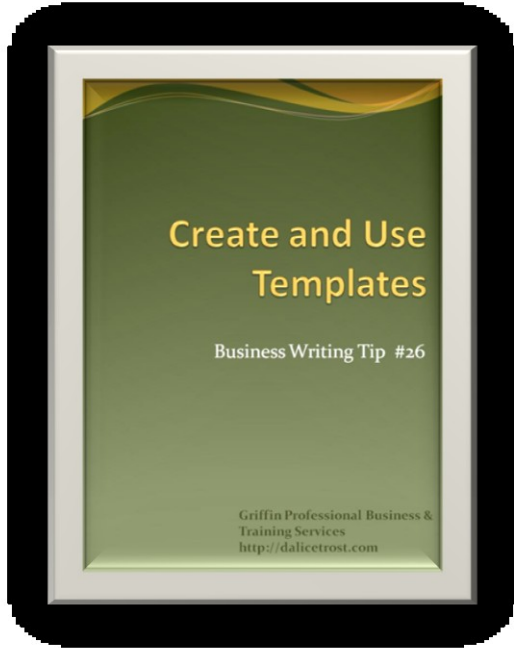


## Getting to Grips with Business Writing

### Business Writing Tips #26 to #30



#### Tip #26

#### Create and Use Templates

**Using templates will save you time.**

When you're writing for business you have to think about two things: the content and the layout.

One of the best ways to increase your productivity is to design and use templates for types of documents that you have to produce repeatedly.

A good template serves as a prompt to help you ensure you've included all the information you need. It also frees up your thinking so that you can focus on expressing your thoughts well.

You can develop templates for any regular writing job. Or you can often find templates on the web that you can adapt to your purposes.

Just some of the things you can use templates for include:

- Business plans
- Project plans
- Meeting reminders and calls for agenda items
- Proposals and quotes
- Sales letters
- Newsletters
- Approval letters
- Reports
- Meeting minutes

Remember that you can also set up email distribution lists to use when you regularly email the same people.

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### Tip #27

#### Use Commas Well

It seems to me that there are three different schools of thought on commas. These arise from historical comma usage. The thing is commas are ruled by two things—convention and rules.

1. The 'we don't need them' school of thought
2. The 'use them everywhere possible' school of thought
3. The 'modern English' school of thought

#### First Group

The first group feels commas are a waste of time and ink. People in this group don't believe that they perform a useful function at all. They suggest we no longer need to bother with what they regard as an 'antiquated' piece of punctuation that serves no purpose. These people omit commas even when the 'rule' states that a comma must be used.

#### Second Group

The second group use commas everywhere. They fling them around and put them in, even in places where they are not needed. Even in places where they are wrong.

#### Third Group

The third group use commas:

- Where the rules say they need them
- At other times in places where the addition of commas makes their writing easier to understand

#### The Rules

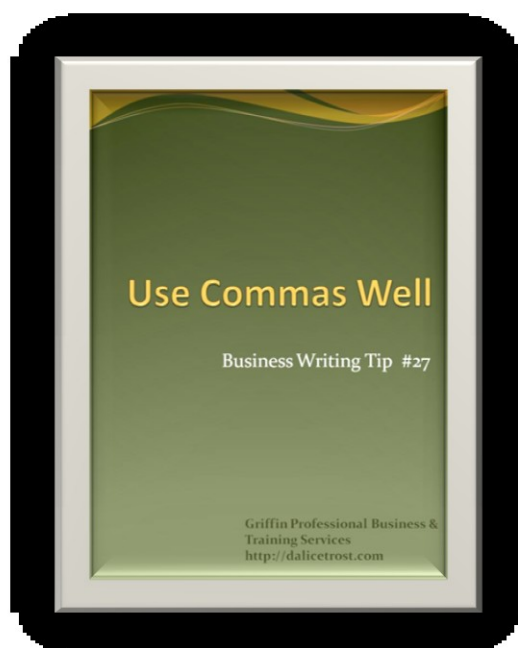
So what are the rules?

There are not many absolute rules about commas, you will be relieved to hear. I will only discuss the main ones here – those that you are most likely to need.

