

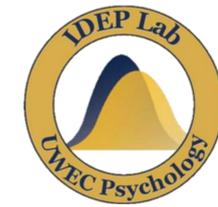


Immediate Hire or Immediate Rejection?

Grammar Usage Errors Taint Ratings of Applicants' Writing, Employability, and Character

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Overview

Scholars debate whether English instructors should devote focused attention to grammar usage and mechanics.^{1,2} On one hand, most grammar usage errors are superficial and do not impede readers' understanding,^{3,4} and an emphasis on mastery of usage rules perpetuates a system in which certain forms of grammar usage may afford status and prestige. On the other hand, studies have illustrated that professionals perceive grammar usage errors as bothersome;^{5,6,7,8} more importantly, interviews with business professionals suggest that grammar usage errors might harm impressions of the writer as a person.⁹

Study Objective:

In the current study, we tested the idea that grammar usage errors taint impressions of a job applicant's writing and character.

We hypothesized that common grammar usage errors in a cover letter would negatively affect people's...

- judgments of the applicant's character
- evaluations of the applicant's writing quality
- ratings of the content of the letter
- likelihood of hiring the applicant

Method Overview (N = 201; 68% Response Rate)

- We asked community adults to evaluate college students' "readiness" for the real world. We asked each participant to read one of three hypothetical professional cover letters written by a college student, and then rate the student applicant who purportedly wrote it. Participants did not know the study was about grammar usage.
- Participants varied in gender: 72 men, 128 women, 1 unspecified; in age: Range 22-80, $M = 49.54 \pm 10.83$ years; and in education level: 20% Associate's or less, 45% Bachelor's, 35% Master's/Doctoral Level Degree.

Stimulus Materials

"The Good"

Excerpts from the cover letter with no errors

- "As a high-achieving student with much to offer, I hope you will consider me for this position."
- "My time in those positions has allowed me to practice reading and analyzing primary literature, generate hypotheses, conduct statistical analyses, and interpret data."
- "I have also identified my greatest strengths: my commitment to work, my optimism, and my determination to succeed."

"The Bad"

Excerpts from the cover letter with 2 errors per 100 words

- "As a high-achieving student with much to offer, I hope you will consider me for this position."
- "My time in those positions has allowed me to practice reading and analyzing primary literature, generate hypotheses, conduct statistical analyses, and interpret data."
- "I have also identified my greatest strengths: my commitment to work, my optimism, and my determination to succeed."

"The Ugly"

Excerpts from the cover letter with 4 errors per 100 words

- "As a high-achieving student with much to offer, I hope you will consider me for this position."
- "My time in those positions have allowed me to practice reading and analyzing primary literature, generate hypotheses, conduct statistical analyses, and interpret data."
- "I have also identified my greatest strengths: my commitment to work, my optimism, and my determination to succeed."

Discussion

In the current study, we predicted and demonstrated that grammar usage errors negatively impact people's...

- judgments of the applicant's character
- evaluations of the applicant's writing quality
- ratings of the content of the letter
- likelihood of hiring the applicant

The effect of the manipulation was consistent across variables. Participants who read a cover letter with a typical error rate (2 per 100 words) reacted far more negatively to the applicant on every dimension compared to those who read a clean cover letter. For some of the judgments, additional errors resulted in even more negativity. Regardless, the jump from "The Good" to "The Bad" was far worse than the jump from "The Bad" to "The Ugly."

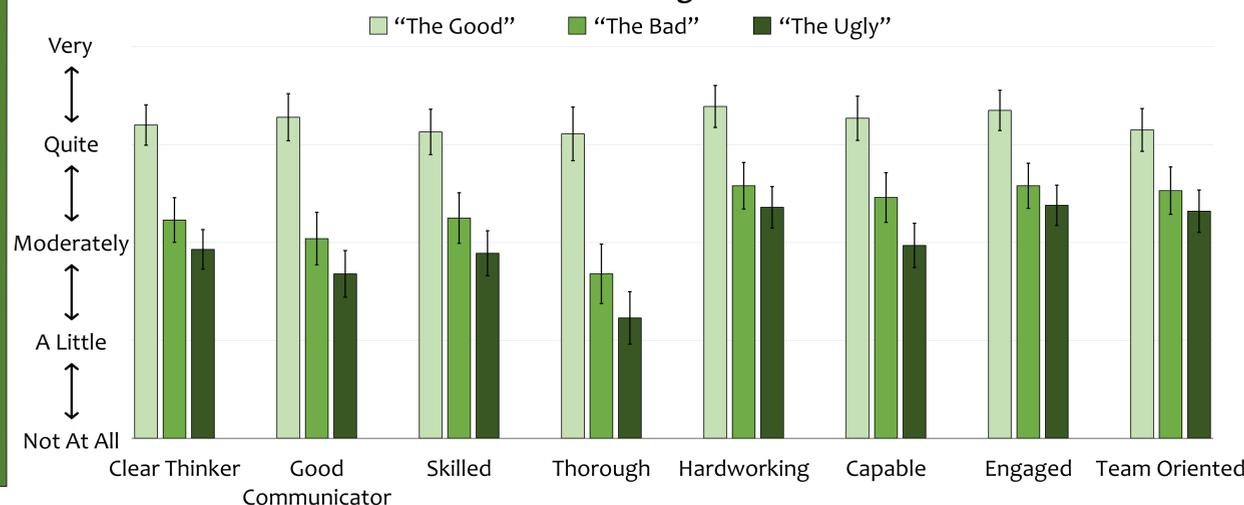
It is possible that a noticeable error ("except" for "accept") at the beginning of both letters with errors made a poor and lasting first impression on readers. Perhaps judgments would have not been so severe in the typical error rate condition if a noticeable error was not present early on in the letter.

