Writing Prose

Contents

Acknowledgments

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1

General Considerations

A Why We Write

We write primarily to communicate—what we question, what we believe, what we know. We also write to discover what we think. Just as expression without thought is empty, so thought is incomplete without expression. But communication is not the only end we try to realize when we write. We write to gain power by defining reality as we see it; we write to signal our membership in a community, to embrace some people and exclude others; we may sometimes even write to obscure. We write to conform to verbal etiquette; we write to define our identities by assuming a particular voice. At times we write to amuse, to enjoy the play of language, and to share our delight in language with others.

This booklet focuses on the primary goal of writing prose: clear communication. But at times it touches on these less overt social, political, even moral purposes in writing. If you wish to become a good writer, you must be self-conscious about these purposes as well.

B Audience

A basic consideration is audience—for whom are you writing? Readers of a national magazine may need to be reminded that Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis, but your teacher and fellow students in a course on Freud will not. Usually it is best to write as if you were speaking to your classmates and to omit background material that the class already knows. Assume that your readers are intelligent enough to understand any argument you put before them, but assume too that the audience must be given the essential evidence for that argument.

Technical material raises particularly acute questions of audience. A discourse on Talmudic law, a description of enzyme activity in the nerve cell, a proof of convergence of a robot navigation algorithm—all refer to complex formal systems of thought. The same passage that appears opaque to one reader may well strike another more versed in the system as obvious. A conscious choice is unavoidable: you may be forced to exclude or irritate one group of readers in your effort to inform your proper audience. But indulgence in technical jargon

for its own sake is likely to put readers off. Choose carefully, and, to your best ability, choose generously: err more toward assisting than taxing your readers.

C Academic Disciplines

In general, the same good writing habits apply as well in one discipline as in another. You should aim for clear, simple, unmystifying prose, whatever your field of study: it never hurts to make your writing understandable to as many readers as possible. You should nonetheless be aware that academic disciplines have characteristic ways of constructing arguments in prose. You may discover that your professors in different fields have different expectations about how you should write, and part of the task you face in becoming a better writer is to identify and understand these differences so that you can accommodate them gracefully.

In the natural and social sciences, for example, many writers follow a set formula in preparing articles for professional journals. First comes a brief theoretical statement that explains the significance of the particular research question the author seeks to resolve. Next comes a research hypothesis that addresses that question, then a presentation and discussion of data—often quantitative—marshaled to test the hypothesis, and finally a conclusion that ties together data, hypothesis, and general theory. This formula works well for many social and natural science papers, and you will often want to apply it to your own work in these fields.

History and literature papers are typically organized in quite different ways. Many historians prefer narrative forms in which the problem or question they seek to answer is presented within the context of a story. Because the storytelling format follows rules that are much less clear-cut than those for scientific writing, the task of outlining so as to integrate your problem, evidence, and argument becomes all the more important. By the same token, when you write as a literary critic, your task is to interpret and explore the language and structure of a text, and this calls for still another set of rhetorical tools. Whatever the discipline you are studying, one of your best strategies, at least in the beginning, will be to consult examples of good writing in that field and use them as guidelines for your own prose.

You should realize that academic disciplines attach great importance to the careful definition and use of concepts, though they achieve this goal in different ways. Some do so explicitly and others more implicitly. In the social sciences, for example, much analysis hinges on such concepts as totalitarianism,

social class, authority, charisma, rationality, ideology, market, and culture. Confusion can arise because such terms often have loose popular meanings as well as more precise disciplinary ones—although just what these tighter meanings are or ought to be can produce spirited professional controversy. The best course is to take special care to master the concepts in a field and to use terms for them as precisely and self-critically as you can.

D   Content

Good writing is the culmination of careful thought: you must have something to say. While we often master a wayward idea only in the act of expression, the struggle to write with no idea in mind leads nowhere. Sensitivity to structure, tone, and style increases a writer's power of expression, but no amount of verbal facility or mechanical rearrangement can disguise the absence of invention. Sentences padded with elaborate connectives or overly technical jargon, paragraphs filled with endless quotation or constant paraphrase and summary, essays that assert no thesis and offer no conclusion—all reveal lack of thought. Mere repetition of what you hear in class or read in another's work gives no insight into your own ideas. If after strenuous study of a subject you seem to have little new to say, see your instructor for advice.

E   Structure

What you wish to say may prescribe the particular form your expression will take, but every experienced writer adopts a conscious plan of organization. Some might conceive of the structure of their prose as narrative (a story), as architecture (a building with foundation and walls), as geometry (a line, a circle, a spiral), or as organism (a tree with branches and leaves). The structure you choose should lend force to your effort at expression and shape the reader's comprehension of your ideas.

1   *Outline*

If an essay is to have a recognizable structure, it must be planned out beforehand. Set down your major points, arrange them in an appropriate sequence, and then make an outline.

2   *Title*

A good title indicates that an essay has a focus. "**The Civil War**" is probably a bad title for a work of less than three volumes. "**Yankee Draft-Dodging**" is better.

3   *Introduction*

If a thesis or other organizing idea is not presented near the beginning of an essay, readers may suspect that none exists. Begin by making statements about

your subject, not about your method (not, "**In this paper I plan to...**"). The opening paragraphs should orient the readers with a clear statement of the thesis and engage their interest by hinting at its importance.

4   *Body of Text*

The body of an essay observes, describes, presents positions, marshals evidence, argues points, moves toward a goal. If the succession of paragraphs cannot be logical—if the ideas presented by each paragraph are of the same logical order—then arrange the paragraphs according to ascending impact, saving your best for last. Restating material is often desirable but avoid extensive quotation or paraphrase, and never quote or paraphrase material that is not essential to your argument. Writers often slip unawares from argument into narrative summary. In some kinds of explication the two are bound together, but the summary should be included only to support or illustrate the argument. Either delete or relegate to subordinate positions points that are barely relevant, no matter how shrewd they are. Notice that you will not be able to decide what is relevant unless you possess a clear organizing idea. An unstructured list of observations is not an essay.

5   *Conclusion*

The end is a position of prominence. The conclusion should follow from the body of the essay, and it should summarize or distill the argument that has preceded. A strong conclusion is more than a mere restatement: it may offer a new example that epitomizes your case; it may open out an argument by suggesting the broader consequences or a more general proposition; it may pose a new question raised by the preceding considerations.

If you run out of things to say and cannot think of a way to conclude, go back, examine your ideas more closely, and revise your argument. If you find that your conclusion merely paraphrases your opening or thesis statement, put the paper aside, clear your mind, and try to think of a stronger conclusion. If, on the other hand, your conclusion looks like a new, unestablished thesis, and if this thesis seems more interesting than the one you began with, then start the paper over using your present conclusion as a new opening.

F   **Revision**

Many people who write professionally—including your teachers—write recursively, putting the work through many successive drafts, each of which involves substantial changes in content and argument. This process of revision frequently proceeds in a "spiral" fashion whereby the completion of each section triggers a complete rereading and editing from the beginning. In contrast,

many students think of writing as a once-only process that begins when they switch on a computer and ends when they tear off the last sheet of printout in the gray light of dawn. This failure to revise often leaves teachers frustrated with students' essays.

You may not have time to subject ordinary work to three or four successive drafts. Still, you should never turn in a paper without reading it through very carefully and giving it *at least one thorough rewrite.* Note that rewriting does not just mean correcting typographical and grammatical errors; it means reconsidering logic, evidence, analysis, rhetoric, and approach. In a good revision you will make significant alterations—changes in sentences and paragraphs, not just words and phrases. Just as writing and thinking are inextricably related, so should your rewriting be the occasion for further reflection.

Another reader can be an invaluable help in revising. When you have more time, or when you are writing a major project like a senior essay, ask someone else to read your second draft, and be willing to go on to a third or fourth draft. The residential college writing tutors can be of great help here. Remember that your ear hears prose differently than your eye sees it. Read out loud as you revise and listen to the rhythm and structure of your writing.

G Race and Gender

Be aware that some usages in English are perceived by certain communities as being racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive. One example is the traditional use of the masculine pronoun to represent an individual, whether male or female. Another is the traditional use of a singular noun ("**the Indian,**" "**the Black**") to represent a diverse group of people. No writer can avoid the choices these matters entail. By our selection of words we inevitably (and, perhaps, unwittingly) signal political and social stances that may or may not reflect our actual positions. If writers exclusively use the masculine pronoun to refer to the "typical" student, they may seem to be saying that only male students matter. If writers use "**s/he**" or alternate "**he**" with "**she,**" they indicate an intention to include both sexes, not to give priority to one. Some ways of avoiding sexist pronouns are problematic—how does one read "**s/he**" aloud? Some (as "**Everyone should bring their book**") violate grammar by confusing singular and plural forms. A better solution may be to use the plural consistently when discussing groups or classes ("**All students should bring their books**"). We cannot mandate how to resolve such issues. We can only suggest that you consider them carefully in your own prose.

