

WRITING CHECKLIST*

Spring 2021

In the interest of avoiding crash landings or dropping unintended bombs, please perform the following checks to make sure that the vehicle to which you're entrusting your grade is in good shape prior to taking off.

Acronyms: These may save space, but they also waste time as readers have to flip back to find out what an HIPC or a MIGA or UNFICYP might be. Since ink is cheap and time isn't, use acronyms minimally.

Big Words: Some students and many professors believe that using lots of \$8 words when a few 25¢ ones would do just as well enhances their credibility. Not in this class. For example:

“Optimizing the efficiency with which ingredients required to produce beverages deemed desirable prior to participation in soporific seminar discussions are utilized is to be commended.”

Translate this to:

“Don't waste coffee.”

Chronology: Readers get confused when your narrative unnecessarily warps time. As in:

“The Truman administration sought to win Congressional support for the Marshall Plan, which it publicly announced in June, 1947. In March, 1947, President Truman called for aid to Greece and Turkey. And in April, 1949, he welcomed the signing of the NATO treaty.

Clarifying Yourself: Avoid phrases like: “in fact,” “as such,” “that said,” “in other words,” and “to put it more precisely,” all of which imply that you haven't been precise to begin with.

Cliches: Overusing particular words and phrases deadens their effect. For example, so many people are “so excited” about so much these days that the phrase now means “something else I have to put up with.” The word “incredible” now means “totally predictable.” And the word “fantastic” has become a synonym for “normal.” Watch also for people who preface pronouncements with the phrase “You know,” a sure sign that they really don't.

Comparatives: When making a comparison, make clear what your standard of comparison is. Don't write sentences like:

“Stalin was less canny.”

Or:

* Attributed to Professor Gaddis, although he neither confirms nor denies authorship.

“Mao was more astute.”

without answering the question: compared to whom or what?

Conjunctions: Proliferating them leads to prolixity, as in:

“The strategy and policy of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations was to contain revolution and radicalism vigilantly and diligently in Southeast Asia and East Asia.”

Consistency of tenses: Being careless about this puts you through more time warps, as in:

“The Soviet Union responded generally to invitations to negotiate when they come from Republican administrations but not when they will come from Democrats because the country doesn’t exist any longer anyway.”

Curate: This term has itself become a cliché, as in:

“Analysis of the way in which advisors, assistants, and confidants curate the information made available”

which suggests the exhibition of mummies in glass cases in gloomy museums.

Dangling participle: A modifier for an unspecified noun, as in this, from a student paper,

"Attending the university during one of the worst pandemics in our nation’s history, a glance into an October 8, 2020, Yale Daily News op-ed provides insight into the reality faced by Yale students."

Or, from another:

"While diving deeper into an event, a higher density of information is typical. . . ."

which leaves unclear *who* is attending or diving.

Economy: Think of words as money and of yourself as having little. Hence, you should always ask: “is this word necessary?”

“Recent and important theoretical/historical insights confirm or at least suggest strongly that there may be an inverse relationship under certain circumstances between the parameters of democratic organization at the sub-systemic level and the propensity of units within such systems to confront one another in ways that could be conceived of as hostile.”

Better:

“Democracies tend not to fight one another.”

Etc.: Abbreviation for the Latin term, “*et cetera*,” which, when translated, means: “I haven’t got around to thinking about the rest of this yet, so I’ll just fudge it.” To be avoided in all situations, unless you’re a monarch who can’t remember all of your titles, as in: “Queen of Great Britain and Realms Beyond the Sea, Empress of India, Defender of the Faith, Commander of the Most Loyal Order of the . . . etc., etc., etc.”

Elegance: Think of whatever your ultimate standard of gracefulness is – whether a Fred Astaire dance or a (Groucho) Marx put-down or Virginia Woolf’s description of the first Queen Elizabeth (in her novel *Orlando*) – and then ask with respect to everything you write: “could I come a little closer to that?”

Feeling: Too many authors transform thinking into feeling, as in "President George H. W. Bush felt differently . . ." Sometimes this habit extends to documents ("The 'Draft Options Paper' felt it better to explore . . ."), bureaucracies ("The Department of Defense felt . . ."), and even cities ("Bonn felt . . ."). The effect is to equate decision-making with itching.

Finding you well: Young people today, in writing to older people, tend begin with: “I hope this finds you well.” This makes the recipients feel even older, as if they’re not expected to last much longer. Which distracts from what the young usually want, which is a letter of recommendation.

Footnotes: Modern computers allow you to put them back where they should be: at the bottom of the page. However, don’t do strange things like numbering them with small case Roman numerals, as if that empire never fell. You may, however, use the old Latin word *ibid.* to indicate that the source for something is cited immediately above. Do not burden us with.¹ And then.² And yet again.³

Ghosts: Vague presences are ok if you’re watching spooky movies, but when encountered in scholarly or official writing they’re generally devices for evading responsibility. As in:

“It was felt that it would not be appropriate” or “it was not thought to be correct . . .” or “one wouldn’t . . .” Or, as in National History Day interview requests: “It has been determined that you know something about your topic. Please tell me whatever it might be.”

