Improving Your Academic Writing

I like to work with doctoral students to improve their writing. Writing is a basic skill for scholars. Most of us, students and professors alike, tend to think we write well, and we probably do. But learning to write well is a lifetime endeavor with plenty of room for improvement for old hands as well as new. To help students get started in this endeavor, I need to help them recognize their errors and appreciate the consequences of those errors. To this end, I have devised a scale of writing errors and assembled a list of associated tips with examples of writing errors and solutions. I present the scale and the tips here so that you might consider them as you think about your own writing. In the beginning, we talk about writing so that we can clear up common errors. Later, we’ll talk about writing because talking about writing is fun.

The type of scale that I employ is a Guttman scale. The defining feature of a Guttman scale is that you cannot attain a given level on the scale until you have attained all the levels below it. Maslow’s needs hierarchy is a good example of a Guttman scale: According to Maslow’s scale, you cannot address your esteem needs, for example, before you meet your needs for food, safety, and love. In the case of the scale below for writing, writers can achieve a Level IV (ideas) discussion with their reader only if none of the errors in Levels I-III (grammar, logic, and style) are present. Scholars rightfully disparage Guttman scales for treating complex phenomena as one dimensional. Although writing is hardly one dimensional, and many readers can overlook errors in grammar, logic, and style to focus on ideas, the scale is useful in helping students identify errors and understand the conclusions that errors may prompt in other readers.

Authors who have given advice on writing, such as Howard Becker and William Zinsser, advocate writing rough first drafts and circulating these drafts among trusted friends for comment. Writing rough drafts is great advice, especially if you struggle to frame your initial ideas. Like most of my peers, I encourage doctoral students to experiment with a variety of writing techniques (such as freewriting, writing memos, and talking their ideas into an audio recorder) to overcome their fears of committing words to paper. The early, rough drafts that result from these techniques are often riddled with writing errors; the point of the endeavor is to free the brain to think, not to seek perfection early. I am happy to work with my advisees on their ideas at this early stage and I don’t mind seeing their rough, imperfect drafts.

When it comes time to share final drafts, however, you can no longer afford most writing errors. To share poor writing with professors in the form of assignments and end of term papers or with reviewers and editors in the form of submissions for publication is an unproductive practice: You sacrifice the time these people could have spent providing useful comments on your ideas by troubling them with noting your errors. Worse yet, these people may take a dim view of your writing and begin to form poor impressions of you as a thinker and scholar.

When I see writing that is too rough for my eyes, I know that the problem is rarely that the draft is an unrevised one. Rather, the problem is that writers do not see their errors. To help students in my seminars see their errors, I note only the writing errors at the lowest level on my scale, and refuse to consider their writing at any higher level. Specifically, I respond to their ideas only if there are no problems in grammar, logic, or style. I restrict papers to two pages in length because errors at the lower levels pop up quickly: I see no point in subjecting myself to reading page after page of poor writing. Only after a student achieves Level IV performance do I permit longer papers. After as many as six to eight weekly two-page assignments, I start receiving clean writing, which means that students can start sharing their ideas with me in longer papers.

You can imagine that this practice initially irks students. When I return their papers, they are disappointed to find that I have marked their writing errors and left without comment their ideas. Although the lesson is painful for both of us, I want to ram home to them the potential consequences of poor writing, including desk rejection of their manuscript from a journal. Some students have grumbled that my process dampens their creativity. They would be correct, of course, if I had asked them to submit memos or rough drafts. But I did not. I asked for polished work. Students appear to have no dearth of classes in which to display their creative thought in writing. Sadly, they have few opportunities to pay careful attention to the writing itself and to learn to craft polished work. My goal is to first help them in that realm, and then, afterwards, to settle in with ideas.

For now, I will simply remind you that a reader will typically read only a page or two before deciding whether to read the remainder of a document. Two pages of good writing are, therefore, a necessity at the front of any piece of academic writing, and further such pages make for good reading. The scale and tips that follow may help you craft those first two pages, and others to come. You might begin by revising your rough draft, full of creative ideas, as best you can, and then consider where your revision falls on this scale.

