

GUIDELINES FOR PAPERS

Papers are a necessary evil of college life. They exist to give you an opportunity to practice writing the types of reports that will be required by employers. You should make every effort to do a respectable job on any paper, if for no other reason than the skills acquired will be useful in later life.

No attempt is being made to dictate the fine points of writing. Feel free to express yourself in any appropriate manner. But while there are many acceptable styles of written communication, there are some errors that are never allowable. Listed below are the types of errors that will be counted against you on your papers. Read this list carefully and understand it. Ask your instructor for clarification if you do not understand something.

Some of these rules may seem arbitrary. They are. These rules are designed to restrict your style and streamline the way you write. They also reflect that the audience you will write for is different than you are. These rules are not appropriate if you are writing the Great American Novel, but that is not what you are doing. You are writing a business report for people who are older than you who learned their grammar when times were less permissive. You must write for this audience if you hope to be successful. Simply follow these rules rather than argue about them.

Plagiarism - Plagiarism is not allowed under any circumstances or in any form. Should you plagiarize and be caught at it, you will suffer severe consequences. Plagiarism is not confined to copying exactly from another source. It is not sufficient to change merely a word or two in a sentence. For the most purposes, if you have a string of five or six words lifted directly from an uncited source you are guilty of plagiarism. If you are incapable of writing creatively, you must at least learn to paraphrase. Quotations must be properly punctuated and referenced in an appropriate style. It is best not to use quotations at all since you are trying to convey your ideas rather than simply parroting someone else.

Late Papers - Papers are due on time. You have plenty of warning, and no excuses will be accepted.

Misspelling - This includes improper hyphenation and the use of archaic forms of words. It is best to have a good dictionary by your side at all times. Even if you use a word processor with a spell checker, you will still have to check your work. The computer will recognize "to", "too", and "two" as proper spellings no matter where they appear in the text. Another example is the words "led" and "lead". Some spell checkers are fairly intelligent, but it is unwise to depend on them. You bear the final responsibility for spelling. If you use a grammar checker, you still have to be careful; even grammar checkers can make mistakes and miss errors.

Typographical Errors - These are regarded as misspellings. Check your work carefully.

Contractions - Contractions do not belong in formal reports. Do not use contractions unless they are part of a direct quote, and since you will not be using quotes you will not be using contractions.

Abbreviations - Any abbreviation must be properly defined on its first usage. The most common form of abbreviation is to describe a concept like Net Income (NI) or a firm's name like General Electric (GE). It is now possible to discuss the NI of GE should you wish to do so. Be careful not to use too many abbreviations since that can make a sentence unreadable.

Run-on Sentences - Independent clauses must be separated by proper punctuation and a coordinating conjunction, if required. A single sentence is designed to convey a single thought, and run-on sentences can be confusing.

Sentence Fragments - Sentences require both a subject and verb. Some forms of creative writing might relax this requirement, but this is not creative writing; this is report writing. You will tend to make this error if you use a lot of compound sentences. A careless writer will make the second independent clause a sentence fragment.

Paragraphs That Run an Entire Page - Keep paragraphs reasonably short. A paragraph is meant to develop a single idea. A typical paragraph will be three to six sentences long. This means that there will be two to four paragraphs per page. Be careful of very long or short sentences.

Single Sentence Paragraphs - A paragraph that is one sentence long tries to do too much. This type of paragraph is frequently a very long run-on sentence. Long sentences are often more readable when broken into smaller pieces.

Mismatched Subjects and Verbs - This refers to structures like "They is..." and "She are...". This type of error is offensive to the eye and the ear. You are most likely to make this kind of error if you are writing a complex sentence with a number of subordinate clauses. For example, "The director of one of the country's largest corporations that specializes in the manufacture of consumer specialty goods is..." has a singular subject ("director") and requires a singular verb ("is" instead of "are") even though "...goods is..." looks and sounds funny. Complex sentences can get you into trouble, so be careful. You need to use them to give your writing a little life, but they can be dangerous to the careless writer.

Repetitive or Weak Structures - Some writers seem to start every sentence the same way. That is one sure way to put the reader to sleep. Many people tend to start sentences with "Although..." or "Also,..." or some other indirect form. This is a very weak style and makes for dull reading. Try to start sentences with subjects. Beginning a sentence with an adverb followed by a comma is forbidden, such as "Recently, ...". This includes forms like "However, ..." and "Therefore, ...".

