Writing Tips – Higher Ed Program – UMass Amherst

Fall 2014

• **Say something interesting** – have a point that someone else will care about.

• **Use literature to make your argument** – use literature to support every step of your argument. Avoid making statements, even those that seem obvious, without having citations from the literature to support your point.

• **Synthesis in a lit review rather than a linear discussion of one study after another** – relate the studies to one other and to your paper’s purpose or central argument (what key concepts exist across the studies?); critically assess the quality of the studies in your literature review (conceptual and methodological strengths and weaknesses); identify gaps or unanswered questions in the literature.

While You Are Writing

• **Create an outline before you start writing** – a good outline can be very helpful for developing a well-organized and coherent paper.

• **Introduction and conclusions** – these help orient the reader. What is the purpose of this paper? Where are you headed? At the end, review the major points you have covered.

• **Pay attention to transitions between paragraphs and sections** – make sure there are logical connections from point to point in your papers. This is particularly important as you move from paragraph to paragraph and will help the reader better understand how the various points you are making relate to each other and flow together to form a coherent whole.

• **Use headings and sub-headings** – Sub-headings help the reader understand the organizational flow of the paper (and they can even help the writer with organization); it is good practice to use sub-headings even in short papers. See APA style guide for proper formatting for headings and sub-headings.

• **Length of paragraphs**. Avoid one-sentence paragraphs as well as overly long (e.g., one-page) paragraphs.

• **Minimize your use of quotations in your text**. Use direct quotations to make your points, but don’t overuse them. Most graduate students rely too much on direct quotes in the early stages of their academic careers. If you use quotations you must always provide a specific page number from the original source in your cite. Also, make sure that you know when to use block quotes (over 40 words) and how they are formatted.

• **Avoid reification** – when writing about abstract entities like “leadership” or “organizations” it is tempting to invest inanimate objects with human characteristics, e.g. “the university aims to improve graduation rates over the next few years” (rather than university leaders aim to
improve graduation rates over the next few years.) Or, “because of budgetary challenges, the organization has been forced to lay off workers.” Much like the using the passive voice, reification encourages assigning responsibility to vague, non-human entities (“market forces”) rather than to actual human beings making decisions. Reification can be tricky to avoid when discussing topics such as leadership and organizations, but it is usually possible to find another way!

- **Read your paper out loud** – reading out loud is one of the best ways to identify poorly constructed sentences and is certainly helpful when you are struggling with your writing.

- **Proofread!!!** – Watch out for missing punctuation, extra spaces and misspelled words – all are easily avoidable and should not occur in graduate-level work. Know your own bad habits in terms of writing (keep an ongoing list), and do one edit focused specifically on identifying those bad habits. Common challenges are using passive voice, or using “that” instead of “who.”

**More Specific Suggestions**

- **Avoid using the same word repetitively.** As much as possible avoid repeating the same word in sentences that are in close proximity to one another. You can use your thesaurus to find words with similar meanings (just make sure that they really are synonyms.)

- **Use the active voice** – the best writing and most enjoyable reading occurs when authors use active voice in constructing sentences. Please use “Subject-Verb-Object” as the basic structure of sentences. A great deal of traditional academic writing is written passively, but that is one of the reasons people often find it so tedious to read! That being said, there are times when using the passive voice works, and it is difficult to eliminate its use entirely.

- **Avoid using stand-alone, generic pronouns such as “this” and “these”** as much as possible especially when you are writing complex topics, as the reader may be confused. Rather then saying “This is too expensive” say “This textbook is too expensive.”

- **Avoid using contractions** – contractions (e.g., couldn’t or don’t) should not be used in formal writing. Spell each word out instead (e.g., “could not” or “do not.”)

- **Use gender-neutral language** – “he” is not a generic pronoun. Since English does not have a gender-neutral singular pronoun, writers frequently use the third person “their” or “they.” Just make sure you don’t mix singular and plural in a single sentence (e.g. “Each student must select their courses” is incorrect. Try “All students must select their courses” instead. See APA style guide Ch. 3, section 12 for more specific ideas on avoiding gender bias in your writing.

- **Use plurals to avoid cumbersome his/her** (e.g., teachers should be sure to have clear learning objectives for their students rather than a teacher should be sure to have clear learning objectives for his/her students.)
• **“White” and “Black” are capitalized** – in APA style “racial and ethnic groups are designated proper nouns and are capitalized” (e.g., “Black” or “White.”) Also avoid “unparallel designations (e.g., African Americans and Whites.)” (see APA Style Guide p. 75). Note that there are reasons you might consciously choose to disregard APA style in order to make a point – if so, clearly state that you are doing so intentionally.

• **Usage of “less” and “fewer”** – if you can count the items, use “fewer.” For example, fewer dollars, but less money.

• **“Who” vs. “That”** – “Who” is for people. For example... It is not: “The student that ate in the dining hall...” It is: “The student who ate in the dining hall...”

• **“Data” and “media” are plural nouns.** For example, it is not: “The data is really complicated.” It is: “The data are really complicated.”

• **Avoid ending sentences with prepositions.** For example, it is not “I gave the package to the woman I went to school with.” Instead, reword the sentence: “I gave the package to the woman with whom I went to school.”

• **Using periods and commas with quotation marks** – periods and commas always go inside of the quotation marks. Example here.

• **Punctuation** – know your commas, semi-colons, and colons. Some rules to remember:
  - a comma must not be used to join two independent clauses
  - a semi-colon should only be used to join two linked independent clauses or as a super comma
  - a colon is used to introduce a list or an explanation
  - a period ends a complete sentence.

• **Watch out for clutter in your writing** – eliminate phrases that don’t add to the meaning (e.g., “Research shows that...,” “It has been found that...” Other examples of word clutter include “furthermore,” “as such,” and others. Occasional use is okay, but if your argument is clear, they don’t add extra meaning.

• **Using first person** is gaining in acceptance (even in journals), but think about whether using it adds to the effectiveness of your writing – is it appropriate given your topic?

**Citations in APA Style**

• **Multiple in-text citations within parentheses** – if you are citing multiple sources within your text, the sources are alphabetized.

• **“References” at the end of the paper** – This section is called “References,” not Reference List, Bibliography, or anything else. Only sources cited in the text are included on the list. Every source cited in the text must be included. When doing final edits and proofreading, check to make sure that your references are complete and correct.
• **Chronicle of Higher Education** cites – the Chronicle should be cited like a newspaper.

• **New Directions series** cites – chapters and issues in the *New Directions* series should be cited like edited books.

• **Consider using a citation management program** to manage your citations and format your reference list - although always double check to ensure that the program formatted everything correctly! Refworks is free for UMass students ([http://guides.library.umass.edu/refworksatumass](http://guides.library.umass.edu/refworksatumass)). Other citation management programs include EndNote and Zotero.

**Writing Resources**

**APA Style**


- APA Formatting and Style Guide at OWL Web site - [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/).

**Lit Reviews**


- *Guidelines for writing a literature review by Helen Mongan-Rallis, Education professor, UMN Duluth* - [http://www.d.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html](http://www.d.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html). This is a good summary of Galvan.

**Writing Style/Mechanics**


**UMass**

- UMass Amherst Writing Center - [http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/](http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/)