

# The Office Professional

Secretaries  
Office Support Staff  
Administrative Assistants

SAMPLE ISSUE  
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## Handling aggressive callers

“I MUST SPEAK with your manager. I have important information he needs to know.” Have aggressive callers used this line or a similar one to convince you to put them through to your boss without delay? And how often have you found out later that the caller was not known to your manager and was just selling something? To handle aggressive callers effectively:

- **Establish clear guidelines with your boss.** If your managers often get unsolicited phone calls from sales people, ask them how aggressive they want you to be in screening calls. Establish guidelines for handling the calls that you think they might want to take.

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- **Ask direct questions until you get the information you need.** Most legitimate callers will be willing to give their name. Callers who refuse to give their names or who give evasive answers are often concealing the fact that they are trying to sell something.

- **Tactfully intercept unwanted callers.** If they refuse to tell you the purpose of their call, try this: “I am Ms. Smith’s closest associate. If you give me an idea of what your call concerns, I’ll do my best to help you.” If you say this in a sincere way that suggests you are willing to help, callers are likely to tell you the purpose of their call.

- **Politely stick to your guns.** Use the “broken record” technique to let aggressive callers know that they will not get to your boss until they tell you the purpose of their call. Keep stating your position, rephrasing it each time. (“I would be glad to help you if you can tell me more about the purpose of your call to Mr. Smith.” Or, “If you give me some information about the purpose of your call, perhaps I can help you.”)

### POLISHING YOUR SKILLS

## Writing with pizzazz

MOST OF US don’t aspire to win a Pulitzer Prize when we write, but we do want our writing to be a credit to us. We want to communicate in a clear, persuasive manner. In *Writing on the Job: Quick, Practical Solutions to All Your Business Writing Problems* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1995), author Cosmo F. Ferrara, Ed.D., presents these suggestions for adding pizzazz to your writing:

- **Turn verbs of being into verbs of doing.** Written documents containing verbs such as *is*, *are*, *were*, and *has been* usually sound flat and bureaucratic. Turn dull writing into engaging prose by changing *being* verbs to *doing* verbs. For example, instead of saying, “I was at the branch office last week and was given a tour of the plant,” say, “I visited the branch office last week and toured the plant.”

- **Write concretely, not abstractly.** Expressing your thoughts concretely gives the reader a clear picture of what you are saying. For example, the sentence, “We discussed the proposal and reviewed the options” is somewhat vague. Compare that sentence with this one: “We *analyzed* the proposal and *evaluated* each option.” The second version more accurately describes exactly what happened. If you have trouble thinking of a concrete verb to replace an abstract one, ask yourself how you would word the sentence if you were saying it. We tend to speak in a more concrete manner than we write.



## EDITOR'S Notebook

### How far have we really come?

I CAN STILL REMEMBER my first “real” job in the working world more than 25 years ago. I worked as a receptionist for a large company and sat in a lush reception area that was walled off from the rest of the office. The managers (all men) worked in offices and the secretaries (all women) sat outside those offices. There was a very clear demarcation between management and support staff in that company. As I moved into progressively more responsible jobs in other companies, I can recall that this dividing line, although invisible, existed in every place that I worked.

Although no one told me that office staff were supposed to take orders and that managers were the ones who made all the big decisions, somehow in those days it was just understood. While some secretaries might have been lucky enough to work with managers who treated them as equal partners, many administrative professionals were relegated to the traditional role of typing, filing, and taking dictation, giving them little opportunity to grow outside of these invisible boundaries and move onward and upward in the organization if they so desired. By the time I moved from administrative work into training and writing in the mid-1980s, things had begun to change, but not fast enough for many of us. Sometimes changes come so slowly that it's hard to see that any real progress is being made.

A couple of years ago, I looked up some old newspaper advertisements from the 1960s and 1970s to see what employers were looking for then and compared those ads to the ones found in today's newspapers. I found one ad for a secretary that specified the company was looking for an “attractive unmarried girl,” under 30 years of age, who could type and take shorthand. This was typical of ads in that era.

