

# Common Writing Mistakes That Will Slow Down Your PR Career

**A Session on Writing Well**

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#PRNews

# Agenda

- What makes writing “good”
- Identifying & avoiding common mistakes
- Tools and resources
- Exercises

**What makes for  
good writing?**

# What makes for good writing

- Clarity
- Content
- Style / Music / Flow
- Readability
- Economy

What makes for good PR  
writing?

# What makes for good PR writing

- Strong headlines / clickable subject lines
- Strong opening / top line
- Thoughtful information hierarchy
- Clear facts / stats + insightful quotes
- Relevant / informative

What makes for good,  
*clean* PR writing?

# What makes for good, clean PR writing

Grammatically sound

Proofread / free of typos

Active voice

Precise

Consistent style (e.g., AP)



**Our goals**

# Focus on

- Impact
- Quality of copy

# Learn to avoid

- Passive voice
- Common mistakes
- Unnecessary words

# Part I.

# **Grammar & Punctuation**

# Pro tips

- Proofread out loud
- Break up walls of text
- Be aware of regional variations
- Spell check / grammar check (and double check!)

Avoid making these  
common mistakes

there / their / they're

**They're** on **their** sofa over **there**.

your / you're

**You're** **your** own worst critic. :(

its / it's

**It's** a relief the roof still has all **its** shingles!



than / then

**Then** we realized more **than** ten people had arrived.

affect / effect

The medicine's strong **effect** on the illness **affected** the doctor's decision.

accept / except

I can't **accept** that everyone **except** my sister is invited.

Get to know your dashes.

# Hyphens, en dashes, em dashes

They're three different things.

**hyphen -**

**en dash –**

**em dash —**

“Her **self-assured** responses to questions **12–15** — the questions about writing skills — convinced me she was perfect for the job.”

–Someone talking about you, maybe.

# Hyphens

- No space on either side
- Links words
- Used when a word breaks into two lines

*Ex. What a user-friendly design!*

# En Dashes

- Used for ranges of numbers
- These are the most OK to mess up

*Ex. Page **350–358***

# Em Dashes

- The dashes you're usually looking for
- Spaces are optional
- Similar to using commas or parentheses

*Ex. The wallpaper — teal, glittering, and reminiscent of a mermaid's tail — transported the audience to a magical world beneath the sea.*

Confront the dreaded  
semicolon



# Semicolons

- Create a bond between two connected sentences...

*We fell on hard times; he offered little sympathy.*

- ...Especially if they have other internal punctuation

*When we fell on hard times, he offered little sympathy; he's not the sympathetic type.*

# Semicolons

- Can also be "super commas."

I watched *The Sopranos*, an HBO drama; *Chopped*, a cooking competition; and the nightly news.

Get pro with your commas

Google or YouTube how to use commas. Thank me later. Or just read [this](#).

Let's eat grandma.  
Let's eat, grandma.  

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COMMAS SAVE LIVES

# Part II.

**“Help,  
I’m verbose!”**

# Remember, good writing is...

- Clear
- **Economical**
- Well-structured

Use the active voice



# Passive vs. Active Voice

Passive:

- The subject is acted upon by the verb

*The presentation will be given by Sid.*

**Active:**

- **The subject acts upon the verb**

***Sid will give the presentation.***

# Why use the active voice?

- Fewer characters
- Reader has to do less work
- More impactful
- Smooooother

# How to use the active voice

There were two awards received by a notable actress.

**A notable actress received two awards.**

# Is the passive voice totally off the table?

- Occasionally helps avoid bias or use of personal pronouns and names.
- More accepted in scientific writing.

# Exercise:

Tennis champ's winning streak ended by knee injury

Knee injury ends tennis champ's winning streak

# Pro tip

- Less is (often) more

**Nix anything redundant**

# Nix redundant pairs

- future plans
  - each individual
  - sudden crisis
  - free gift
  - end result
  - terrible tragedy
- plans
  - each
  - crisis
  - gift
  - result
  - tragedy



# Nix redundant descriptors

- Round in shape
  - Large in size
  - In a confused state
  - Period in time
  - Often times
- Round
  - Large
  - Confused
  - Period
  - Often

A Do I need this word?

ex.: ki basically / currently / specific / different

Two women were hired as execs.

