

Are You Losing Customers Because of Bad Grammar?

By Dianna Booher

Dressed in an Armani suit, a pharmaceutical sales representative drops in at a doctor's office with high hopes of speaking with the managing physician, making a sale, and establishing a relationship that will lead to referral business. Carefully groomed, Steve looks the part—credible, honest, and reliable. But Steve's premier packaging only goes so far. When he opens his mouth, Steve's pitch is cluttered with convoluted phrases, misused words, and mismatched subjects and verbs.

Grammar gremlins destroy great first impressions. Are you, like Steve, allowing grammar errors to limit your success? Not sure? Test your knowledge with some of the most common grammar mistakes seen and heard in business today.

Select the correct answer for each statement below.

1. He mailed multiple invoices to Joe, Sue and (I, me).
2. Carol, Whitney, and (myself, I) are involved in that project.
3. You may make contributions to (whomever, whoever) you wish.
4. People do not buy products (which, that) seem overpriced.
5. The manager stepped (backward, backwards) and fell off the stage.
6. The car drives (well, good) in most road conditions.
7. (Fewer, less) employees are taking vacations due to heavy workloads.
8. Darla has (over, more than) twenty years of experience in human resources.

Let's see how you did.

1. He mailed multiple invoices to Joe, Sue and (I, me).

Me is the object of the preposition *to*. *I* cannot be an object—only a subject. Here’s an easy way to remember. Remove the other people from the sentence and trust your ear to select the word. For example, you would never say, “He mailed multiple invoices to I.” Instead you would say, “He mailed multiple invoices to me.”

2. Carol, Whitney, and (myself, I) are involved in that project.

Myself is a reflexive pronoun, like *yourself* and *herself*. Reflexive pronouns are used to emphasize another pronoun and should never stand alone. For example, you could say, “I, myself, might go there.” But if *I* is not already in the sentence, don’t add *myself*. Again, to remember this rule, leave out the other people and let your ear do the work. You would never say, “Myself is involved in that project.” Instead you would say, “I am involved in that project.”

3. You may make contributions to (whomever, whoever) you wish.

Whomever is the object of the preposition *to*. *Who* and *whoever* are always subjects of a sentence. Here’s an easy way to choose the right word. Substitute *he* (the subject word) or *him* (the object word) for *who* or *whom*; then let your ear do the rest. If *he* sounds right, use *who* or *whoever*. If *him* sounds right, use *whom* or *whomever*. In this case, for example, it is correct to say, “You may make contributions to *him*.” Therefore, *whomever* is correct.

4. People do not buy products (which, that) seem overpriced.

That is correct if the information in the clause (a group of related words with a subject and a verb) is essential to the meaning of the sentence. *Which* is correct if the information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Remove “which seem overpriced,” and you’re left with, “People do not buy products.” The omission of that clause dramatically changes the meaning of the sentence. The clause is essential; therefore, *that* is the correct choice.

5. The manager stepped (backward, backwards) and fell off the stage.

Get rid of that pesky extra “s” in misused words like *backwards*, *towards*, *anyways*, or *anywheres*. The correct words are *backward*, *toward*, *anyway*, or *anywhere*.

6. The car drives (well, good) in most road conditions.

Well is an adverb and describes *how* the car drives, not the car itself. *Well* tells how something is done—how it drives, how it runs. *Good*, on the other hand, is an adjective and can only describe a noun—a person, place, thing, or idea. “It’s a *good* car.”

7. (Fewer, less) employees are taking vacations due to heavy workloads.

If you can count it, use *fewer*; if not, use *less*. Since you can count the employees, *fewer* is correct.

8. Darla has (over, more than) twenty years of experience in human resources.

More than applies to amounts or numbers. *Over* refers to a physical condition. *Twenty years* is an amount so *more than* is correct. The two words are synonymous, but they are not interchangeable.

How did you do?

Here's the point: Go ahead—put on that nice suit and polish your shoes. But don't forget to polish your grammar, too. With increased awareness and a commitment to breaking old habits, you *can* destroy the grammar gremlins.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For all 101 fast and easy ways to correct the most common grammar errors, see Booher's Rules of Business Grammar (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.