Fortunately times have changed in many ways for the administrative profession. If you look at classified ads today, you can see that companies want office professionals who can make decisions, solve problems, lead projects, hire and train staff, and take many other responsibilities previously limited to the domain of managers. While there may still be some inroads needed to strengthen the administrative profession, let's pat ourselves on the back for all we've accomplished in the last 25 years, and look forward to even more exciting changes ahead.

Diane Moore, Editor

- **Write precisely.** Imprecise writing uses extra words and syllables. Precise writing uses fewer words to communicate the same ideas. For example, “I established a new system for monitoring and maintaining office supplies” could be written more precisely as, “I set up a new supplies inventory system.” When proofreading your documents, look for places where you can substitute one word for two or a shorter word for a longer one.

- **Ask rhetorical questions.** As you write, ask yourself what questions might be in the minds of your readers. For example: “What purpose do rhetorical questions serve?” Rhetorical questions encourage readers to continue reading because they want to know the answers.

- **Personalize large numbers.** Expressing numbers in human or visual terms engages readers. Rather than writing, “There are 200,000 car accidents due to drunk driving in this country each year,” say, “One in three car accidents in our city involves a drunk driver.” Readers pay more attention when information affects them personally.

- **Write in the active voice.** Too many people write in the passive voice with sentences like this: “At last week's meeting, it was agreed that the old software must be replaced.” Written in the active voice, this sentence would read, “At our last meeting, we agreed to replace the old software.” Unless you have a good reason for concealing the identity of the person or group taking an action, use the active voice in all your writing.

Using these practical ideas will ensure that you compose business documents that are a pleasure to read and a pleasure to write, too.

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## SELF ASSESSMENT

## How well do you manage stress?

MOST PEOPLE WOULD agree that life is stressful. And most of us could manage the stress in our lives better than we do. To determine how well you handle stress, complete the quiz below, marking each statement *true* or *false*.

1. Although I sometimes feel frustrated because of normal everyday problems (like getting caught in a traffic jam), I can usually put these events out of my mind and get through the day without dwelling on past upsets.
2. I have been diagnosed as having physical ailments (now or in the recent past) caused partially by stress.
3. I do some form of meditation or relaxation exercises regularly.
4. When an unexpected problem crops up at the office, I may panic for a moment or two; then I settle down and focus on what I can do to solve the problem.
5. If I have had a bad day at work, I have a hard time relaxing and enjoying the evening when I get home.
6. I can usually see the humorous side of a stressful situation, and may make a joke to lighten my spirits and make others laugh.
7. Although I sometimes worry about problems, I can usually stop myself from dwelling on things that I can't control.
8. If too many problems happen at once, I tend to get flustered and have trouble concentrating.
9. Although I sometimes wear myself out by working too hard, I make a point of scheduling time for rest and relaxation before I completely burn out.
10. When under pressure to meet a deadline or solve a problem, I can usually maintain a cool head and stay focused on what needs to be done.

11. There's no question that I'm a "worry wart." I can really get myself upset just imagining the bad things that might happen.
12. Day-to-day problems at home and work don't really bother me that much, and I usually take things in stride pretty well.

Give yourself five points for every *true* response you gave to questions 2, 5, 8, and 11, three points for every *true* response to questions 1, 4, 7, and 9, and zero points for every *true* response to questions 3, 6, 10, and 12. Add up your score.

**If you scored between zero and ten,** it is likely that you handle most problems and stressors in a cool, calm, and collected manner. You are able to see the humorous side of most stressful situations, and generally keep yourself from taking things too seriously.

**If you scored between 11 and 23,** you probably cope with stress as well as the average person. Although you may sometimes feel overwhelmed and stressed by unexpected problems or an exceptionally heavy workload, you are usually able to collect yourself, regroup, and get on with whatever needs to be done. You might benefit from incorporating relaxation techniques and regular exercise into your daily routine.

**If you scored between 24 and 32,** you may find getting through days of unexpected problems or deadlines very challenging. You may feel "it's a jungle out there" and have trouble letting go of the day's problems when you get home. On occasion, you may be plagued by stress-related illnesses. If this describes you, look for a stress management course that will give you additional tools and techniques for making positive changes so that you can reduce the stress in your life.

