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CICBV's Involvement with the IVSC

The IVSC is an independent, not-for-profit, private sector organization with 79 member organizations. It develops standards for the reporting and disclosure of valuations across all asset classes. The CICBV has been a contributing member organization of the IVSC and is fully engaged in the work of the IVSC with the objective of contributing to a sharing and enhancement of best practices.

Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona*

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid writes about ways to improve your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Getting Dates Right

A friend gave me a desk calendar for Christmas last year that showed months. I've not used that kind of calendar for years. I use a digital calendar for appointments and have a six month calendar pinned to the cork board by my desk because sometimes I want to see multiple months at a time. But, the calendar was cute and there was room on my desk, so I've been using it when I want a quick idea about the weeks in a given month.

It turns out there was a mistake on the June page. I discovered the error late in June, as I was making plans with friends to go away for what I thought was the Canada Day long weekend. I had glanced at June and saw that the 30th was a Sunday so I figured July 1 was a Monday, making it a three-day weekend.

When I sent out an e-mail about the weekend, I was surprised when a number of people said they would be returning on Sunday because they had to work on Monday. That's when I took a closer look and noticed the 29th was missing on the June page, which meant the 30th was a Monday and Canada Day a Tuesday.

Anyway, typos on calendars are pretty rare, so my mistake isn't something you're likely to make. But, this anecdote provides a reminder that pretty much any time you include dates in something, they're significant and so you should pay special attention to be accurate and clear.

When it comes to dates in reports, opinions, and other business writing, the majority of the confusion comes from the writer's choice of preposition. For example: *The factory was closed from January 8 to January 14.* Does that mean the factory was open on the 14th, or did it reopen on the 15th?

The writer could have avoided the confusion a number of ways. One alternative is to write: *The factory was closed from January 8 up to and including January 14.* Admittedly, that's a bit clunky and sounds pretty formal. Another simple solution would be to add a second sentence, saying: *The factory reopened on the 15th.* But, the simplest remedy is to choose a better preposition: *The factory was closed from January 8 through January 14.*

Due dates are another minefield for confusion. If you write that a payment is *due by October 21*, does that mean that you'll accept a payment on the 21st? Of course, simply using the preposition "on" instead of "by" won't necessarily be the correct thing to do, since a literal interpretation of that means that payments can only be made on the 21st, not before that date. The most elegant solution, I think, is to write: *The payment is due before October 22*. I find business writers often resist recasting the sentence with reference to a different date than one they had been using as a reference, but in cases like this, doing so helps readers take in the information faster.

No later than

Another phrase relating to dates that business writers sometimes use is "no later than". For example: *Submit your request no later than March 15*. Any time you include a negative in a sentence, you're making the reader work hard. *Submit your request before March 16* has the same meaning but is easier for readers to comprehend.

Dates and Days

All sorts of other questions can come up regarding dates if the reference is also related to the concept of a day. The best way to explain this is by example. If you say that a proposal is due on September 10, does that mean any time on the 10th? Or does it mean by a particular time that day? (For example, the close of business on the 10th?) Or, what if you write: *You have 20 days to provide the document*. Does that mean 20 calendar days or 20 business days? In some cases the reader can figure out what date the writer is talking about from the context. (For example, in interpreting laws, references to days and dates are sometimes defined in the statute's definition section or by reference to an interpretation act that may apply.) But why make the reader work so hard?

Conclusion

My hope is that next time you mention a date in a business writing, you'll do more than just glance at the calendar. Take a moment to think about the significance of that information and ask yourself exactly what the reader needs to know with regard to the date. Then, carefully choose prepositions and include descriptions that ensure clarity. Your readers will appreciate it and you'll save yourself the trouble of being misunderstood.

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