Grammar Cheat Sheet

Good grammar still matters in business. Selling a brand through clever taglines and marketing copy may be a grammatical rule-breaker. But a skilled communicator knows what the rules are, how to use them, and when it's okay to break them.

Here are top grammar challenges:

Subject-Verb Agreement
A singular noun ("book") takes a singular verb ("is").
Example: *The new **book is** on the table.*
A plural noun ("books") takes a plural verb ("are").
Example: *The new **books are** on the table.*

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
A singular pronoun takes a singular antecedent, which is an earlier reference to it.
Example: ***Kathy** (antecedent) didn't want to attend the fundraiser. **She** (pronoun) preferred to stay home and study.*
A plural pronoun takes a plural antecedent.
Example: ***Teachers** hope that the more **they** do the more students will learn.*

Apostrophes Uses
Use Apostrophes to show possession.
Example: *The **man's** coat was left by the door.*
Use Apostrophes for contractions.
Example: ***He's** (he is) not sure about taking the job.*
The apostrophe comes after a plural noun ending in "s" when showing possession.
Example: *The **vases'** colors were vivid.*
For possessive plural nouns not ending in "s," the apostrophe follows the noun and precedes the "s."
Example: *The **children's** toys are scattered everywhere.*
Note: Omit the apostrophe when writing the possessive pronoun "its," which eliminates confusion with the contraction "it's."

Homophones
Avoid accidently mixing up homophones, or sound-alike words, such as: 1) "there," "their," and "they're"; 2) "your" and "you're"; 3) "to," "too," and "two"" and 4) "its" and "it's."
Example: *The painters said **they're** willing to store **their** tools over **there** by the door.*
Example: *Make sure **you're** getting the most out of **your** investment.*
Example: *The **two** musicians were **too** short on time **to** play another song.*
Example: ***It's** too early to wake up the baby from **its** much-needed sleep.*

Than or Then
Use "than" when making comparisons.
Example: *The latest marketing campaign is funnier **than** last month's.*
Use "then" to indicate the time something occurs.

Example: *The lecture ended and **then** they left.*

Further or Farther
Use "further" to indicate an additional, figurative distance to go.
Example: *The sprinter pushed herself even **further** to win the race.*
Use "farther" to indicate an additional and measurable distance to go.
Example: *The state house was **farther** away than the visitors originally thought.*

Commas Joining Independent Clauses
Don't use a comma to separate two independent clauses (related sentences that can stand alone). Separate the clauses with a period or semicolon, or join them with a conjunction (and, or, but, etc.).
Example: *The exhibit features American artists. Their work appears in major U.S. museums.*
Example: *The exhibit features American artists; their work appears in major U.S. museums.*
Example: *The exhibit features American artists **because** their work appears in major U.S. museums.*

Misplaced or Dangling Modifiers
Words, phrases, or clauses that are separated from the words they're supposed to describe are called misplaced or dangling modifiers.
Example (misplaced modifier): *The **ripped** women's dress was ruined beyond repair.*
Rewrite: *The women's **ripped** dress was ruined beyond repair.*
Example (dangling modifier): *Detectives spotted a truck behind a house **with an overturned cab.***
Rewrite: *Detectives spotted a truck **with an overturned cab** behind a house.*

Lie or Lay
"Lie" refers to a person or thing stretched out down on a surface. "Lay" refers to *placing* something down on a surface.
Example: *Linda tried to **lie** despite her aching back.*
Example: *Harry decided to **lay** the book on the table.*

Sit or Set
"Sit" refers to a person or thing taking a seat. "Set" refers to *placing* something on a surface.
Example: *The host asked the guests to **sit** down and relax.*
Example: *The host **set** snacks on the table for the guests.*

Rise or Raise
"Rise" refers to someone or something moving from a lower to a higher position.
"Raise" is the act of moving someone or something to a higher position.
Example: *The executive was determined to **rise** through the ranks in her organization.*
Example: *The director promised to **raise** the secretary's status to office manager.*

Run-on Sentences
Fusing two or more independent clauses without punctuation or conjunctions creates a run-on sentence.
Example: *Robert turned in the report nobody took the time to read it nobody even asked for it.*
Rewrite: *Robert turned in the report, but nobody took the time to read it. In fact, nobody even asked for it.*

I or Me
"I" is a noun that takes a verb.
Example: ***I was** the only person in line at the grocery store.*
"Me" is the object of an action.
Example: *The waiter **served me** before serving the others.*

Who or Whom
"Who" is a noun that takes a verb.
Example: *It wasn't clear **who** read the last poem in the program.*
"Whom" is the object of an action and usually follows a preposition.
Example: *It wasn't clear **to whom** the coat belonged.*
Note: Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes "whom" as "fussy" and often replaced by "who." See: https://www.merriam-webster.com/grammar/who-vs-whom-grammar-usage.

Which or That
Both words are interchangeable if they don't change a sentence's meaning.
Example: *The book **that/which** they read is a best seller.*
"Which" is used to introduce an unrestrictive clause, or one that is informational but unnecessary.
Example: *The Arabian horse, **which** is bay colored, placed first in the competition.*

Between or Among
"Between" refers to two people or things.
Example: *The difference **between** the two candidates was minimal.*
"Among" usually refers to more than two people or things.
Example: *Ben was **among** scores of travelers who studied abroad.*

Affect or Effect
"Affect" is a verb, or some action that occurs.
Example: *The polltakers **affected** the survey results.*
"Effect" can be a noun or verb that brings about some action.
Example: *The results didn't have the **effect** we expected.*
Example: *The recurring storms **effected** changes in disaster preparation protocols.*

Fewer or Less
Both words refer to quantity. But generally, "fewer" refers to a specific quantity.
Example: ***Fewer** than 20 people signed up to attend the conference.*
"Less" usually refers to an unspecified quantity.

Example: *There are **less** people without TVs today than in the 50s.*
"Less" can refer to a specific quantity in some cases.
Example: *The library is **less** than three miles away from town hall.*

Can or Could
Both words suggest the ability to or possibility of doing something. "Can" refers to the present.
Example: *First-come passengers **can** sit anywhere.*
"Could" refers to the past or what's possible in the future.
Example: *Sue **could** have won the contest if she had been better prepared.*
Example: *Larry **could** get a scholarship if he studies hard next semester.*

May or Might
Both words suggest uncertainty about something happening now or in the future.
Example: *The plumber **may** be coming at 3 p.m.*
Example: *I **might** be ready on time for once.*
"May" also is associated with giving, receiving, or asking for permission.
Example: *You **may** bring a friend to the concert.*
Example: *The staff **may** dress casually for the holiday party.*
Example: ***May** I give the dog its treats?*

Should or Ought To
Both words refer to an ideal or desired circumstance and are interchangeable.
Example: *I **should** go to bed much earlier than I do.*
Example: *Greg believes he **ought to** exercise more often to stay fit.*
"Ought to" is a more formal term than "should" and therefore used less often.

Shall or Will
Both words make a statement or prediction about a future circumstance. They're also interchangeable.
Example: *Ava said she **will** attend the ceremony.*
Example: ***Shall** we all go to the movies in the same car?*
"Shall" is considered more formal than "will" and therefore used less often.

Note: Check current editions of dictionaries, thesauruses, and other references for changes in word or language uses.