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## 10 Grammar Rules for Chat Agents

Chat writing strategies for better CRM



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Part of the *Best Practices for Online Chat* series by global contact center outsourcer, TELUS International

## ➤ Introduction & Job Aid

TELUS International has conducted extensive research to determine best practices for live chat to maximize online sales and customer service as part of its ongoing efforts to deliver the most current outsourcing solutions to clients. In 2011, TELUS International published a benchmarking study to identify the ideal chat session along with an associated set of business processes and management techniques to help companies ensure success. That research has generated several studies:

- [Best Practices: Online Chat Sales: Boosting customer service and sales ROI](#)
- [Webinar: Five Proven Strategies to Drive ROI for Online Chat](#)
- [Reducing Customer Effort in the Chat Channel: Better chat writing for a better CRM](#)

In this research, we identified three major criteria that contribute to effective chat sessions:

1. Agent skills
2. Chat system features
3. Communications style

Agent skills and chat system features are addressed extensively in the research listed above. This white paper focuses on communications style, in particular the 10 grammar rules agents should follow to communicate effectively in the online chat channel.

Applying these grammar rules will increase customer satisfaction through better readability and comprehension. This research aligns to other studies that indicate people scan online content, rather than read it carefully. Sutherland-Smith (2002) reported that many readers are easily frustrated when not instantly gratified with immediate answers and may adopt a "snatch and grab philosophy...not apparent in print text environments" (p. 664)<sup>1</sup>. In other words, online readers look for individual words and phrases that solve their issues. Without the structure of grammar in the chat channel, rapid fire communication would be difficult and quite often would lead to customer confusion.

TELUS International is focused on providing excellent customer service. If your company is looking to improve service quality, then this paper will provide you with actionable information that can make a difference.

***A job aid is included on the last page for easy reference to the 10 Grammar Rules for Chat Agents.***

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<sup>1</sup> Sutherland-Smith, W. (2002). Weaving the literacy Web: Changes in reading from page to screen. *The Reading Teacher*, 662–669.

## ➤ Communications Style

Communications style in the chat environment is critical. It conveys the company brand, helps ensure accurate information is delivered to the customer, and facilitates achieving company-mandated metrics. Clear and concise communication is imperative, because vocal tones and facial expressions are not available to clarify meaning in an online setting. Good grammar is critical to establish agent credibility. TELUS International has identified five key areas for successful communication:

1. **Brevity and staying on point:** Limit number of words per sentence to reduce confusion, and directly respond to prior customer question.
2. **Grammar, spelling and sentence structure:** Use most grammatical rules, including capitalization and punctuation. Spell accurately to support credibility of agent. Put critical content at the beginning of responses. Put formal responses in complete sentences, while less formal responses can be sentence fragments.
3. **Voice and tone:** Conform to the personality of the site (e.g., informative, professional, innovative). Tone should express the mood or feeling of the voice (e.g., friendly, upbeat, conversational).
4. **Terminology:** Use language that has mass appeal. Avoid slang, clichés and other references that are specific to a region. Avoid unnecessary use of technical terms that may require readers to slow down to understand meaning.
5. **Personalization:** Use customer name and other customer-provided information to personalize responses.

***A note on metrics:** Companies must promote a balance between productivity and quality. Metrics like average handle time (AHT) or concurrent chat ratios need to be combined with quality metrics that the agent can control, such as using good grammar. This ensures that agents can focus on delivering a positive customer experience without having to rush customers off the chat session to hit efficiency metrics. This paper focuses on grammar rules that enhance an agent's ability to increase efficiency and achieve metrics goals.*

This white paper takes a comprehensive look at the *importance of using good grammar*.

## ➤ The 10 Grammar Rules

TELUS International developed a list of 10 grammar rules that all chat agents should follow. Applying these rules 90% of the time increases clarity and readability significantly. Constructing clear sentences for chat requires solid grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling. This white paper provides guidance to help you understand these rules and incorporate them into your company's agent training.

