

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITERS

What follows is a more or less random gathering of suggestions for improving your writing. The central message to remember is that writing is hard work. Competent writing requires constant vigilance against all the bad habits, imprecisions, and awkward constructions that creep into our prose when we allow ourselves to become careless.

Reference Works

Every writer should have certain minimal tools near at hand, and should use them constantly. These include:

A dictionary (American Heritage and Webster's New World are widely recommended);

A thesaurus;

A manual of style (Chicago Manual of Style, MLA Handbook);

A college handbook (Harbrace or Random House are good ones);

A guide to usage (e.g., Wilson Follett's Modern American Usage, H. W.

Fowler's Modern English Usage, Bergen & Cornelia Evans' A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, etc.);

Remember, the point of reference books is to use them. Don't just let them sit on your shelf. This is especially true of dictionaries, which must be among the most essential and least used tools among students today.

PROBLEMS OF SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR

What follow are some of the most common writing problems among undergraduates today. Note which ones occur most frequently in your own writing, and then try to be extra conscious of them when they occur.

failure to proofread: always a sign of laziness and indifference in a writer. Readers will interpret proofreading errors as a sign that you care little about what you have to say, and will draw their own conclusions about how seriously they should take your argument. (Curiously, despite all assertions to the contrary, proofreading seems to become much sloppier when people write on word processors; the best antidote for this is to print out a draft of your text, proofread the printed version, and then make corrections on the computer.)

spelling errors: more laziness, and far more common than they should be. When in doubt, always use a dictionary. Among the most commonly misspelled words are: occurred, benefited, all right (not alright), a/an, its/it's (very commonly confused), affect/effect, to/two/too, their/there/they're, then/than, led/lead, privilege. But this is the tip of the iceberg.

bad hyphenation: also a sign of laziness. Hyphenate at syllable breaks, and consult a dictionary when in doubt.

adjectival hyphens: when a phrase is used as an adjective, hyphens ordinarily appear between its words. Thus, we speak of the "twentieth century" as a noun without a hyphen, but describe "twentieth-century America" with a hyphen.

imprecise use of words: extremely common, cured by regular use of dictionary. Strive always for precision and clarity. Why is it wrong to say that "Ronald Reagan decimated Walter Mondale in the 1984 election"? Or that "Abraham Lincoln was disinterested in the more extreme forms of abolitionism"?

misunderstood punctuation marks: "-" is a hyphen; "--" is a dash. In American usage, " is a quotation mark, unless you are giving a quotation within a quotation, in which case ' is used. Quotation marks are always used in pairs. A colon (:) is used to point from a full sentence to what immediately follows: a list, a quotation, an appositive, or an explanation or summary. What follows a colon need not be a complete sentence in its own right. A semi-colon (;) is used primarily to separate two main clauses (either of which could generally stand on its own as a sentence) which are more connected with each other than a period would indicate; semi-colons are also used to separate items in a list where simple commas would become confusing.

underuse of commas: commas mark the breathing points in sentences, which is to say that they generally separate clauses from each other. Among the most commonly misused commas are those which separate parenthetical clauses from the rest of the sentence. Thus: "Charles Beard, who authored An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, was among the most influential American historians of the first half of the twentieth century." The commas mark a parenthetical (nonrestrictive) clause, and many students would fail to include one or both of them; the most common error would be to omit the second comma.

overcapitalization: English is not German, which capitalizes all nouns. Only proper names are typically capitalized in English, along with titles and some abbreviations. Words like "industrialization" or "capitalism" are never capitalized, for instance. There are as many exceptions as rules in this area, so again, consult a dictionary whenever you are in doubt.

contractions: generally avoid these in formal prose. Can't should be cannot, won't should be will not, wouldn't should be would not, and so on.

slang and jargon: generally avoid these unless they're clearly appropriate to your audience. "Nixon was really ticked off with Archibald Cox," is a case of slang, and would rarely be suitable in a piece of formal writing. Similarly, "The OPEC oil price increases impacted seriously on the economy" is a case of a fad journalistic word creeping like crabgrass into the language; avoid such usages. For different reasons, the sentence, "Indians relied on anadromous fish for their spring food supplies," will leave most readers in the dark. It is almost always better to use simple language that will not send your reader to the dictionary, so write instead: "Between April and June, Indians counted for food on the spring spawning runs, when ocean-dwelling fish made their annual journey up freshwater streams to lay their eggs." Try replacing jargon like "morbidity and mortality" with "sickness and death," and see how much more lively (!) your prose becomes. Avoid inelegant words that end in -ize (prioritize) or -wise (educationwise).

split infinitives: the rules on this are becoming more relaxed, but it is still wise to avoid split infinitives whenever possible. Thus, you should generally prefer "to go boldly where no man has gone before" over "to boldly go where no man has gone before"--unless, of course, you happen to be Captain Kirk.

