

Standards and Guidelines for Formal Writing

Writing, like many other activities (e.g., public speaking, playing a musical instrument, creating a work of art), demands *a combination of acquired talent and achieved skill*. Some of you may have a natural talent to play the piano. That is, you have some intrinsic thing (i.e., “it”) that allows you to sit comfortably in front of a piano and effortlessly make beautiful music. Yet, unless you receive comprehensive training to develop your musical skills (e.g., learning to read and write sheet music, performing exercises to increase the flexibility and speed of your fingers, etc.), you may ultimately squander your natural talent. Sure, you may be able to dazzle a few people for a few minutes at a cocktail party now and then, but you will never realize your potential as a pianist.

What separates good pianists from mediocre or poor pianists is the same thing that separates good writers from mediocre or poor writers—the development of relevant skills. Each of you has some degree of natural writing talent and a certain level of achieved writing skills. That is, writing comes more or less naturally to some of you, and you all have had varying levels of writing instruction and experience throughout your academic career. In this course, *we will work on helping you to develop your formal writing skills*. Most of the writing instruction in this class will stress writing standards rather than mechanical rules. For the most part, you will learn to meet specific objectives or standards in your formal writing, rather than memorize specific rules. Nevertheless, some rules comprise the foundation of important standards. The rest of this section contains three subsections. The first one identifies the general writing standards that will be taught and evaluated in this course. The second one identifies the specific aspects of writing mechanics that will be taught and evaluated in this course. The third one identifies some mechanical “rules” and writing suggestions that will be stressed in this course—since they help you improve the quality of your writing mechanics to achieve college-level writing standards.

General Writing Standards

Over the course of your career, each of you will write much more than you ever anticipated. Most of this will be formal writing (e.g., scientific articles, patient reports, autopsy reports, drug interaction summaries, proposals for research funding, etc.). The ultimate goal of each of these works is to convey information and ideas clearly and effectively to a target audience. A good writer achieves this goal on a consistent basis. The cultivation of several writing standards will help you become a good writer. There are no shortcuts or quick-fixes to improving your writing. Ultimately, intensive and repetitious practice is the best thing you can do to improve the quality of your writing. We will devote our attention in this course to the following writing standards—which reinforce each other.

Your argument should be clear and precise. You should be able to identify your intended audience, which typically includes educated individuals with only minimal technical knowledge in your specific topic area. You should have a solid command of basic rules of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. In addition, you should use appropriate diction carefully and avoid inappropriate jargon or slang. Finally, you should employ clear, precise language to convey effectively your argument or thesis. In other words, a typical reader should be able to easily follow and understand the totality of your exact argument.

Your argument should be structured logically. You should utilize sound reasoning when making an argument. At a minimum, this means that you should not commit any obvious logical fallacies in your argument. For instance, you should be able to demonstrate competency in making a “chain” argument (interconnected “if/then” statements):

If p, then q.

If q, then r.

Therefore, if p, then r.

If money gets tight, then interest rates will rise.

If interest rates rise, then the volume of loans will be low

If money gets tight, then the volume of loans will be low.

Even more, your argument should demonstrate an awareness of the three necessary kinds of evidence to infer causality: (1) association—the variables or events in question must be statistically related; (2) direction of influence—the independent variable or event must precede the dependent variable or event; and (3) nonspuriousness—all rival hypotheses must be reasonably eliminated.

Your argument should have adequate depth. The specificity and precision of your argument should be matched with a sufficient level of depth. In other words, your argument must exceed a merely superficial treatment. This should allow you to dynamically engage with your audience. In particular, you should demonstrate the ability to distinguish among assertions, evidence, and analysis. Finally, you should be able to distinguish between major and minor points in your argument.

Your argument should have an adequate level of support. Scientific arguments are evaluated according to two basic criteria: logical validity and empirical evidence. In addition to utilizing sound reasoning, your argument should also have adequate empirical support. Since you will not be gathering your own primary data, you will largely rely upon the published works of scholars. Thus, you should demonstrate an ability to evaluate the appropriateness of different sources based on criteria such as legitimacy, credibility, and comprehensiveness. You should further demonstrate a proficiency at using the works of others to strengthen the support for your argument. You should avoid making any unsubstantiated claims (e.g., baseless assertions with little or no empirical evidence). Ultimately, your argument should be convincing.

Your argument should be organized coherently. Ultimately, your entire argument should “make sense.” You should have no significant tangents in your written work. In effect, every word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph should be central to your overall argument. This demands that you demonstrate the ability to organize coherent, effective sentences and paragraphs. A member of your intended audience should be able to follow your argument from your opening sentence to your closing sentence. A reader should be able to grasp clearly the significance of your main assertions and supporting evidence.

