

# A Guide to Writing in History and Classics

<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/WritingGuide/00intro.htm>

## **Part 1 (Style): Sections 1-20**

- A. The General Tone of Your Writing
- B. Words and Word Choice
- C. Grammar and Spelling
- D. Organizing Your Work
- E. The Presentation of Your Work

# General Tone

1. Informality
2. Definitive Statements
3. Overstatements
4. Meaningless Words and Non-Statements
5. Choppy Sentences

# General Tone

**1. Informality:** Do not write casually.  
Show respect for the reader.

- Humor, sarcasm and slang are inappropriate in formal writing
- Avoid abbreviations, especially “etc.”

# General Tone

**1. Informality:** Write out numbers which can be expressed in one or two words, e.g. “two hundred”

- Express numbers requiring three or more words as numerals, e.g. 234
- Always write dates in a numerical form, e.g. 44 BCE

# General Tone

**1. Informality:** Avoid first-person forms, e.g. *I, me, my, we, our, us*.

- *Never* use second-person forms, e.g. *you, your!*

# General Tone

**1. Informality:** Avoid first-person forms, e.g. *I, me, my, we, our, us*.

– Do not speak personally or directly to the reader, e.g.

- In **my** opinion, the Greeks were fools.
- **Note** how the Romans treated foreigners.
- **Take**, for example, my wife.

# General Tone

**2. Definitive Statements:** Employ bold assertions of verifiable fact.

- Avoid wishy-washy terms and words that undercut the force of your argument, e.g.

**possibly**

**probably**

**might / may**

**seem**

**could / would**

# General Tone

**3. Overstatements:** Do not use overly general terms. Allow for exceptions.

- Avoid unsupportable assertions, e.g.

INSTEAD OF

always

never

all / every

only

completely

WRITE

**most often**

**rarely ever**

**most / almost**

**on the whole**

**with few exceptions**

# General Tone

**4. Meaningless Words and Non-Statements:** Formal writing requires the use of clear and precise terms.

- Know what words mean
  - if uncertain, look them up in the dictionary
  - e.g., “incredible” means literally “unbelievable” (not “really great”)

# General Tone

**5. Choppy Sentences:** Avoid writing many small sentences.

- Instead, use subordinate clauses
- Link smaller sentences together with conjunctions, e.g.

**when**

**since / because**

**although**

**if**

**and / or**

# Words and Word Choices

6. Phrasing

7. Repetition of Words

8. Noun Clusters

# Words and Word Choices

**6. Phrasing:** Use language which is appropriate in formal writing.

- Avoid local or dialectal expressions, e.g. “just *barely*,” “speak *of*,” “*oftentimes*”
- Use the correct preposition, e.g. “connect *with*,” “different *from*”
- Do not use “big words” if you do not know what they mean
  - no “spontaneously humorous ejaculations” please!

# Words and Word Choices

**7. Repetition of Words:** Avoid repeating words again and again and again.

- Repetitious writing makes a writer's writing look simplistic (and repetitive)
- Conversely, varied and richly textured phrasing creates an atmosphere of learned sophistication

# Words and Word Choices

**8. Noun Clusters:** Avoid using nouns as descriptors. Turn noun clusters into phrases with prepositions or adjectives.

INSTEAD OF

succession line

army strategy

economics matters

WRITE

**line of succession**

**military strategy**

**matters pertaining to economics**

- Standard noun clusters found in dictionaries and course materials (e.g. history class) are acceptable.

# Grammar and Spelling

9. Subject-Verb Agreement
10. Dangling Participles
11. Pronoun Referents
12. Spelling
13. Possessives and Plurals
14. Present-Tense Verbs

# Grammar and Spelling

**9. Subject-Verb Agreement:** Subjects and verbs must agree, e.g.

- 3<sup>rd</sup> singular (-s): Caesar **has** won the battle.
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> plural (no -s): The Romans **have** won.
- Compound subjects with “and” are plural and require plural verbs, e.g.
- Caesar and Augustus **have** won the battle

# Grammar and Spelling

**9. Subject-Verb Agreement:** Singular subjects linked with “or” or “neither/nor” require a singular verb, e.g.

- Neither Caesar nor Augustus **has** won the war as yet.

# Grammar and Spelling

**9. Subject-Verb Agreement:** If subjects linked by “or/nor” are mixed in number (one singular and one plural), the verb agrees with the one which is closer, e.g.

- Neither Caesar nor the Gauls **have** won the war as yet.
- Neither the Gauls nor Caesar **has** won the war as yet.

# Grammar and Spelling

**10. Dangling Participles:** A verb form ending in *-ing* must be next to (or very near) the noun it goes with.

- WRONG: Considering the world today, the Romans made many important contributions to modern life, according to many historians.
- RIGHT: Considering the world today, **most historians agree that** the Romans made many important contributions to modern life.

# Grammar and Spelling

**11. Pronoun Referents:** Check that each pronoun — especially “they” and “it” — refers to the appropriate noun (referent), e.g.

- WRONG: When Rome attacked Gaul, **they** won.
- RIGHT: When **the Romans** attacked Gaul, **they** won.

