

Writing for the World

A Guide to Globalization

QUICK HELP

BASIC

EXPANDED

PROFESSIONAL

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These days, you don't need an office in Hong Kong or Bangalore to conduct business internationally. All you need is a web site and a telephone, and the telephone is optional.

With a web site, it's hard *not* to have a global presence. So it's increasingly important as you write to keep in mind how your American English will be understood by those who speak English as a second language, and how it will translate to other languages and other cultures. This aid will alert you to things that might communicate clearly in Cleveland, but cause confusion (or offend) in Amman or Seoul or Kiev.



- **Keep sentences short.** Long sentences are often grammatically complicated, so they're prone to mistranslation. To be sure your message remains clear, keep your sentences simple.
- **Avoid words with multiple meanings.** For instance, instead of "*it is hard*," say "*it is difficult*." If you must use a term that's potentially confusing, put it in quotation marks when first used to indicate that it carries a special meaning, for example: Set it to control "widows" and "orphans."
- **Include all articles and verbs.** To save time and space, people occasionally write in an abbreviated style—called "telegraphic"—that omits articles and verbs: "Managers to meet following presentation." For a global audience, to avoid misunderstanding, flesh out the sentence completely: "The managers are to meet following the presentation."
- **Keep "that."** In English, especially in speech, we routinely drop the word *that* from our sentences. We often say, "It is a process developed to improve quality," rather than "It is a process that was developed to improve quality." For nonnative speakers of English, the omission of *that* can cause confusion, so take care to use it, even though it makes for a longer sentence in English.



- **Limit acronyms.** Acronyms don't change in translation, so even if you spell out the words that form an acronym, those words, when translated, might start with different letters or appear in a different order, making the acronym itself confusing for someone who doesn't speak English.
- **Avoid humor.** What's funny in Chicago might be offensive in Kabul and fall flat in Nairobi. It's risky to presume you know what entertains those who live in another culture. When writing for an international audience, it's safest to write simply and respectfully, and avoid humorous phrasing.
- **Watch for United States–centered wording.** When writing for a global audience, stay alert to your perspective—words like *foreign* and *non-U.S.* can appear ethnocentric and give offense. Similarly, be specific when referring to U.S. or state government agencies. Rather than “the federal government,” say “the U.S. federal government.” Other countries have federal governments, too.
- **Include state and country (if necessary) with city names.** An international audience will need to know whether you mean Marseilles, Illinois, or Marseilles, France.
- **Specify time by date, not season.** Keep in mind that when it's springtime in Paris, it's fall in Sydney. Indicate time by date, month, or quarter, not by a season.
- **Avoid apostrophes.** Apostrophes aren't used in all languages, so some readers might not be familiar with them, or what, in a contraction, they're intended to replace. To ensure clarity, spell out both words of a contraction. Write “it is” and “we will” instead of “it's” and “we'll.” For the same reason, avoid making words possessive by adding an apostrophe and an s. Instead of “the company's goals,” write “company goals” or “the goals of the company.”
- **Avoid exclamation points and ampersands.** Like apostrophes, these marks are not used in all written languages. To avoid puzzling some audiences, omit them in favor of other punctuation.



- **Avoid slashes.** A slash between two words can also be confusing. Instead of “and/or,” use simply *and* or *or*, or else say “either this or that or both.”
- **Be careful with graphics.** Symbols and icons that are widely understood in the United States may not be understood, or understood in the same way, in other countries. For instance, a red, octagonal sign is not universally used to signal “stop”; use the word itself instead. Not everyone receives their mail in a mailbox, and check marks don’t communicate “verify” to people who don’t use the word “check” in that sense.
- Be especially sensitive to graphics that could be offensive or even obscene in certain cultures—particularly those showing interactions between the sexes, women in short skirts, hands (especially the left hand), and alcoholic beverages.
- **Avoid jargon and idioms.** By definition, jargon and idioms are words and phrases understood by a limited group. So naturally, when writing for a worldwide audience, it’s vital to avoid such terms. Some idioms may seem like standard English, but if taken literally by a nonnative English speaker, they could be confusing. The following list offers examples of American-English idioms and suggests words and phrases to use instead:

Idiom to Avoid	Suggested Substitution
800 number	toll-free number
à la carte	individual
a lot	much; many
ad hoc	temporary; unplanned
as the saying goes	<i>The saying may not be known worldwide; rewrite to eliminate it.</i>
attack (as in attack a problem)	solve
besides	in addition to
boot camp	course, class
bottom line	final result
bread and butter	primary revenue source
burnout	exhaustion
come up to speed	learn

continued



Idiom to Avoid	Suggested Substitution
connect the dots	put together, assemble
cutting edge	innovative; new
deal (noun)	transaction
deal with	manage
draw on	rely on
drill down	analyze; research
drive	encourage; influence; lead; affect; direct
explosion	increase; growth
flag (verb)	mark; highlight
free lunch	benefit; for free
from scratch, or the ground up	from the beginning
full	complete
gear	equipment
geared toward	designed for; intended for
glue (verb)	bind
going forward	in the future
golden rule	primary principle
good bet	likely
grow (as in a business)	enlarge; expand
handle (verb)	manage; process
hard to	difficult to
hassle	problem
holy grail	ultimate reward; ultimate goal
housekeeping	general administration
jump (in market movement)	increase
jump to conclusions	assume
keep an eye out	watch for
key	primary; important
king	leader
left in the dust	outpaced
lion's share	majority
living hand to mouth	a marginal existence
look over	review
look to	desire to; choose to
make the grade	pass

continued

Idiom to Avoid	Suggested Substitution
master (noun)	leader, expert
nirvana	ultimate goal or reward
on the fly	in real time; hastily; spontaneously
on top of	in addition to
once	when
only game in town	sole opportunity
open the door to	lead to
out of the question	impossible
over	more than
pay off	be worth the effort
plus much more	and much more
raise the bar	increase expectations
ready for prime time	prepared for
road warrior	mobile worker; salesperson
rule of thumb	general principle
scrambling to	working toward
short	brief
sliding scale	range
spam	junk e-mail; unsolicited e-mail messages
stick to	continue
streamline	simplify
sweet spot	niche; opportunity
tackle (a problem)	solve
think outside the box	think creatively
toe the line	adhere to the rule
top line	revenue; sales
turn the corner	achieve; reach
turnkey	complete; easily deployed
up and running	operating
with an eye toward	focus; goal

If you liked *Writing for the World*, you might also be interested in *Banishing Business Jargon*, *15 Tips for Effective Writing*, *Words Most Often Confused*, and *Words Most Often Misspelled*. And for more help in the world of words, see our entire set of easy-to-use [Job Aids for Effective Communication](#) that give you quick, clear guidance as you prepare anything from a memo to a manual to a web page.

