

**A GUIDE TO WRITING ACADEMIC PAPERS**  
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I. For help in writing papers at UGA, **consult the Writing Center** (2-2119). After all, you're paying for it!

II. You would be very wise to peruse my paper, "**The Writing Process as Partnership**" (<http://www.uga.edu/religion/rk>) It explains how to write a thoughtful, well-executed paper.

III. **Familiarize yourself thoroughly with an authoritative manual on writing college papers**, such as the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. (The current, fourth edition is by Joseph Gibaldi). That handbook not only provides the necessary technical specifications for any college paper (e.g., margins, spacing, proper forms of quotations and footnotes). It also guides you through the process in more practical terms, e.g., with instructions regarding plagiarism, documentation, and "using a word processor in preparing research papers." Another acceptable handbook is Strunk and White's *A Manual of Style*.

*The Oxford Guide to English Usage* provides help with common problems of vocabulary and grammar. You will find that such books (and usage notes in some dictionaries) occasionally give conflicting advice, usually on minor points. The final authority in such matters is your instructor. And, yes, instructors will sometimes differ with each other, so be prepared to adjust to each. Such is life.

IV. **When writing papers for my courses, you should observe the following points.**

1. **Each sentence should be a sentence.** It should not be half a sentence; it should not be two or three sentences illicitly strung together. **Each sentence has one subject and one verb — no more, no less.** Thanks in large measure to the semi-literates who broadcast information by radio and TV, an increasingly common error is to write in "sentences" that lack verbs. Even some skillful writers (e.g., George Will) try to increase the "impact" of their writing by tossing in non-sentences, such as the following:

⊗ *An example: Bill Clinton.*

⊗ *Meaning liberals.*

Neither of these atrocities is a sentence: neither has a verb. "Meaning" is not a verb, nor is "being," "showing," etc. "Sing" is a verb; "singing" is not. Some publications allow George Will to write incomplete sentences. When you write for them, you may be able to get away with the same thing. When you write for my courses, you cannot. **Write complete sentences!**

Nor may you put two or three sentences into the same sentence. The infamous "run-on sentence" is a subject and a verb and another subject and another verb strung together, often ignorantly separated by a meaningless comma. There are some occasions when two "sentences" may appear in one sentence, separated by a semicolon; the style manuals will explain such occasions (but see #10 below). Note, also, that it is terribly confusing to disrupt a sentence by inserting a full-sentence or multi-sentence quotation inside it, as follows:

⊗ *The statement, "Liberals are wise. Conservatives are fools." is not correct.*

Such a sentence should be recast as follows:

☺ *It is not correct to say, "Liberals are wise. Conservatives are fools."*

2. **Each paragraph should be a paragraph.** A paragraph contains one meaningful line of thought. Then it stops. Another paragraph begins when a new line of thought begins. **Do NOT make the mistake of tacking the topic sentence of paragraph B onto the end of paragraph A in the mistaken belief that it will help provide "a transition."**

**3. Use the active voice, not the passive voice.** The passive voice generally causes ambiguity, and often extreme confusion. Sometimes foolish writers use the passive voice in a useless effort to hide the fact that their thinking is shallow or incomplete, as in the following example:

⊗ *It is believed that liberals are wise and conservatives are fools.*

Such a sentence shows that the writer cannot make the necessary distinction between the thoughts of different parties. Some people hold the belief in question, and others do not. Show that you know that to be the case by using the active voice. Doing so forces you to *tell* the reader who is *doing the doing*:

☺ *Most "mainstream journalists," such as Dan Rather, believe that liberals are wise and conservatives are fools.*

☺ *I believe that liberals are wise and conservatives are fools.*

Figuring out how to explain precisely *who* is doing *what* often helps a writer refine her/his thoughts.

On the other hand, the second of those two examples, while grammatically correct, is likely inappropriate in an academic paper. Many students have been taught never to use first-person pronouns when they write. Such a rule reflects the inability of many teachers to explain the difference between appropriate and inappropriate uses of the first person. The first person is always appropriate when you, the writer, are doing what a writer should be doing in an academic paper: analyzing and evaluating the pertinent data in a manner appropriate to the assignment. The following uses of the first person are quite proper in an academic paper:

☺ *I will attempt to show that Mencius and Hsün-tzu agree on basic principles.*

☺ *In my analysis, Hsün-tzu's views are more sophisticated than those of Mencius.*

Never employ such inane substitutes as "the writer" when referring to oneself:

⊗ *The writer will attempt to show that Mencius and Hsün-tzu agree on basic principles.*

There are many "writers": if you mean "I," **just say "I."**

On the other hand, use of the first person is generally improper if one illicitly imports issues and concerns specific to aspects of one's "external" life:

⊗ *Because I am a Baptist, I consider Hsün-tzu's views closer to the truth.*

As an academic writer, you are merely an analytic mind, not a male or female, Baptist or atheist, Republican or Democrat. You are expected to separate your activity as a thoughtful academic writer from

such aspects of your "external" identity. Learning to do so is an integral part of a traditional "liberal education" (which, by the way, has nothing to do with "liberalism" as an American political philosophy). If you wish to express such aspects of your personal identity, do so in other, more appropriate contexts.

