

Writing Tips

This is a collection of tips and ideas about writing that I've collected. It talks about a lot of common mistakes that everyone makes.

In general, you should look at a style guide like Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Deidre McCloskey's book *Economic Writing* is written by an economist about writing economics. It is quick and fun to read.

General Rules

Oddly enough, your problem in writing academic papers is going to be writing too much, not too little. In general, your paper will have too many paragraphs, your paragraphs too many sentences, and your sentences too many words. Focus on keeping the paper simple and direct.

Your paper is not a mystery story. The research question and contribution must be clear within the first few paragraphs of the introduction. This means that the *results* must be made clear in the first few paragraphs. If you tell someone you estimate the effect of a program intervention on child health, then you better tell them almost immediately *what the estimated effect is*.

Your paper is not a diary. The amount of effort or time that you spent working on something is not proportional to the space it gets in the paper. Six months of assembling, cleaning, and merging data might get two paragraphs. A week of running regressions gets a page. One day of preparing a nice figure showing the essential relationship you are studying will end up getting multiple pages of text.

Make your paper easy to write and understand by having great figures and tables. It is easier to show someone an empirical relationship than it is to tell them about it. Spend time putting together your figures and tables. Do not just use the default options in Excel. If you provide useful figures and tables, then writing the paper will become very easy. If you have too many tables and figures, great. Put them in an appendix. But better to have too many than too few.

Writing and Editing

Writing and editing are different activities. Writing is putting down text for the first time, or doing broad re-arranging of your paper. Do not get stuck when writing in trying to get all the grammar correct, or in trying to avoid all the problems I list below. Just write.

Editing is slowly going back through what you wrote and fixing all the errors in writing. When you are editing, do not get stuck trying to re-think your paper. Just edit. Remove long phrases. Switch from passive to active verbs. Drop adverbs. Check on your use of "the". When editing, get someone else to read the paper if you are unsure whether a sentence works.

Reading your own writing out loud is a great way to edit. It forces you to go slowly, whereas reading allows your brain to skip ahead quickly. You can hear poor sentences more easily than you can see them. If you don't like reading out loud, use your computer. Most have the capability of reading text out loud.

Common Errors

These are phrases or words that commonly get misused.

- "hopefully". Wrong: Hopefully, it will rain. Right: She checked her messages hopefully.
- "impact": refers to collisions. Use "effect".
- "imply" and "infer": to imply is to suggest something, to infer is to deduce something from information. You may infer something from your regressions.
- "irregardless": this is not a word. Use "regardless"

- “is where”: use only to refer to a place. Wrong: A recession is where we need to increase government spending. Right: A recession is when we need to increase government spending.
- “its”: do you mean possession or “it is”? Right: It’s hard to write papers. Right: The dog chewed its bone.
- “less” and “few”. Right: After going to Las Vegas I had less money and fewer teeth. Less refers to something that is unquantified (“money” does not have a quantity) while few refers to something that is quantified (“teeth” is plural).
- “loan” and “lend”: Wrong: Bob loaned me ten dollars. Right: Bob lent me ten dollars.
- “penultimate”: This means second to last, not last.
- “antepenultimate”: Just for fun. This means third to last.
- “while”: means during a time, it is not a synonym for “although”. Wrong: While the effect of smoking is significant, the point estimate is small. Right: Although the effect of smoking is significant.....
- “affect” and “effect”: I affect you. I have therefore had an effect on you.
- “affective”: I am 99% sure you mean “effective”
- “assure”, “ensure”, “insure”: assure is to dispel doubts, ensure is to make sure something happens, insure is to buy protection against risk
- “compliment” and “complement”: the first is flattery, the second means to enhance
- “criteria”: criteria is plural. Criterion is singular.
- “unique”: is a binary state. You cannot be “more unique”, “really unique”, or “very unique”.
- “farther” and “further”: farther refers to distance, further to a time or quantity.
- “fuller”: is a kind of hammer. You cannot get “fuller” by eating more.
- “seminal”: is a very strong word. If the author’s name isn’t Ken Arrow or Paul Samuelson, you’re probably wrong.
- “i.e.”: this is Latin for *id est* and means roughly “in explanation”. Use this to clarify a statement.
- “e.g.”: this Latin for *exempli grati* and means roughly “example given”. Use this to give an example.

The Definite Article

“The” is the most-used word in English. It is also misused by a lot of non-native speakers. It may be tempting to put “the” in front all of the nouns in your sentence. Please don’t.

