

## Fine-Tuning Your Writing

*Once you're sure that your paper makes a compelling argument based on solid evidence, it's time to dig into the nitty-gritty details of your writing. This section provides some helpful tips with wording and formatting so that you can polish up your papers to perfection.*

### Keep Your Fonts Simple and Clean

Unless your teacher says otherwise, use Times New Roman font, 12-point, double-spaced for your essays. This simply looks the most professional.

- And for the love of all that is good, don't put your title in a big, happy party font. That just looks stupid.

### Say No to Slang

Avoid using slang terms, dude... unless they appear in a quotation, of course.

### Contractions aren't Suitable

Don't use contractions in formal papers. Revise sentences like that one to say, "Do not use contractions in formal papers."

### No Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions in an academic paper sound too cutesy, don't you think?

### Get to the Point of Each Sentence

Do not artificially lengthen sentences through excessive use of conjunctions (such as *and* or *but*). Doing so can make your sentence so long that the point you're trying to make isn't clear.

- Don't abuse semicolons either. Instead, deploy semicolons only if you're joining two short and strongly related sentences together.

### Quoting for Emphasis

If you're quoting something, consider putting emphasis on a really important word or phrase by italicizing it.

- For example, you could say, "When Dr. Wily attempts to escape from his pursuers, the narrator describes his efforts as '*clawing* through the jungle while he lets out *roars* of pain' (Hatsune 255, emphasis added). Such animalistic, violent verbs depict Dr. Wily as a belligerent beast rather than the rational human he claims to be."

-- Notice how I've placed "emphasis added" in the citation since the italics on *clawing* and *roars* inside the quotation are mine. Just make sure you don't overdo this, or it will become distracting. Save this technique for when a certain word or short phrase within a longer quote is super duper important.

## Know Your Words

If you are ever the slightest bit unsure of what a word you're using means, then look it up in the dictionary.

- In Microsoft Word, simply holding down ALT and clicking the word will bring up its definition.

- A misused word is a glaring error. For instance, you eat in a *dining* room, not a *dinning* room. A bundle is held together by *cords*, not *chords*. You didn't *sit* the book on the table: you *set* the book on the table. Is your situation really *ironic*, or is it just an uncanny coincidence? Were you *literally* floating on air, or were you *figuratively* floating on air? Should you use *who* or *whom*? Oh, and remember: the sweet *dessert* has two *s*'s in it because you always want seconds.

- The words *lie* and *lay* can create all sorts of confusion, even for Microsoft Word and similar programs. Here's a quick breakdown of each:

-- *to lie* is to rest or recline

-- Present Participle: He *is lying* on the floor now.

-- Past Tense: He *lay* on the floor yesterday.

-- Past Participle: He *has lain* on the floor before.

-- *to lay* is to set something somewhere, to put

-- Present Participle: She *is laying* the book on the table now.

-- Past Tense: She *laid* the book on the table yesterday.

-- Past Participle: She *has laid* the book on the table before.

-- The confusion mostly stems from how the past tense version of *to lie* is *lay* by sheer coincidence. English is weird.

## Vary Your Sentence Structure

Avoid repetition in terms of not only diction but also sentence structure.

- For instance, look at this repetitive string of sentences: "Some people claim that video games are bad for our minds. They assert that delving into senseless violence hurts our children's cognitive growth. They claim children should be outside or reading a book. They believe video games may even lead to violent behavior."

-- Instead, try: "Some people claim that video games are bad for our minds. Specifically, the senseless violence depicted in games may hurt our children's cognitive growth, especially when they should be reading a book or playing outside instead. In their opinion, video games may also lead to violent behavior."

-- Notice how moving phrases around (such that additional commas are needed) and adding a few transition words made that more dynamic than the original they-say-this, they-say-that format.

## **Link Your Ideas**

Use transitional phrases such as *moreover* and *furthermore* to expand a point. Use phrases like *however*, *regardless*, and *yet* to show a change in thought. Use phrases like *in short* to summarize a paragraph.

- Do not use *in conclusion*: we can tell your paper's ending when we get to the last page, thank you very much.
- For more on transitional phrases, look at the page of mine aptly called "Transitional Phrases."

## **Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say (Don't Abuse Parentheses)**

I wouldn't recommend using parentheses in academic papers much, if at all, save for when you're citing something.

- Here's my reasoning: if something's important, then put it in the sentence itself rather than hide it in parenthesis. If it's not important, then cut it. Make up your darn mind.
- Although parenthesis can help organize a sentence for a reader or clarify a point, most developing writers rely on them too much. Be careful.
- Using them too much (like every other sentence) can make your reader (who is processing a lot of information) confused (which is bad when your grade is depending on it), making them re-read sentences to understand your point (and then they lose the flow of your writing).
- Often, you can use commas to offset a relevant phrase rather than parentheses.

## **Make Your Words Count**

Don't add unnecessary words to lengthen your sentences. This doesn't make you sound smarter at all.

- If you think your sentences are too short and simplistic, make sure you're being specific. Make everything crystal clear to the reader so that they can tell exactly what you're thinking based on your writing alone.
- You might want to see if adding an adjective or adverb makes things clearer.
- Alternatively, you could add a short description to something in order to reinforce your thesis or build up a source's credentials. For instance, instead of just, "Dr. Nodoka Pommel found in her research..." try, "Dr. Nodoka Pommel, *who has published over a dozen academic articles on the subject*, found in her research that..." Always give your reader context.

## **Big Words aren't Enough**

On a similar note, be careful when using a thesaurus to spice up your wording.