The rules are grouped into five categories:

- Grammar and Punctuation
- Numbers and Currency
- Spelling and Capitalization
- Commas
- Voice and Tone

## ➤ Grammar and Punctuation

Customers shouldn't have to repeat questions or re-read agent responses to try and figure out the meaning. Using good grammar and punctuation helps agents communicate effectively and helps keep responses brief and on point. The best way for agents to adhere to these rules is to include only one or two ideas per response. Trying to put too much information into one response encourages agents to create run-on sentences and to ignore punctuation. In training, you should remind agents that muddled responses with poor grammar and punctuation impact the velocity of chat. Responses should directly relate to the prior customer question. Chat users want instant gratification, so agents should put the most important content at the beginning of responses.

**Rule #1:** Use periods at the end of complete sentences, and question marks after direct questions.

**Rule #2:** Minimize use of sentence fragments and do not use run-on sentences.

The following example illustrates the use of good grammar and punctuation to keep the chat conversation brief and on point:

**Customer:** *does any of the desktop pc come with raid to mirror the disk*

**Agent:** *Please give me a minute or two to check that out.*

**Agent:** *Thank you for waiting.*

**Customer:** *ok*

**Agent:** *We have our Studio XPS wherein you have an option to upgrade to RAID 0 or RAID 1.*

**Agent:** *Alienware systems are also capable of that.*

**Customer:** *is that the only series with options for raid?*

**Agent:** *Let me check on that.*

**Agent:** *Thank you for patiently waiting.*

**Agent:** *Only the Studio XPS and Alienware system are capable for RAID.*

**Customer:** *ok bye*

Efficiency in the online chat environment often dictates that agents respond less formally by using sentence fragments. Sentence fragments are best used to provide one piece of information, such as price. The example below is interesting. Though short, it demonstrates how lack of punctuation slows down reader comprehension (see the agent's first response). This run-on sentence forces the customer to parcel out the individual pieces of information. Yet, this same agent uses sentence fragments in the right context to provide quick price information.

**Agent:** *By the way, I would highly recommend you our Extended Service Plan (ESP) protects your hardware investment that covers repair of select LCD TVs after manufacturer's warranty expires.*

**Agent:** *1 year for \$69.99*

**Agent:** *\$119.99 for 2-year*

### ➤ Numbers and Currency

Sales and technical support are the end-goals of most online customer interactions. Clearly identifying technical specifications and costs is essential to quick, efficient communication. Here is an excerpt from a real-life chat session that clearly illustrates the importance of communicating technical specifications and costs:

**Agent:** *Now for the power cord, is that just the power cord or the whole adapter?*

**Customer:** *The whole thing - 120V to whater V that the laptop uses.*

**Agent:** *Thank you. We do have here 45 Watt 3 Prong AC Adapter with 3.28 ft Power Cord for \$49.99, or 65 Watt 3 Prong AC Adapter with 3.28 ft Power Cord for \$59.99*

**Agent:** *The 65-watt adapter charges faster than the 45-watt adapter by up to 50%*

**Customer:** *\$49 one are OK*

**Agent:** *For the VGA to display port adapter, it is at \$28.99 each.*

**Customer:** *What happened to the Belkin Pro Series for \$10.99?*

**Agent:** *The Belkin Pro is VGA-to-VGA. Meaning it has both VGA ends. Let me check other options here.*

**Agent:** *I do have one here for \$14.99*

**Customer:** *works for me, 2 of those and 2 of the \$49 power cords*

**Rule #3:** When writing large numbers, use a comma for the thousandths place, e.g., #,###.

**Rule #4:** When writing currency, use a dollar sign, decimals and a comma for thousandths place, e.g., \$#,###.##.

Traditionally numbers *one* through *nine* are spelled out; above *nine*, numerals are used. In lists where multiple numbers are used, agents should follow this rule if all of the numbers are within the same category, such as “one, two or three items” or “10, 11 or 12 items.” In lists such as “the items are available in groups of 5, 10 or 20,” agents should use numerals. When writing measurements, agents should always use numerals (e.g., “3.28 ft Power Cord”).

