

**David Novick's Field Guide to Errors in College Writing:
How to Detect and Correct Common Problems¹**

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Practices to Follow

Use the active writing style.

The active writing style emphasizes:

- Active voice
- Present tense
- Consistent use of terms
- Parallel construction
- Short rather than long words
- Second person
- Defined acronyms
- Conciseness

The most effective writing style for technical material is the active writing style.

Using the active voice means rewriting sentences such as

“The results were displayed in less than ten minutes.”

as

“The computer displayed the results in less than ten minutes.”

Eliminate excess words.

- ~~“In order to~~ “To find the best algorithm...”
- ~~“Many past~~ “Many research projects have...”
- ~~“Despite the above-described~~ “this difference, ...”

Handy rule: Edit ruthlessly.

Stay grammatically correct but avoid sexist language.

Example: “Each student should pay attention to his work.” should be either

“Students should pay attention to their work.”

or

“Each student should pay attention to his or her work.”

Handy rules:

- Try using the plural.
- Do not use “they” or “their” to refer to individuals and what they possess.

Use American English and avoid British expressions.

Examples:

- “Sarah drove a ~~lorry~~ truck.”
- “~~Whilst~~ While the previous work relied on two processors, our approach...”
- “The package will arrive two days ~~hence~~ from now.”

Handy rules:

- Avoid language that sounds pretentious.
- If unsure, check the dictionary to see if the usage is American or British.

Use parallelism in bullet lists (actions, things).

In lists, whether the items are set out in bulleted lines or are separated by commas, express the items in parallel form. Typically this means making sure that all the items in the list are things or that all the items in the list are actions; for actions, all should have the same grammatical construction – nouns should be parallel with nouns, imperatives with imperatives, gerunds with gerunds, and so on.

Examples:

List of errands (imperatives):

- Pick up dry cleaning
- ~~Reecycling~~ Recycle
- ~~Birthday card~~ Buy birthday card

Tasks in writing a paper (gerunds)

- Designing your paper
- Laying out pages
- Preparing your text
- Creating your bibliography

Handy rule: Reread lists and tables of contents for parallelism.

Separate independent clauses with a comma and use commas with conjunctions.

Examples:

- Tina went to the game, and Ellen visited friends.
- Tina went to the game and visited friends.
- There were five crayons in the box: red, green, yellow, and purple.

Handy rule: If the second clause has a different subject than the first clause, use a comma. If the subject is the same for both clauses, do not use a comma. In a list, include a comma before the last entry that starts with 'and'.

Use semicolons sparingly.

Use a semicolon to separate clauses that already contain commas or that could be complete sentences that are related or connected.

Examples:

- There were five colors on the palette, blue, green, orange, white, and black; and seven tubes of paint on the table, blue, green, orange, white, black, red, and purple.
- It was nearly noon; we could not reach the beach before the tide went out.

Check your Spelling.

Use your spell-checker and learn the vocabulary of your field. For example, kernel, not kernal; separate, not seperate; hexadecimal, not hexidecimal.

Proof your papers three ways.

1. Read for typos and grammatical errors
2. Read for appropriate structure or organization
3. Read for content – your message

Do each of these separately; before your final pass, let the material sit and come back to it later. If you have time, leave it for a day; if not, for at least an hour. You will look at it with a fresh eye.

Practices to Avoid

Avoid arguing from belief.

An author's beliefs do not constitute proof of the thing believed, except in some narrow philosophical cases. If you claim something to be true, say it and support it.

Example: rewrite

“I believe that most users will not use documentation, even if available.”

as

“Most users will not use documentation, even if available (Novick et al. 2006).”

Handy rule: Do not use “I believe” in a technical or scientific paper.

Avoid tautologies.

Examples:

- ~~geographic~~ location
- ~~mutual~~ cooperation
- ~~past~~ history

Handy rule: Be ruthless in eliminating unnecessary modifiers, particularly when the modified noun can't be anything else.

In formal writing, do not use contractions.

Examples

- ~~Don't~~ Do not
- ~~Wouldn't~~ Would not

Handy rule: Do not use contractions – but note that ‘cannot’ is not a contraction and can be used in formal writing. Contractions are most commonly used in dialogue.

If you're the sole author, avoid the editorial “we.”

“Only presidents, editors and people with tapeworm have the right to use the editorial ‘we’.” –Mark Twain

Example :~~“We~~ I found that ...”

Alternatively, use ‘this author’ or ‘this investigation’.

Example: “This investigation found that...”

Rarely use the word “it.”

“It” can be ambiguous, so use “it” only if there is no better word to use in the sentence. Note that “it’s” means “it is” and is not the possessive of “it”, which is “its.”

Example: to be better and more accurate, rewrite

“A control character is received and it generates a core dump.”

as

“The application receives a control character and halts; the application then generates a core dump.”

Avoid foreign abbreviations and phrases.

Avoid abbreviations or phrases from Latin and French such as:

For	Use
cf.	compare
e.g.	for example
et al.	and others
etc.	and so on
i.e.	that is
per	in each, for each
q.v.	see
via	through, with, by
vice versa	conversely
vis-à-vis	opposite to, face to
viz.	namely
vs.	instead of, rather than, against

Note that several of these abbreviations and phrases have more than one meaning, so be sure you select the correct alternative.

Word Usage

This section is in alphabetical order by the word or phrase addressed.

Use **allow** and **enable** properly.

