

# Who needs grammar?

Twitter just reminded me that today is National Grammar Day so I shelved what I was going to write (something about nonprofit communications, which I will post later on in the month) so that I could mark this momentous occasion and pay tribute to the power of grammar.

Proper grammar (and punctuation, usage and spelling) makes both written and spoken communication better and easier to understand. Without it, we are left wondering what was meant exactly. After all, if you're trying to make your point, you wouldn't want to mess it up by using the wrong possessive or contraction. And it would affect your writing if you didn't know the effect of your word choice.

Now, I am no grammar queen. That would be Grammar Girl. I recommend buying (and reading too) her very useful reference book: Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.

Another favorite reference is Eats Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss.

You really need to have at least one grammar book on your shelves or in your electronic library.

Who needs grammar? We all do! Oh, and by the way, March is National Reading Month. If you want to improve your grammar, reading (the more, the better) is the key.

*Come learn to blog with me! My next How to Write Your Blog workshop takes place on April 1 in Washington, DC. Get more details and secure your place here.*

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# One action that guarantees social media success

Yesterday, an acquaintance posted a picture of an elaborate, girly birthday cake she had made for her daughter's birthday. She had written "Happy 4th Birthday to my baby" as a caption. I commented saying "Beautiful cake! How old is she?" Someone, let's call her Jane, wrote back "ummmm Deborah. She's 4." I then looked at the post and realized that it indeed said the little girl had turned four. I was focused on the picture and my eyes just skipped the "4th" and read happy birthday to my baby." So I responded: "Sorry Jane. I was looking at the picture. Excuse my stupidity." To which Jane (someone I don't know and who doesn't know me): "I know. I just couldn't resist. It just struck me as so funny!"

Now I don't know Jane, but it was pretty obvious that she was trying to make fun of me, a stranger, in front of our mutual acquaintance and all of her friends. If she had stopped for just a couple of seconds and asked herself if the comment was necessary, she may have opted to skip it. People reading it would have realized I didn't read the caption correctly or they would have ignored it.

This is pretty mild stuff, I know. But people routinely post stuff quickly and with little thought to the consequence. For a "heavier" example, there's the Virginia politician who posted on his Facebook page that pregnant women are simply "hosts" for the baby. He did this to defend his viewpoint that abortion should be illegal. When people criticized him, he redacted the comment, but not before it made news as far away as England, as this article in the Daily Mail shows.

**Social media allows people to engage in real-time conversation, but unlike in-person spoken conversation, social media posts are public, searchable and in many cases, permanent.**

In person, we can say something dumb or insensitive, and then move on. Perhaps we apologize or explain ourselves. The comments we make are not visible to anybody else outside our conversation (unless perhaps they are recorded, and you don't know it, in which case you may have bigger problems than just saying something stupid).

In social media, we have the illusion that we are having an intimate conversation with one person or a group, but in reality, we are making our thoughts completely public.

Before we post ANYTHING to social media, **we should stop** and ask ourselves: Is this really necessary? Does this comment have the capacity to offend? How will people perceive this comment?

Now, I am not advocating that you spend all day deciding whether to say something on social media nor am I saying you need to edit and approve every uttering. That would be counterproductive. You should simply take a moment and think about what you are saying.

On Monday, Brad Phillips wrote a post called "No Word Was Ever as Effective As A Rightly Timed Pause," on his Mr. Media Training blog. His argument is that a pause in conversation has two main effects. One is to give the person who is pausing a moment to pull his/her thoughts together instead of blurting out whatever comes to mind. The second is to give the listener the impression that the person is confident enough to pause, and thoughtful enough to give a well-reasoned response.

**So next time to you are going to write a comment on Facebook, respond to someone on Twitter or even compose a blog post, PAUSE and think about what you are doing.**

*In the DC area and interested in improving your blogging skills? Attend the next How to Write Your Blog workshop on April 1. Details and registration are available on Eventbrite.*

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# The red flags of interpersonal communication to watch out for

There are two main types of human communication: interpersonal and mass communication. Interpersonal communication refers to communication between one person and another (or a few others) and mass communication is the relaying of information between individuals or entities to large groups of people using mass media (TV, internet, etc.).

Interpersonal communication can further be broken down into written, oral and non-verbal communication.

