

Some Comments on Writing.--Jim O'Hara <http://www.unc.edu/~oharaj/writingtips.pdf>

1. Many college papers have moderate to serious problems with writing style. Some will complain that the content is more important than style, but stylistic problems can form an insurmountable barrier between your ideas and your readers.
2. Spelling mistakes are distracting and insulting. **Never write a paper without a good dictionary within reach**, and you should go to it whenever you're not absolutely sure. Budget your time so that you're not printing at 10:29 a.m. for a 10:30 class, with no time to proofread: either you correct errors or I do.
3. Consult the dictionary carefully for any word about whose **meaning** you have any doubts.
4. Read your rough draft carefully for clarity. Do not be satisfied with any awkward phrase; if it sounds awkward to you, who know what you're trying to say, it will bother or mystify anyone else. Do not give up if your first attempt to smooth out a rough spot fails: keep at it, and consider recasting the structure of the sentence to eliminate the problem area. **Rewrite, reread, rewrite, reread, rewrite.**
5. When you've finished the rough draft, look again at your **first paragraph**, and consider changing it, or even replacing it. Often you will have written the first paragraph before the precise form and content of the paper were clear in your mind: now you can go back and write an introductory paragraph that better fits your final product. No topic in the last half of your paper should be a complete surprise to the reader. Don't get stuck making the first paragraph perfect at first, but always look back when you've finished a draft of the paper, and think about rewriting it either a little or a lot. Does it do what it needs to do to make the paper effective? Does it introduce or set up the paper so that your argument is clear and easy to follow? Did you change your mind or get smarter about any issues while writing the paper?
6. The first sentence of each paragraph does not have to be a **topic sentence** indicating what will be in the paragraph, but if it isn't, you should have some idea of why it isn't, and whether a reader can tell where he or she is in your argument. (On rules generally: you can break any rule, but should know why you're doing so.)
7. More generally, the reader should always know **where he or she is in your argument**, and how each new statement, claim, argument, or piece of evidence fits into the larger argument. Sometimes papers that don't allow for this will be criticized for lack of "focus" or for problems in the "flow" of the argument (although at times the problem will be with the argument and not your method of presentation).
8. **Be concise. Omit needless words.** Search diligently for ways to be more economical. Write as though the ink and paper you are using is too valuable for you to use any more than is necessary. This is how your readers will often feel about the time they spend reading your paper/essay/column/book/job application.
9. Your writing style for **formal papers** should be more formal than speech (unless you speak extremely well), but it should not be stilted or unnatural. Do not use phrases or words with which you are uncomfortable, thinking they will make you look smarter, unless you've thought long and hard about exactly what they mean.
10. After you've printed your paper, **proofread** it with great care for spelling mistakes, typos, and missing words or sentences, and (it's not too late) for stylistic problems. The computer makes it easier to correct errors, but also helps introintroduce some. Have a friend or roommate proofread; you can return the favor later.
11. In talking about a writer's work, we often use the present **tense** ("Sallust says, Sallust suggests"). In talking about what happens in a literary work, we also generally use the present tense ("Caesar argues," "Cato claims")
12. A helpful guide to style is W. **Strunk** and E.B. **White**, *The Elements of Style*. They have many examples of the right and wrong way to do things, and have inspired a lot of what I say here, although some of what they say is old-fashioned and questionable. Many bookstores have copies, and at least an older version of it (by Strunk alone) is now available [on-line](#). See also below #30 on UNC's Writing Center.
13. Be extremely careful when copying **quotations**; it is easy to make mistakes. Pay special attention as well to any **names** that may be new to you: they are easy to spell wrong, but also easy to check, and a paper looks extremely careless when characters' names are spelled incorrectly. It's also good to spell the professor's name right.

14. **Work on your style**, and not just the night before the paper is due. Think of your four years in college as a time in which your writing will make the most dramatic improvement in your life. Read good writers. Think about style when you read; think about ways of expressing ideas, of varying sentence structure, of avoiding ambiguity or vagueness. Think about how arguments are structured, how sentences flow and add to what has gone before, how necessary information is presented in the best possible sequence. Think about how the "rules" about introductory paragraphs or topic sentences can be internalized as the desire to place before the reader anything he/she needs to know in order to understand or be persuaded by what comes next.

15. Try not to use **quotations** either too much or too little. Do not write a paper that consists on quotations strung together with only marginal input from you. On the other hand, do not hesitate to cite or quote specific passages to support you argument, and always give the page or book and line reference in an unambiguous way. Learn or ask about the conventions of citation in any new field (e.g. Classics). Work too on introducing quotations effectively and smoothly (don't say "here's another good quote:").

Format for quotations: if you refer to a passage in Homer without quoting it, put the book and line numbers in parentheses after the reference, but before the final punctuation; in the middle of a sentence, put the numbers before the comma (*Iliad* 3.452-55), and at the end of the sentence, put them before the period (*Il.* 1.787). If your paper is about the *Iliad*, you do not have to say this every time you quote a passage; if you switch back and forth between different authors or works, use abbreviations to distinguish one (*Il.* 7.42-47) from the other (*Od.* 4.122-27). If you make repeated references to passages with the same book, you may omit the book reference (122-49). Avoid saying "lines" or "ll" or "verses" or "vv." When quoting a phrase or up to two verses, put the words in the text, in quotation marks, using parentheses or commas where necessary, and a slash (/) between verses: "Always be the best, my boy, the bravest, / and hold your head up high above the others" (*Il.* 6.xx-xx). When you quote **three or more verses**, indent them, single-space, with double-space before and after, and no underlining, and no quotation marks:

Always be the best, my boy, the bravest,
and hold your head up high above the others.
Never disgrace the generation of your fathers.
(*Iliad* 6.xx-xx, Fagles trans.)

