

Basic Proofreading Guidelines

Making sure that your writing is as polished as possible is important — while certainly the substance and ideas should matter the most, how you present yourself in writing contributes to how your substance and ideas will be perceived, and sometimes the way you phrase something (or even the punctuation you use) will affect how your ideas are understood. As always, everything pretty much comes down to *purpose* and *audience*.

Here are some clear and simple things to be aware of. Some of them are basic elements of standard English, some of them are my own personal preferences or pet peeves. As most publishers have [style guides](#), think of this as the style guide for our course. Or think of it another way: As I am an audience with, for better or worse, some authority over you (I get to grade what you write), it's worth being aware of what my assumptions and preferences are, even if, in the end, you choose to violate some of these prescriptions. Ultimately, my hope is that you will pay attention to details and make deliberate decisions in your writing.

The best proofreading advice I can offer is this: **Read your paper aloud and pay attention to what you hear.**

For significant help with all manner of questions regarding grammar, mechanics, and style, see the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#).

Because this guide is a bit long, here's a linked table of contents:

[Formatting](#)

[Use Inclusive Language](#)

[Diction](#)

[Informed Audience](#)

[Authors' Names](#)

[Sentences](#)

[Paragraph Transitions](#)

[Punctuating Titles](#)

[Confusing Words](#)

[Who vs. That](#)

[Awkward or Wordy Phrasing](#)

[The problem of "so"](#)

[Single quotation marks do not indicate sarcasm](#)

[Long quotations](#)

[Hyphens vs. dashes](#)

[Commas](#)

[Serial commas](#)

[Citations](#)

[Works Cited vs. Bibliography](#)

Formatting

Unless otherwise instructed, you should always format anything you turn in for class according to [MLA formatting guidelines](#). That link goes to the Purdue OWL, which has a great overview of those guidelines and sample paper pages. The key points for me:

- double space
- use a standard [serif](#) font in 12-point, unless 12-point is especially big for that font (as it sometimes is for Courier). 12-point Times New Roman is generally a safe font to use as a default. Cambria, which Microsoft Word sometimes uses as a default, seems generally acceptable. As long as you don't get too radical, most people are happy to read work in any reasonable serif font (for instance, I know a very successful book editor who says she always loves it when people submit manuscripts in Georgia). Courier is a common fixed-width font, which some people require.
- indent the first line of your paragraphs and do not put a space between paragraphs
- create a header with your last name and the page number. If you don't know how to do this automatically, just Google it for whatever program you're using.

I would (and do) argue that you should do this for everything you write for school unless specifically told otherwise, because then you will get in the habit of doing it. Not all teachers will remember to tell you that they expect formal formatting, and you can prevent yourself from getting on their bad side by simply making this your normal way of working. On the other hand, not all teachers will require such formal formatting, and there's certainly a good argument to be made that in the age of word processors, students should be more free to format their papers how they want.

Here's why I like standard formatting on papers I receive, even informal ones: it means I look past the formatting at what the student writes. If all of the papers look basically the same, I soon forget who wrote what and I don't think about anything other than the content. If all the papers look significantly different, I first respond to them visually — sometimes well, sometimes not — and then have to try to erase that response from my assessment of the content.

Finally, while some of the formatting guidelines are just a matter of tradition, some are very practical, like a header with your last name and page numbers. Even when reading something online, I like to know what page I'm on. It's easy to add headers to documents, and it makes your reader's life easier. Trust me: You want to make your reader's life easier.

Use Inclusive Language

(unless you don't want to be inclusive, as inclusivity may not always be a primary goal)

The idea of inclusive language can be controversial, and different people have very different ideas about what is and isn't inclusive, and it can all be terribly confusing sometimes ... but like so much else in writing, it comes down to **purpose** and **audience**.

If you want your writing to reach as wide an audience as possible, you need to avoid language that unnecessarily excludes people. (If you *do* want to exclude some people, then of course you should use language that excludes them.) It isn't really about your feelings — you might think, “Calling people with brown hair ‘Greenheads’ is a flattering term!”, but people with brown hair might find it odd at best, offensive at worst. What have you gained by using your term rather than a more open one?