H   Logic and Accuracy

Be logical, especially when you claim to be logical (for instance, when you say "**thus**"). Test your generalizations: Do they contradict each other? What implications follow from them? Try to think of exceptions (your readers will). If you find an irreconcilable contradiction in the materials you are treating, say so rather than avoid the issue. If after careful thought you find a text impossibly obscure, or an issue tangled, or a cause irretrievable, say so. Gestures of humility ("**I fail to see ...**" or "**This formula baffles me**") should appear rarely and only if any reasonable person would be lost. Be precise: if something happens often, but not always, put it that way; if a statement is characteristic of a thing but not absolutely definitive of it, put it that way ("**The general seldom brooded for long after a loss**"). Few mistakes raise the reader's suspicion of a writer's competence so much as untrue statements ("**The general never brooded**"). But avoid excessive qualification: a string of maybes and perhaps looks timid. State firmly, but do not overstate.

I   Tone

Writers' attitudes and emotions have a character or quality most often referred to as "tone." The most attractive tone is firm, honest, reasoned, engaged. Slippery reasoning, arrogance ("**Any fool can see**"), coyness, excessive showiness, breezy intimacy ("**Come on, Hegel, you can do better than that**"), exaggeration ("**the most blatantly miserable condition ever observed**"), contempt for the subject or the reader ("**Let me be perfectly clear**")—all may jar. Good sense, more than flash; discrimination, more than cleverness; conviction and care, more than fancy rhetoric: these distinguish good writing.

J   Author's Presence

While self-consciousness in the act of writing is of primary importance, the undue presence of the author in the written text irritates and distracts. Avoid excessive self-display. Do not complain of the short space at your disposal. If you feel indifferent toward a thesis, choose another one or come up with a fresh approach. Do not burden the reader with your own sentiments. Your hatred or admiration finds most effective expression if you present your topic vigorously, in all its spleen or splendor. You need not grab the reader by the lapels and tell her what you think; rather show her what she must think. Although an essay is a public statement and must abide by public conventions of clarity and reason, it will readily reveal the private feelings of its author. But your avoidance of reference to yourself should not encourage the use of the passive voice, the evil demon of prose style. Make your statements direct. Write about your subject, not your own state of mind—unless it is your subject.

K Quotation and Paraphrase

Your essay expects too much of your readers if they must pull books from their shelves in order to follow your argument. Quote or paraphrase essential material and do so accurately. Inserting your own misspellings or changes in punctuation misrepresents the original author and demonstrates your unreliability as a writer.

Quotation should exemplify your argument—not make it for you. A full page of quotation or paraphrase followed by a single sentence of comment looks padded and reveals laziness. Most readers will simply ignore quoted passages and skip on to your next idea. If you must, paraphrase any extended text drawn from other writers, but only if you have something to say about it. Always be sure to give proper credit for others' ideas or writing, both when you quote and when you paraphrase. For guidance about giving proper credit and avoiding plagiarism, see the *Undergraduate Regulations* and *Sources: Their Use and Acknowledgement.*

L Visual Figures

Especially in the social and natural sciences, writers face the considerable task of presenting prose accompanied by such other material as equations, statistics, charts, maps, and drawings. The reader's comprehension and convenience are the overriding concerns. Small items may be inserted directly into the prose, as in this example:

If we wish to explain the ups and downs in party percentages in American Presidential elections, one equation does quite well for 1900 through 1984:

$$y \begin{pmatrix} \text{change in} \\ \text{incumbent party's} \\ \text{percentage} \end{pmatrix} = x_1 \begin{pmatrix} \text{change in per} \\ \text{capita personal} \\ \text{income} \end{pmatrix} + x_2 \begin{pmatrix} \text{whether} \\ \text{the country} \\ \text{is at war} \end{pmatrix}$$

More complicated material should be located outside the flow of the prose and labeled as, for example, Table 1, Figure 1, or Map 1.

In presenting such separate displays, you should follow three guidelines. First, make them readable in isolation. That is, supply good enough captions, column headings, labels on axes, and so on, to allow readers to understand the table without consulting the prose. Second, at just the point in the prose where you want the reader's eyes to turn to a table, map, or other display for the first time, call attention to it. A signal sometimes used is "(see Table 6)" with or without its own line. Third, if a display may be difficult to grasp, help the reader along by supplying an example of how to manage it, as in this instance:

> **As the regression line in Figure 12 shows, an increase of two percent in per capita personal income yields a gain of about one percent in votes for the party in power.**

M   Proofreading

Proofread! Whether you use a typewriter or a computer, a heavily marked-up manuscript is preferable to an error-laden one. Errors of spelling and grammar may seem trivial, but they create the impression that you have worked hastily or carelessly. Even simple problems like misplaced commas can interfere with the sense of your writing. Word processors and spelling checkers take the drudgery out of proofreading, but you still must carefully reconsider what you have written. Your writing may look cleaner on the computer screen, but looks can be deceiving. Many people write faster and make more changes when they use a word processor. Remember that these habits of composition can make you more prone to certain mistakes, such as typographical errors and problems in parallel structure.

2

Paragraphs

A Purpose

The paragraph differs from the word and the sentence in that it has no obvious counterpart in spoken language. Story has it that Albert Einstein learned to talk very late in infancy, but when he finally spoke he did so in complete sentences—a sign of his lateblooming genius. Yet no one, no matter how brilliant, is credited with speaking spontaneously in paragraphs. The paragraph is a convention of the written word. Since most of us have no innate "ear" for paragraphs, we have to spend considerable effort and practice perfecting an "eye" for them.

If paragraphs are so troublesome, why not dispense with them? There has never been much interest in this idea, at least not for argumentative or expository prose. For readers, paragraphs divide the flow of prose into manageable portions. The paragraph break signals an opportunity to pause, reflect, and assimilate; it may alert readers to a summary, transition, or shift in emphasis. Simply put, paragraphs keep readers from getting lost. They serve a similar function for writers too, keeping them from wandering off into irrelevant chains of association. In composition the paragraph provides an essential unit of organization, large enough to contain several sentences but small enough to be held in immediate memory. Practiced writers find, even though they may not speak in paragraphs, that they definitely think in paragraphs, at least when they sit down to write.

B Construction

At some point in your education you probably encountered a model, scheme, or formula for a well-made paragraph. Most likely this formula involved a thesis sentence, two or three sentences of development, and a conclusion that recapitulates the thesis. This "five-sentence paragraph" and its scaled-up counterpart, the "five-paragraph theme," cause great consternation among teachers. Formulas like these may be useful in some contexts—for instance, when you must write quickly under pressure, as in an examination essay. But even then you should remember that rigid, five-part models may constrain your expression and limit the development of your ideas. If your writing is to help

you grow as a thinker, you must realize that regular models are of only incidental importance. Good writers learn to work through and beyond them.

Consider instead a more flexible and sophisticated definition of the paragraph: a series of statements that expresses a sequence of thought—a definition, an exploration, a demonstration, or a critique—set in some relation to a central idea. There is no single "correct" pattern for this sequence of thought. The design of a paragraph should be dictated by your purpose in writing it, and in this regard it may be useful to think of certain traditional "modes" of expression: description, definition, narration, causal analysis, deductive or inductive reasoning, comparison and contrast. The mode of a paragraph largely determines its structure—for instance, a paragraph that leads deductively from one proposition to another might be organized symmetrically around the two poles of premise and conclusion, while a paragraph of causal analysis is more likely to form itself into an extended string of relationships tracing a path toward or away from a single statement.

But although this flexible approach to paragraph structure is superior to the "five-sentence paragraph," one aspect of the simpler model is worth preserving: its emphasis on a central idea. You need not feel obliged to place a "thesis sentence" at the head of every paragraph, but there should come a point at which your reader can recognize a main idea, a point of focus, or an argumentative climax. A good paragraph is not a loose series of unrelated thoughts. There must be some pattern of subordination or connection even in a paragraph whose structure is digressive or repetitive, and it is impossible to construct such a system of transitions and relationships in the absence of a main idea.

The architecture of paragraphs is a surprisingly rich subject. You can learn much about the way writers think by the way they build their paragraphs. Make a habit of noticing this architecture when you read, both to expand your own repertoire of structures and to promote your understanding of the material.

C   **Length**

A good paragraph is as long as it needs to be. Just as there is no universal blueprint for paragraph structure, so there is no absolute minimum or maximum standard for length. If a paragraph is a sequence of thought, then part of the discipline of writing (and thinking) is knowing when this sequence has arrived at its goal.

Some broad rules of thumb do apply, though they are subject to exceptions. If a single paragraph exceeds a double-spaced page or a single computer screen, reconsider its length. If the paragraph contains a large number of sentences (more than six or seven), see if you can find a place or places to divide it. If such a large paragraph contains only three or four sentences, chances are your sentences are either full of unnecessary words or hopelessly convoluted. Go back and condense.

