



Guidelines for Formatting, Mechanics, and Style¹

The details of your presentation immediately establish your credibility. A reader quickly decides if you know what you're doing and if he or she should take you seriously. Your inattention can be reason enough for a reader (a professor, an employer, the classmate you're hoping to impress) to suspect your dedication and acuity. Don't give them the chance to pass you by! Instructions for formatting your essays are in the **Formatting** section below. The **Mechanics** section refers to common errors in punctuation and citation. The **Style** section contains suggestions for improving the clarity and overall readability of your academic writing.

Formatting

- Use 12-point Times New Roman.
- Double-space all lines of type, except block quotations.
- In the left corner head of your first page, place your name, course #, professor's name, & date.
- Center the title of your essay.
- One-inch margins, left and right; do not justify the right margin.
- Insert page numbers in the upper right corner beginning with page 1.
- Indent at the start of each paragraph.

Mechanics

- Cite your sources of evidence** whether directly quoted or paraphrased; failure to do so constitutes plagiarism.
- Integrate quotations grammatically:** other peoples' words must *fit* into your own sentences. If they don't, re-work *your* sentences until they are grammatically correct.
- Double quotation marks:** in American English, commas and periods go *inside* the quotation marks; colons and semi-colons go *outside* the quotation marks.
- Single quotation marks:** in the U.S., we use them only for quotations *within* quotations (except in block quotes).
- Block quotes:** Use a block if you're quoting 4+ lines; drop the quotation marks around the entire quote; use double quotation marks for quotes within the quote; cite it with a footnote *outside* the final punctuation mark of the quotation.
- Ellipsis:** Use three dots to tell your reader that you have eliminated words in a quotation (. . .); use four dots if the elided words occur at the end of the original sentence (the fourth is a period).
- Use *italics* for titles of books, films, and other large works; use quotation marks for articles, poems, episodes, and other small works.
- Comma:** Use it to set off introductory phrases and dependent clauses; to separate simple items in a series; to join independent clauses with conjunctions (FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*); to separate city, state, and country; and to set off conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore, furthermore*, etc.).
- Semi-colon:** Use it to separate complex elements in a series and to separate two or more independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction. If you can use a period to separate closely related complete thoughts, you can use a semi-colon.
- Hyphen/Dash:** Use a hyphen (-) to connect words to form a single adjective ("hard-hitting song," "nineteenth-century novel"); use an em dash (—) to emphasize, set off—or to dramatize—parts of a sentence.
- It's/Its:** "It's" is a contraction for "it is" ("It's happening again!"). "Its" is a possessive ("Its resolution is near.")
- Noun-pronoun agreement:** "The *government* (sing.) sent *its* (sing.) agents to find out." "Fictional *characters* (pl.) like Wonder Woman have no investment in whether or not we read about *their* (pl.) exploits."

Style

- ❑ **Word choice:** Does that word really mean what you think it means? Is there another word that better expresses exactly what you mean? Consult a good Dictionary and a Thesaurus. You'll find both on-line at <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. You can find the OED online from the OU Libraries homepage.
- ❑ **To Be:** Avoid overusing forms of the verb "to be" (is, are, am, were, etc.); get used to choosing vigorous verbs.
- ❑ **Explain quotations:** You've chosen an especially productive quotation from your source. Don't just leave it there—make it produce! Engage it. Talk back to it. Take your reader from the quotation back into your own thinking about what it implies for your own argument.
- ❑ **Fragments:** Usually reading aloud slowly to yourself will quickly reveal the incomplete sentence. You're missing a subject (headless sentence) or you're missing a verb (tailless sentence).
- ❑ **This/that/it:** Make sure your reader can identify the antecedent to these demonstratives. "This is significant." "That is part of the story." *What* is significant? *What* is part of the story? Prefer the demonstrative adjective ("This common misunderstanding is significant.") over the demonstrative pronoun ("this" or "that" by itself).
- ❑ **Parallel structure:** Whenever you write a series of two or more things, each element in the series must appear in the same grammatical structure and perform the same grammatical function.
- ❑ **Passive construction:** Ask yourself: *Who* did *what* to *whom*? If you can't come up with an active subject of the sentence and a vigorous verb to go with it, you're probably not certain about what you're saying.
- ❑ **Verb Tense:** Write about past events in the past tense ("In the *Gettysburg Address*, Lincoln **associated** the war to save the Union with the broader fight for human equality."); write about your *own* thinking in the present tense, even when discussing past events ("Lincoln's close association of national unity with human equality **demonstrates** that the prevailing interpretation of the Gettysburg Address needs re-thinking.")
- ❑ **Which/that:** Use "that" if you possibly can, which means that you'll use "which" only after a comma. "That" introduces a restrictive clause (something the sentence can't do without) whereas "which" introduces a non-restrictive clause (with additional but not essential information).
- ❑ **Dangling/misplaced modifiers:** Put adjectival and adverbial words and phrases near the noun or verb you intend to modify. In the sentence, "Most Americans see the cowboy in a good light, riding on a white horse with a white hat," why is this horse wearing a white hat? Perhaps the writer means: "Most Americans see the cowboy in a good light, wearing a white hat and riding on a white horse." Dangling modifiers can create a comic impression where none is intended.
- ❑ **Who/that:** Use "who" when referring to persons; use "that" for inanimate objects, places, situations, etc.
- ❑ **Cut the deadwood:** eliminate words that clutter up your sentences. Examples include unnecessary qualifiers ("His point was ~~basically~~ that....") and redundant pairs ("She had a ~~careful and~~ prudent manner.")
- ❑ **Signal your transitions:** You don't need a signpost at every paragraph, but mark the important turns in your argument. Reach backward by using a demonstrative pronoun ("This [what my last paragraph said] leads to...."), asking a question about what you've just finished saying, or repeating a key term from your thesis.
- ❑ **Vacant assertion:** Avoid phrases like "It is interesting to note that" and "I want to point out that." If it should be pointed out, point it out! If it's interesting, *make* it interesting.
- ❑ **One topic per paragraph:** Allow yourself to fully explore each topic before "changing the subject." Does the last sentence in each paragraph still connect firmly with the first one? If not, you probably need another paragraph.