

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING

Paragraphs

Paragraphs serve two functions in effective writing. They serve as signposts for both you, the writer, and your reader. That is, they signal the logic of your argument. In turn, then, they act as the rhetorical building blocks in the construction of your argument. Each paragraph in sequence reflects a key element in the completion of your argument. Well-constructed paragraphs clearly fit together, easily progress one from the other, and strongly build toward a coherent whole.

Paragraphs generally begin with a single indentation and a topic sentence. They follow each other in your text with the standard spacing used within the paragraph itself, unless it is a block quotation. They typically contain a single dominant idea or thought. They seldom contain a single sentence. Paragraphs should rarely exceed one full page in length.

Personal Pronouns

Generally, avoid using personal pronouns, such as “I” or “we,” in formal expository or analytical writing. Using personal pronouns shifts the focus of the writing from your argument to you, the writer. Therefore, keep your focus on your point. Strengthen your argument with active references to the historical actors and a firm reliance on the historical evidence. Do not weaken your text with phrases such as “I think” or “It seems to me.”

Placement of Quotations

If the quotation is four lines or fewer, incorporate it into the text as part of a proper sentence and enclose it in double quotation marks. For example:

According to Smith, “The cremation of the Strasbourg Jews in 1349 amounted to nothing less than a medieval holocaust.”

The impact of the plague on the Jews of Strasbourg in 1349, Smith argues, was “nothing less than a medieval holocaust.”

If the quotation is five lines or longer, use a block quotation. These should be single-spaced and indented, have a blank line before and after the quotation, and should not begin and end with double quotation marks. If a block quotation is introduced with a complete sentence, end the sentence with a colon before you provide the quotation. If, however, you employ a phrase such as *notes*, *claims*, *argues*, *maintains* or *according to the author*, end the phrase with a comma before providing the quotation.

Passive Voice

The term “passive voice” refers to a sentence where the actor/subject (a person, group, etc.) is not “doing” the verb, and instead is serving as the object (the thing or person receiving the action) of the sentence.

Active: The chicken crossed the road.

Passive: The road was crossed by the chicken.

Active: Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Passive: The Declaration of Independence was written by Thomas Jefferson.

The passive voice impedes clarity and contributes to wordiness. Passive voice can obscure your intended meaning by hiding “who” or “what” is completing the action. For example, in the following sentence, it is not clear who did what: “Reform efforts were being conducted.” The meaning becomes clearer when it is changed to: “Women conducted reform efforts.”

To avoid passive voice, make the actor the sentences’ subject. A quick test to help avoid passive voice involves two questions: (1) Is there action in the sentence? (2) If so, does the actor appear as the grammatical subject, i.e. are they “doing” the verb?

Proper Use of Tense

Make sure to write in past tense when discussing events that have already happened. You are writing history, not a novel.

Past tense: Montgomery’s African-American activists responded quickly. They began with plans for a one-day bus boycott.

Present tense: Montgomery’s African-American activists respond quickly. They make plans for a boycott.

Present tense, however, should be used for scholar’s writings, e.g. “Jones argues...”

Possessive vs. Plural

Do not add an apostrophe just because a word ends in *s*. Regular nouns form plurals by adding *-s* or *-es*. Do not use an apostrophe + *s* to make these nouns plural.

Correct: Several senators

Incorrect: Several senator’s

Plural subjects take plural verbs. Singular subjects take singular verbs. This rule is known as **subject/ verb agreement**. Take care not to be distracted by the words between the subject and verb of a sentence, e.g. “The *stack* of books next to the copier *is* mine.” Likewise, remember that compound subjects require plural verbs, e.g. “Her *roommate* and *sister* *are* leaving next week.”

Proper Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings. Examples include: pail/pale, pain/pane, pair/pare/pear, passed/past, patience/patients, overseas/oversees, brake/break, led/lead, to/two/too, and their/there/they’re. Remember that spell check will NOT catch these.

Professional Language (no contractions, slang/ informal writing)

Informal writing tends to be more conversational, and uses contractions, abbreviations, figures of speech, slang, and other popular expressions. Contractions are words formed from two abbreviated words, such as “don’t” for do not, “can’t” for can not and “wouldn’t” for would not. Examples of slang/informal language: dude, freaking, uh-huh, nope, kinda, chill out, stuff, you know, kids, guy, awesome, a lot. By the way, or Anyway (to change the topic).