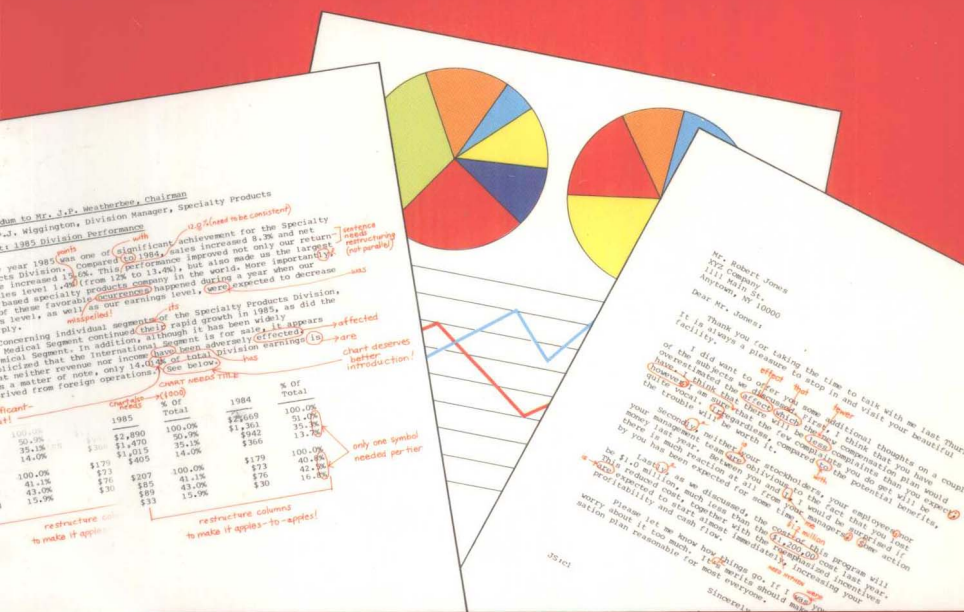


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in business communications

# THE BUSINESS GRAMMAR HANDBOOK

Scott R. Pancoast and Lance M. White



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**THE  
BUSINESS  
GRAMMAR  
HANDBOOK**

*This book is dedicated to our parents.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Edward L. Hutton, CEO of Chemed Corporation and a sound grammarian, deserves much of the credit for this book. His grammar consciousness rubbed off on us when we were young, and his attention to communications detail planted the seeds for the writing of this book.

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We consulted many reference books in writing *The Business Grammar Handbook*. The three that contributed most and that deserve special mention are: Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage* (published by Leonard Harris, New York, 1967); William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* (the third edition was published by The Macmillan Company, New York, 1979); and Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition* (published by William Collins & World Publishing Co., Inc., Cleveland, Ohio, 1976). If we were forced to reduce our reference library to only three volumes, these would be the three.

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# PREFACE

As everyday business writers who typically end up playing the role of editor, we have learned the importance of effective communication in the business world. Promising ideas (and promising careers) are oftentimes lost as a result of ineffective communication—ineffective communication involving words, data, or both. We have found that even the most highly educated of business writers have difficulty with certain grammar concepts and chart-presentation principles. In fact, it seems that most of us got through grade school grammar and never looked back. While we retained most of the basics, some of the more important principles have fallen through the cracks (of our memories) over the years. Regarding charts, it appears that most of us have had no guidance whatsoever on structure, presentation, or clarity; no school at any level provided much instruction in this area.

Despite the importance of communications in business, we have found no truly effective and readable business communications book on the market. The books available today that promise to teach grammar are, almost without exception, rehashes of grade school grammar—full of rules and their endless exceptions. In addition, these textbook-style books are too technical when it comes to the jargon used (“the predicate nominative in the participial phrase . . .”), too thin when it comes to communicating with numbers (few books even broach the topic of graphic presentation), and too thick when it comes to price (have you bought one of these books lately?). And, to top it all

off, none of these books are written specifically *for* the business person *by* the business person.

As a result of this situation, we decided that a different, refreshing approach to business communications was needed. Hence, our book, *The Business Grammar Handbook*. This book does not attempt to address every rule of grammar and every exception; rather, it addresses—in a simple-to-understand style and a simple-to-learn format—only the most troublesome of problems. In other words, what we’re going to teach you here is a simplified approach to coming up with the proper grammar and the effective chart without any grade school rote. In order to develop such an approach, we’ve done something different . . . and important. We have screened literally thousands of business documents and have made files of the many examples of poor grammar, ambiguous phrasing, and convoluted syntax we stumbled across. No business document (or conversation) was sacred—board rooms, annual reports, contracts, simple memos (both internal and intercompany), and even washroom conversations were fair game. After completing the filing phase, we categorized the errors and tallied them to determine which occurred most often. We gave heavy weight, in this tallying process, to errors occurring in annual reports (and, we might add, no annual report we’ve read has been error-free). There are two reasons we chose to do this. First, the tone in an annual report is typically formal, so no “we were being informal” excuses fly. Second, at least twenty professionals usually review an annual report before it goes to print—if an error escapes all twenty, it deserves heavy weight.