The most serious difficulty inexperienced writers have with paragraphs lies not in excessive length but insufficient development. All too often, especially under the pressure of a deadline, students string together two or three as yet unrelated assertions and present them as a fully-formed train of thought. Here is one such stunted paragraph:

> **The American economy faces unprecedented competitive pressure from other industrialized nations. Only by maintaining our superiority in basic research can we hope to survive in this situation. Greater support for universities is essential.**

This is a "paragraph" only by the most liberal definition; it more closely resembles an entry in a notebook. The writer has drawn only cursory links between assertions, and these assertions are not supported by any kind of demonstration or evidence. There is no attempt to pursue implications or consider implicit assumptions. This writing would not be acceptable in a formal academic essay. Fortunately, however, this writer had another chance. Here is what the proto-paragraph became in a second draft:

> **The American economy faces unprecedented competitive pressure from other industrialized nations. The British, French, West Germans, and above all the Japanese have spent billions to modernize their industries and expand into new markets. The key to this expansion is basic research that does not need to have a quick payoff—the investigation of fundamental principles in chemistry, physics, and biology research. Basic research in materials technology launched superconductivity, which may become one of the three most important technologies of the next century. If the U.S. is to stay competitive with Japan and Europe, we must expand our efforts in basic research.**

This version is longer, but it is also more specific, more precise, and better focused. The first assertion, about competitive pressure, has been supported

with references to the Europeans and Japanese. The second assertion, about basic research, has been expanded—we now know what basic research is—and bolstered with the reference to superconductivity. The third assertion, about support for universities, has been moved to a separate paragraph and in its place there is a sentence that summarizes and points ahead to further development.

The fact that this improved paragraph leads on to later discussion brings up another common pitfall of paragraph construction: integrating paragraphs into the larger structure of an argument. Paragraphs in an essay, like sentences in a paragraph, have to be assembled according to some logical scheme. The first sentence of the paragraph usually serves as the "hook" that links one paragraph to another. By the same token the final sentence may provide a "signpost" that informs readers where the argument is about to take them. These transitional sentences are placed at the seams or border lines of an essay, the points where the structure of analysis and argument is often weakest. Therefore the transitions between paragraphs are often the most interesting parts of an essay. They are the points where opportunities for extension and refinement are greatest.

If the logic of a paragraph seems unclear to you or a second reader, consider adding transitional material. If you can think of no necessary connection between paragraphs, reconsider their order in your essay. Writing with a word processor makes changing the sequence of paragraphs a fairly simple task. When "cutting and pasting" blocks of text, be sure you do not introduce inconsistencies (for instance, by relying on arguments that formerly came before but after re-ordering come later). Be prepared to write new transitions to knit the recombined structure together.

3

Sentences

Structure and Function

The English sentence consists at minimum of a noun (a subject) and a verb (a predicate). As we learn in "grammar school," many additional rules govern what is grammatical and what is not. But a grammatical combination of words, while a necessary feature of a sentence, can still yield a meaningless sentence. Consider an example concocted by the linguist Noam Chomsky:

> **Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.**

This sentence is perfectly regular and grammatical, but it is also nonsense. It demonstrates that more goes into making a good sentence than just strictly observing rules. Sentences must make sense—and this requirement is not trivial. They report facts, define terms, give commands, narrate events, question judgments, proffer opinions, or assert conclusions. Sentences organize a writer's ideas, and we test sentences not merely for their formal properties, but also for their logic and meaning. The sentence is thus the chief means by which we manufacture sense out of words.

Fragments and Weak Verbs

Omitting the predicate verb produces a sentence fragment, something you may wish to do occasionally for deliberate rhetorical effect. Like this. But too many sentences without verbs make your style seem telegraphic. Or silly. Like the copy in so many advertisements today. Use the verbless sentence sparingly, as you would other strong stylistic devices.

In good sentences, subject and predicate are not merely present but complementary. The verb is strong enough for the noun, and vice versa. In most mediocre sentences, on the other hand, the verb is the weak partner. There we find strings of nouns (often abstract nouns, to make matters worse) loosely joined by the weakest of verbs, the linking verb "is," or its more genteel but equally vacuous cousins, "seems," "appears," "exists," as in "**Effective ordnance delivery is imperative.**" Nearly always, such vague linking verbs can be replaced with more precise and therefore more effective verbs: "**Our bombers must be sure to hit the airfield.**" This last sentence is much clearer than the original because it specifies the subject ("**bombers**") and object ("**airfield**") of the action in question (bombing, not "**ordnance delivery**"). Using a vivid

active verb often has this effect; it forces writers to make up their minds, to express their opinions fully, to say exactly what they mean.

The verb "to be" in its linking form is not the only offender, of course. A great many other pallid verbs hinder writers by preventing or obscuring decisions about what they really think. "**Relates to**" is a prime example. What kind of relation is involved? Identity? Contrast? Alteration? Each of these concepts can be expressed in a strong active verb ("**mirrors**," "**reverses**," "**transforms**") to make the sentence sharper, more specific, more immediately intelligible.

In general, seek out active and specific verbs and avoid passive and vague ones. Try to use verbs that evoke a metaphor or concrete image (so long as it is an appropriate image, of course). Avoid at all costs verbs or verb phrases that solve a problem of expression without solving a problem of meaning. If you do not know what to say about a subject but you find a construction that lets you appear to say something (e.g., "**the length of Whitman's lines is impressive**"), you will only puzzle or annoy your reader and will not succeed in disguising your indecision.

C   **Passive Voice**

Weak verbs proliferate when writers become addicted to the passive voice. Passive constructions use the object of an action as the subject of a sentence. They therefore emphasize actions in themselves rather than the agents responsible for the actions. There are appropriate uses for this perspective—for instance, in scientific writing, where one often wants to describe processes that lack an obvious agent.

Since the passive voice lets you avoid specificity, you should be aware of what you are not specifying. Sometimes writers use the passive voice as a way of obscuring important issues or avoiding responsibility. Compare these two presidential pronouncements:

Mistakes were made.

The buck stops here.

In the first sentence, virtually a textbook example of the passive voice, the speaker attempts to limit damage from a political scandal by neglecting to identify the parties responsible for the "**mistakes**." In the second sentence, which is clear, direct, and active, the speaker declares his responsibility. Sentences in the passive voice do not inherently lead to deceitfulness, but it is much harder to evade hard truths when you write in the active voice. Avoid passive constructions whenever possible, since they are often vague. For example:

Public television can be perceived by some as boring. When its programs are viewed, they seem tedious and cannot be easily understood. The interest of a wide audience is not attracted. This narrowness of appeal is imputed to excessive intellectualism. How can this be supported by a so-called "public" network?

These unfortunate sentences should be rewritten: "**Many viewers find public television boring because it is too intellectual, a questionable quality in a 'public' network.**" Most of us have a natural desire to avoid straightforward assertions like this because they bring on us the burden of controversy. Good writers distinguish themselves by their willingness to accept that burden.

Despite its dangers, there are appropriate uses for the passive voice. For instance, when the agent is irrelevant ("**This seat is occupied**") or unknown ("**The child was injured in the riot**"), avoiding the passive voice may be clumsier and less accurate ("**Someone is sitting here already**"; "**A policeman, a rioter, a random brick, or an unexpected heart attack injured the child in the riot**"). Scientific and other technical writing admits a greater use of the passive voice. While the phrase, "**Total energy is wasted in the form of heat,**" might be recast as, "**Some agency which is not yet identified wastes total energy in the form of heat,**" the second is graceless and borders on superstition. Much scientific writing adopts the passive perspective even when the actors are clearly known ("**The concentration of sodium is observed to increase when a charge is applied**") as an unstated way of emphasizing that the actions or observations discussed are in some sense universal: the same phenomena will be reported by all observers. Finally, even in relation to facts and observations reported by specific individuals, technical writers often choose the passive voice as a means of summarizing a body of knowledge with which they assume their intended audience is already familiar ("**It can be shown that the total energy of a dissipative system decreases [Lord Kelvin, 1886]**").

D   Padded Sentences

Strong verbs make sentences concise. If you take care to choose a specific word in the first place, you will have no need for those tired modifiers ("**almost,**" "**quite,**" "**rather,**" "**very**") that flesh out vague sentences. Another padding device is the construction "**It is the…that**" as in:

But for himself, it is the possibilities of bodily movement that excite and please him.

The writer of this sentence has managed to find two strong verbs, but is apparently uneasy with them and so buttresses the sentence with "**it is,**" hedging on the assertiveness of the verbs. This construction can be useful ("**It is the corporation that benefits, not the workers**"), but in general it is weak, and you should avoid it. The sentence above should be rewritten: "**The possibilities of bodily movement excite and please him.**"

Sentences can also be padded with an empty introduction or "dummy head":

Thus we see that ....

It is my opinion that ....

On the contrary, we must agree that it has become crystal clear that ....

These wordy phrases shove the main idea of the sentence into a "that" clause. Do not use an introductory phrase unless it is essential to the meaning of your sentence. Write about your subject, not about your own mental state or the quality of your argument.

Make your writing efficient by selecting nouns and verbs that have no need for extending, qualifying, limiting adjectives and adverbs. To be sure, you need not adopt extreme austerity as the invariable goal of your writing. Occasionally, a stripped, lean style cannot express a genuinely subtle or involved argument. You may need to employ the baroque style of a Henry James as well as the directness of a Hemingway. But use more complex or ambitious language only when no simpler statement precisely expresses your meaning. Avoid wordiness.

