UNBC History Program Writing Guide

We have good news and bad news for our students on the subject of writing. The good news is that for most students, the usual errors that bring essay grades down are fairly few in number, and are not difficult to recognize and correct. The comma splice, the run-on sentence, and a few other errors make up the bulk of these writing mistakes. A small number of words also make up the majority of word errors: confusion between *its* and *it's* is the most common one.

The bad news, on the other hand, concerns what might be called "fine writing," that is, writing as a skilled art--not just correct writing, but pleasing or attractive writing, the kind of writing that someone might want to publish. Unfortunately, not all of us can be Mozarts of the pen, nor can fine writing be learned from rules. Just as all great artists study the artists who went before them, so really good writers learn to write partly from extensive reading of other writers. To put it more plainly, you will never be a truly great writer unless you have read widely, both fiction and non-fiction. Reading the great novelists and the great non-fiction writers of the past, reading scores and hundreds of books, will give you a feel for the sound of the English language in a way that merely learning rules cannot. If you are not a reader, then the best you can hope for as a writer is to write correctly, which will make you a good, but not an excellent writer. But being a good writer is no mean feat, and for most students, it is a worthwhile goal.

There are several reasons why you should take the advice given in this writing guide to heart. In the first place, the fewer writing errors you make, the higher your grade is likely to be. Secondly, you will want to write as correctly as possible, so that if you leave university for a job that requires you to write, you will be able to do so without embarrassing yourself. It's not only a question of making your meaning clear, though this is a large advantage of correct writing. It's also a question of how people perceive you. If you write a message to your employer that says "I could of told you its to early too develop the property," what do you think she (assuming she is literate) will think of you? Fortunately, the rules listed in this guide, and in the longer guides that we refer to, will help you steer clear of these common errors.

Note: this little guide is written in a semi-formal style. We use elisions, but you should not do this in a formal essay. We say *don't do this,* but you should write *avoid doing this,* and you should write *Hitler did not take his general's advice,* not *Hitler didn't take . . .*

We also use the first person, but you should not (see below for why). We could write more formally if we wanted to; in fact, we do when we write for publication.

This guide is organized into two sections. The first is a list of recommended guides to style, organization, and grammar. The second is a list of points specific to the History program at UNBC.

1. Recommended Guides:

There are a great many good guides available on the web. Students, especially senior and graduate students, who want a printed guide may wish to buy a copy of *Writing History: A Guide for Canadian Students,* published by the Oxford University Press. It's an excellent guide, using Canadian examples. Almost as good, and free, is the essay guide published online by the History Department of the **University of Calgary**, available at

http://hist.ucalgary.ca/sites/hist.ucalgary.ca/files/EssayHandbook.pdf

We very strongly recommend this guide. It has long passages on topics such as how to use quoted material in essays, how to write an introductory paragraph, and the like.

Students who wish to consult other guides will find plenty of them on the web. We recomment the following ones:

a) A Guide from the University of Chicago:

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting

This is a writing guide rather than a guide to style and grammar, and is full of wise advice for Humanities students.

b) A guide from the University of Toronto, made up of submissions from a number of different Canadian universities:

http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice

This is a very comprehensive guide.

If you follow the rules for citation contained in these guides, you won't go far wrong. Remember that we use the Chicago style, not the MLA style, for citations.

Top of Page

2. Specific points;

These are matters of punctuation, grammar and word use that are covered in the standard guides, errors that are so frequently made that we thought it useful to mention them specifically here. Some of us use short forms to indicate these errors when we grade papers--*cs* for comma splice, and so on, and a list of these abbreviations will be handed out during the appropriate courses.

a. The comma splice.

This consists of two principal clauses joined with a comma, for instance *Jack and Jill went up the hill, they found no water in the well.* (A principal clause, which is the same thing as a short sentence, has a subject and a verb, and expresses a complete thought.) There are several solutions:

Jack and Jill went up the hill, but they found no water in the well. (add a conjunction). The comma is optional here. A good solution.
Jack and Jill went up the hill; they found no water in the well. (separate with a semi-colon). This grammatically correct but rather awkward.
Jack and Jill went up the hill. They found no water in the well. (make one sentence into two). This sounds a bit like baby-talk.
When Jack and Jill went up the hill they found no water in the well. (turn one of the principal clauses into a subordinate clause). A good solution.

b. The run-on sentence.

