

A Few Things About Writing

Aside from all the memorable times, what's college good for? Consider the following three things, in ascending order of importance.

First, you should hold onto a few facts and figures learned in the classroom. Knowing that modern income taxation began in 1913 with the 16th Amendment to the Constitution, for instance, may prove helpful at a career-critical cocktail party somewhere down the road.

Second, you should learn how to learn. After a few years here, you should be armed with the skills and desire necessary to continue educating yourself. Your career options and earning capacity will depend in substantial part not on what you have learned at the UW—though you should absorb as much as possible here—but on how effectively you can learn at work. Your colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients, and other innocent bystanders will have a great deal to teach you. Be ready.

Third, you should learn how to write. In nearly any profession, well-crafted words will lead you where you want to go. In other words, *you are what you write*. I cannot emphasize this point strongly enough. You should assume that your professional life after college will require you to write clearly, concisely, and cogently.

So I want you to give me your best work. In return for your diligence, I will provide the feedback any writer needs to improve. Even your professors—especially your professors!—solicit critical reviews from friends and colleagues before sending articles or book manuscripts to editors. In the spirit of the academy, then, I encourage you to exploit one another ruthlessly. Get help from your friends, your family, telemarketers who disturb you during dinner—“Well, now that you’ve called, do you like ‘indefatigable’ or ‘unyielding’ in this sentence?”—and, of course, the folks at the Writing Center (more about them later). Writing is intensely personal, but you should practice it as a social enterprise whenever possible. And just as you submit your writing to others’ scrutiny, you should edit their work as well. An old saw suggests that one cannot be a good editor without being a good writer or be a good writer without being a good editor. Do both.

You get the point: I take writing seriously because it's important. Fortunately, it can be a good deal of fun as well. Take chances in your writing. Write precisely, but not like a machine. Be at ease in your prose, but try not to be too cute. Throw a few big words in, but remember that a well-placed little word can be downright compelling and that inordinately polysyllabic terminology can sound silly (see?). Writing well requires you to find the right synthesis of these qualities. I hope I can help you do exactly that.

The Ten Commandments, 2nd Edition

Thou Shan't Burden Your Papers With Cover Sheets

Trees are scarce. Save them by forsaking cover sheets at all times. In this course, you should simply place the date and the course number in the upper right corner of the first page (write your name *only* on the back of the last page). If the aesthetics of this Spartan style bother you, get over it. I hate cover sheets. Similarly, do not suffocate your papers in those hideous plastic folders and do not use paper clips or more than one staple to bind your pages. Your papers will speak quite nicely for themselves without these adornments. More importantly, all of this extra business makes reading and responding to your papers difficult, so be good to me: keep your submissions elegantly simple.

Thou Shalt Include Page Numbers Without Fail

You need not number the first page, but please check to see that each subsequent page is numbered. If you forget to tell the computer to do this, feel free to write them in. Page numbers help your readers keep track of the paper and refer to specific passages in their comments.

Thou Shan't Rely On A Spellchecker To Do (All Of) Your Job

Technology is your friend, of course, and you should employ it religiously. But always read your work carefully to catch any mistakes the computer cannot recognize—and there are plenty. My mom once submitted a grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities with “the Untied States” in the first sentence. Ouch.

Thou Shalt Provide Your Work With a Suitable Title

Titles are important. A good title captures not only a paper's topic, but something of its central argument as well. A poor title might not ruin a good paper, but an outstanding one can make a good paper better. Keep in mind that colons facilitate complex titles—“A Tragedy of the Commons: State Aid to Railroads in the 19th Century”—but they are not essential. Some writers insist that good social science requires a colon in the title. That's ridiculous. Colons are acceptable but optional. In fact, they are so commonplace that a title-without-colon can be striking in its simplicity.