#### Lists

Use commas to separate items on a list.

*I visited Paris, Rome, Milan and Prague last summer.* (In this sentence some people would include a comma after Milan, and that's okay. There's no hard and fast rule about commas before conjunctions, although usually in UK English you would not put one there. The exception is when the item following the word 'and' is a long expression. For



example, 'The team members were discussing the next quarter's strategy, the training plan, and the proposed compensation and benefits changes.')

### Adjectives

These are a little like a list.

*The report was well-researched, professionally written, concise, clear and thorough.*

### When words are put into a sentence that interrupt the flow

Sometimes we use words in the middle of a sentence that might normally be found at the beginning.

The word 'however' is a common culprit here. 'My boss, however, did not agree.'

This also applies when we provide more information about something or someone within a sentence. 'David Flynn, the deputy sales manager, did not agree with the proposal.'

### With direct speech

*The boss said, 'It's going to take far too long to complete the project if we do it like that.'*

### When subordinate clauses begin the sentence

*If you are ever in Prague, give me a call and we'll meet up.*

(Without a comma this would be, 'Give me a call if you are ever in Prague and we'll meet up.')

### Before the non-restrictive relative pronoun 'which'

This rule is as much about when to use 'which' and when to use 'that' as it is about commas. The rule is that we use a comma before the non-restrictive relative pronoun 'which'. I can hear you asking, 'What on earth is a non-restrictive relative pronoun?'

I'll try and make this clear with examples. A non-restrictive relative pronoun introduces a clause that is not essential the meaning of a sentence. I am going to borrow my examples from [The Elements of Style](#) by Strunk and White (p. 59) because I think their example is very clear.

*The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage.* (Restrictive)

*The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage.* (Non-restrictive)

The first sentence tells us which lawnmower we are talking about. The restrictive clause defines.

On the other hand the second sentence tells us a fact about the only lawnmower in question. The non-restrictive clause only describes. And it is this one that uses a comma.

### What about when the rules don't apply?

My rule of thumb for using commas at other times is to read the sentence carefully watching out for two things.

## Getting to Grips with Business Writing

1. Are there places where you would naturally pause when reading a long sentence? If so, often a comma will help your reader. Particularly in long sentences.
2. Is the meaning clear if you don't include a comma? Lynne Truss includes some excellent examples in her wonderful book [Eats, Shoots & Leaves](#).

Incorrect comma usage	Correct comma usage
Leonora walked on her head, a little higher than usual.	Leonora walked on, her head a little higher than usual
The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank and swam to the river-bank.	The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank, and swam to the river-bank.

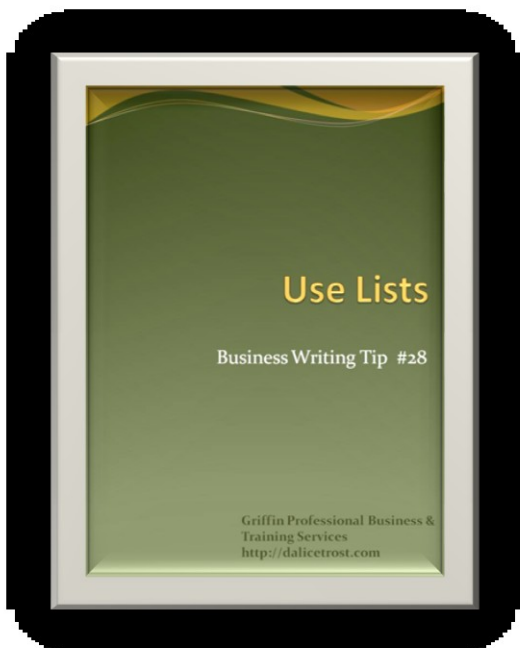
In another example that Truss gives the sentence could be perfectly correct, but add commas and the sentence has a very different meaning.

