

WRITING STYLE GUIDELINES

Here are some tips to help you avoid some common errors of grammar and writing style.

1) General writing advice

A) Use the simplest language you can to express your idea or make your point. Say things in as few words as possible. Delete any passages that could be considered “filler” or “fluff.”

B) Read your paper out loud to yourself before you turn it in. If some sentences or passages sound awkward when you read them out loud, your reader will find them awkward as well. Find a way to say what you want to say in a way that sounds natural.

2) Common writing mistakes to avoid

A) I especially urge you to avoid an error that is frequently found in student papers: the run-on sentence. Remember to separate sentences with a period, not a comma. For example, the following is a run-on sentence:

Avoid run-on sentences, they annoy Professor Ball.

To avoid annoying Professor Ball, you should write:

Avoid run-on sentences. They annoy Professor Ball.

B) The word "however" is often involved in run-on sentences. Look out for mistakes like this:

The UPS strike has made it difficult for the bookstore to get its orders filled, however the US Postal Service is delivering some packages.

A better way of putting that would be:

The UPS strike has made it difficult for the bookstore to get its orders filled. However, the US Postal Service is delivering some packages.

It might sound even better to say:

The UPS strike has made it difficult for the bookstore to get its orders filled. The US Postal Service, however, is delivering some packages.

And even better yet, you can often avoid a run-on sentence involving "however" by writing a sentence using "although":

Although the UPS strike has made it difficult for the bookstore to get its orders filled, the US Postal Service is delivering some packages.

C) Another frequent culprit in incorrect or inelegant sentences is the term "for example". Avoid this kind of construction:

There are a number of countries in which population has been growing slowly, for example Germany and the United States.

It sounds better to say:

In a number of countries, including Germany and the United States, population has been growing slowly.

or:

In some countries, such as Germany and the United States, population has been growing slowly.

Here is an appropriate use of "for example":

In some countries, population has been growing slowly. For example, in Germany and the United States average annual population growth rates have been less than one percent since 1980.

Or if you prefer:

In some countries, population has been growing slowly. In Germany and the United States, for example, annual population growth rates have been less than one percent since 1980.

D) Be careful about how you use the words "affect" and "effect." Affect is a verb that means something like "to have an influence on":

I did not know how the rain would affect the horse race.

Effect is a noun meaning something like a consequence or a result:

As it turned out, the rain did not have much of an effect on the horse race.

E) The expression "due to" usually does not sound good in written work. Instead say something like "because of," "as a result of," or "as a consequence of."

F) It is usually best to avoid the abbreviations "e.g." and "i.e.," but if you must use them be sure you know what they mean. "E.g." means "for example" and "i.e." means "that is."

G) “While” does not mean “although.” So do not write

While I find statistics to be a very interesting subject, I rarely make it to class because it meets so early in the morning.

Write this instead:

Although I find statistics to be a very interesting subject, I rarely make it to class because it meets so early in the morning.

H) If you are talking about a whole lot of countable things (like people, or countries, or brands of cell phones), you should not say that there is a large “amount” of them. Instead, say there is a large “number” of them.

I) Don’t get tripped up by “then” and “than”:

If you remember all these rules, then I will be happier than a pig in mud.

J) Your word processor's spell-checker can be a handy device, but it is not a substitute for careful proofreading. Here is a mistake your spell-checker won't catch:

I don't proofread my papers because its boring.

That should be:

I don't proofread my papers because it's boring.

The particular lesson here is that the contraction of "it is" is "it's." "Its" is the possessive of "it," as in:

Proofreading your paper will improve its quality.

3) Advice with special relevance for your Econ 203 research papers

A) If you use a word or expression in your paper, you should know what it means. It is often tempting, especially when you don’t quite know what is going on and what you are saying, to use a technical term or piece of jargon that you don’t really understand, and just hope that it makes sense in the context. In my mind, that is a form of academic dishonesty.

B) When you do a formal statistical hypothesis test and your conclusion is that you should reject a null hypothesis, you have not “proven” that the hypothesis is false. (This is really a technical matter that we will see in class.) So be careful not to use the word “prove” in that context.

C) A “trend” is a pattern in data that is observed over time. For example, there might be an upward trend in a country’s inflation rate over a ten-year period. If you see a pattern in the data that does not reflect a phenomenon that has happened over time, don’t call it a trend. For example, if you notice that low-income countries tend to have higher inflation rates than high-income countries, don’t call that a “trend.” You can often use the word “pattern” instead of erroneously using the word “trend.”

D) The significance of each table, figure or piece of computer output that you include with the paper should be explained in the text of the paper. You should not include any tables, figures or computer output with your paper that you do not refer to in the paper.

E) You should not photocopy a table or figure from another source and include it with your paper. If it serves a purpose, it is fine to recreate a figure from another source. For instance, you can enter into Stata the data someone else used to produce a scatterplot, then use Stata to produce your own scatterplot, and include that with your paper. (You would of course clearly indicate that you had reproduced the figure or table from another source, and include that source in your reference list.)

F) When referring to your data set in your paper, you should not refer to it by the ICPSR study number. You should use the name of the data set, like the World Values Survey, or the Panel Study on Income Dynamics. Your paper’s reference list should then include a complete citation. A suggested form for the citation of your data set can be found on the ICPSR web page for your study.

4) Formatting

A) Every assignment that you turn in should

- (i) have the names of all the people who contributed to it written on the first page or a cover sheet
- (ii) have the date on the first page or a cover sheet
- (iii) have page numbers on all the pages (except for the cover sheet and the first page of text)

B) Your paper should be followed by a reference list. The format of your reference list should follow APA style. Every reference that is mentioned in your paper should be included in the reference list; anything not mentioned in your paper should not appear on your reference list.

C) When you mention a reference that you have used in the text of your paper, you should give a citation using APA style. That will mean giving a brief reference in parentheses in the text rather than giving a citation in a footnote. (Footnotes can be used to make comments or to insert a point that you believe is important, but that might interrupt the flow of the paper if it were in the main text.)