

The Political Science Department's Ten Commandments of Good Writing

As a college student you will write many papers. Why? Well, writing about something—or at least writing well about something—necessitates that you think more deeply about a subject than you otherwise would. In a scholarly paper you have to present evidence and employ logic to make an effective argument. Writing well requires you to think and write clearly. These are valuable skills, useful in any profession that a college graduate might enter.

Learning to write well is a difficult task, however, even a lifelong one. We consider it part of our job to help you become a better writer. Toward this end we offer the following advice and a couple of web links that should help you learn how to write well.

- 1. Plan out your argument and describe your argument in a thesis sentence.** Normally a scholarly paper in political science should attempt to demonstrate a thesis. You must know your thesis before sitting down to write. When a student writes without knowing what he or she is trying to demonstrate, the resulting product has an obvious “stream of consciousness” feel to it that will result in a lower grade. Your paper should be organized to logically demonstrate the thesis.
- 2. Move beyond opinion to formulate a testable thesis.** Arguments which demonstrate a thesis differ from opinions. An opinion requires no investment of time or energy; an opinion is simply a statement like “I don’t like Niccolo Machiavelli.” Opinions are essentially uncontestable. By contrast, a thesis is contestable, like the statement that “Machiavelli makes contradictory assertions.” This is a thesis which can be supported or refuted by presenting an argument.
- 3. Offer evidence to lead the reader to your conclusion.** You don’t get anywhere in a scholarly paper by simply asserting that a thesis is true. Instead of merely asserting that something is true, or telling a reader what the evidence you sifted through suggests, you *must offer up the evidence itself* to your reader. It is your job to convince a reader of the point you are trying to make, and marshaling good evidence in the text of the paper is the thing that helps to get you there.
- 4. Identify good sources and cite them properly.** Scholarly writing is a quest to find the truth. The writings of others can help you demonstrate the truth of a point. You can also cite sources as a counterpoint to your own thesis; your thesis may be valuable because it refutes the findings of these others. Sources that have been vetted by experts in peer-reviewed journals and University press books are significantly more worthy of citation than something like Wikipedia, because they are based on in-depth research. Properly citing your sources is important. We expect you to cite in the style described in this American Political Science Association’s citation manual: [[link to our citation manual here](#)]
- 5. Write meaningful introductions and conclusions.** Avoid beginning a paper by using a “canned” construction such as: “This essay will evaluate the advantages of proportional representation electoral systems.” Instead, use your introduction to provide the reader with a “road map” to your argument: “Proportional representation has several advantages, including X, Y, and Z. As I will argue, X, Y, and Z make proportional representation a stronger electoral system than those based on plurality...” An effective conclusion should be memorable, interesting, meaningful, and it should clearly summarize your findings.

6. **Omit needless words.** Every word in a sentence should carry meaning. A sentence should not run on needlessly, nor should it contain numerous prepositional phrases. Sentences with excess words or too much qualifying language sound flabby, and often simpler sentences are more powerful than complex ones. This being said, not every sentence needs to be short. Some will be short, others won't. Variation in sentence length makes for more engaging writing.

7. **Use active verbs.** Good writers use a wide variety of verbs in their writing and these verbs are often very specific in their meaning. "Abraham Lincoln spoke eloquently" is a better sentence than "Abraham Lincoln was eloquent" for the simple reason that the first sentence contains an active verb. "To be" and its typical form "is" is the weakest verb you can use. Substitute active verbs for "is."

8. **Spell check, paginate, and use subheadings to guide your reader.** Always spell check your papers. Failing to take a few minutes to spell check papers is a glaring sign to a professor that you are exceedingly lazy and don't care about the work you submit. Also, always put page numbers on papers. If you were presented with 30 papers without page numbers wouldn't you get sick of counting pages over and over? In any long paper (10+ pages), you should set off the parts of your paper with subheadings—this makes the organization of the paper more clear and makes it easier to read.

9. **Learn to rewrite/revise.** Most college courses do not require any rewriting. This omission is a pity because rewriting is probably the most effective way to learn about how to write well. Rewriting is not simply a matter of correcting a few stray red marks. Take the initiative and reexamine the entire paper. You should scrutinize organization, evidence, word usage, grammar, logic, and citations in a rewrite. Ripping a paper to shreds and reconstructing it is painful work, but it is work that needs to be done if you are to become the best writer that you can be.

