

Seven Cs of Writing ~ Issue 2

CORRECTNESS – Part 1

Well, aren't you suckers for punishment. You've come back for more!

Last month, I introduced the 7 Cs of writing – a framework that I use when teaching writing skills to professionals. This month, as promised, I am going to make a start on CORRECTNESS. Don't forget, there will be several newsletters on this particular 'C'.

Correct grammar, tense usage and syntax are imperative to professional writing. When speaking another language, a grammatical slip will often go unnoticed, but not when it is staring the reader in the face! The good news is that when we write, we have more time to think about grammatical rules.

Dutch speakers of English are prone to a particular group of grammatical mistakes in English which usually stem from direct translation. For example, if you think "*I am working for Branch Out*" or "*I live here for 10 years already*" are correct, then you are, I'm afraid, sorely mistaken! More often than not, the similarities between Dutch and English work to the advantage of the Dutch speaker. However, there are occasions when comparison and direct translation just don't work, and these are the areas that I will be focusing on in **Correctness**.

So, let's get cracking!

PRESENT TENSES –

Present simple e.g. *I work* & **Present Continuous** e.g. *I am working*

PROBLEM

Many Dutch speakers have an incomplete understanding of the differences between these two tenses in terms of usage, meaning and application. Are you prone to saying “*I am working for Vodafone*” (that is if you work for Vodafone), “*I am living in Delft*” or “*I am appreciating your help*”? Then you are not alone. The Dutch tend to frequently over rely on the PRESENT CONTINUOUS when they should be using the PRESENT SIMPLE.

CAUSE

Why? Well maybe because there is no equivalent to the PRESENT CONTINUOUS in Dutch, although there is the ‘Ik ben aan het ...’ form which is comparable.

EXPLANATION

All English tenses have a simple and a continuous (or ‘progressive’) form and the rules governing the two forms’ usage can differ greatly. Note the differences between the present simple & present continuous:

THE PRESENT SIMPLE	THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS
Facts e.g. The sun rises in the East	Activities in progress at the moment of speaking e.g. Sam is talking to a client at the moment
Habits & routines e.g. I always get up early	Activities in progress now, but not at this exact moment e.g. I’m reading a really good book at the moment
Permanent situations e.g. Philips produce electrical goods	Trends and developments in progress over a longer time period e.g. The economic situation is improving
Timetable future e.g. The train to Utrecht leaves at 07.10.	‘Diary future’ e.g. I am working in Rotterdam tomorrow and Amsterdam on Thursday
In general, the Present Simple describes actions and situations that are ALWAYS or GENERALLY true	In general, the Present Continuous is used to describe activities that are TEMPORARY and there is also an idea of something happening for A LIMITED TIME

Tips

Grammatical rules are all very well, but the only way to master correct usage is through practice, practice and, yes, you guessed right, practice. Particularly considering that the mistakes you have been making are ingrained and are therefore difficult to eradicate. However, here are a few tips to help you on your way.

1. Pay attention to time phrases – certain time phrases are used with certain tenses. In the case of the two present tenses:

PRESENT SIMPLE (*I work ...*) : **always, often; usually; frequently; mostly; sometimes; occasionally; rarely; never; in general; as a rule; generally speaking; on the whole; by and large** etc.

NB: Check out correct word order regarding use of these words.

PRESENT CONTINUOUS (*I am working ...*) : **At the moment; currently; today; this week/month/year; now** etc.

2. Some verbs cannot be used in the CONTINUOUS e.g.
hate, like, love, need, prefer, want, wish, believe, imagine, know, mean, realise, recognise, remember, suppose, understand, belong, concern, consist, contain, depend, involve, matter, need, owe, own, possess, appear, resemble, seem, hear, see

Mmm, what does this tell us about McDonald's latest slogan "I'm loving it"!

1. Remember that if you overuse the PRESENT CONTINUOUS when you should be using the PRESENT SIMPLE, you could be giving a native speaker the impression that you only work on a project basis (e.g. *I am working for ING* instead of *I work ...*) or that you do not have a permanent address (e.g. *I am living in Amsterdam* instead of *I live ...*). Incorrect tense usage can cause misunderstandings!
2. Be careful with questions and negatives in the PRESENT SIMPLE. English works with a system of 'helping verbs' to form questions and negatives. Pay particular attention to the PRESENT SIMPLE:

Typical mistake	What you should say
Does he works every day? She doesn't likes football.	Does he work every day? She doesn't like football. NB: Questions and negatives in the Present Simple are formed with the auxiliary verb 'do/does' & 'do not/does not'. These auxiliary verbs do all the work which means the second verb remains in its base form

'A' VERSUS 'AN'

We all think we know the rules of the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an': we use 'an' with words that begin with a vowel (a, e, i, o and u) and 'a' with words that begin with a consonant. Easy!

Well, it's not quite that straight forward. Why do we say 'a uniform' and not 'an uniform'? Why do we say 'an honest man' and not 'a honest man'?

- 'an' is used before an unsounded 'h' e.g. an honorable peace; an honest mistake BUT a horse; a hurried job
- If the noun (or adjective) begins with the vowel 'u', but this is pronounced as a **non-vowel** sound, then use the article 'a' e.g. An umbrella; an uneventful day; an unfortunate incident.
Note that the 'u' in these words is pronounced /uh/

BUT

A utility; a united front; a useful tool

Note that the 'u' in these words is pronounced like the /y/ in 'you'

- If the noun (or adjective) begins with the vowel 'o' that make the same sound as the /w/ in 'won' e.g. a one-legged dog
- If the first letter of an abbreviation takes the same sound as a vowel sound, use 'an' e.g. an **MBA** course

Well, that's it for this month folks – I've run out of pages! Watch out for more CORRECTNESS in two months time. Next month's newsletter will be looking at COURTESY. To be more precise, the conventions and standard language of modern business correspondence. An absolute MUST, so don't miss it. Until then, happy writing!

Nicola