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Johnny Can't Read? Now Johnny's in the Workplace, and He Can't Write, Author Says

Business Communication Suffers from Declining Quality, Increasing Informality

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (June 24, 2002)—Language, like hairstyles, changes over time. Few would dispute that the English language today, as spoken and written in the United States, is significantly more informal than 20 years ago.

During that time, we have seen the birth of e-mail, the proliferation of terms “like” and “you know” and, according to some, the decline of writing skills in the workplace.

This decline has been a boon for author, college instructor and business communications expert Kathy Sole. Sole conducts writing workshops for corporations, government agencies and professional organizations and runs a business writing and editing firm in Roseville called *WriteSource*. Her previously published book *What's the Rule? A Simple Guide to Perfect Punctuation, Great Grammar, and Superb Sentences and Style* is set for release on CD-ROM in June.

“Managers continually call and tell me that their employees can't write,” she says. But those same employees wonder why they were sent to her workshops, believing themselves to be solid writers.

“There's a disconnect between the writing skills people are learning in school and the skills they need in the workplace,” Sole says. “We need to teach people how to write effectively for the business world. If we don't teach them these skills while they're still in school, we end up retraining them as adults.”

Sole, who holds a master's degree in communication studies, isn't advocating pedantic adherence to what may be outdated rules or a return to diagramming sentences. In fact, her approach stresses translating archaic grammar rules into language people can understand and use.

She cites one current grammar book that tells writers, “Do not use a comma before the subordinating conjunction when an adverbial clause follows an independent clause.” Sole believes that rules such as this one don’t mean anything to business writers. Instead, she tells writers not to use commas around a word or phrase if it is necessary to understand the meaning of a sentence. For example, commas should not be used in the sentence “The store located in the mall is having a sale” if the intent is to tell readers which store is having the sale.

Despite today’s informal business atmosphere, some basic rules of punctuation, grammar and usage need to be upheld and taught, Sole maintains. “If we let them all go, then communication breaks down and misunderstandings occur.” The issue, she says, is what we teach and how we teach it. She states, “We don’t need to make the rules so complicated and so mysterious. Let’s use the old KISS principle—Keep It Simple and Straightforward!”

Sole also believes the standards for business correspondence have changed. While many people in the workplace today were taught to use the salutations “Dear Sir” or “Dear Madam” or “To whom it may concern,” those phrases are increasingly replaced today by the more personal and informal “Dear (insert first name).” Similarly, Sole has seen 20-somethings giggle at the mention of closing a letter with “Yours truly,” thinking that it sounded as though the writer was sending a “love letter.” Many letter writers today simply omit the salutation and closing altogether, she says.

Another issue that often arises in business correspondence is the subject of tone—not so much what you say but how you say it. Sole says that when she covers the topic of tone in her workshops, “it’s a revelation to most people.” Workshop participants often are unaware that words have emotional meanings as well as descriptive meanings, she says. For example, a company would not likely use the word “skinny” in advertising a diet product, opting instead for “slender” or “slim” because of the more positive image those words convey.

Considerations of tone should be applied to inter-office communications as well as communications with customers, Sole says. For example, she recommends against using “you” with a negative word, such as in a performance evaluation. Sometimes this may require use of the passive voice—something most of us have been taught not to do.

“This example illustrates my basic point. I believe the English language contains some do’s and don’ts and some maybe’s. We need to teach students grammar and punctuation rules that are useful and give them some guidance to help them communicate more effectively,” she says.

What’s the Rule?, both in book and CD-ROM format, is available at Amazon.com, Borders.com, Barnesandnoble.com, Real World Publications’ Web site (www.whatstherule.com) and select Sacramento area bookstores.

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