

Do Writers Really Care About Proper Grammar?

by Barbara McNichol

I learned what a hot topic grammatical errors can be when one of my favorite blogs, Article Writing and Marketing Insights from Ezine Articles, took a subject close to my heart and made it relevant to everyone who writes.

Within 24 hours of posting “Avoiding the (6) Common Grammatical Errors That Make Authors Look Du...Unprofessional,” the blog received 776 views and 93 comments. That’s evidence of how “hot” the topic of incorrect grammar can be!

The blog post started:

*in these days of txtng, iming and all low caps, its easy to take shortcuts to writing
However, even though we now use our keyboards as we once did our phones, what most people do not understand is how unprofessional the improper use of the English language can make an article, and its author, look.*

Look at the sentence above again. Does it look professionally written to you? Now, I’m not saying you need to go back to 9th grade English class and try and figure out where your participles are dangling, but making sure you have a command of the basics is essential.

The post went on to list six common errors that make authors look unprofessional. Five of them are what I call Word Trippers—a pair of similar words with different meanings and spellings that can trip people up: loose/lose, affect/effect, it’s/its, their/there, than/then. (The sixth addressed misuse of semicolons, something that riled writer Jeff Rubin so much, he established September 24 as National Punctuation Day.)

“They Just Don’t Care!”

Among the blog comments, the most philosophic came from a subscriber named Jenny who wrote, “I am always amazed at how many who consider themselves writers make these mistakes – which are so easily avoided if one is paying attention. Personally, I think they just don’t care. Thanks for a provocative post that is a very good starting point in dealing with a problem that is unfortunately much bigger than those six examples!”

As an editor who deals with mistakes like these in articles and manuscripts, I endorse Jenny’s observation that the problem is bigger than these six examples. But I challenge her statement, “I think they just don’t care.” Rather, I see three factors at play here:

(1) People tend to write in a stream-of-consciousness manner, eager to get ideas down (that’s how I approach drafting of my ezine and the initial piece is downright sloppy). In this creative mode, fine tuning isn’t the first priority.

(2) “Instant messaging” is just that! People seem to be hurrying to move on to the next thing, feeling good about “getting that done” and prematurely declaring the piece complete. They don’t make sure what they’ve written comes across exactly the way they wanted to say it.

(3) Writers often lack the desire, discipline, or dedication to revisit their prose with a fresh eye, a clear mind, and breathing space to think it through.

Half-Baked Prose

I call the result of this propensity to write fast, move on, and never look back “half-baked.” After all, you wouldn’t eat a loaf of bread that’s half-baked. Why would you send out a written piece that isn’t fully “cooked” either? The solution? Take time to put your writing “back in the oven” and question the key elements: the validity of the thoughts, the logical thread of persuasion, and the correct use of each word. Yes, gremlins such as incorrect grammar and punctuation still get through unintentionally. So do unclear transitions and inexact word choice. Because of these, reviewing your written piece only once simply isn’t enough.

Three Steps to Perfection

I suggest if you habitually add these simple steps, you can “bake” your piece close to perfection:

(1) Print your piece and then go to another area to read it aloud as if a 10 year old needed to understand it. You’ll recognize unclear passages quickly that way.

(2) Question each word for its meaning, spelling, and role in the sentence, then take time to look up what you suspect isn’t correct. Don’t rely on memory alone; it can be shaky. Instead, access easy-to-use resources that will make your writing life easier.

(3) Revise, reread, revise, reread . . . until you’re satisfied.

Above all, slow down and think about your readers, be they 10 years old or 100. No one wants to eat half-baked bread, nor do they want to read partly polished prose. Flavor your writing until it’s “cooked” just right!

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