

WRITING WELL*

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler” (Albert Einstein)

“Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly” (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Writing well involves thinking. It is not possible to separate the quality of one's thinking from its written expression. In this course, no distinction will be made between good communication and good content. To perform well on your essays you must both think and write well. Here are some things to work on in your writing, followed by a key to symbols I will use when evaluating your essays.

General imperatives and suggestions for your writing:

- Carefully write your introductory paragraph, indicating your purpose and how you plan to approach it.
- Avoid referring to your own writing, such as, ‘in this paper’ (or paper, thesis, dissertation, whatever). Just get into the analysis. Active voice, first person, is preferred to passive constructions.
- Write a conclusion to each essay (this can but need not include a summary of your argument).
- Avoid duplicate and triplicates of the same word in a sentence, and scrutinize paragraphs for repeated words where one could be deleted or a synonym used.
- Minimize unusual and fancy words, which lose their impact by overuse. The more unusual a word is the less often it should appear. Some words stand out so much they should appear no more than once in a book, or chapter, and they should be used strategically to enhance dramatically some particular point.
- Make sure there are transitions between paragraphs. New paragraphs should not be abrupt and seem to come "out of nowhere." Your writing should flow in an understandable fashion from beginning to end.
- Do not use contractions in most non-fiction writing, e.g., write out "do not" instead of using "don't".
- Make antecedents clear: every time you use pronouns – such as this, these, it, his, her, their, etc. – make absolutely certain the referent is clear. This is nowhere more important than in making clear who the speaker is: Are you summarizing someone else, for example, or speaking for yourself? (Hint, inject phrases such as: "she continued," "she concluded," "he contended", "he averred" "she builds this argument on...". Such phrases make it clear that you are still describing somebody else's thought, rather than launching into your own analysis. Phrases such as "it seems to me" can also be used to indicate your own thinking, if this is not otherwise obvious.)
- In American English, usually punctuation comes before quotation marks, but you should also learn the exceptions. Learn the differences between American and the spelling used in Britain and its commonwealth; toward, for example, rather than towards, should be used in the United States.

** See Strunk, White, and Angel, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed., and Williams, *Style*, 7th ed., 2003, both published by Longman.

- Do not make statements of opinion without explaining your assumptions with regard to moral principles, or the facts that you believe back up your views. Ask yourself, if someone else was reading your essay, could that person legitimately ask you questions such as "Why?" or "How do you know that?" If such questions are unanswered, answer them, or explain why such answers are beyond the scope of your essay.
- Be pithy. Avoid unnecessary words and phrases. Shorter sentences are usually clearer, and often provide a powerful emphasis. Use few modifiers (adverbs and adjectives). Modifiers should be minimized so the ones you use will have more of an impact. Ask yourself if they are really needed. Use long and complex sentences only when what you are trying to convey requires them.
- Avoid beginning sentences with 'However', 'But', and 'For example'. It is best, for example, to put however and for example within commas after a phrase that introduces the sentence, as was done earlier in the sentence you are now reading.
- Avoid tautology (needless repetition). Especially, minimize "previewing" and "reviewing," namely, telling the reader what you are going to do and then what you just did. Just do it.
- Write and rewrite and re-organize (see item immediately above). Most writers vastly under value the improvements that come through thoughtful revisions. Lucid writing almost never results from first drafts. If you find yourself directing traffic, saying things such as, "As I said earlier" or "As I will discuss presently," there is usually an organizational problem in your essay. By moving things around and reworking transitions, you can avoid such traffic-directing. Your goal should be to say things once and then move on, with the main exceptions in an introductory paragraph or when you think a lucid summary is needed as part of, or preceding, your concluding argument.
- Use quotations judiciously. It is when you put things in your own words (with fewer quotes) that it becomes clearer how deeply you understand the material – and it is that process of putting it into your own words that actually deepens your understanding. Quotations should be reserved for occasions when: (1) only a quotation would provide credible evidence for an argument you are making – in other words – in cases that demand evidence and readers should not be expected to take your word for it; (2) an especially powerful, eloquent, or memorable quotation will enhance your overall presentation; (3) when the quotation is so pithy that you could not summarize an author's point of view in fewer words than she or he did.
- Proof read carefully. Also have a friend proof read your essays and tell you where he or he finds unclear any aspect of it.
- Consider writing in the simple past tense, even regarding recent events, as recommended and explained in the style guidelines for the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*: "Past tense articles have a longer stylistic shelf life, for in a few years, phrases like 'recently' are outdated, but the past tense continues to be apropos. The past tense also eliminates the stylistic awkwardness that accompanies references to the dead in the present tense. Even though we may consider the ideas of great thinkers to be of eternal interest, it is nevertheless literally untrue that Socrates still argues, suggests, implies, avers, or contends." See the [JSRNC submission guidelines](#) for more ideas.

The symbols on the following page refer to the major mistakes I expect you to avoid in your essays. These symbols will also serve as a key to some of my comments.

AC	Avoid contractions.	NRQ	Not (or inadequately) responsive to the question
AF	Avoid “filler” and “fluff” – do not waste time – get directly to the central issues.	OS	Overstatement (avoid statements such as “never” and “always” unless no exceptions exist, i.e., unless you have defended them)
AI	Avoid intensifiers (such as “very”).	S	Simplify sentence – Your sentence(s) are too long or use unnecessarily obscure words. (Solutions: divide the section into more sentences and/or simplify the language. Generally speaking, use the simplest words that can express what you wish to convey.)
ANT	Antecedent Unclear	SP	Spelling
AP	Avoid passive constructions. It is usually best to write in the active voice.	SU	Speaker unclear (see comments above)
AWK	Awkward – The sentence structure is awkward, although the meaning is not completely lost.	TFT	Delete “the fact that” and similar unnecessary phrases.
DEF	Define	UC	Unclear – Something is missing, or the sentence structure is poor, which has confused the meaning
DEV	Develop this section – more discussion needed.	URQ	Unresponsive to the Question
DP	Dangling participle/preposition – Do not end sentences with words such as: of, about, with (by inserting the word earlier in the sentence and including the word “which,” you can usually solve the problem).	WT	Wrong Tense (or the tenses are inconsistent) – Make the singular and plural agree (e.g. between subject (noun), pronoun, and verb). Or, make past, present and future tense agree.
EX	Explain	WW	Wrong word (or better word choice is possible)
IS	Incomplete sentence/sentence fragment (usually has no verb)		
MA	Misplaced adverb – Generally speaking, do not separate a verb from the adverb. Wrong: He wrote about the ethics of ingestion carefully. Right: He wrote carefully about the ethics of ingestion. (The verb, “wrote,” is adjacent to the adverb, “carefully.”)		
MI	Misuse of verb “is” – Do use the verb “is” when you should use a phrase such as “refers to.” E.g.: “The civil religion thesis is religious nationalism” (wrong); “The civil religion thesis refers to the idea that patriotism and nationalism can themselves become religions phenomena” (correct).		

IF YOU DO MAKE GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AT LEAST DO NOT MAKE THE ONES THIS PAGE REMINDS YOU TO AVOID.