
ON WRITING AND THINKING: HELP FOR WRITING GOOD PAPERS

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Most of us have to write and rewrite our papers. Each revision makes the paper better. Each revision also helps clarify our thinking, which in turn, improves the next version of the paper. I recommend we read this through before and after we write—then re-write employing these ideas.

I have to follow my own rules too—none of us can escape it. But the best writers learn how to remove bad writing from their work and then polish what is left into effective prose.

We design writing for class to help us become better thinkers and communicators and thereby more effective managers. The best managers are skilled at communicating their ideas effectively and efficiently. We want our students to have writing skills that will distinguish them from ordinary managers.

Please pay attention to:

1. *Quality and thoroughness of analysis.* Most writers are quite good at describing *what* happened and *who-did-what-to-whom*. Analysis requires that the writer go beyond the descriptive presentation of who and what to answer questions of why and how. Through analysis we begin to think about what we can learn from one or two cases about a larger topic. For example, what can we learn about management in general, by looking at one manager?
2. *Clear focus, organization, writing, and presentation.* Often very good ideas hide behind poorly organized and poorly presented papers. If the reader is having trouble understanding what the writer is trying to say, usually it is usually the writer's fault. Writers are responsible for making the paper understandable for the reader.
3. *Internal consistency of the arguments.* Each paper should have a thesis or argument. Good writers developed their arguments in such a way that the reader says "of course," at the end of the written piece.
4. *Accurate and effective use of theory to reflect on and provide new insights into personal case experiences.* Theories are suggestions about how things work. Theories are not accurate representations of the world, but rather, simplified representations of it. We should be able to describe briefly any theory we encounter, identify assumptions embedded in a theory, and apply the theory (identifying places where the theory explains things well and where it does a poor job of explaining things) to a case or organization.

Our common errors include:

1. Providing descriptions of case events (what happened) rather than analyses of the events.
2. Trying to discuss every single aspect of the case—it is better to write thoroughly about a few well-defined topics than superficially about many.
3. Making inferences and generalizations without providing data from the case to support the generalizations, examples to help define them, or theory references to ground them (for example, we might say that everyone in the case wanted "involvement" and "participation." How do we know that? What evidence do we have? What do we mean by involvement and participation? The list goes on).
4. Ignoring theory and writing only about opinions—good papers take a set of theoretical ideas and show how we can apply those ideas to some specific aspect of the case.
5. Ignoring our own interpretations and restating theory after theory from the readings—good papers use theory to support insights and to cast a new light on personal experiences and observations.

Three Cardinal Rules for Good Writing

I. Omit needless words.

If we keep this rule, we will have avoided breaking the next two.

Mostly we write like we talk and we talk too much. Well, we use too many words.

Here are a few suggestions to get us started:

- Omit adjectives and adverbs. These are ok if we are writing the great American romance novel. See, that is a good example. I did not need to add the "great American" adjectives, did I? The meaning is the same without it. But I tried to get fancy and wasted your time.
- Choose strong nouns and verbs; when we do, we will not need adjectives and adverbs. For example, instead of writing "he was a little weak acting around the boss," write "Jack ate dirt when the boss was around."
- Jettison useless words such as *actually*, *basically*, *in order to*, *very*, *that* (most of the time) and so on. They add nothing to our meaning.

II. Avoid the passive voice.

This is the best way to improve our writing and thinking quickly. When we write in the active voice, we have actors doing something rather than having something done to them by somebody—usually an unnamed actor. The reader has to work reversing out the ideas to get the writer’s meaning. By then it is too late—we have lost the attention of the reader.

There is really no good way to avoid using it, so do not worry about writing in passive voice in the *first* draft. But revise it out later. We talk and write in the passive naturally. If we try to avoid writing in passive voice, we develop writer’s block. So start with writing ourselves clear and then edit out the passive voice. (And eventually we will find ourselves editing our spoken passive voice on the run.)

Editing out the passive will make us re-think what we actively mean, who is doing the action and to whom. This is the “and thinking” part of writing and thinking. Just do it.