Two women were hired as execs.

# Other things to watch:

- Punctuation
- Unnecessary capitalization
- Subject-verb agreement
- Consistency (spaces around em dashes, formatting of names, use of Oxford comma, etc.)

# **Part III.**

**Putting it into practice**

# Keep an eye on

- Punctuation
- Passive voice
- Redundant language
- Use of hyphens / dashes
- Common errors (there / their / they're)

# Our goal:

- Make things more concise,
- Impactful,
- Polished,
- Clear.

# #1. Edit this sentence

The design Firm has been acquired by a large design-focused agency, whose work centers on interaction design.



The design Firm has been acquired by a large design-focused agency, whose work centers on interaction design.

***A large agency focused on interaction design acquired the firm.***

***A design-focused agency acquired the firm.***

# Now edit this one

The company is thrilled to announce that the new CEO, who has previously worked in various C-level roles at Vimeo, GitHub, Facebook, among other places, will be starting on July 1st.

The company is thrilled to announce that **the new CEO**, who has previously worked in various C-level roles at Vimeo, GitHub, Facebook, among other places, will be **starting on July 1st**.

- The new CEO — who was previously at Vimeo, GitHub, and Facebook — starts July 1.
- The company is thrilled to announce that the new CEO starts July 1.
- **The new CEO starts July 1.**

# #2. Improve these headlines

- Three separate women earn accolades as their company thrives
- Stock prices unexpectedly soar after surprise release of tax returns by cofounder
- Artist reveals true facts of discrimination case

# Improving these headlines

- Three **separate** women earn accolades as **there** company thrives

*Three women earn accolades as company thrives*

*Women earn accolades as their company thrives*

# Improving these headlines

- Stock prices **unexpectedly soar** after **surprise** release of tax returns **by cofounder**

*Stock prices unexpectedly soar after cofounder releases tax returns*

*Stock prices soar after cofounder releases tax returns*

# Improving these headlines

- Artist reveals **true facts** of discrimination case

*Artists reveals facts of discrimination case*

# #3. Improve these blurbs

- The director said it was actually a surprise to have been nominated for the major award.
- Shortly after first opening their doors during the grand opening morning, the new owners discussed there past histories as entrepreneurs.
- Currently the singer is in conversations with several particular famous managers.



# Improving these blurbs

- The director said it was **actually** a surprise to **have been** nominated for the major award.

*The director was surprised to be nominated for the award.*

# Improving these blurbs

- Shortly after **first** opening their doors **during** the **grand opening morning**, the new owners discussed **there past histories** as entrepreneurs.

*Shortly after opening their doors on grand opening morning, the owners discussed their histories as entrepreneurs.*

# Improving these blurbs

- **Currently** the singer is having conversations with **several particular famous** managers.

*The singer is having conversations with several managers.*

# **Practical magic: Online writing tools**

# The Hemingway App



**Hemingway**  
Editor

Write Edit Help

If you made it to this 8 AM session, I'm proud of you! Thanks for coming — I hope you've got some coffee.

I'm going to try writing until the Hemingway app tells me I've done something I should reconsider. The app can be a helpful tool if you throw in a large block of text. Keep in mind, **however**, that it's not a human, and it might make some suggestions that won't help you. Think **critically**, and you'll be fine!

