

Brandeis University
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ENG 171A
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COMPOSITION GUIDE

Writing assignments are not only a means of assessing the performance of the student: they are also a means of instruction. To be sure, much of the instruction is the self-instruction that comes through the student's efforts in writing the paper; but another part comes through the instructor's comments on the finished product. I have written this guide, first, to make as clear as I can what I look for in a paper; second, to help you to avoid the most common and likely faults of student papers; and third, to make my own job of commenting on your papers easier by allowing me to refer, when necessary, to the sections of this document.

I. CRITERIA OF EVALUATION

To the extent that the criteria by which I evaluate a student paper can be abstracted from all particular assignments, they may be stated as follows, in order of importance:

1. Does it fulfill the assignment? If the assignment is to answer a certain question, does it answer that question? If the assignment is a complex one, comprising several component tasks, does it fulfill all of those tasks?

2. Are its claims and its reasoning clear and coherent? Is it clear what claims the writer is making, and how those claims are supposed to relate to one another logically?

3. Are its claims supported by evidence of the appropriate kind, whether empirical observation, abstract reasoning, or textual fact? Are its premises credible and its inferences valid?

4. Does it deal adequately with objections and contrary considerations, especially ones that either are readily apparent or have already been presented in the course, whether in the reading or in class sessions?

5. Are its contents strictly relevant to the assignment? Is it free of irrelevant matter?

II. FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

§ **1. Format.** All papers should be computer-printed or typed, preferably in 12-point type, double-spaced, with margins of at least one inch all around. The reason for these requirements is that I need room for writing comments. Please use either one of the standard book typefaces, such as Times Roman, Palatino, and the like, or a typewriter font such as Courier, rather than a sans-serif type such as Helvetica or Futura.

§ **2. At the top left.** The following information should appear at the top left of the first page:

Student's name

Name of course (code or title)

Name of assignment (e.g., "First paper")

Date of submission of paper

I prefer that you not use a cover sheet: it uses paper needlessly.

§ 3. Which question(s)? If the assignment gives you a choice of questions, you must explicitly indicate which one you are answering. If the assignment gives you several separately numbered questions to answer, you must correspondingly number your answers to each.

§ 4. Do not hand in a collection of loose or unnumbered sheets. Unless your paper has only one page, number the pages and *staple* (not paper-clip) them together.

III. SOME RUDIMENTS OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

§ 5. Be sure that you understand the assignment. There is no rule more important than this. Write on what is assigned, and only on what is assigned. If the assignment takes the form of a question, your task is to answer that question. If you are in doubt as to the meaning of a question, please ask me for clarification, and the sooner the better. It may be that I have failed to make something clear, or even that I have made a mistake in the assignment: in either case, it is best that I should know about it, so that I can make the necessary clarification or correction to the entire class.

§ 6. Re-write. There have been writers of genius who did their best work in a single draft, but the chances are that you are not one of them. Use your first draft to work out your own thoughts. You may, if it helps you, include repetitions, changes of mind, loose analogies, vague speculations, invectives against the author you are writing about, or whatever you please. Subsequently, though, you must re-work what you have written to make it presentable to others, and in particular to make it answer to the assignment. Superfluous and irrelevant thoughts and expressions must be stricken, vague statements made precise, expressions of opinion either substantiated or removed, and so on.

§ 7. Write to be read. The following is a way of evaluating a paper for readability. Imagine that you were to give your paper to a student in this class to read aloud to another student in the class, where the first student is a competent reader and both students have kept up with the reading assignments. Ask yourself: would the first student be able to read the paper aloud without getting confused by sentence structures, or giving the wrong emphasis to a construction, or having to go back to re-read sentences in order to understand them? And would the second student be able to understand everything that you meant to say in writing the paper from listening to the first one read it? If the answer to both these questions is "Yes," then you have achieved perfect readability. I do not expect you to achieve such perfection, but it is the ideal toward which you should strive.

§ 8. Be clear, concise, and to the point. If you do not have a clear understanding of the point

you are trying to make, neither will your reader. One precise statement is far better than three vague shies at the same point. Do not waste space with airy statements about the historical significance of the author you are writing about, what great insights he had, and suchlike rubbish. (For further examples, see § 12 below.)

§ 9. By your (written) words shall ye be judged. The fact that you were thinking certain thoughts at the same time as you were writing certain words does not make it the case that you have expressed your thoughts in writing. You must *say* (in written words) what you *mean*. I will make what allowances I can for verbal and grammatical slips, but in general I will grade your work according to what you have written, not according to what you might have meant to say.

§ 10. Provide textual support. When making interpretative claims about a text, you must provide evidence, either by citation (naming a location in the text) or by quotation. The fact that somebody, such as the editor of a volume or even your instructor, makes a certain claim about the text is not itself any justification for the claim. Quotations must be indicated by quotation marks, or, if you are quoting a passage of more than a few lines, indentation. The source of every quotation—both the text and the location (usually the page number)—must be clearly indicated. Remember also that unless you are quoting a short statement or phrase whose meaning is quite obvious, you must explain its meaning in your own words. Be sure to make clear when you are presenting your own views and when you are presenting those of the figure you are writing about.

§ 11. Are you asking me? Assertions are best expressed by declarative sentences, not interrogative ones. Rhetorical questions should be employed sparingly, if at all. In general, don't ask a question unless you want an answer. (See also § 22 below.)