Can you be a good mass communicator if you aren't a good interpersonal communicator? That's the question I have been thinking about lately as I see people who work in communications jobs (PR, advertising, design, etc.) who seem to have issues communicating one-to-one. I believe the better your interpersonal communication skills are, the better you are able to do mass communication.

Here are some red flags that I have been noticing:

**Passive-aggressive/indirect communication.** Not saying what you mean or being underhanded is not effective communication.

**Jargon-laden communication.** Often people think that they will impress others by using jargon. Or worse, they assume that everyone understands what they are saying. In either case, by using jargon, people are failing to communicate simply and therefore are being ineffective.

**One-way communication.** This is a big one. It may be evidenced by constantly interrupting the other person or not listening to what he/she is saying or displaying a lack of curiosity by not asking questions. Some people carry on monologues and don't seem to be aware of or care about what others think. By not caring about or adjusting to your audience, you are not being an effective communicator.

**Not being "human."** People who don't acknowledge others or are incapable of social niceties (greeting people, asking about their weekend, etc.) are also communicating that they are not interested. Lack of interest in the person you are communicating with is a recipe for failed interactions.

If you come across this behavior in a communications professional (e.g., PR practitioner, a writer or an advertising executive) you should be wary. If someone is incapable of effective interpersonal communication, why should you trust that he or she can communicate on a larger scale?

In big media news, CNN announced it will cancel Piers Morgan Live after only three years. I'm not surprised. Last week, I watched an entire episode for the first time, and what struck me was that Piers tended to interrupt his guests many times. He continually interjected his thoughts and didn't allow the guests to finish talking. It was highly annoying to watch, and I am sure, highly annoying for the guests too. Piers seems to be a master at one-way communication. Unfortunately, that doesn't make for effective (or interesting) TV. What a contrast from his predecessor Larry King, who was known for showing an interest in his guests.

What red flags do you notice in interpersonal communication? Do you think there is a correlation between being good at interpersonal communication and succeeding at mass communication?

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## What shoveling snow can teach you about blogging

Last week, the Washington, DC area was hit by one of the largest snowstorms we've had in four years. Some areas got as much as 18 inches of snow. Me, well I only had about 14 inches. When it stopped snowing, I opened my garage door (I couldn't open the front door because there was too much snow) and this is what I saw:



Snowy driveway, February 13, 2014

The snow was up to my knees and it was heavy. I didn't know where to start.

After three hours of shoveling, some melting and the fact the neighbor cleared his driveway, this is what my driveway looked like:



Shoveled out  
driveway, Feb. 13

So, what can you learn about blogging from shoveling out your snowy driveway?

**You have to start.**

You can't get very far if you don't start shoveling (or blogging). That driveway will not magically clear itself. And yes, you can wait for the snow to melt...but you aren't going to be able to get anywhere until it does.

**You will see results.**

Blogging, like shoveling snow, can be a hard, long process. But the results are there if you just start working at it.

**It takes as long as it takes.**

It may take you three hours or it may take you 20 minutes. My neighbor, who is younger and taller than me, was able to dig out his driveway in about 45 minutes. He also helped my other neighbor do his. There are different levels of skill and ability, but that doesn't mean you can't do it. If it takes longer, it does.

What is stopping you from blogging? Is it that it daunts you? Is it that it is hard? Let me know. And keep an eye out for

details about my next blogging workshop, to take place in Washington, DC on April 1.

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## Please mind the details

If you've been to London and ridden the Underground, you are familiar with the phrase "please mind the gap." It's a repeated warning for people to watch their step getting on and off the trains as there is a space between the train and the platform. It is posted everywhere inside the stations because people need to be reminded and London's transportation authority certainly doesn't want accidents.



Mind the Gap by nikoretro  
on Flickr

I wish we had a similar reminder for communications managers, especially those who deal with event publicity and marketing. Instead of "mind the gap" it would say "mind the details." Because it's all about the details: the where, when, how, who, why and how much.

Common mistakes, which I have seen just these past few days:



Sending an email blast announcing an event and neglecting to include the date and time (or location).

Announcing an event and getting the dates mixed up (saying it is Tuesday, February 12 instead of Wednesday, February 12).

Website page about an event including a “more information” button for an event, but not providing any information about what the cost will be.