**4. Singular is singular, and plural is plural.** Singular agrees with singular; plural agrees with plural. In speech, many of us often mix the two, and such is the nature of speech that doing so generally occasions little confusion. But writing is not speech. A particular problem is the misuse of the plural pronouns *they/them/their* as though their referents were singular, as in the following abominations:

⊗ *A person must do what they believe in.*

⊗ *One needs to rid themselves of impurities.*

Except in cases that require psychiatric attention, a person is only one person. Write accordingly.

One reason that people often write sentences such as those in the above example is that since the 1970s the issue of gender-specific language has been on many minds, including fuzzy ones. Until then, the terms "man/men" and "he/him/his" were used generically, and confusion was uncommon. Then, some people decided that the generic use of such words was "sexist." Others (including many women writers) continue to use those terms generically. Doing so is not "wrong," but it will annoy some readers, and may occasion confusion in certain contexts. On the other hand, some fuzzy minds reacted to the sudden discovery of gender by deciding that another set of gender-specific words should be used generically, i.e., by defaulting to feminine pronouns. Such usage shows off one's ideological colors, but risks confusing and annoying the reader, and sometimes falsifies reality:

⊗ *Shakespeare's actor always knew her lines.*

⊗ *Mencius wished his student to develop her innate goodness.*

(In Shakespeare's theatre, all actors were male, and Mencius is not known to have had any female

students. Do not pretend that falsehood is truth. See further "The Kirkland Corollary," below.)

To avoid such problems, many writers today **foolishly** default to the gender-inclusive pronouns *they/them/their*. While such pronouns may not be gender-specific, they are **most definitely plural**, and **can NEVER be singular**, whatever one's ideology.

Fortunately, there is really no problem here at all. Many such sentences can simply be cast in the plural throughout:

☺ *People must do what they believe in.*

☺ *Shakespeare's actors always knew their lines.*

In other cases, it may be necessary to recast a sentence in the singular throughout:

☺ *One needs to rid oneself of impurities.*

These sentences are all now grammatically correct, as well as ideologically unobjectionable.

Of course, it is also perfectly acceptable to use both gender-specific pronouns together: *he/she, his/her, him/her* (or, if masculine-pronoun priority offend thee, do what I do — put the pronouns in alphabetical order: *he* is in the dictionary before *she*, but *her* comes before *him* or *his*).

In any case, the goal is to communicate clearly, and mixing singular and plural defeats that goal.

**5.** Once, writers could count on *The American Heritage Dictionary* for reliable "usage notes." Today, it has been diluted by two generations of "anything goes" writers. But it usually still gives good advice. Even experienced writers should review its usage notes under "that," "this," and "which." **Do not use the pronoun "this" as the subject of a sentence:** doing so often leads the reader to wonder what "this" is. Try adding a noun and converting "this" into an adjective ("this idea...", "this fact...", etc.).

**6. A hyphen is not a dash.** Never write a sentence such as the following:

☹ *Tom-my friend-came to see me.*

It is true that your keyboard probably lacks a dash (—). Some wordprocessing programs will let you import one (e.g., in WordPerfect 5.1/5.2, select "Font," then "WP Characters," then click on "ASCII" and pull down to see other options; choose "Typographic Symbols," and you will find an importable dash in the fourth row). The "sentence" above should look like the following:

☺ *Tom — my friend — came to see me.*

Otherwise, put two hyphens together to simulate a dash:

☺ *Tom -- my friend -- came to see me.*

The *MLA Handbook* says not to space before or after a dash. Some of us do anyway, for aesthetic reasons, and no one has ever reported being confused. The overriding principle is simply to make sure that you never confuse your reader. But in general, do what the handbooks tell you to do.

**7. A possessive noun always needs an apostrophe; a possessive pronoun never has an apostrophe.** This rule keeps you from confusing "its" and "it's" (much less "your" and "you're"). "It's" is a contraction of the subject/verb "it is": it is never a possessive. The following example is wrong:

☹ *I liked the book. It's ending surprised me.*

On the other hand, since the advent of the wordprocessor, many students have forgotten that **possessive nouns need apostrophes**. Instructors constantly read such bungled sentences as the following:

☹ *Tom liked George Wills prose.*

Even if you forget whether his name is Will or Wills, there has to be an apostrophe in there somewhere.