adverbial comparatives: nouns and verbs have different comparatives, and you should always be careful about which you need to use. Thus, you would say that "Chicago grew more quickly than St. Louis in the second half of the nineteenth century," not that "Chicago grew quicker than St. Louis...." Conversely, Chicago's had a quicker rate of population increase during this period.

noun-verb agreement: errors here occur most often when subject and verb are separated, and when the writer becomes confused about what the actual subject of the sentence is. For example, "The garden of daffodils and pansies were lovely in the afternoon light" is in error. The subject is "garden", not "daffodils and pansies," so the verb should be "was."

unstable tenses: one of the most common problems in undergraduate writing. In general, stick to the past tense in historical writing. But when you do use another tense, make sure that you use it consistently: do not move randomly back and forth between past and present tense. A bad example of this would be a paragraph that began: "America in 1860 was a nation on the verge of war. The South feels that it must protect its economy and way of life against the attacks of the abolitionists; the North is increasingly torn on the issue of slavery, but was committed to holding the Union together."

complex tenses: if you do not have a clear sense of how to use the various tenses in English, consult a college handbook and go to work on them. Since history writing requires careful attention to past action, pay special attention to the many forms of the past tense. It is less crucial that you know the names of the various verb forms of English than that you develop an ear for when they should be used--but knowing the names helps develop the ear! Examine the different verbs in the following sentences and see whether you can identify why each takes the form that does: "After arriving at Dallas to deliver what would have been a stirring speech, John F. Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald. As Americans began the process of dealing with their grief, they tended to be more aware of the unfulfilled promises Kennedy left behind than they were of the accomplishments he had actually achieved." If you have any trouble distinguishing past perfect, past imperfect, past participles, and infinitives...work on these.

prepositions: all too often, these either dangle or are mischosen. There are many words in English which can be combined only with certain prepositions, and unless you develop a good ear for these combinations--aided always by the dictionary--you will make many errors. Thus, one does not "conform with" something; one "conforms to" something. One does not perform an "investigation into" something, but an "investigation of" something--but one does "look into" something. The judiciary is not "independent from" the executive, but "independent of" the executive. Many such usages are purely idiomatic, and simply have to be learned. Pay attention to them. Dangling prepositions are removed from the words they connect, and should be avoided whenever possible. In the sentence, "Is that the place he was going to?", the "to" dangles; it would work better if the question read, "Is that the place to which he was going?"

bad referents: perhaps the biggest single problem in undergraduate writing, appearing constantly in many insidious guises. The problem is best understood in terms of pronouns: whenever you write a sentence in which the reader has to pause--

even for a fraction of a second--to figure out a pronoun's meaning, you have a bad referent. In the sentence, "Sam was walking with John when he told him the news," there is no way to know who is telling the news to whom. The pronoun "it" is especially susceptible to these problems. Whenever you write a pronoun, look at it closely and ask if there is any possibility that it refers to more than one other noun. Bad referents also occur when a pronoun has no referent at all. Take the following sentences: "Harvard's student population expanded quickly during the period from 1960 to 1980. A major reason was that they now included women." The word "they" in the second sentence has no referent; the author has assumed that the implicit subject of preceding sentence was "students" (or maybe Harvard?), when in fact "population" is the subject. Even harder to detect are bad referents that derive not from pronouns but from misunderstood or ambiguous noun phrases; this occurs especially when past participles serve as adjectives. Try the sentence: "The mayor ran the government and established businesses controlled the economy." Until you reach the end of the sentence, you can't be sure that the mayor didn't establish businesses; in your momentary confusion, you lose your forward momentum and the flow of the sentence is lost. Bad referents are a constant trap for the inattentive writer.

run-on sentences and non-sentences: these occur surprisingly frequently in undergraduate prose. Non-sentences missing some fundamental part of speech, like a verb. Run-on sentences seem to go on and on often trying to pack too much information into a single grammatical unit and connect the pieces together with lots of ands that don't impose a tight unity on the sense of the sentence. The best sentences are generally short and punchy.

STYLISTIC ERRORS

Whole books have been written about the problems of achieving a fine English prose style, and there is no space here to pursue the topic in real depth. Books you may find helpful if you want to work on your prose include the usage guides listed in the preceding section, as well as:

- Strunk & White, The Elements of Style (a real classic);
- John Trimble, Writing with Style;
- Richard Lanham, Style: An Anti-Textbook;
- Bruce Ross-Larson, Edit Yourself; and many others.

clarity: the central goal of all prose. All your energy should be directed toward achieving this end; everything else is secondary to it. Any unintended ambiguity, any sense of confusion in your reader, means that your message has been improperly communicated and probably inaccurately received.