### Keeping problems in perspective

The next time you feel stressed out and overwhelmed by problems, try these strategies:

- **Focus on what you can control.** Research shows that 85 percent of what we worry about doesn't happen, and that a large proportion of the other 15 percent can be changed or improved by taking some action.
- **Don't invest major energy in minor problems.** Ask yourself how important the problem will seem a year from now. If its importance will be minimal, why waste a lot of time and energy on it now?
- **Tackle major stressors head on.** Identify the one thing that causes you the most stress each day and take steps to eliminate or alleviate it. For example, if you find arriving home from work to be stressful because you have to simultaneously prepare dinner and deal with your children, plan to order in or go out for an inexpensive dinner one night a week. Or make double portions of whatever you cook on the weekend, and then just heat up the extra portion later in the week so you don't have to spend an hour in the kitchen when you first arrive home.
- **Ask for help.** If you're really struggling with a problem, don't try to go it alone. Get support and advice from a friend, family member, or professional counselor.
- **Write it down.** Record your thoughts and frustrations in a journal. This will give you a healthy outlet for expressing your feelings. However, you will also benefit if you analyze the patterns in the problems or situations that seem to challenge you repeatedly. Think about the steps you can begin to take to resolve these situations over the long term, rather than continuing to let them cause you stress.

## 10 customer service tips

Here are 10 tips that can help you excel in serving customers, both internal and external.

1. Take pride in what you do—in the way you serve every customer.
2. Pay attention the minute a customer appears. Acknowledge her with a nod, even if you're on the phone.
3. Look your customer in the eye in face-to-face situations.
4. Tell the customer your name. "I'm Tom. How may I help you?"
5. Never make a customer wait for anything without offering an explanation.
6. When you must tell a customer that you can't do something, immediately follow up by saying what you can do.
7. Do what you say you'll do.
8. If you use an answering machine to answer after-hours phone calls, return every call promptly.
9. Always invite the customer back: "Please come back and see us again."
10. Before you ask, "Was everything satisfactory?" be sure you know what you'll do if the customer says no.

## R-A-F-Ting down the paper river

Send the paper that crosses your desk down river using the R-A-F-T method suggested by Jan Lewis of National Seminars.

- **Refer** it to the right person if you aren't the one who should handle it.
- **Act** on it right away. Items that can be dealt with easily, do now.
- **File** it, if necessary. Eighty percent of papers filed are never looked at again. Keep only what you really need.
- **Toss** out routine memos which give you information you know or can easily remember. Record meeting information on your calendar, then discard the memo. When you receive revisions, throw away the original documents.

## GETTING ALONG

# How to work with almost anyone

MENTION THE TERM "difficult people," and almost everyone thinks of a specific person they have worked with on the job. Bob Bevard, a trainer from San Antonio, Texas, says that it's an inescapable fact of life that we won't always like the people with whom we work. In his seminar on "How to Work with Almost Anybody (and what to do about it if you can't)," Bevard offers these ideas for working effectively with others whom we consider to be "difficult":

• **Distinguish between people who are different and those who are truly difficult.** Bevard cautions against labeling others as difficult when in fact they may just have a way of working that is different from yours. If you like to have things organized weeks in advance while your co-worker doesn't mind pulling things together at the last minute (and maybe even thrives on it), she is not necessarily difficult, but just has a different way of working. However, if she deliberately delays giving you essential information that you need to do your job and seems to enjoy seeing you stressed by it, then she might be living up to the image of "difficult." Bevard says that when a person is truly difficult, most people have problems working with him or her. However, if you are the only one having a problem with a co-worker, it's more likely a case of conflict between your different personalities and styles.

• **Identify how the other person's behavior affects you.** Does your co-worker who completes things at the last minute really have an impact on your work, or do you just find her behavior annoying? If she doesn't affect your work directly, why not accept that she simply does things in a way that differs from your approach and let it go at that? But what if her behavior does affect you and has an adverse impact on your work?

