

General Writing Tips

1. Avoid Contractions & Conversational Language

Example:

“I suppose that since passing is the topic of my paper, I should provide a definition.”

The main problem here is that the writer lacks confidence and conviction. This informality undermines the authority of the writer.

Example:

“This group of friends was mostly guys which was a nice change from my friends in middle school who were a bunch of let’s just say not very nice girls.”

This statement is unclear because of its reliance on informal language (i.e. “let’s just say not very nice girls”). At the end of this statement, as the reader I simply don’t know what the author means. I may try to guess, but by not being clear and specific, the author has opened up the possibility that I may misunderstand.

2. Direct quotes should not appear at the beginning or end of paragraph.

Example:

“As was the case with Joel (from Kroeger’s book), I was not always certain that I was different from what the people around me assumed me to be. Kroeger claims that, “Passing is about accommodating the self” (p. 106).

The problem in the above passage is that the writer does not clearly connect the quote with her own analysis. Nor is it clear exactly what the author of the book means in the quote. This problem could be solved by following up the quote with a statement of explanation.

A Better Alternative:

“As was the case with Joel (from Kroeger’s book), I was not always certain that I was different from what the people around me assumed me to be. Kroeger claims that, “Passing is about accommodating the self” (p. 106). Kroger’s point is that in passing people are often trying to pretend to fit others’ expectations of them and in so doing they often lose track of themselves.

3. Avoid 2nd Person (“you”)

Example:

While you can vote and fight for our country at the age of 18, you cannot drink alcohol until you are 21.

The use of second person (“you”) sounds accusatory to the reader. It often sounds as if the writer is making assumptions about the reader (because by implication it is that the reader is “you”). For example, when I read the above statement I thought, “I am not 18. I am older and can legally engage in all of these activities.” Although the author probably intended to connect with me, the author actually distracted me by inviting me to think about myself and if I fit the profile that was given.

A Better Alternative:

US Society appears to have conflicting expectations about when citizens should be treated as adults. On the one hand, young people are considered adults at age 18 when it comes to voting and fighting for our country. On the other hand, in the case of alcohol, young people are not considered adults until the age of 21.

4. Avoid Rhetorical Questions

Example:

Everything points to drinking being a cool and socially acceptable thing. And who doesn’t want to fit in with the trendy group?

People often use rhetorical questions as a device for engaging their readers. But, when a question is offered without an answer, the reader is often left wondering what the purpose of the question was (and if the author is able to answer). This kind of frustration undermines the authority of the writing. Rather than asking questions, you should answer them.

5. Evidence, Evidence, Evidence

Example: a passage lacking evidence...

“Norms can change depending on your location and situation (Baker, 1/23). When I traveled to Germany, I entered a new group with a whole new set of norms completely different from the ones I had grown accustomed to throughout my life.”

This statement is unclear because the author does not back up his observation with examples of the ways that norms differ between the US and Germany. As a result, I as a reader am unconvinced that the two countries are so different.

6. You can't always trust your spell-check.

Spell check will not catch issues like your/you're; affect/effect; or definitely/defiantly.

Plagiarism

You may hear this word a lot and be a little unsure (and worried) about what it means. Most people worry about “accidentally” plagiarizing. And it is true that all plagiarism (even the unintentional kind) can get you into trouble. I believe that the best way to avoid plagiarism is to adopt a very conservative definition of the term. I consider plagiarism to be *“any deliberate or reckless representation of another’s words, thoughts, or ideas as one’s own without attribution”*

So, What can you do to avoid plagiarism?

1. **Think positively about citations!** Sometimes students worry about using too many cites—afraid the professor will think you are relying too much on other people’s ideas. But this is exactly how academic writing works – we always build on the knowledge of those who came before us. More importantly, using citations allows you to demonstrate how clearly you understand the material you are reading. This is especially true when you make clear distinctions between what the author has to say and your analysis of their ideas. Rather than making you look less sophisticated, the use of allows you to show your knowledge and understanding

Example:

Marx (140-56) argues that there are two groups of people in industrialized societies, those with power and those without. While Marx’s argument is helpful because it helps us to see the ways that power influences behavior, Marx underestimates...

2. **Take good notes.** Keep track of the articles that you read and the ideas that you pull out of each. Also, keep track of the page numbers (for quotes and paraphrases).
3. **Plan ahead.** Often students feel tempted to plagiarize because they wait to work until the last minute. At the last minute, students can get lazy about their citations or, worse, be tempted to take a paper from somewhere else. If you plan ahead, allow yourself time to edit, and seek outside support (from friends, the writing center, etc.), you can improve your writing skills and avoid the temptation to cheat.

Citations

You will need to include citations for any sources that you reference in your assignment (including class notes and class readings). You will also need to create a bibliography for any outside sources that you use.

Course lecture can be referenced by including information that specifies the professor's name and date of lecture.

Examples from lecture:

- *The self is created through the process of socialization (Baker, 2/2/09).*
- *According to Baker (2/2/09), the self is created through the process of socialization.*

Book material can similarly cited using the author's name and the page number.

Examples from a text:

- *Sullivan argues that culture is a product of interaction (28-34).*
- *Sociologists believe that culture is a product of interaction (Sullivan 28-34).*
- *According to Sullivan, culture "is created through a process of consensus-building" (29).*

At the end of your paper, you will need to provide a bibliography. You may use MLA or APA format, but you must be consistent. If you need help with your bibliography, see the following cites

You can also be efficient with your citations if several sentences in a row draw from the same source.

Example:

According to Goffman, we are always performing. All of us have many different social roles to play and we choose which one to act out based on the situations we encounter. Goffman argues that in most cases we make these choices quickly and perform our roles effectively (Baker, 2/2/09). For example, I am a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a student...

-The Purdue Online Writing Lab (a truly excellent resource on all things writing-related)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

-Noodlebib (a website that will create a bibliography for you!)

<http://www.ithaca.edu/library/research/noodlebib.php>

The IC Writing Center - <http://www.ithaca.edu/hs/depts/writing/writingcenter/>