Details matter and they matter more when you are doing any type of event planning. Please mind the details. Double check them. Have somebody else check them. Don’t assume that people will figure things out.

Finally, realize that if you don’t provide the proper details or you provide the wrong details you are making it very hard for people to attend your event.

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## **If everything is important, nothing stands out**

Have you ever been in a situation where a client (internal or external) keeps wanting to add “news” to a press release or material to a brochure or more stuff to the website? “It’s important” they’ll say. “We NEED to include this. It MUST be in there.”

You then end up with a press release that is three pages or

longer; a blog post that could double as a PhD dissertation; and a website that will give readers a headache. I will bet good money that everybody out there has come across this type of thing.

**IMPORTANT**

Rubber Stamp by Enokson on  
Flickr

But, the thing is it doesn't have to be that way. Most things are really not that important. The client only thinks they are, usually because someone else (a donor, a higher up, a PIA person) has some stake in that particular bit of information (or "content" as we are now referring to it).

**Here's the bottom line: if you include all the so-called important stuff, nothing, and I mean nothing, will stand out. And then all your efforts will be wasted.**

Instead of including everything and anything, as a communications person you will need to step in and do the following:

1. **Prioritize.** Among those important things are the ones that are extremely important, right?
2. **Assign different information to different areas.** Perhaps one important bit is appropriate to a press release and the other should go on the blog.
3. **Edit.** And then edit again. Be ruthless. Remove excess information if you want your message to be heard.

Thoughts? How do you handle lots of "important" information?

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# Is your website really working for you?

I am assuming your business/organization/service/product has a website. If not, well, that is another story. For the purposes of this post, you do have a website and it is functional. It may even be pretty (I mean “well designed”).

But, and this is a big but, **does it have all the information that your AUDIENCE needs?**

I have been working on a project that involved getting information about documentaries from various sources, including the filmmakers’ websites. The information I needed was fairly basic: synopsis of the film, year made, how long it is (running time), name of director and other people involved in production and country of origin. And guess what, even though virtually every film had a website, precious few websites had anything resembling basic information. Some listed awards or screenings. Some listed reviews. Some had blogs (not always updated) that talked about the filmmaking process. But basics—which are needed for anybody that is planning to screen a film—LACKING.

And that is not just limited to film websites. Have you ever gone to a restaurant website looking for a menu or for hours of operation and not found either? Have you tried to find a phone number from a service provider’s website and be forced to email or look for another provider?

It is truly astonishing how many websites lack basic, useful and needed information. Many sites get so caught up in bells and whistles (don’t get me started on websites with flash or self-playing video) that they forget their basic mission is to provide information. Information that their target audience (read: potential customers) wants and needs.

**Your website is not working for you if your target cannot find the information it needs.**

Of course, this leads to another conversation that has to do with planning and strategy. Websites are not simply pretty things to make sure you have an internet presence. They play a big part in your communications and marketing efforts.

Before you build a website (and before you do anything communications-related), **you must be able to answer these four questions**

1. Who is your target audience?
2. Why would they visit your website?
3. What are they going to do when they are on your site?
4. What information does your target audience absolutely, positively need? (Hint: it is always the stuff that is most basic—address, hours, location (map), telephone number, contact person/people, pricing, etc.)

What do you think? And more importantly, have you checked to see if your website is working for you?

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## **Don't be a fashion victim...you will freeze!**

We are in our third straight week of sub-freezing weather here in Washington. The Potomac is frozen and so are some people's brains apparently. I am talking about the fashion victims. There are two major categories:

- Stuck in the past

- Too cool for school

Those that are **stuck in the past** unpack their winter coats from the time machine closet. Take for example a lady I saw on the Metro the other day. She was sporting an oversize circa 1980 LL Bean barn jacket. I didn't see her shoes, but I would not have been surprised to see some Bean duck boots on them. That, in conjunction with her mullet hair cut (I am totally not making this up), made me stare in amazement. I kept thinking that this woman was desperately ready for some new clothes, and a makeover.

Don't be that fashion victim! Know when to refresh your image. Perhaps you need a new website. Perhaps your logo colors could change. Or that Times New Roman you have been using in your print materials could be upgraded for something a bit more modern.