Important Aspects of Writing Mechanics

This second subsection identifies those specific aspects of writing mechanics that will be taught and evaluated in this course. Consistently satisfying this group of internally reinforcing criteria will help you write in a mechanically sound manner. This forms the necessary foundation for the writing standards of the prior subsection.

You should utilize correct spelling, appropriate grammar, and proper punctuation. Rather than solely relying upon the “spell-check” feature of your word-processing program, you should regularly utilize a collegiate dictionary as a reference. The type of formal writing performed in this class demands the use of a tone, tense, and diction that is appropriate for your intended audience.

You should use effective sentence structures. Rather than writing unnecessarily long and complex sentences, you should consistently write simpler sentences that maximize clarity and precision. This will help you accomplish your goal of conveying your ideas and information effectively.

You should create well-organized paragraphs. Each of the paragraphs that you write should be autonomous. That is, each paragraph should make sense internally if it stood alone. You should demonstrate awareness that creating a paragraph is a purposive act (not simply a casual decision about creating a break in a long string of sentences).

You should utilize adequate transitions between paragraphs. The overall organization and coherence of your argument is bolstered by a successful use of transitions between paragraphs and sections. This strengthens the clarity of your argument, and it also heightens your level of engagement with the reader.

You should properly cite others' works. You should recognize the differences among paraphrasing, quoting, and plagiarizing. You should know not just how to paraphrase and quote properly (with adequate citation) but also why you should document sources in the first place. A satisfactory written work clearly credits others when their ideas and words are used.

Mechanical Rules/Helpful Suggestions

This third subsection identifies some specific mechanical “rules” that will be stressed in this course. The specific rules discussed below attempt to correct for some of the most common problems in formal writing. This subsection also includes a few helpful suggestions for formal writing. These rules and suggestions will help you improve the quality of your writing mechanics to achieve college-level writing standards. If you want to **succeed** in this class and others, you should pay particular attention to these rules and suggestions.

The Writing Process

The writing process is hard work. Above all other suggestions, you should realize that writing is re-writing. Your final draft should NEVER be your first draft. There is no magical number of drafts that you should write, but generally it is better to write more than fewer drafts.

Improving your writing demands an intensive commitment over time. Your writing will improve substantially through consistent use of pre-writing exercises, outlining, analytical drafts, first drafts, and multiple iterations of revising.

Reading your paper aloud helps you identify problem areas. When we normally read our writing (with an internal voice), we have a tendency to read too quickly and superficially. That is, we tend to gloss over mistakes when we are not deliberate. When we hear our writing verbalized aloud, we are better able to identify problem areas.

You should practice peer-editing. If you increase the number of peers who rigorously critique your paper, then you decrease the likelihood that your

Clarity, Precision, and Accuracy of Word Use

Dew knot misspell words. Misspelled words in formal writing are simply not acceptable. Dictionaries are inexpensive, and the best ones (e.g., *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Miriam-Webster Dictionary*, etc.) are available online for free. The correct spelling of words in writing is like dribbling in basketball. Both are necessary for competence respectively.

Sexist language is inappropriate. Its typical imprecision and inaccuracy prevents you from meeting rigorous formal writing standards. Using the terms “policeman,” “fireman,” or “Congressman” when you are referring to a woman is inaccurate. The gender neutrality of the terms “police officer,” “fire fighter,” “Congressional representative,” or “Senator” are more precise when the gender of the person in question is unknown. Also, use of the terms “mankind” or “men” when referring to all of humanity denies the existence of half of the population. That is not too accurate. In addition, the use of sexist language reinforces the sexism that is deeply rooted in our culture of ideas. This obviously conflicts with the democratic ideals of America.

Bad Example: “A researcher’s main goal is to have his findings become fact.”

Corrected: “A researcher’s main goal is to have his or her findings become fact.”

Avoid contractions, slang, and colloquialisms. These are acceptable in informal speech, but they are typically inappropriate in formal writing. Slang and colloquialisms often undermine the intended clarity and precision in your writing. Also, think about it. Robert DeNiro has no use for contractions.

Do not switch from the singular to the plural forms of nouns and pronouns. This threatens the clarity and precision of your statements in formal writing.

Bad Example: “The researcher has the responsibility of doing what they feel is right.”

Corrected: “The researcher has the responsibility of doing what he or she feels is right.”

Bad Example: “The group of researchers identified what they deemed acceptable.”

Corrected: “The group of researchers identified what it deemed acceptable.”

Avoid excessive use of pronouns and other nondescript nouns. These include “he,” “she,” “his,” “hers,” “them,” “they,” “theirs,” “it,” “its,” “this,” and “that.” You should always be explicitly clear about who or what you are discussing. If there is any possibility that a reader may misinterpret your sentence, then you should use a more descriptive noun.