Here's a more realistic example: Some people really believe that “mankind” always has been and always will be a universal word that includes all *homo sapiens*. And it may in fact have been in the past read as universal — before the 1960s or 1970s, you can find countless examples of even staunchly feminist writers using “mankind” to mean everybody. But it doesn't mean that anymore. That's just a fact. Many many many readers will read the word “mankind” as sexist. Unless that's a fight you want to put energy into, why not just use a more inclusive word like “humankind” or “people”?

I expect you will try to avoid obviously racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc. language in my class, because your peers (and I, your teacher) have various identities, and unless you really want to offend people, it's generally better to try to be civil, open, and friendly. Obviously, it's a judgment call, but that's something we're trying to refine: your judgment as a writer. The best and most flexible writers have the most sensitive ears for language and spend time thinking about the little distinctions that can matter a lot.

Don't be afraid to use *they/their* as a singular pronoun, despite what any self-proclaimed grammarian tells you.

[The singular *they* has a long history in English](#) [see also [this more recent link regarding Taylor Swift](#)], and I think it solves our language's pronoun gender problem pretty nicely. Anybody who says *they* can't be used as a singular is flat out wrong; it has been used that way for centuries. Feel free and encouraged to use it in my class.

Here's an example. Instead of writing "Whatever his/her own feelings, a student is best off avoiding sexist language," try replacing *his/her* with *their*. (*His/her* suggests there are only 2 genders. Using that construction leaves out people who don't identify as male or female, and plenty of such people exist.) Our sentence rewritten with a singular *they* would read: "Whatever their own feelings, the student is best off avoiding sexist language."

Of course, that sentence could easily be re-cast in the plural, and that's **the most elegant and least controversial solution**: "Whatever their own feelings, students are best off avoiding sexist language."

For thorough guidelines on using inclusionary rather than exclusionary gender language, [see the National Council of Teachers of English website](#). (If your writing requires specific reference to transgender people, please be sure to be familiar with the terms in the [GLAAD Media Reference Guide glossary](#).)

Really, this all can be boiled down to general advice about language: Use words purposefully and thoughtfully, and do your best to think about how your words could be read by someone who is not you. Purpose and audience.

Diction

Diction is word choice, and the most basic way to talk about diction is to note two kinds: formal and informal. There are lots of different levels of formality and informality, but when proofreading an academic paper, keep in mind that it's better to err on the side of being formal than of being informal. Imagine that you are reading your paper to someone older than you, someone you really respect and want to impress. If what you are writing is not an academic paper, then you should pay attention to finding the diction that is most appropriate for what you want to communicate. Once again: *purpose* and *audience*.

Informed Audience

Unless specifically told otherwise, always assume you are writing for an informed audience: someone who has read the same texts as you. This allows you to focus more on analysis than on summary. When you summarize, you tell us what something says. When you analyze, you tell us why what it says is important, how it works, why it is

faulty, etc.

Authors' Names

First, spell them correctly. Second, refer to them by their full or last name. **Do not refer to writers by their first name in formal writing**, even when you know them well as a personal friend.

Sentences

There are a few things you want from your sentences. First, you want some sentence variety — try to write sentences of different lengths and structure. Second, you want your sentences to relate to each other. A paper is not a collection of sentences that could be rearranged into any order. A paragraph full of sentences that each seem to exist in their own little universe is a bad paragraph. Think of each sentence as a rung in a ladder: the ladder of your reader's thought, the ladder of your argument.

Paragraph Transitions

Paragraphs are wonderful tools for organizing ideas, and paragraph breaks can be excellent ways of giving your reader a moment to breathe between ideas. But paragraphs should not be islands of information unto themselves. Ideally, each paragraph leads into the next, giving us a sense of continuity and flow. (The best way to see this is to analyze some published writing that you think is effective. Look at how the writer moves from one paragraph to the next.)

Punctuating Titles

The titles of big things get underlined or *italicized*; the titles of littler things or parts of big things go in “quotation marks”. Here’s the list:

underlined / *italicized*

books
full-length plays
magazines
newspapers
full-length movies
TV series titles
albums

“quotes”

short stories
poems
one-act plays
essays
magazine/newspaper articles
specific episodes of TV shows
encyclopedia articles

long poems

songs

Confusing Words

There are many confusing words in English, but here are the two most frequently confused sets:

Its: possessive	Their: possessive
It's: contraction (it is)	They're: contraction (they are)
	There: direction

Another common confusion: *effect* vs. *affect*. The challenge here is that both words have multiple meanings and can shift which part of speech they are. Most commonly, though,

effect is a noun (e.g. *the effect of something*) and

affect is a verb (e.g. *to affect the outcome of something*).