Thou Shan't Submit Error-Ridden Papers

There is no excuse for sloppy work. If your paper suffers from too many glaring, correctable errors, I will simply stop reading it. We all miss a little something here and there, but basic errors should be minimal and approaching zero. I look forward to devoting a good deal of my time to assisting you in becoming a better writer, but careless papers do not merit the substantial commitment I am prepared to make. If this commandment seems unnecessary or gratuitous, well, you'd be surprised.

Thou Shalt Provide Section Headings

In papers of (roughly) 1,000 words or more, section headings help your reader follow your progress through a series of central ideas. Set section headings apart from the text by applying **bold** or *italic* styles. I am not a great fan of underlining, but I'll accept it as a means of distinguishing section headings. One more note: Do not "orphan" your section headings by leaving them alone at the bottom of a page. Check "print preview" to ensure that your section headings are where they belong.

Thou Shalt Minimize The Passive Voice

You should avoid passive verbs as much as possible—they are weak and almost always inferior to more active formulations. Consider a simple example: "We made mistakes" is infinitely clearer and more forceful than "Mistakes were made." You needn't (and can't) eliminate all passive verbs (i.e., any form of "to be") but you should use them as little as possible. Your writing will be more concise and more effective when you do.

Thou Shalt Avoid Clichés

In the final analysis, this commandment calls in a very real sense for you to hit the nail on the head—if there is any method to your madness. As this painful sentence suggests, trite expressions are deadly. Avoid them unless your writing calls for self-conscious satire.

Thou Shan't Apply For Work At The Department Of Redundancy Department

Careful repetition or restatement can assist you in clarifying an argument, but redundancy, if it is "visible to the eye" (aaack!), only muddles your writing.

Thou Shalt Know and Live by the Timeless Maxim "Less is More"

The most common problem I encounter (and this is not at all limited to undergraduates) is a lack of economy in writing. Good writers work hard to purge their prose of unnecessary words, and the harder you look, the more you'll find. Be ruthless in making your writing as efficient—and therefore as effective—as possible.

Grading Criteria

Here's what I'll look for in your writing. Though the two are closely linked, I consider a paper's *substance* and *presentation*. The breakdown looks (more or less) like this...

I. Substance (70 points)

- A. *Argument*—35 points—You offer a cogent, persuasive, and creative main argument.
- B. *Support*—25 points—To support your claims, you invoke and cite an appropriate number of relevant readings and lectures.
- C. *Organization*—10 points—You provide a clear introduction, a statement that foreshadows the progression of your paper, and an effective conclusion that does more than simply restate your argument. You organize paragraphs sensibly and make the reader's job easy by presenting your ideas in a coherent, systematic way.

II. Presentation (30 Points)

- A. *Linguistic Presentation*—20 points—You present a paper with near-flawless diction, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and syntax.
- B. *Aesthetic Presentation*—10 points—You adhere faithfully to format and layout rules (see below).

Format and Layout Rules

A few simple guidelines for your written submissions in this course: Leave *one-inch margins* on all sides, use a *font* that is neither too small nor too large, include *page numbers* on all but the first page, *cite others' work and ideas* in a consistent manner, *double-space* your lines, and write your name *on the back of the last page only*.

A Few Suggestions About the Process

- Before setting off aimlessly, sketch some sort of outline. Unless you find it helpful, you don't need an excessively organized outline. Just let your thoughts flow onto a piece of paper. I tend to do my best "outlining" in the crowded corners of a notepad or a paper assignment sheet. However you do it, think before you write, and think freely. Don't be afraid to write your way into new ideas as well, which is another way of saying: "How can I know what I think before I write it?"
- When working at more than one sitting, don't end a session when you're completely out of ideas. Instead, stop one paragraph (or idea) before your brain shuts down. Recognizing this moment can be difficult, but I think you'll find it if you look for it. Simply write a few words or a sentence or two that can get you started when you return to the paper next time. Momentum is everything; generating it from scratch can be the most daunting obstacle in writing. Hemingway once called blank paper "the white bull." Give yourself a rolling start by introducing an idea that can get you going at your next session.
- Read your writing out loud to check for funky passages you might not pick up without hearing them. You might even read your draft to someone else, but at the very least you should mumble it to yourself. I guarantee you'll catch a few oddities.
- Finish your paper far enough in advance of the due date that you can leave it alone for a day or two before returning to it with a fresh set of eyes before turning it in. I know this is asking a great deal, and I admit that I do not always practice what I'm preaching here. But I can also tell you that when I *do* follow this piece of advice, my writing is sharper for the effort. When you let a paper sit for a couple of days—or even for a few hours if that's all you have—you achieve the sort of separation you need to be a keen editor of your own work. After spending unholy amounts of time with your creation, you have likely found and corrected all the errors you can without removing yourself from it. So take a break. Let the thing cool off, distract yourself for a while, and return to the paper with a vengeance. A final round of revising will pay substantial dividends.
- Finally, please feel free to turn to our department's excellent Writing Center.

