

Stylistic advice sheet*

- 1) Nouns are, verbs do—and so if you want your writing to be lively, use active verbs. The verb "to be" is not active or informative. If you use "is" frequently, your writing will become overloaded with things.
- 2) Try to avoid verbs that are nouns in disguise, including the ubiquitous "ize" group ("prioritize") and computer jargon ("network," "interface").
- 3) Be sparing in your use of abstract nouns; be generous with concrete ones. The aim is to avoid floating away into an amorphous haze. Ditto adjectives: nothing is more deadly than strings of abstract adjective-noun clusters linked by tiny verbs. "Abstract verbalization is symptomatic of the culture's denial of its personal agency and responsibility"--snore. When the abstractions pile up, the reasoning often becomes circular (perhaps without the author even knowing it).
- 4) A plethora of adjectives and adverbs may shut out the reader's imagination, or may just sound effusive and "overwritten." Try to avoid vague evaluative adjectives (a good poem, an interesting idea, etc.). Instead, take advantage of your power to describe precisely, using the language with the largest vocabulary on earth.
- 5) "Mistakes were made." Those who want or need to deny personal responsibility (bureaucrats, soldiers, criminals, etc.) often use the passive voice, thus making the object of the action into the subject of the sentence (the true agent disappears). A smart reader knows this technique, and will not accept it blindly. Write honestly and actively, saving the passive voice for those occasions when the subject truly is unknown, the object truly is your focus, or the active construction sounds awkward.
- 6) The main clause signals your major point; the subordinate clauses qualify or reinforce it. Take advantage of the wonders of a main clause.
- 7) Use subordinate clauses to clarify the relationship between your ideas. Compound sentences only connect thoughts, whereas complex sentences explain the nature of their connection.
- 8) Conjunctions and prepositions may all be equal, but they are not all the same. "However" signifies a contradiction, while "nevertheless" overrides it. Be precise in using these connecting words; they can vastly improve the logic and clarity of your writing.
- 9) Notice how often you say "this," "that" and "it."
- 10) Contractions have become increasingly mysterious to the general public, but they still retain meaning. Getting them wrong will jar a knowledgeable reader and will thus diminish your authority. It's=it is; its signals a possessive.
- 11) A few quibbles about diction:
 - a-"Incredible" means, literally, not believable. "Literally" means literally, i.e., not metaphorically. Don't use these words as if they were the meaningless equivalents of exclamation points (and while we're at it, avoid exclamation points in expository prose).

b-Something is unique (the only one of its kind) or not; it cannot be "more unique" or "most unique." The same applies for other superlatives ("ideal," etc.)

c-Try not to resort to "deal with" ("this paper deals with," "Shakespeare deals with"); it is too vague to mean much.

d-You can "center on" but not "center around."

e-"Man" is, grammatically speaking, a false generic; this means "man" often refers only and correctly to the male of the human species, and hence cannot be assumed in all cases to include the entire genus. Although for many centuries very few authors saw a problem in blurring the species and its males, many of your readers may feel alienated if you do the same unconsciously. Thus, while you certainly should quote Milton on "man's first disobedience," try to use a gender-neutral term such as "humanity," "people," or "human beings" in your own writing, unless you have a good historical or polemical reason not to do so. The same problem applies to the use of the pronoun "he" as if it were gender-neutral.

12) A genre (from the Latin words for "kind") identifies a particular category of literature. Please do not call a play a "novel"; to someone who has devoted much of her life to literary study and theatre, this is like scraping your fingernails along the blackboard.

13) Be consistent about verb tenses within a paragraph. I encourage you to use the "literary present tense" to animate your discussion of texts, but be aware that in other fields of study, the conventions may be different.

14) In discussing works written in earlier times, try to avoid the slang of our current cultural moment; it often sounds (or is) anachronistic. Words such as "lifestyle" and "self-esteem," outside their framework in sociology or psychology, can be intrusive and sometimes inappropriate.

15) The introduction to an essay should do just that: it should introduce the main idea in a way that compels your reader's attention. It should not rival the analytic body of your essay in size. Get to your particular topic as quickly as possible so that you can explore it as profoundly as possible.