- “Allow” means permit, or let have.
- “Enable” means provide with means, power or opportunity do to something

Examples:

- “This tool enables the user to build new data models.”
- “Purchasing a license for this tool allows the user to use the tool.”

Handy rule: Unless the context involves giving permission, you should use “enable” instead of “allow.”

Use **“begs the question”** sparingly.

“Begs the question,” means to support a conclusion by assuming the conclusion as true. “Begs” does not mean “raises.”

Examples:

- “This painting is trash because it is obviously worthless.”
- “The defendant must be guilty because he's a criminal.”

Both of these are examples of begging the question because the conclusion is assumed to be true.

Handy rule: If you are not clear on what is meant by the phrase “begs the question,” do not use it.

Use **“compose”** and **“comprise”** correctly.

- The word “compose” means that some number of elements join together to make a larger thing.
- The word “comprises” means that a thing is made up of a number of sub-things.

Handy rule: The whole comprises the parts, and the parts compose the whole.

Use **“data”** as a plural.

Examples:

- “The data ~~indicates~~ indicate that...”
- “The instrument generated only a single datum.”

Singular: datum (or data point)

Plural: data

“Hopefully” is almost always misused.

Example: “Hopefully, the ship will arrive tomorrow.” Rewrite as:

“I hope that the ship will arrive tomorrow.”

or

“With any luck, the ship will arrive tomorrow.”

Correct use: “Snoopy gazed hopefully at his supper dish.”

Handy rule: Use “hopefully” only when the actor is actually hopeful.

Use I, me, and myself carefully.

- I is a first-person pronoun. It is the subject or actor: “I went to the store.”
- Me is also a first-person pronoun. It is the object: “Then it hit me!”
- Myself is a reflexive first-person pronoun. It covers exactly the case where the actor is “I” and the object would otherwise be “me.”

Examples:

- Correct: I caught myself.
- Wrong: He told Harry and myself. Correct: He told Harry and me.

Note: “myself” can also be an intensifier as in: I painted the car myself.

Handy rules:

- Never use “myself” as the subject.
- Use myself as the object only when the subject is “I.”

Use “impact,” “effect” and “affect” correctly.

“Impact” is a noun, not a verb, meaning (a) a physical collision of an object or (b) a significant or major effect. Note that “impacted” has a specific technical meaning for teeth (see examples).

“Effect” is almost always a noun, meaning (a) something that inevitably follows an antecedent (as a cause or agent) or (b) an outward sign. “Effect” has a narrow meaning as verb: to bring about; for example, “The state effected the policy by levying fines on persons not complying.”

“Affect” is almost always a verb, meaning to produce or have an effect upon. “Affect” in psychology has a narrow meaning as a noun: the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion (“The subject lacked affect.”)

Handy rules:

- *Effect* is a noun.
- *Impact* is a noun, meaning a big effect.
- *Affect* is a transitive verb.

Examples:

- Adding computer memory will affect performance.
- Removing computer memory will have a serious impact on performance.
- Using this application will have a positive effect on performance.
- The dentist removed Jane’s wisdom tooth because it was impacted.

Infer vs. imply

(Adapted from <http://www.grammartips.homestead.com/imply.html>).

Often, “infer” is mistakenly used for “imply.”

“Are you ~~inferring~~ implying that I am crazy?”

If someone gets the idea from your behavior that you are crazy then he or she is inferring that you are crazy. But if he or she is subtly letting you know that he or she thinks so, then he or she is implying that you are crazy. You, of course, can infer from his implication that he or she thinks you are crazy.

Imply: to put the suggestion into the message (the sender implies)

Infer: to take the suggestion out of the message (the receiver infers)

Implication: what the sender has implied

Inference: what the receiver has inferred

Handy rule: *writers* or *speakers* imply; *listeners* or *readers* infer.

“Media” is the plural of “medium.”

Examples:

- Television is an audiovisual medium.
- The medium is the message.
- The classroom provided many audiovisual media including a VCR, 2 DVD players and a TV.

Handy rule: Think carefully about what you mean.

“On the other hand” requires “on one hand.”

Use of the expression “on the other hand” is an error if it is not preceded by a contrasting section marked by the expression “on one hand.”

Handy rule: Use “on one hand/on the other hand” only in cases where there are exactly two alternatives, and if you're going to mention one hand be sure to mention the other one, too.

Example:

- “On one hand, the car was fairly new; on the other hand, it had suffered an accident.”

That and which are not the same.

“That” helps identify the thing that is being introduced;
“which” introduces a comment on something already identified.

Examples:

- “The sea that I sailed stretched clear and blue to the horizon.”
- “The sea, which stretched clear and blue to the horizon, beckoned with...”

Handy guideline: If the phrase needs a comma, use which—just remember “comma which.”

World-Wide Web and Internet are proper nouns.

Often writers will refer to a “web site” or “the internet.” These should be capitalized as proper nouns because they are specific, named things.

Examples:

- “The World-Wide Web serves...”
- “...because many Web sites present...”
- “Since the inception of the Internet...”

Handy rule: Capitalize “Web” and “Internet” because they are proper nouns.

Short List of Books to Consult

Strunk, William Jr, E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, MacMillan, NY, 2003

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

American Heritage Dictionary

Alley, Michael, *The Craft of Scientific Writing*, Springer, NY, 1996

Haramundanis, Katherine, *The Art of Technical Documentation*, Digital Press/Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998