E   Subject–Verb Agreement

In English the subject and the verb must agree in number. This is an elementary rule of sentence grammar, but students run afoul of it all too often, in part because word processors make it possible to change a few words without retyping a sentence in its entirety. When you revise on a computer, be sure to reconsider carefully any sentence in which you have made changes.

Problems with agreement can also develop in sentences with complicated or deceptive structures, especially compound subjects (two or more nouns linked by "**and**"). Here is a case in point:

The magnitude and volatility of recent market activity makes effective forecasting difficult.

Read carelessly, this sentence may not seem erroneous, but in fact its singular verb ("**makes**") is out of agreement with its plural, compound subject ("**magnitude and volatility**"). The sentence should read:

> **The magnitude and volatility of recent market activity make effective forecasting difficult.**

As we have said before, always read your draft aloud as one stage of revision. Many writers find it much easier to catch problems of agreement in this way than by silent proofreading.

F   Pronoun Reference

Most pronoun problems result from ambiguity of reference. Take this sentence: "**Odysseus wants to go home and is blocked by the gods, which is unfortunate.**" What does "**which**" refer to—Odysseus's desire or the gods' action? Perhaps the writer has in mind the whole idea of Odysseus's thwarted desire; if so, the sentence should be revised for greater clarity.

"**It**," "**that**," and "**this**" are among the worst vague pronouns, as in the construction, "**Homer says that Odysseus is weeping when he is on the island of the sun god and loses all the crewmen. This shows his humanity.**" "**This**" is too weak a link between the two sentences; it needs replacing with "**The weeping**" or an equivalent phrase. A precise reader, incidentally, would also object to "**his**" in the last example. Does it refer to Homer? Odysseus? The sun god? The only safe procedure with a pronoun (he, she, it, they, them, that, these, who, what, each, every, such, some, many, and so on) is to make sure a pronoun refers unambiguously to a single antecedent, which in most cases will be the closest possible noun. Remember that "antecedent" means "going before."

If you suspect that your reader will not follow your reference, replace the pronoun with its antecedent noun. A little repetition is better than a lot of confusion. In these necessary repetitions competent writers sometimes observe a principle of variation. They avoid repeating the same bare noun over and over by using it in phrases (hence "repetitions" becomes "these necessary repetitions" above) or by substituting obvious synonyms. Used intelligently, variation contributes to good style. Be careful, however. Synonyms are seldom exact and may confuse your meaning. Like any formal device, this sort of variation can be overdone ("**He picked up the handgun and pointed the revolver at his victim, whereupon he fired the weapon and then threw the pistol away**").

G   Dangling Participles

Other features of sentence structure can create problems with reference. A dangling participle is an "**-ing**" or "**-ed**" verb form made to modify an absent or distant noun rather than, as it should, the subject of a sentence's main clause. Dangling participles are easy to spot if you ask yourself who or what is doing the action of the participial verb. Consider this sentence: "**Relating this interpretation to the second stanza, a lovely image is formed.**" The subject of this sentence, "**a lovely image**," clearly does not do the work of "**relating**." That is the job of the reader, whom the passive construction inconveniently omits.

A subtler and consequently more common abuse of participles arises when writers employ them as an inadequate link between parts of a sentence:

> **Not only did the Wife of Bath have other company in youth, but she had five husbands, echoing the Samaritan woman.**

What is the antecedent of "echoing"? In fact, the participle has no antecedent at all. It is not a modifier, but a tenuous link between the two parts of the sentence. A stronger connection is needed here—something like "**but she had five husbands, like her predecessor the Samaritan woman.**"

Inadequate links are even more common with past participles. Participial phrases modify nouns, as in "**Exhausted from their ordeal, the hostages refused to speak to the press.**" The adjective "**Exhausted**" clearly applies to "**hostages**." Contrast this with the example:

> **Based on early primary results, the senator decided to withdraw.**

What noun does the participle "**Based**" modify? It does not modify "**results**" (the results are not based on something, rather something is based on the results). It also does not modify "**senator**" (we do not speak of people being "**based on**" things). In fact, the participial phrase here modifies a phantom noun, and you could repair this sentence by summoning up that phantom: "**The senator's decision to withdraw was based on early primary results.**"

H   Parallelism and Comparisons

Words or phrases parallel in meaning should be parallel in form. There are few easier ways to improve the logic, clarity, and style of a sentence. We can see how this rule works if we clumsily alter the first sentence of this paragraph to read: "**Words or phrases parallel in meaning should be parallel as far as form**

goes." This second version makes prompt understanding difficult, because it removes the similarity in form of "**in meaning**" and "**in form.**" Readers of the first version can easily connect two phrases so similar in appearance.

Comparisons work in the same way. Terms to be compared must be formally (and logically) identical: write "**Odysseus's fate is less harsh than that of Aeneas,**" not "**Odysseus's fate is less harsh than Aeneas.**" "**Odysseus's fate is less harsh than Aeneas's**" is still another correct possibility.

I   **Split Infinitives and Final Prepositions**

The split infinitive and the preposition at the end of a sentence are not ordinarily major threats to clarity, but careful writers avoid them when they conveniently can. "**To boldly go where no one has gone before**" is just as clear as "**boldly to go**" or "**to go boldly,**" but split infinitives are likely to draw criticism from some readers. If you want such readers to attend to what you say and not to the placement of adverbs in your sentences, keep "**to**" and the verb together.

Some writers prefer not to end a sentence with a preposition. If you follow this practice, be careful to use the objective case of pronouns: "**the man I am speaking with**" should be rewritten as "**the man with whom I am speaking.**"

J   **Overly Complex Sentences**

Watch out for the excessively complex sentence, which is likely to confuse your readers. Such a sentence presents a dreadful tangle of words. It hides "that" clauses within "that" clauses like a nest of Chinese boxes, it endlessly multiplies qualifications, it trips over its own punctuation, and it drags its slow length along to a conclusion readers cannot understand—because they have forgotten the opening of the sentence. The following, quoted as an example in Orwell's *Politics and the English Language,* is relatively short but nevertheless unintelligible:

> **I am not, indeed, sure whether it is not true to say that Milton who once seemed not unlike a seventeenth-century Shelley had not become, out of an experience ever more bitter each year, more alien to the founder of that Jesuit sect which nothing could induce him to tolerate.**

In this particular conglomeration the double negative used for rhetorical effect ("**not unlike,**" and so on) causes the chief difficulty. Other complex sentences go wrong for different reasons. You can avoid trouble by following a few guidelines:

> *Use the opening "that" clause sparingly:* "**That this problem has been over-looked by previous analysts demonstrates ....**"

> *Use parenthetical interruptions judiciously and infrequently.*

> *Do not include a long quotation in mid-sentence.* Readers will not remember the beginning of the sentence when they reach the end.

> *Avoid strings of appositive phrases,* as in "**The king, a man who likes to travel, a man who likes to love, a fighter, a saint, a wealthy father, sits down.**"

> *Avoid strings of nouns used as adjectives,* as in "**the Yale English Department Undergraduate Student Writing Subcommittee.**" This bureaucratic style is confusing. Is the committee made up of students or is it concerned with student writing?

> *Avoid strings of prepositional phrases,* as in "**The opinion of the representative over the issue about the superintendent was heard.**" This sentence sounds like an income tax instruction.

> *Use few elaborately modified gerunds,* as in "**the trooper's unconscionably harsh interrogating of the witness.**" (Remember that gerunds require a possessive: "**trooper's.**") This phrase seems stiff and needlessly difficult. Rewrite as "**the unconscionably harsh interrogation of the witness by the trooper.**" Or much better, turn either the gerund "**interrogating**" or the noun "**interrogation**" into a verb: "**The trooper brutally interrogated the witness.**"

> *Be careful with the conjunction "as,"* which can mean both "at the same time as" and "because." "Since" is equally ambiguous, but less treacherous than the overworked "as."

4

Words

An especially common weakness in writing is poor word choice. If you wish to write with clarity and grace, you must be willing to spend some time thinking about the words you use, about their sounds and rhythms, about their connotations, even about their histories—the meanings of the root words from which they are derived, the associations they have acquired through centuries of use. Avoid words that are either too pompous or too colloquial, and beware of jargon. Try to use language that is vivid and precise; a paper that relies on vague and abstract language will be colorless, anonymous, and dull.

A Imprecise Usage

Know the meaning of the words you use. Keep a good college dictionary close at hand. For special problems, use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), which gives the historical development of words.

Think carefully about the connotations and etymologies of the words you use. English is a rich language. Its syntax and core vocabulary are Germanic (Anglo-Saxon), but at various points in its history it received heavy infusions of Romance vocabulary from Latin and French. This happy mixture allows for great stylistic flexibility. Be aware of the subtle differences between Germanic and Latinate words. "**I was bothered until I worked out an answer**" conveys the same basic information as "**I experienced difficulty prior to arriving at a solution,**" but the two sentences have very different shades of meaning.

