

Writing and referencing: some proofreading tips

Markers do not only mark for writing and referencing; argument, understanding, analysis, and research are also important—but it can be difficult to appreciate these dimensions of the essay when obscured by unclear writing and referencing. As difficulty is exhausting, it will affect the markers' assessment. Careful proofreading, which resolves eighty percent of such errors, is an easy way to move your essay up a notch on the marking scale.

Essays invariably improve with revision and careful proofreading: one sure way to improve your draft and to avoid getting marked down for issues with writing and referencing is to plan to complete your draft two days before the deadline. Let your draft sit overnight and then, if possible, read a print-out (Anni Albers: "to change my mind, I change the medium") in order to really re-vision the essay, marking it up by hand. A trusted technique for proofreading is to read each line backwards. Then, only after you've entered your corrections into the word-processed document, run Spelling and Grammar checker. Take time to review each change, rather than just automatically accepting the suggestions.

For referencing, follow the MLA conventions for in-text parenthetical citation. To avoid plagiarism, every citation of something you have read, even a paraphrase (where you are casting the source material into your own words) needs to be cited. (It's thus a good practice to keep track of sources as you cut and paste, rather than to save the citing for later. EndNotes or another citation software can be helpful.) The conventions are designed to make this process as economical, with as little interruption to the flow of the text, as possible—thus, for instance, no comma is required between author surname and page number(s) within the parenthetical in-text citation. If there are further citations from the same text, with no other text cited between, you need not repeat the author name, just include the page number(s). Also, if you attribute the quotation in a leading phrase, then you do not need to cite the author name in the parenthetical citation, just the page number(s). You only need cite the title when there are multiple works from the same author in the Works Cited. Note that the parenthetical in-text citation comes between the closing quotation mark and the final punctuation mark (usually a period), not after the punctuation mark. It only comes after the period when you are citing a block quotation. Block quotations do not require quotation marks. Be sure to alphabetize your entries in the Works Cited (by surname or title if there is no author) and to use hanging indents; do not number or bullet point the entries. The OWL Purdue site has a good guidance on MLA conventions for citation:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_style_introduction.html

The MLA website also offers guidance: <https://style.mla.org/mla-format/>

Our department recommends using MLA conventions; should you choose to use another convention (such as Chicago or MHRA), then the important thing is to be consistent. Whichever convention you choose, stick with and follow the guidelines. There will be particular guidance for citing reference works, websites, the wide variety of print sources, and sources from different media: keep the guidance on hand, so you can look these up.

A note on Wikipedia: Wikipedia can be useful for orienting yourself quickly to a topic, but as Wikipedia entries themselves sometimes contain incorrect or incomplete information, never or rarely cite Wikipedia. Always take time (with the help of the Wikipedia footnotes, if necessary) to find the source and cite the source, not the Wikipedia entry.

As for sources, try to diversify your secondary sources and don't rely too much or too exclusively on a single source.

For writing, be sure that your paragraphs don't run on for too long. While certainly there can be exceptions, a paragraph that runs longer than a page is generally too long. Use paragraph breaks to organize your exposition, to ventilate the text and pace the reading for the reader. Don't forget to include a title, which can be different (more interesting) than what gets called a "title" in UK higher ed, which is really a thesis statement.

At the level of sentences and mechanics, here are some tips to help you avoid the most common errors and irregularities that can bring a mark down when they occur too frequently:

Punctuation—use commas sparingly, but do use them when they are required, as when separating items in a list. Never use a comma where a period should go, as between two independent clauses that are not joined by a conjunction (this is called a "comma splice" or "run-on" sentence). Consult these quick rules for the comma:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/index.html

(There also is a link to a page with more extensive coverage on rules for the comma.)

Semicolon and colons—use semicolons even more sparingly. A semicolon can be used to conjoin two independent clauses (instead of a comma) when putting in a period and starting a new sentence makes the prose too short and choppy. (Semicolons can be used to make your prose flow better, but don't overdo them.) The part after the semicolon reads as an addition or afterthought to what comes before the semicolon. But if the second part of the sentence is an explanation, illustration or direct result of the first part, then use a colon. Semicolons can also be used to separate series of series, groups of groups of items that need to be marked off from one another by something stronger than a comma. (Think of the semicolon as the halfway point between a comma and a period.) Too often, however, I read semicolons that are standing in for colons or, even worse, commas. When in doubt, avoid the semicolon.

Check out this 90-second vidcast on the semicolon:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?_ga=2.216147926.1903550029.1610062942-1409570904.1605529390&v=F8uQESW76to&feature=youtu.be

Here is some guidance on differences between commas and semicolons:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/commas_vs_semicolons.html

One other tip: when using the word “however,” there are two situations, one requiring a semicolon and comma and the other excluding the comma. When “however” is used as an adverb—as in, “However you see it, writing’s still hard work.”—there is NO comma. When “however” is used as a conjunction, it is preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma, as in: “I started early on my essay; however, I still stayed up late the night before it was due.” (If you put a comma between “essay” and “however,” it’s a comma splice or run-on sentence.)