Bad Example: “The scientists posed several questions for the research participants, who responded with contempt. They were not amused.”

Corrected A: “The scientists posed several questions for the research participants, who responded with contempt. The latter were not amused.”

Avoid using excessively vague nouns and descriptors. Formal writing demands precision and specificity. First, you should avoid using abstract words for aggregates when you are really talking about specific groups or individuals. For instance, if you want to refer to a report written by an official in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, it would be imprecise to refer to “the government.” It would probably also be imprecise to refer to “the USDA.” For greatest precision, it would be best to refer to “an official in the USDA” or, even better, use the individual’s name. “The government” did not write the report, and it would be inaccurate to give credit to this aggregate. Indeed, there may be individuals in different agencies who object to most of the content of the report in question! Using the term “the government” would prohibit us from investigating this intriguing conflict. Second, you should avoid using vague descriptors when formal writing standards demand precision. Sentences that begin with “Some people believe . . .” or “Many people think . . .” lack the necessary precision of scientific arguments. Such phrases send a warning that sloppy thinking is about to follow. Indeed, vague descriptors such as “some” or “many” have been used to perpetuate biases, prejudices, and conventional wisdom that have little basis in the empirical world. One’s first reaction after reading such phrases are “How many?” and “Prove it!” Obviously, this is not the type of reaction you want to provoke when you trying to make a convincing argument.

Avoid words that are unnecessarily normative or evaluative. When writing about technology and science, you need to be keenly aware not to fall prey to the inertia of American ideology, which holds that science and technology in America ONLY advances or progresses and that ALL OF US are categorically better off as a result of changes in science and technology. When talking about dynamics in science and technology over time, it is accurate and precise to utilize descriptive terms such as “change” and “development.” Conversely, it is inaccurate and imprecise to utilize normative and evaluative terms such as “progress” and “advancement.” The former words are value-laden and promote normative judgments. When someone talks about science or technology advancing or progressing, he or she is making a value-laden judgment—that science and technology equals advancement or progress. This denies all of the problems introduced by technological and scientific development. This also denies that individuals or groups voice objections to scientific and technological change, because of ideological, moral, or religious beliefs or because they disproportionately bear the burdens of this change.

Quality of Sentence Structure

Make sure each sentence you write is actually a complete sentence. A complete sentence has a subject, predicate, complete thought, and proper punctuation.

Bad example: “By doing safety checks on equipment, help the experiment go smoothly.”

Corrected: “By doing safety checks on equipment, a researcher can increase the probability that an experiment will run smoothly.”

Ask yourself the following question about each of your sentences. “What am I trying to say, and how can I say it more effectively and more clearly?”

Avoid awkward sentences that could be more clear and coherent if written differently. This cannot be stressed enough.

Bad example: “Also, taking proper precautions to protect their subjects after the experiment is what social researchers have to do.”

Corrected: “Also, social researchers should take proper precautions to protect their subjects after the experiment.”

Be consistent in your tense. Shifting your tense within or between sentences unnecessarily confuses readers.

Avoid excessive use of rhetorical questions. When you are trying to make an argument with supporting evidence, you will be more convincing when you convey your ideas with statements rather than questions. Not only do questions sound awkward within the body of your paper, but they also disrupt the logical structure of your argument.

Try not to overuse quotations from other sources. An excessive amount of quotations is usually a clear sign of a superficial argument. This signals to the reader that the written work lacks analytical depth. Think of quotations as scarce resources. They should be conserved and used only when they provide you with the best opportunity to convey your ideas with maximum effectiveness. Your first inclination should be to attempt to paraphrase the author’s ideas into your own words.

Do not overuse your comma. A comma can be a good thing, but only when used in moderation, not when you just stick it in anywhere, because as you will soon notice, a comma is a license to make sentences that keep going and going with no apparent coherency, so please use your commas in moderation.

Avoid ending sentences with prepositions. A prepositional phrase contains both a preposition and a noun. Thus, a preposition at the end of a sentence gives off the idea that your thought is incomplete and there is something missing. Avoid this potentially confusing situation for a reader by rephrasing the sentence more clearly.

Bad example: “The research participant should be given as much information as possible to base his or her decision on.”

Correction: “The research participant should be given as much information as possible upon which to base his or her decision.”

Avoid passive language. Passive language (“It was discovered that . . .”) is less concise, accurate, and interesting than active language (“Dr. Henderson discovered that . . .”).

Bad example: “The methodology has been adopted by most archaeologists.”

Corrected: “Most archaeologists have adopted the methodology.”

Avoid tangents. The goal of writing is to convey information clearly and effectively. Thus, everything you write should be crucial to your argumentation. Including a tangent in your writing distracts the reader from what you want him or her to comprehend. A tangent can be as long as several paragraphs or as short as an unnecessary phrase.