

Rules for Formal Writing to Literate Audiences

Or: How to write for Jim Spickard's classes.

All writing – indeed, all language – is governed by medium and audience. Written language is different from spoken language. Language aimed at a literate audience is different from the language use on social media. We all have to be bi-, tri-, or multi-lingual in our writing and speaking styles. That's part of being educated.

My courses call for formal writing aimed at literate audiences in the particular society and historical era in which we live. This is the kind of writing that shows you are educated and thus worthy of a job. It is not the only way to write, but learning this form is a necessary skill. It's not hard. You have known the rules since 4th grade. Still, we all get lazy, or out of practice, or forget what audience we are trying to reach. To give you practice, I have certain requirements. Please pay attention to the following.

Category One: Terminal Offenses

Some writing issues are so annoying as to call for immediate rejection. If you have TWO instances of the following offenses in a single document, you will get no credit for it until you rewrite and resubmit it. These rewrites are treated as late work; you can only redo an assignment once. Warning: I shall not read past the second error, so don't expect me to find everything you've done wrong.

- Mixing up possessives and plurals: 's indicates a possessive, except for "it's", which is a contraction for "it is"; a single s usually indicates a plural, though some words need es and a few inherit odd Latin or German endings (e.g.: *alumna / alumnae*).
- Misused singular and plural verbs, pronoun case, etc.: "She is ... / they are ..." is correct; so is "We gave [something] to them. / They gave [something] to us."
- Pronoun agreement in number. Never write "a person they"; this is okay in spoken language but not in the written form. It is also a lazy way to avoid sexist speech. Use "people they" or rewrite the sentence.
 - This issue has become more complex with the recent (and justified) concern for sensitivity to transgender people. This movement rightly notes that "she or he" forces some people into inappropriate boxes. ("Using "she or he" makes for awkward sentences anyway.)
 - I have no objection to accommodating people who wish to be addressed as "they" rather than "she" or "he" in direct speech. That is a matter of personal respect. Unfortunately, using "they" for a singular is unacceptable in formal writing. It makes you look uneducated or lazy and distracts from what you are trying to say.
 - It is far better to rewrite the sentence to avoid both sexism and genderism. (You can always use "one".)
- Mixing up there / their / they're
- NEVER write "In so-and-so's article/book, [INSERT TITLE], s/he writes that ...". That is shoddy construction. Instead use "In [INSERT TITLE], so-and-so writes that ...".
- Writing incomplete sentences.
- Using 'impact' as a verb. Instead, use "affect", "influence", etc. The same goes for "message", "gift", "dialogue", etc. These are fine as nouns. Just don't verb nouns.

Note: proofreading catches most of these problems. Turn off your word-processor's *autocorrect* option, as it frequently substitutes the wrong word for the right one. (In Word: use the menus File, Options, Proofing, Autocorrect Options, then uncheck the last box on the screen.)

Category Two: Offenses That Are Only Terminal If Widespread

- Consistent misspellings. I can accept a few of these, but will reject your paper if I get fed up. Turn on your spell-checker but turn off autocorrect; then search for errors.

- The same goes for homonym and near-homonym errors: affect/effect, loose/lose, its/it's, etc. (Mixing up the homonyms *there* / *their* / *there* is a terminal offense; see above.)

Category Three: Non-Terminal Offenses

These writing issues are serious, but not serious enough to warrant the death penalty. The following demonstrate that you have had a good education. This impresses people, buys you social position, and brings you money. It also improves your grades.

A. Things to avoid:

- Excessive use of the passive voice. Don't write "The rules were written with care." Write "I [or someone] wrote the rules carefully."
- Ruling-class speech. This is a form of the passive voice that authorities and rich people use to avoid responsibility for their actions.
 - Don't write "The demonstrators were beaten." Write "The police beat the demonstrators."
 - Don't write "There was an unfortunate oil spill." Write (if it's true) "We cut corners to maximize our profits; the pipe burst and spilled oil all over. Now you get to clean it up."
- Split infinitives. While not technically incorrect, these are sloppy writing. Good writers will occasionally use them intentionally – for example, to really, truly, emphatically make their points. The rest of us should refrain.
- Dangling prepositions. Despite Winston Churchill's apocryphal "this is the kind of tedious nonsense up with which I will not put", ending a sentence with a preposition typically sounds wrong. Rephrase it – and let rhythm be your guide.
- Sentences longer than 40 words. (Yes, Faulkner made this work, but you're not Faulkner and neither am I.)
- Comma faults. Remember the joke about the panda who walks into a bar, orders food, pulls out a gun, shoots the water, then walks out. (The panda eats, shoots, and leaves.)
- Academic jargon. For example, "hegemony" is a fine word, if you have enough theoretical moxie to distinguish it from "domination", "oppression", "exploitation", "rulership", etc. Most students (and most faculty) don't. Even those who do are better off using words that their audiences understand. (Except for "moxie": look it up.)

B. Things to embrace:

- Clear, pungent prose.
- Appropriate use of commas. E.g.: after each item in a series except the last: "a, b, and c" rather than "a, b and c."
- The subjunctive tense. English has a good one, though it is not nearly as well-developed as in Spanish, French, German, etc. In English, it is mainly used for counter-factual statements. E.g.: "If I were to allow sloppy writing in this class, I would not be a good teacher." (Not "If I was".)
- Proofreading. If you doubt this, see Mark Eckman & Jerrold Zar's "Owed to the Spell Chequer" (aka "Candidate for a Pullet Surprise") at <http://grammar.about.com/od/spelling/a/spellcheck.htm>

I leave you with this thought from Kurt Vonnegut:

"Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers, whatever you're writing. If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your reader will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an ego maniac or a chowderhead — or, worse, they will stop reading you."