Political Science Writing Center
Smith 220B
(206) 616-3895
pswrite@u.washington.edu
<http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/>

The center is staffed with skilled writers and editors who will gladly assist you with your papers. The staff can provide more detailed assistance if you come to them with a relatively complete draft, but do not hesitate to seek help in the early phases of your projects. Keep in mind that the tutors at the Writing Center will not edit, correct, or proofread your papers. They are writing instructors, not copy editors, which leads me to my next point concerning...

48 Deadly Sins

I've assembled a list of several common and easy-to-make mistakes. You should consult this now, every night before going to sleep, and whenever you're unsure about something. This is hardly exhaustive, and I do not intend to be pedantic about these things. I learned many of these things the hard way—in professors' red ink. I've marked my Top Ten Pet Peeves with asterisks. Do you have other candidates for inclusion in this linguistic Hall of Shame?

A/An—Use *a* before consonant sounds and *an* before vowel sounds. This rule is simple enough, but I want to draw your attention to an ongoing controversy. Certain writers prefer *an* before several variations of the word “history,” but this bizarre choice assumes a pronunciation that sounds like “istory.” Try saying that, and then tell me if you want to use an *an* there. Use an *a* instead: “In *The Politics Presidents Make*, Stephen Skowronek presents a historical account of presidential politics.”

A lot—It's not “alot”: “Even at the height of the impeachment proceedings, Clinton raised *a lot* of money for the Democratic Party.”

Affect/Effect—Affect is a verb meaning to alter or influence; effect is a verb meaning to bring about or cause. “Ken Starr *affected* the outcome of the 1998 congressional elections by effecting a sense of outrage among Democratic voters.” Of course “effect” can also be used as a noun meaning consequence or result, as in “One *effect* of the Starr investigation was higher-than-expected Democratic turnout.”

All right—Not “alright.”

***Anxious/Eager**—This is one of the all-time classics. Though most of us use *anxious* when we mean *eager*, these words are *not synonymous*. To say one is anxious is to say that one has anxiety, worries, or nervousness about something. To say one is eager means one wants to do something soon. I'm eager to be less anxious about the usage of these terms.

Any time—Not “anytime.”

***Assure/Ensure/Insure**—They're close in meaning, but not interchangeable. *Ensure* means to make sure: “Before starting the car, I ensured that the baby was buckled in.” *Assure* is a bit different; you assure another person of something: “After ensuring that the baby was buckled in, I assured her mother that everything would be fine.” Careful writers use *insure* only in referring to the business of insurance: “Even if I hadn't worn my seat belt, my life was insured for \$500,000.”

Between/Among—Use *between* when referring to two entities, as in “American politics reflects an enduring tension between liberalism and republicanism.” Use *among* when referring to three or more entities, as in “The 2000 presidential election forced voters to choose among Gore, Bush, Nader, and several minor-party candidates.”