16) Paragraphs provide a mechanism to organize the ideas in an essay. Opening and closing sentences of paragraphs "stand out," and hence provide a special opportunity for highlighting your ideas or analysis. If you use them to describe or to quote, you are sacrificing that opportunity, so do so sparingly. If you organize paragraphs to follow the story ("Then," "Next,") rather than to direct our attention, you are again losing the chance to emphasize your own thinking.

17) In your conclusion, try to forestall this response: "What you've shown me seems true based on the textual evidence you have marshaled in support of your thesis--but so what?" A conclusion allows you to give a fuller sense of the import and significance of your thesis, and to raise related issues and questions for your reader's further consideration. If you can't answer the "so what?" question, you may need to choose a more challenging thesis.

18) All the above are guidelines, not rules--and even rules can be broken for the sake of style or sense. However, to write most effectively you should know when you are breaking rules or modifying conventions, and do so sparingly.

About citations: If an idea or observation does not derive from your own study, and is not a matter of common knowledge or fact (i.e., you could find it in at least five sources), you *must* say where you learned it. This is a matter of simple honesty. Conversely, you do *not* need to preface all your remarks with “I believe” or “it seems to me”; only do so if you are switching back to your own thoughts from someone else’s, or if you want to give your point special emphasis (because your idea is unconventional, or objectively less persuasive than your others).

If you are quoting more than two lines of verse or five lines of prose, set off the passage (with spaces and indentation) from the body of your essay, and do not use quotation marks. Present the verse in metrical lines, as it appeared in the original text. If the passage is shorter, incorporate it within your paragraph, and separate verse lines with a slash mark (/). Rather than simply inserting a quotation as a freestanding sentence, try to introduce and integrate it into a sentence of your own; this is less jarring and more helpful in directing your reader’s attention (any grammatical changes need to be signaled with brackets). However, don’t try to sustain your own sentence “through” a longer indented quotation, as a rule: it’s too hard to keep your syntax in mind *and* adequately attend to the meaning of the quoted passage.

The longer the quotation, the more you need to analyze it. If you have one particular point to make, use only that section of the text which supports it (although make sure you are true to the original context and syntax, and signal all ellipses and changes).

You can use footnotes or parenthetical citation within the text; the latter works especially well for repeatedly cited sources. Use any standard form of scholarly citation (e.g., MLA, Chicago Manual of Style, etc.), and be consistent. For my essays, if you follow this format for footnotes, you’ll be fine: author, *title* (place of publication: publisher, year): page number. For the bibliography (only necessary if a long essay), it’s: author’s last name first, first name. *Title*. Place of publication: publisher, year.

At the end of a quotation, the commas and periods you add to clarify its place in the sentence go inside the quotation marks, even though they are not part of the quotation (I know this is illogical, but it is the U.S. convention). However, if you have a parenthetical citation at the conclusion of your sentence, the period goes after that citation. For example,
 “Henderson requires too much work.”
 “Henderson requires too much work” (Henderson, p. 20).
 Your semicolons, colons, and parentheses go outside the quotation marks.

Marginal abbreviations I use:

√ : good point, understood

frag: sentence fragment

ww: wrong word (diction mistake)

cs: comma splice

agr: subject-verb or singular-plural noun agreement

ref: unclear, confusing, or nonexistent referent

awk: awkward phrasing

//: problem with parallelism

sp: spelling

cap: capitalize, or don't

p: punctuation oddity or omission

c: change comma usage (add or delete one, as fits)

uncl: meaning unclear

split inf: split infinitive

? : I don't get it, or sometimes an incredulous "really?"

! : "goodness!" or some similar sign of forceful surprise, or amusement at your wit

ss: consult this stylesheet

If the grammatical terms I use in this stylesheet are unfamiliar or hazy, please feel free to speak with me or a writing tutor, or consult a composition handbook. I am always happy to do what I can to help you improve your writing.

*This handout draws extensively upon a similar stylesheet designed by my teacher Prof. E.W.Taylor (Columbia University), to whom I remain most grateful.