In none of these will your reader get any sense of who is doing or thinking what.

Haigspeak: Named for former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, this inelegance transforms perfectly good nouns into clunky verbs. As in:

“Let me caveat that statement,” to quote Haig himself; or “the Eisenhower administration was impacted by the force of public opinion,”

which in addition to being passive creates distracting images of cratered moonscapes.

I know that you’re very busy: The usual preface to e-mails assuming that you’re *not* too busy to do whatever it is the sender wants you to do.

¹Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 327.

²Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 328.

³Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 329.

Identification: Always give people’s full name and some indication of who they are the first time you mention them. Rare exceptions are allowed, in the case of religious deities and rock stars. Or royalty, but they normally require Roman numerals.

Inflection points: To be used only if you went to Harvard or wish you had. For everyone else, “turning points” or, for a more dramatic effect, “pivotal moments” should suffice.

Mixed metaphors: These are always entertaining, but their vigor can at times obscure the intended meaning. As in this example, taken from a faculty colleague’s e-mail:

“We have our own departmental juggling-acts, and can’t try to get all our horses through the same hole in the hedge simultaneously. Still, we should have some wiggle room, and support from central casting. . .”

Novel: When used as an adjective, this word refers to something new, as in “the novel coronavirus.” When used as a noun, it’s to a work of fiction, like *War and Peace*. When used to describe a work of non-fictional scholarship, as in “Professor Gaddis’s novel *Strategies of Containment*,” it’s guaranteed to irk Professor Gaddis.

OMG: Abbreviation for an exclamation that used to have religious significance but now no longer does.

Page numbers: The current generation of students seems to believe that their professors enjoy doing their own page counting so that they can write comments like: “on your bloody unnumbered 37th page, you said . . .” This is not true.

Paragraphs: These should proceed straightforwardly toward some specific destination, not spread out all over the landscape in great loops and swirls, like the Mississippi River. Each should contain a particular idea, clearly linked to those that have gone before and those that follow. They are not to be composed of flotsam, jetsam, and other randomly arranged debris. Nor should they be barges, stretched out over several stagnant pages. Paragraphs are meant to get you somewhere, not to contribute to the general dampness of things.

Passive Voice: There may be rare moments when it might be preferable to write:

“The Reagan administration was affected by the force of public opinion.”

instead of:

“Public opinion affected the Reagan administration.”

But I cannot think of what they might be.

Possessives: These will soon disappear from the English language, but for the purposes of this class please remember that:

“It’s” means “it is”—not that something belongs to something else. For that, use “its.”

“Policy-maker’s” refers to what one of them has, “policy-makers” to what several of them have.

It's not all right to drop possessive marks altogether on the assumption that your instructor will supply them wherever they're needed.

Proactive: A word meaning "very active," or "especially active," which when overused makes all "active" measures seem passive.

Prolixity: Saying too little with too much, as in this, from a student paper: "It seems that we can take comfort in the fact that we can reformulate our idea of truth in a way that justifies our choosing neither abyss." Translation: "We need not decide."

Pronouns: Prefer your own if you like, but make sure that each refers, unambiguously, to a preceding noun, and isn't floating aimlessly like pollen.

Propounding the Perfectly Obvious: Avoid statements that tell us what we already know, as in:

"Meanwhile, history was moving on."

Quotations: Use them when you have something distinctive to convey, whether in a well-turned phrase or an original insight. Don't use them for what you could just have well put in your own words. As in this, from a student paper:

"On December 7 [1941] in the early morning six Japanese aircraft carriers launched an attack on the United States Pacific fleet . . ."⁴

Redundance: Saying the same thing several times may be useful if you're delivering a sermon or a campaign speech, but in writing it kills brain cells while enlarging carbon footprints. As in:

"American foreign policy during the early Cold War had both economic and strategic roots. Which is to say, considerations of economics and strategy influenced it. Or, to put it another way, economists and strategists were both influential."

Repetition: Take advantage of the English language's glorious diversity by not repeating the same noun, verb, adjective or adverb in the same paragraph. Here's an example of what not to do:

"Regional specialists have stressed the receptivity of the Middle Eastern region to regional influences emanating from the region of the Persian Gulf."

Split Infinitives: It will soon become acceptable to carelessly split an infinitive – like the one that's just been split – but for the moment you should regard this as like picking your nose in public.

Standards of Significance: Generally it's best to move from important points to less important ones, not the other way around. So don't write:

"Mao Zedong refused to brush his teeth, which as a result were covered with green scum. Late in November, 1950, he ordered Chinese forces in North Korea to attack."

⁴Gerhard L. Weinberg, A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 260.

Thought leaders: Folks who've convinced themselves that if they slog through snowdrifts to Davos every winter, others will follow.

Time period: This phrase is redundant, since all periods of which we know occur within time. The same is true of "at this point in time," although it's often welcomed as a signal that dull meetings are about to end.

Writing Checklists: This list gets longer every year. The distinction of adding to it, however, isn't one you should seek.