose and Focus**

To be a persuasive business writer, be succinct and direct. Focus on the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of this report or letter?
2. Who needs to be convinced?
3. What issues, problems, and areas of prior belief (or disbelief) need to be addressed in order to make your communication convincing?
4. What is the most neutral and factual argument that can be advanced?

A succinct, focused communication aims to clarify a few points rather than to cover an unlimited array of issues. The decision of what to include and what to forego derives from the four questions stated above.

In addition to a few suggestions discussed below, reading *The Elements of Expression*<sup>4</sup> may help to improve the freshness and expressiveness of your writing.

## **Repetition of Words**

The repetitive use of a word arises when the writer focuses on sentences rather than stepping back and viewing the writing as a unified piece. Take advantage of the useful distinctions and choices among words that have similar meanings. Careless repetition can erode the impact of a writer's message.

## **An Economy of Words**

Use specific terms rather than vague generalities. Never assume that more words will improve clarity. When multiple modifiers seem to be needed, consider whether choosing a different noun or verb could express your intended meaning more precisely, with fewer words.

Unnecessary words dull focus and make writing stale. These examples illustrate how adding a modifier whose meaning is already inherent in the word being modified is pointless:

clearly delineated	terribly insidious
sincerely appreciate	merely arbitrary
unnecessary redundancy	consensus of opinion
make good sense	entirely consistent
very excessive	perfectly appropriate

Avoid nonsensical phrases such as "needless to say" and "not to mention," and use specifics rather than "etc."

## **Overcharged Adjectives**

Another problem is the frequent use of overcharged adjectives such as "critical," "urgent," "special," "unique," "immediate," and "essential." These can create an effect that is *opposite* the intended impact by triggering a reader's defenses and filters. Good justifications are neutral, factual, and specific -- not pumped up by overgeneralizations, hyperbolic words, or emotional arguments.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Elements of Expression: Putting Thoughts into Words*, Arthur Plotnik, Authors Choice Press.

## Unclear Antecedents

Wherever you use a pronoun in your writing, ask yourself: "where is the antecedent?" (the noun a pronoun substitutes for and refers to, which usually precedes the pronoun). Antecedents are seldom clear when they are distant, separated by other pronouns, separated by other antecedents, or in a different sentence.

## Sentences Beginning with "There" and "It"

Sentences that begin with "there" and "it" can usually be improved, rendering them more direct and succinct. Use first person subjects and action verbs when their use makes writing more direct. For example:

"It is planned to augment the budget . . . "	vs.	"The budget will be augmented..."
"There was a late appropriation last year which modified the total."	vs.	"A late appropriation last year modified the total."
"There will be a meeting on Monday, and the committee will meet to discuss whether to extend the contract."	vs.	"The committee will meet on Monday to discuss whether to extend the contract."
"There will be waste and inefficiency fostered as long as space remains as currently used and until the space plan is completed."	vs.	"Until the space plan is completed waste and inefficiency will persist."

These examples suggest that many sentences would be improved if they were revised to avoid beginning with "there" or "it."

## Clarity of Comparative Statements

Whenever expressing a comparison, consider whether the counterpart with which you intend to make a distinction needs to be clarified. For example, consider the following sentence: "The campus makes better use of teaching assistants in independent study courses." *Better than what or whom?* Better than another campus? Better than most of the UC system? Better than was previously the case? Whenever such words as "better," "greater," "more," "less," or "different" are used, consider whether the question of "than what or whom?" needs to be clarified.

## Indented Bullets

Summarizing key points using indented bullets can make business writing more concise, while providing visual relief for the reader. Generally, bullets should be parallel in terms of form, tense, and mood; and they should usually not be multi-sentence.

## Communicating Using Numbers

The purpose of a table, chart, diagram, or graph is to clarify and simplify data that would be less understandable or less interesting if it were embedded in text. A table is often desirable because it breaks up text and provides the reader visual relief, graphic interest, and a different communication mode.

Apply these guidelines to tables, charts, diagrams, and graphs:

1. Include a descriptive title that conveys the essence or intent of the data.
2. Label all axes, rows, and columns.
3. Indicate dimensions, scale, or units of measurement.
4. Indicate the source by footnote or notation below the table, chart, diagram, or graph.
5. In either the title or the labeling, indicate the population. For example, “General Funds” or “Instructional Users” or “Fall 2004 Entering Transfer Students” would indicate the population covered by a table or graph.
6. Do not confuse the reader with too many variables unless a creative way can be found to convey more than two data-dimensions on the same table or graph. See Tufte<sup>5</sup> for excellent examples and ideas.
7. Avoid massive blocks of numbers. Simplify through condensation or summarization, break up visually, or split into separate tables. However, avoid splitting up a table onto two pages.
8. Do not use more significant digits than warranted by the accuracy of the data. Conversely, do not write “approximately” before an exact, non-rounded number, such as “approximately 6,246” (although “approximately 6,250” would be appropriate usage).

## ZotMail Messages

Most ZotMail messages, as initially drafted, could be condensed 40-60 percent without losing essential content. When drafting a message, aim for the “cut it in half” goal and edit aggressively. Challenge every word by asking: Is this sentence/phrase/word *necessary* to deliver the essential message?

Draft your ZotMails in a simple font (Courier New) without bullets, underlining, italics, indentation, or special characters. Double-check all Web links to ensure that they function flawlessly.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, E. R. Tufte, Graphics Press.

Administrative and Business Services ZotMails have received praise from junk mail critics because they are concise, well written, and to the point. The percentage of ZotMails that are ignored or discarded appears to be proportional to message length. Critically edit ZotMail content, keeping in mind that as you make it more succinct, you are increasing its ability to influence your intended readership.