

Common Stylistic Errors to Avoid

Tense

Incorrect Example: When you come to the Writing Center, always bring your assignment, and you should remember to sign in.

Correct Example: When you come to the Writing Center, always bring your assignment and remember to sign in.

What to remember: Pick a tense and stick with it! Present tense is appropriate for most essays, especially those that analyze literature.

***Hint:** Tense shifts often occur between sentences and even between whole paragraphs. The best way to avoid this is to make sure you read and reread what you have written each time you add new material.

Noun/Verb Agreement

Example: Students ~~writes~~ *write* in mysterious ways.

What to remember: Singular nouns require singular verbs; Plural nouns require plural verbs.

Noun/Pronoun Agreement

Example 1: The school board reconsidered ~~their~~ its decision.

Example 2: A person should make sure ~~their~~ *his* schedule is in order.

What to remember: Number and gender must agree throughout a sentence.

Apostrophes

Incorrect Example: The school board reconsidered ~~it's~~ its decision.

*This is like saying "The school board reconsidered it is decision."

What to remember: Apostrophes indicate possession (*Jim's dorm, the Jones's house, the states' policy*) or contraction (*didn't*).

***Hint:** If you are using an apostrophe, try to justify it. Does it show possession? Does it fit in the sentence if you break apart the contraction? Why are you even using a contraction in a formal paper?

Quotations and Periods

"Quotations end like this."

"Not like this".

"Unless you do this" (Right 101).

Redundant Comparatives

Incorrect Examples: Most bestest, more bigger, more clearer.

*These are incorrect because either something is the best (for example) or it is not. By definition of *best*, there are no categories of **bestest*.

Homonyms

Examples: Adds/Ads, Aisle/I'll, Seas/Seize/Sees, Accept/Except, Allowed/Aloud, Bridal/Bridle, Chord/Cord/Cored, Faze/Phase, Effect/Affect, Lead/Lead/Led, Mantle/Mantel, Medal/Meddle/Metal/Mettle . . . you get the idea.

Your Mission: Choose the right word when you write.

***Hint:** Use a dictionary if you are not sure.

Ending Sentences with Prepositions

Incorrect Example: Where are you at?

*You can leave off the preposition (*at*) and still understand the sentence (*Where are you?*).

Side note: Ending a sentence with a preposition is not wrong, per se. Nevertheless, many students abuse the privilege. If a sentence can be understood without a preposition tacked to the end, leave it out!

What to remember: Check the ends of your sentences for unnecessary prepositions. If you find them, take them out and even re-word the sentence if necessary. Chances are good that this will make your writing clearer.

Informality/Contractions

Examples: Can't, don't, wouldn't, haven't, it's, over the top, nice, cute, getting stuck into, in a big way, vs., etc., i.e., awesome, cool, hot, guys, kids, and other slang, expressions, contractions, and colorful words. Writing in the first person is also considered to be more informal.

The Rule: If you are writing a formal essay, do not use informal language.

***Hint:** After you write a rough draft, check for informalities and replace them with more appropriate descriptions and terms.

Passive Voice

Incorrect Examples (Passive):

The paper was written by the student.

The paper was written.

*The sentences are passive because the subject does NOT do the action.

Correct Example (Active)

The student wrote a paper.

*The subject does the action.

What is going on here? Passives are written with a form of the verb BE and a past participle (was written, is written, and so on).

Side note: Passive voice is not necessarily incorrect. In fact, it is used excessively in some types of formal writing. However, you should be careful not overuse passive voice. It can make your writing very unclear and some professors specifically request that you not use it.

Typographical Errors

A lot of mistakes in papers are simply typos. Read through your work several times to avoid silly mistakes and do not rely entirely on your computer's spellchecker.