The following response, from the same chat session, is an excellent example of summarizing a complicated order using numbers:

**Agent:** *Let's do a quick recap to be sure I get this order right. Your order is for two pieces of Display Port-to-VGA Adapters and two 45-Watt 3-Prong AC Adapters with 3.28 ft Power Cords for your laptop.*

Agents should strive for clarity of information and consistency. As mentioned earlier in this white paper, online readers look for individual words and phrases that solve their issues. If using numerals helps readers find the information they most care about, then agents should use them.

### ➤ Spelling and Capitalization

Accurate spelling and capitalization ensures clarity of the information and helps maintain credibility with the customer. Agents should pay attention to spelling as they are typing and correct errors as they go. While agents should leverage built-in spell checkers, it is important to remember that spell checkers don't check for context and meaning. A correctly spelled word misused in a sentence can cause the same amount of confusion as a misspelled word. In addition, agents should take the time to capitalize the first word of a sentence, proper nouns, and the first word of a salutation/closing.

The example below illustrates the lack of proper capitalization. Notice that the agent does not capitalize the first word in any of his responses. As for spelling, notice the word "checked" in the third agent response. It is spelled correctly, but improperly used. The meaning is still clear, yet it causes the reader to pause to confirm the information.

**Rule #5:** Watch the built-in spell checker and fix spelling mistakes.

**Rule #6:** Capitalize the first word of a sentence, proper nouns, and the first word of a salutation/closing.

**Customer:** *Hi, looking at product code 6X999-DPPCDU1, the catalog says it comes with a i7 overclocked to 3.36 Xor \$1499 but when I enter that, it comes with a 2.8ghz, overclocking costs an additional \$499.*

**Agent:** *i am glad you chatted with us today and i am happy to check that out for you*

**Customer:** *actually additional \$399*

**Agent:** *the product code that you were looking at comes with i7 however, up to 2.8 ghz only.*

**Customer:** *I can see that, but that is NOT what the catalog I received says.*

**Agent:** *i will double checked on that. is it a July catalog?*

**Customer:** *Everything else is correct. It is from page 30, yes July*

**Customer:** *first thing listed is "Overclocked Interl Core i7 (3.36GHz, 8MB Cache)*

**Agent:** *kindly give me a couple of minutes to further check it*

**Customer:** *Take your time and thank you.*

**Agent:** *you are welcome. one moment please.*

**Agent:** *thank you for patiently waiting.*

**Agent:** *we do apologize for the inconvenience, however, there is just a website error.i suggest you check back after an hour or two as we are currently fixing it*

**Customer:** *excellent. Thanks.*

Related to capitalization and spelling is the usage of emoticons and acronyms. Not all customers understand the meaning of emoticons or acronyms, so we recommend developing a list of company-approved abbreviations for chat communications. Acronyms only help agents accelerate chat sessions if the customer understands their meanings. In addition, agents should avoid unnecessary use of technical terms that may require readers to pause to understand meaning, or they should spell these words rather than use abbreviations. This includes minimizing the use of emoticons, such as :) and lol, which are only effective if used sparingly. (See the list of commonly used chat abbreviations at the end of this white paper.)

### ➤ Commas

Agents should use their judgment to decide whether a series of words needs a comma. Speed and efficiency might dictate omitting commas for short series of words. For example, “cable, laptop and mouse” doesn’t need a comma before the *and* because the list is short and the meaning is clear.

However, if the agent is writing a more complex list, then commas are necessary to improve readability and clarify meaning.

Here are examples from two different agents from the same company describing the same feature. One keeps the content concise, using a short string of words that does not require a comma before the *and* for clarity.