A Guttman Scale for Academic Writing

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| Level IGrammar | At Level I, your writing displays numerous errors in grammar, syntax, typing, and spelling. Because readers tend to associate these errors with poor education, sloppiness, laziness, or insufficient respect for the reader, Level I errors are the most damning. For this reason, you should work diligently to remove them from your writing. Get a good grammar book, and read it often. |
| Level II Logic | Level II is concerned with logical flow. Errors at this level include sentences that do not follow logically their predecessors, paragraphs that do not flow sensibly from the ones before them, and entire sections that seem out of place. You can remedy many errors in logical flow by writing a full-sentence outline. Outlines are helpful because when you find yourself struggling to nest a thought at a certain place in the outline, you often realize that the thought does not belong there, but somewhere else. Another tactic is to repeat in each sentence a key word or phrase (typically a noun) from the preceding sentence to ensure a clear progression across sentences. Finally, using section headings helps provide a cognitive roadmap for the reader. Logical flow is particularly important in academic writing because you need to help the reader to understand the paper’s ideas and the relationships among ideas. Logical flow ensures a clear cognitive roadmap among ideas for readers. When your writing does not flow logically, readers wonder if you cannot think clearly, hence the imperative for you to eliminate errors in logic from your writing. |
| Level IIIStyle | Style is the focus of Level III. Although each author has his or her own style, academic communities tend to follow certain style norms. To violate those norms is to send a clear signal that you are not a member of that community. If readers suspect that you are not a member of the community, they will be more suspicious of your ideas, of your command of prior research, and of your conclusions. In short, in academic writing, sending such a signal can align the reader against you from the start. Examples of universal style in academic writing include avoiding informal phrases, contractions, and expressive punctuation. Other community-specific norms may dictate such aspects of style as when you might introduce the sample, how you should describe the methods, and whether or not you should discuss limitations of your work. |
| Level IVIdeas | Level IV concerns what you want desperately to talk about and what the reader is eager to engage: ideas. Scholars in your community are typically the only people capable of determining errors at this level because the errors concern such matters as your interpretation of past research, how you have defined and operationalized constructs, and the validity of your conclusions. Ideally, your writing will evince no Level IV errors, but certainly you want your ideas, and not your errors in grammar, logic, and style, to be the focus of your conversation with readers. To ensure a Level IV conversation, you cannot afford mistakes at the lower levels. |

Writing Tips to Address Errors at Each Level of the Scale

These tips address common errors in student writing concerning grammar, logic, style, and ideas. The examples come from master’s student reports that I have received, but the underlying problems appear in doctoral student writing as well.

Grammar Errors

Dangling Modifiers

Example: “In addition to offering a variety of work hours and locations, job transfer might be a good option for a Baby Boomer.”

Problem: Job transfer did not offer a variety of work hours and locations; rather, the manager did.

Correction: “In addition to offering a variety of work hours and locations, managers might provide a job transfer as a good option for a Baby Boomer.”

Alternative: “In addition to a variety of work hours and locations, a job transfer might be a good option for a Baby Boomer.”

Noun-Pronoun Agreement (Singular/Singular, Plural/Plural)

Example: “Can the work that needs to be done be flexible for the volunteer, or will you require that they work at a certain time for a fixed amount of time?”

Problem: The volunteer is singular, but the second part of the sentence asks about more than one person.

Correction: “Can the work that needs to be done be flexible for volunteers, or will you require that they work at a certain time for a fixed amount of time?”

Better: “Can the volunteers’ work be flexible, or will you require that they work at a certain time for a fixed amount of time?” [This version also corrects the passive construction.]

Pronouns without Referents

Example: “A manager should select tools they are comfortable with and that will best suit the needs of the team.”

Problem: Who is “they”? Perhaps the team? Or is this another noun-pronoun agreement problem?

