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“My Employees Can't Write”

Expert Addresses the Business Literacy Problem in America

KINGSTON, WA (May 16, 2005)—Like, it's a problem, you know? People are value-adding, architecting, and incenting all over the place! With jargon, slang, and nouns used as verbs...there's a language crisis in the business world. Never fear! Author and business communications expert Kathy Sole has a solution.

“Managers I talk with continually complain that their employees can't write,” says Sole. “The writing skills people learn in school and the language they use in emails or text messages to their peers often are not applicable or appropriate in today’s workplace. We need to teach people how to write effectively for the business world. If we don't teach them these skills in school, we end up retraining them as adults.”

Sole, who holds a master's degree in communications studies, isn't advocating dogmatic adherence to outdated rules or a return to diagramming sentences. On the contrary, her approach stresses translating archaic grammar rules into practical language business people can understand and use.

Sole offers an innovative, in-house writing skills training program to help employees improve their business writing skills. *Brush up on the Basics* allows companies to choose the content that meets their specific needs—without program development costs.

Sole also just released the second edition of her book, *What's the Rule? A Simple Guide to Perfect Punctuation, Great Grammar, and Superb Sentences and Style* (Real World Publications, 2005) that uses easy-to-understand language to address grammar topics such as commonly confused words, active and passive voice, and verb usage.

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In both the workshops and the book, Sole stresses that today's informal business atmosphere has led to manipulation of grammar usage, which in turn, leads to misunderstandings. She explains that while some grammar rules are out of date, others are timeless and shouldn't be ignored.

“Business writing today is more conversational,” Sole says. “But, we need to know where to draw the line between conversational and unprofessional. Some of the basic rules of punctuation, grammar, and usage need to be upheld and taught. If we let them all go, then communication breaks down.”

For example, Sole explains that the standards for business correspondence have changed. No longer are people using “Dear Sir,” “Dear Madam,” or “To Whom It May Concern.” With the advent of email, most people are using first names and ending correspondence without a complimentary close such as “Yours truly” or “Sincerely.” Is it appropriate for business correspondence to be this informal?

Another issue that often arises in business correspondence is the subject of tone—not so much what you say but how you say it. “When I cover the issue of tone in my workshops, it's a revelation to most people,” she says. “Workshop participants often are unaware that words have emotional meanings as well as descriptive meanings. For example, a company would probably not use the word ‘skinny’ when advertising a diet product, opting instead for ‘slender’ or ‘slim.’

“The English language contains some do's, don'ts, and maybes,” recaps Sole. “We need to inform people about when it's okay to write informally and when it's not appropriate. It could mean the difference between getting and not getting a promotion (or the client's business). “Let's teach the rules people need,” Sole says. That's exactly what she hopes to do, one comma and one verb at a time.

Kathy Sole is a technical writer and editor, a college instructor, and an authority on business communications. She was formerly vice president of a major international bank and manager of its worldwide instructional publications department. Her unit wrote, edited, and published more than 3,000 policies, procedures, and training materials annually. For the past 18 years, she has owned and operated WriteSource, a company that specializes in writing and editing complex government, business, and academic documents. She has also taught college communications courses for seven public and private colleges and universities. Learn more at www.whatstherule.com

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