

## BONUS ITEM

### A communication briefings Test Of Grammar and Punctuation Skills

By Gary Blake

Grammar and punctuation errors are bad for business. Such errors can waste time and money spent to correct mistakes. But they can cause an even bigger loss: customers offended by the errors.

To help make sure your organization doesn't suffer because of these mistakes, we offer this test. See how many errors—both grammar and punctuation—you or others in your organization can find.

#### The Test

1. We sat through a dull repetitive meeting on a crisp, October day; later, each supervisor promised to complete their reviews by Friday.

2. "I should have filed the reports", Tom said.

3. Having found the boy's coat, the search was ended by the secretary. She as well as her manager believe in action not words.

4. A series of articles on how to write memos have been printed in the newspaper, see Fig. 1. Tom sent them to John and I; then, I forwarded them to Mary and yourself.

5. We all admire her ability with words, however, her vocabulary skill shows itself when she writes words such as supercede, judgement and acknowledgment.

6. Thank you for sending me the checks ... numbers 23-25 ... after the May 15, 1997 meeting.

7. Before becoming the head of Microsoft, George told us that Bill Gates went to school with Max. Max said that Mr. Gates' leadership skills were as good, or better than, those of the people who taught leadership seminars.

8. This group uses state of the art equipment in its soon to be completed, downtown site.

9. Are you sure he said "My decision was very much effected by your serious tone of voice?"

10. I think he said "Is it my fault that neither of the word processors are working?"

#### The Answers

1. We sat through a dull, repetitive meeting on a crisp October day; later, each supervisor promised to complete his or her review by Friday.

**Explanation:** You need a comma after "dull," but you don't need one after "crisp." *Reason:* "Crisp" acts as an adjective modifying the phrase "October day."

Think of the comma as replacing "and." You might write "a dull *and* repetitive meeting" but not "a crisp *and* October day." Also, test the need for a comma by reversing the adjectives. If they still make sense, you need a comma. For example, "repetitive and dull" works just as well as "dull and repetitive."

"His or her" is correct with the singular noun "supervisor." Even so, many writers have given up on the singular noun-singular pronoun agreement. When in doubt, it's best to use a plural form.

*Example:* "Later, the *supervisors* promised to complete *their* reviews by Friday."

2. "I should have filed the reports," Tom said.

**Explanation:** Periods and commas always go within the quotation marks.

3. Having found the boy's coat, the secretary ended the search. She, as well as her manager, believes in action, not words.

**Explanation:** Switching the positions of "search" and "secretary" corrects what is called a "dangling" modifier: "Having found the boy's coat." It's called "dangling" because it modifies "search" but should modify "secretary." And that leaves "secretary" dangling in sentence limbo.

Because it's parenthetical, the phrase "as well as her manager" needs to be set off with commas. "Believes" must agree with the singular sub-

ject “she.” And you need a comma after “action” to set off the contrasting thought.

4. A series of articles on how to write memos has been printed in the newspaper (see Fig. 1). Tom sent them to John and me, and I forwarded them to you and Mary.

**Explanation:** “Series” is singular and takes “has.” “See Fig. 1” belongs in parentheses because it’s a secondary—or parenthetical—piece of information. The pronouns should be “me” and “you.” How can you tell? Take John and Mary out of the sentences. You wouldn’t say “Tom sent them to I.” Sounds ridiculous. And you wouldn’t say “I forwarded them to ‘yourself.’” The technical explanation: “Me” and “you” are objects of the preposition “to,” so they must be in the objective case.

5. We all admire her ability with words; however, her vocabulary skill shows itself when she writes words such as “supersede,” “judgment” and “acknowledgment.”

**Explanation:** Use a semicolon to break up the run-on sentence—two sentences that run together without the needed end punctuation. Also, a coordinating conjunction—“however” in this case—that ties two independent clauses together always takes a semicolon before and a comma after. *Other problems:* “Supersede” and “judgment” were misspelled.

6. Thank you for sending me the checks (numbers 23-25) after the May 19, 1997, meeting.

**Explanation:** Ellipses are misused. Use them when you want to show hesitation or omission. Parentheses around “numbers 23-25” would be better. Also, you need a comma after the year when you use it with a date. But don’t use a comma when you use only the month. *Example:* May 1997.

7. George told us that Bill Gates, before he became the head of Microsoft, went to school with Max. Max said that Mr. Gates’ leadership skills were as good as, or better than, those of the people who taught leadership seminars.

**Explanation:** Correct the misplaced modifier—“Before he became the head of Microsoft”—by placing it next to what it actually modifies: “Bill Gates.” You need to add the word “as” after “as good” to keep the idea parallel—“as good as those of the people ...”

You’ll find two views on the need for an apostrophe and an “s” to show possession in proper nouns that end in “s,” such as Gates’ and Dickens’. We prefer no “s.” But both ways are acceptable. However, most authorities advise that you use the

“s” for common nouns. *Example:* boss’s.

8. This group uses state-of-the-art equipment in its soon-to-be-completed downtown site.

**Explanation:** Use hyphens to link the words in “state of the art” and “soon to be completed.” *Reason:* This makes clear that the entire phrase of two or more words is an adjective—called a compound adjective—modifying a noun.

Delete the comma between “soon-to-be-completed” and “downtown.” *Reason:* “Soon-to-be-completed” and “downtown” are not adjectives of equal weight. Instead, “soon-to-be-completed” modifies the entire phrase—“downtown site.”

9. Are you sure he said “My decision was very much affected by your serious tone of voice”?

**Explanation:** Use “affected,” not “effected.” “Affected” means “influenced.” As a verb, “effected” means “caused to happen.” Also, in this case, the question mark follows the quotation mark because the whole sentence is a question, but the quote is not.

10. I think he said “Is it my fault that neither of the word processors is working?”

**Explanation:** “Neither”—the subject of the “that” clause—is singular and requires the singular verb “is.” “Processors” is not the subject. It’s the object of the preposition “of.” And in this case, the question mark ends the quote, not the whole sentence, so it goes inside the quote marks.

Note that there’s no comma after “said.” That’s because the entire question is the object of the verb “said.” And you should not put any punctuation between a verb and its object.

### How did you do?

You should have corrected 25 errors, including misspelled and misused words. *Scoring:* 20-25—go to the head of the class. 15-19—your skills are reasonably good. 11-14—you may need a punctuation and grammar refresher. 1-10—you need help.

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