

Professor Potter's Paper Pet Peeves

Paper Rules

- Follow the paper specifications (e.g., paper length, citation style)

Clichés and Colloquialisms (c/c)

- Avoid use of clichés and colloquialisms (e.g., call the shots, piece of cake, plain and simple, behind bars)

Incorrect or Inappropriate Use of Apostrophes

- Be mindful of the correct use of apostrophes (e.g., “it’s” vs. “its;” regarding decades – *incorrect*: 1990’s or ‘90’s, *correct*: 1990s: ‘90s)
- Do not use contractions (e.g., write “they are” instead of “they’re,” “it is” instead of “it’s”)

America vs. the United States

- The most correct reference to the United States of America is “United States,” not “America.” Use “U.S.” only if using as a descriptor etc. (e.g., U.S. English, U.S. law, U.S. citizen)

British vs. U.S. Spelling

- Please use U.S. English, not British English (e.g., “offense” instead of “offence,” “labeled” instead of “labelled,” “analyzed” instead of “analysed,” “color” instead of “colour”).

Sexist Language

- If referring to general individuals, use non-sexist language. Obviously, if you are writing about the inmates in a men’s prison or an all-male police force, it is OK to use male/“masculine” pronouns.
- “Latino” is considered a “masculine” term, referring to a man/boy or referring to a group of gender identities; thus, it is best to use “Latina” as an ethnic identifier to refer to a woman/girl. The plural version regardless of sex/gender that is often seen is “Latinos,” which is technically correct in the Spanish language. However, modern U.S. English often utilizes “Latinos/as” or “Latinas/os.” A newer version to use is “Latin@s,” but the *newest* version is to use that removes specific gender identity altogether is “Latinx” (can be used as singular or plural; typically pronounced “lah-teen-ex”).
- Additional examples of words NOT to use for general purposes: mankind, workman’s comp, bail bondsman, manpower. (Arguably, the term “freshman” is sexist! So “first year student” is preferred.)
- When referring to a woman 18 years old and above, do not use the term “girl” to describe her (and, arguably, this can apply to teenaged females, as well). “Woman” is the more appropriate term. (Case in point!: People typically do not write – or say – “boy” when referring to men, i.e. adults. Further, calling a Black adult man or late-adolescent a “boy” is viewed as an affront and racially coded.)
- When referring to the two majority (binary) gender identities, be careful of automatically listing the male pronoun first. A good standard to use is to alternate throughout the paper (e.g., “he and she...” then later, “she and he...”). Or you can even alphabetize the pronouns (e.g., “he or she...”, “her or him...”, “boys and girls...”). However, because some individuals are non-gender conforming or genderqueer or of other gender identities, try to find a way to refer to all genders, not just the majority binary.

Race Labeling

- Referring to groups or individuals by race or ethnicity is often challenging, as these racial/ethnic identifiers change over time and individuals identifying with a racial/ethnic group may prefer a term different than what is deemed as the presently acceptable label. For instance, several years ago, “African American” was determined an appropriate label. However, many individuals who fit within this classification prefer to be referred to as “Black.” In another example, a woman identified as Latina may have a personal identity preference of “Chicana,” while another Latina may prefer “Mexican American,” and yet another may prefer “Puerto Rican” or “puertorriqueña.” Each of these examples more specifically refers to the heritage of the individual.
- In sum, when referring to groups, or an individual for whose preference you do not know, the most recently acceptable label should be used. That is, “African American” or “Black,” “Asian” or “Asian American,” “Latinx,” “Native American” or “Indigenous,” and “White.” To refer to multiple groups by race, but none of whom are White, the acceptable term is “people of Color” -- do NOT shorten to “colored,” do NOT use “nonwhites,” and please make every effort to avoid using “minorities.” Regarding capitalization of Black and White, when referring to race, it is the writer’s preference to capitalize or not.

1st person, 2nd person, or 3rd person?

- Try to use 3rd person language as often as possible. However, depending on the type of paper being written (such as one that includes an experiential or reflection component), 1st person (I/me/we) is completely acceptable where applicable. Do NOT use 2nd person (you/your).