Capitalization—This is a pesky problem for many of us. I can't begin to write every rule of capitalization, but here are a few pointers with special relevance for my courses. First, you should capitalize party names (as in the Democratic and Republican Parties and Democrats and Republicans). After all, they're proper nouns! You should capitalize President when it attaches directly to a specific occupant of the White House, as in "President Bush." But you should not capitalize president if you don't follow it with a name, as in "The president often follows Karl Rove's political advice." The rules here are simple: if it's a proper noun, capitalize it. If it isn't, don't.

Congress—Capitalize the word *Congress* when referring to our national legislature, but do not capitalize the adjective *congressional*.

Congressmen—Unless you intend to refer only to male members of Congress, do not write "Congressmen." This is not about political correctness; it's about precise writing. In reference to members of our national legislature, after all, "Congressmen" is simply wrong. "Members of Congress," "Representatives," and "Senators" are acceptable alternatives where appropriate. In a related matter, observers of American politics have traditionally used the term "Congressman/woman/ member" to refer to members of the House of Representatives. This is not ideal. "Congressmembers" technically refers to both representatives and senators. Nevertheless, I will grudgingly accept this idiomatic usage if you find it convenient.

***Could of/Could have**—Think about it. *Could of* is an outrage. Similarly, "should of" and "would of" are entirely inexplicable. Everyone *should have* learned these things in the second grade.

Data—*Data* is plural; datum is singular. Do not write "The data indicates that parties affect policy outcomes." Instead, write "The data *indicate* that parties affect policy outcomes."

Ellipses—Ellipses are used to indicate the omission of words or (occasionally) for literary effect in the middle or at the end of a sentence. They consist of three dots separated by spaces (and surrounded by spaces): "I don't remember . . . what happened," she said. Those three dots may or may not be preceded by a period, depending on whether the omission is in the middle of a sentence. The period, as always, is flush with the preceding letter, and there is a space between the period and the first ellipsis: "This is a fine mess. . . .Why don't you do something about it?" There is no need to use ellipses at the beginning or end of a quotation, except perhaps to create the feeling of trailing-off at the end (I thought I did the right thing, but then again . . .).

Entitled/Titled—You may be *entitled* to see any play you want, but the famous Thornton Wilder play is *titled* "Our Town." Note the lack of a comma between titled and the title. The same rule applies to books you may cite in writing papers for this or any other course.

Everyday/Every day—*Everyday* is an adjective, as in "Gary Payton is the Sonics' everyday point guard." *Every day* is simply two words meaning "every day." That's simple enough.

Farther/Further—Use *farther* only to refer to distances, as in "John Daly hits a golf ball farther than anyone else on the PGA Tour." Use *further* when you want to imply a non-spatial separation such as "Nothing could be further from the truth." It's a simple rule: "farther" refers only (and always) to actual distances.

Female/Women—In most cases, use *women* as the (plural) noun and *female* as the adjective: Female soldiers, female priests. Phrases like “women senators” should be confined to quotations of people who have actually—and inexplicably—uttered those words. Think about it: Does anybody *ever* say “men senators”? “Female” is fine as a noun when referring to animals, when it hasn’t been established whether the person in question is a woman or a girl, and when referring to a group that includes both women and girls.

Freshman/Freshmen—Don’t use the plural of freshman as an adjective. It’s *freshman* Republicans, not “freshmen Republicans,” just as it’s *sophomore* political science majors, not “sophomores political science majors.”

Grow—Avoid using “to grow” as a transitive verb meaning to expand or to increase the size of. As a transitive verb, it means to raise or cultivate, as with crops. President Clinton was a skilled speaker, but in claiming that we need to “grow the economy,” he did our language wrong.

Hopefully—*Hopefully* is an adverb meaning “to do with hope.” Unfortunately, the word has come to mean “I hope.” I urge you to resist the herd mentality behind this increasingly common usage. If you write “Hopefully, more people will vote in the 2004 elections,” you are effectively stating that more people will vote with hope or optimism in 2004. Instead, you should write “I hope more people will vote in the 2004 elections.”

