

## 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.
- Write a conclusion to each essay (this can but need not always include a summary of your argument).
- Avoid tautology (needless repetition), especially unnecessary “previewing” and “reviewing,” namely, telling the reader what you are going to do and then what you just did. Make the Nike advertisement your writing mantra and just do it.
- 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."
- Do not use contractions in most non-fiction writing, e.g., write out "do not" instead of using "don't".
- Reduce modifiers such as “very” and “certainly.” They can almost always be eliminated without losing meaning. If you do not use them often they will better convey what you are trying to emphasize when you do use them.
- 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," "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.)

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

- In American English, usually punctuation comes before quotation marks, but you should also learn the exceptions.
- 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.
- Shorter sentences are usually clearer, and often provide a powerful emphasis. Use long and complex sentences only when what you are trying to convey demands 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.
- Write and rewrite and re-organize. 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.
- Proof read carefully. Also have a friend proof read your essays and tell you where she or he finds unclear any aspect of it.

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”).		
ANT	Antecedent Unclear	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.)
AP	Avoid passive constructions. It is usually best to write in the active voice.		
AWK	Awkward – The sentence structure is awkward, although the meaning is not completely lost.		
DEF	Define	SP	Spelling
DEV	Develop this section – more discussion needed.	SU	Speaker unclear (see comments above)
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).	TFT	Delete “the fact that” and similar unnecessary phrases.
		UC	Unclear – Something is missing, or the sentence structure is poor, which has confused the meaning
EX	Explain	URQ	Unresponsive to the Question
IS	Incomplete sentence/sentence fragment (usually has no verb)	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.
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.”)	WW	Wrong word (or better word choice is possible)
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.**