• **Accept that you can't make difficult people change their personalities.** Much of the stress we experience in dealing with difficult people comes from the amount of energy we expend wishing they would change or trying to get them to change in the hope that they will behave differently. By the time you meet a difficult person, he has likely behaved in this manner for many years. His behavior has become deeply entrenched in his personality, making it unlikely that he will radically alter his behavior to become the kind of person whom you consider to be less difficult. Bevard emphasizes that we can't change someone else's personality. We may be able to influence them to change their behavior, but only if they wish to do so. The only behavior we can change is our own. This needs to be our primary focus when managing the situation.

• **Identify who owns the problem.** Difficult people rarely see themselves as having a problem. Instead, those who have trouble accepting a difficult person's behavior are the ones with the real problem. Bevard says it's important to accept that if we have a problem with their behavior, we have to take responsibility for communicating that there is a problem and state our desired solution.

• **Choose a course of action.** Rather than just reacting each time the other person pushes your "hot buttons," consciously choose your response to the situation. There are three courses of action we can choose from when dealing with any problem. First, we can try to change the situation (for example, rearranging your work space to minimize contact with a talkative co-worker). If it's not possible to change the situation, we can work on changing ourselves. We can stop reacting to the other person's behavior in a way that stresses us out and instead figure out what we want and need from the situation. If we don't ask for changes, it's highly

unlikely that the other person will spontaneously change his behavior. A third option is to consider leaving the situation. While Bevard acknowledges that this may be a drastic and hard step, this is likely to be necessary only in rare cases where a situation seems truly destructive or even dangerous.

- **Focus on behavior, not personality.** If you decide on the second course of action, to make it clear what you want, need, and expect, plan your communication strategy. Don't try to address intangibles like "attitude," but rather focus on the specific behavior that's unacceptable and on what you feel, think, and want. If you say, "You always give me your report at the last minute so that I look bad when my own report is late," it's likely to elicit a defensive reaction from others. But if you state, "I feel frustrated when I receive your report at the last minute. I'd like to receive it no less than two working days before the end of the month," the other person can't argue with that because you are talking about what you want and need.

Remember that you don't have to be best friends with a difficult co-worker. But these strategies will help you to create a rational, productive working relationship with most of the people you meet in your working life.

*Bob Bevard delivers a wide range of professional development seminars, including "How to Work with Almost Anybody (and what to do about it if you can't)."*

*For more information on his seminars, send e-mail to [BobBevard@aol.com](mailto:BobBevard@aol.com) or call 210-695-2700.*

## MY OFFICE PROBLEM—SOLUTION

### Re-starting a stalled career

IN A RECENT ISSUE, we told you about Lee, who feels as though she is stuck on a career plateau after working as a CEO's executive assistant for the last eight years. Lee likes her work and thinks that both her boss and her company are great, but she feels that she is stagnating. She asked our readers for advice about how to restart her stalled career.

Jennifer Nauss, Staff Assistant with Penn State Geisinger Health System, recommended that Lee seek career counseling. She says, "Check with a local college or university or your human resources department to see if they have a career-resource program to help you narrow down your likes, dislikes, aptitudes, and skills, and identify careers that match these criteria. Evaluate whether any of these careers are available within your company and begin developing skills that you will need to make yourself marketable. At that point, consider talking with your boss."

Evelyn A. Madison, CPS, B.S., Director of College Administration at Oregon State University, advises Lee to do some soul-searching to set new goals. She suggests, "Do some 'what if' exercises such as 'What if I won the lottery, what would I want to do with the rest of my life? What if my boss told me to restructure my job in any way I see fit, how would it be?' Dream big! Talk with your boss about your desire to learn new tasks (which will also alleviate his work load). Consider asking for educational leave to take college classes. Give compelling reasons for how this endeavor could help you make a greater contribution to the goals of your company. Also, consider becoming a mentor or teaching CPS exam prep classes."