In fact, we can all write without using passive voice. Yes, it is hard work until we develop good sleuthing skills (finding the passive when we write it) and construction skills—re-writing it to active voice.

See my favorite pet peeve, below.

III. Avoid negative construction.

Think of negative words as hot peppers in a recipe. If we use too many we spoil the taste and anger the consumer. We may use it to emphasize something. We avoid using it out of hand.

Rather, think of what we mean *positively* and say it.

- Jill did not succeed at getting the sale.
- Jill failed to get the sale.

Checklist: Our Most Popular Writing Mistakes and Rules

Below I list a few of the common writing mistakes we all make; I add a few comments just for fun. These things bug me in my own writing. If I see them in writing, the bugging factor increases for each page I read and find them. I thought it might be helpful to list them here for all of us.

The Dreaded Passive Voice. This is a form of writing to be avoided¹ at all costs. We must get actors to act and avoid the business of having things done to them. This is my favorite pet peeve. Please eliminate the passive voice from all writing to help preserve what little sanity I have left.

The Three Rules of Writing. There are only three rules for good writing: omit needless words, omit needless words, omit needless words. I recommend that we all go over anything we write and apply these three rules, one at a time.

Negative Construction. We try to avoid it as much as possible because the reader has to work too hard to figure out what the writer means—positively. Rewrite the sentence using a verb that means what we want to say without the negative word. (Rather than saying, “She did not succeed,” say “She failed.”)

First Rule of Writing. The first rule of business and writing is to follow the rules. Pay attention to spacing, length, pagination and format. Paying attention to details is important in this business. First things first; follow the rules. Formatting makes our text look good and easy to follow. Many people conserve space as if another tree will die if we add white space. Nonsense, most of what we write today remains electronic—so be generous in using white space to help the reader.

Use a Grabber. Our task in the first sentence is to **grab** the reader’s attention and establish a **connection** between the writer and the reader. Get to the point quickly, say something interesting or interestingly, even funny, and move on.

Mark Twain Rule. Remember the Mark Twain Rule of writing: “The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug!” Make sure our words mean what we intend.

¹ Passive voice easily creeps into good writing—here, “to be avoided,” is passive. By whom? Change to “that we must avoid.” I know you will disallow the abominable and revolting passive voice to sneak into your writing—ever.

Joe Friday Rule. Do we need this information? Remember what Dragnet's Joe Friday said: "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts."²

Chesterton Rule. Ending a sentence with a preposition is only a venial sin these days. However, remember Chesterton: "Ending a sentence with a preposition is one thing up with I will not put!" The best writers will avoid this trap.

The Sentence Rule. All sentences must have a proper subject and verb. Avoid long sentences. Simple is better.

Paragraphs Express One Idea. Avoid long paragraphs—academic journals seem to attract long, rambling paragraphs. The rule is each idea gets one paragraph. When we have stated the idea, start anew with the next.

Big Words Rule. This is a fundamental rule of good writing: never use a big word when a little one will do. Use it. Do not utilize it.

As a Matter of Fact. Avoid words that end in "ize" generally. Nobody wants to read or hear prioritize, for example, when we mean rank.

The Pomposity Rule. Postman and Weingartner call the triumph of style over substance pomposity.

Nouns as Verbs Rule. Yikes! We never use nouns as verbs. We may have an impacted tooth—a gruesome thought. Use *affect* or *influence*. We are never impacted by anything.

Avoid Contractions Rule. We do this in formal writing. Spell out the words: I'm, don't, shouldn't, can't and so on. But most of those are negative constructions which we avoid in the first place.

Avoid clichés Rule. These are tired expressions that *we must avoid like the plague*. Nobody wants to read tired expressions.

² <http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/dragnet.asp>

Mixed Referents. Never mix a singular noun with a plural referent. We must avoid sexist language, but we must find a way to do it without grammatical error. Changing the noun to a plural form usually works nicely.