Germanic words contribute vigor and directness; Latinate words add elegance and complexity. The best prose stylists keep a balance between Germanic and Latinate, concrete and abstract vocabulary, and they manipulate the differences in the length, sound, and "feel" of words. In general, avoid Latinate words if you can translate into Germanic equivalents with no loss of meaning. Do not use "**facilitate his departure**" if you mean "**help him leave.**" Such nuances can be particularly important because they may introduce implied metaphors. You can tell by looking at the word "skyscraper" that it is a metaphor, but unless you have studied Latin you may not be aware that words like "aspersions" (from L. *aspergere,* to sprinkle) and "supercilious" (from L. *supercilium,* eyebrow) are also metaphorical. Writers can make unintentionally

comic mistakes when they fail to realize that abstract, neutral-looking Latin words may be "dead metaphors"—metaphors that can return embarrassingly to life when the reader is more aware of etymology than the writer. For instance, a student writing a paper about the *Iliad* may wish to say that the poem makes us think about the complexities of death. He unwittingly writes:

In the *Iliad* death becomes a multi-faceted subject for rumination.

Gems have facets (and so, metaphorically, does a complex problem); a cow ruminates (and so do people, metaphorically, when they "chew over" ideas). But the two metaphors do not mix well; gems do not belong in a cow's stomach.

Imprecision can also result from using generally related terms as if they were synonymous—by failing to distinguish, say, between "**irony**" and "**sarcasm**" or between "**efficiency**" and "**effectiveness**" or between "**disinterested**" and "**uninterested**."

The following words and phrases are often used imprecisely:

> *"Like" is a preposition; "as" is a conjunction:* "**Ann thinks like I do**" is incorrect ("**Ann thinks as I do**"). The use of "like" as a conjunction has become quite common, but resist it, since it obliterates a useful distinction in the language. Sometimes students bend over backwards, using a complicated construction with "as" when the preposition "like" would be better. Not "**As with many philosophers, Kant**" but "**Like many philosophers, Kant.**"

> *different than,* as in "**Cesium chloride is different than sodium chloride in three respects.**" Say "**different from.**" Better to revise for an active verb: "**Cesium chloride differs from**" or "**Three qualities distinguish cesium chloride from sodium chloride.**"

> *infer and imply:* To "infer" is to ascertain by a rational process; to "imply" is to suggest. Speakers or actors imply; readers or witnesses infer. "**I infer that he is unreliable because his actions imply it.**"

> *effect and affect:* An "effect" is a result; the noun "affect," a rarely used psychological term borrowed from the German *Affekt,* is an emotional condition. "To effect" is to cause or bring about; "to affect" is to influence.

> *lie and lay:* Lay is a transitive verb (one that takes an object: "**Lay down your arms**"); lie in either of its senses ("recline" or "tell an untruth") is intransitive

and takes no object. These verbs are frequently confused because the past form of lie is lay: "**He lay down and died last night**" is correct; "**I am going to lay down for a minute**" is not.

> *verbal and oral:* Speakers and writers consistently confuse "**verbal**" (expressed in words) with "**oral**" (expressed in speech — or literally, from the mouth). The alternative to a written agreement is not a verbal agreement, but an oral agreement.

B Slang and Colloquialisms

Slang terms and colloquialisms make informal speech earthy, pungent, and evocative. In formal prose, however, they become breezy and ineffective. For example:

> **Carter's attempt to liberate the hostages was not a very cool move.**

Distinctions between "formal" and "informal" are never absolute, and intelligent writers often use colloquialisms for a conscious stylistic effect or rhetorical purpose. The best standard to go by is *considered use:* never use a colloquial expression without good cause or without thinking carefully about your reader's likely reaction. (Note: enclosing a colloquialism in quotation marks distances the writer from the quoted material, but some readers may find this patronizing or offensive.)

Here are some common colloquialisms to avoid:

> *kind of, sort of, as qualifiers,* as in "**Jefferson was sort of ornery.**" These two qualifiers (along with "rather," "quite," "very") imply that the following adjective is not adequate to the task. Pick better adjectives.

> *a kind of, a type of, and a sort of,* when no other kinds, types, or sorts are nearby. Not "**Bismarck was a kind of Machiavellian**," unless you have been speaking of several kinds of Machiavellian, but "**Bismarck was a Machiavellian.**"

> *comes across as,* in "**Odysseus comes across as honest.**" Use "seems" or "appears." "**Odysseus seems honest.**"

> *awesome, incredible, unique, and other hyperbolic adjectives,* as in "**Lendl is an awesome player with an incredible groundstroke.**" These words mean "capable of inspiring sublime dread," and "impossible to believe," and "one of a kind." In writing, use them only with precision.

C   Jawbreakers and Jargon

Some writers have a tendency to use sophisticated or mystifying language where plainer stuff will do. Using fancy words just for "impact" may make your reader suspect you of pomposity.

Use polysyllabic words sparingly. Words like "**epistemological**," "**institutional-ization**," and "**hermeneutic**" originate in philosophy, political science, and Biblical studies. They are specialized terms, appropriate in their original disciplines but likely to be seen as jargon when used loosely, especially outside the field. Before you use technical language, make sure it is intelligible to your audience and appropriate to the discipline and subject. The cardinal rule here is: make sure there is no plainer word with the same meaning.

> *audience:* Do not write "**Alaskan Natives relied on anadromous fish for their spring food supplies**" if your intended reader is, say, a historian. It is almost always better to use simpler language that will not send your reader to the dictionary: for example, "**Alaskan Natives relied on the spring spawning runs, when ocean-dwelling fish made their annual journey up freshwater streams to lay their eggs.**"

> *discipline:* Do not describe a love scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with the specialized social science term "**personal interaction**" if you are writing literary criticism. Likewise in an economics paper, refrain from suggesting that inflation "**deconstructs**" a monetary system unless you carefully explain how this concept from literary theory might apply to economics.

> *subject:* In an essay on the Indian struggle for independence, do not refer to "**Mahatma Gandhi's combative stance.**" Gandhi was a pacifist; he may have been recalcitrant or resistant, but not "**combative.**"

Technical terms often serve a good and legitimate purpose, but these words can be a problem even in their proper field when overused or intended to impress or mystify the reader. In the sciences, be careful with words like "**impact**" (as verb), "**utilize**," "**parameter**," "**paradigm**," "**input**," "**output**," "**throughput**," "**interface**," "**interact**," and "**interpersonal**." In the humanities, use caution with "**dissonance**," "**phenomenological**," "**dialectical**," "**discourse**," "**deconstruct**," "**marginalize**," "**ironize**," "**thematize**," "**foreground**" (as verb), and "**post-modern**."

D   Abstract Language

Excessively abstract language is imprecise, lifeless, and hard to read. Consider the following sentence, taken from a student paper:

All through this experience, however, he is aware of his position relative to good and evil; his cognizance of this and his subsequent conduct leave no doubt as to his desire for good.

Although the context would help to clarify the meaning, the sentence itself loses clarity through abstraction. Who or what is it about? It describes someone (unidentified) who has had an "**experience**" (undefined), who is not only "**aware of his position**" but "**cognizant**" of it as well (redundant, since "cognizant" means "aware"), and whose unspecified "**subsequent conduct**" leaves no doubt as to his desire for good. The sentence occurred in a paper about Goethe's *Faust,* but reading such a description of the play would hardly lead you to suspect that Faust's "**experiences**" include fornication, murder, magic, forest meetings with witches and devils, and a love affair with Helen of Troy.

Writers often fall into abstraction by substituting nouns for verbs. Compare the following sentences:

The growth of New York led to conditions of crowding in certain residential neighborhoods.

As New York grew, more and more people crowded in to look for housing in a few key neighborhoods.

The second sentence has three lively verbs to the first sentence's single—and rather dull—"**led to**." Notice also how "**growth**" and "**crowding**" conceal "**grow**" and "**crowd**."

Beware the verb "to be," which encourages overly abstract and noun-laden prose. Consider:

The crowding of New York's residential neighborhoods was a function of immigration and natural population increase in combination with the social geography of ethnic settlement.

One little verb struggles to hold 25 sprawling words together. Compare:

Even the birth rate of native New York families would have strained the city's housing stock. But when the immigrants added their numbers to the city's natural growth, certain neighborhoods nearly exploded.

Notice how sharply the second version differs from the first. In correcting for the misuse of "to be," you often improve the logic and structure of your sentence.

Substituting vivid, concrete words for abstractions will help you avoid a sty-
listic fault as well: the awkward repetition of likesounding endings, as in "**His
cognition of her renunciation of all emotion facilitated his creation.**"

E   Wordiness

Less is more. Jaw-breakers, jargon, and over-use of Latinate abstractions all
make writing wordy. Inexperienced writers often throw these into their sen-
tences without knowing their meaning or function, simply because they have
seen them before. Here are some notorious examples:

> *such that,* as in "**They scored and scored, such that their final victory was
inevitable.**" Rewrite: "**They scored so much that ....**"

> *the fact that,* as in "**The fact that you are leaving pleases me.**" Omit "**the fact**"
unless you are speaking of facts; say "**That you are going pleases me,**" or less
stiffly, "**I am pleased that you are going.**"

> *it is interesting to note that,* as in "**It is interesting to note that Shakespeare
wrote no sestinas.**" Just note it.

