

When Does "Informal" Become "Intolerable" In Net Writing

By George McKenzie

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When I got my first TV anchor job, my news director gave me a piece of advice that everyone writing copy on the internet will do well to remember.

"Be conversational," he said. "But be credible."

In other words, you don't have to use all that formal "proper English" they drummed into you in sixth grade.

But sloppy grammar and incorrect usage will destroy your credibility and detract from your message.

So what's right for the net?

No doubt about it, some Internet business owners are afraid to write promotional letters or web copy because they aren't sure they know proper English. They don't want to embarrass themselves by writing something that their high school English teacher would have covered in red ink.

On the other hand, some entrepreneurs don't think grammar matters in copywriting. They like to write as they talk in casual conversation.

Who's right? As usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. If by "proper English" we mean formal academic writing, then proper English has no place in copywriting. Webpages, e-zines, and marketing copy should be informal and chatty--never formal or stuffy. However, some basic rules of grammar are necessary to make the meaning clear.

OK:

- *Slang, clichés, and popular language
- *Sentence fragments and informal construction
- *Contractions and simple words
- *Ignoring some formal rules of grammar, such as not using

prepositions at the end of a sentence

Not OK:

- *Misusing commonly confused words: they're, there, their; here, hear; complimentary, complementary; its, it's; accept, except
- *Missing or incorrect punctuation: periods, question marks, and occasional exclamation points at the end of sentences; quotation marks, commas, and dashes where needed
- *Run-on sentences: keep sentences (and paragraphs) short
- *Incorrect subject-verb agreement: a singular subject requires a singular verb

You can find great grammar help on the Internet--just search for grammar. Find a site that you like--one that's easy for you to look up the questions you have as you write. You can use a print style guide if you prefer, but many of the grammar websites are interactive and offer search features that save you time.

If you want people to get your message, make your web and ad copy easy to read and understand. Sometimes you need to use correct grammar to do that. Your reader won't understand your meaning if you ask him to except the offer when you want them to accept the offer. A run-on sentence that contains two thoughts without any separation will confuse the reader you don't want to do that. Oops! Let's try that again: A run-on sentence that contains two thoughts without any separation will confuse the reader. You don't want to do that.

Sometimes, though, your copy is easier to understand if you ignore some rules. Tell me what you're looking for is better than tell me for what you are looking. Don't wait is more readable than do not wait.

You don't need to use "proper English" in copywriting, but you do need to respect the rules of grammar and avoid making mistakes that will detract from your message.

The most important grammar rule in writing for the web is the same rule even the most educated broadcasters have used for years:

Be conversational, but be credible.

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