**Agent:** *You might be interested to extend the warranty of your system to further secure your computer. We also have the accidental damage protection which would cover drops, spills and other possible physical damages. Would you like to check our current promotions on it?*

The other agent provides more detailed information and uses commas for readability.

**Agent:** *You still have an option to extend it so that you can get assistance with future technical concerns and to cover for future repair and replacement. You also have an option to get accidental damage protection which covers repair and replacement for various accidental damage. This includes: liquid spilled on or in unit, drops, falls, and other collisions, electrical surge, damaged or broken LCD due to a drop or fall, and accidental breakage (multiple pieces). The resolution that we will give you will be a free repair or free replacement for the parts or the computer itself.*

**Rule #7:** Use commas to separate words and word groups with a series of three or more if necessary to clarify meaning.

**Rule #8:** Use a comma plus a simple conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) to connect two independent clauses.

Using commas with simple conjunctions to join two independent clauses (clauses to be emphasized equally) aids readability. The agent's comment below properly uses a comma with a simple conjunction (in this case *but*) to create a clearly worded and professional response.

**Agent:** *It sounds like it could be one of several issues, but I am unfortunately not equipped to diagnose the problem you are experiencing.*

The following run-on sentence uses no commas to separate thoughts and forces the customer to slow down to decipher meaning.

**Agent:** *I believe they do but if they do not. you can print out the steps on the manual which is available online so you will not have difficulty on installing them.*

A better way to construct this sentence is:

*"I believe they do, but if they do not, you can print out the steps in the manual, which is available online, so you will not have difficulty installing them."*

This agent response is still awkward, but using commas properly with the conjunctions allows the customer to easily understand the agent's intent.

## ➤ Voice and Tone

The agent's voice and tone should conform to the personality of the brand. Voice expresses the company's basic personality (e.g., informative, professional, innovative, knowledgeable). Tone expresses the mood or feeling of the voice (e.g., friendly, upbeat, conversational, courteous). Agents should draw on corporate identity and customer expectations to shape the voice and tone of their responses. It is important to teach the official voice and tone during new hire training and to point out that agents should refrain from using their personal communication style. This will ensure brand consistency in all customer touch points. We recommend that agents use humor sparingly because it is easily misinterpreted in an online setting, where vocal tones and facial expressions aren't available to clarify meaning.

**Rule #9:** Use active voice.

**Rule #10:** Maintain corporate identity while avoiding slang and overly technical terms.

Language used should have mass appeal. Agents should avoid slang, clichés and other references that are specific to a region. Words like "cool" and "awesome" may work for casual conversations, but aren't suitable in professional dialogs. Notice in the example below that the agent uses the term "awesome" in a way that doesn't seem appropriate in context.

**Agent:** *While I am checking, how is your computer running so far? Any issues that you are encountering with it?*

**Customer:** *no. everything is great*

**Agent:** *that's great to hear*

**Agent:** *is this for back up for your files?*

**Customer:** *back up for my pics and videos, yes*

**Agent:** *awesome*

**Customer:** *i need 2 so one will back up the other*

### Further Clarification on Active vs. Passive Voice

People often have difficulty defining active versus passive voice. But when reading, they can quickly recognize the awkward, vague and wordy style of passive writing. Although passive voice isn't wrong, it's not the best way to phrase your thoughts. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. For instance, "I am checking on the status." In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon. For instance, "My laptop got stolen." In general, using active voice is more direct and conveys agent confidence to address a customer's issues. Compare this excerpt of a real-life agent/customer dialog to the rewritten dialog below it.