Although we included grammar usage errors that did not impede readers' understanding, and the substance of all the cover letters was the same (i.e., described an applicant with strong background knowledge and experiences), the grammar usage errors still tainted evaluators' overall impressions of the applicant.

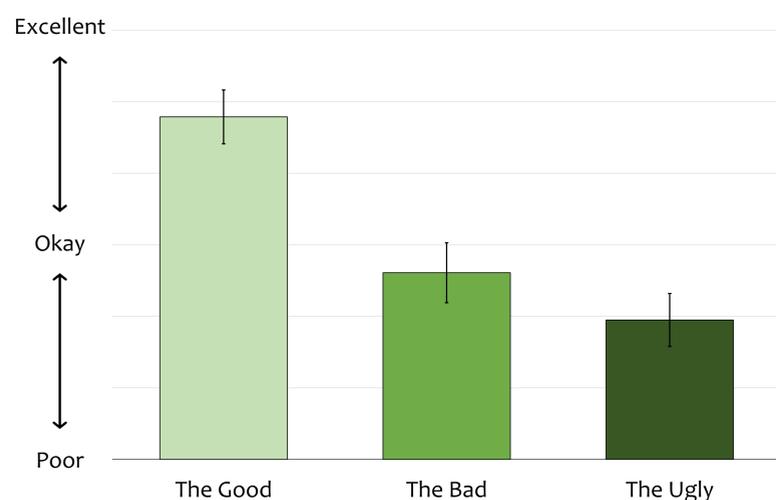
In conclusion, our findings imply that grammar usage matters. Therefore, we suggest that writers attend not only to the content of their message (i.e., what they are saying), but also to their grammar usage (i.e., how they say it).

Results

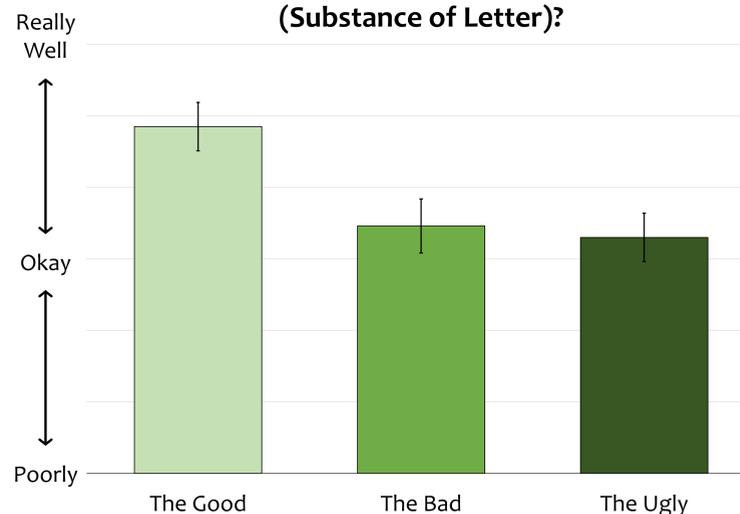
Character Judgments



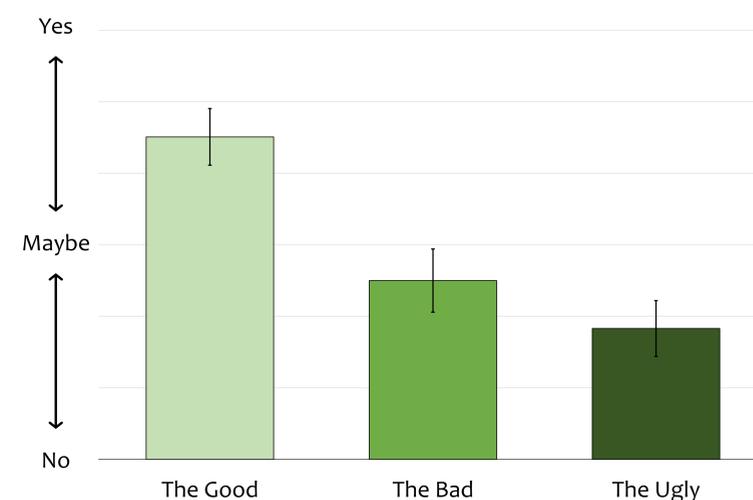
How Was Their Overall Writing Quality?



How Well Did They Sell Themselves (Substance of Letter)?



Would You Hire Them?



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Acknowledgments

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