APPENDIX

A Guide to Writing Good Essays

Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.

—Mark Twain

THE BASICS

Outline:

Writing an essay without first determining its general content and organization is not wise. This results in "flow-of-consciousness" prose that has no clear organization or goal. Even for the simplest essays, it is extremely useful to outline, on paper, what you are going to write. This is especially critical for an evaluative essay, which requires that you follow a common theme or thesis throughout the text.

Proof-Read:

The majority of your mistakes will be minor. However, these mistakes will absolutely ruin an essay if they are not corrected. A thorough reading of the essay, combined with a spelling check on the word processor, will identify almost all of these small errors that are bound to destroy your grade.

LAZY MISTAKES THAT WILL RUIN YOUR GRADE

Misspellings:

In this age of word processing, there is absolutely no excuse for misspelling words.

Incomplete Sentences:

An incomplete sentence contains only a dependent clause that does not express a complete thought. Dependent clauses almost always begin with conjunctions such as *because, if, since, that, unless, when, where, whether,* or *as.* A worse sin is to write a sentence that does not contain a verb.

Run-on Sentences:

This occurs when two independent clauses are written as a single sentence without any conjunction separating them. An independent clause contains at least a noun and a verb, and makes sense by itself. Two independent clauses in the same sentence should be connected with a conjunction such as *and, but, or, for, then, yet, still, however,* or *therefore* **preceded** by a comma. They can also be divided into

two separate sentences or **rarely** separated by a semicolon. **Never** simply place a comma between two independent clauses.

Wrong: Some people followed herds of animals, others stayed where farming was adequate.

Right: Some people followed herds of animals, but others stayed...

Right: Some people followed herds of animals; others stayed...

Nonsensical Sentences:

Like the previous errors, nonsensical sentences are almost always attributable to laziness. For example: Animal bones and fossils can be identified as one form of food for people.

Some people followed herds of animals on the plains.

Time that is being efficiently used up thanks to the hierarchical system.

The main reason for the extended length of time would be at the time when the archaeologist has published his reports.

GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS

Subject-Verb Agreement:

Always makes sure that the subject and verb agree in number and person. A common problem is to change verb tenses or subject number between sentences that discuss the same subject or event. Remember that phrases between the subject and the verb do not affect the number of the verb; e.g., The purpose of these rules *is* to help you get an 'A'.

Parallel Constructions:

Parallel thoughts should be expressed in grammatically parallel content and structure.

Wrong: The students came to class on foot, by car, and bicycle.

Right: The students came to class on foot, by car, and **by** bicycle.

Wrong: It was both a long section and very tedious.

Right: It was both a long and tedious section.

Wrong: His comments were marked by disagreement and scorn for the essay's content.

Wrong: His comments were marked by disagreement **with** and scorn for the essay's content.

Misplaced Modifiers:

This is a very common problem. Keep related words together and in the order that conveys their intended meaning.

The Aztec rulers almost sacrificed all of their own people.

The Aztec rulers sacrificed almost all of their own people.

Both sentences are correct, but they convey different meanings. Misplaced modifiers can often make the sentence quite entertaining.

e.g., He told her that he wanted to marry her often.

PUNCTUATION

Colons and Semicolons:

Use a colon before a list or summary that explains the preceding material, but **never** use one after a verb. Semicolons are used between complete independent clauses that are too closely related to be written as separate sentences. It is wise to avoid their use, for they can become "writing crutches" that will obscure your writing.

Comma:

The following are a few of the rules for comma usage. A general rule of thumb is to place a comma at every point where you would normally pause if you read the sentence out loud.

Use a comma to separate independent clauses that are joined by conjunctions such as *and, but, or, for, yet*, and *so*. An independent clause is one that contains its own noun and verb, and makes sense by itself.

e.g., *The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible world, and the pessimist fears this is true*—James Branch Cabell

Joining independent clauses without a conjunction creates a run-on sentence

Wrong: The keg ran out of beer, most people left the party.

Right: The keg ran out of beer, and most people left the party.

Use a comma between dependent and main clauses **only** when the dependent clause **precedes** the main clause. A dependent clause is an incomplete statement that cannot stand alone.

Right: *If you can't say anything good about someone, sit right here next to me.*—Alice Roosevelt Longworth

Wrong: Everything is funny, unless it is happening to someone else.

Use a comma after an introductory element, such as *for example, in general, therefore,* and *however.* **Never** place a comma between the subject and verb!

Parenthetical Statements:

One or two of these per page may be too many! Try to substitute another punctuation mark for dashes or parentheses. Use parenthetical statements only to set off **relevant** explanatory or peripheral material. Do not place random thoughts or tenuous analogies in parentheses.

EASILY CONFUSED AND MISUSED WORDS

Civilization:

In common usage, this refers to a complex society that possesses a written language, advanced arts, and sciences. Do not use it to refer to all prehistoric societies.

Culture:

Because culture is an intangible entity, such as the ideas, customs, and skills found in a society, it is not animated. For example, cultures do not adapt or react to environmental changes; societies do.

