

This handout highlights key style techniques that first-year students might find useful for their writing. The strategies will help ensure the writing is suitable for an academic audience and minimize distractions for readers accustomed to academic writing conventions. Please note that these are general guidelines and not strict “rules” by which a writer must always abide. Adhering to some simple guidelines, however, can help students improve their writing.

1) Avoid colloquial language. Unless a writing assignment explicitly states that a conversational tone is appropriate, write using more formal language.

Original: It was so noisy, I couldn't hear myself think.

Revised: The noise made concentrating difficult.

Original: Group work can be problematic because a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Revised: Group work can be problematic when not everyone contributes equally, causing the project's quality to suffer.

Original: I worked hard on the assignment because I didn't want to screw up.

Revised: I worked diligently on the assignment because I wanted to succeed.

2) Omit contractions. Spell the words out completely (for example, do not versus don't).

3) Use passive voice judiciously. Writing in the active voice almost always improves the clarity of writing. (See Resources below.)

4) Minimize the use of split infinitives because many writers think splitting infinitives violates a rule of grammar. Although we may more commonly say “to quickly run,” the preferred use in academic writing is to write “to run quickly.” Split infinitives are actually grammatically correct, but the general academic convention is to avoid them.

5) Use the first person effectively. If you choose to use the first person, carefully consider when and how you can use it to strengthen your writing. (See Resources below.)

6) Do not end sentences with prepositions. Like the use of split infinitives, there is no historical or grammatical reason to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. Nevertheless, many professors and publishers avoid doing so because of a pervasive belief that ending sentences with prepositions is incorrect.

7) Provide page numbers so your readers can easily navigate through your paper, should they desire. Numbering pages also enables a grader to determine quickly whether the paper is the proper length if the assignment contained a page requirement.

8) Provide your essay with a title that gives the reader a clear idea of your paper's topic.

9) Use the citation style your professor prefers if your paper requires citations. (See Resources below.)

10) Proofread carefully, paying careful attention to common mistakes, such as using correct homonyms (led vs. lead) and apostrophes for possessives (it's vs. its). (See Resources below.)

11) Incorporate time for revision because revising is a key part of the writing process. (See Resources below.)

12) Read your paper aloud. This strategy will help you catch awkward phrases and even missing or extra words. (See Resources below.)

Many first-year students face challenges adjusting to the academic writing that university professors expect. Writing assignments are often unfamiliar, both longer and more complicated than high school projects. Standards at the university level are also quite different than in high school. Adhering to these recommendations will help avoid distractions for your readers. Rather than wondering, for example, what page number they are reading or being confused because of an excessive amount of passive voice, your readers will be able to focus on the paper's content.

Helpful Online Resources

Passive and active voice handout: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/passive-active.original.pdf

Using first person effectively: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/first-person.original.pdf

Citations reference from Duke Libraries website: <http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/index.html>

Proofreading for common grammatical mistakes:

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/smhandbook6e/Player/MainFrame.aspx?task=handbook&taskid=3>

Numerous strategies for revising: <http://twp.duke.edu/writing-studio/resources/academic-writing/revising>

Reading aloud: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/reading-aloud.original.pdf