

Three Steps to Better Writing

(along with some common errors...)

I. **Paragraphing**

- ONE idea per paragraph
- Idea must be one you can develop
- Idea must be expressed in the topic sentence

Once you've written a paragraph, go back over it and make sure every sentence is related to or develops the topic introduced in the topic sentence.

- Any sentence that does not support or clarify the idea expressed in the topic sentence should be:
 1. deleted
 2. considered as the topic of another paragraph
 3. incorporated into the existing topic sentence
- paragraph's last sentence does **not** need to sum up the paragraph
- paragraph's last sentence should **not** introduce the topic of the *next* paragraph
- develop your topic sentences by brainstorming on scratch paper the ideas you want to cover in your essay
- draw arrows between the ideas that seem to relate well; this helps you organize your essay before you even begin to write
- transitions: topic sentences are generally better for transitions than the final sentence of the previous paragraph.

Some words are good "transition" words and phrases: "Not only...but also"; "Consequently..."; "On the other hand,"; "In addition to..."; "Nonetheless..."

II. **Active, vivid, and precise verbs**

- Active voice is nearly always better because it gives your writing punch and precision

"Who did what to whom" should be the basic structure of your sentence.

Subject of the sentence does the action:

"Drought brought famine." NOT
"Famine was caused by the drought."

How to spot passive voice?

Be on the lookout for the verb “to be” + “by”

By the verb “to be” we mean → is/are was/were

“The finicky Professor **is** annoyed **by** students who write in the passive voice.”

Instead:

“Students who write in the passive voice **annoy** the finicky professor.”

Notice the “Who did what to whom” structure:

Who (students) did what (annoy) to whom (the professor)

-- Avoid using the weak verb “to be” whenever you can – circle it every time you see it and try to replace it with some other verb.

Don’t say, “She **was** successful.” Say, “She succeeded.”

Lead with your point, don’t bury it at the end of the sentence.

For example,

Don’t say, “Another example of Wilson’s idealism **was** his determination to create a League of Nations.”

Instead, say, “Wilson’s determination to create a League of Nations also **demonstrated** his idealism.”

-- Don’t “waste” your main verb.

“Hitler was a man who ruled Germany from 1933 until his death in 1945.”

In this case “Hitler was a man” is the “guts” of your sentence – not an especially good use of your main verb. (Most readers already know that Hitler was a man.) Instead, say:

“Hitler ruled Germany from 1933 until his death in 1945.”

-- Give your writing **precision** by choosing just the right verb

“conceded” vs “acknowledged” vs “admitted”

“said” vs “explained” vs “mumbled” vs “thundered”

Ask yourself: “What **exactly** is my subject doing?”

Picture the scene in your head, then use verbs to create a mental picture in your reader's mind.

Don't dress up a weak verb with an adverb – find a better verb. Don't say, "said quietly;" say "whispered."

Words to avoid: strong, big, large, interesting (none are precise)

III. "No Repeats"

- Vary your word choice. Don't use the same words over and over. Check on the printed page to make sure you're not repeating the same words too often.
- When referring to historical actors, use their full name the first time you mention them: "John F. Kennedy"; thereafter refer to them by their last name: "Kennedy." If you are repeating their name several times in a paragraph, use other identifiers: "the president"; "the administration"; "Washington"; "the White House."
- Eliminating "repeats" of verbs will also enhance precision by forcing you to choose words that say *exactly* you mean.

BONUS RULE: "K. I. S. S." → Keep it simple, stupid.

- No "inter-office memos." **Never** say, "In this paper I will..." or "As I said previously..."
- Don't annoy or distract the reader by intruding your own voice into the story. This means not using the first person "I."
- Don't tell the reader what you're going to do, just get to it.
- Prune excess or flowery words and imprecise, confusing phrases

For example...

Don't say, "utilize," say "use" [verbs ending in -ize are almost always bad]

Don't say, "Because of the fact that," say "Since"

Don't say, "The mistrust that Stalin held..." say "Stalin's mistrust"

"in terms of" à ??? (avoid this phrase, it confuses more than it clarifies)

COMMON ERRORS

1-- Make sure your nouns and pronouns agree in number

“party,” “government,” “United States,” “Kennedy administration” all take the singular “it.”