(*Effect* as a verb means to cause something to happen, to bring something about; *affect* as a noun is mostly limited to psychology and means emotion or desire, especially as it influences behavior.)

We all have different sorts of words that confuse us. Learn yours and keep a list on your computer or near your desk to remind yourself.

For some more information on frequently-confused words, see [this guide from the chief of copyediting at one of the largest publishers in the world, Random House.](#)

Who vs. That

This is extremely minor, but it's a pet peeve of mine, so I will mention it. *Who* as a relative pronoun is used when referring to human beings, *that* as a relative pronoun is used when referring to things that aren't human beings. Thus it is better to write, "I had a conversation with a scientist who thought grammar was more interesting than physics" than "I had a conversation with a scientist that thought grammar was more interesting than physics." (This is assuming the scientist is a human being, of course...)

Awkward or Wordy Phrasing

I generally dislike Strunk & White's popular *The Elements of Style*¹, but I love one piece of advice in it: "Omit needless words." It's a beautiful example of what it proclaims. Note that *needless* does not mean "write short sentences" or "write only summaries" or something like that. It's not about length. It's about necessity.

The following words are filler — avoid them unless absolutely necessary (and even then, give them a second thought): *very*, *a lot*, *really*, *rather*, *pretty* (as in "*pretty boring*"), *little* (as in "*a little awkward*"), *just* (as in "*just a little annoying*"), *somewhat*, *well* (as in, "*Well, it was really rather pretty awful*").

Also, here's a type of sentence I commonly see:

In "The Call of Cthulhu" by H.P. Lovecraft it suggests that the universe is ruled by gods that don't care at all about human beings.

Aside from not knowing what exactly the "it" refers to, the problem with this sort of sentence is that it could be much more gracefully written:

"The Call of Cthulhu" by H.P. Lovecraft suggests that the universe is ruled by gods that don't care at all about human beings.

Or, if you're certain that what you want to suggest is that Lovecraft himself believed this (probably not true, but more likely if you were writing about an essay instead of a short story):

In "The Call of Cthulhu", H.P. Lovecraft suggests that...

¹ For a particularly sharp take-down of the book, see ["50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice"](#) by Geoffrey Pullum, a highly respected linguist. Rather than Strunk & White, I'd recommend *Style: Toward Clarity & Grace* by Joseph Williams. There's also some good stuff to be found in older books such as Jacques Barzun's *Simple and Direct* and William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. And if you really want to dig into the particulars of grammar, the single best book I know is [A Student's Introduction to English Grammar](#) by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum. For a history of how all this came to be, Henry Hitchings wrote a really interesting book, [The Language Wars: A History of Proper English](#).

Word order matters a lot in contemporary English. Pay attention to your wording.

The problem of "so"

For a two-letter word, *so* is awfully problematic at times. In formal writing, it is almost always best to avoid using *so* as a simple intensifier modifying an adjective ("The essay is so brilliant!"), and please try to avoid using it as a synonym for *very*, *exceedingly*, or *extremely*. We all use it this way in informal speech, but it is usually not appropriate to formal writing.

Single quotation marks do not indicate sarcasm

Just about the only time single quotes are necessary in American written English is when you need to indicate a quotation inside a quotation (In "[*Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender*](#)", Judith Lorber shows us that...). No matter what you see on various websites or in other students' papers, single quotes do not have a different meaning from double quotes. If you want to suggest a sarcastic tone or want to suggest something is not really what it is, use double quotes. (Unless you're British, in which case all of this is exactly the opposite.)

Long quotations

Quotations of fewer than three lines should be written as part of the text. Quotations of three or four lines or more should be made into blockquotes. Example:

This is the text of my paper. I'm writing along, having a grand old time. Yeah, my diction here is informal and I'm going to get a rotten grade. So be it. Whoa, but now I want to use a quote! Come here quote! As Quoteman Struthers, that most quotable of writers, says:

Hello there, I am a quotation. Imagine that I am a long quotation, even though, for purposes of this demonstration, I'm really not that long. (376)

And now we're back to the text of my paper. By the way, that number in parentheses is the page number. Note that it's outside the punctuation. That's a weird little difference between a blockquote and a regular quote (in a regular quote, the page number would immediately follow the end quotation mark).