This is not necessarily a long sentence, but one in which principal clauses follow each other without any punctuation: *Jack and Jill went up the hill it rained on them when they came down again; Susan loves to draw flowers she is a fine artist.* The solution to these two incorrect sentences is the same as for comma splices; in fact, this can be thought of as a type of comma splice, though it's more obviously wrong.

c. The sentence fragment.

A sentence has a subject and a verb, and is a complete thought. A sentence fragment lacks one or more of these. In *I failed all my courses. Because I drank too much,* the second part is a sentence fragment, because although it has a subject *I* and a verb *drank,* it is

not a complete thought. The solution is to make it into one sentence: *I failed all my courses because I drank too much,* or, *Because I drank too much, I failed all my courses.*

c. The colon.

There is only one common use for the colon: it follows a principal clause, before a quotation or one or more examples. (as here)

There were three reasons for his failure, pride, sloth, and gluttony. (wrong)
There were three reasons for his failure: pride, sloth, and gluttony. (correct)
The reasons for his failure were: pride, sloth, and gluttony. (wrong, because *The reasons for his failure were* is a subordinate rather than a principal clause. This is the most common wrong way of using a colon.

e. Quotation marks,

used to quote direct speech.

She said that he was the biggest fool she knew.
She said "he is the biggest fool I know."
"He is," she said, "the biggest fool I know."

Don't use sarcastically in so-called "sneer quotes." *The professor gave his "lecture" to the sleeping class.*

f. The apostrophe.

The apostrophe indicates possession and elision.

Elision, or something left out, is easy: *We're*=we are; *you're*=you are (not the same as *your*), *they're* (not *there* or *their*), *I'm, he's,* and so on.

The most common error is the word *its/it's. It's* is an elision; it means *it is. Its* is possessive. So *baby it's cold outside* is correct, and so is *the dog chased its tail.* However, *the school must repair it's furnace* is WRONG.

Note: *we could've danced all night* is an elision of *could have,* not *could of.*

Possession is more difficult. The rule is that the apostrophe goes right after the name of the possessor. Thus

women's books, not *womens' books,* because the books belong to women, not to womens.

the boy's book means a book belonging to one boy
the boys' book means a book belonging to more than one boy
Note: *Homer and Marge's children* -- only the second name has the apostrophe

Note: words that end in s sometimes add an extra *s (Bishop Bompas's bible)* and sometimes not *(Ulysses' adventures),* mostly depending on the sound.

We are going to visit the boys' is wrong because nothing is possessed. There must be some sense of something being possessed or belonging to something else. It doesn't have to be a person: *we are all time's captives* means we are all captives of time.

Similarly, *we are going to visit the Smiths'* (or *Smith's*) is wrong for the same reason (nothing is being possessed), and so is *the Smith's* (or *Smiths'*) live here.

But *we are going to visit the Smiths' house* is correct as is *this is the Smiths' house-- (this is the Smith's house* is wrong because *the Smiths* implies a family of more than one person).

One often sees this error in public signs: *Bicycles' on sale tod*ay (wrong) or *Sorry, no bananas' today* (wrong), or in bad writing: *The Nazi's were bad people* (wrong, wrong wrong--nothing is being possessed. THIS ERROR MAKES STEAM COME OUT OF OUR EARS, an effect you are presumably not striving for.)

Apostrophes (NOT *apostrophe's*) were once used with dates (the 1880's), but the correct form now is to leave them out (the 1880s).

g. Exclamation mark.

The exclamation point is used for exclamations, not casual emphasis.

"Get out of here you moron!" he yelled .
But not *Finally, the war was over!*

h. Use of the passive and active voices.