#### Passive (Real-life)

**Customer:** *Well thank you. What I want is a computer complete with a Word Processing program and a spreadsheet program all ready on it. I will need to look elsewhere, but thank you.*

**Agent:** *For the MS Office software, it is sold separately.*

**Customer:** *Ok, thank you again.*

#### Active (Rewritten)

**Customer:** *Well thank you. What I want is a computer complete with a Word Processing program and a spreadsheet program all ready on it. I will need to look elsewhere, but thank you.*

**Agent:** *We sell the MS Office software separately.*

**Customer:** *Ok, thank you again.*

### ➤ General Points to Emphasize in Agent Training

In your company's training for online chat agents, it is important to emphasize that:

- Agent responses in the chat environment should adhere to most grammar rules.
- Agents should keep conversations short and on point.
- Agents should provide the most important information at the beginning of responses.
- Agent writing skills can significantly impact customer effort; muddled responses with poor grammar and punctuation impact the velocity of chat.
- Agents should know, and be expected to convey, the company's voice/tone and use the appropriate amount of personalization.

Good grammar is important for all of these reasons—precise sentences are easy to read. Writing that is peppered with misspellings, confusing acronyms and grammatical mistakes not only confuses the reader but also calls into question the credibility of the information. Using good grammar—especially punctuation and capitalization—enhances the level of professionalism and minimizes confusion. Agents require training on basic writing skills to ensure a consistent, positive customer experience.

## About TELUS International

TELUS International is the global arm of TELUS, a leading national telecommunications company in Canada, with \$10.3 billion of annual revenue and 12.6 million customer connections. TELUS International delivers contact center, IT and business process outsourcing solutions to some of the world's largest and most respected corporations in the financial services, telecommunications, consumer electronics, and utilities industries. Our multi-channel programs include voice, email, chat and social media customer care. For more information about our contact center outsourcing solutions and improving your customers' online chat experience, contact us: [information@telusinternational.com](mailto:information@telusinternational.com).

### Learn more about TELUS International:

Web: [telusinternational.com](http://telusinternational.com)

Email: [information@telusinternational.com](mailto:information@telusinternational.com)

Twitter: [@TELUSint](https://twitter.com/TELUSint)

### In collaboration with Kenna Inc.

Kenna, Inc. founder Kim Keating was the lead consultant on the 2011 benchmarking study [\*Best Practices: Online Chat Sales: Boosting customer service and sales ROI\*](#). Kenna has since collaborated with TELUS International on several thought leadership pieces focused on using chat and social media effectively for customer service. Kenna's vision is to help organizations build multi-channel strategies that are competitively advantaged and designed to drive long-term customer loyalty. For more information, visit <http://kennainc.com> or contact Kim Keating at [kim\\_keating@kennainc.com](mailto:kim_keating@kennainc.com).

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## Chat Writing: Reference

### 10 Grammar Rules for Chat:

- 1 Use periods at the end of complete sentences, and question marks after direct questions.
- 2 Minimize use of sentence fragments and do not use run-on sentences.
- 3 When writing large numerals, use a comma for the thousandths place, e.g., #,###.
- 4 For currency, use a dollar sign, decimals and a comma for thousandths place, e.g., \$#,###.##.
- 5 Watch the built-in spell-checker and fix spelling mistakes.
- 6 Capitalize the first word of a sentence, proper nouns, and the first word of a salutation/closing.
- 7 Use commas to separate words and word groups with a series of three or more.
- 8 Use a comma plus a simple conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) to connect two independent clauses.
- 9 Use active voice.
- 10 Maintain corporate identity while avoiding slang and overly technical terms.

### 10 Common Abbreviations for Chat:

Below are common acronyms used by customers that all agents should be aware of. The second column can be used to list your own company and brand-approved acronyms for use by agents.

<b><i>Often typed in lower case for speed:</i></b>	<b><i>List of your company-approved acronyms:</i></b>
1. lol or LOL – laugh out loud; laughing out loud	1. _____
2. btw or BTW – by the way	2. _____
3. fyi or FYI – for your information	3. _____
4. asap or ASAP – as soon as possible	4. _____
5. w/ – with	5. _____
6. b4 – before	6. _____
7. btwn – between	7. _____
8. thx or Thx – thanks	8. _____
9. cya – see ya	9. _____
10. cos – because	10. _____