**8. Space twice after a period.** Also, **space twice after a colon** (*pace* MLA).

**9.** For some unknown reason, some teachers in Georgia have wrongly been teaching students not to space before a parenthesis:

☹ *Some journalists(e.g., Rather) assume conservatives to be fools.*

It is true that you should not space inside a parenthesis, as in the following sentence:

☹ *Some journalists ( e.g., Rather ) assume conservatives to be fools.*

But without exception, **space once before opening and after closing parentheses**, as follows:

☺ *Some journalists (e.g., Rather) assume conservatives to be fools.*

Also, remember that parentheses open once and close once, so you cannot use parentheses inside

parentheses. If you feel that you need to do so, consult the style books for alternatives.

10. Semicolons are like guns: never use them unless you have been properly trained to do so by someone who knows what he or she is doing.

11. The abbreviation of the word "page" is simply the letter "p" followed by a period, not the letters "pg" followed by a period. **Do not invent abbreviations.** In fact, **do not invent anything** when you are writing. There is an accepted way of doing things, and whenever you do something different, you are going to annoy and/or confuse your reader. **A good writer learns and follows the accepted standards.**

12. Do not try to impress your reader by using fancy words instead of more common words. A writer who uses "obtain" instead of "get" is not necessarily displaying intelligence or sophistication. Some fancy words have become very trendy. For instance, until the 1980s the word "societal" was used only in sociology dissertations. It is not just a synonym for the word "social." If you do not know the difference, do not use it: it is tricky to use correctly, and seldom really useful. **Stick to simple, clear terms.**

13. Finally, when you are writing an academic paper, **never succumb to the temptation to show off your cleverness. Just do the assignment.** The academic essay or research paper is not an exercise in creative writing. Rather, it is a test of **how well you understand the material, how well you can think, and how clearly and precisely you can express pertinent thoughts.** If you do those things well, you will delight your instructor. Find other, more appropriate outlets for your cleverness and creativity. For more on the nature of the academic paper, see "The Writing Process as Partnership."

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**The Nyitray Admonition**  
by Professor Vivian-Lee Nyitray  
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(used by permission)

Try to **avoid imposing a modern sensibility on the past.** Avoid phrases and vocabulary that instinct tells you belongs to the recent past. Hamlet had a "life," not a "lifestyle." Don't say that a character "deals with her feelings about her meaningful relationships" or that "Hamlet tries to work out his problems." Few people in past centuries tried to develop themselves as individuals or to establish interpersonal relationships (although they did try to conquer their passions, understand themselves, examine their natures, and make friends). People in the past were not, for the most part, democratic, tolerant of religious or racial difference, concerned for individual rights (though they could recognize tyranny), fascinated by the personality (though they were interested in human nature), particularly squeamish, or believers in "Progress." Don't let your vocabulary imply otherwise.

#### **The Kirkland Corollary**

The same holds for other cultures. For instance, until the 20th century, China did not have "citizens": it had "people" (or, in a political context, "subjects"). Similarly, it had no "minorities": it had higher/lower social (not economic) classes, and some "foreigners." As a general rule: *anything that modern people assume to be true is quite likely something that people of other periods or other cultures would not hold true.* For instance, *virtually no one in any non-Western culture would have understood or accepted a modern doctrine of human equality.* Beware the arrogance of branding people of other cultures stupid or evil (or, in contemporary terms, "primitive," "racist," "sexist," etc.) just because their ways are different from our own. Besides, most of the assumptions, values, and thought-patterns that we cherish today will indubitably strike many of our descendants as hopelessly (even culpably) wrong, in terms that many of us will never be able to imagine. It is easy to be self-righteous; it is much harder to respect and understand those who are different from us, but such is the nobler course.

Note also the potential historical problem posed by adopting certain gender-sensitive modes of writing. Many Americans of the late 20th century deem it proper to adopt gender-neutral language. I, for one, am generally comfortable using both third-person-singular pronouns (e.g., "the writer must be considerate of her or his reader"). It is important that you be consistent in your use of such pronouns. *But please do be aware of certain logical problems!* For instance, it would be, at best, far-fetched to say, "the Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty tried to be considerate of her or his reader." Confucian scholars in premodern China were, almost by definition, male (though women of certain periods were often literate, and a few became accomplished writers).

To pretend that the category of "Confucian scholar" was always an equal-opportunity calling is contrary to historical fact, and thus absurd. Writers who default to the generic feminine should be particularly alert to this problem.