IV. COMMON COMPOSITIONAL MISTAKES

In the examples below, in the left column, underlining is used to indicate faulty words or constructions, while in the right column, italics are used to give the corresponding correct expression, and comments are enclosed in square brackets. A lot of the examples were taken from students' papers on Descartes and Berkeley.

§ 12. Mushy opening

There have been many different views of the nature of the mind.

The question of the basis of morality has occupied philosophers for centuries.

[Such sentences need not to be "corrected," but to be stricken and replaced by something more to the point.]

§ 13. Failure of agreement between pronoun and antecedent

In David Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste," he presents a theory of art that includes universal rules.

In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," David Hume presents [or:] David Hume, in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," presents [or, simplest yet:] In "Of the Standard of Taste," David Hume pres-

The wax must still exist, but the idea of a body now seems doubtful. It could, however, still be a thing, even if the body is not evident.

The wax [The structure of the sentences would make “it” refer back to “the idea of body,” which is not what the writer meant.]

Hylas admits that the color does not really exist in the objects; that they are apparent colors.

the colors . . . they [As the sentence is written, “they” can only refer to “the objects.”]

§ 14. Subject pronoun used as object

The wax experiment illustrates this for we the readers.

for us readers [or:] *for us, the readers* [The fact that a subject phrase follows the pronoun does not make the pronoun itself a subject]

This makes the mind the most evident thing about he as a person.

about him as a person

The dispute between my friend and I

between my friend and me [You wouldn’t say “between we,” would you?]

§ 15. Omission of apostrophe in possessive ending

Peoples different beliefs

People’s

Are these his ideas or Gods?

God’s

Descartes argument

Descartes’

§ 16. Transitive verb used intransitively

This justifies that the mind is indubitably the thing known most clearly.

justifies the claim that [or:] *justifies the conclusion that*

He identified earlier in the meditation that he is “a thing that thinks.”

asserted . . . that he is [or:] *identified himself . . . as*

As Descartes examines further

inquires [or:] *examines the matter*

§ 17. Sentence fragment (or misplaced period)

Descartes declares himself to be “a thinking thing.” Which he explains as “a thing that doubts, understands, . . .”

Descartes declares himself to be “a thinking thing,” which he explains as “a thing that doubts, understands, . . .”

The one thing that he cannot doubt about himself is that he is a thinking thing. Although he cannot help thinking that he knows corporeal things more distinctly than he knows himself.

The one thing that he cannot doubt about himself is that he is a thinking thing, although he cannot help thinking that he knows corporeal things more distinctly than he knows himself.

§ 18. Dangling modifier

In order to appreciate the argument, certain points must be understood. *In order to appreciate the argument, one must understand certain points. [As the sentence is written, “certain points” is the subject of the verb “appreciate”]*

§ 19. Redundant or inappropriate preposition in relative clause

It is the root to which all other functions stem from. *which . . . stem from [or:] from which . . . stem*

Judgment is a method on which perception depends upon. *on which . . . depends [or:] which . . . depends on [or:] upon which . . . depends [or:] which . . . depends upon*

He must declare that anything for which he can find reason to doubt is false. *which [or] that*

Kant is looking for something in which will solve the puzzle. *which [or] that*

§ 20. Comma between a conjunction and the clause it governs

Although, all of the traits of the wax changed, the wax itself is still present. *Although all*

This is all Descartes can admit to himself because, he cannot deny his thinking. *himself, because he*

§ 21. Ungrammatical use of quotation

This is later proven by Descartes when he says “certainly none of the aspects that I reached by means of the senses.” *[I cannot say how to correct this sentence, or rather this string of words that is punctuated as if it were a sentence, because I cannot tell what the student was trying to say.]*

§ 22. Question used in place of declarative sentence in a subordinate clause

Philonous argues that Hylas’ distinction is untenable because if a color is seen with the eye, does that mean that the whole object is filled with it? *because if a color is seen with the eye, that does not mean that the whole object is filled with it.*

Hylas says that how can he say that matter is perceivable but the existence of God's mind is not? *Hylas asks how*

§ 23. "One" and "you" mixed

Hylas is saying that one sees colors in your imagination. *one . . . one's [or] you . . . your*

§ 24. Subordinate clause used as subject

Simply because the authority to confer candidacy is nowhere codified does not mean that it is nonexistent. *The fact that . . . does not mean [or perhaps:] Simply because . . . , that does not mean*

§ 25. Redundant "that" in subordinate clause

Someone might argue that even though a novel's moral vision is defective, that this defect is not an aesthetic defect. [From a publication by a professional philosopher!] *that even though a novel's moral vision is defective, this is not an aesthetic defect.*

§ 26. Missing comma before name used in addressing someone

This does not come up much in expository papers, unless the writing assignment involves dialogue.

That's true Socrates.

That's true, Socrates [The writer did not mean "That's genuine Socrates," though that is the sense of what he or she has written.]

Hello Socrates!

Hello, Socrates!

§ 27. Misspelled name

To illustrate this would be tedious (though I cherish the memory of a student paper in which one of the three ways in which the writer spelled "Descartes" was "Desecrate"). Please be sure that you correctly spell the names of the authors you write about. Do not refer to J. S. Mill as "Mills," to Jane Austen as "Austin," or the like.

For further guidance in matters of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style, an excellent source is Purdue University's On-line Writing Lab, at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>. A classic short treatise of such matters is *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, the fourth edition of which is available in a 100-page paperback (Allyn and Bacon, \$7.95). The first edition (1918), by Strunk alone, is reproduced on line at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>.