Wanted: Good Writing

Today's young professionals have been reared in the computer age when learning about technology seems to be far more important than mastering such mundane things as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. After all, most of us communicate now through e-mail, and you obviously don't need spelling, grammar, and punctuation for that! We seem to forget that good writing, like good manners, will get you into places that money never will.

CEOs and managers say they spend an inordinate amount of time rewriting and correcting their employees' letters and reports. In a business climate that is putting a high premium on productivity and cost-effectiveness, or in any other business climate, that is a terrible waste of your managers' knowledge and skills, and it's a big waste of your money.

After all, if one of your employees wrote in a letter for you to send out "I am writing in reference to your letter of October 15 to say that we will be unable to meet your deadlines," wouldn't you change it to something like "We won't be able to meet your deadlines because..."? Or if that same employee has you saying "I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for..." wouldn't you automatically edit it to read "Thanks for..."? Wouldn't you underline "Please be advised that the remuneration for your services is in the mail" down to something a bit shorter and easier to understand, such as "I've mailed your check"? You would certainly change "It is this firm's hope that our actions have met with your satisfaction" to something like "We hope our actions are satisfactory."

Grammar Quiz!

Still not persuaded that there's a problem and it's probably costing you money? See whether you can find any grammar problems in the sentences that follow. Respond quickly, as if you were writing a letter, and don't grab your favorite grammar reference book. You'll find the answers at the end.

1. I wish my roommate was not such a slob.
2. None of us really know what happened that night at the party.
3. According to news reports, he hung himself in prison.
4. Ever since I got the flu, all I want to do is lay down.
5. Whom should I say is calling?
6. It's a shame he's already working.
7. The chairman wanted Karen and I to speak to the press about the new policy.
8. The demands of the job, such as need for quick decisions, is what really appeals to her.
9. Nixon said "I am not a crook;" others weren't so sure.
10. He said all his affection was reserved for his wife Susan.

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1. It should be "were," not "was." The sentence refers to a condition contrary to fact, which requires the subjunctive mood.
2. It should be "knows," not "know." "None" is the subject of the sentence and requires a singular verb.
3. "Hung" should be "hanged." Things are "hung"; people are "hanged."
4. "Lay" means to "set something down"; "lie" means "to rest."
5. It's "who," not "whom." The word in question is the subject of the clause "who is calling" and requires the nominative case.
6. "It's" is the possessive pronoun; "it's" is the contraction for "it is."
7. "I" should be "me." The phrase "Karen and me" is serving as the direct object of the sentence and requires the objective case.

8. The subject of the sentence is the word "demands."; therefore, "is" must be "are." "Appeals" must be "appeal."
9. Because you are using a direct quote, the attribution must be set off by a comma from the quote — put a comma after "said." Also, semicolons always go outside the quotation marks.
10. Unless the man referred to is a bigamist, you must put a comma after "wife."

The problems in these sentences aren't particularly arcane points of grammar. A lot of the people who read your materials are going to recognize them as mistakes. Toss in a few misspellings of such words as "accommodate," "canceled," "judgment," and "manageable," and stir briskly with a few dollops of "affect" when you mean "effect," or "aggravate" when you want "irritate," or "historic" when "historical" is needed, and your communication can quickly end up in the wastebasket. Would the people who are responsible for your written communication have done as well with these 10 sentences as you did?

Second Reader Needed

Despite the fact that many of today's young professionals haven't been properly prepared in the use of the language, most businesses have at least one person, other than a manager, who has a better-than-average understanding of the language and an ability to use it. Sometimes you can spot them even before you've seen their work. They tend to be quiet, fairly introspective people who read a lot and can converse intelligently on a variety of subjects. Newspapers call them "copy editors."

You don't need a copy editor, but you do need someone who is responsible for "vetting" all written material from your business that will be seen by the public. And, yes, that includes material generated by the top managers. Everybody's writing...