Melanie Kern, an Executive Assistant with South-Western Educational Publishing, offers this advice based on personal experience. "I, too, felt that I was going nowhere after seven years and several positions leading to Executive Assistant to a VP. I loved working with my boss, but felt that I wasn't being challenged by anything new. We discussed my short- and long-term goals, evaluated my strengths and weaknesses, and concluded that I could continue in the administrative role while expanding my knowledge and stretching into another field. Talking with my supervisor was the best solution. We were able to re-evaluate my goals and responsibilities to suit both of us."

#### TECH TIP

### Reverse lookup is a handy tool

Oh no! You've done it again: you've written a phone number on a piece of paper, but forgot to write down who the number belongs to. Don't worry. Reverse lookups on the Web can come in handy for tracking down names and addresses, using only a phone number. Two of the best reverse lookup web sites are Infospace ([www.infospace.com/info/reverse.htm](http://www.infospace.com/info/reverse.htm)) and Anywho ([www.anywho.com/rl.html](http://www.anywho.com/rl.html)). Both of these web sites do reverse lookups for the United States and Canada, and they both offer white pages lookups as well. The reverse lookup is a handy feature for those of us with poor handwriting, poor memories, or both!

## Passwords: the longer, the better

Software that cracks passwords is readily available and is intended to help administrators recover lost passwords. However, this software is also used by hackers to decode passwords for illicit purposes.

To keep your password protected, an article in the February 12, 2002, issue of *PC Magazine* recommends not only using a combination of upper- and lowercase letters and numbers, but also creating a password that is more than eight characters long. For extra protection, try inserting nonalphanumeric characters, such as # or @, as most password-cracking software doesn't look for these characters unless a search is specified for each one individually.

## Reducing office hazards

Workers are often the first to know if there's a hazardous condition on the job. According to a recent article in the online edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, while employers have a responsibility to provide a safe workplace, employees also have a responsibility to speak up if they see an unsafe condition at work. Workers who see a hazardous situation can make their office safer by:

- **Speaking up.** Don't assume that someone else will report the situation or that management will notice what needs to be done.
- **Reporting your concerns calmly.** Make suggestions, if possible, for how things can be improved.
- **Documenting your concerns, if necessary.** You may have noticed the number of times workers have slipped on a damaged step or nearly been hit by a swinging door. While most employers will respond to these kinds of concerns quickly, consider contacting the Occupational Safety & Health Administration ([www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)) for assistance if you feel a hazardous situation is not being addressed.

## TEAMS AND TECHNOLOGY

# Working on virtual teams

TECHNOLOGY HAS RESHAPED the way that we work and has given rise to a range of alternative work arrangements, such as telecommuting. While these new ways of working give us more flexibility, they also pose a new set of challenges, says Debra Dinnocenzo, author of *Dot Calm: The Search for Sanity in the Wired World* (Berrett-Koehler, 2001). Ms. Dinnocenzo, who spoke on the topic "Distance Dialog: New Ways to Work and Communicate" at a recent conference of the International Association of Administrative Professionals, says that virtual teams have become a permanent fixture in many workplaces.

While this trend has been growing for a number of years, the events of September 11 fueled interest in virtual teams. Companies have become more cautious about requiring employees to travel extensively for face-to-face meetings and are examining ways to create flexible working arrangements without requiring employees to work in the same place at the same time. If your company is working toward a virtual team approach, here are some factors that are important to consider:

- **Recognize that we are still a high-touch society.** Regardless of the popularity of e-mail and voicemail, we still communicate best in face-to-face meetings where we can not only hear what is being said, but see and interpret subtle nonverbal communication.

Videoconferencing has become a popular means of holding virtual meetings. But Ms. Dinnocenzo says that while videoconferencing technology is improving, it is still not seamless enough to replace the real thing in every situation and is not yet up to people's needs and expectations in terms of cost and quality of communication.

- **Get the technology in place.** If your company is going to ask you and other employees to work as a virtual team, be sure that you take advantage of the best technology available. While your dial-up Internet connection may be sufficient for recreational surfing, remote access to your company's network is essential. Otherwise you may waste hours (and tie up your phone line) uploading documents that would only take seconds to send from the office.