Apostrophes—it’s = it is. You know that, but you’ll inevitably make this mistake. Look for it when you are proofreading. (Its for the possessive is not like John’s, it’s a possessive pronoun like his, her, my, yours, none of which take apostrophes.) The possessive of a singular proper noun ending in s takes the apostrophe + s: Chris’s car, Marlon James’s novel. Say these phrases aloud and you’ll hear the extra s, so don’t leave it out in writing! I know leaving the extra s out in such cases is accepted convention in some British publishing, so you will read things like Chris’ car, but it’s not accepted usage in any of the style guides and that’s why you rarely see it in journalism. The apostrophe with no extra s to indicate the possessive is reserved for plural nouns: the dogs’ tails, authors’ publications. Never use the apostrophe to make a plural: Nazi’s is not the plural of Nazi—it’s Nazis. The possessive of the plural is Nazis’.

Consult this concise introduction to the apostrophe:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/apostrophe_introduction.html

Quotation marks or “inverted commas”—in US conventions, quotations take double quotation marks, while a quotation inside of a quotation takes single quotations marks; in the UK it’s the opposite. Also, in US conventions, the closing quotation mark comes after the final punctuation mark; in the UK it comes before. Whichever convention you choose, be consistent.

Here are some rules for quotation marks:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/quotation_marks/index.html

Sentence fragments—watch out for sentence fragments, which are sentences lacking a main (finite) verb. Sentence fragments typically begin with the following words and phrases: although, as if, because, before, even though, how, if, so that, that, though, unless, when, where, whether, which, while, who, whom, whose, why, for example, for instance, like, mainly, namely, such as; or with a participial verb, like running or thinking. If you find yourself beginning a sentence with one of these words, make sure the sentence has a subject and a main verb (a non-finite verb like running or to catch doesn’t count).

Here is some guidance on sentence fragments:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/sentence_fragments.html

Dangling modifiers—if you begin a sentence with a participial phrase, such as “Walking home,” make sure the grammatical subject of that action is stated in the second part of the sentence: “Walking home, I admired the frosty trees.” (“I” is the grammatical subject of “walking home.”) In, “Walking home, the frosty trees were beautiful,” “Walking home” is a

dangling modifier.

Here is some guidance on dangling modifiers:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/dangling_modifiers_and_how_to_correct_them.html

Vague or ambiguous pronouns—every time you use the word “they,” “that,” “this” or “it, STOP! And ask yourself, “they what?” “That what?” “This what?” “What is it?” Is it clear what or who this pronoun refers to? (Generally, avoid beginning sentences with “It” or “It is . . .,” “They” or “They are . . .,” “That” or “That is . . .”) To clarify, simply insert the noun the pronoun is pointing to (usually in the prior sentence): “That dog,” “This house,” “The question,” etc.

Here is some guidance on clear pronoun usage:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/index.html

Subject verb disagreement—Singular verbs take singular subjects; plural verbs take plural subjects; beware the compound subject: “Hiss and Kunstler both argue . . .”

Here is some guidance on subject verb agreement:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/subject_verb_agreement.html

Titles: titles of books, films, plays and other long literary works (an epic poem, for instance) should be italicized; use quotation marks for the titles of individual (short) poems, songs, one act plays, short stories, essays, book chapters, TV series episodes.

Here is some guidance on formatting titles:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/quotation_marks/quotation_marks_with_fiction.html

A note on style: avoid overly long sentences or sentences with too many parenthetical phrases. The writing might come out this way, but then go back and revise. Often the order of thought is not the best order of presentation. Take time in revision to disentangle those long, complicated thought structures into shorter, simpler sentences, to do in two shorter sentences what you are trying to do in one big long sentence. (Think SVO—subject, verb, object—sentence structure.) If you find your writing too choppy, on the other hand, you can always combine some of the sentences into longer structures. Also avoid repetitive sentence structures: if you find yourself beginning two or three sentences on the same page with the same word, restructure one or two of them.

Vocabulary: when in doubt about a word, especially when trying a new (to you) word, or dealing with homophones, take time to look the word up. Criterium or criterion? (Criterion is the more current usage: the online OED offers an indication of frequency in current use.) Exemption or exception? Sewn or sown? I recommend bookmarking the OED (available free through the Warwick library): <https://0-www-oed-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/>

Take time to read the etymology of the word, which often offers a fascinating glimpse at the hidden poetry of words (clue comes from the word “clew,” meaning a ball of yarn, the ball Ariadne gave Theseus to help him find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth), origins in other languages (e.g. alcohol comes from Arabic), and other histories and facts: did you know that salad comes from salt, from the habit of seasoning dishes of cold vegetables?

The OED also offers examples of usage, from earliest recorded to more recent, so you can see how the use has changed: e.g. villain used to mean peasant.

If you have time and someone willing, having your essay read by a trusted peer, friend or family member can be invaluable. Never take their critiques, comments or corrections without a dose of your own judgment; the peer reviewer is a sounding board, someone who might help you notice the forest you’ve been missing for the trees, or vice versa, but you are the ultimate judge of your own writing. Reading aloud sometimes helps too. Writing can be hard work, but the moment of final revision should be one to savor, as you enjoy the results of your labor and where it has taken you: happy revising!

JS

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