

Brief academic writing and revising tips

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We write to record ideas in words. I write as an author and editor of social science research. I offer the following opinions as guidelines, not rules.

1. Write like you might lose your reader's attention. Your words compete with apps.
 - a. Research only matters to the extent that others understand it.
 - b. Most people prefer easy reading to hard reading.
 - c. Use small words, simple sentences and short paragraphs.
 - d. Write like you speak: plainly.
 - e. Read your writing out loud. Good writing sounds natural when spoken.
2. Write declarative sentences: {Subject} {verb} {whatever else}
 - a. Some call this "writing like Hemingway" and attach unneeded adornments.
3. Rewrite gerunds using active verbs. Example:
 - a. "States have varying levels of usage restrictions implemented" → "Usage restrictions vary across states" or, better still, "State usage restrictions vary."
4. Do not start a sentence with a clause longer than 3 words.
 - a. Long clauses hold the reader in suspense until you reveal the point of the sentence. Suspense is tiring and confusing, and therefore inconsiderate. Put long qualifiers after the verb when needed. Remove them when possible.
 - b. Examples: "As expected, ..." "However, ..." "In truth, ..." "To our surprise, ..." "More specifically, ..."
 - c. Clauses to avoid: "To the extent that gerbils could learn to fly airplanes, ..." "To the best of my knowledge, ..." "On the other hand, ..."
 - d. Most people learn not to start spoken sentences with long clauses, because they directly observe the listener's processing cost and potential distraction. Reader distractions are not easily observed in written media, but they are even more important.
5. Punctuation:
 - a. Learn from the widespread misuse of parentheticals in the economics literature. Only use parentheticals for citations in formal writing. Use them in your rough draft and then remove them when you rewrite. Parentheticals take the reader out of the flow of the manuscript.
 - b. Footnotes let the reader choose whether to engage or not. Use footnotes for caveats and tangents. Still, use footnotes sparingly. Important ideas should be in the text; unimportant ideas should be removed.
 - c. The [Oxford comma](#) is usually unnecessary.
 - d. Questions can be helpful if used sparingly.
6. Miscellaneous ways to lower your reader's reading cost:
 - a. Rewrite negations: "Not impossible"--> "Possible," "Less costly"--> "More easily"
 - b. Define technical terms that have specific meanings within the context of your research. Use technical terms consistently, exclusively and repeatedly.

- c. Nonspecific pronouns—"they," "their," "that," "this," "these," "it," etc.--frequently have multiple possible referents. Nonspecific pronouns are hard for many readers to parse. Nonspecific pronouns are especially confusing for non-native English speakers. Replace nonspecific pronouns with referents.
 - d. Eliminate unnecessary words.
- 7. Quote original sources.
 - a. Disclose epistemological bases of claims.
 - b. Disclose source biases.
 - c. Quote sources only when necessary.
- 8. Quantify when possible, e.g. "Several states have loosened..." → "8 states have loosened...", "I found some errors" → "I found two errors."
- 9. Avoid first-person possessive pronouns, e.g. "my research," "my model," "my predictions," "my data," "my results."
 - a. Research is a collective enterprise. Other people contributed indirectly by creating methods, writing software, producing data, funding your salary, giving advice, asking questions, etc. You play a special role as the vessel bringing the research forth, but publication requires assignment of copyright and collective agreement about accuracy. It is gauche to claim individual ownership of a collective good.
 - b. First-person, non-possessive pronouns ("I" and "we") are OK. Use them to describe your actions and thoughts. Be careful not to make yourself the focus of the paper, unless you are also the focus of the research.
 - c. The "[royal we](#)" is acceptable.
 - d. You can use elements of the paper as the subject if you prefer the third-person perspective. "The next section presents a new theory of gerbils flying airplanes."
- 10. Spellcheck every draft. The number and nature of spellchecker corrections are noisy signals about your current writing quality.
- 11. It is normal to revise an academic paper 20-25 times before its first journal submission.
 - a. Some revisions should start with the final section and then work backward. Otherwise the ending will be less polished than the start.
- 12. Writing is either finished or unfinished.
 - a. Writing is finished when reading it out loud feels natural.
 - b. Important writing requires multiple readings for confirmation.
 - c. Writing will never be perfect.
- 13. All writing reinforces habits. Writing skill improves with practice and decays with neglect. Write consistently across media.

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