Possessive and Plural Confusion. Many confuse these, using them interchangeably. If we do not know the difference between managers, manager's and managers' or when to use which, we just have to look it up.

Proof it. We must fire our proofreaders when they fail us. Get a good one—or two. This is one of the best things we can do for ourselves; too often we overlook it.

Semicolons. We use semicolons to separate two complete and similar sentences. Watch colons, regular, semi and intestinal.

Quotation Marks. Use them carefully. The rule is to use them to set off a word or phrase when we mean it in a different way than how folks normally define it. Otherwise avoid them.

Commas. These nasty squiggle things confuse me too. But we need to learn when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Try reading the sentence aloud with and without them.

Capitals. Most of us want to capitalize too much. Avoid capitalization, thanks. Unless we have a specific reason—supported by a specific rule—we do not capitalize. Emphasize by word choice and strong style.

Etc. We avoid etc., i.e., and all such nonsense in formal writing. Write plainly. Etc. means “and more of the same things.” Is that what we want to say? Probably not, that would be boring and violates the rule about omitting needless words. I cannot think of a good excuse to use it.

Dashes. We put a dash between two words modifying a third. Part-time faculty teach here. No spaces.

Two Dashes. Use two of them—without spaces—to set off a phrase. We may use them in place of commas. But use appropriately; I like them. Most word processing packages now conveniently convert them to a single, longer dash—which is even better.

Person. Generally, we use only one person, never mixing persons and, almost always, avoiding the second person in formal writing.

Slashes/. We avoid the slash in formal writing. Say what we mean—in words. Try reading the slash aloud, it makes no sense. If we mean “or” or “and” say it.

And/Or. There is never any need for this annoyance. The word “or” includes the meaning “and.”

Quotes. The punctuation goes inside the quotation marks in this country. The Irish do it the other way around. I can barely keep one system straight.

Sexist Language. Avoid it. This is easy to do if we make the noun plural. For instance we can say that managers eat their employees for lunch. But we would not say that the manager eats his employees for lunch. We would also avoid the awkward his/her.

Titles of Books, Movies and Songs—From the Grammar Girl:

Publications can have their own renegade styles, but the most common way to format titles of newspapers, movies, books, and plays, is to put them in italics. In the past, we could choose between underlining and italics (as long as we were consistent), but now that computers automatically underline website and e-mail addresses, italics is the safe way to go to avoid confusion.

When we mention shorter works such as poems, articles, chapter titles, and names of songs, we use quotation marks.

- Yesterday I read *The New York Times*, watched *Casablanca*, and listened to "Let It Be."

Ten Ways Grammar Can Help Fight Gobbledygook

From Terrence Denman, *How Not to Write, An Office Primer for the Grammatically Perplexed*, Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2005, pp 136-138.

1. Do not use the passive voice.
The report was sent to the finance director by the audit office.
The audit office sent the report to the finance director.
2. Do not use a noun to hide a verb.
We made the decision to raise interest rates.
We decided to raise interest rates.
3. Do not use any unnecessary words.
This affects the productivity situation in our Detroit factory.
This affects productivity in our Detroit factory.
4. Do not use a complex proposition when a simple one will do.
In the event of the fire alarm sounding, immediately leave the building.
If the fire alarm sounds, immediately leave the building.
5. Do not waste words at the beginning of a sentence.
It will be noted that the report emphasizes thorough auditing.
The report emphasizes thorough auditing.
6. Do not intensify a word unless you have to.
It is very important to write succinctly.
It is important to write succinctly.
7. Do not use an unnecessary adjective.
My past experience in personnel management has been valuable.
My experience in personnel management has been valuable.
8. Do not use unnecessary auxiliary verbs.
Toyota has been using only 177 suppliers per plant.
Toyota uses only 177 suppliers per plant.
9. Do not forget to use the imperative mood of the verb.
The order should be sent right away.
Send the order immediately.
10. Do not use the of-genitive too often.
The answers of the candidates were poor.
The candidates' answers were poor.