An example of the active voice is this: *The dog bit the boy.* An example of the passive is this: *The boy was bitten by the dog.* Usually it's better to use the active rather than the passive, so it's better to write *The Germans started the war* than *The war was started by the Germans.* This is not always true, however. You could argue that it's better to say *He was devastated by the death of his wife* than *The death of his wife devastated him.* It's really a matter of taste. Just don't overdo the passive.

i. Use of the first person.

It's almost always a bad idea to write *In my opinion, Stalin was the worst monster of the twentieth century,* or *I think that Stalin . . .* There are two reasons for this. First, it's rather informal, and you want your essays to be formal. More important, though, is that such use is almost always redundant. If you think Stalin was the greatest monster, simply say *"Stalin was the greatest monster. . .* Adding *I think* or *In my opinion,* or *In my own personal heartfelt opinion, I truly believe that. . .*adds nothing at all. If you say it, you believe it, unless you are quoting someone else, in which case it's that person's opinion.

j. Splitting infinitives.

We mention this just for the sake of nostalgia.

Decades ago, when we were your age, grammarians shuddered at sentences such as this: *They sought to boldly go where no man has gone before.* Instead, we were supposed to say *to go boldly* or even better, *boldly to go.* The prohibition was apparently based on the fact that since Latin verbs cannot be split (because they are only one word), English ones should not either. This was just silly, and even the Oxford University Press permits split infinitives now. The same is true of the old rule about not ending sentences with prepositions. Winston Churchill destroyed this one when he replied to criticism of his style by writing *This is the kind of thing up with which I will not put.* Did you notice the sentence above that ended *an effect for which you are presumably not striving.* That sounds rather pompous, though it would have been the preferred style fifty years ago.

k. Colloquial Language

This category covers a good many sins (better than *a lot of sins,* and certainly much better than *alot of sins,* heaven forbid). You do not want to write an essay that sounds as though you were chatting informally to a buddy. A sub-category that illustrates the point is what one of us calls the "jock cliché:" *Hitler faked out the French. Stalin psyched out his enemies. The tank corps deked round the right flank.* Don't do it.

3. Tricky words

Top of Page

Over the years (and the decades), we've encountered words and phrases that are constantly misused in essays. Here are a few of the worst culprits:

1) ***lay* and *lie.*** These words are so commonly misused that probably within your lifetime the distinction between them will be erased. Nevertheless, for now, it would be good for you to use them correctly. Don't be discouraged if most of the people you hear in daily life and on TV use them incorrectly.

Lay is a transitive verb, which means that it requires an object. *Please lay the spoons on the table* is correct because *spoons* is the object of the verb *lay.* However, *Please go upstairs and lay down* is WRONG, because there is no object for the verb *lay.* It doesn't matter if everyone you hear on TV says this; it's still wrong. The sentence should be *Please go upstairs and lie down. Lie* is an intransitive verb that requires no object.

The simple past tense of *lay* is *laid -- Yesterday she laid the spoons on the table.* Also, with *had* the verb is also laid--*The chickens had laid ten eggs by Tuesday.*
The past tense of *lie* is *lay--Yesterday she went upstairs and lay down.* Also, with *had* the verb is *lain--The jungle had lain undisturbed for centuries.*

Isn't that confusing? *Lay, lie, laid, lain*--and then there's the verb *to lie* as in to tell an untruth, the past tense of which is *lied,* as in *He lied to the police,* to say nothing of the noun *lye,* a caustic cleaning substance. No one ever said English was easy. *Lay, lie, laid, lain, lied*--perhaps you should choose a different word.

2) ***That/which.*** This can be really confusing. The Calgary guide explains it this way: *That* is used in restrictive clauses and *which* is used in non-restrictive clauses. Thus, *It was these two factors that led to the war* is correct because *that* refers to an essential (restrictive) component of the sentence. *The Great Reform Act, which gave many middle-class men the right to vote, was passed in 1832* is correct because "which" refers to a non-essential (non-restrictive) component. The sentence would still read as correct if the non-restrictive clause was removed: *The Great Reform Act was passed in 1832.*
See?

