

## A Writing Guide

Do not start your paper by writing; start it by reading. Read *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White or Christopher Lasch's *Plain Style*. But especially read good writing. When students ask how they can write better, my typical response is "Read well-written stuff and then mimic it. Eventually you'll find your own voice." Remember, writing well is *difficult* and takes time. It requires structure, discipline, patience, clear thinking, organizational skills, and practice. *Never* has a good paper been written over-night.

### Some Commandments of Good Writing:

- 1. Make an OUTLINE before you write anything. Let your argument drive the organization of the paper. Make sure you have a point.**

Pages filled with words do not constitute an essay. Nothing is more frustrating than reading a paper that clearly has no structure, and simply meanders from one thought to another. Think about the question or questions you are trying to answer. Think about the best way to answer them. Have a plan in front of you before you begin writing. You can work out the details during the writing process, of course, but you need a basic idea of where you are going and how you are going to get there.

Outlines help students see their argument in the boldest terms possible: I will argue X, then Y, then Z. Seeing the argument on one page helps you see the weak and strong points. Take it from someone who has written books and articles for publication: *YOU WILL NEVER STOP OUTLINING OR GET TO THE POINT WHERE YOU DON'T NEED TO DO THIS ANY MORE.*

- 2. Structure your paper with a strong opening paragraph, clear transitions, and strong topic sentences.**

The first paragraph should introduce your reader to the subject matter and the question and argument you're dealing with. The paragraph should introduce your thesis: it tells the reader where your paper will head (without giving away juicy details). Each paragraph should have a topic sentence; each topic sentence should serve to uphold the thesis statement. Each sentence within a paragraph should carry evidence to support the topic sentence of that paragraph. Use transition sentences to tie your thoughts together and to signal that you are moving on to the next point.

As writers, we often do not discover what we're trying to say until we have wrestled our way through the entire paper. In that case, once you've found your thesis go back and build it into the introductory paragraph. Restructure and rewrite the paper to fit the thesis.

- 3. Avoid vague "fluff" sentences that take up space but do little to advance your argument.**

Every sentence within a paragraph needs to *work* for you. It should assert a specific point, present evidence that supports that point, or set up a transition to the next paragraph. A sentence that does none of these things simply detracts from the flow of your argument and distracts the reader. Scrutinize the sentences you write mercilessly. Constantly ask yourself, “does this sentence really say anything meaningful? Does it follow logically and consistently from the one I just wrote? Am I being specific enough?”

Don’t assume that the reader is familiar with ideas or terms you reference in your writing. Don’t simply mention such elements in passing if they are important. Remember, your job as a writer is to take the reader by the hand and lead her through your argument. You’ll lose her if you are not careful to introduce specific ideas in a systematic fashion, and place them in a context she can understand. Be sure you establish the proper context so the reader will know why the evidence you are citing is important.

*Helpful Hint: Underline all of your topic sentences then read them aloud. Ask yourself if they flow logically and support your thesis.*

#### **4. Use active voice verbs.**

Make every sentence tell who did what to whom. Passive voice verbs obscure your intentions and hide the historical actors.

By using active voice verbs, you will convert static, leaden prose into lively and compelling language. You will force yourself to consider who and what you are talking about and why they may have acted the way they did, thus answering your own questions in the process.

No: The Native inhabitants were slaughtered by the white settlers.

Yes: White settlers slaughtered native inhabitants.

#### **5. Avoid forms of the verbs "to be" and "to seem."**

Use verbs that convey action and specific meaning. "To be" is a boring, weak, and vague verb. It implies a static state of "being" rather than the dynamic engagement and agency of the subjects. Avoid construction like “was because” and “another thing was that” at all costs (they sound cheesy). Similarly, "to seem" weakens your prose.

*Helpful hint: Circle all the "to be" verbs in your paper. If you find more than a few, the paper probably contains passive voice and weak sentences. If you find "to seem" forms, you can probably eliminate all of them.*

#### **6. Use the past tense for historical writing, even when discussing authors and their literary characters or intellectuals and their ideas. Be sure to be consistent – do not switch back and forth between verb tenses.**

#### **7. Avoid using “I” or “we” in your arguments.**

## **8. Use specific subjects and objects.**

Avoid the lonely pronoun: make sure all pronouns refer clearly to specific antecedents. *CHECK FOR CONTINUITY!* If the antecedent is plural, make sure the pronoun is plural (and so with singular). Avoid beginning a sentence with "It was": this construction is inherently vague and makes it hard for your reader to figure out what you're referencing.

## **9. Vary sentence structure.**

Employ all three of the sentence structures you learned about in high school: simple, compound, and complex. You do not want your essay to read like this:

Todd stepped out of the house. He closed the door when he left. He carried cracked corn in a bucket. He approached the chicken yard. The chicken clucked expectantly. The reader of this narrative fell asleep.

It should look like this instead:

Todd stepped out of the house and closed the back door, a bucket of cracked corn on his arm. As he approached the chicken yard, the hens clucked expectantly. The reader fell asleep, but not, at least, because of the stultifying structure of the prose.

## **10. Be careful with quotes.**

Avoid block quotes. Quote people for sure but quote them sparingly: Example, Randolph Bourne believed that "social criticism" should "shock." Keep quotes succinct, and make sure to set them off within a sentence you write. Do not simply drop a quote into an essay "unannounced."

## **11. Sweat the details.**

You should have printed out and carefully proofread many copies of your essay before you hand in the final draft. Good writing requires much thought, ink, and hard work. You all have good points to make, do not let your writing obscure them.

Read your paper aloud. In addition to helping you eliminate small errors like repeated words or typos, reading aloud helps you avoid "paper-speak." Many students who speak eloquently adopt an inflated style - "paper-speak" - when they write. Reading your essay aloud will help you see if the paper flows, makes sense, and supports your argument. It will also alert you to cumbersome or confusing sentences, especially run-ons. If you have to take several breaths, the sentence is much too long.

## **12. Seek professional help.**

If you think you need extra help with your writing – and we all do at times – do something about it. Use the Writing Counseling Service of the Academic Advancement Center (Alden Library, phone: 593-2645, web: [www.ohiou.edu/aac/writing](http://www.ohiou.edu/aac/writing)). They are ready, willing and able to assist you.