***Its/It’s**—*Its* is the possessive form, as in, “Its fender folded in the collision.” *It’s*, on the other hand, is a contraction of the words *it* and *is*, as in, “It’s important that you fill out an accident report.”

Impact—Careful writers avoid using “impact” as a transitive verb. While teeth may be *impacted*, the Federal Reserve Board’s decisions on interest rates *affect* the economy, they don’t “impact” it. There’s nothing wrong with saying the Federal Reserve *has an impact* on the economy. Impact is a fine noun; it’s just not a transitive verb.

Individual—The correct word is usually *person*, not “individual,” unless there’s an overriding need to distinguish the person you’re referring to from a multiple-person unit.

***Less/Fewer**—*Less* refers to volumes of material—a fluid, gas, or commodity we cannot readily divide into distinct components. *Fewer*, on the other hand, refers to discrete items such as golf balls or voters. So, for example, you might write, “I feel terrible; I think I should’ve eaten less cereal and fewer apples this morning.” In a related matter, you should distinguish between *number* and *amount*, the former referring to discrete items such as congressional newsletters and the latter to volumes such as milk.

Like/As—Write (and say) “As I said earlier,” not “Like I said earlier.” Do so and you’ll set yourself off from the crowd quite nicely with your unpretentious accuracy.

Loath/Loathe—*Loath* is an adjective meaning reluctant, as in “He was loath to accept a pay cut.” *Loathe*, a verb, connotes strong antipathy: “He loathed his senator and hoped to elect a new one.”

None—None typically requires a singular version of “to be,” as in “None of the litigants *is* willing to settle out of court.” Reason: “none” is a contraction of “no one.”

Numbers and Numerals—*Spell out one through nine and use numerals for 10 and up.* This includes numerals for the 1, 2, etc., in 1 million, 2 billion, etc. It also includes ordinal numbers: first, 10th, First Street, 10th Street. The beginning of a sentence is an exception, of course, with the additional exception of years: 1975 was a very good year.

President—As noted above, you should capitalize this one when it is attached to the name of someone who currently holds or has held the office, as in *President Hayes*. Do not capitalize it even when referring implicitly and obviously to a particular president, as would be the case if you were writing in the present tense about President Bush without using his name: “The president claimed to have discovered several new and useful words.” Do not capitalize *presidency* either.

Quotation Marks—Commas, like periods, always go inside quotation marks: “*I wrote The Sun Also Rises,*” *Hemingway said.* Note that single quotation marks should be used when quoted material rests within a larger quotation. Semicolons and colons never go inside quotation marks: *He never watched “Cheers”;* *he just didn’t think it was funny.* Quotations ending in question marks never take a comma, either inside or outside: “*What’s wrong with you?*” *she asked.* Question marks and exclamation points can go either inside or outside, depending on the meaning: “*What about Seinfeld?*” *he asked.* Think about this one: *Can anybody really sing “The Star-Spangled Banner”?* Question marks and commas don’t mix. If there’s a question mark, leave the comma out: “*Are you kidding?*” *she asked.* In American English, commas and periods go inside quotation marks.

Quote/Quotation—*Quote* is a verb; *quotation* is a noun.

***Says/Writes**—When discussing written work, do not write “Skowronek *says* that presidential leadership depends on the opportunities of a particular moment in time.” Unless you’ve spoken with the author, all you know is that he has *written* that presidential leadership depends on the opportunities of the moment. Accurate alternatives to “says” include *argues, writes, suggests, insists, claims, maintains,* etc.

Semicolons—Use the semicolon when two sentences are fused together without the word *and*: “I peeked outside; the weather looked atrocious.” The key here is that the clauses on each side of the semicolon must be able to stand alone as complete sentences if they were separated by a period.