> *the nature of, the case of, the character of,* as in "**Let us speak of the case of
Churchill**" or "**The nature of suburbs is to sprawl.**" Say "**Let us speak of
Churchill**" and "**Suburbs sprawl.**"

> *intensifiers or certain other qualifiers with absolutes:* when an adjective
describes a state or quality that can be either present or absent but never any-
thing in between—for instance, "**dead,**" "**unique,**" or "**perfect**"—then strictly
speaking that adjective may not be intensified. Thus while you might describe
Michelangelo as "**unique,**" it would be wrong to call him "**totally unique**" or
"**more unique.**"

> *excessive adverbs:* avoid emphatic adverbs by replacing a weak adjective and
its intensifier with a strong adjective; replace "**very bad**" with "**disturbing**" or
"**shameful.**" Use all adverbs conservatively. Remember the "Tom Swifties"
jokes which poked fun at the overuse of adverbs in certain children's books:
"'**Flat tire,**' he said sparingly. '**Must have been a nail,**' she replied pointedly.**"

> *long-winded adverbial phrases:* revise "**in a cold manner**" or "**in an inau-
thentic way**" to "**coldly**" or "**inauthentically.**"

> *long-winded verb phrases:* change "**makes reference to**" to "**refers,**" "**is pleas-
ing**" to "**pleases,**" "**is adjacent to**" to "**adjoins,**" "**is different from**" to "**differs
from.**"

> *somewhat of, and other weak intensifiers,* as in "**somewhat of a trial**." Simply leave the phrase out.

F   Figures of Speech

New ideas are often easier to grasp if they are presented in the more vivid context of a specific example or in analogy to some familiar image. Figures of speech—metaphor ("**The river was an ancient witness**"), simile ("**The river advanced deliberately, like a dignified village elder**"), personification ("**old man river**"), and so on—are all means of bringing writing to life in this fashion, much as the parable animates moral teaching or role playing stimulates psychological insight. These livelier modes of expression, if used sparingly, have the virtue of focusing the reader's attention and clarifying the writer's position; in skilled hands, figures of speech instill prose with grace and beauty. But, as with any other device, they will distract and obscure if used excessively ("**Old man river was an ancient witness who advanced deliberately as if he were a village elder**"), imprecisely ("**The winding river bore the crooked smile of a toothless hag**") or inaccurately ("**The icy river foamed with a fiery dullness**").

Two warnings seem particularly relevant to unpracticed writers. First, take great care to avoid mixing metaphors, whether intentionally ("**The angry river foamed like a glass of beer**"), or unintentionally ("**The raging torrent of words dried my pool of resolve**"). Second, use extended metaphor—the "conceit"—cautiously if at all, since readers' efforts to follow the clever elaboration of your original analogy may eventually cost them the memory of the idea you chose to embellish.

G   Pronoun Case

In some languages, for instance German or Latin, the form of a noun varies according to its grammatical function in the sentence (its case). A word takes one kind of ending when it is the subject, another when it is the object, and so forth. Luckily, writers of English do not observe such complicated distinctions for nouns. But we still discriminate between subject and object pronouns: "I" and "me," "she" and "her," "he" and "him," "who" and "whom," among others. Writers who fail to observe the difference between subject and object pronouns are likely to write expressions such as:

Till the stars fall from the sky / For you and I

A rock singer straining to find a rhyme might resort to this usage, but it will not redound to your credit as a Yale undergraduate. Pronouns following

prepositions always take the objective case ("**For you and me**"), as do pronouns that function as direct objects ("**The Dean gave Stanley and me a hard time**"). When uncertain about pronoun case, some writers incorrectly substitute "myself" for "me" ("**The award went to Kim and myself**"). Use "myself" only in contexts when you mean to emphasize your solitariness or independence ("**I did it all myself**"); "myself" does not mean the same thing as "me."

H   **"That" and "Which"**

The pronouns "that" and "which" introduce modifying clauses. "That" signals a restrictive clause — a clause necessary to the identification of the term it refers to. "Which" tells the reader to expect a nonrestrictive clause, one on which the full meaning of the antecedent term does not depend. For example:

> **The book that I read this morning was impossibly obscure.**

> **Hrolf's fury, which had not yet abated, spoiled his squash game.**

In the first sentence, the clause introduced by "**that**" is essential to the meaning of the sentence; in the second, the clause introduced by "**which**" could almost be enclosed in parentheses, as a brief interjection or "aside."

In practice even experienced writers tend to use "which" when they properly should use "that." In a few more decades this distinction may have worn away, but for the moment you should probably observe it.

I   **Dubious or Contested Usages**

English is always changing to accommodate new social and intellectual settings. Some words condemned by one generation as slang or jargon become standard vocabulary for the next. A good instance is the word "trait," which came out of French and was regarded as a showy neologism all the way through the 1930's. Now no one thinks twice about it. Some words, however, never become acceptable. Certain English obscenities have been in the language since the Middle Ages but have never passed into polite usage. Since good writers may disagree about the propriety of specific words, there can be no hard and fast rules about them. Here are some usages that currently stand as dubious:

> *nouns made into verbs with the suffix "-ize":* some words of this type ("**summarize**," "**agonize**") occur so commonly that they have become accepted. Others ("**finalize**," "**prioritize**") are still in dispute. Do not make up "-ize" verbs on your own.

> *nouns used as verbs,* as in "**The recession will impact the poor.**" This usage has become common in bureaucratic prose, but most writers resist it. Rewrite: "**The recession will burden the poor.**" Constructions like the original often substitute inelegant abstractions for simpler, more vivid verbs.

> *due to, owing to,* as in "**He ran down the mountain due to the bear.**" Say, "**because of the bear.**" Strictly speaking "due to" and "owing to" are financial terms ("**Your loan payment is due to the bank**"); the issue here is whether these phrases can function as synonyms of "because." Whether or not they are proper synonyms, people often use them that way. Better to use "because," which is a perfectly acceptable conjunction.

> *"quote" is a verb, "quotation" a noun:* The inverted commas are "quotation marks," not "quotes." A cited passage is a "quotation," not a "quote."

J   Spelling

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, even learned people spelled with extreme (or extream, or extreem) inconsistency. Modern rules of English spelling are often difficult to learn and apply because they reflect the complex linguistic heritage of English and its tendency to absorb new words from other languages.

Readers may form an opinion of you based on your attention to detail. Spelling errors can make you seem careless, clumsy, or ignorant. When you are not sure how to spell a word, look it up. If you write with a word processor, use a spelling checker on your final draft to catch any misspellings you may have missed in proofreading. Keep a list of words you continually misspell—doing so may help you break the habit. In particular, watch out for these three classes of words:

> *words constantly misspelled,* usually words with double consonants or other unusual forms: for example, "**accommodate**," "**embarrass**," "**occurred**," "**neither**," "**receive**" (these are the correct spellings).

> *words derived from Latin or Greek,* often misspelled in the plural or mistaken for singular: e.g., **data** (the datum is, the data are), **medium** (the medium is, the media are), **phenomenon** (the phenomenon is, the phenomena are), **criterion** (the criterion is, the criteria are).

> *common phrases mistaken for single words,* or vice versa: for instance, "**a lot**," "**each other**," "**cannot**," "**everyday**," and "**all right**." Never write "**I can not**

understand why we see each other alot more than most people." Only write "**everyday**" if you mean to use the adjective (meaning ordinary) not the adverbial phrase (once every twenty-four hours). While you might use the expression "**alright**" when quoting colloquial speech, the phrase "**all right**" is the preferred written form.

5

Punctuation

A Commas and Semicolons

The details of punctuation may seem trivial, but by properly punctuating you arrange the parts of your sentence logically. Punctuation should alert readers to the structure of your thought. It is the visual equivalent of vocal inflection. If you read your prose aloud, you will avoid errors of punctuation like the ones in this sentence:

> **The issue of abortion, is complex and, extremely controversial.**

The writer here did not understand that commas mark a pause, usually in the same place where someone reading aloud would stop for emphasis or breath; no one would ordinarily pause between subject and verb or between a conjunction and its appended phrase. Generally speaking, commas have four uses: to separate items in series, to bracket words in apposition, to set off an introductory phrase, or to punctuate compound and complex sentences.