Etc.:

This is normally used as a "writing crutch" to end a list of items. It is better to say "and so forth" or "all the rest." Never use any of these after a list introduced by *such as* or *for example.*

Fewer/less:

"Fewer" is used for units, "less" for quantity or bulk. "Fewer" takes a plural noun, while "less" uses a singular noun.

It's/its:

"It's" is the contraction of "it is." "Its" is a possessive pronoun.

There/their:

"There" is an adverb or noun used in a variety of situations, while "their" is always a possessive pronoun.

STYLE

Avoid Writing in the First Person:

Write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of your writing, rather than to your own mood and temper. Similarly, do not interject your opinions into your essay. If your writing is good, you can subtly reveal your feelings and opinions within the text.

Prepositions:

The use of prepositions can be confusing. There is no need to be anal about this issue, especially when your sentence ends with a verb that is always accompanied by a preposition. However, try to avoid ending with prepositions that could easily be incorporated into the body of the sentence.

Bad Sentence Beginnings:

It is grammatically correct to begin a sentence with a coordinate conjunction such as *but, and, then, however, thus,* and *therefore.* However, you should avoid frequently using them as a "writing crutch" to connect a series of sentences. This is particularly true of *then* and *next*, which are frequently used to string sentences together when discussing a sequence of events. Try removing these from your sentences; usually they will make perfect sense and sound better without them.

Even worse sentence beginnings are phrases such as *the truth is, the fact is,* and *what I am trying to say is.* If you feel you are possessed of the truth, say it right away. If you have to restate something you said in the previous sentence, then you're in trouble.

Omit Unnecessary Words:

This is the most common problem found in all essays. People often believe that their writing will sound much more impressive if their sentences are long and confusing...NOT SO!

Bad Style: Archaeology basically begins by carefully studying the smallest attributes of a single prehistoric culture in the past.

Good Style: Archaeology begins by studying the attributes of a prehistoric culture.

Bad Style: The tree-ring method for chronological dating is able to show whether or not a drought occurred or if a wet period of rain occurred.

Good Style: The tree-ring dating method can show whether a drought or wet period occurred.

Avoid redundant word combinations such as first *time ever, regular routine, rarely ever, past history, ultimate outcome, chronological dating*, etc. The same is true of redundant or unnecessary adverbs and other wordy expressions:

it is often the case that	=	frequently
owing to the fact that	=	since or because
all of the details	=	all the details
finish up the work	=	finish the work
take into consideration	=	consider

Finally, avoid **repetition.** Try not to use the same word or phrase more than once in every two or three sentences. Using the same word twice in the same sentence is definitely bad style.

Use Simple Words:

Avoid four- or five-syllable words when one or two syllables will convey the same idea. Many people believe that the use of "sophisticated" words will make their writing sound intellectual. However, these words are often not well understood by either the writer or the reader. Avoid elaborate, pretentious, coy, and cute words.

Use Words Correctly:

If you don't really understand what a word means, don't use it! Don't make up words. For example, avoid the use of nouns as adjectives, either by chaining nouns together or by tacking *-ize*, *-ness*, or *wise* onto a noun: e.g., *adaptation system change, strategize, anxiousness.*

Do Not Use Cliches, and Avoid Metaphors:

Avoid expressions such as the bottom li*ne, the cutting edge, covers a huge terrain, the seeds of archaeology, prehistory,* and *waiting to be unleashed.*

Be Specific and Concrete:

Avoid using vague and abstract words, phrases, and sentences. For example, the words *relation and related are virtually meaningless.* They simply indicate that two things are somehow connected. Almost everything in the world is connected in some way, so try to replace this word with something more concrete.

　　Bad Style: Relative and absolute chronologies are related in important ways.

　　Bad Style: The tools of the prehistory of mankind, found under the earth's surface, give rise to more advanced weapons in the layers above.

　　Bad Style: The archaeologist uses his various methods in order to find something under the ground.

Avoid Meaningless Qualifiers:

Try not to use phrases such as *most important, really, amazingly, fantastic, very interesting, rather, kind of, one of the most,* and *very*. No one is really going to believe that you are that fantastically fascinated by the most important subject of archaeology.

Avoid the Passive Voice:

The passive voice uses more words and often lacks the vigor of the active voice. Although it is difficult to use only the active voice in essays on archaeology and prehistory, try to avoid the passive voice as much as possible.

　　Passive: The Chacoan Anasazi were investigated by Dr. James Judge.

　　Active: Dr. James Judge investigated the Chacoan Anasazi.

Avoid Bias in Language:

Bias-free language reduces confusion and avoids possible offense. Avoid the use of masculine pronouns or other words specifying race or gender. For example, "human" or "person" can easily be used in place of "man."

Desk-top references to writing are very useful and inexpensive; many cost less than ten dollars.

REFERENCES:

Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White
1979 — *The Elements of Style*. McMillan Publishing Co., New York.

Venolia, Jan
1988 — *Write Right! A Desktop Digest of Punctuation, Grammar, and Style.* Ten Speed Press, Berkeley.