*'The convict said the judge is mad.'* Or is it, *'The convict, said the judge, is mad.'*

**So carefully read what you have written and think about whether commas will help people understand your meaning.**

If you want to delve more into the delights of comma placement, Michael Swan's [Practical English Usage](#), provides good advice and examples. Mark Tredinnick devotes some 15 pages to its use in [The Little Green Grammar Book](#). He too provides excellent examples and clear explanations.

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### Tip #28

#### Use Lists

At work it seems like each day there is more to read. There are more emails, more journals, more articles, more reports.

Each day we are faced with hundreds, even thousands, of words.

But you write as well. You are part of the challenge. You are creating words that others have to read.

And you want people to read your words, otherwise you wouldn't write them.

In this tip we will look at lists and how to use them to help make your writing easy to read. You see, lists are very easy for people to scan quickly.

There are two kinds of lists:

1. Ordered lists
2. Unordered lists

### **Ordered Lists**

In ordered lists we use numbering. This numbering implies an order or sequence.

A numbered list can also be used, as I have done, when you want to emphasise the number of items. There are two kinds of lists, there are three possible solutions, there are ten members on the team. Or you might want to tell people to follow a sequence of actions, in order.

So if you need to put things in order, or if you want to emphasise the number of points, use a numbered list.

### **Bulleted Lists**

Bulleted lists are the lists to use when you just want to list a number of things, without implying a sequence or specific order. These use a graphic symbol to introduce each point. Usually it's a 'bullet', but it could be a check mark or finger pointing (often used in presentation materials).

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## **Tip #29**

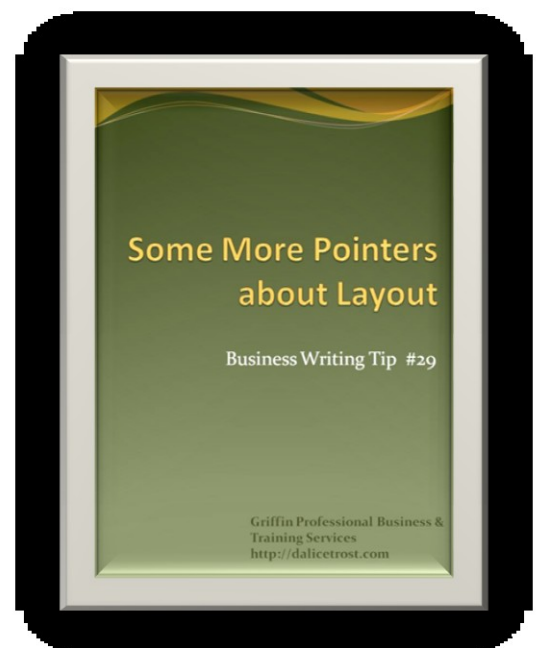
### **Some More Pointers about Layout**

In the previous tip I talked about using lists as a way to make your text easier for your reader to read. But there are times when we can't use lists. So what can we do then?

#### **Write short paragraphs**

When it comes to reading a novel by Charles Dickens you might be happy to work your way through long paragraphs, but when it comes to business writing, short is definitely sweeter. Short sentences. Short paragraphs.

You want to make it easy for readers to skim read what you have written.



You want to avoid people struggling for hours to work out just where your sentence or paragraph is heading.

So keep it short.

### **Use white space**

Think about it. It may seem as though it's wasted space, but when there's white space on the page, between the paragraphs and between the sections, it's easier for your eye to run through it quickly and find the relevant information.

Use space when you lay out business letters. Put space between the heading, the greeting, each paragraph, your closing, and your signature block.

### **Font**

Keep your font simple. I suggest a serif font like Times New Roman or Cambria for printed documents, and a sans serif font like Arial for things people will read on their screens. If you use colour, use it to highlight things that you really need to emphasise, and use it sparingly. A document with too many fonts and too many colours looks messy.