Correction: “A manager should select tools with which team members are comfortable and that will best suit the team’s needs.”

Pronouns with Too Many Referents

Example: “Limited resources likely won’t allow managers to fly in members of their teams for every meeting, but they should plan to hold in-person meetings at critical stages of the project.

Problem: Who should do the planning? Possibilities in this sentence include resources, managers, members, and teams.

Correction: “Limited resources likely will prevent members of teams from flying in for every meeting, but managers should plan to hold in-person team meetings at critical stages of the project.”

Demonstrative Pronouns without Nouns

Example: “This involves naming who will work on the project, the steps to complete the project, and the project scope.”

Problem: The reader must find the noun to go with “this” in the previous sentence, but several nouns may qualify.

Correction: “This task involves naming [better: deciding or determining] who will work on the project, the steps to complete the project, and the project scope.”

Errors in Logic

Missing Comparisons

Example: “The project requires different skills, expertise, and technical capabilities from suppliers.”

Problem: The sentence does not make clear from whom or what the skills, expertise, and capabilities differ. Is the comparison between the organization and its suppliers or among its suppliers?

Correction: “The project requires a variety of skills, expertise, and technical capabilities that no single supplier is likely to possess.”

Odd Ordering

Example: “Finally, managers must evaluate, inspire, and resolve conflicts between team members, often from a distance.”

Problem: One presumes that managers should not inspire conflicts, and possibly not evaluate conflicts.

Correction: “Finally, managers must inspire and evaluate team members, as well as resolve conflicts among them, often from a distance.”

Segues

Example: “Millennials’ career flexibility can sometimes be interpreted as a lack of commitment by the older generations.” Immediately following this sentence is a section titled, “Intergenerational conflict within the workplace.”

Problem: Why are the authors shifting to a discussion of conflict when they were just talking about career flexibility and commitment?

Correction: “Older generations can sometimes interpret the career flexibility of Millennials as a lack of commitment. Such misinterpretations are one of several possible causes of conflict across generations.”

Roadmap

As a writer, you need to provide a clear roadmap for your readers so that they understand why one sentence follows the next, why one paragraph follows the next, and why one section follows the next. A good trick is to repeat in each sentence some word or phrase, typically a noun, from the sentence before it. A more tiresome approach, but one that works for clear academic writing, is to provide a roadmap paragraph before launching into a series of subsections (e.g., “In the next sections, I discuss….). Such paragraphs are no substitute, however, for segues all along the path of your writing because readers may well forget the directions they received several pages ago. Remember that if you foreshadow one upcoming section in a roadmap paragraph, you must foreshadow them all. Moreover, the number of sections that you foreshadow should equal the number of sections that follow; readers who count the sections in the roadmap paragraph only to encounter more or fewer sections than you specified become confused, defeating the point of the roadmap.

Errors in Style

Passive Constructions

Example: “Teleworkers should be issued hardware and software from an inventory either identical to office-based workers or otherwise company approved.”

Problem: The actor is invisible – who is issuing the tools? Passive constructions make for boring reading.

Correction: “Managers should issue hardware and software to teleworkers from an inventory either identical to the inventory for office-based workers or otherwise company approved.”

Parallel Construction

Example: “According to the Federal Acquisition Regulation, legal reasons for sole source contracts include:

* Only one firm has a product that will meet the project’s needs or only one firm can do the work;
* The situation is unusually and compellingly urgent;
* For purposes of industrial mobilization;
* An international agreement.”

Problem: Items on a list or in a series do not look similar when their phrasing differs. Here, the problem is full sentences versus phrases. Often, the problem is noun phrases versus verb phrases, or tenses of verb phrases.

Correction: “According to the Federal Acquisition Regulation, legal reasons for sole source contracts include:

* Only one firm has a product that will meet the project’s needs or only one firm can do the work;
* The situation is unusually and compellingly urgent;
* A sole source contract will mobilize the industry;
* An international agreement allows a sole source in this scenario.”