You know some people are totally **too cool** when they go out in subfreezing weather with no socks on. Apparently (and since I am not so cool) wearing socks is never fashionable, even when there is a wind chill factor of -15 and snow on the ground. I most often see young women fashion victims. They are wrapped up in their not so warm coat, no hat (that apparently is also not cool) and walking around in ballet slipper shoes with no hosiery of any type. I did also see a skinny-jean wearing dude with boat shoes and no socks...in January in Washington DC.

Don't be so fashionable that you can't dress appropriately for the weather. Or in communications, don't do things because everybody else is doing it or because it's so cool. Sure, all the home decor people are crazy about Pinterest, but perhaps your law office just doesn't have the visuals for it. Maybe orange is the new black, but your elderly audience needs heavy, large black type to read what you are saying.

The only one that gets hurt by being a fashion victim is you...

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# Why customer retention should be job one

It's easy to lose customers and very hard to get them back. Once they are gone, chances are they won't be back.

The reality is that there are many people and companies doing what you do. There's always an alternative for customers who are unhappy for any reason. Too many companies seem to lose sight of this reality, and they do little to ensure that they keep the customers they have.

## **Here's how my heat/AC contractor failed to retain my business:**

Back in November, my schedule changed and I was not going to be working out of my home office. In December, I generally get a home heating inspection with my heat/AC contractor. It helps to make sure all parts are working properly and that my heat will continue through the winter. This company is a family-run place where I have been a customer for three years.

**Strike one:** I got a reminder card from the company in late November. I called right away to schedule an appointment. They had no open slots until LATE December, one month away. Mind you, I had just gotten the card.

**Strike two:** I explained to the scheduler that I would not be home because of my situation and that I was hoping for a Saturday appointment. It turns out this company does not do inspections on Saturdays, only emergency work. Then I asked for an early weekday appointment. Again, the scheduler could not accommodate me. She told me that she could not find a technician in my area that would be available for their first appointment at 8:00 a.m.

**Strike three:** I informed the scheduler that I would be forced to switch companies if she didn't try to accommodate me because I did not want to have a heat inspection later than December (remember, they were already scheduling late late December). No response and no attempt to rectify the situation.

**And they are out:** After some research, I called another highly rated heat/AC company that not only was scheduling earlier in December (meaning they have more technicians) but would also provide guaranteed 8:00 a.m. appointments. It cost \$20 more per annual contract than my previous company, but the ease of scheduling was worth it to me.

My first heat/AC contractor lost my business not because it wasn't good at it what it does but because it made no effort to accommodate me. They seemed to forget that there are other contractors out there.

Most heat/AC contractors do not market actively. Many have websites and most work on their ratings on places like Angie's List, but they mostly depend on word of mouth. This is why working to RETAIN customers should be a large part of their business model.

**Customers that stay are a continuing source of income AND of referrals.**

Again, the reality is that keeping customers should be job one: Losing customers is easy and getting them back is difficult. No amount of marketing will bring back a customer that has found a better alternative.

What are you doing to retain your customers or clients? I'd like to find out what specific actions you are taking and I will be sharing those in a future blog post.

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# Stop! Don't start on that next project until you can answer this

It's January and chances are you are working hard to get the year off to a good start. You may be in charge of creating something—a newsletter, a flyer, an ad—that is intended to achieve a communications or marketing objective. It may be to publicize an upcoming event or perhaps to solicit support for a cause or maybe you are advocating for a policy change. We'll assume that this project is part of a larger strategy and will help further your overall communications goals.



Before you start any marketing/communications project you should be able to answer these five questions:

1. What is the main **objective** for the piece? Or ask yourself this: What do you want the audience to do with this piece?
2. Who is the **target audience**? Really, who is it? Be specific.
3. What are the top **three messages** you want to convey?
4. Knowing who the target is, what is the **best way to**



**communicate** your message? Will you use graphics? Which ones? What kind of language will you use?

5. Has this piece been **done before**? If so, why are you doing it again? What was it that worked or didn't work before? If not, why are you doing it now?

This may seem obvious to some, simplistic to others, but surprisingly, many people trying to create communications aren't able to answer these questions. Why else do you think we are inundated with useless letters, flyers and brochures? Even if you are a pro, doing this exercise will help you to create a better product, guaranteed!

What is your process for getting communications projects done? Please share!