Incorrect or Unclear Antecedents - A pronoun refers to another noun somewhere else in the text. This relationship must be unambiguous and correctly stated. Consider the following sentences:

"Bankers, state and local government officials, and members of the general public are all working together in an effort to prevent the possible failure of a number of large financial institutions from damaging the economic infrastructure of the nation. They feel that some of their work may actually hasten these failures."

The "they" and "their" in the second sentence are confusing. Their relationship to the groups named in the previous sentence is not at all clear. This makes it impossible to tell who is doing what to whom. This type of error can be avoided by using pronouns sparingly. Every time you use a "he", "she", "it", or "they", you must be sure that there is absolutely no doubt to whom or what the pronoun refers.

Exhibits - It is often appropriate to introduce tables, charts, or graphs to support an argument or line of reasoning. Refer to all such items as "Exhibits". Any documentation that supports your written argument must be logical and sequential. Exhibits must be introduced in order. If you find that your exhibits are not in the same order as they are introduced, fix the order. Be sure to mention any assumptions that are relevant to the exhibits either in the text, on the exhibit, or in both locations. Any exhibit must contain enough descriptive information to be self-explanatory. All exhibits must support the previous discussion, and the recommendation section must stand by itself. No exhibits may be introduced in the final section of the paper where recommendations are made. Avoid overly long exhibits that must be "continued" on the next page.

Series Punctuation - Both the forms "Dick, Jane, and Sally..." and "Dick, Jane and Sally..." are acceptable (note the use of the second comma). Once you pick a style, you must use that same style throughout the document. You cannot switch back and forth; you must be consistent.

Inappropriate Phraseology - This is a catchall for poor wording. There are some words and phrases that are never appropriate in report writing. The following items will count as errors (in no particular order):

Use of ordinal adverbs is forbidden. This means words like "firstly", "secondly", , and "lastly" are banned. These words sound just plain dumb, so do not use them.

Use of the word "also" is absolutely forbidden. "Also" is a very fine four letter word, but novice writers tend to abuse it horribly. You will not use it at all.

Use of any form of the verb "to look" is forbidden. No person or company is ever "looking to" do anything.

Use of any form of the word “current” is forbidden unless you are writing about the flow of water or electricity.

Use of the word “obvious” in any form is forbidden. The truth of the matter is that nothing is ever obvious. There is always something that you do not know. When you start describing things as obvious, you are guilty of hubris, stupidity, or both. You will not do that in your writing. The word “evident” is forbidden for the same reason.

Use of the word “significant” or any of its forms implies that a statistical test has been conducted, and you are then obligated to present the results of that test. Any claim of “proof” requires substantiation, usually mathematical in form.

Avoid parentheses and brackets. Use sparingly, if necessary.

Avoid *italic*, **bold**, or underlined type except in titles, subtitles, and those very few places where you wish to place extreme emphasis.

The words “basically”, “essentially”, “clearly”, and their synonyms are not allowed. By using these words you are telling your reader that s/he is too dumb to understand your reasoning. Never insult your reader.

The word “impact” is a noun, not a verb. Only overaged yuppies and careless tyros would use the word as a verb, and you will not do so.

The word “desire” belongs only in romance novels and cheap, lurid videos. You will not use it or any form of it.

You may grow flowers in your garden, but you will not “grow a firm”.

A firm does not have eyes so it cannot “see” anything.

You should refer to a company or an organization as “it”. A Board of Directors may be an “it” or a “they” depending whether you are talking about a piece of the organization or the individuals who are members of that piece of the organization.

A “number” can be counted, like the number of dollars in your wallet. An “amount” can be measured, like the amount of water in a glass. You do not have a “number of water in a glass” nor do you have an “amount of dollars in your wallet”. Be careful to use these words correctly. A similar situation exists with “lesser” and “fewer”. A “lesser” amount is measurable, like water, and you may count “fewer” dollars in your wallet today when compared to yesterday. Note that all these situations imply a comparison of two or more items. Be sure that the comparison is properly described.

The word “option” can only be used to refer to the financial contract of the same name. When you need to make a decision, you have “choices” or “alternatives” but not “options”.

Be extremely careful when using the word “risk”. Risk is a precisely defined financial concept, but the word has become blurred and muddy when used in everyday speech. Use this word correctly, or you could confuse the reader.

Be careful of words and phrases that sound alike. When people lose their jobs, it is sometimes called a “layoff” (noun, one word). The managers make the decision to “lay off”(verb and adverb, two words) the workers. Another example is “payback” and “pay back”. Be sure you have the “get-up-and-go” to “get up and go” to the library if you need a reference book.