- You can find a thesaurus at [Thesaurus.com](http://Thesaurus.com) or in Microsoft Word by holding ALT and clicking a word.

- When used wisely, a thesaurus can help you find more specific, vivid words. For example, “Luigi is a good man” could mean that he’s successful, powerful, sexy, brave, smart, or just about anything else that’s “good.” Instead, you could make your meaning clear by declaring, “Luigi is a virtuous man.”

- However, don’t use the thesaurus just to hunt down really big words to sound smart. Doing so will break up your flow and make you sound like a stuck-up faker. For instance, rather than say, “The exorbitant amelioration of the previously sumptuous domicile made it materialize before our eyes as something no longer antediluvian once more,” try, “The expensive renovation of the once-lavish home made it look fresh again.” Notice how the second sentence sounds perfectly fine without using needlessly big words.

- Also, always check a dictionary to make sure you’re using your new words properly. Synonyms may have subtle differences you should be aware of.

### **Specific Words Spice Things Up**

Vivid verbs, adjectives, and adverbs can help you make your point clear.

- Rather than say, “Serena likes to dress in nice clothes,” try, “Serena, the prim daughter of a horseback rider, enjoys adorning herself with the most stunning of dresses.” Compare the verbs, adjectives, and adverbs used in each sentence to see how that worked.

-- More specific nouns, such as *dresses* instead of *clothes*, made the point even clearer. Never be vague. Always step back and consider how many ways your words could be interpreted. After all, *clothes* could be almost anything, including sweaters, hats, and boots.

-- Also notice how I added a modifier to *Serena* (“the prim daughter of a horseback rider”) so that I could introduce her character without taking too much time to explain the necessary context.

### **Modify Meticulously**

Watch out for dangling or misplaced modifiers.

- The basic idea is to make sure that any word or phrase modifying something is next to whatever it’s modifying.

- For instance, in this sentence, “Felicia talked about how she almost hit another car at the dinner table,” it sounds like Felicia was actually at the dinner table when she almost hit another car. That doesn’t make sense. Try, “At the dinner table, Felicia talked about how she almost hit another car.” By putting “at the dinner table” right next to “Felicia talked,” you’re making it clear that the location refers to where she did the talking.

- Here’s another example: “Being a white person, it is difficult to remember how privileged I am.” This sentence makes “it” sound like a white person. Since the phrase “being a white person” is

referring to the speaker, the speaker should immediately follow the phrase. So let's try, "Being a white person, I often find it difficult to remember how privileged I am."

- And let's look at this sentence: "After overcoming many obstacles, Toad tells Mario that the princess is in another castle." Guess what? You're saying that Toad overcame the obstacles! Try rewording it somehow, like this: "Toad tells Mario, who has overcome many obstacles, that the princess is in another castle."

- The phrase doesn't always have to be right next to what it's modifying, but that's when things get complicated. Basically, you should read your work carefully to make sure nothing's unclear. If a sentence can be misunderstood, it will be misunderstood.

- I'd recommend looking up "dangling/misplaced modifiers" online or asking your teacher about them if you still find yourself confused.

### **Books Don't Talk**

If you're analyzing a piece of writing, don't write something like, "The book says..." or "The article says..." Books and articles don't talk. Try, "The narrator declares..." or "[Author name] asserts..." You shouldn't go too long without mentioning the author directly: talk about what message they're trying to get across.

- On that note, whenever you mention an author, you should never use only their first name. If you say things like, "John uses this scene to..." it sounds as if you're treating him like your home dawg. Try, "Milton uses this scene to..."

### **Say What?**

To introduce a quote, use more vivid wording than "says."

- Wording such as "argues," "asserts," "declares," "speculates," and so on make the speaker's intentions clearer.

- For more details on leading into quotes, please see the page of my website called "Using Quotations."

### **Perfect Your Pronouns**

Make sure your pronoun references are clear. Who is "she"? Who (or what) is "they"? That sort of thing.

- Also, if you use "this," make sure it's clear what "this" is. Take a look at this passage: "In 2016, Luan Stiles founded the Dragon Protection Alliance, an organization famous for raising the American dragon population by 50%. This motivated the citizens of her hometown to name a park after her." Does this passage mean that the people named the park after Stiles because she founded the Dragon Protection Alliance, or does the passage mean that the people named the park after her because her organization raised the dragon population? Be specific by referring to what "this" is. For

instance, here, you could say, “This achievement in raising the dragon population motivated the citizens of her hometown to name a park after her.”

- If you don’t know what noun you would put after a lonely “this” or “these,” you might want to rethink your wording. If you’re not sure what “this” is, how will your reader know?

### **Stories in the Present**

When discussing what happens within a work of fiction, make sure you’re using the present tense.

- For example, rather than say, “In this video game, Toad told Mario that the princess was in another castle,” say, “In this video game, Toad tells Mario that the princess is in another castle.”

- This is true of video games, books, movies, TV shows, poems, and so on.

- Only use past tense if you’re describing something that happened *before* the story began or before the scene you’re describing. For instance, “During this touching scene, Rin tells her surrogate father about how her biological parents cared for her while she was young.” Rin *tells* in the present time of the story panning out, but her biological parents *cared* for her before this conversation between her and the surrogate father.

### **Find Reliable Help for Specific Dilemmas**

There are many books and websites that can help you with all the details of English grammar. Here are just a few:

- The University of North Carolina’s Writing Center

- Purdue OWL: Online Writing Lab

- Common Errors in English Usage (via Washington State University)

**Grammatical rules can be tricky, but a basic understanding of them can help you polish up your papers so that your readers can more easily grasp the points you’re trying to make.**

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