Similarly, if you quote extensively from something in prose, you indent and single-space, with no quotation marks:

This portrayal of Hector and his wife shows and tells us that the greatest
Trojan fighter, as well as all the other fighters, wish to return home
to their wives and quit the endless torments of this war, just as many
Argives would like to return to their homes.

16. Non-sentences or **sentence-fragments**. Such as this. Sentences that may go on and on but have no main verb. Okay in your first novel but not in formal papers.

17. Do not make errors with **possessives** (singular: man's; plural: dogs' or women's; words ending in s: Augustus' [there are some different ideas about this third category]) and plurals, which except in very limited circumstances DO NOT HAVE AN APOSTROPHE. Possessive pronouns do not have an apostrophe: his, her, their, and the ever-tricky its. English has an awkward system but we're stuck with it; you can be forgiven for not having mastered possessives in grammar school or high school but there is no excuse for not doing so now. RESOLVE TO BECOME A PERSON WHO STOPS MAKING ERRORS WITH POSSESSIVES.

18. **Pronouns**, including relative pronouns (who, which, etc.) **must have a clear antecedent** (the word to which they refer back), with which they must agree in number. Restructure any sentence with ambiguous pronouns.

19. When you have a **comma** before some parenthetical material, you need **another one** after it to indicate you're going back to the main sentence structure. Don't write "Cato's argument, coming after Caesar's won the day." You need another comma after "Caesar's." Not "Marius, who was a man of the people won the war," but "Marius, who was a man of the people, won the war."

20. Words and phrases like "the fact that," "that is," and "very" usually take up more space than they're worth. Make every word count.

21. Try not to **split infinitives** in formal writing by putting a word between the "to" and the verb ("to **boldly** go"). This is arguably an old-fashioned, dying rule, but it's good to know about, since some readers react poorly to it.

22. One favorite way for student writers to be **wordy** is to say "What Caesar wants is" instead of "Caesar wants," or

"There were some senators who" instead of "Some senators" or "Because of the fact that" instead of "Because."
Direct, concise writing is the best; with concise writing you also get to say a lot more in a few pages.

23. **Do not join independent clauses with just a comma**, they must have a conjunction or a semi-colon. (That sentence exemplifies the problem: change to "comma; they" or "comma, for.") More examples: If you want to say both "I went to the kitchen," and "I made some toast," you can't just say

"I went to the kitchen, I made some toast."

You need some other connective:

"I went to the kitchen; I made some toast." (Learn about, but don't overuse, the semi-colon.)

"I went to the kitchen, and I made some toast."

"I went to the kitchen, where I made some toast."

"After I went to the kitchen, I made some toast."

This error makes your writing less like writing and more like casual speech; you are free to write this way in novels, but not formal papers. (Don't write the way I lecture: my mouth doesn't have a backspace key; if it did I would sound much more eloquent.)

24. One of the keys to writing well is to **learn how to subordinate clauses** as in # 23 and in other ways. This both helps you to vary sentence structure (e.g. linking choppy sentences), and also can make the relationship between your statements more clear, so that your sentences and arguments flow. Think about this, read about it, and watch what good writers do.

25. Make sure singular **subjects** have singular **verbs**, and plural or compound subjects have plural verbs. You all know this, but it's easy to get it wrong in a long sentence or with a compound subject ("Courage and wisdom, especially in a time of turmoil for the Republic, is(XXXX) necessary for the survival of")

26. Make sure that **adjectives** and **participles** actually modify the word you want them to, especially at the start of a sentence. In "Written in the 40's, Sallust makes his histories relevant..." "written" modifies "Sallust" not "histories." Same with "Carefully analyzed, we can understand Sallust...." In these cases "written" and "analyzed" are "**dangling participles**" that can't modify the words that structurally they must modify. So too "Rushing out the door, his hat fell off," where the hat seems to be rushing.

27. If you omit words from a quotation (quotation, by the way, is a more elegant word than quote, which used to be just a verb), use an **ellipsis**: three dots ..., but if you do it at the end of a sentence, add a fourth one, as the period: ("My nobility is of the old fashioned kind My opponents are different.")

28. Again: proofread maniacally always. Always right and type with a dictionary nearby and use it whenever you're not sure exactly what a word means, or how its spelled. If you don't look it up, I'll have too. Read through a paper before you hand it in and correct typos by pencil or pen. Always check quotes and especially names of characters against the original. Reading out loud, or switching off with a friend to proofread each other, are both good practices.

29. Please print, type, or write by hand **page numbers**; if you don't I must.

30. **The Writing Center** is in the [Student and Academic Services Building](#) at the intersection of Manning Drive and Ridge Road, **phone 962-7710**; see their **website** at <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>, which has lots of material online as well.

31. Become familiar with the rules about **plagiarism** as discussed in the Honor Code; see <http://instrument.unc.edu/> and <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html>. Two additional comments: 1) If in doubt, find out. 2) If you're in a panic and your life is falling apart, it's better to turn in a bad paper, or turn in nothing but go see the professor, than to plagiarize.