Do not begin a paragraph with a subordinate clause or phrase.

Do not start a paragraph with a sentence whose subject is a pronoun.

Do not begin sentences with numerals. If you must begin a sentence with a number, spell it out. Numbers used in the body of the paragraph should be spelled out if they are less than 10, and numerals should be used for numbers 10 and greater. There are exceptions to this rule, but they are rare.

Do not use any first person pronouns (“I”, “my”, “me”, “we”, “us”, “our”) or second person pronouns (“you”, “your”).

Do not use phrases like “as discussed earlier”. You are insulting the reader by implying a lack of intelligence or a short memory.

Do not use rhetorical questions; they insult the intelligence of the reader and waste space. The only question marks in a formal report (if any) should be in direct quotations (which you will not use).

Do not use phrases like “not to mention”. If it is not worth mentioning, do not do so.

Do not use phrases like “In my opinion,...” The paper IS your opinion.

Do not end a sentence with a preposition.

Do not use the imperative tense of verbs.

Do not use dashes. Use hyphens sparingly.

Do not use the word “it’s” under any circumstances.

Do not split infinitives. You will not attempt “to quickly complete” an assignment, but you may wish “to complete an assignment quickly”. You may wish to review the grammatical concept of verbals and brush up on gerunds and participles, too.

Do not use the word “guys”. It is a good idea to remove this word from your spoken vocabulary, too. Some people really resent being referred to as “guys”, especially women and their escorts.

Do not wax rhapsodic and use flowery language. Be careful of idiomatic phrases. Avoid them if possible, especially if you do not understand their true meaning.

Use of a Thesaurus - A thesaurus can be a useful tool or a weapon of self-destruction. It is best used when you need a synonym or antonym to a word that you may be overusing. Problems arise when the thesaurus is used to try to avoid plagiarism. Some students will copy directly from another source and then use the thesaurus to find a synonym for every fifth word. This is still plagiarism and will be regarded as such. Quite often the words that are chosen to replace the original words carry slightly different meanings, and the resulting sentences can be confusing and/or amusing. Do not use any word that you do not understand; be careful of nuance.

Structure of the Paper - Keep the structure clean and simple. Use one inch margins on all sides. Use a standard five space indent at the beginning of paragraphs. Double space between sentences and paragraphs. Use full justification, and double space between lines. Use a 12 point font. It is allowable to use smaller fonts in the exhibits to make the exhibit fit the page, but do not go smaller than 8 point. There are only three acceptable fonts, Times New Roman, Arial, and Calibri. Be sure to check that the font in the body of the paper is the same as the font on any exhibits or attachments and in the header and footer. Place page numbers at the bottom of the page if you use them. Use italic and bold fonts sparingly. Bibliographies and footnotes can be in any reasonable format, but the usage must be consistent throughout the paper.

HINTS...HINTS...HINTS

These instructions might have you considering either changing your major or slitting your wrists. Neither action is career enhancing, so accept the fact that you will have to work on your writing. Do not think that you can put a few scribbles down on a piece of paper and let some typist figure it out for you; that technique never works. Typists are very expensive, too. You will do a better job if you do it yourself.

Prepare an outline before writing your paper. By organizing your thoughts, the writing will be easier, and you will make fewer mistakes. The outline is neither required nor expected to be turned in with the paper. It is strictly for your benefit. If you think that you are good enough to write with the outline "in your head", you are very, very wrong.

You must proofread your paper. You are advised to go into a room, close the door, and read the paper aloud. Many written sins are uncovered when they are spoken aloud. At times you will be unable to understand what you wrote. It is much better for you and your grade if you find these mistakes before the instructor does.

Another variation of reading aloud is to read your paper to a friend or family member. If the listener cannot understand what you are trying to say, the paper is probably

poorly written. Remember that you are writing for an audience that will only know what you present in the paper. Your writing must be clear and concise if you are to be understood. There is one restriction to using this technique. If you are writing a paper that is supposed to represent individual work, say as part of a take-home test, you may not use another member of that class as your audience.

Take advantage of the English Department's Writing Center. It will make you a better writer, but you must be careful. You are held responsible for the rules presented in this set of Guidelines. If you should receive recommendations from someone in the Writing Center or another source that are contrary to these Guidelines and you follow those recommendations, you could lose points on your paper. Make use of the "find and replace" feature of your word processor to search for any forbidden words.

Take a little time and care, and you can produce a good quality paper. A good paper is the only way you will be able to get a good grade. A good paper is something you can be proud of, so make the effort to do a good job.