## Readability



**Grade 4** (Good)

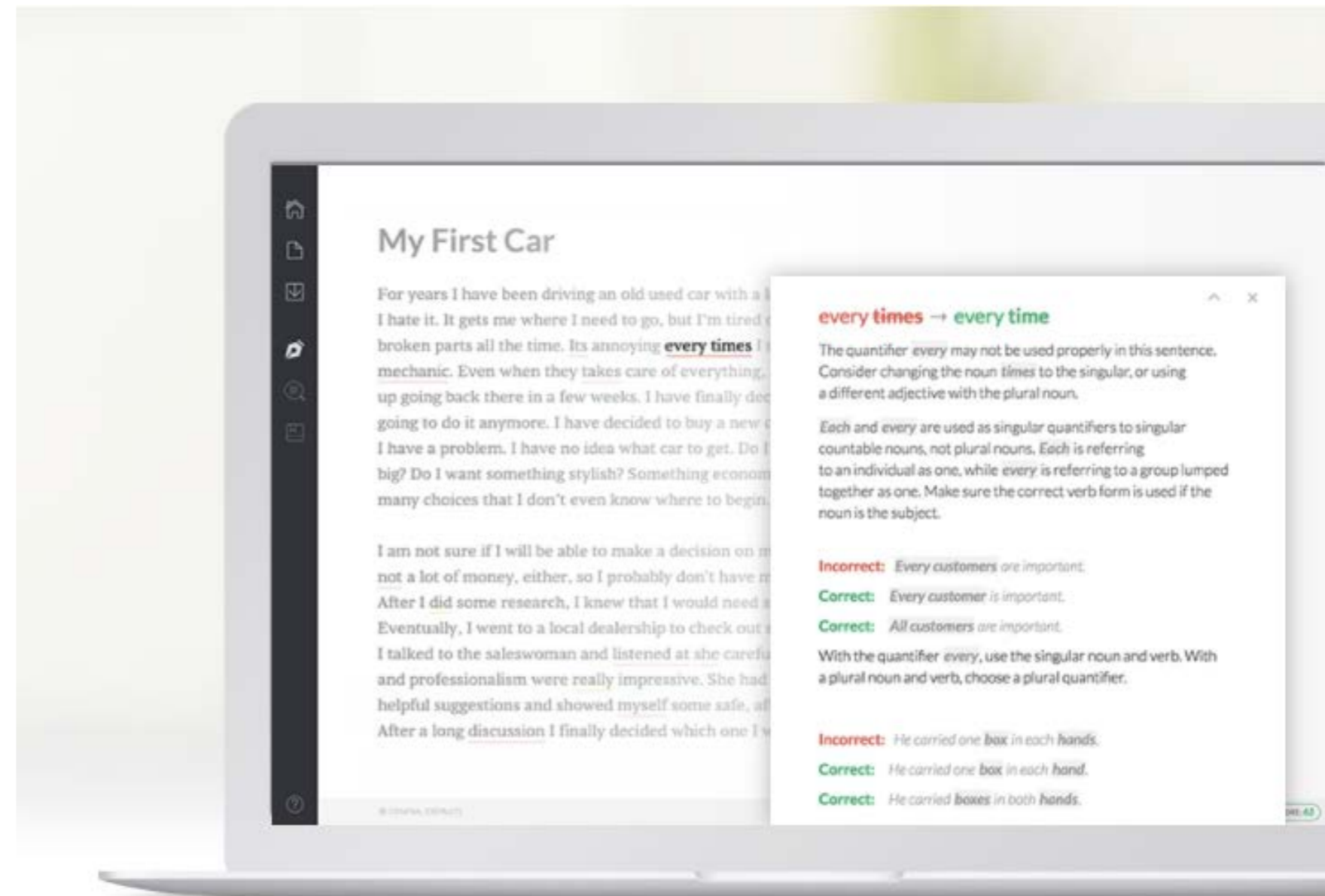
Words: 80 [More](#)

0 of 6 sentences are hard to read.

0 of 6 sentences are very hard to read.

# Grammarly

- Chrome
- MS Word



# **Key takeaways**

Put yourself in the  
recipient's shoes  
& your work will improve  
immediately.

<3



- **Be concise:** get rid of repetitive language, unnecessary words, and excess characters
- **Sweat the details:** proofread your work and look out for common mistakes
- **Write for impact:** use a strong, active voice — don't fall back on exclamation points or passive constructs to make your points
- **Get nerdy:** Brush up on your self-editing skills

Questions?

# Resources

- Purdue Online Writing Lab: Passive Voice <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/03/>
- Grammar Girl <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>
- Mail Chimp's Writing for Accessibility <http://styleguide.mailchimp.com/writing-for-accessibility/>
- The New Yorker's Comma Queen <http://video.newyorker.com/series/comma-queen>
- Grammar from The Oatmeal (you're welcome) <http://theoatmeal.com/tag/grammar>