

Quick Guide: Oh no, grammar!

A familiar groan from your school days? If only you had listened, you'd know all about nouns, verbs, sentences and so on. Or perhaps you were part of a 'lost generation' at school between the late 60s and 90s, and so didn't have a formal education in grammar and punctuation. Do not fear, here are our first top ten tips on grammar:

- 1. Know your parts of speech.** There are eight but the two that you need to be familiar with are nouns and verbs. A noun is a 'naming' word, eg dog, London, Janet, management. A verb is a 'doing' or 'action' word, eg 'The boy **lives** in London.'
- 2. Subjects and verbs must agree in number** in a sentence. Consider this sentence: 'The box of documents are in reception.' This is incorrect, because there is only one 'box'. Therefore, use the singular verb and say: 'The box of documents is in reception.'
- 3. Me or I?** Would you say: 'John and me are going to the conference' or 'John and I ...'? You should say: 'John and I ...' because if it was only you going you would say: 'I am going ...' and not: 'Me is going ...' To find out which is correct, remove the other person from the sentence, see what you would say, then when you put the other person back don't change it. This also works when 'me' or 'I' are used in other places.
- 4. Me or myself?** 'Myself' is a reflexive pronoun and should only be used with 'I' so: 'I am not myself today.' The common error often made is: 'Please reply to my secretary or myself' when you should correctly say: 'Please reply to my secretary or me.'
- 5. Should, shall, would and could.** The following pairs are all correct: I **should** appreciate it if you **could/would** ... I **would** appreciate it if you **could** ... I **shall** appreciate it if you **will**. Or, simply say in plain English: 'Please would/could/will you ...'
- 6. Comprise and consist.** 'Comprise' is never followed by 'of' so: 'The team comprises three people.' 'Consist' is always followed by 'of' so: 'The team consists of three people.'
- 7. Use 'were' rather than 'was' after 'if', 'as if', 'as though' or 'I wish'.** For example: 'I wish I were going too.'; 'If I were you ...'; 'He talked as though he were preoccupied.'
- 8. May or can?** If you are asking permission say: 'May I ...' rather than: 'Can I ...' The reason is that you obviously can do something but you are asking for permission to do it, so 'may' is the correct word to use.
- 9. Match words in a list.** Consider this sentence: 'You can get to sunny Margate by train, car or cycling.' Two nouns and one verb have been used. Match the words and say: 'You can get to sunny Margate by train, car or bike.'
- 10. Avoid tautologies.** That is, saying the same thing twice. The most common ones in business are 'enclosed herewith' and 'attached hereto'. Keep it simple and say it once so 'enclosed' or 'attached'.

Compiled by Judith Di-Castri