Why Grammar Counts At Work

By Susan Adams, Forbes Staff

Grammar has been getting attention in the media lately, and for good reason. The Wall Street Journal started the discussion last month with a piece about the growing number of grammar gaffes in the office, especially among younger employees. Examples: "There's new people you should meet," instead of "there are new people you should meet," and "he expected Helen and I to help him," instead of "he expected Helen and me." The piece quoted managers and bosses who were fed up with younger employees who bring the vernacular of emails, Twitter messages and casual conversations into the office, including the ubiquitous use of the word "like" and those who say, "I could care less," when they mean "I couldn't care less." The piece mentioned a survey of 430 employers taken earlier this year, in which 45% said they planned to increase training programs to improve employees' use of grammar and other skills. Because I am over 50 and I was raised by grammar sticklers, I am sympathetic to managers' complaints about rampant grammar mistakes. One of my parents' pet peeves: the improper use of "lay" and "lie." Anytime someone says "I'm tired and I'm going to lay down," I cringe. You lay down an object, but you lie down on the bed.

On the other hand, as my colleague Alison Griswold points out in a thoughtful, well-researched piece, experts recognize that language rules evolve, rather than remain static. Alison gives some great examples, like the use of the words "google," "access" and "reference" as verbs. "Access" only went from being a noun to a verb in 1962, Alison learned from the Online Etymology Dictionary. Alison has several wonderful quotes from linguistics professor Alice Harris at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Harris's conclusion, in short: language is constantly changing, and often those changes bubble up from informal usage. I should probably let go of my fixation on "lay" and "lie."

Still, as a plainspoken piece on today's Harvard Business Review blog points out, it's better to err on the side of grammar caution. The story is written by Kyle Wiens, CEO of iFixit, an online repair manual. Wiens says, simply, that he won't hire people who have bad grammar. He gives all of his job applicants a grammar test, making exceptions only for people with serious extenuating circumstances like dyslexia or those who are learning English as a second language. "If job hopefuls can't distinguish between 'to' and 'too,' their applications go into the bin," he writes. Wiens explains that he cares about grammar for two reasons. One, he points out, is that in this digital age, when we communicate increasingly in written texts and posts, "your words are all you have." We project ourselves through our written words, he notes. Another reason is that poor grammar shows a kind of sloppiness. Wiens wants to hire people who pay attention to detail.

I can think of several other reasons that grammar is important, in spoken English as well as in the written word. When you speak, you project your level of intelligence and thoughtfulness. You also demonstrate how organized you are, in your thoughts and in your intentions. If you can get your sentences straight before you say them, you're promising that you're more likely to master tasks at work. In addition to good grammar,

it's best if you can scrub your speech of awkward pauses, "ums" and "uhs." The other thing eloquence suggests is that you are listening closely to the other person, and you're serious about what you want to convey to that person. Good grammar and clear sentences suggest respect.

Given how fast the digital world is changing the way we communicate, we may witness a more rapid change in grammar rules. But for now, as Kyle Wiens sensibly points out, it's best to keep grammar rules in mind and try to abide by them, when writing and speaking.

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