Note that your paper should be double-spaced, and the blockquote may either be double- or single-spaced, depending on which you find most attractive.

Hyphens vs. dashes

A hyphen (-) is not a dash (-- or —). A dash is the length of two hyphens (generally ... it gets complex when you are typesetting, because there are two lengths of dashes, but we're not typesetting...) This is important because they do opposite things. A hyphen links words together that might not otherwise be linked, whereas a dash separates or suggests a change in direction. A hyphen makes two words hug each other, a dash pushes words away.

In typography, there are differences between [en-dashes](#) (length of the letter n) and [em-dashes](#) (length of the letter m). In your papers, I do not care about this distinction.

Commas

[There are lots of rules for comma use](#), and they're all worth learning, but I'm only going to call your attention to one particular rule...

In American English, commas are the wimps of the punctuation playground. Just about every other type of punctuation is stronger. This is important to remember, because a common error is what's called a [comma splice](#) — a comma that tries to hold two independent clauses together. While it may be able to do this in British English, and it can certainly do it in German German (and all other types of German, as far as I know), we don't make 'em so strong over here. Thus, this is an error:

Independent clauses have subjects and verbs, they're a lot of fun to write!

That's an overstressed comma, and it's going to collapse. What will solve the problem? Just about anything else:

Independent clauses have subjects and verbs. They're a lot of fun to write!

Independent clauses have subjects and verbs; they're a lot of fun to write!

Independent clauses have subjects and verbs: they're a lot of fun to write!

Independent clauses have subjects and verbs -- they're a lot of fun to write!

Stylistically, I, personally, prefer the first and second solutions, but the second two are certainly not wrong.

Serial commas

I insist on the serial comma (aka, the "Oxford comma". Vampire Weekend has a song in which the chorus is: "Who gives a *@%# about an Oxford comma?" The answer: I do). That means writing "The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker..." and **NOT** "The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker." Yes, different people have different styles. This is one of the very few cases where I will say that the other style is wrong. (Why? Because it leads to unnecessary ambiguity and can suggest a relationship between the second and third items separate from the first item -- one famous example is a book dedicated "to my parents, Ayn Rand and God".) (Occasionally, the Oxford comma can also lead to ambiguity. But less often than not.) (Yes, I'm trying to justify a personal preference here. And it is little more than a personal preference. But it's a strong preference.)

Citations

Though different citation styles (MLA, APA, *Chicago Manual of Style*) vary in their details, most follow a similar sort of logic, and part of that logic involves in-text citations when you aren't using footnotes (I like footnotes, myself, but some people hate them). Here's the structure for MLA:

"quote" (page).

Note that **the punctuation goes after the closed parenthesis**. The logic is this: the page number is not part of the original quotation, so it doesn't belong in the quote, but it is part of the sentence you have written, so punctuation goes after it.

Also, note that most styles try to make the in-text citation as short as possible. All you put in the parentheses is *the least amount of information you need to find the item on the list of works cited*. For instance:

(Cheney 428)

(That's [MLA](#). Other systems sometimes like commas or the abbreviation *pg.*, but are these really necessary? According to those other styles, yes. Which is one reason I like MLA...)

However, there are ways to get stylish. For instance:

As Cheney notes, "Sometimes we just want to change things up a bit" (428).

Why not repeat the author's last name in the parentheses? Because it's a repetition! You don't need it! (Unless you have lots of citations of articles by some schmuck called Cheney, which case different style systems handle things in somewhat different ways, sometimes using the author's name and publication date, sometimes using numbers or

letters, sometimes using all of those things...)

Remember: **The whole goal of in-text citations is to provide a quick way to find more information on the works cited page.**

Works Cited vs. Bibliography

A works cited page is different from a bibliography. A works cited page lists exactly that: works that you have cited in your paper. If there is not an in-text citation for something, then it should not be on your works cited page. A bibliography (sometimes also labeled "References") lists all of the works you consulted, regardless of whether you cited them in the paper. Bibliographies are useful for giving readers a sense of the available material about your topic and the depth of your research, but works cited pages tend to be more common in papers for undergraduate classes.



WWW.PHDCOMICS.COM

[source](#)

This guide was written by [Matthew Cheney](#). No rights reserved, although credit is appreciated if you choose to share it.