Unless they are very short, two independent clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction ("and," "but," "for," "nor," "or," "so," "yet") are separated by a comma:

> **Criticisms of Shakespeare's plays fill whole libraries, but the facts of his working career can be summarized in a brief pamphlet.**

Two independent clauses not connected by a coordinate conjunction are separated by a semicolon, unless they are members of a longer series of such clauses. Compare these two sentences:

> **Criticisms of Shakespeare's plays fill whole libraries; the facts of his working career can be summarized in a brief pamphlet.**

> **Criticisms of Shakespeare's plays fill whole libraries, the facts of his working career can be summarized in a brief pamphlet.**

The first clearly presents two independent and equally important ideas; the reader sees immediately that they are to be contrasted. The second version (a "run-on sentence" or "comma splice") is initially confusing. Seeing the comma, the reader thinks a third element will follow in the series, like this:

> Criticisms of Shakespeare's plays fill whole libraries, the facts of his working career can be summarized in a brief pamphlet, but the details of his married life need only a single paragraph.

Readers of the second version eventually can see what is meant (and they will also see that it is incorrectly punctuated), but it is your business as a writer to make understanding prompt, not eventual. Do not overuse the semicolon, but remember that it is an important signal to the reader, indicating that a following clause is a fully independent addition to or modification of what precedes it.

B   Commas with Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Clauses

A restrictive clause limits meaning or specifies which of a number of objects is intended. Such clauses are not set off by commas.

> The document that Franklin produced met with favor.

Nonrestrictive clauses provide supplementary information not necessary to identify the subject. They are set off by commas.

> The document, which Franklin produced, met with favor.

In the first sentence (containing a restrictive clause), we speak of Franklin's work as opposed to someone else's; among several documents, Franklin's was favored. In the second sentence (which has the nonrestrictive clause), we already know which document is under consideration, and we learn parenthetically who happened to write it.

C   Commas in Series

Punctuate a series (of words, of phrases, or of clauses) with a comma after every term except the last, including the one before "and":

> Bring the shells, books, boxes, and umbrella.

> Lightning flashed, thunder cracked, and the torrential rains began.

In general, as in the second example, put shorter items in the beginning. If the terms within the series require commas themselves, as do appositional insertions, then separate the terms with a semicolon:

> The members included His Highness, Ralph, Prince of Wales; Roger, Second Vice-Earl of Nantucket; Justice Spade; the Very Reverend Dr. Mack, Bishop of Anglia; and Eustace Gordon, Lord Hello.

The punctuation makes it clear that five people are named.

D Parenthetical Phrases

Interpolations or modifications can be put inside commas, like this, if they are quite brief. If they are longer or more disruptive, you may wish to choose between dashes—like this—or parentheses (which, you will remember, always travel in pairs). There are several nuances to consider in this choice. Unlike parentheses, the dash can be used to break the flow of a sentence at a single point—dashes are more arresting and emphatic. Parentheses, on the other hand, allow you to digress or make oblique reference to your subject. Both devices can be useful, but try not to wear them out.

E Colons

The colon (:) signals that the next part of the sentence exemplifies or describes in different terms the preceding part. Usually it introduces a definition, specification, or example. The colon may introduce a phrase:

His purpose was clear: to offend all those who heard him.

It may introduce a clause or series of clauses:

His speech was an offense: it disturbed the Dean, outraged the alumni, and blackened the name of the university.

But it should not divide elements of a sentence that do not require division, as in:

Your speech was an offense against: the Dean, the University, the Council of Churches, and God.

The last example does not require a colon.

F Quotations and Ellipses

In American (not British) usage, put commas and periods inside closing quotation marks, and semicolons and colons outside.

He said, "Never again will we go so far."

"Never again will we go so far," he said.

He said, "Never again will we go so far"; we nonetheless went on.

He said, "Never again will we go so far": those very words.

If you have a parenthetical reference at the end of a quotation, precede it with quotation marks and follow it with the punctuation:

" …government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish…" (p.76).

> Americans fought bitterly so that "government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish" (p.76); yet seldom….

The string of three or four dots that appears in the examples above is called an *ellipsis,* and it indicates that the sentence being cited has not been given in full. Ellipses are very useful but must be handled intelligently. Be careful not to pare away so much of the original text that the quotation becomes unfaithful or nonsensical. An ellipsis with three dots (…) indicates that only the beginning or middle of the sentence has been omitted. An ellipsis with three dots followed by a period (….) means that the remainder of the sentence, up to its closing period, has been left out.

G   Square Brackets

Square brackets [these] are not to be confused with parentheses (these) or braces {these}. Square brackets are used to introduce editorial comment into quoted material or to correct for ambiguity caused by removing a quotation from its original context:

> I hope to see you all next month in Paris [Texas].

Introducing the word *sic* (Latin for "thus") in square brackets signals that your quotation contains some error or questionable expression the reader might notice:

> The idea never ocured [*sic*] to me.

Some writers prefer not to use [*sic*], since it can reflect an attitude of superiority or class bias. You are best off using [*sic*] only to identify mistakes made by educated sources who should know better. If you decide not to employ the [*sic*] convention, you should inform your readers of your practice in the first footnote or in a separate statement at the beginning or end of the paper.

H   Block Quotations

If you intend to quote more than one sentence, or if a single quoted sentence takes up more than three lines, set the quotation as a separate block. Insert one blank line in double-space format, two blank lines in single spacing. Then type the block quotation in single-space format with each new line indented. Do not enclose block quotations in quotation marks (" "). Follow the quotation with a footnote or page reference as you would an ordinary quotation. Remember that all the standards of good quotation apply to block quotations, particularly the caution against padding out your text with irrelevant material.

I Contractions and Possessives

An apostrophe (') indicates that one or more letters have been omitted from a word in a contraction ("do not" becomes "don't"; "he is" becomes "he's"). Apostrophes also occur in possessives ("**the wrath of Guido**" becomes "**Guido's wrath**"). Generally you need worry only about possessives, since contractions are not acceptable in formal prose; but if you do have occasion to use the contraction "it's" (for "it is"), do not confuse it with the possessive form of the pronoun, "its" (no apostrophe). Never leave out the apostrophe in a possessive noun (not "**Herbs dog**" but "**Herb's dog**"). In making plural nouns possessive, use the apostrophe alone:

The soldiers' cries gave away their position.

In making possessive a proper noun that already ends in "s," you may use either the apostrophe or an apostrophe and an "s," thus:

This is an important feature of Yeats' poetry.

This is an important feature of Yeats's poetry.

J Abbreviations and Acronyms

With a few obvious exceptions (Mr., Dr., p. for page), keep abbreviations (e.g., etc., i.e., esp., cf., and others) to footnotes; spell out and translate into English in your text ("for example," "and so forth," "that is"). "Cf." means "compare" and implies that the reference will offer a different opinion from yours; use "see" when you mean "see." Do not confuse "e.g.," which means *exempli gratia,* or "for example" with "i.e.," which means *id est* or "that is." "Et al." is not interchangeable with "etc." — et al. stands for *et alia* ("and others") and refers only to persons; etc. stands for *et cetera* ("and other things") and refers only to objects and concepts. Do not use *Op. Cit.:* in later notes referring to previously cited work, simply repeat the name of the author and a shortened version of the title ("**Marx,** *Manifesto,* **p. 5**").

An acronym is a sequence of capitalized letters comprising the initial letters of the important words in titles (OPEC, FBI, NASA). Before you use an acronym, you should write out the full title and follow it by the acronym in parenthesis. Exceptionally well known acronyms may be used immediately without being defined (USA, USSR). Acronyms can save you space, but be careful not to condense your prose beyond the point that your readers can follow.

K   Exclamation Points and Other Devices for Emphasis

Reserve the exclamation point for cases of genuine surprise or perplexity, which will come along very rarely. If you simply wish to emphasize a statement, set it off between dashes or (if really necessary) underline it.

L   Hyphens

A hyphen (-) is a mark that joins two elements into a single word. You should hyphenate syllables of a word broken across a line end. When a noun phrase is used as an adjective (for example, "the fiction-writing enterprise" or "eighteenth-century literature"), use a hyphen between elements. It is not otherwise necessary to hyphenate words in a noun phrase (for instance, "I enjoy fiction writing" or "Napoleon was born in the eighteenth century"). Do not confuse the hyphen with the dash, which is written as a long horizontal line,—, or a pair of hyphens, --.

6

Writers' Tools

There are a number of tools that can be of great help as you compose, edit, and revise your prose. Too few students make regular use of them. Ideally, these tools should never be more than an arm's length away from the desk at which you are writing, and you should employ them without hesitation whenever a question about form or meaning occurs to you. If such books are not part of your personal reference library, you will not use them nearly as often as you should.

A   Dictionary

When you read, a dictionary is the place to discover the meanings of unknown words; when you write, on the other hand, it is a more complicated tool for distinguishing among the nuances of words you already know, thus permitting you to choose your words more precisely. A dictionary can tell you many things about a word: its spelling, its pronunciation, its different meanings, even its history. Some of the best dictionaries illustrate such information with examples of proper usage, including special idioms that determine how a particular word will combine with prepositions and other parts of speech. One especially useful tool, the *Oxford English Dictionary,* attempts to illustrate the entire history of every word in the English language with quotations that exemplify each word's changing usage. A version is available online via the Yale University Library Research Workstation (*www.library.yale.edu/pubstation,* then "Databases and Electronic Journals"). By reading dictionary entries carefully, you can learn an enormous amount about the rich textures of sound, meaning, and nuance that English has bequeathed us.