# Grammar and Spelling

**11. Pronoun Referents:** Check that each pronoun — especially “they” and “it” — refers to the appropriate noun (referent), e.g.

- WRONG: When Caesar’s army attacked the Gauls, **they** won.
- RIGHT: When Caesar’s army attacked the Gauls, **it** won.

# Grammar and Spelling

**12. Spelling:** Correct spelling shows the care and precision an author has taken in writing. Use Spell Check *and* proofread!

(“in that place”) **there** vs. **their** (“belonging to them”)

(“a heavy element”) **lead** vs. **led** (“directed, guided”)

(“at that time”) **then** vs. **than** (as in “more than”)

(“belonging to”) **of** vs. **have** (past tense marker)

# Grammar and Spelling

**13. Possessives and Plurals:** Most possessives and contractions use an apostrophe, whereas plural nouns do not.

## No Apostrophe

(plural) **the sons** vs. **the son's** (“belonging to the son”)

(plural) **the Romans** vs. **the Romans'** (“of the Romans”)

(“of it”) **its** vs. **it's** (= it is; contraction)

(“of whom”) **whose** vs. **who's** (= who is; contraction)

# Grammar and Spelling

**13. Possessives and Plurals:** The possessive form of names ending in -s may be formed with just an apostrophe (or an apostrophe plus -s), e.g.

- Euripides' (or Euripides'**s**)
- Augustus' (or Augustus'**s**)

# Grammar and Spelling

**14. Present-Tense Verbs:** Use past-tense verbs to describe historical action, e.g.

- WRONG: Caesar **comes**, **sees**, and **conquers**
- RIGHT: Caesar **came**, **saw** and **conquered**

# Grammar and Spelling

**14. Present-Tense Verbs:** Use present-tense verbs in reference to modern scholarship and writers, e.g.

- To understand better why Caesar conquered Gaul, historians **read** and **study** his memoirs.

# Grammar and Spelling

**14. Present-Tense Verbs:** Do not mix past and present tenses in writing about historical events:

- WRONG: Only seven years after he **arrives** in Gaul, Caesar conquered it.
- RIGHT: Only seven years after he **arrived** in Gaul, Caesar conquered it.

# Grammar and Spelling

**14. Present-Tense Verbs:** When summarizing what happens in a work of literature, use the present tense.

- WRONG: In Book 22 of *The Iliad*, Achilles **killed** Hector.
- RIGHT: In Book 22 of *The Iliad*, Achilles **kills** Hector.

# Grammar and Spelling

**14. Present-Tense Verbs:** On the other hand, refer to the activities of a historical author with past-tense verbs.

- WRONG: The Greek tragedian Sophocles **writes** about Oedipus' horrible fate.
- RIGHT: The Greek tragedian Sophocles **wrote** about Oedipus' horrible fate.

# Organizing Your Work

15. Paragraphs

16. Punctuation

17. Run-ons and Fragments

# Organizing Your Work

**15. Paragraphs:** Avoid making paragraphs which are too long or short.

- Paragraphs should be at least three sentences long
- They should not run shorter than four lines or longer than two-thirds of a page
- They should come at logical divisions in the argument

# Organizing Your Work

**16. Punctuation:** Stick to the period (.), comma (,) and colon (:).

- a colon (:) should be used mainly when the writer is introducing a list
- in formal writing, it is best to avoid questions (?) and exclamations (!)
- I prefer that you avoid semicolons (;) and long or numerous parentheses ()

# Organizing Your Work

**16. Punctuation:** Run-ons and sentence fragments are usually the result of improper punctuation.

- to avoid **run-ons**, make sure there is a period between independent verbs\*
- to avoid **fragments**, make sure there is an independent verb\* between periods

\*for more about independent verbs, see Section 17 in the Writing Guide

# Presentation

18. Neatness

19. Quotes

20. Proofread

Prepositions

Plagiarism

# Presentation

**18. Neatness:** Make your writing look presentable.

- No smudges or dog-eared corners
- Italicize the titles of works (e.g. *The Iliad*), including the article (e.g. ***The Iliad***)
- Indent paragraphs
- Read over your work and look for extra blank spaces or words run together.
- [Follow the directions in \*The Writing Guide\*](#)

# Presentation

**19. Quotes:** Do not quote other works at length.

- Original Works (e.g. Homer)
  - Quote only as much as is salient and necessary for you to make your point
  - Instead, summarize the passage in your own words and cite it by using line numbers
  - Assume the reader is familiar with the work

# Presentation

**19. Quotes:** Do not quote other works at length.

- Modern Scholarship and Criticism
  - It is better to paraphrase than quote because it shows you understand the author's point
  - Make sure to reference the source, e.g. (Wilson, *Notes on The Iliad*, p.18)

# Presentation

**20. Proofread:** Read your paper several times before you turn it in.

*If you cannot stand to read it, why would someone else feel any different?*

# Presentation

**Plagiarism:** You may not collaborate on writing assignments with other people, especially other students in this class.

- Your papers must be entirely your own work
- Be warned: I have and will prosecute academic dishonesty to the fullest extent allowed by the University