Tallying process completed, we discovered something quite interesting—a 90:10 rule, similar to the familiar 80:20 business rule (Pareto’s law), seemed to apply to business-communications problems. That is, it appeared that ten percent of all communications rules were causing ninety percent of the problems. Marketing personnel, stockbrokers, general managers, accountants, and every other business type were all having problems “obeying” the same ten percent of business-related communications rules. It is these ten percent that our book focuses on.

## **2 THE BUSINESS GRAMMAR HANDBOOK**

Master the forty or so guidelines we provide, and you will eliminate ninety percent of your potential for significant grammar- and chart-related errors (and, hopefully, that little bit you remembered from grade school will take care of the other ten percent).

We have made an effort in this book to ensure that learning these forty or so guidelines will be easy to do. We walk you through each lesson, providing you with simple-to-read, simple-to-remember instructions without the use of technical grammar/communications jargon. We never tell you, for example, that a “gerund or verbal noun, when qualified, must be preceded by an adjective,” as quoted from another communications book. Instead, we use language for the everyday business writer.

In addition, we have used the tried-and-true “challenge-then-review” technique throughout the book. At the beginning of each lesson, there is a quiz—termed “Challenge” in the book—in which the reader is asked to make appropriate corrections and improvements. Following each Challenge is a Review, consisting of an easy-to-understand explanation of the concept(s) involved as well as the answers to the Challenge. This challenge-then-review format allows you to involve yourself in the book.

And, in order to make the guidelines even easier to learn, we have divided the book into two sections. The first section, “Good Grammar at a Glance,” is about communicating effectively with *words*; this section covers grammar, punctuation, structure, and writing strategy and represents a refreshing approach to solving the everyday business writer’s everyday writing problems. The second section, “Good Graphs at a Glance,” provides an insightful set of guidelines—never before offered—for communicating effectively with *numbers*; this section covers the effective presentation of graphs, charts, and illustrations. We feel this section of the book is especially relevant in today’s business world, where everyone with access to a personal computer is capable of producing a chart with the touch of a finger; this situation has elevated the importance of chart presentation to new heights.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is *not* a reference book (reference books are not really read, only referred to). Your success with *The Business Grammar Handbook* depends on your reading and *enjoying* it. After reading it through and gaining an understanding of the various lessons, you can then use it for reference as necessary.

**I**

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**GOOD  
GRAMMAR  
AT A  
GLANCE**



# INTRODUCTION

Grammar, in general, means “a body of rules for speaking and writing a given language.” “Good Grammar at a Glance,” the first section of this book, is about *business* grammar, the body of rules for speaking and writing the *business* language. Business grammar is no different from “English” grammar; it is just more specialized. Business people have special demands, special needs, and special difficulties when it comes to communicating. Thus, a special body of rules facilitating the use of language is appropriate for the business person.

The problem with grammar for business is the problem that exists with any body of rules—no one can remember all of them. The “Good Grammar at a Glance” section of this book attempts to translate a huge body of rules (including all the exceptions to the rules) into a relevant, focused, and usable set of guidelines.

## THE GUIDELINES

“I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times.”

—*the late Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen*

Laying down any guidelines of grammar—be it English or business grammar—is difficult because several levels of usage exist. The hierarchy starts with the more formal levels at the top

and relaxes with each stage, ending with the informal, colloquial level at the bottom. Generally, we have remained loyal to the more formal levels of usage in this book, primarily because most business correspondence, as well as most business presentations and speeches, is formal in tone. This formal level of usage is also the purest; it is the most conducive to concise, precise, and powerful communication. We realize, however, that in some cases the formal (or technically correct) language may be too pretentious or stilted for the typical business audience. We are careful to point out such instances in the book and to recommend alternative solutions. But remember, the formal level of usage is never “wrong” and is always a valuable tool.

To provide a sound basis for this “Good Grammar at a Glance” section, we sought guidance from many sources:

- The practices of outstanding writers, especially those in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, and *The New York Times*.
- Our observation of writing practices that promote clarity and quality of voice in communications.
- The opinions of authors of other grammar books.
- The personal preferences of the authors (our experience as real-world, business-document “editors” allows us some leeway in formulating “official” guidelines of the business language).

## ORGANIZATION OF GUIDELINES

As stated in the preface, this book uses the challenge-then-review format. The statements in the Challenge sections are grouped according to the type of error that occurs in each statement—the title of the lesson is typically a hint as to what type of error to look for. In addition, the real-world examples that contain those real-world errors are attributed in this book to their real-world authors. We weren’t shy when the authors were corporations (annual reports, brochures, etc.). But, to avoid

embarrassing individuals and to maintain confidentiality in certain circumstances, we have left out most names and included instead only a title and an indication of company size. (Also, the excerpts themselves are sometimes revised, responsibly, to eliminate extraneous or confidential material.)

The mix of sources included in this book is primarily a function of our personal business agendas, so do not conclude that those given credit for error-filled excerpts are any less grammar-proficient than those whose errors do not appear in the book. In particular, two sources of grammar errors quoted in this section—J. Peter Grace, Jr., and *The Wall Street Journal*—are, considering their prolific output, remarkably error-free and effective communicators.