“The Communist **party** had always valued abject loyalty. In fact, **they** insisted that everyone wear red underwear.”

For the noun and the pronoun to agree, “**they**” should be changed to “**it.**”

“The **Kennedy administration** had little interest in the Cuban government’s perspective since **they** assumed Castro had no legitimacy.” “**they**” should be changed to “**it.**”

2-- Do not use contractions in formal writing.

-- It’s vs its

RULE OF THUMB: since you will never use contractions, you will never use “it’s” (which means “it is”) So, “its” is always right. If you find an “it’s” in your paper, change it to “it is.” If it sounds weird, you’ve made an error – the correct form should be “its.”

3-- For smoother prose, avoid sentences that don’t reveal important information and keep your use of prepositional phrases to a minimum.

AWKWARD:

Mark J. White is the author of a book called *Missiles in Cuba*. In his book he argues that a crisis in which the world was in danger was the result of the reckless diplomacy of both superpowers.

BETTER:

Mark J. White’s *Missiles in Cuba* argues that both superpowers’ reckless pre-crisis diplomacy precipitated a dangerous international situation.

Check your prose to be sure you’ve used the fewest sentences and fewest words to convey the greatest amount of information. For example, there is no need to spend a sentence telling your reader that Mark White is the author of a book when you really want to tell the reader what the book *argues*.

4-- Failure to attribute quotes. When the voice of the paper changes from your voice to someone else’s, the new speaker must be introduced. This is different than citing the quote.

WRONG:

Kennedy modeled his Alliance for Progress on Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. In fact, "he instructed his advisers to look for a catch phrase like 'Good Neighbor' that he could call his own." (Leuchtenburg, 106)

RIGHT:

Kennedy modeled his Alliance for Progress on Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. In fact, one historian has noted, "he instructed his advisers to look for a catch phrase like 'Good Neighbor' that he could call his own." (Leuchtenburg, 106)

NOTE that both quotes are cited, but only one is attributed. Usually you don't have to identify a historian by name, after all if your readers want to know which historian, they can always look at the footnotes.

Sometimes the attribution sounds smoother when you put it in the middle of a quote, particularly if the quote has a natural pause:

"Throughout his years in the White House," one historian has observed, "Robert Kennedy remained intensely loyal to his brother."

5-- Overuse of quotes. Your paragraphs should not simply be strings of quotes. Only quote directly if the quote is vivid, cleverly phrased, or effectively illustrates the point you are trying to make. Otherwise, use your own words. You will be less likely to overquote if you attribute all your quotes. After a while, it just gets awkward to have to say repeatedly, "As one historian has noted," or "According to one scholar..."

-- It is better to quote historical actors than historians. Quotes from historical actors reinforce the immediacy of the moment; quotes from historians interrupt that moment.

6-- Incorrect sentence structure

WRONG:

"Looking for every source of revenue it could find, tax increases seemed the only option for the administration."

RIGHT:

"Looking for every source of revenue it could find, the administration concluded that tax increases were its only option."

NOTE that the phrase before the comma should modify the word **immediately** after the comma. In this case, the phrase modifies "the administration" not "tax increases," so "the administration" must follow the comma.

[In short, the **administration** is doing the “looking”; the **tax increases** aren’t.]

7 – Miscellaneous

-- Spell out numbers up to 100 and round numbers thereafter

Exception: percents: 93 percent.

-- Spell out numbers over 100 (and percents) when they begin a sentence. Never begin a sentence with a numeral.

-- Spell out centuries: 19th century (wrong); nineteenth century (right)

-- Don’t use “WWI” or “WWII.” Spell them out.

-- “while” vs “though”

While means “at the same time as” not “although”

WRONG:

“While Kennedy never trusted Khrushchev, he knew he had to work with him.”

RIGHT:

“Though Kennedy never trusted Khrushchev, he knew he had to work with him.”

“While Kennedy negotiated with Khrushchev, Castro fumed in Havana.”

-- “affect” vs “effect”

“affect” is a verb; “effect” is *usually* a noun.

WRONG:

“The conflict effected the exchange of goods in the region.”

“The new drug had many side affects.”

RIGHT:

“The conflict affected the exchange of goods in the region.”

“The new drug had many side effects.”

-- “loose” (adjective) vs “lose” (verb)

The screw was **loose**.

Don’t **lose** your mind.