- **Be as responsive and available as possible.** When people reach your voicemail at the office during business hours, they assume that you're in a meeting or working. However, if people repeatedly get your voicemail when they try to reach you in your home office, they may draw a different conclusion. Be sure that you are accessible by phone during business hours and reply to voicemail promptly. If you have to leave your home office during business hours, arrange to have your calls forwarded to your cell phone. If you are taking time from your day for a dental or medical appointment and won't be "on the job" for a period of time, advise your boss and colleagues just as you would if you were at the office.

- **Realize that face to face meetings are still essential.** Ms. Dinnocenzo advises that face-to-face meetings of virtual teams be held quarterly, or at least once a year. Team meetings are particularly essential when kicking off a long-term project, and individual meetings should always be held when dealing with sensitive situations such as performance management issues.

*Debra Dinnocenzo is president of ALLearnatives, a consulting firm with a focus on new ways to work wisely. Visit her web site at [www.allearnatives.com](http://www.allearnatives.com).*

## Getting the most from conferences

CONFERENCES CAN PROVIDE a welcome break from your everyday work routine. And they are also a wonderful opportunity to learn and to expand your professional network. To get the most out of the conferences you attend:

- **Study the program outline.** Review all sessions being offered and select those that will benefit you the most. In addition, select second choices so that if a session is full, you won't waste time deciding what to do next. Many large conferences offer special "first-timer" orientations.

Attending these sessions will ensure that you get the most from the conference resources and services available to you.

- **Put the office on hold.** Concentrate on the conference, and don't let yourself be distracted by minor problems back at the office. Resist the temptation to check your voice mail unless you are expecting an urgent call. Leave a number at the office where you can be reached in an emergency, then check messages at the conference once in a while.

- **Be prepared to network.** Take a good supply of business cards. (If you don't have any, get some; they're a worthwhile investment.) When you exchange cards with someone, take a minute to make notes on the back of the card about where you met, what you talked about, and what follow-up action you might take. When you return home, go through the cards and follow up with the most promising contacts you made.

- **Don't be shy about talking with strangers.** You are surrounded by people with whom you share a strong interest. Take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions and compare opinions. Ask things like, "Why did you choose to come to this session?" "Have you ever used this product?" "What's the most useful new idea you've come across at this conference?" "Where else do you get good ideas to use in your job?"

- **Record action ideas.** Don't bury good ideas in notes that you may never look at again. Use a separate sheet to list ideas that you want to try as soon as you return to work.

- **Follow up on new ideas immediately.** When you return to the office, before catching up on messages and mail, take out your action list and plan how you can implement at least one idea. E-mail your boss or copy your colleagues on some of the materials you collected.

By following up immediately, you will get more value from the conference and ensure that the time you spent there benefits both you and your employer—which is the reason you went in the first place.

## CYBER ASSISTANT

### Online help with salaries and job descriptions

IN SMALL COMPANIES, office professionals often find themselves handling human resource responsibilities such as hiring and interviewing, as well as preparing job descriptions and setting salaries. If your job includes these responsibilities, you may want to make use of web sites that offer information about salaries and job descriptions rather than reinventing the wheel yourself.

Some web sites specialize in information about administrative jobs, such as [www.officeteam.com](http://www.officeteam.com). OfficeTeam publishes a free yearly salary guide that provides average starting salaries for administrative and office support professionals with brief descriptions of the positions included in the survey. If you don't want to download the entire salary guide, you can view a brief version of it on the International Association of Administrative Professionals' web site ([www.iaap-hq.org](http://www.iaap-hq.org)).

Many other web sites go beyond the administrative field, such as [hrnext.com](http://hrnext.com), which provides comprehensive descriptions of a wide variety of jobs, from accountant to web site designer (click on Tools to get to the job descriptions). Although we weren't able to find a comparable salary guide on the [hrnext.com](http://hrnext.com) site, there was a wide variety of articles available on subjects such as jobs that are exempt and the issue of overtime. (Some materials are free while others are only available to [hrnext.com](http://hrnext.com) subscribers.)