3) What do you do if you want to begin a sentence this way: *A student who wants to pass must make sure* ____ *essays are in on time?* What pronoun goes in the blank space? Years ago we would have written *his,* for the rule was that the male pronoun stood for the female, something that has been unacceptable for quite a number of years now. But what to replace it with? *He/She* is awkward, and no one talks that way. You could say *their*, but that goes against the rule that the number of the pronoun must match the number of the noun it refers to--*A student* is only one, and thus not *they* or *their.* Some people don't mind *A student who wants to pass must make sure their essays . . .,* but it makes us cringe, and you don't want to do that. People have tried to make up words that fit, but the best solution is to start the sentence in the plural: *Students who wish . . .* and then *their* will be correct. If this doesn't work, then rewrite the sentence in some other way.

4) ***Disinterested/uninterested****.* The second word describes someone who doesn't care about something, while the first describes someone who isn't biased one way or the other. A criminal court judge, therefore, is supposed to be disinterested but certainly not uninterested.

5) ***Notorious*** doesn't simply mean famous; it means famous for being bad. You would describe Hitler as notorious, but not Mother Teresa.

6) ***Affect/effect.*** *Affect* is a verb--*the drought will affect crop production. Effect* is a noun--*the drought will have a bad effect on crop production.* But *effect* is also a verb, meaning to cause-- *The speaker wanted to effect a change in the system.*

7) ***Reactionary.*** *Reactionary* doesn't mean radical or revolutionary in the radical sense, but the exact opposite. A reactionary person is one who reacts against the present in favour of the past, an extreme conservative.

8) ***Principal/Principle.*** *Principal* means main or chief, which is why the person in charge of the school is the principal, the school's chief or principal officer. A *principle* is a fundamental law or tenet (not tenant; that's the person who rents your basement). Thus *the principal reason that the principal was fired was that he demonstrated his lack of principles by selling grades for drugs.* That's not much of a sentence, but it illustrates the point.

9) ***Déjà vu.*** This is one of those words and phrases that is almost always used incorrectly, but it's nice to remember what it actually means. It does not suggest something that you've seen before, but something that you sense that you've seen before, even when you know you haven't. *Walking the streets of Paris for the first time, he felt a sense of déjà vu.* If it meant what most people think it does, you might as well say *Walking the streets of Paris, he realized he'd been there before.* The true meaning is much more sophisticated.

10) ***I could care less.*** We are sure none of you would ever write this, but just in case, it should be *I couldn't care less.* In any case it's a cliché. Similarly with *I could of danced all night,* which should be *I could have . . .*

11) ***Unique*** **and** ***literally.*** Purists--and we are purists--insist that these words should be used to mean what they say. *Unique* means one of a kind, and thus there is no such thing as almost or very unique. It's either one of a kind, or it isn't. *Literally* means really, actually, so that if *he literally exploded with rage,* someone needs to bring a mop and pail to clean up the blood.

12) ***Aggravate*** does not mean to annoy; it means to make worse--*walking on his broken ankle too soon aggravated the injury.* **Irritate** means to annoy.

13) ***Infer/imply.*** The person speaking implies; the person listening infers--*He implied I had been drunk at the party. By your slurred speech I inferred that you were drunk.*

Top of Page

14) ***Fewer/less.*** Fewer refers to things that can be counted individually; less refers to things that cannot--*The wolf is sad today because there is less wind to blow the house down, and fewer pigs to eat.*

15) ***Irregardless.*** There is no such word. Yuk.

16) ***Then/than****. Then* means at another time, or in that case--*Now we are happy, but then we were miserable. If you refuse to work, then you shall not eat. Than* appears in comparative sentences--*You can run faster than I can.*

17) ***lose/loose.*** The first is the opposite of *win;* the second is the opposite of *tight.*

18) ***alot,*** as in *"I drank alot of beer."* The correct form is *a lot.* The word *allot* means to parcel out, or allocate, as in *"each speaker was allotted twenty minutes."*