

PPT Style Sheet

Reading (before seminar)

Here I list those rules of grammar and style which I see violated most often in student writing. If you have particular difficulty with grammar and style, then I highly recommend that you practice your skills by taking any relevant quizzes at the following website: http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quiz_list.htm.

1. Avoid the three most common types of malformed sentences: sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices.

A **sentence fragment** is an incomplete sentence: “Not because one dislikes the sound of the child’s cries.”

To correct a sentence fragment, fill in the remainder of the sentence: “This would not occur because one dislikes the sound of the child’s cries.”

A **run-on** sentence consists of several complete sentences joined without proper punctuation: “Laozi was a Daoist thinker thus he focused on the Way as a guide for good living.”

To correct a run-on sentence, you may separate these sentences with a semicolon: “Laozi was a Daoist thinker; thus he focused on the Way as a guide for good living.” You may also divide them into separate sentences: “Laozi was a Daoist thinker. Thus he focused on the Way as a guide for good living.”

A **comma splice** consists of several complete sentences joined with only a comma: “Laozi was a Daoist thinker, thus he focused on the Way as a guide for good living.” Students often create comma splices when using the terms “therefore,” “thus,” and “hence.”

As with a run-on sentence, you may correct a comma splice by separating these sentences with either a semicolon or a period.

2. Be ruthlessly concise. Be especially wary of clunky signposting phrases, clunky verb phrases, and empty phrases.

Clunky signposting phrases include “this is because,” “the reason why,” and “this is why”:

Avoid writing, “This is because Hegel’s conception of history is dialectical.”
Instead write, “For Hegel’s conception of history is dialectical.”

Avoid writing, “The reason why I believe in God is because of my faith.”
Instead write, “I believe in God because of my faith.”

Avoid writing, "This is why I disagree with Plato."
Instead write, "Therefore, I disagree with Plato."

As a rule, be suspicious of verbs longer than a single word:

Avoid writing "X provides an explanation of Y."
Instead write, "X explains Y."

Avoid writing, "I will give an argument for the conclusion that X."
Instead write, "I will argue that X."

Avoid writing, "This should be of benefit to most people."
Instead write, "This should benefit most people."

Empty phrases include "it is," where "it" has no referent, and "there is," where "there" does not indicate a location.

Avoid writing, "It is not a good idea for Rawls to rely on hypothetical scenarios."
Instead write, "Rawls should not rely on hypothetical scenarios."

Avoid writing, "There is no reason for Nietzsche to be pessimistic."
Instead write, "Nietzsche has no reason to be pessimistic."

3. Use statements instead of rhetorical questions.

Avoid writing, "Who can tell what is in the mind of God?"
Instead write, "No one knows the mind of God."

Avoid writing, "What if everyone adopted this policy?"
Instead write, "If everyone adopted this policy, the result would be disastrous."

4. Replace passive voice with active voice.

Avoid writing, "It could be argued that this premise is false."
Instead write, "I will argue that this premise is false."

Avoid writing, "The following reply could be given by Descartes."
Instead write, "Descartes could give the following reply."

5. Eliminate all sexist language, such as the exclusive use of masculine pronouns to refer to arbitrary individuals (e.g., "if someone were to see a child fall into a well, he would spontaneously feel compassion"). Even if a philosopher expresses views unrelated to gender in sexist language, you must use non-sexist language to discuss those views. Further, if a philosopher explicitly defends sexism, you must use non-sexist language to express your own views, though you will of course use sexist quotations from this philosopher. Here are three options for non-sexist writing.

Option 1: Use “he/she” and its cognates throughout your paper: “If someone were to see a child fall into well, he/she would spontaneously feel compassion.” Such phrases can be clunky when repeated, however.

Option 2: Use the gender-neutral term “one”: “If one were to see a child fall into a well, one would spontaneously feel compassion.” But be warned that writing in this way sometimes feels opaque.

Option 3: When you first refer to an arbitrary individual, use a feminine pronoun to signal that you are not using sexist language. Then alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns in your examples. Of course, do not switch gender mid-example! I find this option most elegant and always use it in my writing. For example: “If someone were to see a child fall into a well, she would spontaneously feel compassion.”

6. Ensure that your pronouns agree. The pronoun “they” is plural and thus cannot be used as a gender-neutral singular term.

Avoid writing, “If someone were to see a child fall into a well, they would spontaneously feel compassion.”
Instead write, “If someone were to see a child fall into a well, she would spontaneously feel compassion.”

The pronoun “one” does not agree with “his” or “her” but does agree with “one’s.”

Avoid writing, “One should fulfill all of her duties.”
Instead write, “One should fulfill all of one’s duties.”

7. Avoid sweeping generalizations (especially false ones).

Avoid writing, “Ever since the dawn of time, mankind has pondered the nature of evil.” Instead prune this filler material from your paper entirely.

8. As an independent scholar, you must emphasize **primary sources**, such as the texts we read for this seminar. Treat the claims of **secondary sources** (scholarly texts which interpret or summarize primary sources) with no special respect, and steer entirely clear of **tertiary sources** (sources which summarize secondary sources) such as Wikipedia or the dictionary.

9. Avoid using terms like “prove.” While philosophers aim to provide strong evidence for their claims, they rarely deal in proof.

10. Be precise in your use of language.

Avoid using a word if you do not know its exact meaning.

Avoid the expression “argues why.” Instead use the expression “argues that” or the expression “explains why.”

Avoid the expression “interpret that.”

Avoid writing, “I interpret that Descartes is a rationalist.”
Instead write, “I interpret Descartes as a rationalist.”

Avoid writing, “I interpret that Descartes’ key premise is that God is perfect.”
Instead write, “On my interpretation, Descartes’ key premise is that God is perfect.”

Avoid redundant signposting.

Avoid writing, “Since I think, therefore I exist.”
Instead write, “Since I think, I exist.” You may also write, “I think. Therefore, I exist.”

The abbreviation “i.e.” means “that is” and is used to introduce a restatement of a phrase or an expression. By contrast, the abbreviation “e.g.” means “for example.”

Practice (in seminar)

Exercises: For each of the following sentences, identify which rule(s) it violates and then rewrite that sentence. Be warned that I may have included some miscellaneous errors not mentioned above.

- a) But what is the reason for this conclusion of Hume’s?
- b) This point is completely overlooked by Nagel, however, who gives an explanation of consciousness in terms of the perspective of the subject.
- c) Hobbes’ view is too pessimistic, thus he concludes that if anyone were in the state of nature, he would automatically do anything to survive.
- d) King Milinda is initially skeptical of the idea that the self does not exist. Since if there is no self, then who could possibly be talking to him?

Homework (after seminar)

Remember to **print two copies** of your homework, and **put your name on the back** so that I may practice anonymous grading.

- e) I will argue that Zhuangzi's approach is flawed. This is because he gives no evidence for his claims, but instead tells pointless stories to convince the reader.

- f) There is no evidence that Plato can supply to show that souls exist after death, his conclusion should not be accepted by rational people.

- g) Suppose that someone is being deceived by an evil demon, he does not know anything that he thinks he knows. Because the demon is inventing his reality.

- h) It is not valid to assume that all music is extravagant, therefore Mozi's argument falls apart.