Invest in a good college dictionary (Webster's *New World,* the *American Heritage,* the *Random House,* or the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate* are all excellent) and do not let it gather dust. You should never write a paper without referring to it at least a few times.

B   Thesaurus

A thesaurus is a collection of synonyms, words with similar — but not *identical* — meanings. Many of us were trained in secondary school to use it simply as a tool for finding substitute words to replace ones we were using too frequently in our prose. Although this is one possible use for a thesaurus, it is not

the best or most important one; moreover, it has the danger of encouraging us to view synonyms as indistinguishable in meaning and simply spelled differently. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Treat the thesaurus not as a warehouse with shelves of identical spare parts, but as a chest full of unique jewels, each best suited to a slightly different setting. As such, the thesaurus can be even more useful than a dictionary in helping you explore the nuances of an idea, the slight variations in meaning that you must understand if you are to write with precision and grace. The most important use of a thesaurus is to help us find not duplicate words, but exact ones. Use it whenever you think there is a *better* word out there than the one you are currently using.

C   **Handbooks and Guides to Usage**

Handbooks of English are grammars of the language, but they are designed to be especially helpful for writers who wish to be reminded about the correct form of a particular usage. Some are organized as comprehensive textbooks stepping you through each part of the language; others adopt dictionary formats to enable you to look up the answers to questions that concern you. Each has its own distinctive character, and it is often worth owning two or more so you can read more than one author's explanation of how to solve a problem. The following handbooks are among the better ones now available:

Wilson Follett. *Modern American Usage: A Guide,* edited and completed by Jacques Barzun. New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. A dictionary guide that is the American equivalent of Fowler (see next entry).

H. W. Fowler. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage,* 3rd ed., revised and edited by Robert Burchfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. The standard dictionary guide to usage problems in British English.

Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference,* 4th ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

John Hodges and Mary E. Whitten. *Harbrace College Handbook,* 14th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2000.

James A. W. Heffernan and John E. Lincoln. *Writing: A College Handbook,* 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994.

D   **Style Manuals**

A style manual (sometimes called a style "sheet") is a standard set of forms for preparing a manuscript for final submission or publication. It gives you a set of rules for such things as tables of contents, chapter headings, quotations, punctuations, footnotes, bibliographic citations, and so on, none of which are

completely standardized in English. Different disciplines have quite different rules for how references should be cited in a manuscript. To know how to prepare your Yale papers so that they best suit the requirements of the field in which you are writing, you should consult the relevant style manual.

Two style manuals are used most widely in the humanities and some social sciences:

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, ed. Joseph Gibaldi. 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1999.

The Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. This is probably the most comprehensive style manual on the market, giving you examples of virtually every sort of citation or manuscript form you are likely to encounter. An abridged version in paperback gives you most of the essentials you will need for a Yale paper: Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations,* 6th ed. rev. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Academic style sheets, especially those in the sciences, often tend to follow the format of the chief journal or professional association publishing in a given discipline. See, for instance, Robert J. Sternberg's *The Psychologist's Companion: A Guide to Scientific Writing for Students and Researchers,* 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, which describes the standard forms of writing in the field (summaries, reviews, research papers) and covers matters of documentation in detail. Similar guides may be found for most academic disciplines—ask your instructor.

E Miscellaneous Guides

In addition to the standard reference works discussed above, there is a host of books designed to help you improve one or another aspect of your writing skills. No brief list could hope to survey the wealth of tools that are available to you under this heading, but here are a few that have proven especially helpful to other Yale students:

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff. *The Modern Researcher,* 6th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2000. A classic guide to the entire process of researching, organizing, and writing an original piece of scholarship. Most of the examples are drawn from the work of historians.

Robert A. Day. *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper,* 5th ed. Phoenix: Onyx Press, 1998. A reliable and thorough guide to writing in the sciences.

Mary Lynch Kennedy and Hadley M. Smith. *Academic Writing: Working with Sources across the Curriculum.* Paramus, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986. Good advice on quoting and paraphrasing sources, on documentation, and more generally on writing research and review papers.

Richard A. Lanham. *Revising Prose,* 4th ed. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. An excellent discussion of the problems you should consider as you set about revising your rough draft. Lanham has written other helpful books about writing, including his provocative *Style: An Anti-Textbook,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. All are worth reading.

Richard Marius. *A Writer's Companion,* 4th ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1998. A brief guide to the making of arguments and the honing of style, written by a historian and novelist.

Norman E. Steenrod, Paul R. Halmos, Menahem M. Shiffer, and Jean A. Dieudonné. *How to Write Mathematics.* Providence, RI: American Mathematical Society, 1983. A comprehensive guide to the special problems one faces in writing mathematics.

William Strunk and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style,* 4th ed. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. If you own no other book about writing, own this one. Despite its age and its occasionally archaic advice, it has stood the test of time remarkably well. No other guide is more readable or more helpful, and it deserves to be reread frequently.

Edward R. Tufte. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information.* Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1992. A delightful and opinionated guide to incorporating graphical information effectively with prose.

William Zinsser. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction,* 6th ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1998. Sensible and readable suggestions about essential matters of style, including clarity, simplicity, unity, and proper usage.

F Word Processing

Yale students, like writers everywhere, are turning to the computer and its word processing software for all stages of the writing process. There are many excellent reasons for doing so. Word processing eliminates or streamlines many of the routine tasks involved in writing, allowing you to work faster. With a word processor, you no longer need to retype your entire draft in order to change it, so that you are much less likely to feel daunted by the task of revising. The computer gives you many sophisticated tools for manipulating

your prose, such as block moves, text searches, global replacements, and automatic footnotes. Word processing replaces the old notion of discrete drafts with a continuous cycle of reconsideration and refinement, making it easier to work toward more and more polished prose. In the end, your finished copy will often look neater than a text written or typed by hand, especially if you use a spelling checker to catch errors. All of these capabilities make the word processor an immensely powerful and attractive tool, so much so that most writers would not dream of working without one. If you think of the word processor merely as a computerized typewriter, you are selling the technology short.

Many teachers nonetheless complain that there is no sharp difference in quality between papers written on word processors and those done by hand or on a typewriter. Indeed, some claim that there has been a significant *deterioration* in the quality of manuscripts because students write so quickly on the computer that they become careless about the elementary tasks of rereading and proofreading prose. Word processing may help you organize and refine your ideas, but the invention, analysis, and persuasion on which all good writing depends must still come from you. The word processor may not be simply a high-tech typewriter, but neither is it an artificial intelligence. The quality of your prose—whether measured in terms of the insight of your ideas or the accuracy of your spelling and punctuation—is your responsibility.

Taking control of the word processor so that you can use it as effectively as possible requires that you recognize the new problems it can introduce into your prose. The greater speed of computer composition, for instance, can lead to sloppiness or wordiness: as essays become longer, they often lose their organizational clarity or focus. Relocating passages in block moves ("cutting and pasting") often introduces errors of parallelism or logical sequence. Computer revision all too frequently produces noun-verb or other word combinations that no longer agree with one another. Because you do not retype an entire sentence when you change it on the computer, a sentence such as "**The typical student does not proofread carefully enough**" can easily become "**Too many Yale students does not proofread carefully enough.**" No spelling checker can identify such errors, so the only way to guard against them is to slow down and reread everything you revise, preferably out loud. Your ear will hear errors that your eye has great trouble seeing on the computer screen.

Perhaps the most serious pitfall of word processing lies in the fact that only a small part of one's text—far less than a conventional page—is visible at any

given time. The computer screen gives writers the compositional equivalent of tunnel vision, causing them to forget statements they may already have made and making it difficult for them to keep track of the larger framework in which individual paragraphs are embedded. Although word processing is in many ways preferable to older forms of writing, the constraints of the display screen are a substantial drawback. For this reason, you should *print out your word processor file at regular intervals* in order to see it whole. At the very least, produce one complete printed draft for revision and correction before you turn in any essay.

This technique, by the way, will also provide a safeguard against the inevitable power failures and system crashes that sooner or later will wreak havoc with your word processor files. Remember always to make multiple disk copies of any work you are doing, and keep at least one copy of a big project (such as your senior essay) at a location where it will be safe if something happens to the other ones. Never turn off your computer without making a backup of the work you have just done. As an additional safeguard, it's a good idea never to copy your backup file onto the same disk twice in a row. Instead, have a stack of two or more backup disks, and save new copies of your file onto the top-most disk in the stack, moving it to the bottom of the stack as soon as you have written the latest version of the file to it. This way, if something goes wrong with the copy you are making to the top disk on the stack, you will still have the most recent version of your work sitting safely at the bottom. In sum, writing on a word processor means writing in a powerful new way, but the goal for your final product remains the same: clear, readable prose that will convey your ideas to your reader in an engaging and understandable way. Keep that goal foremost in your mind at all times, and you will find that your prose—whether written with a computer or a quill pen—will gain a grace and clarity that will do honor to yourself and your audience alike.

Index