***Serial Commas**—As a writer, your most important job is to make your reader’s job easier. One way to do this is to use what people refer to as a “serial comma.” A serial comma is placed directly after the penultimate (an often-misused word that means “*next-to-last*”) item in a series of more than two. So, for example, you would write “President Clinton traveled to Martha’s Vineyard, Boston, and Providence on his last trip.” If you omit the comma after Boston, a reader will understandably combine “Boston and Providence” into a singular unit, as if those two cities were unified in some way, which they might have been if there were another coherent unit of two cities after “Boston and Providence,” such as “Annapolis and Baltimore.” The point: Your reader doesn’t know “Boston and Providence” ends the sentence until after he or she has seen the magical period. I could go on, but I’ll spare you if you simply keep things clear by using that last comma. You’ll sleep better at night knowing you’re doing the right thing.

Since/Because—Do not use *since* when you mean *because*. *Since* refers to a temporal relationship, as in “Has it really been two weeks since we met?”

Single Quotation Marks—In American English, single quotation marks have *only* two roles: First, they’re used when one quotation occurs within another; second, they’re used as a matter of typographical style in headlines and other headings. Some writers seem to think “minor” quoted material such as a nickname is not worthy of the full-quotation-mark treatment and thus gets single quotes, but they’re wrong.

Superlatives—Words like *most*, *best*, and *strongest* are appropriate only when considering the relative qualities of more than two items. In other words, you may think the Huskies are the best team anywhere, but on any given game day, they can really only be the *better* team on the field.

That/Which—*That* introduces essential clauses; *which* introduces non-essential (also known as non-restrictive) clauses. Here’s a handy hint to cut through all the jargon: “Which” clauses are always set off—usually by a comma, sometimes by a dash or with parentheses. So your choice is between *that* or a comma followed by *which*. If the comma seems out of place, *that* is the appropriate word. Consider this example: “The Democratic National Committee, *which* raised \$49.4 million in 2000, is one source of campaign money *that* the 2004 nominee can count on.”

***They**—For the sake of my sanity, do not use “they” to refer to a single person (as in “If a voter wants a Democrat to win in 2004, they might want to send some cash to the DNC.”). They, as you surely know, is a plural pronoun. This one really rankles me.

Toward—Please do not attach a superfluous “s” to the end of *toward*. “Towards” is sloppy and unattractive. In fact, it’s untoward. (Ditto: *backward* and *forward*.)

***Try and/Try to**—Never, ever, *ever* use “try and” instead of *try to*.

Ultimate/Penultimate—The latter is often misused. “Penultimate” does not mean greater or more important than ultimate; it means, simply, next to last in a series, as in “the penultimate *Seinfeld* made me laugh more than the final episode did.”

Unique—This poor word is one of the most abused in the language. Do not be afraid to use it, but remember that it is an absolute term meaning “one of a kind.” What I’m getting at here is that nothing—not one thing!—can be “very unique” or “kind of unique.” Something is either unique or it isn’t.

***Who/That**—When referring to human beings, always use the word *who* instead of *that*. You would write “Norm Dicks is the U.S. Representative who once played football for the Huskies.” Unless you think Norm Dicks is some sort of robot, you would definitely *not* write “Norm Dicks is the U.S. Representative that once played football for the Huskies.”

Who/Whom—Admittedly, the use of *whom* is increasingly rare, especially in our speech. But you should not throw another handful of dirt into this word’s half-filled grave just yet. Use *whom* when referring to the object of an action, as in “Whom did you invite to the party?” or “To whom did the senator think she was speaking?” I’m uncomfortable about insisting on the use of “whom” in every situation where it’s technically appropriate because of its potential to sound stilted and pretentious. Nevertheless, you should keep it in your quiver of verbal arrows and fire one off occasionally just to keep everyone honest.

Whose/Who’s—As with the old *its/it’s* distinction, *whose* is possessive, as in “Whose fault was this calamity?” *Who’s*, however, is a contraction of *who* and *is*, as in, “Who’s to blame here?”

1900s/20th Century—*1900s* does not refer to a century but to a 10-year period beginning in 1900 and ending in 1909 (or 1901 to 1910, depending on your position in *that* debate). If you wish to refer to the 100-year period from 1901 to 2000, you should call it the *20th century*.