

TTU Faculty Tips for Professional Communication

Recommendations from TTU faculty

Communication that is too casual often seems to indicate lack of respect or lack of intelligence. You are educated and smart. You know how to conduct business for yourself and for others. Communicate clearly to avoid misunderstandings and to exhibit your professional competence.

- Proofread everything you write, even text messages.
- Eliminate irritating fillers such as *like*, *uh*, *um*, and *you know*.
- Study irregular verbs so you never use a helping word with a past tense verb (have ran, had sang, has went, have been gave, for example).
 - Do not switch to uneducated language as soon as you walk out of the classroom; for example, use standard English in the halls and on your cell phones.
- Address your professors and your supervisors with respect.
- Enunciate every single syllable distinctly.

Position of periods and commas with quotation marks

Follow the convention of American printers: Periods and commas **always** belong **inside** quotation marks in sentences. The sense of the sentence is not a consideration. Note: If you publish work in some other locations, such as the United Kingdom, the rules change.

EXAMPLES:

“Please sign up for the company picnic by September 5,” the manager said.
The e-mail message told us “YO,” but we did not understand what that meant.
We will discuss the next three chapters: “Etiquette for Cubicles,” “Business Cards for Entrepreneurs,” and “How to Sound Smart.”

When a speaker overuses the word “like,” listeners often become annoyed.

When a speaker overuses the word *like*, listeners often become annoyed. (also correct)

Sexist Language?

Be careful to avoid sexist language when using singular pronouns.

Help readers to concentrate on your message instead of your use of singular pronouns. Years ago, a masculine pronoun (his, he) was acceptable when the gender of a noun could refer to either a man or a woman, but today your writing could be offensive if you use that practice. Don't suggest, for example, that all teachers are women or all scientists are men. Learn to navigate around this pesky problem with English pronouns.

Problem:

Each doctor should bring his registration papers to the meeting.
(All doctors are not men.)

Acceptable alternatives:

Each doctor should bring his or her registration papers to the meeting. (can sound awkward)

Each doctor should bring her/his registration papers to the meeting. (can sound awkward)

Each doctor should bring registration papers to the meeting.

Doctors should bring their registration papers to the meeting.

Each doctor should bring their registration papers to the meeting. (acceptable for casual communication)

Notes:

Plural pronouns are neither masculine nor feminine in English, so changing the noun to plural is usually a good option.

His or her, his/her options are not considered sexist, but they are often awkward, especially if they are used often in a paper.

Problem:

Each doctor should bring their registration papers to the meeting.

Note: This option mismatches a singular noun (doctor) and a plural pronoun (their).

While this choice is becoming acceptable in oral and written communication, be careful with important papers, such as formal reports, papers for publication, and employment messages.

Apostrophes for possessives and contractions, not plurals

Avoid apostrophes to indicate plurals except to avoid confusion.

The executive has a corner office.

The executive's office has a commanding view of the city.

The managers occupy cubicles nearby.

The managers' cubicles are adequate.

Our business expanded in the 1980s, but it slowed in the 1990s.

Mr. Smith is CEO of a family company, Modern Industries, Inc.

Mr. Smith's position takes him all over the country.

The Smith family owns the company.

Three Smiths work in the office, and five Smiths work on the manufacturing floor. The Smiths own the company.

The Smiths' company is growing steadily.

I thought the speaker said *a* too many times.

How many *as* did you hear? (Italicized *a* only—possibly difficult to see)

How many *a's* did you hear? (Added apostrophe may avoid confusion.)

Make a list of do's and don'ts. (This construction is still accepted although outdated.)

Hyphen vs. Dash

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a hyphen as “a punctuation mark - that is used to connect words or parts of words” and a dash as “a punctuation mark – used especially to show a break in thought or in the structure of a sentence.” These two punctuation marks are not the same. Often writers connect words when they mean to show a break in a thought.

Incorrect: The winner is our most qualified candidate-Allen Johnson.

(By combining two words with a hyphen, this sentence suggests that *candidate-Allen* somehow describes Johnson.)

Better: The winner is our most qualified candidate—Allen Johnson.

(Note: A comma would also work here instead of a dash.)

Most word processors will automatically turn two hyphens into a dash.

More faculty recommendations for professional writing

One error COB professors often notice in written papers is the misuse of *it's* and *its*.

It's = it is or it has

its = possessive

Thing is a vague word. Try to be more specific.

Use *one* or *he, they, it* (3rd person)

instead of *I* (1st person) or *you* (2nd person) for formal reports.

While contractions such as *can't* and *I'm* work well for casual communications such as e-mail messages, avoid contractions in formal business writings such as long reports and proposals.

Signposts in the form of minor headings, bold type, or words like *first, second, third* help your reader understand a long report. Consider using bullets or short paragraphs to take advantage of white space: Big blobs of gray type look uninviting and may not be read.

Me and Jim studied in the library should be *Jim and I studied in the library*.