However, [salaryexpert.com](http://salaryexpert.com) provides both free job descriptions and salary data, and adds a section that shows related job titles. *The Wall Street Journal* (which taps into SalaryExpert's database of job descriptions and salaries) also provides a free salary calculator, which allows you to determine cost of living differences between cities in the event that you (or your spouse) get transferred.

Although there are many web sites available with salary and job description information, most of the information provided by these web sites is available at no charge. Visit several different sites and compare the salaries from each one to ensure that you compile accurate information.

## STEP BY STEP BUSINESS BASICS

### Handling business lunches

WHILE MOST IMPORTANT business meetings and discussions take place at the office, on some occasions, business is conducted over a meal—usually lunch. Whether the occasion is for decision-making or celebration, it's important to treat business lunches like any other office meeting. Here are a few suggestions for handling business lunches in a professional manner:

- **Follow the lead of the host.** If your manager or someone else is hosting the meal, take your cues from her. While you don't need to order exactly what she orders, choosing lobster tails when the boss orders a light salad may seem like bad form (especially if she is paying). If there is to be any business discussion during or after the meal, let the host be the one to initiate it.
- **Order your food with minimum fuss and choose easy meals.** If you're on a restricted or special diet, don't wait until everyone is ordering to demand a complete list of ingredients for every dish on the menu. Phone the restaurant in advance to find out what's on the menu that will work for you, and be prepared to order quickly, especially when dining in a large group. Order meals with little “splash potential,” and save the spaghetti and meatballs for another time.
- **Be cautious about ordering alcohol.** While more business lunches are becoming alcohol-free, you may find yourself at a table where everyone is ordering a glass of wine with their meal. Use your judgment about whether to join in and, if in doubt, follow your host's lead. However, if your host enjoys three-martini lunches, you don't have to try and keep up, nor do you need to order a drink if you don't drink alcohol at all. However, you might order a soft drink like ginger ale to sip on while everyone else is drinking wine or other spirits.
- **Brush up on table manners.** If you are uncertain about which fork or glass to use, read up on dining manners in a good etiquette book such as *Handling the Restaurant Interview—Etiquette, Good Table Manners Bring Success in Business and Job Searches* by the editors of Brown Herron (available for download at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). If you're really stuck, just follow the lead of others around the table.
- **Be prepared to cover your own bill.** Unless the lunch invitation makes it clear that the host is paying, always take a credit card or sufficient funds to pay for your own meal. If it's clear that everyone is paying for their own bill, suggest before ordering that separate checks be prepared. If one bill is presented for the entire group, don't get into haggling over pennies. If you have ordered a more expensive meal than others, offer to kick in a little more toward the bill, even if your colleagues don't do the same.

## FEEDBACK

### Clearing up comma confusion

Dear TOP:

I've noticed lately that the comma appearing before “and” is often missing in sentences listing a series of things. For instance, I would think the proper way to write a sentence would be, “Today we'll visit the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Smithsonian Institution.” Instead, I often see sentences reading, “Today we'll visit the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial and the Smithsonian Institution.” Did I miss school the day they explained this difference?

BW

Dear BW:

When it comes to grammatical controversy, we consult our grammar guru, Bill Sabin, author of *The Gregg Reference Manual*. Mr. Sabin explains that there have always been two schools of thought about whether to use the comma when listing a series of things in a sentence. He says that business writers most often use the comma before “and” when listing a series, just as you would. We follow this guideline in *TOP*. However, the comma is often left out in casual writing and in newspapers.

Mr. Sabin advocates using the comma to enhance clarity and certainty of meaning. He cites the example of a will in which an estate was to be divided equally among heirs who were listed in this manner: Ann, Barry, Cindy, Dennis and Elliot. The omission of a comma after Dennis's name was interpreted to mean that Dennis and Elliot were a unit, and that one share was to be divided between them. We can easily see how this minor difference in punctuation can lead to major—and, in this case, costly—confusion.

Thanks for writing!

Diane Moore, Editor

## NEVER NEVER

Never insert *at* at the end of a statement inquiring about the location of a person or object. This use of *at* is redundant.

**INCORRECT:** Do you know where the hotel is at?

**CORRECT:** Do you know where the hotel is?