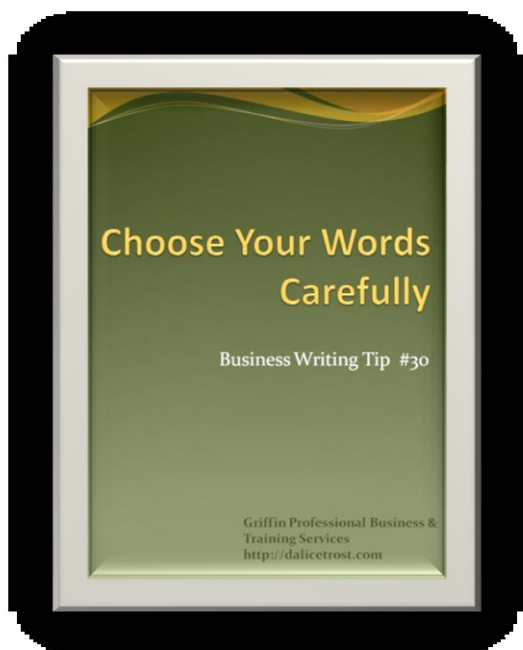
### **Headings**

Use headings to guide your reader through your document. Not everyone needs to read everything. If you make it clear that certain information is contained in certain sections, people can read what they need to.

### **Graphics and Images**

Use appropriate graphics and images to illustrate your points. If you want to show a price trend, or company growth, a clear graph will make your point more quickly than a narrative. These also help to break up large chunks of text and make the overall document more accessible to your readers.

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### Tip #30

#### Choose Your Words Carefully

In previous tips we have looked at words. We've considered using short words instead of long words, single words instead of many, concrete and specific words instead of generalities, and the need to watch out for words that are easily confused.

In this tip we'll look at one major consideration when it comes to word choice in business writing. This one isn't about readability.

#### Discrimination

Discrimination is a major issue in the business world. We need to avoid words that discriminate against sex, race, nationality, disability, sexual orientation and age. The challenge is that many of the words we use are so ingrained in our culture that we don't think twice about using them. And when we do, we don't mean any harm. But it is important to think about this issue and choose our words carefully.

- Use gender-neutral words. Instead of *chairman*, use *chair* or *chairperson*. Instead of *policeman* write *police officer*. Instead of *air hostess*, try *cabin crew*. *Bar staff* instead of *barman*...
- Watch out for your use of pronouns. Avoid the use of masculine pronouns to refer to both sexes. Use plural pronouns instead (purists may say that this is a little clumsy, but I consider discrimination is a bigger issue than slightly clumsy grammar). Or you can use *he/she*, *she or he*, *he or she*, *s/he*. You'll find plenty of debate of the singular use of *they* and very little agreement. That said, it is widely accepted in business writing
- Some professional roles have been traditionally filled by men (e.g. engineers, doctors, barristers). Take extra care with your pronouns when you are referring to these and avoid the automatic use of *he* or *him*
- There are words in English which suggest male dominance. Think about *man-made*, or the use of the generic term *man* to refer to the human race. Try *manufactured* or *humanity*

## Getting to Grips with Business Writing

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- When it comes to disabilities, many words that were previously accepted are now regarded as inappropriate. Words that spring to mind include *handicapped* and *retarded*
- The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation has published an excellent paper, 'Guidelines for Discussing People with Disabilities in Quality of Life Grant Applications'. In this paper the foundation suggest putting the person first, not their disability. For example, *the child with a physical disability* rather than *the physically disabled child*

It's quite simple really. In business writing avoid using words that imply a judgement or bias, and that are insensitive to the gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or disability.

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### About the Author



Dalice Trost is a freelance B2B copywriter, TEFL teacher and corporate training provider. She works with companies and individuals to ensure that they are communicating effectively in English. Her extensive network of experienced, proven international trainers in all aspects of business differentiates her from the crowd of corporate training providers. Visit her website at <http://dalicetrost.com> for details of the corporate training and business services she offers through her Prague based company, Griffin Professional Business & Training Services.

Dalice has worked in both the public and private sectors in Australia and the UAE, and is now enjoying European life in the Czech Republic. She spent more than 10 years working for a major B2B conference and training provider developing conference and training programs in just about all aspects of business. Her first Kindle ebook, *A Busy Person's Guide to Networking*, is available from Amazon. Follow @dalicejt on Twitter.

For more Business Writing Tips visit Dalice's blog at: <http://dalicetrost.com/blog>