underusing verbs: verbs are what give your sentences energy and life. Use as many of them as possible, and make them as vigorous as possible. Compare the following sentences: "The growth of New York led to conditions of crowding in certain residential neighborhoods." "As New York grew, more and more people crowded in to look for housing in a few key neighborhoods." The second sentence has three lively verbs to the first sentence's single--and rather dull--"led to."

over-use of the verb "to be": the verb "to be" is one of the most over-used verbs in the English language. It has no independent life of its own, but is mainly used to modify other verbs and to connect nouns with adjectives. Using it is little better than using no verbs at all. Consider: "The crowding of New York's residential neighborhoods was a function of immigration and natural population increase in combination with the social geography of ethnic settlement." One little verb struggles to hold 25 sprawling words together. Compare: "Even the birth rate of native New York families would have strained the city's housing stock. But when the immigrants added their numbers to the city's natural growth, certain neighborhoods nearly exploded." A common problem in modern prose, often attributed to the social sciences, is to replace verbs with abstract nouns, a process in which the verb "to be" plays an important and insidious role. These two sentences are a good example.

over-use of adjectives, adverbs, and nouns: a corollary to both of the above rules. Over-use of adjectives and adverbs is a common problem with prose that tries to be elegant or dramatic. Strunk's rule of "Omit needless words" will apply to adjectives and adverbs more than half of the time; English almost always has a noun or a verb that will communicate more precisely with one word what you wanted to communicate with two or more. Take the sentence: "Stepping out into the bright sunshine amidst the delicate singing of the birds, she sensed a passionate stirring in her spirit that left her open to the mysterious excitement of the brave challenge that lay ahead of her." By modern standards, that's pretty ornate, and would make most readers uncomfortable. Try instead: "She left the house that morning excited by the prospect ahead of her." Useless modifiers that can almost always be omitted include such old friends as certainly, hopefully, actually, in fact, in particular, indeed, necessarily, needless to say, particularly, really, somewhat, very, and so on. Phrases such as "the fact that," "the number of," "the amount of," "the field of," "the idea of," "the degree of," and so on, can almost always be cut with no loss at all to your meaning.

associated rules: prefer concrete over abstract vocabulary. Avoid purple prose. Avoid cliches. Avoid latinate vocabulary: prefer short words to long ones.

avoid the passive voice: the passive construction often saps life from a sentence. It is constructed by inverting the subject and object, taking the active verb and turning it into a past participle, and adding the auxiliary verb "to be." Thus, "He ran the circus" becomes "The circus was run by him." Often the subject disappears altogether in such constructions, which is one of its attractions for writers: you can escape having to assert who was responsible for causing an event. "Blacks were often lynched during the 1920's" omits the agent and weakens the verb; better to say, "The Ku Klux Klan and other racist organizations often lynched blacks during the 1920's."

sentence length: generally prefer short sentences to long ones, but vary the length of your sentences to achieve changes in rhythm. "The morning began with the resignation of the chief of staff, who had finally had enough of the strains under which he had been working, and by the end of the afternoon, many of the officers found themselves with a host of new obligations and responsibilities." There's nothing formally wrong with that sentence, but it would probably be better if shortened. So try: "That morning, the chief of staff finally broke under the strain of his duties. He resigned. As a result, by the end of the afternoon, the other officers found themselves with a host of new obligations and responsibilities."

parallelism: use parallel syntax to express parallel ideas. Compare "new ways of weaving cloth and to sew garments" with "new ways of weaving cloth and sewing garments." The latter is much easier to follow, and flows much more smoothly.

sexist and racist language: be aware that there is a major political debate among writers these days over the traditional use of the male pronoun to represent any individual, whether female or male, and the traditional use of the singular ("the Indian" or "the Black") to represent a complex group of people. Replacing every instance of "he" with "he or she" is often inelegant, but also more accurate. Another solution is to refer to plural groups as plural groups, so that when you mean to refer to a group that includes both men and women, use the ungendered "they." Certainly it is less racist to speak of "Blacks" than to speak of "the Black" as if the latter were a single (usually male) undifferentiated racial category. There are no easy answers to these problems, but you should at least consider what to do with them in your own prose.

LARGER ISSUES:

All quotations must be exact. Inserting your own misspellings or changes in punctuation is to misrepresent the original author, and demonstrates your own unreliability as a historian.

Assume infinite intelligence and infinite ignorance in your reader; explain everything.

Paragraphs should form discrete and coherent arguments. All parts of a paragraph should revolve around a central idea.

Introduce all people and other important details. Never use a quotation without letting the reader know who's speaking. Keep constant track of time and make sure your reader always knows when and where a given event is taking place.

Keep what's important at the center. What's your argument?

Follow a clear trajectory. Summarize whenever you've reached an important waystation, and keep setting signposts so the reader will know where you've been and where you're going. Effective signposting is probably the single most important indication that a reader is paying attention to his or her audience.

Strive always for clarity.