Consistent Formatting and Usage

* If you capitalize second level headings, say, then you need to do so consistently, rather than doing one or two here, but not the next one or the one after that. If you make first level headings bold, for example, make all the first level headings bold.
* If you introduce an acronym, then use it instead of the full term it replaces for the remainder of the document; do not switch back and forth between the acronym and the full term.
* If you decide to count something in the text, then do not begin with “First, we see that….” and then forget to ever identify something later as “second.” In general, do not use counting with more than three or four items because readers struggle to keep more items than that in their head. Also, if you do count, announce at the beginning how many items the reader can expect (e.g., “There are at least three reasons why…”).
* If you place a word in italics, quotes or boldface, then make sure that you have a good reason for doing so and that your reason is clear to the reader. Random, unexplained specially **formatted** “terms” \*frustrate\* *readers*. See?
* If you use a long dash to set off the beginning of a phrase (e.g., –), then do not use two short hyphens at the end of the phrase (e.g., --); instead, repeat the long dash.

Word Choice

* that/which
* where/in which
* as/because
* once/after
* while/although
* since/because
* in order to/to
* feel/believe or think
* where/when

Example: “While their study was context- and culture-specific, the findings are a good exploration of the potential benefits of mentoring in many contexts and cultures.”

Problem: The writer means to recognize a limitation of the study and argue that this limitation does not affect the validity of the findings, but speaks instead of duration.

Correction: “Although this study was context- and culture-specific, its findings are a good exploration of the potential benefits of mentoring in many contexts and cultures.”

Vague or Boring Language

Example: “It is of course important to use proper grammar and proofread for typos.”

Problem: The pronoun has no referent at all, and the reader must wade halfway through the sentence before finding anything of substance or meaning. I read the phrase “it is important” in student writing far too often. That sometimes students write “of the utmost importance” does not improve matters.

Correction: “Using proper grammar and proofreading for typos are important steps in good writing.”

Document Formatting

Follow the norms for academic writing. Typically, that means text that is double-spaced, with 11 or 12-point font in most cases and margins at least one inch on each side. Use an accepted norm for citing publications in your text and writing complete citations of all works, and be consistent. You may use footnotes or a reference list according to the norms of your community or the style guidelines of the publication to which you submit your work.

Tables and Figures

All tables and figures should have a label (e.g., “Table 1.”) and a title (e.g., “2010 U.S. Workforce Demographics by Age, Gender, Race, and Ethnicity”). Typically, in a paper, you should center tables and figures on the page. Always, you should introduce them in the text before their appearance. Tables and figures need to be big enough so that their features, including text and axis tick marks, are legible. Also, give these items some “breathing room” in the form of ample white space before and after them. In general, a table has rows and columns with text or numbers in the cells; a figure is a graphic of some type (e.g., a chart, a photo, a sketch). Number your tables and figures in order, and do not skip any numbers. If you use colors or symbols to distinguish items in a table or figure, be sure to include a legend explaining what each color and symbol means. I have not covered the basics of good table and chart design in this document, but I will simply tell you that less is better. That is to say, avoid excessive colors, unnecessary lines and shading, and repetitive text or labels. In short, beware the defaults and templates of Excel and other programs.

Audience

Writing for an academic audience means that you should avoid informal language, contractions, passive constructions, and other characteristics of casual or business writing. Minimize your use of bulleted lists. You do not need to write in a pompous, distant, or jargon-filled way to sound like a smart, talented academic. Instead, write in a way that is meant for others to understand, not in a way that is meant to impress. Master clear, engaging academic writing and impressions of your scholarship will start off on the right foot.

Errors of Ideas

Ideally, as a writer you will engage your reader with your ideas and enter into a discussion, of sorts, about content. That discussion is what you want: not that you want readers to find errors in your ideas, but that you want them to help you explore your ideas in depth. You cannot have that discussion, however, if your readers are struggling with errors of grammar, logic, or style in your writing.