I can’t possibly give you a full set of rules for using “the” correctly. But let me give you a few principles that should help your writing.

We use “the” to refer to a specific instance of some noun. You cannot use “the” until you’re sure that the reader knows which specific instance of the noun you are talking about.

- In some cases, you can assume the reader knows the specific instance. “The President will visit Houston in September.” You presumably don’t need to explain to the reader that there is a President, so you write “The President”.

- In most other cases, you need to first explain which instance you mean. “The U.S. economy entered a recession after the housing bust of 2007 and the financial crisis of 2008. The recession continued through 2009.” I told you first which recession I was talking about. After that, I can assume you know I mean the 2008/09 recession when I say “the recession”.

You use “a” or “an” to refer to any instance of a noun. Above, I said “The U.S. economy entered a recession.”. I used “a” because I was establishing which recession we were talking about - you didn’t know yet. If I had said “The U.S. economy entered the recession after the housing bust of 2007 and the financial crisis of 2008,” that would be wrong, as I didn’t know which recession you meant yet.

Note that I said “the housing bust of 2007” and “the financial crisis of 2008”. These are cases where I could assume the reader understood what I was referring to already.

Words that End in -ly

There is almost no reason to use a word that ends in -ly. These are adverbs, and they have no place in your writing.

People sometimes call these “weasel words” because they try to persuade without offering any further evidence. Examples are: fairly, extremely, obviously, exceedingly, remarkably, surprisingly. One particular word - “really” - should never, ever, ever, ever, be used in your paper.

Passive Voice

This paragraph *was written* in passive voice. It *was constructed* to illustrate how boring passive voice sounds. The problem is that subjects *are excluded* from the sentences. You have almost no idea that this sentence *was written* by me.

I wrote this paragraph with an active voice. *I constructed* it to illustrate how active voice sounds stronger. All *the sentences have* clear subjects.

Passive voice gets dull, especially when repeated sentence after sentence. Using “is verb-ed” in a sentence is a good sign that you are using passive voice. Look through your paper for am/are/were/being/is/been/was/be - these are verbs used by passive sentences. You will find it tempting to use passive voice, because it often sounds “science-ish”: “The regressions were run using clustered standard errors.”. No, “I used clustered standard errors in these regressions.”

Choice of subject

Academic papers will often use “we” as the subject of their active sentences: “We find a fiscal multiplier of 0.6.”. If the paper has multiple authors, that is appropriate. Some people use “we” even though they are the only author of the paper. I personally find this annoying. Use “I”. Take some ownership of your paper.

But, if you are determined to use “we”, then at least be consistent. Do not flip back and forth from “I” to “we”.

Footnotes

- The footnote mark goes at the end of the sentence, after the period.¹
- I should be able to read your paper and understand it without reading the footnotes.
- Footnotes are for things like citations, or asides that may interest someone who wants further information about your work.
- If they are longer than 3 or 4 sentences, then either (a) put the text in the paper or (b) drop it entirely.

¹Like this.

Cliches To Avoid

This are just lazy, take up a lot of space, and don't really tell add anything. You can almost always remove them and improve your writing.

- in a very real sense
- in some sense
- in the final analysis
- it has long been known
- it is widely known
- it is interesting to (the reader will be the judge of that)
- it is of interest to
- it is worth pointing out
- it stands to reason
- needless to say (then don't)
- par for the course
- the fact that
- a matter of concern
- I wish to
- along these lines
- as a matter of fact
- in actuality
- easier said than done
- find it interesting
- from the point of view of

Long phrases

You will be tempted to fill your paper with phrases that are too long (remember, sentences have too many words). Here are a few examples, with the shorter alternative in parentheses. Use the shorter alternative. Always be thinking if you can shorten things up.

- it is often the case that (often)
- a considerable amount (much)
- a large/small number of (many/few)
- a lot of (many)
- a majority of (most)

- a number of (many)
- accounted for by the fact that (caused by)
- based on the fact that (because)
- despite the fact that (although)
- due to the fact that (because)

Repetition

In an academic paper, you'll find that you need to keep repeating the same term or phrase over and over and over again. "The current account balance is related to XYZ. Most countries, because of lacking XYZ, tend to have high current account balances. An effect of these high current account balances is to raise interest rates." It will sound annoying when you write it. You will be tempted to change the phrase, or use synonyms. ("Child health", "child well-being", "child medical outcomes", "pre-adult health"). Don't. You're not writing a novel. It may sound monotonous, but the reader should not be confused by switching terms. It is just a fact of academic writing that parts of it will sound repetitive.