10. **Be a good writing critic.** A computer can check your spelling and grammar, but it cannot check your logic or the flow of your writing. Have a trusted friend or two read your work and give you honest feedback. Read the work of your classmates and friends. Attempt to discover your writing weaknesses and find out how to correct them. Sometimes it helps to read your work out loud to yourself or to have someone read your paper out loud to you; this can help you discover your personal writing "voice." You should also be an avid reader; you can learn a lot about writing well by admiring the style and eloquence of effective writers.

A final caution: **Do not plagiarize—ever!** There are several types of plagiarism. Lifting words or paraphrasing someone else without attribution are the most common forms. Collaborating on writing when you are required to do your own work is another. Plagiarism is like a criminal offense to academics. You are stealing someone else's thoughts and essentially refusing to think things through yourself. Do not put yourself in jeopardy of failing a course or being expelled because of plagiarism (yes, it does happen). For a fuller discussion of UW-Oshkosh's Disciplinary Code, including forms of academic misconduct, see <http://www.uwosh.edu/dean/studentdisciplinecode.html#Chapter%20UWS%2014>. The Purdue University English department has a helpful site on plagiarism: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/>

Usage and Style Points

When you write, be yourself, but be professional. Sometimes students believe that using complex, convoluted sentences full of big words will make them sound “smarter” and more “scholarly.” You will be a more effective writer if you use language and sentence constructions with which you are comfortable.

Avoid the temptation to write as you speak. Spoken language is often too fragmented, informal, and colloquial to use in a college-level paper.

Indent and single space quotations longer than four lines.

Avoid grandiose generalizations. In a paper you will typically attempt to demonstrate a very specific thing. Stick to that topic and avoid generalizations about the world or how everyone thinks or the shape of human history.

Don't make your points through rhetorical questions. Rarely is a point effectively made by asking a question rather than making a statement.

Avoid using contractions in scholarly writing.

Avoid using slang and clichés. They are fine for conversations between friends, but they do not help you to make your point in a scholarly paper.

Do not use phrases like “I feel” or “I think.” These phrases have no place in a discipline that aims to use evidence to build a case. At best they are a nuisance. At worst they suggest to your reader that you are unwilling to do the work of actually demonstrating something through evidence, so you fall back on mere assertions of opinion.

Semi-colons should only be used to separate two phrases which would be complete sentences if they stood alone; they are used to link two closely related ideas. The semi-colon is used properly in the sentence above.

Do not make a practice of beginning sentences with “It.” “It” is a very weak way to begin a sentence.

Keep your audience in mind. If the reader of your paper is a professor, he or she has likely read the works under discussion but he or she has not memorized them. This allows you to explain the finer points of the items under consideration without rehashing their full argument.

There are many good books on how to write. One of the best is the time-tested *Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. This little pamphlet will give you additional information about how to write well. We recommend that you buy a copy.

Writing is like exercise. You need to practice if you wish to improve, and revising your own work is excellent practice.

Professor Pet Peeves

Do not assume that your reader knows what you are thinking. We need words to tell us what is on your mind.

A quotation mark comes after punctuation in a sentence, not before. Example: Winston Churchill said “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.”

You should not casually refer to someone in a paper using his or her first name.

The word “being” is often misused and should be used with care. The phrase “Being as how Putin is a dictator...” is not proper usage.

A “novel” is a work of fiction—don’t use this word to describe a non-fiction book.

Know the difference between “its” and “it’s.” The word “it” is never possessive; the only time “it’s” is used is as a contraction of “it is.” *Example:* “The Sudan is experiencing genocide in its Darfur region. Of the genocide, President Bush said ‘it’s a big problem.’”

Know the difference between “you’re” and “your.” “You’re” should only be used as a contraction for “you are,” not as an expression of possession. *Example:* “When *Your* dog has fleas *you’re* responsible for bringing him to the veterinarian.”

Know the difference between “there” and “their.” There is used to describe a place and their refers to a set of individuals. *Example:* The leaders of the Scotland study abroad trip arrived there Tuesday. Meanwhile, their luggage was still in Chicago.”

Know the difference between to and too. “To” is a preposition. You use “to” as an introduction to a phrase containing a verb. “Too” means “also” or “as well.” *Example:* “Tim was planning to take the course on Political Science methods. Jim wanted to take the methods course too.”

Answer the question and follow the assignment! Sadly, many papers do not even attempt to fulfill the assignment that is given. Likewise, many of the essays that we get do not even attempt to answer the question that was asked. We professors do not come casually to our essay questions and paper assignments. We write them precisely, as we have this guide. We want you to answer what has been asked. We want paper assignments to be followed. Answering the question at hand or fulfilling the paper assignment at hand is the *only* way to get a good grade.